

Book Review: The war for muddy waters: pirates, terrorists, traffickers and maritime security

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This impressive and excellently researched book combines the multidimensional layers of crime at sea, bringing the muddy waters of the littorals into focus. The author also offers a criminological theory to explain the growing preponderance, dynamism, and interconnected nature of maritime crime today. Whilst the book is clearly written from the US naval perspective¹ and aimed at a US readership, this does not detract from the value it brings to the range of arguments explored when dissecting the complex componentry of maritime security. Rather than just using a US lens, he focuses on US related case studies to highlight emerging trends and the weaknesses of conventional methods used to counter, global maritime crime, and terrorism. Tallis provided an excellent synopsis of the book when he spoke at the Institute of World Politics in November 2019².

The book comprises three parts with eight chapters; Part One – Shaping Strategy, Part Two – Cocaine and the context in the Caribbean; and Part Three – Integrating piracy. The book is enriched with eight photographs and one diagram. There are 37 pages of extensive and very useful notes along with a comprehensive index.

The introduction sets the scene by describing in detail the unprecedented and daring amphibious raid conducted by 10 terrorists of the Pakistani Islamic extremist organisation, Lashkar-e-Taiba, on India's largest city and financial epicentre, Mumbai. The terrorists attacked several targets, killing at least 174 people in a well-coordinated operation lasting an extraordinary four days. The vivid description of this unexpected and unforeseen ingenious attack establishes the tone of the book, which provides some unsettling truths about negligence of political focus and complacency concerning a complex and interconnected area of growing illicit activities. The common thread throughout the book emphasises the links between population growth, urbanization, littoralisation, and the links to criminality.

Tallis provides a graphic description of the Littorals as not just benign coastal areas but as a ribbon of coastal hinterland which includes 75% of the global population, 80% of capital cities and almost “all major centres of international trade and military power”, raising its significance as an area of geopolitical importance.

To balance the equation, he also describes the multiplicity of modern naval operations, listing nine separate domains at sea and ashore that constitute their area of interest, demonstrating the demands placed on conventional maritime forces (US Navy and US Marine Corps) when contemplating, planning, and conducting modern littoral operations.

¹ Tallis is an analyst for the US Centre for Naval Analysis and has worked for US naval staffs ashore and operationally deployed at sea.

² <https://www.iwp.edu/events/the-war-for-muddy-waters-pirates-terrorists-traffickers-and-maritime-insecurity/>

In chapter one Tallis examines the continuously evolving definitions for maritime security, requiring theorists to regularly revisit what the phrase means and to whom. Looking ahead, he paints a picture of how demographic trends and the predicted growth of urban populations, especially in the littorals, will combine with the maritime, making it a united rather than a divided space, with a variety of differing characteristics that have to be considered equally and interactively. He posits that the maritime space and the land, especially in the littorals cannot be addressed as distinct entities.

Tallis then introduces the increasing influence of transnational organised crime, cyber security, and climate change as emerging hybrid threats, none of which respect man-made borders. Indeed, criminals successfully exploit the self-imposed limitations of borders and boundaries on governments and their organic institutions with alacrity.

Chapter two introduces the broken window theory including the influence of context as a format for examining much of the maritime criminal activities he explores throughout the book. The broken window theory³ describes how the interplay of perception and security of the local population in urbanised areas can lead to a chain of events resulting in a collapse of law and order. Whilst the social experiments which led to the formulation of the theory were conducted on urban streets, the fundamentals were broadly applicable. The principle being, if a community see that authority doesn't care about minor crimes, like broken windows - for example, the community will become progressively disenfranchised, believing their environment is gradually becoming more dangerous and threatening. Especially if there is no perceived attempt by the authorities to find and hold the perpetrator(s) to account. Consequently, collective community spirit is undermined, and the situation can deteriorate into significant and problematic unrest and an increasing trend of criminality. The broken window represents the beginning of a vicious circle of societal deterioration.

Whilst the community responds to what they see as a deteriorating situation, by avoiding the area or exploiting criminal opportunities, the institutional first responders (police in the case of the urban US environment) are yet to register to the scenario as a priority that requires their action. The opportunity to nip a situation in the bud is lost and it escalates at an accelerated rate. This type of scenario, Tallis suggests, is also evident at sea, whether it be low level piracy, smuggling, trafficking or illegal unreported and unregulated fishing where initial incidents are unseen (because the marine police/coastguard/navy have not been made aware/or observed the activity, due to lack of maritime assets) or ignored (because the appropriate agency decides to turn a blind eye, believing that it is beneath them or they are not configured to interject) until, unmanaged, the situation exacerbates and becomes a major problem. Tallis also suggests that the self-imposed, imaginary barriers, institutions have established by stove piping or siloing problems prevent proactive action and solution. As a way of linking this to the maritime security, he refers to naval theorists like Mahan, Corbett, and Till, who believes that maritime security means "good order at sea".

In part two of the book the focus is on the Caribbean, the US's backyard. Tallis examines the extent of criminal behaviour that is going on and how the US consistently fails to allocate the appropriate political attention and resources to manage it. Tallis therefore emphasises the broken window theory and that crime is context-dependent and multidimensional by outlining some of the inherent problems that exist but are often overlooked or ignored by the dominant regional player.

The Caribbean Sea is "at the vortex of the Americas". It covers 1.5 million square nautical miles, with over 7,000 islands, and the seascape is shared by 13 sovereign states and 12 dependent territories of

³ Defined by two social scientists James Q Wilson and George L Kelling in an article in the Atlantic magazine in the early 1980s, adopted in New York city in the 1990s to redefine policing strategies
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/03/broken-windows/304465/>

European countries. Much of the rise in crime and narcotics trafficking specifically has been a consequence of the US's alteration of priorities after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. Much of the most startling research is based on the testimony provided by General John F. Kelly, United States Marine Corps⁴, before the 113th Congress, House Armed Services Committee in Washington DC 20th March 2013 and other senior component commanders working with SOUTHCOM.

Whilst the US regards all seven Central American countries as "major drug transit countries." "80% of US bound cocaine first moves by water." General Kelly said that SOUTHCOM, perceives itself "as the lowest priority geographic combat command" and he said that forces under his command failed to capture an astounding 80% of the estimated trafficked narcotics because of resource scarcity. The problems facing the US are significant; they are hampered by borders, which traffickers exploit. The old drug cartels have undergone a process of metamorphosis, becoming more nimble and less traceable. The problem is "simultaneously too extensive for the Coast Guard to handle alone and too unconventional to arouse much enthusiasm from the Navy." It is sadly stated that "Despite accounting for more than half of all the drug seizures by US authorities [and other agencies], the USCG is fighting a losing battle."

Having provided the unvarnished truth about the situation in the Caribbean, in chapter four, Tallis highlights the multidimensional and interdependent complexities of trafficking illicit items including firearms and people across the Caribbean. General Kelly's testimony is again quoted as the most credible and succinct observation of a deteriorating situation by saying "skyrocketing criminal violence exacerbates existing challenges" and that the Caribbean Basin "remains the most unequal and insecure region of the world." Further, it is highlighted that the trafficking of persons is likely to be the fastest growing illicit trade in the world and the second most prevalent transnational crime in the Caribbean, after narcotics. General Kelly observes that "criminal networks can move just about anything on [their] smuggling pipelines." And that the "same networks that facilitate human smuggling and narcotics trafficking could easily be leveraged by terrorists." He also points out it is "significant to note that the two are not mutually exclusive."

In the final chapter of part two, Tallis brings together context and conclusions, re-emphasising the lack of ships and aircraft to intercept criminals. He also provides significant evidence about the degrees of invisible crimes, including widescale corruption, money laundering and the interrelationship of these crimes to trafficking. He is quick to extoll the virtues of the USCG as the only military law enforcement organisation which is a member of the national intelligence community, and he notes the way they are using innovative techniques and practices to counter the evolution of criminal structures. General Kelly's comments touch on "corrosive criminal violence" and the "permissive environments for illicit activities", bringing us back to the resonating theme of the broken window theory.

Part three of the book globalises the area of interest and integrates piracy into the mix of this complex and multifaceted transnational maritime criminal world. Tallis focuses on the two principal current regions affected by piracy in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) and the waters off SE Asia.

Chapter six examines the perception of piracy in the GoG. Whilst piracy may be attracting the media's attention, the West African countries that are littoral to the GoG are prone to a diverse range of criminal activities that seem to be mutually supporting. Having extended his research to include an extensive of agencies and local knowledge Tallis offers a slightly different and fascinating perspective to that normally portrayed.

⁴ *Commander, US Southern Command 2012-2016, and latterly, former Chief of Staff to President of the United States of America, Donald Trump.*

The geographical position of West Africa, opposite the Caribbean, makes it the ideal lawless gateway for cocaine to enter the continent and, more importantly, as a conduit into Europe. Despite the assumption that most consignments are moved by air, the volumes moved by sea are far greater. Guinea Bissau (a relatively small country located on the western coast of West Africa), located at about 10°N Latitude, is at the eastern end of the so-called “Highway 10” of the transatlantic narcotics trafficking corridor, making it the first African “narco-state” where the value of transhipped drugs exceed the nation’s GDP. The scale of drug trafficking is destabilising the region according to President Obama and it “undermines ... prosperity, security and the ability to connect with other countries.” according to Till.

Tallis returns to the broken window theory, linking narcotics trafficking with the core principles of multidimensionality and context specificity. He links narcotics trafficking with other crimes, noting that maritime disorder is contagious. He points out that the pirates and criminals take full advantage of the sanctuary offered by coves, creeks, and swamps along the African coastline. These villains are often more capable and experienced seafarers than the law enforcement agencies “set to combat them”.

In Martin Murphy’s book on Contemporary Piracy and Maritime Terrorism (p13, 2007), he identifies seven major factors that enable piracy to flourish, including a permissive political environment. This is undeniably evidenced by the increase in piracy attacks increase around elections, as a campaign financing mechanism. Later in his book (p46) Murphy offers six major factors that contribute to terrorism at sea, which are uncannily like those that facilitate piracy. It should therefore be no surprise that there are many strong links between the two practices and that “piracy breeds piracy”. Today the GoG is one of the most insecure waterways in the world and piracy is becoming increasingly sophisticated.

Efforts to curb the piracy in the GoG appear impotent. A mixture of former colonial powers, the EU, US, and African authorities have “created a veritable alphabet soup of counterpiracy players” that leads to duplication, confusion. They all seem to be missing the fundamental point that piracy is not a discrete crime but a manifestation of transnational organised crime, leaving Tallis to pose the question (also asked by others like Siebels in Maritime Security in East and West Africa reviewed in Issue 2), if piracy is part of wider maritime disorder, why is counterpiracy so focused on just one crime?

Chapter seven focuses on evolving security tactics off the coast of SE Asia. By its geographic structure and nature, the SE Asian region is far more maritime-focused than Africa, with two thirds of its population being reliant on the maritime sphere. Tallis observes that if Somali pirates are muggers, SE Asian pirates are pickpockets. Whilst on the face of its piracy across SE Asia seems to be more effectively managed, several commentators, including the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, have stated that these archipelagic states and the waters that link them are prime targets for Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups and the threat should not be underestimated. Other commentators have referred to this mass of waterways as an “overlapping web of criminality” that is connected through the maritime domain and noted that the seaborne criminals are more dynamic than “atomised” [fragmented] land bound counterparts.

One pertinent point highlighted for the region, which applies globally, is that while navies are often tasked to address maritime security problems because they possess the needed hardware, they often lack the arrest authority and knowledge base necessary to police maritime areas effectively. The hybrid nature of crimes like piracy, terrorism and trafficking of people, weapons and goods is not easily addressed by conventional policing authorities either. Indeed, across every region the challenge of conceptualising non-traditional, transnational, and human security issues is proving very difficult. Echoing other observers and commentators, Nincic urges that, “The global maritime community should focus less on stopping a particular form of maritime crime ... and more about creating holistic measures to counter an increasing ‘web’ of maritime criminality.”

It is also important to understand that SE Asia sits in an area of warming seas along the seams of tectonic plates, making it a “climatically and seismically fragile zone”, as Kaplan refers to it, potentially resulting in a maritime security catalyst for this already complex and fraught region.

In the final chapter of the book, Tallis attempts to provide some navigational advice for charting a course through this multiplicity of challenges. Maritime security as an identified and distinct area of concern is only about twenty years old and is most definitely a post-Cold War defined category of academic scrutiny and understanding. It is therefore not surprising that the deeper the research delves, the more complex and multifaceted the subject reveals itself to be. After twenty years of global experience, it feels that we have only just started to understand the enormity of maritime security.

Tallis suggest that criminology appears to be a very useful tool to understand the multidimensional aspects of seaborne crimes, which emanate from individuals and communities living on land. Is it time for criminology to be “marinized” incorporating the unique elements which are evident at sea, like invisible boundaries and borders, an inhospitable and uninhabitable domain, lacking continuous or consistent governance and policing? It is evident that criminals are exploiting waterways to their complete advantage. Until law enforcement institutions learn how to exploit the maritime domain, they will be unable to counter the multidimensional interrelated and interdependent nature of maritime transnational organised crimes with their decentralised and non-hierarchical management processes. The authorities need to be able to dominate the pirates hunting grounds, the trafficker’s networks, and the terrorist’s freedom of maritime manoeuvre, or they will remain on the back foot. This process will require cross-governmental, institutional, and cross border cooperation, collaboration, and a collective innovative maritime philosophy.

Tallis has used this revealing, fascinating and incisive book in an attempt to disrupt complacency and initiate radical discussions that are broader and more encompassing than previous debates. As this maritime century gathers momentum, Tallis offers a timely wake-up call to the realities of maritime crime and security. These challenges will not be addressed without fresh innovative approaches. We need to have criminologists who understand the maritime domain in all its dimensions. In one of the final references, Tallis notes a comment from an IMO staffer who writes that he senses “an almost existential crisis around the question of what navies is for,” The tides are shifting, and the littorals are gaining importance. Conceptualising muddy waters and the opaque sinister world of crime and sckuldugery they harbor is paramount to stability ashore.

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