

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: The Red Sea – a region in crisis

Background

Various crises are currently of concern in countries along the Red Sea, even though the main threat remains the Houthi campaign against commercial shipping in the southern Red Sea. Other issues, such as the wars in Sudan and in Gaza, nonetheless add to the instability and create a volatile area where security should not be taken for granted.

Overall, the general security situation in the region has deteriorated following the escalation of conflict in the wake of the Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023. In particular, Houthi forces in Yemen launched a series of missile and drone attacks – initially against southern Israel before expanding their attacks to commercial vessels in transit.



Houthi weapons on display during a parade in Sana'a (Photo: Social media)

Following the large number of attacks and attempted attacks against civilian and naval vessels in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden since November, US military forces – together with the United Kingdom and supported by several other countries – began conducting strikes in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen in January. Successive strikes prompted the Houthis to threaten that “all US, UK interests have become legitimate targets” as well as pledging to continue to attack Israel-linked shipping.

Iran has denied participating in the attacks and has largely refrained from getting involved in the conflict between the Hamas and Israel. This is both due to the US’ deterrence against potentially aggressive Iranian behaviour, but also due to the Iranian regime’s own calculations, which most likely do not favour a prolonged confrontation with the US or Israel.

The Houthi campaign has entered its seventh month, and the results are clear to see. Vessel traffic is approximately half of what it had been prior to the campaign. Egypt has suffered a matching decrease in revenues from the Suez Canal, wreaking havoc on the country’s battered economy.

There have been widespread fears that the Israel-Hamas conflict would lead to a regional escalation, which has yet to materialise. In April 2024, following a series of tit-for-tat strikes between Israel and Iran, an Israeli vessel was seized in the Gulf of Oman, south of the strait of Hormuz. The incident has not led to a significant escalation in threat levels, due to a combination of US pressure and the Iranian government's calculations. Iranian decision-makers have adopted a de-escalatory approach, wary of provoking further US or Israeli retaliation. Both Iran and the US seek to avoid any miscalculations which could lead to armed conflict between their forces.

These developments are relevant because they underscore the nature of the threat faced by shipping in the area. While tensions are serious in the region, few players have any appetite for all-out war. The crisis in the Red Sea has drawn much of the shipping industry's attention, given the outsize impact it has had on the sector. However, it is far from the only crisis in the Red Sea and is just the latest turbulence in a small region where big changes are underway. Moreover, the Houthi problem is merely one of the issues that may affect the maritime environment.

Yemen

The war in Yemen drives the current threats in the Red Sea. Yemen has enjoyed uneasy ceasefires for the past two years. Two separate but interconnected wars are being fought in the country: the Saudi war against the Houthis, and the intra-Yemeni conflict.

The Saudis and the Houthis are currently respecting the April 2022 ceasefire which stopped the mutual drone and airstrikes. This led to the current peace negotiations, which have not led to a definitive outcome. Saudi Arabia seeks a peace agreement for all of Yemen, whereas the Houthis only negotiate on their own behalf, leading to worries about a continuation of intra-Yemeni fighting once the Saudis have agreed on the terms of their withdrawal. Skirmishes between Yemeni factions continue, and there is evidence of rearmament among different factions.

The peace negotiations between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia are one of the enablers of current tensions at sea, besides Israel's operations in Gaza. The Houthis and the Saudis are negotiating their peace, and neither party wishes for a resumption of hostilities. The Houthis will continue to exert pressure on their adversaries, notably through the current maritime campaign, but are very likely to remain below the threshold of a Saudi reaction. Meanwhile, the Saudis are likely to refrain from provoking renewed Houthi strikes against Saudi oil facilities and populations centres.

Sudan

Yemen is not the only Red Sea country experiencing armed conflict. Sudan is mired in the "generals' war". In April 2023, fighting erupted in Khartoum between the UAE-backed Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by General Hemedti, and the Saudi-backed Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Burhan. Both men are vying for control of Sudan.

Their troops have committed a number of atrocities across the fragmented frontlines, yet neither side has achieved military dominance. With Khartoum no longer under control of the SAF, General Burhan moved his headquarters to Port Sudan, which remains operational as a port. Despite the

move, there has been relatively little fighting in the country's eastern provinces along the Red Sea, and operations at Port Sudan have not been interrupted since the early days of the war.

The war has not yet led to threats at sea. Given its nature, such threats are unlikely to materialise. However, the war is part of the threat picture and adds to the region's instability. Smuggling flows have increased to and from Sudan, while refugee flows towards neighbouring countries continue, notably to Egypt which is finding itself increasingly isolated in a region it once shaped.

Egypt

Egypt is arguably the country which has most suffered from the Houthis' Red Sea campaign, on top of bearing the brunt of refugee flows from Sudan's civil war and managing the fallout of Israel's war in Gaza. The country is currently going through a harsh foreign currency crunch, spurred by economic mismanagement as much as by external shocks.

Following Field Marshal Al Sisi's coup in 2014, Egyptian debt has ballooned to over USD 160 billion, as the government has splurged on infrastructure projects such as the new capital city and the doubling of the Suez Canal expansion. As mentioned, traffic in the Suez Canal has decreased by 50% since the start of the Houthi campaign, meaning less income to service the debt. Egypt had already begun cutting power to decrease domestic gas consumption and export more gas, further harming domestic growth.



Egyptian naval vessel in the Suez Canal (Photo: Egyptian Navy)

On top of the economic crises, Egyptian redistribution policies have focussed on military spending, a requirement for any Egyptian government to stay in power. The Egyptian navy in particular has undergone a fast transformation since 2014. Several new vessels have been acquired, including large and capable amphibious assault ships. These assets are part of a new naval doctrine aiming more at power projection than defence, which used to be the primary objective of the navy.

The new doctrine is based on a perceived increase in threats to Egypt, instability in the Horn of Africa and the wars in Libya, Gaza and Sudan. The implementation of this new doctrine is hampered, however, by logistical and personnel issues as well as financial limitations. This has

significantly sapped Egyptian influence in the Red Sea and turned the country into a passive object of events rather than the leader it considers itself to be.

Summary

The latest example of broader dynamics coming together is the Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement on using Berbera port for Ethiopian trade, away from western-controlled Djibouti. As old alliances fray, states like Ethiopia are shuffling their arrangements to future-proof their economies against turbulent times. In a knee-jerk reaction to what was perceived as an Ethiopian diplomatic victory, Egypt threatened to use force to defend “Somali sovereignty”. However, neither Egypt, Somali sovereignty nor Egyptian threats of violence were taken seriously as the announcement elicited no reaction from regional actors.

The Red Sea is a region where previous alliances are coming apart and many states are effectively unable to ensure their own security, including their own borders. An alternative maritime security architecture therefore has to emerge. Ongoing operations, namely Prosperity Guardian and Aspides, are a repeat of tried methods to ensure maritime security and may provide a temporary relief.

However, just as naval operations merely suppressed the piracy problem which reignited more recently, international security missions are likely to simply hide the security failures of regional actors. These actors have no incentive to adjust their behaviour. In the coming years, it is therefore possible that commercial shipping through the Red Sea will have to navigate additional threats beyond the attacks conducted by Houthi forces.

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

Persistent attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure by Russian forces were often reported in April. Although few of these attacks are known to have specifically targeted maritime infrastructure, knock-on impacts include power outages in ports. Additional disruption to maritime operations cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, local weather conditions have also impacted some operations.

The most significant development in April was the aid package passed by the US, which paved the way for additional support packages to Ukraine to be announced by other countries. Although such packages of both financial and military aid are positive developments for Ukraine, much depends on when the monetary and military support arrives – and whether this will be in sufficient quantities.

Therefore, the current situation of the war will likely continue in May and continue to influence the general and regional security environment. Fighting remains concentrated in southern and eastern parts of Ukraine. Military developments on land during April have continued to be difficult for Ukraine, not least due to insufficient supplies of military aid. At present, the military advantage on the ground varies, but Russian forces held the initiative in recent weeks.



The Odessa Law Academy after a Russian missile attack on 30 April (Photo: Social Media / X)

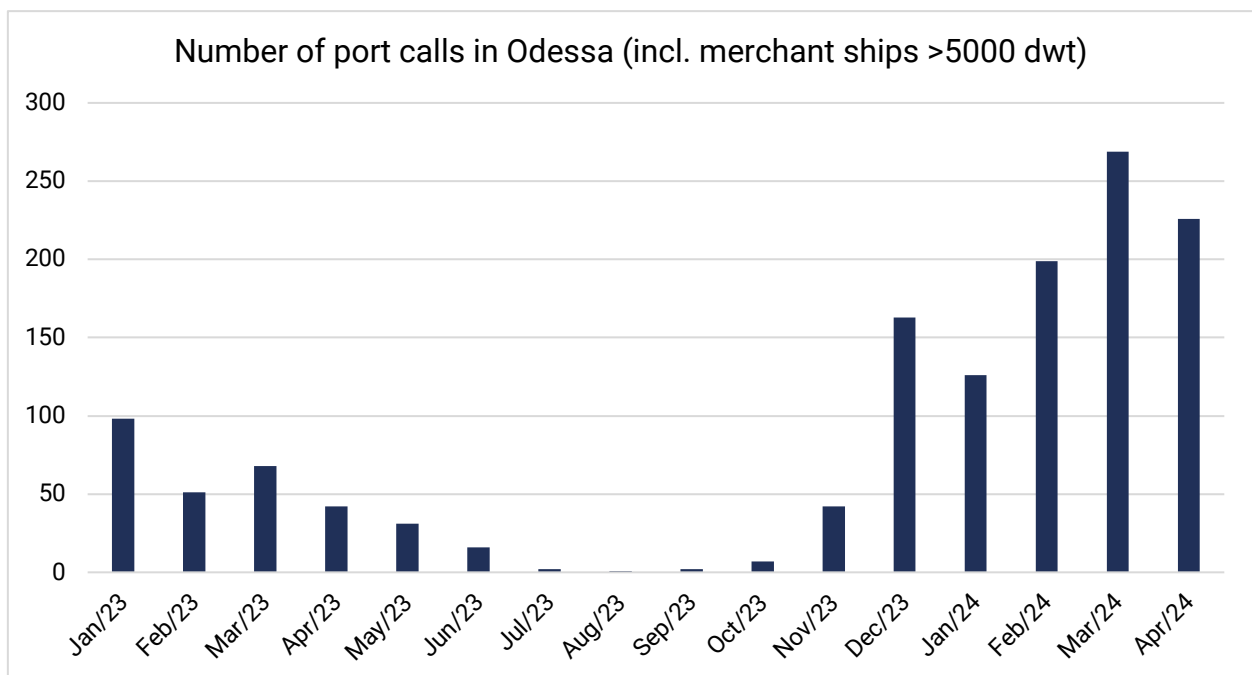
Immediate changes to any frontlines appear unlikely, including with incoming financial and military aid packages. It is possible that Ukrainian forces will be in a better position to counter current Russian offensives. However, with intensified Russian attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure and the supply lines of Ukrainian forces, such an immediate outlook is less certain.

Black Sea

In April, news broke of an agreement between Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and the UN to safeguard all vessels in the Black Sea which are not carrying military or military-related equipment. However, it was reported that Ukraine, near the announcement of the agreement in March, withdrew its support for undisclosed reasons. It is likely that Ukraine saw little meaning in being bound by an agreement which might hamper its own strategic objectives. Ukrainian attacks on Russian Black Sea Fleet vessels continued in April, especially in and around Crimea. Similar attacks are likely to continue.

Regarding future naval mine clearance capabilities, Ukraine has announced it has increased its naval drone capabilities. However, it is currently unknown when these additional capabilities will be operational. As previously noted, it is possible that the tri-party Mine Countermeasures Naval Group in the Black Sea (MCM Black Sea), signed in Istanbul on 11 January involving Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, could be operational in 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. Russian Black Sea Fleet's surface vessels have been further diminished in April, and it is unlikely that they can sustain any future patrolling regime which would enable them to control vessels entering Ukrainian waters.



The number of merchant ships calling Odessa has increased significantly after the announcement of the 'humanitarian corridor' in the Black Sea (Source: Lloyd's List Intelligence / Seasearcher)

The Ukrainian 'humanitarian corridor', which includes the ports of Odessa, Chornomorsk and Pivdenny continues to function with both agricultural and metal products being exported. However, as incidents in April have shown, Russian forces continue to target the Ukrainian Black Sea coast, maintaining the threat towards commercial shipping in the area. Nevertheless, the ongoing success of the corridor is still based on Ukraine's ability to limit Russian naval superiority

in the Black Sea. 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 the steady flow 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.

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 operations 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 April, 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. Should the the tri-party Mine Countermeasures Naval Group in the Black Sea (MCM Black Sea) become operational in May, it is expected to positively impact Danube maritime operations.

Summary

The war in Ukraine is very unlikely to conclude in the foreseeable future. With the ongoing increased intensity of Russian attacks during April, attacks against Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, including maritime, are likely to continue in May. Depending on new military supplies to Ukraine, such attacks may be less disruptive. Attacks against the Ukrainian Black Sea coast do not signify a change in Russian military strategy, but rather a continuation of previous strategic objectives.

It 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 ship operators 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, currently, 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.

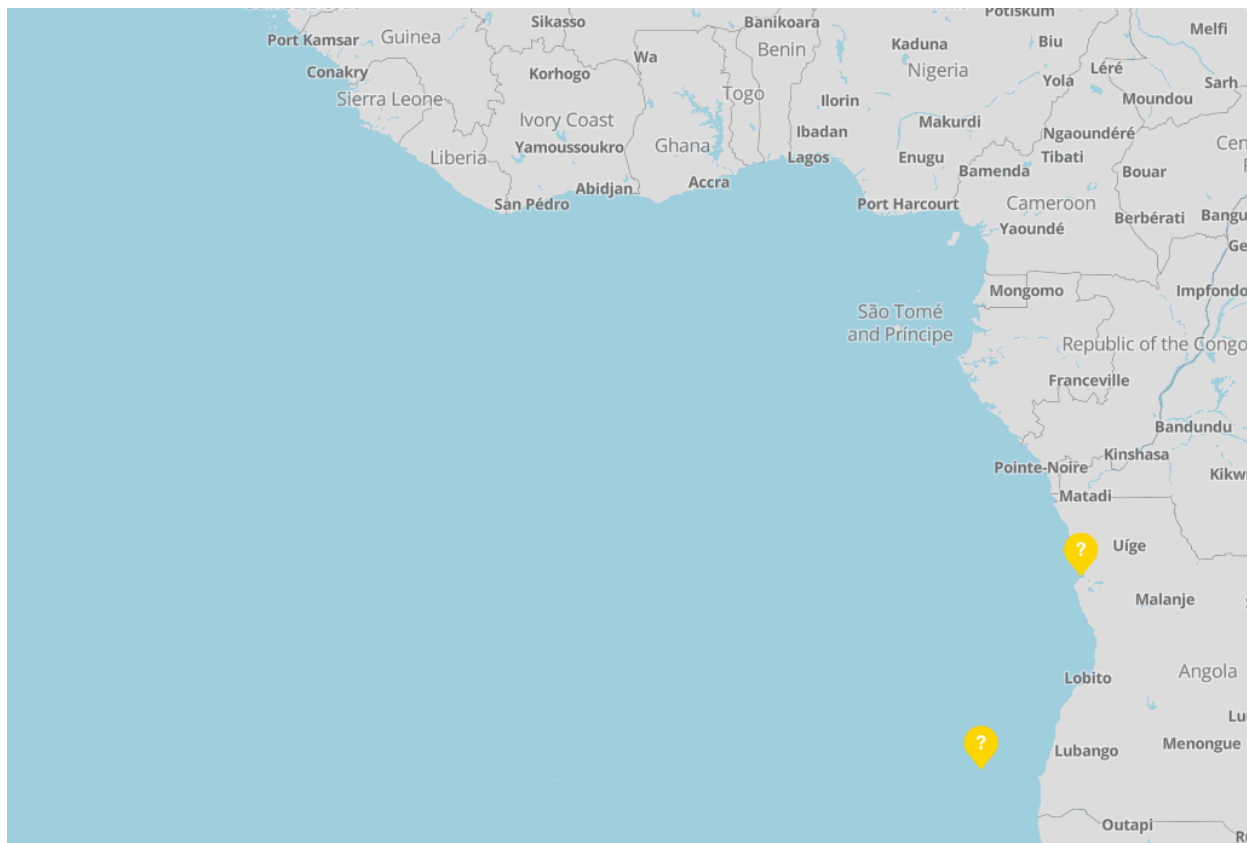
The impact of future Ukrainian and Russian operations should be monitored closely. Risk Intelligence strongly recommends thorough threat and risk assessments prior to any transit and to update contingency plans according to the current situation.

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



Incidents

12 April – Supply ship BOURBON EXPLORER 519 approached

Suspicious activity, Port of Luanda (Angola), 00:45 LT (23:45 UTC on 11 April)

15 April – Merchant ship reports suspicious hailing

Suspicious activity, Off Tombua (Angola), 04:52 LT (03:52 UTC)

Assessment

Nigeria / Niger Delta

Attackers operating off the southern and eastern Niger Delta remain the most significant potential threat for merchant ships in international trade operating 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.

At the same time, crude oil theft and smuggling of illegally refined oil products remain the most prominent security concern for the Nigerian government. Such operations have long provided constant revenues to organised criminal groups. In early 2021, profit margins began to increase significantly, leading to a drop in piracy as criminal groups concentrated on much more profitable oil-related activities. As a consequence, Nigerian crude oil production and export levels have remained suppressed in recent years. Ongoing budget shortfalls are a major constraint for government efforts to boost growth and development.

Security agencies carry out frequent operations to limit the amount of oil theft. In April, the Nigerian Navy extended Operation Delta Sanity by 90 days. The operation was launched in January to combat oil-related crimes, in line with government efforts to ramp up Nigeria's oil production.



Naval personnel onboard the CECILIA after the ship was detained for suspected involvement in smuggling of refined products. (Photo: Nigerian Navy)

Despite the renewed military efforts, the overall situation in the Niger Delta remains fragile. For a long time, the Nigerian government has attempted to "pay off" criminal or militant groups in the region through security contracts.

These attempts have not led to long-term success because the underlying conditions in the Niger Delta have not been addressed. As long as that remains the case, ongoing military operations will largely be window-dressing and are very unlikely to lead to sustainable improvements of the security situation. Maritime operators should therefore monitor developments 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 only two maritime security incidents reported in April. One incident involved a supply ship which was approached at the Luanda anchorage (Angola), yet the perpetrators escaped when the crew sounded the alarm. The other incident was reported off the Angolan coast where a merchant ship received a call from an entity claiming to be the Angolan coastguard. However, it was impossible to verify whether this hailing was indeed conducted by any government officials.

Overall, the trend of few security incidents which has already been observed in recent months continued. Moreover, virtually all security incidents that did take place during this time 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 30 April 2024, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



Incidents

A complete list of the 31 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 weekly "Security Threat Update: Red Sea/Gulf of Aden".

9, 20, 21 and 29 April – Merchant vessels report approaches

Suspicious activity, Gulf of Oman and Gulf of Aden

13 April – Container vessel MSC ARIES seized by Iranian forces

Naval operation, Gulf of Oman

27 April – Container vessel MSC ORION reports attack

Insurgency operation, Somali Basin

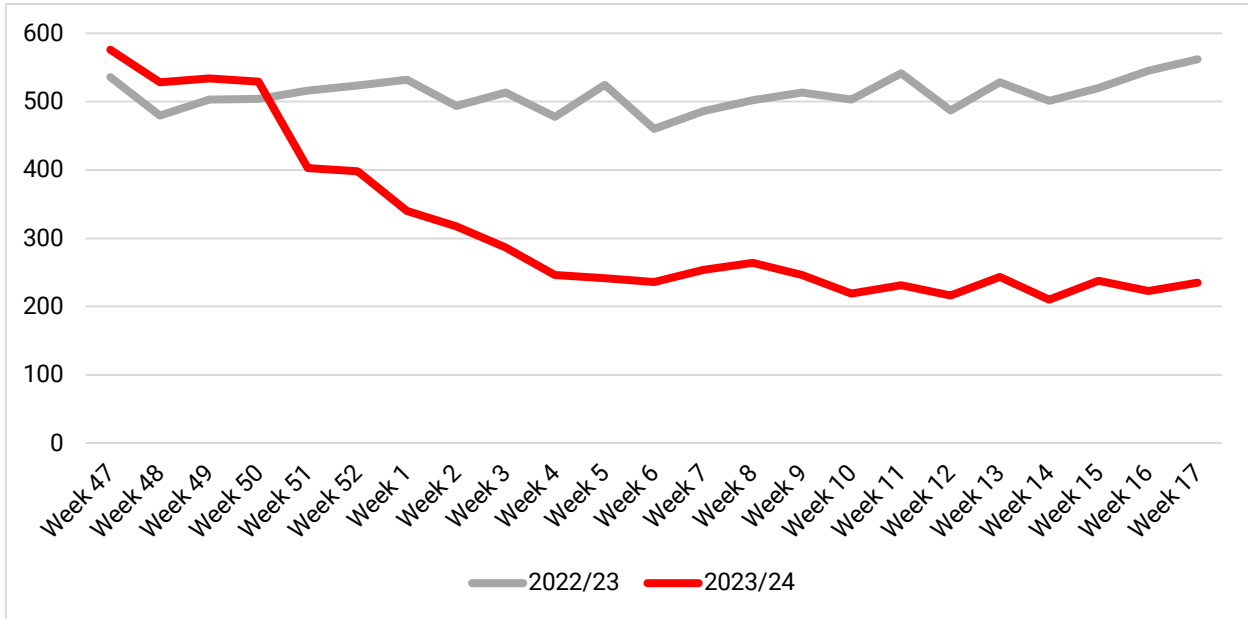
Assessment

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 April, military strikes against Houthi positions in Yemen as well as interceptions of aerial and naval drones continued, although there was a period of reduced activity in the middle of the month.

The tempo of activity in April differed to previous months. No Houthi attacks against merchant ships were recorded for more than two weeks during the month. It is not clear if this was due to events on the ground in Gaza or wider political events, with direct Iranian strikes on Israel, or whether Houthi forces needed to replenish their missile and drone stocks following strikes against their facilities as well as the tempo of operations they have been sustaining previously. It might have been a combination of all these factors.

Attacks resumed with the container ships MAERSK YORKTOWN targeted on 24 April and MSC DARWIN VI on 25 April in the Gulf of Aden. There was also an apparent drone attack on the MSC ORION on 27 April which took place in the Somali Basin. The Houthis had previously threatened to expand the geographic area where they would target vessels but it was unclear if their capabilities would support such a threat. Details still need to be confirmed but it appears that Houthi forces were able to target the MSC ORION to the south-east of Socotra Island with a drone.



Weekly Bab el Mandeb transits by merchant ships larger than 10,000 dwt (Source: Lloyd’s List Intelligence/Seasearcher)

Overall, it is likely that the Houthis assess that the current level of pressure is sufficient for them to reach their political goals. Traffic through the Bab el Mandeb is still rendered difficult by Houthi willingness to strike at vessels, with the Houthis likely aware that they do not need to expend further ammunition to deter commercial traffic from passing. A low level of operations might be sufficient to continue to apply pressure to Israel, the US and the UK.

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.

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. 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 two significant developments in this area during April. On 13 April, Iran launched a large-scale drone and missile attacks against Israel. The attack was a response to the earlier Israeli attack against Iran's consulate in Syria. The conflict between both countries has long been fought through proxy forces and this was the first time that Iran has directly attacked Israel.

A wider military confrontation between Iran and Israel has the potential to further destabilise the Middle East and the attack led to significant diplomatic efforts to prevent escalation. Israel conducted limited reprisal strikes but Iran has been content to see its own attack as the end of this round – at least for now.

During the early morning on 13 April (prior to the attack against Israel), the container ship MSC ARIES was boarded and seized by Iranian forces from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The ship had departed from the UAE and was en route to India when it was approached by an IRGC helicopter. A video showed military personnel rappelling onto the deck.

Prior to the seizure of the MSC ARIES, Iran was pursuing two separate tracks for its maritime operations: vessel seizures and detentions related to commercial disputes over oil sanctions, as well as limited direct strikes against merchant vessels linked to Israel. With the MSC ARIES seizure, those two tracks have been combined as the ship has a direct commercial connection to Israel and was likely targeted for that reason – also to line up with Iran’s attack on Israel.

What is less clear is whether the MSC ARIES will be ‘held hostage’ for a specific purpose by Iran. In previous cases, Iran has used such detentions to secure the release of its own vessels or cargoes (STENA IMPERO), funds frozen in foreign banks (HANKUK CHEMI), or lost revenues from oil seizures related to US sanctions (ADVANTAGE SWEET).



Iranian forces boarding the MSC ARIES via helicopter (Source: social media)

It is more likely, however, that the MSC ARIES case is an extension of Iran’s limited tit-for-tat targeting of Israel-linked shipping. In this case, the MSC ARIES presented itself as an opportunity for action in proximity to Iran. It was also useful to demonstrate that Iran is prepared to escalate its operations against Israel-linked shipping.

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 leadership in 'resistance' to Israeli operations in Gaza with avoiding an escalation in the conflict with Israel. Low-level operations – such as assistance to the Houthi campaign – help to show leadership. Direct attacks on a limited scale against Israel-linked ships, 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 but further cases are expected, particularly targeting US-linked ships or ships related to Iran's crude oil trade as well as Israel-linked ships.

Somali Basin and wider Indian Ocean

There was a decrease in activity in this area during April with a tapering down of pirate-related operations. No further merchant vessels have been hijacked and there were no incidents with fishing vessels off the Somali coast. With regards to fishing vessel incidents, it might be the case that there has been some progress in deterring illegal fishing, but it is more likely that further incidents will take place as this is a persistent issue off the Somali coast.



The ABDULLAH under naval escort after release (Photo: EUNAVFOR)

For merchant ship operations, the most significant development was the ransom payment for the ABDULLAH, claimed at \$5 million. The vessel departed the Somali coast under naval escort on 14 April having been held for just over a month. The successful ransom has demonstrated that the piracy model still functions – that vessels can be held by pirates off the Somali coast and ransom payments received. This is likely to act as an incentive for future hijacking attempts.

Criminal groups will have to balance this with the prospect of naval action. The initial 'surge' in Somali piracy seen over the past months was likely partly due to perceptions that naval forces were tied up elsewhere in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea, leaving the Somali Basin unprotected. This proved not to be the case and the Indian Navy was active in rescuing fishing vessels as well as the high-profile boardings of the LILA NORFOLK and RUEN – the latter resulting in the arrest of 35 perpetrators and their detention in India for trial.

Related to the activities of the Indian Navy, a Turkish Navy ship visited Mogadishu at the end of April. Somalia and Turkey signed a 10-year defence and security agreement in February that includes 'maritime security support'. Turkey has already been heavily involved in training the Somali National Army in its fight against militant group al-Shabab.

A Turkish company manages the port of Mogadishu, local patrolling of the port has also been supported by the EU and the African Union through equipment, facilities, and training. It is expected that the implementation of the agreement will focus on illegal fishing and piracy. Whether this will include direct Turkish Navy actions in the area is unclear.

As noted in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden section, the container vessel MSC ORION was apparently targeted by a Houthi drone on 27 April while south-east of Socotra Island in the Somali Basin. It is unclear as to how the operation was carried out, particularly for the targeting of the vessel, but the incidents suggests that the Houthis are making good on their intentions to expand their vessel targeting beyond the southern Red Sea and western Gulf of Aden.

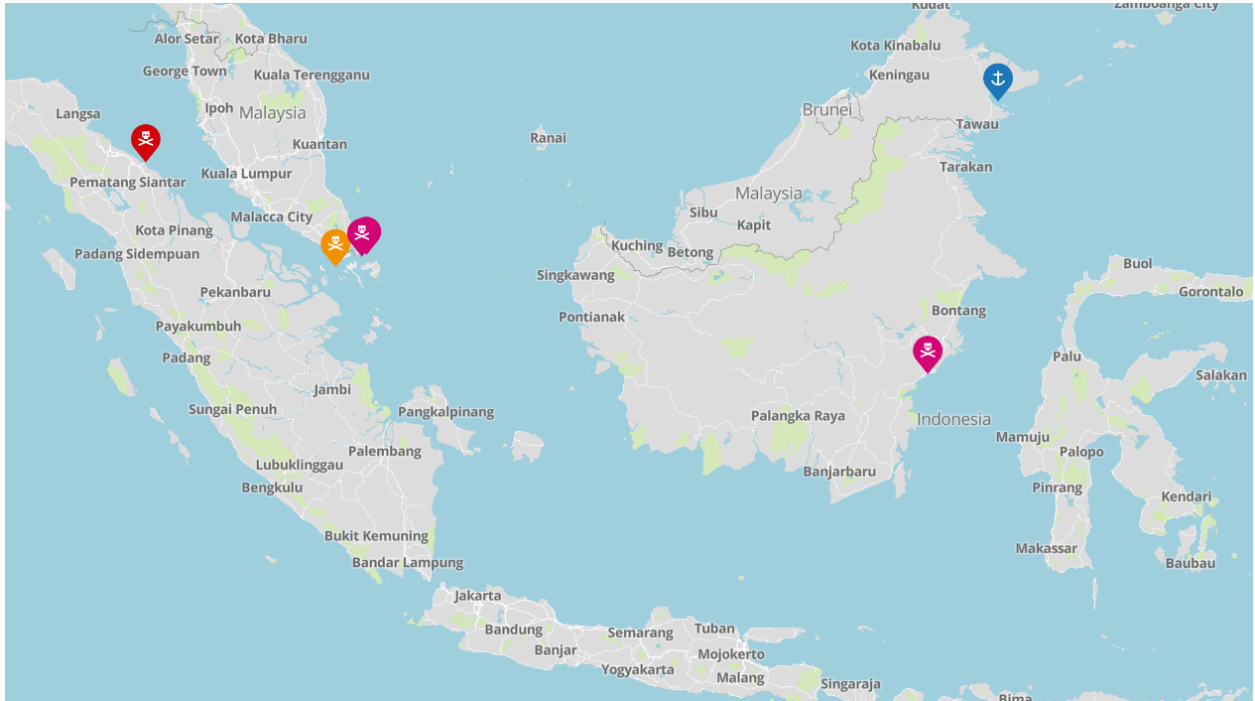
Forecast

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 level is assessed to be elevated and after the successful ransom payment for the ABDULLAH, additional attempts to hijack vessels are possible – at least on a limited basis.

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 30 April 2024, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



Incidents

4 April – Bulk carrier SHAKESPEARE boarded

Armed robbery, Kuala Tanjung port (Indonesia), 01:10 LT (18:10 UTC on 3 April)

6 April – Barge LINAU 135 boarded

Theft, Singapore Strait TSS, 16:45 LT (08:45 UTC)

7 April – Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency officers injured in shoot-out

Naval operation, Darval Bay, Sabah (Malaysia), 08:40 LT (00:40 UTC)

13 April – Product tanker SOLAR ROMA boarded

Theft, Balikpapan anchorage (Indonesia), 04:25 LT (21:25 UTC on 12 April)

14 April – Bulk carrier CASANOVA boarded

Failed robbery, Singapore Strait TSS, 03:19 LT (19:19 UTC on 13 April)

14 April – Barge HEXAGRO 9 boarded

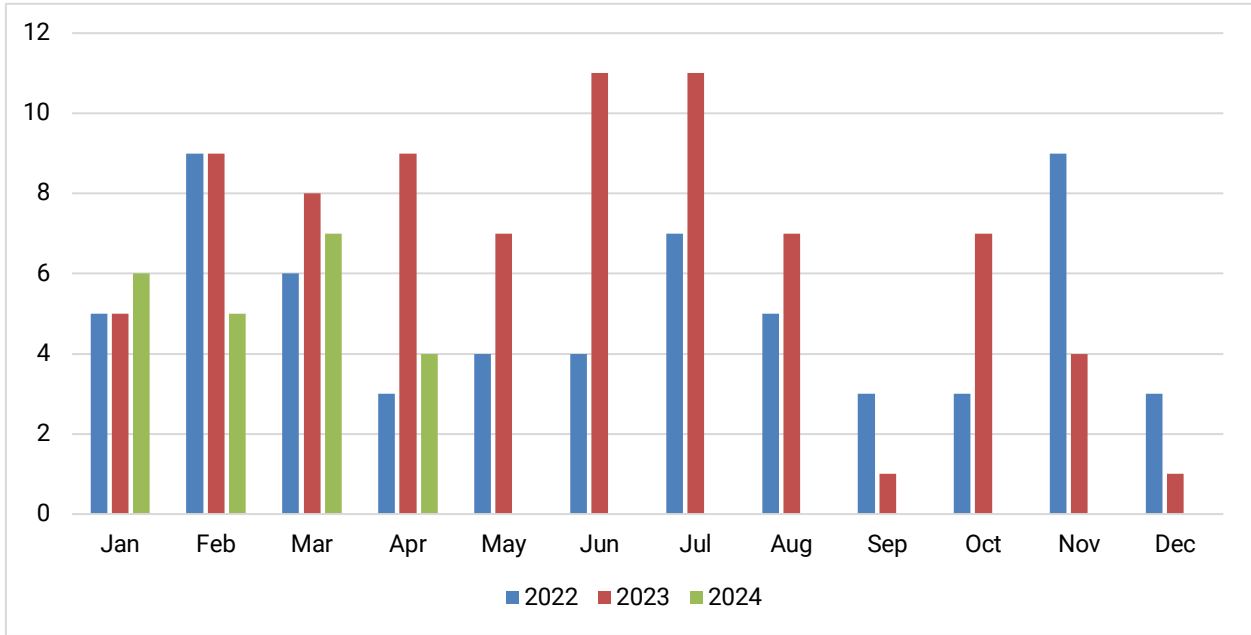
Theft, Singapore Strait TSS, 18:20 LT (10:20 UTC)

Assessment

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

Boardings in the form of thefts and armed robberies remain the prevalent threat for merchant ships within these areas. Six incidents were recorded in South East Asia in April, four of those took place within the Straits of Malacca and Singapore (SOMS).

One failed incident involved a bulk carrier underway in the western zone of the Singapore Strait. Scrap metal and similar items were stolen from two barges underway in the eastern limits of the strait. The sole boarding on the Malacca Strait involved a rare armed robbery at Kuala Tanjung port. Another rare incident involved perpetrators that engaged in a shoot-out with officers of the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency in Darval Bay off eastern Sabah. It is unlikely that these perpetrators posed a threat to merchant vessels, as it is understood that their goal was to prey on local residents travelling on small boats.



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)

Over the past 12 months, 58% percent of reported incidents in the region have taken place in the Singapore Strait. Of these, 48% involved perpetrators reported as armed. Most perpetrators are likely carrying knives, even though 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, improving their ability to escape.

During the past twelve months there have been 71 incidents in the SOMS. Of these, 52 occurred in the Singapore Strait and 19 in the Malacca Strait. Of the total, 42 involved bulk carriers, 15 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 75% of all SOMS incidents targeted ships underway, all but four in the Singapore Strait. During the past twelve months, 75% 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 boardings at anchorages and while alongside, as illustrated by the incidents at Kuala Tanjung and Balikpapan.

Incidents in 2022 and 2021 involving locally trading ships illustrated the vulnerability for smaller local vessels to hijackings for cargo theft. Larger and internationally trading tankers have not been targeted by hijackers in recent years. These incidents, together with the illegal sale of fuel from tugs and regular related law enforcement interventions in the region, further illustrate 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, 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 during which a crew member on a merchant ship 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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