

MARITIME SECURITY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA:  
PIRATES AND ANTI-PIRACY MEASURES IN CENTRAL  
VIETNAM UNDER THE NGUYEN DYNASTY  
(1802 – 1885)

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This article analyses the activities of pirates and measures to prevent piracy during the Nguyen Dynasty (Vietnam) in the Central Sea in the nineteenth century. The research is based on an analysis of original sources compiled by historians of the Nguyen Dynasty. The results show that piracy was quite common in the East Sea in the nineteenth century. Pirates originated mainly from neighbouring countries such as China, Japan and Indonesia. The study also shows that the Nguyen Dynasty applied many measures to prevent piracy and it achieved practical results. The results of the research not only contribute to clarifying the history of maritime security in the nineteenth century but also suggest recommendations to ensure maritime security in the East Sea nowadays.

**Keywords:** East Sea, Central Vietnam, Nguyen Dynasty, Tau O pirate, pirates, maritime security

## 1. Introduction

Central Vietnam or miền Trung is one of the three main regions of Vietnam. The central provinces have a coastline of about 1,900 km, which account for nearly 60% of the coastline of Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> This area is located in the centre of Vietnam on the international traffic routes from East to West, from North to South, so the Central Coast region is an important strategic position.<sup>2</sup> It is easy from there to access other regions of the country as well as other countries in the region. At the

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<sup>1</sup> LÊ [LE], T. *Địa lí Kinh tế - Xã hội Việt Nam* [Socio-Economic Geography of Vietnam].

<sup>2</sup> NOER, J. H. *Chokepoints: Maritime Economic Concerns in Southeast Asia*.

same time, this is also a place with great potential for minerals and seafood. With its strategic location and value in commercial, economic and military terms, the Central Coast region had to face the risk of piracy. In the nineteenth century, piracy was frequent, which was the cause of severe socio-economic losses to the Nguyen Dynasty and affected maritime security.<sup>3 4</sup>

Vietnamese historical sources mentioned many types of pirates such as sea invaders, the Te Ngoi, Qing pirates, Tau O pirates, Do Ba, Cha Va, and Nuy pirates. These names are derived from the origins of pirate groups. In the nineteenth century, the central sea recorded the appearance of most pirate groups originating from China, Japan, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia, among which the most common were Chinese pirates, followed by the Cha Va pirates from Southeast Asia.

During this period, piracy from China appears to be related to the upheaval in the political and social situation in China during the Qing Dynasty. Some of those who did not cooperate with the Qing dynasty or those from anti-Qing organizations were defeated and disbanded and made a living as pirates at sea. In addition, Chinese society was increasingly chaotic socioeconomic recession and instability, the number of poor people in coastal areas who joined the pirates increased. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the political situation was also unsettled with a social crisis and the government had to focus on dealing with the struggles of peasants and solving domestic problems; all this helped create favourable conditions for piracy.<sup>5</sup>

The Nguyen kings were well aware of the position and role of the Central Coast region for the country's economic interests and national security.<sup>6</sup> Every king of the Nguyen dynasty pursued policies and measures to prevent and eradicate piracy, to contribute to ensuring national sovereignty and maritime security, especially in the coastal area in central Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> LÊ [LE], T. C. *Tổ chức phòng thủ và hoạt động bảo vệ vùng biển miền Trung dưới triều Nguyễn giai đoạn 1802 – 1885* [Organization of Defense and Activities to Protect the Central Sea Area under the Nguyen Dynasty in the Period 1802 – 1885].

<sup>4</sup> NGUYEN, T. M. H. The Anti-Piracy Activities of the Nguyen Dynasty in the South China Sea, 1802 – 1858. In *International Journal of Maritime History*, 2019, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 50–80.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> LÊ [LE], T. C. *Tổ chức phòng thủ và hoạt động bảo vệ vùng biển miền Trung dưới triều Nguyễn giai đoạn 1802 – 1885* [Organization of Defense and Activities to Protect the Central sea Area under the Nguyen Dynasty in the Period 1802 – 1885].

<sup>7</sup> TRẦN [TRAN], T. M. Hoạt động phòng thủ trên biển của vương triều Nguyễn (1802 – 1884) [The Maritime Defense Activities under the Nguyen Dynasty (1802 – 1884)]. In *Tạp chí Phát triển Khoa học & Công nghệ* [Science and Technology Development Journal], 2014, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 48–58.

## 2. Methodology

We use primarily the historical method and the logical method in this study. These are the two methods that are considered the two main and indispensable means of studying history. The historical method helps scholars “restore” the full picture of historical events and phenomena through the lens of relevant historical sources as accurately as possible. On that basis, historians will review, evaluate, and outline the nature, rules, or trends and developments of historical events and phenomena. That is the manifestation of the application of the logical method in the study of History. In addition, we also use statistical, comparative, analytical, and synthetic methods to help make our statements more transparent and objective.

The first material resource is the *Châu bản triều Nguyễn* (Official documents of the Nguyen dynasty) which is the only surviving administrative document of the monarchy, as well as being an original document, with great authenticity. In addition, the second material resource is the history compiled by the National Historian Office of the Nguyen dynasty such as *Đại Nam thực lục* (Chronicle of greater Vietnam), *Khâm định Đại Nam Hội điển sự lệ* (History of the cabinet system in the Nguyen dynasty). The other resource is research projects on the sea, islands, and pirates under the Nguyen dynasty by Vietnamese and foreign researchers.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. *The Area of Operation and the Target of the Pirates*

The original documents recorded by historians of the Nguyen Dynasty show that in the nineteenth century, pirates appeared throughout the Central Coast, but mostly in the provinces of Thanh Hoa, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa because these are localities with many islands, estuaries and coastlines, rich in products with a busy sea trade.

The pirates’ first target of attack was state transport ships, civilian ships being used by the court to transport rice, money, or possessions from the capital to ports in the North or South. Foreign and domestic merchant ships and fishing boats were also the targets of pirates. The negligence of crews on ships and the lax checks by of the imperial army also created an opportunity for pirates to increase their activities. The history of the Nguyen Dynasty has recorded many cases of ships carrying state goods being attacked by pirates; many military officers were punished for not being active in preventing or catching pirates. For instance, in 1841, a ship carrying goods of the Thanh Hoa province authority being taken

from Bien station to Quen station was attacked by pirates. The commander, Le Dinh Hoan, did not know they were pirates. The pirates had come up close and stole all their weapons and the goods on the ship.<sup>8</sup> In 1842, the commander of the naval force of the Hai Duong province, Le Cong Bao, took a ship carrying goods from the capital to the Nam Dinh province. When the ship arrived at the Luot estuary in the Ha Tinh province sea, it met two pirate ships. Le Cong Bao and his assistant Nguyen Thiem Tho were killed by the enemy, most of the soldiers in the ship were wounded and died. The ship was also taken away by pirates.<sup>9</sup> Even armed imperial soldiers failed to face pirates many times.

In particular, the pirates also went ashore and operated very recklessly. When night fell, they went into villages on the island or coastal areas to steal wealth, burn houses, and even kill civilians, which caused a lot of damage to people and property. A typical example of this action is recorded in documents in 1823 and 1865. The National History of the Nguyen Dynasty states that in 1823 in the Thanh Hoa province pirates appeared in Cu Nham commune, Quang Xuong district, they killed people, destroyed more than 300 houses and took all their possessions and left.<sup>10</sup> In 1865, pirates entered the two estuaries of Can Hai and Thai Hoi in the Nghe An province for plunder; they destroyed 217 houses, injured and killed 4 people.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, they also kidnapped women and children for human trafficking, because Vietnamese women are famous in China for being gentle and diligent, so people wanted them as servants or prostitutes in Hong Kong and Singapore, or as domestic servants in Chinese families on the mainland and there may have been occasions when the boss took them as concubines.<sup>12</sup>

### ***3.2. The Operating Time and Frequency of Pirates***

The Central Coast region from February, March to September was usually quite calm, with a southwest wind which was suitable for ships and boats to sail as well as for fishing. This was the time when trading activities, ships going back and forth took place a lot and piracy also increased.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Vol. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3.

<sup>12</sup> TSUBOI, Y. *Nước Đại Nam đối diện với Pháp và Trung Hoa 1847 – 1885* [Dai Nam Faced France and China 1847 – 1885].

<sup>13</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 4.

Pirates from China usually appeared from the beginning of February, but Cha Va pirates would not arrive in this sea until about May. The Nguyen Dynasty was aware of this operational mode, so it soon adjusted the timing of patrols.<sup>14</sup> Even so, throughout the Nguyen dynasty, piracy activities frequently occurred.

Regarding the frequency of piracy in the Central Sea, research has established that pirates appeared here mostly under King Tu Duc, at least in Gia Long. During Tu Duc's reign, pirates appeared many times in many localities every year. Historians of the Nguyen Dynasty recorded that in 1857 pirates appeared 9 times in Thanh Hoa, Thua Thien, Khanh Hoa, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen. In 1865 there were eight times that pirates appeared in Thanh Hoa, Thua Thien, Da Nang, Nghe An, Binh Dinh (see Fig.1). Piracy occurred with varying frequency in each dynasty largely according to the domestic situation. When the politic and economic situation is stable, the government will have the opportunity to focus on patrolling and closely monitoring the sea area and make things hard for pirates to operate. If the opposite is true then it will be a favorable environment for the bandits.<sup>15</sup> For example, during the Tu Duc period, after the French invasion, Vietnam suffered a serious crisis: economic depression, political turmoil, constant rebellions by poor peasants plus the intrusion and influence of Western colonialism, all these factors prevented this dynasty from spending much time dealing with piracy.<sup>16</sup> At that time, in China, society was also in the throes of a peasant struggle and the coming of colonialism. The people or organizations that opposed the Qing dynasty were unsuccessful, the poor coastal people as a last resort also joined the pirate groups and their familiar destination was Vietnam in general and Central Vietnam in particular.

In comparative terms of frequency and nature, piracy in the central region was still not as significant as on the northern coast, especially in Quang Yen. In their appearances in the waters of the central provinces, pirates often travelled with small forces and few ships and there are no historical records of any tense clashes between pirates and imperial army (except for the case in 1867 in Sa Ky estuary, Quang Ngai province). The reason was probably that this coastal area was close to the imperial capital of Hue, where the Nguyen Dynasty's army was stationed, so the bandits had to be careful. Meanwhile, in the north, especially in Quang Yen, Chinese pirates often gathered in large numbers to loot, operating very recklessly, sometimes pirates and bandits still cooperated to make things much

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<sup>14</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUẢN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 5.

<sup>15</sup> LÊ [LE], N. *Nhà Nguyễn và những vấn đề lịch sử* [The Nguyen Dynasty and Historical Issues].

<sup>16</sup> NGUYỄN [NGUYEN], P. Q. *Việt Nam thế kỷ XIX (1802 – 1884)* [Vietnam in the 19th Century (1802 – 1884)].

more difficult for the imperial army to handle. In 1827, the pirates in Quang Yen, Ba Cong Dung, gathered more than 50 ships to plunder Tien Yen. General Nguyen Dang Khanh and Le Dao Quang brought soldiers and ships to deal with the pirates.<sup>17</sup> At the end of 1832, Nguyen Bao in Quang Yen, more than 10 Qing human trafficking ships sneaked into Vung Lat, Chan Chau village, Hoa Phong district, attacked the district and killed the military, including the district chief, Bui Doan Ta. The pirates attacked again, going on the rampage and looting in the port of Van Don. The imperial army tried to suppress and kill the head, Ngo A Tam, arrested Phan A Bat (the accomplice of Ngo A Tam) and Nguyen Bao who ran away.<sup>18</sup>

### ***3.3. Methods of Operation and the Tricks of Piracy***

Those who lived as outlaws on the high seas to avoid the attentions of fishermen or being arrested by the imperial army, often had to change their methods of operation with many tricks. Pirates in the Central Sea were like pirates in general: the most popular way was to hide in uninhabited waters, wait until the time was right, then strike. The annals of the Nguyen Dynasty recorded that ships of the Qing Dynasty kept their old habits, often roaming the sea, picking on merchant ships.<sup>19</sup> Or they disguised themselves as civilian fishing boats or legal merchant vessels so that when the opportunity arose, they went into action. A French Consul in a letter to the Governor of Cochinchina dated 4 April 1879 described the pirates' method of attack:

The pirates have a sailing boat exactly like a normal Chinese sailing boat. This sailing boat is used as a warehouse. It went up and down the coast and launched small Vietnamese boats in all directions. Each one has several armed personnel. From a distance, these boats are not suspicious. When they saw a boat that could be hijacked, they approached and asked the other boat to stop. If the boat owner did not immediately obey, the bandits opened fire, whether someone was injured or not, the people on the boat were attacked in terror, feeling threatened, and had to give up all attempts at resistance. The captured boat and its crew were immediately taken to the sailing boat. Hearing gunshots, the sailing boat also approached the

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<sup>17</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 8.

battleground. Valuable goods were brought onto the sailing boat by bandits, after which the boat and the people on board were released.<sup>20</sup>

It was the many unpredictable tricks along with their dangerous and dynamic properties that made the eradication of this object extremely difficult, causing a lot of damage. Pirates in the nineteenth century became a permanent problem, threatening the economy, politics, national defence and security, not individually as in previous periods. Solving this problem also meant bringing peace and development to the country, to protect national sovereignty over the sea. Fully aware of the dangers and threats posed by pirates, the Nguyen government always paid attention to the prevention of piracy with many measures.

### ***3.4. Countermeasures of the Nguyen Dynasty against Pirates in the Central Sea and Islands***

#### *3.4.1. Patrolling and Hunting for Pirates*

Immediately after acceding to the throne, King Gia Long turned his attention to security in the East Sea through piracy prevention. The king soon issued regulations on patrol and control of the sea. In August of the 9th Gia Long year (1810), the king revised four aspects of sea transport, including: “The transport is once a year, in the middle of April, it starts. The officers, before the day of departure, instruct the local captains to patrol the sea day and night; When the ship passes by, if any help is needed, the local patrol force should immediately examine and report it”.<sup>21</sup>

Continuing Gia Long’s legacy, King Minh Mang resolutely eliminated pirates. The King commanded the Infantry that Thanh Hoa and Nam Dinh provinces had 2 or 3 groups of pirates who stole merchant boats and were captured by the officers in the past, so the situation was under control. Then pirates suddenly appeared in the Quang Nam province, a situation that had to be remedied quickly. King Minh Mang immediately ordered Nguyen Duc Truong to lead soldiers and ships to the sea for patrolling.<sup>22</sup>

To protect maritime security and eliminate pirates, King Minh Mang took sea patrols very seriously because he understood that the country’s coastline was very

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<sup>20</sup> TSUBOI, Y. *Nước Đại Nam đối diện với Pháp và Trung Hoa 1847 – 1885* [Đại Nam Faced France and China 1847 – 1885].

<sup>21</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUẢN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 2.

long, and patrolling was very important. The records say that King Minh Mang ordered a ship in the capital to patrol the sea. Firstly the purpose was to train the sailors to be proficient in swimming, secondly to practice, to fight underwater to become acquainted with the sea; finally to make the pirates aware of the prestige of the imperial navy.<sup>23</sup>

In order for the patrol and control of the islands to be effective, King Minh Mang had clearer specific regulations compared to the regulations of King Gia Long about the time as well as the way to implement them. In 1830, King Minh Mang instructed coastal localities to return to the North from Quang Binh every year, starting from March to July, soldiers and ships were sent twice to the islands where pirate ships could pass to search for them. If a Qing ship was found hiding, the situation was suspicious, the local authorities would be arrested for investigation.<sup>24</sup> A few months later, King Minh Mang asked to extend the time of sea patrol from February to September each year.<sup>25</sup> Thus, except for the rainy and windy winter months, there was always the presence of patrol forces at sea in both the capital and localities, but the main focus was from February to September. Those were favourable months for sea transportation. This was also a time when there were many pirates.

Under Minh Mang, groups patrolling and hunting pirates were usually quite large, from about 50 to more than 100 soldiers, belonging to many different forces but always infantry and marines, in which marines were more numerous. For example, the patrol led by Phan Van Duc in the 11th Minh Mang year (1831) had 2 deputy commanders and 60 soldiers with a total of 104 marines and infantry.<sup>26</sup>

In 1837, the king assigned 1 commander, 2 deputy commanders, 80 experienced marines, 10 artillerymen carrying weapons and sent two ships with the names of Binh Hai and Tinh Hai to the coastal areas of Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Binh Thuan to look for pirates.<sup>27</sup>

The force involved in sea patrol was quite diverse, including the marines sent by the king to the provincial patrol forces. Therefore, in order to prevent the maritime patrol forces from avoiding responsibility and blaming each other, the

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<sup>23</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *CHẤU BẢN TRIỀU NGUYỄN - TRIỀU MINH MẠNG* [Official Documents of Minh Mang Reign], Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia 1 [National Archives Center N1], Vol. 41, Sheet 43.

<sup>27</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 5.

king made specific regulations about the territorial waters of the provinces along with specific positioning of the forces and setting up a landmark on the sea in order to demarcate the border of the sea patrol clearly.<sup>28</sup> Once the territorial waters of the provinces had been defined, the forces controlling the provinces had to inspect all the territorial waters of their province. When meeting with the patrol team of the provinces bordering the South and the North, the two sides had to signal to each other and exchange information.<sup>29</sup> The sign of recognition when the patrol ships meet had to clearly state the date, month, time, the destinations where the two patrol ships were to meet, and the name of the ships they met at the border. At the end of each month, all the paperwork each day was collected to be submitted to the local government.<sup>30</sup>

When the patrol ship met the pirates, besides the responsibility of making an immediate arrest, the ships also had to fire 3 big guns during the day, at night they fired 5 cannons to signal to ships from near and far to come to their aid.<sup>31</sup> To eliminate the possibility of enemy ships disguising themselves as patrol ships, the state stipulated that, when chasing pirates, if there were ships from far away, the patrol should immediately raise the yellow flag, which a big ship would hang at the stern flagpole, and a small ship would hang on the mast to identify the sailors' national flag. If there was no flag, that meant it was a pirate ship and should be chased quickly.<sup>32</sup>

With the above strict rules and regulations, King Minh Mang was very interested in patrolling the waters and islands. During his reign, fleets patrolled the seas day and night, braving the waves to hunt for pirates, to protect the security and integrity of the territorial waters.<sup>33</sup>

During the Thieu Tri and Tu Duc dynasties, the patrol work was carried out regularly as usual. Regulations on marine patrols and controls in the Minh Mang era continued to be maintained, with little change in the general regulations. One year after ascending the throne, Thieu Tri gave a command to patrol the sea.<sup>34</sup> Later, the king became more strict with patrolling and dealing with pirates. In

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<sup>28</sup> NỘI CÁC TRIỀU NGUYỄN [Cabinet of the Nguyen Dynasty]. *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* [History of Cabinet System in the Nguyen Dynasty], Vol. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Vol. 5.

<sup>33</sup> NỘI CÁC TRIỀU NGUYỄN [Cabinet of the Nguyen Dynasty]. *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* [History of Cabinet System in the Nguyen Dynasty], Vol. 5.

<sup>34</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 1.

1847, the king continued to tell the localities near the sea that the ships sent by the court and the provinces to patrol the sea should immediately destroy any enemy ships they met. If the patrol forces did not have any achievements, they would be examined in terms of their position, name and strictly punished. The king became more and more strict with patrol tasks and dealing with pirates.<sup>35</sup>

After the French attack on Da Nang (1858), even though there was a war in the country, King Tu Duc still never failed to patrol the waters, even to implement it earlier than in previous times. Historians of the Nguyen Dynasty mentioned that according to the previous regulations, ships on patrol in Cochinchina and Tonkin were sent out every February, and in July, they returned. But in later years, merchant ships from Cochinchina and Tonkin were often boarded and robbed by the sea enemies around the end of December and early January. Therefore, at the beginning of each year, it was necessary to gather forces to suppress the pirates.<sup>36</sup>

However, at this time, due to the turmoil in the domestic political situation, the enemy was also active and more frequent. Meanwhile, the maritime patrols took place later for various reasons and so became less and less effective. The state did not have enough ships and weapons, so had to delegate more responsibility to the localities or hired merchant boats, although resources in the localities were limited. The example of Tu Duc for the Infantry in 1865 gives us a partial picture:

There was a boat shortage in the capital and a few ships were not enough, so the provinces sent their own soldiers and boats, depending on the number of enemies, and set to sea to intercept and check the terrestrial territory; or let the provinces choose the boats for trading or fishing, to prepare undercover soldiers, armour and weapons, disguised as merchant boats, about 3–4 ships in a group, luring them into the sea gate, using only professional people; or they hired a Qing boat like *Banh Dinh Tu* to fight them.<sup>37</sup>

In order to deal with the slyness of the pirates, the measures for patrolling the sea had to be carried out flexibly and with a new tactic. Even in face-to-face combat, strategies for capturing the enemy had to be flexible and compatible with specific circumstances. This depended very much on the talent of the people directly leading the operation. During the Nguyen dynasty, the military

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<sup>35</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

mandarins sent to take charge of patrols were mainly experienced, knowledgeable and talented people... They did not always carry out military operations and direct combat to destroy the pirates. Crafty measures such as disguising merchant boats and fishing boats to approach and surprise enemy boats were also highly recommended. In 1837, in parts of Cau Mong and Da Nung estuary, Phu Yen province, enemy boats stole merchant boats and then disappeared. The provincial authorities and officials arrested the pirates and the officers in charge were demoted. General Ton That Luong asked to take a soldier who had pretended to be a merchant to go to sea to investigate. The King approved.<sup>38</sup> After that, this method was included in the rules by King Minh Mang in 1838: “Every year, to patrol the sea, the Qing enemy was still hiding in many local places we sent ships to the station, or pretend to be a merchant boat, depending on the location; if the enemy boat approaches for piracy, we immediately rush to capture”.<sup>39</sup>

While pursuing the pirates at sea, sea patrol forces had to regularly coordinate with each other and mobilize the people with many new measures in order to capture them. According to Tu Duc period records, on 18 February 1868, 4 pirate ships sneaked into Chap Son bay and chased fishing boats. The local government sent soldiers and people to take precautions to prevent them.<sup>40</sup>

An entry for 10 February 1867 recorded a similar case: “Three pirate ships from the North went to chase and rob merchant boats off the Sa Huynh estuary. The local soldiers immediately sounded the alarm and cooperated with the people’s boats to capture the pirates”.<sup>41</sup>

However, some attempts to catch the pirates were not successful and at times the imperial army was also helpless before their slyness and cunning. Despite every effort, the problem of piracy was reduced but could not be completely eliminated. Consequently, on many occasions the ships and civilians were also robbed of all contents and goods and threatened with being killed. Many local officials, even the head of the province, were severely disciplined. The reason for the difficulty in eradicating piracy was in part the lack of effort by some of those in charge.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> CHẤU BẢN TRIỀU NGUYỄN - TRIỀU TỰ ĐỨC [Official Documents of Tu Duc Reign], Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia 1 [National Archives Center N1], Vol. 170, Sheet 217.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., Vol. 158, Sheet 271.

<sup>42</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 5.

### 3.4.2. Reward and Punishment Policies and Other Regimes

In order for the patrolling and chasing of pirates to be effective, the Nguyen dynasty had clear policies of reward and punishment. Historical documents of the Nguyen Dynasty recorded many cases of the king promoting or bestowing money and other rewards on those who actively hunted pirates. In cases where pirates were caught, the king often gave large rewards. In 1836, at Thuan An estuary, there were 3 pirate ships hijacking merchant boats. Tran Cong Dao, deputy captain of the marine force of the Binh Dinh province that was transporting state goods, pursued this pirate group, which immediately fled to the East. When the news was delivered to the court, King Minh Mang commended him for his courage and promoted him to the position of head of the navy, while the soldiers were awarded 100 coins.<sup>43</sup> Even in the event that the patrol force could not capture the sea enemy but the damage was limited and the merchant boat was saved, a reward was also awarded. In 1837, Tien station in the Binh Thuan province had news that pirates tied up traders in order to steal their goods. Tran Quang Nghia brought troops and soldiers to chase them and the enemy fled. King Minh Mang knew and promoted Quang Nghia and rewarded his militia with 50 coins.<sup>44</sup> For areas that were always calm all year round, if no acts of piracy occurred, the court would also give rewards. The chieftain of the Tu Duc dynasty on 22 December 1877 recorded that the Infantry had requested a reward for guarding the sea all year round. Following this request, Nguyen Van Thuy, an estuary guard in the Binh Dinh province, was awarded a promotion by the king.<sup>45</sup>

In order to promptly encourage patrols, the king always paid much attention and shared the difficulties and dangers of this force.<sup>46</sup> For soldiers wounded in fighting the enemy, the court also showed concern for their treatment and gave them financial rewards. In 1870, the Historians wrote about the fact that Marine captain Nguyen Van Bao, soldiers Le Van Yen, Nguyen Van Sa were injured when fighting pirates. King Tu Duc ordered that they should return to the province for treatment and granted Nguyen Van Bao 10 ounces of silver, the rest,

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<sup>43</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 5.

<sup>45</sup> *CHẤU BẢN TRIỀU NGUYỄN - TRIỀU TỰ ĐỨC* [Official Documents of Tu Duc Reign], Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia 1 [National Archives Center N1], Vol. 279, Sheet 76.

<sup>46</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 8.

according to the custom of minor serious injuries, were checked by Thanh Hoa province and then immediately granted the money<sup>47</sup>.

From understanding the difficulties of sea patrol workers, to motivating them, the Nguyen kings provided additional salaries for the mandarins directly involved in this work. In addition, in the case of patrolmen who accidentally had accidents from, for example, storms or the sinking of their ships, help was given for their funerals and for the families of the victims.<sup>48</sup> This was a very necessary job to comfort the families of the dead soldiers as well as to encourage them in the war against this dangerous and difficult enemy.

In addition to spending a lot of attention on soldiers working on the sea, catching pirates with great rewards, the Nguyen Dynasty also punished very severely anyone who did not fulfil their responsibilities. The Nguyen Dynasty stipulated: "In any sea waters where the enemy appeared once, but the captain did not know or did not arrest the enemy immediately, if that enemy escapes, the captain of the local waters will be demoted 4 ranks." Other officials, depending on the situation, will be put on trial.<sup>49</sup> Those who work on the patrol must be strict, not use excuses but harass merchant boats, and if there are violations they will be severely punished.<sup>50</sup> The Dai Nam record actually recorded many cases of local sea management, when even the head of the province was severely disciplined, demoted due to not having actively pursued the pirates. In particular, in some cases, the king beheaded a military officer due to his cowardice if he had not put up a fight and had allowed the pirates to escape.

### 3.4.3. Mobilization of Forces and Means to Patrol and Hunt for Pirates

The forces directly carrying out patrol and piracy activities under the Nguyen dynasty were diverse, including regular forces and the local population. Among them, the regular force is the main, full-time one, professionally organized and trained by the State.

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<sup>47</sup> CHÂU BẢN TRIỀU NGUYỄN - TRIỀU TỰ ĐỨC [Official Documents of Tu Duc Reign], Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia 1 [National Archives Center N1], Vol. 279, Sheet 76.

<sup>48</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 7.

<sup>49</sup> NGUYỄN [NGUYEN], Quang Ngọc [Quang Ngọc]. *Tư liệu về hai quần đảo Hoàng Sa và Trường Sa của Việt Nam* [Documentation of Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands of Vietnam].

<sup>50</sup> NỘI CÁC TRIỀU NGUYỄN [Cabinet of the Nguyen Dynasty]. *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* [History of Cabinet System in the Nguyen Dynasty], Vol. 5.

The Navy was the main force for patrolling and hunting for pirates. The Marines of the Nguyen Dynasty consisted of divisions based in the capital and provinces. The duties of the navy were to patrol and protect the security of the islands, to hunt down the pirates, to serve the transport of goods. The importance of the marines in this work was confirmed by King Minh Mang through the decree sending the Infantry in 1841: “Up until now, where the ships go, usually the number of infantry dispatched is more than half. Sea support is entirely from the marines, how much does the infantry give? From now on, if there is an issue on the sea, we should assign two marine forces and one infantry force”.<sup>51</sup>

Marines in the capital and in the localities often coordinated with each other in patrolling and hunting pirates. In urgent cases, when the locality reported pirates, the court immediately sent ships to the locality to assist. The records of Thieu Tri dynasty on 17 April 1841 recorded that Truong Dang Que under the order of the king to send ships to investigate piracy in Nghe An, Thanh Hoa waters had to go immediately and coordinate with the locality to fight the pirates.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the naval forces sent by the state to patrol, the people living in the islands and coastal areas were also assigned by the Nguyen Dynasty to coordinate with the army to ensure the security and stability of the islands. According to the law of the Nguyen Dynasty, people living on islands and coastal areas were prohibited from selling or resupplying food to sea enemies and smuggling ships. At the same time, they had the responsibility of patrolling and guarding the sea and islands. In return for such cooperation they received benefits from the state such as exemption from personal taxes, exemption from the obligation to join the army. In 1826, the people on Cu Lao Cham island were granted exemption from taxes and from joining the army because they simultaneously guarded the fire station and patrolled in the waters of Cu Lao Cham.<sup>53</sup>

People in Tan Hop ward, Dien Ban district, Quang Nam province since 1826 conducted patrols at sea and at the observatory asking for exemption from their duty to join the army. The king agreed with both the above proposals.<sup>54</sup> In 1834,

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<sup>51</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 1.

<sup>52</sup> CHÁU BẢN TRIỀU NGUYỄN - TRIỀU THIỆU TRI [Official Documents of Thieu Tri Reign], Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia 1 [National Archives Center N1], Vol. 318, Sheet 87.

<sup>53</sup> CỤC VĂN THƯ VÀ LƯU TRỮ NHÀ NƯỚC [State Records And Archives Department of Vietnam]. *Mục lục châu bản triều Nguyễn (1825 – 1826)* [Index of Official Documents of Nguyen Dynasty (1825 – 1826)], Vol. 2, pp. 369–370.

<sup>54</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 2.

King Minh Mang ordered the coastal localities to examine the islands inhabited by people living in the province's waters to quickly repair fishing boats so they could move fast. Where the population was large, 3 ships should be made, where there were fewer people 2 ships. Each one could contain about 20 people. Repair fees were to be provided by the government. The state also provided long spears, rifles, and ammunition for local people to use for patrols. When we met the enemy, we fought together and ran to notify the authorities at the same time, to avoid delay and not being in time.<sup>55</sup> With this policy, on the one hand, the Nguyen dynasty added militia to the guard force, reducing the regular patrol force. On the other hand, the operation of the local units was quite flexible, both able to support and notify the regular forces to promptly come to the rescue. That was the regulation of the state, but on the local side, residents living on islands and coastal areas aware that protecting the security and order of the islands was not only a responsibility and obligation for them but also a right. These activities would help them protect their interests, protect the security of the place where they lived and did business. That is why many fishermen on the island actively asked the court for permission to "build ships and receive weapons from the state until the time comes to patrol" as the case of Ly Son island residents Quang Ngai province.<sup>56</sup>

Participating in the prevention of piracy in addition to domestic forces, the Nguyen Dynasty also mobilized the assistance of foreign forces, most notably the Qing Dynasty and France. Because Vietnam shares a sea bordered China, which is a sea area that is favourable for the enemy to hide, in the pursuit of pirates, many people and soldiers of that country needed to be mobilized to join. In 1882, the governor of Y Bich seaport in the Thanh Hoa province was Tran Van Tuyen and deputy Hoang Ngoc Quang together with the Qing's fishing boat, Ly Tan Hoang, captured pirates (18 pirates), ships (2 ships) and firearms, weapons, and the provincial government submitted the cases.<sup>57</sup> By the time of Tu Duc, there were also French people participating in pirate fishing. Vietnamese waters were an important target of the French colonialists from very early on. From the Treaty of Versailles to the Treaties of Nham Tuat, Giap Tuat, *Traité Patenôtre*, the seaways were always included in the negotiating terms between France and the Hue court. Therefore, the French were always proactive and actively assisted the Nguyen dynasty in patrolling and controlling the waters and in hunting pirates.<sup>58</sup> Conversely, there are also many cases where the court

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<sup>55</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 8.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 7.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3.

resorted to French assistance, as was the case with piracy in 1865.<sup>59</sup> During the Tu Duc dynasty, the court officials repeatedly coordinated with the French in hunting down many pirate groups. There were also cases where the French army did this alone.<sup>60</sup>

Performing the task of patrolling, catching pirates, the official forces and the militia were all equipped with weapons and support vehicles by the court. For the marine force, in 1833, King Minh Mang stipulated that each Marine guard be provided with a bird gun to the number of 100 pieces, 2 cannons, 200 long spears, 21 spears.<sup>61</sup> For fishermen's residential areas in the coastal area, especially in places at risk of piracy, in 1833, the court allowed the three provinces of Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, and Khanh Hoa to consider coastal residents to colonize the territory... annually the amount supplied to each village was 3 or 5 guns, and one gun is 30 rounds; distributed 20 or 30 long spears to be used for the prevention of Do Ba pirates. In winter, when there was a north wind, there was worry about the aggression of Bo Da pirates, the weapons would be returned.<sup>62</sup> From 1834 onwards, a new policy was implemented in all provinces with sea and islands. Even without a ban on the sea, ships trading in all provinces and cities across the country to the sea to trade were granted weapons by the State to increase the self-defence of merchant boats against problems at sea, especially pirates.<sup>63</sup>

The early kings of the Nguyen dynasty were aware of the important role of warships in the issue of naval construction. There are three types of ships commonly used for marines: bronze-clad ships, steam-powered ships, and distribution ships. In order to increase the effectiveness of patrolling and catching pirates, the Nguyen dynasty also provided patrol ships with effective sea-going tools such as telescopes, hourglasses, and maps.<sup>64</sup>

From the above documents it is clear that the early Nguyen dynasties spent a lot of the state treasury on the issue of equipping combat vehicles for the patrolling and controlling of the sea area. Such attention was aimed at improving

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<sup>59</sup> TRẦN [TRAN], Đức Anh Sơn [Duc Anh Son]. *Tàu thuyền và ngành đóng thuyền ở Việt Nam thời Nguyễn* [Vessels and Boat Building Industry in Vietnam during the Nguyen Dynasty].

<sup>60</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 3.

<sup>61</sup> NỘI CÁC TRIỀU NGUYỄN [Cabinet of the Nguyen Dynasty]. *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* [History of Cabinet System in the Nguyen Dynasty], Vol. 5.

<sup>62</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vol. 4.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 8.

<sup>64</sup> NỘI CÁC TRIỀU NGUYỄN [Cabinet of the Nguyen Dynasty]. *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* [History of Cabinet System in the Nguyen Dynasty], Vol. 5.

the effectiveness of the prevention of piracy, protecting the security and sovereignty of the islands, bringing a peaceful life to the people in general and fishermen living in the Central Coast region in particular. However, compared with the requirements, the weapons and means of the Nguyen Dynasty were limited in both quantity and quality.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, the effectiveness of the prevention and elimination of pirates of the Nguyen Dynasty in the Central Coast region still had many limitations.

#### 4. Conclusion

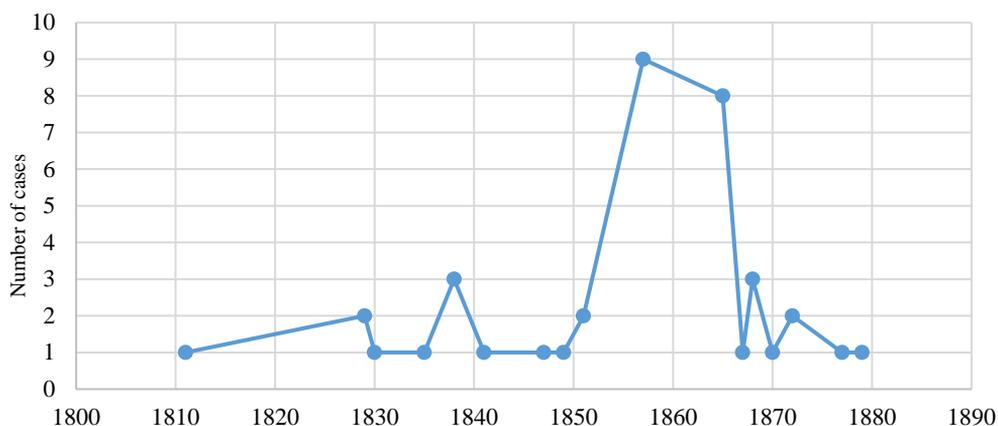
The vast sea and islands in the Central Region not only had an important strategic position but was also rich in natural resources, so besides favourable factors for economic development, this sea area was also attractive for pirate groups. They often increased their activity when the weather was favourable or the court officials and fishermen were negligent, distracted, and lacking in vigilance in their defences. The damage caused by these pirate groups was not only economic and not only to fishermen in estuaries and islands, but it became a major threat to the security and politics of the country, because the Central region was the capital of the Nguyen court, the bridge between the North and South.

Recognizing the importance of the sea and the islands as well as the danger of piracy, the Nguyen Dynasty – the last dynasty in Vietnamese history and also the one that owned the largest unified territorial sea – soon developed many measures to deal with piracy. In particular, special attention was paid to patrolling and controlling sea areas, with a strict reward and punishment regime for patrol forces, and mobilizing coastal fishermen to participate in anti-piracy activities. Although there were still many limitations, we cannot deny the Nguyen dynasty's efforts to eliminate pirates and protect the security of the islands.

Currently, piracy is still an obsession for fishermen at sea, a permanent threat to maritime security not only in Vietnam but also in other countries in the world, so the successes and failures of the Nguyen dynasty in fighting piracy are valuable lessons for posterity. The lesson is to always pay attention to the patrol and control of the sea, to focus on the development of the navy, the modernization of the army, to have the right policy of reward and punishment in the prevention of piracy, to raise awareness of the importance of prevention, to closely coordinate with the people and neighbouring countries sharing a sea border in the prevention of piracy as well as national and international maritime security protection.

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<sup>65</sup> NỘI CÁC TRIỀU NGUYỄN [Cabinet of the Nguyen Dynasty]. Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ [History of Cabinet System in the Nguyen Dynasty], Vol. 5.



**Fig. 1.** Frequency of Piracy in the Central Sea of Vietnam, 1802 – 1883.  
(National Historian Office of The Nguyen Dynasty<sup>66</sup> and Cabinet of The Nguyen Dynasty<sup>67</sup>)

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<sup>66</sup> QUỐC SỬ QUẢN TRIỀU NGUYỄN [NATIONAL HISTORIAN OFFICE OF THE NGUYEN DYNASTY]. *Đại Nam thực lục* [Chronicle of Greater Vietnam], Vols. 1–8.

<sup>67</sup> NỘI CÁC TRIỀU NGUYỄN [Cabinet of the Nguyen Dynasty]. *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* [History of Cabinet System in the Nguyen Dynasty], Vol. 5.

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