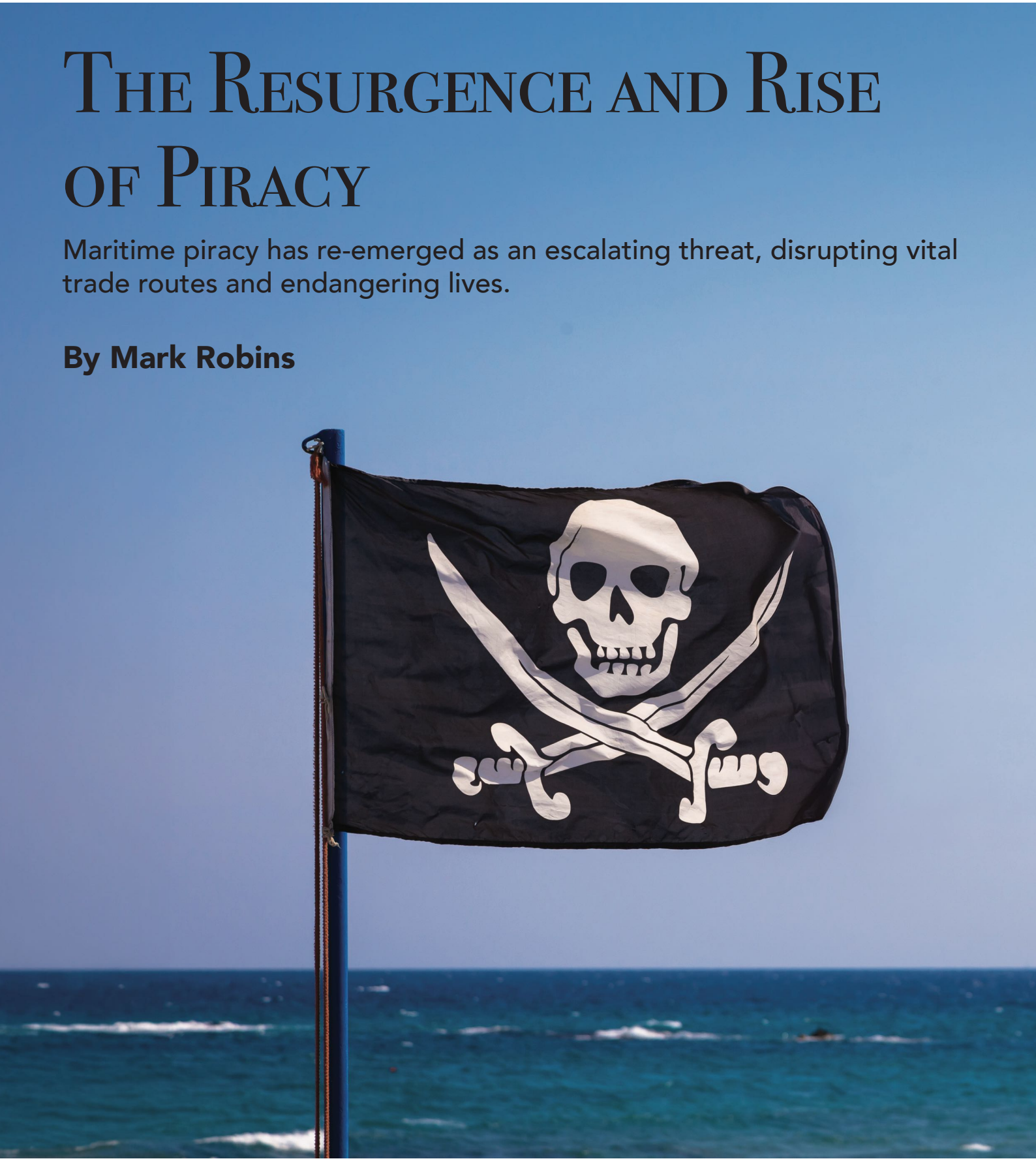
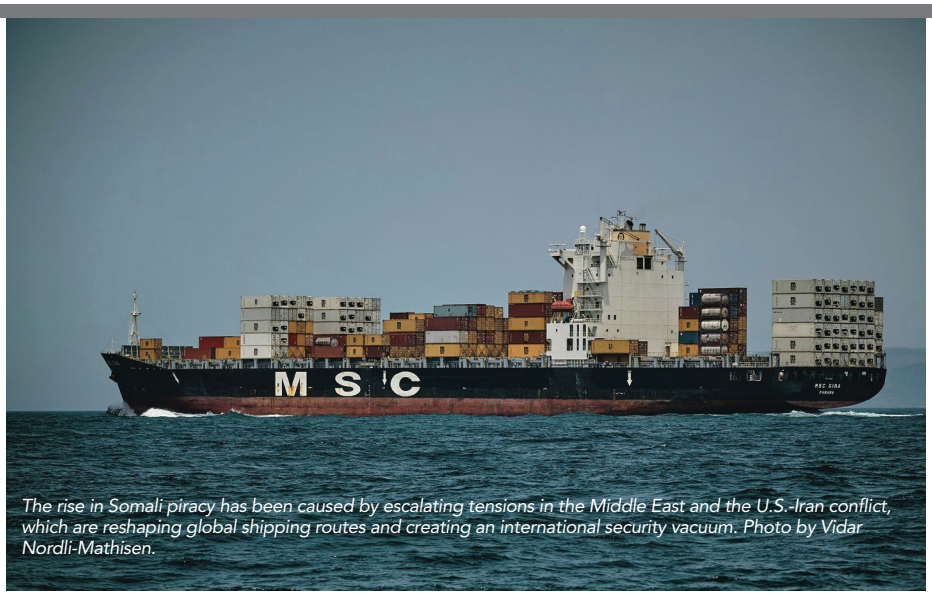
The Resurgence and Rise of Piracy

Maritime piracy has re-emerged as an escalating threat, disrupting vital trade routes and endangering lives.

By Mark Robins





The rise in Somali piracy has been caused by escalating tensions in the Middle East and the U.S.-Iran conflict, which are reshaping global shipping routes and creating an international security vacuum. Photo by Vidar Nordli-Mathisen.

Obviously, it's evolved into a lot more than walking the plank, a search for gold doubloon and Johnny Depp. Modern piracy is a major international concern and after a relative calm in which the world thought it had been neutralized, this threat has reared its ugly head again.

Maritime piracy is defined in international law primarily through Article 101 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). According to this provision, piracy consists of illegal acts of violence, detention, or depredation committed for private ends by the crew or passengers of a private vessel and directed against another ship or aircraft on the high seas or in a place outside the jurisdiction of any state. Piracy (hijacking, hostage-taking, theft) in the world's shipping lanes can lead to delays and disruptions in supply chains, produce financial losses, endanger personnel, damage critical equipment, and increase both overall transportation costs and market uncertainty.

A False Sense of Peace

According to a paper published by Oceans Beyond Piracy titled "Human Cost of Maritime Piracy, 2012," for much of the 2010s, "Somali piracy was seen as the epitome of maritime insecurity. At its height in 2011, Somali groups launched 237 attacks, holding more than 700 hostages at once and extracting ransoms estimated at $146 million." According to a reference article by Oxford Academic titled "Piracy and Maritime Security in Africa," the combination of naval patrols, armed guards on ships, and capacity-building initiatives largely suppressed this threat by 2017.

However, the perceived end of Somali piracy was misleading. The Somali Basin is moving toward being designated a high-risk area.

The United Kingdom-based International Chamber of Commerce's (ICC) International Maritime Bureau (IMB) has documented this rise. The IMB's Piracy Reporting Centre (PRC) operates 24 hours a day to receive reports, issue alerts, liaise with authorities to get timely responses to assistance and support seafarer safety. The PRC has noted a resurgence of Somali piracy, highlighting the continued risks facing seafarers. It reported 51 incidents for the period of January through September 2026, with 36 vessels boarded, eight hijacked, four fired upon and three attempted boardings. In 86% of incidents, perpetrators successfully gained access to the vessel. Violence against crew members increased with 105 crew members affected, compared to 72 in the same period for 2025.

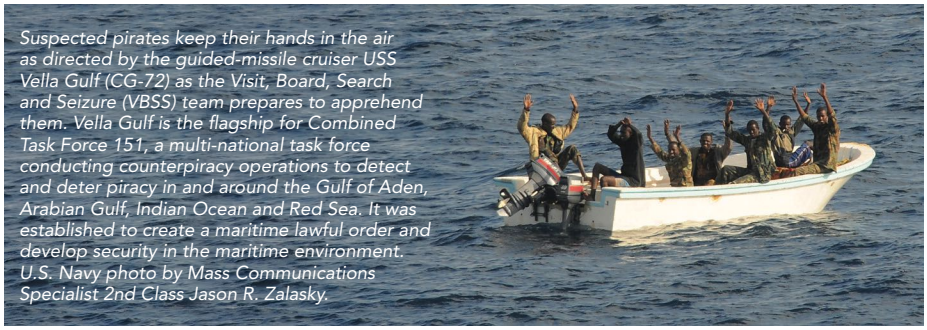
Thankfully, most hijacked vessels were released with the crew reported safe. But this unfortunate increase is impossible to ignore. On July 17, 2026, seven armed Somali pirates hijacked a Tanzanian-flagged chemical and oil products tanker, MT ASANA, roughly 75 miles off the coast of Mukalla. The latest confrontation came after the cargo ship MV Lutuf was seized on August 17, 2026, off Jiifle, on the Puntland coast.

The threat is increasing dramatically due to an emerging network of allies between Al-Shabaab, the Houthis and Somali pirates. These groups have left the Somali government incapable of addressing the piracy issue effectively.

IMB director Michael Howlett says, "The recent uptick in Somali piracy activity is a reminder that the threat remains. Incidents this year have also shown adherence to Best Management Practices (BMP) recommendations remains one of the most effective ways to deter hijacking attempts and protect crews. Continued vigilance is essential to safeguarding seafarers and the vital trade routes on which the global economy depends."

Resurgence Reasons

Tensions and political instability in Somalia, a severe Somali humanitarian crisis and weakened maritime deterrence have contributed to the resurgence. Also, most believe the rise in Somali piracy has been caused by escalating tensions in the Middle East and the U.S.-Iran conflict, which are reshaping global shipping routes and creating an international security vacuum. The Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint through which roughly 20% of global oil, gas, and raw material exports pass, has seen significant disruptions amid this



Suspected pirates keep their hands in the air as directed by the guided-missile cruiser USS Vella Gulf (CG-72) as the Visit, Board, Search and Seizure (VBSS) team prepares to apprehend them. Vella Gulf is the flagship for Combined Task Force 151, a multi-national task force conducting counterpiracy operations to detect and deter piracy in and around the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Gulf, Indian Ocean and Red Sea. It was established to create a maritime lawful order and develop security in the maritime environment. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communications Specialist 2nd Class Jason R. Zalasky.



The amphibious transport dock ship USS San Antonio transits the Gulf of Aden to serve as command ship for Combined Task Force 151. The task force conducts counter-piracy operations in and around the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and the Red Sea and was established to create a lawful maritime order and develop security in the maritime environment. Photo by MC3 John K. Hamilton.

conflict. Because of this, container ship transportation through the Suez Canal has significantly decreased with the hope of bypassing this hostile chokepoint.

Detouring ship traffic through the Cape of Good Hope adds roughly 3,500 nautical miles to a typical Asia-to-Europe voyage and has created an unexpected window of opportunity for Somali pirate networks. Thousands of slow-moving, heavily laden commercial vessels opting for the longer Cape of Good Hope route now sail closer to Somalia's unstable coastline. Pirate networks understand this and are seizing new opportunities to regroup after years of relative decline, according to maritime security analysts.

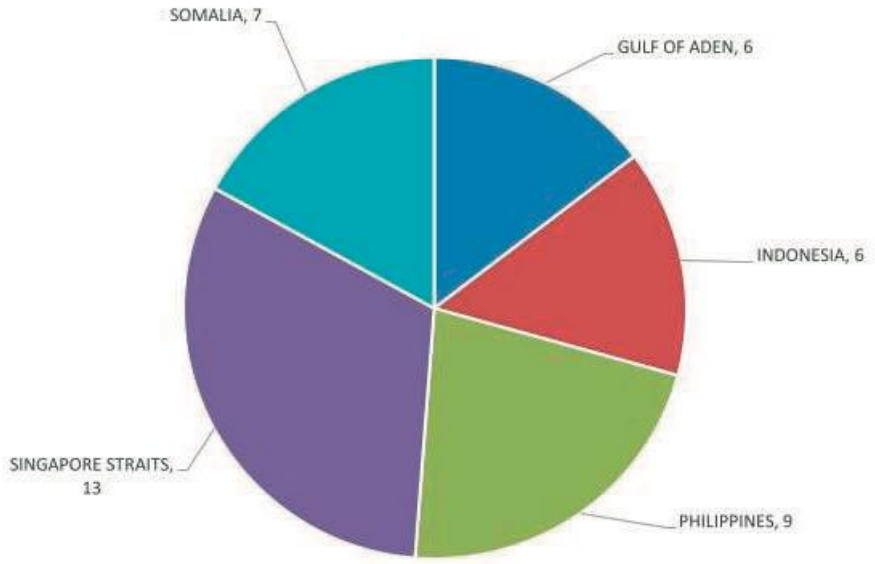
Also, international naval forces have redistributed assets to protect shipping lanes in the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, reducing security pressure on the western Indian Ocean. Naval patrols by international coalitions are not available as often to suppress pirate attacks and their deterrent has lessened. This lack of reinforcement has allowed pirate groups to prosper and mount attacks at an extended range.

Additionally, according to a report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Tackling Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing in Somalia," another reason for this piracy rise is Somali fishermen's frustration with foreign trawlers' overfishing. Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing off the Somali coast by foreign vessels from Iran, India and Pakistan, drain the Somalia economy of approximately USD 300 million yearly, detracting from economic growth, damaging marine resources, increasing local grievances and leaving civilians in desperation. Because of this, young Somalis see piracy as an economic lifeline, with pirate groups locally celebrated as generous employers whose multi-million-dollar ransoms fund whole communities.

Also, Somali piracy has resurfaced because international maritime security measures securing the Somali coast had been reduced due to fewer attacks. The EU Operation Atalanta (a European Union military operation established to deter, prevent and repress piracy and armed robbery off Somalia) and NATO's Operation Ocean Shield both scaled back commitments by the late 2010s. In March 2022, the UN Security Council

ICC- IMB Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships Report – January - September 2026

CHART A: The following five locations contributed 80% of the total 51 incidents reported in the period January – September 2026



There are numerous hotspots being monitored for piracy threats including the Gulf of Guinea and the Bangladesh and Singapore Straights. Chart courtesy of International Chamber of Commerce.

did not extend the resolution authorizing international navies to counter piracy, and in January 2023, the shipping industry removed the Indian Ocean High Risk Area designation.

Not only has piracy increased, but also the tools that pirates are using have increased in technology upgrades. Advanced weaponry, training and strategic intelligence have turned a once-rudimentary criminal act into a highly sophisticated one. Now equipped with GPS and satellite technologies, they can track commercial ships further into ocean regions. Reinvested pirate ransom money is funding large fishing boats (dhows) that can be used as mother ships to attack skiffs hundreds of nautical miles away from shore.

Other Locations

While Somalia may be the best known location for maritime piracy, there are other hotspots that are being monitored for this threat. The Gulf of Guinea stretches from Senegal to Angola, covering over 3,700 miles of coastline. Typical daily trade in the Gulf of Guinea involves 1,500 vessels traveling through the region's waters or in and out of nearly twenty commercial seaports.

On January 10, 2026, armed attackers abducted nine crew members from the fishing vessel IB Fish 7 in Gabonese waters. In February 2026, gunmen attacked and robbed fishing boats off the coast of Ghana. These incidents reflect the persistent threat of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, which some believe is an even more dangerous maritime region than the Somali coast. While Gabonese authorities have increased patrols, the proximity of the attack to the coast highlights the ongoing challenges of securing territorial waters against highly mobile and well-armed criminal networks. The Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency's (NIMASA) Deep Blue Project has implemented modern security assets, including advanced surveillance technology, drones, armored vehicles and specialized tactical equipment to strengthen maritime security and surveillance.

The Bangladesh and Singapore Straits also have long been a hotspot for maritime piracy. According to ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ISE), a total of 132 incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships (ARAS) were reported in Asia during 2025. This marks an increase of 23% in terms of the total number of incidents compared to 2024 (107 incidents). Of the 132 incidents, two were incidents of piracy that occurred on the high seas, and 130 were ARAS that occurred within internal, archipelagic and territorial waters of the coastal state. Notably, the number of incidents declined significantly during August to December 2025, after several arrests of perpetrators by the Indonesian authorities in July and August 2025. The arrests made by the authorities sent a strong message of deterrence to potential perpetrators.



An instructor from the Senegalese naval special forces, Forces Speciale de Mer (FSM), leads a subject control exercise during FSM-led Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) training during Obangame Express 2025. Obangame Express is one of three regional maritime exercises led by U.S. Sixth Fleet as part of a comprehensive strategy to provide collaborative opportunities to African forces and international partners to address maritime security concerns. U.S. Navy photo by Chief Mass Communication Specialist John Pearl.

Piracy Prevention

To ensure the shipping industry keeps abreast of the latest piracy and ARAS situation in Asia and to encourage timely reporting of incidents to the nearest coastal state, the Centre has been taking action. It has been promoting the use of the enhanced Mobile Application (ReCAAP) to facilitate the ease of incident reporting and information sharing, an Interactive Dashboard-ReCAAP Data Visualization Map and Panel (ReVAMP) for the industry to produce insights regarding the latest piracy and ARAS situation in areas of concern in Asia.

The International Maritime Organization's (IMO) mandate is to make trade and travel by sea as safe and secure as possible and will respond to this rise in piracy. The Organization has suitable regulations and guidance through the Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) and with input from the Organization's Facilitation Committee (FAL) and Legal Committee (LEG). Through capacity-building activities the IMO aims to enhance maritime security worldwide, with particular focus on developing countries. Also, to further quell this potential piracy boom, law enforcement is counting on multilateral cooperation, international laws and superior communication technologies to stop pirates in the courts, the ports and the banks, as well as on the high seas.