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BOOK REVIEWS

LIFTING THE VEIL ON PRIVATE MARITIME SECURITY


In April 2012 a video began to circulate of an incident that had taken place off Somalia. It shows private armed guards using heavy and repeated volleys of semiautomatic rifle fire to repel the close approach of two skiffs with armed pirates on board. Although most of the comments attached to the post were supportive, even “gung ho,” more sober analyses were largely critical, pointing to poor tactics, disorganized command, wasteful use of ammunition, inadequate defensive preparations, and more damningly, failure to observe proper procedures. In May, a U.S. company, admitting responsibility, claimed that the reaction had been justified and responsible because the guards believed that the pirates had rocket-propelled grenades and feared for their lives. The company also claimed the attack had been the second on its client’s ship in three days. The challenge to maritime security mounted by Somali pirates is arguably the most substantial challenge to the lawful and peaceful use of the sea in fifty years. Responses to this challenge are beset with difficulties. The ocean space from Somalia to India is vast, too large to be patrolled effectively by a force of a hundred ships, even if so many vessels were available. The onus, therefore, has fallen to the potential victims to protect themselves, a solution that has been promoted vigorously by the United States but for a long time has been resisted by the shipping industry and by most other states. The tide of opinion, however, has turned. Shippers now realize that the naval protection they demanded will not get any better than it is now and is in fact likely to recede as financial constraints diminish warship numbers and steaming hours. Instead, shippers have turned to the private sector, which despite a shortage of experienced operatives has responded with alacrity. Where once the number of maritime security specialists could be counted on the fingers of one hand, now there are probably nearly a hundred, most of them domiciled in the United States and the United Kingdom.
sets out to examine “the evolution, function, problems, and prospects of private security operating in the maritime sector.” It suggests that the events of 9/11 were crucial in shifting port-security responsibilities away from the state and onto private industry, “reinterpreting,” as Cullen puts it, maritime actors from passive objects needing state protection to responsible subjects accountable for their own security. This shift has now been extended to ships transiting areas prone to piracy, including Southeast Asia, the Arabian Sea off Somalia, and the Gulf of Guinea. The implications of this new interpretation are enormous, particularly when added to the increasing use of private contractors in a quasi-military role, as exemplified by Blackwater—a dynamic particularly generated by the Iraq conflict. As the market potential of that war zone declined, companies and individuals reportedly started new ventures and new careers in the waters off Somalia. Understandably, given the book’s focus, few of its essays delve deeply into the strategic and moral issues to which these activities give rise. The editors instead have chosen to emphasize the many practical implications of this development, including the early experience in the Strait of Malacca, by the acknowledged expert, Carolin Liss; the often-violent challenges to ship and fixed-platform operators off Nigeria; the uncertainties and complexities of a legal regime struggling to come to terms with rapid change; the role of private contractors in the security of ports; and the arguments for and against the use of armed guards on ships versus alternative risk-reduction measures that owners need to take into account. Other essays examine the equally complicated questions that arise when private operators take on coast-guard and fishery-protection roles, drawing on examples from Sierra Leone, Somaliland, and Puntland.

This is a timely and well-informed introduction to a new industry about which most people—even people familiar with shipping—know relatively little. This veil must be lifted, because the demands for private maritime security are likely to increase in line with the growing economic importance of the seas and the criminally and politically inspired challenges to which that importance gives rise.

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This is Benerson Little’s latest of three books about pirates. In this one he has done a superb job of recounting the violent history that surrounds pirates and raiders and the measures that have been taken to hunt and suppress them. Also, Little has not forgotten privateers, who, depending on available opportunities, easily switched from being pirate hunters to pirates. Little opens by noting the differences between pirates, who are principally active on the seas, and raiders, who are more associated with attacking from, not on, the water. Additionally, he provides detailed information about pirate and raider ships and about tactics and weapons, which over the centuries progressed from rams, arrows, and spears to cannon and muskets.

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