First General Assembly

Ensuring secure shipping lanes and safe navigation

Research Report

Leiden Model United Nations 2024

"Out of this world"

Forum: First General Assembly

Issue: Ensuring secure shipping lanes and safe navigation

Student Officer: Yasmine Benradi

Position: Deputy Chair

Introduction

The General Assembly 1 at a Model United Nations (MUN) conference, primarily focuses on issues related to disarmament, international security, and the regulation of armaments. This includes addressing threats to global peace, such as the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, as well as other security challenges. GA1 plays a crucial role in promoting international cooperation to maintain peace and security, although it does not have the authority to impose sanctions or enforce actions. Ensuring secure shipping lanes and safe navigation is a significant issue for the General Assembly 1 because it directly relates to international security and stability. Vital sea routes are used not only for trade but also for military operations, humanitarian aid, and energy supplies. Any disruption can have far-reaching consequences for international peace and security.

The issue involves a large number of countries, including those with large shipping industries, those with strategic maritime locations and those involved in regional conflicts. Major maritime powers: Countries such as the United States, China, the Russian Federation and European Union countries (e.g., Germany, the Netherlands), all of which have strong naval forces and strong economic interests in safe shipping lanes.[1]

Countries near major sea routes are also significant such as the Strait of Hormuz (Iran, Oman), Bab-el-Mandeb (Yemen, Djibouti, Eritrea) and the Strait of Malacca (Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia). Countries near hotspots of piracy, particularly around the Horn of Africa (Somalia) and the Gulf of Guinea (e.g., Nigeria, Ghana).

Over time there have been some important moments in the history concerning this problem, a few examples in the timeline of key events below:
1982 - United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS): This historic treaty defines the rights and responsibilities of nations regarding maritime activities, including territorial waters, economic zones and international shipping lanes.[2]

2000-2012 - Rise of Somali Piracy: This period saw a significant increase in attacks by pirates in the Horn of Africa, particularly in the Gulf of Aden. This led to an international military response, including the EU NAVFOR operation Atalanta, to protect shipping lanes.[3]

2010-present - South China Sea dispute: An ongoing territorial dispute between China and several Southeast Asian countries (Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei) over claims in the South China Sea, one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.[4]

---

[1] https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/maritime-power#:~:text=Up%20to%20now%20(May%202023,the%20support%20that%20such%20an
[2] https://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/legal/pages/unitednationsconventiononthelawofthesea.aspx#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20Convention%20on,the%20oceans%20and%20their%20resources.
[3] https://eunavfor.eu/mission
[4] https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea

2018-2019 - Attacks on tankers in the Strait of Hormuz: A series of attacks on oil tankers escalated tensions between the U.S. and Iran, threatening global energy security.[5]

2020 - Piracy crisis in the Gulf of Guinea: The Gulf of Guinea became a global hotspot for piracy, with an increase in kidnappings and attacks on ships, setting off alarm bells about the safety of shipping lanes in West Africa.[6]

Definition of Key Terms

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS):
An international treaty that sets out the legal framework for maritime activities, including navigation, resource rights, and territorial waters.

Freedom of Navigation:
The principle that ships from any country can freely pass through international waters without interference, especially critical in strategic shipping routes.

Chokepoints:
Narrow sea passages where maritime traffic is concentrated, such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Panama Canal, which are critical for global trade.

Piracy:
Criminal acts committed at sea, including hijacking, kidnapping, and armed robbery, particularly affecting regions like the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Guinea.

South China Sea Dispute:
An ongoing territorial conflict involving China and several Southeast Asian nations over control of islands and maritime boundaries in one of the world's busiest shipping areas.

International Maritime Organization (IMO):
A specialized agency of the UN responsible for regulating shipping and ensuring maritime safety and security, including counter-piracy efforts.

Naval Coalition Forces:
International naval alliances, such as the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and EU NAVFOR, that conduct operations to ensure the security of key maritime routes.

Tanker War:
Refers to the attacks on oil tankers during conflicts (notably the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s), as well as recent incidents in the Strait of Hormuz that impact global oil supplies.

Gulf of Aden:
A body of water between Yemen and Somalia that connects the Arabian Sea to the Red Sea via the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, historically a piracy hotspot.

Strait of Malacca:
One of the world's most important shipping lanes, located between Malaysia and Indonesia, it connects the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean through the South China Sea.

---

[5] https://www.reuters.com/graphics/MIDEAST-ATTACKS-HORMUZ/0100B0B50N3/
[6] https://www.icc-ccs.org/icc_test/index.php/1305-latest-gulf-of-guinea-piracy-attack-alarming-warns-imb#:~:text=IMB%20data%20shows%20that%20the,in%202019%20from%2017%20incidents.

General Overview

The importance of safe shipping lanes

Safe shipping lanes are the lifelines of global trade and security and play a crucial role in the seamless movement of goods, energy supplies and resources across continents. About 90% of world trade is transported by sea,[7] making these sea routes indispensable to the global economy. Disruptions in these routes can lead to serious economic consequences, affecting everything from food supply chains to industrial production. Shipping routes are the arteries of international trade, connecting producers and consumers worldwide. They ease the movement of a wide range of goods and keep markets supplied and industries functioning. Any disruption in these routes can lead to significant delays and increased costs, affecting the global supply chain. Major shipping lanes are critical to the transportation of oil and gas. Key choke points such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal are vital to energy supplies[8]. The Strait of Hormuz alone carries about 20% of the world's oil. Any disruption in these regions could lead to skyrocketing oil prices and global instability. The South China Sea, another critical route, carries more than 30% of the world's shipping, underscoring its importance for energy and trade.[9]

The importance of military and strategy means that shipping routes are not only commercial lifelines, but also strategic benefits. They are essential for the movement of military resources and humanitarian aid. Regions such as the South China Sea are of both commercial and military importance, making their security crucial to national and international stability. The presence of military forces in these areas ensures the safe passage of ships and deters potential threats.

Threats and challenges to shipping lanes

The Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa are two of the most notorious regions for piracy. Although Somali piracy has declined somewhat, it remains a concern. Recently, the Gulf of Guinea has surpassed the number of incidents. The number of reported incidents in the Gulf of Guinea rose in the first nine months of 2023, from 14 during the same period in 2022 to 21.[10] These regions are troubled by weak governance and economic instability, making it difficult to counter piracy effectively.[11] Piracy attacks lead to higher insurance costs for shipping, detour of ships, and higher prices for goods. The economic impact is significant as shipping companies have to invest in additional security measures and pay higher premiums.[12] There has been an international response. Multinational naval forces, such as EU NAVFOR and Combined Maritime Forces, have been deployed to protect ships in piracy-prone areas. These efforts have had some success in reducing piracy incidents, but the threat remains persistent because of underlying socio-economic problems.[13] Climate change can also be a threat to secure lane shipping. Evidently because of danger on water, rising sea levels, changing weather patterns and increased frequency of severe storms make shipping more dangerous. Coastal infrastructure, such as ports, are becoming increasingly vulnerable to natural disasters.

---

[7] https://www.marineinsight.com/know-more/busiest-shipping-lanes-in-the-world/
[8] https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-economic-consequences-attacks-red-sea-shipping-lanes
[9] https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/360deg-view-policies-needed-secure-shipping-chokepoints
[10] https://iccwbo.org/news-publications/news/rise-in-maritime-incidents-and-piracy-reveals-latest-imb-report/#:~:text=Reported%20incidents%20increased%20in%20the,kidnapped%20and%20two%20were%20injured.
[11] https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-economic-consequences-attacks-red-sea-shipping-lanes
[12] https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240119-red-sea-crisis-how-global-shipping-is-being-rerouted-out-of-danger
[13] https://www.bcg.com/publications/2024/these-four-chokepoints-are-threatening-global-trade

Key stakeholders and their position

The United States has been actively involved in conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge excessive maritime claims, especially in the South China Sea. The South China Sea is a vital shipping route where a significant portion of global trade transits, making freedom of navigation essential for international commerce. The region is highly disputed, with China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei all claiming parts of it, particularly over islands like the Spratly and Paracel Islands. China has constructed and militarized artificial islands, raising concerns about freedom of navigation. This region is crucial to world trade: more than 30% of shipping traffic passes through it.[14] Since 2015, the United States navy has carried out regular FONOPs to affirm that international waters should remain open to all nations and that China's extensive territorial claims—such as enclosing large swaths of the sea with straight baselines around islands—are not recognized under international law (the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, UNCLOS).[15]

The European Union has also been proactive in ensuring maritime security, although its focus has extended beyond the South China Sea. In particular, the EU has taken a leadership role in anti-piracy operations and the protection of critical maritime chokepoints, such as the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, through its Operation Atalanta. This mission, launched in 2008 under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), was primarily aimed at countering piracy off the coast of Somalia, which posed a significant threat to international shipping lanes. The EU's approach focuses on a combination of naval patrols, international cooperation, and capacity-building for regional partners. Through these efforts, piracy in key areas like the Horn of Africa has significantly decreased. The EU also works closely with organizations like the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and local governments to enhance maritime governance and ensure that trade routes remain secure. Additionally, the EU has a growing interest in the Indo-Pacific region, where it has begun to coordinate with countries like Japan and India, aligning its maritime security strategies to maintain freedom of navigation.[16]

In summary, both the U.S. and the EU have been central players in safeguarding international shipping lanes, although in different regions and through varying strategies. While the U.S. focuses more on countering China's territorial claims in Asia, the EU has historically concentrated on combating piracy and enhancing maritime governance in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. Both, however, share a commitment to keeping vital sea lanes open and ensuring the free flow of global commerce.

Challenges in addressing the issue.

Maritime laws, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), provide clear rules for navigation and territorial waters. However, enforcement remains a major challenge. For example, piracy often takes place in international waters where no country has jurisdiction, complicating law enforcement. In regions such as the South China Sea, competing claims of sovereignty complicate enforcement of international law. Coastal states can assert excessive maritime claims and infringe on the right of other nations to sail freely. Developing countries, especially those near piracy hotspots, often lack the maritime resources and infrastructure needed to effectively patrol their waters. While international aid is crucial, it is often insufficient in the face of growing security threats.[17] The maritime industry is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and marine pollution. Addressing the environmental impacts of shipping while ensuring safety adds to the complexity of the problem.[18]

---

[14] https://www.z2data.com/insights/big-challenges-global-supply-chains-are-facing-in-2024
[15] https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf
[16] https://eunavfor.eu/mission
[17] https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/applying-law-sea-protect-international-shipping
[18] https://allmilitaryoperations.com/protecting-shipping-lanes/

International Cooperation and Solutions Being Discussed

In the Gulf of Guinea, regional countries, with the support of international partners, have implemented the Yaoundé Code of Conduct.[19] This initiative aims to enhance cooperation on maritime security and combat piracy, which has been a significant threat in the region. Similarly, in the South China Sea, ASEAN and China have been negotiating a Code of Conduct to manage disputes and prevent conflicts. Although progress has been slow, these efforts are crucial for maintaining peace and security in this strategically important area.

Technological advances play a crucial role in ensuring maritime security. Surveillance and monitoring capabilities have improved significantly using satellite technology, automated aerial vehicles (UAVs) and naval drones. These technologies make it possible to monitor vast maritime areas, prevent piracy, detect illegal activities, and provide early warning of environmental hazards. As global shipping becomes increasingly dependent on digital infrastructure, cybersecurity has become a major concern. Ensuring secure communications and navigation systems is essential to prevent cyber-attacks on shipping lanes, which can have devastating consequences for global trade and security.

Conclusion

In summary, ensuring secure shipping lanes and safe navigation is critical to maintaining global trade, energy security, and international stability. With about 90% of global trade relying on maritime routes, any disruption can lead to severe economic and geopolitical consequences. The importance of major sea lanes, such as the Strait of Hormuz, the South China Sea, and the Gulf of Aden, extends beyond commerce; they are strategic zones for military operations and humanitarian aid. The key stakeholders, including the United States, European Union, and countries near vital chokepoints, have taken various actions to address these challenges, ranging from naval operations like FONOPs to anti-piracy missions.

However, threats such as piracy, geopolitical tensions (especially in the South China Sea), and environmental issues like climate change complicate the security landscape. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated international efforts, stronger enforcement of maritime law, and technological advancements, such as enhanced surveillance and cybersecurity measures.

In terms of solutions, fostering international cooperation, strengthening technological capabilities and increasing resource sharing among nations are essential steps in securing global shipping lanes.

[19] https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Security/Pages/West-and-Central-Africa.aspx#:~:text=Yaoundé%20Code%20of%20Conduct&text=The%20Code's%20primary%20objective%20is,and%20unregulated%20(IUU)%20fishing.

Bibliography

Adams, Michelle. 6 February 2024. "Big Challenges Global Supply Chains Are Facing in 2024". *Z2data.* https://www.z2data.com/insights/big-challenges-global-supply-chains-are-facing-in-2024

Ahmed, Zahra. 8 February 2024. "11 Busiest Shipping Lanes In The World". *Marine Insight.* https://www.marineinsight.com/know-more/busiest-shipping-lanes-in-the-world/

Alan Reinsch, William. Denamiel, Thibault. Schleich, Matthew. Todman, Will. 22 January 2024. "The Global Economic Consequences of the Attacks on Red Sea Shipping Lanes". *CSIS.* https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-economic-consequences-attacks-red-sea-shipping-lanes

Baraniuk, Chris. 21 January 2024. "Red Sea crisis: What it takes to reroute the world's biggest cargo ships". *BBC.* https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240119-red-sea-crisis-how-global-shipping-is-being-rerouted-out-of-danger

BCG. 12 February 2024. "These Four Chokepoints Are Threatening Global Trade". *BCG.* https://www.bcg.com/publications/2024/these-four-chokepoints-are-threatening-global-trade

Can, Yusuf. Kennedy, Mark. Macaron, Joe. 13 February 2024. "360° View of Policies Needed to Secure Shipping Chokepoints". *Wilson Center.* https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/360deg-view-policies-needed-secure-shipping-chokepoints

Council on Foreign Relations. (n.d.). "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea." *Council on Foreign Relations,* https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea.

Dominguez, A. (2024, februari 28). "Applying the Law of the Sea to Protect International Shipping." *United Nations.* https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/applying-lawseaprotect-international-shipping

Editorial. (2024, april 13). "Safeguarding Global Trade: Strategies for Protecting Shipping Lanes." *All Military Operations.* https://allmilitaryoperations.com/protecting-shipping-lanes/

EU Naval Force. (2024). "Mission."*EU Naval Force*. https://eunavfor.eu/mission

European Union Naval Force. (n.d.). "Mission." *European Union Naval Force,* https://eunavfor.eu/mission.

Granados, Samuel. 9 July 2019. "Strait of Hormuz: The World's Most Important Oil Artery." *Reuters*, https://www.reuters.com/graphics/MIDEAST-ATTACKS-HORMUZ/0100B0B50N3/.

International Chamber of Commerce. (n.d.). “Latest Gulf of Guinea piracy attack alarming, warns IMB”. *ICC-CCS.* https://www.icc-ccs.org/icc_test/index.php/1305-latest-gulf-of-guinea-piracy-attack-alarming-warns-imb

International Martime Organisation. (n.d.). “Maritime security in West and Central Africa.”
International Martime Organisation
https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Security/Pages/West-and-CentralAfrica.aspx#:~:text=Yaound%C3%A9%20Code%20of%20Conduct&text=The%20Code's%20primary%20objective%20is,and%20unregulated%20(IUU)%20fishing

International Maritime Organization. (n.d.). “United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.” *International Maritime Organization*, www.imo.org/en/ourwork/legal/pages/unitednationsconventiononthelawofthesea.aspx.

Maritime power. (n.d.). *ScienceDirect*. https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/maritime-power

United Nations. (1982). *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.*https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf