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Monthly Intelligence Report

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Table of contents

Table of contents	1
Monthly Intelligence Report	2
Monthly focus: Undercurrents for maritime operations in Asia	3
<i>Background and overview</i>	3
<i>'America First' strategy and Asia</i>	3
<i>Taiwan Strait: military exercises and airspace violations</i>	5
<i>South China Sea: contested areas and freedom of navigation</i>	6
Update: Maritime dimensions of the war in Ukraine	8
<i>Situation on land</i>	8
<i>Black Sea situation</i>	10
<i>Summary and forecast</i>	12
West Africa	13
<i>Incidents</i>	13
<i>Assessment: Inner Gulf of Guinea (Togo to Cameroon)</i>	14
<i>Assessment: Outer Gulf of Guinea (Côte d'Ivoire to Gabon)</i>	15
Western Indian Ocean	17
<i>Incidents</i>	18
<i>Assessment: Southern Red Sea – Gulf of Aden</i>	18
<i>Assessment: Gulf of Oman – Persian Gulf</i>	20
<i>Assessment: Somali Basin and wider Indian Ocean</i>	21
South East Asia	23
<i>Incidents</i>	23
<i>Assessment: Straits of Malacca and Singapore, South China Sea, Indonesian archipelago, Sulu / Celebes Seas</i>	24
<i>Political developments</i>	25
Definitions	28
<i>Threat levels</i>	28
<i>Incident types</i>	28

Monthly Intelligence Report

This report includes an overview of attacks against merchant vessels over the past month in three regions (West Africa, the western Indian Ocean and South East Asia) as well as assessments of different types of threats in these areas. In addition, the report includes a monthly focus article and provides a brief update on the maritime implications of the war in Ukraine.

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Monthly focus: Undercurrents for maritime operations in Asia

Background and overview

International trade and politics in Asia are becoming more closely linked, with the US in particular using tariffs and trade restrictions to put pressure on China. At the same time, the loose alliance between China, India and Russia is reshaping Asian trade and impacting the global economy.

This month's focus article provides updates on recent events in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea which are taking place in this broader context. Relevant to these two locations is the new US National Security Strategy (NSS), released in December by the Trump administration. The NSS provides clarity on US priorities for Asia, yet it also introduced a new ambiguity over Taiwan that represents Trump's transactional approach to foreign and security policies.

'America First' strategy and Asia

The NSS provides context for a range of recent actions taken by President Trump, under the broad characterisation of 'America First'. Much of the focus is on the security of the US border against perceived threats of mass migration, transnational criminal organisations, and hostile foreign incursion or ownership of key assets.

There is also a focus on trade flows, including in the Asia-Pacific, with language to support "freedom of navigation in all crucial sea lanes" and "secure and reliable supply chains." Underpinning the strategy are principles such as "strength is the best deterrent" while maintaining military dominance and a balance of power.

The NSS articulates a guiding principle for Asia: win the economic future, prevent military confrontation. Particular attention is given to trade relations with China, with the goal to re-balance trade through "prioritising reciprocity and fairness" – suggesting that the US will continue to focus on the trade deficit and that tariffs will be a favoured policy tool.

The links between trade and security are even more clear in the NSS: "strong American deterrence opens up space for more disciplined economic action, while more disciplined economic action leads to greater American resources to sustain deterrence in the long term." In short, 'America First' means a dominant economy and a dominant military.

As noted, shipping routes and supply chains are a priority. Regarding Taiwan, the NSS says that the US “does not support any unilateral change to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.” In the South China Sea, the US warns of a ‘toll system’ that could allow a potentially hostile power to close and reopen it at will. The US will continue to invest in its own military to prevent this system but will push regional countries to increase cooperation with the US and boost their own defence spending – with India, Australia, Japan and South Korea mentioned directly.



Presidents Trump and Xi at a bilateral meeting in October 2015
(Photo: White House Press Office)

The link between trade and security is central to the NSS for Asia but perhaps not so much of a change in focus from previous US administrations – even if the rhetoric is now more strident. For those watching the Taiwan situation closely, commentators have noted the shift in US language – from using the word ‘oppose’ for any takeover by Beijing to ‘does not support’ such a shift. This suggests a disapproval rather than a commitment to action.

Elsewhere, the NSS mentions somewhat elliptically a scenario where an unfavourable balance of forces would make defending the island impossible. Although speculation is difficult, it is likely that President Xi will see an opening here to press the US for a more favourable interpretation of the situation between Beijing and Taipei in the future – perhaps even as part of a grand economic deal for rebalancing China-US trade relations.

Nonetheless, the US at present remains committed to Taiwan’s defence. On 18 December, the US announced the largest ever arms deal between the two, valued at around \$11 billion. In response, Beijing announced symbolic sanctions against US arms firms and their executives. Military exercises dubbed ‘Justice Mission 2025’ were also carried out by Chinese forces around Taiwan. If there is to be a grand bargain between Washington and Beijing, there is much work to be done.

Taiwan Strait: military exercises and airspace violations

For now, the Taiwan Strait remains a volatile flashpoint. After a quiet period, tensions quickly spiked in 2025. On 31 March, China conducted a series of military drills around Taiwan, describing them as a “stern warning” against separatism. Chinese fighters, bombers, and warships simulated a full maritime blockade. These exercises intensified in early April under the banner of ‘Strait Thunder-2025A’ during which Beijing’s forces launched live-fire rocket barrages aimed at simulated port and energy facilities in eastern Taiwan. Notably, the new aircraft carrier Shandong participated in joint operations east of Taiwan, rehearsing a multi-domain blockade.

China’s incursions into Taiwan’s airspace continued, around 200 incidents per month of Chinese aircraft routinely ‘testing’ Taiwanese air defences. These incursions, as well as China’s military exercises, serve not only a tactical purpose but also function as political signals. They aim to punish Taipei for strengthening ties with Washington and other partners. By conducting high-profile manoeuvres, Beijing aims to discourage foreign officials from visiting Taiwan or engaging in defence cooperation.

Additionally, the coordination and scale of these operations reflect the PLA’s activities in combined arms and multi-domain warfare. This public display of operational capability is a message to both domestic and international audiences, underlining China’s readiness to respond to perceived provocations and its determination to deter any moves it interprets as threatening its sovereignty over Taiwan.

Taipei’s response has been to treat this as a long game rather than a series of one-off crises. Taiwan has expanded dispersal and readiness drills, hardened command-and-control, and accelerated procurement and integration of stand-off and air-defence effects. Allies have focused on deterrence and reassurance rather than tit-for-tat retaliation: routine US transits of the Strait, stepped-up surveillance and reconnaissance presence, and more frequent exercises and coordination with Japan and other regional partners. The combined effect is to raise the costs of any PLA miscalculation.

The high tempo of PLA air activity is unlikely to directly target merchant ships, but it creates a more unpredictable environment. Together with naval manoeuvres, they raise the risk of close encounters, miscalculation, or the imposition of temporary exclusion zones during exercises. Even in the absence of intentional blockades, commercial entities may encounter extended re-routing requirements, increased insurance costs, and enhanced safety procedures.

The political signalling aspect also matters with Taiwan’s leadership deepening ties with the US and Japan. China is motivated to keep pressure high as both punishment and deterrence, meaning shipping traffic will likely continue to transit through an increasingly militarised environment. In short, while a full-scale disruption to shipping in the Taiwan Strait remains unlikely, the elevated baseline of PLA incursions points to rising operational

risks, growing uncertainty in voyage planning, and gradually increasing costs for commercial shipping.

South China Sea: contested areas and freedom of navigation

China's sweeping territorial claims in the South China Sea overlap those of several Southeast Asian states. In 2025, the most dramatic incident occurred on 11 August near the contested Scarborough Shoal. Philippine officials reported that two Chinese government ships collided while attempting to block a Philippine Coast Guard resupply mission.

Manila quickly called the Chinese actions "dangerous" and said Beijing was pushing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Philippine military leaders warned that Beijing's "illegal, coercive" tactics risked provoking further conflict.

This incident prompted a flurry of responses. Washington immediately sided with Manila. The US State Department condemned China's "reckless" manoeuvres and commended the professionalism of the Philippine Coast Guard in handling the situation.

Similarly, US lawmakers voiced support for the Philippines' right to defend its claims. In the days that followed, Beijing's foreign ministry insisted the Chinese Coast Guard had simply taken "necessary measures to expel Philippine vessels" from what it called its waters. In other words, China framed the episode as enforcing its sovereignty.

The US then sent a naval message of its own. The destroyer USS HIGGINS transited near Scarborough Shoal on a freedom-of-navigation patrol. China's Southern Theatre Command claimed to have monitored and "driven away" the US vessel, accusing it of violating Chinese sovereignty. The Seventh Fleet swiftly refuted this, stating that the destroyer was asserting "navigational rights and freedoms" under international law and would not be deterred by Beijing's complaints.

This US move – the first American warship in the shoal area in years – underscored that Washington backed Manila's stance on the disputed waters.

Southeast Asian governments have reacted diplomatically. Vietnam protested activities by both China and the Philippines in May 2025, sending notes to both capitals to demand respect for Hanoi's claims. The US Indo-Pacific Command announced joint maritime drills with Japan and the Philippines in Philippine waters to "uphold freedom of navigation and other lawful uses of the sea."

Secretary of State Marco Rubio also issued a statement, condemning China's "destabilising plans" regarding disputed features. ASEAN partners like Japan have similarly affirmed that they will not allow unilateral changes to the status quo in the South China Sea.

Overall, the South China Sea incidents of 2025 have strengthened US–Philippines defence ties. Manila has since sought more US patrols and training missions in its waters. Other claimants have likewise sought support: Vietnam has increased its maritime enforcement and held joint patrols with partners. The events have also drawn in new players. British and French warships now more frequently transit the region alongside US ships.

These developments are emblematic of a larger pattern: China is increasingly willing to press its territorial frontiers in contested waters, using hybrid coercion and assessing the responses of claimants and external actors. The incident in August revealed both the boldness and risk in Beijing's posture and highlighted the challenges that the Philippines and regional states face in defending legal maritime rights without triggering military escalation.

Additional services

The Risk Intelligence System provides clients with real-time intelligence and situational awareness to assist in threat avoidance for global maritime and land-based operations. Additionally, Risk Intelligence offers ship operators the option to purchase security intelligence reports for individual ports and terminals.

For more tailored support, bespoke services such as threat assessments or voyage-specific risk assessments help identify and mitigate both persistent and emerging security threats.

Risk Intelligence also hosts frequent webinars, offering in-depth updates, mini masterclasses on situational awareness methodologies, and expert analysis of current events. Schedules and registration details are available on the company's website.

Update: Maritime dimensions of the war in Ukraine

Situation on land

In late November and December, Ukraine stepped up the pressure against the Russian-affiliated so-called "shadow fleet", i.e. vessels supporting the Russian war effort by transporting crude oil and refined products. Attacks were conducted with naval drones in the Turkish EEZ, causing significant Turkish condemnation, as well as in the northern Black Sea.

One vessel, the MIDVOLGA-2, was hit by an aerial drone on 2 December. While Ukraine denies any involvement, Risk Intelligence has identified the drone as a Ukrainian model. The denial is likely a result of heavy Turkish condemnation of strikes in the Turkish EEZ, and a need for Ukraine to limit diplomatic fallout. Further strikes against Kremlin-aligned vessels occurred in the Caspian and the Mediterranean Seas.

The Ukrainian objectives in conducting these strikes may be:

- To signal to the Kremlin that Ukrainian intelligence and special forces can identify, track, and strike their assets anywhere.
- As deterrence and signal to any third-party operators that "shadow fleet" vessels are now seen as legitimate targets.
- To increase insurance costs for ships going through Russian waters, including sanctions-compliant vessels and vessels trading international oil from terminals in Russia.
- To kill or destroy high-value targets onboard vessels.

It is not assessed that Ukraine is attacking ships to destroy them. The campaign against maritime energy export infrastructure is having a far more systemic effect on harming the Russian economy. However, symbolic strikes to support objectives 2 and 3 may have a significant effect. Such strikes against vessels considered to be part of the "shadow fleet" as defined by Ukraine are very likely to continue in 2026.

During December, Ukraine continued the bombing campaign against Russia's oil infrastructure with strikes against Sea of Azov ports like Temryuk and Rostov. Taman in the Kerch Strait has also come under attack. Given the high impact of such strikes, including the propaganda value and the operational utility of forcing the Russian military to stretch

their anti-UAV and anti-missile defences, these strikes are very likely to continue. Collateral damage to vessels in port is possible.

While the CPC terminal near Novorossiysk has previously not been targeted, the November strike against one of the terminals indicated that the Ukrainian calculus may have changed. Before the marine terminal, Ukraine hit other in-land installations like pumping stations related to the CPC, indicating an increasing intent to limit exports via the pipeline.

Commercial ships primarily calling the CPC terminal are increasingly likely to be named on Ukrainian intelligence's public "shadow fleet" list. This may be due to the CPC being 44% owned by Russian energy majors like Lukoil, and that the CPC terminal, while mainly transporting Kazakh oil, can input Russian oil products into the pipeline. The mixed oil, as well as the revenue Russia gets for the transport, may be why Ukraine are now increasingly willing to target the CPC and its users.



Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy during a visit to the US in December.
(Photo: Ukraine Presidential Office)

Throughout the month, Russian forces continued to target Ukrainian civilian infrastructure. This included attacks against ports in Chornomorsk, Pivdenny, Odesa, and the Danube ports. This is likely part of the overall Russian bombing campaign against Ukraine to degrade civilian society, as well as limit transport and logistics corridors for military transports. Such strikes will continue with varying intensity.

While there have been strikes on port infrastructure, the majority of Russian bombing efforts remain concentrated on energy infrastructure rather than maritime transport. Russia is likely to continue targeting power and heating infrastructure in Ukraine to exacerbate the suffering of Ukrainians during the winter. Given the intensity of Russia's attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, especially targeting power supply and the electricity grid, the impact is likely to be more widely felt than in previous winters. This is true both for the country in general as well as across industry sectors, as is also indicated by scheduled power-cuts.

Reporting indicates that Russian attacks against Ukrainian ports did not significantly impact port operations. While power disruptions occurred,

commercial traffic during December remained relatively consistent, although traffic might decrease somewhat due to the grain export season coming to an end. The issue of disruptions due to the requirement to shelter-in-place during air raid alerts persist.

Diplomatic efforts have continued during December at a high level, including a visit of Ukrainian president Zelenskyy to the US. However, there have been no significant breakthroughs or developments.

Risk Intelligence also offers a comprehensive 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

November and December incidents in the Black Sea highlighted the capacity of Ukrainian forces to target sanctioned (and potentially non-sanctioned) merchant ships calling Russian ports. Further incidents in December also highlighted that Russian forces are able to target vessels both in Ukrainian ports and during transit.

Future incidents of directly attacking vessels that Ukraine sees as legitimate targets are possible, likely limited to sanctioned vessels (as during recent incidents in the Black Sea). The attacks against the KAIROS and the VIRAT, as well as the attack on the CPC terminal in Novorossiysk, are likely part of Ukraine's escalated focus on targeting Russia's oil sector.

Ukrainian forces have been attacking Russian refineries and associated infrastructure throughout Russia, including at Novorossiysk. It is also likely that given the current military pressure on land, Ukraine has decided to intensify and widen its military operations in the Black Sea. This may be to prove both a point of capability and to further increase the pressure on Russia's economy. As part of the conflict, Ukraine is tracking all merchant ships entering Russian ports. Vessels and masters may be listed online for sanctions targeting and public scrutiny.

Although the regional threat picture is generally stable, the November and December incidents highlight that military operations can take place in the wider Black Sea, including with both naval and aerial drones. However, the impact on operations is likely to be localised. Naval drones include both surface and underwater drones. While collateral damage to vessels in either Ukrainian or Russian ports remains the most likely, recent military operations also indicate the possibility for Ukrainian forces to target specific vessels during transit.

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. Until a ceasefire is agreed, the regional threat picture is likely to remain unchanged.

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 corridor and the participating Ukrainian Black Sea ports are operational in accordance with IMO Circular Letter 4748. The corridor, sometimes referred to as the 'humanitarian 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 have also been reported at Ukrainian Danube ports. Future incidents cannot be ruled out, but are less likely than in Ukraine's larger ports. Direct targeting of merchant ships is also less likely. For Danube maritime operations, collateral damage also remains the greater threat to commercial operations.

Several incidents involving merchant ships have been reported since early 2024, underlining that Russia is prepared to target commercial ships en route to or from Ukraine in specific cases. Russia has previously announced that any 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 some of the attacks. Similar future incidents remain a possibility. 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.

Warnings about and sightings of naval mines, particularly in the western and northwestern Black Sea, continue. Some incidents have impacted maritime operations, with demolitions and drifting drones located as far south as Turkey. Ukrainian forces are reported to patrol Ukrainian waters to mitigate the threat from drifting mines to merchant ships. Romanian, Bulgarian and Turkish forces are operating similar measures in their waters. Based on the extent of maritime traffic and the number of mine-related incidents, the threat level in relation to mines is moderate.

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. Irregular migration crossing the Black Sea is a lesser threat than for the Mediterranean. However, a small number of migrants have previously been intercepted attempting to cross the Black Sea, often trying to reach Bulgaria or Romania. It is unlikely that the threat level will increase under current circumstances.

Summary and forecast

Ukraine's objectives include signalling to the Kremlin the capability to strike anywhere, deterring third-party operators from trading with Russia, increasing insurance costs for merchant ships calling Russian ports and terminals, and targeting high-value assets. The campaign against maritime energy export infrastructure is more impactful on the Russian economy than targeting individual tankers. Strikes against "shadow fleet" vessels are nevertheless expected to continue in 2026.

Ukrainian strikes against Russia's oil export infrastructure are likely to continue as well, due to their high impact and propaganda value. The attack against the CPC terminal near Novorossiysk indicated a shift in Ukraine's strategy to limit exports via the pipeline. Vessels calling the CPC terminal are increasingly listed as part of the "shadow fleet" according to Ukraine's definition due to the CPC's partial ownership by Russian energy majors and its role in transporting mixed oil.

Most Russian bombing efforts are likely to remain focused on energy infrastructure. Despite power disruptions, commercial traffic in Ukrainian ports remained relatively consistent in December and is likely to continue without major disruptions. Short-term operational impacts due to air raid alerts will remain a concern.

Russia and Ukraine are both likely to continue to engage with the US in an attempt to place their respective views at the forefront of the US approach. Even though Ukraine has repeatedly stated its readiness to agree to various proposals for either a ceasefire or a peace settlement, Russia is unlikely to do so as long as it believes it can achieve its military ambitions.

Until there are firm indications of all parties decidedly moving in a unified direction towards any ceasefire or peace settlement, the current situation is likely to continue. By extension, the overall threat picture for the Black Sea will also likely remain unchanged.

Further information

Risk Intelligence provides a regularly updated 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.

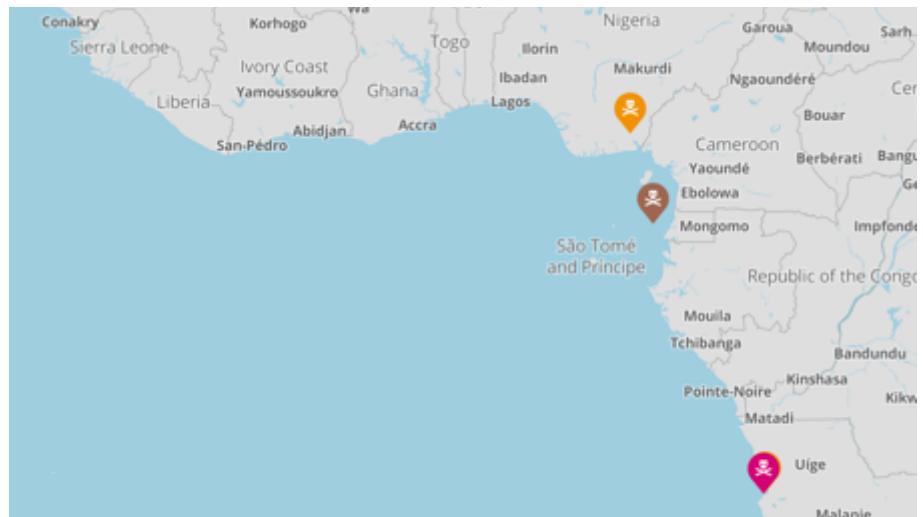
In addition, the report provides an up-to-date overview of the current situation in Ukraine and the northern Black Sea, including concise information regarding the status of exports of grain and other types of cargoes from Ukrainian ports.

West Africa

Summary

- There were no significant changes to the maritime security situation across the region in December. The threat level was underlined by an attack against LPG tanker off Equatorial Guinea (more details under 'Assessment: Outer Gulf of Guinea').
- Two incidents at the Luanda anchorage were also reported in December, both without any violence against crew members (more details under 'Assessment: Outer Gulf of Guinea').
- The current dry season, set to last until around April, will allow for small boat operations deep offshore, analysed in more detail under 'Assessment: Inner Gulf of Guinea / Forecast'.

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 31 December 2025, shown on the map below. Further incident details are available on the Risk Intelligence System.



Source: Risk Intelligence System

Incidents

3 December – LPG tanker CGAS SATURN attacked

Kidnap/ransom, 25 nautical miles south-west of Bata (Equatorial Guinea)

7 December – Container ship boarded

Theft, Luanda anchorage (Angola)

15 December – Bulk carrier PMS ENZIAN boarded

Failed robbery, Luanda anchorage (Angola)

30 December – Local passenger boat attacked

Failed kidnap/ransom, Cross River state (Nigeria)

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. The threat level was underlined by one incident in December, described in more detail in the next section.

At the same time, it is important to thoroughly analyse all reported incidents. This was underlined by two cases in October which were widely distributed through reporting centres as initial information suggested that both could have been potential piracy incidents. However, it was later established that neither incident was security-related which was unfortunately not clarified through follow-up reports.

Overall, several incidents at sea over the past 12 months have been widely reported as pirate attacks as well. However, thorough analysis shows that random attacks against merchant ships in international trade have been rare. Most involved vessels had instead shown suspicious operating patterns prior to the respective incidents. Reported attacks were therefore very likely directly connected to other types of illicit operations at sea. Reporting these merely as piracy shows a limited understanding of interconnected maritime security issues in the region.

The fragility of regional governments was once again underlined by a coup attempt in Benin in early December. After several successful and failed coups in recent years across West Africa, this was yet another attempt to overthrow an increasingly unpopular government which has failed to address economic issues which continue to affect large parts of the population. At the same time, the coup attempt was quickly suppressed by military forces, leading to several arrests. While this episode did not have direct impacts on maritime operations, it is very likely that land-based security issues will be a priority for Benin's government in the coming months.

In Nigeria, crude oil theft and smuggling of illegally refined oil products have long been major concerns for the government. Such activities provide organised criminal groups across the Niger Delta with significant revenues. In recent years, profit margins have skyrocketed, leading to a drop in piracy across the Gulf of Guinea as 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 December, military forces once again announced the destruction of dozens of illegal refining sites across the Niger Delta. Vessels and equipment to transport and store stolen crude oil and illegally refined products were also seized. These operations were part of Operation Delta Sanity which was launched in January 2024.

Similar activities are very likely to continue in the coming months but sustainable improvements of the situation remain unlikely. While the impact of this situation is almost exclusively domestic, it is noteworthy because these efforts require a lot of resources, leaving limited room for naval and law enforcement activities across the Nigerian EEZ.

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 current dry season enable operations deep offshore with small boats. Attacks may therefore take place at significant distances from the coastline.

For merchant ships, crew vigilance and measures recommended in *BMP Maritime Security* remain important to mitigate risks. Security escort vessels for operations off Nigeria are 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 in the Nigerian maritime domain (territorial waters and EEZ). MoU signatories can provide escort vessels partly manned by naval personnel which can only operate in Nigeria's EEZ.

Forecast

The threat level in the coming month remains high across the inner Gulf of Guinea, underlined by several incidents in the past 12 months. Pirate attacks are possible at up to 250 nm from the coastline, particularly during the current dry season which is set to last until April. All ship types may be targeted.

Inshore attacks against locally trading vessels or against military detachments remain a threat across the Niger Delta, highlighted 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 and from Nigerian ports.

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

One boarding of an LPG tanker was reported in December. Nine crew members were kidnapped and held hostage for more than three weeks. It is likely that a ransom was paid to secure their release. However, it should be noted that the vessel which was involved in the incident had been operating solely in Central Africa for a significant period. It is therefore possible that this case was linked to other criminal activities at sea which are frequent in this area, similar to several other cases in recent months.

Two other security incidents were also reported in December, both involving anchored ships off Luanda (Angola). In both cases, however,

there was no violence against crew members, similar to most other low-profile attacks across West and Central Africa.

Overall, the security situation at sea throughout the region 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

Summary

- There were no Houthi attacks against merchant ships in December, continuing the low number of operations in recent months. Shipping lines have expressed intentions to resume Red Sea transits, but the threat of Houthi attacks is unchanged.
- A local dhow was attacked in the Somali Basin, but there were no piracy incidents affecting merchant vessels in transit.
- Saudi Arabia carried out an air strike against a UAE arms shipment in the port of Mukallah as part of an ongoing dispute between rival proxy forces in southern Yemen, analysed in more detail under 'Assessment: Southern Red Sea – Gulf of Aden'.

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 31 December 2025 are shown on the map below. Further incident details are available on the Risk Intelligence System.



Source: Risk Intelligence System

Incidents

There were four incidents reported in December, shown on the map above. Additional information about the situation in the region is available in Risk Intelligence's *Middle East Weekly Intelligence Report*.

5 December – Bulk carrier BOBIK reports incident with fishing boats
Other maritime risk, Red Sea

6 December – Dhow AL SAFA reports attack offshore Eyl, Somalia
Failed attack, Somali Basin

24 December – Vessel seized for alleged fuel smuggling
Naval operation, Persian Gulf

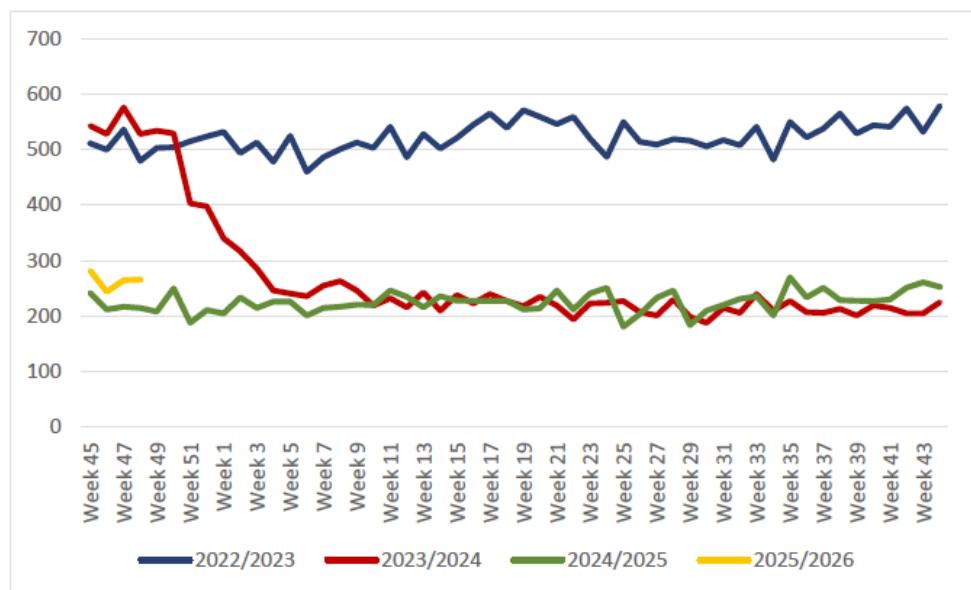
30 December – Saudi air strike targets arms shipment
Military operation, Mukallah, Yemen, Gulf of Aden

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 merchant ships transiting the Red Sea. There were no attacks reported in the Red Sea or Gulf of Aden during December, consistent with the minimal level of operations being maintained by the Houthis in the area. There was one incident reported, involving the bulk carrier BOBIK, noted below.

The overall low number of incidents is likely due to the absence of vessels that meet Houthi targeting criteria rather than a shift in the Houthi campaign. This is despite a Houthi statement during the month that created some ambiguity about future intentions. The threat level for vessels linked to Israel through ownership, other commercial relations, and recent port calls remains unchanged. The threat levels for other vessels depend on their affiliations but the overall threat level is at least elevated in this area.

Bab el Mandeb year-on-year comparison of merchant ship transits
(Source: Lloyd's List / Seasearcher)



There has been a small increase in the number of transits through the area, when comparing recent weeks to the same period in 2024. There are very few "valid" targets as per the Houthis' targeting parameters sailing through the Bab el Mandeb. Despite the absence of recent incidents, there have been no changes in Houthi intentions or capabilities that would suggest that significant increase of traffic is imminent.

Several shipping companies have recently made statements as to their interest in resuming transits once conditions allow. This supports the small uptick in traffic but it remains the case that most operators are waiting for a more sustained change in the overall security and political situation.

Further progress in Gaza is likely still required before the Houthis will reconsider their campaign. It is also likely that they will seek additional concessions regarding their political and economic situation in Yemen before allowing a full resumption of Bab el Mandeb transits.

At present, the internal security situation in Yemen is precarious and the Houthis are likely to seek to solidify their power in northern Yemen. There is also an ongoing dispute between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over rivalry between proxy forces in southern Yemen. Saudi Arabia carried out an air strike against an apparent UAE arms shipment in Mukallah. This dispute will complicate a diplomatic resolution to the civil war in Yemen, but is not expected to regular Gulf of Aden transits.

The incident with the bulk carrier BOBIK was initially reported as a potential attack by up to 15 small craft. Additional information clarified that it was an encounter with fishing vessels and that the armed guards on the bulk carrier fired first as one of the vessels approached to 1-2 cables. The incident highlights the likelihood of encountering local traffic in the Bab el Mandeb area and the challenges of accurately identifying actual threats.

Forecast

The security situation in the Red Sea is largely contingent on the situation in Gaza and on the broader political situation in the region. The Houthis will make their own calculations as to the costs and benefits of continued attacks, but their goal of reducing traffic has been achieved.

Military action has likely degraded some Houthi capabilities, but they have still been able to substantially reduce ship traffic in the Red Sea. An absence of attacks does not necessarily indicate a change in Houthi tactics. Any improvement to the current situation will require a resolution to the Gaza conflict and likely the meeting of some other Houthi demands related to their political and economic situation.

Assessment: Gulf of Oman – Persian Gulf – There was one incident in this area during December. Iran intercepted a local tanker in its territorial waters on suspicion of fuel smuggling. This was likely a constabulary operation as fuel smuggling is common in the area, rather than an operation to target international shipping.

There is an ongoing threat of politically motivated vessel seizures affecting international shipping. In October, Iran levied a US\$170 million fine against the owners of the MSC ARIES, which was seized in April 2024. Ship seizures are often given a veneer of legality by Iranian law enforcement agencies. There was no fine levied against the product tanker TALARA, seized by Iran in November but subsequently released. Although seizure incidents are isolated, they are a reminder of Iran's capabilities and intentions in this area.

Iran has expressed some openness to renewed nuclear talks with the US, but likely as a means to buy time to rebuild following the conflict in June. The economic situation in the country remains fragile. Iran finds itself in a position of weakness with internal political debates also relevant. There appears to be some interest in diplomacy, but it remains to be seen what this might mean in practice. Iran still has potential levers it can pull to apply pressure, particularly in its immediate neighbourhood.

Defence cooperation between Iran and Russia is expected to continue, as well as civilian nuclear cooperation. It is also expected that China will continue to be a major buyer of Iranian oil. There are currently no specific maritime security implications. Nonetheless, it is symptomatic of how Iran's nuclear programme is a primary driver for overall political and strategic relations in the region.

At the end of the month, Israeli prime minister Netanyahu foreshadowed additional military action against Iran's nuclear programme and any ballistic missile rearmament. A future escalation in tensions, with possible military action, can therefore not be ruled out.

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 remains reluctant to escalate its conflict with Israel but has asymmetric options to apply pressure, including in the maritime environment. Iran, however, is cautious to avoid wider implications to its own security and is likely focused on increasing its defence capabilities.

There is still 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. Such operations give Iran the option to retaliate on a case-by-case basis and linked to specific disputes.

Assessment: Somali Basin and wider Indian Ocean

The dhow AL SAFA reported being attacked off Eyl, Somalia on 6 December 2025. While the dhow was transiting from Kismayo to Berbera, it came under attack from one skiff and was fired on by an automatic weapon. The attackers took no further action, their motivation is unclear. Dhows have been previously attacked and robbed in the area, as well as being hijacked for use as mother ships – as in the case with the Iranian dhow in November that was used to attack two merchant ships and approach two others.



Naval forces inspect a Yemeni dhow
(Source: EUNAVFOR)

Widespread attacks on shipping remain unlikely, and most current activities will still be directed mainly at fishing and locally trading vessels close to the coast. There will likely be some deterrent on further operations targeting shipping, given the failure of the recent attacks. Opportunistic incidents are nevertheless possible, the threat level remains elevated throughout the area.

Local traffic is relatively dense, particularly close to the Somali coast and in the Gulf of Aden. Proximity of small craft to merchant vessels should be expected and might be mistaken for potential threats. Approaches by small craft to distances of under one nautical mile are typical. Such craft are likely to be local fishing or trading vessels.

Nonetheless, it is also expected that pirate groups are monitoring merchant ships in the region. Three incidents of suspicious activity were reported between 21 and 23 November, after the dhow mother ship was disrupted, and it is not clear if these cases were local traffic or pirate monitoring activities.

It is likely that the same shore-based infrastructure to support large-scale piracy activities similar to the situation a decade ago is not in place. Nevertheless, the ABDULLAH ransom in April 2024 showed that there are still financial incentives for opportunistic attacks despite the deterrent factor of naval operations. The LIAONING DAPING 578 case in December 2024 also

showed that fishing disputes – and the complicated politics surrounding fishing licences in the Somali Basin – are likely to be the primary driver for piracy in the near future, rather than hijackings of merchant ships.

The militant group al-Shabab remains active in Somalia, despite military efforts by the Somali government with regional and international support to eradicate the group. Reporting has noted that there has been an increased tempo in US drone strikes against al-Shabab targets in recent months. There is only a limited maritime dimension to the conflict. This is unlikely to change significantly in at least the short term.

Despite the proximity between areas of the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman, there are no security implications for the Indian Ocean from regional tensions focused on the Persian Gulf and surrounding areas.

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 – and weather conditions. 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.

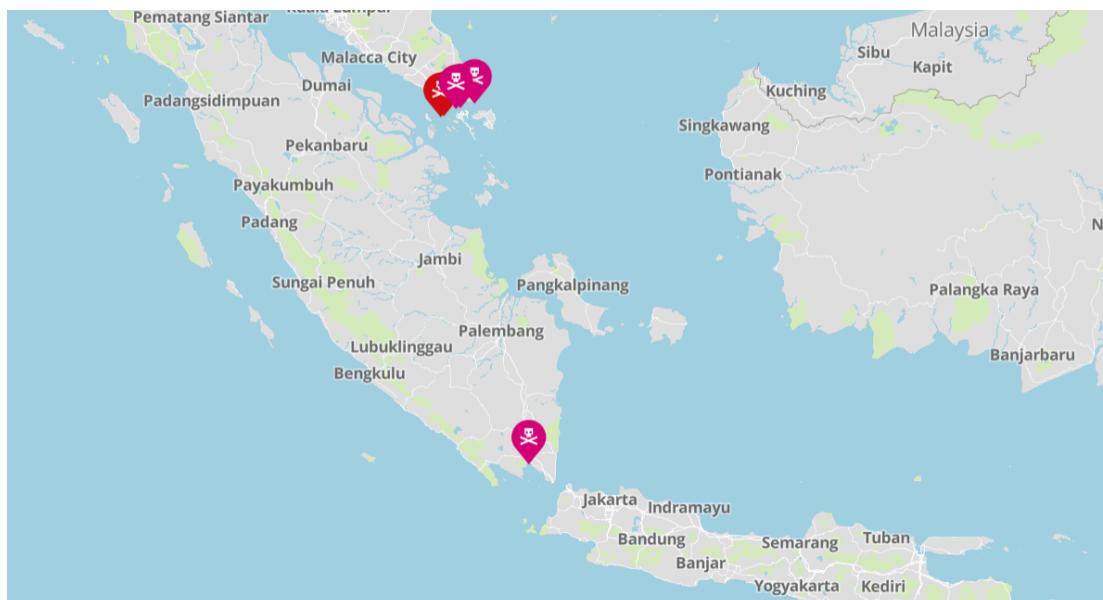
Proximity to the Somali coast can also lead to encounters with local militias or criminal operations although the threat level is low. Military operations continue in Somalia against militant Islamist group al-Shabab. There is only a limited maritime dimension to this conflict which is not expected to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

South East Asia

Summary

- Indonesian Marine Police patrols on the Phillip Channel have suppressed vessel boardings in the Singapore Strait following the arrests of members of two gangs on Batam in July.
- During the past twelve months, 80% of the 148 incidents reported in the region have taken place in the Singapore Strait, analysed in detail in the Assessment section.
- China continued its provocations towards Taiwan and the Philippines, underscoring its hardline stance toward Taiwan, and its determination on territorial claims, analysed in more detail under 'Political Developments'.

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 31 December 2025, shown on the map below. Further incident details are available on the Risk Intelligence System.



Source: Risk Intelligence System

Incidents

13 December - Barge boarded underway

Theft, Singapore Strait

15 December - Bulk carrier BULK SYDNEY boarded underway

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

17 December - Bulk carrier ECO DIAGON ALLEY boarded underway

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

21 December - Barge boarded underway

Theft, Singapore Strait

23 December - Vessel boarded at anchorage

Theft, Tangkil Island anchorage, Indonesia

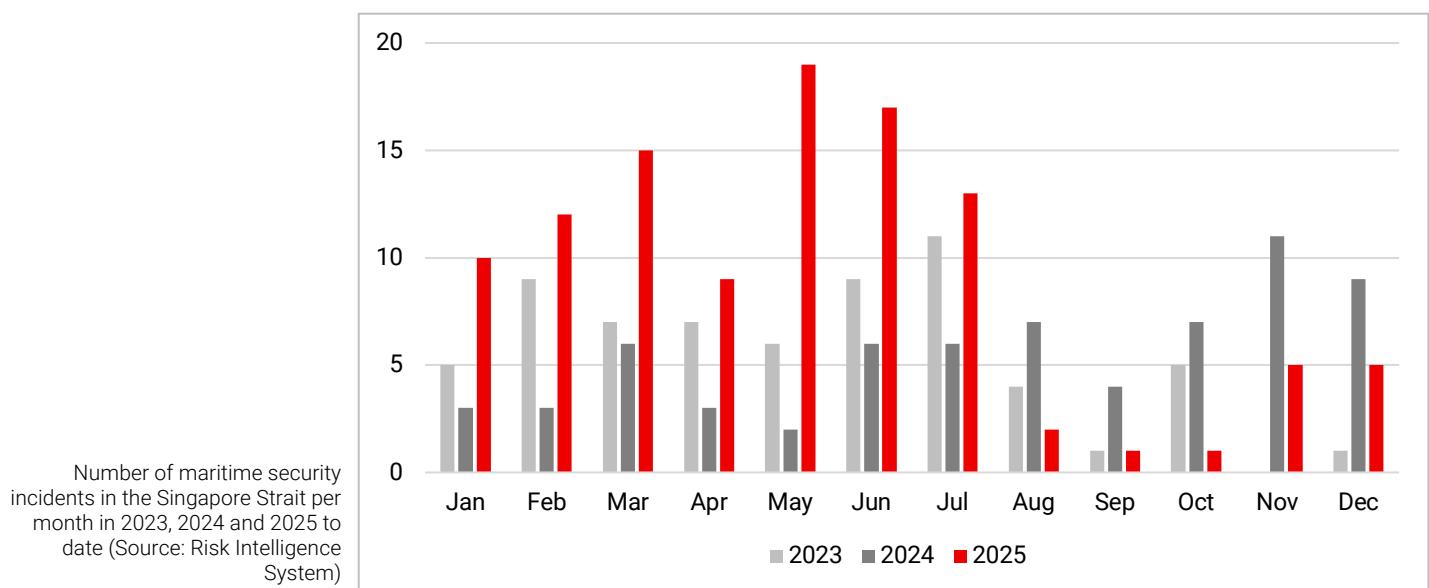
25 December - Barge LKH 2882 boarded underway

Theft, 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, Taiwan Strait and 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

Six incidents were recorded during December, all representing the typical patterns related to thefts and armed robberies in the region. Five took place on the Singapore Strait, with one boarding at the Tangkil Island anchorage, Indonesia. The present frequency of Singapore Strait boardings represents the average tallied from 2022 to 2024, when 5.1 boardings were reported per month on average. This return to the historical frequency of boardings could indicate that the Indonesian Marine Police have dialled back patrols on the Philip Channel.



Turning to the previous 12 months, 81% of the incidents reported in South East Asia took place in the Singapore Strait. Of the 109 incidents there, 58 involved bulk carriers, 26 involved tankers, 13 involved barges and other craft in tow and 10 involved container ships. The outliers involved two general cargo vessels. No incidents involving passenger vessels have occurred in the Singapore Strait. All Singapore Strait incidents during this period targeted ships underway, with 83% taking place in the western zone between Karimun and Batam.

Armed robbers and thieves, known to be using the drug crystal meth which can cause violent and erratic behaviour, typically board vessels at night seeking engine spares, supplies and equipment while avoiding crew.

Areas with the highest frequency of criminal activity during the past twelve months beyond the Singapore Strait include Tarahan Anchorage and the ports of Balikpapan, Batangas, Batu Ampar, Belawan, Dumai, Kuala Tanjung, Manila, Sandakan, Tanjung Priok and Vung Tau. Although most boardings of vessels underway take place in the Singapore Strait, there have been incidents involving vessels underway in the Java Sea, the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait.

Hijacking

Two tug hijackings in the Java Sea in 2024, both targeted for their biodiesel 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. Arrests of gang leaders have suppressed such crimes, despite occasional incidents involving small tankers and barges, which are locally owned, managed and trading.

As fuel subsidies continue to be phased out across Southeast Asia, rising prices may drive increased fuel smuggling and illicit sales in the South China Sea, Sulu/Celebes Seas, and the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. This economic pressure heightens the risk of opportunistic hijackings targeting smaller tankers, particularly those carrying refined fuel cargoes. While full-scale hijackings remain rare, smaller regionally trading tankers and tankers on domestic routes remain vulnerable, underscoring the need for continued vigilance.

Offshore

Reports of boardings targeting oil rigs are infrequent. However, there is credible evidence of underreporting for such 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. Otherwise, boardings of OSVs at anchorages are occasionally recorded.

Political developments The upper South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and adjacent areas are generally characterised 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.

China sustained pressure around Taiwan in December through persistent “grey zone” operations and military signalling. Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defence reported regular PLA air and naval activity, including fighter and bomber patrols crossing the median line, while unmarked maritime militia vessels continued operating near offshore islands. Beijing also reiterated its opposition to foreign military involvement in the Taiwan Strait following renewed US arms support to Taipei.

On 29 December, the PLA launched “Justice Mission 2025,” the largest live-fire exercise of the year, with coordinated operations around Taiwan. The drills simulated encirclement and a blockade of Taiwan’s key ports, involved live rockets and extensive ship and aircraft deployments, and covered multiple zones in the Taiwan Strait. Taipei condemned the exercises as provocative and placed its forces on high alert. The operation followed a significant US arms sale to Taiwan and was framed by Beijing as a warning against “external interference.”

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula remained elevated. North Korea conducted additional missile-related activity in December, including tests believed to support solid-fuel and hypersonic delivery systems, while continuing to frame its actions as deterrence against US–South Korea military cooperation. In response, South Korea strengthened readiness measures, advanced missile defence integration, and expanded joint exercises with US forces.

Tensions between China and the Philippines persisted through December, marked by fresh maritime confrontations and expanded allied coordination. On 10 December, U.S., Philippine, and Australian vessels conducted a joint patrol near Scarborough Shoal, reinforcing Manila’s claims and drawing sharp Chinese condemnation. Washington and Canberra framed the exercise as lawful and routine, underscoring allied resolve against coercive actions.

Mid-month, Philippine forces completed another resupply mission to the grounded BRP SIERRA MADRE at Second Thomas Shoal despite Chinese Coast Guard obstruction. The operation delivered personnel and provisions without direct clashes, highlighting the enduring standoff.

Manila also advanced maritime surveillance capacity, confirming delivery schedules for additional TC-90 patrol aircraft from Japan. Officials stressed the acquisition as vital to counter persistent Chinese incursions near contested shoals. Separately, the Philippine Coast Guard reported Chinese vessels operating off Zambales, maintaining a buffer presence that Manila denounced as illegal.

ASEAN and China sustained momentum on the South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC), with December talks in Kuala Lumpur refining draft provisions ahead of the 2026 target. Chinese officials reiterated support for “constructive dialogue” while resisting external arbitration clauses.

ASEAN negotiators pressed for enforceable safety protocols, citing recurring incidents near Scarborough and Second Thomas Shoal. The Philippines, preparing for its chairmanship, renewed calls for accelerated progress and transparency. Despite advances, sovereignty-sensitive language and dispute resolution remained unresolved, with China emphasizing “strategic patience” and ASEAN defence chiefs urging binding commitments.

China and Indonesia maintained pragmatic engagement, convening in Jakarta for technical discussions on joint patrol communication and incident reporting near the Natuna Sea. Both sides described the exercise as incremental trust-building. Economic cooperation advanced with port upgrade projects in Bitung and Kendari, integrated into Indonesia’s maritime axis strategy. Diplomatic messaging remained restrained: Foreign minister Retno Marsudi reiterated Jakarta’s non-alignment, while

Chinese representatives commended Indonesia's "balanced approach." December's developments underscored steady bilateral rhythm, with operational gains continuing to outpace political rhetoric.

Overall developments highlight ongoing tensions, provocations, diplomatic initiatives and complexities in the region. Resolutions to all disputes are unlikely in the short term. While widespread conflict is unlikely, 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, Vung Tau and the Tarahan anchorage. 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 tankers and tugs. The threat that internationally-trading tankers will be hijacked for cargo theft is low. The threat of kidnappings of crew from merchant ships in the Sulu and Celebes Seas is also low, particularly within designated transit corridors. Fishing trawlers remain vulnerable, similar to other small craft, tugs, ferries and locally-trading vessels.

On the geopolitical front, the threat of military operations disrupting commercial traffic in the region is 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 the threats of piracy and armed robbery at sea in various forms but does not include other threats to merchant vessel operations such as stowaways or smuggling. All possible contingencies cannot be covered by any assessment and this report only includes an assessment of the threat for merchant vessels in general and not specific vessel types.



Knowing Risk

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