

Six Observations on Global Maritime Security Governance

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Introduction

Let me start by thanking you for the invitation. I've heard many good things about this seminar over the years, so I'm delighted to be here, especially at the twentieth anniversary.

I was asked to offer reflections on the state of maritime security governance. I'm happy to do so and would like to present six observations on trends and developments.

We have just learned about key shifts and patterns in geopolitics, and while I do not agree with everything—we can return to that in the Q&A—these are important background conditions that help explain the observations I would like to present to you.

If you're interested in our research, I invite you to check out some of our work.

- Our book "Understanding Maritime Security" provides a comprehensive resource for security at sea.
- In a report published with the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, we have assessed global maritime security governance and outlined twenty emerging threats.
- Finally, I invite you to follow my LinkedIn newsletter "Turbulent Seas," where I regularly publish shorter analytical pieces.

Evolution of Maritime Security Priorities

Let's get started. My first observation is perhaps the most obvious: it concerns shifting policy priorities.

We are looking at different waves. Terrorism was the key concern in the 2000s and was gradually replaced by piracy in the late 2000s and early 2010s, driven by incidents off the coast of Somalia.

In the 2010s, there was significant focus on the smuggling of humans, narcotics, and contraband. Also, environmental crimes at sea were taken more seriously.

Most recently, the emphasis has shifted towards what can be called grey zone threats.

Our next speaker will tell us more about this. Here we're looking at cyber incidents, infrastructure sabotage, armed attacks on shipping, and various provocative state actions at sea, including the abuse of civilian vessels.

While the grey zone is our main concern today, we should also begin to anticipate what the challenges of the future might look like.

Beyond the Surface

This brings me to my second observation.

Because of growing attention to the grey zone, maritime security is increasingly thought of in multidimensional terms. For decades, the focus was on the surface and ship movements.

Now we have started to look down to the ocean floor and up to the air space and orbit, and to better understand the links to cyber security.

Subsea infrastructure now forms an important part of the discussion, and the link to space is becoming more prevalent. Maritime cyber security is arguably one of the most pressing problems.

This is in many ways a welcome development, but it also implies that the agenda is becoming more complex.

The relationships to space and cyber security, as well as critical infrastructure policies, need to be better organized. New policy actors are now relevant to the conversation, but managing too much complexity is not always beneficial.

A New Wave of Privatization

My third observation will be most familiar to those in the shipping industry. We are witnessing a new wave of privatization of maritime security, linked to technological developments in robotics, sensors, data fusion, and AI.

Private maritime security companies have existed for some time. Their proliferation was largely driven by Somali piracy and the need to employ armed guards on board vessels.

While these business models persist, a new generation of companies provides risk assessment and surveillance services. Platform providers such as Windward and Starboard, and surveillance providers such as Sail Drone and Unseenlabs, to name but a few, cater to both industry and states.

This is great news on one hand, because it means that new technologies become available not only to industry, but even the least developed states—obviously at considerable cost.

It also means it becomes increasingly difficult to hide at sea. We are getting better at tracking illicit vessels and moving closer to making maritime domain awareness not only a vision but a reality.

Yet we are also becoming increasingly dependent on and locked into these new platforms. There are no global standards, nor mechanisms to ensure data transfer or communication between them.

How we can ensure that information flows freely, and how we want the public-private divide in maritime security to look, requires rethinking.

The Coastguard Revolution

My fourth observation concerns maritime security forces. A growing emphasis on coastguard rather than military capacities can be observed.

I called this the "coastguard revolution" in a recent newsletter. Why are coastguards becoming more important?

There are several reasons.

- Maritime industrial activities are increasing and require greater safety oversight.
- Environmental protection laws are tightening and need to be enforced, including to address pollution and safeguard marine protected areas.
- Grey zone threats are another reason—they blur traditional boundaries, but most often they require civilian and law enforcement responses rather than straightforward military action.
- Navies are pivoting to war preparation and are increasingly focused on "high-end" military tasks rather than constabulary duties. This shift leaves coastguards to fill critical security gaps and potentially to take on diplomatic roles traditionally handled by naval forces.

This implies that investments in maritime security should carefully ensure we have sufficient coastguard capabilities, or at least invest in dual-use capacity.

Regional Intensification

My next observation concerns governance questions more directly.

We are seeing consolidation and intensification of regional seas cooperation. This is partly an outcome of higher geopolitical tensions. It has been well established that when global powers increase tensions, neighbouring states move closer together.

A good example is the North Sea and Baltic Sea. Due to grey zone challenges, we are seeing a new wave of regional cooperation to ensure better coordination, information exchange, and improved joint surveillance. The NorthSeal information sharing platform, initiated by Belgium, is a good example.

This is not only a European phenomenon. Regional cooperation initiatives are also on the rise in the Western Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia.

This means that neighbours are increasingly working together independently of major powers.

At the same time, there is a high risk of overlap and duplication, and a complex patchwork of maritime security governance is emerging.

Consider a simple question: is maritime security in the North Sea better handled by NATO, the EU, or a regional initiative—or all three?

The Return of the UN

Finally, we are witnessing remarkable momentum at the UN level for maritime security. This seems paradoxical, given all the talk about a crisis of multilateralism. Yet the facts tell a different story.

The UN Security Council has held three meetings on maritime security this year, two of which were high-level meetings.

At the May debate, where I had the pleasure to brief the Council, the UN Secretary-General gave a remarkable speech and asserted a new principle: there cannot be global security without maritime security.

More than one hundred and twenty states took the floor at the May debate, and the consensus across the board to uphold UNCLOS and work together on maritime security was remarkable. At the August debate, that consensus became even more pronounced.

Global attention to the oceans more broadly has also become more prominent. The new treaty on biodiversity coming into force next year and the UN Sustainable Development Goal 14 process have been driving this momentum.

This new momentum is promising and represents a genuine window of opportunity for making maritime security governance at the global level more effective.

I invite you all not only to follow this process but actively to help shape it. By ensuring that governments—whether Norway, the flag states you are working with, or the countries you are trading with—have the right awareness and expertise, we can develop more effective UN structures to address threats in the coming year.

Final words

Thank you once again for the opportunity to present these observations. I hope these come through as evidence that if we work together, the future need not look too bleak. There are new opportunities ahead. Industry leadership is vital to ensure that these opportunities are seized. I hope you will support our work and those of other researchers. I look forward to the discussion.

Thank you.

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