Maritime piracy\(^1\) has been endemic to the international system for many hundreds of years. Indeed the narratives of Shih Fa-Hsien, a Buddhist monk from Ceylon, record cases of raiding, robbing and other instances of marauding in the waters of the Malacca Strait and South China Sea as early as 414 AD.\(^2\) Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the Mediterranean was infested by maritime violence, with rulers on both sides of the Moslem–Christian divide sponsoring raiders operating out of the Barbary states of Tunis, Tripoli and Algeria, on the one hand, and Rhodes and Malta on the other. Buccaneers based in Jamaica were extremely active during the seventeenth century, encouraged in many respects by London’s continuing undeclared war against Madrid following the end of formal Spanish–British hostilities in 1603. Harbour raids and attacks against ships at anchor have been equally as endemic, particularly around West Africa and along the Arabian coast as well as in the Thames between London and the English Channel.\(^3\)

Echoes of privateering continued well into the twentieth century. Sea raiding, thought to be condoned by Indonesia, was a factor that the Commonwealth naval forces had to take into account during the Malayan Emergency (1948–60) and Sukarno’s subsequent policy of ‘Confrontation’ against the newly created Malaysian Federation between 1963 and 1966.\(^4\) Moreover, during the 1970s, numerous attacks against Vietnamese boatpeople fleeing the Communist regime in Indochina were documented, with many of the assaults carried out in the Gulf of Thailand by Malaysian and Thai raiders.\(^5\) Despite these instances, for much of the later twentieth century the issue of piracy was essentially sidelined in importance to the wider East–West ideological struggle that was taking place between the superpowers and their respective blocs. However, with the end of that conflict and the
somewhat artificial constraints that this placed on regional security, piracy is once again emerging as a prominent issue of concern, in terms of incident, lethality, complexity and scope.

The scope and scale of contemporary maritime piracy in the international system

Types of piracy currently taking place in global waters

It is possible to identify at least four types of piracy that are currently occurring in waters around the world:

1. Harbour and anchorage thefts/attacks. This is a form of piracy that has been encouraged by the relatively relaxed security procedures of many small and not so small ports. The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) defines these type of assaults as Low-Level Armed Robbery (LLAR) – an opportunist attack on a ship, mounted close to land by small high speed craft, crewed by criminal ‘maritime muggers’ normally armed with knives. Their targets are usually cash and portable high-value personal items with an average theft of between US$5000 and US$15 000.6

2. Ransacking and robbery of vessels on the high seas or in territorial waters. This is a more common form of piracy and one that, if carried out in narrow sea-lanes, has the potential to seriously disrupt maritime navigation. This is especially true in cases where vessels are out of control because the crew has been detained or locked up. The IMB defines these types of assault as Medium Level Armed Assault and Robbery (MLAR) – violent attacks of robbery involving serious injury or murder by well organised gangs, usually heavily armed and working from a ‘mother’ ship.7

3. Hijacking of vessels to convert them for the purposes of illegal trading – the so-called phantom ship phenomenon. This type of piracy follows a typical pattern. Vessels are first seized with their cargoes off-loaded into lighters at sea (such merchandise either being kept by the pirates themselves or sold off to private bidders). The ships are then fraudulently re-registered and issued with false documents to enable them to take on board a fresh payload. The new cargo is never delivered to its intended destination but transferred to another vessel and taken to an alternate port where it is sold to a pre-arranged buyer who more often than not is a willing participant in the whole venture.8 The IMB defines these types of assault as a Major Criminal Hijack (MCHJ) – well resourced and