The MENA2050 Regional Vision Team

Note 5




# Maritime Security in the MENA Region:

# Lessons from the Malacca Straits Patrol

**Authors**: Omar Al- Ubaydli, Layal Alghoozi, Noora Alozaibi, Arnon Bersson, Noor Elgallal, Ben Grischeff, and Munya Yusuf; with support by ChatGPT

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## Executive Summary

This paper explores the applicability of the Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP) as a model for enhancing maritime security in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The MSP, developed through close cooperation among Southeast Asian littoral states, has been widely credited with significantly reducing piracy and improving maritime domain awareness in one of the world's busiest sea lanes. Its success was underpinned by coordinated patrols, real-time information-sharing, and a gradual expansion of scope to address a broader range of maritime threats.



**Figure 1: The Straits of Malacca**

In contrast, the MENA region continues to face acute and evolving maritime security challenges, particularly in the Straits of Hormuz and Bab Al-Mandab, driven by geopolitical

rivalries, non-state actor activity, and the heavy involvement of extra-regional powers. Current security responses in the region are fragmented, often externally driven, and lack a unified regional framework.

This study combines academic research with insights from interviews conducted with six maritime and regional security experts. It compares the structure, operational mechanisms, and evolution of the MSP with the current security landscape in the MENA region. In doing so, the paper identifies both the opportunities and limitations for adapting elements of the MSP to MENA's unique political and strategic context.

The analysis reveals that while the MSP offers valuable lessons in regional collaboration, information-sharing, and capability-building, significant contextual differences, such as sovereignty sensitivities, political rivalries, and capacity disparities, pose serious obstacles to replication. The following five conclusions summarize the core findings of this study.

Conclusion 1: Regional cooperation is essential but context-specific. The success of the MSP demonstrates that regional cooperation can significantly improve maritime security. However, replicating such a model in the MENA region requires careful adaptation to local geopolitical realities, sensitivities, and power asymmetries.

Conclusion 2: Sovereignty concerns and political friction are major barriers. Unlike Southeast Asia, the MENA region is characterized by deeper political divisions, sovereignty sensitivities, and a lack of cohesive regional security architecture. These factors make the implementation of a joint maritime security framework inherently more complex.

Conclusion 3: Extra-regional dependency undermines indigenous security solutions. Current maritime security efforts in the MENA region heavily rely on extra-regional actors, limiting the development of autonomous and sustainable regional solutions. A shift toward regionally-led initiatives is both necessary and strategically desirable to reduce external dependency. However, as geopolitical tensions increase globally, convincing extra-regional players to devolve responsibility for maritime security to local actors will be difficult, especially in light of the large capacity gaps that need to be filled.

Conclusion 4: A gradual, incremental approach is most viable. A full-scale replication of the MSP is unlikely in the short term. Instead, a phased approach – starting with low-sensitivity areas, such as anti-piracy patrols, environmental monitoring, and information-sharing – offers a more feasible path forward for building trust and capacity.

Conclusion 5: Capacity building and trust are foundational requirements. A successful MENA maritime security initiative must prioritize naval capacity building and confidence-building measures. Without narrowing the gap in capabilities and fostering mutual trust, any cooperative framework will struggle to take root or deliver lasting results.

## Introduction

The Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP) is widely regarded as a successful model of regional maritime security cooperation. Initiated by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore in the early 2000s – and later joined by Thailand – the MSP significantly reduced piracy and armed robbery incidents in one of the world's most vital maritime corridors through coordinated patrols, information sharing, technological integration, and capacity-building initiatives. Its success has attracted interest from other regions facing similar security challenges.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region faces a different yet equally complex set of maritime security threats, particularly in the Straits of Hormuz and Bab Al-Mandab. These waterways have become flashpoints for geopolitical r ivalries, attacks on commercial shipping, and the growing influence of non-state actors. Unlike Southeast Asia, however, maritime security responses in the MENA region remain fragmented, heavily reliant on extra-regional actors, and lacking a cohesive indigenous framework.



**Figure 2: Bab Al-Mandab**

This note draws on both academic literature and expert interviews to examine what lessons the MENA region might derive from the MSP experience. It begins by analyzing the historical development and structure of the MSP, then assesses current threats and countermeasures in the MENA region. Through a comparative analysis, the paper identifies key factors that contributed to the success of the MSP and explores the extent to which a similar model could be adapted to the specific political, strategic, and institutional landscape of the MENA region.

## 1. Background on the Malacca Straits Patrol

### 1.1 The Situation before the Launch of the Malacca Strait Patrol

Prior to the establishment of the Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP), the Malacca Strait faced acute maritime security challenges that significantly impacted regional and global shipping. The Strait, which serves as one of the world's busiest maritime

corridors, saw a dramatic rise in piracy and armed robbery during the late 1990s and early 2000s. This surge was attributed to a combination of socio-economic instability in the region, including poverty, political unrest, and inadequate maritime governance (International Maritime Bureau [IMB], 2001).

Thegeographic and operationa l characteristic of the Strait exacerbated these security issues. The Malacca Strait, approximately 805 kilometers long and as narrow as 2.8 kilometers at its tightest point, is characterized by heavy maritime traffic and challenging navigation conditions (Cheong, 2006). This made it difficult for individual nations to effectively patrol and secure the Strait's extensive waters. The dense traffic not only increased the risk of maritime incidents but also complicated efforts to monitor and respond to threats (Lee, 2012).

The increase in maritime crime during this period had substantial economic consequences. Shipping companies faced higherinsurance premiums nd operational costs due to the heightened risk of piracy. Additionally, the frequency of attacks l ed to disruptions in international trade, affecting global supply chains (Smith, 2009). The impact on regional economies was also significant, with increased costs for maritime security measures and a decline in investor confidence in the region (Wong, 2014).

Efforts to address these security challenges were initially fragmented. The littoral states of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore conducted isolated operations but lacked a cohesive, coordinated approach to tackle the problem (Chong, 2018). This lack of coordination often resulted in overlapping responsibilities and gaps in coverage, further complicating the security landscape. Since ensuring the strait's security had been complex due to differing perspectives among the littoral states; Singapore advocated for a collaborative approach involving all users, while Indonesia and Malaysia preferred a model where the littoral states bore sole responsibility. This divergence was manageable in the 1990s with bilateral frameworks such as the Indonesia-Singapore Coordinated Patrols effectively addressing piracy and sea robbery. However, an increase in attacks in the early 2000s led the shipping industry to seek internationalization of Malacca Strait security under a United Nations mandate. The US proposal for the Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI) in 2004, suggesting US policing of the strait, further intensified regional tensions

In response to these issues, there was growing recognition of the need for a unified regional approach to maritime security. The deteriorating security situation, coupled with increasing international pressure, underscored the urgency of establishing a more effective and coordinated maritime security framework (IMB, 2018; Jamil, 2021).




**Figure 3: The symbol of the US Indo-Pacific Command**

**Participant 5:** *I think two main developments were key here. One was related to what was then called the Pacific Command (it wasn't yet called Indo-Pacific Command). The Pacific Command mentioned that they would patrol the Malacca Strait. Back then, this was under the specter of potential extra-regional intervention in policing the waterway, which brought the three countries together.*

*Prior to this, the three countries actually had quite divergent views regarding extra-regional involvement in the Malacca Strait. Singapore was, in fact, more liberal about the idea that the waterway could be policed by all the stakeholders involved. This means it shouldn't just be for extra-regional users. Singapore's perspective stemmed from the standpoint that, since the Malacca Strait is classified by the UN as a waterway used for international navigation, and it is so heavily used by the international community, it would be unfair for only the three littoral states to bear the responsibility alone.*



**Figure 4: Malaysian naval vessels**

*However, Indonesia and Malaysia, for reasons of sovereignty and their jurisdictional rights, opposed the idea of extra-regional involvement. They believed that the states alone should bear the responsibility for policing the waters. So, even though there was an increase in piracy and attacks on shipping in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the three countries could not actually come to a consensus on how to address it.*

*Given these developments, it's not surprising that the Pacific Command proposed to police the waters. The idea was that, if the three countries weren't able or willing to handle the job together, then they would step in. However, I think that, while this was a significant issue, it wasn't decisive enough to push the three countries together.*

*The other important development that occurred around the same time was when Lloyd's of London, through its joint committee, classified the waterway as a high-risk area. This had clear direct economic ramifications, especially regarding marine insurance premiums, which in turn could impact the economies of the affected countries. Singapore, in*

*particular, would be highly impacted, as it is so reliant on shipping and the inflow of maritime trade. Indonesia and Malaysia were also concerned about the potential economic consequences on their own economies, particularly regarding shipping trade.*

*That was one of the key reasons that contributed to the eventual cooperation. If I'm not mistaken, it was around the 2005 Shangri-La Dialogue when the three countries came together. They agreed to form what was initially called the Malacca Strait Security Initiative (MSSI), which later evolved into what we now call the MSP. So, these are the two key factors that led to the eventual formation of the initiative.*

## 1.2 Establishment of the Malacca Strait Patrol

The MSP was established as a tripartite security initiative by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, represents a landmark in regional maritime cooperation. Emerging from the 2004 Declaration on the Security of the Malacca Strait, the MSP was a direct response to escalating maritime security threats in one of the world's most crucial waterways, as its strategic significance made it a target for piracy, smuggling, and potential terrorist activities, necessitating a robust and collaborative security mechanism (Cheong, 2006).

The inception of the MSP signified a profound shift in the approach to maritime security in Southeast Asia. Central to this initiative were the Coordinated Patrols (CP), a groundbreaking step that saw the naval forces of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore conducting joint patrols in their respective territorial waters. This coordination, while respecting the sovereignty of each nation, was designed to present a unified front against maritime threats. The success of the CP was underpinned by the establishment of the Joint Operations Room (JOR), a critical infrastructure that enabled real-time communication and coordination among the participating naval forces. This facility ensured that any security breach or potential threat in the Strait could be swiftly addressed with a coordinated response, thereby significantly enhancing the deterrent effect against illicit activities (Rahim, 2008).

MSP's effectiveness was further bolstered by the integration of advanced surveillance technologies. The deployment of radar systems, coupled with satellite monitoring, dramatically improved the capability of the littoral states to detect and track suspicious vessels. These technologies allowed for comprehensive maritime domain awareness, a key factor in the successful interdiction of pirate attacks and smuggling operations. The Maritime Security Information System (MSIS), a centralized platform for data sharing, played a pivotal role in streamlining operations and enhancing the decision-making process. By facilitating the seamless exchange of information, the MSIS ensured that all stakeholders had access to the most current and relevant intelligence, thereby optimizing response

times and operational efficiency (Ng, 2017).



**Figure 5: Suspected pirates assemble on the deck of a dhow in waters off western Malaysia, January 2006.**

Thailand's involvement, while not originally a part of the MSP, evolved over time as the need for broader regional cooperation became evident. Given its proximity to the Strait and the interconnected nature of maritime threats, Thailand's naval forces began collaborating with the MSP, particularly in intelligence sharing and joint exercises.

Thailand's inclusion underscores the growing recognition of the necessity for a comprehensive, regional approach to maritime security, reflecting the broader trend of ASEAN-driven initiatives in maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia.

The success of the MSP was not solely the result of regional efforts. The initiative received substantial international support, most notably from the United States and Japan, alongside organizations such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The contributions from these external actors were multifaceted, ranging from financial aid to technological assistance and capacity-building programs. The United States, for instance, provided sophisticated surveillance equipment and training to bolster the capabilities of the MSP forces. Japan's involvement was particularly notable in the realm of capacity building, where it funded various training programs and contributed to the technological infrastructure necessary for effective maritime surveillance. This international support was crucial not only in enhancing the immediate operational capabilities of the MSP but also in ensuring its long-term sustainability and adaptability to evolving security challenges (Smith, 2009; Jamil, 2021).

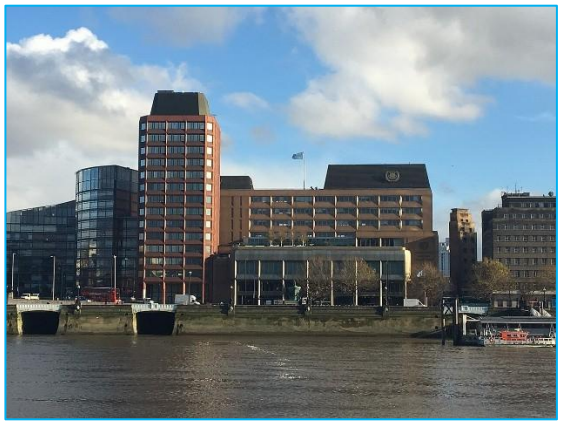


**Figure 6: The headquarters of the IMO are located on Albert Embankment, Lambeth, London.**

The patrol's establishment represented a significant departure from previous maritime security frameworks in the region, which were often characterized by a lack of coordination and a reliance on unilateral action. By emphasizing collective security and regional cooperation, the MSP set a new precedent for how Southeast Asian nations address common security challenges. This multilateral approach, rooted in mutual

respect for sovereignty and shared responsibility, has since become a cornerstone of maritime governance in the region, influencing subsequent security initiatives and fostering a more integrated regional security architecture (Mok, 2020).

## 1.3 Evolution of the Malacca Strait Patrol

The MSP has evolved significantly since its establishment in 2004, adapting to an increasingly complex array of maritime security challenges. Initially a trilateral initiative among Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, the MSP's primary focus was on combating piracy and armed robbery, particularly given the strategic importance of the Malacca Strait as a key global shipping lane. However, the scope of the MSP has expanded considerably over the years to address a broader range of threats, reflecting the dynamic nature of maritime security in the region (Lee, 2012).

**Participant 5**: *Another evolution is that MSP has been touted as a success story for the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP). As you might be aware, ReCAAP has often been criticized as a "talk shop," with limited ability to address security issues. MSP, however, shows that Southeast Asian countries can actually work together tangibly and address common security problems on their own. This has also helped to attract additional extra-regional interest in terms of providing capacity—whether through training, technical assistance, funding, or equipment.*

A major milestone in the MSP's evolution was the introduction of the Enhanced Malacca Strait Patrol (EMSP) framework in 2006. This framework broadened the MSP's mandate beyond piracy, incorporating initiatives such as the Maritime Security Awareness Program (MSAP), which aimed to improve awareness and preparedness among maritime stakeholders. The EMSP marked a shift towards a more holistic approach to maritime security, including counter-terrorism, human trafficking, and environmental protection (Tan, 2015). This expansion was crucial in adapting the MSP to emerging threats, ensuring its continued relevance in a rapidly changing security environment.

Technological advancements have played a pivotal role in enhancing the MSP's operational capabilities. The integration of advanced surveillance technologies, including radar systems, satellite imagery, and Automatic Identification Systems (AIS), has significantly improved the MSP's ability to monitor and respond to potential threats (Ng, 2017). The development of the Maritime Security Information System (MSIS) has further enhanced data sharing and situational awareness among participating nations, making it a vital tool in the MSP's operational framework (Zhang, 2022). These technological enhancements have been critical in maintaining the effectiveness of the MSP as maritime threats have evolved.

The MSP has also placed a strong emphasis on joint exercises and training

programs, which have greatly improved the skills and interoperability of maritime security personnel. Thailand's inclusion in the MSP expanded the regional cooperation and added depth to these joint efforts, enhancing the initiative's overall capabilities (Mok, 2020; Robinson, 2023). Regular training and simulation exercises have ensured that the personnel involved are well-prepared to address the diverse challenges posed by the maritime environment, further strengthening the MSP's operational readiness.



**Figure 7: Indonesia naval vessels**

In addition to operational enhancements, the MSP has increasingly focused on building regional and international partnerships. Engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, including regional organizations, international maritime agencies, and private sector entities, has been key to expanding the MSP's support network and securing additional resources (Jamil, 2021). These partnerships have not only provided valuable resources but have also facilitated the sharing of expertise and best practices, further bolstering the MSP's ability to address complex maritime security challenges.

The evolution of the Malacca Strait Patrol reflects a dynamic and adaptive approach to maritime security. From its initial focus on piracy, the MSP has expanded its scope to address a wide range of threats, supported by technological advancements, joint exercises, and strong regional and international partnerships. These developments have been crucial in ensuring that the MSP remains an effective tool for safeguarding one of the world's most important maritime corridors.

## 1.4 Success of the Malacca Strait Patrol in Addressing Maritime Security Issues

The MSP has played a critical role in enhancing maritime security in the Malacca Strait, particularly in reducing incidents of piracy and armed robbery. Since its implementation, the MSP has achieved significant success, as evidenced by the dramatic decline in piracy cases. For instance, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) reported a peak of 38 piracy incidents in 2004, but this number fell to single digits annually after 2008, underscoring the effectiveness of the MSP's coordinated efforts (IMB, 2018).



**Figure 8: The Battle of Palembang was a naval battle fought between Ming China's treasure fleet commanded by**

**Admiral Zheng He and the pirate fleet led by Chen Zuyi at Palembang, Sumatra, in what is now modern Indonesia.**

**Participant 1**: *I would say the MSP has been a resounding success. When it first began, reports of piracy in the area were rife. Today, a single incident makes major headlines, so there has been a marked reduction in piracy incidents. The MSP could also be a blueprint of sorts for regional security initiatives, as all sides have worked together well, set aside sovereignty concerns, and improved maritime security capability, including surveillance. In addition, initiatives such as the Changi Information Fusion Centre (IFC) continue to play vital roles. Added bonuses include interoperability.*

A key factor in this success has been the strong regional cooperation among Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. The introduction of Coordinated Patrols (CP) and the establishment of the Joint Operations Room (JOR), The "Eyes-in-the-Sky" (EiS) aerial patrols, demonstrate the littoral states' commitment to security and have been instrumental in enhancing operational coordination and communication among these states (Cheong, 2006; Rahim, 2008). Thailand's inclusion in 2008 further strengthened this regional cooperation, expanding the geographic scope of operations and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the patrols.

The use of advanced technology has also been crucial to the MSP's success. The integration of radar systems, satellite monitoring, and the Maritime Security Information System (MSIS) has significantly improved the MSP's ability to detect and respond to potential threats in real time. This technological edge has enabled more efficient management of maritime activities and has played a key role in reducing security incidents in the Strait (Ng, 2017; Chong, 2018). The MSIS, in particular, has become a cornerstone of the MSP's strategy, facilitating timely decision-making and enhancing operational coordination.

The MSP's adaptability in addressing a wide range of maritime security issues beyond piracy has also been a key to its success. The initiative has integrated counter-terrorism measures, human trafficking prevention, and environmental protection into its framework, reflecting its comprehensive approach to maritime security (Lee, 2012). This broadening of scope has enabled the MSP to remain relevant in addressing the evolving security challenges in the region.

MSP's success in addressing maritime security issues can be attributed to effective regional cooperation, the integration of advanced technologies, strong international support, and its adaptability in responding to a diverse range of threats. The MSP has proven to be a vital instrument in safeguarding the Malacca Strait, one of the world's most critical maritime corridors.

## 1.5 Key Factors Contributing to the Success of the Malacca Strait Patrol

The effectiveness of the MSP in addressing maritime security challenges is largely due to a combination of strong regional cooperation, technological advancements, international support, and ongoing capacity-building efforts. These factors have collectively strengthened the MSP's ability to protect one of the world's busiest and most strategically important maritime corridors.

Regional cooperation stands out as a critical element in the MSP's success. The collaborative efforts among Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand have been fundamental in enhancing maritime security in the region. The MSP's collaborative framework has facilitated effective communication and coordination, allowing the participating states to respond to threats in a unified manner (Cheong, 2006; Rahim, 2008). Thailand's participation since 2008 has further expanded the scope and depth of these operations, reinforcing the initiative's overall effectiveness.




**Figure 9: ASEAN headquarters in Jakarta**

**Participant 1**: *ASEAN prizes regional autonomy, particularly over some aspects of security. The states involved thus excluded the US from involvement. The issue of sovereignty also played a part in this decision, precluding the possibility of direct involvement from a non-regional power. It must be remembered that domestic sensitivity over the involvement of an outside power, particularly the US, would not be particularly welcomed, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia. China is a non-factor - when MSP was launched, China neither had the capability, nor willingness, to be part of such an initiative.*

Technological innovation has been another key factor contributing to the MSP's success. The integration of advanced surveillance technologies, such as radar systems, satellite imagery, and Automatic Identification Systems (AIS), has greatly improved the MSP's monitoring and response capabilities. The Maritime Security Information System (MSIS), in particular, has provided comprehensive situational awareness, enabling the timely detection and management of potential

threats (Ng, 2017; Chong, 2018). These technological tools have been essential in maintaining the MSP's effectiveness in an increasingly complex maritime environment.

**Participant 1**: *I would say the IFC mentioned above is among the key successes. Others include the Eye in the Sky initiative, which introduced joint air surveillance capabilities.*



**Figure 10: Japanese naval vessels**

International support has played a significant role in sustaining the MSP's operations. Countries like the United States and Japan have provided critical resources, including patrol vessels and technical expertise that have bolstered the MSP's operational capabilities (Smith, 2009; Zhang, 2022). Additionally, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has offered guidance and support, helping to align the MSP with global maritime security standards and practices. This international assistance has been crucial in ensuring the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the MSP.

Capacity-building initiatives have also been vital to the success of the MSP. Regular joint exercises and training programs have enhanced the skills and interoperability of maritime security personnel across the participating states (Mok, 2020; Robinson, 2023). These initiatives have not only improved technical proficiency but have also fostered a culture of cooperation and mutual understanding, which is essential for effective joint operations. The inclusion of training modules focused on emerging threats, such as cyber security and counter-terrorism, has further ensured that the MSP remains adaptable and relevant.

The MSP's ability to evolve and address a broad spectrum of maritime security issues is another key factor in its success. By expanding its focus beyond piracy to include terrorism, human trafficking, and environmental protection, the MSP has demonstrated its capacity to adapt to the changing security landscape in the region (Lee, 2012). This adaptability has been crucial in maintaining the MSP's effectiveness over time. These elements have collectively enabled the MSP to address a wide range of maritime security challenges and ensure the safety of one of the world's most vital maritime passages.

However, it is important to note coincidental, fortuitous developments that have also contributed to the decrease in piracy.

**Participant 5**: *We have to consider that there are multiple other factors at play. For example, some have attributed the*

*attacks in the waterways to the unrest in Aceh, which is located very near the mouth of the Malacca Strait. The community in Aceh is essentially an agrarian and fishing community. During the time of unrest, largely due to the insurgency, there was a huge economic impact on the livelihoods of the locals. This led to some of the affected community members, particularly those in coastal areas, turning to piracy and other criminal activities at sea as a way to sustain their livelihoods.*

*Then there was the impact of the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in December 2004. The tsunami had a significant effect on these activities because it wiped out many of the coastal communities. I was told that many of the pirates who lived in these areas perished in the tsunami itself. So, during and after that time, thanks to mediation efforts—if I'm not mistaken, led by Norway—there was also a push for peace in Aceh, which contributed to the eventual decline of these attacks.*

*We have to consider all of these factors. Piracy itself is really a symptom of a much broader economic problem on land. Socioeconomic hardships and other grievances on land often lead to problems at sea. So, piracy is more of a symptom than anything else. It is notable that the respective governments in the region have been doing their best to address these socioeconomic issues. They've been doing this both on their own and with international help, including through UN agencies. They have also worked with private and public NGOs to improve conditions. This improvement in the socioeconomic situation in these regions, particularly along the Strait, has contributed to the decline in piracy as well.*

*So, I wouldn't say that the MSP alone was decisive in the decline of piracy. There's a lot to consider about whether or not it has always been effective. For one, the terms of reference for the MSP back then were pretty restrictive. It was essentially based on what we call a "coordinated patrol" format. This means that each party involved would have their own forces patrol the waters within their recognized international boundaries, and they would share communication frequencies and standard operating procedures (SOPs) for coordinating action in cases of contingency.*



**Figure 11: Royal Thai Navy HQ on Arun Amarin Road, Bangkok**

*This has been helpful over the years, but one could argue that this arrangement isn't always very attractive. The problem is that each of these three countries—if you add Thailand into the picture, which is also very important here—has disparities in their capabilities and maritime capacity.*

*For instance, Singapore's maritime capabilities are very strong compared to Indonesia and Malaysia, and this creates challenges when trying to coordinate patrols in the strait.*

## 1.6 Persistent Challenges Facing the Malacca Strait Patrol

The Malacca Strait Patrol, despite its numerous successes, continues to grapple with several persistent challenges that threaten to undermine its effectiveness in addressing maritime security issues. One of the primary challenges is the evolving nature of maritime threats. Although piracy and armed robbery incidents have significantly declined, new and complex threats have emerged, such as terrorism, human trafficking, and environmental crimes (Lee, 2012). These emerging threats require the MSP to continually adapt its strategies and operational framework, necessitating regular updates to surveillance technologies and procedural adjustments to remain effective (Zhang, 2022).



**Figure 12: The Strait of Malacca as viewed from the city of Malacca, Malaysia. Besar Island ('Big Island') is visible in the distance.**

Geographical and operational complexity of the Malacca Strait itself poses another significant challenge. The Strait is one of the world's busiest maritime corridors, characterized by narrow and congested waters that accommodate an enormous volume of international shipping traffic. This dense traffic complicates the MSP's efforts to conduct effective patrolling and monitoring, as distinguishing between legitimate maritime activities and potential security threats becomes increasingly difficult (Cheong, 2006). The constant movement of vessels in such a confined space increases the likelihood of incidents and complicates the task of maintaining security and safety in the region (Ng, 2017).

Coordination among the participating states—Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand—remains another critical challenge for the MSP. Although the MSP has established mechanisms for joint operations and information sharing, differences in national policies, priorities, and resource allocation can hinder the effectiveness of these collaborative efforts (Rahim, 2008). Each nation has its own set of maritime security concerns and strategic interests, which can lead to inconsistencies in the implementation of joint initiatives. Ensuring seamless coordination and maintaining a unified approach to maritime security requires ongoing diplomatic engagement and effective management of inter-state relations.

The involvement of private sector stakeholders in the MSP introduces both opportunities and complexities. While the participation of private sector entities has enhanced the MSP's operational capabilities by providing additional resources and expertise, it also brings challenges related to regulatory compliance, coordination, and information sharing (Jamil, 2021). The private sector's primary focus on commercial interests can sometimes conflict with the broader security goals of the MSP, necessitating careful management and continuous dialogue to align these interests with the patrol's objectives.

Resource limitations are another persistent challenge for the MSP. While international support has been crucial in bolstering the initiative's capabilities, there remains a consistent need for financial resources, technological upgrades, and capacity-building initiatives to sustain the MSP's operations (Smith, 2009). As maritime threats continue to evolve, the demand for more sophisticated technology and training increases, placing additional strain on the available resources. The MSP's long-term effectiveness depends on continued investment from both regional and international partners to ensure that it can meet these growing demands (Robinson, 2023).

While the Malacca Strait Patrol has made significant strides in enhancing maritime security, it faces ongoing challenges that require constant adaptation and innovation. The evolving nature of maritime threats, the geographical complexity of the Strait, coordination difficulties among participating states, the involvement of private sector stakeholders, and resource limitations all present substantial obstacles. Addressing these challenges necessitates sustained cooperation, investment, and strategic planning to ensure that the MSP continues to safeguard one of the world's most critical maritime corridors effectively.

## 2. Threats to Maritime Security in the MENA Region in 2024/25

While the MENA region features many significant threats to maritime security, in the interests of parsimony, this note will focus exclusively on the Straits of Hormuz and Bab Al-Mandab. We hope that future notes can tackle the important maritime security issues relating to the Mediterranean Sea, which are generally less acute than those currently affecting the Arabian Peninsula.

### 2.1 The Evolution of Threats and Counter measures in the Straits of Hormuz

Prior to the notable incidents of piracy in 2019, the Gulf's maritime security was primarily influenced by geopolitical tensions, territorial disputes, and the strategic significance of its shipping lanes. The region, a vital artery for global energy supplies, witnessed various security challenges that shaped its maritime environment.



**Figure 13: The Straits of Hormuz**

The region has long been a theater of geopolitical rivalry, particularly between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. These tensions often manifested in naval posturing and military exercises, contributing to an environment of mutual suspicion. The United States maintained a significant naval presence in the region, primarily through the Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain, to ensure the security of maritime routes and deter potential threats (Ulrichsen, 2020).

Several territorial disputes impacted maritime security in the Gulf. The disagreement between Iran and the UAE over the sovereignty of the Greater and Lesser Tunb islands and Abu Musa Island led to periodic naval confrontations and heightened alertness among regional navies (Ulrichsen, 2020). These disputes necessitated constant vigilance and contributed to the complexity of maritime operations in the area.



**Figure 14: U.S. Navy convoy in the Strait of Hormuz on 21 July 2016**

The Strait of Hormuz, a narrow passage connecting the Gulf to the Arabian Sea via the Gulf of Oman, is one of the world's most critical chokepoints for oil transportation. Approximately 21% of global petroleum liquids consumption passed through this strait in 2018 (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2019). The strategic importance of this route made it a focal point for security measures, with regional and international navies conducting patrols to ensure the free flow of commerce.

To address the multifaceted security challenges, several initiatives were undertaken, with the most salient being the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). Established in 2001, the CMF is a multinational naval partnership comprising 34 nations. Its mission includes counter-terrorism, counter-piracy, and ensuring the security of maritime routes in the region (Combined Maritime Forces, 2020).

Before 2019, piracy was not, predominant issue in the Gulf compared to other regions like the Gulf of Aden or the Somali coast. However, the potential for such threats existed, prompting regional navies to remain vigilant.

The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) reported sporadic incidents of armed robbery and attempted attacks, but these were relatively infrequent and often swiftly addressed by naval forces (International Maritime Bureau, 2018).

Since 2019, the Gulf has faced escalating maritime security challenges, primarily due to geopolitical tensions, territorial disputes, and strategic vulnerabilities. Regional actors have been implicated in several incidents involving the seizure of commercial vessels. In response to these threats, several initiatives have been undertaken:

**International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC)**: Established in 2019, the IMSC aims to ensure freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce in the Middle East. It is led by the US, and contains several countries from the region, including Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019).

**European-Led Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH)**: Launched in 2020, EMASOH focuses on enhancing maritime situational awareness and ensuring safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz. It operates alongside the IMSC, reflecting a coordinated international effort to address regional security concerns (European External Action Service, 2020).

**Joint Naval Exercises**: Countries such as China, Russia, and Iran have conducted joint naval drills in the Gulf of Oman, demonstrating a commitment to collaborative maritime security efforts.

The "Marine Security Belt 2024" exercise, held in March 2024, involved over 20 ships and aimed to enhance cooperation in combating piracy and terrorism (Associated Press, 2024).

**Private Security Measures**: The surge in maritime violence has led to increased demand for private maritime security services. Specialist companies report a rising number of ship-owners seeking advice on navigating high-risk waters, particularly off Yemen (Financial Times, 2024).

Despite these measures, several challenges persist. The most notable is the continuation of the rivalry between Iran and neighboring Gulf states, though the recent China-brokered reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia has helped decrease some of the tension building in the Gulf. An important aspect of this has been the emergence of threats relating to non-state actors. Groups like the Houthis have demonstrated an ability to conduct long-range attacks on commercial shipping, complicating security efforts and requiring adaptive countermeasures (The Australian, 2024).

Maritime security incidents have also had economic repercussions, including increased insurance premiums and potential disruptions to global oil supplies. The strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz means that any instability can have far-reaching economic effects (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2019).

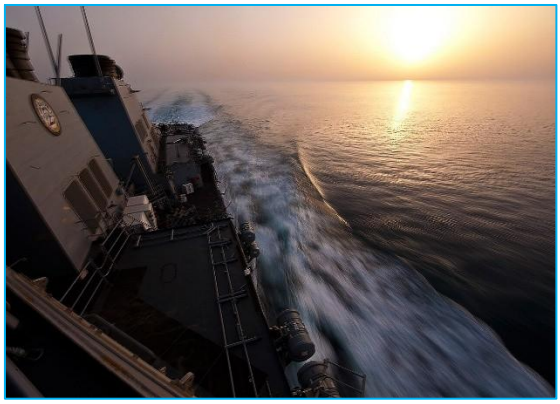


**Figure 15: The guided-missile destroyer USS Porter transits the Strait of Hormuz in May 2012. Porter is deployed to the U.S. 5th Fleet**

Notably, none of the aforementioned measures has been both indigenous and comprehensive; instead, each initiative involves significant extra-regional players, and the non-participation of key local players. Accordingly, ensuring effective collaboration between regional and international actors remains a challenge. Differing national interests and strategic priorities can hinder unified responses to security threats (Ulrichsen, 2020).

## 2.2 The Evolution of Threats and Counter measures in Bab Al Mandab

Prior to the 2023 Hamas-Israel conflict, Bab Al-Mandab Strait—a critical maritime chokepoint connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden—faced significant security challenges. These challenges stemmed from geopolitical tensions, regional conflicts, and the activities of non-state actors, necessitating various countermeasures to ensure the safety of this vital international shipping route.

The most salient security threat has been the Houthi movement in Yemen. Their control over parts of Yemen's western coastline enabled them to launch attacks on vessels transiting the strait. Notably, in 2016, the Houthis targeted the USS Mason with anti-ship missiles, highlighting their capability to disrupt international shipping (LaGrone, 2016).

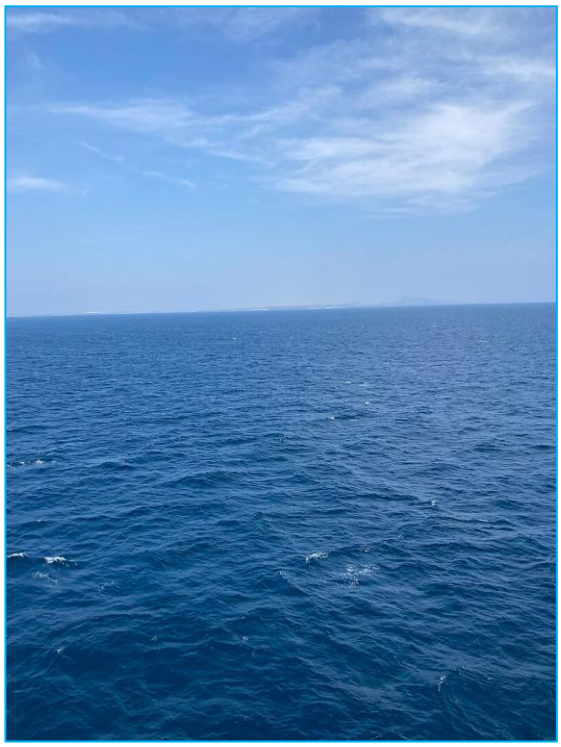


**Figure 16: Strait of Bab Al-Mandab with Perim Island in the distance**

The region has also faced threats of piracy and armed robbery**.** Pirates operating from Somalia and other areas occasionally targeted vessels near Bab Al-Mandab, exploiting the strait's high traffic and strategic importance (Oceans Beyond Piracy, 2018).

To mitigate the threat of piracy and ensure safe passage through Bab Al-Mandab, international coalitions, including the afore mentioned Combined Maritime

Forces (CMF), conducted regular naval patrols. These operations aimed to deter piracy and provide rapid response capabilities to incidents in the region (Combined Maritime Forces, 2019). Moreover, regional cooperation was bolstered through agreements such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct, which facilitated information sharing and coordinated responses to maritime threats among signatory states (International Maritime Organization, 2017). In addition to these state-led efforts, shipping companies increasingly employed private maritime security contractors to safeguard vessels transiting Bab Al-Mandab. These armed guards provided an additional layer of defense against potential attacks (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017).

Despite these countermeasures, several challenges persisted, most notably that groups like the Houthis have adapted their strategies, employing sophisticated weaponry and asymmetric tactics, complicating traditional security responses (LaGrone, 2016). Further, sustaining continuous naval patrols and security operations required significant resources. Many regional states faced limitations in funding and capacity, affecting the consistency and effectiveness of security measures (International Crisis Group, 2017). The costs associated with enhanced security measures, including higher insurance premiums and the employment of private security, placed financial burdens on the shipping industry, potentially affecting global trade dynamics.

Notably, as with the Straits of Hormuz, prevailing maritime security initiatives have failed to be both homegrown and comprehensive. Local actors have seemingly lacked the resources and capacity to act alone, while ongoing conflicts in Yemen and broader regional tensions undermined cooperative security efforts, as political considerations often hindered unified action against common maritime threats (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017).

Since the 2023 Hamas-Israel conflict began, security dynamics in the Red Sea have become increasingly complex, particularly due to escalated threats from non-state actors and regional tensions. The conflict has exacerbated existing security challenges, leading to disruptions in maritime commerce and prompting international responses.

Yemen's Houthis leveraged the Hamas-Israel conflict to increase their influence in the Red Sea. The Houthis heightened attacks on commercial vessels they believed to be associated with Israel or its allies. In December 2023, they claimed responsibility for attacks on two commercial ships in the Red Sea, allegedly linked to Israel (CNN, 2023). This escalation caused disruptions to maritime traffic and raised security concerns among international shipping operators.

The United States led efforts to form a multinational coalition to protect navigation in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. This coalition, including the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, and

Spain, enhanced surveillance, intelligence sharing, and joint naval patrols to address the elevated security risks (CNN, 2023). Additionally, the U.S. deployed B-2 stealth bombers equipped with bunker-buster bombs to target Houthi military infrastructure in Yemen, specifically aiming to destroy underground facilities used for launching attacks (The Sun, 2023).

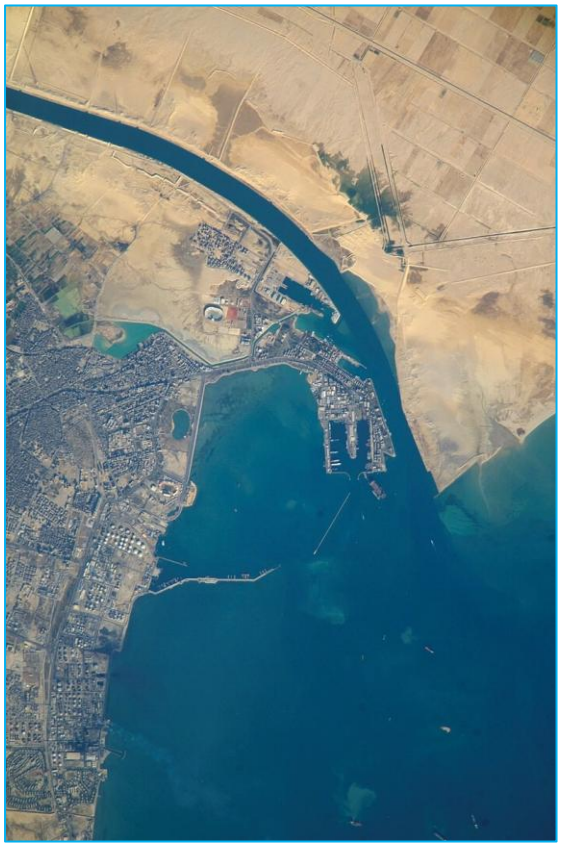


**Figure 17: The southern terminus of the Suez Canal at Suez on the Gulf of Suez, at the northern end of the Red Sea**

The intensified Houthi threats resulted in significant rerouting of maritime traffic. Over 6,600 ships opted to avoid the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, choosing instead to navigate around the Cape of Good Hope. This detour added to shipping times and costs, impacting global trade and supply chains. The Suez Canal Authority reported a 23.4% drop in revenue due to the reduced traffic (Ahram Online, 2023). Such disruptions highlight the economic costs tied to the security situation in the region.

In response to the escalating regional tensions, diplomatic initiatives sought to de-escalate the crisis. The United Nations Security Council passed a resolution calling for humanitarian pauses in Gaza, aiming to facilitate aid and mitigate regional hostilities (DW, 2023). While focused on the Hamas-Israel conflict, the resolution also highlighted broader international concerns regarding stability in adjacent regions like the Red Sea, which has seen an increase in military confrontations.



**Figure 18: An MQ-1 Predator, armed with AGM-114 Hellfire missiles**

Despite international responses, the Red Sea continues to face significant security challenges. The Houthis' access to advanced weaponry has strengthened their capacity to disrupt shipping lanes, thus complicating countermeasures (AP News, 2023) . The complex geopolitical environment, with proxy conflicts and varying state interests, makes unified security efforts challenging. Additionally,

the economic impact of the disruptions, including increased insurance premiums and shipping costs, adds to the pressures on regional economies and international trade. Needless to say, the absence of a homegrown, all-encompassing security solution has persisted.

# 3. What MENA Region Maritime Security Stakeholders Can Learn from the Malacca Straits Patrol

## 3.1 Structure and Benefits

Based on Section 2, it is evident that there exist significant threats to maritime security in the MENA region, and that the region's countries are yet to set up a comprehensive system for tackling these threats. Several initiatives exist, but they are either partial in their coverage, or they involve external players, most notably the US. This latter feature in particular contributes to the friction in the region, as the US has conflicts with countries such as Iran. Moreover, the resource costs of these efforts are considerable, and they are also creating significant economic disruption to the region.

Accordingly, in principle, there is much to be gained from emulating the MSP either in the Straits of Hormuz or Bab Al-Mandab. Ideally, the littoral states would – as the MSP member states did – agree to set their differences aside and work collaboratively and collectively on a maritime security construct that excludes extra-regional players such as China, Russia, and the US.

Beyond these direct benefits, there would also be indirect benefits in terms of reducing the level of regional conflict in other domains. This stems from the fact that maintaining maritime security is a central component of the national security strategies of countries throughout the MENA region.

The specific steps required could shadow those used in the MSP: starting with coordinated patrols dedicated to counterpiracy operations, then moving toward a shared, centralized operations center with intelligence sharing, and jointly developing advanced technological solutions. Over time, the scope of activity could expand, as could the number of countries involved.

**Participant 1**: *The MSP has been expanded, to include tackling the issue of illegal fishing, for example. It has also addressed human trafficking, smuggling, and environmental issues.*

## 3.2 Key Challenges

A primary challenge is overcoming the political differences that exist among the key powers in the regional, both at the level of governments and populations. This challenge is accentuated by the limited presence of effective regional cooperation structures, and the existence of acute asymmetries in naval capabilities, with one of the most advanced militaries

(Israel) having significant diplomatic frictions with other major players.

**Participant 1**: *I don't see the possibility of replicating the MSP in the MENA region. Capability is one key impediment. I do not think the navies of the region, with the exception perhaps of Israel, are capable of conducting such operations without a significant ramp-up of capacity-building, and this requires outside help. There is also no regional structure where such an idea could be raised. Most importantly, individual state sensitivities preclude such action. The Houthi attacks against commercial shipping in the Red Sea are a case in point. Despite obvious threats to their own interests, none of the littoral states joined the US-led mission, never mind proposed a similar initiative.*

**Participant 2**: *Egypt and Israel, and Egypt and Saudi Arabia, in an arrangement like that, would have to tailor an arrangement that is so fitting for each one of them with their respective sensibilities and size and clout and power and all of that… The challenge unique to this region that would need to be addressed is that there has to be a weight given to each country and its own requests in something like that.*



**Figure 19: Egypt-Israeli border north of Eilat**

**Participant 3**: *Israel cannot step on Egypt's toes. It caters very much to Egypt's sensibilities and national security issues and just doesn't want to antagonize Egypt. So they have had a good working relationship before. But if you're going to include Saudi Arabia and now we're talking about the Red Sea and regionalizing everything [it becomes more complicated than bilateral negotiations because] each country has to be given what it needs in terms of its own individual national security.*

*Now, you add once you go to the Gulf, then you're talking Iran and Saudi Arabia… It has to be understood from the national security point of each country and their populations, because none of these countries' populations would want to be perceived as [ being sucked] into something that is at the expense of their own sovereignty or autonomy.*

*[It is important to be] very diplomatic and cautious – almost anthropological about understanding the internal logic of the given partner or a given country. Once you accommodate that, people become much*

*more receptive, responsive, and collaborative just because you understand where they're coming from to begin with, then they can accommodate you.*



**Figure 20: Israeli naval vessels**

**Participant 4**: *The complexities of multilateral cooperation present significant challenges. In a multi-stakeholder arrangement, building trust among diverse players is difficult, especially regarding sensitive matters like intelligence-sharing. Each nation has unique limitations, sensitivities, and agency roles, creating obstacles to consistent information exchange and defined collaboration boundaries. Achieving a cohesive policy framework across different countries is demanding, particularly given concerns over sovereignty and enforcement. For instance, some regional actors may not favor Israeli forces playing an active enforcement role in shared maritime zones. Thus, designing an operational structure that respects each state's concerns while maintaining collaboration efficacy is a nuanced task.*

**Participant 5**: *I wouldn't say that whatever has been done by the MSP could be easily replicated in the MENA region.*

*The regional context in MENA is very different. For example, there is always concern about [regional country] in the MENA region. We don't have anything like [it] in the Malacca Strait region. But in MENA, that would be an additional issue. If [country] is viewed as a threat by other nations in the region, then clearly that would stand in the way of comprehensive cooperation. [It] might come on board because their idea is that they don't want extra-regional naval presence in the region, so there could be some convergence on that front. However, in terms of implementation and carving out spheres of responsibility, that would be a major challenge.*

*Additionally, in the MENA region, there are issues that we don't face in the Malacca Strait, such as the situation with the Houthis in Yemen, or other militant groups scattered across the region, which could complicate maritime security. Therefore, the experience in the Malacca Strait wouldn't be directly applicable to the MENA region. In fact, we might even have to learn from you on how to deal with such issues, since you've encountered them in the MENA region.*

*One other issue that the MENA region would face is the same one we faced in the Malacca Strait: disparities in capacity and capabilities among the countries' maritime forces. This disparity is likely to be even wider in MENA due to the multiplicity of actors involved. In the Malacca Strait, there are just four of us, and the disparity wasn't too wide to begin with because Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and*

*Thailand all have pretty significant baseline naval capabilities. I can't say the same for the MENA region. Some countries, for example, those in East Africa, have virtually no maritime capabilities, or their capabilities are very limited. So, despite the much wider geography in the MENA region, this disparity in capability would be an even bigger challenge to address.*

**Participant 6**: *[Some MENA countries haven't] ratified key maritime agreements that are an important precursor to effective cooperation. Moreover, though the Gulf states have invested heavily in their militaries over the last 30 years following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, due to their threat perception, there has been an overinvestment in terrestrial forces, and an underinvestment in naval forces, creating a capacity gap that will be difficult to fill.*

A further challenge is the nature of piracy threats. The MSP was primarily dealing with autonomous pirates associated with organized crime, whereas in the MENA region, there is a considerable threat of state-backed pirates, receiving support from governments that in principle would be involved in a homegrown replica of the MSP.

**Participant 1**: *State-backed piracy was not an issue. The nature of the problem in the Straits was the presence of pirates abetted by organized crime groups. In my view, the main issue was lax law enforcement in remote coastal areas which allowed such groups to flourish. It is difficult to hypothesize about what could be done about potential state-backed piracy operations - apart from [country], there are no instances of rogue state actors in this region.*

**Participant 3**: *You have to have state-to-state conversations. ISIS [had] networks of support and financial support from countries. Once these countries sorted things out and cut the logistics and the financial support networks, something disintegrated… We have, as a world, at this point, relied too much on non-state actors so that we don't clash with one another. I think the world is fed up with this formula! It is exhausting. And the alternative of replacing it is like it's going to be a state-on-state conflict. Like we're going to fight one another. So in order not to do that, fight one another like conventional wars, or resort to these ultra militarized non-state actors because they're not just terrorists – they're now militarized non-state actors!*



**Figure 21: Combined Air and Space Operations Center used in the war against Islamic State**

*We have to go back to state to state relations, diplomacy, deterrence formulas. Even honestly, if it's like a little bit or one on one limited wars but between states*

*that, at this point, is better than these kinds of non-state actors, pirates, groupings, militias, etc. This mess has to be reconceptualized as a non-solution at this point… Even the development between Israel and Iran at this point. That they are on the brink of going to war, somehow maybe that is actually a development from just having non-state actors doing all the work. Of course, I don't want a war in Iran, but I am saying now going back to state-on-state conversations, whether they are diplomatic or even threat of conventional wars, that scares us as an audience enough to have them sort things out. But having this little thing here and that. I think it is all more harmful than not.*



**Figure 22: Defensive surface-to-air missile system**

*Maintain a very strong defensive approach. Because if you are very strong defensively, nobody can object since you're defensive and you're not a threat to anyone… So I think this is the attitude that each country should have a very strong defense posture and respect itself and everybody will respect you and there will be no encroachment.*

One participant drew an important distinction between pirates being state-backed versus benefiting from low-grade collusion. Sometimes, the support is more about confronting economic challenges of local populations than it is actively disrupting security arrangements or projecting geopolitical strength.

**Participant 5**: *How do we really know that piracy is state-backed? This is, of course, a key question. Now, how do we define "state-backed"? Is it done with malicious intent from the policymakers sitting in the respective capitals, or are we referring to something like collusion between local maritime forces and the pirates? For example, I don't see any evidence that the four capitals, or even elsewhere, have malicious intent to support piracy. If anything, we are more concerned about non-state actors trying to export the nexus between piracy and terrorism to disrupt shipping security in the waterway.*

*The general understanding is that the regional countries, especially the four MSP countries and their neighbors, have no reason to sponsor or back piracy in the area. Ultimately, what would be the objective of doing so? Even if the objective were to justify extra-regional involvement, that doesn't seem to be something anyone in the four countries would support. Of course, among all the countries involved, I don't see any reason why any of them would want to escalate the issue when they are themselves part of the MSP.*

*What I do believe, though, is that collusion is something often discussed between the perpetrators and the local authorities. Local authorities are not just simply law enforcement; there are quite intricate and*

*complex linkages between the local authorities and business interests. This creates a very complex dynamic. In some cases, local authorities may believe that by allowing or even condoning such activities, they are maintaining local socioeconomic peace and stability. If they are unable to provide livelihoods for local communities, they may feel that there's no reason to stop people from engaging in activities that could support their livelihood. So, they allow it to happen rather than creating trouble back home.*

*In this context, some local authorities might even receive bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye to these activities. So, while I wouldn't describe it as "state-backed piracy," I do think that collusion between local authorities and pirates is more prevalent. At the higher political level, however, I don't think there is any malicious intent to back piracy in the area.*

A final comment from a reviewer revealed the following additional challenge. A critical but underappreciated constraint in the MENA region is the predominance of coast guard-style maritime forces with limited capacity for blue-water operations. While coast guards are essential for constabulary duties (e.g., anti-smuggling, SAR), they lack the capacity to manage high-intensity threats such as cruise missile defense or amphibious operations. To operationalize any MENA maritime security initiative that aspires to strategic autonomy, transitioning from coast guard to navy-level capabilities is indispensable.

## 3.3 Including Extra-Regional Players

A major issue in the MENA region is the extensive preexisting involvement of extra-regional players. This is especially pronounced in Bab Al-Mandab, where over a dozen naval bases exist in countries such as Djibouti. In the Malacca Straits, there may have been a tacit threat of extra-regional involvement that helped motivate the organic emergence of the MSP, allowing the contributing countries to manage the involvement of extra-regional players from a position of strength and unit.

**Participant 1**: *As far as I know, there has not been any pressure for outside powers to be included in the initiative. This could well be because of opposition to such moves, as well as the overall success of the MSP.*

In contrast, in MENA, the extra-regional players are already there in force, and the regional players are fragmented with highly variable bilateral relations with those extra-regional players. This makes the process of involving extra-regional players highly chaotic and unstable.

**Participant 3**: *Sometimes the policy of resisting the presence of other global powers backfires and makes our partners even create bilateral relations one on one and undo things... It's not a mono-polar world any more.*



**Figure 23: US Fifth Fleet forces in action**

**Participant 5**: *There is one contextual difference between Southeast Asia and the MENA region. In Southeast Asia, we didn't have extra-regional maritime forces patrolling our waters to begin with. But in your case, in the MENA region, the waters are already patrolled by extra-regional forces, particularly American forces. So, the challenge is: how do you convince them that it's time for them to leave and for you to take control of maritime security on your own? This is something that needs to be discussed. I believe this is an important consideration.*

As the emerging cold conflict between China and the US increases in intensity, managing extra-regional players will become more difficult. While these powers might initially welcome a stable arrangement that limits their military footprint and saves them the headache of policing an area that is far from their homeland, in the future, they may begin to see their involvement as an opportunity to pressure their adversary, or to protect their own direct interests.

**Participant 4**: *From my perspective, a regional collaboration model, where local forces assume responsibility, would likely align with American interests by reducing the need for direct U.S. involvement. This approach allows the U.S. to rely on regional players for maritime security, reducing the necessity of deploying American troops or ships. However, while the U.S. may welcome a shift to local management, such an arrangement could introduce new geopolitical challenges. Specifically, as this route sees heavy Chinese maritime traffic, Beijing might demand greater involvement in any regional security framework, contending that its stake in these shipping lanes is more substantial than the U.S's.*



**Figure 24: Chinese President Xi Jinping with U.S. President Joe Biden at the 17th G20 in Bali, November 2022.**

*Furthermore, should the U.S. attempt to influence or lead this regional task force, it could exacerbate tensions with China, which would likely insist on participating in decision-making for a security structure so essential to its economic interests. Thus, although the U.S. would appreciate regional states taking the lead, the inherent competition between superpowers for influence in this key transit area complicates the situation. Any involvement from either side, particularly if one seeks*

*more control, could trigger pushback from the other, highlighting the delicate balance required for successful, multi-nation collaboration in this strategically critical region.*

*From the U.S viewpoint, a regional collaboration among states would be highly beneficial, reflecting genuine multilateral cooperation similar to the spirit of the Abraham Accords. However, while such cooperation is promising, I believe the U.S. would still view a superpower presence as essential for managing serious security risks. Although the U.S. may appreciate this alliance, it likely anticipates that China will respond by increasing its own involvement in the region, possibly targeting collaborations in underrepresented areas like Africa, including nations such as Somalia and Sudan. This parallel effort by China would reflect its strategy of engaging in regions where U.S. influence is less pronounced.*

A final remark regarding extra-regional players is that India and France blur the line between "extra-regional" and "indigenous," especially through naval basing rights and historic roles. Unlike the U.S. or China, India and France maintain deep-rooted military and economic linkages with MENA states, including naval bases and defense treaties. Their longstanding presence – particularly France's in Djibouti and India's in Oman – suggests that they might be viewed not as "outsiders," but rather as embedded actors whose inclusion in a regional maritime security initiative may be less politically sensitive.

## 3.4 Overcoming the Challenges

In light of the considerable challenges, an overarching suggestion is starting small and working up.

**Participant 5**: *So, if there were to be a similar or equivalent initiative in the MENA region, I believe it would be best to start small. You could begin with just one particular waterway on a trial basis, involving a select group of actors. Such a smaller setup could gradually expand in the future, depending on how it progresses. That would be one potential way forward.*

A more refined version of this approach would be to focus on less sensitive issues, and encourage each country to work on the areas in which it has a comparative advantage. This would help build trust and credibility in a region that suffers from a chronic deficit in these domains.

**Participant 3**: *In particular, I would emphasize the importance of information-sharing as a core component of these collaborative models. For instance, using frameworks like the MSP, we can learn how states contribute unique strengths to maintain regional security without necessarily sharing sensitive or classified information initially. Instead, participants can exchange operational capabilities and non- sensitive data, building trust gradually. Each nation's unique contribution reinforces the partnership's value; for example, countries like Egypt and Israel could see tangible benefits from cooperation as each state brings distinct resources and roles to the table. By clarifying these roles, cooperation*

*becomes more compelling, as each partner recognizes practical advantages and understands the importance of involvement. This structured, trust-building approach can create a robust and stable collaborative framework that promotes long-term regional security.*

*To address these complexities, I suggest categorizing potential areas for collaboration. Issues like environmental protection or fishing rights are likely to see smoother cooperation, given their less sensitive nature. Security, however, poses a greater challenge, especially when considering threats like missile defense or intervention in arms supply routes to conflict zones, such as Iranian shipments to Yemen. For less controversial security matters like anti-piracy efforts, collaboration may be more feasible. Nonetheless, when dealing with high-stakes security issues, differing national interests and sensitivities will likely hinder cooperation. Learning from models like the Malacca Strait Patrol, which focuses more on piracy than high-level security concerns, could provide valuable insights, though adapting such frameworks to address complex security needs would require significant adjustments.*




**Figure 25: Hellespont Alhambra (now TI Asia), a ULCC TI-class supertanker, which are the largest ocean-going oil tankers in the world**

*For effective regional collaboration, I believe each player should contribute its strengths. For example, Israel can offer cybersecurity expertise, while Arab states, with their deep knowledge of oil and tanker security, could handle petroleum-related security. However, challenges arise because MENA countries have different perspectives on threats and how to counter them. Israel may prioritize removing any Iranian-backed threats in maritime zones, but Saudi Arabia and Yemen may not fully align with this view. Thus, establishing a unified definition of threats, such as terrorism, is critical to ensuring cohesion. Agreeing on these basic terms can lay a foundation, while disagreements could be addressed at a later stage.*

*One possible solution is to model cooperation on frameworks like the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), creating subcommittees to manage specific issues. For example, Israel and Saudi Arabia could agree on a broader definition of*

*terrorism and address it jointly, while other nations might adopt narrower definitions. Alternatively, security responsibilities could be divided geographically, allowing Israel, as part of a regional maritime security model, to take a more active role in areas like Aden and Hudaydah, where its security interests are heightened. This way, regional actors could focus on areas of mutual interest while managing sensitive disagreements flexibly.*

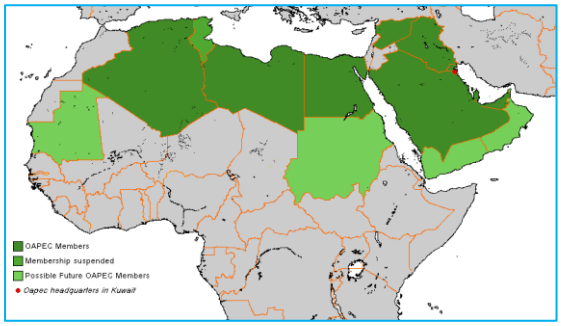



**Figure 26: Map of OAPEC Members and their status**

A complementary suggestion is to embed cooperation efforts in international organizations and international law that – for the most part (see above) – the countries have already ratified under the UN umbrella.

***Participant 4** : To foster regional collaboration, I would begin by leveraging international law and organizations, such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO), to address state-backed threats like terrorism and piracy. Working through these bodies enables tools like asset freezes, boycotting curtain banks and sanctions against offending states, providing a structured foundation for cooperative action. At the national level, focusing initially on piracy and fisheries would be an effective entry point, as these are less sensitive issues and offer a practical opportunity for information-sharing and building trust. By addressing piracy first, MENA states can establish committees, gain experience in cooperation, and develop a success story that encourages future collaboration on more complex security issues. This gradual, step-by-step approach can lay the groundwork for effective regional security partnerships.*

If the broader geopolitical conflict between extra-regional players can be managed within the context of the MENA region, then those extra-regional players can be active contributors to MENA versions of the MSP, primarily through capacity building.

**Participant 5**: *The idea of having such an initiative is to demonstrate self-reliance and reduce the need for extra-regional policing of the waters, how do you go about achieving that? It can't be the case that, overnight, you tell them to leave. You would likely need a roadmap—a roadmap that gradually reduces extra-regional maritime presence.*

*And of course, this would have to be tied to parallel capacity-building assistance that is done alongside the initiative. Gradually, the end goal would be to see that this initiative takes off, and over time, the concerned parties are able to project self-reliance by policing their own waters without the need for extra-regional intervention.*

A final suggestion made by a MENA2050 colleague was the establishment of a MENA maritime security fund to help foster intra-MENA maritime security improvements, notably in supporting the region's least prosperous countries. This could follow the example set by the OPEC development fund, which uses the bloc's wealth to contribute to the economic growth of less fortunate countries.

## Conclusion

This note has sought to explore the viability of transplanting the success of the MSP to the MENA region by creating a homegrown analogue that counters piracy in both the Straits of Hormuz and Bab Al-Mandab. Based on our analysis of the literature and interviews with six experts from South-East Asia and the MENA region, the following five conclusions emerge.

**Conclusion 1: Regional cooperation is essential but context-specific.** The success of the MSP demonstrates that regional cooperation can significantly improve maritime security. However, replicating such a model in the MENA region requires careful adaptation to local geopolitical realities, sensitivities, and power asymmetries.

This reflects the broader reality that in the security domain, while there is much to be gained from studying the efforts of other countries and regions, local idiosyncrasies – most notably the history of conflict – constitute a critical consideration for those formulating sustainable homegrown solutions.

**Conclusion 2: Sovereignty concerns and political friction are major barriers.** Unlike Southeast Asia, the MENA region is characterized by deeper political divisions, sovereignty sensitivities, and a lack of cohesive regional security architecture. These factors make the implementation of a joint maritime security framework inherently more complex.

These divisions are particularly stark at present in the Red Sea, where previous efforts at establishing codes of conduct have failed to secure the buy-in needed for l asting success. Asymmetries in capabilities are a major barrier to further cooperation because they create a misalignment between what states are able to contribute to a security architecture and the level of influence that would maintain a sustainable balance of power. Divergent historical security threats have contributed to these asymmetries, with countries such as the GCC member states overly invested in terrestrial capabilities at the expense of naval ones.



Figure 27: Armed pirates in the Indian Ocean

**Conclusion3: Extra-regional dependency undermines indigenous security solutions.** Current maritime security efforts in MENA rely heavily on extra-regional actors, limiting the development of autonomous and sustainable regional solutions. A shift toward regionally-led initiatives is both necessary and strategically desirable to reduce external dependency. However, as geopolitical tensions increase globally, convincing extra-regional players to devolve responsibility for maritime security to local actors will be difficult, especially in light of the large capacity gaps that need to be filled.

When the MSP was established, the specter of extra-regional involvement was looming, but the window of opportunity to extinguish those threats was successfully seized by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (and subsequently Thailand). In the MENA region, foreign interests are heavily entrenched, and backed by formidable military capabilities that are unmatched by local players. This makes the genesis of exclusively homegrown security solutions arduous. From a political perspective, partnerships with India and France may be more compatible with regional sovereignty and long-term capacity building in light of their unique roles in the region.

**Conclusion 4: A gradual, incremental approach is most viable.** A full-scale replication of the MSP is unlikely in the short term. Instead, a phased approach – starting with low-sensitivity areas like anti-piracy patrols, environmental monitoring, and information-sharing – offers a more feasible path forward for building trust and capacity.

As the saying goes, Rome wasn't built in a day, and even the most sophisticated security arrangements – be they the EU or MSP – had to start somewhere. In the MENA region, it is difficult to envisage the requisite political will emerging even for a small-scale scope of cooperation. However, the same could have been said about the countries that joined the European Coal and Steel Community following the conclusion of WWII. A potentially decisive factor in bringing regional players to the table with a constructive attitude is the threat of nuclear proliferation in the region if countries' chronic sense of insecurity is left unaddressed.



**Figure 28: Former headquarters of the European Coal and Steel Community High Authority in Luxembourg**

**Conclusion 5: Capacity building and trust are foundational requirements.** A successful MENA maritime security initiative must prioritize naval capacity building and confidence- building measures. Without narrowing the gap in capabilities and fostering mutual trust, any

cooperative framework will struggle to take root or deliver lasting results.

A consistent theme articulated by the new Trump administration is the desire to reposition military assets away from the MENA region. Whether this sentiment survives the emergence of a Sino-Russian desire to fill any American military vacuum remains to be seen. However, in the short- to medium-term, there is surely an opportunity to work with a war-weary America to develop local capacities under the banner of "ridding the US of its security burden". While precise estimates are difficult to come by, the US has surely spent billions in Bab Al-Mandab since October 2023, and will be open to alternative arrangements that involve a smaller financial burden.

Ultimately, as with all challenges in the MENA region, the key to a prosperous future will be long-sighted leadership by the heads of state. Bold and visionary actions that can sideline belligerent forces and help ordinary citizens appreciate the folly of maximalist foreign policy can potentially usher in a new era of indigenous peace to a region that has been mired in violent conflict for decades.

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# Appendix:
# Interview Questions

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*Questions directed at participants from South East Asia:*

**Preamble**: The Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP) is a cooperative maritime security initiative involving Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. It was established to ensure the safety and security of one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, the Straits of Malacca, which is vital for global trade. The patrol focuses on combating piracy, armed robbery, and other transnational crimes in the region. This interview wishes to explore the lessons that the MENA region countries can learn from the MSP's success.

**Question 1**: At the time of its establishment in 2004, what do you think were the key factors in convincing the MSP countries to work together rather than deferring to China or the US to maintain maritime security?

**Question 2**: How would you rate the success of the MSP, and what are the most important factors that explain this success/ failure?

**Question 3**: Today, 20 years after its launch, what are the key evolutions in its operational structure that have facilitated the MSP's continuing work?

**Question 4**: How has the MSP adapted to the growing maritime assertiveness of large powers such as China and the US, and how has it resisted any pressure for them to supplant the MSP?

**Question 5**: Has the MSP ever had to confront pirates who are potentially state-backed? If so, how did the alleged state backing affect the manner in which they dealt with the threats? [If not, please comment on this hypothetically.]

**Question 6**: Do you think the MSP could successfully expand its mandate to other domains, such as cybersecurity and environmental protection, without adversely affecting its core mission?

**Question 7**: Based on your knowledge of the MENA region, do you think that the MSP's success can be exported to the MENA region?

**Question 8**: Do you have any other comments/suggestions?

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*Questions directed at participants from the MENA region:*

**Preamble**: The Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP) is a collaborative security initiative involving Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, aimed at safeguarding one of the world's busiest maritime chokepoints. The MSP has been effective in reducing piracy and other threats as well as enhancing maritime security through coordinated patrols, intelligence-sharing, and regional cooperation. As experts in the MENA region- particularly those familiar with the maritime conflicts in the Red Sea, Bab Al-Mandab, the Suez Canal, the

Mediterranean Sea and the Arab Gulf- the MSP presents a potential model for addressing similar challenges in our region.

**Question 1**: Considering the strategic importance of the Red Sea, Bab Al-Mandab, the Suez Canal, and the Gulf in global trade, how can the successes of the MSP be adapted to create a similar maritime security initiative in the MENA region, and what specific challenges unique to this region would need to be addressed?

**Question 2**: What are the potential geopolitical implications of establishing a collaborative maritime patrol in the MENA region, similar to the MSP, considering the complex interplay of regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel and Iran, and how might this affect the security dynamics around key chokepoints in the region?

**Question 3**: Given the MSP's reliance on regional players, what would be the pros and cons of including non-regional actors in a similar MENA-focused patrol initiative, and how might the involvement of global powers impact the sovereignty and decision-making of MENA states?

**Question 4**: Do you think that external powers – most notably the US – would support or oppose the development of an analogue to the MSP?

**Question 5**: How could the differing political systems, security priorities, and military capabilities of MENA countries be reconciled to form a coherent and effective maritime security patrol, analogous to the MSP, which addresses both traditional threats like piracy and terrorism and emerging challenges such as cyber-attacks on maritime infrastructure?

**Question 6**: What suggestions do you have – be they based on the MSP or otherwise – on how to deal with pirates that are potentially state backed?

**Question 7**: Do you have any other comments/suggestions?