

# **Making and breaking waves: The evolution of global maritime security thinking**

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## **1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The concept of maritime security has been around for decades. And it has continuously evolved. To understand current challenges and dilemmas for security at sea, it is useful to zoom out and take a perspective that is more distant from what appears to be the most present problems of today. We need to consider the broader context in which maritime security is situated and how we got to where we are right now. This is the objective of this short note.

I intend to firstly argue that by now maritime security is a major element in a broader political turn to the oceans. What has become known as the maritime security agenda emerges from the new political attention given to the oceans; a development that amounts to an ‘ocean revolution’. Secondly, I shall provide a brief reconstruction of the history of maritime security thinking. This gives us a history of the present – a trajectory of how thinking has evolved until today. I will show that the evolution of maritime security thought has seen four distinct waves. While in 2022 we are in the midst of the fourth wave, in my last section I shall raise the question of whether a fifth wave is on the horizon and what it might imply.

My distinct hope is that such an exercise in contextualization will be useful to provide orientation for the maritime security community but also an interesting short introduction for those new to the debate.

## **2. Maritime security and the ocean revolution in global politics**

The oceans have received unprecedented global political attention in recent years. In 2022 alone, seven global multi-lateral conference address challenges of global ocean governance. In formats such as the Our Oceans Conference or the UN Oceans Conference, the aim is to find global solutions, best practices, tools and funding mechanisms for how the oceans and marine life can be better protected, how marine resources can be used sustainably, and oceanic activity can be safeguarded. Problems such as the effects of climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, overfishing and illicit resource exploitation and realizing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals drive the agenda. A major shift in political attention has occurred that amounts to an ocean revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the ocean debates are focused on three paradigms: ‘blue economy’, ‘ocean health’, and, more recently, ‘blue justice’. Each of these stands for a particular way of thinking and governing the oceans and foregrounds issues such as exploitation, conservation, protection and justice differently. Maritime security is the fourth key paradigm in the ocean revolution. Although maritime security is often debated in separate formats and is not so well connected to the other debates, it is one of the major ways of how to think and govern the oceans and respond to the challenges the marine environment is facing.

Comparable to the other three ocean paradigms, maritime security has seen a remarkable evolution. It has developed from a marginal concern over local criminal activities at sea to a global high-level priority. This is perhaps best evidenced by an event that took place in autumn 2021. The UN Security Council held its first open debate on maritime security. At the meeting, heads of states discussed in the state of maritime security, how to approach it holistically, and how international institutions could be enhanced to deal with it.<sup>3</sup> Over the years, the majority of states and regional organizations have developed dedicated maritime security policies and strategies, engagement in international naval operations and investments in capacity building is substantial, and more recently new geostrategic thinking in the frame of the Indo-Pacific narrative has put maritime security in the center of attention.

There continues to be no commonly agreed definition of maritime security. Yet if we use events such as the UN Security Council debate as evidence, there is strong indication that actors agree on a core set of challenges linked to the term, and that agreement includes the US, European states, African states, Russia, India or China. Yet while there is commonality, there are also divergences. Different states and other actors put different emphasis on what is to be prioritized in maritime security.

From an analytical stand point, maritime security has three dimensions<sup>4</sup>: First, an inter-state dimension, which ranges from questions of power projection, the sea power discourse, to inter-state disputes over boundaries, territories and resources and grey zone warfare operations. Second, maritime terrorism; that is, threats from non-state actors with political objectives, which might attack ships or maritime installations; and thirdly, blue crime, that is threats from non-state actors that pursue private economic objectives and engage in activities such as piracy, smuggling or illicit fishing.

These three dimensions provide a common understanding of what is at stake in maritime security, but they also offer an analytical grid to investigate how priorities in maritime security differ. The next section draws on this grid to reconstruct the evolution of maritime security.

### **3. The evolution of maritime security**

I will argue that the evolution of maritime security is best captured in waves. These waves provide broader trends in thinking. While they are situated in time and to some degree follow upon each other, they also overlap and there are no clear breaking points. I distinguish between four of such waves and end with the question whether a fifth wave is on the horizon.

#### *Wave 1: Emergence: terrorism, pirates and the rise of holistic understandings*

The debates on security at sea quite obviously have a long history.<sup>5</sup> Much of this is a history of empires, naval hegemony and sea power. But it is also a history of marine safety, that is, the prevention of the loss of life at sea through accidents as well as one of negotiating the law of the sea. When maritime security emerged in the 1990s, it partially combined earlier sea power and marine safety thinking.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in reflecting the broader global trend of widening and deepening the concept of international security, the concept shifted emphasis.

In this first wave, threats from non-state actors were seen as the key problems of maritime security. Pirates, first in Southeast Asia, and then in Somalia undermined freedom of navigation and

threatened key trade routes. But also, the fear over maritime terrorism and the potential impact of an attack carried out by a shipping vessel that evolved after 2001 was a key driver of the debate.

This shift in thinking about security at sea is remarkable. In this new framing any kind of civil maritime activity is security relevant and potentially a threat. It is no longer just military vessels that require attention. Instead, all kinds of maritime activities come into focus as having security implications. The outcome of this period were naval operations to counter terrorist and pirate activities, measures to enhance port security, but also the first generation of Maritime Domain Awareness programmes that have the intention to know and understand maritime activity and the threats they might entail.

### *Wave 2: Consolidation: Maritime Security Strategies and the extension of scope*

A second wave incorporates an increasing consolidation of maritime security as a concept and way of framing security challenges at sea. Political actors increasingly understood the diversity of maritime security threats and see the need to develop joint responses. It was recognized that it is not enough to target a threat, such as piracy off the coast of Somalia, through dedicated naval operations, but also to conceive of the connections between threats and regions. Countries and regional organizations started to appreciate the complexity of maritime security and the challenge of interagency coordination.

The focus turned firmly to the full spectrum of blue crimes in this phase.<sup>7</sup> This implied more emphasis on illicit migration at sea, various expressions of smuggling, including narcotics, counterfeit goods or weapons, but also environmental crimes. Much attention in this phase is also paid to identify how maritime security as a new way of thinking about the sea should be organized and governed on national and regional level. The key outcomes of this wave are the conclusion of national and regional maritime security strategies. For instance, the EU, India, France, Spain or the UK publish such strategies between 2014 and 2015. Many of these strategies proposed new governance systems and installed novel coordination mechanisms for maritime security.

### *Wave 3: Expansion: MDA, Capacity Building and meeting the Blue Economy*

The third wave stands for a global expansion of such approaches. Security challenges at sea are globally seen through the lens of maritime security and tools such as maritime domain awareness, maritime security strategies, inter-agency coordination approaches become widely used across the globe.

There are now attempts to introduce and strengthen Maritime Domain Awareness across regions, drawing on pioneering centres such as the Information Fusion Center in Singapore.<sup>8</sup> Such centres were opened in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Drafting maritime security strategies has become a global practice, with several states in Africa and Southeast Asia starting such processes. A key driver for this global expansion has been substantial investments in capacity building.<sup>9</sup> Key international actors, in particular the United States, the European Union, Australia and different United Nations bodies have initiated large regional and national programmes to assist countries with weak maritime law enforcement capacities. This is done in the hope that countries could take full responsibility over their waters and future threats could be prevented this way. The growth of the UNODC's Global Maritime Crime Programme is a good indicator for this expansion. What started as a small prison

support programme in Kenya, quickly became a globally spanning enterprise with hundreds of staff providing capacity building around the world.<sup>10</sup>

In and through these engagements, an important development takes place. Maritime security meets the blue economy.<sup>11</sup> For many countries investments in maritime security only made sense when they discovered the discourse of the blue economy, that is, the idea that there are substantial economic growth and employment opportunities at stake. Through the blue economy, maritime security became more than a demand that global powers put on smaller states. Smaller countries started to recognise that protecting the oceans is linked to their economic futures.

The merging of maritime security and blue economy concerns also shifted priorities. Illicit fishing as an environmental and economic crime, but also as an issue that might facilitate overall maritime insecurity came to the fore. Compared to terrorism, piracy or smuggling, illicit fishing is however a much more contested issue. Controversies revolve around whether states or regional organizations can be held accountable for facilitating illicit fishing activities.<sup>12</sup> Throughout this wave, we see hence a global expansion of holistic maritime security thinking, the merger with the blue economy and the rise of illicit fishing as key priorities.

#### *Wave 4: Geopoliticization: The consequences of Indo-Pacific thinking*

While the third wave remains powerful, by 2022 another wave of maritime security thinking has become dominant. It is above all characterized by revisiting maritime security as a geopolitical problem and a return to foreground sea power discourses. It is no longer blue crime and maritime terrorism that is in the focus, but spheres of influence. Initially it was the question of how to cope with the rise of the Chinese navy and how to resolve the South China Sea dispute that set the agenda.

With the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a key regional construct and main policy narrative, many states and regional organizations started to consider maritime security as a question of freedom of navigation operations, and of establishing permanent military presences and naval exercises.<sup>13</sup> Maritime security is increasingly seen as an inter-state problem that needs to be addressed by military instrument sand a naval build up, instead of a (civil) maritime law enforcement issue.

This new geopolitical thinking about maritime security implied that the original key challenges that led to the rise of maritime security - maritime terrorism and blue crime - are at growing risk of dropping out of sight. This also puts the multilateral solutions, such as maritime domain awareness, and law enforcement coordination mechanism at the risk of geo-politicization which could undermine decades of global cooperative efforts or put small states into difficult positions. While in 2022 we are in the midst of this wave, we need to ask as well whether there is a new wave on the horizon?

#### *A new wave on the horizon? Climate Change, Environmental Crime and Blue Justice*

Whether the geopolitical wave will lose influence or not, there is now a strong debate that calls for better integrating maritime security in broader ocean governance efforts to ensure a safe and healthy marine environment. In many ways this implies a closer convergence between the ocean paradigms introduced earlier – ‘blue economy’, ‘ocean health’, ‘blue justice’ and maritime security.

The merger of maritime security and blue economy is strengthening and new links to ocean health and blue justice are established.

It is increasingly recognized, for instance, that one of the core governance approaches of the blue economy and ocean health - the instalment of marine protected areas - require effective law enforcement and hence the tool box of maritime security. Many of the dangers to ocean health, including illicit fishing, pollution or other environmental crimes, call for maritime security responses.

The meaning of environmental security at sea and its capacity to integrate the different paradigms is increasingly debated. This also entails to consider the impact of climate change on different threats at sea, but also the constraints for law enforcement problems such as sea level rise and severe weather events will pose. It also includes more attention to blue justice and how the risks and revenues of the ocean economy and of climate change are distributed. Perceptions of injustice are after all one of the key drivers of blue crimes. What role different maritime security actors have in the environmental security agenda at sea, in particular navies, will be one of the key puzzles of this wave that is on the horizon.

#### **4. Conclusion: Towards commonality?**

The story of maritime security is a story of commonality. Maritime security stands for a fundamental rethinking of security at sea that draws on a shared understanding of the key challenges that the oceans are facing. The different waves that I have laid out, show that priorities are changing over time.

Even if the most recent, geopolitical wave puts some of the achievements at risk, maritime security is overall a history of the evolution of regional and global cooperation. The dense collaboration in tackling the threat of piracy off the coast of Somalia in less than for years, should always be a powerful reminder in this regard of what can be achieved if states work together. Indeed, also the UN Security Council debate of autumn 2021 leaves one with the impression that future cooperation will be possible.

Growing geopolitical competition does not have to mean that multilateral cooperation has to come to an end. The challenges that the new environmental wave on the horizon poses, suggest strongly that more cooperation will be needed. Understanding maritime security as a part of a broader ocean agenda is an important step into this direction.

#### **Endnotes**

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<sup>2</sup> See Bueger, Christian and Felix Mallin. 2022. Bueger, Christian and Mallin, Felix, *The Ocean Revolution: A New Framework for Cross-Paradigmatic Ocean Policy and Research*. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4014064> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4014064>

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- <sup>3</sup> See Bueger, Christian. 2021. Does Maritime Security Require a New United Nations Structure? *Global Observatory*, 26.8.2021, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2021/08/does-maritime-security-require-a-new-united-nations-structure/>
- <sup>4</sup> See Percy, Sarah. 2018. Maritime Security. In *The Oxford Handbook of International Security*, edited by Alexandra Gheciu and William C Wohlforth, 607–21. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Bueger, Christian and Timothy Edmunds. 2020. Blue Crime: Conceptualising Transnational Organised Crime at Sea, *Marine Policy* 119, 104067; and Bueger, Christian and Jan Stockbruegger. 2022. Maritime security and the Western Indian Ocean’s militarisation dilemma, *African Security Review*, online first 04 Apr2022, doi: 10.1080/10246029.2022.2053556,
- <sup>5</sup> For a compelling reconstruction of attempts to govern the oceans, see Bosco, David. 2022. *The Posiedon Project. The Struggle to Govern the World’s Oceans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- <sup>6</sup> See Bueger, Christian. 2015. What is Maritime Security?, *Marine Policy* 53: 159-164.
- <sup>7</sup> See Bueger, Christian and Timothy Edmunds. 2020. Blue Crime: Conceptualising Transnational Organised Crime at Sea, *Marine Policy* 119, 104067.
- <sup>8</sup> See *Paving the Way for Regional Maritime Domain Awareness*, eds. Christian Bueger and Jane Chan. Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technical University Singapore, 2019.
- <sup>9</sup> See Bueger, Christian, Timothy Edmunds and Robert McCabe. 2020. Into the Sea: Capacity Building Innovations and the Maritime Security Challenge, *Third World Quarterly*, 41(2), 228-246.
- <sup>10</sup> See UNODC. 2022. Global Maritime Crime Programme, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/piracy/index.html>
- <sup>11</sup> Voyer, Michelle, Clive Schofield, Kamal Azmi, Robin Warner, Alistair McIlgorm, and Genevieve Quirk. 2018. “Maritime Security and the Blue Economy: Intersections and Interdependencies in the Indian Ocean.” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 14 (1): 28–48.
- <sup>12</sup> Okafor-Yarwood, Ifesinachi and Dyhia Belhabib. 2020. The Duplicity of the European Union Common Fisheries Policy in Third Countries: Evidence from the Gulf of Guinea, *Ocean and Coastal Management* 184, 1-11.
- <sup>13</sup> See paradigmatically the shift in thinking within the European Union, as discussed e.g. in Rettman, Andrew. 2022. EU eyes Indian Ocean naval adventure, *EU Observer*, 25.1.2022, <https://euobserver.com/world/154186>; see also Bueger, Christian and Jan Stockbruegger. 2022. Maritime security and the Western Indian Ocean’s militarisation dilemma, *African Security Review*, online first 04 Apr2022, doi: 10.1080/10246029.2022.2053556.