Indonesia - the Center of "Humane Piracy"

The Strait of Malacca between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula is a strategic corridor connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which maintains maritime traffic between Europe, Africa and East Asia. The Strait of Malacca is used to transport approximately 25% of all the cargo sent by sea on the planet. Considering the number of ships with valuable cargo passing through it every day, as well as the low standard of living in Indonesia and Malaysia, the states occupying Sumatra, most of the Malay Peninsula and other neighboring islands, it is not surprising that the phenomenon seemingly forgotten in other places still thrives here.

In the period from 2012 to 2017, Indonesia led the world in pirate attacks, surpassing even Somalia. This follows from a report published by the International Maritime Bureau in 2017. In that year alone, 43 pirate attacks were recorded in Indonesian waters. To be fair, in 2018 Indonesia temporarily became runner up to Nigeria, but it is still clear that the problem of piracy in the Strait of Malacca is quite serious.

Nevertheless, Indonesian piracy is not the cruel, high-tech and ultra-profitable business that Europeans are used to thinking piracy represents. The attacks do not take place offshore on the high seas, but in territorial waters. Only smaller vessels are in serious danger of attack. Bloody battles with the use of artillery and the destruction of the entire crews of captured ships do not happen here. Rather, it may be better dubbed "armed robberies at sea": pirates take money and mobile phones from the crew, take valuable equipment from ships, etc.

Thus, in February 2018, a tug was seized in the Strait of Malacca. In the early morning, just before dawn, four people approached the ship in a motor boat and an underwater scooter, climbed aboard on a rope with a hook and took out a machete. Threatening lives with their weapons, they tied up the driver and robbed the towboat. Most attacks take place in this very fashion. Sometimes the crew is taken hostage and released for a small ransom, sometimes the sailors are thrown into the sea in a lifeboat and the ship is hijacked, but in any case, the pirates try to avoid casualties.

Along the entire Strait of Malacca, on the Indonesian coast, there are small bays in which local residents, low income boatmen and fishermen equipped makeshift berths, often illegally. Pirates live in these unofficial ports and in the cities adjacent to them. Most of them come from the poorest strata of society. They use motorized boats and utility machetes as weapons. Knowing the area well, they hide in the coastal thickets and look out for small, poorly guarded ships that have come too close to the dangerous shore. Most attacks happen at night.

Belief in magic is widespread among these people, so witchcraft that brings good luck in attacks is a separate and lucrative line of business on the Indonesian coast. Many pirates are popular among the locals. One pirate leader was confirmed to have built a small town and mosque with stolen riches. It is not only inhabitants of the coastal rural areas who earn their living through piracy: unemployed young people from the big cities are also ganging up and trying their luck in sea robbery. Poverty and unemployment in Indonesia have consistently provided new members to criminal organizations. If the village pirates are groups of local people who know each other and most of whom are trying to increase their meager livelihoods by criminal means, then the urban gangs, consisting of people from different parts of Indonesia that are not connected by kinship and neighbor ties, are more mobile and ambitious, and more in line with modern ideas on organized crime.

Indonesian pirates have ties to transnational crime, for example, there have been cases where pirate crews were hired from abroad specifically to loot a rival's ship.
Of course, piracy in the Strait of Malacca is an unpleasant phenomenon, but it does not bring as much evil as it may seem. Pirates do not kill people, losses of hijacked ship and stolen cargo owners are reimbursed by insurance companies, and losses of insurance companies are compensated by the fact that the more cases of ship robberies occur, the more ship and cargo owners want to insure their property. For this reason, the Indonesian government is in no hurry to launch a large-scale campaign to end piracy on its shores.

The main concern of the international community associated with Indonesian piracy is the possibility of spreading radical Islam ideas among pirates and establishing links between them and the international terrorist underground. Almost 90% of Indonesia’s 270 million people are Muslim, and about 13% of Indonesians live below the poverty line. This situation can contribute to the spread of extremism, especially among people already accustomed to illegal activities. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Indonesia has repeatedly become a target for terrorist attacks in 2000-2016, there is no cooperation between terrorist groups and local pirates so far. According to experts, there are no prerequisites for such cooperation - pirates are interested in maintaining an intensive traffic flow through the Strait of Malacca, and rampant terrorism will certainly reduce the flow of merchant ships and attract many military men from different countries to the region, who will quickly put an end to free piracy. In addition, the goal of terrorist attacks is to harm as many civilians as possible, and this is always easier to achieve on land than at sea by attacking ships with small crews. Thus the risk of Indonesian pirates working with terrorists is not a big one.

Nevertheless, the Indonesian government needs to monitor the situation and take measures for the socio-economic development of the country. Indonesian piracy will end on its own when poverty and unemployment are eliminated, first in the coastal regions and then across the country.

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