

Book Review: The New Pirates: Modern Global Piracy from Somalia to the South China Sea by Andrew Palmer

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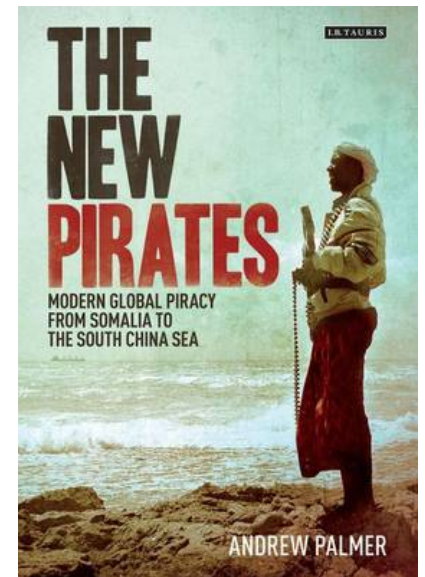
Andrew Palmer's new contribution to the field is less academically rigorous but nonetheless important as he brings in a new perspective on the development and impact of modern piracy off the Somali coast, writes **Caroline Varin**.

The New Pirates: Modern Piracy from Somalia to the South China Sea.
Andrew Palmer. IB Tauris. 2014.

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Andrew Palmer, CEO of Idarat Ltd. and Idarat Resilience JLT – both maritime security companies – brings a wealth of professional experience to his first book *The New Pirates*. Piracy is defined as the criminal act of hijacking, kidnapping and robbery “in the high seas outside the jurisdiction of any state” (p.8) which inevitably affects maritime trade and travel. This criminal activity, which Palmer argues should be treated as an organized criminal business, has been around since the dawn of time. The resurgence of piracy in the twenty-first century, however, requires a contextual analysis, which Palmer offers in this book.

The first half of *The New Pirates* explores the political, historical and economic development of Somalia, which led to state failure in the early 1990s. The country is the victim of colonialism, authoritarian leadership, a drought-prone territory, and foreign interference. It is also strategically placed on the horn of Africa, along which 40 per cent of the world's oil is transported. The lawlessness, poverty, and economic opportunities offered by nearby trade routes have created a market for piracy that is unprecedented and incredibly lucrative; [the ransoming of the Greek-flagged *Maran Centaurus*](#) in January 2010 set a new record for the business, with news agents reporting that the ship's owners paid between \$5 and \$7.5 million for the release of the cargo and crew. This inevitably drove the market for piracy, and at its peak in 2010, pirates held 1,181 seamen aboard 53 ships, according to the International Maritime Bureau.





EU Naval Force flagship ITS SanGiusto captures suspected pirates – Nov 2012. Credit: [EU Naval Force Media and Public Information Office](#) CC BY-ND 2.0

In addition to running kidnap-and-ransom operations, pirates have linked up to international criminal organisations in Africa, Europe and India, according to Palmer. These transnational networks launder the ransom payments, exchange intelligence on the movements of ships and the value of cargo, and extend into related criminal operations such as human, weapon and drug trafficking, and illegal migration. Pirates have also become increasingly violent in order to pressurise governments, families and ship owners to pay the every-increasing ransoms. Seamen from developing countries unable or unwilling to pay the demanded ransoms are more likely to fall victim to brutal and abusive treatment including “tying hostages upside down and dragging them in the sea, locking them in freezers, beating them and putting plastic ties around their genitals” (p.199).

In response to the growing threat of piracy, shipping companies have adopted new policies and defence mechanisms ranging from surrounding the vessels with razor wire and electric fences to using armed security guards on board. The additional costs of lawyers, insurance, private security companies to negotiate and deliver the ransom payments, and professional consultants such as Palmer, cost the global economy up to \$12 billion a year. In addition, the international naval operation currently monitoring the Somali seas currently cost an approximate \$1.5 billion a year. Compared to a few payments of a couple million dollars a year for releasing hostages, one must ask whether the cost of defending against piracy is really worth it.

While Palmer offers an original insight into the corporate approach to piracy, his book draws heavily from secondary sources which he cites at length. The analysis on failed states and Somali history is long-winded and in places poorly researched. Although the title of this book suggests a story of modern piracy “from Somalia to the South China Sea”, Palmer barely touches on piracy trends and responses in Asia or the Caribbean, which is a shame as there is a rich history of pirate activities in both regions, with relatively successful responses in each case. A more in-depth historical study and the incorporation of academic resources would have improved this book.

On the other hand, Palmer’s industry experience is highly valuable: his suggestions for improving vessel resilience and his contribution to the debate on armed private security guards are both pragmatic and insightful. He also draws attention to the socio-economic differences of hostages from developing countries and their horrific treatment at the hands of pirates, an issue that is often overlooked in the discourse on modern piracy.

Andrew Palmer’s contribution to the field is less academically rigorous but nonetheless important as he brings in a new perspective on the development and impact of modern piracy off the Somali coast. While his book makes a few unfulfilled promises, it does effectively analyse the impact of piracy on the shipping industry and offers possible solutions to commercial vessels. Overall, *The New Pirates* is a continuation of Idarat’s consulting services, providing “systemic and resilient solutions (...) to safeguard shipping and other maritime assets”.

Caroline Varin is a lecturer at Regent's University where she specialises in global conflict and international security. She received her PhD from the London School of Economics and is the author of *Mercenaries, Hybrid Armies and National Security*, forthcoming from Routledge. [Read more reviews by Caroline.](#)

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