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Maritime Security: An Interview with Ioannis Chapsos

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Ioannis Chapsos discusses the concept of maritime security, the drivers behind maritime insecurity and the need to enhance maritime security governance.

Q What is maritime security?

Maritime security is relatively new as a concept with no universally accepted definition. Instead, it is defined by the threats it encapsulates, which obviously occur in or stem from the maritime domain. In this framework, we can identify two main aspects of maritime security.

The first includes the 'traditional' threats posed against states, such as maritime territorial disputes (e.g. South China Sea), geopolitical rivalries with maritime implications and dimensions (e.g. tanker seizures by Iran in the Straits of Hormuz), and naval blockades as part of UN sanctions, etc. The second strand looks into the 'contemporary' challenges to human security where non-state actors are primarily involved. This includes threats such as maritime terrorism, piracy, illegal fishing, arms/ drugs/ human trafficking and smuggling by sea and deliberate damage to the environment, to name just a few.

This lack of definition actually offers the flexibility to the 'end users' to include new emerging threats that are relevant to their security environment and define maritime security according to their (national or regional) needs and interests. The UK, for example, is the first state that identifies cyber-attacks in the maritime domain as one of the major risks in its 2014 National Strategy for Maritime Security. Similarly, the EU in its 2014 Maritime Security Strategy

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considers illegal archaeological research and pillage of archaeological objects as one of the key security risks and threats.

Maritime security is therefore quite broad and keeps expanding due to the dynamic nature of the maritime space and the criminal enterprises alike. What is important, though, is to understand maritime security not as individual siloes of different threats but rather as a comprehensive challenge where threats are interdependent and interacting in various forms and with different local or regional traits.

Q. What are the greatest threats facing maritime security at the moment?

It is difficult and equally risky to identify one threat from the above list as greater that another, for the simple reason that they occur with different intensity in different regions and with different implications for a variety of state and non-state actors.

Traditional territorial disputes and geopolitical rivalries, for example, cannot be overlooked as they always pose a significant threat to international peace and security. Maritime terrorism incidents might not be as frequent as their land based equivalent, but their implications are quite emphatic. Their aftermath is a reminder of the increasing involvement of non-state actors in international security and the needs for more security measures and precautions. Maritime piracy and armed robbery at sea (which occur primarily in SE Asia, the Gulf of Guinea and off Somalia) pose significant challenges to the blue economy, sustainable development and seafarers lives, given that 90% of international trade is conducted through the established primary and secondary sea-lanes in ships' hulls.

Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing is equally challenging to the blue economy and sustainable development. It accounts for approximately 15% of the annual catches globally with the annual cost estimated to be around $20 billion, while it simultaneously poses a significant risk to coastal communities - especially in developing countries - that rely on fish for their dietary requirements. IUU activities are also often associated with other forms of highly organised crimes, such as tax evasion, human trafficking, forced labour, etc. which inflict additional financial damage and human suffering, using the legitimate cover of the fishing industry for illegal activities.

The maritime space also enables intercontinental trafficking, including the smuggling of humans, arms, drugs or even wildlife. Migrant smuggling poses severe challenges to human security, with the unprecedented loss of human life in the Mediterranean being just one tragic example. Finally, the advancement of technology and the increasing reliance of ports and vessels on the internet also increase their vulnerability to cyber-attacks, which could prove to be catastrophic, especially against hybrid threats, where terrorist attacks can be launched against ports, utilising cyber vulnerabilities of security systems.

Q. How significant is natural resource scarcity in driving maritime insecurity?

Natural resources have been key drivers of insecurities and conflict throughout history. As such, their significance in the maritime space cannot be underplayed, given the wealth of living and non-living natural resources that lay offshore.

The vast majority of global oil and natural gas deposits, for example, exist offshore and the question of who has the legal rights to extract and exploit them can create significant tensions and maritime disputes. A very recent example is the tensions between Turkey and Cyprus in the East Mediterranean. However, the living resources are often overlooked. Fish provide for the livelihoods of billions of people worldwide, while it is essential for international food security as well as the environment in terms of marine biodiversity, sustainability of fish species and coral reefs, etc. The Cod wars of the past provide evidence on the significance of living natural resources in driving maritime insecurity. However, more recent focus on the potential of the blue economy as well as increased awareness and global concerns about the marine environment add even more gravity to them.

But we can by no means claim that natural resource scarcity is the ONLY driver of maritime insecurities, since other factors like the promise of financial rewards (as in piracy and other criminal enterprises) or political gains (as in maritime terrorism) are perceived as significant drivers too.

Q. How much global coordination and cooperation is there between states and international institutions regarding measures to address maritime insecurity?

The emergence of Somali piracy is a good example of international cooperation and coordination. In this case, several multinational naval task forces were deployed in the Western Indian Ocean's high-risk area and escorted transiting merchant vessels to provide security. In addition, regional information sharing centres have been established in order to improve response times and mobilise security mechanisms against pirate attacks. International agencies like Interpol

play a key role in addressing crimes like piracy and fisheries crime, while UN departments like the UNODC lead the campaigns against fisheries crimes, trafficking and smuggling of all kinds. Other examples could be the deployment of a multinational force under a UN mandate to enforce the naval blockade off Libya during the recent conflict, and the newly established international maritime security mission launched by the UK and the US to safeguard freedom of navigation and safe passage of merchant vessels through the Gulf of Oman.

Yet, although positive signs and initiatives do exist, there is still plenty of space for improvement. Maritime crimes are highly organised and transnational by nature so all countries should actively participate in cooperation initiatives, information sharing and capacity building in any way possible. It is difficult to comprehend, for example, why in SE Asia, Indonesia - the biggest archipelagic country in the world - and Malaysia, another coastal State adjacent to one of the most infested with piracy hot spots globally, are not signatories to the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against ships in Asia (ReCAAP).

International and Regional Organisations should make it their priority to lead and launch new initiatives to promote regional and international cooperation and raise awareness on the benefits of the blue economy that are at risk due to maritime insecurities. They must also stress that no state can deal with transnational threats alone. It should be instead a collective task to maximise the possibility of success.

Q. What role do private sector actors play in maritime security?

The private sector has a protagonist role in maritime security, as it can be identified within three different capacities: as a victim, a security provider and a crime perpetrator. Piracy and armed robbery at sea, for example, target primarily merchant vessels, and as such the shipping industry is the victim. In order to enhance its security and harden merchant ships' security against attacks from Somali pirates, the shipping industry started contracting private maritime security companies and deployed armed (or unarmed) teams onboard ships transiting the Western Indian Ocean's high-risk area. As such, the already existing and thriving private military and security industry expanded the spectrum of provided services offshore, with some success, claiming that no ship carrying an armed security team onboard has ever been hijacked (so far).

On the other hand, though, part of the fishing industry itself is the perpetrator of IUU fishing and associated crimes where different elements and 'branches' of those involved have to be highly organised within transnational criminal networks to make the crime(s) possible. Hence, coastal and flag states, as well as the private sector in general and the fishing industry in particular should be held accountable and responsible for the suppression of these crimes. There are also occasions where the private sector could be used for state-sponsored dubious and controversial activities such as fishing in disputed areas, terrorism, etc.

For all the above reasons, and given the prominent role(s) that the private sector holds in security in general and maritime security in particular, public-private initiatives and cooperation is essential for insecurities to be suppressed, better controls and tighter regulations to be introduced and even more importantly to be adequately implemented.

Q. How could global maritime security be strengthened?

Personally, I am convinced that the cornerstone for a robust maritime security foundation should be states' political stability. My research shows that state fragility and human insecurity ashore will most likely project maritime insecurities at sea, so that should be the starting point: to confine insecurities on land before they get seaborne.

Maritime security can also be strengthened by enhancing maritime security governance, by building the necessary capacities wherever they are mostly needed and by suppressing corruption at all levels and sectors. These in turn can be achieved only through international cooperation. There are different levels of jurisdiction in different maritime zones and coastal states have sovereign rights in their territorial waters.

Several developing states do not have the capacities to enforce the law in their territorial waters, so the international community should take the necessary steps to support them in order to improve, before they export (maritime) insecurity in either neighbouring states or the open seas. Furthermore, the oceans are part of the 'common goods' and it is responsibility of ALL states that enjoy these goods and benefit from international trade and the blue economy in general to follow the rule of law and enforce it. Hence, this can again be achieved through international cooperation and burden sharing.

All maritime security challenges are born, developed, sustained and nurtured on land. Whether it is ungoverned spaces that provide safe havens for pirate groups; ports where (illegal) fishing boats depart from and/ or land their catches; or locations where humans are trafficked or recruited for forced labour

purposes and ports where they are transported through. All these criminal groups are land based and that is where these crimes have to be addressed and stopped by enhancing law enforcement efforts ashore. In this framework, any international collaboration efforts and resources should not be only put into a witch-hunt for criminals around the globe's oceans, trying to treat the symptoms but instead focus on addressing the root causes of maritime insecurities on land.

Image credit: US Pacific Fleet/Flickr.

About the author

Dr Ioannis Chapsos is Assistant Professor of Maritime Security at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR), Coventry University. His latest research is focused on the links between illegal (IUU) fishing, fisheries crimes and transnational organised maritime crime in the fishing industry, as well as their implications on coastal communities, particularly in SE Asia (Indonesia).

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