



RiskIntelligence

# Monthly Intelligence Report

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## Monthly Intelligence Report

This report includes an overview of attacks against merchant vessels over the past month in three focus regions (West Africa, the western part of the Indian Ocean and South East Asia) as well as assessments of different types of threats in these regions. These areas are currently considered to be the global regions where the threat of such attacks is most significant.

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# Monthly focus: Taiwan's elections and cross-strait relations

## Background

Political tensions have increased in the Taiwan Strait area this year. Statements by the People's Republic of China (PRC) President Xi Jinping in March were widely interpreted as a harder line for China's Taiwan policy.

The US response has added fuel to the fire. The US-Taiwan Relations Act does not require the United States to defend Taiwan, but it states that it is US policy to maintain the capacity to do so, creating strategic ambiguity about US actions in the event of a PRC attack on Taiwan. In recent statements, President Biden has appeared to abandon the ambiguity by stating that the US forces would defend Taiwan, stoking concerns of political tensions increasing further.

In November, however, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit was hosted by the United States. During the summit, US President Joe Biden and China President Xi Jinping agreed to resume military-to-military communications and efforts, widely interpreted as an improvement in relations after a significant deterioration in recent years.



*US President Joe Biden meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping during the APEC summit in November 2023 (Photo: US State Department)*

## China's 'grey zone' activities

China has engaged in a variety of grey zone activities to put pressure on Taiwan. Trigger factors can be US officials making visits to Taiwan and vice versa, increased US military support to Taiwan, or other political factors such as statements by Taiwanese politicians on the issue of independence.

## *Military exercises*

Since US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022, China has stepped up its military activities in the waters and airspace near Taiwan. PRC forces have conducted several exercises around Taiwan since the beginning of the year.

In September, the Chinese military conducted exercises north of Taiwan. This included a no-sail zone warning for an area off Taizhou city in Zhejiang province for live fire exercises. Exclusion zones for commercial operations are typically part of these exercises.

During the exercise, a record number of 103 aircraft were launched as part of a violation of Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ) on 17 September. This is part of an increasing trend of ADIZ violations.

## *Harassment at sea*

The China Coast Guard (CCG) and its supporting maritime militia engage in regular standoffs with other claimant state vessels in the South China Sea. On several occasions in 2022, Chinese law enforcement vessels shadowed and challenged research and survey vessels which were conducting marine research and exploration activities within the Philippines' EEZ. Chinese vessels stopped shadowing only after the survey vessels returned to a port.

In 2023, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the CCG and its supporting maritime militia had confrontations with not only the Philippines but also vessels from other countries in the South China Sea. In November, a PLAN warship and its militia vessels followed a US Navy ship which was within 12 nautical miles of the Taiwan-controlled Itu Aba Island in the South China Sea. In October, the CCG and its militia vessels rammed a Philippine Coast Guard vessel and a military-run supply boat off the Second Thomas Shoal, contested between China and the Philippines.

The Chinese behaviour pattern in the South China Sea has been similar to previous years with an increasing number of incidents. This can be attributed to an increasing frequency of CCG and maritime militia patrols in disputed waters. These activities are likely to increase further in the coming months, although it should be noted that merchant vessel transits are very unlikely to be affected.

## **Taiwanese elections: the parties**

The political landscape in Taiwan is primarily characterised by a division between two major parties: the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Kuomintang (KMT). The DPP generally leans towards advocating for Taiwanese autonomy, promoting Taiwanese identity, and maintaining a sceptical stance towards China. On the other hand, the KMT supports closer economic and cultural ties with China and aligns itself more broadly with a Chinese identity.

The Taiwan People's Party (TPP) is a relatively new political party in Taiwan. It was founded in 2019 and has a pragmatic view on politics, placing a strong emphasis on moderate policies and

emphasising good governance, social welfare, and economic development. Its candidate, Ko Wen-je, will be running for the upcoming election as well.

Presidential and legislative elections in Taiwan are scheduled for 13 January 2024. The next president will play a major role in guiding cross-strait relations for the next four years. The DPP under President Tsai Ing-wen has controlled the presidency and legislature since 2016.



*William Lai Ching-te, the DPP's presidential candidate, during a speech in October 2023 (Photo: Social Media / X)*

The DPP presidential candidate, William Lai Ching-te, Taiwan's Vice President, has echoed President Tsai Ing-wen's stance that Taiwan is already a sovereign, independent country called the Republic of China. The KMT presidential candidate, New Taipei Mayor Hou Yu-ih, has endorsed former president Ma Ying-jeou's cross-strait policy approach, stating that the close cross-strait economic and political engagement is helpful to the return of cross-strait stability. His endorsement also signals continuity in the KMT's cross-strait policy.

The TTP's Ko Wen-je has initially proposed to resume cross-strait talks involving the controversial Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), which labelled him as a pro-China candidate. He subsequently retracted his statement after receiving criticism and his stance on cooperation with China is somewhat unclear.

### **Open race with one favourite**

While the DPP's William Lai is still the election frontrunner, his lead has fallen below 30 per cent for the first time in seven months at the end of November. He is followed by the TTP and the KMT candidates. At the same time, it was revealed that KMT and TTP are in support of contesting as a team in the legislative election to increase the chances of victory as they push for the resumption of cross-strait exchanges. The cooperation aims to gain maximum seats against the independence-leaning DPP.

There is also a growing public discontent after eight years of DPP rule as polls indicate that the public favours a change in government. As the election draws near, mounting economic instability together with a string of DPP official-related sexual harassment incidents will probably increase the uncertainty of the outcome.

## Outlook

The outcome of the elections and China's response will be an important barometer for whether regional tensions will increase or decrease in the coming period.

If DPP candidate William Lai wins, cross-strait tensions will very likely continue for the next four years. Beijing might put more pressure on Lai to control his pro-independence tendencies. While his adoption of President Tsai's more moderate China policy may help allay the concerns of many Taiwan voters, Beijing doesn't recognise Tsai's approach as moderate.

Tensions with China will likely decrease if Hou wins the presidency as China will lessen its pressure on Taiwan to support the KMT's legitimacy and resume cross-strait dialogue. Taiwan will have more freedom to engage internationally under this scenario, and there will be fewer military provocations on a regular basis. While the long-term threat to Taiwan's sovereignty will remain, the short-term threat of conflict will drop.

The impact of a Ko presidency on cross-strait relations is harder to predict because of his ambiguous China policy. Although Ko's reception as mayor of Taipei was mostly positive in China, it is uncertain if China will have enough faith in a Ko administration to soften its military threats. However, Ko does not belong to a party that is formally in favour of independence, and he is free to change his mind on policy, which might put him in a position to improve cross-strait ties.

The implications of the 2024 Taiwan election are significant not just to cross-strait relations but also to its foreign policy. The new leadership will inevitably face complex challenges during their time in the coming four years while the maritime community will need to remain alert as to the implications of how these challenges unfold.

### Additional services

The Risk Intelligence System provides clients with real-time intelligence and situational awareness that will assist in avoidance of threats for operations around the globe. Moreover, Risk Intelligence offers ship operators the possibility to purchase security intelligence for individual ports and terminals. Bespoke services such as vessel-specific or voyage-specific risk assessments can also help to determine and to mitigate persistent or emerging security threats and risks.

In addition, frequent webinars provide in-depth updates, mini masterclasses in situational awareness methodology, and analysis of current events. Schedules and registration forms can be found at [riskintelligence.eu/webinars](https://riskintelligence.eu/webinars).

# Update: Maritime dimensions of the war in Ukraine

## Situation on land

Weather conditions in late November have significantly impacted operations, both military and maritime. The war in Ukraine continues with both Ukrainian and Russian forces each attempting to position themselves with an advantage over the other for the winter months ahead. The war also continues to influence the security environment in the Black Sea region, with Russian forces continuing to target Ukrainian civilian infrastructure across the country.



*Bad weather wreaked havoc in Ukraine in late November (Photo: Social Media / X)*

In November, Russian forces also continued the shelling of Ukrainian facilities on the Black Sea coast. The degree to which individual port operations are directly affected remains difficult to determine. Some port operations are known have been affected due to damage caused by attacks either directly against port facilities or indirectly as part of power cuts or similar.

Ukrainian offensive operations have made some progress in various locations including military operations towards Russian-occupied Crimea – although details are often unverifiable. Fighting remains concentrated mainly in southern and eastern parts of Ukraine. The overall threat picture is very likely to remain volatile in the coming weeks.

## Black Sea

During November, Ukraine's military launched several operations against Russian forces with Russia retaliating, mainly by attacking the Ukrainian Black Sea coastline. Similar to October, Russian military operations targeting port infrastructure were reported, including the ports of Odessa and Pivdenny (formerly Yuzhny).

Similar attacks are likely in the coming weeks, underlining a possible strategy of deliberately targeting port infrastructure relating to Ukrainian exports through the Black Sea. In late November,



UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated that it would be difficult to revive the previous Black Sea Grain Initiative.

The announced Ukrainian 'humanitarian corridor', initially for the departure of vessels in the ports of Odessa, Chornomorsk and Pivdenny, has been used for transits by an estimated 150 vessels at the time of this report. Some coordination with the Ukrainian Navy is believed to occur, likely in an attempt to avoid unnecessary hindrances to both commercial and military operations. Some development regarding a more permanent arrangement for the corridor is known, including an insurance arrangement between Ukraine and a United Kingdom-based syndicate of marine insurers. However, talks on additional details are ongoing.



*Bulk carrier with a cargo of wheat leaving from Ukraine (Photo: Oleksandr Kubrakov)*

It is possible that, if a permanent and formal structure to the 'humanitarian corridor' is announced, Russia may attempt to disrupt this trade by various means including dropping mines from Russian military aircraft. Russian forces may also increase the intensity of attacks on Ukrainian ports. The previously noted Ukrainian reiteration of an earlier warning to commercial vessels transiting to Russian-controlled Ukrainian ports that these would be seen as legitimate military targets has not been retracted. Russian officials have made similar statements regarding merchant ships calling at Ukrainian Black Sea ports.

The targeting of Ukrainian port infrastructure is likely to continue which also means the continued heightened likelihood of collateral damage for vessels at berth – as previous incidents have proven – or direct missile hits, though likely unintended. The north-western part of the Black Sea near the Ukrainian and Crimean coasts, including the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait, is still assessed as prohibited area of navigation by the Russian Navy.

Vessels transiting the Kerch Strait and Sea of Azov are assumed to have Russian permission. The operational status of Berdyansk and Mariupol remains disputed. Russian officials claim both ports are open and operating. Ukrainian authorities have previously stated that they would remain closed until again under Ukrainian control.

Overall, the general threat picture has become increasingly volatile particularly since Russia withdrew from the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July. This increases the possibility of collateral

damage or mistaken targeting of merchant ships. While direct targeting of civilian vessels has occurred and remains likely, the main threat is still assessed to be from potential mines or collateral damage as a result of being in the vicinity of an attack on port infrastructure.

## Port operations

Ukrainian Black Sea ports are understood to be closed to normal operations, Odessa, Chornomorsk and Yuzhny have all handled vessels which have used the 'humanitarian corridor' announced by the Ukrainian Navy. This is likely to continue but will be influenced by the overall security situation.

Ukrainian Danube ports are operating. However, delays and operational disruptions are known to have occurred throughout November, often due to weather conditions and pilot shortages, but disruptions also occur due to Russian attacks. As Russian missile and drone attacks continue, future delays and disruptions cannot be ruled out.

## Summary

Attacks against civilian, including maritime, infrastructure are likely to continue in the coming weeks. It remains unclear to what degree Russia or Ukraine would enforce their threats against vessels transiting to each other's Black Sea ports as potential military targets. However, circumstances are most likely to be individual rather than a blanket approach. Collateral damage is still assessed as the most likely.

Diplomatic breakthroughs, ceasefire agreements or any return to the previous regional security situation in the Black Sea are still assessed as unlikely in the near term. The volatile nature of the war means that the security situation can change on short notice. Major successful offensive operations by both Ukrainian and Russian forces appear unlikely, but if they should occur will likely have a wider impact on the general security situation, including the maritime environment.

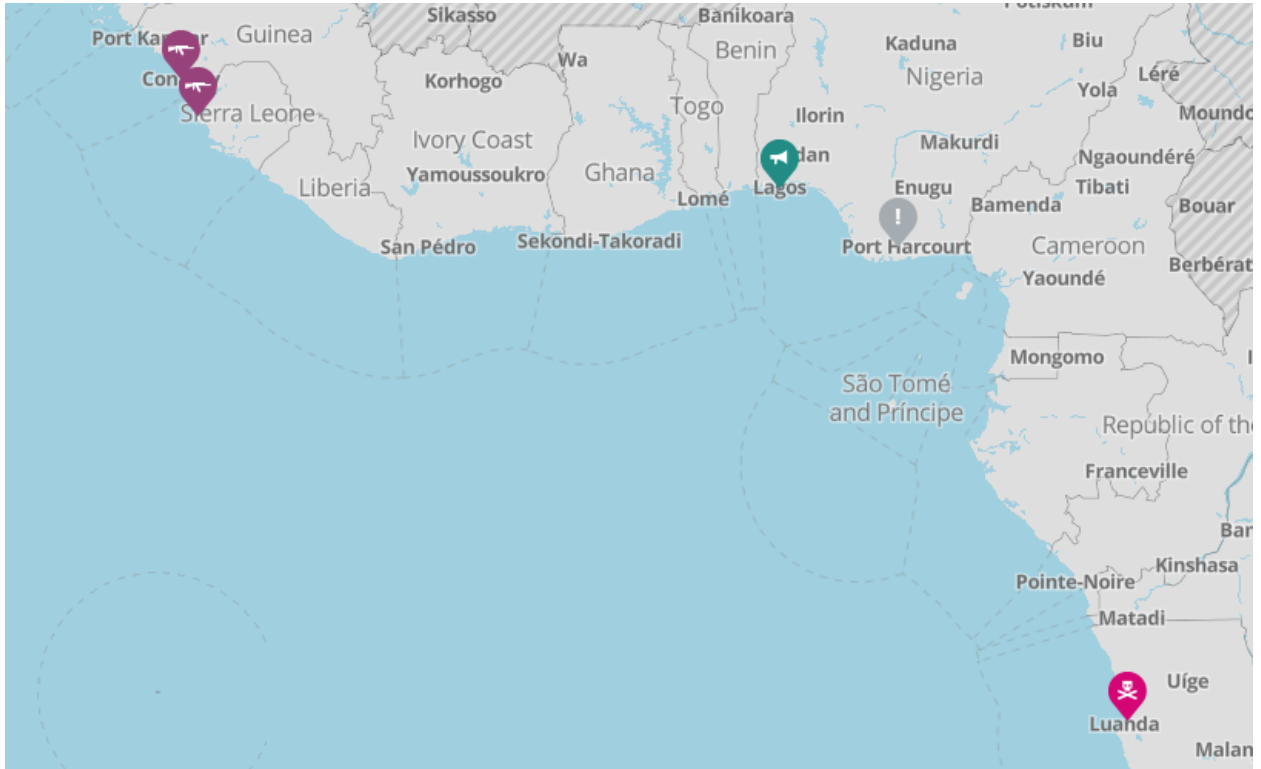
Merchant ship operations should take the possibility of collateral damage into account. The impact of future Ukrainian and Russian operations should be monitored closely. Risk Intelligence strongly recommends conducting thorough threat and risk assessments prior to any transit and to update contingency plans according to the current situation.

### Further information

Risk Intelligence provides a weekly threat assessment for ports in the northern part of the Black Sea, covering both the operational and security situation. In addition, the report provides a concise overview of the current situation in Ukraine and the northern Black Sea, including constantly updated information regarding the status of exports of grain and other bulk cargoes from Ukrainian ports.

## West Africa

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 30 November 2023, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



## Incidents

### **2 November – Offshore supply vessel BOURBON AUTAN boarded**

Theft Luanda anchorage (Angola) 23:20 LT (22:20 UTC)

### **3 November – Security boat attacked**

Other maritime risk Rivers state (Nigeria) Early morning

### **4 November – Armed attack against central prison**

Insurgency operation Conakry (Guinea) 05:00 LT/UTC

### **14 November – Nationwide strike by port workers**

Activism Nigerian ports

### **26 November – Armed attack against military barracks and prison**

Insurgency operation Freetown (Sierra Leone) Early morning

# Assessment

## Nigeria / Niger Delta

Attackers operating off the southern and eastern Niger Delta remain the most significant threat in the Gulf of Guinea. While few security incidents involving merchant ships at sea have been reported over the past 24 months, the threat level was underlined by several high-profile incidents in the first half of 2023. Attacks against local vessels in or near the Niger Delta are also frequent, underlining the fragile security situation.

Crude oil theft and sales of illegally refined petroleum products reached record levels in 2022 and have remained a significant concern this year. Such operations have long provided constant revenues to organised criminal groups yet profit margins skyrocketed in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nigerian oil production and export levels even fell to historic lows in April and remain significantly below the quota set by OPEC, resulting in major revenue shortfalls for Nigeria's government.

In recent months, the government has stepped up efforts to improve the security situation. The highly controversial contract with a security company which is ultimately controlled by a former Niger Delta militant leader was extended and patrols conducted by the Joint Task Force and the Nigerian Security & Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) have been ramped up. This has resulted in several reports about violent clashes including one in early November during which several NSDCD personnel were killed when they were ambushed during pipeline surveillance operations in Rivers state, located in the southern part of the Niger Delta.



*Security boats operated by the NSCDC in the Niger Delta during a commissioning ceremony (Photo: NSCDC)*

The overall situation in the Niger Delta is closely linked to oil and gas revenues which are crucial for federal and state-level budgets. Short-term improvements may be useful to boost crude oil production and to finance urgent expenditures, especially on the federal level. However, "paying off" criminal groups in the Niger Delta through security contracts is very unlikely to be successful

in solving long-standing security concerns. Maritime operators should therefore monitor developments which may include an uptick in attacks against merchant ships at sea in the coming months.

Successful boardings of merchant ships remain most likely on "low and slow" types such as small bulk carriers or product tankers, offshore supply ships or fishing vessels. However, other vessels may also be targeted. Weather conditions during the dry season – which will last until about April – make it possible to operate small boats even deep offshore. Attacks may therefore take place at significant distances from the coastline.

For ongoing operations, crew vigilance and measures recommended in *BMP West Africa* remain important to mitigate risks. This may include the use of security escort vessels off Nigeria. These can be offered by several dozens of companies which have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Nigerian Navy; the most recent version of this document was officially published in June 2021. The MoU remains the legal basis for additional security measures employed in the Nigerian maritime domain (territorial waters and EEZ). MoU signatories are authorised to provide escort vessels partly manned by naval personnel which cannot operate outside of Nigeria's EEZ.

In addition, it is vital to carefully analyse all security-related incidents. Many cases which are simply reported as piracy involve vessels which are solely trading within the region. Such incidents are unlikely to be genuine pirate attacks aimed at random targets. Overall, it is important to recognise piracy as merely one symptom of insecurity at sea which is closely linked to other organised criminal activities.

In Nigeria, attacks against local shipping or military patrols highlight that kidnappings and other criminal activities remain a security threat which may affect merchant ships again in the coming months.

## Forecast

The threat level in the coming month remains severe off the Niger Delta, despite limited numbers of incidents in recent months. Attacks are possible at distances of up to 250 nm from the coastline, particularly under favourable weather conditions during the dry season which is set to last until about March. All ship types may be targeted.

Inshore attacks against local passenger and cargo vessels or against military detachments remain a threat across the Niger Delta, underlined by various incidents in recent months. Such attacks are not a direct concern for merchant ships in international trade, but crews must be vigilant during river transits in the Niger Delta.

## Gulf of Guinea (Côte d'Ivoire to Gabon) / West Africa (Senegal to Angola)

Maritime incidents in November were limited to one ship being boarded at the Luanda anchorage (Angola). Similar to most of these cases across the region, the perpetrators escaped when they were discovered by the crew. Violence against seafarers is rare during such incidents which are usually aimed at stealing easily accessible items on deck.

Two land-based incidents were also recorded in November, underlining that instability on land may have knock-on impacts on maritime operations. On 4 November, a large prison was attacked in Guinea's capital Conakry. The perpetrators tried to free four leaders of a coup in 2008 who are accused of being responsible for a massacre of civilians. Security forces were able to bring the situation under control but movement restrictions were immediately put in place which affected the entire city, including port operations in Conakry.

On 26 November, armed men attacked a military barracks and the central prison in Sierra Leone's capital Freetown. Authorities announced an immediate nationwide curfew which was replaced by a nighttime curfew, starting on the following day. While security forces were able to quickly restore calm, the incident was later described as an attempted coup, underlining political fragility in the country. The incident has also increased existing tensions in the region where several coups have taken place in recent years yet these had so far been limited to francophone countries.

Overall, the number of maritime security incidents in recent months remains low compared with previous years. Despite this improvement, limited naval and law enforcement capabilities as well as a lack of cooperation between different agencies on the national and regional level remain issues which have a negative impact on maritime security.

Limited financial and human resources will remain another concern for navies across the region in the coming years. Maritime operators should therefore not interpret a low number of incidents as a significant reduction of the threat level. Criminal activities at sea remain closely linked. Illegal fishing, smuggling as well as other illicit operations have even increased in the recent past. Alleged pirate attacks may also be a cover for other types of illicit activities.

### Forecast

Throughout the Gulf of Guinea, the threat of kidnap-for-ransom attacks is assessed as moderate to high for the coming month, depending on the distance from the Niger Delta coastline where perpetrators can protect hostages from security forces and rival gangs during ransom negotiations. The threat level for vessel hijackings is assessed as low.

Across countries in West and Central Africa, perpetrators may try to board berthed or anchored vessels. Around most anchorages, the amount of small boat traffic is virtually impossible to control for security agencies. Threat levels vary between different ports, but perpetrators will generally escape upon discovery.

## Western Indian Ocean

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 30 November 2023, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



## Incidents

### 14 November – Merchant vessel reports suspicious approach

Suspicious approach/local traffic Gulf of Oman

### 15 and 23 November – USS THOMAS HUDNER intercepts drones

Counter insurgency/military operation Red Sea

### 19 November – Vehicle carrier GALAXY LEADER detained by Houthi forces

Naval operation Red Sea

### 22 November – Fishing vessel AL MIRAJ hijacked

Hijacking at sea Somali Basin

### 24 November – Container vessel CMA CGM SYMI attacked by suspected Iranian drone

Insurgency/hybrid operation Arabian Sea

### **25-27 November – Merchant vessels report suspicious activity**

Suspicious approaches/local traffic Gulf of Aden

### **26 November – Product tanker CENTRAL PARK boarded / suspected hijackers arrested / ballistic missiles fired into the Gulf of Aden**

Hijacking at sea / naval operation / hybrid attack Gulf of Aden

### **29 November – Fishing vessel hijacked**

Hijacking at sea Gulf of Aden

## Assessment

### Southern Red Sea – Gulf of Aden

This area covers shipping routes which are potentially affected by the conflict and political dynamics in Yemen. There has been a shift in the security situation due to a new policy announced by the Houthis in northern Yemen to target Israeli shipping in the Red Sea and any naval forces involved in the protection of that shipping. US naval forces have been involved in operations to intercept drones and missiles fired by Houthi forces, although it is not clear if these were specifically targeting US warships or were part of the campaign started in October to target Israel.



*Yemen's Houthi forces seizing control of the vehicle carrier GALAXY LEADER  
(Photo: Houthi Military Media)*



In line with this new policy, the Bahamas-flagged vehicle carrier GALAXY LEADER was detained by Houthi forces in the Red Sea around 50 nautical miles west of Hudaydah on 19 November. The vessel was transiting southbound and unladen at the time. It is now being held in the Hudaydah port anchorage.

Previous Houthi operations to seize locally-trading vessels have not shown the same level of sophistication as this operation. A professional video shot – including the symbolic flying of the Houthi and Palestinian flags on the seized vessel – was published by the Houthis after the operation for propaganda purposes. The operation is very similar in *modus operandi* to the boarding carried out on merchant vessels by Iranian military forces in the Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf, leading to speculation on Iranian support for this operation.

The boarding and seizure operation was unexpected in the sense that the Houthis have not used this tactic before and have not shown the ability to use helicopter-borne forces for such a purpose. A limited drone strike against the vessel would have been consistent with Houthi tactics to date in the Red Sea, so this incident represents a shift in capabilities. That the operation was carried out some distance from the coastline also suggests confidence in being able to operate in this wider area, potentially enabled by the relative détente between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia in the past 12 months and the generally improved security situation in the Red Sea. Indeed, the Saudi response has been muted and analysis suggests that Saudi Arabia is keeping its ongoing peace process with the Houthis separate from any actions taken by the Houthis to target Israel and act as a pressure valve for wider Arab discontent with Israel's actions in Gaza.

On 26 November, five armed men on a skiff boarded and seized the tanker CENTRAL PARK while it was transiting the International Recommended Transit Corridor between Somalia and Yemen. All crew members were able to assemble in the citadel. The gunmen attempted to break into the citadel but without success. Subsequently, they left the vessel in the direction of Yemen and were pursued by the USS MASON, a US navy destroyer which was in the vicinity. A US helicopter gunship flew over the skiff and fired warning shots. A Japanese destroyer assisted with the interdiction. The gunmen were eventually arrested.

Following the incident, two missiles were fired at the USS MASON from a Houthi-controlled area of Yemen, without hitting the vessel. The tanker is linked to Israel through its ownership profile, suggesting that this boarding was part of ongoing Houthi efforts to target Israeli shipping, although outside the typical area of Houthi operations in the Red Sea. A US Pentagon spokesperson was reported saying, however, that the perpetrators were identified as Somali and that the incident was 'piracy-related'. It is a significant coincidence if this were a Somali hijacking attempt that the vessel selected was linked to Israel and that the naval response from the US resulted in a Houthi missile attack. Until there is more clarification, it is assessed as very likely that the CENTRAL PARK was targeted specifically, and that there is not a significant increase in the threat to the majority of vessels in transit in the Gulf of Aden at this time.

Overall, for most vessels in transit, threats remain generally low; piracy is highly unlikely in the southern Red Sea and unlikely in the Gulf of Aden. Vessels should expect encounters with local traffic, which might be fishermen, traders, or smugglers (or all three). It is not clear whether the suspicious approaches reported around the time of the CENTRAL PARK incident were related or were due to generally heightened vigilance by vessels at this time and these were pattern-of-life

encounters. The incident on 29 November of a hijacked fishing vessel was only reported at the time of writing but is likely linked to illegal fishing as noted in the Somali Basin section below.

Yemeni and Eritrean coastguard forces are active in this area, particularly around the Hanish Islands where the maritime borders of Yemen and Eritrea meet. These forces might not be immediately recognisable. There have been previous incidents involving private craft where Yemeni and Eritrean forces intercepted such craft which had not been immediately recognisable and were not following typical transit routes. Coastguard craft might shadow merchant vessels as part of their regular operations. The situation in Sudan is not affecting maritime security.

## Forecast

There is a high threat to vessels in transit linked to Israel through ownership. It is likely that targeting lists for these vessels have used publicly accessible records that – even if they do not always reflect the most accurate structure of ownership/management – to identify ‘Israeli’ shipping targets that can be used to apply pressure to business and political groups in Israel. Attacks against other transiting vessels are currently not expected, particularly for most ships that are using established transit corridors. Proximity to naval vessels might also increase the possibility of collateral damage if these warships are targeted by drones/missiles.

For transiting vessels, encounters with local traffic – that have armed crew on board – are likely to continue. Such encounters are not a significant threat but can lead to cases of mistaken identity. Proximity to the Yemeni coast increases the possibility of such encounters. Pirate attacks are unlikely in this area, despite the CENTRAL PARK incident that has been attributed to Somali piracy by some reporting.

## Gulf of Oman – Persian Gulf

There was one significant incident in this area in November. The container vessel CMA CGM SYMI was hit by a drone, likely fired by Iranian forces, in the Arabian Sea on 24 November. Some damages were reported, but no casualties among the crew. Like previous incidents in this area in 2021 and 2023, the vessel was linked to Israel through ownership and was very likely specifically targeted.

There has been a heightened threat to merchant vessels in the Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf for some time, due to Iran’s selective targeting of certain vessels to make broader political statements. Maritime operations are still an option for Iran. Currently, however, it is more likely to focus on land-based operations using proxy forces in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Additional attacks on Israel-linked vessels are nevertheless possible. Iran is likely to be providing some degree of assistance to the Houthi campaign against Israel, but this recent action in the Arabian Sea likely serves to demonstrate ongoing capabilities and intentions.

Iran continues to detain the crude oil tanker ADVANTAGE SWEET, seized in April with a cargo bound for Houston. It is likely that there will be further operations by Iran linked to this dispute, or at least prolonged negotiations for the release of the ADVANTAGE SWEET. Vessels with US connections, through flag, ownership/management, or cargo, currently face a higher threat. Seizing vessels has been a successful strategy for Iran as it is typically able to secure concessions in return for the vessel's release. It is not unusual for vessels to be held for several months before a political compromise is reached.



*Damage to the Israeli cargo ship HELIOS RAY after an explosion in 2021  
(Photo: Channel 13 News)*

## Forecast

There are various permutations that might increase (or decrease) the threat to certain vessel profiles, such as port calls, cargo, flag, or ownership/management. The current threat remains higher for vessels linked to Israel. Limited operations against vessels are a tactic that Iran can use in response to actions taken by Israel or other states in the region. In the current climate, operations on land are likely to be favoured. Limited maritime operations are nevertheless possible. Attacks linked to Iran in the past have included the use of limpet mines and drones/missiles to target vessels.

There is also a threat of potential vessel boardings and seizures as Iran has an extended record of such operations to resolve political and commercial disputes. The frequency of these incidents is difficult to predict but further cases are expected ongoing, particularly targeting US-linked vessels.

## Somali Basin and wider Indian Ocean

Merchant ships in transit should expect encounters with local traffic, which might be fishermen, traders, or smugglers (or all three). Skiffs will often pass close to merchant ships and the crew are likely to be armed, even if they are not showing weapons to avoid attracting attention from armed guards that might provoke an incident.

Until this month, there had been no confirmed pirate attacks since 2019 when international fishing vessels were targeted. An Iranian fishing vessel was reportedly hijacked on 23 November off Eyl in Somalia. The incident is likely to be linked to illegal fishing activity in the area and appears to have been carried out by local fishermen. Illegal fishing is an ongoing issue and has been a major focus for Somalia in expanding its maritime enforcement capabilities. Iranian vessels have been seized in the past and their crews held, with captives released as recently as 2022 and 2020.

There was a further report on 29 November of a fishing vessel being boarded and hijacked off Bosaso, Puntland. The incident was only reported at the time of writing and no further details are currently available. It is assessed that these incidents are not a typical 'pirate' hijacking as previously seen in this area.

Pirate attacks against merchant vessels in transit continue to be unlikely to occur. Naval forces remain in the area, focusing on a range of maritime threats – including piracy and smuggling – which is an important deterrent to attacks on merchant ships. Somalia is continuing to develop its maritime policies to improve further the security situation in the Somali Basin.

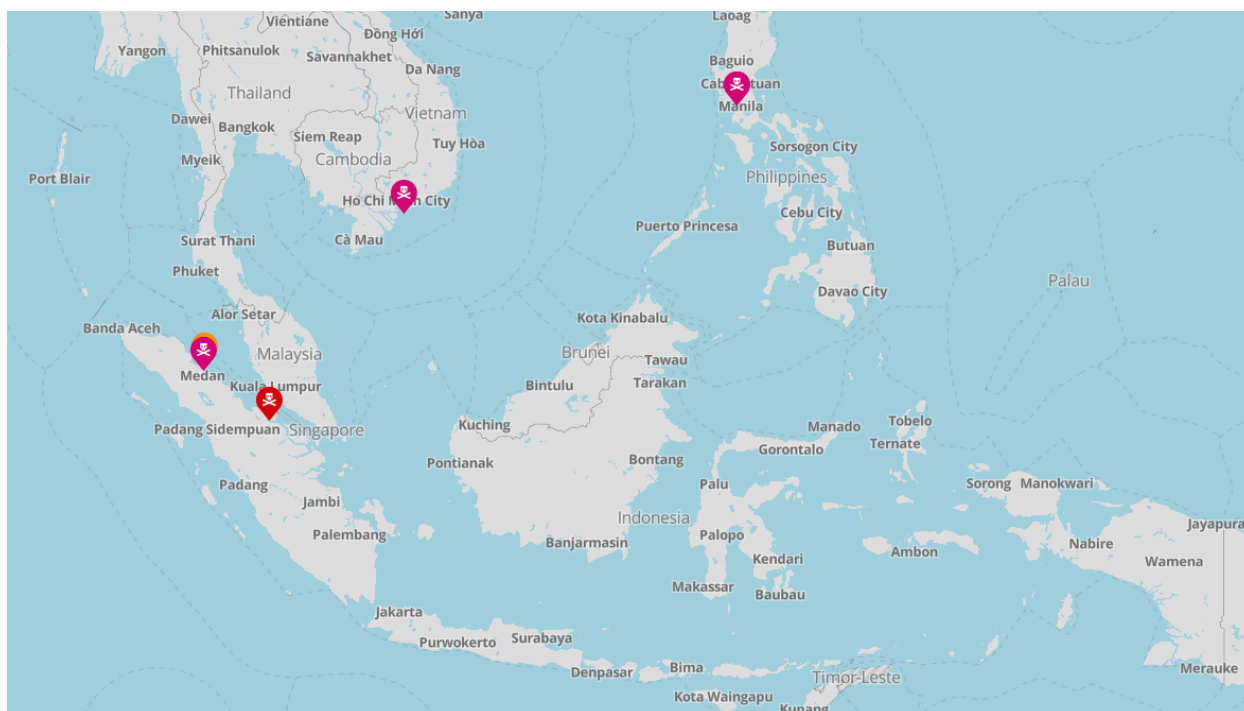
### Forecast

Local craft of various kinds are very likely to be encountered in this area and are potentially difficult to identify in some cases. Most vessels in transit are unlikely to be affected. Pirate attacks are unlikely, unless specifically linked to fishing disputes.

Proximity to the Somali coast can also lead to encounters with local militias or criminal operations but the threat level is low. Military operations continue in Somalia against militant/terrorist group al-Shabab. However, there is only a limited maritime dimension to this conflict which is not expected to affect merchant ships in transit.

## South East Asia

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 30 November 2023, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



## Incidents

### **1 November – General cargo ship MATSUSHIRO boarded**

Armed robbery Dumai anchorage (Indonesia) 10:45 LT (03:45 UTC)

### **6 November – General cargo ship ELISABETH OLDENDORFF boarded**

Theft Vung Tau anchorage (Vietnam) 01:50 LT (18:50 UTC on 5 November)

### **14 November – Chemical tanker ARGENT DAISY boarded**

Failed robbery Belawan anchorage (Indonesia) 20:23 LT (12:23 UTC)

### **20 November – Chemical tanker ARGENT DAISY boarded**

Theft Port of Belawan (Indonesia) 04:45 LT (21:45 UTC on 19 November)

### **23 November – Chemical tanker ARGENT DAISY boarded**

Failed robbery Dumai anchorage (Indonesia) 04:35 LT (21:35 UTC on 22 November)

### **26 November – Container ship HANSA COLOMBO boarded**

Theft Manila anchorage (Philippines) 02:45 LT (18:45 UTC on 25 November)

### **26 November – Container ship G. CROWN boarded**

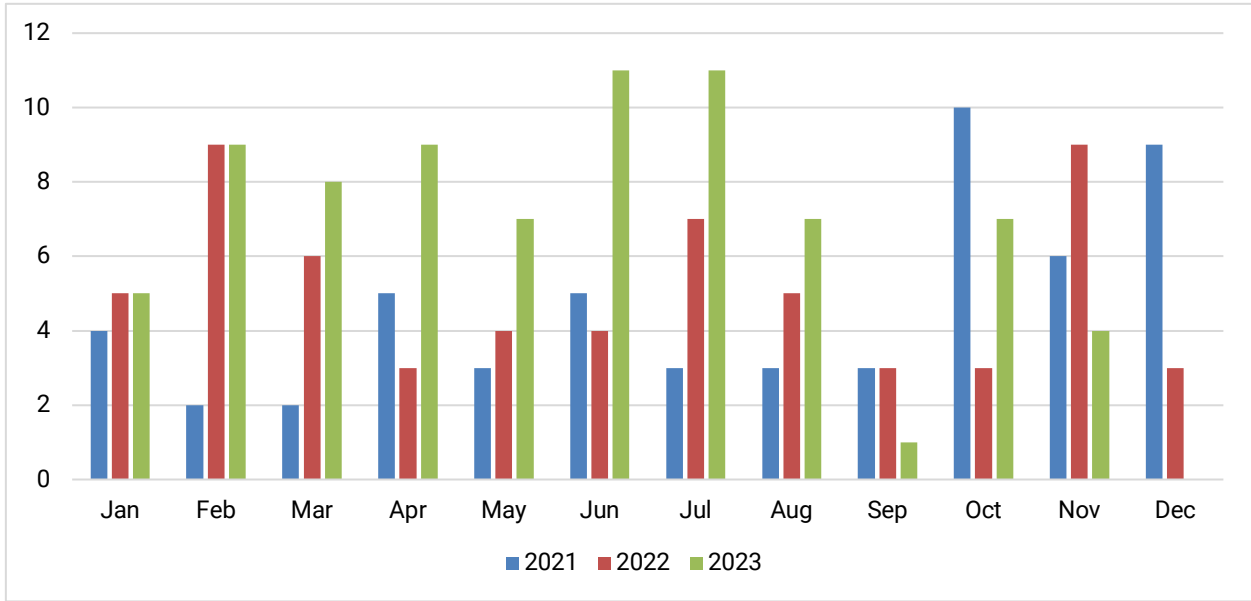
Theft Manila anchorage (Philippines) 02:45 LT (18:45 UTC on 25 November)

# Assessment

## Singapore and Malacca Straits, South China Sea, Indonesian archipelago, Sulu / Celebes Seas

Statistically, thieves and armed robbers operating along the Singapore Strait remain the most significant threat for merchant vessels, although there were no recorded incidents in the Singapore Strait during November. Arrests of suspected perpetrators on Karimun Island at the end of October could have contributed to the reduction of reported incidents involving vessels underway. Of the seven incidents recorded in South East Asia during November, four involved boardings at ports and anchorages along the the Malacca Strait, with no vessels boarded while underway.

It was also unusual for one vessel to be involved in three separate incidents, as illustrated by the ARGENT DAISY boardings at Belawan and Dumai. The remaining incidents involved the boarding of an anchored tanker off Vung Tau, Vietnam, and boardings of two container ships during the same night at the Manila anchorage.



*Number of maritime security incidents in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore per month in 2021, 2022 and 2023 to date (Source: Risk Intelligence System)*

Over the past 12 months, about 64% percent of all reported incidents in the region have taken place in the Singapore Strait. Of these, 43% involved perpetrators that were reported as armed. It is likely that most perpetrators are actually carrying knives, even though these weapons may not be observed by crew during incidents. As the borders of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore intersect in the Singapore Strait, perpetrators appear to take advantage of jurisdictional challenges there, improving their ability to escape.

During the past twelve months there have been 82 incidents in the straits of Malacca and Singapore (SOMS). Of these, 67 occurred in the Singapore Strait and 15 in the Malacca Strait. Of the total, 46 involved bulk carriers, 19 involved tankers, while 12 involved barges and other craft

in tow. The outliers involved a general cargo vessel, OSVs, a rig and a pipe-laying barge (attacked two times). No incidents in the straits have involved container ships or passenger vessels.

Overall, during this period 82% of all SOMS incidents targeted vessels underway, all but three in the Singapore Strait. During the past twelve months, 66% of the Singapore Strait incidents have taken place in the western zone between Karimun and Batam. As coastal authorities have increased patrols, response times are generally quick when incidents are reported. While most perpetrators are armed with knives or machetes, they will rarely attack the crew unless provoked.

For the wider region, incidents typically encountered are non-violent boardings at anchorages and while alongside, as illustrated by the boarding at Vung Tau.

A notable incident in 2022 involved the hijacking of a bunker barge and the theft of its fuel cargo off Sulawesi. That incident, together with the unsolved theft of cargo from the OCEAN PRIDE in October 2021, illustrates that locally-trading tankers are vulnerable to hijackings, whilst larger tankers in international trade have not been targeted in recent years. These incidents, together with the illegal sale of fuel from a tug in the Johor Strait in March and regular law enforcement interventions in the region, further show that the black market trading of fuel at sea continues.

Armed robbers and thieves usually board vessels at night and target supplies and engine spares while avoiding crew. Areas with the highest frequency of criminal activity during the past twelve months include the Singapore Strait, the ports of Batangas, Belawan, Manila, Sandakan and Tanjung Priok. Boardings of vessels alongside are less frequent, with the above listed incident at Belawan being one of the rare occurrences.

Aside from the Singapore Strait, boardings of vessels underway have also occurred in the Malacca Strait, the Natuna Sea and the southern South China Sea, although at a lower frequency. Most incidents in the region involve bulk carriers and tankers, with very few involving container vessels. Boardings of oil rigs are infrequent and generally involve the theft of equipment and supplies.

Moreover, some incidents during the past 12 months illustrate that crew members may be injured during attacks. In addition to the stabbing in October, an incident took place in June in which a seafarer suffered a head injury. In July 2022, perpetrators tied up and threatened a seafarer at gunpoint while stealing engine spares. Crew alertness is an important deterrent.

The March 2023 hijacking of a tug during which palm seed batches were stolen from the barge in tow and a similar incident off Sulawesi in January are the only confirmed hijackings for cargo theft in the region since 2017. In 2018, there was one failed incident which had the markings of a product theft attempt involving the LEE BO off Mersing, Malaysia in the South China Sea.

The arrests of gang leaders behind hijackings had effectively suppressed such crimes, despite occasional incidents involving small tankers and barges which are locally owned, managed and trading solely in the region. As prices remain relatively high, it is possible that illegal fuel sales in the South China Sea, Sulu/Celebes Seas and the Singapore Strait will increase. This increases the vulnerability of smaller tankers to potential hijackings, similar to the period from 2011 to 2017.

As a result of intensified military operations in the southern Philippines and eastern Malaysia, kidnap for ransom activity of the Abu Sayyaf Group and its affiliates has been significantly suppressed. No cargo vessels have been targeted in the Sulu/Celebes Seas since February 2017. Tugs and fishing trawlers have also not been attacked since January 2020.

## Forecast

In the coming month, the threat of boardings of vessels that are underway or anchored for the purposes of theft or armed robbery is moderate. Higher threat locations include the Singapore Strait and anchorages at Batangas, Belawan, Dumai, Manila, Sandakan and Tanjung Priok. Lower threat levels are present in the southern South China Sea off the Malaysian peninsula, and the Natuna Sea off Pulau Mapur, Indonesia.

The threat of hijacking for product theft is moderate for locally trading small tankers. Hijackings in the region are infrequent due to effective law enforcement. The threat that internationally-trading tankers will be hijacked for cargo theft is assessed as low.

The threat of kidnappings of crew from merchant ships in the Sulu and Celebes Seas is low, particularly within the designated transit corridors. Fishing trawlers remain the most vulnerable craft with respect to ASG-related kidnapping operations, although other small craft, tugs, ferries and locally-trading vessels may also be vulnerable.



## Definitions

### Threat levels

The threat levels used in this report are as per the Risk Intelligence System and are assessed based on the likelihood and consequence of a particular threat type occurring. The threat levels are as follows:

- Low: Negligible impact on operations in the coming month due to the unlikely occurrence of threat-related activity.
- Moderate: Some potential for minimal impact on operations in the coming month due to occurrence of low- level threat-related activity.
- Elevated: Moderate impact on operations in the coming month is possible with some threat-related activity expected to occur.
- High: Potential for major impact on operations in the coming month due to the occurrence of significant threat- related activity.
- Severe: Potential for severe impact on operations in the coming month as significant threat-related activity is ongoing or expected to occur.

### Incident types

The report covers the threats of piracy and armed robbery at sea in various forms but does not include other threats to merchant vessel operations such as stowaways or smuggling. All possible contingencies cannot be covered by any assessment and this report only includes an assessment of the threat for merchant vessels in general and not specific vessel types.

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