

Vessel boardings and geopolitics dominate Asian maritime security



Risk Intelligence examines security incidents and concerns in Asian waters in the second quarter of 2024.

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Judging from reports published during the second quarter, one might assume that the greatest maritime security concerns for operators of the merchant fleet in Asia are centred around the South China Sea's Saint Thomas Shoal and the Taiwan Strait.

While the Chinese military forces do conduct significant military exercises along the Taiwanese coast while the Chinese Coast Guard continues its provocations aimed at the Philippines Navy, to date neither activity has resulted with significant consequences for merchant shipping plying these waters. On the

other hand, opportunistic armed robbers and thieves have maintained their focus on the profits to be gained from stealing vessels' equipment and spare parts in areas farther to the south and west.

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Risk Intelligence, as part of its daily security incident analysis and monitoring operations, tallied a total of 22 reported vessel boardings in Asian waters during the second quarter, with half of these taking place along the Singapore Strait. In a distant second place in terms of the number of vessel boardings is Chittagong, Bangladesh, where two thefts and one inconsequential boarding took place at the anchorage. Dumai with two boardings trailed Chittagong, the site of one theft and one inconsequential boarding at the anchorage, while armed robberies, thefts and inconsequential boardings were also recorded at Vung Tau, Manila, Belawan and Balikpapan.

Chittagong's second place standing behind the Singapore Strait has drawn attention amongst stakeholders, including ReCAAP which in June issued a special report that compared the single reported vessel boarding in Bangladeshi waters during 2023 with nine reported boardings between 01 January and 31 May this year. While the dramatic nine-fold increase is cause for concern, this year's decline in the number of incidents from seven in Q1 to three in Q2 may be grounds for cautious optimism.

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It is also worthy to note that when the theft of property from vessels is promptly reported to the Bangladeshi authorities, they have an admirable record of apprehending the perpetrators and returning the stolen items.

Like all categories of crime, whether on land or at sea, there is a significant degree of under reporting, therefore the tally of known boardings does not represent the actual crime level within any straits, anchorage areas or ports in

Asia. When assessing such statistics, it is also important to bear in mind that the generic term 'piracy' is now applied to a wide range of crimes, from vessel hijackings and seafarer kidnappings to armed robberies and thefts, a practice that can be misleading.

Similarly, the accuracy of the respective statistics hinges on the severity of the crimes, with statistics for hijackings and kidnappings being far more accurate than statistics for armed robberies and thefts. A vessel operator is far more motivated to report a hijacking or kidnapping during which the fate of vessels and seafarers is at stake as compared to a theft of engine spare parts, for obvious reasons. With that in mind, there is high confidence that an absence of reports of hijackings and kidnappings in Asia reflects an actual absence of such crimes during Q2, while the number of reports of armed robberies and thefts tallied in the same period is unlikely to reflect the true scope of these less significant yet still serious crimes.

Not all vessel types are targeted by criminals in Asia. There have been no recorded incidents involving cruise ships, and no container vessels have recently been targeted while navigating the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. Bulk carriers continue to be the most frequently targeted ships, in particular when reducing speed to transit the Singapore Strait, followed by tankers and barges. Vessels with low freeboard such as OSVs and heavy lift vessels, both offering easy access to perpetrators on sampans, also remain vulnerable.

As mentioned above, the area with the highest frequency of vessel boardings continues to be the Singapore Strait, with 50% of the boardings in the second quarter taking place within the strait's recognised International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) boundaries. Here nine of the 11 incidents involved vessels underway, while two involved ships situated at anchorages off Batam. Further illustrating the strait's position as the primary area of armed robberies and thefts, June 2024 was the first month since May 2021 during which all reported maritime security incidents in Southeast Asia took place within the boundaries of the Singapore Strait.

As has been the case for several years regarding the Singapore Strait, bulk carriers are most often targeted, followed by tankers and barges. In Q2, seven of the 11 incidents involved bulk carriers, with the remainder involving one heavy lift vessel, an OSV and two barges, from which thieves seek scrap metal cargo.

Despite the frequency of Singapore Strait boardings, in most cases the crew is unharmed, while the perpetrators focus on taking spare parts and equipment that they can sell onshore. In a marked improvement from previous years, at this time merchant shipping in Asia is not facing more significant consequences stemming from hijackings or kidnappings.

Maritime security concerns in Asia are not limited to the aforementioned geopolitical activities in the South China Sea and [piracy](#) in the broader sense. While merchant ships navigate these waters they are surrounded by a significant level of migrant smuggling with a dark fleet seeking to operate under the radar, and drug and contraband smuggling. Currently, however, these activities have not had significant impact on merchant ships, although monitoring this activity remains necessary in light of potential future consequences.

One example of consequences relates to the dark fleet. In Asia large tankers transporting sanctioned oil cargoes have sought to disguise their activities by using the names and particulars of innocent traders in AIS broadcasts, with implications for the operators of the vessels subject to such identity theft. Smaller vessels illegally buying, selling and storing fuel comprise another dark fleet. Conventional cargo vessels are rarely impacted by their operations, except when duped into purchasing fuel from such rogue traders.

The widespread smuggling at sea in Asia has not had significant impact on the merchant fleet as the crime syndicates involved primarily move their contraband on small boats, thereby circumventing conventional ports, although there are occasional concealments discovered in containerised cargo. Illegal movements of migrants and refugees is also done on small boats, so far without the consequences similar to what has been seen in the Mediterranean.

As is true on all the world's waters, awareness of the potential threats amongst vessel operators and crew is the best defence in mitigating all potential consequences, whether great or small. While the threat levels in Asia are not as significant as those in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, the significance and nature of the threats do change, and therefore require continued attention.

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