



RiskIntelligence

# Monthly Intelligence Report

February 2023

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## Monthly Intelligence Report

This report includes an overview of attacks against merchant vessels over the past month in three focus regions (West Africa, the western part of the Indian Ocean and South East Asia) as well as assessments of different types of threats in these regions. These areas are currently considered to be the global regions where the threat of such attacks is most significant.

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# Monthly focus: The Taiwan Strait – future maritime flashpoint?

## Introduction

In August 2022, China held military exercises around Taiwan and fired missiles into the Taiwan Strait. The display of force came in response to a visit by Nancy Pelosi, then speaker of the US House of Representatives. Since then, Taiwan has become increasingly alarmed at the possibility of a military invasion by China. In January, the US expanded training provided to the Taiwan military to enhance deterrence against China and deepen cooperation. In addition, Taiwan has also extended its conscription term from four months to a year to meet current military readiness requirements and raised defence spending by 15%.

The US accepts the so-called One China Policy, where Beijing is the government of China. But it maintains unofficial relations with Taiwan and opposes the use of military action by Beijing to force reunification. Rhetoric has sharpened in recent months, potentially making the Taiwan Strait a flashpoint for armed conflict in the future.

## Chinese Communist Party congress

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held its 20th National Congress in October 2022. The outcomes of the National Congress were not surprising with Xi Jinping re-elected as general secretary. Having now secured the top party post, Xi is well on track to be re-elected PRC president at the 14th National People's Congress, scheduled to convene in March 2023. Xi's third term as leader of the CCP signifies the priority to ensure centralised control of all aspects of the internal and external party-military-state activity.



*The 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party opens in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in October 2022 (Photo: Xinhua)*

In Xi's opening address at the National Congress, he stressed peaceful reunification of Taiwan and China. He also hinted that the US should not interfere when he said "resolving the Taiwan question is a matter for the Chinese, a matter that must be resolved by the Chinese." He also vowed to never renounce the use of force to "reunify" with Taiwan, saving it as a last resort.

There was also a generational turnover in CCP leadership with a wave of retirements and corresponding promotions of personnel. The more notable changes are the promotion of General He Weidong to vice chairman of the Central Military Commission and Wang Huning as the chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). He was the former head of the Eastern Theatre Command, which is in charge of holding joint combat readiness patrols and combat drills in the sea and airspace around Taiwan, focusing on land strikes and sea assaults. This could signify a shift in China's reunification strategy through policy and military posturing.

## Taiwan's local elections in 2022

Taiwan held local elections in November 2022. The Kuomintang (KMT) won 13 of the top political posts of local governments across 22 cities, counties, and special municipalities, while the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won only five. Of the remaining contested localities, one was held by the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), the other two went to independent, non-affiliated politicians.

With this electoral victory, the KMT continued its winning streak at the local level since 2018 and made progress toward reconstituting electoral ground lost in 2014. The 2022 local elections also resulted in the resignation of Tsai Ing-wen as the chairperson of DPP. While it is customary that the chairman of the losing party steps down to take responsibility, Tsai's resignation from the post will weaken her influence over the party's upcoming primary process, which is set to begin in the first quarter of 2023.



*President Tsai Ing-wen at a press conference announcing a plan for realigning Taiwan's military force structure. (Photo: Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan))*

While local elections tend to focus on local issues rather than cross-Strait and national issues, the results will nevertheless affect party politics leading up to the 2024 presidential and legislative elections. This could influence internal dynamics within Taiwan, as well as across the Taiwan Strait.

## Summary and forecast

The results from the 20th National Congress should be seen as part of a long-term CCP strategy to intensify pressure on Taiwan and disrupt the cross-strait status quo. China will pursue harsher, more punitive action toward perceived expressions of or external support for Taiwanese independence. After massive pro-democracy demonstrations shook Hong Kong in 2019, it signalled the failure of the “one country, two systems” in Hong Kong. Wang Huning was likely appointed to lay the groundwork for Taiwan's unification by writing a unification strategy that replaces the “one country, two systems”. Meanwhile, General He Weidong's appointment in the CMC could signal an increased focus on military activity toward Taiwan.

The military response to Nancy Pelosi's visit in August is a likely indicator of what these actions may entail. There will likely be more “grey zone” activities such as military exercises, missile drills, economic coercion, and cyber (or disinformation) warfare. It is assessed that there will also be a shift in ideology in China's United Front work towards Taiwan and pro-unification propaganda.

Since the National Congress, China has held two military exercises around Taiwan in December and January, focusing on land strikes and sea assaults. Dozens of Chinese aircraft were detected with some crossing the median line of the Taiwan Strait. China will likely continue to conduct combat drills in Taiwan waters and attempt to cross the median line more frequently, aimed at creating a “new normal” in the Taiwan Strait. It is assessed that China has no intention of blocking trade routes because its trade volumes would also be affected if there were any transit restrictions. There should be a minimal impact on commercial vessels transiting the waters surrounding Taiwan, including the Taiwan Strait.

In the long run, what shape the new reunification policy or strategy might take and what consequences it might bring remain uncertain. For Taiwan, President Tsai has started the year by offering assistance to China to tackle its Covid-19 crisis while reiterating that cross-strait war is not an option to solve problems. However, Taiwan will hold a presidential election in January 2024 when President Tsai will retire after serving two four-year terms. However, it is unlikely that the new president will change the status quo in the self-governing democracy of 24 million. It is therefore likely that we should continue to look to Beijing for the next moves in any escalation.

### Additional services

The Risk Intelligence System provides clients with real-time intelligence and situational awareness that will assist in avoidance of threats for operations around the globe. Moreover, Risk Intelligence offers ship operators the possibility to purchase security intelligence for individual ports and terminals. Bespoke services such as vessel-specific or voyage-specific risk assessments can also help to determine and to mitigate persistent or emerging security threats and risks.

In addition, frequent webinars provide in-depth updates, mini masterclasses in situational awareness methodology, and analysis of current events. Schedules and registration forms can be found at [riskintelligence.eu/webinars](https://riskintelligence.eu/webinars).

# Update: Maritime dimensions of the war in Ukraine

## Situation on land

The war in Ukraine continues to influence the overall security environment in the Black Sea region. Fighting along several frontlines – mainly in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine – continues but strikes across Ukraine are also reported. Forces on both sides are undertaking various offensive and counter-offensive operations. However, weather conditions are currently affecting these operations.

## Black Sea

The north-western Black Sea near the Ukrainian and Crimean coasts is still assessed as a generally prohibited area of navigation by the Russian Navy. Russian officials announced that the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait are closed, although some vessels are transiting the area, likely with Russian permission. The operational status of the Ukrainian ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol remains disputed but according to Russian officials, both ports are open and operating. Ukrainian authorities have stated that they would remain closed until again under Ukrainian control. However, the ports have seen some traffic which is allegedly coordinated by Russia to transport stolen Ukrainian grain as well as metals and metallurgical products seized from Ukrainian territory, although verification of these reports is impossible. Ukrainian-controlled ports in the Black Sea remain officially closed, aside from the exports agreed as part of the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI).



*A joint civilian inspection team visiting a merchant ship. (Photo: OCHA/Levent Kulu)*

## Port operations / deal on grain exports

The parties of the BSGI have extended the agreement by another 120 days, starting on 19 November 2022. The current number of transits continues to be low, largely due to local weather conditions which has also caused delays to the inspection process.

The BSGI's purpose is to facilitate safe navigation for exports of grain, foodstuffs, and fertilizers from three Ukrainian ports (Odessa, Chornomorsk and Pivdennyi), excluding other maritime operations in these ports. All operations under the BSGI are coordinated by the Joint Coordination Centre (JCC) in Istanbul. Details on the current state of operations in Odessa, Chornomorsk and Pivdenny are unverified. Facilities supporting the BSGI are assessed as operational, though not at full capacity.

Concerns regarding threats from potentially drifting sea mines and wider concerns of collateral damage persists. Recent reports include incidents off both the Ukrainian and Bulgarian coasts. Furthermore, when Russia withdrew from participating in the implementation of the initiative in late October, reportedly due to an attack on Russian naval vessels in Sebastopol, concerns were raised regarding the future of the BSGI. The withdrawal was short-lived, with Russia rejoining a few days later. However, as the November extension includes no changes, Russia (or any of the other parties) could withdraw again in the future. Additionally, the BSGI includes no safeguards in the form of security guarantees for transits from any of the signing parties including no officially coordinated mine-clearing activities.

## Summary

The BSGI will continue to be affected by the war in Ukraine, where individual events can directly influence operations covered by the initiative. Reports involving sea mines have previously impacted maritime operations, similar incidents are to be expected. Seasonal weather conditions are known to impact shipping as well. Furthermore, with the presence of naval assets in the area and ongoing shelling around Kherson, north-west of Crimea, operations in the area have to take into account the possibility of collateral damage, even if the warring parties have no intention of causing direct harm to merchant ships in transit. Civilian infrastructure throughout Ukraine continues to be targeted, resulting in power cuts – though some outages are planned, to conserve power – which in turn has previously halted some port operations. Risk Intelligence strongly recommends a full risk assessment prior to any transit, and to update contingency plans accordingly.

The overall security environment including any strikes against ports or, potentially, against vessels, as well as the possible dangers from sea mines, and any possible collateral damage, will continue to influence commercial operations. The impact of future Ukrainian and Russian offensive operations on land is uncertain and should be monitored closely on an ongoing basis.

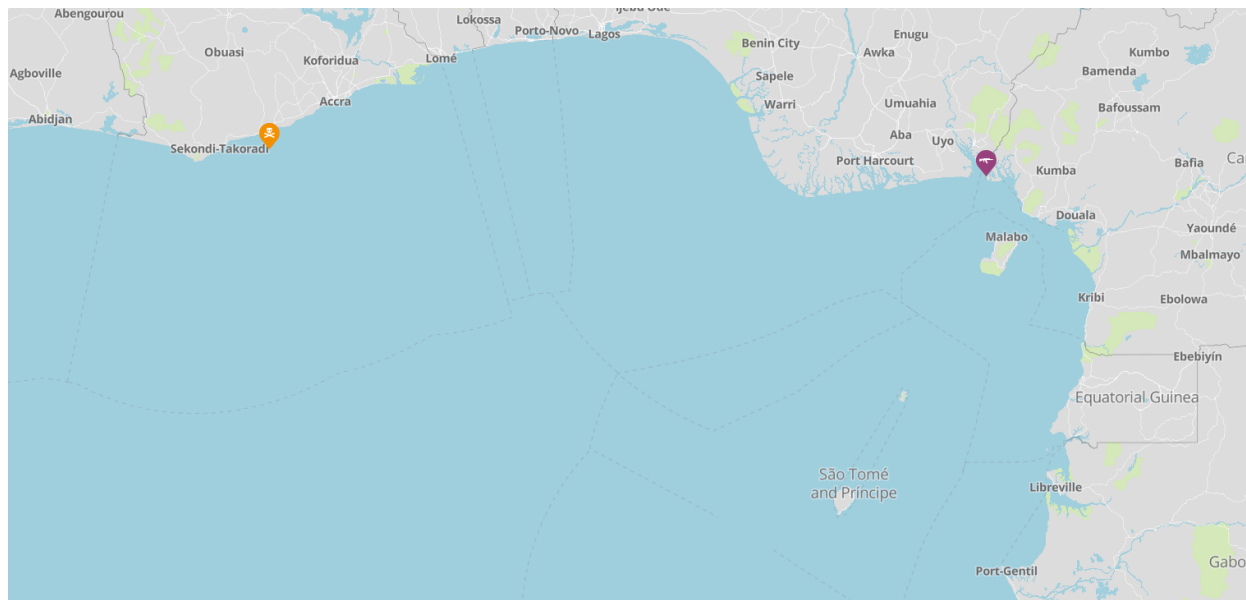
## Further information

Risk Intelligence provides a weekly threat assessment for ports in the northern part of the Black Sea, covering both the operational and security situation. In addition, the report provides a concise overview of the current situation in Ukraine and the northern Black Sea, including constantly updated information regarding the status of the Black Sea Grain Initiative.



## West Africa

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 31 January 2023, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



## Incidents

### 10 January – Military base attacked

Insurgency Bakassi peninsula Cameroon

### 25 January – Product tanker SEACLIPPER boarded

Failed theft Takoradi anchorage Ghana 23:50 LT/UTC

## Assessment

### Nigeria / Niger Delta

Attackers operating off the southern and eastern Niger Delta remain the most significant threat in the Gulf of Guinea, even though very few security incidents have been reported over the past 18 months. Indications of the lingering threat were boardings involving a bulk carrier around 280 nautical miles off Lome in April and an offshore supply vessel off Escravos in October. In December, two ships were attacked south of Bioko island. Attacks against local vessels in or near the Niger Delta are also frequent, highlighting that the security situation remains fragile.

Crude oil theft and sales of illegally refined petroleum products have reached record levels in 2022. Such operations have provided constant revenues to organised criminal groups for many years yet profit margins have significantly increased since early 2021. Nigerian production and export levels fell to historic lows in mid-2022. While the situation has slightly improved in recent

months, revenue shortfalls are very likely to remain a strategic challenge for Nigeria's new government after the upcoming elections.

The presidential election is scheduled for 25 February. It is possible that a run-off between the two leading candidates will be required for the first time. There are also other close contests in elections for seats on the national and state-level assemblies as well as for governorships, meaning that the security situation is very likely to remain tense until at least mid-March when most of these elections are supposed to be concluded.



*The frontrunners in Nigeria's presidential election: Bola Tinubu, Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi (left to right) (Photo: Premium Times)*

The situation in the Niger Delta is very likely to be a primary concern for the new government. Revenues from oil and gas exports remain crucial as diversification of the economy has made only very little progress in recent years. With the government budget already heavily reliant on debt, short-term improvements in the security situation to boost export levels will be crucial. However, the strategy of "paying off" militant or criminal groups through security contracts in a bid to limit the amount of stolen oil has been tried in the past. Such attempts have not led to sustainable improvements of the situation but maritime operators should closely monitor any developments as these may lead to another uptick in attacks against merchant ships at sea.

Ongoing conflict in the anglophone part of Cameroon – along the border with Nigeria – is another lingering concern. Separatist groups in both countries maintain close links while security forces lack resources and cross-border coordination. Merchant ships in international trade are very unlikely to be targeted, but the situation has a significant impact on the private sector, particularly on oil companies operating in Nigeria and Cameroon. An attack against a Cameroonian military outpost on the Bakassi peninsula in January underlined the potential level of violence.

Successful boardings of merchant ships remain 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 and boarded. Weather conditions during the dry season – which will last until about March – generally allow for operations of small boats deep offshore. Attacks may therefore take place at significant distances from the coastline.

For ongoing operations, it remains important to ensure crew vigilance and consider measures such as those recommended in *BMP West Africa* to mitigate risks. This may include the use of security escort vessels off Nigeria. These can be offered by several dozens of companies which have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Nigerian Navy; the most recent version of this document was officially published in June 2021. The MoU remains the legal basis for additional security measures contracted in Nigeria and employed in the Nigerian maritime domain (territorial waters and EEZ). MoU signatories are authorised to provide escort vessels partly manned by naval personnel which cannot operate outside of Nigeria's EEZ.

It is also vital to thoroughly analyse security-related incidents. Some attacks over the past 18 months involved vessels which are solely trading within the region. Such cases are unlikely to be genuine pirate attacks against random targets. Overall, it is important to recognise piracy as merely one symptom of insecurity at sea which is closely linked to other organised criminal activities.

In Nigeria, attacks against local shipping or military patrols highlight that kidnappings and other criminal activities remain a security threat which may affect merchant ships again in the coming months. Main hotspots for organised crime are Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers and Akwa Ibom states.

## Forecast

The threat level in the coming month remains severe off the Niger Delta, despite limited incidents in recent months. Attacks are possible at distances of up to 250 nm from the coastline, particularly with favourable weather conditions during the current dry season which is set to last until about March. All ship types may be targeted.

Inshore attacks against local passenger and cargo vessels or against military detachments remain a threat across the Niger Delta, underlined by various incidents in recent months. Such attacks are not a direct concern for merchant ships in international trade, but crews must be vigilant during river transits in the Niger Delta.

## Gulf of Guinea (Côte d'Ivoire to Gabon) / West Africa (Senegal to Angola)

One incident was reported across the region in January, targeting an anchored ship off Takoradi in Ghana. The vessel was boarded by several men who escaped when they were discovered by the crew. It was later discovered that they had tried to steal some items but these could be recovered by the crew.

Overall, the low number of security incidents in recent months remains noteworthy. At the same time, limitations of law enforcement at sea have been underlined by three incidents that were all reported as hijackings in November and December respectively. Moreover, the current situation is to a large degree related to unique circumstances in Nigeria rather than to developments in other coastal countries.

The lack of financial and human resources will remain a concern for navies across the region in the coming years. Maritime operators should therefore not interpret a limited number of incidents as a significant reduction of the threat level. Criminal activities at sea remain closely linked. Illegal fishing, smuggling as well as other illicit operations have even increased in the recent past. Alleged pirate attacks may also be a cover for other types of illicit activities.

## Forecast

Throughout the 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 have access to the necessary infrastructure to protect hostages from security forces and rival gangs during ransom negotiations. The threat level for vessel hijackings is assessed as low across the region.

In West and Central Africa as a whole, perpetrators may try to board berthed or anchored vessels. Around most anchorages, the amount of small boat traffic is virtually impossible to control for security agencies. Threat levels vary between different ports, but perpetrators will generally escape upon discovery.

## Western Indian Ocean

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 31 January 2023, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



## Incidents

There were no incidents reported in the region during the month.

## Assessment

### Southern Red Sea – Gulf of Aden

This area covers shipping routes which are potentially affected by the conflict and political dynamics in Yemen. Threats for vessels in transit are generally low; piracy is highly unlikely in the southern Red Sea and unlikely in the Gulf of Aden. Vessels should expect encounters with local traffic, which might be fishermen, traders, or smugglers (or all three). Skiffs will often pass close to merchant ships and the crew are likely to be armed.

Yemeni and Eritrean coastguard forces are active in this area, particularly farther south in the Hanish Islands area where the maritime borders of Yemen and Eritrea meet, and there have been fishing disputes in the past. These forces might not be immediately recognisable as law/border enforcement. There were no incidents in January, following on from two likely cases of mistaken identity in December and November respectively.

There have been no further Houthi drone attacks after oil facilities in southern Yemen had been targeted in October and November. There has been no major escalation of the conflict in Yemen despite fighting ongoing on land. Talks are taking place in Oman which likely explains the restraint on both sides.

There is some optimism and UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg has foreshadowed “a potential step change in the trajectory of this eight-year-conflict” but warned that without a formal agreement, “the state of uncertainty will persist, and with it an increasing risk of military escalation and a return to full-blown conflict.” Until there is such an agreement, further maritime attacks cannot be ruled out.

## Forecast

Unless there is a new ceasefire in Yemen, Houthi attacks could resume, including the use of drones, missiles and WBIEDs against ports (likely) or tanker vessels linked to Saudi Arabia (less likely). There have been no recent incidents but the focus of Houthi attacks in the Gulf of Aden does not rule out similar operations in the Red Sea.

For most vessels in the Red Sea, however, the threat is lower. Attacks against transiting vessels are currently not expected, particularly for ships that are using the established transit corridors from the Bab el Mandeb northwards.

## Gulf of Oman – Persian Gulf

There were no security incidents in this area during January to suggest that Iran has launched a new campaign against merchant shipping following the drone attack against the PACIFIC ZIRCON in November 2022. Iran continued constabulary operations in its own waters to combat fuel smuggling, but these are unrelated to regular merchant traffic.

Iranian media reported a drone strike made against an ammunition factory in Isfahan in central Iran on 28 January. It is currently unclear who was behind the attack, but it is indicative of the general state of relations in the region where tit-for-tat strikes might be carried out by a variety of actors to demonstrate capabilities and intentions. If Iran determines that Israel was behind the strike then retaliation – which could affect maritime targets – is likely.

The US Navy intercepted a fishing vessel carrying small arms in the Gulf of Oman that was heading for Yemen. The conflict there is still driving regional arms smuggling and the seizure was typical of regular interceptions. This trafficking is normally conducted by local craft on well-established routes.



*US Navy personnel transferring seized weapons in the Gulf of Oman (Source: US Navy)*

## Forecast

There are various permutations that might increase (or decrease) the threat to certain vessel profiles, such as port calls, cargo, flag, or ownership. At this time, the threat is higher for vessels linked to Israel, highlighted by the drone attack against the PACIFIC ZIRCON.

Limited operations against vessels are a tactic that Iran can use in response to actions taken by Israel or other states in the region. Operations linked to Iran have included the use of limpet mines and drones/missiles to target vessels. Future incidents are likely.

## Somali Basin and wider Indian Ocean

No maritime incidents took place in this area during January. As in other areas, ships in transit should expect encounters with local traffic, which might be fishermen, traders, or smugglers (or all three). Skiffs will often pass close to merchant ships and the crew are likely to be armed, even if they are not showing their weapons to avoid attracting attention from armed guards that might provoke an incident. Such encounters are more likely in the Gulf of Aden, as noted above.

There have been no confirmed pirate attacks since 2019 and any piracy incidents would be opportunistic, although remain possible in an area out to around 300 nm from the Somali coast – primarily in the Gulf of Aden and east of Puntland. Nonetheless, the overall threat continues to decline. The shipping industry has removed its formal high-risk area (HRA) designation for the Indian Ocean on 1 January 2023.



*Somali National Army forces in operation against al-Shabab (Source: SNA/Twitter)*

In Somalia, the government continued its military campaign against al-Shabab in January. The militant group remains a serious threat. It is still apparently able to operate effectively in Mogadishu despite the crackdown. There were more IED attacks in the city in January than in the each of the previous 12 months.

The government has reported several military successes, and the US also conducted at least one drone strike in January in support of Somali forces. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether there will be a dramatic improvement in security. There are, however, few maritime dimensions to this fighting and this is unlikely to change at least in the short term.

## Forecast

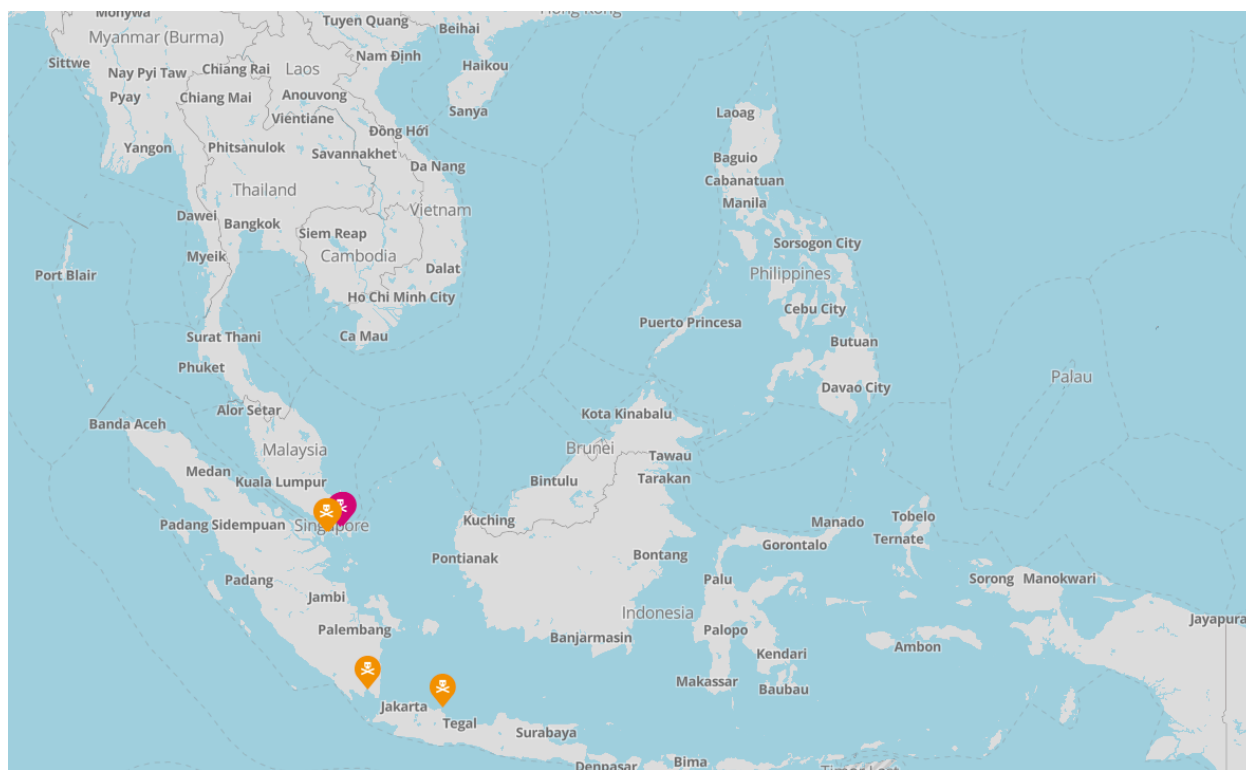
Local craft of various kinds are very likely to be encountered in this area, potentially difficult to identify. Proximity to the Yemeni coast increases the possibility of encounters with militia forces, but such encounters should not be expected. Most vessels in transit are unlikely to be affected; pirate attacks are unlikely.

Proximity to the Somali coast can also lead to encounters with local militias or criminal operations but the threat is low. Military operations continue in Somalia and there will be ongoing fighting, particularly in southern areas, as the government continues its offensive against al-Shabab. There is only a limited maritime dimension to these operations which are not expected to affect merchant ships in transit.



## South East Asia

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 31 January 2023, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



## Incidents

### **04 January – Barge LKH 9889 boarded**

Theft Singapore Strait TSS 13:55 LT (05:55 UTC)

### **05 January – Barge SINHIN 4 boarded**

Theft Singapore Strait TSS 14:55 LT (06:55 UTC)

### **05 January – Barge SINHIN 4 boarded**

Theft Singapore Strait TSS 16:50 LT (08:50 UTC)

### **20 January – Bulk carrier S CAPE boarded**

Failed robbery Singapore Strait TSS 01:15 LT (17:15 UTC on 19 January)

### **26 January – Product tanker CETO boarded**

Failed theft Balongan anchorage Indonesia 02:15 LT (19:15 UTC on 25 January)

### **27 January – Bulk carrier boarded**

Failed theft Singapore Strait TSS 23:35 LT (15:35 UTC)

### **29 January – Bulk carrier LBC GREEN boarded**

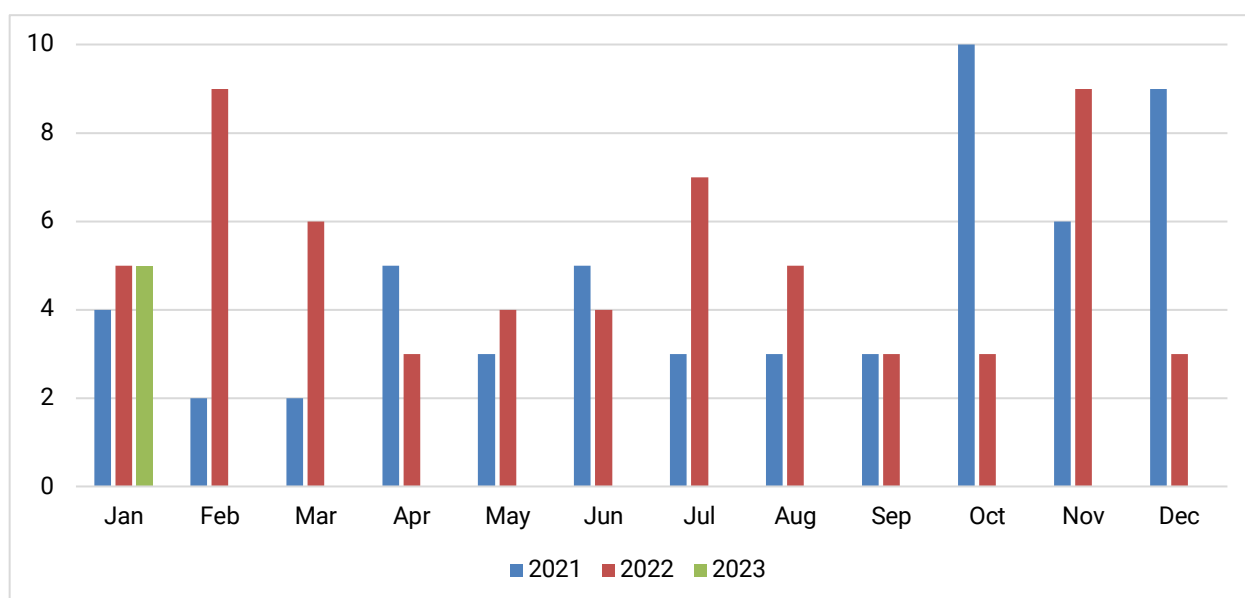
Failed theft Panjang anchorage Indonesia 04:00 LT (21:00 UTC on 28 January)

## Assessment

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

Thieves and armed robbers operating in the Singapore Strait remain the most significant threat for merchant vessels within these areas, even though more than half of the boardings result with no property stolen.

Seven incidents were recorded in South East Asia during January, five of which took place in the Singapore Strait. Vessels targeted included three bulk carriers, three barges and one tanker. The incidents in the Singapore Strait all involved vessels underway, while one bulk carrier and one tanker were boarded at Indonesian anchorages. The incidents were categorised as three thefts and four boardings in which nothing was stolen.



*Number of maritime security incidents in the Singapore and Malacca Straits per month in 2021, 2022 and 2023 to date (Source: Risk Intelligence System)*

Over the past 12 months, 62% percent of all reported incidents in the region have taken place in the Singapore Strait. One incident on the Singapore Strait in January involved perpetrators armed with knives. As the borders of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore intersect in the Singapore Strait, perpetrators appear to take advantage of jurisdictional challenges there, improving their ability to escape.

Within the same period, there have been 61 incidents in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore (SOMS). Of these, 55 occurred in the Singapore Strait and six in the Malacca Strait. Of the total, 34 involved bulk carriers, 11 involved tankers, while fifteen involved barges and other craft in tow. The outlier involved an OSV. None involved container vessels.

Overall, 92% of all SOMS incidents targeted vessels underway, all but one in the Singapore Strait. The remaining five incidents all took place at Belawan, four at the anchorage and one targeting a vessel alongside. During the past twelve months, about half of the incidents have taken place

in the western waters of the Singapore Strait between the islands of Karimun and Batam. As coastal authorities have increased patrols, response times are generally quick when incidents are reported. While most perpetrators are armed with knives or machetes, they will rarely attack the crew unless provoked.

For the wider region, incidents typically encountered are non-violent boardings at anchorages as illustrated the boardings east of Tanjung Priok and in the Sunda Strait.

A notable incident in 2022 was the hijacking of a bunker barge and the theft of its fuel cargo off south-east Sulawesi in January. That incident, together with the unsolved theft of cargo from the OCEAN PRIDE in October 2021, illustrates that locally-trading tankers remain vulnerable to hijackings, whilst larger tankers in international trade have not been targeted by hijackers in recent years. These tanker incidents – together with the illegal sale of fuel from a tug in the Johor Strait in March – further show that black market trading of fuel at sea continues.

Perpetrators usually board vessels at night and target supplies and engine spares while avoiding crew. Areas with the highest frequency of criminal activity during the past twelve months include the Singapore Strait, anchorages along the western Makassar Strait, and at Batangas, Belawan, Sandakan and Tanjung Priok. Boardings of vessels alongside are less frequent.

Aside from the Singapore Strait, boardings of vessels underway have also occurred in the Natuna Sea and the southern South China Sea. Most incidents in the region involve bulk carriers and tankers, with very few involving container vessels. Boardings of oil rigs are rare, although one such incident did take place in the South China Sea off Bintulu in May 2022.

Moreover, five incidents during the past 12 months illustrate that crew members may be injured during attacks. In addition to the most recent incident in December, perpetrators tied up and threatened a seafarer at gunpoint while collecting engine spares during an incident in July 2022 in the Singapore Strait. Crew alertness is generally an important deterrent.

The aforementioned hijacking off Sulawesi in January is the only confirmed hijacking for cargo theft in the region since 2017. In 2018, there was one failed incident which had the markings of a product theft attempt involving the LEE BO off Mersing, Malaysia in the South China Sea. The arrests of gang leaders behind hijackings had effectively suppressed such crimes, despite occasional incidents involving small tankers and barges which are locally owned, managed and trading solely in the region. As prices increase, it is likely that illegal fuel sales in the South China Sea, Sulu/Celebes Seas and the Singapore Strait will increase. This increases the vulnerability of smaller tankers to potential hijackings, similar to the period from 2011 to 2017.

As a result of intensified military operations in the southern Philippines and eastern Malaysia, the kidnap for ransom activity of the Abu Sayyaf Group and its affiliates has been significantly suppressed. No cargo vessels have experienced kidnapping incidents in the Sulu/Celebes Seas area since February 2017. Subsequently only tugs and fishing trawlers were targeted, with the last incident recorded in January 2020.

## Forecast

In the coming month, the threat of boardings of vessels that are underway or anchored for the purposes of theft or armed robbery is moderate. Higher threat locations include the Singapore Strait, anchorages along the western Makassar Strait, and anchorages at Batangas, Belawan, Sandakan and Tanjung Priok. Lower threat levels are present 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 assessed as moderate for locally trading small tankers. These operations are infrequent due to effective law enforcement. The threat that internationally-trading tankers will be hijacked for cargo theft is assessed as low.

The threat of kidnappings of crew from cargo vessels on international trading routes in the Sulu and Celebes Seas is assessed as low, particularly while navigating within the designated transit corridors. Fishing trawlers remain the most vulnerable craft with respect to ASG-related kidnap for ransom operations, although other small craft, tugs, ferries and small locally-trading merchant cargo vessels may also be vulnerable.

## 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.