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Securing International Maritime Trade

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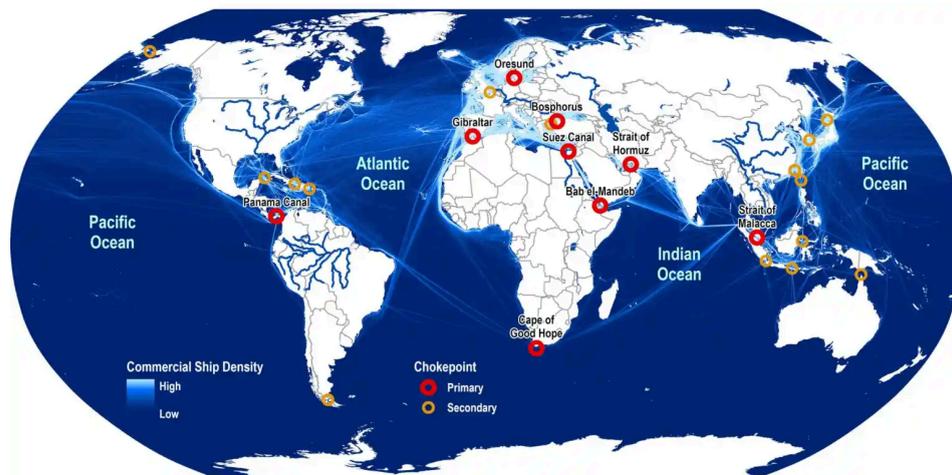
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Introduction

80% of international trade is transported via sea, it forms the backbone of the global economy, however maritime trade is fragile. Via piracy, disruption of chokepoints and conflicts, seafaring trade can be slowed down, interrupted, or stopped in its entirety. Nowadays these issues are more visible than ever. With conflict in the Red Sea, tensions rising over the Panama Canal and pressure in the South China Sea due to disputes over territorial waters. Therefore it is of utmost importance that the global society keeps the maritime trade safe.

In recent history the world has noticed how quickly trade can be impacted when the container ship Ever Given got stuck in the Suez Canal in march of 2021, this created a congestion that lasted 6 days. This traffic jam at sea held up 400 ships, disrupted the global supply chain and delayed billions of dollars worth of trade. These events, even though they may look minor, can cause major issues in global maritime trade. That's why it's imperative that global maritime trade is kept safe by the member states of the United Nations.



Definition of key terms

Cybersecurity

The practice of protecting people, data and systems from cyber attacks.

Cyber Warfare

The use of computer technology to disrupt the activities of a state or an organisation. It's often aimed at political, financial or military goals.

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

A maritime zone that spans 200 nautical miles from a nation's coastline where a nation has the rights to exploit any marine resource found in that area (this includes wind or solar energy).

Maritime Chokepoint

A small naval passageway that connects two larger bodies of water like the Suez Canal.

Piracy

As stated in article 101 of the UNCLOS, acts of illegal violence, robbery or detention, committed by the crew of one ship against the crew of another ship for personal gain outside of the jurisdiction of any state. Also known as robbery at sea.

Territorial waters

The sovereign waters that (partially) surround a nation. The territorial waters of a nation stretch to 12 nautical miles from the coastline.

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)

A legally binding United Nations document which established the laws of the sea.

General Overview

Maritime trade is the backbone of the international economy, as stated during the introduction, 80% of the trade volume is transported via sea. All nations on earth rely on maritime trade to provide crucial products such as: food, raw materials, oil and many other manufactured products like vehicles and clothes. Maritime trade routes are therefore some of the most important pieces in the puzzle that is our world. As a result, security issues with maritime trade have ripple effects that affect all nations and businesses.

The Threat Of Piracy

One of the largest threats to global shipping is *piracy*. Piracy has been a threat that has proven to be hard to squash given the asymmetrical nature of the problem. Three major areas where piracy remains a threat are the Gulf of Aden, The Gulf of Guinea and The Strait of Malacca. Piracy in the Gulf of Aden peaked during the early 2000's, in 2008 the United Nations Security Council authorised repressing piracy using "any means necessary" in resolution 1816. This caused a gradual decline in piracy until 2023-2024 when it surged again but not on the same scale as earlier. Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea had its peak in 2019, with a 50% rise in incidents. Incidents have declined since then but it still remains a risky area with 21 attacks in 2025. The area with the most pirate activity by a long shot is the Strait of Malacca, with 80 registered attacks in 2025, almost doubling the number of attacks in 2024. 2025 marks the year with the highest number of pirate attacks in the Strait of Malacca in 19 years. This is worrying as 60% of global trade flows through the Strait of Malacca.

Vulnerable Chokepoints

Which is another challenge to securing global maritime trade, *the vulnerability of chokepoints*. The most important chokepoints are, the Panama Canal, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Gibraltar and the Strait of Malacca. These narrow passages are easily compromised and when that happens the entire world feels it. The world supply chain is built on all of these small links working and when one of them is disrupted it takes weeks if not months to get everything back in order. A great example of this is the closure of the Suez canal for eight years due to hostilities between Israel and Egypt from 1967 till 1975. This closing of the canal cost shipping companies 11.1 billion US dollars (adjusted for inflation) yearly only from having to sail longer routes. That's not even taking into account the hit the local economy felt because the amount of travel to those places dropped significantly.

Conflicts And Regional Tensions

The last point which has a substantial effect on the safety and security of global international maritime trade is *conflicts and regional tensions*. Conflicts can target international shipping to draw attention to their cause, to cause awareness in people. It can also make shipping lanes through waters near a conflict dangerous or unnavigable, for instance right now when the United States is attacking small vessels near Venezuela but in doing so, creating a hostile zone in the Caribbean near Venezuela as any oil ship coming near

Venezuela can get seized by the United States Navy. Regional tensions can impact shipping as nations try to gain more territorial waters and expand their EEZ but in doing so encroaches on other nations territorial waters and EEZ. A great example of this is the situation in the South China Sea, where China is trying to legitimize claims over a large portion of the South China Sea by making artificial islands to expand their territory.

Cyberwarfare In Shipping

Another issue that has risen to be a viable threat in today's digital day and age is *cyberwarfare*, modern ships have many interconnected systems with things like radars and advanced gps systems, ports also rely heavily on advanced systems to operate the machinery and monitor cargo. These all be shut down with cyberattacks like ransomware and disrupt the operations of an entire port for weeks on end. Such as what happened in 2017 to APM Terminals a subsidiary of Maersk Shipping during a large cyberattack in Ukraine, ransomware had spread via a company affiliated to APM Terminals and disrupted port activity costing roughly 300 million in damages. *Cybersecurity* is therefore another aspect to keeping global maritime trade secure.

Major parties involved

China

One of the largest countries in global maritime trade, it's the world's biggest exporter. China contributes a lot to securing global maritime safety, they invest a lot in ports globally and have increased naval presence in key areas such as the Red Sea. China depends on secure maritime routes to export its products.

International Maritime Organisation (IMO)

The IMO is a specialized agency within the United Nations that is responsible for the safety and security of global shipping. The organisation coordinates efforts to improve the safety and protection of international shipping. The IMO also sets global safety standards.

The United Nations Security Council

The security organ of the United Nations, this is the organisation which authorizes the use of physical force to end conflicts, for instance in 2008 with the excessive piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

The United States Of America

The United States is another big exporter and importer which exudes a great amount of influence over the world's shipping lanes. The USA has many naval forces deployed worldwide to keep the shipping lanes safe and protected. It participates in many operations to protect volatile areas at sea such as the Red Sea.

The European Union

The European Union is a political and economic alliance of nations in Europe, focused on fostering trade and welfare of its citizens. To achieve that goal the EU needs the global shipping lanes to remain safe, it has previously launched operation Atalanta, an operation to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.

Timeline of events

- 1948 March 6th** The International Maritime Organisation is established in Geneva.
- 1967 June 5th** The start of the Six Day War between Israel, Egypt and Syria. This conflict would lead to the closure of the Suez Canal for 8 years until 1975.
- 1982 December 10th** The UNCLOS, United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea is adopted with 170 parties signing the document.
- 1989 December 20th** The United States Launch Operation Just Cause, closing the Panama Canal for a short time.
- 2004 July 1st** The ISPS code (The International Ship and Port Facility Security Code) is adopted, laying down a set of measures meant to enhance the safety and security of ships and port facilities.
- 2008 June 2nd** The United Nations security council passes resolution 1816 which authorizes combatting piracy in the territorial waters of Somalia using any means necessary.
- 2013 June 25th** Signing of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct by many nations in West and Central Africa aiming to decrease piracy in the Gulf Of Guinea.
- 2021 March 23rd** The cargo ship Ever Given got stuck in the Suez Canal. The ship blocked the canal entirely, the ship was stuck for 6 days until March 29th.
- 2023 October 19th** The Red Sea crisis begins after the Houthi rebels in Yemen fire missiles at Israel. They later start firing missiles and drones at innocent cargo ships, leading to military intervention with a US-led operation called Operation Prosperity Guardian and a EU-led reaction called Operation Aspides

Relevant UN treaties and events

United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea: Establishes an international law for naval traffic and activities, 10th December 1982.

International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (ISPS Code): An IMO code establishing a security framework to enhance the security of ships and ports globally, 12th December 2002

United Nations Security Council Res 1816: A resolution by the United Nations Security Council which authorizes combatting piracy within Somalia's territorial waters, 2nd June 2008.

Yaoundé Code Of Conduct: A Code by countries in West and Central Africa to combat piracy in the Gulf Of Guinea, 25th June 2013.

A/RES/78/69; Oceans and the law of the sea: General Assembly resolution, affirms the importance of international cooperation to ensure safe and secure seas, 5th December 2023.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Combined Task Force 151

Combined Task Force 151 was an effort from the EU Operation Atalanta and NATO Operation Ocean Shield. It was set up in 2009 to counter and prevent pirate attacks in the Gulf Of Aden. Task Force 151 reduced pirate attacks in the area by a significant amount, it also showed great naval coordination between participating nations, however it failed to address the root cause of the issue, that being the situation on the mainland.

Yaoundé Code of Conduct

The Yaoundé Code Of Conduct is a code written in 2013 by a number of countries in West Africa near the Gulf Of Guinea, another area where piracy is prevalent. It states that signatories will cooperate to the fullest extent within the resources that the signatory has access to. They will cooperate to combat piracy by policing coastal waters and apprehending vessels that are suspected of committing piracy. While piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is declining, issues like insufficient funding and it not being a legally binding document prevent the code from reaching its full potential.

Project Deep Blue

Project Deep Blue is an operation by the Nigerian navy to reduce piracy in Nigerian territorial waters. Using patrol vessels, aircraft and drones, piracy in the region has been reduced. It has raised concerns that the scope of the operation is too small because it is only in Nigerian waters, therefore it lacks regional cooperation.

Malacca Strait Patrols

A security initiative by Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia to secure the Strait of Malacca. Started in 2004, it saw early success, with it being stripped of its 'war risk' status by Lloyds List in 2006. However there has been a surge in incidents in the Strait of Malacca as incidents rose from 43 in 2024 to 80 in 2025. The unsuccessfulness of this operation mainly stems from Malaysia and Indonesia being reluctant to allow foreign nations (mainly the USA) in their territorial waters. Another aspect is the sheer amount of ships that travel through the Strait of Malacca yearly, and the size of the strait make it difficult to combat piracy effectively.

Possible solutions

UN Security Cooperation

With many of these issues affecting the entire world, it only makes sense that the United Nations should have an organisation which is authorized to use violence to combat piracy on a global scale. This organisation will lay the framework for combatting piracy and tackle its root causes. This will increase the ties between countries dealing with piracy in the same area while also being backed by a coalition which has the material to deal with the threats at sea and land.

New Legal Framework

The most vulnerable places on the high seas right now, are the chokepoints such as the Bab El Mandeb strait and the strait of Hormuz. Such critical sea passages could be put under a new international zone regarding the aspect of marine security and safety. This would include new laws to secure these passageways in such a way that no nation could suddenly close one off. This can be done by marking the waters as United Nations territory, giving the UN a proactive role in keeping the global economy safe.

Establishing online maritime security

The online systems used by ships, ports and shipping companies can at any time be attacked via a cyberattack. For that reason a forum for solutions and information sharing should be set up. It should allow for all nations or coalitions in sub-forums to share their experiences in dealing with cybersecurity threats. The forum would play an important role in alerting other nations about prominent hacker groups or the cyber-programms of other nations to make sure that global maritime trade stays safe and protected. The inclusion of sub-forums is absolutely necessary because of course, not all nations want to share their strategies with other states.

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