



# Countering maritime piracy

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## Introduction

As our world continues to be increasingly globalized and international trade becomes an essential part of many countries' economies, maritime piracy will continue to become an increasing threat to the stability of such trade. Concerning amounts of pirate attacks have been recorded in 2022, most of them in the Gulf of Guinea, Gulf of Aden and in Southeast Asia. In these regions, piracy has had a major impact on the stability of the regions, and the vessels that cross them. Crew members are abducted and seized for ransom, cargo is stolen, vessels destroyed, and local populations are even recruited to help in the attacks. Not only that but pirates have been known to gain control of significant portions of harbors along the coasts, limiting the capability for ships to dock and increasing gang violence, insecurity, and crime for settlements nearby.

Piracy has a significant impact on trade and the stability of nations. Some of the most unstable regions in the world such as the gulfs of Aden and Guinea are their main areas of operations, leading to more nationwide instability in countries that are already deeply affected by war and economic recessions. The strategic points where these straits lie also prevent much of the essential trade to pass through, such as food and fuel. It is crucial for nations to find a solution to this issue, to prevent maritime piracy from causing further harm to the economy, but also ensuring the safety of crew members and civilians who are facing life threatening situations at the hands of pirates.

## Definition of Key Terms

### **Maritime Piracy**

The plundering, hijacking, or detention of a ship in international waters.

### **Gulf**

A portion of an ocean or sea partly enclosed by land.

**Frigate**

A sailing warship (of any size) built for speed and maneuverability.

**Trade routes**

A trade route is a logistical network identified as a series of pathways and stoppages used for the commercial transport of cargo.

**Hijack**

The crime of using force or threats to unlawfully take control of an aircraft, ship, car.

**Vessel**

A large boat or ship.

**Illegal Boarding**

An illegal boarding is when pirates have boarded a ship but have not taken control of the vessel

**Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC)**

International shipping company operating worldwide in the cargo and commercial transport

## General Overview

One of the major threats that maritime piracy poses on the world is its impact on international trade. Today, the continuous hijacking of boats in certain areas have resulted in multiple crew members being taken hostage by pirates and asking for ransom demands but also in the financial deficit of some shipping companies, who must pay the high costs of insurance and repair, ultimately affecting the economy of the nation. Although piracy may be very dangerous, issues are generally recorded in the same geographical areas, which have become pirate hotspots such as the Gulf of Guinea, Gulf of Aden, and Southeast Asia.

### Gulf of Guinea

Currently rising to one of the main centers of maritime piracy, the Gulf of Guinea presents an ideal setting for boat hijacking. Rich in oil and natural gas, the region has caught the interest of larger nations such as the EU and its member states and the USA. The gulf also holds some of the largest

harbors in Africa, with cities such as Lagos and Abidjan being large centers for trade and development for the continent. Maritime commerce between the surrounding African states and the EU has increased over the past few years, especially when the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the energy crisis that ensued in Europe increased the demand for external sources of energy. Increase in trade however has also resulted in an increase in piracy. Local pirates seize the opportunity to hijack these boats from which they can seize the precious cargo; oil, natural gas and even minerals, and sell them to gangs or the black market in surrounding nations such as Nigeria, Togo, Benin and Côte d'Ivoire. Hijacking a boat also means that ransom demands can be made, and pirates generally hold hostage the European/American born crew members, in hopes that their governments or family members will pay the sum. This has proved successful many times for pirates and ransom demands and the amounts demanded have skyrocketed in the past 5 years. Violent acts of piracy have also spread in the region, with fighting sometimes spilling over land, as different pirate groups try to defend their own territory. The desire to join pirate gangs has also increased in the region, with local populations having sometimes little choice but to enter the gangs to sustain their lifestyle and find enough money for them and their relatives. However, measures have been put in place recently, and countries around the gulf have tried to tackle the issue. Western nations have offered regular joint training with the local coast guards, such as the joint military operation between the French marines and the Nigerian army and the Danish and Spanish governments have provided funds to the Nigerian government. European frigates currently patrol the area and Nigeria has increased its maritime defense budget in an effort to protect its coasts from pirate attacks. These efforts have proven useful, and the spike previously seen has, since 2020, slightly decreased, giving hope for the region that it can recover from the spread of piracy within the gulf and its trade routes.

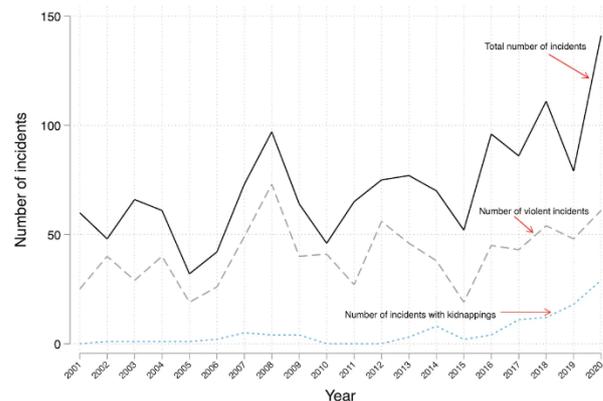


Figure 1: Piracy and robbery on ships in the Gulf of Guinea, The Washington Post,

### Gulf of Aden

Historically one of the most dangerous regions in terms of maritime piracy, the Gulf of Aden has seen some of the worst incidents in modern piracy seen in its waters. To begin, the gulf is strategically located at the mouth of the Red Sea and by extent the Suez Canal and plays a major role in the maritime commerce between Asia and Europe. In 2021 it was estimated that around

21 000 ships pass through the gulf annually, making it one of the busiest maritime trade routes in the world. Studies also estimate that another 11% of all seaborne petroleum passes through the Gulf of Aden, due to its proximity to oil rich states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman, and the gateway to richer MEDCs in Europe. It is no surprise that the gulf has become such an important center for piracy, as it is located at the heart of some of the most important trade routes in the world. Not only that, economic and social instability in neighboring countries such as Somalia and Yemen have led to the increase in piracy around the area, as citizens desperately try to find a way to earn enough money. Many locals are known to have been forced to join pirate ranks however some of the most affected by this pirate activity are fishermen. Pirate vessels generally target the fishermen's boats when they cannot find other more attractive targets. They can also be subject to violent random attacks, leading their boats and provisions to be stolen by pirates. Fishermen also count in the ranks of those most probable of joining piracy related activity, due to the poor financial income and the need for more money. The height of piracy related activities came in the early 2000 to 2010s, with numerous hijackings of cargo boats in the area recorded but also attacks on commercial vessels. One of the most famous incidents of pirate hijacking came with the French luxury yacht *Le Ponant* in 2008, where all civilians and crew members on board were captured and held for ransom. Other commercial yachts have been seized after this incident, such as the yacht *Carré d'As IV*, captured by Somali pirates a few months later, who demanded over 1 million dollars in ransom for the hostages and the release of pirates captured by French special forces while rescuing the victims of the attack on *Le Ponant*. Maritime piracy has also slowed down the provisioning of humanitarian aid in the region, with millions of locals being left without food or water that were located on captured vessels belonging to the World Food Program and other NGOs. Despite this notorious reputation, current governments from both sides of the gulf have installed further regulations to prevent the spread of piracy. Powerful trading nations such as the EU member states, the USA, UK and China have also provided assistance by ensuring regular military patrols and constructing naval military bases to secure trade notably in countries such as Djibouti. However, this has not prevented piracy from resurging in the area, and with current issues such as the Yemeni civil war and the humanitarian crisis in Somalia have led more and more pirate groups to form in this ever so unstable region.



Figure 2: Map of the Gulf of Aden and its surrounding states, WorldMaps, 2016



## Southeast Asia

Finally, the last region deeply affected by the effects of maritime piracy is Southeast Asia, especially in the areas of the Malacca and Singapore straits. According to reports, among the 37 incidents recorded worldwide in the first three months of 2022, 41 per cent of them occurred in Southeast Asian waters. This shows how drastic and unexpected the increase in piracy in the region these past few months has been; and the adaptability of piracy to foster in trade routes long thought to be safe. It is also vital for the straits in Southeast Asia to be kept secure, as they offer one of the only easy access gateways from East Asia and the South China Sea to Europe. Every year, thousands of boats pass through the straits of Malacca and Singapore, carrying infinite supplies of oil, goods, and precious minerals. The extreme narrowness of the straits makes it an attractive target for pirates, who know the boats will have no choice but to pass through. On May 28, 2014, a group of 10 pirates hijacked the ship *Orapin 4* transporting large amounts of fuel from Singapore to Borneo in Indonesia. This was the sixth similar incident in 3 months, and over the years pirate attacks in the area have grown exponentially. Countries in the area have tried to prevent the spread of piracy in the region, especially Malaysia with the strengthening of coast guards and development of task forces collaborating with the local military. However, neighboring countries refuse to continue spending large amounts of money in order to tackle the issue, making it difficult for there to be a significant decrease in piracy in the area, due to the lack of action from local authorities. Foreign powers have also not taken action to solve the issue, as piracy in the area developed quicker than expected. Now, the area is rising to become the prime spot for all maritime pirate attacks in the world. This could have a significant impact on commerce between nations, especially with powerful trading nations such as China and Japan, who heavily rely on the security of these straits, to be able to continue trade between them and large trading nations in the West. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade And Development (UNCTAD), as of January 1, 2022, two of the top three ship-owning countries, in terms of both dead-weight tonnage and of commercial value, included China and Japan. Both countries have based a large part of their economies on maritime exports, notably goods produced in factories in the nations, and the repeated incidents in the Southeast Asian straits could have potentially devastating effects on large scale international trade.

All around the world piracy has affected the development of international maritime commerce, shipping costs, and the number of incidents recorded each year is on the rise. As new target regions develop around strategic trade routes and geographically prosperous areas, hijacks and ransom demands have made the certain strategic routes unreliable, possibly affecting to great lengths the

stability of economies reliant on such trade. Countering maritime piracy will also have long term benefits for the maritime industry, such as creating a secure environment for crew members and all those working in the maritime business, reduce crime in local villages near pirate hotspots and ensure the reliable flow of maritime commerce. It is also important for nations that are less involved in maritime trade to also take action in preventing a rise in maritime insecurity as piracy could potentially affect large scale international trade and the global economy.

### Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event
17 <sup>th</sup> of March 1958	Creation of the IMO
10 <sup>th</sup> of December 1982	The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is adopted, criminalizing maritime piracy
4 <sup>th</sup> April 2008	Hijacking of the French commercial luxury yacht <i>Le Ponant</i>
2 <sup>nd</sup> September 2008	Yacht <i>Carré d'As IV</i> is hijacked just a few months after <i>Le Ponant</i>
4 <sup>th</sup> April 2009	Cargo ship <i>Maersk Alabama</i> is hijacked by Somali pirates
25 <sup>th</sup> April 2009	Vessel <i>MSC Melody</i> is captured near Somalia
18 <sup>th</sup> April 2010	Cargo ship MV <i>Prantalay</i> is captured by Somali pirates, all crew members were captured
24 <sup>th</sup> of May 2014	The cargo boat <i>Orapin 4</i> is hijacked between Singapore and Borneo
1 <sup>st</sup> of November 2019	Start of the joint military operation between the French and Nigerian marines in the Gulf of Guinea

### Major Parties Involved

#### European Union (EU)

The European Union has also played a major role when countering maritime piracy, due to its great influence on maritime trade and its relationships with other countries. EU member states are very reliant on resources in certain hotspots for pirates such as oil and natural gas in the Gulf of Guinea, which have become an increasingly precious resource for European states due to the current conflict in Ukraine. Trade with other major powers such as China and India are also vital, and

maritime vessels are a key to transport many goods sold in the EU. Therefore, it has actively participated in relieving key straits and areas of pirate attacks, by financially helping local states to invest in their coast guard but also through joint military operations conducted independently by certain member states, such as France in Nigeria or Spain.

### **International Maritime Bureau**

The international maritime bureau also plays a key role in preventing maritime piracy, as the NGO aims to relieve trade routes of maritime dangers and localize threats. They have issued several reports on incidents including the hijacking of ships by pirate gangs and place them on a map. This has helped many governments and organizations wishing to know if their vessels have been captured. The IMB also creates many projects dedicated to the stop of piracy in local areas, especially with local populations and governments.

### **People's Republic of China**

The People's Republic of China has always played a major role in maritime piracy, being a leading nation in terms of maritime exports and trade. Over the past few years China has been concerned with the increased amounts of piracy, especially in Southeast Asia and the Gulf of Aden which are both essential parts of trade routes separating China from powerful trade partners such as Europe and India. China has actively participated in the relief of pirates, especially off the Gulf of Aden which has included many special military operations aimed at targeting prominent pirate gangs and securing the route for commercial and cargo vessels to pass. China has also used its foreign military bases nearby such as in Djibouti as a center from which operations can be launched, which have increased safety and security in the region. For China, trade is extremely important and if this flow is disturbed could have massive international consequences on the goods imported in countries heavily reliant on Chinese merchandise.

### **Nigeria**

Nigeria is one of the largest countries in Africa. With the biggest population and one of the strongest economies of the continent, its important position as one of the leading countries in Africa has largely been compromised by the incessant rise of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, threatening the stability of the important trading routes between its largest city Lagos and richer countries in Europe. However, export of resources, especially oil, are a key sector to the economy, and could possibly

affect thousands of civilians if put at risk. Some of Nigeria's ports are also used as bases for pirates, which have raised crime and insecurity along the coasts and in nearby settlements to the harbors used as a base. This has led the country to invest in new frigates for the coast guard, and even participated in a joint military training with the French naval army in 2019. This has helped to significantly reduce the impact of piracy attacks in Nigeria and in the gulf.

## Indonesia

Indonesia is a large state composed of thousands of islands in the South Pacific. Boats passing through Southeast Asia must pass through the nation, as it lies near both the Singapore and Malacca straits. This makes it a very attractive location for pirates, who use the number of small islands to their advantage, both used as their bases and ways to corner vessels and hijack them. The government of Indonesia has expressed its concern over the growing issue of maritime piracy within its borders, however, has never wished to take any actions to prevent it, or further invest in the prevention of maritime piracy. This policy is very different to the one adopted by nations close by such as Malaysia who has invested a lot of money in developing a program aimed at countering maritime piracy in collaboration with its military, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA). The Indonesian government has repeatedly justified its lack of response to the issue by reminding all nations that there are high upfront costs in building a system strong enough to repel pirates while also having genuine positive outcomes. The poor structural stability and coordination between the island of the country has also been an issue brought by the government, and that the lack of a strong and unified system concerning maritime management would make it hard to implement an effective solution to the problem.

## Somalia

Strategically lying on the Southern shore of the Gulf of Aden as well as the Indian Ocean, Somalia has become over the years an epicenter for global maritime piracy. Having recently suffered a devastating civil war and currently experiencing droughts and shortages in food due to the increasing temperature in the region, the current state of Somalia has led maritime piracy to thrive. As more and more locals are falling under the poverty line, piracy has attracted many who were hoping to find enough money to survive. The peak of Somali piracy happened in the 2000s to 2010s, where multiple cargo ships as well as commercial vessels were captured by pirates. To prevent piracy from happening, the government of Somalia has already collaborated with the international community and foreign military, in an effort to secure the trade routes around the Gulf of Aden and decrease crime levels in the country. However, the general lack of resources and control from the

government have made it hard to completely eradicate piracy, and today certain major pirate gangs are resurging as tensions rise again in this unstable region.

## IMO

Since its creation in 1958, the IMO's mission has always been to encourage member states to collectively discuss ways to improve safety at sea on a global level. Over the years, this specialized agency of the United Nations has been able to successfully create a series of regulations to increase the security of trade routes including preventing maritime piracy and criminalizing the act to hijack a ship. The IMO has therefore been invested in preventing the spread of piracy around the world, through increased talk between nations to develop specific regulations which could free the trade routes and guarantee the safety of vessels passing through strategic straits but also collaborating with local governments to find solutions that could work with the resources provided.

## Possible Solutions

Although piracy acts on international trade routes have increased in the 21st century, possible solutions to resolve the issue at hand do exist and can be used to prevent the spread of such acts around the world and ensure the safety of vessels traveling through important trade routes and areas.

A first solution is to increase the number of local coast guards and maritime authorities in areas most affected by maritime piracy. This increase in security would most probably result in a decrease in piracy acts around the coasts, and prevent the development of armed gangs in harbors, especially in politically unstable areas. Today, many nations with close proximity to high maritime piracy areas rely on foreign aid to train and finance maritime security development programs and could potentially lead to a decrease in piracy in the area.

Another solution is to encourage governments to collaborate with NGOs and agencies specialized in the countering of maritime piracy, to secure relevant data on recent piracy acts and use the resources collected to locate where intervention is needed. This could help decrease the impact of maritime piracy on global trade, as today, many governments lack information on where pirates operate, making it more difficult to locate and prevent the hijacking of vessels in affected areas.

Finally, a last solution that could be implemented is the encouragement of prosecuting major pirate gang leaders that today, still run free. Due to their wide scale influence in certain neighboring

nations, governments have failed to find and prosecute such leaders. If this was to be implemented, it could possibly prevent the influence of maritime piracy on locals, who are told to believe that piracy is not a criminal act.

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