

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime – Research Report I

Combating Maritime Piracy and Organized Crime at Sea

Introduction to the Topic:

Maritime piracy and organized crime at sea have for a long time been significant threats to global trade, security, and human lives. Maritime piracy refers to acts of robbery, hijacking, or violence committed on the high seas against vessels, their cargo or crew, often for economic gain. Organized crime at sea encompasses illicit activities such as drug trafficking, human smuggling, illegal fishing, and weapons trafficking. Together, these activities not only endanger seafarers but also destabilize maritime trade, threaten economic stability in the local and international stage, and fuel transnational crime networks.

Organized crime at sea operates in parallel with piracy, leveraging vast networks to smuggle contraband and facilitate human trafficking. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), maritime routes are the preferred channels for smuggling, given their vastness and lack of effective policing. The proceeds from these crimes are recurrently used to finance terrorism, corruption, and other destabilizing illicit activities, creating a cycle of insecurity in the maritime transportation industry.



Figure no. 1 - Types of attacks on ships between January and September of 2024 (ICC-IMB Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships ICC INTERNATIONAL MARITIME BUREAU PIRACY AND ARMED ROBBERY AGAINST SHIPS REPORT FOR THE PERIOD.

(2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.icc-ccs.org/reports/2022%20Annual%20IMB%20Piracy%20and%20Armed%20Robbery%20Report.pdf>)

Globally, over 80% of international trade is conducted via maritime transport. Despite advances in naval technology and increased international cooperation, piracy and organized

crime persist, exploiting gaps in governance, law enforcement, and economic stability. In recent years, hotspots such as the Gulf of Guinea, the Somali coast, and Southeast Asia's Strait of Malacca have become infamous for high-profile attacks, such as the 2023 kidnapping of 16 crew members from an oil tanker near Lagos, Nigeria.

PIRACY HOTSPOTS

An analysis of global maritime piracy identified areas where attacks have been most frequent, including waters around the Strait of Malacca, the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Guinea.

Incident density score 0–0.2 0.2–0.8 0.8–1.6 1.6–2.5 2.5–3.4 >3.4

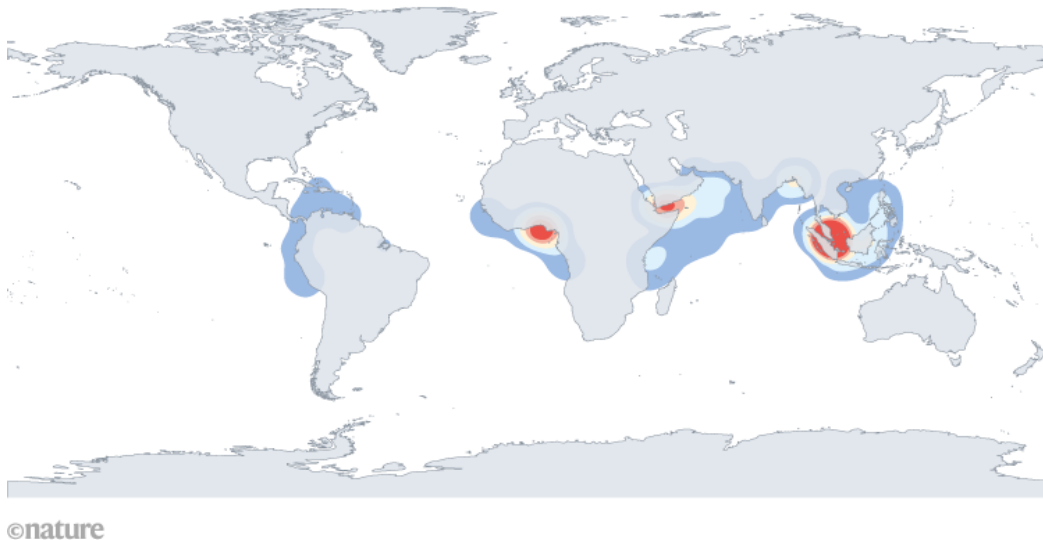


Figure 2 - Density world map of incidents of piracy (Kreier, F. (2024). Piracy at sea is waning— but hotspots remain. Nature. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-024-00124-6>)

According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), 2023 saw 120 incidents of piracy and armed robbery, a slight increase from 2022. The Gulf of Guinea accounted for nearly 30% of these incidents, underscoring the resurgence of piracy in West Africa. Similarly, Southeast Asia reported a rise in armed robberies, while Somali piracy, although diminished, remains a latent threat due to weak governance and fragile economic conditions in the surrounding areas.

Background Information:

The socioeconomic drivers of piracy, such as poverty, unemployment, and corruption, exacerbate the issue. Coastal communities in piracy-prone regions often lack alternative livelihoods, making criminal activities an attractive option for desperate individuals. Political instability limits effective law enforcement, which in turn allows criminal networks to operate with impunity. Moreover, disputes over maritime boundaries or borders and a lack of jurisdictional clarity in international waters complicate coordinated enforcement efforts between organisations and nations, which clears the path for those who threaten security at sea.

In addition, the impacts of piracy and maritime crime extend far beyond the immediate economic losses. Global trade suffers due to increased shipping costs, higher insurance premiums and disruptions to supply chains. For instance, rerouting vessels to avoid high-risk areas, like the Gulf of Guinea, adds significant costs to maritime logistics. Furthermore, companies are also finding it more difficult to find crew to populate these ships. Seafarers face physical and psychological harm from these attacks with many incidents involving kidnappings, assaults, or prolonged detentions. The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) reports a steady rise in post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) among affected seafarers, making the job unattractive for many.

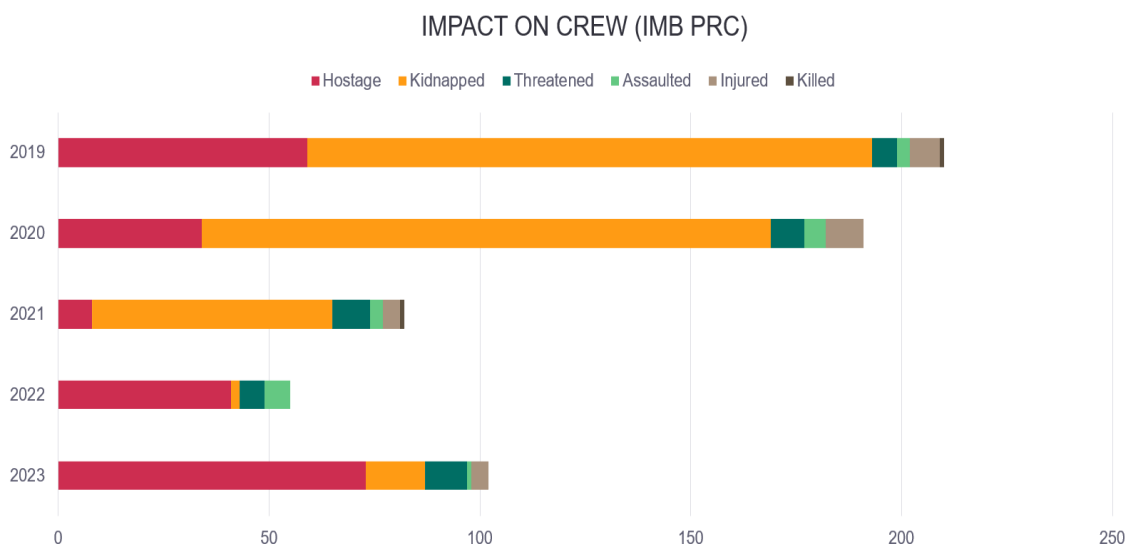


Figure 3 - Record of frequency and type of attack on crews (Is the decline in global piracy over? (2024, April 16). Retrieved from: <https://gard.no/insights/is-the-decline-in-global-piracy-over/>)

Although still present today, the history of maritime piracy dates back centuries, with famous figures like Blackbeard and Henry Morgan symbolizing the golden age of piracy in the 17th and 18th centuries. Modern piracy, however, emerged prominently in the late 20th century, at the same time as the rise of globalisation and the resulting increased maritime trade.

In the 1990s, the collapse of Somalia's government created a vacuum that enabled piracy to flourish along its coastline. Somali pirates hijacked vessels for ransom, targeting high-value shipping lanes like the Gulf of Aden. By 2010, Somali piracy accounted for over 200 attacks annually, prompting a robust international military response under the European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) and NATO's Operation Ocean Shield.

West Africa's Gulf of Guinea became a piracy hotspot in the 2010s, driven by oil theft and political instability in Nigeria and neighbouring countries. Unlike Somali piracy, which focused on ransom payments, West African pirates are renowned for their specialisation in cargo theft and kidnappings.

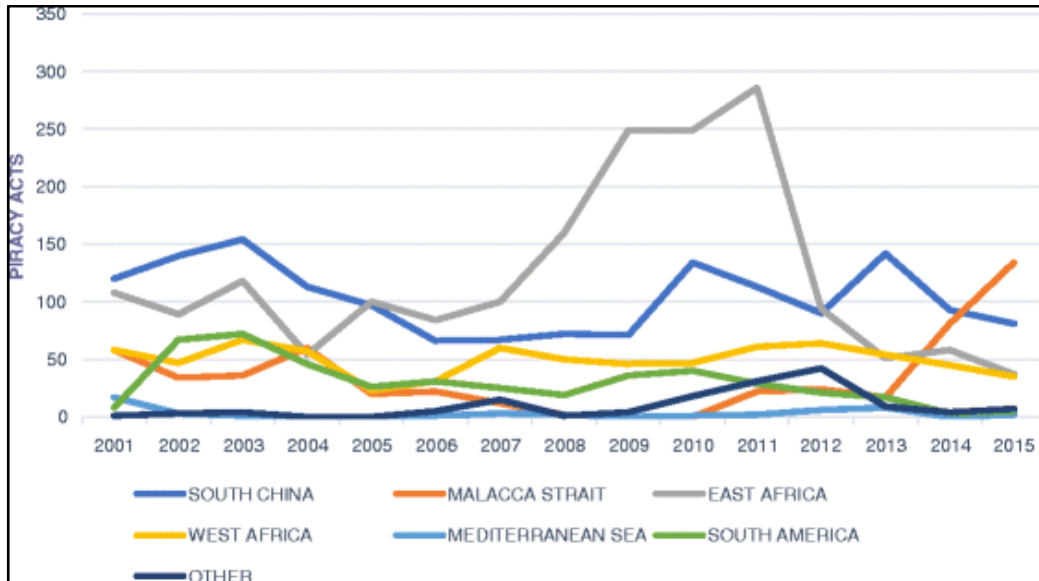


Figure no. 4 - Evolution of piracy in different regions of the world (2001-2015) (Hamza, F. R., & Priotti, J.-P. (2020, December). Maritime trade and piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean (1994–2017). *Journal of Transportation Security*, 13. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12198-018-0190-4>)

Past UN Actions:

- **Resolutions 1816, 1838, and 1846:** Authorisation for international naval forces to combat piracy off Somalia’s coast. These resolutions allowed states to enter Somali territorial waters to suppress piracy. Later, Resolution 1851 expanded these permissions, allowing for operations on Somali land.
- **The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS):** Established in 1982, UNCLOS provides the legal framework for prosecuting piracy. It defines piracy under Article 101 and mandates states to cooperate in the suppression of piracy, granting them universal jurisdiction over pirate acts. Complementary treaties, such as the SUA (Suppression of Unlawful Acts) Convention, bolster legal measures by addressing violence against ships and their crews.

Focus of Debate:

Debate should promote collaboration between nations to share intelligence, resources, and strategies for combating piracy, while encouraging countries to adopt comprehensive anti-piracy laws and harmonize legal procedures for prosecuting offenders. Furthermore, significant parties should attempt to see their aims satisfied.

Significant Parties

Nigeria: Nigeria plays a pivotal role in combating the issue, as it is at the epicentre of piracy activities in the Gulf of Guinea, a global hotspot for this type of crime. The country has taken significant steps to enhance its naval capacity through initiatives such as the Deep Blue Project and its collaboration with regional partners under the Yaoundé Code of Conduct. These measures aim to improve surveillance, training, and rapid response mechanisms, reflecting Nigeria's commitment to addressing piracy threats within its waters and beyond.

Somalia: With its extensive coastline, Somalia has historically been a hotbed for piracy, driven by economic instability and weak governance. However, international naval operations like EU NAVFOR's Operation Atalanta have drastically reduced piracy incidents in Somali waters. Additionally, the country has partnered with international organizations to bolster governance capacity and create alternative livelihoods for coastal communities, providing long-term solutions to the root causes of piracy.

Indonesia: Indonesia holds a critical position in maritime security due to its proximity to the Strait of Malacca, one of the busiest and most vital shipping lanes in the world. The Indonesian government collaborates with Malaysia and Singapore through the Malacca Straits Patrol initiative, conducting joint naval patrols and sharing intelligence. These efforts are essential in trying to diminish piracy and armed robbery in the region, and thus to safeguard nearly a quarter of global trade.

China: China, as a leading global trading nation and second biggest economy in the world, has vested interests in maintaining secure sea routes. The Chinese Navy actively participates in international anti-piracy missions, particularly in the Gulf of Aden, where it has been instrumental in protecting commercial vessels. China has also increased its naval presence in other high-risk areas, reflecting its commitment to safeguarding its economic and strategic interests. It is in the upmost Chinese interest to safeguard the cargo of their ships during their trips.

United States: The U.S. plays a dominant role in global maritime security, leveraging its military and economic power to address the issue. Through initiatives such as the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), the U.S. collaborates with allied navies to conduct anti-piracy operations in regions like the Arabian Sea and Southeast Asia. Moreover, the United States supports capacity-building programs in piracy-prone regions, helping to strengthen local enforcement capabilities.

India: India is situated in a strategic location near major shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy has undertaken numerous anti-piracy missions, particularly in the Gulf of Aden, where it has safeguarded both Indian and international commercial shipping. India's efforts also extend to collaborating with international forces to enhance regional stability and maritime law enforcement.

Japan: Japan is heavily reliant on secure maritime routes for its trade and energy imports. The Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force has played a crucial role in anti-piracy operations, especially in the Gulf of Aden. Japan also provides technical and financial assistance to developing nations, enabling them to strengthen their maritime security infrastructure and capabilities.

European Union Member States: Countries such as Germany, France, and Spain, have been at the forefront of securing global trade routes and supporting international maritime security initiatives. The EU's Operation Atalanta is a key effort in combating piracy off the Horn of Africa, ensuring the safe passage of humanitarian aid shipments and commercial vessels, which often pass through Mediterranean waters.

Glossary and Key Terms:

Piracy: Criminal acts of violence, detention, or depredation committed for private ends on the high seas against another vessel, its cargo, or its crew.

Organized Crime at Sea: Illicit activities such as smuggling, human trafficking, and illegal fishing conducted by transnational criminal groups.

Maritime Law Enforcement: Actions undertaken by naval or coast guard forces to enforce national and international maritime laws.

Gulf of Guinea: A region in West Africa noted as a global piracy hotspot, especially for kidnappings and oil theft.

Strait of Malacca: A narrow, strategic waterway between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, heavily trafficked by global shipping and prone to piracy.

Yaoundé Code of Conduct: A regional agreement among West African nations to address piracy, armed robbery, and other maritime crimes collaboratively.

EU NAVFOR (European Union Naval Force): The EU's operational force deployed to deter piracy off the Horn of Africa, notably through Operation Atalanta.

Deep Blue Project: Nigeria's integrated maritime security initiative aimed at enhancing surveillance and operational capacity to combat piracy in the Gulf of Guinea.

UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea): An international treaty establishing legal guidelines for maritime activities, including the suppression of piracy.

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