



The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

Bridging Waters

Strengthening Europe's Maritime Security Engagement
Through Partnerships with Rising Middle Powers

Benedetta Girardi and Pieter-Jan Vandoren

December 2025





Bridging Waters

Strengthening Europe's Maritime Security
Engagement Through Partnerships
with Rising Middle Powers

Authors:

Benedetta Girardi and Pieter-Jan Vandoren

Contributor:

Thomas Jansen

Quality Assurance:

Dr. Tim Sweijts

Cover photo:

Global International Connectivity Background

Photos by Canva

December 2025

The research for and production of this report has been conducted within the PROGRESS research framework agreement. Responsibility for the contents and for the opinions expressed, rests solely with the authors and does not constitute, nor should be construed as, an endorsement by the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence.

© *The Hague* Centre for Strategic Studies. All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reproduced and/or published in any form by print, photo print, microfilm or any other means without prior written permission from HCSS. All images are subject to the licenses of their respective owners.

Table of Contents

	Executive Summary	IV
1.	Introduction	1
2.	Methodology	4
2.1.	Categorising threats	4
2.2.	Assessing the risk	8
2.3.	Analysing preventive and responsive measures	9
2.4.	Evaluating cooperation effectiveness	10
3.	Evaluate: maritime threats in the South China Sea and Red Sea	12
3.1.	The threat landscape in the South China Sea	13
3.2.	The threat landscape in the Red Sea	15
3.3.	Key Takeaways	16
4.	Cooperate: countermeasures for a threat-based approach	19
4.1.	Understanding maritime threats' countermeasures: prevention and response	19
4.2.	Preventive and responsive measures in the South China Sea and Red Sea	27
4.3.	Key takeaways	30
5.	Prioritise: European engagement options in the Red Sea and South China Sea	31
5.1.	Cooperation options for European states	31
5.2.	Key takeaways	36
	Conclusion: an actionable agenda for European cooperation with emerging regional powers in the South China Sea and Red Sea	37

Executive Summary

This report examines how Europe can strengthen its maritime security engagement through structured cooperation with rising middle powers in two strategically vital regions, the South China Sea and the Red Sea, and offers a corresponding agenda for action. Indispensable to European prosperity as they serve as critical arteries for global trade, both seas face mounting instability driven by great-power rivalry, blue crime, environmental pressures, and the increasing hybridisation of maritime threats. Using a threat-based methodology grounded in the Actor, Motivation, Capability, Action, Target (AMCAT) framework, comparative risk assessments, and a Cooperative Effectiveness Assessment Framework (CEAF), the study identifies the most urgent threats, evaluates preventive and responsive counter-measures, and outlines where cooperation between Europe and littoral states can be both feasible and impactful, which the report defines as measures with high cooperation value. The analysis was conducted through a rigorous, multi-layered methodology combining in-depth desk research with the use of our in-house assessment frameworks for threat evaluation and cooperative opportunity scoring. These frameworks enabled us to compare and rank strategic options in a systematic manner. The research was further enriched by a global expert survey, a dedicated workshop, and a series of commissioned papers, together providing a robust and comprehensive evidence base for our findings.

The report finds that threat landscapes in the two regions are distinct but converging. In the South China Sea, risks are strategic and long-term, dominated by great-power competition, interstate maritime disputes, and the weaponisation of IUU fishing. Escalation risks are high: a minor incident can cascade into a wider confrontation that would be difficult for Europe to avoid. In the Red Sea, instability is more episodic and primarily non-state in nature, driven by chokepoint disruptions, terrorism, and piracy, yet its consequences are immediate and globally disruptive, as recent attacks on shipping and the Suez blockage have shown.

Furthermore the report delineates two types of cooperative measures: preventive measures and responsive measures. Preventive measures are proactive measures designed to deter, detect, or eliminate maritime threats before they materialise. They offer the most immediate and sustainable impact and include capacity building, training, information sharing, and enhanced maritime domain awareness. They strengthen resilience while at the same time serving as trusted entry points for cooperation. Responsive measures, which are initiatives taken to reduce the severity, impact, or consequences of a maritime threat after it has occurred or is imminent, are indispensable for high-intensity threats. However, their effectiveness depends heavily on interoperability, trust, and clear legal frameworks, all of which remain uneven across both regions.

Drawing on these insights, a structured set of cooperation options, categorised in four types and applicable to the regional context and threat-risk landscape, emerges:

1. 'Full Sails Ahead' – High cooperation value, Medium-low risk

These measures provide practical, uncontroversial, and visible benefits, making them ideal starting points for sustained European engagement.

2. 'High-Stakes Manoeuvres' – High cooperation value, High risk

While politically delicate, these measures offer the greatest long-term payoff in bolstering stability, trust, and Europe's strategic presence in contested waters.

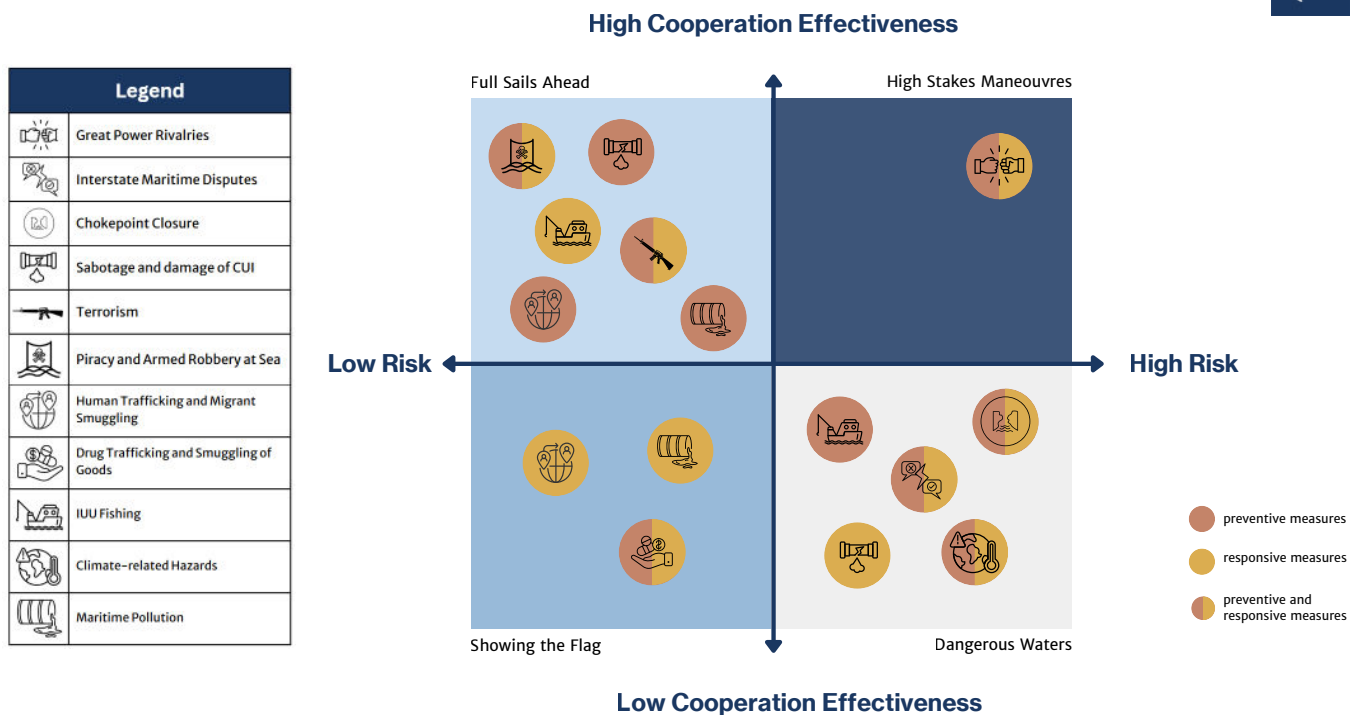
3. 'Showing the Flag' – Medium cooperation value, Low-risk

These measures offer symbolic value but limited strategic effect; they should not absorb disproportionate attention relative to higher-value cooperation.

4. 'Dangerous Waters' – Medium cooperation value, Medium-High-risk

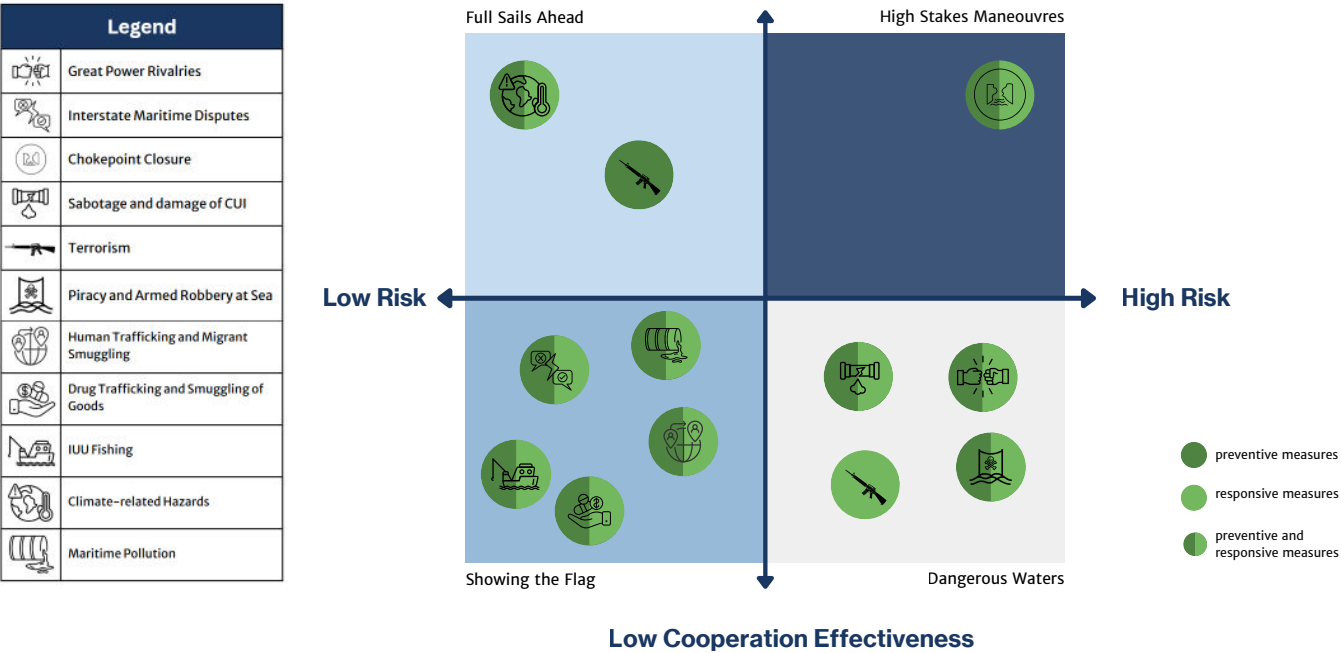
While these measures provide operational benefits, they often encounter sovereignty sensitivities or require long-term resource commitments that are hard to sustain.

Evaluating measures in the South China Sea





Evaluating measures in the Red Sea



The conclusion stresses that Europe must adopt a threat-based, region-specific, and priority-driven approach to maritime cooperation. With threats becoming increasingly hybrid and the line between state and non-state actors blurring, cooperation must go beyond diplomatic signalling and rely on operational, sustainable engagement tailored to the political and institutional realities of each region.

Overall, the study demonstrates that Europe's ability to safeguard its maritime interests depends on its capacity to match limited resources with strategic prioritisation, tailoring its engagement to regional risk profiles and pursuing partnerships that reinforce a stable, rules-based maritime order. A differentiated, cooperative, and threat-based approach emerges as the clearest path for Europe to secure critical sea lines of communication, build durable partnerships with emerging middle powers, and uphold stability across key maritime corridors.

The study gives European policymakers an actionable agenda built on a threat-based approach that takes into account regional specificities, providing recommendations for Europe to engage with partners in the Red Sea and Sout China Sea. For a deeper dive into regional views on cooperation with Europe, we suggest reading the [connected paper series](#). The series goes one step deeper by proposing an in-depth look at cooperation opportunities between European states and a selection of littoral states in the Red Sea and South China Sea.

An actionable agenda for maritime cooperation

In the **South China Sea**, Europe should prioritise crisis-management and deconfliction mechanisms, while in parallel implementing measures to tackle blue crime and future-proof critical port and undersea infrastructure.

1. **Develop multilateral crisis management and deconfliction mechanisms to tackle great power rivalry.** This threat entails the most significant escalatory risks, and as such needs to be prioritised by European policymakers. This can be achieved through the implementation of both preventive and responsive measures, including:
 - 1.1. Hosting regular joint training missions and communication exercises with regional navies to build trust and reduce the risk of accidental clashes.
 - 1.2. Conducting regular joint deconfliction drills, focusing on maritime communication and rules of engagement to avoid accidental escalation.
 - 1.3. Focusing on strengthening both preventive and responsive communication capabilities to enable long-term, sustainable information-sharing.
2. **Strengthen maritime governance through preventive cooperation on blue crime.** While this type of threat is less pressing than geostrategic ones, it is a concern for all regional emerging powers, regardless of political alignment and national priorities. Implementing preventive measures facilitates cooperation to tackle persistent, albeit lower-risk threats, offering Europe the opportunity to build ties to regional powers with little escalation risks. This can be achieved by:
 - 2.1. Expanding regional information-sharing platforms, similar to ReCAAP, to share real-time data on piracy, IUU fishing, and smuggling, improving maritime domain awareness.
 - 2.2. Reinforcing regional crime-prevention authorities such as local coast guards, port and border authorities through capacity-building exercises, joint trainings, screening and hostage-rescue drills, and embedding naval advisors in local patrols.
 - 2.3. Providing equipment such as small patrol boats, cargo scanners, and detection tools, to support local capabilities needed for threat detection, staff training, and threat monitoring, enhancing local capacities for both prevention and mitigation.
3. **Future-proof vital maritime nodes by enhancing resilience of critical infrastructure.** Tackling threats to CUI or mitigating the effects of climate change might yield uncertain outcomes due to blurry legal frameworks and the complexity of climate-related hazards. Still, strengthening infrastructure allows to reduce shared vulnerabilities. A carefully-calibrated cooperation between European and littoral states can support the stabilisation of maritime infrastructure by:
 - 3.1. Providing co-funding, technical assessments, and engineering support to raise port elevations, reinforce storm-surge defences, modernise power systems, and integrate digital early-warning tools.
 - 3.2. Sharing data and technology to map submarine cables and pipelines, deploy sensors for anomaly detection, and develop shared protocols for rapid inspection and repair.
 - 3.3. Creating maritime infrastructure resilience training programs with regional powers, offering training to littoral-state authorities in climate adaptation, cyber-security for port operations, and crisis-response planning.

In the **Red Sea**, cooperation should focus on chokepoint resilience, climate-adapted port infrastructure, and coordinated multinational operations to target piracy and terrorism

1. **Plan for chokepoint security and maritime trade continuity.** Given the global significance of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal, regional contingency planning should be prioritised to protect these chokepoints from disruptions. This could include:
 - 1.1. Developing a regional contingency planning framework for the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal, including shared rerouting plans and rapid-response drills in case of a disruption.
 - 1.2. Establishing real-time maritime surveillance systems to monitor chokepoint areas and allow for immediate intervention if a threat emerges. This preventive measure fosters cooperation by focusing on operational security and transparency.
 - 1.3. Co-financing the upgrade of critical port infrastructure at chokepoints to improve resilience against disruptions, including flood defences and backup power systems.
2. **Counter piracy and smuggling with coordinated multinational operations.** A continued expansion of multinational naval deployments in the Red Sea, especially through established initiatives such as the EU's Operation Atalanta allows to curb piracy and illicit maritime activities, contributing to stabilising the maritime environment in the long run. This can be realised by:
 - 2.1. Expanding multinational naval deployments to curb piracy and illicit activities in high-risk areas like the Gulf of Aden and Bab el-Mandeb Strait.
 - 2.2. Enhancing regional maritime intelligence-sharing systems to track illicit trafficking and piracy, improving the ability to detect and prevent illegal activities in real-time.
 - 2.3. Facilitating joint maritime law enforcement training for local authorities on detecting illegal cargo and preventing smuggling.
3. **Implement long-term comprehensive planning for environmental challenges.** These type of threat might not be as pressing, but they can be tackled through low-risk measures that offer concrete cooperation opportunities with littoral states. In a region lacking overarching security cooperation frameworks, this gives Europe credibility and visibility as a capacity-building partner. Europe can start this by:
 - 3.1. Co-developing early-warning systems for climate-related hazards such as coastal erosion, extreme weather, and rising sea levels, ensuring Red Sea states are equipped with timely information to respond to emergencies.
 - 3.2. Co-financing climate-resilient infrastructure projects such as flood barriers, elevated port structures, and storm surge protections for ports vulnerable to environmental threats.
 - 3.3. Creating joint maritime pollution response teams to quickly respond to oil spills and environmental disasters in the Red Sea, ensuring rapid containment and mitigation.



An actionable agenda for cooperation in the South China Sea



An actionable agenda for cooperation in the Red Sea



Introduction

Maritime security is increasingly recognised across Europe as a strategic imperative, central for safeguarding global trade, maintaining regional stability, and defending the openness of maritime routes. This awareness has accelerated the development of national maritime security strategies across the continent, with countries such as the United Kingdom, Spain, Denmark, and Finland adopting or updating comprehensive frameworks to address the evolving maritime environment.¹ Similarly, maritime security is a key pillar in regional foreign policy documents, notably the French, German, and Dutch Indo-Pacific strategies, which emphasise freedom of navigation, sustainable ocean governance, and partnerships with like-minded states.² At the European level, this prioritisation culminated in the 2023 revision of the EU Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS), which highlights the need for integrated naval capabilities, rule-based governance, and greater resilience across critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs).³

Over 80% of world trade by volume travels by sea, and Europe's economies are deeply dependent on unhindered maritime flows for energy imports, manufacturing inputs, and consumer goods. Maritime security is thus not merely a commercial priority but a strategic necessity, directly linked to energy security, supply chain resilience, and economic prosperity. A handful of critical maritime chokepoints are particularly vulnerable to disruptions. Strategic passages such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Strait of Malacca handle the majority of the world's maritime trade and energy flows. Disruptions in any of these areas, whether due to conflict, terrorism, accidents, or environmental disasters, can have immediate and cascading effects on global markets and supply chains. Recent events, such as the temporary blockage of the Suez Canal in 2021 or the recurring attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, underscore how localised maritime instability can have global repercussions. For Europe, whose trade depends on maritime connectivity, ensuring maritime security is not a distant concern but a vital economic and geopolitical interest.⁴

This is particularly true for the Netherlands, a country whose economy is among the world's most globally integrated. According to the 2024 DHL Global Connectedness Report, the Netherlands ranked first worldwide in information connectedness and second in trade and overall connectedness. Safeguarding secure and stable maritime flows is therefore not only

¹ "National Maritime Security Strategy," GOV.UK, accessed July 17, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-maritime-security-strategy>; Government of Denmark, *Global Strategy for Maritime Security 2025–2028* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2025); Government of Spain, *National Strategy for Maritime Security 2024* (Government of Spain – Department of National Security, 2024); "Maritime Policy Action Plan," serial publication, Finnish Government, June 3, 2022, <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/164192>.

² "Indo-Pacific: een leidraad voor versterking van de Nederlandse en EU-samenwerking met partners in Azië," Text, accessed July 18, 2025, <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/detail>; Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy* (Paris, 2021); Federal Foreign Office (Germany), *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific* (Federal Foreign Office, 2021), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>.

³ "Maritime Security: EU Updates Strategy," Text, European Commission - European Commission, accessed July 17, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_1483.

⁴ Benedetta Girardi et al., *What the Indo-Pacific Means to Europe: Trade Value, Chokepoints, and Security Risks*, 3-4, 8-10, 12-15 (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), 2023), <https://hcss.nl/report/what-indo-pacific-means-to-europe-trade-value-chokepoints-security-risks/>.

a European priority but also a national imperative for the Netherlands, given its role as a global logistics hub and gateway to Europe.⁵

This urgency has become even more pronounced with the growing democratisation of maritime threats. Whereas maritime security was once dominated by traditional state-based threats, such as naval rivalries and territorial disputes, the domain has now become increasingly democratised. Non-state actors, from transnational criminal networks to militant organisations, have gained access to technologies and capabilities that enable them to challenge maritime order.⁶ The proliferation of cheap unmanned systems, GPS spoofing tools, and dual-use surveillance technologies allows actors with limited resources to disrupt shipping lanes, conduct piracy, or interfere with undersea infrastructure.⁷ Furthermore, cyberattacks targeting ports, maritime logistics systems, and automatic identification systems have become pervasive, increasing tenfold between 2016 and 2023.⁸ This democratisation expands the range of actors involved in maritime insecurity, complicating deterrence and response mechanisms and blurring the boundaries between civilian and military domains.⁹

As the maritime domain grows more contested, interconnected, and technologically complex, Europe's ability to safeguard its interests at sea will depend on its capacity to form meaningful partnerships. The scarce naval capabilities of European states limit their ability to effectively prevent and deter maritime threats on their own. It is thus imperative for Europe to cooperate more effectively with other emerging powers globally to promote maritime security. While some collaboration is ongoing, margin for improvement exists for Europe to achieve a more structural, consistent, and threat-based approach that regularly engages with regional states.

The goal of this report is therefore threefold. First, it brings into focus the maritime threats that affect Europe's ability to trade and engage with partners around the world. Second, it identifies preventive and responsive measures to tackle the aforementioned threats. Third, it evaluates concrete avenues of cooperation with regional powers to increase maritime security in areas considered pivotal for Europe's maritime trade.

It does so by focusing on two key regions: the Red Sea and the South China Sea. These regions have been chosen for four reasons. First, they are vital maritime corridors through which a significant portion of Europe's global trade passes. Second, they include a number of critical chokepoints that are especially vulnerable to disruption. Third, both regions face a range of maritime security challenges, from piracy and territorial disputes to grey-zone activities. Finally, they are home to a growing number of emerging powers that hold considerable potential as partners for Europe in promoting stability and open sea lanes.

After the methodology (section 1), the second section of the report presents a maritime threat assessment. It develops a taxonomy of maritime threats and applies it to the Red Sea and the South China Sea. This section concludes by assessing the risks associated with these

⁵ Steven A. Altman and Caroline R. Bastian, *DHL Global Connectedness Report* (DHL, n.d.), accessed October 15, 2025, <https://www.dhl.com/global-en/microsites/core/global-connectedness/report.html>; "The Netherlands Is One of the World's Most Connected Countries," *Invest in Holland*, May 22, 2024, <https://investinholland.com/news/the-netherlands-is-one-of-the-worlds-most-connected-countries/>.

⁶ Christian Bueger et al., *Securing the Seas: A Comprehensive Assessment of Global Maritime Security* (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2024), <https://unidir.org/publication/securing-the-seas-a-comprehensive-assessment-of-global-maritime-security/>.

⁷ Bueger et al., *Securing the Seas*.

⁸ Meixuan Li, *Maritime Cybersecurity: A Comprehensive Review* (2024), 8, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.33934.78405>.

⁹ Bueger et al., *Securing the Seas*.

threats and identifying the most significant regional trends. The third section defines and distinguishes between preventive and responsive countermeasures, taking a deep dive into regional applications of such responses. Finally, section four highlights avenues for cooperation between emerging regional powers and European states. It examines which solutions are considered most effective within the two regions through a threat-based approach, before all major findings are summarised in the conclusion.

Overall, the report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the maritime threats present in the Red Sea and South China Sea, the risks they pose to open maritime routes, and the range of preventive and responsive measures available to both Europe and regional partners to strengthen maritime security.

In addition, the report serves as the foundation for a connected paper. The series goes one step deeper by proposing an in-depth look at cooperation opportunities between European and littoral states in the Red Sea and South China Sea. The six papers, written by regional experts, revolve around the practical implementation of selected preventive and responsive measures that European states could implement together with Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam. Each paper looks at one measure approached by the perspective of one of the six regional emerging powers. The series thus offers concrete examples of how a threat-based, regional-specific approach could look like.

1. Methodology

The report uses a four-step methodology to offer a comprehensive analysis of maritime threats, preventive and responsive measures, and cooperation opportunities for European and regional emerging powers. In the first step, the analysis categorises maritime threats first generically and then specifically for the Red and South China Seas using the Actor, Motivation, Capability, Action, and Target (AMCAT) framework. In the second step, it examines the risk that each threat poses to maritime security in both seas through an impact-by-probability framework using expert judgment corroborated by survey verification. Third, the report reviews preventive and responsive strategies from a regional perspective by analysing the results of a global expert survey. Fourth, it explores how Europe could collaborate with emerging regional powers, using the Cooperative Effectiveness Assessment Framework (CEAF) and supplemented by data from our expert survey comprised of government officials, scholars and industry experts. This section describes the four steps in details.

1.1. Categorising threats

To achieve concrete, applicable measures, it is critical to understand the nature of maritime security threats. A systematic typology where threats are categorised and broken down allows for a comprehensive understanding of the contingencies that can disrupt maritime stability. To this end, the report uses the AMCAT framework. This framework, first developed by HCSS in 2008, ensures that threats are defined, categorised, and compared across multiple analytical dimensions. This allows for a coherent understanding of their characteristics and interrelationships across different seas.

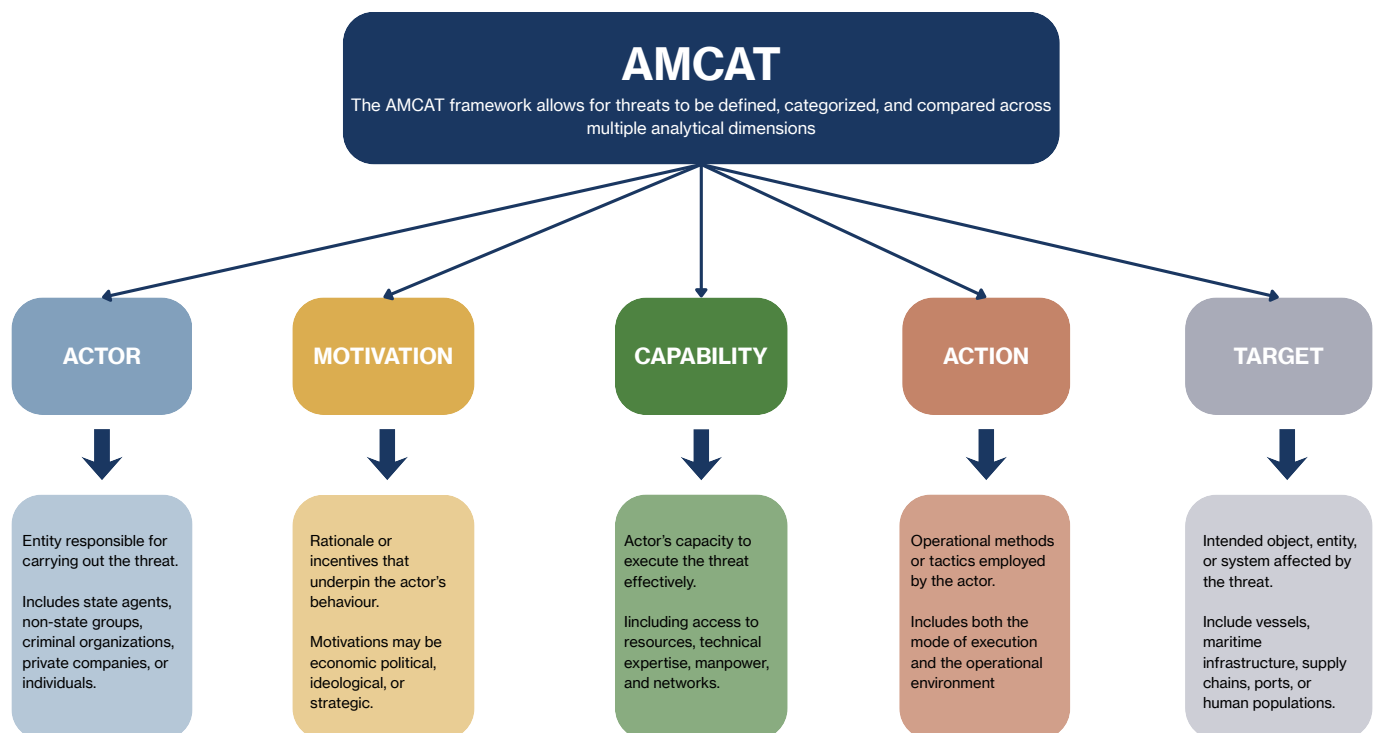
In this methodology, a threat is understood as an event, action, or condition that has the potential to negatively affect maritime security, whether through harm to people, disruption of lawful maritime activity, or degradation of maritime governance, environment, and stability. The AMCAT framework disaggregates each threat into five analytical components: Actor, Motivation, Capability, Action, and Target. These dimensions collectively capture both the drivers and manifestations of maritime instability and can be defined as follows:

1. **Actor:** Refers to the entity responsible for carrying out the threat. Actors can include state agents, non-state groups, criminal organisations, private companies, or individuals. This dimension helps identify the sources of insecurity and distinguish between organised, opportunistic, and state-led forms of activity.
2. **Motivation:** Explores the rationale or incentives that underpin the actor's behaviour. Motivations may be economic (e.g., profit from illicit trade), political (e.g., coercion or signalling), ideological, or strategic. Understanding motivation is critical to anticipating future behaviour and designing targeted interventions.
3. **Capability:** Examines the actor's capacity to execute the threat effectively. This includes access to resources, technical expertise, manpower, and networks that enable sustained or high-impact operations. Capability assessment helps differentiate between low-level, opportunistic threats and those requiring more coordinated or resourced efforts.

4. **Action:** Describes the operational methods or tactics employed by the actor. This includes both the mode of execution (e.g., hijacking, cyberattack, smuggling) and the operational environment (e.g., coastal, offshore, port-based). Mapping actions across threats supports the identification of recurring operational patterns and vulnerabilities.
5. **Target:** Defines the intended object, entity, or system affected by the threat. Targets may include vessels, maritime infrastructure, supply chains, ports, or human populations. Analysing targeting behaviour clarifies which components of the maritime system are most exposed to risk.

By coding each identified threat along these five dimensions, the taxonomy enables a structured comparison across threat types and contexts. The use of the AMCAT framework (summarised in Figure 1) thus ensures internal consistency across threat assessments and applicability across different regions. This is of particular relevance, as the democratisation of the maritime security environment requires moving beyond geographic perspectives to adopt a holistic framework centred on the nature and scope of threats.¹⁰ Analysing the threat landscape through the lens of the AMCAT methodology enables to apply a consistent methodological approach to both Red and South China Sea.

Figure 1: AMCAT Framework



¹⁰ John Stawpert, "Maritime Security in an Era of Unprecedented Challenges," *The Maritime Executive*, September 30, 2025, <https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/maritime-security-in-an-era-of-unprecedented-challenges>.

The application of the AMCAT methodology results in the identification of three broad categories that entail eleven types of threats in total (Figure 2):

1. Geostrategic threats

Threats stemming from power politics, regional tensions, and strategic control over key sea lanes, chokepoints, and infrastructure. This includes:

- a. **Great Power Rivalries:** Rivalries between major powers that may escalate into conflict, undermining freedom of navigation and regional stability.¹¹
- b. **Interstate Maritime Disputes:** Disputes over islands, maritime borders, and exclusive economic zones, creating unsafe conditions for navigation.¹²
- c. **Chokepoint Closure:** Obstruction of key maritime chokepoints disrupting global trade and navigation.¹³
- d. **Sabotage and damage of Critical Underwater Infrastructure (CUI):** Disruption to underwater installations such as communication cables, pipelines, or energy infrastructure.¹⁴

2. Blue crime

Threats stemming from (transnational) organised crime at sea. This includes:

- a. **Terrorism:** Acts of violence or sabotage targeting maritime assets, in particular ships, people, ports, or offshore facilities.¹⁵
- b. **Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea:** Illegal acts of violence or detention at sea for private gain.¹⁶
- c. **Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling:** Illegal recruitment, transport, or harbouring of people through coercion or deception for exploitation.¹⁷
- d. **Drug Trafficking and Smuggling of Goods:** Illicit production, transport, and trade of drugs and goods across maritime borders.¹⁸
- e. **Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing:** Fishing in violation of national or international laws or outside regulated areas.¹⁹

3. Environmental disruptions

Threats of environmental nature, including:

- a. **Climate-related hazards:** Natural disasters (e.g., cyclones, floods, sea-level rise) that threaten maritime operations, ecosystems, and infrastructure.²⁰
- b. **Maritime pollution:** pollution from human activity that threaten maritime operations, ecosystems, and infrastructure.²¹

¹¹ Benedetta Girardi et al., *What the Indo-Pacific Means to Europe: Trade Value, Chokepoints, and Security Risks* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), 2023), 11, <https://hcss.nl/report/what-indo-pacific-means-to-europe-trade-value-chokepoints-security-risks/>.

¹² Girardi et al., 11.

¹³ Girardi et al., 11-12.

¹⁴ Alexander Lott, *Unconventional Legal Approaches to Protecting Underwater Infrastructure* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), 2025), <https://hcss.nl/report/unconventional-legal-approaches-protecting-underwater-infrastructure/>.

¹⁵ Shivam Kumar Pandey, "A Comprehensive Classification System of Non-Traditional Maritime Security Threats: A Step towards Enhancing Maritime Security," *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 13, no. 6 (2023): 232, <https://doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.13.06.2023.p13831>.

¹⁶ "Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships," International Maritime Organisation, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Security/Pages/PiracyArmedRobberydefault.aspx>.

¹⁷ "Understanding Human Trafficking," United Nations, United Nations, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/understanding-human-trafficking>.

¹⁸ Pandey, "A Comprehensive Classification System of Non-Traditional Maritime Security Threats," 231.

¹⁹ Pandey, "A Comprehensive Classification System of Non-Traditional Maritime Security Threats," 231.

²⁰ Girardi et al., *What the Indo-Pacific Means to Europe* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), 2023), 12; Pandey, "A Comprehensive Classification System of Non-Traditional Maritime Security Threats."

²¹ Girardi et al., *What the Indo-Pacific Means to Europe* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), 2023), 12; Pandey, "A Comprehensive Classification System of Non-Traditional Maritime Security Threats."

Annex 1 contains a summary table of each threat's breakdown according to AMCAT framework.

After identifying the threat categories, these are applied to analyse maritime threats in the Red Sea and South China Sea ([Annex 2](#)).

Figure 2: Summary of threats' types identified through AMCAT methodology



	Maritime threat	Symbol	Description
Geostrategic threats	Great Power Rivalries		Rivalries between major powers that may escalate into conflict, undermining freedom of navigation and regional stability.
	Interstate Maritime Disputes		Disputes over islands, maritime borders, and exclusive economic zones, creating unsafe conditions for navigation.
	Chockepoint Closure		Obstruction of key maritime chokepoints disrupting global trade and navigation.
	Sabotage and damage of Critical Underwater Infrastructure (CUI)		Disruption to underwater installations such as communication cables, pipelines, or energy infrastructure.
Blue crime	Terrorism		Acts of violence or sabotage targeting maritime assets, in particular ships, people, ports, or offshore facilities.
	Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea		Illegal acts of violence or detention at sea for private gain.
	Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling		Illegal recruitment, transport, or harbouring of people through coercion or deception for exploitation.
	Drug Trafficking and Smuggling of Goods		Illicit production, transport, and trade of drugs and goods across maritime borders.
	Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing		Fishing in violation of national or international laws or outside regulated areas.
Environmental disruptions	Climate-related hazards		Natural disasters (e.g., cyclones, floods, sea-level rise) that threaten maritime operations, ecosystems, and infrastructure.
	Maritime pollution		pollution from human activity that threaten maritime operations, ecosystems, and infrastructure.

1.2. Assessing the risk

The AMCAT methodology, as highlighted above, provides a framework for the categorisation of threats but does not allow directly to evaluate the risk posed by each threat. Addressing maritime threats however requires prioritising interventions according to the risks they entail. This is especially true for middle powers with limited resources. Therefore, the second methodological step is to assess the risk posed by the categorised threats. Because risk reflects both the likelihood of a threat occurring and the severity of its disruption, an impact-by-probability assessment is applied.

Each threat in the Red Sea and South China Sea is evaluated for both impact and probability, using the different dimensions of the AMCAT framework. A critical analysis of the actors involved, the motivation that drives them, the capabilities at their disposal, the actions they planned and the targets they identified, provides a strong foundation to gauge both impact and probability of each threat. Subsequent corroboration utilising the insights of the expert survey, where participants were asked to rank the probability and impact of each threat, ensures the robustness of these results.

The assessment is carried out for both dimensions on a scale from 1 to 5, as specified below (Table 1 and Table 2):

Table 1: Scoring for the assessment of Probability variable



Scoring	Probability Value	Qualitative description
1	Highly unlikely	The threat is exceptional and would occur only under extreme or unprecedented conditions.
2	Unlikely	The threat is not expected to occur under normal conditions, though not impossible.
3	Possible	The threat could reasonably occur, depending on evolving circumstances or triggering events.
4	Likely	The threat is expected to occur under current trends or conditions.
5	Highly likely	The threat is certain to occur. It may already be taking place or occur repeatedly.

Table 2: Scoring for the assessment of Impact variable



Scoring	Impact Value	Qualitative description
1	Very low	Minimal or negligible effect on operations, systems, or populations. No lasting disruption.
2	Low	Limited impact, mostly contained. Minor disruption to specific actors or sectors.
3	Moderate	Noticeable impact on services, trade, or security. May require coordinated response.
4	High	Significant disruption to regional stability or core systems.
5	Very high	Severe, wide-ranging, and lasting impact. Strategic or existential in nature.

To obtain the final risk score for each threat, the score of probability is then multiplied by that of impact. The final assessment is a result of the averaging of survey response with the research team's evaluation, so as to balance regional perspectives with expert judgment. This framework allows not only to assess the risk per threat, but also to compare values across threats and seas. Such an assessment highlights which threats are perceived to be as more immediate and with greater impact, which helps guiding a prioritisation of countermeasures.

1.3. Analysing preventive and responsive measures

The third section of the report focuses on measures that Europe can take in cooperation with regional emerging powers in the Red Sea and South China Sea. First, a literature study examines the different types of countermeasures to maritime threats, making a distinction between preventive and responsive measures. The literature study also provides a longlist of measures available to counter the threats highlighted in section 2.

Having established the range of existing measures, the research examines which concrete actions can be undertaken by European and regional powers, as perceived by regional emerging powers. Here, a survey collecting the opinions of 60 regional experts is employed. Comprising 17 questions, the survey was distributed among government officials, industry representatives, and subject-matter experts from both regions. In total, 60 respondents – 25 from the Red Sea and 35 from the South China Sea – provided input on perceptions of maritime threats, the effectiveness of preventive and responsive measures, and the capacity of littoral states to address security challenges on their own and in cooperation with European states.

The survey focused on six case studies: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam in the South China Sea; and Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the Red Sea. Country selection was guided by three main criteria: (a) possessing a coastal border with the relevant maritime area; (b) having been subject to maritime threats as highlighted from the database compiled with AMCAT methodology; (c) being identified as a partner with cooperation potential based on prior analysis -specifically, the HCSS 2023 report *Getting Them on Board: Partners and Avenues for European Engagement in Indo-Pacific Maritime Security*.²²

Annex 3 contains a full report of the survey results.

²² In the previous study, in-depth research was conducted on potential partners for Europe in the Indo-Pacific. The research categorised states in the region on the basis of international affinity and maritime security relevance, designating a handful of countries as promising partners for European states to cooperate with on maritime security issues. For further specifications, please refer to Benedetta Girardi et al., *Getting Them On Board: Partners and Avenues for European Engagement in Indo-Pacific Maritime Security* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), 2024), <https://hcss.nl/report/getting-them-on-board-european-engagement-indo-pacific-maritime-security/>.

1.4. Evaluating cooperation effectiveness

After examining regional perspectives on preventive and responsive measures, the report proceeds to assess the value for Europe to undertake each of these measures with regional emerging powers. The last step of the methodology is thus a cross-analysis of the cooperation effectiveness of each proposed measure vis a vis the risk they tackle.

The application of the Cooperative Effectiveness Assessment Framework (CEAF). This applies a 1-5 scale to rate each preventive and responsive measure across three dimensions (Impact, Feasibility, and Cooperative Value), which are combined into a single Cooperative Effectiveness Score (CES).

The dimensions are evaluated according to the rationale highlighted in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Cooperation Effectiveness Assessment Framework scoring criteria



Cooperative Effectiveness Assessment Framework (CEAF)		
Dimension	Guiding question	Scale (1 – 5)
Impact (I)	How well does the measure address the identified maritime threat?	1 = Minimal impact; the measure barely addresses the threat. 2 = Limited impact; some aspects of the threat are mitigated but gaps remain. 3 = Moderate impact; addresses key elements of the threat but not comprehensively. 4 = Significant impact; effectively addresses most aspects of the threat. 5 = Highly effective; fully addresses the maritime threat and provides robust mitigation.
Feasibility (F)	Can local emerging powers implement it with European support?	1 = Not feasible; requires resources, expertise, or conditions beyond local or European capabilities. 2 = Low feasibility; implementation would face significant obstacles. 3 = Moderate feasibility; achievable with effort and coordination. 4 = High feasibility; can be realistically implemented with support. 5 = Fully feasible; easily implementable with existing capabilities and support.
Cooperative value (CV)	Does it build interoperability and long-term trust?	1 = Low cooperative potential; does not promote collaboration or trust. 2 = Limited potential; some cooperation possible, but benefits are marginal. 3 = Moderate potential; promotes trust and interoperability in specific contexts. 4 = High potential; strengthens collaboration and builds long-term trust. 5 = Very high potential; significantly enhances interoperability and sustained cooperation.

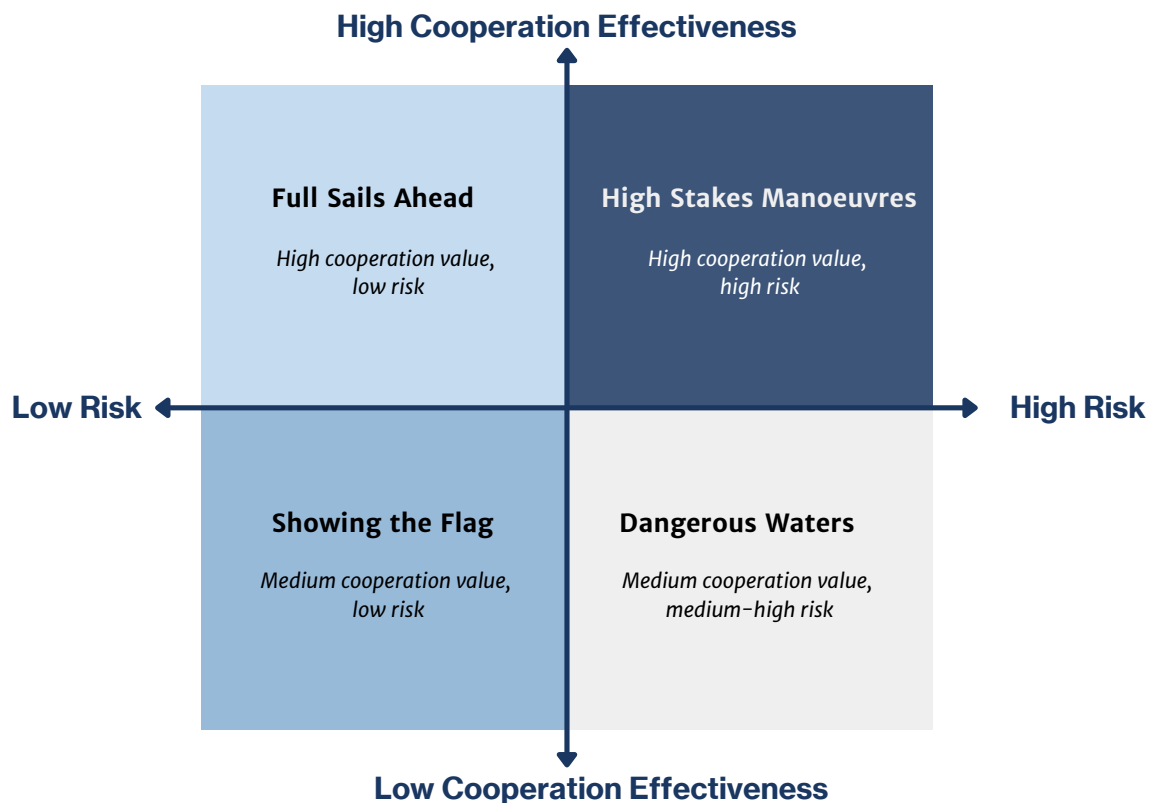
Because the framework is applied only to measures already identified as politically and operationally plausible for European engagement according to the methodology described in section 1.3, most options start from a relatively high baseline of feasibility. As a result, the distribution of scores is compressed toward the upper end of the scale (3–5).

Scores should therefore be interpreted comparatively rather than absolutely: a measure with a CES of 4.4 is not ‘very high impact’ in abstract terms, but performs markedly better within this specific set of feasible cooperative options. The framework captures relative promise among viable initiatives, not the full range of conceivable actions from failure to success. This still helps in prioritising preventive and responsive measures.

The CES score provides an overview of the partnership value of each measure. However, European states have limited resources and capabilities to pursue joint maritime security cooperation with local states. Assessing the cooperation effectiveness of preventive/responsive measures vis a vis the risk they tackle is thus necessary. Methodologically, this is done by cross-analysing the scores of the CEAF framework with the risk assessment by threat explained in section 1.2. By doing this, the report divides the measures into four categories, taking into account both the magnitude of the threat that needs to be tackled (risk) and the effectiveness of joint maritime security initiatives in strengthening maritime security partnerships (CES). Figure 3 below summarises these categories.

To further address regional perspectives when evaluating preventive and responsive measures, a webinar was held with regional experts on the South China Sea and Red Sea. The public webinar focused on discussing how Europe can work with littoral states to deploy concrete preventive and responsive maritime-security measures, such as coordinated maritime-domain surveillance and information-sharing (preventive), and joint naval/coast-guard patrols or responses to incidents (responsive). The webinar's outcomes were taken into account when formulating recommendations in the conclusion, enabling a more regional-specific approach to policy suggestions.

Figure 3: Categorisation of measures' types according to risk x cooperation effectiveness



2. Evaluate: maritime threats in the South China Sea and Red Sea

This section examines the evolving maritime security landscapes of the South China Sea and the Red Sea, two regions of immense strategic, economic, and geopolitical significance both globally and for Europe. Both seas serve as essential arteries for global trade and energy transport, yet they are increasingly shaped by overlapping threats ranging from great power rivalry and interstate disputes to transnational criminal activities and environmental disasters. By systematically evaluating the probability and impact of these threats, this section seeks to provide a comparative understanding of the risk environment in both maritime theatres. In doing so, it lays the analytical foundation for identifying where cooperation among European states and regional emerging middle powers is most urgently required and potentially most effective.

Figure 4: Summary of threats' risk evaluation according to Impact x Probability

Risk score		South China Sea	Red Sea
High			
Medium			
Low			



2.1. The threat landscape in the South China Sea

The South China Sea is a critical waterway and resource hub, rich in fisheries, oil, and gas. Competition over these assets has intensified disputes among littoral states. The area has become a central arena of strategic rivalry between China and the US, with both powers seeking to extend their influence across this vital maritime corridor.²³ China's dual role as a global superpower and a littoral state contributes to ongoing frictions, particularly through overlapping maritime claims with neighbouring countries and related escalation risks.²⁴

Beijing has asserted sovereignty over most of the South China Sea, encompassing regions also claimed by Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Disputes such as those concerning the Spratly Islands have significantly heightened regional tensions and raised concerns about the possibility of military escalation.²⁵ Any outbreak of conflict in this heavily trafficked zone would severely disrupt trade and render the sea unstable for commercial and security operations.²⁶

It is thus no surprise that interstate maritime disputes and great-power rivalry are assessed to be the two most significant threats in the South China Sea, when measured by both impact and probability. As tensions among littoral states intensify, so too do the concerns regarding the safety of CUI, often the target of sabotage, and the openness of maritime chokepoints, especially of the Malacca Strait, with US\$3.5 trillion of global trade passing through its waters every year.²⁷

In contrast, most challenges posed by non-state actors such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and piracy are assessed to be less pressing. Criminal networks exploit poorly monitored border zones, taking advantage of interstate distrust and the resulting gaps in governance.²⁸ For instance, the South China Sea serves as a major transit route for crystal methamphetamine trafficked from Myanmar to Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.²⁹ In the first half of 2025 alone, over 95 incidents of piracy and armed robbery at sea were recorded, a number that exceeds the total reported for all of 2021 and 2022.³⁰ Still, while persistent, blue crime issues are generally secondary concerns with limited destabilising potential compared to geostrategic threats.

²³ "America's Security Role in the South China Sea," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed September 14, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2015/07/americas-security-role-in-the-south-china-sea?lang=en>.

²⁴ Esther E. Song and Sung Eun Kim, "China's Dual Signalling in Maritime Disputes," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 5 (2024): 660–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2394179>.

²⁵ Song and Kim, "China's Dual Signalling in Maritime Disputes."

²⁶ Girardi et al., *What the Indo-Pacific Means to Europe* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), 2023).

²⁷ Thomas Dent, "The Strait of Malacca's Global Supply Chain Implications," *Institute for Supply Management*, November 21, 2023, <https://www.ismworld.org/supply-management-news-and-reports/news-publications/inside-supply-management-magazine/blog/2023/2023-11/the-strait-of-malaccas-global-supply-chain-implications/>.

²⁸ Anup Phayal et al., "Interstate Hostility and Maritime Crime: Evidence from South East Asia," *Marine Policy* 143 (September 2022): 105134, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2022.105134>.

²⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2025), 14.

³⁰ "Combating Piracy at Sea, Maritime Piracy, Sea Piracy | ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre," accessed October 8, 2025, <https://www.recaap.org/>.

IUU fishing is the notable exception, since it emerges as a concern almost as pressing as interstate maritime disputes and chokepoint closures. This is less surprising when considering that IUU fishing in the South China Sea has not only been an tool of international organised crime, but also instrumentalised by states to reinforce maritime claims, blurring the line between crime and geopolitics. In this sense, IUU fishing is not merely a livelihood or enforcement issue but a catalyst for interstate disputes, amplifying rather than existing apart from the broader geopolitical competition.³¹

Beyond political and military concerns, the South China Sea is also vulnerable to natural hazards including typhoons, tropical storms, cyclones, earthquakes, and rising sea levels as well as man-made environmental threats -all of which pose substantial, albeit secondary, risks to maritime routes and port infrastructure.³²

Overall, geostrategic threats emerge as the most pressing concern in the South China Sea, where uncertainty is driven by great power competition and interstate maritime disputes. Blue crime and environmental disruptions also contribute to the instability of the maritime landscape, albeit to a secondary extent. The notable exception remains IUU fishing, a hybrid threat that blurs the boundaries between state actors and international organised crime. Table 4 below summarised the risk assessment through impact-by-probability scores.

Table 4: Summary of threat assessment for the South China Sea



Threat Category	Threat Type	Probability	Impact	Risk
Geostrategic threats	Great power rivalries	4.3	4.6	19.8
	Interstate maritime disputes	3.7	4.2	16.4
	Chokepoint closure	3.6	3.95	14.2
	Sabotage and damage of CUI	3.5	3.7	13.1
Blue crime	Terrorism	2.2	2.2	4.8
	Piracy and armed robbery at sea	3.65	2.91	10.6
	Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling	2.8	2.4	6.7
	Drug Trafficking and Smuggling of Goods	3.5	2.41	8.4
	IUU Fishing	4	3.3	13.2
Environmental disruptions	Climate-related hazards	3.45	3.3	11.4
	Maritime Pollution	3.2	2.75	8.8

³¹ Commander Jennifer Runion et al., "Fishing for Trouble: Chinese IUU Fishing and the Risk of Escalation," U.S. Naval Institute, February 1, 2023, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/february/fishing-trouble-chinese-iuu-fishing-and-risk-escalation>.

³² Song Yang et al., "Global Effects of Climate Change in the South China Sea and Its Surrounding Areas," *Ocean-Land-Atmosphere Research* 3 (January 2024), <https://doi.org/10.34133/olar.0038>.

2.2. The threat landscape in the Red Sea

The Red Sea forms part of a crucial global trade artery linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal. It is a vital trading waterway, with approximately 12% of global trade navigating through its waters, and the Suez Canal represents the most vital chokepoint for European maritime imports and exports.³³

Maritime security in the Red Sea dominated global headlines in 2023 after the Houthis launched indiscriminate attacks on commercial shipping. Rapid US and EU intervention ensured the Bab el-Mandeb Strait remained open.³⁴ Just two years earlier, global supply chains were similarly disrupted from the north when the Ever Given blocked the Suez Canal.³⁵ Together, these incidents cemented chokepoint closure and terrorism as the most critical maritime threat in the region, a perception that persists nowadays.

The Red Sea faces additional threats, including piracy, sabotage and damage of CUI, and the looming threat of great power competition. Although international operations such as the US-led Combined Task Force 151 and the EU's Operation Atalanta have reduced piracy incidents, underlying conditions of poverty, weak governance, and political instability in coastal states persist.³⁶ The danger extends beyond shipping: the Red Sea is also home to 16 internet cables clustered together, earning it the label of "the internet's most vulnerable place on earth."³⁷ The Red Sea's security landscape is further complicated by a dense concentration of foreign military bases in Djibouti, where the US, China, France, and Japan all maintain presences.³⁸ While great-power rivalry in this context remains less immediate than in the South China Sea, its potential impact is thus significant.

Other blue crime activities, such as drug and human trafficking are seen as secondary concerns, together with environmental disruptions. Shifting weather patterns and increasing desertification in the region heighten the risk of stronger dust storms, raising the likelihood of similar disruptions in the future.³⁹ Lastly, in sharp contrast with the South China Sea, IUU fishing is the lowest risk for the maritime security of the Red Sea. This is likely due to the lack of IUU fishing instrumentalization from state actors in the region. Table 5 summarises the threat assessment for the Red Sea.

³³ Richard Partington, "What Is the Red Sea Crisis, and What Does It Mean for Global Trade?," World News, *The Guardian*, January 3, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/03/what-is-the-red-sea-crisis-and-what-does-it-mean-for-global-trade>; Girardi et al., *What the Indo-Pacific Means to Europe* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), 2023).

³⁴ "[Visual] The Houthis' Red Sea Attacks Explained," International Crisis Group, accessed September 14, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/visual-explainers/red-sea/>.

³⁵ Vivian Yee and James Glanz, "How One of the World's Biggest Ships Jammed the Suez Canal," World, *The New York Times*, July 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/17/world/middleeast/suez-canal-stuck-ship-ever-given.html>.

³⁶ "The Roots of Somalia's Slow Piracy Resurgence | International Crisis Group," June 7, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/somalia/roots-somalias-slow-piracy-resurgence>.

³⁷ Matt Burgess, "The Most Vulnerable Place on the Internet," Tags, *Wired*, n.d., accessed October 6, 2025, <https://www.wired.com/story/submarine-internet-cables-egypt/>.

³⁸ Paul Van Hooff et al., "Guarding the Maritime Commons | What Role for Europe in the Indo-Pacific," The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, February 2022, <https://hcss.nl/report/guarding-the-maritime-commons-europe-in-indo-pacific/>.

³⁹ Jenny Messenger, "Chokepoints and Climate Change: Future Challenges for the Suez Canal," *Global Trade Review (GTR)*, n.d., accessed September 14, 2025, <https://www.gtreview.com/supplements/gtr-mena-2023/chokepoints-and-climate-change-future-challenges-for-the-suez-canal/>.

Table 5: Summary of threat assessment for the Red Sea



Threat Category	Threat Type	Probability	Impact	Risk
Geostrategic threats	Great power rivalries	3	4.3	12.9
	Interstate maritime disputes	3	3.5	10.5
	Chokepoint closure	4.2	4.7	19.7
	Sabotage and damage of CUI	3.4	3.7	12.6
Blue crime	Terrorism	4.1	4	16.4
	Piracy and armed robbery at sea	3.5	3.5	12.25
	Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling	3.4	2.6	8.8
	Drug Trafficking and Smuggling of Goods	3.3	2.6	8.6
	IUU Fishing	2.6	2.15	5.6
Environmental disruptions	Climate-related hazards	3.1	2.9	9
	Maritime Pollution	3.2	2.55	8.2

2.3. Key Takeaways

Assessing maritime security threats in the Red Sea and South China Sea unveils similarities and differences between two regions that hold equal importance for European prosperity and (economic) security. Each sea represents a distinct but interconnected maritime system where the interplay of geopolitical rivalry, organised crime, and environmental pressures shapes the overall risk environment. From the threat assessment, summarised below in Figure 4, three key insights emerge.

2.3.1. Convergence of trends

Although the Red Sea and the South China Sea have distinct threat landscapes, both are marked by a common trend: the increasingly hybrid nature of maritime threats. In the South China Sea, IUU fishing is both a transnational organised crime activity, and a way for state actors to exercise pressure in a contested environment made unstable by great power competition.⁴⁰ Criminal activity, strategic rivalries, and territorial claims are thus interconnected, creating an environment where blue crime feeds geopolitical rivalry rather than existing apart from it. In the Red Sea, a similar pattern emerges, though in a different form: non-state violence, such as Houthi attacks on commercial shipping, directly shapes global trade and triggers the involvement of littoral states and outside powers alike.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Runion et al., “Fishing for Trouble.”

⁴¹ Kevin Truitte, “The Red Sea Insurgency: The Asymmetrical Houthi Threat to the Strategic Waterway,” Georgetown Security Studies Review, December 21, 2018, <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2018/12/21/the-red-sea-insurgency-the-asymmetrical-houthi-threat-to-the-strategic-waterway/>; Jeong Hwang Yu, “Houthis and Maritime Security: More Than Just Modern Piracy?,” Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies, October 23, 2024, <https://www.journalofterritorialandmaritimestudies.net/post/houthi-is-and-maritime-security-more-than-just-modern-piracy>.

This hybridisation of maritime threats in both seas blurs the boundaries between state and non-state actors, complicating efforts to ensure security through traditional state-led initiatives.

2.3.2. Divergence of implications

Despite these areas of convergence, the implications of maritime threats diverge sharply between the South China Sea and the Red Sea, particularly in terms of escalation dynamics. In the South China Sea the escalation risks are far higher than in the Red Sea, especially in the long-run. The region is heavily militarised, with naval patrols, coast guard vessels, and maritime militias operating in contested waters, heightening the likelihood that a minor maritime incident could trigger a broader confrontation between major powers.⁴² Considering the strategic value and geography of the South China Sea, a conflict between major powers in the region will hardly stay localised, and is likely to soon expand to involve not only other littoral states, but also other countries globally. Should this happen, it will be hard for European states to avoid involvement.⁴³

On the other hand, the Red Sea's risks are episodic and generally non-state driven. While attacks on shipping or chokepoint disruptions can cause immediate and costly global consequences, they are less likely to evolve into sustained interstate conflict. Still, they have immediate and tangible economic repercussions, as the ongoing Red Sea Crisis demonstrates.⁴⁴ European states have already suffered the impacts of disruptions in the Red Sea that resulted in backlogged ports, shipping delays, and rise in insurance costs.⁴⁵

In short, the South China Sea's threats are strategic and long-term, whereas the Red Sea's ones are tactical and short-term but globally disruptive. For European and littoral states, this has important implications for response efforts.

2.3.3. Interdependence of responses

Divergences and convergences in the threat landscapes of the Red Sea and South China Sea in essence underscore the need for threat-based approaches that take into account regional differences but tackle global disruptions. Most importantly, such approaches must be rooted in cooperation among states. This refers not only to littoral states directly affected by the abovementioned maritime threats, but also other globally who benefit from open maritime trade routes and sea lines of communication.

As the boundaries between state and non-state actors blur, it becomes difficult for traditional, state-led responses to be effective in tackling multifaceted threats. The distinct long- and short-term implications of maritime threats make it necessary to deal with both

⁴² Alexander C. Tan and Neel Vanvari, "Conflict in a Crowded Sea: Risks of Escalation in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, April 11, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/conflict-in-a-crowded-sea-risks-of-escalation-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

⁴³ Van Hooft et al., "Guarding the Maritime Commons | What Role for Europe in the Indo-Pacific"; Vera Kranenburg and Nick Bontenbal, "Rising South China Sea Tensions and Concerns for Europe," *Clingendael Spectator*, August 23, 2023, <https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/rising-south-china-sea-tensions-and-concerns-europe>.

⁴⁴ Victoria Sainz, "The Red Sea Shipping Crisis (2024–2025): Houthi Attacks and Global Trade Disruption," *Atlas Institute for International Affairs*, March 27, 2025, <https://atlasinstitute.org/the-red-sea-shipping-crisis-2024-2025-houthi-attacks-and-global-trade-disruption/>.

⁴⁵ "Recent Threats in the Red Sea," European Parliament, March 27, 2025.

unpredictability and escalation risks. Tackling all of the factors above is virtually impossible for a state on its own. This is especially true for emerging powers, who often lack the capabilities to manage the breadth of these challenges on their own. Cooperative efforts among states hence become indispensable to tackle maritime threats.

In sum, the South China Sea and the Red Sea illustrate two distinct but somewhat converging threat landscapes for maritime security. In the South China Sea, the main threats are of geostrategic nature, rooted in the rivalry between great powers and disputes among littoral states. In contrast, the Red Sea's instability arises from the vulnerability of chokepoints as well as terrorism and piracy. Both regions are marked by a growing interconnection between state and non-state threats, where hybrid risks, such as state-linked IUU fishing in the South China Sea or militant attacks on trade routes in the Red Sea, blur the lines between geopolitics and blue crime. Managing these risks requires a threat-based approach rooted in sustained international engagement, as the breadth of maritime threats exceeds the capabilities of individual states.

3. Cooperate:

countermeasures for a threat-based approach

This section builds upon the threat assessment presented in the previous chapter by shifting the focus from analysis to action. It explores how international cooperation can prevent and respond to maritime security threats in the South China Sea and the Red Sea. The section distinguishes between preventive and responsive measures, detailing how each can enhance resilience, improve maritime governance, and strengthen collective security.

3.1. Understanding maritime threats' countermeasures: prevention and response

For a threat-based approach to be effective and efficient, it is fundamental that each countermeasure is tailored not only to the threat, but also to the objectives of interstate cooperation. The latter can be broadly described as (a) preventing a potential maritime threat from manifesting; and (b) responding to an already ongoing maritime threat. Following this logic, responses to maritime threats can broadly be divided into two different categories: preventive measures and responsive measures. This section elaborates on both types of countermeasures and illustrate their applications in the South China Sea and Red Sea.⁴⁶

3.1.1. Preventive measures

Preventive measures involve proactive actions taken to deter, detect, or eliminate maritime threats before they materialise. These measures aim to reduce risk by addressing vulnerabilities through early intervention, strengthening resilience, and limiting opportunities for threats to emerge.⁴⁷

Collaborative preventive measures are specifically aimed at enhancing maritime security by providing training, sharing information and supplying equipment to strengthen the capabilities of one or both countries.⁴⁸ This often leads to a win-win scenario, where the receiving party

⁴⁶ Lutz Feldt e.a., 'Maritime security—Perspectives for a comprehensive approach', *ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security* 2, nr. 74 (2013): p2.

⁴⁷ Lilly R. Sucharipa-Behrmann and Thomas M. Franck, "Preventive Measures," *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics* 30 (1998 1997): 485.

⁴⁸ Walter Bateman, *Capacity Building for Maritime Security Cooperation: What Are We Talking About?*, University of Wollongong, January 1, 2005, 23, https://ro.uow.edu.au/articles/chapter/Capacity_Building_for_Maritime_Security_Cooperation_What_Are_We_Talking_About_/27793005/1.

sees an opportunity to enhance its law enforcement capabilities, while the donating party benefits from the improved security situation.⁴⁹

Joint trainings are an effective way to strengthen maritime security and can be done through exercises or by providing actual training sessions to civilian or military personnel.⁵⁰ Joint trainings enhance the operational skills and efficiency of naval forces, thereby improving their ability to conduct patrols, identify suspicious activities, and respond effectively to incidents. This strengthens the deterrence against malignant actors and prevent such threats from manifesting in the first place.⁵¹

Preventive cooperation is generally easier to initiate than responsive measures because it is less intrusive, whereas responsive measures demand operational action and real-time coordination, which can raise sovereignty concerns and make them more politically challenging. Preventive measures therefore face lower barriers to enact, making them logical avenues for cooperation in mini- and multilateral settings. Additionally, preventive measures can serve as confidence building measures, providing a stepping stone toward more structural cooperation.⁵²

For instance, France's sustained cooperation with the Vietnamese navy, including tailored trainings has led to notable improvements in its maritime capabilities.⁵³ Similarly, the Japanese government's support for the civilian maritime training program run by the Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding (CCCCPA) aims to enhance security in the Red Sea region.⁵⁴

Another type of preventive measure is information sharing, which increases the MDA of partner states. By providing access to real-time data and historical records of maritime activities, states are better equipped to detect and respond to threats.⁵⁵ The Regional Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), comprising 21 member states, serves as an information-sharing hub that helps coordinate efforts to combat piracy and armed robbery in Asia.⁵⁶

A similar structure emerged in the Western Indian Ocean following counter-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa. The Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) platform, initially established as a forum for coordination and deconfliction, facilitated the development of the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor and the creation of MERCURY, a neutral

⁴⁹ Nazery Khalid, "With a Little Help from My Friends: Maritime Capacity-Building Measures in the Straits of Malacca," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31, no. 3 (2009): 429, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41487398>.

⁵⁰ Yee-Kuang Heng, "UK-Japan Military Exercises and Mutual Strategic Reassurance," *Defence Studies* 21, no. 3 (2021): 337, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2021.1931134>.

⁵¹ Heng, "UK-Japan Military Exercises and Mutual Strategic Reassurance."

⁵² John F. Bradford et al., *Maritime Cooperation and Security in the Indo-Pacific Region* (Brill, 2022), 268–69, <https://brill.com/display/title/63876>.

⁵³ "Vietnam Coast Guard and French Navy strengthen cooperation," [en.qdnd.vn](https://en.qdnd.vn/military/intl-relations-and-cooperation/vietnam-coast-guard-and-french-navy-strengthen-cooperation-575373), accessed June 19, 2025, <https://en.qdnd.vn/military/intl-relations-and-cooperation/vietnam-coast-guard-and-french-navy-strengthen-cooperation-575373>.

⁵⁴ "Deputy FM Inaugurates Training to Support Maritime Security in Red Sea," accessed June 19, 2025, <https://sis.gov.eg/Story/205453/Deputy-FM-inaugurates-training-to-support-maritime-security-in-Red-Sea?lang=en-us>.

⁵⁵ Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, *Understanding Maritime Security* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 177.

⁵⁶ Lee Yin Mui, "Piracy and Armed Robbery as an Evolving Threat to Southeast Asia's Maritime Security," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, December 7, 2022, <https://amti.csis.org/piracy-as-an-evolving-threat-to-southeast-asias-maritime-security/>.

communication channel that provides real-time data on naval operations and piracy incidents to all navies operating in the area.⁵⁷

Providing financial or material assistance is another form of collaborative preventive measure, as it enables partner states to strengthen their fleets and maritime capabilities. This in turn makes them more credible in deterring and preventing threats, while also increasing their readiness to act effectively when required.⁵⁸ The US, for instance, systematically provided money to countries in the South China Sea allowing them to enhance their maritime capabilities. The Philippines received patrol vessels and was given \$500 million to modernise its military and coast guard.⁵⁹ Indonesia was granted more than \$50 million for the establishment of an Integrated Maritime Surveillance System (IMSS) strategically positioned to cover the Malacca Strait.⁶⁰ Malaysia received funding to convert transport aircraft into maritime surveillance aircraft.⁶¹ Through such initiatives, the US enabled its partners to strengthen their maritime security and operational readiness.

3.1.2. Responsive measures

A responsive measure involves actions taken to reduce the severity, impact, or consequences of a maritime threat after it has occurred or is imminent. These measures aim to contain damage, ensure safety, and maintain continuity of maritime operations.⁶²

Not all threats can be prevented in advance. Responsive measures primary rationale is therefore to limit harm by reacting once a threat materialises, effectively countering it. This means they depend on timely detection, clear lines of authority, and the operational capacity to translate situational awareness into immediate action.⁶³ Responsive measures are therefore inherently linked to crisis management, damage control, and continuity planning, requiring states to maintain flexible and well-resourced mechanisms that can be activated at short notice.⁶⁴

Collaborative forms of responsive measures rely on highly operationalised and action-oriented forms of security cooperation. Unlike preventive measures, which can often remain limited to information exchange or capacity building, responsive measures presuppose the ability to coordinate interventions across agencies and jurisdictions. This makes them

⁵⁷ Bueger and Edmunds, *Understanding Maritime Security*, 156.

⁵⁸ U.S. Coast Guard, *Indo-Pacific Strategic Intent and Update for FY 2021 and FY 2023* (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2024), 7.

⁵⁹ Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Philippine Navy Commissions U.S. Patrol Vessels," *Naval News*, September 11, 2023, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/09/philippine-navy-commissions-u-s-patrol-vessels/>. Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "U.S. Commits \$500M to Modernize Philippine Military, Coast Guard Against External Threats," *USNI News*, July 31, 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/07/31/u-s-commits-500m-to-modernize-philippine-military-coast-guard-against-external-threats>.

⁶⁰ U. S. Embassy Jakarta, "Fact Sheet: DoD-Funded Integrated Maritime Surveillance System," *U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Indonesia*, April 24, 2022, <https://id.usembassy.gov/fact-sheet-dod-funded-integrated-maritime-surveillance-system/>.

⁶¹ "Malaysia Strengthens Maritime Security with Advanced Patrol Aircraft, Regional Collaboration," *Indo-Pacific Defense FORUM*, n.d., accessed June 19, 2025, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2025/02/malaysia-strengthens-maritime-security-with-advanced-patrol-aircraft-regional-collaboration/>.

⁶² Kristopher A. Pruitt et al., "Modeling Homeland Security," *The Journal of Defense Modeling and Simulation* 1, no. 4 (2004): 192, <https://doi.org/10.1177/875647930400100401>.

⁶³ Josheena Naggea and Rebecca K. Miller, "A Comparative Case Study of Multistakeholder Responses Following Oil Spills in Pointe d'Esny, Mauritius, and Huntington Beach, California," *Ecology and Society* 28, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-13737-280124>.

⁶⁴ Naggea and Miller, "A Comparative Case Study of Multistakeholder Responses Following Oil Spills in Pointe d'Esny, Mauritius, and Huntington Beach, California," 1–2.

more sensitive to questions of trust, interoperability, and legal mandate.⁶⁵ When embedded effectively, they not only help contain individual incidents but can also reinforce the credibility of the broader maritime security architecture by demonstrating that states are capable of responding collectively to emerging threats.⁶⁶

Such cooperation is perhaps most visibly expressed through maritime patrols, which represent an important form of collaborative responsive measures.⁶⁷ This is illustrated by the Trilateral Cooperative Agreement (TCA) established in 2016, between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, (also known as INDOMALPHI) to combat growing piracy and terrorist activities in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas. Its success led to the formation of Trilateral Maritime Patrols (TMP), Trilateral Air Patrol (TAP) and the construction of multiple Maritime Command Centres (MCC).⁶⁸

Technical missions such as those from the Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (PERSGA) can also be considered collaborative responsive measures. Following Houthi attacks on vessels near Djibouti, which was designated as a port of refuge for damaged ships, the Government of Djibouti requested PERSGA's assistance. Concerned about the risk of marine pollution from oil and hazardous and noxious substances (HNS), PERSGA was mobilised to strengthen regional response mechanisms and support the implementation of the relevant regional protocols for effective spill preparedness and management.⁶⁹

Another form of responsive measures can be found in the ever-stronger maritime security collaboration efforts between Vietnam and the Philippines to reduce the regional threat from China. The rising number of confrontations between China's maritime militia and the Philippines and Vietnam led the latter two to sign an agreement on maritime security cooperation.⁷⁰ This was followed by concrete actions such as a communication hotline between the two countries to increase communication and joint exercises specifically focused on Search And Rescue (SAR) to improve their cooperation capabilities.⁷¹ Moreover, dialogues to discuss best practices on maritime law enforcement, were also held.⁷²

⁶⁵ Jürgen Haacke, "The ASEAN Regional Forum: From Dialogue to Practical Security Cooperation?," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22, no. 3 (2009): 445, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570903104057>.

⁶⁶ Commander Shishir Upadhyaya, "Malacca Strait Security Initiative: Potential for Indian Navy's Participation in the Evolving Regional Security Environment," *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, ahead of print, Taylor & Francis Group, July 2, 2010, 48–49, world, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733150903441986>.

⁶⁷ John F Bradford, *The Growing Prospects for Maritime Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia*, 58, no. 3 (2005): 64.

⁶⁸ "Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines Consider Expanding Sulu Sea Trilateral Patrols," accessed June 20, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/indonesia-malaysia-philippines-consider-expanding-sulu-sea-trilateral-patrols/>; "Opening Address by HE GEN (Ret) Ryamizard Ryacudu, Minister of Defence, Ministry of Defence, Indonesia, at the '2018 Southeast Asia Counter-Terrorism Symposium: A Collective Approach' - RSIS," accessed June 20, 2025, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-speeches-article/rsis/opening-address-by-he-gen-ret-ryamizard-ryacudu-minister-of-defence-ministry-of-defence-indonesia-at-the-2018-southeast-asia-counter-terrorism-symposium-a-collective-approach/>.

⁶⁹ "Technical Mission on Oil and Chemical Spill Contingency Planning and Preparedness for Maritime Incidents in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, Field Visit – Djibouti – March 2024," *Persga*, n.d., accessed July 17, 2025, <https://persga.org/news/technical-mission-on-oil-and-chemical-spill-contingency-planning-and-preparedness-for-maritime-incidents-in-the-red-sea-and-gulf-of-aden-field-visit-djibouti-march-2024/>.

⁷⁰ "Vietnam, Philippines Sign Agreements on Maritime Security Cooperation," accessed July 17, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/vietnam-philippines-sign-agreements-on-maritime-security-cooperation/>.

⁷¹ "Vietnamese, Philippine coast guards conduct joint training on search and rescue operations, fire prevention and firefighting," *en.qdnd.vn*, accessed July 17, 2025, <https://en.qdnd.vn/military/intl-relations-and-cooperation/vietnamese-philippine-coast-guards-conduct-joint-training-on-search-and-rescue-operations-fire-prevention-and-firefighting-577361>; *Vietnam and Philippines Establish Maritime Hotline – Asian Defence Journal*, February 7, 2024, <https://adj.com.my/2024/02/07/vietnam-and-philippines-establish-maritime-hotline/>.

⁷² Vietnam+ (VietnamPlus), "Vietnam Coast Guard Region 2 hosts exchange with Philippine coast guard," Vietnam+ (VietnamPlus), April 16, 2025, <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-coast-guard-region-2-hosts-exchange-with-philippine-coast-guard-post317512.vnp>.

3.1.3. A threat-based approach

Having distinguished between the nature of preventive and responsive measures, it is essential to translate these categories into a coherent, threat-based framework. This logic can be applied to the specific maritime threats addressed in section 2, delineating a series of preventive and responsive measures that address specific maritime threats in the Red Sea and South China Sea.

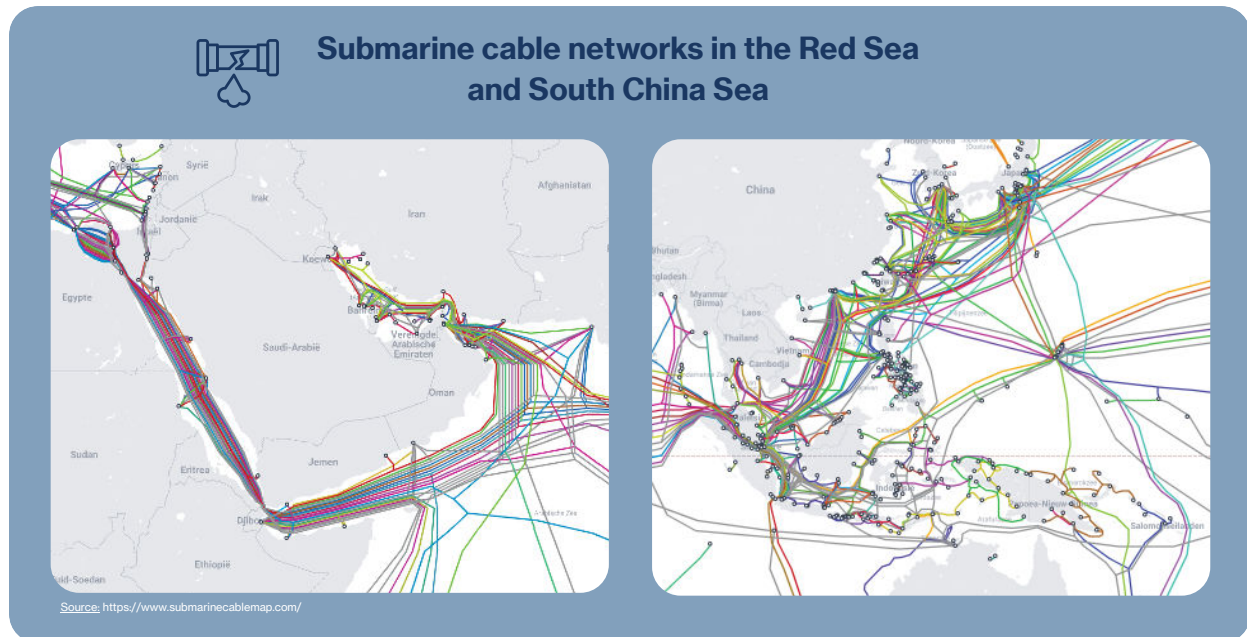
For great power rivalries, regular joint training, communication exercises, and live deconfliction drills foster trust, clarify rules of engagement, and reduce the likelihood of accidental escalation.⁷³ Interstate maritime disputes can be mitigated through collaborative hydrographic surveys, maritime boundary mapping, and real-time satellite vessel tracking, promoting transparency and preventing misinterpretation over territorial claims.⁷⁴ Chokepoint closures are addressed with infrastructure upgrades, scenario planning, and rapid rerouting drills, ensuring continuity of maritime trade despite disruptions.⁷⁵ To protect critical underwater infrastructure, joint inspections, underwater drone surveillance, and maintenance missions prevent sabotage and allow swift repair if incidents occur. This is fundamental, given the density of CUI in both the Red Sea and South China Sea (Figure 5).⁷⁶

⁷³ Ariel González Levaggi, *Great Power Competition in the Southern Oceans: From the Indo-Pacific to the South Atlantic*, Palgrave Studies in Maritime Politics and Security (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36476-1>; K. S. Balakrishnan, "Great Power Rivalry and Military Activities in the South China Sea," *SAMUDERA - Journal of Maritime and Coastal Studies* 1, no. 1 (2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.22452/samudera.vol1no1.2>.

⁷⁴ Bueger et al., *Securing the Seas*; Sebastian Bruns et al., *Conceptualizing Maritime et Naval Strategy: Festschrift for Captain Peter M. Swartz, United States Navy (Ret.)* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845299150>; Nong Hong, "China's Maritime Law Enforcement Reform and Its Implication on the Regional Maritime Disputes," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, April 1, 2015, <https://amti.csis.org/chinas-maritime-law-enforcement-reform-and-its-implication-on-the-regional-maritime-disputes/>.

⁷⁵ Girardi et al., *What the Indo-Pacific Means to Europe* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), 2023); Steve Banker, "Navigating Maritime Chokepoints to Improve Resilience," *Logistics Viewpoints*, February 10, 2025, <https://logisticsviewpoints.com/2025/02/10/navigating-maritime-chokepoints-to-improve-resilience/>.

⁷⁶ Alexander Lott, *Unconventional Legal Approaches to Protecting Underwater Infrastructure*; "Why Is Critical Underwater Infrastructure the Target?," *NATO ENSEC COE*, n.d., accessed September 14, 2025, <https://www.enseccoe.org/publications/why-is-critical-underwater-infrastructure-the-target/>.

Figure 5: Maps of submarine cable networks in the Red Sea and South China Sea

Terrorism is countered with advanced cargo screening, joint port security training, and random drills, deterring attacks and improving threat detection. Piracy and armed robbery are addressed by supporting local patrols, embedding naval advisors, and conducting hostage rescue drills to enhance rapid response capabilities.⁷⁷ Combating human trafficking and migrant smuggling relies on joint training, detection tools, and fast interception boats to spot suspicious activity and intercept illicit operations. Drug trafficking and smuggling of goods is mitigated through modern scanning systems, staff training, and surprise inspections to detect concealed contraband. IUU fishing is tackled by sharing real-time monitoring data, donating patrol vessels, and providing training to enforce compliance effectively.⁷⁸

Climate-related hazards are managed via resilient port infrastructure, backup power systems, mobile flood barriers, and scenario planning, reducing disruptions from extreme weather. Finally, maritime pollution is addressed through provision of pollution prevention equipment, spill-response resources, and joint rapid-response training, ensuring environmental protection and swift containment of incidents.⁷⁹

Table 6 and Table 7 provide a more in-depth breakdown of preventive and responsive measures states can implement to tackle maritime threats.

⁷⁷ "Maritime Security: Key Strategies and Best Practices," Nautilus Shipping, March 2025, <https://www.nautilusshipping.com/news-and-insights/the-role-of-maritime-security-in-ensuring-global-safety-and-trade>; Bueger et al., *Securing the Seas*.

⁷⁸ "Tech vs. Threat: Innovative Solutions to Combat IUU Fishing," *Oceanology International*, June 5, 2024, <https://www.oceanologyinternational.com/london/en-gb/blog/articles/innovative-solutions-to-combat-iuu-fishing.html>; Nautilus Shipping, "Maritime Security"; Bueger et al., *Securing the Seas*.

⁷⁹ Regina Asariotis et al., "Climate Change and Seaports: Hazards, Impacts and Policies and Legislation for Adaptation," *Anthropocene Coasts* 7, no. 1 (2024): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44218-024-00047-9>.

Table 6: Preventive responses for tackling maritime threats

Threat	Preventive Measure	Rationale
Great Power Rivalries	Host regular joint training missions and communication exercises with regional navies to build trust and reduce the risk of accidental clashes.	Joint regular training, communication, and crisis response drills coordinated among regional navies builds trust and intercultural understanding thus reducing the likelihood of accidental naval confrontations.
Interstate Maritime Disputes	Fund and participate in joint hydrographic surveys and collaborative maritime boundary mapping with local authorities to reduce misunderstandings and prevent incidents.	Joint surveys including bathymetric mapping and identification of navigational hazards help prevent disputes over resources like oil and gas and supports future agreements.
Chokepoint Closure	Provide technical support and co-financing for resilience upgrades at key ports and help develop alternative routing plans through shared scenario workshops.	Providing technical support and co-financing to implement infrastructure upgrades, including flood protection measures and backup power systems as well as scenario-based workshops to develop alternative routing plans during adverse conditions helps prevent future disruptions.
Sabotage and damage of CUI	Conduct routine underwater inspections and maintenance missions with local partners, sharing expertise and equipment to keep infrastructure secure.	Conducting joint underwater inspections, maintenance missions, as well as sharing expertise and equipment among local partners enhance maritime security, prevent accidents, and ensure the resilience of critical infrastructure.
Terrorism	Deliver regular joint port security training, run random screening drills together, and share best practices to deter infiltration and attack planning.	Joint port security training with random screening drills helps the effective sharing of good practices to spot case and region-specific terrorist alerts thus enhancing maritime security.
Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea	Support long-term capacity building by providing small patrol boats, equipment, and training local coast guards to maintain visible, routine patrolling.	The donation of small coastal patrol boats, equipment and training to local coast guards helps maintain visible and routine patrols in less monitored regions.
Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling	Organise joint training for local port and border staff on spotting suspicious cargo and passenger behaviour before it becomes a security incident.	Joint training for local port and boarder staff improves awareness for suspicious passenger behavior across cultures thus preventing human trafficking and disrupting transnational smuggling networks trains guards and customs officials to spot red flags in passengers' behaviours and travel documents.
Drug Trafficking and Smuggling of Goods	Supply modern scanning systems for ports and provide ongoing cooperative training for customs officers to improve early detection.	Supplying modern scanning units, staff training for early detection of concealment methods and inter-agency cooperation disrupts drug trafficking networks and stops illegal products from arriving in their destination.
IUU Fishing	Share real-time monitoring data with local maritime authorities and provide training on how to interpret and act on it to prevent illegal fishing.	Sharing real time satellite data, patrol reports and offering staff training shrinks unmonitored zones and discourages illegal fishing.
Climate-related Hazards	Co-finance resilient port infrastructure improvements, such as raised docks and flood defences, and conduct joint scenario planning for extreme weather.	Co-financing resilient port infrastructure improvements and joint scenario planning for extreme weather prevents unprepared ports and vessels from causing broader disruptions of big supply chains.
Maritime Pollution	Provide funding for pollution prevention equipment and work with local ports on regular inspections and staff training to ensure compliance with environmental standards.	Funding pollution prevention equipment for local ports and staff training for regular inspections enhances environmental compliance in ports by sharing best practices and reinforcing the importance of environmental protection.

Table 7: Responsive responses for tackling maritime threats

Threat	Responsive Measure	Rationale
Great Power Rivalries	Run live deconfliction drills and naval communication exercises with local navies.	Drills on established rules of the road for naval encounters with communication procedures, safe distances, and prohibitions on certain aggressive manoeuvres makes commanders less likely to accidentally escalate un-planned encounters.
Interstate Maritime Disputes	Provide satellite monitoring and real-time vessel tracking in disputed areas.	The use of satellite imagery to track coastal guards, fishing, and other naval vessels in disputed waters allows for greater accountability over established agreements and Early warnings on conflict-escalation.
Checkpoint Closure	Train port and coast guard teams in live crisis rerouting and rapid reopening drills.	Emergency response drills for rapid salvage, rerouting, and reopening protocols make accidents less disruptive to transportation chains.
Sabotage and damage of CUI	Deploy underwater drones and inspection teams to protect and repair cables quickly.	Recurrent drone surveillance operations to monitor underwater cables and infrastructure for tampering or sabotage dissuades saboteurs plans and speeds the response to an attack.
Terrorism	Install advanced cargo scanners and train port staff to detect threats on the spot.	Screening cargo before it leaves its port of origin with and authorities trained to detect high-risk shipments stops the smuggling of arms to terrorist groups and deters terrorist attacks.
Piracy	Embed naval advisors in local patrols and conduct hostage rescue drills.	Joint hostage rescue drills strengthen local coast guard and naval force's ability to properly respond to piracy in the region.
Human Trafficking And Smuggling	Supply fast interception boats and detection tools for coastal enforcement units.	Fast interception boats and detection tools for coastal enforcement units allows for immediate response from coastal enforcement units when a boat raised concerns over human trafficking and smuggling.
Drug Trafficking And Smuggling Of Goods	Run surprise port inspections with sniffer dogs and mobile inspection teams.	Randomised port inspections with sniffer dogs and mobile inspection teams disrupt routes of drug trafficking and smuggling of goods, ensuring port workers and cargo comply with counter-terrorism and anti-smuggling standards.
IUU Fishing	Donate patrol vessels and satellite tracking	Donation of patrol vessels and satellite tracking paired with radar technology enables rapid interception of illegal fishing boats and thereby deterring IUU fishing (because higher likelihood of getting caught)
Climate Change	Deploy mobile flood barriers and backup power for ports during severe weather	After extreme weather events caused by climate change, foreign aid could help reconstruct damaged ports with resilient infrastructures such as flood barriers and backup power generators.
Maritime Pollution	Supply spill-response booms and conduct rapid response training for port staff.	Regular joint training exercises with port staff and local responders, supported by the strategic deployment of response equipment such as booms, skimmers, and dispersants, ensure rapid containment of accidental spills in busy waterways.

3.2. Preventive and responsive measures in the South China Sea and Red Sea

Collectively, these measures provide tools aiming at both prevention and response, emphasising a threat-based approach to tackling maritime security threats. Still, selecting the correct partnerships and implementing them requires attention to regional specificities. To address this, the report makes use of survey results. The survey asked regional experts in the South China Sea and Red Sea to evaluate the preventive and responsive measures mentioned in section 3.1.3. More precisely, experts were asked to provide their judgment on the overall effectiveness of the proposed measures and the extent to which littoral states can implement them on their own as well as to indicate which littoral states are best equipped to implement what measure. The results are summarised in the following two sub-sections, and reported at length in [Annex 3](#).

3.2.1. South China Sea

Preventive measures proved particularly effective against threats from non-state actors such as organised crime, terrorism, and IUU fishing. Strengthening MDA through real-time data, satellite feeds, and modern equipment enables states to identify hotspots early and deter illicit activity before it escalates.

Vietnam illustrates the economic stakes of prevention. When the EU issued its 2017 “yellow card” warning, a formal notice that Vietnam was failing to curb IUU fishing and risking future trade sanctions, its seafood exports to Europe fell from 35% to 12%.⁸⁰ Real-time monitoring, capacity-building, and compliance training therefore became essential not only to protect marine resources but also to preserve Vietnam’s seafood export competitiveness, projected to reach \$10 billion by 2025.⁸¹ Similarly, piracy prevention efforts that build long-term capacity through the provision of small patrol boats ranked far higher than initiatives focused solely on funding, illustrating a broader pattern in which tangible assets and technical expertise are valued more than direct financial aid. Responsive measures consistently appeared less effective against organised crime, underscoring the value of preventive investment in these domains.

Responsive measures proved more effective than preventive ones in addressing interstate disputes and great-power competition. For the Philippines and Vietnam, frequent confrontations with Chinese patrols and maritime militia demand immediate deterrence. Real-time satellite data sharing, often coordinated with the United States, helps track Chinese movements and provides evidence that supports de-escalation efforts.⁸²

⁸⁰ Nguyen Khac Giang, 2024/18 “Assessing Vietnam’s Challenges in Fighting IUU Fishing” by Nguyen Khac Giang, 2024, no. No. 18 (2024): 3–4, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2024-18-assessing-vietnams-challenges-in-fighting-iuu-fishing-by-nguyen-khac-giang/>; Công, “Vietnamese Seafood at the EU Gateway – Vast Potential, Tough Challenges, and the Path to Green Transition,” June 15, 2023, <https://en.mae.gov.vn:443/Pages/chi-tiet-tin-Eng.aspx?ItemID=9013>.

⁸¹ *Combating Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing in Vietnam – The EU’s Yellow Card – EIAS*, n.d., accessed September 14, 2025, <https://eias.org/publications/op-ed/iuu-fishing-in-vietnam/>; “Vietnam’s Aquatic Exports Soar toward 10 Bln USD amid Trade Hurdles | Vietnam+ (VietnamPlus),” accessed October 6, 2025, <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnams-aquatic-exports-surge-toward-10-bln-usd-amid-trade-hurdles-post327215.vnp>.

⁸² aixueying, “Assessment of the Philippines’ Maritime Domain Awareness Capabilities,” Text, 南海战略态势感知计划, October 30, 2024, <https://www.scsapi.org/en/dtfx/assessment-philippines%E2%80%99-maritime-domain-awareness-capabilities>.

Both preventive and responsive approaches identified IUU fishing and sabotage and damage of CUI as threats most amenable to effective mitigation. Advanced technologies, such as satellite imagery for tracking fishing activity and underwater drones for monitoring undersea infrastructure, were assessed as indispensable tools. The threat of chokepoint disruption also loomed large, particularly for countries bordering with the Strait of Malacca. With more than 94,000 ships transiting annually and nearly 30 percent of global trade passing through, preventive measures such as crisis rerouting exercises and rapid reopening drills were judged essential for ensuring resilience in the event of disruption.⁸³

Country-specific findings further illustrate the diversity of threats in the region. Indonesia, for instance, inches forward into the crosshairs of great power competition as its longstanding policy of non-alignment and strategic hedging is under growing strain following intensifying US-China rivalry.⁸⁴ Malaysia is most closely associated with the management of chokepoint risks, while Vietnam and the Philippines remain on the frontline of interstate maritime disputes with China.⁸⁵ Together, these cases reveal how divergent priorities and persistent distrust create a patchwork of overlapping security structures and ad hoc coalitions, formed only when shared interests temporarily outweigh political frictions.

On average, the ability of South China Sea littoral states to manage maritime threats independently was assessed with only moderate confidence. This scepticism reflects the region's protracted progress toward cooperative governance. Negotiations on a South China Sea 'Code of Conduct' between ASEAN and China, ongoing for over two decades, illustrate the sluggish pace and limited outcomes of such efforts. Although a three-year negotiation timeline was announced in 2023, expectations for a substantive and enforceable agreement remain low.⁸⁶ In the meantime, cooperation continues to depend on piecemeal, country-specific initiatives rather than on a coherent regional framework.⁸⁷

3.2.2. Red Sea

Collaborative maritime measures in the Red Sea emerged as markedly less effective than those in the South China Sea, reflecting limited regional capacity to manage threats effectively. Structural weaknesses weigh heavily: Sudan is mired in civil war, while Eritrea, Yemen, and Somalia lack meaningful maritime capabilities, leaving long stretches of coastline practically ungoverned.⁸⁸ Even relatively stronger actors such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt face significant constraints, as their long coastlines and diverse security priorities stretch resources thin. The result is an uneven security architecture in which a handful of capable states attempt to compensate for the chronic incapacity of their neighbours.

⁸³ "These Are the World's Most Vital Waterways for Global Trade," World Economic Forum, February 15, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/02/worlds-busiest-ocean-shipping-routes-trade/>.

⁸⁴ "Alliances in a Shifting Global Order: Indonesia | German Marshall Fund of the United States," accessed September 14, 2025, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/new-geopolitics-alliances-rethinking-transatlantic-engagement-global-swing-states/indonesia>.

⁸⁵ Council on Foreign Relations Action, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," Global Conflict Tracker, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

⁸⁶ Rahman Yaacob, "A Code of Conduct Won't Solve the South China Sea Crisis | Lowy Institute," The Interpreter, May 15, 2024, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/code-conduct-won-t-solve-south-china-sea-crisis>.

⁸⁷ Rosnani Rosnani et al., "Asean Maritime Security Cooperation," *Journal of Maritime Research* 19, no. 2 (2022): 63, <https://www.jmr.unican.es/jmr/article/view/652>.

⁸⁸ "Managing Security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden - The Red Sea Council and the Prospect of Multilateralism," text, 5, accessed October 20, 2025, <https://www.foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI%20Memo%208112>.

Preventive measures proved the most effective tools against non-state threats, particularly drug trafficking, piracy, and smuggling. These activities thrive in poorly governed coastal zones and exploit weak maritime enforcement, making prevention and cooperation critical. Multinational naval deployments such as the US-led Combined Task Force 151 and the EU's Operation Atalanta have demonstrated that international coordination can reduce piracy. Yet the persistence of poverty and political instability in coastal communities means the risk of resurgence remains high.⁸⁹ Djibouti is central to these preventive efforts: as the host of multiple foreign bases, including those of the United States, China, France, and Japan, it is both a focal point of competition and a hub for coordination. Its role as a platform for joint training, information-sharing, and best-practice diffusion, has been institutionalised through the Djibouti Code of Conduct.⁹⁰

Responsive approaches, by contrast, function less effectively in the Red Sea than in the South China Sea, particularly in dealing with great-power competition and state-led threats. While naval deployments can respond to piracy or smuggling, they are ill-suited to compensate for the region's deep structural deficits. Unlike Southeast Asia, which benefits from ASEAN as a standing framework for maritime dialogue, the Red Sea lacks an equivalent body. The Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (the "Red Sea Council") has been criticised as inadequate, either for excluding key stakeholders or for lacking the institutional depth to manage complex maritime challenges.⁹¹

Country-specific dynamics underscore these limitations. Saudi Arabia is pivotal in balancing regional and extra-regional interests. With ambitions to consolidate its position as a Middle Eastern power, Riyadh is expected to play a central role in shaping cooperation.⁹² Joint naval exercises as a key responsive tool for building trust, improving interoperability, and cultivating habits of cooperation that may reduce the risks of miscalculation. Egypt, by contrast, is critical for its control of the Suez Canal, through which more than \$1 trillion in goods transit annually.⁹³ Its role extends well beyond the Red Sea, and responsive measures such as upgrading port infrastructure, enhancing crisis management training, and improving rapid-response capacity were judged indispensable for safeguarding chokepoint security.

Taken together, these dynamics highlight the fragmented and fragile nature of Red Sea maritime cooperation. Preventive measures, particularly piracy suppression and the protection of CUI offer the clearest areas of progress, often enabled by external support and technological innovation. Responsive measures, however, remain hampered by weak institutions, political fragmentation, and competing external interests. As in the South China Sea, cooperation is ad hoc and heavily dependent on a few capable states. But in the Red Sea, the institutional void and capacity deficits are deeper, leaving the region more reliant on external actors and more vulnerable to systemic shocks.

⁸⁹ HM Government, *Government Response to the House of Lords EU Committee Report on Somali Piracy and Operation Atalanta* (UK Parliament, 2012), 1, <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/lords-committees/eu-sub-com-c/AtalantaFollowup/20121016GovtResponsetoHOLEUCteeSomaliPiracy-UFINAL.pdf>.

⁹⁰ *DCoC – Djibouti Code of Conduct*, n.d., accessed October 7, 2025, <https://dcoc.org/>.

⁹¹ "The GCC States' Security Policies in the Red Sea Geopolitical Border: Factors and Policy Options," *Luiss Mediterranean Platform*, n.d., accessed September 14, 2025, <https://mp.luiss.it/archives/the-gcc-states-security-policies-in-the-red-sea-geopolitical-border-factors-and-policy-options/>.

⁹² Cinzia Bianco, "Global Saudi: How Europeans Can Work with an Evolving Kingdom," *ECFR*, May 8, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/global-saudi-how-europeans-can-work-with-an-evolving-kingdom/>.

⁹³ hbarzani, "A Lifeline under Threat: Why the Suez Canal's Security Matters for the World," *Atlantic Council*, March 20, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/a-lifeline-under-threat-why-the-suez-canals-security-matters-for-the-world/>.

3.3. Key takeaways

The analysis of preventive and responsive measures to counter maritime threats in the South China Sea and the Red Sea reveals three overarching insights.

3.3.1. Prevention and capacity building as the fundamental basis

Preventive measures, emphasising capacity building, information sharing, and training, offer the most immediate and sustainable impact against non-state maritime threats. Their lower political sensitivity makes them practical entry points for cooperation between Europe and regional partners. When combined with technology-enabled MDA, including satellite data, UAV/USV patrols, and integrated information platforms, these efforts enhance both early detection and coordinated action. Long-term, outcome-linked capacity-building programs that strengthen institutions and embed operational expertise yield far greater resilience than ad hoc interventions.

3.3.2. Effective response depends on interoperability, trust, and legal clarity

Responsive measures remain indispensable for addressing high-intensity threats such as great power rivalries and interstate disputes, but their effectiveness hinges on interoperability, trust, and shared legal frameworks. Operational cooperation falters when jurisdiction, rules of engagement, or evidentiary standards are unclear. Progress therefore requires harmonising legal and procedural norms, improving information-sharing mechanisms, and establishing consistent command-and-control (C2) linkages. Where regional institutions remain underdeveloped, interim minilateral or technical arrangements can serve as pragmatic scaffolding for more formal cooperation to emerge.

3.3.3. The importance of regional governance and resilience

Maritime security strategies must reflect regional realities. In regions with established cooperative mechanisms, structured coordination can build on existing institutional foundations; in areas with weaker governance or fragile institutions, external support and phased capacity development are prerequisites for meaningful responsiveness. Across both contexts, resilience, through contingency planning, diversified logistics, and adaptive crisis management, must be coupled with regional governance systems.

4. Prioritise: European engagement options in the Red Sea and South China Sea

This section assesses the potential of European engagement with regional emerging powers by evaluating the cooperation effectiveness of various preventive and responsive measures against distinct threats in the Red Sea and South China Sea. Building on Section 3, which emphasised the role of local capacity, regional priorities, and institutional realities, it explores Europe's potential as a partner and capacity-builder. The focus is on advancing lasting partnerships with emerging powers in the South China Sea and Red Sea, while securing both European and regional interests.

Given the high economic and diplomatic costs of comprehensive engagement, Europe must prioritise measures with the greatest feasibility and impact, while fostering long-term trust and interoperability. By cross-referencing CEAF scores with the risk analysis from Section 2, this section provides an evaluation of each measures vis a vis the threat they aim at preventing/mitigating. The measures are categorised into four quadrants, balancing risk and reward, as visualised in Figure 6 and Figure 7. The four categories can be used by policymakers to prioritise measures and cooperation areas on the basis of the strategic objective of the cooperation, as they mark distinctive trade-offs between cooperation value and threat-related risks.

4.1. Cooperation options for European states

In short: **'Full Sails Ahead'** measures represent the most immediate cooperation venues with the highest likelihood of sustained EU-littoral state engagement. At the same time, these measures mostly tackle secondary threats, leaving maritime routes exposed to more pressing risks, such as those taken on by **'High Stakes Manoeuvres'** measures. Here, countermeasures tackle high-risk scenarios that have high escalatory potential and disruptive consequences, but also significant rewards in term of fortifying maritime security cooperation and securing sea lines of communication. Still, resource limitations might constrain the ability of European and regional states to undertake such efforts. Cooperation might then still be possible through **'Showing the Flag'** measures, which highlight where engagement may be maintained at a lower level for diplomatic or symbolic reasons. Still, this type of measure should not absorb disproportionate attention as it yields lower rewards both in terms of long-term cooperation and maritime security. Lastly, **'Dangerous Waters'** measures are those for which both gains and risks are moderate, therefore not presenting immediate rewards or for Europe and partners, unless planning is carefully made for long-term, sustained cooperation.

Applying these four categories to regional realities allows for a policy-oriented overview of cooperation options rooted in a threat-based, regional-specific approach.

Figure 6: Evaluation of preventive and responsive measures in the South China Sea

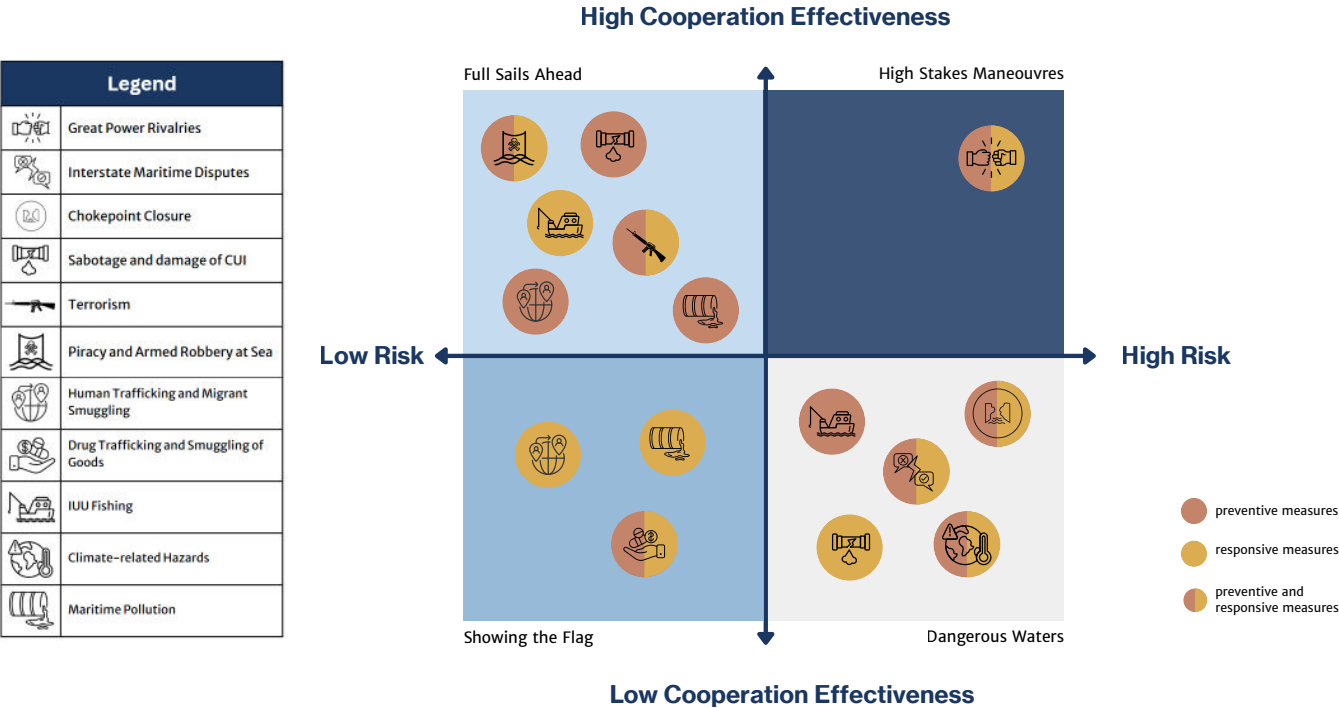
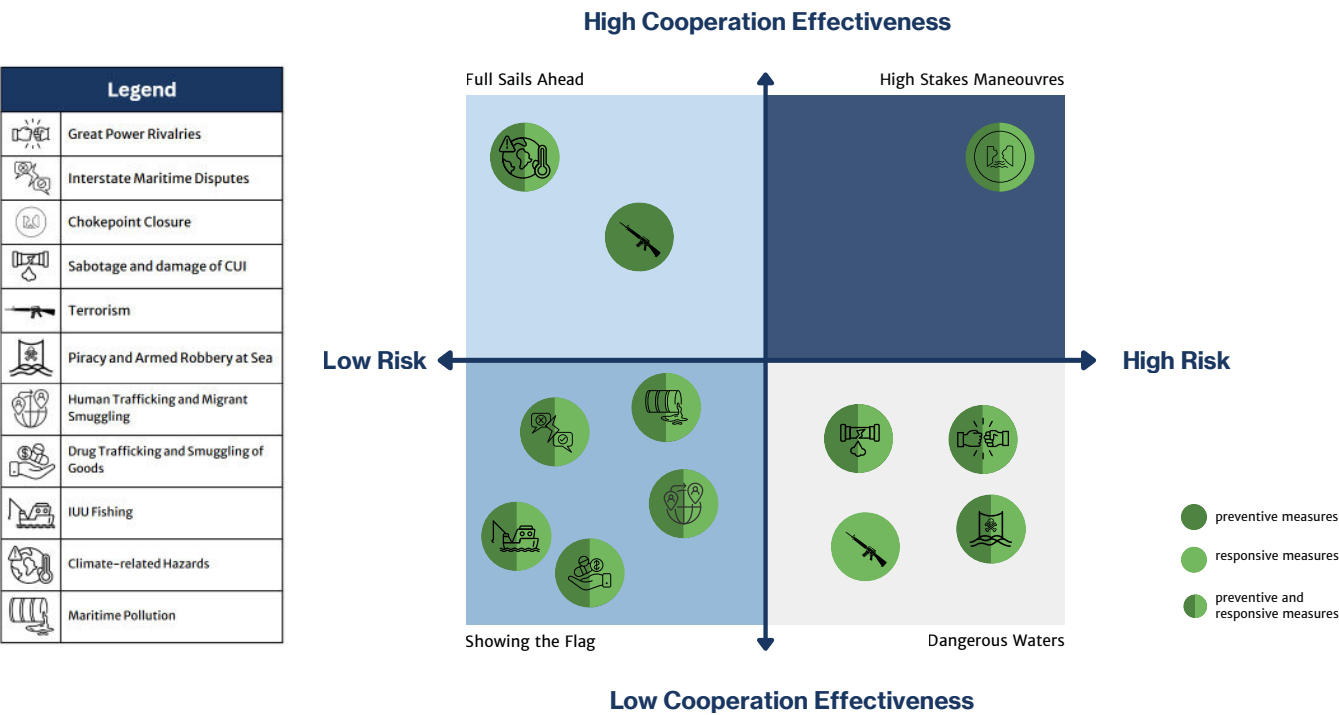


Figure 7: Evaluation of preventive and responsive measures in the Red Sea



4.1.1. **Full Sails Ahead': high cooperation value, medium-low risk**

Measures in the top left quadrants are those where political sensitivities are low, operational needs are clear, and littoral states generally welcome external support.

In the **South China Sea**, most of blue crime challenges, such as piracy and armed robbery at sea, IUU fishing, and human trafficking fall here. They represent classic non-traditional security threats: disruptive, economically damaging, and cross-border by nature, yet not hinging on sovereignty issues. Preventive and responsive initiatives such as joint training for port and border officials to detect human trafficking or suspicious cargo, embedding European naval advisors in local patrols, running hostage rescue or interception drills, and co-deploying assets for joint maritime patrols could prove both feasible and mutually beneficial. Similarly, preventive cooperation on maritime pollution and CUI protection yield high cooperative potential with partners in the South China Sea as an uncontroversial issue that can deliver tangible operational outcomes, and enhance Europe's reputation as a reliable partner.

In the Red Sea, the availability of this type of measures is limited to preventive and responsive interventions on climate change and terrorism prevention. Climate-related hazards, such as coastal erosion, extreme weather, and environmental degradation, affect all littoral states irrespective of national and regional dynamics. As such, preventive cooperation on early-warning systems, disaster-response planning, and climate-resilient port infrastructure is likely to be broadly welcomed, since it offers clear operational gains without intruding upon national prerogatives. Cooperation in this area in the Red Sea is potentially more effective than in the South China Sea as the targeted area is more restricted and less littoral states would be involved, allowing for sustainable longer-term investments. Preventive counter-terrorism efforts similarly enhance local capabilities without binding states into security arrangements.

Overall, this category presents measures for low-risk, high-utility cooperation for Europe and regional emerging powers. Activities are practical, uncontroversial, and deliver visible benefits in preparedness and resilience.

4.1.2. **'High-Stakes Manoeuvres': high cooperation value, high risk**

Measures in this category tackle threats that are high-risk yet still offer opportunities for targeted collaboration that, if carefully calibrated, can yield great long-term benefits for European partnerships with regional states and maritime security at large. These measures represent the most strategically consequential but politically and operationally demanding areas of engagement.

For the **South China Sea**, this translates in measures tackling great power rivalries. Sino-American competition in the region affects every facet of the maritime environment, from freedom of navigation operations to militarised artificial islands, and thus represents a considerable challenge for littoral states. Europe has an interest in upholding an open, multilateral order that is not polarised by great power competition and allows small and middle powers to play a role in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, its involvement risks being interpreted through the prism of broader geopolitical competition and Sino-American alignment, bringing considerable escalatory risks to an already tensioned geopolitical context. Addressing this threat through both preventive and responsive measures is thus of primary concern to European and regional states, while carrying significant risks.

Measures addressing chokepoint closure are the equivalent in the **Red Sea**. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait and Suez Canal are among the world's most strategically sensitive maritime corridors. Disruptions, whether from state confrontation, militia attacks, or spillover from regional conflicts, carry major economic, political, and security risks. European involvement in preventive or responsive measures, such as contingency planning for traffic management, joint scenario exercises, or coordinated surveillance to detect emerging blockages, offers substantial strategic dividends but carries clear diplomatic risk. Any action that touches on chokepoint governance is easily interpreted through broader regional rivalries, especially involving the Gulf states and actors in the Horn of Africa. Engagement thus demands careful calibration, sustained political dialogue, and strict neutrality. Nevertheless, the strategic value is high: cooperation here strengthens trust, ensures continuity of maritime flows, and anchors Europe as a stabilising actor in fundamental waters for European prosperity.

In these contexts, both preventive and responsive measures can lead to undesired escalation, making engagement riskier and more delicate. Cooperation thus requires intensive coordination, diplomatic skills, and financial investment. At the same time, it yields significant returns in long-term access, trust, and influence while tackling some of the most pressing threats Sea and South China Sea.

4.1.3. 'Showing the Flag': medium cooperation value, medium-low risk

Some threats are relatively low-risk and easier to address at both the political and capability level, yet cooperation may yield limited strategic transformation for the maritime security landscape as a whole. These measures often absorb European attention during naval presence missions or diplomatic outreach but do not necessarily grant long-term stabilisation and security of maritime routes.

A clear example in the **South China Sea** is both preventive and responsive cooperation against drug trafficking and smuggling of goods, which register low risk and only medium effectiveness across regional powers. Measures such as joint surprise inspections, provision of mobile scanning teams, or the deployment of sniffer dogs can be implemented by contributing to efforts of regional organisations such as ASEAN that already target these issues. Still, cooperation on these measures rarely transform broader security relations or institutional practices, as it does not address the riskiest threats. Additionally, in many cases, local authorities may prefer to manage these issues unilaterally or exclusively through existing regional arrangements, limiting the scope for European added value. Likewise, certain forms of maritime-pollution responsive cooperation in lower-risk environments, such as routine inspections without associated capacity-building or limited equipment donations that are not embedded in wider environmental or regulatory reforms, are unlikely to have significant effects on threats that are already perceived as less disruptive.

For the **Red Sea**, this seems to be the case for most preventive and responsive measures, including those addressing interstate maritime disputes, drug trafficking and smuggling of goods, maritime pollution, IUU fishing, and human trafficking and migrant smuggling. These lower-risk threats are familiar to regional authorities and generally fall within existing enforcement mandates, which makes cooperation with Europe feasible but not transformative. Preventive and responsive measures all offer operational improvements but their strategic effect is modest. Most Red Sea states prefer to manage these concerns via

bilateral arrangements or established regional frameworks, limiting opportunities for deeper institutional alignment.

Such activities nonetheless maintain European visibility, support incremental capability gains, and demonstrate a commitment to maritime governance. They are, in essence, a form of signalling and confidence-building, but do not yield long-term strategic gains for Europe. While implementing this type of measures still has diplomatic value, they risk absorbing disproportionate attention and resources if prioritised over cooperation initiatives tackling more pressing threats.

4.1.4. **'Dangerous Waters': medium cooperation value, medium-high-risk**

This category encompasses measures that offer steady, practical improvements to maritime security but are limited in their ability to reshape underlying maritime security dynamics in the short-term.

These initiatives, such as joint hydrographic surveys to ease interstate maritime disputes, port-resilience upgrades to mitigate chokepoint closure risks, real-time data sharing to reduce IUU fishing, and co-financed infrastructure and scenario planning for climate-related hazards, primarily strengthen transparency, preparedness, and cooperative capacity across **the South China Sea**. Yet their cooperative value remains moderate. This is either due to the political sensitivity of the threat tackled or for the constraints on both European and local capacities to sustain long-term efforts. For example, shared monitoring for IUU fishing improves situational awareness but cannot offset differing national priorities, while climate-resilience projects require long-term funding that not all states can sustain. Similarly, joint boundary-mapping efforts clarify maritime spaces but cannot resolve sovereignty claims. Responsive measures to sabotage of CUI might also prove to be too nationally sensitive for operational cooperation, especially considering issues related to cabotage, legal responsibility, and data sensitivity.

For the **Red Sea**, a similar logic can be applied to measures tackling sabotage and damage of CUI, great-power rivalries, responsive counter-terrorism, and piracy and armed robbery at sea. These issues combine political sensitivity with operational complexity, reducing the likelihood of successful sustained cooperation despite clear security needs. For instance, CUI sabotage is a high-stakes concern in a region where responsibility, attribution, and legal jurisdiction are often contested. Regional partners may hesitate to share data or operational access due to sovereignty concerns, making cooperative efforts less fruitful. Likewise, responsive counter-terrorism cooperation and anti-piracy operations offer practical benefits, but they require robust intelligence exchanges, interoperable procedures, and long-term resource commitments that not all states can sustain. The operational value is evident, but political and financial constraints limit deeper, longer-term cooperation opportunities.

In sum, these measures improve maritime security in specific domains but cannot easily reshape underlying regional dynamics. Without a long-term framework and sustained local buy-in, they risk becoming resource-intensive with uncertain returns.

4.2. Key takeaways

4.2.1. **Balancing risk and effectiveness while accounting for limited capabilities and diplomatic returns is the key to a successful engagement with regional powers.**

Europe must be selective and pragmatic, prioritising initiatives that maximise both operational gains and diplomatic returns. Resources should be allocated where preventive and responsive measures can produce tangible improvements in maritime security while advancing broader strategic objectives. This balance requires continuous reassessment of Europe's naval, financial, and diplomatic capacities, ensuring that ambition remains matched by feasibility.

4.2.2. **Clarifying objectives and prioritising measures according to purpose and trade-offs maximises cooperation outputs.**

Europeans must differentiate between the purposes of their engagements -whether deterrence, resilience-building, or partnership consolidation- and determine which instruments are most appropriate for each. Each of the four types of measures involves a trade-off between diplomatic visibility, cost, and risk; hence, clear prioritisation is essential. Policymakers should articulate their objectives explicitly before engaging with littoral states, aligning maritime actions with a coherent strategic vision that weighs short-term gains against long-term stability and trust. This prioritisation ensures that Europe's engagement remains both efficient and effective, avoiding overextension while maximising its geopolitical and security returns. Distinguishing four types of measures enables an objective-driven choice of cooperation initiatives.

Conclusion: an actionable agenda for European cooperation with emerging regional powers in the South China Sea and Red Sea

This report has examined how Europe can strengthen its maritime security engagement through structured cooperation with rising middle powers in two strategic regions: the Red Sea and the South China Sea. By systematically applying a threat-based methodology grounded in the AMCAT and Cooperative Effectiveness Assessment Frameworks, it has provided a comprehensive mapping of maritime threats, assessed the associated risks, and evaluated both preventive and responsive measures available to European and regional actors. It has further explored how Europe can align its limited capabilities and diplomatic leverage with the needs and realities of littoral states, ensuring that cooperation is both targeted and sustainable while catering to regional needs.

The analysis has shown that maritime threats in both regions are increasingly hybrid, multi-dimensional, and interconnected. In the South China Sea, great power rivalries, interstate maritime disputes, and the weaponisation of IUU fishing dominate the threat landscape. In the Red Sea, instability stems primarily from chokepoint vulnerabilities, terrorism, and piracy, reinforced by the weakness of regional governance and the absence of robust institutional frameworks. Across both theatres, these dynamics underscore the necessity of a cooperative, threat-based approach that adapts to regional conditions rather than relying on uniform prescriptions.

The study's evaluation of preventive and responsive measures revealed that prioritisation is key for Europe to maximise the output of its cooperation with regional emerging powers. As they say goes, 'not all measures are created equal': some of them offer strengthening of partnerships, but yield lower results in ridding maritime routes from pressing threats; others entail high escalatory risks, yet promise significant rewards in terms of long-term bilateral cooperation and overall stability. Consequently, Europe's engagement must not only strike a careful balance between preventive investment and responsive readiness on a regional basis, but also take into account a series of trade-offs between cooperation effectiveness, diplomatic visibility, and escalatory risks.

The key findings for each section are summarised in the table below:

Section	Focus	Key takeaways	Implications for Europe
2. Evaluate	Comparative threat landscape in the Red Sea and South China Sea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both regions exhibit a hybridisation of threats, where state and non-state actors overlap (e.g., IUU fishing, Houthi attacks). South China Sea: high escalation risks; strategic, long-term threats tied to great-power rivalry. Red Sea: episodic, non-state threats with immediate global trade repercussions. Effective responses require cooperative, threat-based approaches adapted to regional differences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Europe must recognise both regions' interconnected but distinct risk profiles. Engagement strategies should integrate both strategic deterrence (South China Sea) and stability operations (Red Sea).
3. Cooperate	Effectiveness of preventive and responsive measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevention and capacity building (training, information-sharing, MDA technologies) provide sustainable, low-risk impact. Response effectiveness depends on interoperability, trust, and legal clarity among partners. Regional governance and resilience are vital: institutions must match local capacity and political realities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritise long-term cooperation. Support regional governance frameworks and interoperability. Balance legal harmonisation and trust-building for effective crisis response.
4. Prioritise	Assessment of European engagement options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four types of measures drive policymaking decision and prioritisation of cooperation initiatives. Europe's maritime role must be regionally tailored: measures have different effectiveness in Red Sea and South China Sea. Strategic prioritisation needed: focus of measures depends on objective of cooperation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply context-specific approaches reflecting regional needs. Optimise resource allocation through structured prioritisation. Manage trade-offs and strengthen long-term partnerships while maintaining strategic efficiency.

From a policy perspective, the findings emphasise the need for European policymakers to look at maritime security cooperation in the South China Sea and Red Sea from a threat-based approach that considers regional specificities. With the increasing hybridisation of threats and the blurring of the lines between states and non-state actors, effective cooperation hinges not only on diplomatic signalling, but also on operational, sustainable engagement that can distinguish between short- and long-term priorities. Whereas preventive measures provide a more immediate cooperation entry point, preparing to implement responsive initiatives is key in two of the most contested waters globally. Long-term strategic risks and short-term tactical threats can have equally disruptive consequences for European prosperity. Europe should hence have a clear measure prioritisation plan for each the Red Sea and South China in order to effectively reap the fruits of a cooperation with regional emerging powers that must go beyond diplomatic signalling.

Accordingly, the research findings can be conveyed into an actionable agenda (Figure 8 and Figure 9) for European engagement in the South China Sea and Red Sea respectively.

In the South China Sea, the most pressing threats are of geostrategic nature and have high escalatory potential with long-term strategic consequences. Still, the presence of regional frameworks such as ASEAN facilitates cooperation. When looking to engage with regional powers, the recommendations are hence that European states:

1. **Develop multilateral crisis management and deconfliction mechanisms to tackle great power rivalry.** This threat entails the most significant escalatory risks, and as such needs to be prioritised by European policymakers. This can be achieved through the implementation of both preventive and responsive measures, including:
 - 1.1. Hosting regular joint training missions and communication exercises with regional navies to build trust and reduce the risk of accidental clashes.

- 1.2. Conducting regular joint deconfliction drills, focusing on maritime communication and rules of engagement to avoid accidental escalation.
- 1.3. Focusing on strengthening both preventive and responsive communication capabilities to enable long-term, sustainable information-sharing.

2. **Strengthen maritime governance through preventive cooperation on blue crime.** While this type of threat is less pressing than geostrategic ones, it is a concern for all regional emerging powers, regardless of political alignment and national priorities. Implementing preventive measures facilitates cooperation to tackle persistent, albeit lower-risk threats, offering Europe the opportunity to build ties to regional powers with little escalation risks. This can be achieved by:

- 2.1. Expanding regional information-sharing platforms, similar to ReCAAP, to share real-time data on piracy, IUU fishing, and smuggling, improving maritime domain awareness.
- 2.2. Reinforcing regional crime-prevention authorities such as local coast guards, port and border authorities through capacity-building exercises, joint trainings, screening and hostage-rescue drills, and embedding naval advisors in local patrols.
- 2.3. Providing equipment such as small patrol boats, cargo scanners, and detection tools, to support local capabilities needed for threat detection, staff training, and threat monitoring, enhancing local capacities for both prevention and mitigation.

3. **Future-proof vital maritime nodes by enhancing resilience of critical infrastructure.**

Tackling threats to CUI or mitigating the effects of climate change might yield uncertain outcomes due to blurry legal frameworks and the complexity of climate-related hazards. Still, strengthening infrastructure allows to reduce shared vulnerabilities. A carefully-calibrated cooperation between European and littoral states can support the stabilisation of maritime infrastructure by:

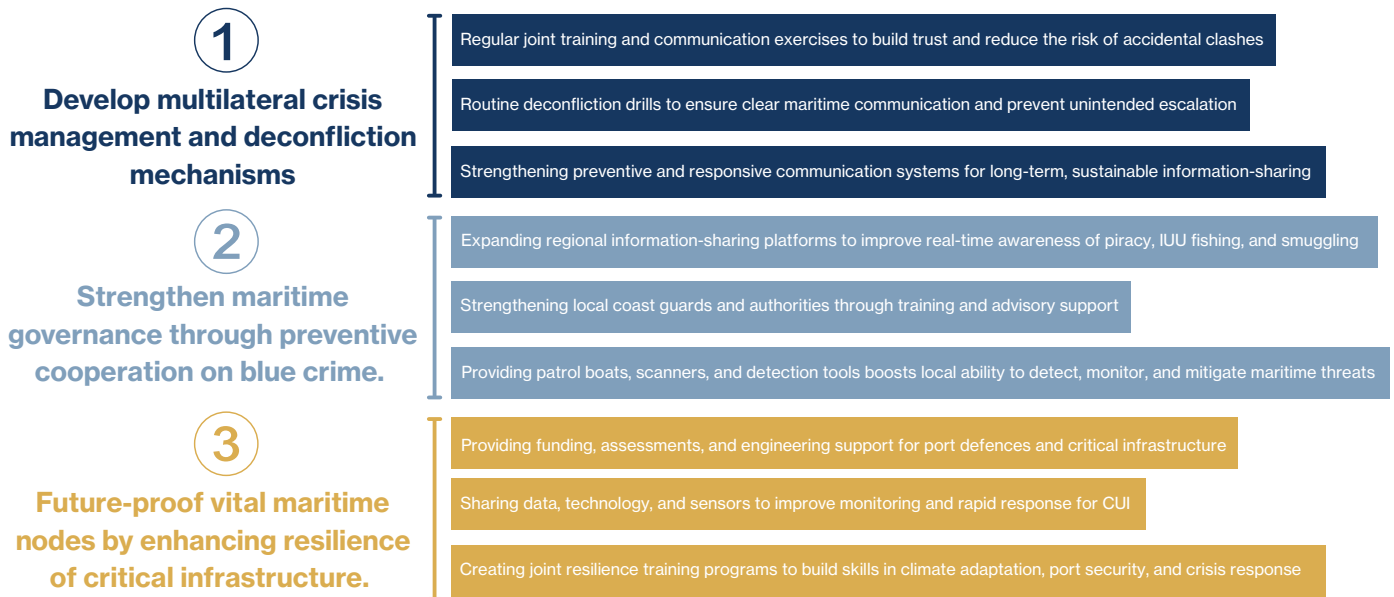
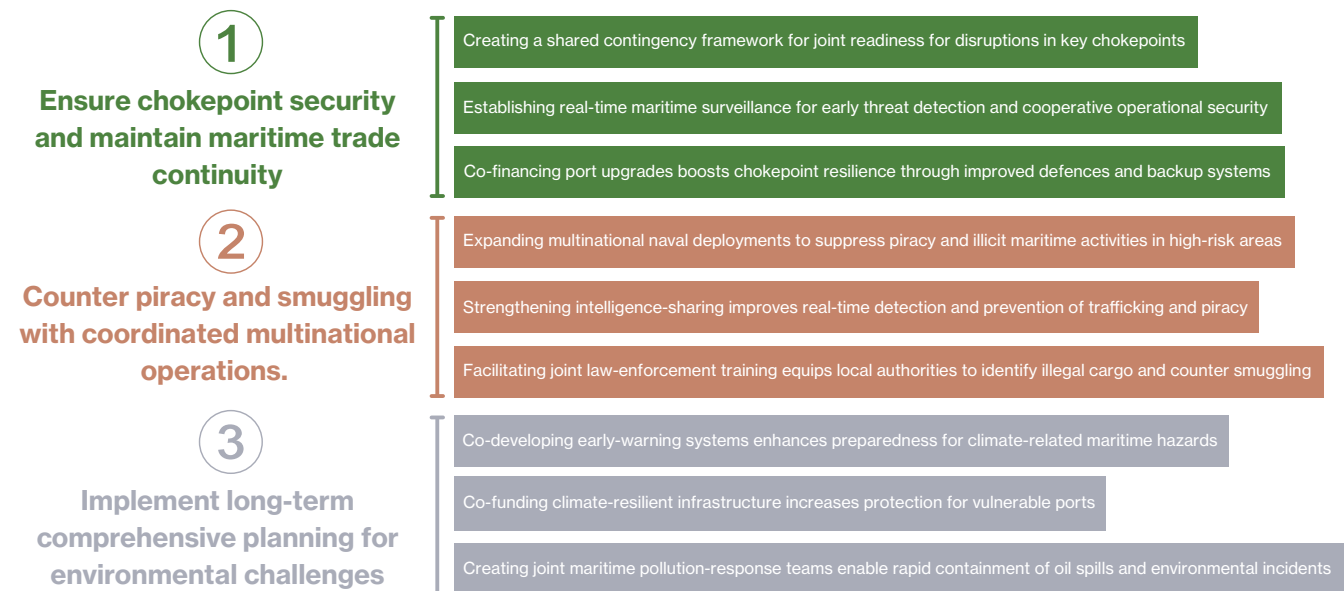
- 3.1. Providing co-funding, technical assessments, and engineering support to raise port elevations, reinforce storm-surge defences, modernise power systems, and integrate digital early-warning tools.
- 3.2. Sharing data and technology to map submarine cables and pipelines, deploy sensors for anomaly detection, and develop shared protocols for rapid inspection and repair.
- 3.3. Creating maritime infrastructure resilience training programs with regional powers, offering training to littoral-state authorities in climate adaptation, cyber-security for port operations, and crisis-response planning.

For the Red Sea, the approach differs due to the episodic nature of threats, often driven by non-state actors, that generate tactical short-term disruptions. The unpredictable nature of such threats, as well as the lack of overarching regional security frameworks, make it more difficult to have low-hanging fruits when it comes to partnering with littoral states. Still, there are venues for European states to tap into so far little-explored cooperation potential. In particular, the recommendations for European are to:

1. **Plan for chokepoint security and maritime trade continuity.** Given the global significance of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal, regional contingency planning should be prioritised to protect these chokepoints from disruptions. This could include:
 - 1.1. Developing a regional contingency planning framework for the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal, including shared rerouting plans and rapid-response drills in case of a disruption.
 - 1.2. Establishing real-time maritime surveillance systems to monitor chokepoint areas and allow for immediate intervention if a threat emerges. This preventive measure fosters cooperation by focusing on operational security and transparency.

- 1.3. Co-financing the upgrade of critical port infrastructure at chokepoints to improve resilience against disruptions, including flood defences and backup power systems.
2. **Counter piracy and smuggling with coordinated multinational operations.** A continued expansion of multinational naval deployments in the Red Sea, especially through established initiatives such as the EU's Operation Atalanta allows to curb piracy and illicit maritime activities, contributing to stabilising the maritime environment in the long run. This can be realised by:
 - 2.1. Expanding multinational naval deployments to curb piracy and illicit activities in high-risk areas like the Gulf of Aden and Bab el-Mandeb Strait.
 - 2.2. Enhancing regional maritime intelligence-sharing systems to track illicit trafficking and piracy, improving the ability to detect and prevent illegal activities in real-time.
 - 2.3. Facilitating joint maritime law enforcement training for local authorities on detecting illegal cargo and preventing smuggling.
3. **Implement long-term comprehensive planning for environmental challenges.** These type of threat might not be as pressing, but they can be tackled through low-risk measures that offer concrete cooperation opportunities with littoral states. In a region lacking overarching security cooperation frameworks, this gives Europe credibility and visibility as a capacity-building partner. Europe can start this by:
 - 3.1. Co-developing early-warning systems for climate-related hazards such as coastal erosion, extreme weather, and rising sea levels, ensuring Red Sea states are equipped with timely information to respond to emergencies.
 - 3.2. Co-financing climate-resilient infrastructure projects such as flood barriers, elevated port structures, and storm surge protections for ports vulnerable to environmental threats.
 - 3.3. Creating joint maritime pollution response teams to quickly respond to oil spills and environmental disasters in the Red Sea, ensuring rapid containment and mitigation.

In conclusion, Europe's ability to act as a credible maritime security actor in the Red Sea and South China Sea depends on its capacity to think strategically, act selectively, and cooperate effectively. A nuanced threat-based approach, underpinned by clear priorities and realistic resource allocation, offers the most viable path forward. By embedding cooperation within regional realities and focusing on shared security interests, Europe can reinforce the stability of vital sea lines of communication, strengthen its global partnerships, and contribute to a more resilient and rules-based maritime order. This necessitates a strategic outlook on regional partnerships that is underpinned by a clear prioritisation of cooperation objectives and maritime security priorities on the European side.

Figure 8: Summary of agenda points for the South China Sea

Figure 9: Summary of agenda points for the Red Sea




The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

HCSS

Lange Voorhout 1
2514 EA The Hague

Follow us on social media:

@hcssnl

The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies

Email: info@hcss.nl
Website: www.hcss.nl