



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:

Disruptions to maritime security paradigms

Upending assumptions

At the geopolitical level, the Trump administration in the US is upending long-held political and economic assumptions about the international system. Since Trump's inauguration in January, the US has already launched trade wars against traditional partners (Canada, Mexico, the EU), foreshadowed territorial acquisition (Greenland), and cast doubt on established alliances (NATO in particular).

Trump has repeatedly wielded tariffs as an economic tool but also as a means of coercion, with potentially significant implications for trade flows. At the same time, the administration is moving fast to push for peace in the Israel/Gaza and Russia/Ukraine conflicts – with uncertain outcomes in both cases – as well as instigating a policy of 'maximum pressure' on Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons programme. Events are moving fast and some US policies are changing on a weekly or even daily basis.



Various changes under the Trump administration have already affected the maritime environment (Source: AP Photo)

Uncertainty and risk

When events are moving fast, paradigms can be disrupted or even broken. This requires risk assessments to take into account more uncertainty – introducing variables that were not previously a consideration. Business interruption, for example, has been a high-ranking concern only in recent years, reflecting the hangover from supply chain disruption during the Covid pandemic.

Since late 2023, there has already been one example of business interruption for shipping – the Houthi attacks against merchant vessels in the Red Sea. This campaign has significantly affected maritime traffic through this region. It is one of the most prominent recent examples of how geopolitical developments can have direct impacts on commercial supply chains.

Even as US policies are impacting other maritime areas such as the Black Sea and Persian Gulf, the US itself is becoming more interested in the potential for trade disruptions. The Federal Maritime Commission has launched an investigation into "maritime chokepoints" to identify "any regulations, policies, or practices that create unfavourable shipping conditions."

The areas under consideration are: the Northern Sea Passage, the English Channel, the Malacca Strait, the Singapore Strait, the Strait of Gibraltar, the Panama Canal, and the Suez Canal. Whether this investigation is primarily aimed at benefiting US companies, or is a genuine attempt to smooth shipping flows, remains to be seen.

Hot spots getting hotter

By and large, there are concerns that existing hot spots for maritime security might get even hotter in the coming months. Current hot spots include the Persian Gulf, the eastern Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and the Taiwan Strait. In all these locations, different factors contribute to the security environment and of these are shifting.



Chinese naval exercise in the Taiwan Strait (Source: China Military Online)

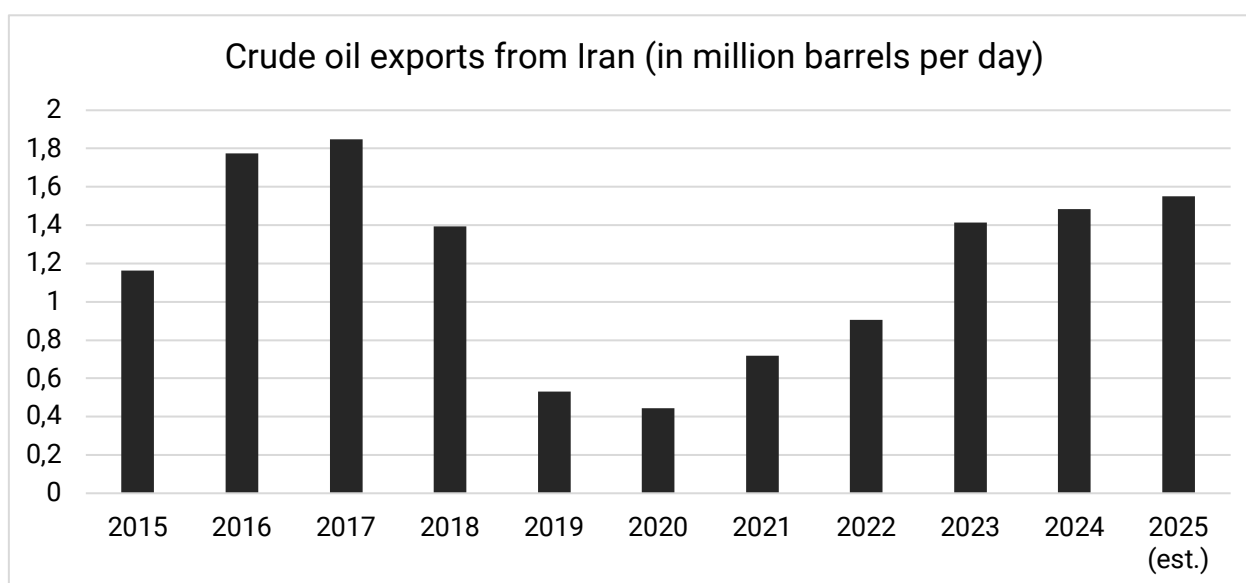
As tensions in the Middle East ebb and flow, there are significant concerns that actors in the Persian Gulf may decide to shift their conflicts to the maritime environment. The most worrying conflict in that regard is the rivalry between Iran and the US/Israeli axis.

Other hot spots have different threat profiles. Despite the conflict affecting Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria in recent months, the maritime environment has been largely unaffected. There are, however, lingering political tensions – particularly over offshore oil and gas developments – that are being monitored ongoing.

In the Indian Ocean, particularly the Somali Basin, the surge in piracy seen at the end of 2023 and in early 2024 has shifted, now being more driven by illegal fishing off the Somali coast. Meanwhile, the recent focus in the Baltic Sea has been on hybrid warfare as an outcome of worsening relations between Russia and Europe.

In the Black Sea, calls at Ukrainian ports have been affected by Russian drone and missile attacks on those ports. These have not just affected operations but also resulted in collateral damage to merchant ships. In March, there has been much discussion of a potential ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine that may reduce threats in the Black Sea and allow for safer transits. At the time of writing, however, and despite US efforts to move the ceasefire process forward, details on coverage, timing, and enforcement have yet to be confirmed.

US foreign policy moves under the Trump administration have so far focused on Europe, Russia/Ukraine, and the Middle East. Other than trade (and tariffs), there have yet to be significant developments affecting Asia, particularly US-China relations. There are tensions emerging, such as the US focus on sanctioning Iran's oil exports as China buys the vast majority of those exports.



Crude oil exports from Iran between 2015 and 2025, highlighting the impact of political developments in recent years. (Source: International Monetary Fund)

The Trump administration is likely, however, to levy tariffs against Taiwan (and other countries) in April. Taiwan has so far moved cautiously, saying that it will decrease its own tariffs to redress the trade imbalance. Taiwan is reliant on US defence commitments, and its government is likely mindful of Trump's criticism of defence spending by other allies, with US officials noting that there would be a likely expectation that Taiwan will need to spend more.

As China increases its own military spending, and carries out ongoing military exercises around Taiwan, China might be thinking that it can negotiate directly with the US – as Russia has done over Ukraine – and secure concessions that could affect Taiwan's future. Scenarios have already been proposed where China could use sanctions or even blockades to disrupt trade to Taiwan, which would have a significant maritime impact in the Taiwan Strait.

Crises or opportunities?

The Trump administration's goal of moving fast on multiple issues might yet yield beneficial results and resolve several current conflicts affecting maritime security. There might be opportunities for improvements to take place in current hot spots.

However, the US has found – even only a few months into a new presidency – that conflicts cannot be resolved by sheer force of US willpower. Therefore, there is potential for simmering conflicts to escalate into crises – and to cause business interruption, particularly for shipping. Comprehensive threat and risk assessments will therefore be even more important in the near future. In addition, companies should improve or update their contingency planning, considering relevant scenarios and whether current maritime security paradigms will indeed be disrupted.

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.

Risk Intelligence has also released a series of recent reports, client briefings and whitepapers to improve the longer-term preparations of maritime stakeholders in various areas across the globe.

Update: Maritime dimensions of the war in Ukraine

Situation on land

Military developments in March have not significantly changed the overall aspects of the Russian offensive campaign in Ukraine, or Ukrainian defensive operations against the Russian invasion. However, there were some reported changes along the contact line, including reports of Ukrainian forces withdrawing from their incursion into the Russian Kursk Oblast and other reports of Russian forces making incremental military gains.

Russian forces have continued to target Ukrainian energy and other civilian infrastructure, including ports, to continue the pressure on the Ukrainian government's ability to protect and provide general services. Localised scheduled power outages were often reported throughout Ukraine in March. This will likely continue in April. Knock-on impacts for port operations are likely to differ but some impact should be expected – at least until some form of ceasefire agreement is found between Russia and Ukraine as well as implemented and enforced.



Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy visiting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in March 2025 (Photo: Ukraine Presidential Office)

Politically and diplomatically, there was much activity in March, including various talks held between the US and Russia and the US and Ukraine in Saudi Arabia, as part of US attempts to establish a ceasefire agreement between Russia and Ukraine. Official statements followed the talks, including the aim of a stated ceasefire in the Black Sea, to ensure the safe passage of commercial shipping. However, no actual commitments were enforced following the statements. The talks therefore provided little progress towards any real ceasefire or any likely end to the war.

Three vessels were involved in incidents in the port of Odesa in March. All incidents were the result of Russian military action towards the port. All three vessels were impacted during general attacks on the port and city infrastructure. However, Russian forces appear to have a low regard for possible collateral damage, including to commercial vessels.

One incident involving the MJ PINAR also resulted in the death of four seafarers. The incidents further underline that the threat to vessels operating in the area of the Ukrainian Black Sea ports is higher when in port, compared to during transits in the Black Sea – as the majority of ships involved in incidents have been in port during Russian attacks.

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 security picture varies depending on the operational area. Impacts or disruptions caused by military operations are most likely in the northwestern part. Military operations remain likely 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 merchant ships were apparently deliberately targeted on some occasions in the past. 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 subject to 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. Ukrainian forces are reported to continuously patrol Ukrainian waters as part of mine countermeasures to mitigate the threat from drifting mines to ships transiting to participating ports of the Ukrainian Black Sea corridor.

Romanian, Bulgarian and Turkish forces are operating similar countermeasures in their waters as part of a tri-party agreement. Based on the number of vessel transits, both in the Ukrainian Black Sea corridor and the general Black Sea, and the reported number of mine-related incidents, the threat level in relation to mines is moderate.

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, with expected local operational differences and issues.

Incidents involving merchant ships were reported in 2024 and 2025, underlining that Russia is prepared to deliberately target commercial ships en route to or from Ukraine in specific cases. Russia has announced that ships travelling to Ukraine's Black Sea ports will be viewed as possibly carrying military cargo, and such unsubstantiated claims have been made by Russia, seemingly to justify the attacks. Similar incidents remain possible. 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, although it is less likely that Ukraine would deliberately and overtly target merchant vessels.

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

There was a notable increase in diplomatic and political statements and activities during March, with an increased focus on possible ceasefire agreements – indicating increased efforts by the US, Ukraine, Russia and European nations towards a future outcome that will support their respective interests. However, various statements following multiple talks, held between the US and Russia and the US and Ukraine in Saudi Arabia, were mired by both confusion in difference in the translations of the statements and an apparent lack of willingness to subsequently enforce the agreements – all resulting in no actual ceasefires being implemented.



Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy during a visit to France in March 2025 (Photo: Ukraine Presidential Office)

Although diplomatic and political efforts are likely to continue in April, the present situation and the resulting threat picture are also likely to continue. Intensity and focus of attacks may vary, with Russian forces likely to continue to target Ukrainian infrastructure and to attempt to occupy

greater areas of Ukraine. The ability of Russia to threaten and attack Ukrainian energy infrastructure remains dependent on Ukrainian capabilities to protect these facilities.

Further commitments of support to Ukraine remain crucial and will determine the country's ongoing ability to withstand the Russian forces. There were also further negotiations regarding the Ukrainian mineral and rare earth agreement between Ukraine and the US but no conclusion was reached in March. Negotiations are likely to carry on into April.

Notwithstanding the various negotiation efforts and diplomatic and political activity which took place in March, any timeline for a ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia remains uncertain. The parties involved appear to be no closer to any common ground regarding their individual priorities and desires for diplomatic breakthroughs, compared with February. Therefore, Russian attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, particularly against power generation and energy distribution networks, are likely to continue.

Future attacks on port or other maritime infrastructure cannot be ruled out. Ukraine will also likely continue its fight against the Russian forces. Its ability to continue the fight, however, will remain depended on future and ongoing support from its partners.

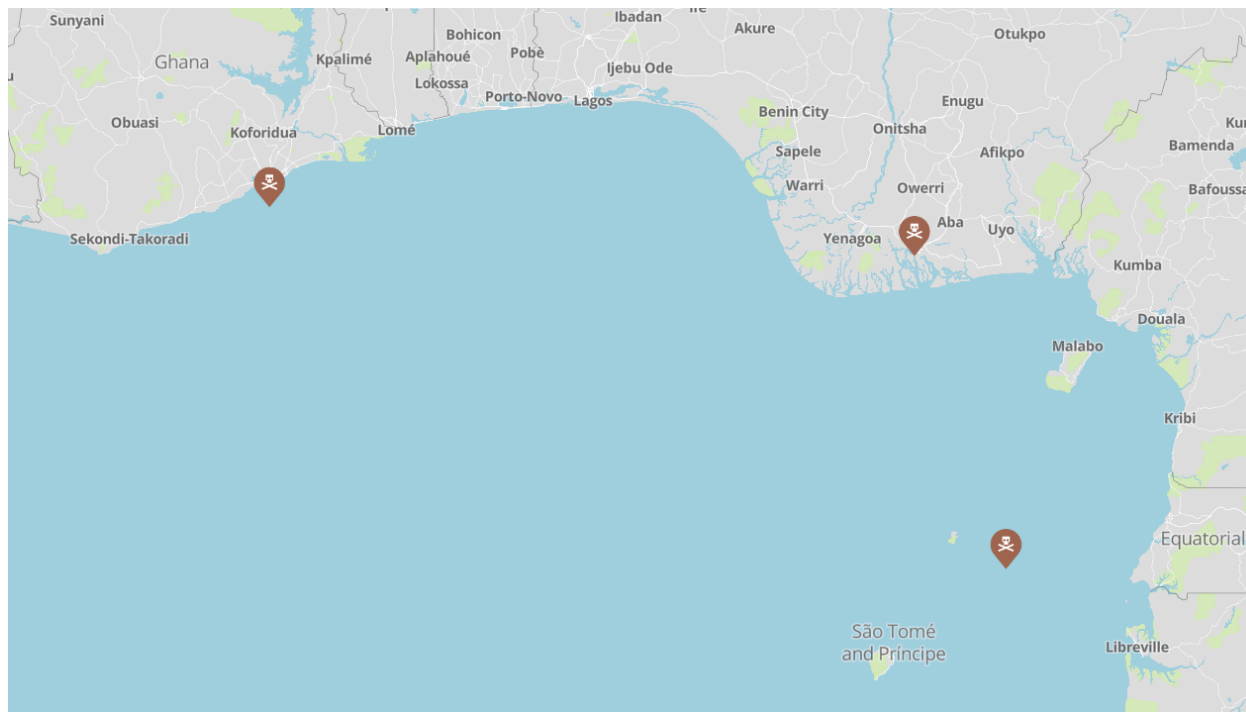
Further information

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



Incidents

17 March – Bitumen tanker BITU RIVER boarded

Kidnap/ransom, 30 nautical miles east of Santo Antonio Island (Equatorial Guinea)

26 March – Local passenger craft attacked

Kidnap/ransom, Degema River, Rivers state (Nigeria)

27 March – Fishing vessel MENG XIN I boarded

Kidnap/ransom, 16 nautical miles south of Accra (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. Some attacks have been reported in the past twelve months, including several incidents between December and March. Most recently, ten crew members were kidnapped from a bitumen tanker off Equatorial Guinea in March, discussed in more detail in the next section. At the same time, it

is very likely most recent incidents have been closely linked to other illicit activities at sea. Piracy should therefore not be analysed in isolation as the threat level for merchant vessels is heavily influenced by such activities.

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 preparing for an operation against an illegal refining site in the Niger Delta region (Photo: Nigerian Ministry of Defence)

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 March, the military once again announced that dozens of illegal refining sites in several Niger Delta states had been dismantled. In addition, various 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 Maritime Security* 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 spells of good weather in the current rainy 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 were two maritime security incidents in March, involving a bitumen tanker that was boarded around 80 nautical miles off mainland Equatorial Guinea and a fishing vessel which was boarded off Ghana.

The bitumen tanker was attacked by several armed men who kidnapped ten crew members. It was initially reported that the perpetrators were able to breach the citadel but it is very likely that the crew members had assembled in a safe muster point which was not as protected as a regular citadel. Based on the location of the attack and the vessel's trading patterns, it is likely that the ship was not targeted at random. Nevertheless, this case underlined that the threat of kidnap-for-ransom attacks in the region remains, even though the number of such cases had been low in recent years compared to the situation in 2019 and 2020.

Another incident also involved the kidnapping of crew members. In this case, a fishing vessel was targeted off Ghana but it is very likely that this case was directly linked to a criminal dispute. While Niger Delta-based groups are in theory capable of conducting a kidnap-for-ransom attack at such a distance from Nigeria, there are no indications that any other vessel was targeted despite the presence of many merchant ships in the immediate vicinity.

Overall, the 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.

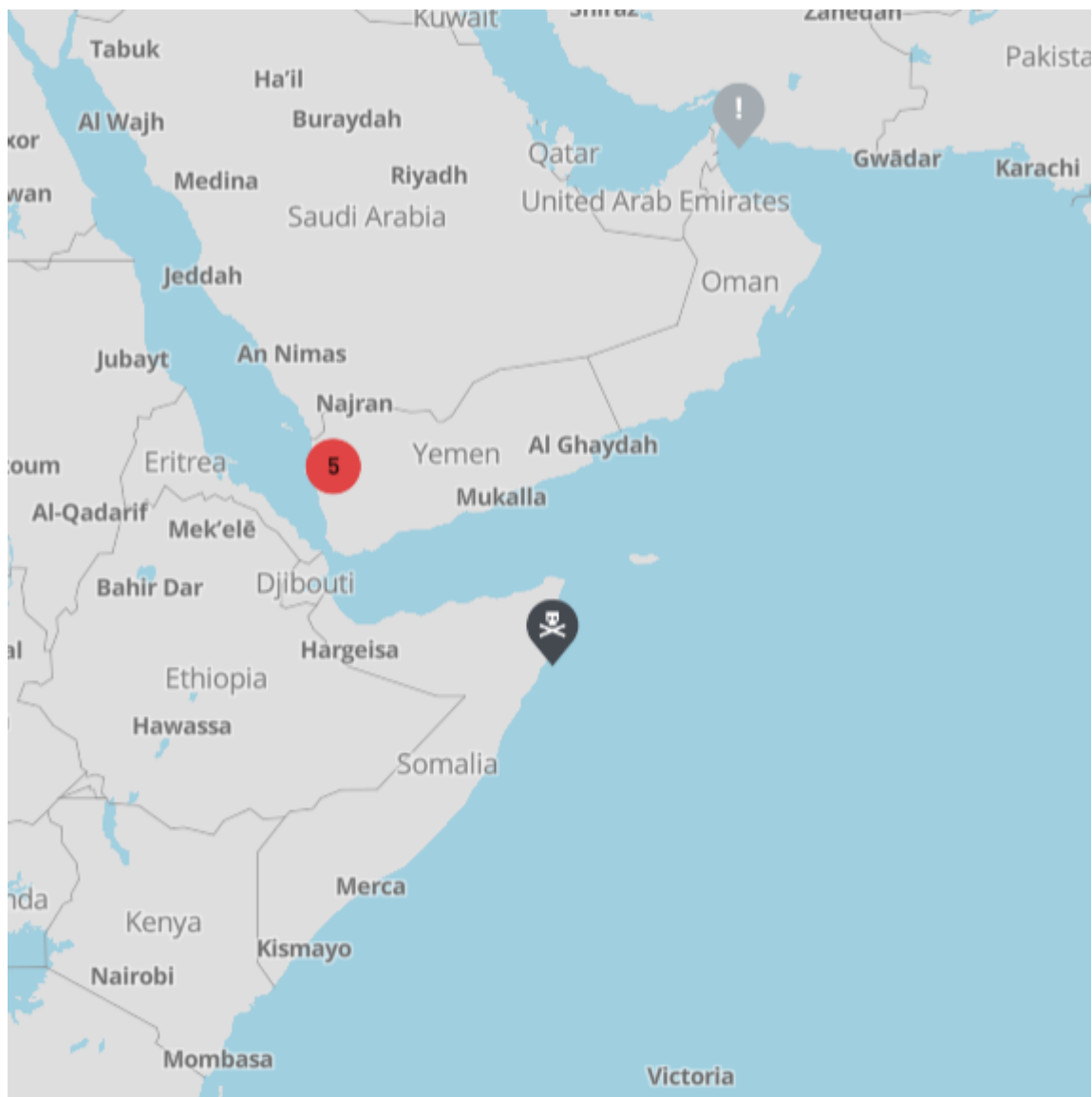
Forecast

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



Incidents

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

10 March – GPS interference reported

Other maritime risk, Gulf of Oman

16 March – Dhow AL-HIDAYA 1 reportedly hijacked

Hijacking at sea, Somali Basin

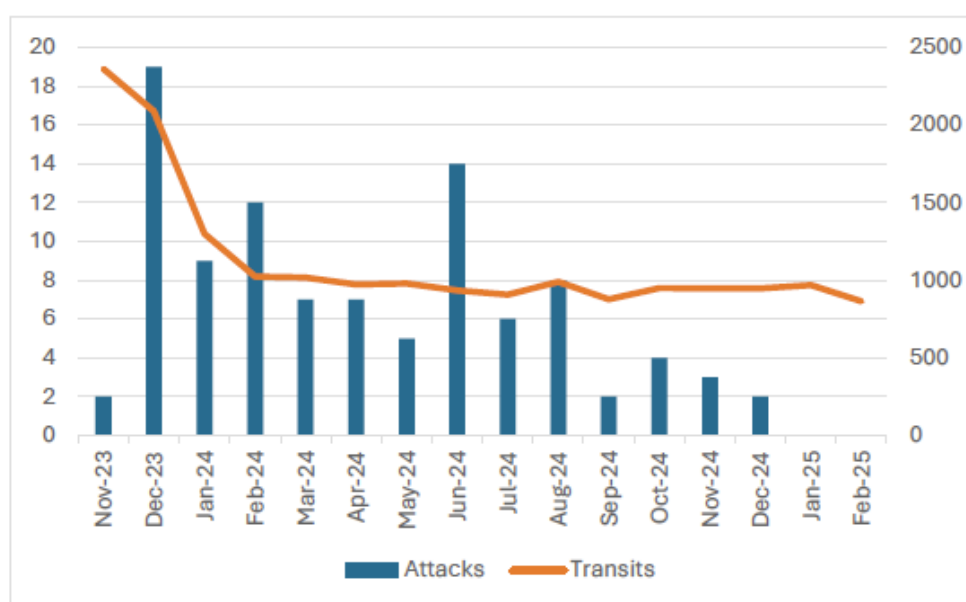
Assessment

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 transiting through the Red Sea. Incidents took place in this area during March and were limited to US naval operations and bombing attacks on Houthi assets as part of a widely-publicised resumption of direct US strikes against the Houthis.

The Red Sea campaign is effectively paused. The Houthis have conducted no strikes against civilian targets since before announcing the campaign's suspension on 19 January 2025. Currently, the Houthis have banned "Israeli vessels" from transiting the Bab el Mandeb. No new threats have been made to commercial shipping by the Houthis, who have continued trading ordnance with the US over the past two weeks.

The Houthis have repeatedly signalled that they did not intend to relaunch the campaign. The Houthis will likely focus on targeting US naval assets in the short term, as well as occasionally attempt to strike Israeli territory. The Houthis are likely to calculate that exchanging ordnance with the US Navy will have the same deterrent effect on commercial shipping as launching ordnance directly against commercial shipping. This assessment does not preclude a resumption of strikes against civilian vessels, which remains subject to Houthis' political goals.



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

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 situation in Gaza and whether there will be a permanent cessation of hostilities that will satisfy Houthi conditions. The Houthis will be tempted to launch missiles against Israel, inviting further Israeli or US 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. There was an incident of GPS interference in the Gulf of Oman in March, although this appears to have been a one-off.

There have been political developments of note in the region. Statements from the Trump administration suggest that the US will pursue a three-pronged strategy in the Middle East: firstly, support for Israel; secondly, dealing with the Houthi threat to shipping in the Red Sea; thirdly, seeking the dismantling of Iran's nuclear weapons programme. The goals are interrelated. Iran has been singled out as, according to the US State Department, using revenues from oil exports to "finance attacks on US allies, support terrorism around the world, and pursue other destabilising actions."

Mike Waltz, the Trump administration national security adviser, has said that the issue of Iran's nuclear weapons programme has "come to a head" and that the US would be seeking "full dismantlement". It is not yet clear the mechanism by which the US hopes to achieve this goal. In the first Trump administration, the US withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that had negotiated constraints on Iran's programme.

Iran has insisted recently that it sees the JCPOA as the only mechanism through which to negotiate, and it has been supported by China in this position. If the US wants Iran to return to the negotiating table, it is yet to be agreed exactly what table will be involved. The JCPOA also involved China, Russia and the EU, and Iran wants those parties to be present.

Additional sanctions have been announced by the US against Iran's oil exports. Measures announced on 20 March 2025 included the first sanctions by the US Treasury on a Chinese refinery, one of the so-called 'teapot' refineries – small, independent, privately-owned refineries that operate outside of the state system in China. Included were also 12 entities and one individual, and eight vessels identified as involved in trading with Iran. Despite the new sanctions, it is not clear how effective they will be. The trade between Iran and China – which includes the

vast majority of Iran's exports – takes place outside the US financial system, limiting the ability of the US to levy penalties.

The US has also bolstered its military presence in the region, likely to signal its intention towards Iran that it is serious about its maximum pressure policy. Iran has been cautious in responding to US demands and it is likely that Iran will draw out this pre-negotiation phase for as long as possible so that it can see how the positions of all players – particularly China – will develop. Iran still has the capability to launch limited operations in the Gulf of Oman but there has been no particular escalation in the threat so far.

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, particularly as the Trump administration would likely provide more support to Israel.

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 on a limited basis.

Somali Basin and wider Indian Ocean

One incident was reported in this area in March. The Yemeni-flagged dhow AL-HIDAYA was hijacked just off the coast of Somalia on 16 March. The dhow had a Somali crew and was held until 20 March. EUNAVFOR forces inspected the dhow and assisted the crew.

This incident followed the two hijackings that 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.

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, 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.



The AL-HIDAYA inspected by naval forces following her release (Photo: EUNAVFOR)

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.

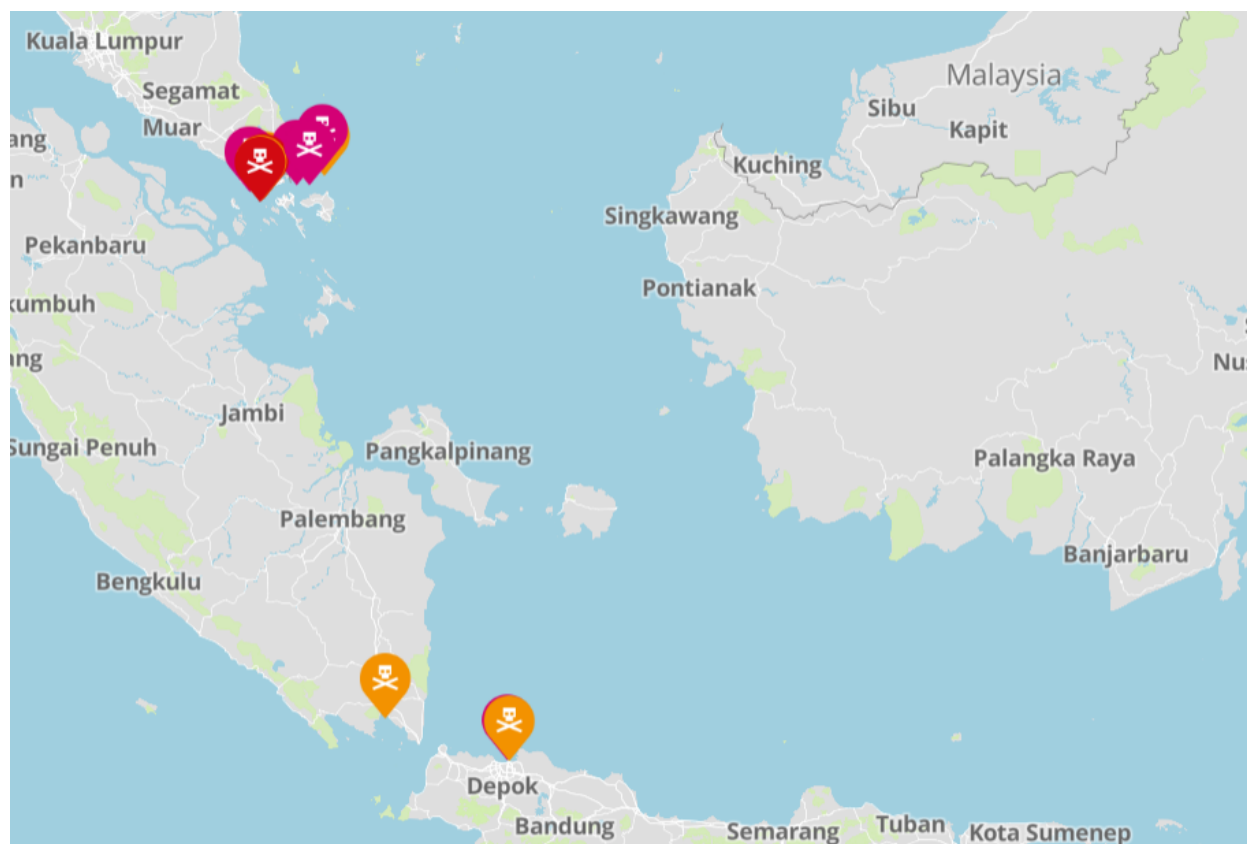
Forecast

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



Incidents

3 March – Crude oil tanker AILAMA boarded underway

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

5 March – Merchant ship reports attempted boarding

Failed theft, Port of Tanjung Priok (Indonesia)

7 March – Barge LKH 7887 boarded underway

Theft, Singapore Strait

8 March – General cargo ship MITO boarded at berth

Theft, Port of Tanjung Priok (Indonesia)

11 March – Crude oil tanker PRISMA boarded underway

Failed robbery, Singapore Strait

13 March – Container ship boarded underway

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

16 March – Container barge LINEAU 135 boarded underway

Theft, Singapore Strait

16 March – Barge POE 2502 boarded underway

Theft, South China Sea

17 March – Barge POE 2502 boarded underway

Theft, Singapore Strait

19 March – Container ship CNC LEOPARD boarded underway

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

22 March - Tanker boarded at anchorage

Failed theft, Tarahan Anchorage, Indonesia

23 March – Bulk carrier FATEMA JAHAN I boarded underway

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

23 March – Barge JIN HWA 44 boarded underway

Failed theft, South China Sea

Assessment

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

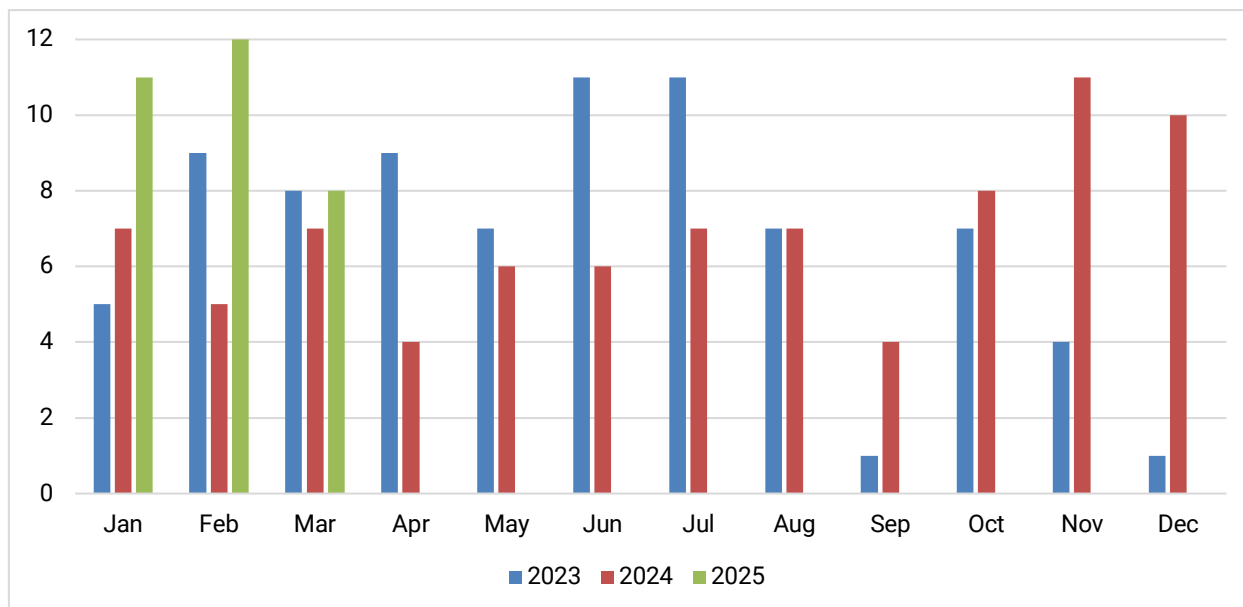
While the wider region experiences regular piracy incidents in the form of thefts and armed robberies, the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and also areas northward have attracted attention due to geopolitical developments. Below is an update on this month's piracy activity, followed by an overview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

Piracy

Boardings in the form of thefts and armed robberies remain the prevalent threats for merchant ships within these areas. Thirteen incidents were recorded in South East Asia in March. Of these, 38% involved armed perpetrators and 62% took place within the boundaries of the Singapore Strait, where bulk carriers, tankers, container ships and barges were boarded in transit. The five incidents that did not take place in the Singapore Strait involved two vessels at Tanjung Priok, a tanker at Tarahan Anchorage and barges in transit in the lower South China Sea.

The activity recorded in March illustrates the typical nature of crimes in the region. The trend of perpetrators acting more aggressively towards crew members remains a cause for concern, although the absence of violent confrontations between perpetrators and crew during month was welcome.

Over the past 12 months, 74% 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 94 incidents in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore (SOMS) during the past 12 months. Of these, 85 occurred in the Singapore Strait and 9 in the Malacca Strait. Of the total, 56 involved bulk carriers, 18 involved tankers, 10 involved barges and other craft in tow and 3 involved container ships. The outliers involved general cargo vessels, heavy lift vessels and OSVs. No incidents in the SOMS have involved passenger vessels.

Overall, 87% of all SOMS incidents during this period targeted ships underway, all within the limits of the Singapore Strait. During the past twelve months, 82% 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, typical incidents 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, Tarahan Anchorage 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 incidents in February 2025 and December 2024.

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 soldiers participate in a live-fire exercise at Laoag, Ilocos Norte, Philippines (Photo: Eloisa Lopez)

South Korea has 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 March, G7 foreign ministers took a tough stance on China, stepping up language on Taiwan and omitting some conciliatory references from past statements, including to "one China" policies. In response, China has lashed out at accusations made by the G7 that it is endangering maritime safety, saying that the G7 members are "filled with arrogance, prejudice and malicious intentions".

China further warned the United Kingdom against "provoking tensions" in the South China Sea after its foreign minister called Beijing's actions in the disputed waters "dangerous and destabilising". "The UK should respect China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea and refrain from provoking tensions or sowing discord over regional disputes," China's foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said in Beijing.

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.

Meanwhile, some progress was made regarding territorial claims in the South China Sea during March. Indonesia and Vietnam got closer towards formalising their sea boundaries after more than a decade of negotiations in a deal that could strengthen regional maritime security and curb illegal fishing, although this could also lead to friction with China over its territorial claims.

A visit by the US Secretary of Defense in the Philippines at the end of March was met by a Chinese show of force in the form of naval patrols in disputed waters. Prior to the visit, the Philippine and US navies conducted exercises during which personnel utilised defunct offshore platforms as monitoring stations. In practice, it is understood that these platforms will remain in regular use to monitor Chinese forces in the area. These exercises followed an incident during which two Philippine Coast Guard ships, deployed 25 to 30 nautical miles east of Scarborough Shoal in the West Philippine Sea as part of a routine maritime patrol, were blocked by Chinese vessels.

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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