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# Monthly Intelligence Report

Risk Intelligence System  
Advisory Services  
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# Table of contents

<b>Table of contents</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Monthly Intelligence Report</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Monthly focus: US influence in the Caribbean and implications for maritime operations in Venezuela</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>Background and overview</i>	3
<i>Evolution: Enforcing sanctions to securing oil revenues</i>	3
<i>Aftermath of US strikes and short-term outlook</i>	5
<b>Update: Maritime dimensions of the war in Ukraine</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Situation on land</i>	8
<i>Black Sea situation</i>	10
<i>Summary and forecast</i>	11
<b>West Africa</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>Incidents</i>	14
<i>Assessment: Inner Gulf of Guinea (Togo to Cameroon)</i>	15
<i>Assessment: Outer Gulf of Guinea (Côte d'Ivoire to Gabon)</i>	16
<b>Western Indian Ocean</b>	<b>18</b>
<i>Incidents</i>	18
<i>Assessment: Southern Red Sea – Gulf of Aden</i>	19
<i>Assessment: Gulf of Oman – Persian Gulf</i>	20
<i>Assessment: Somali Basin and wider Indian Ocean</i>	22
<b>South East Asia</b>	<b>24</b>
<i>Incidents</i>	24
<i>Assessment: Straits of Malacca and Singapore, South China Sea, Indonesian archipelago, Sulu/Celebes Seas</i>	25
<i>Political developments</i>	27
<b>Definitions</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>Threat levels</i>	29
<i>Incident types</i>	29

# 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: US influence in the Caribbean and implications for maritime operations in Venezuela

## Background and overview

The US military build-up in the Caribbean drastically changed the threat landscape in the region. The deployment of naval assets enabled a cinematic night raid that ended with the abduction of Nicolas Maduro and his wife, and the destruction of multiple air defence systems in Venezuela. It was also crucial for enforcing oil quarantine and incentivising state actors to align with the Trump administration under threat of retaliation.

In August 2025, the US Navy initially deployed eight warships, allegedly in support of a comprehensive counter-narcotics operations in the Caribbean. The deployment took place amid threats of military action against the Maduro regime and was followed by several air strikes against alleged drug smuggling boats in international waters.

The counter-narcotics narrative eroded as air strikes increased in frequency along the eastern Pacific. Top US officials warned of superior military strength and stated that regime change aligned with US interests. Threats of forceful action materialised on 10 December when a US Coast Guard team boarded the crude oil tanker SKIPPER after the vessel had departed from the Jose terminal loaded with Venezuelan oil.

## Evolution: Enforcing sanctions to securing oil revenues

According to US officials, the US Coast Guard had a seizure warrant for the SKIPPER which had been blacklisted by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) in November 2022. The ship was reportedly flying the Guyanese flag but later confirmed by the Guyanese maritime administration to be improperly registered in the country. US officials also stressed that the vessel was carrying sanctioned Venezuelan oil and days earlier had performed an irregular ship-to-ship (STS) transfer off Curacao.

The US subsequently seized at least six other tankers, five of them in the Caribbean while another was confiscated about 190 nautical miles south-east of Iceland. While the seizure of sanctioned oil by the US is not unprecedented, the confiscation of vessels was marred by multiple controversies.

For instance, the seizure of the tanker CENTURIES raised concerns as US law enforcement had no warrant in place, nor was the ship sanctioned by the US or reportedly flying a false flag. In a sudden turn of events, the Panamanian foreign office nevertheless provided indications it had allowed the boarding of US officials as the ship had reportedly violated regulations for vessel registration.

The case of the BELLA-1/MARINERA drew international attention as the US chased the ship for several days until seizing it in the North Atlantic. The incident was notable as the vessel allegedly changed its name after refusing to be boarded by law enforcement units and changed flag mid-voyage with the Russian Federation granting temporary permission to sail under its flag.



Presidents The BELLA-1/MARINERA was seized by US authorities in the North Atlantic (Photo: US Coast Guard)

Inconsistencies of US law enforcement cast doubts on whether the US abided by international law. The US also set a precedent that could be emulated both by rivals and allies. Concerns were partially addressed by statements issued by US officials in which they asserted an interest in targeting sanctioned and stateless vessels, drastically reducing the risk profile of ships engaged in legitimate maritime commerce.

At the same time, it raised the stakes for vessels that often engaged in unsafe maritime practices, including AIS spoofing, irregular STS transfers, or repeated hull name swaps, among others. Uncertainty levels grew as the US struck Caracas and its surrounding areas, prompting vessels loaded with Venezuelan oil to leave port by adopting saturation tactics, i.e. sailing in convoys while hoping to strain USCG resources.

Until then, the oil quarantine was seen to be the early stages of a naval blockade, signalling intentions to use economic rather than military means in order to compel Venezuelan leaders on making concessions to the US. Nonetheless, the threat landscape became more stable as the US

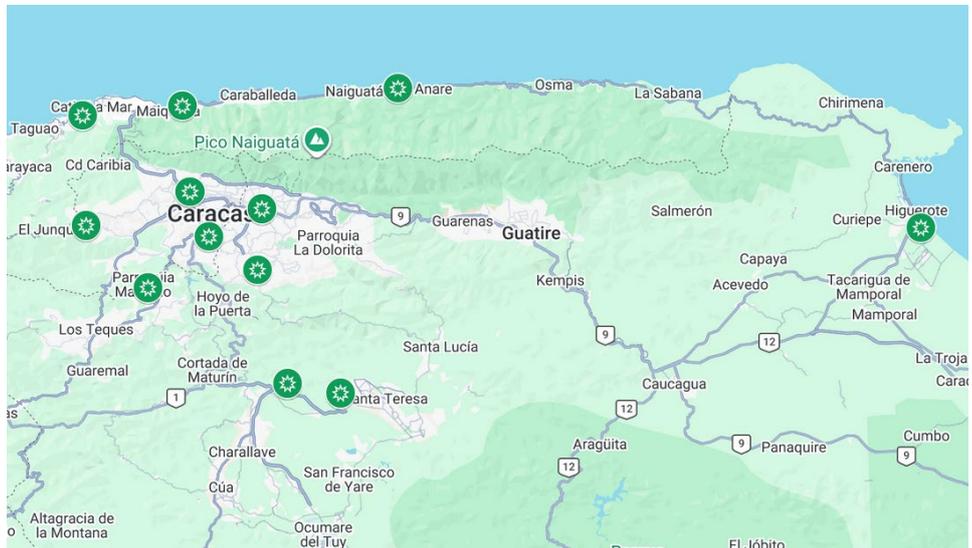
government declared a national emergency aiming to protect Venezuelan oil revenue.

Increased bilateral cooperation was noticeable after the US seized the OLINDA, which was instructed to return to Venezuelan shores. Days later, both countries reportedly reached an agreement for over 30 million barrels of oil. Enforcement of oil sanctions is expected to remain limited to stateless and sanctioned ships. However, the seizure of further tankers may decrease in frequency as the US government is more interested in assessing the possibility to rolling back sanctions to enable increased oil trade and production.

### Aftermath of US strikes and short-term outlook

On 3 January 2026, the US military attacked several military installations in and around Caracas with the aim of disabling air defence systems and shocking the Venezuelan military as special forces apprehended the Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro and his wife. The strikes entailed the participation of over 150 aircraft and multiple naval platforms stationed in the Caribbean.

Most attention from international observers was paid to how the infiltration of special forces unfolded as well as to footage on various strikes. However, less attention was paid to the fact that the United States bombed a storage facility within the port of La Guaira, which is a small container terminal located half an hour away from Caracas.



Map of US strikes in Venezuelan territory on 3 January 2026.  
(Source: Risk Intelligence)

The attack against the port of La Guaira signalled that the US was not only targeting military installations but also civilian facilities of strategic interest. Unlike communication antennas on the outskirts of Caracas, this attack was directed at a BUK-M2E system hidden within a storage facility, triggering secondary explosions which damaged the port's perimeter and residences in its proximity.

Renewed threats on the use of force were made should any internal faction be assessed as attempting to spoil the advancement of US interests in the country. At first, these threats were met with a softer tone from civilian and military leadership in Venezuela, as well as with announced changes to the country's oil and gas regulatory framework. However, these developments were triggered by the need to secure control of the public discourse and state institutions rather than by a longer-term strategy.

Latest developments signal Venezuela's willingness to ease regulations over the oil and gas sector. Proposed law changes include a reduced tax burden and allowing private actors to assume full management of fields, while the domestic political narrative shifted from resisting an invasion to the need of collaborating with international partners to profit from oil exports. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of reforms may be limited, given that the government can reverse these changes virtually without notice.

Further attacks are possible if the Venezuelan leadership fails to meet demands from the Trump administration, including refraining from public statements of defiance. US domestic politics are a key driver for US military action, and Venezuelan officials are known to constantly factor in how likely the Trump administration is willing to comply with its threats.

Likewise, attempts to resume a constant flow of oil shipments to extra-hemispheric powers without US consent are considered to be a liability and a potential trigger for another wave of strikes aimed to reassert control over the political elite.

Uncertainty remains as to whether sanctioned or flagless tankers are waiting for authorised oil traders to face demand shortages or to complete the sale of the agreed volume between Venezuelan and US officials to resume operations toward Asia. The latter would pose a lower exposure, especially if international attention steers to controversial developments in other areas of the globe.

### **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

Incidents reported during January resembled reported attacks in December, as both Russia and Ukraine continued to put pressure on export capabilities with attacks on port infrastructure and vessels.

There was little change along the Russia–Ukraine front line during the month, despite unverified Russian claims of further territorial gains. Throughout January, Russian forces continued to strike Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, including ports in Chornomorsk, Pivdenny, Odesa, and the Danube port of Izmail. These attacks form part of Russia’s broader campaign to undermine Ukrainian society and disrupt key transport and logistics corridors used for military purposes. Such strikes are expected to continue with varying intensity.

On 7 January, the crude oil tanker ELBUS (Palau-flagged) reported a drone attack off the Turkish Black Sea coast near Inebolu. This marks the sixth war-related incident involving a vessel operating inside the Turkish EEZ and the fourth since November 2025, in this case involving a ship that had not been sanctioned.

Notably, of the four most recent maritime incidents, the ELBUS is the third crude oil tanker with links to China. This may suggest that Ukraine is increasingly focusing on Chinese-affiliated vessels involved in transporting Russian oil. If this is the case, such strikes are assessed not as attempts to sink vessels but as efforts to deter Chinese participation in Russian oil exports. However, this approach carries risks for Ukraine, as reporting suggests that both Russia and Ukraine procure drone components from the same Chinese suppliers.

Recent maritime incidents indicate that Ukrainian forces can identify and track vessels with sufficient precision to strike selected targets. These operations are likely intended to discourage third-party operators from supporting Russian oil exports. The assessment remains that Ukraine’s objective is not the destruction of vessels, but the degradation of Russia’s oil export capacity.

Ukraine is therefore expected to continue targeting Russian oil infrastructure in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, including ports and associated facilities. Further attacks on the CPC terminal near Novorossiysk are also likely, given previous strikes on the terminal and

its pipeline network. Continued pressure on inland pumping stations and broader CPC infrastructure can be anticipated.

Diplomatic activity continued in January, although developments have been complicated by the US administration's heightened focus on Greenland. It was therefore notable that tensions around Greenland eased during the World Economic Forum in Davos. Nevertheless, the shift in US priorities resulted in the war in Ukraine receiving less prominence than in previous years.



Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy during his address at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2026. (Photo: Ukraine Presidential Office)

A scheduled meeting between Zelensky and Trump took place, although the outcome has not been reported. Meanwhile, a US negotiating team travelled to Russia on 22 January to present negotiation proposals. Given Russia's ongoing pressure on Ukraine, an immediate breakthrough appears unlikely. However, rapid developments remain possible.

The Davos meeting also included the presentation of the US-led Board of Peace, whose broad remit may serve as a mechanism for the US administration to "park" the Ukraine conflict if no substantial progress is achieved soon. Comments regarding the negotiations continue to suggest that much of a potential agreement has already been drafted, with claims that only one major issue—territory—remains unresolved. However, as territorial questions are the most contentious, genuine progress through negotiation alone appears improbable.

**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

Incidents in the Black Sea since November highlighted the capacity of Ukrainian forces to target sanctioned (and potentially non-sanctioned) merchant ships calling Russian ports. At the same time, they also

highlighted that Russian forces are able to target vessels both in Ukrainian ports and in transit.

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

Ukrainian forces have for several months been attacking Russian refineries and associated infrastructure throughout Russia, including at Novorossiysk. It is also likely that given the current military pressure Ukraine is facing 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.

Although the regional threat picture is generally stable, incidents in recent weeks underlined that military operations can take place in the wider Black Sea, including both naval and aerial drones which are used for military operations. However, the impact on operations in the wider Black Sea 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 or near Ukrainian ports is a greater concern. Vessels may be damaged when ports or surrounding cities are subject to Russian missile and drone attacks. Until a comprehensive ceasefire is agreed, the regional threat picture is likely to remain unchanged and influenced by the ongoing Russia/Ukraine war. Although diplomatic efforts continue, the outlook for a suitable and lasting solution remains unclear and unlikely under present circumstances.

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 continuously patrol Ukrainian waters as part of mine countermeasures to mitigate the threat from drifting mines to ships transiting to Ukrainian ports. Romanian, Bulgarian and Turkish forces are operating similar countermeasures in their waters as part of a tri-party agreement.

Other threats in the Black Sea include GPS spoofing and jamming, fraud and corruption as well as smuggling. 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

Global attention shifted away from the war in Ukraine in January, mainly due to renewed US focus on Greenland. Following the World Economic Forum in Davos, a trilateral meeting between US, Ukraine and Russia was held in Abu Dhabi. The meeting produced no concrete results, but the presence of all three parties suggests a modest step forward.

Ukrainian attacks on maritime targets in the Black Sea and elsewhere are likely to continue. Energy and oil export facilities remain the primary targets, though strikes against Russian naval vessels or ships engaged in transporting Russian crude oil and refined products are also possible. Ukraine may broaden its target set if it deems it operationally necessary. However, winter conditions are expected to limit naval drone activity.

If Ukraine persists in constraining Russia's Black Sea oil exports, Russia is likely to respond by placing similar pressure on Ukraine's maritime

export capacity. This could involve intensified targeting of port infrastructure, including vessels alongside, increasing the risk of collateral damage. Commercial vessels—potentially including neutral shipping—may face heightened risk from “like for like” retaliation.

Despite these risks, Russia is expected to maintain its primary focus on striking Ukraine’s critical energy and heating infrastructure, a long-standing strategy aimed at worsening civilian hardship during the winter months. Any attacks on ports are therefore expected to be selective, serving signalling purposes or targeting high value assets rather than reflecting a shift in Russia’s broader operational priorities.

Both Russia and Ukraine are likely to continue courting US support. However, ongoing negotiation efforts are unlikely to yield meaningful progress, as Russia remains unwilling to accept Western forces in Ukraine as part of any security arrangement.

Until all parties demonstrate a clear and unified move towards a ceasefire or settlement, the current situation—and the wider threat landscape in the Black Sea—will 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 January. The threat level was underlined by an attack against a fishing vessel off Gabon (more details under 'Assessment: Outer Gulf of Guinea').
- Four incidents at different anchorages across the region were also reported in January, all without 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 January 2026, shown on the map below. Further incident details are available on the Risk Intelligence System.



Source: Risk Intelligence System

## Incidents

### 6 January – Tug **BLUE MOMMY** boarded

Theft, Abidjan anchorage (Côte d'Ivoire)

### 7 January – Tanker boarded

Theft, Takoradi anchorage (Ghana)

### 11 January – Fishing vessel **LIANPENGYU 828** attacked

Kidnap/ransom, 33 nm north-east of Port-Gentil (Gabon)

**11 January – Local passenger boat attacked**

Failed kidnap/ransom, Cross River state (Nigeria)

**20 January – General cargo ship LAKE ONTARIO boarded**

Theft, Luanda anchorage (Angola)

**27 January – Bulk carrier PENELOPE OLDENDORFF boarded**

Theft, Takoradi anchorage (Ghana)

**Assessment:  
Inner Gulf of Guinea (Togo to  
Cameroon)**

Attackers operating off the southern and eastern Niger Delta continue to be the most significant 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, all reported incidents have to be analysed thoroughly. This was underlined in October when two incidents were widely distributed through reporting centres with initial information suggesting that both could have been piracy incidents. However, neither incident was security-related which was unfortunately not clarified through official follow-up reports. A similar case in January was initially reported as a suspicious approach by a speedboat south of Lagos, yet it was later confirmed that this was not a security incident.

In addition, several cases over the past 12 months have been widely reported as pirate attacks. 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 simply as piracy shows a limited understanding of interconnected maritime security issues in the region.

For the Nigerian government in particular, crude oil theft and smuggling of illegally refined oil products have long been a much higher priority than anti-piracy operations. Such activities have long provided organised criminal groups across the Niger Delta with significant revenues which have further increased in recent years. This also led to a drop in piracy across the Gulf of Guinea as criminal groups have concentrated on much more profitable types of 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 January, 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 Sentinel which was launched in January as part of an overall effort by the Nigerian government to substantially increase oil production.

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 a fishing vessel in Gabon's territorial waters was reported in January. Several crew members were kidnapped by a Niger Delta-based group. The attackers were pursued by regional navies but could not be intercepted. However, it should be noted that the vessel which was involved in the incident had likely been engaged in illicit operations at sea, including unlicensed fishing activities. It is therefore

unlikely that the fishing vessel was a random target for the perpetrators. Similar to several similar incidents in recent months, this case was likely linked to other criminal activities which are frequent in this area.

Four other security incidents were also reported in December, all involving anchored ships off Luanda (Angola), Takoradi (Ghana) and Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) respectively. In all four cases, however, there was no violence against crew members, similar to most other low-profile incidents 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 January, continuing the low number of operations in recent months. There were no other incidents reported in this area during the month.
- Regional tensions increased following widespread protests in Iran and threats made by the US that it might carry out strikes to compel a return to nuclear negotiations by Iran and possibly to impose other conditions.
- Piracy remains an elevated threat in the western Indian Ocean although there were no incidents affecting fishing or merchant vessels in January.

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 31 January 2026 are shown on the map below. Further incident details are available on the Risk Intelligence System. There were no incidents reported this month.



Source: Risk Intelligence System

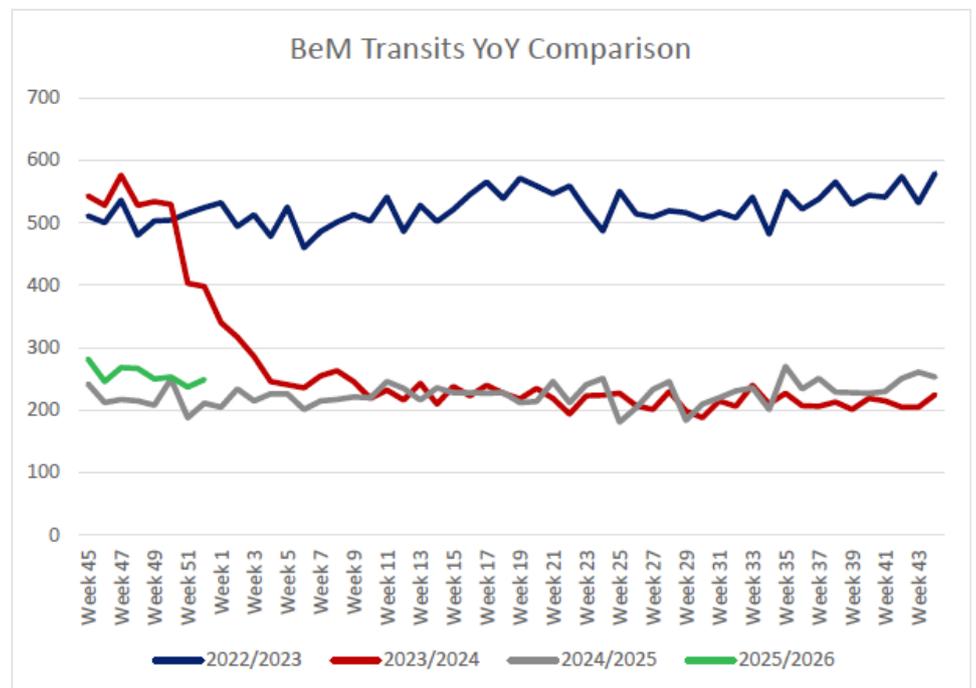
## Incidents

There were no incidents reported in January, as shown on the map above. Additional information about the situation in the region is available in Risk Intelligence's *Middle East Weekly Intelligence Report*.

## 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 January, consistent with the minimal level of operations being maintained by the Houthis in the area.

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. 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 no significant change in the number of transits through the Red Sea. There are very few “valid” targets as per the Houthis’ targeting parameters passing the Bab el Mandeb. Despite the absence of recent incidents, there have been no changes in Houthi intentions or capabilities that would suggest an imminent increase of traffic.

In January, the Houthis released a documentary-style video about their attack on the MARLIN LUANDA in January 2024 in what some interpreted as a veiled threat against the US regarding Iran. However, this video mainly served as a reminder of Houthi intentions and capabilities.

Several shipping companies have recently made statements as to their interest in resuming transits once conditions allow. This supports the small uptick in traffic between September and November, followed by another drop in December. Overall, most operators are still 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. This dispute has now been largely settled in favour of Saudi Arabia. However, it has complicated any diplomatic resolution to the civil war in Yemen, although it is not expected to affect Red Sea or Gulf of Aden transits.

### 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 were no incidents in this area during January. There remains an elevated threat of limited action by Iran in pursuit of specific goals related to its sanctioned oil exports.

Despite this consistency, the wider political situation has seen a deterioration in relations with the potential for further conflict. Firstly, widespread public protests in Iran led to a heavy-handed crackdown by the regime. The Iranian government is therefore very focused on internal security as well as protecting itself against existential threats. Its ability to project force regionally has been diminished, but not its ability to act in its immediate neighbourhood.



Iran's supreme leader speaks out against threats by the United States  
(Source: Iranian media)

Secondly, the US threatened military action against the Iranian government during the protests. Subsequently, the US has made additional threats if Iran does not return to the negotiating table over its nuclear programme. The US and Israel have also focused on Iran's ballistic missile capabilities, potentially raising an additional issue of contention.

In support of potential military action, the US has deployed a carrier strike group into the Indian Ocean. Iran has said that it will not negotiate whilst being threatened. Media reporting has suggested that some kind of US strike could be imminent, but it is difficult to assess the likelihood.

If a strike were to take place, the Iranian government would likely feel significantly vulnerable – particularly in light of the protests – and seek to deter further US action by responding against US assets in its immediate neighbourhood, such as military facilities in Qatar that were previously targeted. In such a scenario, there would be potential for further escalation that could affect shipping operations in the area.

### 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. This includes 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.

The wider security situation, and its maritime implications, will depend on whether the US takes direct military action against Iran to force it to return to nuclear negotiations or to achieve another outcome. Iran will be wary of escalation but will also want to protect its interests and to ensure the survival of the current regime.

## Assessment: Somali Basin and wider Indian Ocean

There were no events in this area during January. The most recent incident was the attack on the dhow AL SAFA off Eyl, Somalia in December. The dhow was not hijacked but the concern remains that the intention was to use it as a mother ship – as in the case with the Iranian dhow in November that was used to attack two merchant ships and approach two others.



EUNAVFOR forces respond to the HELLAS APHRODITE boarding (Source: EUNAVFOR)

Widespread attacks on shipping remain unlikely. Most current activities will be directed mainly at fishing and locally trading vessels close to the coast. These activities include armed robbery of such vessels or their hijacking for other purposes. 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.

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.

It is likely that the 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 complicated politics surrounding fishing licences in the Somali Basin – are currently likely to be the primary driver for piracy.

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. The group controls certain areas in central Somalia and is also able to carry out terrorist attacks in the capital, Mogadishu. There is

only a limited maritime dimension to the conflict. This is unlikely to change significantly in 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.

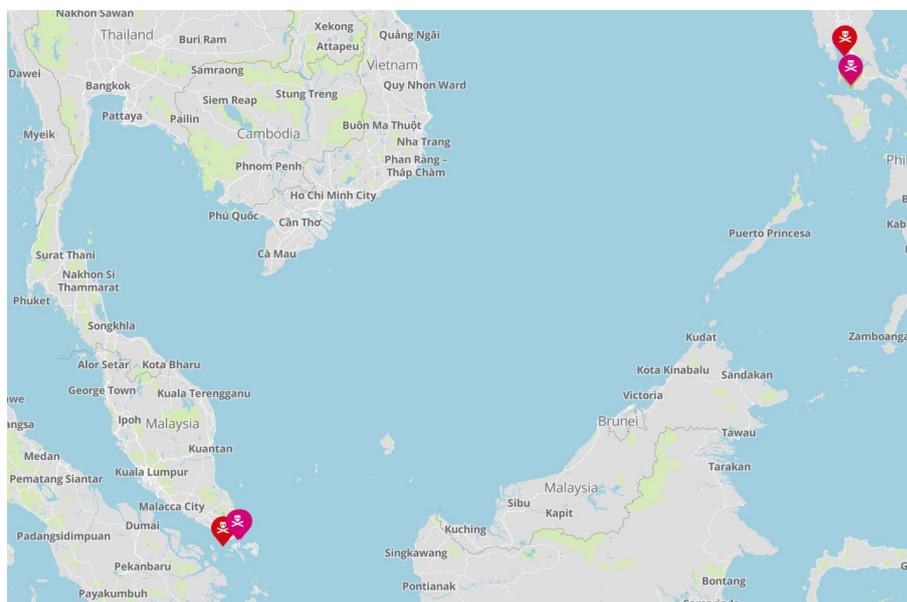
Proximity to the Somali coast can also lead to encounters with local militias or criminal operations although the threat level is low. Military operations continue in Somalia against militant Islamist group al-Shabab. There is only a limited maritime dimension to this conflict which is not expected to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

# South East Asia

## Summary

- Indonesian Marine Police patrols on the Phillip Channel have contributed towards a return to the historical frequency of Singapore Strait boardings.
- During the past twelve months, 78% of the 132 boardings 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 detail under 'Political Developments'.

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 31 January 2026, shown on the map below. Further incident details are available on the Risk Intelligence System.



Source: Risk Intelligence System

## Incidents

**03 January - Ro-Ro ship SUPER SHUTTLE RORO 9 boarded**  
Theft, Batangas anchorage (Philippines)

**05 January - Barge LKH 7887 boarded underway**  
Theft, Singapore Strait

**16 January - Barge LKH 2882 boarded underway**  
Theft, Singapore Strait

**16 January - Bulk carrier SAKIZAYA WISDOM boarded**

Theft, Batangas anchorage (Philippines)

**17 January - Bulk carrier EMPRESS ZONDA boarded underway**

Armed robbery, Singapore Strait

**19 January - Barge MANYPLUS 5 boarded underway**

Theft, Singapore Strait

**22 January - Cargo vessel SUPER SHUTTLE RORO 9 boarded**

Failed robbery, Batangas anchorage (Philippines)

**25 January - Container vessel MAERSK VILNIUS boarded**

Theft, Manila anchorage (Philippines)

**26 January - Container vessel MAERSK CAP JACKSON boarded**

Armed robbery, Manila anchorage (Philippines)

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

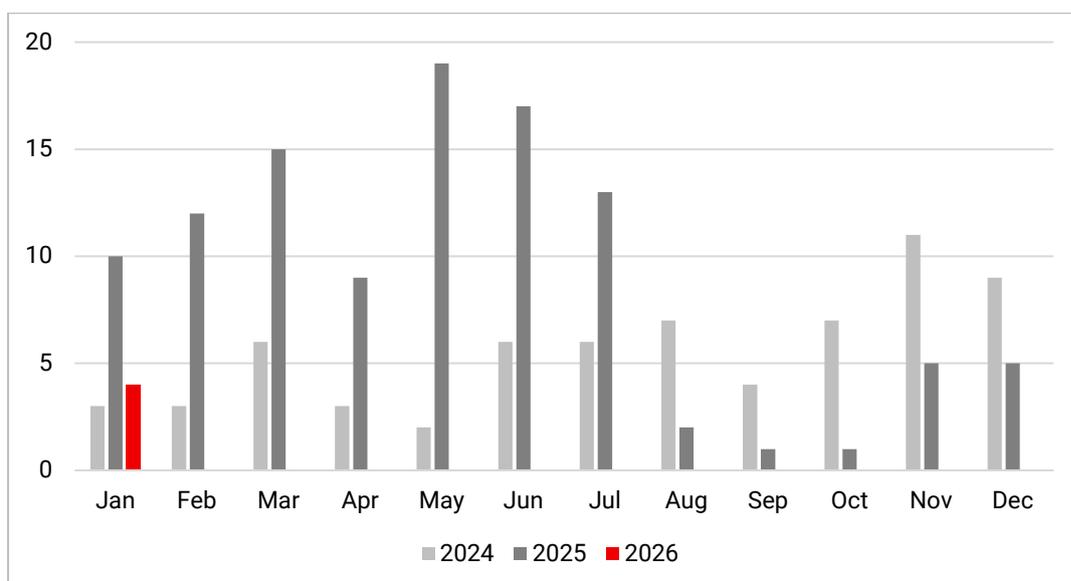
While the wider region experiences regular boardings in the form of thefts and armed robberies, the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait and areas northward have attracted attention due to geopolitical developments. Below is an update on this month's piracy activity, followed by an overview of geopolitical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

**Piracy**

Nine boardings, of which three involved armed perpetrators, were recorded during January. These represent the typical patterns for the region, with a continued absence of hijackings and kidnappings. Four boardings took place on the Singapore Strait, while five took place at the Batangas and Manila anchorages in the Philippines.

The current frequency of Singapore Strait boardings closely aligns with the average tallied from 2022 to 2024, when 5.1 boardings were reported per month. This return to the historical frequency of boardings could indicate that the Indonesian Marine Police have dialled back patrols on the Philip Channel. During the past two months, no cargo ship has been boarded east of 103:40E.

Number of maritime security incidents in the Singapore Strait per month in 2024, 2025 and 2026  
(Source: Risk Intelligence System)



Turning to the previous 12 months, 78% of the 132 boardings reported in South East Asia took place in the Singapore Strait. Of the 103 boardings there, 51 involved bulk carriers, 24 involved tankers, 16 involved barges and other craft in tow and 10 involved container ships. The outliers involved two general cargo vessels. No boardings involving passenger vessels have occurred in the Singapore Strait. All Singapore Strait boardings during this period targeted ships underway, with 82% taking place in the western zone between Karimun and Batam.

Armed robbers and thieves operating on the Singapore Strait, 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, Belawan, Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Tanjung, Manila, 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 northern 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 future implications.

China maintained elevated military and political pressure around Taiwan in January following its December exercises. The PLA continued regular air and naval patrols in the Taiwan Strait, with frequent fighter and bomber sorties crossing the median line and naval vessels operating on both sides of the island. Beijing reiterated its opposition to “external interference,” signalling that the December drills were part of a sustained pressure campaign rather than a one-off event.

Taiwan reported ongoing “grey zone” activity, including the presence of unmarked maritime militia and dual-use vessels near islands and key sea lanes. While no live-fire exercises were confirmed in January, the tempo of PLA activity remained higher than pre-December levels, reinforcing Beijing’s incremental coercion strategy.

On the Korean peninsula, tensions remained elevated. North Korea continued missile-related development activity, though without major launch events, while emphasising its nuclear deterrence posture in official statements. South Korea and the US increased readiness and joint training activities, citing the need to deter further North Korean provocations and reassure regional partners.

Tensions between China and the Philippines persisted into January, marked by intensified Chinese patrols and renewed ASEAN diplomacy. On 31 January, the China Southern Theater Command announced naval and air patrols around Scarborough Shoal, framing the operations as countermeasures against “infringement provocations.” Manila denounced the activity as illegal within its EEZ, underscoring the enduring standoff.

On 29 January, the Philippines formally opened its ASEAN chairmanship by hosting the Foreign Ministers’ Retreat in Cebu. Discussions centred on regional priorities and the South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC). Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono urged faster progress, stressing ASEAN unity under the theme “Navigating Our Future, Together.” The Philippines reiterated its push for transparency and binding commitments, while China continued to resist external arbitration clauses.

Parallel to the retreat, ASEAN and China convened the 25th Senior Officials' Meeting on the Declaration of Conduct in Cebu on 30 January. Delegates reaffirmed the 2026 target for completing the COC, emphasising adherence to UNCLOS and the need for enforceable safety protocols amid recurring incidents near contested shoals.

On the sidelines, Philippine and Chinese officials held bilateral talks, describing the exchange as candid and constructive. Both sides underscored the importance of sustained dialogue, though maritime disputes remained unresolved.

China and Indonesia maintained pragmatic engagement, with Jakarta reiterating its balanced approach during ASEAN deliberations. Indonesian officials highlighted cooperation while avoiding alignment, reinforcing the steady rhythm of bilateral ties.

Overall developments highlight ongoing tensions, provocations, diplomatic initiatives and geopolitical 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 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, Tarahan Anchorage and the ports of Balikpapan, Batangas, Belawan, Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Tanjung, Manila, Tanjung Priok 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 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.



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