



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 Houthi threat in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden

Introduction

On 19 January 2025, Houthi forces in Yemen announced that they would pause their attacks against merchant ships in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The Houthis were able to frame their announcement as a success, given that their campaign was ostensibly in opposition to Israel's war in Gaza and that their goals had been achieved.

Following the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, the Houthi announcement was in line with their previous statements. However, the campaign is merely paused while the ceasefire in Gaza remains in place. The Houthi leadership has repeatedly stated that they still have their “finger on the trigger”.



Pro-Houthi tribesmen gather to protest against the United States, Britain and Israel in Sanaa, Yemen in December 2024 (Photo: Social media / X)

These statements underline that the Houthis are willing – and very likely able – to relaunch attacks against commercial shipping at any time. It is therefore no surprise that maritime traffic through the Bab el Mandeb and the Suez Canal remains at the same level as prior to the Houthi announcement.

Houthi campaign on hold

Whether the Houthi campaign against commercial shipping will stay on hold depends first and foremost on developments related to the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel.

Note: The current status of the situation in Gaza is also considered on an ongoing basis in Risk Intelligence's weekly *Security Threat Update: Red Sea / Gulf of Aden*.

So far, the ceasefire in Gaza has been violated on several occasions by both sides, yet the overall deal remains in place. Various governments have put pressure on the Israeli government and on Hamas to ensure that the ceasefire does not break down which would lead to an early return to fighting.

The fact that the Houthis have so far not used ceasefire violations to resume their attacks against merchant ships – or against targets in Israel – suggests that they are content with the current campaign pause. The Houthi leadership would likely prefer a negotiated settlement of the conflicts in Gaza as well as in Lebanon to consolidate their control over large parts of Yemen. At the same time, Houthi representatives have stated on several occasions that they could relaunch their operations in support of the Palestinians at any point.

The decision to resume attacks against commercial ships will ultimately be based on political considerations. The Houthis do not want to be perceived as weak due to not keeping their promise to react against “Israeli aggression”. At the same time, it is likely that they will calibrate their response to the level of violence displayed by Israel in Gaza if large-scale military operations resume. A Houthi response to violent Israeli actions in the West Bank is also possible.

Any potential resumption of the Houthi campaign would likely be announced and followed up by at least one widely published strike on a merchant ship. Such an attack would very likely be in line with the targeting parameters stated by the Houthis.

Houthi capabilities

Precise estimates of the effects of military strikes against Houthi forces in Yemen are virtually impossible. An assessment is even complicated for military forces due to the lack of reliable sources in Yemen, particularly in the Houthi-controlled part of the country. Nevertheless, some assessments are possible based on various sources:

- Houthi capabilities have been somewhat degraded but significant capabilities remain in place. Most importantly, the Houthis have the required equipment to continue to pose a threat for merchant vessels. Any assessments to the contrary are very likely politically motivated and lack credibility.
- Houthi forces continue to improve or re-build their arsenal and are very likely to receive outside support from their allies.

The lack of publicly announced interceptions of weapons shipments to the Houthis does not mean that smuggling has stopped. Strikes against weapon factories in Iran may have impacted the supply to an extent but there are numerous suppliers for different types of equipment. Some weapons, notably aerial and naval drones, are even manufactured domestically in Yemen. While this is dependent on imported parts, there is an extensive black market network to allow manufacturing to continue.

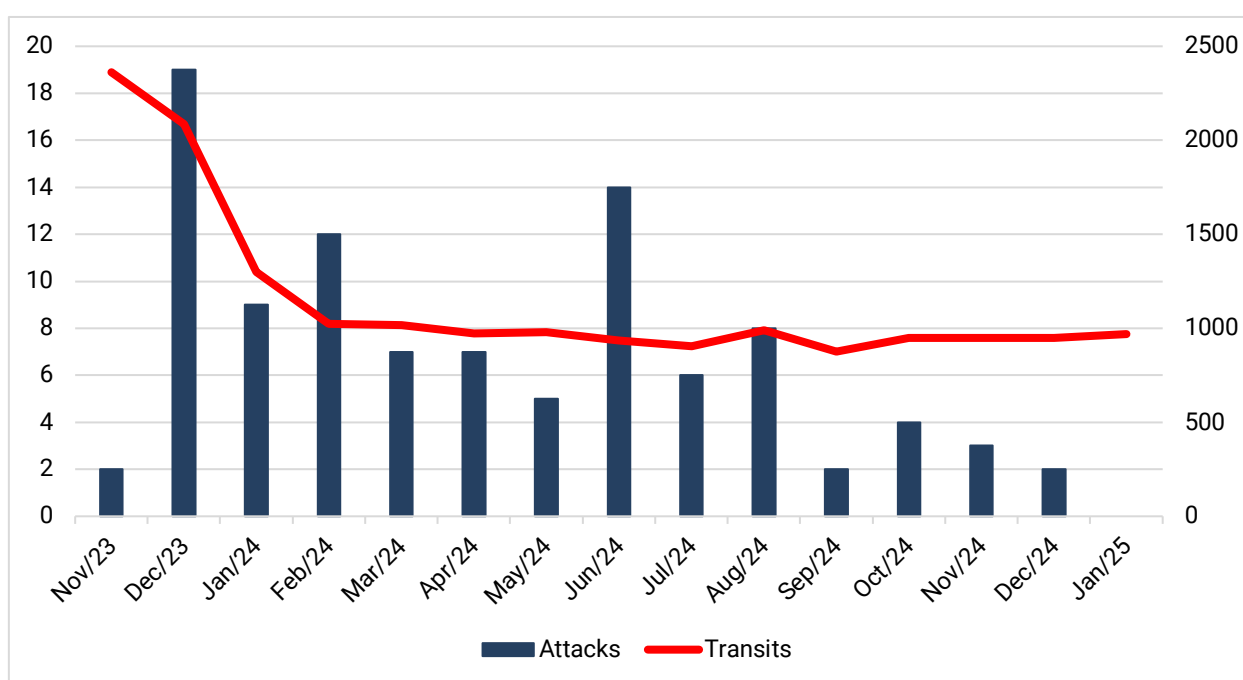
Overall, it is possible that missile launch systems have been destroyed in significant numbers. The same is not true, however, for aerial drones which do not require sophisticated launch system. Moreover, several missiles have been launched from Houthi-controlled territory towards

Israel in December and early January, underlining that these capabilities remain available to Houthi forces.

No uptick in maritime traffic

Figures released by JMIC show a substantial increase in Red Sea traffic throughout February. The methodology behind those figures, however, is not clear. Significant swings in week-to-week data strongly suggest that these figures are not reliable as they do not align with other sources.

Overall, monitoring through commercial sources shows no increase in maritime traffic through the Red Sea so far, shown in Figure 1. Nevertheless, many stakeholders in the maritime industry are closely monitoring the situation. Virtually all ship operators which have re-routed their vessels around Africa to avoid the Red Sea would like to return to regular voyages.



*Figure 1: Number of attacks against merchant ships per month (blue columns) and the number of monthly Bab el Mandeb transits by merchant ships >10,000 dwt (red line)
(Source: Risk Intelligence System / Lloyd's List Intelligence/Seasearcher)*

There are no obvious candidates to take the lead in returning to the Red Sea. Many representatives of shipping companies have stated that they are prioritising the safety of their seafarers. This position is strengthened by the fact that a return to "normal" maritime traffic through the Red Sea would lead to a significant decline in revenues for many ship operators.

The decrease in the number of Houthi attacks in the second half of 2024 can be explained because the Houthis had already achieved their political goals with attacks against merchant ships during the first half of the year. Occasional "reminder attacks" were all that was necessary to keep maritime traffic through the area at a low level.

Current threat levels have not substantially changed after the announcement regarding the pause of the current Houthi campaign. The only change is the slight decrease of threats linked to the US, UK and other countries involved in Operation Poseidon Archer. If the Houthis resume their campaign, however, that threat level is expected to increase again.

It should be noted that the decision to target any ship lies solely with the Houthis' interpretation of the respective vessel's commercial associations. Houthi forces have previously relied on AIS data, financial filings as well as publicly available information to identify their targets. In some cases, this has apparently led to mistakes as ships were very likely targeted based on outdated information in publicly available databases.

Conclusion

The shipping industry is reluctant to return to Red Sea voyages. This position is underlined by maritime traffic statistics and supported by an assessment of the threat situation. The ceasefire between Israel and Hamas remains fragile. Regional countries have an interest in sustainable peace but an erratic US policy has led to additional uncertainties.

Ultimately, the security situation for commercial shipping in the Red Sea will be determined by the Houthis in Yemen. They were able to mount a successful campaign to restrict Red Sea transits, despite the efforts of international navies and a series of airstrikes by the US, UK and Israel. Even if there were tactical costs to the Houthis, the campaign was a strategic success. Unless the ceasefire in Gaza holds, there are no particular impediments to the Houthis resuming their attacks.

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

In February, few changes were reported along the contact line, although Russian operations have achieved small advances. Russian forces have continued to target Ukrainian energy and other civilian infrastructure to continue the pressure on the Ukrainian government's ability to protect and provide general services. However, Ukrainian services were reported to continue to function, albeit with some disruptions which are likely to continue.

Localised scheduled power outages were often reported throughout Ukraine in February. Ukrainian energy providers have stated that scheduled power cuts will likely continue in the coming weeks. Russian forces are also likely to continue to target civilian infrastructure, including ports. Knock-on impacts for port operations are likely to differ but some impact should be expected.



Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy with visiting leaders in Kyiv, marking the third anniversary of Russia's invasion (Photo: Ukraine Presidential Office)

The diplomatic and political developments during February are attempts by various stakeholders to position themselves for their own desired outcomes in relation to the war. While there is much reporting on a possible ceasefire or peace negotiations, timelines and developments in the coming weeks remain uncertain.

The initially reported agreement between the US and Ukraine which then broke down at the last minute was a part of the approach by the US administration to focus on ending the war in Ukraine. However, there remains a degree of elusiveness in the Trumps administration's stance towards both Russia and Ukraine, which adds to the continued uncertainty of any ceasefire negotiations.

The present situation is therefore likely to continue, albeit with varying intensity and focus of attacks, with Russian forces likely to continue to target Ukrainian infrastructure and continue to attempt to occupy greater areas of Ukraine.

Ukrainian attacks against Russian infrastructure were also reported during February. Ukraine is likely to continue with conducting attacks in Russia, particularly to target oil-related facilities, to impact the ability for Russia to produce and export oil products.

The ability of Russia to threaten and attack Ukrainian energy infrastructure remains dependent on Ukrainian capabilities to protect these facilities. While the contact line continues to change marginally, the ongoing Ukrainian incursion into Russia also continues.

Risk Intelligence also offers a weekly report which provides an up-to-date situational picture for port calls and other types of commercial maritime operations in the northern part of the Black Sea.

Black Sea situation

Across the Black Sea, the regional security picture varies depending on the operational area. Impacts or disruptions caused by military operations are most likely in the northwestern part. Military operations also occur in the wider Black Sea, including with naval and aerial drones which are used for military operations in the eastern Black Sea. Military operations targeting Russian and Ukrainian coastal military infrastructure or related equipment have included attacks against Russian and Ukrainian port infrastructure and port cities.

Incidents have also been reported at Ukrainian Danube ports. Further attacks cannot be ruled out, but these are less likely than in Ukraine's larger ports. Direct targeting of merchant ships is unlikely, even though two vessels were apparently deliberately targeted in 2024. Collateral damage to ships in Ukrainian ports or in the vicinity is a greater concern. Vessels may be damaged when ports or surrounding cities are targeted by Russian missile and drone attacks.

Warnings about and sightings of naval mines, particularly in the western and northwestern Black Sea, occur infrequently. Some incidents have impacted maritime operations, with demolitions and similar future incidents possible as far south as Turkey.

Power outages occur throughout Ukraine and can impact port operations on short notice. Further likely implications for maritime operations include complications with crew changes, with known cases based on nationality and operational impact by sanctions targeting trade with Russia.

The Ukrainian Black Sea 'humanitarian' corridor and participating Ukrainian Black Sea ports are operational in accordance with the IMO Circular Letter 4748. The corridor is relatively secure to use, although the general security situation in Ukraine is dictated by the ongoing war. The situation remains highly volatile, local operational differences and issues should be expected.

Two incidents involving merchant ships in 2024 underlined that Russia is prepared to deliberately target commercial ships en route to or from Ukraine in specific cases. Given that Russia had

previously announced that any ships travelling to Ukraine's Black Sea ports will be viewed as possibly carrying military cargo, as was claimed with the two targeted vessels, similar incidents remain possible. The threat highlights the Russian focus to impact traffic to Ukrainian Black Sea ports. Furthermore, Russia has not withdrawn the prohibition of navigation north of 45-21N, announced at the start of the war in February 2022.

The Ukrainian defence ministry has also announced that Ukraine would consider all ships travelling to Russian Black Sea ports as potentially legitimate targets, likely in response to the Russian announcement. It is unclear to what degree Ukraine is prepared to act on this statement. The overall security situation can change at short notice.

Other threats in the Black Sea include GPS spoofing and jamming, fraud and corruption as well as smuggling. Politically charged demonstrations can also impact regular operations in coastal countries, although these are not known to directly target the maritime sector.

Summary and forecast

The diplomatic and political statements and activities during February indicate increased efforts by the US, Ukraine, Russia and European nations towards a future outcome that will support their respective interests. This is likely to continue in March, given that the differences in opinion on what outcomes can be agreed to remain unlikely to be resolved in the near-term.



Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy during his visit to the United States on 28 February 2024 (Photo: Ukraine Presidential Office)

The Ukrainian mineral and rare earth agreement – which broke down at the last minute – was intended to ensure continued US interest and possible future support for Ukraine. However, the impact of the current situation on continued or future US involvement in Ukraine – and the potential influence it might have on ceasefire or peace negotiations – remains to be seen. The timeline for a ceasefire in Ukraine is still uncertain.

While Russian forces have somewhat increased the territory they occupy in Ukraine, Ukraine has also managed to maintain a presence as part of their incursion in the area of Kursk in Russia. Nevertheless, Ukraine's ability to continue the fight against Russian forces is already somewhat undermined by the ambiguous messaging from the Trump administration.

Given the current Russian and Ukrainian ability to continue the war, both in their own way to achieve their own objectives, it is most likely that it will be future political and diplomatic developments which will influence any breakthroughs.

Russian attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, particularly against power generation and energy distribution networks, are likely to continue. Attacks on port or other maritime infrastructure cannot be ruled out. Similarly, Ukraine is likely to continue targeting Russian oil-related infrastructure to weaken the Russian economy and further their incursion into the Russian Kursk region.

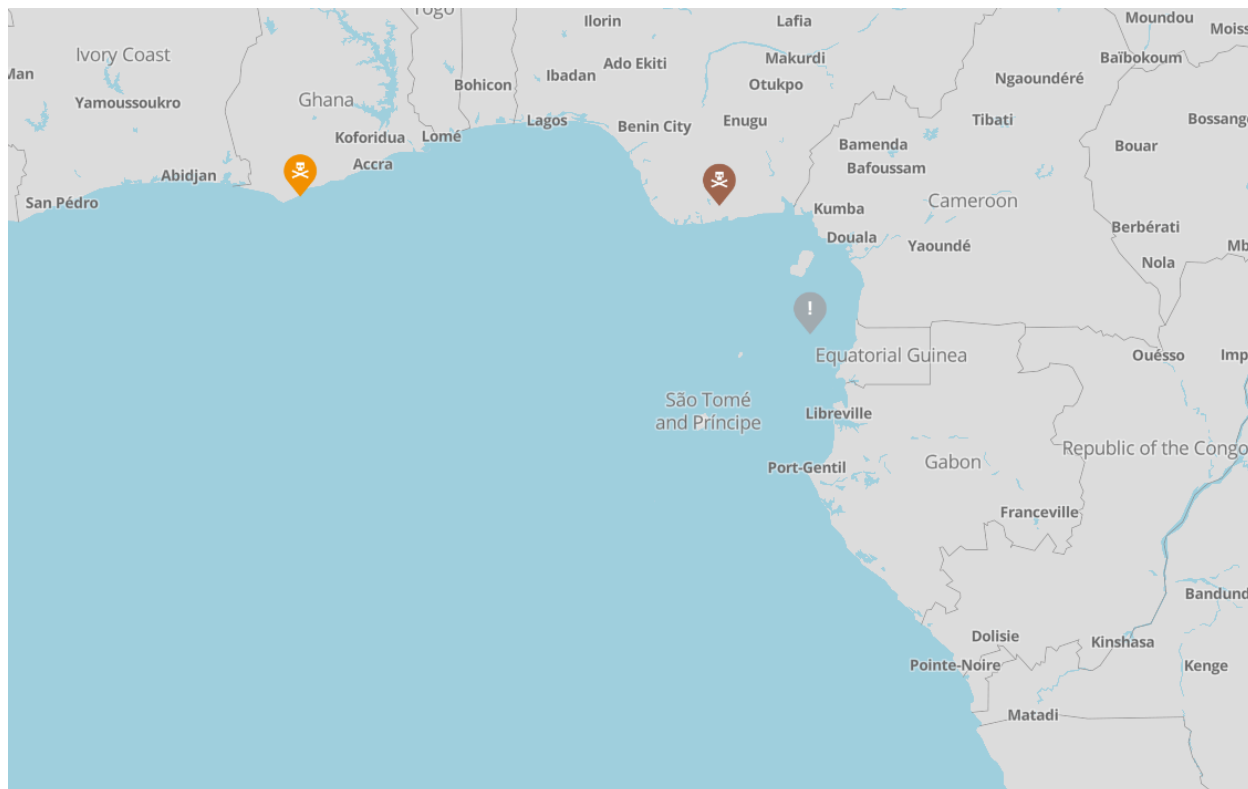
Further information

Risk Intelligence provides a weekly threat assessment specifically for ports in the northern part of the Black Sea. The report covers both the operational and the security situation for various ports.

In addition, the report provides an up-to-date overview of the current situation in Ukraine and the northern Black Sea, including concise information regarding the status of exports of grain and other types of cargoes from Ukrainian ports.

West Africa

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 28 February 2025, shown on the map below. Further incident details are available on the Risk Intelligence System.



Incidents

1 February – General cargo vessel JSP VENTO boarded

Other maritime risk, 41 nm south-west of Kribi (Cameroon)

6 February – Local passenger craft attacked

Kidnap/ransom, Bonny River (Nigeria)

24 February – Product tanker EUROTRADER boarded

Failed theft, Takoradi anchorage (Ghana)

Assessment

Inner Gulf of Guinea (Togo to Cameroon)

Attackers operating off the southern and eastern Niger Delta remain the most significant potential threat for merchant ships in international trade operating in the inner Gulf of Guinea. Few attacks have been reported in the past twelve months but the threat was most recently

underlined by several incidents between December and early February which included an attempted attack against a container ship, the boarding of an offshore supply vessel and the kidnapping of three crew members from a fishing vessel off Gabon. At the same time, it is very likely that these incidents were closely linked to other illicit activities at sea, underlining that piracy cannot be analysed in isolation.

Attacks against local vessels in or near the Niger Delta frequently highlight the fragile security situation in this part of Nigeria. Such attacks are also often linked to other illicit activities, namely to oil-related crimes, or to conflicts between oil companies and local communities.



Nigerian military personnel with a seized wooden boat that had been used to transport stolen crude oil (Photo: Nigerian Navy)

Overall, crude oil theft and smuggling of illegally refined oil products have long been major concerns for the Nigerian government. Such activities generate significant revenues for organised criminal groups across the Niger Delta. In recent years, profit margins have skyrocketed, leading to a drop in piracy across the Gulf of Guinea as organised criminal groups have concentrated on these much more profitable operations. Virtually all high-profile pirate attacks in the past have been carried out by Niger Delta-based groups.

Nigerian security agencies carry out frequent operations to limit crude oil theft. In February, the military once again announced that dozens of illegal refining sites in several Niger Delta states had been dismantled. In addition, several boats transporting stolen crude oil and illegally refined oil products were also seized. These efforts are part of Operation Delta Sanity, ongoing since January 2024. Similar military operations in recent years have not led to sustainable improvements of the situation which only has a limited effect on neighbouring countries.

Overall, the security situation in the Niger Delta remains fragile. Initiatives to combat crude oil theft and illegal refining are likely to remain largely window-dressing. Maritime operators should monitor developments as an uptick in attacks against merchant ships is possible anytime.

Successful boardings of merchant ships are 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 between October and March also enable operations deep offshore with small boats. 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 dozens of companies which have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Nigerian Navy.

The MoU is the only 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 high across the inner Gulf of Guinea, despite limited numbers of incidents in recent months. Pirate attacks are possible at distances of up to 250 nm from the coastline, particularly during the current dry season. All ship types may be targeted.

Inshore attacks against local passenger and cargo vessels or against military detachments remain a threat specifically 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 should be vigilant during river transits to Nigerian ports and terminals.

Outer Gulf of Guinea (Côte d'Ivoire to Gabon)

There was one maritime security incident in February, involving a product tanker at the Takoradi anchorage (Ghana).

The ship was boarded by two men who escaped empty-handed when they were discovered by the crew. There was no confrontation with any crew member, similar to most incidents which are reported at anchorages across the region. However, some cases in recent months have also highlighted that there is a potential for violence when intruders are directly confronted.

The overall security situation at sea has improved in recent years. Nevertheless, 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 issues. 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.

Limited financial and human resources will remain a concern for maritime security agencies across West and Central Africa 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 are 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.

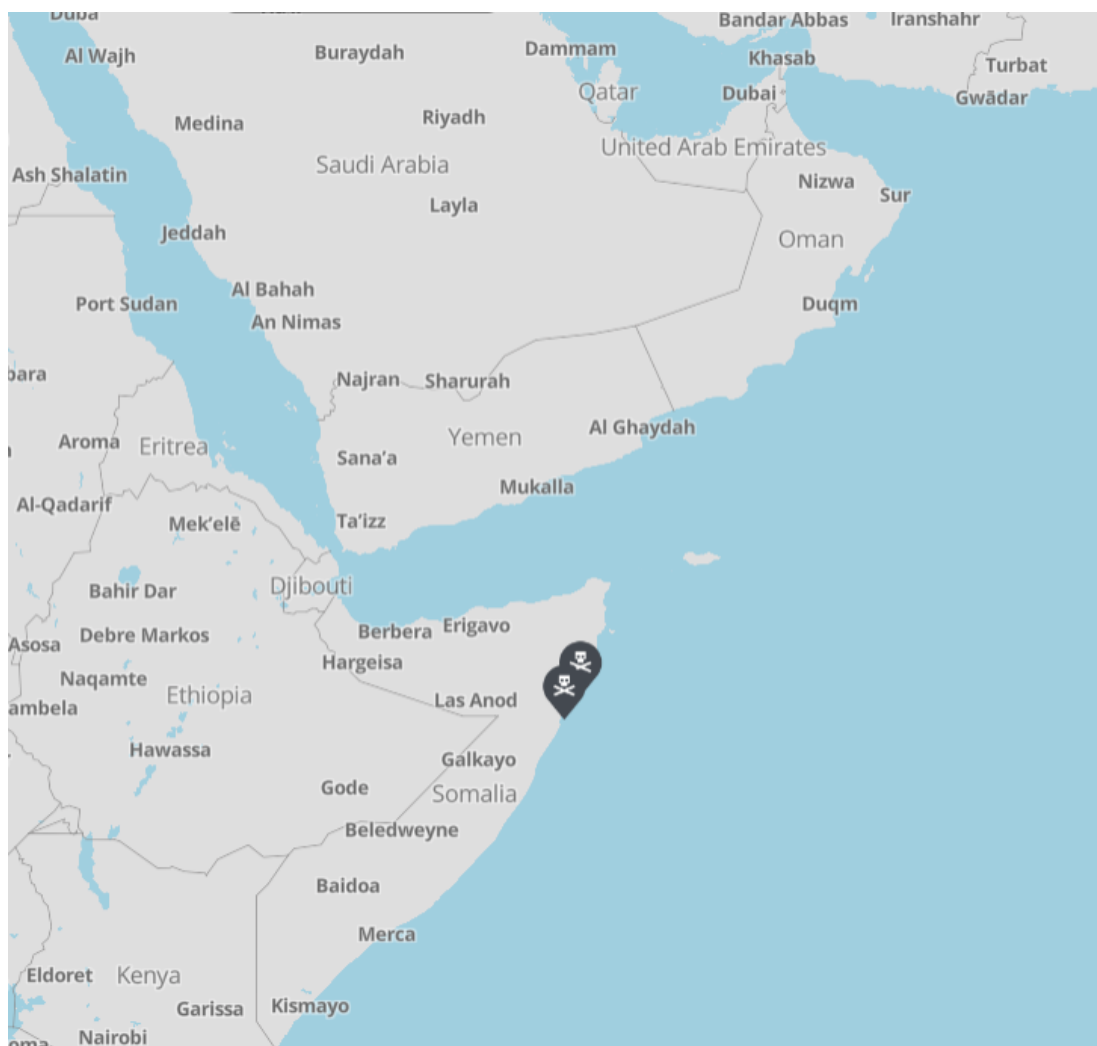
Forecast

Throughout the outer 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 ship hijackings for the purpose of cargo theft is 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 28 February 2025, shown on the map below. Further incident details are available on the Risk Intelligence System.



Incidents

Additional information about Houthi-related threats can be found in Risk Intelligence's weekly *Security Threat Update: Red Sea/Gulf of Aden*.

7 February – Dhow AL NAJMA No. 481 hijacked

Military operation, Yemen

17 February – Fishing vessel SAYTUUN 2 hijacked

Military operation, Yemen

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 transiting through the Red Sea. The current status of Houthi operations is discussed in more detail in the monthly focus section above.

There were no incidents in this area during February. The ceasefire between Israel and Hamas has remained in place and the absence of Houthi attacks has been consistent with their statements. The ceasefire in Gaza is continuing roughly along the planned track. Prisoner exchanges have continued despite mutual accusations of ceasefire violations and bad faith behaviour. Pressure is accumulating on both sides to begin the delayed talks on a post-war settlement.

The first phase of the ceasefire formally ended on 1 March, whereas talks about a post-war settlement were intended to start in early February. These have been delayed due to mistrust and an incompatibility of respective demands. Israel has nonetheless adjusted its demands to the disarmament of Hamas – rather than its destruction – although it still envisages an end to the security threat poses by the group. Gaza reconstruction is being discussed regionally.



Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip (Photo: UNRWA)

The Houthis have announced a pause of their campaign and about no longer targeting vessels calling Israeli ports, with Israeli commercial links other than ownership, and US and UK links. Only ships registered in Israel or with predominantly Israeli ownership would be targeted.

In addition to Houthi-related activity, other forces operate in the area as well, notably the Eritrean coastguard. Merchant ships 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 security situation in the Red Sea is now contingent on the durability of the Gaza ceasefire and whether this will be a permanent cessation of hostilities that will satisfy Houthi conditions. The Houthis might be tempted to launch missiles against Israel, inviting further Israeli or US/UK air strikes. If there are further air strikes, the Houthis might choose to retaliate with attacks against merchant ships linked to those countries.

Military action has likely degraded some Houthi capabilities, but they have been able to substantially reduce ship traffic in the Red Sea for a relatively low cost. There are therefore no significant barriers to resuming attacks against merchant ships should they determine that there has not been enough progress in the Gaza conflict.

Gulf of Oman – Persian Gulf

There have been no significant incidents in this area for some months. The overall situation is representative of a general de-escalation after Iran suffered two significant setbacks with the degradation of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the defeat of its ally in Syria. It is likely that Iran's policies are now more directed to the strategic level and the future role of its proxies throughout the Middle East.

With a new US presidency, Iran may also face increased economic pressure – such as new US sanctions – and will likely be looking to strengthen its relations in the region (notably with Saudi Arabia) and outside the region (particularly with China).

Despite the absence of incidents in the past six months, Iran retains the option to carry out limited operations in its maritime backyard, particularly of the type seen in 2023 and prior: limited strikes against specific ships directly linked to Israel through ownership or management, or attacks against ships linked to commercial disputes (including US-linked vessels). Iran has undertaken these operations to retaliate without substantial risks of escalation.

The US has imposed new financial sanctions against entities trading in Iranian petroleum products. Reports have noted that the sanctions target oil brokers in the United Arab Emirates and Hong Kong, tanker operators and managers in India and China, the head of Iran's National Iranian Oil Company, and the Iranian Oil Terminals Company.

Iran has actively pursued new markets, notably with China. US estimates are that Iran's revenues from oil exports were \$53 billion in 2023 – compared to \$16 billion under 'maximum pressure' during the previous Trump presidency. However, China does not recognise US sanctions and purchases from Iran are largely made outside the US financial system.

Forecast

There has been a heightened threat to merchant ships 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 reluctant to escalate its conflict with Israel but has asymmetric options to continue to pressure Israel, including in the maritime environment. Iran will, however, be cautious to avoid wider regional implications to its own security.

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. These operations are often on a case-by-case basis and linked to specific disputes. If there is aggressive enforcement of sanctions, Iran might be tempted to retaliate.

Somali Basin and wider Indian Ocean

Two hijackings were reported in February, involving the Yemeni trading dhow AL NAJMA No. 481 and the Yemeni fishing vessel SAYTUUN 2. Both were held for nearly a week. The SAYTUUN 2 traversed north along the Somali coast and was apparently used to launch a number of skiffs to search for other vessels to target – although no other hijacking attempts took place. There was also a report that a ransom had been paid by the vessel's owner to secure the release.



The SAYTUUN 2 following her release from pirate control (Photo: EUNAVFOR)

These two cases reinforce the current assessment that pirate activities are directed mainly at fishing and locally trading vessels close to the coast. There have been no recent reports of pirate activity far from the coast, as seen in late 2023 and early 2024.

It is likely that vessels might be used as 'mother ships' and it is possible that this was the intention of the hijackers of the AL NAJMA No. 481, who stayed on board for several days until releasing the vessel and stealing two skiffs and their outboard engines. In the case of the SAYTUUN 2, the vessel stayed close to the Somali coast – rather than moving out into the open ocean – suggesting that the pirates were more interested in similar vessels to board rather than merchant ships farther out to see where naval activity is more prevalent.

There might not be the shore-based infrastructure to support large-scale piracy activities similar to the situation a decade ago. Nevertheless, the ABDULLAH ransom in April 2024 shows that there are still financial incentives for opportunistic pirate attacks despite the deterrent factor of naval operations. The LIAONING DAPING 578 case in December 2024 also shows that fishing disputes – and the complicated politics surrounding fishing licences in the Somali Basin – might be the primary driver for piracy in the near future, rather than hijackings of merchant ships.

Since the initial surge in pirate attacks in late 2023 and early 2024, related activity has moved back closer to the Somali coast as a result of the monsoon period but also likely a greater reluctance amongst perpetrators of operating farther out in the Indian Ocean where naval vessels are patrolling. EUNAVFOR estimates that there are no more than three pirate groups in operation.

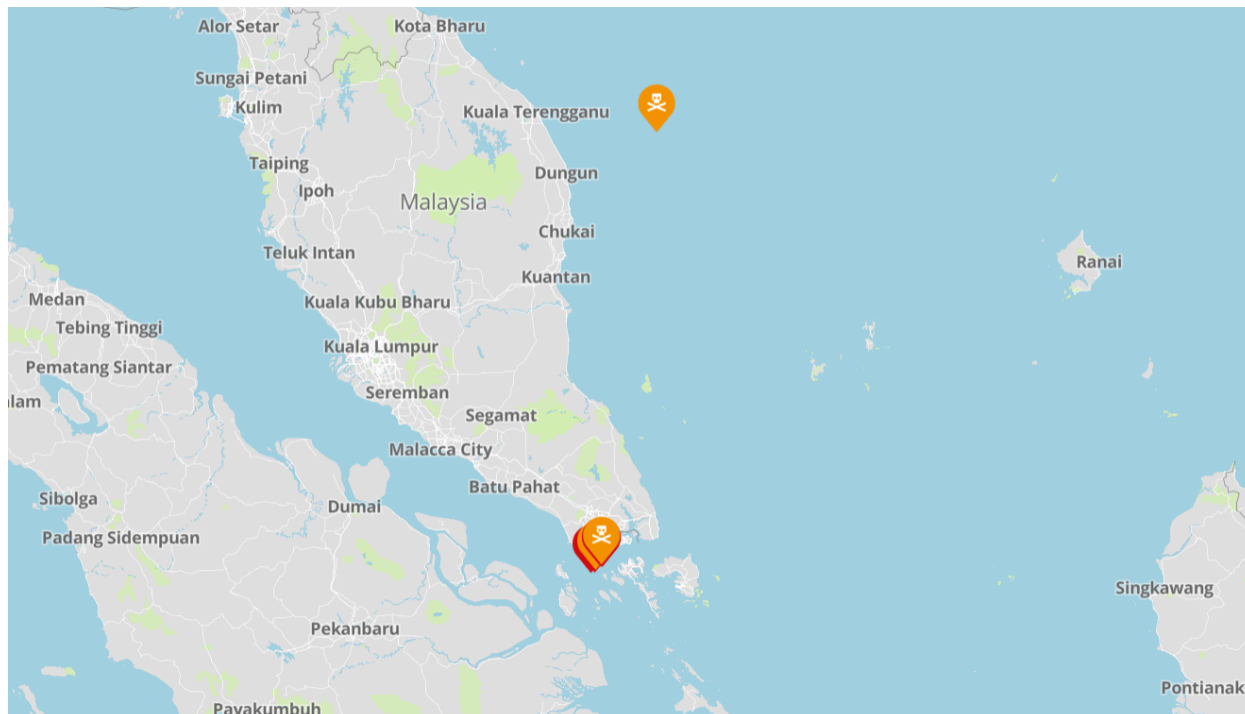
Forecast

Opportunistic boardings remain possible in this area, even beyond 500 nautical miles from the coast, but levels of activity are expected to vary based on local conditions and naval activity. The threat level is assessed to be elevated but trending downward. Hijacking activity is expected to be focused on fishing and locally trading vessels close to the coast.

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 28 February 2025, shown on the map below. Further incident details are available on the Risk Intelligence System.



Incidents

1 February – Product tanker HAIMA boarded underway

Failed theft, Singapore Strait

3 February – Bulk carrier BELAJA boarded underway

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

3 February – Product tanker ZEVIROUS boarded underway

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

12 February – Crude oil tanker SEA AMBER boarded underway

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

14 February – Bulk carrier CANCUN boarded underway

Failed robbery, Singapore Strait

16 February – General cargo ship PELICANA boarded underway

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

16 February – Bulk carrier ATROTOS HERACLES boarded underway

Failed theft, Singapore Strait

19 February – Offshore platform boarded

Failed theft, Tembikai oil field, Malaysia

22 February – Bulk carrier CYCLADIC SPIRE boarded underway

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

26 February – Bulk carrier OCEAN DILIGENCE boarded underway

Failed theft, Singapore Strait

28 February – Bulk carrier IFESTOS boarded underway

Failed robbery, Singapore Strait

28 February – Bulk carrier DSM ROSE boarded underway

Failed robbery, Singapore Strait

28 February – Product tanker BASSETT boarded underway

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

Assessment

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

While the wider region experiences regular piracy incidents in the form of thefts and armed robberies, the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and also areas northward have attracted attention due to geopolitical developments. Below is an update on this month's piracy activity, followed by an overview of geopolitical events.

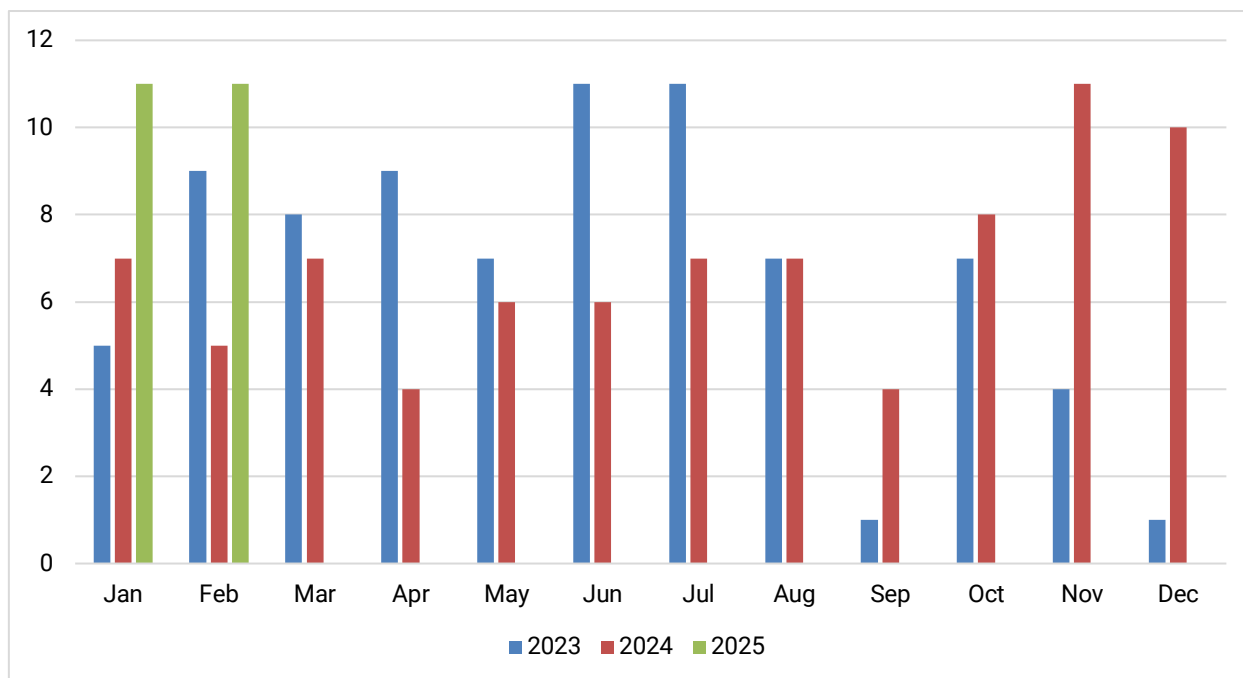
Piracy

Boardings in the form of thefts and armed robberies remain the prevalent threat for merchant ships within these areas. Thirteen incidents were recorded in South East Asia in February. Of these, 69% involved armed perpetrators and 92% took place within the boundaries of the Singapore Strait, where the incidents involved bulk carriers, tankers and one general cargo vessel, all boarded while in transit. The one incident that did not take place in the Singapore Strait involved an offshore platform off Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia.

The activity recorded in February illustrates the typical nature of crimes in the region. The trend of perpetrators acting more aggressively towards crew members remains a cause for concern, as illustrated by the BASSET incident during which one crew member was attacked and suffered knife wounds that required a medical evacuation.

Over the past 12 months, 75% percent of reported incidents in the region have taken place in the Singapore Strait. Of these, 65% involved perpetrators reported as armed. Most perpetrators are

likely carrying knives, even though weapons may not be observed 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.



Number of maritime security incidents in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore per month in 2023, 2024 and 2025 to date (Source: Risk Intelligence System)

There have been 92 incidents in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore (SOMS) during the past 12 months. Of these, 82 occurred in the Singapore Strait and 10 in the Malacca Strait. Of the total, 59 involved bulk carriers, 16 involved tankers, while 8 involved barges and other craft in tow. The outliers involved general cargo vessels, heavy lift vessels, OSVs and one container ship. No incidents in the SOMS have involved passenger vessels, and no container ships have been boarded while within the limits of the Singapore Strait.

Overall, 86% of all SOMS incidents during this period targeted ships underway, all but one in the Singapore Strait. During the past twelve months, 83% 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.

Armed robbers and thieves usually board vessels at night and target supplies and equipment while avoiding crew. Areas with the highest frequency of criminal activity during the past twelve months include the Singapore Strait and the ports of Balikpapan, Batangas, Batu Ampar, Belawan, Dumai, Manila, Sandakan and Vung Tau. A relatively new location is Indonesia's port of Kuala Tanjung on the Malacca Strait where bulk carriers have been boarded at anchor and alongside.

Although most boardings of vessels underway take place in the SOMS, there have also been incidents involving vessels underway in the Java Sea and the South China Sea. Most incidents in the region involve bulk carriers and tankers.

While reports of boardings targeting oil rigs are infrequent, Risk Intelligence has seen credible evidence of underreporting for oil rig incidents. When such boardings take place, perpetrators generally target unmanned platforms and steal equipment and supplies as illustrated by the 19 February incident listed above.

Two tug hijackings in the Java Sea in 2024, both targeted for their bio-diesel cargos, the hijacking of a tug in March 2023 during which palm seed batches were stolen from the barge in tow and a bunker barge hijacking off Sulawesi in January 2022 are the only confirmed hijackings for cargo theft in the region since 2017. The arrests of gang leaders had effectively suppressed such crimes, despite occasional incidents involving small tankers and barges which are locally owned, managed and trading.

As fuel subsidies in the region are being withdrawn, price increases could lead to increased fuel smuggling and sales in the South China Sea, Sulu/Celebes Seas and the SOMS. Demand for bio-fuel products could be another driver motivating hijackings. In turn, this increases the vulnerability of smaller tankers to potential hijackings.

Political developments

The South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and adjacent areas northwards are generally characterized by an absence of immediate maritime threats against commercial ships. There are, however, various political and strategic level undercurrents that might have implications in the future. North Korea is nuclear armed and has a sizable military. The regime wants to protect itself and any escalation could pull in China, Japan, and the US.



US and Philippine Air Force fighter jets and bombers conduct a joint patrol over the Scarborough Shoal (Photo: Philippine Air Force)

South Korea has recently scaled back its anti-North Korea focus in its 2025 policy plans. The unification and defence ministries have downplayed President Yoon Suk-yeol's policies amid his ongoing impeachment trial. The new policy objectives emphasise stable management of the situation and establishing a foundation for unification. The change reflects South Korea's effort to distance itself from President Yoon's more controversial policies.

In February, South Korea and the US conducted a ten-day joint reconnaissance exercise in northern parts of South Korea as part of their efforts to enhance their combined operational capabilities. As an apparent response, North Korea launched strategic cruise missiles over waters off its west coast. The launch was announced as part of a readiness exercise to showcase counterattack capabilities and a deterrence to South Korea and the US. A previous cruise missile firing was conducted on 25 January, the first missile launch after US President Trump took office.

A Chinese-owned cargo ship was detained on 25 February by Taiwan's coastguard on suspicion of damaging a subsea telecoms cable west of the island. Taiwan's Chunghwa Telecom reported damage to a subsea cable, but its telecom service was quickly redirected to other cables. The vessel was escorted back to port in Tainan for investigations. In January, a Chinese-owned cargo ship was briefly detained on suspicion of damaging a subsea telecoms cable northeast of Taiwan. Subsequently, the vessel was released and continued its journey to Busan, South Korea, as bad weather prevented the coastguard from boarding the ship for verification.

China's military conducted joint combat readiness patrols in the vicinity of Taiwan on 26 and 27 February, which accounted for the uptick in the number of Chinese military aircraft and vessels detected near Taiwan during the period.

Similar activity took place over the contested Scarborough Shoal in February, with China's Southern Theatre Command conducting naval and air combat readiness patrols in the territorial waters and airspace around and above the shoal, followed immediately by similar joint air patrols conducted by US and Philippines forces.

Prior to these exercises, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. offered to remove US missile systems from his country in exchange for China's agreement to halt "aggressive and coercive behaviour". China had previously demanded the removal of these missile systems claiming they are "inciting geopolitical confrontation and an arms race." China did not officially agree to the terms of this proposal. Meanwhile, the Chinese Coast Guard deployed a long-range acoustic device against Filipino Navy sailors, a move that could cause deafness.

Political developments with a potential impact on regional conflicts and specifically on maritime security in South East and East Asia are covered in more depth in the "Asia Strategic Outlook", issued every six months by Risk Intelligence.

Two close encounters were reported in February. In one, an Australian Air Force P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft was conducting a routine surveillance patrol over the Yellow Sea when a Chinese PLA J-16 fighter jet released flares in its path. Although no injuries were sustained, nor was any damage caused, the Australian Defence Forces stated that the actions were "an unsafe and unprofessional manoeuvre that posed a risk to the aircraft and personnel."

The second incident involved a Chinese Navy helicopter that intercepted a Philippine civilian maritime domain awareness flight over Scarborough Shoal. The helicopter reportedly flew as close as three meters from the turboprop aircraft. A Philippine Coast Guard spokesperson described China's actions as "dangerous flight manoeuvres" and described the conduct as a disregard to international aviation regulations.

Other exercises in February involved the US, Australian and UK navies who jointly conducted a “link exercise”, a coordinated manoeuvring exercise, and a variety of other combined operations in the South China Sea.

China denounced Vietnam’s construction on “illegally occupied” islands and reefs in the Spratly archipelago. A spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that they are an inalienable territory of China. Hanoi is building a 3,000-meter runway on one of the islands. A Chinese spokesman said that China has always opposed construction work by the countries concerned on “illegally occupied” islands and reefs.

As the month drew to a close, China conducted live-fire exercises in the Gulf of Tonkin, in the Beibu Gulf area that is situated closer to the Chinese side of the gulf. The exercises followed Vietnam’s announcement regarding a new line marking what it considers to be its territory in the contested body of water between the two countries.

Against the backdrop of ongoing provocations in the region, various high-level talks focused on de-escalation and enhanced coordination between maritime agencies. For example, China and Brunei announced talks aimed at future collaboration on oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea, a development that has drawn attention though some experts suggest it may be more symbolic than substantive. Japan and the Philippines agreed to further deepen defence ties in the face of an “increasingly severe” security environment in the Indo-Pacific region.

These developments highlight ongoing tensions, diplomatic initiatives and complexities in the region. Resolutions to all disputes are unlikely in the short term. While widespread conflict is also unlikely, these ongoing issues are ever present and remain a potential concern.

Forecast

In the coming month, the threat of boardings of vessels underway or at anchor for theft or armed robbery is moderate. Higher threat locations include the Singapore Strait and the anchorages at Balikpapan, Batu Ampar, Batangas, Belawan, Dumai, Kuala Tanjung, Manila, Sandakan and Vung Tau. Threat levels are lower 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 and tugs. 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.

On the geopolitical front, the threat of military operations disrupting the flow of commercial traffic in the region is assessed as low.

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 high-profile threats such as piracy and armed robbery at sea as well as insurgency attacks. It does not include all other threats to merchant ship operations, e.g. 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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