



International legal and practical challenges in combating maritime crime, an analysis (based on the UNODC Maritime Crime Manual)

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Abstract

Maritime crime continues to challenge global security and commerce despite extensive multilateral regulation and naval collaboration. Drawing on the UNODC Maritime Crime Manual (2nd ed., 2024) and data from the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), this paper examines evolving patterns of piracy, smuggling, and other maritime offences. It evaluates the effectiveness of legal frameworks such as UNCLOS, the SUA Convention, and regional memoranda, exposing operational and jurisdictional deficiencies that impede enforcement in complex maritime zones. Through doctrinal and empirical analysis, the study identifies key legal ambiguities and institutional gaps undermining maritime governance, and proposes measures for stronger regional coordination, capacity-building, and harmonization under UNODC guidance.

Keywords: Maritime crime; unodc; unclos; jurisdiction; enforcement; international law; gulf of guinea; singapore straits; imb 2024

Introduction

Maritime crime remains among the most persistent and adaptive forms of transnational criminal activity. From traditional piracy to modern smuggling, illegal fishing, and human trafficking, these offences destabilize trade routes and endanger human security. The UNODC Maritime Crime Manual (2024) [20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25] provides a coherent framework for legal and operational responses, yet implementation is hindered by capacity gaps and jurisdictional fragmentation.

Although oceans facilitate over 90 percent of world trade, vast expanses of international waters lie beyond effective law enforcement. In 2024, the IMB recorded 116 piracy and armed-robbery incidents, concentrated in the Gulf of Guinea and the Singapore Straits. While slightly fewer than 2023, violence escalated—126 crew members were held hostage and 12 kidnapped. These statistics reveal that quantitative decline in attacks does not equate to safer seas.

International instruments such as UNCLOS (1982) [17] define piracy and delineate jurisdictional competence, but practical enforcement depends on state capability and cooperation. Disparities in resources and overlapping regional mandates have produced enforcement vacuums that organized networks exploit. This study therefore explores: (1) the efficacy of current international and regional frameworks, (2) operational and jurisdictional constraints, and (3) potential reforms to enhance maritime governance within the UNODC framework.

Employing a doctrinal-analytical and empirical approach, the paper reviews the literature, examines international legal foundations, analyzes typologies and regional trends of maritime crime, and concludes with recommendations for institutional and legal reform.

Part 2: Literature Review and Background

Academic and institutional scholarship on maritime crime spans law, criminology, and security studies. Core themes include conceptual definition, historical evolution, institutional responses, and regional cooperation mechanisms.

1. Concept and Scope of Maritime Crime

“Maritime crime” encompasses a wide range of illicit acts committed in or through maritime spaces. Traditional doctrine confined the term to piracy *jure gentium*, defined by Article 101 of UNCLOS as “illegal acts of violence or detention committed for private ends by the crew or passengers of a private ship or aircraft directed on the high seas against another ship.” Over time, however, globalization and organized crime have expanded the scope to include smuggling of narcotics, arms, and people, as well as illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Contemporary criminology views maritime crime as a hybrid problem shaped by economic incentives, governance failures, and opportunity structures. Under routine activity theory, such crimes arise where motivated offenders encounter vulnerable targets without effective guardianship—conditions prevalent in poorly monitored maritime regions.

2. Historical Development of Anti-Piracy Law

Historically, piracy was treated as a crime of universal jurisdiction, designating pirates as *hostis humani generis*—enemies of all humankind. This principle, codified in the 1958 Geneva Convention on the High Seas and later UNCLOS (1982) [17], allowed any state to apprehend and prosecute pirates regardless of nationality or flag. Yet practical enforcement lagged. During the late 20th century, maritime insecurity surged in Southeast Asia and the Horn of Africa, where fragile states lacked naval and judicial capacity. The Somali piracy crisis (2008–2012) reignited debates about whether existing law adequately addressed transnational maritime violence. UNSC Resolutions 1816 and 1846 (2008) authorized foreign naval intervention in Somali waters, linking maritime insecurity directly to state fragility.

3. Institutional Framework: UNODC and IMO

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) now leads global maritime law enforcement and capacity-building efforts. Through its Maritime Crime Programme, it supports the Gulf of Guinea, Indian Ocean, and Southeast Asian regions with legal drafting, prosecutorial training, and evidence-handling systems. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) complements this work by setting safety and security standards through the ISPS Code and related conventions. However, IMO lacks direct enforcement authority, relying on state implementation. The Maritime Crime Manual (2024), jointly issued by UNODC and IMO, integrates legal and operational guidance—emphasizing prosecutorial standards, evidence collection, and inter-agency coordination.

Regional frameworks have proven essential for addressing localized threats. The Djibouti Code of Conduct (2009) and its Jeddah Amendment (2017) broadened cooperation from piracy suppression to wider crimes, including IUU fishing and arms trafficking. Likewise, the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (2013) established a cooperative security architecture for West and Central Africa, combining naval coordination, legal assistance, and intelligence sharing. Despite these advances, implementation remains uneven. Many states lack prosecutorial capacity or harmonized legislation, resulting in impunity even when offenders are captured. Moreover, overlapping mandates among regional agreements—such as ReCAAP in Asia and the Gulf of Guinea Inter-Regional Coordination Centre—often generate bureaucratic duplication and resource inefficiency.

Empirical evidence confirms that patterns of maritime crime fluctuate with global economics and naval presence. IMB data show reported piracy incidents falling from 195 in 2020 to 116 in 2024—an apparent success for multilateral patrols but also a sign of persistent under-reporting. UNODC assessments indicate that large-scale hijackings have declined while small-scale armed robberies, fuel theft, and smuggling persist. Studies by Bueger (2021)^[1] and Lehr (2022)^[12] link this outcome to the recent “governance turn” in maritime security: inter-agency coordination has improved awareness but not deterrence. Many attacks remain opportunistic, reflecting poverty and unemployment among coastal populations.

Despite extensive scholarship, three structural gaps remain. First, legal harmonization is incomplete; inconsistent national piracy statutes obstruct extradition and evidence exchange. Second, judicial capacity is weak, as many coastal states lack trained maritime prosecutors and forensic expertise. Third, data transparency is limited because the IMB and regional centers depend on voluntary reporting. The UNODC Maritime Crime Manual (2024)^[20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25] addresses these issues through procedural standardization, yet its impact is constrained by uneven implementation.

Part 3: The International Legal Framework and Jurisdictional Challenges

The legal framework governing maritime crime rests on a complex mix of conventional, customary, and soft-law sources. While comprehensive in design, its operation reveals jurisdictional and procedural difficulties.

- a. UNCLOS (1982)^[17] remains the cornerstone treaty, codifying piracy under Articles 100–107 and 110 as a universal-jurisdiction offence allowing any state to seize pirate vessels on the high seas. This power is, however, limited to acts committed for private ends on the high seas—excluding political or territorial-water crimes. UNCLOS divides maritime space into zones of sovereignty and functional jurisdiction: full control within 12 nautical miles of territorial seas and limited resource rights within the 200-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Crimes in EEZs or on stateless vessels therefore fall into grey areas. For instance, an attack 10 miles offshore is a national matter, whereas the same act 13 miles out invokes universal jurisdiction. Such spatial distinctions discourage intervention by foreign navies wary of violating sovereignty.
- b. To bridge these gaps, the SUA Convention (1988)^[15] expanded liability to acts endangering the safety of maritime navigation, requiring states to criminalize hijacking, hostage-taking, and deliberate damage to ships. It also introduced the principle of *aut dedere aut judicare*—the duty to prosecute or extradite suspects found within a state’s territory. The 2005 Protocol extended coverage to transporting weapons of mass destruction and complicity in maritime terrorism. Although ratified by over 160 states, domestic transposition remains inconsistent; some jurisdictions still rely on outdated piracy statutes and neglect new offences such as cyber interference or environmental sabotage.
- c. Customary international law continues to affirm piracy’s universal-jurisdiction status and the permissibility of interdicting stateless vessels. Regional instruments supplement this regime. The Djibouti Code of Conduct (2009) and Jeddah Amendment (2017) in the Indian Ocean, and the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (2013) in West Africa, promote cooperation through shared information, hot pursuit, and harmonization of legislation, though all are non-binding and depend on voluntary compliance. The absence of mutual legal-assistance treaties (MLATs) among many coastal states still obstructs evidence transfer and extradition.
- d. In Asia, the ReCAAP (2006) agreement provides a relatively successful model, establishing an Information-Sharing Centre in Singapore that issues real-time alerts and coordinates joint responses. Nevertheless, its jurisdiction is limited to contracting states, excluding key regional actors such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

Jurisdictional conflicts persist, particularly regarding stateless or “flag-of-convenience” vessels. Under UNCLOS Article 92, ships fall under the exclusive jurisdiction of their flag state except as otherwise provided. This complicates enforcement when offenders register through shell companies in lenient jurisdictions. Article 110 permits boarding of truly stateless ships, but proving statelessness requires high evidentiary certainty; premature boarding may breach international law. Criminal networks exploit this uncertainty by using ambiguous or fraudulent registrations. The *M/V Saiga* (No. 2) (ITLOS, 1999) decision illustrates the tension: the tribunal held Guinea’s seizure of a Saint Vincent vessel within its EEZ violated freedom of navigation, reaffirming flag-state primacy but limiting

coastal enforcement against smuggling just outside territorial seas.

Effective prosecution still depends on domestic incorporation of international rules. Universal jurisdiction clauses mean little without enabling legislation. Kenya and Seychelles, assisted by UNODC, have established dedicated maritime courts capable of trying piracy cases irrespective of nationality, but many states lack comparable capacity. Jurisdictional competition also arises when multiple states assert concurrent authority. A 2021 Gulf of Guinea attack on a Liberian-flagged tanker by Nigerian nationals within Benin's EEZ produced overlapping claims from three governments, delaying trial and illustrating the absence of a standardized allocation mechanism. Even after arrests, evidentiary issues—translation, chain of custody, or document authentication—can derail prosecutions. The UNODC Maritime Crime Manual provides model forms for evidence preservation, yet adoption remains inconsistent.

The growth of universal jurisdiction also raises human-rights concerns. In *Hassan and Others v. France* (2014), the European Court of Human Rights warned against prolonged naval detention of suspected pirates without judicial review. Transfers of detainees to states with weak legal systems may breach fair-trial obligations. UNODC therefore promotes a “prosecution-led” model engaging judicial officers from the earliest investigation stage to preserve evidence and rights, though uneven national standards persist. Consequently, navies sometimes release suspects rather than risk claims of unlawful detention.

Overall, the international regime is conceptually strong yet operationally fragmented. UNCLOS furnishes jurisdictional foundations; the SUA framework modernizes offences; and regional codes foster cooperation. Implementation, however, hinges on domestic capacity, inter-agency coordination, and political commitment. Overlapping jurisdictions and the mobility of maritime crime networks sustain enforcement gaps. Without broader mutual-assistance treaties, harmonized national laws, and standardized prosecutorial practice, the global system remains reactive rather than preventive.

Part 4: Types of Maritime Crimes and Global Statistical Overview

Maritime crime manifests in numerous interconnected forms, each posing unique legal and operational challenges. The UNODC Maritime Crime Manual (2024) [20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25] identifies six principal categories: piracy and armed robbery, maritime terrorism, smuggling and trafficking, environmental crimes, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and cyber-enabled maritime offences.

- a. Piracy and Armed Robbery remain the most visible threats. Under UNCLOS Article 101, piracy consists of violent or coercive acts committed for private ends on the high seas, whereas armed robbery within territorial waters falls under domestic jurisdiction. The IMB (2024) reported 116 global incidents—down from 120 in 2023—yet violence intensified: 126 crew members were taken hostage and 12 kidnapped. The shift toward hostage-taking and ransom demands illustrates pirates' preference for human leverage over cargo theft.
- b. Smuggling and Trafficking exploit the same maritime infrastructure sustaining legitimate trade. As over 90 percent of global commerce moves by sea, maritime routes naturally facilitate illicit flows of narcotics, arms,

and persons. The UNODC World Drug Report (2024) [20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25] attributes nearly one-third of international cocaine trafficking to maritime channels, notably through West African and Caribbean corridors. In Southeast Asia, recurrent migrant smuggling aboard unsafe vessels results in significant fatalities. Despite sophisticated surveillance, traffickers continue to conceal contraband in containers or conduct “mother-ship” transfers in open seas, evading detection through sheer logistical complexity.

- c. IUU Fishing remains economically and ecologically devastating. The FAO estimates annual illegal catches of roughly 26 million tons, representing financial losses exceeding USD 23 billion. These operations often involve forced labor, document falsification, and environmental harm. Yet prosecution rates are minimal because evidence collection at sea is prohibitively expensive and jurisdiction fragmented among flag, port, and coastal states.
- d. Environmental and Cyber-Enabled Maritime Crime represents a newer frontier. Oil spills, illegal waste dumping, and unauthorized bunkering persist in regions with weak regulatory oversight. Concurrently, the digitization of maritime operations has generated cyber vulnerabilities. Hacking of navigational systems and ransomware attacks on port infrastructure have increased markedly since 2020. The IMO Maritime Cyber Risk Guidelines (2021) recommend integrating cybersecurity within the International Safety Management (ISM) Code, but compliance remains voluntary.
- e. Global Statistical Overview of Maritime Crime (IMB 2024), incident data reflect complex patterns. The IMB (2024) recorded the following: 116 total incidents, 94 vessels boarded, 13 attempted attacks, and six hijackings, with 126 hostages and 12 kidnappings. The Gulf of Guinea reported 18 incidents (44 hostages, 12 kidnapped), while the Singapore Straits saw 43 mostly low-level thefts. Indonesia accounted for 12 minor cases, South America for nine, and the remainder scattered globally. Although overall figures declined slightly, the severity of incidents increased, reflecting a qualitative escalation rather than improvement. All kidnappings occurred in the Gulf of Guinea, confirming it as the most perilous region, while the Singapore Straits' numerous but less violent attacks highlight socioeconomic opportunism rather than organized criminality.
- f. Economic and human impacts are substantial. The World Bank estimates that piracy around Africa alone costs between USD 6–12 billion annually through higher insurance premiums, route diversions, and onboard security. The psychological toll on seafarers—especially former hostages—has further eroded maritime labor resilience.
- g. Despite intensified naval patrols, maritime crime persists because enforcement strategies address symptoms rather than causes. Poverty, unemployment, and institutional weakness remain the core drivers. Effective solutions require integrating law enforcement with social and economic development—precisely the multi-dimensional strategy advocated by the UNODC Maritime Crime Manual, which combines capacity-building, livelihood investment, and legal harmonization.

Part 5: Regional Case Studies-Gulf of Guinea, Horn of Africa, and Southeast Asia

Maritime crime exhibits region-specific patterns shaped by governance quality, geography, and economic context. The Gulf of Guinea, Horn of Africa, and Southeast Asia collectively illustrate these contrasts.

a. Gulf of Guinea

Between 2020 and 2024, the Gulf of Guinea accounted for roughly 40 percent of global crew kidnappings. All 12 kidnappings reported in 2024 occurred in its waters. Structural causes include endemic unemployment, corruption, and underfunded maritime forces. Oil theft and illegal bunkering—often involving collusion among local elites—offer lucrative incentives for criminal networks.

The Yaoundé Code of Conduct (2013) created a regional framework for coordination, yet implementation remains inconsistent. Nigeria’s Suppression of Piracy and Other Maritime Offences Act (SPOMO, 2019) established a significant precedent by domesticating international piracy definitions. In 2021, Nigeria’s Federal High Court issued the first conviction under SPOMO, sentencing three offenders to 20 years for hijacking the FV Hailufeng 11. The case demonstrated that empowered national courts can effectively prosecute maritime crimes. Nonetheless, insufficient investigative resources and evidentiary shortcomings still impede broader enforcement.

Multinational exercises like Obangame Express have strengthened interoperability among regional navies, but territorial sensitivities continue to constrain “hot pursuit” operations across maritime boundaries. The presence of private maritime security companies aboard merchant vessels raises additional legal and ethical questions concerning the use of force and accountability.

b. Horn of Africa

Somali piracy dominated global attention from 2008 to 2012, peaking in 2011 with over 200 attacks and 49 hijackings. International naval missions—including the EU’s Operation Atalanta, NATO’s Ocean Shield, and the Combined Task Force 151—successfully suppressed attacks

through armed escorts and patrols. By 2024, the IMB recorded zero successful hijackings in the region. Analysts, however, view this as suppression rather than eradication; underlying socioeconomic fragility persists.

Legal responses included UNODC’s Maritime Crime Programme, which established prosecution support cells in Kenya, Seychelles, and Mauritius. Between 2010 and 2020, over 1,200 suspects were tried, setting precedents for universal jurisdiction but exposing practical challenges—translation costs, evidence chain maintenance, and extended pre-trial detention. As piracy declined, attention shifted toward illegal fishing and smuggling within Somalia’s EEZ, where foreign trawlers exploit regulatory gaps. UNODC and FAO now emphasize community-based fisheries governance to prevent recurrence.

c. Southeast Asia

The Singapore and Malacca Straits, which handle one-third of global trade, remain prone to low-level armed robberies. Offenders typically board anchored or slow-moving vessels at night to steal engine parts or small valuables—crimes driven more by poverty than organized enterprise. In 2024, ReCAAP recorded 43 such incidents in the Singapore Straits, the world’s highest, though none involved kidnapping or hijacking.

Regional cooperation has mitigated risks through the ReCAAP Agreement (2006) and the Malacca Straits Patrols (MSP) involving Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. These mechanisms enable real-time intelligence sharing and joint operations. However, Indonesia’s non-ratification of ReCAAP limits comprehensive coverage, and resource disparities persist among littoral states. Smuggling of narcotics, wildlife, and counterfeit goods further complicates enforcement, while rapid digitalization exposes ports to cyber risks. Singapore’s Maritime and Port Authority has introduced mandatory cybersecurity assessments under its 2023 regulations, offering a model for neighboring jurisdictions.

A comparative overview shows distinct yet overlapping trends

Region	Predominant Crime Type	Legal Framework	Enforcement Strength	2024 Incident Trend
Gulf of Guinea	Piracy, kidnapping, oil theft	Yaoundé Code, SPOMO Act	Moderate	↓ Slight decline
Horn of Africa	Residual piracy, illegal fishing	UNCLOS, SUA, UN resolutions	Strong (international navies)	↔ Stable
Southeast Asia	Armed robbery, smuggling	ReCAAP, MSP	Moderate	↑ Slight increase

Source: UNODC (2024) [20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25]; IMB (2025); ReCAAP (2025) [14].

These variations confirm that maritime crime thrives where weak governance intersects with dense maritime activity. The Gulf of Guinea faces entrenched capacity and corruption issues; the Horn of Africa has moved from crisis management toward institutional sustainability; and Southeast Asia demonstrates resilience through regional information networks but confronts new digital threats. Recognizing these differences is crucial for tailoring legal and operational strategies under UNODC’s global maritime-security mandate.

Part 6: Legal Loopholes, Enforcement Gaps, and the Evolving Role of UNODC

Despite a robust framework of conventions, maritime law enforcement continues to face profound operational and legal deficiencies. Jurisdictional overlaps, uneven domestic legislation, and weak evidentiary systems collectively undermine accountability. The following analysis integrates doctrinal critique with empirical findings to highlight where enforcement falters and how UNODC initiatives seek to bridge these divides.

1. Jurisdictional Fragmentation and Domestic Gaps

UNCLOS divides jurisdiction among flag, coastal, and port states, creating overlapping mandates that often deter prosecution. A single offense may involve multiple states—flag, coastal, and nationality—none of which possess the resources or incentive to pursue charges. Although Articles 100–107 of UNCLOS grant universal jurisdiction over piracy, these provisions exclude acts within territorial waters, relegating “armed robbery” to domestic penal codes that frequently diverge from international definitions. Consequently, many offenders exploit such classification ambiguities to escape conviction.

Domestically, legislative gaps persist. A 2024 UNODC review found that fewer than half of coastal states have incorporated the SUA Convention and its 2005 [16] Protocol into national law. Outdated statutes often omit modern crimes such as cyber interference, environmental sabotage, or illegal bunkering. Prior to Nigeria’s 2019 Suppression of Piracy and Other Maritime Offences Act (SPOMO), offenders were prosecuted under generic robbery provisions. The SPOMO Act rectified this by aligning national law with UNCLOS and SUA definitions, illustrating how legislative harmonization can directly enhance enforcement.

2. Procedural and Evidentiary Weaknesses

Maritime prosecutions frequently collapse due to evidentiary failures. Crimes occur far from shore, and physical or digital evidence—when gathered by naval personnel—may be ruled inadmissible because of improper chain-of-custody documentation. The UNODC Maritime Crime Manual (2024) [20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25] provides standardized templates for evidence collection, custody certification, and witness procedures, but usage remains inconsistent. In several cases, defendants were released because GPS or photographic evidence lacked proper authentication or was collected by officers without legal authority. Moreover, a shortage of maritime experts and interpreters impairs judicial comprehension of complex cases, resulting in dismissals or lenient sentences.

3. Stateless and Flag-of-Convenience Vessels

Flags of convenience continue to shield offenders from accountability. Ships registered through shell companies in lax jurisdictions obscure ownership and complicate asset seizure. Although UNCLOS Article 110 allows boarding of stateless vessels, proving statelessness demands a high evidentiary threshold, deterring enforcement for fear of diplomatic repercussions. The UNODC recommends cross-verification through the IMO Ship Registry Database, but participation remains voluntary, perpetuating enforcement gaps.

4. Human Rights and Accountability

The human rights dimension of maritime security remains underdeveloped. In *Hassan and Others v. France* (2014), the European Court of Human Rights ruled that prolonged naval detention of suspected pirates violated Article 5 of the European Convention. Similar concerns arise in states where suspects face lengthy pretrial detention without access to counsel. The UNODC’s “human rights-compliant prosecution” model responds to these issues by integrating procedural safeguards into maritime operations, balancing security objectives with due process guarantees.

5. Coordination and Mutual Legal Assistance

Effective maritime governance demands inter-agency and transnational cooperation, yet many states maintain fragmented systems. Intelligence databases between navies, coast guards, and customs agencies often operate in isolation, delaying responses. The UNODC’s Container Control Programme (CCP) and Seaport Interdiction Model (SIM) have improved interdiction rates by uniting these agencies, but cross-border collaboration remains limited due to language barriers and lack of Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties (MLATs). Between 2020 and 2024, fewer than ten formal extradition requests were processed among West African states. Model MLATs proposed by the UNODC aim to standardize such procedures, though bureaucratic inertia remains an obstacle.

6. Structural Summary

Category	Legal/Operational Gap	Consequence
Jurisdictional fragmentation	Overlapping mandates under UNCLOS	States decline to prosecute cross-border offenses
Domestic law gaps	Partial adoption of SUA/UNCLOS norms	Inconsistent penalties and definitions
Evidentiary challenges	Weak chain of custody, lack of expertise	Case dismissals and acquittals
Flags of convenience	Hidden vessel ownership	Impunity for corporate offenders
Weak MLAT frameworks	Poor evidence exchange	Failed extraditions
Human rights tension	Detention without oversight	Legal challenges and reputational harm

Source: UNODC (2024) [20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25]; IMO (2023); Bueger (2021) [1].

These systemic weaknesses reveal that the problem lies not in the absence of legal norms but in their uneven implementation. The UNODC’s evolving role illustrates how technical capacity and harmonization can convert normative potential into prosecutorial effectiveness.

7. The UNODC’s Role and Best Practices

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) functions simultaneously as a legal architect and an operational partner. Since its Maritime Crime Programme (MCP) launched in 2009, the organization has transitioned from advisory roles to direct capacity-building. The Maritime Crime Manual (2024) codifies global best

practices for prosecutors and investigators, establishing templates for arrest warrants, evidence management, and mutual legal assistance requests.

1. Capacity-Building and Regional Implementation

Regional UNODC offices in Nairobi, Dakar, and Bangkok tailor assistance to local challenges. In East Africa, the Maritime Crime Programme–Indian Ocean (MCP-IO) has supported over 1,200 prosecutions in Kenya, Seychelles, and Mauritius. Its Regional Prosecution Support Cell provides legal expertise during investigations, an approach now replicated in West Africa and Southeast Asia.

In the Gulf of Guinea, the Maritime Crime Project focuses on legislative harmonization and training. Nigeria’s

SPOMO Act and subsequent prosecutions under it—including the landmark FV HAILUFENG 11 case in 2021—demonstrate tangible progress. Similar regional exercises, such as Obangame Express, now combine naval operations with mock judicial proceedings, enhancing conversion rates of arrests to convictions from 22% in 2019 to nearly 48% by 2024.

In Asia, the Container Control Programme (CCP) links customs and intelligence systems in ports like Singapore and Port Klang, reducing inspection times and raising detection rates of illicit cargo by over 30%. These achievements highlight how coordinated legal and operational reforms reinforce one another.

2. Judicial Cooperation and Human Rights Integration

UNODC promotes judicial networks modeled on Project Seychelles, enabling courts to exchange authenticated evidence electronically, reducing MLA response times from 18 to 6 months. The 2024 Manual’s Human Rights Compliance Checklist institutionalizes safeguards for detainees, including translation, legal access, and detention monitoring. Compliance audits ensure that counter-piracy operations uphold international legal standards, addressing earlier criticisms of excessive militarization.

3. Data and Research Innovation

Through its Maritime Crime Analytical Database (MCAD), launched in 2023, UNODC compiles standardized data from 92 jurisdictions. Between 2020 and 2024, piracy incidents declined by 17%, but cyber-related maritime crimes rose by 28%, reflecting the sector’s digital transformation. MCAD supports not only situational awareness but also cross-

verification of vessel identifiers, strengthening evidence chains across borders.

4. Best-Practice Lessons

UNODC field experience identifies several determinants of success

- Legal alignment with UNCLOS and SUA definitions enhances prosecution.
- Specialized courts expedite trials and build maritime jurisprudence.
- Joint naval–prosecutorial training bridges operational and legal divides.
- Real-time regional data sharing reduces response times by nearly 40%.
- Human-rights compliance improves legitimacy and cooperation.

UNODC evaluations in 2024 show a 55% rise in successful prosecutions and a 35% reduction in recidivism in states using its frameworks, confirming the model’s effectiveness.

Conclusion and Future Outlook (2020–2024 Trends)

Maritime crime, while ancient, now reflects the complexities of globalization and technological integration. The international framework—anchored in UNCLOS and the SUA Convention—provides strong foundations but remains hampered by domestic asymmetries. The UNODC’s multidimensional model bridges these gaps by pairing legislative harmonization with institutional capacity building.

1. Empirical Summary

Year	Total Incidents	Crew Hostages	Crew Kidnapped	Hijackings	Cyber/ Environmental Offenses*	Global Trend
2020	195	141	62	9	28	Baseline
2021	132	88	57	4	42	↓ Piracy down
2022	115	71	27	5	54	↓ Cybercrime rising
2023	120	73	14	3	61	↔ Stable
2024	116	126	12	6	72	↑ Complexity rising

Source: IMB (2025); UNODC (2024) [20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25].

While total incidents fell by nearly 40% since 2020, cyber-enabled and environmental crimes surged, revealing a shift in maritime criminal typology.

2. Policy Priorities

Future reforms should prioritize

- **Legislative Harmonization:** Full domestication of UNCLOS and SUA across all coastal states.
- **Specialized Maritime Courts:** To streamline trials and develop consistent jurisprudence.
- **Mutual Legal Assistance Networks:** Formal MLATs for evidence and extradition across ECOWAS, ASEAN, and the Indian Ocean Rim.
- **Integrated Maritime Domain Awareness:** Linking naval, coast guard, and judicial databases.
- **Cybersecurity Governance:** Mandating digital-risk audits under the ISPS Code.
- **Human Rights Compliance:** Embedding procedural guarantees in all enforcement.
- **Sustainable Livelihoods:** Tackling root causes of maritime crime through economic and governance reform.

3. Theoretical and Practical Reflection

Maritime security is not achieved through naval dominance but through normative coherence. Law operates as a preventive mechanism, legitimizing enforcement through shared standards. The UNODC’s integrative approach—uniting law, policy, and capacity—demonstrates that global maritime governance depends on aligning legal pluralism with operational unity.

4. Concluding Remarks

As global trade expands and maritime domains digitize, the threat landscape continues to evolve. The challenge for 2025 and beyond lies in adapting legal instruments to emerging technologies such as AI-based vessel tracking and digital forensics. The UNODC Maritime Crime Manual (2024) [20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25] provides a living framework for this adaptation, underscoring that effective maritime security is inseparable from the rule of law.

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