



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 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: A resurgence of Somali piracy?

Background

The recent hijackings of the bulk carriers RUEN and ABDULLAH and their detention off the Somali coast has been reminiscent of the Indian Ocean piracy threat of old. It has been 11 years since the last merchant vessel, the tanker SMYRNI, was successfully taken by Somali pirates. In that case, the vessel was freed after 10 months with a ransom claimed by the pirates of \$9.5 million.

Despite the ransom payment, the situation in the Indian Ocean was changing rapidly. Armed guards and naval activity were increasing the risk for pirates and reducing their possible rewards. Pirate kingpins and investors moved into other areas, including the growing market for arms smuggling in the Gulf of Aden and legal businesses in Somalia. But there was no substantial change to many of the factors that allowed piracy to occur: a ready supply of foot soldiers and areas of the coast not under direct government control where vessels could be held.



Spanish frigate CANARIAS escorting a vessel off Somalia (Source: EUNAVFOR)

The Red Sea connection

There have been seven reported boardings of fishing dhows off Somalia since November. These are likely linked to illegal fishing in the area, which has been a major focus for Somalia in expanding its maritime capabilities. Iranian vessels have been seized in the past and their crews held. There has also been enforcement by Somalia against Iranian illegal fishing, which has been an issue of contention between both governments.

Attacks on merchant vessels have been a separate development. It is likely that some networks have been reactivated to take advantage of the 'distraction' of Houthi attacks – or at least the pirate perception that there will be reduced naval activity in the Indian Ocean. The bulk carrier RUEN was hijacked about 400 nautical miles off Somalia on 14 December and taken to a position just off Somalia. On 4 January, the bulk carrier LILA NORFOLK was boarded by armed men around 460 nautical miles off Somalia before being assisted by the Indian Navy. The bulk carrier WAIMEA was also approached by skiffs on 27 January in what might have been a boarding attempt.

Most recently, on 12 March, a group of 15 to 20 Somali pirates hijacked the Bangladesh-flagged bulk carrier ABDULLAH and took the 23 crew members hostage. The ship was boarded from two boats approximately 600 nautical miles off the coast. With the freeing of the RUEN, the ABDULLAH is now the only merchant vessel currently held by pirates.

Securing vessels off Somalia

There was a lack of information available on the RUEN while the ship was under pirate control. EUNAVFOR noted that the situation was being monitored by its own forces and contact was being maintained with the Somali government. It was not clear whether ransom negotiations were underway. The pirates were able to secure the vessel from intervention, although Somali media claimed in February that three men had been arrested by Puntland forces. There were 18 crew members on the RUEN, with one evacuated due to medical issues. The number of pirates was not confirmed but reported to be around 20 in total.

The number of pirates involved was bolstered to 35 when the RUEN took to the sea on 12 March, apparently to act as a mother ship for subsequent attacks although it is unclear as to why this decision was taken by the pirates. Subsequently, the Indian Navy responded and the destroyer INS KOLKATA intercepted the RUEN around 260 nautical miles east of Somalia.



Indian naval forces surrounding the RUEN (Source: Indian Navy)

In an extended operation, the Navy monitored the RUEN while the pirates responded with gunfire, including shooting down a surveillance drone. According to an Indian Navy statement, its forces disabled the steering system and navigational aids, forcing the RUEN to stop. 'Forceful negotiations' with the pirates then took place before they surrendered. The operation also involved a second Indian vessel, INS SUBHADRA, as well as an airdrop of marine commandoes. The 35 arrested men were taken to Mumbai where they will face trial.

The ABDULLAH, however, remains detained off Somalia. News reports have cited a ransom demand of \$5 million, but the Bangladeshi owners SR Shipping have not confirmed details. "According to the latest information we have, the pirates have not harmed the sailors in any way. We are trying to ensure that no harm comes to them. We are leaving no stone unturned for the

return of the hostages,” the owners were quoted. Other reports have said that the crew have been able to contact their families.

EUNAVFOR forces are monitoring the situation. Meanwhile, Bangladeshi authorities ruled out a military operation to free the vessel. Surveillance footage from EUNAVFOR shows the ship being resupplied from the shore. Local reporting has said that the pirates have installed heavy weaponry to deter any intervention, as well as cutting deals with local villages for supplies but these details have not been confirmed.

Naval deterrent?

If the ABDULLAH hijacking leads to a ransom payment with the pirates able to escape any subsequent law enforcement operations, it will certainly bolster the risk vs. return model for continued piracy attacks. However, two vessels have now been successfully freed – the LILA NORFOLK and the RUEN – by naval operations, with the Indian Navy committed to a new level of anti-piracy in its maritime backyard (having also freed a hijacked dhow in January). Moreover, forces from the Seychelles were recently able to rescue a hijacked Sri Lankan fishing vessel.

It is therefore likely that future pirate operations will have to balance potential returns from a ransom versus the risk of robust naval operations – which may have taken the pirates by surprise, having incorrectly assessed that the Red Sea was a distraction for regional forces. The fate of the 35 pirates in Indian hands may be a determinant. As a local fisherman in Eyl in Somalia was reported saying, “I don’t believe any pirate in their right mind would take the chance.”

At the same time, with the owners of the ABDULLAH reportedly looking for a quick settlement, there will still be the temptation for the pirates of a fast return on their investment. When the Bangladeshi bulk carrier JAHAN MONI (under the same management) was hijacked off Somalia in 2010, it took 3 months to reach a negotiated settlement – with the ransom reportedly close to \$5 million.

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.

Update: Maritime dimensions of the war in Ukraine

Situation on land

The situation regarding the war in Ukraine during March can be viewed in two halves, before and after the Russian presidential election. Russia was initially focussed on accomplishing a successful election for incumbent president Vladimir Putin before subsequently intensifying missile attacks on Ukraine, including Kyiv and Odessa.

Furthermore, a week after the Russian presidential election, the terror attack at a Moscow concert venue occurred which Russian officials have attempted to spuriously link to Ukraine. This link is highly tenuous, as this would be such a far-fetched deviation from the Ukrainian approach to the Russian invasion that the proposed supposition remains incredulous at best.

The ongoing war will continue to influence the general and regional security environment. Fighting remains concentrated in southern and eastern parts of Ukraine. Military developments on land during March have continued to be difficult for Ukraine, as the US is currently no closer to approving further military aid. EU support continues but is so far not able to fill the gap left by the US. At present, the military advantage on the ground appears at a standstill, with both sides eyeing a chance of gaining a strategic advantage.

Changes to the Ukrainian leadership which were initially announced last month have continued with further announced changes to various leadership roles in the Ukrainian government. On the other hand, following the recent election in Russia, President Putin announced that there would be no immediate changes to the current leadership roles.



Russian President Vladimir Putin addressing a gathering of representatives from various organisations in March (Photo: Russian presidential office)

The number of attacks targeting Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, especially electricity, has intensified during the latter half of March. Although few of these seem to have been against maritime infrastructure and targets, power outages have been reported and disruption to

maritime operations can therefore not be ruled out. Furthermore, remnants of winter-weather conditions have also impacted some regional operations during March.

Any future operational impact on individual ports will vary as past incidents have shown and will depend on local circumstances. Some port operations have been affected due to damage caused by attacks either directly against port facilities or indirectly as part of power cuts or similar. Previous incidents have also involved merchant ships, as the most likely result of collateral damage, as they have not been assessed as the intended targets. There have also been reports of mine-disposal operations taking place near the Odessa coast.

Black Sea

Ukrainian attacks on Russian Black Sea Fleet vessels continued in March, especially in and around Crimea. Similar attacks are likely to continue.



Still image from a video published by the Ukrainian military, showing the feed from a naval drone approaching the SERGEI KOTOV patrol boat of the Russian navy (Source: Telegram)

No further details regarding the expected tri-party Mine Countermeasures Naval Group in the Black Sea (MCM Black Sea). The tri-party arrangement, signed in Istanbul on 11 January involving Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey – is earliest expected operational in April or May.

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 a prohibited area of navigation by the Russian Navy. However, the Russian Black Sea Fleet's surface vessels have been significantly diminished since the outbreak of the war and it is unlikely that they can sustain any future patrolling regime, which would enable them to control vessels entering Ukrainian waters.

The Ukrainian 'humanitarian corridor', which includes the ports of Odessa, Chornomorsk and Pivdenny continues to function with both agricultural and metal products being exported with more than 1000 vessel transits. However, the comment by President Zelenskiy in late February – that Ukraine would not be able to sustain the corridor and ensure the safety of vessels transiting unless the US begin to send military aid again – is still assessed to represent a genuine concern.

It is therefore still uncertain to what degree this is to assert pressure on the US to release the delayed aid packages, and to what degree the corridor directly needs US support. However, the announcement of a desire to re-establish the ferry route between Chornomorsk and Ponti in Georgia indicates a degree of confidence from the Ukrainian side.

Nevertheless, the ongoing success of the corridor is based on Ukraine's ability to limit Russian naval superiority in the Black Sea which ensures safe passage. In addition, it continues to be bolstered by the insurance arrangement between Ukrainian banks and UK-based marine insurers.

It is worth noting that with an increase in the number of vessels using the 'humanitarian corridor', Russia may attempt to disrupt this trade by various means, including by potentially increasing the intensity of attacks on Ukrainian port infrastructure or other civilian infrastructure, which will also impact port operations. Additionally, there is some indication, by recent Russian comments following the Moscow terror attack that an intensification of military attacks in Ukraine may occur. This may likely coincide with Ukraine's own increased attacks towards Russia.

It is still worth taking warnings towards commercial vessels going to Russian and Ukrainian ports respectively as legitimate military targets into account. However, this is very likely dependent on specific and individual circumstances as well as military developments on land.

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.

Port operations

Ukrainian Black Sea ports which are not part of the 'humanitarian corridor' are understood to be closed to normal operations. The ports of Odessa, Chornomorsk and Yuzhny all handle vessels which have used the 'humanitarian corridor'. This is likely to continue but will be influenced by the general security situation and political and diplomatic developments.

Ukrainian Danube ports are operating. However, delays and operational disruptions are known to have continued in March, often due to weather conditions. Drifting mines, pilot shortages and disruptions due to Russian attacks remain likely and future delays and disruptions cannot be ruled out. When the tri-party Mine Countermeasures Naval Group in the Black Sea (MCM Black Sea) becomes operational, it is expected to positively impact Danube maritime operations.

Summary

The war in Ukraine is very unlikely to conclude in the foreseeable future. With increasing Russian attacks during the end of March, attacks against civilian infrastructure, including maritime, are likely to continue in April. The attack against the MEKHANIK POGODIN, a Russian-flagged civilian vessel, at the time located between Mykolaiv and the Crimean peninsula, does not signify a change in Ukrainian approach to civilian vessels as this was assessed to be a vessel used by the Russian forces.

It therefore still remains unclear to what degree Russia or Ukraine would enforce their threats against civilian vessels transiting to each other's Black Sea ports as potential military targets. If such incidents were to occur, they are most likely to be isolated cases rather than a sustained campaign by either side. Collateral damage remains the most likely threat for merchant ships and merchant shipping operations should take the possibility of collateral damage into account.

Any diplomatic breakthroughs, ceasefire agreements or any return to the previous regional security situation in the Black Sea are unlikely. The volatile nature of the war means that the security situation can change at short notice. Major successful offensive operations by Ukrainian or Russian forces remain unlikely in the near term. However, any change in circumstances would likely have a wider impact on the general security situation, including the maritime environment.

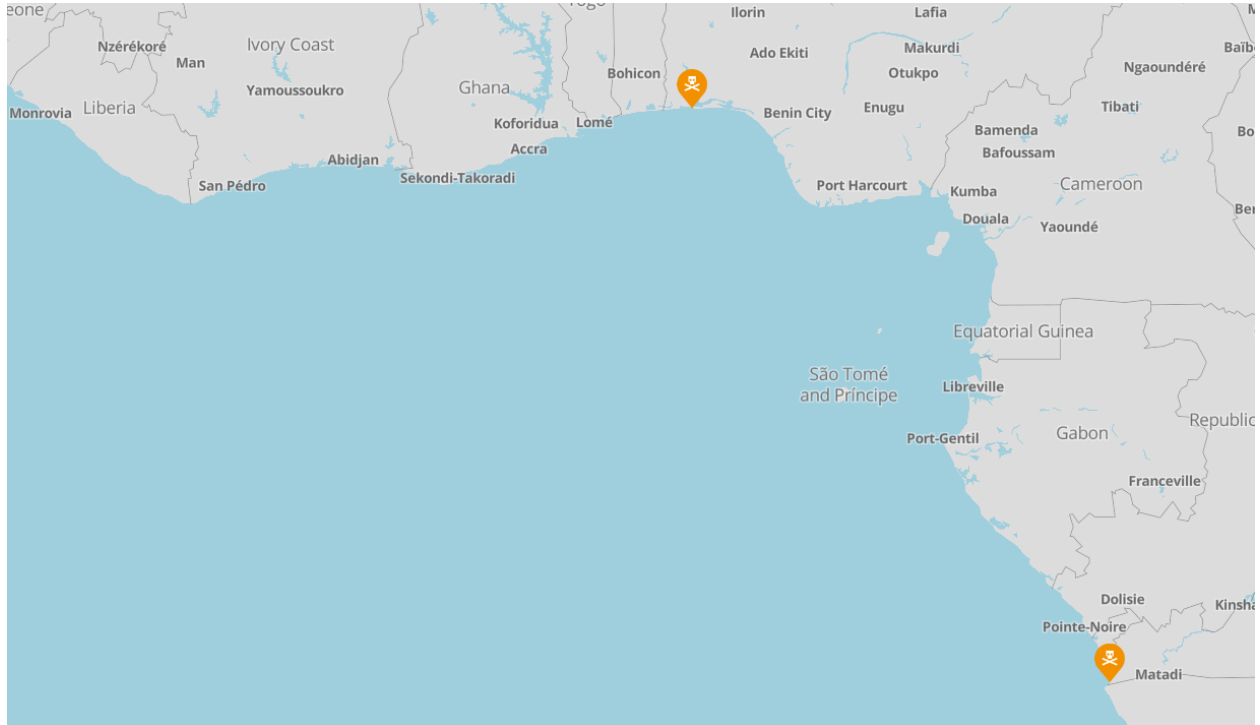
The impact of future Ukrainian and Russian operations should be monitored closely. Risk Intelligence strongly recommends conducting thorough threat and risk assessments prior to any transit and to update contingency plans according to the current situation.

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 31 March 2024, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



Incidents

10 March – Container ship ULANGA boarded

Failed theft, Port of Banana (DR Congo)

14 March – Container ship CMA CGM CHIWAN boarded

Failed theft, Lagos anchorage (Nigeria), 05:55 LT (04:55 UTC)

Assessment

Nigeria / Niger Delta

Attackers operating off the southern and eastern Niger Delta remain the most significant potential threat in the Gulf of Guinea. While few security incidents involving merchant ships have been reported in 2023 and 2024 to date, infrequent high-profile incidents continue to underline the general threat level.

Attacks against local vessels in or near the Niger Delta are also a concern, further highlighting the fragile security situation.

Crude oil theft and sales of illegally refined petroleum products remain a significant concern for the Nigerian government. Such operations have long provided constant revenues to organised criminal groups yet profit margins began to skyrocket in early 2021. Nigerian crude oil production and export levels have recovered somewhat in recent months yet they remain below the quota set by OPEC as well as below the production level projected in the federal budget. Any shortfalls will likely have to be financed by additional debt.

Security agencies carry out frequent operations to limit the amount of oil theft. In March, the Nigerian Navy detained a tanker at around 170 nautical miles offshore which was allegedly used to transport stolen crude oil. Such operations, however, have been ongoing for years without much success.



The tanker SWEET MIRI was detained by the Nigerian Navy in March, along with all 13 crew members. (Photo: Nigerian Navy)

The overall situation in the Niger Delta is closely linked to oil and gas revenues which are crucial for budgets on different government levels. Various measures have been implemented by President Bola Tinubu since his inauguration in May to boost oil production which would help to implement his economic plans. Most importantly, however, the government has continued to "pay off" criminal or militant groups in the Niger Delta through security contracts.

Similar attempts in the past did not have long-term success because the overall conditions in the Niger Delta have not been addressed. Maritime operators should therefore monitor developments in the region as an uptick in attacks against merchant ships at sea is possible on short notice.

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 upcoming rainy season make it complicated to operate deep offshore with small boats. Attacks, however, may take place at significant distances from the coastline during spells of good weather even during this period.

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 dozens of companies which have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Nigerian Navy.

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 reported as piracy involve ships solely trading within the region. Such incidents are unlikely to be genuine piracy involving 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.

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 during spells with favourable weather conditions which may occur in the upcoming rainy season which is set to last until about September. 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)

There were no maritime security incidents reported in March. This continued a trend that was already observable in recent months. Moreover, virtually all security incidents that did take place were low-profile cases which did not result in physical confrontations between crew members and the respective perpetrators.

While the security situation at sea has improved significantly in recent years, limited capabilities of naval and law enforcement agencies as well as a lack of cooperation between these agencies on the national and regional level remain ongoing concerns. These aspects have a negative impact on maritime security, manifested in a range of issues, e.g. illegal fishing and an increasing amount of cocaine smuggling particularly through West Africa.

Limited financial and human resources will remain a concern for maritime security agencies across the region in the coming years. Maritime operators should therefore not interpret a low number of incidents as a significant reduction of the general threat level. Criminal activities at sea remain closely linked. Illicit operations in general have remained stable or even increased in the recent past. Alleged pirate attacks may also be a cover for other types of illicit activities.

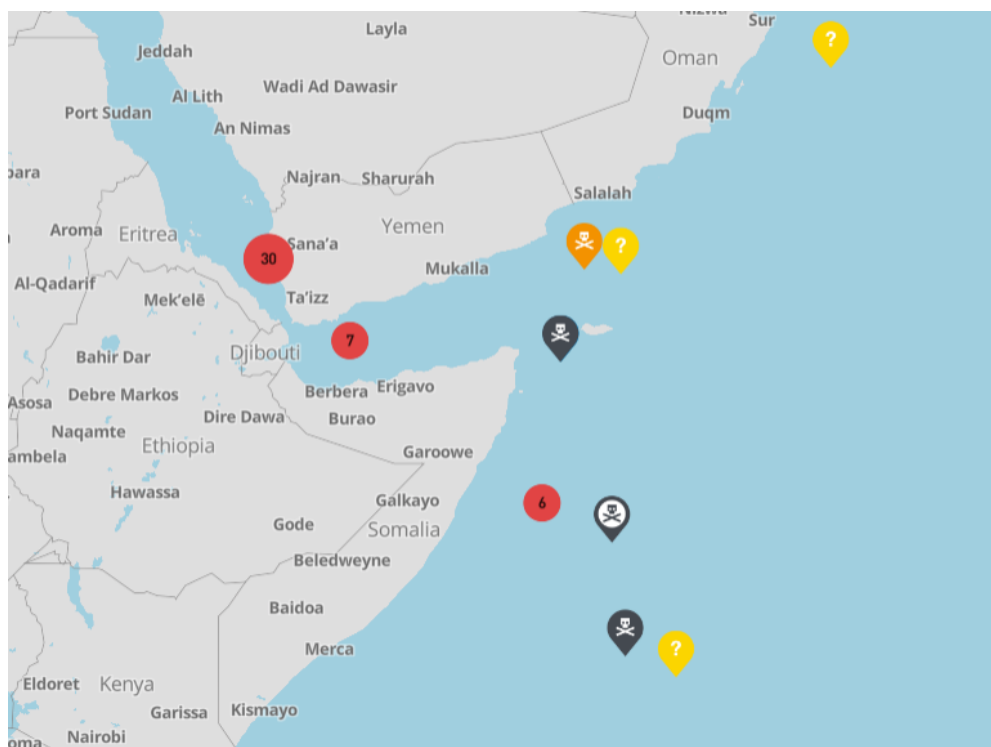
Forecast

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 31 March 2024, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



Incidents

A complete list of incidents related to Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden can be found on the Risk Intelligence System as well as in Risk Intelligence's "Security Threat Update: Red Sea/Gulf of Aden" which is issued on a weekly basis.

6 and 20 March – Merchant vessels report approaches

Suspicious activity, Gulf of Oman and Gulf of Aden

12 March – Bulk carrier ABDULLAH hijacked

Hijacking, Somali Basin

16 March – Indian navy frees hijacked bulk carrier RUEN

Naval operation, Somali Basin

21 March – Product tanker YAMILAH-III reports attack

Failed attack, Gulf of Aden

28-29 March – Hijacked fishing dhow AL KAMBAR freed by Indian Navy

Hijacking and naval operation, Somali Basin

Assessment

Southern Red Sea – Gulf of Aden

This area covers shipping routes which are affected by the conflict in Yemen, including operations by Houthi forces to target shipping linked to Israel as well as the US and the UK. In March, military strikes against Houthi positions in Yemen as well as interceptions of aerial and naval drones continued, though they have not succeeded at stopping strikes against merchant ships.

The first fatalities of the current Houthi campaign were reported aboard the TRUE CONFIDENCE, which was struck south of Aden. A missile hit the accommodation block, killing three seafarers and wounding several others. Along with the RUBYMAR, these attacks underline the severe threat level for certain merchant ships transiting the area, and the difficulty to mitigate the impact of missile or drone strikes. A stroke of bad luck may result in dramatic consequences. Overall, the threat level remains based on individual characteristics of specific ships.



The TRUE CONFIDENCE after being hit by a missile (Source: US CENTCOM)

Maritime traffic in the Red Sea has stabilised at roughly half of what it was prior to the campaign. The overall number of transits through the Bab el Mandeb varies slightly but has not significantly altered since late January. Weekly Suez Canal transits showed a noticeable uptick in late February, which can to some extent be explained by Muslim economies gearing up for the Ramadan month during which consumption traditionally increases.

On 14 March, Houthi leader Abdelmalik Al Houthi announced that vessels within the group's declared targeting parameters would be targeted as far as into the Indian Ocean, even if they were headed towards the Cape of Good Hope. Al Houthi justified the announcement by stating that the goal of the Houthis was to hurt Israeli trade regardless of where it passed through. It is unlikely, however, that the Houthis are able to strike moving targets at such a distance.

A previous attack on the MERCER STREET in 2021 south of Oman was assessed to have been conducted with decisive Iranian support. A new attack in the area, far out of the range of regular Houthi operations would run counter to Iran's current goal to distance itself from Israeli-linked violence. The declaration is more likely meant to maintain pressure on the Israeli economy while

attempting to stretch naval assets. It should also be seen as an attempt to present the Houthis as the legitimate government of Yemen which remains one of their main goals.

Overall, the threat level for vessels directly owned by Israeli companies or trading with Israel has been severe since the beginning of the Houthi campaign. Such vessels therefore stopped transiting the Red Sea, ultimately leading the Houthis to expand their potential targets to vessels directly linked to the US and the UK which has been highlighted by recent attacks. However, some attacks were very likely carried out based on outdated information in publicly available databases, underlining the threat level for collateral damage.

Other vessels in transit may be targeted due to misidentification. They may also suffer collateral damage if they are close to kinetic attacks or to interceptions of drones and missiles by military forces. Overall, it is vital to consider that this remains a highly dynamic situation. Risk Intelligence strongly recommends all stakeholders to closely monitor the situation. Updates regarding incidents as well as constantly updated assessments of current threat levels are available through the Risk Intelligence System.

Despite the level of Houthi activity, other forces operate in the area, notably the Eritrean coastguard which is concerned about boundary disputes with Yemen. Merchant vessels diverting to areas close to Eritrean territorial waters are likely to encounter coastguard vessels that might be mistaken for threatening, even if they are engaged in regular constabulary tasks.

In the wider Gulf of Aden, there was an attack reported on 21 March, which followed a suspicious approach the day before. The incident was recorded as a failed attack, and the characteristics are of an opportunistic hijacking attempt. In this area, there is still the potential for encounters with local traffic – such as armed smugglers and fishermen – and such traffic has ‘warned away’ merchant vessels in previous incidents. Overall, while there is currently an elevated threat of piracy throughout the region, other small boat encounters are possible as well.

Forecast

The increased naval presence in the area is having some impact. Ongoing attacks, however, highlight the challenge of providing area defence to merchant ships.

It is difficult to forecast the duration of current Houthi operations. These are symbolic for the Houthis as part of their public campaign against Israeli military operations in Gaza. If there is a breakthrough in this conflict, the Houthis might scale back operations. For now, however, additional attacks should be expected at a tempo where the Houthis can continue to pressure Israel and the international community.

To date, the Houthis have not incurred significant costs, particularly in their talks with Saudi Arabia, to deter them from continuing. Military action has likely degraded some capabilities of the Houthis, but they retain numerous drones which are easier to deploy and to launch undetected than anti-ship missiles. The focus is expected to remain on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, where ships can be easily identified and targeted.

Gulf of Oman – Persian Gulf

There were no significant developments in this area during the last month. Although Iran has reinvigorated its campaign against Israeli shipping interests after the start of the war in Gaza, there have been no strikes since the Liberia-flagged product tanker CHEM PLUTO was attacked by at least one drone while underway in the Arabian Sea on 23 December.

Although Iran supports land-based options through its proxy forces for putting pressure on Israel, it is likely that Iran could demonstrate ongoing intentions and capabilities in carrying out maritime attacks. The threat to vessels directly linked to Israel is therefore high throughout this area, even though the volume of attacks is much lower than in the Red Sea. There was a report of a suspicious approach in the Gulf of Oman in March, but this was likely to have been local traffic as no aggressive intentions were reported.

An Iranian court issued an order during March for the confiscation of the crude oil cargo on board the seized tanker ADVANTAGE SWEET, detained by Iran in April 2023 and likely linked to ongoing disputes with the US over sanctioned oil cargoes. The vessel was under charter to Chevron and loaded in Kuwait, with its ownership/management structure including Chinese, Turkish and Swiss entities. It is not clear when the vessel itself might be released, but the confiscation of the cargo could be the first step in this process.

Forecast

There has been a heightened threat to merchant vessels in the Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf for some time, due to Iran's targeting of certain ships to make broader political statements. Iran is balancing two priorities: showing leadership in 'resistance' to Israeli operations in Gaza and avoiding an escalation in the conflict with Israel.

Low-level operations – such as some degree of assistance to the Houthi campaign – help to show leadership. Direct attacks on a limited scale, such as in November and December, underline capabilities and intentions without crossing escalation thresholds.

There is also a threat of vessel boardings and seizures as Iran uses such operations to resolve political and commercial disputes. The frequency of these incidents is difficult to predict – with no incidents to date in 2024 – but further cases are expected, particularly targeting US-linked ships or ships related to Iran's crude oil trading.

Somali Basin and wider Indian Ocean

There were two significant developments in this area during March. Firstly, the RUEN was freed from pirate control by the Indian Navy while offshore. Secondly, the bulk carrier ABDULLAH was hijacked and is now being held just off the Somali coast while ransom negotiations are ongoing. These developments are considered in detail in the feature article in this month's report.

The RUEN left the coast of Somalia on 12 March still under pirate control and was assumed to be used as a mother vessel. The Indian Navy intercepted and freed the ship after disabling the steering. All 35 perpetrators on board were detained and transported to India.



Military boarding teams stationed off the RUEN (Photo: Indian Navy)

In the ABDULLAH incident, the Bangladesh-flagged bulk carrier was boarded by 20 armed men who took control of the vessel after the crew were unable to secure themselves in the citadel. The vessel was then shadowed by naval forces to the coast of Somalia.

Recent incidents are a reminder that the capabilities of Somali 'pirates' have not diminished. Large-scale structures in Somalia have been mostly demolished so a widespread return to piracy is unlikely. However, opportunistic hijackings can still take place and merchant ships may be targeted. Operations in December and January took place at significant distances from the coast, up to 800 nautical miles. The ABDULLAH hijacking took place at around 600 nautical miles.

Moreover, fishing vessels are still targeted for hijacking. The Iranian-flagged dhow AL KAMBAR was hijacked just off Puntland on 28 March but was subsequently freed in an operation by the Indian Navy on 29 March. Iranian vessels in particular have often been accused of illegal fishing in Somali waters and have been frequent targets in this area.

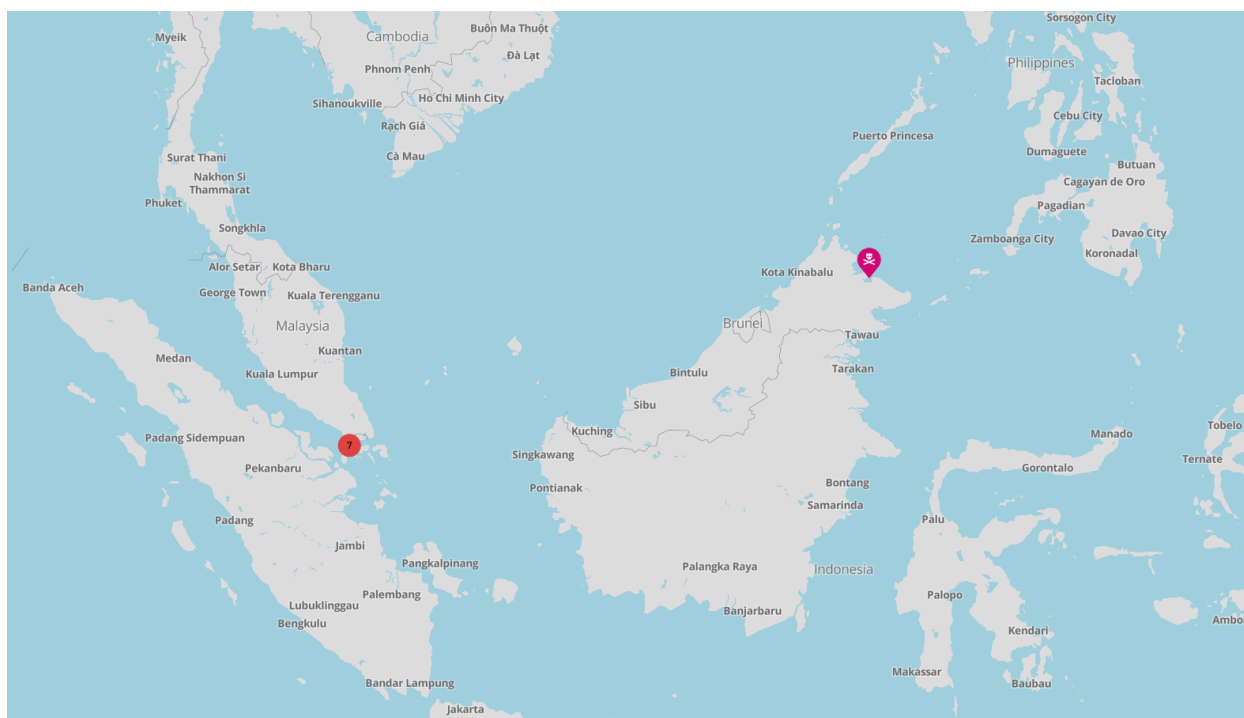
Forecast

Opportunistic boardings remain possible in this area, even beyond 500 nautical miles from the coast. This threat is still emerging and must be closely monitored. The threat is assessed to be elevated and a successful ransom payment for the ABDULLAH is likely to lead to additional attempts to hijack vessels.

Proximity to the Somali coast can also lead to encounters with local militias or criminal operations although the threat level is low. Military operations continue in Somalia against militant Islamist group al-Shabab. There is only a limited maritime dimension to this conflict which is not expected to affect merchant ships over the next month.

South East Asia

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 31 March 2024, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



Incidents

1 March – Heavy load carrier **BOKA VANGUARD** boarded

Armed robbery, Batam anchorage (Indonesia), 02:10 LT (19:19 UTC on 29 February)

1 March – Container ship **MAERSK VERACRUZ** boarded

Theft, Sandakan anchorage (Malaysia), 03:46 LT (19:46 UTC on 29 February)

4 March – Bulk carrier **ALPHA HOPE** boarded

Failed theft, Singapore Strait TSS, 02:50 LT (18:50 UTC on 3 March)

6 March – Bulk carrier **APIRADEE NAREE** boarded

Failed robbery, Singapore Strait TSS, 00:30 LT (16:30 UTC on 5 March)

6 March – Bulk carrier **YANGTZE CROWN** boarded

Theft, Singapore Strait TSS, 00:35 LT (16:35 UTC on 5 March)

26 March – Drill ship **AMBUR** boarded

Failed theft, Malacca Strait TSS, 08:54 LT (00:54 UTC)

30 March – Bulk carrier **GEORGE ISLAND** boarded

Failed robbery, Singapore Strait TSS, 00:14 LT (16:14 UTC on 29 March)

31 March – Barge under tow boarded

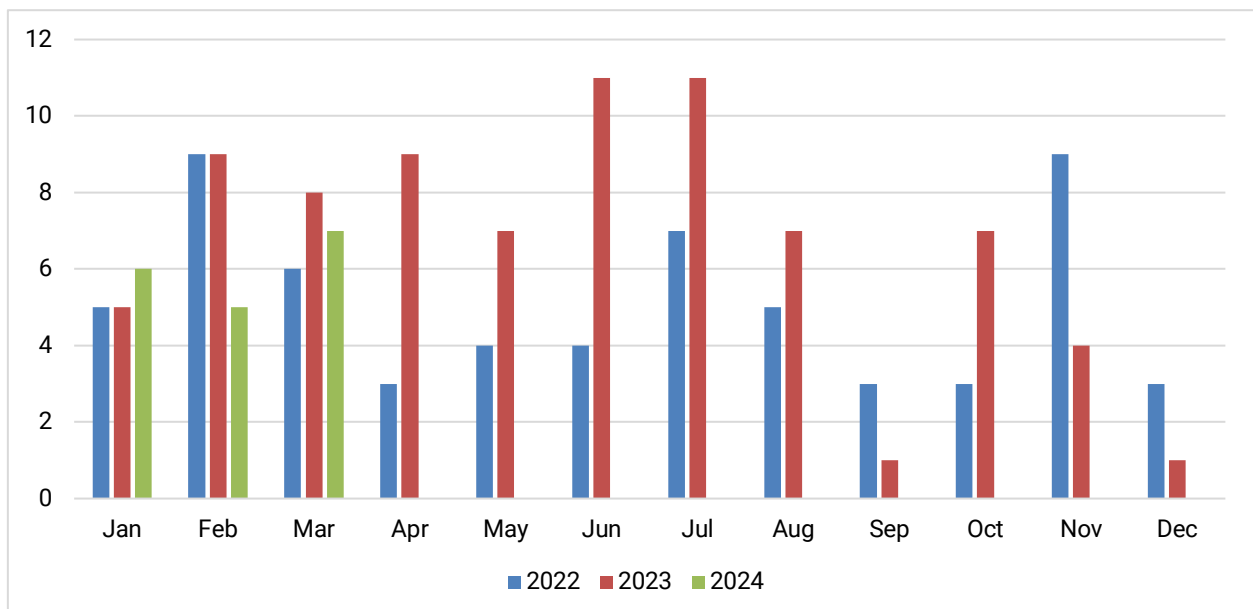
Theft, Singapore Strait TSS, 03:35 LT (19:35 UTC on 30 March)

Assessment

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

Boardings in the form of thefts and armed robberies remain the prevalent threat for merchant vessels within these areas. Eight incidents were recorded in South East Asia during March, including one armed robbery in the Singapore Strait. During 2024, all but one recorded Singapore Strait incidents have taken place in the western zone of the Traffic Separation Scheme's eastbound lane between Karimun and Kapalajernih islands. For March, six of the seven incidents involved vessels underway in the Singapore Strait. The outliers involved a drill ship under tow that was boarded in the Malacca Strait and a container ship boarded at Sandakan.

Over the past 12 months, 57% percent of all reported incidents in the region have taken place in the Singapore Strait. Of these, 47% involved perpetrators that were reported as armed. It is likely that most perpetrators are 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.



Number of maritime security incidents in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore per month in 2022, 2023 and 2024 to date (Source: Risk Intelligence System)

During the past twelve months there have been 76 incidents in the straits of Malacca and Singapore (SOMS). Of these, 56 occurred in the Singapore Strait and 20 in the Malacca Strait. Of

the total, 43 involved bulk carriers, 18 involved tankers, while 7 involved barges and other craft in tow. The outliers involved general cargo vessels, 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 73% of all SOMS incidents targeted vessels underway, all but four in the Singapore Strait. During the past twelve months, 73% 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 incident at Sandakan.

Incidents in 2022 and 2021 involving hijackings and cargo theft from locally trading ships illustrated the vulnerability for smaller local vessels to hijackings and cargo theft. Larger and internationally trading tankers have not been targeted in recent years. These incidents, together with the illegal sale of fuel from tugs and regular related 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, Dumai, Manila, Sandakan and Tanjung Priok. Boardings of vessels alongside are less frequent.

Aside from the Singapore Strait, boardings of vessels underway have also occurred in the Malacca Strait as illustrated by the drill ship AMBUR incident listed above, the Natuna Sea and the southern South China Sea, although at a significantly 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 a 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 in turn 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 a failed attack in 2018. Kidnappings of crew from tugs and fishing trawlers have not succeeded since 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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