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To cite this article: Edward R. Lucas (2019) Public Goods, Club Goods, and Private Interests:, Security Studies, 28:4, 710-738, DOI: [10.1080/09636412.2019.1631381](https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1631381)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1631381>



Published online: 01 Jul 2019.



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Public Goods, Club Goods, and Private Interests: The Influence of Domestic Business Elites on British Counter-Piracy Interventions in the South China Sea, 1921–35

Edward R. Lucas 

ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on the question of how domestic elite preferences drive states' foreign policies by studying British efforts to suppress maritime piracy in the South China Sea in the 1920s and 1930s. The archival record shows that the British conducted military interventions, which included destroying entire Chinese villages, principally to serve the private aims of London business elites. Absent these parochial interests Britain ignored pirate attacks, including attacks on British-flagged ships. This finding challenges the standard structural explanation, put forward by global public goods scholars, that powerful maritime states suppress piracy to protect universal access to the global maritime commons. It does so through a detailed examination of the principal example cited by this argument's supporters: historical British counter-piracy efforts. Understanding why states pursue their foreign policies also provides a greater understanding of why powerful states choose to serve as global public goods providers in some instances but not in others.

In the early morning of 23 March 1927, the residents of two coastal villages in mainland China, seventy-five miles east of Hong Kong, awoke to find a British Royal Navy aircraft carrier and several other warships stationed off-shore. A landing party of three hundred Royal Marines and Hong Kong police destroyed both villages and sank forty fishing boats. The raid was retaliation for an attack two days earlier against the steamship *Hop Sang*, owned by the British company Jardine Matheson. Pirates disguised as passengers had overwhelmed the steamship's crew and diverted it to Bias Bay, where they disembarked with a large haul of looted goods.¹ While piracy was common in the South China Sea during the 1920s and 1930s, British

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¹"The Pirates of Bias Bay," *Times* [London], 25 March 1927, 14; Bias Bay is now known as Daya Bay. I use the older name for consistency with quoted archival sources.

military intervention was not. London chose to ignore most pirate attacks, including attacks against oceangoing British-flagged vessels. What distinguished the *Hop Sang* piracy from most other attacks was not the ship's cargo, route, or flag, but its owners' elite social status.

Global public goods scholars typically present British military interventions to suppress piracy in the imperial era as quintessential examples of a maritime hegemon's intentional provision of global public goods.² British historical examples are also used to promote an activist United States foreign policy today.³ The efforts to protect international maritime trade serve as a core empirical foundation for the broader claim that powerful states play a crucial stabilizing role in the international system. Based on the tenets of hegemonic-stability theory, the standard, structural explanation of counter-piracy presents powerful states as willing to take a leading role to ensure universal access to the global maritime commons and secure trade routes. These actions are not carried out for altruistic reasons; instead, maritime hegemons view securing the commons as being in their rational self-interest—as doing so can maintain or increase their access to overseas markets—and this self-interest motivates them to willingly serve as global public goods providers.⁴ Thus, global public goods theory posits that powerful states serve as public goods providers when and where they perceive their national interests as overlapping with those of the international system as a whole.

Despite serving as the empirical cornerstone for much of global public goods theory, international relations scholars have paid scant attention to the sources of British interest in suppressing piracy in the imperial era.⁵ As a result, global public goods scholars cannot adequately explain the significant

²"Maritime hegemon" denotes a central subcategory of hegemonic status that focuses on the ability to exert unsurpassed commercial and military influence in the maritime realm. This status is a function of both naval power and maritime commerce, such as percentage of global maritime trade and control of overseas markets. See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (New York: Scribner, 1976), 164; Michael Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower: America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), 98; Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 142–45.

³Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005), 14; Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The American National Interest and Global Public Goods," *International Affairs* 78, no. 2 (April 2002): 233–44; Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Will the Liberal Order Survive? The History of an Idea," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 1 (January–February 2017): 12.

⁴Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Stephen D. Krasner, "State Power and the Structure of International Trade," *World Politics* 28, no. 3 (April 1976): 317–47.

⁵The same critique cannot be leveled at historians, as many have examined the relationships between pirates, empires, and international law in detail. Unfortunately, this body of research has been absent from the global public goods discussion within international relations. For example, see Lauren Benton, "Toward a New Legal History of Piracy: Maritime Legalities and the Myth of Universal Jurisdiction," *International Journal of Maritime History* 23, no. 1 (June 2011): 225–40; Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Introduction to 'The Concept of Piracy,'" *Humanity* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 23–25; Simon Layton, "The 'Moghul's Admiral': Angrian 'Piracy' and the Rise of British Bombay," *Journal of Early Modern History* 17, no. 1 (January 2013): 75–93; Anne Pérotin-Dumon, "The Pirate and the Emperor: Power and Law on the Seas, 1450–1850," in *Bandits at Sea: A Pirates Reader*, ed. C. R. Pennell (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 25–54; Amedeo Policante, "The New Pirate Wars: The World Market as Imperial Formation," *Global Discourse* 3, no. 1 (2013): 52–71.

variation in powerful states' response to piracy over the past two hundred years; both Britain historically, and the United States in the contemporary era, have often chosen to ignore major instances of piracy. I address this gap in the scholarship by asking: Why, and under what conditions, do maritime hegemons intervene to suppress piracy? Studying how states determine their foreign policies is a seminal question in international relations. Because of the prominence of counter-piracy examples in public goods scholarship, this question allows for a broader investigation of the causal mechanisms that lead powerful states to serve as global public goods providers. Together with a thorough account of why past events occurred, a more complete understanding of state motivations allows for a generalized understanding of the conditions under which powerful states provide global public goods.

I examine this question through a study of South China Sea piracy during the interwar period—a significant and sustained episode of pirate activity that scholars have almost entirely overlooked.⁶ Between 1921 and 1935, pirates based in Bias Bay hijacked hundreds of vessels in the South China Sea, including at least thirty-five large, oceangoing steamships transiting in international waters.⁷ Despite being the region's dominant maritime power, the British largely ignored this problem. Following particular instances of piracy, however, Britain launched punitive military actions, landing troops in mainland China to burn villages. Officials even considered razing an entire Chinese township, which would have left as many as ten thousand people homeless. Based primarily on original research conducted in government and business archives in the United Kingdom and Hong Kong, I argue that pressure from domestic business elites played a critical role in spurring London to pursue robust counter-piracy measures. Absent this pressure—or when it originated from those lacking sufficient social capital⁸—the British chose to ignore piracy. This finding serves as a basis for revising the standard structural explanation of maritime hegemons' interests in suppressing piracy to account for domestic-level factors. Rather than intentionally serving as a global public goods provider when it perceived national interests overlapping with systemic ones, the British government sought to provide club goods to serve the interests of elites with the requisite social status.⁹ Because the drivers of parochial interests differ from those

⁶Despite the attention paid to the Bias Bay pirates at the time, I know of no published sources, scholarly or otherwise, that examine this case in detail. Aspects of this case are discussed in Christopher J. Bowie, "Great Britain and the Use of Force in China, 1919 to 1931" (PhD diss., Oxford University, 1983); Peter Singleton, "Defining Piracy: The Chung Tam Kwong Case and British Piracy Suppression in China in the Early 1930s," *Great Circle* 5, no. 1 (April 1983): 48–63; and Iain Ward *Sui Geng: The Hong Kong Marine Police 1841–1950* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1991).

⁷A list of attacks is included in Table 1.

⁸Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–58.

⁹Like public goods, club goods are nonrivalrous; however, unlike public goods, they are exclusionary in that benefits are limited to those in "the club."

of national ones, and in many instances are more limited in scope (particularly than those of a powerful state), they typically overlap with systemic interests less frequently. This suggests that maritime hegemons intervene against pirates less frequently—or at least under different conditions—than suggested by the standard structural account.

The Bias Bay piracy case is well suited for studying maritime hegemons' motivations for intervening to suppress pirate attacks. Because this paper examines government decision making, it is important to study a historical period when communication technology permitted central authorities to stay in regular contact with military forces and diplomats around the world. Prior to the establishment of a global telegraph network in the latter half of the nineteenth century, ships and overseas colonies were cut off from central authorities for months or even years at a time.¹⁰ British decisions to carry out significant military interventions in response to acts of piracy were often taken by local authorities rather than London.¹¹ Although Britain's relative maritime power decreased during the interwar period, no force surpassed the Royal Navy in terms of gross tonnage until the mid-1930s, and the British possessed the world's largest merchant fleet until the middle of the twentieth century.¹² The Royal Navy also retained its dominant position in the South China Sea until Japanese maritime expansion in the mid-1930s. Thus, Great Britain can be classified as a maritime hegemon in this period, albeit a declining one.

This paper proceeds as follows: after a brief examination of the maritime piracy literature, I present two separate causal explanations for counter-piracy intervention alongside a discussion of the empirical evidence required to distinguish between these competing logics. I follow this with a study of South China Sea piracy between 1921 and 1935, with attention paid to the British decision-making process. I separate the case into three temporal phases, determined by Britain's response (or lack thereof) to pirate attacks in China. The three phases allow for a within-case analysis of British motivations. I conclude with a discussion of the case study's overall findings and their implications for understanding foreign policy decision making more broadly.

Counter-Piracy and the Provision of Global Public Goods

Although the spike in Somali piracy between 2007 and 2012 generated considerable research, counter-piracy remains an undertheorized subject. Scholars have tended to examine how maritime hegemons suppress piracy

¹⁰Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

¹¹Grace E. Fox, *British Admirals and Chinese Pirates, 1832–1869* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1940); Gerald S. Graham, *The China Station: War and Diplomacy 1830–1860* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1978).

¹²Ian Friel, *A Maritime History of Britain and Ireland* (London: British Museum Press, 2003).

rather than why they chose to do so in the first place.¹³ When the sources of powerful states' interests are addressed, military intervention to suppress piracy is typically presented as an intentional effort to secure international shipping routes and ensure universal access to the global maritime commons.¹⁴ These benefits constitute public goods because they are nonexclusionary and nonrivalrous: all merchant vessels enjoy the benefits of pirate-free seas, and the security accorded to any particular vessel does not subtract from the security of the whole.¹⁵ There is no requirement that goods be provided intentionally to be considered public; however, the standard explanation of counter-piracy asserts that powerful states, like Britain historically or the United States today, protect global shipping based on conscious strategic calculations. Thus, this standard structural account is concerned not only with policy outcomes but also with powerful states' motivations for pursuing these policies. This account derives from the tenets of hegemonic-stability theory, which posits that a state dominating the international system through a combination of military and economic power intentionally takes a leading role in providing stable global trade because it stands to benefit most relative to other states.¹⁶ While a hegemon, like any other state, acts in its rational self-interest, the scope of its interests are global. As a result, hegemonic interests frequently overlap with those of the international system as a whole, leading a powerful state to choose to serve as a global public goods provider. The more powerful the state, the greater its interests in the management of the international system.

¹³Christian Bueger, "Territory, Authority, Expertise: Global Governance and the Counter-Piracy Assemblage," *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (September 2018): 614–37; Christian Bueger and Jan Stockbruegger, "Security Communities, Alliances, and Macrosecuritization: The Practices of Counter-Piracy Governance," in *Maritime Piracy and the Construction of Global Governance*, ed. Michael J. Struett, Jon D. Carlson, and Mark T. Nance (New York: Routledge, 2013), 99–124; Ursula E. Daxecker and Brandon C. Prins, "The New Barbary Wars: Forecasting Maritime Piracy," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 11, no. 1 (January 2015): 23–44; Ursula Daxecker and Brandon C. Prins, "Enforcing Order: Territorial Reach and Maritime Piracy," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 34, no. 4 (July 2017): 359–79; Justin V. Hastings, "Understanding Maritime Piracy Syndicate Operations," *Security Studies* 21, no. 4 (October–December 2012): 683–721; Justin S. Lewis, "Maritime Piracy Confrontations across the Globe: Can Crew Action Shape the Outcomes?" *Marine Policy* 64 (February 2016): 116–22; Edward R. Lucas, "Somalia's 'Pirate Cycle': The Three Phases of Somali Piracy," *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 55–63; Martin N. Murphy, *Somalia: The New Barbary? Piracy and Islam in the Horn of Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Sarah Percy and Anja Shortland, "Contemporary Maritime Piracy: Five Obstacles to Ending Somali Piracy," *Global Policy* 4, no. 1 (February 2013): 65–72.

¹⁴Mandelbaum, *Case for Goliath*, 14; Mandelbaum, *Frugal Superpower*, 98; Nye, "American National Interest and Global Public Goods"; Nye, *Paradox of American Power*, 142–45; Nye, "Will the Liberal Order Survive?," 12.

¹⁵Scott Barrett, *Why Cooperate? The Incentive to Supply Global Public Goods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁶Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Kindleberger, *World in Depression, 1929–1939*; Krasner, "State Power and the Structure of International Trade"; G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition: Essays on American Power and International Order* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006), 24; Josef Joffe, "Defying History and Theory: The United States as the 'Last Remaining Superpower,'" in *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power*, ed. G. John Ikenberry (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 155–80; Jens Ringsmose, "NATO: A Public Goods Provider," in *Theorising NATO: New Perspectives on the Atlantic Alliance*, ed. Mark Webber and Adrian Hyde-Price (New York: Routledge, 2016), 201–22.

Britain's historical experiences in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries serve as the empirical foundation for presenting counter-piracy as an example of global public goods provision by a maritime hegemon. Paul Kennedy explains British military counter-piracy interventions as helping to ensure safe passage for all vessels, regardless of their flag state. While British merchants were the intended beneficiaries of these efforts, "the fact that the general benefits of this campaign fell to all nations was never grudged."¹⁷ Similarly, international relations scholars view powerful states as motivated to suppress piracy as part of an intentional effort to protect international trade flows and globalization. For Joseph S. Nye Jr., "maintaining open international commons such as freedom of the seas and the suppression of piracy" constituted one of the three classic public goods provided by the British Empire. This is instructive for the contemporary era, as the "United States, like nineteenth-century Britain, has an interest in keeping international commons, such as the oceans, open to all."¹⁸ Similarly, Michael Mandelbaum states that the "British navy patrolled the sea lanes along which much of the world's commerce passed," and that in "the second half of the twentieth century, the United States succeeded Britain, assuming the responsibility for providing secure geopolitical conditions for trade."¹⁹ Mandelbaum views the provision of the global public good of secure sea-lanes as part of the United States' role of *Ordnungsmacht* (order maker), and in this sense it "functions as the world's government."²⁰ As a result, the United States retains the dominant—and often unique—"responsibility for quasi-governmental tasks that are vital to global order," including "furnishing security for international economic activity."²¹ Contemporary US government policy statements also reflect the idea that it suppresses piracy to protect international maritime trade and ensure universal access to the maritime commons. A 2008 National Security Council action plan describes the American strategy to counter Somali pirates as being "in the interest of the global economy, [and] freedom of navigation."²² Similarly, the 2015 National Maritime Strategy outlines the Navy's role in upholding "the laws, rules, and norms that govern standards of behavior in the maritime commons for transit, trade, and the pursuit of natural resources."²³

¹⁷Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 164–65.

¹⁸Nye, "American National Interest and Global Public Goods"; Nye, *Paradox of American Power*, 144; Nye, "Will the Liberal Order Survive?"

¹⁹Mandelbaum, *Case for Goliath*, 14.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 9–18.

²¹Mandelbaum, *Frugal Superpower*, 98.

²²National Security Council, "Countering Piracy Off the Horn of Africa: Partnership and Action Plan" (December 2008), 3.

²³"A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower" (March 2015), <http://www.navy.mil/local/maritime/150227-CS21R-Final.pdf>.

Hegemonic-stability theory has faced many conceptual and empirical critiques since its first appearance.²⁴ Despite this, it remains the theoretical basis for the standard structural-level account of powerful states' efforts to suppress piracy in both historical and contemporary contexts. According to this account, because powerful states have an "interest in keeping international commons ... open to all," maritime hegemons intentionally take on the burden of public goods provision.²⁵ Using British counter-piracy as their principal historical evidence, public goods scholars, like Nye and Mandelbaum, make general claims about the essential role powerful states play in providing order to the international system. These claims, in turn, are used to promote an interventionist—or at least activist—American foreign policy today.²⁶ Missing from this chain of argument, however, is a detailed empirical examination of the causal mechanisms that motivate powerful states to combat pirates. As a result, public goods theorists do not adequately address the question of why maritime hegemons sometimes act to suppress piracy, but at other times do not. In order to explain this variation, and to shed light on foreign policy decision making more broadly, it is necessary to look within the black box of the state and examine the domestic sources of counter-piracy policies.

A Domestic-Level Explanation of Counter-Piracy Intervention

The standard structural account of counter-piracy intervention presented by global public goods scholars assumes states are rational, unitary actors that weigh the costs and benefits of foreign policy decisions before acting. A domestic-level analysis, alternatively, conceives of the state as "a representative institution constantly subject to capture and recapture." Actors who possess sufficient influence are able to use the apparatuses of power to achieve their own foreign policy goals. This is primarily a bottom-up view, where the "fundamental actors in international politics are individuals and private groups." As these actors' interests are "analytically prior to politics," it is their beliefs and desires that shape a state's foreign policies.²⁷ Political scientists have examined a vast array of different actors at the domestic

²⁴Joanne Gowa, "Rational Hegemons, Excludable Goods, and Small Groups: An Epitaph for Hegemonic Stability Theory?" *World Politics* 41, no. 3 (April 1989): 307–24; Timothy J. McKeown, "Hegemonic Stability Theory and 19th Century Tariff Levels in Europe," *International Organization* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 73–91; James Ashley Morrison, "Before Hegemony: Adam Smith, American Independence, and the Origins of the First Era of Globalization," *International Organization* 66, no. 3 (July 2012): 395–428; Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International Organization* 39, no. 4 (Autumn 1985): 579–614; Michael C. Webb and Stephen D. Krasner, "Hegemonic Stability Theory: An Empirical Assessment," *Review of International Studies* 15, no. 2 (April 1989): 183–98.

²⁵Nye, *Paradox of American Power*, 144.

²⁶Nye, "Will the Liberal Order Survive?"

²⁷Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 516–18.

level, with a particular focus on corporations.²⁸ While scholars have paid most attention to domestic issues, they have also studied how private interests influence government foreign policy decisions, ranging from those of agricultural trade to grand strategy.²⁹ Outside the liberal tradition, neoclassical realists also take into account domestic-level factors to explain foreign policy decision making.³⁰ However, although most recent studies of foreign policy emphasize domestic issues, explanations of powerful states' interests in suppressing piracy remain wedded to structural-level assumptions rooted in hegemonic-stability theory.

The study of business influence on politics has a long history that extends beyond the political science literature. Adam Smith warned of merchants' ability to persuade legislatures to pass laws supporting their parochial interests.³¹ Building off Marx and Engels's claim that the "executive of the modern state is nothing but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie,"³² instrumental Marxists focus on the capitalist class' ability to shape state policy.³³ Historians have examined the influence of Britain's "gentlemanly capitalists" over its gentlemanly states-

²⁸Frank R. Baumgartner et al., *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); David Coen, "The European Business Interest and the Nation State: Large-Firm Lobbying in the European Union and Member States," *Journal of Public Policy* 18, no. 1 (January–April 1998): 75–100; David Coen, "Empirical and Theoretical Studies in EU Lobbying," *Journal of European Public Policy* 14, no. 3 (2007): 333–45; Anne Therese Gullberg, "Lobbying Friends and Foes in Climate Policy: The Case of Business and Environmental Interest Groups in the European Union," *Energy Policy* 36, no. 8 (August 2008): 2964–72; Helen V. Milner and Dustin H. Tingley, *Sailing the Water's Edge: The Domestic Politics of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 77–121; Mark A. Smith, *American Business and Political Power: Public Opinion, Elections, and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Benjamin C. Waterhouse, *Lobbying America: The Politics of Business from Nixon to NAFTA* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); John R. Wright, *Interest Groups and Congress: Lobbying, Contributions and Influence* (New York: Pearson, 2003).

²⁹Benjamin O. Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of U.S. National Security Policy, 1949–51* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Jeffrey A. Frieden, "The Economics of Intervention: American Overseas Investments and Relations with Underdeveloped Areas, 1890–1950," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 1 (January 1989): 55–80; Kishore Gawande and Bernard Hoekman, "Lobbying and Agricultural Trade Policy in the United States," *International Organization* 60, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 527–61; Kevin Narizny, *The Political Economy of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); James H. Nolt, *International Political Economy: The Business of War and Peace* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Etel Solingen, *Regional Orders at Century's Dawn: Global and Domestic Influences on Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Peter Trubowitz, *Defining the National Interest: Conflict and Change in American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Bastiaan van Apeldoorn and Nana de Graaff, "Corporate Elite Networks and US Post–Cold War Grand Strategy from Clinton to Obama," *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 1 (March 2014): 29–55; Patricia T. Young and Jack S. Levy, "Domestic Politics and the Escalation of Commercial Rivalry: Explaining the War of Jenkins' Ear, 1739–48," *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 2 (June 2011): 209–32.

³⁰Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998): 144–72; Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³¹Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Lausanne, Switzerland: MetaLibri, 2007), 502.

³²Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2002), 221.

³³Sam Aaronovitch, *The Ruling Class: A Study of British Finance Capital* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1961); Harold Joseph Laski, *The Foundations of Sovereignty and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1921); Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (Basic Books, 1969).

men in considerable detail.³⁴ Elite-theory scholars use Max Weber's concept of a "status group,"³⁵ as distinct from class, to examine how social elites shape government policy.³⁶ Elites form longstanding and close social networks through familial ties, shared experiences in prestigious educational institutions, and membership in exclusive social clubs. These networks—or social capital—are "the product of investment strategies ... aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term."³⁷ Like economic capital, social capital is convertible into political influence. Business elites with social connections to government officials can more easily gain access to policymakers than those without. Calls for action and requests for assistance originating from within a socially cohesive elite status group are more likely to be heeded than requests from lower-status outsiders.³⁸ Ethnographic and historical studies of Britain demonstrate the close social ties between government officials and business elites, both at home and in the colonies during the period in question.³⁹ While the interwar period witnessed significant social changes, men from high-status family and educational backgrounds continued to dominate the upper echelons of government and business.⁴⁰ For example, only in 1919 did it become possible to join the Foreign Office without possessing a private income.⁴¹

As maritime piracy targets commerce, an examination of states' motivations for suppressing pirate attacks must account for the role that commercial interests play in shaping the decision-making process. A domestic-level explanation, rooted in the longstanding liberal tradition of international-relations theory, posits that maritime hegemony intervenes to suppress piracy in response to

³⁴For a discussion of "gentlemanly capitalism," see P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688–2000* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2002), 646–47.

³⁵Max Weber, *Sociological Writings: Max Weber*, ed. Wolf Heydebrand (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1994), 107–20.

³⁶Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (September 2014): 564–81; C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939); Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society*, vol. 4 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935); John Scott, *The Upper Classes: Property and Privilege in Britain* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982); Michael Useem, *The Inner Circle: Large Corporations and the Rise of Business Political Activity in the U.S. and U.K.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Jeffrey A. Winters, *Oligarchy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³⁷There is no single agreed-upon definition of "social capital." I use this term as employed by Pierre Bourdieu, who focuses on high-status individuals' ability to mobilize networks of connections for their own advantage. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 249; Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1996).

³⁸Scott, *Upper Classes*, 158–62; Useem, *Inner Circle*, 63.

³⁹Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism, 1900–1949* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Howard Glennerster and Richard Pryke, "The Contribution of the Public Schools and Oxbridge: 1 'Born to Rule,'" in *Power in Britain: Sociological Readings*, ed. John Urry and John Wakeford (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1973), 213–25; Tom Lupton and C. Shirley Wilson, "The Social Background and Connections of 'Top Decision Makers,'" *Manchester School* 27, no. 1 (January 1959): 30–51; Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, 37.

⁴⁰A list of this case study's key figures, with details on educational background, is included in Table 2.

⁴¹Anthony Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain* (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1962).

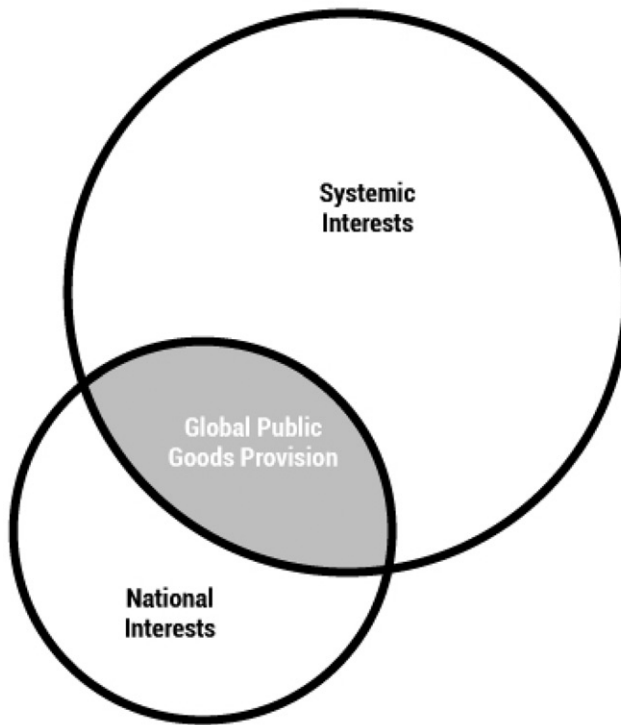


Figure 1. Standard account of global public goods provision.

pressure from business elites. Powerful states do not seek to provide global public goods, like secure sea-lanes and universal access to the global maritime commons, when these systemic interests overlap with their own extensive national ones, as portrayed in the standard, structural account (see Figure 1). Instead, they seek to provide club goods to benefit the private interests of those actors with the requisite social capital to influence government policy-making.⁴² While these actions may still result in public goods provision, this is an unintentional byproduct, not the intentional result of strategic calculations. These differing causal mechanisms have important implications for understanding hegemonic behavior. Parochial interests do not always align with national ones, and, at times, pursuing the private concerns of individuals and groups can prove detrimental to broader state interests.⁴³ Private and club goods, like protecting particular shipping companies' vessels, are also typically more limited in scope than the national interests of a powerful state and

⁴²Originating in economics, club theory was "intended to bridge the gap between private and pure public goods." While sharing some of the characteristics of public goods, club goods are exclusionary, as they are limited to the membership unit—unlike pure public goods. James M. Buchanan, "An Economic Theory of Clubs," *Economica* [New Series] 32, no. 125 (February 1965): 1–14; Todd Sandler and John Tschirhart, "Club Theory: Thirty Years Later," *Public Choice* 93, no. 3/4 (1997): 335–55.

⁴³For a study of this phenomenon, see Noel Maurer, *The Empire Trap: The Rise and Fall of U.S. Intervention to Protect American Property Overseas, 1893–2013* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

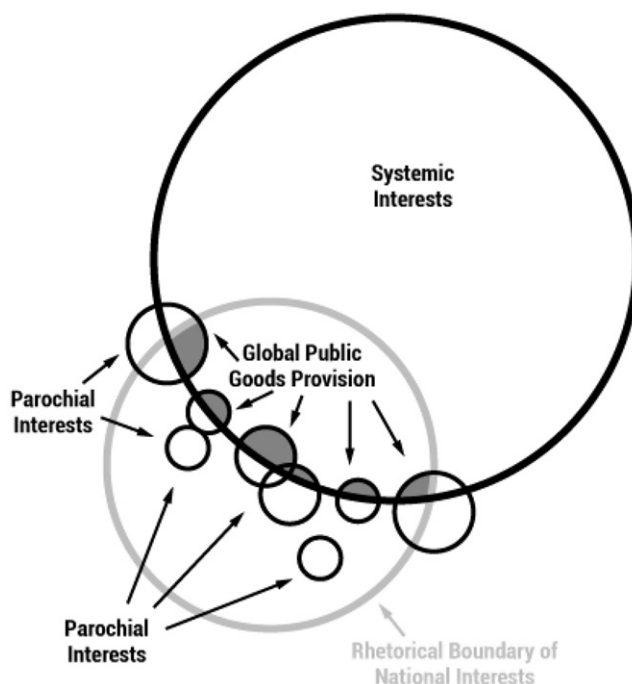


Figure 2. Domestic-level account of global public goods provision.

therefore will not overlap with systemic interests as frequently (see [Figure 2](#)). Thus, a domestic-level account suggests that powerful states will provide the global public goods of secure sea-lanes and universal access to the maritime commons less frequently, or at least under different conditions, than is assumed in the standard, structural account of counter-piracy.

Comparing Competing Explanations of Counter-Piracy Policy

In order to compare the validity of the structural and domestic-level explanations of state motivations for combatting pirates, it is necessary to examine the decision-making process in detail. For interwar Britain, this requires in-depth research in government archives, with a particular focus on Foreign Office, Admiralty, Cabinet, and Colonial Office records. Because the domestic-level theory alleges a significant role for business elites, it is also necessary to examine the archives of large, London-based firms with significant commercial interests in China, like Jardine Matheson and John Swire & Sons, Ltd.⁴⁴

The archival evidence needed to support these competing explanations differs significantly. According to scholars like Nye and

⁴⁴Jardine Matheson and Swire & Sons were two of the largest British firms operating in China at the time. See Geoffrey Jones, *Merchants to Multinationals: British Trading Companies in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Mandelbaum, maritime hegemons intentionally shoulder the burden of providing public goods of secure international maritime trade and access to the global maritime commons. If this standard, structural-level explanation is correct, British military interventions should come in response to attacks carried out against commercial vessels with little regard paid to the flag-state of the ship or the crew's and passengers' nationalities. Documentary evidence supporting this account would include records demonstrating a comparable interest from within government for all attacks on large commercial vessels. Internal government correspondences could also reference the need to protect maritime trade more broadly as one of the principal reasons for intervening against piracy.

Alternatively, if the domestic-level explanation is correct, documentary evidence would need to demonstrate sustained lobbying efforts by business elites demanding that Britain do more to suppress piracy. This claim would require corroboration from both government and business archives, for example, through correspondences from shipping company executives to government officials requesting better protection for their ships. To demonstrate that this explanation is valid, however, it would necessary to show that these efforts influenced British government policies. Establishing a causal relationship with archival research is a significant challenge. To substantiate this claim, Britain should have been more willing to intervene militarily following attacks on ships owned by London-based business elites than following attacks on ships (including British-flagged ships) owned by those who lacked social capital. Further support for this explanation could come from uncovering close personal ties between business and political elites and demonstrating how these ties facilitated business-elite access to senior decision makers. With these points in mind, I turn now to the case of Bias Bay piracy.

The Bias Bay Pirates: 1921–35

Phase I (1921–26): Inaction

Maritime banditry has a long history in East and Southeast Asia.⁴⁵ Significant British involvement in the region began in the early nineteenth century, with the growth of the opium trade and the establishment of the Hong Kong colony. While the British always considered themselves victims of pirates,

⁴⁵For historical accounts of piracy in China, see Robert J. Antony, ed., *Elusive Pirates, Pervasive Smugglers: Violence and Clandestine Trade in the Greater China Seas* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010); Fox, *British Admirals and Chinese Pirates, 1832–1869*; Dian H. Murray, *Pirates of the South China Coast, 1790–1810* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); Nicholas Tarling, *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World: A Study of British Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century South-East Asia* (Melbourne, Australia: F. W. Cheshire, 1963).

Table 1. Attacks by Bias Bay against oceangoing steamships, 1921–35.

Date	Ship's Name	Registration	Owner
PHASE 1			
December-15-21	<i>Kwong Lee</i>	Chinese	China Maritime Steamship Navigation Co.
November-19-22	<i>Sui An</i>	British	Hong Kong, Canton, and Macao Steamboat Co.
May-13-23	<i>Tai Shun</i>	Chinese	China Maritime Steamship Navigation Co.
September-08-23	<i>Hsin Chang</i>	Chinese	China Maritime Steamship Navigation Co.
October-23-23	<i>Sun Ning</i>	Chinese	Shui Hing Steamship Co.
December-05-23	<i>Ka Ngo</i>	Chinese	Mr. So Wah Hing (individual)
December-27-23	<i>Hydrangea</i>	British	Chiu On Steamship Co.
October-03-24	<i>Ning Shin</i>	Chinese	San Peh Steamship Navigation Co.
January-13-25	<i>Hong Hwa</i>	British	Ho Hong Steamship Co.
May-03-25	<i>Hui Hai</i>	Chinese	Tung Hing Steamship Co.
December-18-25	<i>Tung Chow</i>	British	John Swire & Sons (Butterfield & Swire)
February-07-26	<i>Jade</i>	French	Shun Cheung Steamship Co.
March-25-26	<i>Hsin Kong</i>	Chinese	China Maritime Steamship Navigation Co.
August-06-26	<i>Hoi Nam</i>	Chinese	Mr. Leung Kwong Kee (individual)
August-21-26	<i>Sandviken</i>	Norwegian	Wallen & Co., agents (chartered by USSR)
October-01-26	<i>Hsin Fung</i>	Chinese	China Maritime Steamship Navigation Co.
November-11-26	<i>Hanoi</i>	French	Indo-China Steamship Navigation Co.
PHASE 2			
November-15-26	<i>Sunning</i>	British	John Swire & Sons (Butterfield & Swire)
December-22-26	<i>Hang An</i>	Chinese	Great China Steamship Co.
January-07-27	<i>Seang Bee</i>	British	China & Southern Trading Co.
March-21-27	<i>Hop Sang</i>	British	Jardine Matheson (Indo-China Steamship Navigation Co.)
May-06-27	<i>Feng Fu</i>	Chinese	San Peh Steamship Navigation Co.
July-20-27	<i>Solviken</i>	Norwegian	Wallen & Co., Agents (chartered by USSR)
August-27-27	<i>Hsinchi</i>	Chinese	China Maritime Steamship Navigation Co.
August-30-27	<i>Yat Shing</i>	British	Jardine Matheson (Indo-China Steamship Navigation Co.)
October-19-27	<i>Irene</i>	Chinese	China Maritime Steamship Navigation Co.
PHASE 3			
February-24-28	<i>Hua An</i>	Chinese	Sheung On Steamship Co.
April-14-28	<i>Hsin Wah</i>	Chinese	China Maritime Steamship Navigation Co.
May-27-28	<i>Teau</i>	British	John Swire & Sons (Butterfield & Swire)
September-26-28	<i>Anking</i>	British	John Swire & Sons (Butterfield & Swire)
July-12-29	<i>Haiching</i>	British	Douglas Steamship Co.
September-29	<i>Deli Maru</i>	Japanese	Osaka Shosen Kaisha
November-30	<i>Hirundo</i>	Norwegian	[Unknown]
November-18-31	<i>Hanyang</i>	British	John Swire & Sons (Butterfield & Swire)
January-29-35	<i>Tungchow</i>	British	John Swire & Sons (Butterfield & Swire)

Chinese merchants bore the brunt of the attacks. Archival evidence also supports Chinese accusations of European predation, including attacks carried out by British subjects, against Chinese mariners.⁴⁶ A combination of factors in the latter half of the nineteenth century, including the introduction of steamships, led to the end of the large pirate fleets common in earlier eras.⁴⁷ The political instability caused by the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912 and the ensuing prolonged civil war, however, meant a return of pirate activity in China. As Beijing ceased to exercise authority over much of the country, banditry and warlordism increased. In coastal regions, bandits focused

⁴⁶Edward R. Lucas, "Fighting Pirates: Maritime Hegemons' Interests in Combatting Piracy" (PhD diss., American University, 2016), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1807960079/?pq-origsite=primo>. Perhaps the best-known example of Chinese accusations of British piracy came at the outset of the Arrow War in 1856. J. Y. Wong, *Deadly Dreams: Opium and the Arrow War (1856–1860) in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁷Fox, *British Admirals and Chinese Pirates, 1832–1869*, 185–86; Murray, *Pirates of the South China Coast, 1790–1810*.

their attention on the most lucrative targets: the merchant ships that transited between Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, and elsewhere. The most active pirates operating in the South China Sea were based out of Bias Bay in Guangdong Province, seventy-five miles northeast of Hong Kong. Although these pirates hijacked ships throughout East and Southeast Asia, captured vessels were brought to Bias Bay to be looted.

One of the earliest reported attacks on an oceangoing steamship attributed to these pirates occurred in December 1921 when they attacked the Chinese-flagged *Kwong Lee* while it was en route from Shanghai to Hong Kong. Although the pirates shot a Chinese passenger and stole approximately £300,000⁴⁸ worth of valuables, there was little reaction from British authorities.⁴⁹ Britain's response to the piracy of the British-flagged *Sui An* eleven months later was somewhat less muted. Owned by Hong Kong merchants, the *Sui An* was transiting from Macao to Hong Kong when pirates, who had boarded as passengers, seized it.⁵⁰ Because of the attack, the governor of Hong Kong, Sir Reginald Stubbs, established a special anti-piracy commission in the colony.⁵¹ Following the pirate attacks on several other vessels near Hong Kong, including a local ferry, Stubbs proposed a combined military expedition with local Cantonese forces situated in Guangzhou to attack suspected pirate villages. The Cantonese declined the offer, stating that they "were willing and able to deal with [the] situation themselves."⁵²

The increase in attacks led local Hong Kong merchants to demand greater naval protection for their vessels.⁵³ Although London received these proposals, British diplomats were concerned that robust counter-piracy efforts could increase anti-British sentiment in China. In the view of the consul general in Guangzhou, Sir James Jamieson, landing troops in China was "not called for" in these instances.⁵⁴ The piracy of the British-flagged *Hydrangea*, also owned by Hong Kong merchants, elicited a similar response from Foreign Office officials, who viewed military actions to suppress piracy as "quite inconsistent with our policy of non-intervention."⁵⁵

As piracy continued to flourish throughout 1924, British officials in China faced increasing demands from local Hong Kong merchants that they take a harder line against pirates.⁵⁶ To reduce attacks on British ships, Jamieson proposed limiting the number of vessels allowed to register as

⁴⁸All amounts of pounds sterling listed in this article are in 2018 value.

⁴⁹Bowie, "Great Britain and the Use of Force in China, 1919 to 1931," 171.

⁵⁰"Report of the 'Sui An' Piracy Commission," 8 February 1923, Foreign Office [hereafter FO] 228/2873, The National Archives of the United Kingdom [hereafter TNA].

⁵¹Bowie, "Great Britain and the Use of Force in China, 1919 to 1931," 171.

⁵²Ronald Macleay to Foreign Office, 13 January 1924, FO 371/10249 (F139/30/10), TNA.

⁵³"Extract of a Report by Commander-in-Chief China Station," 30 November 1923, FO 371/10249 (F1127/30/10), TNA.

⁵⁴Jamieson to Foreign Office, 23 November 1923, FO 228/2873 (F138), TNA.

⁵⁵B. Newton (minute), 7 January 1924, FO 371/10249 (F30/30/10), TNA.

⁵⁶"Notes on Piracy in the Delta 1924," 14 May 1925, FO 371/10933 (F2964/94/10), TNA.

British. He admitted that although removing “from the Hong Kong register all ships not owned by indisputably British companies ... would not prevent piracy, it would at any rate prevent the occurrence of insults to the British flag.” Although this proposal was rejected as impracticable, that it was considered at all points to a distinction in the minds of officials between the owners of British vessels. While these locally owned vessels employed white British officers, government officials dismissed them as “beachcomber types,” denoting their low social status.⁵⁷

The archival record lists attacks against three oceangoing vessels by the Bias Bay pirates in 1925—two British and one Chinese. In January, pirates hijacked the British-flagged *Hong Hwa*, en route from Singapore to Hong Kong. The ship was owned by Lim Peng Siang, a British subject and wealthy Singaporean merchant. The *Hong Hwa* was diverted to Bias Bay, where the pirates disembarked, taking over £260,000 in loot.⁵⁸ Eight days later, a detachment of Cantonese soldiers raided the village in cooperation with a small contingent of Hong Kong police.⁵⁹ In May, pirates hijacked the Chinese-flagged *Hui Hai*.⁶⁰ Unlike the *Hong Hwa* attack, this act of piracy elicited no official British reaction. The absence of response to the piracy of the Chinese ship becomes more apparent when compared to the attack on the *Tung Chow*, a vessel owned by the London-based company John Swire & Sons. On 18 December 1925, pirates hijacked the *Tung Chow* as it transited between Shanghai and the Shandong Peninsula in northern China.⁶¹ In response, Swire & Sons senior managers began calling for government action, stating that their status as tax-paying British merchants entitled them to Royal Navy protection.⁶² This lobbying was primarily conducted via social contacts within the British government. Confidential Swire & Sons correspondence stated that Sir Sidney Barton, the British consul in Shanghai, “is doing his utmost to get the British government to realize that action by the Navy is the only cure for these attacks.”⁶³ Government records corroborate this, as a telegraph from Barton to the Royal Navy urged “that immediate action be taken by the British Naval authorities to deal with [the] pirate base in Bias Bay.”⁶⁴ The Navy acted upon the

⁵⁷Jamieson to Foreign Office, 17 June 1924, FO 371/10251 (F2223/30/10), TNA.

⁵⁸“General Report on the Piracy of the S.S. ‘Hong Hwa,’” 3 March 1925, FO 371/10933 (F1532/94/10), TNA.

⁵⁹“Raid on Pirates’ Lairs,” *Times*, 22 January 1925, *Times* Digital Archive.

⁶⁰“Piracies of Sea Going Ships Committed by Bias Bay Pirates since 1921,” 29 August 1929, FO 371/13916 (F5736/72/10), TNA.

⁶¹“Piracy of S.S. *Tung Chow*,” 1 March 1926, FO 371/11670 (F860/84/10), TNA.

⁶²Swire & Sons to Austen Chamberlain, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, December 1925, FO 371/10933 (F6149/94/10), TNA.

⁶³John Swire & Sons internal correspondence: Shanghai to London, 31 December 1925, John Swire & Sons Archives [hereafter JSS] XII 1 1/7 (Box A32).

⁶⁴Sidney Barton, Consul General, Shanghai, to Cecil Clementi, Governor of Hong Kong, 24 December 1925, FO 371/11670 (F1064/84/10), TNA. Retransmitted to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 20 January 1926.

telegram immediately, offering to assist Cantonese authorities in combating piracy.⁶⁵

British officials were quick to respond to calls for action from Swire & Sons managers by aiding the Cantonese government, but they continued to oppose unilateral military interventions. Many in the Foreign Office believed these actions harmed Britain's broader national interests in China.⁶⁶ A British consul in China, George Moss, articulated these opinions by asking: "Why should we patrol it for the benefit of foreign shipping?"⁶⁷ Officials like Moss clearly did not consider ensuring universal access to the maritime commons a cause worthy of British action.

Although there were no attacks on British ships between December 1925 and November 1926, the Bias Bay pirates continued to hijack vessels throughout the South China Sea. In February 1926, they attacked a French ship and carried off over £400,000 worth of gold and silver bullion. The following month, pirates hijacked the Chinese *Hsin Kong* in a similar fashion.⁶⁸ Although these attacks were as detrimental to international maritime trade as that on the *Tung Chow*, British officials never entertained any ideas of intervening in either case. Not all British officials approved of London's willingness to ignore piracy in China when it did not directly affect ships owned by London-based shipping companies. The new governor of Hong Kong, Sir Cecil Clementi, proved to be one of the most vocal supporters of direct intervention. In a June 1926 secret dispatch to the secretary of state for the colonies, Leo Amery, Clementi proposed that Britain should dispatch soldiers to Bias Bay immediately following the next pirate attack. "The troops would also search pirate villages and, if necessary, destroy them."⁶⁹ Despite gaining support among several senior Foreign Office officials, most still viewed Clementi's plan as risky. In early November 1926, Sir Austen Chamberlain, the foreign secretary, stated that he was "rather alarmed" by the Bias Bay plan and summoned Deputy Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Sir Victor Wellesley to discuss the matter.⁷⁰

London's reluctance to act against the Bias Bay pirates, despite protestations from Hong Kong merchants, characterizes this initial phase. Although the pirates attacked British ships and threatened international maritime trade throughout the region, most senior British government officials continued to favor nonintervention. British subjects killed or injured in these attacks were dismissed as being of low social status. This policy faced

⁶⁵Clementi to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 20 January 1926, FO 371/11670 (F1064/84/10), TNA.

⁶⁶FO 371/11670 [F85/84/10]; *London Gazette*, 14 May 1926, issue 33162, p. 3174.

⁶⁷Moss (minute), "Interdepartmental Piracy Conference," 8 January 1926, FO 371/11670 (F85/84/10), TNA.

⁶⁸"Piracies of Sea Going Ships," 29 August 1929, FO 371/13916 (F5736/72/10), TNA.

⁶⁹Clementi to Amery, 30 June 1926, FO 371/11671 (F3637/84/10), TNA.

⁷⁰Chamberlain (minute), 5 November 1926, FO 371/11671 (F4820/84/10), TNA.

significant challenges following the attack on the *Tung Chow* in December 1925, which provoked an immediate lobbying campaign from London-based business elites. After that attack, government officials began considering unilateral military action to protect British shipping. London's concern, however, did not extend to all ships equally. Unlike the *Tung Chow* incident, attacks on locally owned British vessels did not lead to discussions of unilateral intervention. The ships were of comparable size, transited the same routes, carried similar cargo and passengers, and flew the same flag; they differed only in ownership. Of the four British ships pirated during this phase, the *Tung Chow* was the only ship owned by a London-based firm: Swire & Sons. Run by men like George Warren Swire,⁷¹ Swire & Sons executives were members of the same elite status group as the government officials they pressured for action.

Phase II (1927): Offensive Measures

For eleven months following the *Tung Chow* piracy, discussions about how to respond to attacks on British ships remained hypothetical. Although the Bias Bay pirates continued to hijack vessels at a rate more than twice that of 1925, none flew the British flag.⁷² In November 1926, however, pirates attacked the Swire & Sons-owned steamship *Sunning*. The attack began in the same manner as those previous, with pirates disguised as passengers hijacking the ship and forcing it to steam toward Bias Bay. Unbeknownst to the pirates, however, some of the ship's officers had secretly been collecting makeshift weapons. While on watch soon after midnight, the Second Officer hit one of the pirates over the head with a fourteen-pound lead weight. A fracas ensued, and the ships' officers soon recaptured the bridge.⁷³ Using firearms taken from the fallen pirates, the officers secured the bridge and brought the European passengers up from belowdecks through a skylight. On learning that the crew had retaken the bridge, the remaining pirates advanced on the rebellious ship's officers, using the chief engineer and several cabin boys as human shields. In the ensuing melee within the darkened ship, four of these hostage crewmembers suffered various gunshot wounds to the chest, arms, and thighs. The pirates' efforts to retake the bridge failed, and they retreated to the stern of the ship. After several more unsuccessful attempts to regain control of the vessel, the pirates set fire to the *Sunning* in an apparent attempt to smoke out the bridge. In response, the officers dropped anchor, which protected

⁷¹G. W. Swire, a graduate of Eton College and a member of London's social elite, served as chairman of Swire & Sons from 1927 to 1946.

⁷²There is no evidence to suggest that this was due to an intentional policy by pirate organizations to avoid attacking British ships.

⁷³"Report by Master of the S/S *Sunning*," 19 November 1926, JSS XII 1 1/7 [Box A32].

the bridge from smoke by turning the ship's head into the wind. The pirates then offered to extinguish the fire in exchange for the officers' weapons—which the crew refused to do. Eventually most of the pirates decided to abandon the *Sunning* in two of ship's boats, taking stolen goods and money with them.⁷⁴ Swire & Sons managers' immediate response to the attack was to press their demands for increased Royal Navy protection for their steamships. G. W. Swire telegraphed the Foreign Office to request a meeting "to get information about what you are going to do in this matter of piracy prevention."⁷⁵ The following week, he telegraphed again to inform them that repairing the ship would cost £734,000 and concluded by stating: "It is a pretty expensive business for those of us who are not protected as we should be."⁷⁶

More so than any previous attack, the *Sunning* piracy got the attention of Britain's highest-level policymakers. On 23 November, Chamberlain presented the Cabinet with a memorandum on piracy in China. The memorandum expressed the Foreign Office's general concurrence with Clementi's plan for direct military intervention on the Chinese mainland, although it raised concerns about the repercussions of these actions. While not wholeheartedly endorsing the plan to land troops in China, the memorandum stated that, so long as the Hong Kong government consulted the Foreign Office beforehand, it would not object to the operation.⁷⁷ This was a major shift in the Foreign Office's policy toward counter-piracy. With the Foreign Office's acquiescence, the Cabinet approved the plan for a punitive raid against villages in Bias Bay, with the caveat that it not take place until after the next piracy of a British ship.⁷⁸ That attack came in late January 1927, when more than one hundred pirates hijacked the British ship *Seang Bee* en route from Singapore to Hong Kong. Owned by a Singapore-based shipping company, it was the largest ship hijacked in the South China Sea to that date.⁷⁹ It was also one of the costliest piracies in terms of valuables looted.⁸⁰ In Clementi's view, this was an excellent opportunity to carry out punitive action against villages in Bias Bay.⁸¹ However, despite previously agreeing to the proposal following the attack on Swire & Sons' *Sunning*, the proposed operation now met strenuous opposition from senior Foreign Office officials. Claiming that raiding villages in Bias Bay "would produce

⁷⁴E. D. C. Wolfe, Captain Superintendent of Police, Hong Kong to W. T. Southorn, 20 November 1926. FO 371/12426 [F350/41/10].

⁷⁵G. W. Swire to G. A. Mounsey, 17 November 1926, FO 371/11671 (F4970/84/10), TNA.

⁷⁶G. W. Swire to V. A. Wellesley, 24 November 1926, FO 371/11671 (F5103/84/10), TNA.

⁷⁷"British Policy in China," 23 November 1926, Cabinet Records [hereafter CAB] 24/182, TNA.

⁷⁸"Minutes of the 38th Meeting" Committee of Imperial Defence [hereafter CID], Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, 2 December 1926, CAB 53-1, TNA.

⁷⁹"Steamer Seized by Pirates," *Times*, 1 February 1927.

⁸⁰Bowie, "Great Britain and the Use of Force in China, 1919 to 1931," 171.

⁸¹Clementi to Amery, 31 January 1927, FO 371/12426 (F975/41/10), TNA.

[a] disastrous effect on world opinion,” Chamberlain got the Colonial Office to agree not to take direct punitive action without first consulting British diplomats in China.⁸²

On 21 March 1927, Bias Bay pirates hijacked Jardine Matheson’s *Hop Sang* as it steamed toward Hong Kong. On receiving news of the piracy, Clementi sent a telegram to Amery urging “that a punitive expedition to Bias Bay should be authorized immediately.” At 1:58 pm the following day, the Colonial Office received a telegram from Clementi stating that a “punitive operation will be carried out by the Navy at dawn March 23rd unless you telegraph instructions to the contrary.”⁸³ At 5:25 pm Amery telegraphed Clementi, instructing him not to act without first consulting the British minister in Beijing, Miles Lampson.⁸⁴ By this time, however, a small fleet was already steaming toward Bias Bay. Early the next morning, three hundred Royal Marines destroyed two villages and sank approximately forty small vessels anchored offshore. The British also distributed notices informing residents that the raid was in retaliation for an attack on a British vessel.

British officials in London were surprised to learn that Clementi had gone ahead with the raid, seemingly in contravention of Colonial Office orders.⁸⁵ In response to Amery’s inquiries on the matter, the governor defended his actions by stating that he had received the directive not to proceed thirty minutes after the punitive operations in China had commenced. He further justified his actions by stating that “immediate action was essential in order that punishment might follow [the] crime.”⁸⁶ Although Clementi’s action displeased many in the Foreign Office, British diplomats presented a united front when confronted with protests over the raid from the Kuomintang government.⁸⁷ The British government also hoped the punitive raid would put an end to Bias Bay piracy.

The unilateral military intervention, however, did not have the desired effect. The Bias Bay pirates continued to attack steamships throughout the spring and summer of 1927. As Kuomintang forces pushed northward in an effort to unify the country under a central authority, wealthy Chinese citizens moved large amounts of gold and silver bullion to the relative safety of Hong Kong and other ports in southern China, as well as abroad. These high-value shipments provided greater incentives for piracy. Over a five-day period in late August 1927, Bias Bay pirates hijacked two large

⁸²Chamberlain to Miles Lampson, British Minister to China, 1 February 1927, FO 371/12426 (F949/41/10), TNA.

⁸³Clementi to Amery, 22 March 1927, FO 371/12427 (F2687/41/10), TNA.

⁸⁴Amery to Clementi, 22 March 1927, FO 371/12427 (F2627/41/10), TNA.

⁸⁵See discussion in minutes, 23 March 1927, FO 371/12427 (F2627/41/10), TNA.

⁸⁶Clementi to Amery, 30 March 1927, FO 371/12427 (F3007/41/10), TNA.

⁸⁷Brenan to the Kung Hsiang-hsi, Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs, Canton, 29 March 1927, FO 371/12427 (F4266/41/10), TNA.

oceangoing steamships in the South China Sea: the Chinese ship *Hsinchi* and Jardine and Matheson's *Yatshing*.⁸⁸ The day after the latter arrived in Hong Kong, the Royal Navy dispatched a task force to Bias Bay. The raid proceeded in a similar fashion as the one carried out in March, with soldiers landing and destroying homes of suspected pirates.⁸⁹ The raid led to more protests from the Cantonese authorities, who objected to these "repeatedly inhuman and lawless acts," which showed that the British "delight in being international criminals."⁹⁰

Kuomintang protests did little to dissuade Clementi from advocating for increasingly harsh actions against pirates. In early October, he proposed a plan to destroy an entire township on the shores of Bias Bay—an operation that would take 500 soldiers three days to complete and destroy 2,000 residences, leaving 8,000 to 10,000 people homeless. Appalled by Clementi's plan, the senior naval officer in Hong Kong refused to participate.⁹¹ Many at the Foreign Office, including Chamberlain himself, shared the view that Clementi's plan was both impracticable and immoral. It was also becoming clear that punitive raids were ineffective at quelling piracy. Following the rejection of Clementi's plan to destroy an entire Chinese township, London began to focus on defensive measures such as stationing armed guards on board passenger steamships. These defensive measures would come to characterize the third phase of British counter-piracy operations in the South China Sea.

During the second phase, the British government adopted a more robust counter-piracy policy, which included unilaterally conducting punitive raids against suspected pirate villages in mainland China. These raids, however, took place only in response to attacks on ships owned by London-based shipping companies. The archival record demonstrates that British government officials paid considerably more attention to attacks on British-flagged merchant ships than to attacks on foreign vessels. Discussions about raiding Bias Bay villages explicitly referenced responding to attacks on British vessels, a point made clear in official notices given to village residents. Britain's willingness to ignore piracy against foreign vessels during this phase challenges the standard explanation that maritime hegemons serve as willing providers of the global public goods of secure international trade and universal access to the maritime commons.

While London was ostensibly concerned with all attacks on British ships, in practice, the response to the *Sunning* (Swire & Sons), *Hop Sang* (Jardine Matheson), and *Yat Shing* (Jardine Matheson) attacks differed significantly from the response to the piracy of the *Seang Bee* (China & Southern).

⁸⁸Clementi to Amery, 1 September 1927, FO 371/12428 (F7312/41/10), TNA.

⁸⁹Clementi to Amery, 2 September 1927, FO 371/12428 (F7312/41/10), TNA.

⁹⁰Wu Chaoshu to Brenan, 6 September 1927, FO 371/12428 (F8120/41/10), TNA.

⁹¹Tyrwhitt to Lampson, 22 October 1927, FO 371/12428 (8261/41/10), TNA.

Table 2. Biographical details on key actors.

Name	Position	Birth Year	School	University
David Lloyd George	Prime Minister (1916–22)	1863	Llanystumdwy	
Andrew Bonar Law	Prime Minister (1922–23)	1858	National School	
Stanley Baldwin	Prime Minister (1923–24; 1924–29)	1867	High School of Glasgow	Cambridge
Ramsey MacDonald	Prime Minister (1924; 1929–35)	1866	Harrow	
George Curzon	Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1919–24)	1859	Drainie Parish school	Oxford
Austen Chamberlain	Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1924–29)	1863	Eton	Cambridge
Arthur Henderson	Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1929–31)	1863	Rugby	
Rufus Isaacs	Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1931)	1860	University College School	
John Allsebrook Simon	Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1931–35)	1873	Fettes	Oxford
Winston Churchill	Secretary of State for the Colonies (1921–22)	1874	Harrow	Royal Military College, Sandhurst
Victor Cavendish	Secretary of State for the Colonies (1922–24)	1868	Eton	Cambridge
James Henry Thomas	Secretary of State for the Colonies (1924; 1931)	1874		
Leo Amery	Secretary of State for the Colonies (1924–29)	1873	Harrow	Oxford
Sidney Webb	Secretary of State for the Colonies (1929–31)	1859	[Switzerland and Germany]	University of London
Philip Cunliffe–Lister	Secretary of State for the Colonies (1931–35)	1884	Winchester	Oxford
Malcolm MacDonald	Secretary of State for the Colonies (1935)	1901	Bedales School	Oxford
Reginald Stubbs	Governor of Hong Kong (1919–25)	1876	Radley	Oxford
Cecil Clementi	Governor of Hong Kong (1925–30)	1875	St. Paul's	Oxford
William Peel	Governor of Hong Kong (1930–35)	1875	Silcoates	Cambridge
Ronald Macleay	British Minister to China (1922–26)	1870	Charterhouse	Oxford
Miles Lampson	British Minister to China (1926–33)	1880	Eton	
Sidney Barton	Consul–General Shanghai (1922–29)	1876	St. Paul's	
Victor Wellesley	Deputy Under–Secretary, FO	1876	[Germany]	
Frank Ashton-Gwatkin	Head of Economic Relations Dept., FO (1934–39)	1889	Eton	Oxford
Oliver Locker-Lampson	Member of Parliament	1880	Eton	
Godfrey Locker-Lampson	Under–Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1925–29)	1875	Eton	Cambridge
Hugh Dalton	Under–Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1929–35)	1887	Eton	Cambridge
Business Executives				
G. Warren Swire	Chairman Swire & Sons' (1927–46)	1883	Eton	
Henry Keswick	Director Jardine Matheson (until 1928)	1870	Eton	Cambridge

Of the four attacks, that on the *Seang Bee* was the only one in which officials in London explicitly forbade Clementi from launching a retaliatory raid on Bias Bay, despite the attack being both the largest and costliest. Although wealthy British subjects, the *Seang Bee*'s ethnic Chinese Singaporean owners were not members of the London social elite; thus, British officials did not face pressure from within their own status group.⁹² Conversely, the two punitive raids came in the immediate aftermath of attacks on Jardine Matheson's *Hop Sang* and *Yat Shing*. A long-standing merchant firm with Scottish roots, by the 1920s Jardine Matheson was primarily controlled by the Keswick family. Like the Swires, the Keswick family were (and remain) members of Britain's social elite. For example, Henry Keswick, the company's director in 1927, was a graduate of Eton and Cambridge and had served as both a member of Parliament and the Hong Kong Legislative Council.⁹³ Rather than a quintessential example of the provision of global public goods, an analysis of this second phase suggests that British counter-piracy was more an exercise in providing club goods to serve high-status domestic elites' interests. When these parochial interests were not threatened, Britain ignored pirate attacks.

Phase III (1928–35): Defensive Measures

On 14 April 1928, pirates hijacked the Chinese-flagged *Hsin Wah*, which was en route from Shanghai to Hong Kong. Although Clementi reported the incident, officials at the Foreign Office saw "no British interests directly involved in the 'Hsin-Wah' case," as the vessel was not British.⁹⁴ This act of piracy was soon overshadowed by an attack on Swire & Sons' *Teon* on 27 May. Britain immediately protested to the Kuomintang government, now established in Nanjing, demanding that the Chinese retaliate against the pirates.⁹⁵ In response, the Chinese dispatched a gunboat to Bias Bay, an indication of the Nationalists' increasing capability to govern.⁹⁶ This action led the British government to determine that unilateral action was not required.⁹⁷

In late September, pirates hijacked a second Swire & Sons ship, the *Anking*, while it steamed from Singapore to Hainan Island off the southern Chinese coast, resulting in the deaths of two British officers and one

⁹²That the owners were not white Europeans also likely contributed to London's ambivalence toward the *Seang Bee* attack. While outside the scope of this paper, the role of race in British counter-piracy policies in Asia warrants further study. For a discussion of British attitudes toward piracy that addresses nineteenth-century theories of racial categories, see Layton, "Moghul's Admiral."

⁹³Jones, *Merchants to Multinationals*.

⁹⁴Toller (minute), 12 July 1928, FO 371/19191 (F3630/43/10), TNA.

⁹⁵Lampson to Foreign Office, 30 May 1928, FO 371/13191 (F2761/43/10), TNA.

⁹⁶Chu Chao-hsin, Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, Canton, to Brenan, 8 June 1928, FO 371/13191 (F3825/43/10), TNA.

⁹⁷See correspondence between Colonial Office and Foreign Office, August 1928, FO 371/13191 (F4088/43/10), TNA.

Chinese crewmember.⁹⁸ Following the attack, a senior Swire & Sons manager wrote to the Foreign Office, threatening that the company would cease carrying Chinese passengers if something were not done about piracy. In a postscript he added that “my own opinion is that the provision of Military guards is the immediate step to take.”⁹⁹ The use of anti-piracy guards, and the question of who should pay for them, proved to be the most contentious dispute between the British government and the mercantile community over the next several years.

In response to pressure from business elites, London began considering stationing British military personnel aboard British steamships in China. Not all British ships received this protection, however, as only five merchant firms were included in the plan, among them Jardine Matheson and Swire & Sons.¹⁰⁰ London did not consider stationing anti-piracy guards on locally owned British ships. The Royal Navy, not wishing to deploy sailors for the purpose, suggested tasking the army with the operation, adding that the Hong Kong-based soldiers “might appreciate the opportunity of [a] change of air.”¹⁰¹ The senior army officer in Hong Kong, however, opposed using his men as anti-piracy guards because it would be detrimental to their training regime.¹⁰² London overruled these objections, and the Army Council authorized the deployment of soldiers as anti-piracy guards. In late October, the government informed company executives of the decision; however, as this was only to be a temporary measure, it also advised shippers to prepare to provide for their own defense in future.¹⁰³ This final directive irritated G. W. Swire, who peevishly informed the Foreign Office: “I am afraid that we cannot accept the entire onus ... of our own defence.”¹⁰⁴

Other British business elites shared Swire’s concern that the government intended to shift the expense of providing armed guards to companies. In November, Jardine Matheson senior executives met with Foreign and War Office officials. The War Office advised the shipping company “to get as influential representations made from Hong Kong as possible, both official and non-official, with the view of bringing pressure to bear.” The executives relayed this information to their manager in Hong Kong, who was also a member of the colony’s Legislative Council.¹⁰⁵ In addition to that from Swire & Sons and Jardine Matheson, the government also faced

⁹⁸Southorn to Amery, 30 September 1928, FO 371/13191 (F5341/43/10), TNA.

⁹⁹H. W. Robertson to Mounsey, 3 October 1928, FO 371/13191 (F5383/43/10), TNA.

¹⁰⁰The other three companies were Peninsular & Oriental, Douglass Steamship Company, and Canadian Pacific.

¹⁰¹Tyrwhitt to Admiralty, 3 October 1928, FO 371/13191 (F5397/43/10), TNA.

¹⁰²Major-General C. C. Luard to War Office, 3 October 1928, FO 371/13191 (F5382/43/10), TNA.

¹⁰³Mounsey to Robertson, 24 October 1928, FO 371/13192 (F5696/43/10), TNA.

¹⁰⁴G. W. Swire to Ashton-Gwatkin, 25 October 1928, FO 371/13192 (F5881/43/10), TNA.

¹⁰⁵Jardine Matheson Internal Correspondence, London to Hong Kong, 16 November 1928, Jardine Matheson [hereafter JM]/J1/2/22; Minutes of Hong Kong Legislative Council, Financial Committee Meeting, 29 November 1928, <http://www.legco.gov.hk/1928/h281129.pdf>.

pressure from insurance companies, merchant marine guilds, business associations, and members of Parliament regarding the anti-piracy guards.¹⁰⁶ The pressure on the government to maintain deployments of British soldiers on board steamships continued throughout the early months of 1929. Despite these efforts, in the spring the companies were informed that the guards would be withdrawn the following year, in April 1930.¹⁰⁷

On 5 June 1929, Ramsey MacDonald returned to 10 Downing Street at the head of a Labour government. The change in government, however, did not initially alter the stated plan to withdraw guards the following spring. Increasingly concerned by the possibility of having to pay for their own defense, Swire & Sons, Jardine Matheson, and the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, together with the Merchant Navy Federation, wrote a joint letter requesting a meeting with the prime minister.¹⁰⁸ Given other matters at hand, however, MacDonald was unable to grant the companies' request at that time. Although the executives had trouble getting access to the prime minister, G. W. Swire was able to meet with his son, Malcolm MacDonald, a newly elected member of Parliament. The younger MacDonald had traveled to China in 1929, where he had made several personal contacts in the business world, including with Swire & Sons' Shanghai manager.¹⁰⁹ He also had close personal connections to senior Foreign Office officials.¹¹⁰ The companies considered MacDonald "very sympathetic" toward their concerns over piracy. Over the next several months, MacDonald and G. W. Swire exchanged several correspondences, a fact that Swire wanted kept confidential.¹¹¹ For his part, MacDonald was willing to write to government officials on behalf of his "friends who have large business interests in China," including Swire & Sons and Jardine Matheson.¹¹² Recipients could not have helped but notice that MacDonald wrote on 10 Downing Street letterhead. He also helped arrange a meeting between the shipping companies and the Admiralty.¹¹³ As a senior Jardine Matheson manager put it: "[MacDonald] is entirely in sympathy with the Companies' views and has done his best to press our point of view on the powers that be."¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁶Coombs to Locker-Lampson, 14 November 1928, FO 371/13192 (F6297/43/10), TNA; China Association to Chamberlain, 15 November 1928, FO 371/13192 (F6336/43/10), TNA; T. W. Moore, Imperial Merchants Service Guild, Secretary, to Chamberlain, 21 November 1928, FO 371/13192 (F6423/43/10), TNA; Looker to Locker-Lampson, 12 November 1928, FO 371/13192 (F6277/43/10), TNA.

¹⁰⁷Wasitell to A. V. Alexander, First Lord of the Admiralty, 29 August 1929, FO 371/13916 (F5736/72/10), TNA.

¹⁰⁸John Swire & Sons to R. Macdonald, 21 November 1929, FO 13196 (F6293/72/10), TNA.

¹⁰⁹Jardine Matheson Internal Correspondence, London to Hong Kong, 23 January 1930, JM/J1/2/25.

¹¹⁰Dalton to Wellesley, 29 December 1929, FO 371/14722 (F577/577/10), TNA.

¹¹¹Jardine Matheson Internal Correspondence, London to Hong Kong, 23 January 1930, JM/J1/2/25.

¹¹²M. MacDonald to A. Henderson, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 22 July 1930, FO 371/14689 (F4080/61/10), TNA.

¹¹³John Swire & Sons Internal Correspondence, London to Hong Kong, 21 February 1930, JSS3/1/8 (Box 67); "Statement of Interview at the Admiralty," 24 March 1930, JSS/3/3/1 (Box 1189).

¹¹⁴Jardine Matheson Internal Correspondence, London to Hong Kong, 20 March 1930, JM/J1/2/25.

The elder MacDonald appears to have been less sympathetic toward the shipping companies than his son. In a letter to Swire & Sons on 7 March 1930, he made it clear that British military guards would be withdrawn according to plan and that the merchants should make their own arrangements for protection.¹¹⁵ However, on the same day it received the prime minister's letter, Swire & Sons' London office telegraphed Hong Kong, stating that "we are informed ... unofficially" that the government was considering extending the guards' deployment for another six months.¹¹⁶ Although the telegram did not identify the unofficial source, records show G. W. Swire receiving a "quite unofficial" letter from Malcolm MacDonald the previous day.¹¹⁷ The information proved accurate: on 12 March the Cabinet agreed to extend temporarily the guards' deployment, conditional on certain provisions.¹¹⁸ Most important among them was the requirement that shippers reimburse the government for the attendant costs.

Although none of the shipping companies welcomed the idea of covering the expense of providing armed guards, Swire & Sons was the most opposed to what it saw as "the onerous conditions" of having to pay for their own security.¹¹⁹ In June, the company sued the government for not providing adequate protection against pirates.¹²⁰ While the court agreed that the government had a "political duty" to protect British subjects, it was not under any legal obligation to protect British ships in China from piracy.¹²¹ Swire & Sons appealed the ruling, this time using the feudalistic argument that "as the subject oweth to the King true and faithful ligeance and obedience, so the King is to govern and protect his subject." This failed to convince the Court of Appeal, which noted, "Henry II would, I think, have been surprised to hear that if his tenant went to China, the King was bound to follow and protect him." The court again dismissed Swire & Sons' case with costs.¹²²

While piracy continued to plague shipping in northern China throughout the 1930s in general, Bias Bay piracy largely disappeared by the middle of the decade. The final attack attributed to these pirates took place in January 1935, when they hijacked Swire & Sons' *Tung Chow* shortly after it departed Shanghai. As with the ship's hijacking a decade earlier, the pirates diverted the vessel to southern China and looted it. Technological advances,

¹¹⁵N. Butler, Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, to John Swire & Sons, 7 March 1930, JM/J1/2/25.

¹¹⁶Jardine Matheson Internal Correspondence, London to Hong Kong, 7 March 1930, JSS 3/1/8 (Box 67).

¹¹⁷During later legal action between Swire & Sons and the British government, the company informed its attorneys that "the correspondence between Mr. G.W. Swire and Mr. Malcolm MacDonald is quite unofficial and personal" and should not be disclosed. The contents of this letter do not survive in the archival record. John Swire & Sons to Thompson, Quarrell & Attneave, 12 March 1931, JSS/3/3/3 (Box 1189).

¹¹⁸Foreign Office to Lampson, 18 March 1930, FO 371/14675 (F1496/8/10), TNA.

¹¹⁹Butterfield and Swire to Commodore R. A. S. Hill, Anti-Piracy Committee President, Hong Kong, 31 March 1930, FO 371/14675 (F3338/8/10), TNA.

¹²⁰Thompson, Quarrell, and Attneave to Treasury Solicitor, 24 June 1930, FO 371/14675 (F3479/8/10), TNA.

¹²¹"Notes of Judgment," 19 May 1931, FO 371/15476 (F2961/110/10), TNA.

¹²²"Notes of Judgment" 11 April 1932, JSS/3/8/9 (Box Add. 41).

as well as domestic political changes in China, however, meant that the pirates were not as successful as they had been in 1925. Once it became clear that the ship was overdue at its destination, the Royal Navy initiated a search, which included the use of aircraft. Although the pirates tried to disguise the ship, naval aviators spotted the *Tung Chow* seventy miles east of Hong Kong. On seeing the airplanes, the pirates fled inland. British diplomats in China informed Kuomintang officials of the attack, who promised to act promptly. Unlike the unfulfilled promises of the 1920s, the Chinese government soon dispatched soldiers to the region.¹²³ Although piracy continued in other parts of China, the hijacking of passenger steamships in southern China temporarily ceased until after 1945, when the British had to deal with piracy in southern China again.¹²⁴ Once the People's Republic of China reasserted Beijing's authority throughout the country in the early 1950s, however, the centuries-old problem of Chinese maritime piracy largely disappeared.

Defensive anti-piracy measures—measures aimed to protect only particular British vessels—characterized this third phase. Although pirates targeted many countries' ships, London continued to dismiss attacks on foreign-flagged ships as not concerning British interests.¹²⁵ As before, protection did not extend to all British ships equally. There was no discussion of providing soldiers to guard ships owned by British subjects in Asia. This phase also witnessed sustained pressure by British business elites, like G. W. Swire, to convince the government to do more to protect British shipping. Swire was able to use his social connections to exert influence both officially and unofficially. Malcolm MacDonald's willingness to lobby government officials on behalf of his friends with business interests in China (as well as possibly leaking confidential information) is the clearest example of social capital's utility. This pressure played a significant role in determining British counter-piracy policies during the period, particularly regarding the provision of anti-piracy guards. Although London did not acquiesce to all the shippers' demands, such as indefinitely providing guards free of charge, domestic elites were frequently successful in influencing government policy to serve their private interests.

Conclusions and Avenues for Future Research

British policies toward the Bias Bay pirates changed significantly between 1921 and 1935. From largely ignoring the problem in the first phase,

¹²³See "Piracy of S/S 'Tungchow' & Anti-Piracy Measures in China," 1935, ADM 116/3037 (Case 4181).

¹²⁴Adm. C. H. J. Harcourt, Commander-in-Chief, Hong Kong, to J. P. Reeves, British Consul, Macao, 26 January 1946, Public Records Office, Hong Kong 169/2-106 (16(E)/2); "Piracy of the S.S. WINGSANG off the Coast of China," 1952, Admiralty Records [hereafter ADM] 1/23219, TNA.

¹²⁵Toller (minute), 12 July 1928, FO 371/19191 (F3630/43/10), TNA.

Britain adopted a policy of punitive military raids in the second. Enacting this policy was a direct response to attacks on Swire & Sons and Jardine Matheson ships, as London explicitly forbade punitive raids following attacks on locally owned British ships. When the punitive raids failed to stop attacks on British shipping, the government implemented defensive measures, such as deploying anti-piracy guards aboard some British steamships. Again, only select shipping companies, like Jardine Matheson, Swire & Sons, and Peninsular & Oriental, received armed guards. A domestic-level explanation, rooted in the liberal tradition of international-relations theory, that focuses on business-elite lobbying accounts for this shifting response to piracy. British counter-piracy efforts were directly linked to attacks on shipping companies controlled by elite British families, such as the Keswicks and the Swires. Men like G. W. Swire used their social capital to acquire private information and influence government policies to promote their private interests. Attacks against foreign-flagged vessels, and even British vessels owned by those lacking sufficient social capital, garnered little attention or reaction. British subjects of low social status killed or injured by pirates were denigrated as “beachcomber types” and ignored.

Influential domestic actors were not always successful in persuading London to pursue their preferred policies. Unsurprisingly, shipping companies wanted the government to do even more to promote their private interests. G. W. Swire, for one, appears to have been perpetually displeased with what he viewed as London’s inadequate response. While government officials addressed the companies’ demands, they were also mindful of competing concerns, such as the expense of counter-piracy operations and fears of entanglement in the Chinese civil war. Yet, despite these powerful disincentives to pursuing robust counter-piracy operations, Britain continued to suppress pirates—actions taken primarily in response to pressure from business elites in London. This challenges the standard structural explanation put forward by public goods scholars that maritime hegemons intervene to suppress piracy because they have “an interest in keeping international commons, such as the oceans, open to all.”¹²⁶ Importantly, it does so based on a detailed examination of a critical case for this argument’s supporters: historical British counter-piracy. Rather than intentionally providing the global public goods of secure trade and universal access to the maritime commons, government officials sought to provide club goods to serve the interests of business executives with whom they shared elite social status. Members of the club (often quite literally) enjoyed the benefits of military interventions to further their private interests;

¹²⁶Nye, *Paradox of American Power*, 144.

outsiders—in terms of either nationality or social status—were denied these same advantages.

These findings inform discussions of counter-piracy operations from other historical periods as well. Prior to the establishment of an intercontinental telegraph system in the latter half of the nineteenth century, diplomats and military officers, rather than central governments, typically made the decision to pursue specific military actions. This suggests that in earlier periods lobbying conducted by local business elites would have been more effective in influencing government policies than at the time of the Bias Bay pirates. However, the central argument remains valid: states act to suppress piracy primarily to achieve parochial aims, not national ones. Looking forward from this case to the contemporary period, systemic changes in the maritime industry, like the use of “flags of convenience,” have altered hegemonic power in the maritime realm. Britain’s maritime power stemmed from its possessing both the world’s most powerful navy and largest merchant fleet. Today, the United States, which dominates the world in naval power, ranks far below Panama, the Marshall Islands, and Liberia in terms of flagged merchant shipping. Moreover, none of the world’s major shipping companies are headquartered in the United States. Regardless, shipping companies still spend millions lobbying Washington.¹²⁷ Further research is required to explore the role private interests play in determining counter-piracy policies in other cases.¹²⁸

Together with these implications for piracy studies, the findings presented here highlight the importance of elite preferences in shaping foreign policy more broadly. Although few would dismiss business interests as unimportant—as evidenced by the vast sums corporations spend on lobbying—public goods scholars have tended to ground their analysis in structural explanations, like hegemonic-stability theory, rather than in the liberal tradition of international relations, which looks within the state to explain foreign policy. Determining why powerful states pursued a particular set of foreign policies sheds light on past actions and corrects the historical record. Clarifying the casual mechanisms that drive decision making also allows for a more generalized understanding of the conditions under which powerful states provide global public goods. Rather than being the intentional result of strategic calculations based on national interests, public goods are the unintentional byproduct of the pursuit of domestic actors’ private interests. Public goods provision is most probable when systemic interests align with those of domestic actors

¹²⁷For example, see Maersk Inc. congressional lobbying reports for 2009 and 2010: <http://disclosures.house.gov/ld/pdfform.aspx?id=300244132>; <http://disclosures.house.gov/ld/pdfform.aspx?id=300270598>; <http://disclosures.house.gov/ld/pdfform.aspx?id=300300040>; <http://disclosures.house.gov/ld/pdfform.aspx?id=300312200>; <http://disclosures.house.gov/ld/pdfform.aspx?id=300349659>.

¹²⁸For an examination of the role business elites play in influencing powerful states’ counter-piracy policies from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, see Lucas, “Fighting Pirates.”

who possess sufficient influence to shape government decision making. Absent these conditions, powerful states are likely to decline their supposed duty to serve as global order makers.

Acknowledgments

A previous version of this paper was presented at the “Emerging Scholars in Grand Strategy” conference in June 2016. The author wishes to thank Bridget L. Coggins, Michael C. Desch, Dan Lindley, Sebastian Rosato, and the other participants, as well as the anonymous reviewers at *Security Studies*, for their feedback. The author is also grateful to American University, the Cosmos Club Foundation, and the University of Haifa’s Center for Maritime Policy and Strategy Research for their generous financial support. Additional thanks are due to Boaz Atzili, Thomas A. Crosbie, Andrew Lambert, Tom Long, Hovig Papazian, Jens Ringsmose, Sharon K. Weiner, and the participants in the Royal Danish Defence College’s faculty seminar. Finally, this research would have been impossible were it not for the assistance of Julie Makinson and numerous other archivists, librarians, and staff at the School of Oriental & African Studies, the British Library, the National Archives, Cambridge University Library, the National Maritime Museum, the Library of Congress, and the Hong Kong Public Records Office.

Disclosure statement

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, the Department of Defense or that of the United States Government or any other of its agencies.

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