

“CONTEMPORARY MARITIME SECURITY CHALLENGES: CONFRONTING DISORDER MULTIPOLAR COMPETITION”

T. Dewadharu Achsyan

Indonesian Naval Staff and Command College (SESKOAL)

achsyaandewadharu@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT.

The global maritime security landscape in 2026 faces a profound paradox: while piracy has fallen to its lowest level in 35 years, strategic competition for control of the world's sea lines of communication has intensified to levels not seen since the Cold War. This article examines the convergence of geopolitical rivalries in the South China Sea, the weaponization of commercial shipping in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, the institutional transformation of maritime governance in Southeast Asia, and the emerging strategic frontier of the Arctic. Employing a qualitative comparative case study approach based on data from January to June 2026, the article argues that a fundamental shift is underway from a US-led unipolar maritime order toward a more fragmented and contested multipolar system. This transition does not necessarily lead to armed confrontation; rather, it manifests in what can be termed a “maritime security disorder,” characterized by overlapping jurisdictions, emerging norms, and the strategic exploitation of maritime ambiguity.

Keywords: Maritime security, South China Sea, UNCLOS, maritime governance, geopolitics

ABSTRAK

Pada lanskap keamanan maritim global tahun 2026 muncul paradoks yang mendalam: meskipun perompakan (*piracy*) telah turun ke level terendah dalam 35 tahun, persaingan strategis untuk mengendalikan jalur komunikasi laut dunia justru meningkat hingga tingkat yang belum terlihat sejak Perang Dingin. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana rivalitas geopolitik beririsan di Laut Tiongkok Selatan, pemanfaatan komoditas/pelayaran niaga sebagai instrumen persenjataan (*weaponization of commercial shipping*) di Laut Merah dan Teluk Persia, transformasi kelembagaan tata kelola maritim di Asia Tenggara, serta kemunculan Arktik sebagai *strategic frontier*. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan *qualitative comparative case study* berbasis data periode Januari hingga Juni 2026, artikel ini berargumen bahwa sedang terjadi pergeseran mendasar dari tatanan keamanan maritim yang bersifat unipolar dengan kepemimpinan AS menuju sistem multipolar yang lebih terfragmentasi dan diperebutkan. Pergeseran ini tidak selalu berarti meningkatnya konfrontasi bersenjata; melainkan tampak dalam apa yang dapat disebut sebagai “*maritime security disorder*”, yakni kondisi gangguan keamanan maritim yang ditandai oleh tumpang tindih yurisdiksi, terbentuknya norma-norma baru, dan pemanfaatan strategis atas *ambiguitas* di laut.

Kata kunci: keamanan maritim, Laut Tiongkok Selatan, UNCLOS, tata kelola maritim, geopolitik

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has often been called the “maritime century.” Yet in 2026, the world’s oceans simultaneously serve as unprecedented global connectors and arenas of intensifying strategic competition. Approximately 90% of global trade by volume traverses maritime routes, with the Strait of Malacca alone carrying an estimated quarter of global traded goods and two-thirds of global container shipping (Azmi, 2026; Khalid, 2026). The security of these sea lines of communication (SLOCs) is therefore not merely a matter of naval power projection but a fundamental prerequisite for global economic stability and food security.

Maritime security as an academic field has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Initially dominated by traditional issues such as piracy, smuggling, and territorial disputes, it now encompasses hybrid threats, transnational organized crime, and great-power competition at sea (Till, 2018; Bueger, 2015). However, most of the literature still tends to analyze regions in isolation, despite the growing systemic interconnectedness of global shipping routes. The state of the art reveals that research on maritime security in the Indo-Pacific remains largely bilateral or region-specific, with few studies integrating the South China Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Arctic into a single analytical framework.

The gap this article seeks to fill is the lack of understanding of how the fragmentation of the global maritime order – from unipolar to multipolar – creates new forms of systemic insecurity, rather than merely an accumulation of individual threats. Accordingly, this article poses the following research question: How do current (2026) maritime security dynamics across various hotspots shape a pattern of “managed disorder” in the transition toward a multipolar order? The aim is to identify, analyze, and synthesize contemporary maritime security issues to develop a conceptual framework for policy-making and future research. The theoretical contribution is to enrich maritime security studies with a systemic transition perspective, while the practical contribution is to provide input for ministries of defense and navies (particularly the Indonesian Navy) in formulating adaptive national maritime strategies.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a **qualitative comparative case study approach**. This design was chosen because it allows in-depth analysis of several maritime regions with different but systemically interconnected dynamics.

Time and place of research: The research was conducted as a library study, collecting data from various credible international sources between January and June 2026. The geographical focus includes the South China Sea, the Strait of

Malacca, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Black Sea, and the Arctic.

Data sources: Primary data consist of official reports from international organizations (IMO, ICC, IISS), official government statements, and defense and maritime security policy documents from relevant states. Secondary data include Scopus-indexed journal articles, think tank reports (CSIS, IISS, RUSI), and verified international news media.

Data collection techniques: Documentation and indirect observation of publicly reported maritime events. All data were collected through online searches with the following criteria: (a) published between January and June 2026; (b) from official sources or credible media; (c) directly relevant to maritime security issues.

Data analysis techniques: Analysis proceeded in three stages: (1) data reduction by categorizing events by region and threat type; (2) data presentation in thematic narrative form; (3) conclusion drawing and verification through cross-source triangulation. The analytical approach is thematic analysis from a geopolitical and maritime security perspective.

DISCUSSION

A. The 2026 Global Maritime Security Paradox

In 2026, the world faces a striking paradox. According to the ICC International Maritime Bureau, global piracy fell to just 16

incidents in the first quarter of 2026, down from 45 in Q1 2025 and 33 in Q1 2024 – the lowest level in 35 years (World Ports, 2026). This success is primarily attributable to effective international naval patrols, the use of private security on commercial vessels, and improved port-state controls.

Yet at the same time, strategic tensions at sea have escalated dramatically. Foreign warships are increasingly operating near disputed waters, joint military exercises have expanded in scale, and threats to chokepoints now come not only from states but also from non-state actors such as the Houthis in Yemen. This suggests that the decline in low-level maritime crime does not necessarily reflect an overall improvement in maritime security. Rather, the threat has shifted upward: to state-based competition and asymmetric warfare.

This paradox indicates that maritime security studies must clearly distinguish between maritime crime and maritime strategic competition, as each requires different policy instruments.

B. The South China Sea: Claims, Capabilities, and Co-optation

The South China Sea remains the world's most consequential maritime flashpoint. Two parallel trends are evident in 2026: first, the accelerating expansion of Chinese naval capabilities; second, the deepening of US-Philippines security cooperation as a counterbalance.

1. Chinese Naval Modernization

According to 2026 assessments, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) now operates approximately 841 vessels, making it the world's largest navy by fleet size (Vanguard, 2026). This includes the operational deployment of the aircraft carrier Fujian, Type 054B frigates, Type 076 amphibious assault ships, and Type 093B nuclear-powered attack submarines (Bellingham Herald, 2026; DNA India, 2026). In June 2026, a carrier battle group centered on the Liaoning conducted its first live-fire exercises, demonstrating strike capabilities amid heightened tensions with the United States and Taiwan (News of Bahrain, 2026).

More significantly, China has forward-deployed electronic warfare capabilities across its artificial island bases in the Spratlys. In late May 2026, the PLAN's Southern Theater Command used active electronic interference to drive off the Dutch frigate De Ruyter near the Paracel Islands (US Naval Institute News, 2026). Chinese military experts characterized this as the first significant use of such measures, noting that electronic warfare left the Dutch ship's "communication lines, data links, and radar systems blind and deaf" (China News, 2026). This incident marks a new threshold: China is now willing to employ non-kinetic means to assert its maritime claims and challenge foreign military presence in waters it deems sovereign.

2. Strengthening the US-Philippines Alliance

In response, the United States and the Philippines have deepened bilateral military cooperation. The annual Balikatan exercises in April–May 2026 expanded in scale and sophistication. US and Philippine forces conducted live-fire drills in Zambales province, launching anti-ship missiles and anti-aircraft artillery to shoot down drone targets (Ahram, 2026). In early June 2026, integrated air defense drills and joint naval maneuvers took place in or near the disputed South China Sea, including a "full-scale battle scenario" simulating the defense of the Philippine archipelago (Morning Star, 2026). The US also deployed a P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft to Singapore, reinforcing regional surveillance capabilities (News of Bahrain, 2026).

3. The Stalled Code of Conduct

Amid these tensions, the long-negotiated Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea remains unfinished. The Philippines, as ASEAN Chair 2026, has made completion of the COC a top priority, insisting that the document be legally binding and based on international law, particularly UNCLOS (Straits Times, 2026). However, China and several ASEAN claimant states differ fundamentally on the scope, legal force, and dispute resolution mechanisms of the proposed code. Whether the COC can be finalized by the end of 2026 remains highly uncertain.

C. Weaponizing Chokepoints: The Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Black Sea

If the South China Sea represents long-term strategic competition, the Red Sea and Persian Gulf in 2026 represent acute crises demonstrating the vulnerability of shipping lanes to non-state actors and asymmetric warfare.

1. The Houthi Blockade in the Red Sea

In early June 2026, Iran-backed Houthi forces in Yemen announced a “complete and total ban” on Israeli maritime navigation in the Red Sea, declaring all Israeli-linked vessels legitimate military targets (Bernama, 2026). The declaration, accompanied by missile launches targeting what the Houthis described as sensitive Israeli sites, followed Israeli military strikes in Iran. The Houthis have demonstrated a proven capability to strike commercial vessels, disrupt shipping, and force costly reroutings using drones, sea mines, anti-ship missiles, and explosive-laden boats (The National, 2026).

The economic consequences are substantial. While Gulf oil exports continue, cargoes have been diverted to avoid the Red Sea, increasing voyage times, insurance premiums, and freight costs. The Bab el-Mandeb – the narrow strait connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden – has become a pressure point through which a non-state actor can extract geopolitical leverage.

2. Crisis and Reconstruction in the Persian Gulf

In the Persian Gulf, the trajectory has been different but no less consequential. After months of heightened tensions, the United States and Iran reportedly reached a peace agreement in mid-June 2026, opening the prospect of reopening the Strait of Hormuz (CNA, 2026). However, an estimated 500 vessels remain trapped in the Persian Gulf, and analysts warn that clearing the backlog could take weeks, with oil shipments resuming only gradually (Central News Agency, 2026). The United Nations’ International Maritime Organization noted that over 500 ships – primarily tankers and bulk carriers engaged in international trade – remain at anchor, and thousands of seafarers remain vulnerable (UN Geneva, 2026). A multinational mine-clearance operation is being prepared, led by the United Kingdom and France, with 15 countries pledging support (Zaobao, 2026; Ifeng, 2026).

3. The Black Sea Grain Corridor

The Black Sea represents a third theater where maritime security is directly tied to food security. After Russia withdrew from the original grain deal, Ukraine established a temporary shipping route to resume exports from Odesa, Chornomorsk, and Pivdennyi. By June 2026, a new international agreement had been reached, with Turkey and the UN mediating safe passage (New Age, 2026). A London-

based marine insurance broker launched specialized coverage for Ukrainian grain exports, including advanced vessel tracking and a 24/7 monitoring operations room (World Ports, 2026). Nevertheless, the corridor remains vulnerable to Russia's unpredictable participation, the threat of mines, and concerns about military use.

D. Institutional Responses: ASEAN and Coast Guard Diplomacy

1. The ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Declaration

In response to these challenges, Southeast Asian states have pursued institutional innovation rather than military escalation. The Philippines, as ASEAN Chair 2026, placed maritime cooperation at the center of its agenda under the theme "Navigating Our Future, Together" (RRI, 2026). At the May 2026 ASEAN Summit in Cebu, leaders adopted the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Maritime Cooperation, which reaffirms the bloc's collective commitment to deepen maritime coordination and recognizes the multi-dimensional nature of maritime issues (PNA, 2026). The declaration proposes several concrete initiatives: the formal inclusion of the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum (ACF) as a sectoral body, and the establishment of an ASEAN Maritime Centre in the Philippines (PNA, 2026; PTV News, 2026).

2. The ASEAN Coast Guard Forum

The ACF has moved from an informal dialogue to a formalized

mechanism. At a meeting in early June 2026, participants reaffirmed the importance of strengthening practical maritime cooperation among ASEAN coast guards through dialogue, information sharing, capacity-building, and operational coordination (PNA, 2026). This creates a non-military, law-enforcement channel for managing maritime disputes and addressing transnational maritime crime.

3. Indonesia's Maritime Security Transformation

Parallel to these regional efforts, Indonesia has accelerated its domestic maritime security consolidation. The government has prepared a new Maritime Security Law to provide Bakamla (Indonesia's Maritime Security Agency) with a proper legal basis as a coast guard (Kompas, 2026). Bakamla has also inaugurated three zonal commands and is building the National Maritime Surveillance System (Kompas, 2026; Antara, 2026). However, the agency faces significant capability gaps, with a stated need for 274 vessels by 2045 compared to a current fleet of only ten (Kompas, 2026).

E. The Arctic: The Emerging Strategic Frontier

The Arctic is rapidly emerging as the next arena of maritime strategic competition. Driven by climate change, melting sea ice is opening new shipping routes – the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage – and exposing vast

untapped hydrocarbon and mineral resources.

In 2026, the United States has taken decisive action to strengthen its Arctic posture. The US Coast Guard has awarded contracts for up to 11 Arctic Security Cutters with approximately \$3.5 billion in funding (Fox News, 2026; IP Defense Forum, 2026). The new icebreaker *Storis* is actively patrolling the Arctic near Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone (World Ports, 2026). The strategic rationale is clear: China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are all expanding their presence in the Arctic (Seapower, 2026). For China, the Arctic represents a potential "Polar Silk Road" complementing the Maritime Silk Road. The militarization of the Arctic, though still in its early stages, has the potential to introduce a new dimension of great-power competition into the maritime domain.

CONCLUSION

Based on analysis of five major maritime hotspots in 2026, this article concludes that global maritime security is undergoing a systemic transition from a US-led unipolar order toward a more fragmented multipolar system. This transition does not take the form of open war; rather, it manifests as a "managed disorder" characterized by three main features.

First, overlapping claims and jurisdictions without agreed settlement mechanisms, as seen in the South China Sea.

Second, the weaponization of shipping lanes by state and non-state actors, as seen in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf.

Third, the fragmentation of maritime legal norms, with UNCLOS interpreted in fundamentally different ways by disputing parties.

The decline in global piracy should not create a false sense of security. The threat has shifted to higher and more complex levels. Institutional responses such as strengthening the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum and building national coast guard capacity are positive steps, but they are insufficient to resolve the root causes of disputes. Meanwhile, the Arctic is emerging as a new frontier that could become the next great-power competition arena.

Thus, the goal of identifying and synthesizing current maritime security issues within a systemic transition framework has been achieved. The answer to the research question is that the pattern of "maritime security disorder" emerges from the convergence of strategic competition, legal fragmentation, and the rise of non-state actors that exploit maritime ambiguity.

Recommendations

Theoretical recommendations.

Future research should develop an analytical model that integrates geopolitical, legal, and technological dimensions simultaneously, and test hypotheses about

the correlation between declining maritime crime and increasing strategic tensions.

Practical recommendations.

For ministries of defense and navies (particularly the Indonesian Navy), it is recommended to:

- (1) Strengthen maritime defense diplomacy through forums such as the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum;
- (2) Accelerate the development of integrated national maritime surveillance systems (such as Indonesia's NMSS);
- (3) Develop contingency scenarios for simultaneous disruptions at multiple chokepoints (e.g., the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea);
- (4) Begin preparing Arctic capabilities, even though long-term, given that global warming will open the region. In addition, maritime security law reform should be completed urgently to provide legal certainty for coast guard institutions.

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