

Editorial

From the Editor-in-Chief

Professor Chris Bellamy

28 February 2026



The views expressed in this Editorial are 'Comment' and are entirely the Editor-in-Chief's personal views based on developments up to the end of February 2026, when Israel and the US launched a war with Iran.

Welcome to the seventh issue of our journal, Volume 4 Issue 1. Since we published Volume 3 issue 2 more than a year ago, this issue has been further delayed because global events have been moving fast and tracking the latest developments has been akin to spray-painting a moving car. For that reason, we have gone to press on 28 February 2026, that is therefore the information cut-off date for this issue and this Editorial. We have also not been able to complete double-blind peer reviewing of any submitted articles but hope to do so for the next issue. We are extremely grateful to our referees for undertaking a demanding and responsible job and to our contributors. I would ask our readers to submit articles using the web-based system on the Journal website (<https://ijmcs.co.uk/>) which enables them to be anonymised and sent to expert referees. Shorter articles can also be submitted as 'comment' pieces which are clearly identified as such and are not subject to independent peer review.

This issue therefore comprises this Editorial and a definitive and comprehensive analysis of the shipping industry's responses to developing maritime crime and security threats since 2001 by our Managing Editor Peter Cook. Peter notes that the maritime industry has responded to the challenges posed by a resurgence in piracy and other forms of maritime crime with alacrity and ingenuity. This is followed by a book review, again by Peter, of *Outlaw Ocean: Crime & Survival in the Last Untamed Frontier* by Pulitzer Prize winning author Ian Urbina.

In passing, I might note that while I am based in London, headquarters of the UN's International Maritime Organization (IMO), in the northern and (just) western hemispheres, Peter is based in Melbourne, in the southern and eastern hemispheres. That gives us a global compass, which I am sure is only coincidence.

With the cut-off date of 28 February 2026, in this issue we are not speculating on the motives, progress or outcomes of what is undoubtedly a war between Israel and the US on the one hand and Iran and its various proxies on the other. I expect the next issue will feature much expert analysis of that conflict; however, it pans out. I urge our worldwide audience to contribute analysis of all those and we anticipate that our next issue will be largely devoted to the conflict, given its inevitable interrelated focus on maritime security, crime, the global economy and trade.

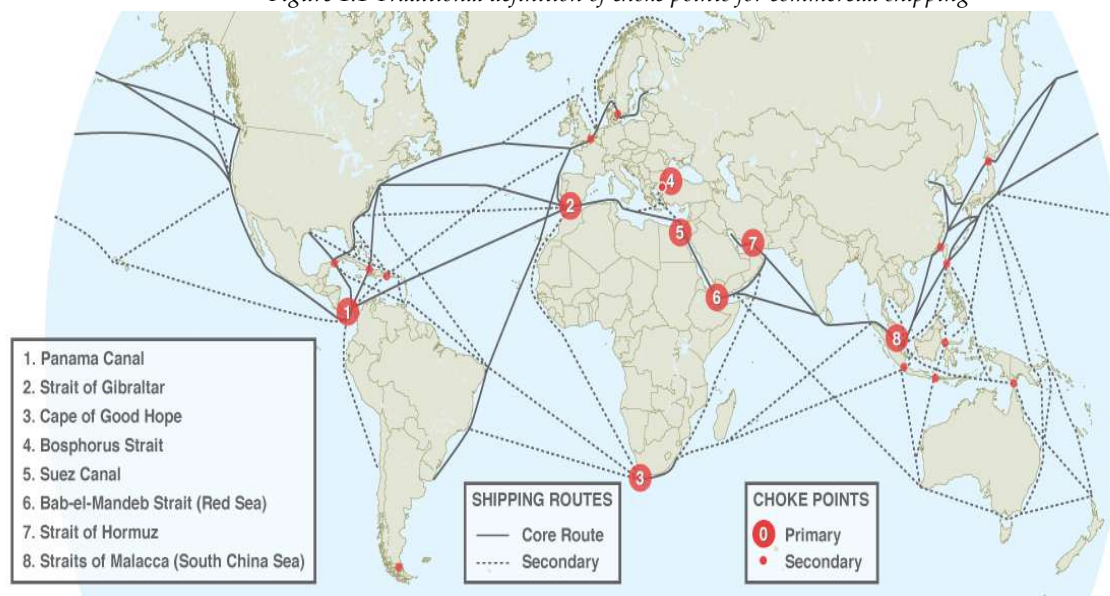
In this Editorial I shall analyse the main events relating to maritime crime and security over the past year and also relevant background to the US/Israel – Iran/proxies war which seems to have started as I finish writing this time.

WORLD WAR III CONTINUES AND EXPANDS: THE MAKING OF A GLOBAL CONFLICT?

The timeless tyranny of geography: the Persian Gulf and Bab-el-Mandeb

As noted in my previous editorial (Vol. 3 Issue 2 pp. 1-26), in my view World War III has started. Without speculating on future developments after 28 February 2026, the US/Israel – Iran/proxies war will inevitably pivot around one or possibly two of the key maritime chokepoints. These chokepoints are well known and the main ones for commercial shipping traffic appear in Figure 1.1. In Figure 1.2 I have added the Berring Strait, which is becoming critical with the opening of the Arctic Sea routes (as noted in the article Polar Opposites Vol. 3 Issue 2 pp. 74-109), the English Channel (French *la Manche*) and Greenland- Iceland - UK (GRIUK) gap. The English Channel is the shortest

Figure 1.1 Traditional definition of choke points for commercial shipping



route for Russian ships heading south from the Baltic or Murmansk towards the Mediterranean, but, given that at sea we drive on the right. In the narrowest part of the Channel, that necessitates passing through UK territorial waters. Coming the other way the converse is true. That should not be a problem

even for warships under international law, provided they have the right of ‘innocent passage.’ Given the current relations between Russia and the UK – and France, however, ‘innocent passage’ is dubious forcing Russian warships transit through the GRIUK gap. Submarines can only claim ‘innocent passage’ transiting on the surface, so Russian submarines in UK or other territorial waters (see below) that are sub-surface, will be, by definition, transiting illegally.¹

These choke points also are the origins of many key maritime terms. The Panama and Suez canals give their names to ‘Panamax’ and ‘Suezmax’ vessel sizes. Panamax maxima is a tonnage of 52,500 DWT, a length of 289.56 metres, a beam of 38.31 m and a draft of 12.04 m – the limits of the Panama Canal. Suezmax are limited to a tonnage of 200,000 tons, a length of 275 metres, a beam of about 50m and a draft of 12,94 m, the limits of the Suez Canal. Anything bigger than that is ‘Cape Size’ and has to go round the Cape of Good Hope (3), another choke point. I have not added the Strait of Magellan south of South America, but should there be some catastrophic closure of the Panama Canal² that could become another choke point.

Figure 1.2. Updated choke points as relevant to World War III



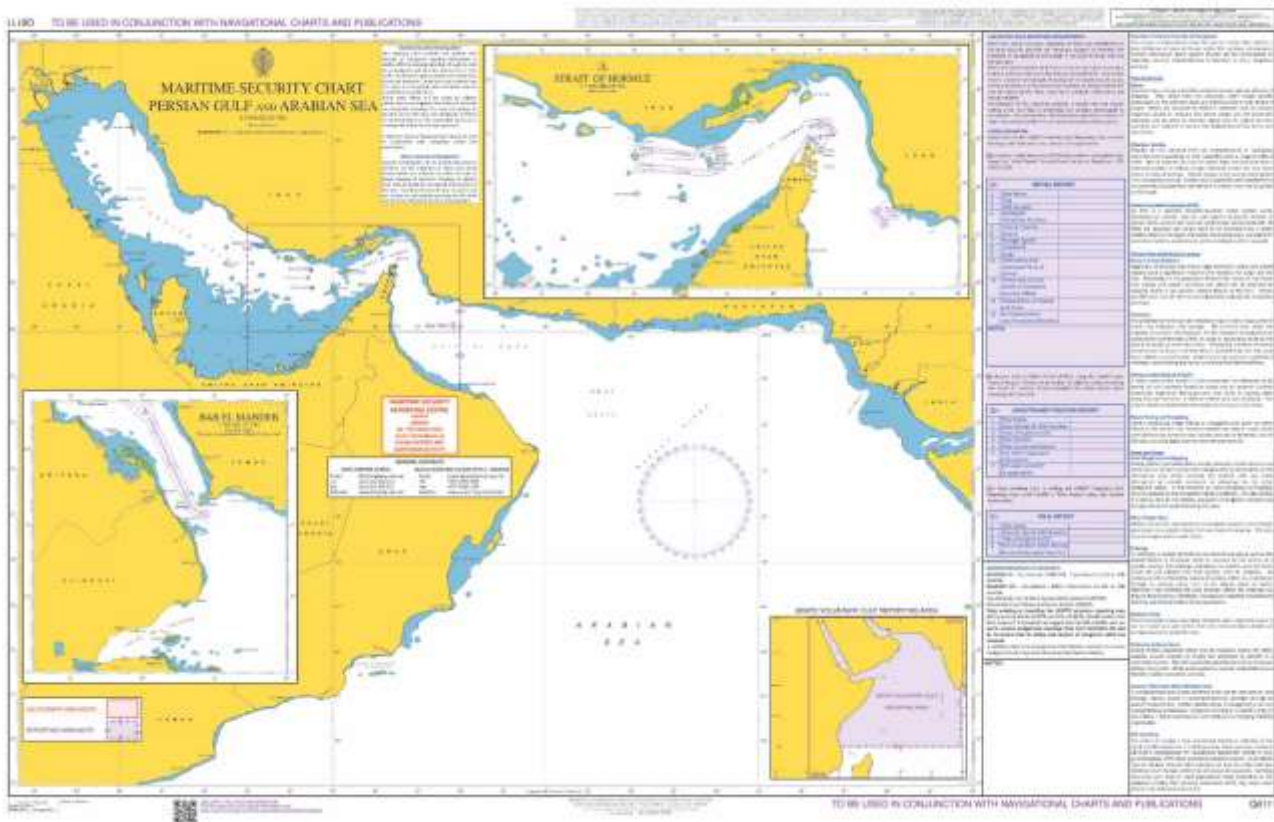
¹ Adam Leong Kok Wey, *From Gallipoli to the Strait of Malacca: Why maritime choke points still decide the fate of nations. How a crucial regional waterway may be affected in the event of conflict.* ;

Published 4 Jul 2025 <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/gallipoli-strait-malacca-why-maritime-choke-points-still-decide-fate-nations>

² The restrictions on vessel size transiting the Panama Canal have recently been reduced for a period because of drought in Central America resulting in lower water levels in the canal system (<https://unctad.org/publication/navigating-troubled-waters-impact-global-trade-disruption-shipping-routes-red-sea-black>)

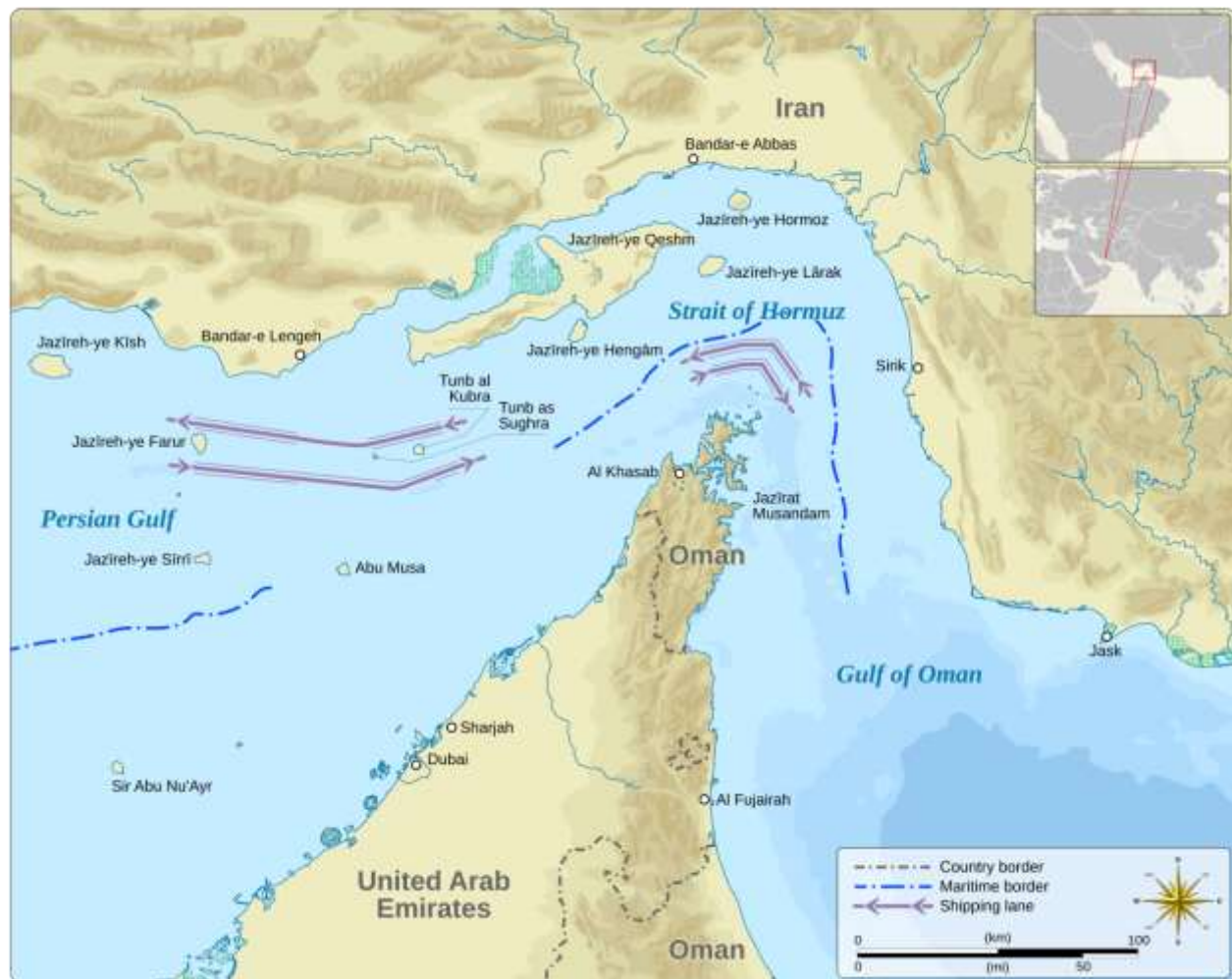
Given the critical choke points at 6 and 7, any conflict involving Iran will pivot upon those choke points. Geography gives Iran a major strategic advantage: it can easily close the Strait of Hormuz, its principal strategic weapon to counter any western military advantage. Figure 1.3 shows an excellent chart of maritime security in the Gulf region. The chart is indicative and its compilers stress that it should not be used for navigation, but that maritime charts must be used. Figures 1.4 to 1.6. are relevant maritime charts. It can be seen that the area of shallow water along the coasts shown in Figure 1.3. corresponds to a 10-metre depth contour in Figures 1.4 to 1.6.

Figure 1.3. Maritime Security Chart Q6111 published by UK Hydrographic Office (indicative)³



³ <https://www.admiralty.co.uk/charts/planning-charts/maritime-security-charts>

Figure 1.4. Strait of Hormuz. Navigational Chart. Darker blue is <10 m deep.



On 7 January 2026, the US Navy and Coast Guard seized the Russian flagged tanker *Marinera* in the North Atlantic, after it had been shadowed by the patrol vessel *USCG Munro* for several weeks. The tanker had previously borne the name *Bella I* and flown the flag of Guyana.

One of the most significant seizures occurred on 22 January 2026 when the French Navy seized the UK-sanctioned and Comoros Islands -flagged tanker *Grinch* in the Alboran Sea in the western Mediterranean between North Africa and Spain. The tanker had departed from Murmansk on 5 January. The operation was led by a Horizon class frigate, probably French,⁴ and was monitored by HMS *Dagger*, a British Cutlass Class fast patrol vessel. Naval commandos transported by two NH90 helicopters boarded

⁴ The *Horizon* class is in service with the French and Italian navies.

the ship, despite previous Russian warnings against boarding. The French president Emmanuel Macron said that "We will not tolerate any violation,"(...) "The activities of the 'shadow fleet' contribute to financing the war of aggression against Ukraine". Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy thanked him and said "This is exactly the kind of resolve needed to ensure that Russian oil no longer finances Russia's war". The tanker was eventually released on 17 February after "paying several million euros and three weeks of costly immobilisation", in the words of French Foreign Minister Jean Noel Barrot.⁵

Besides facilitating the transport of Russian sanctioned goods, primarily oil, the shadow fleet seems to have other functions and also to exemplify other aspects of hybrid war. In August 2025, the Danish investigative media company Danwatch reported that it had obtained internal correspondence from the Danish state-owned pilotage⁶ company Dan Pilot speaking about reports of uniformed "extra crew members" – presumably Russian – photographing infrastructure such as bridges. Danish military sources suggested this was done to inform the Russian Federal security service (FSB). although it could have been for the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) or the Military Intelligence Directorate (GRU). The information could have been shared among all of them.⁷ In December 2025, Sweden's Sveriges Television reported that the Swedish Amphibious Corps (Amf) (marines) had reported armed and uniformed personnel behaving in a similar way. The Amf believed they had been hired by private security companies. SVT quoted Swedish military officials who said that there was an increased Russian military presence in shadow fleet shipping lanes, supposedly to support the shadow fleet.⁸

In February 2026, Agence France Presse (AFP) reported that two Russian security crew were aboard the *Boracay* when French authorities boarded the ship; one was a former member of the paramilitary Wagner Group. They were tasked with protection instructions, ensuring the ship followed orders in line with Russian interests, and gathering intelligence. Their presence was confirmed the captain's lawyer. The crew were reported to be part of a private security group called Moran Security Group, founded by retired FSB colonel Vyacheslav Kalashnikov⁸

Russia's shadow fleet is therefore a highly adaptive sustaining oil exports in defiance of sanctions, It poses significant environmental and security risks, and challenges international enforcement efforts. Its operations highlight the intersection of sanctions evasion, hybrid warfare, espionage, cyber warfare, private military or paramilitary companies, and global energy markets.

⁵ Ibid. Citing Guilbert, Kieran (17 February 2026). 'France releases suspected Russian "shadow fleet" tanker after fine', *Euronews*. Retrieved 17 February 2026.

⁶ Pilotage means navigating a vessel or aircraft using fixed visual references and local knowledge to ensure safe passage in challenging or restricted areas.

⁷ 'Pilot warns; Shadow Fleet spies in Denmark'. *Danwatch*. 2 August 2025. Retrieved 16 December 2025 and 'Marinen Russland skyddarskugflottan med militär operationen. *SVT Nyheter* (in Swedish). 15 December 2025. Retrieved 16 December 2025.

⁸ "Two Russian security personnel were on board France-seized tanker, sources say". *France 24*. Retrieved 23 February 2026.

2025 also witnessed Russian submarines spying in British waters. On 24 October the BBC reported that UK Defence Secretary John Healey had a message for Russian President Vladimir Putin “‘We’re hunting your submarines”’⁹

He said there had been a "30 percent rise in Russian vessels threatening UK waters".

This, according to Healey, was evidence of increased "Russian aggression right across the board" which he said was impacting Europe, not just Ukraine.

The Ministry of Defence said Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic was now back to the same levels as the Cold War era. The RAF and Royal Navy had been stepping up their watch of the North Atlantic, where Russian submarines are most active. The RAF was flying missions most days, sometimes around the clock and often reinforced by other NATO allies.

BBC News joined the defence secretary on a flight on one of the RAF's new P-8 Poseidon aircraft Known by the RAF as the MRA (Maritime Reconnaissance Aircraft) -1. They were the first media to be allowed to observe an active mission.¹⁰

Members of the nine-strong crew faced banks of monitors – showing them what' was happening both on and under the surface of the water.

It is a high-tech spy plane, so the BBC was not allowed to film or photograph any of the screens.

From the outside the P-8 may look like an airliner, just painted grey and with fewer windows. It is in fact the airframe of a Boeing 737 -800, but inside it is fitted out with sophisticated cameras and sensors and listening devices.

Observing the crews at work, Healey said "Russia is challenging us; it's testing us; it's watching us. But these planes allow us to say to Putin – we're watching you; we're hunting your subs."

At first, the crew tracked a number of surface vessels, using the aircraft's cameras to look for any suspicious equipment or activity. At times they flew just a few hundred metres above the waves.

Western nations are increasingly concerned that Russia might try to sever critical undersea cables as part of its hybrid warfare – causing chaos and disruption to internet communications.

Later, they switch the mission to hunt for submarines. At the back of the aircraft are stored 129 active and passive sonar buoys which can detect underwater sounds.

In 2024 an RAF P-8 monitored the 5,372-ton displacement Russian Oceanographic survey ship (spy ship) *Yantar* which was reported to be hovering over undersea cables in the Irish Sea. In addition to numerous other surveillance capabilities, *Yantar* can launch submersibles below to dive, according to some reports, to 6,000 metres (20,000 feet). That makes it ideal to survey – and, therefore, potentially, rip up, undersea cables and pipelines.

In August 2025 the RAF, working with US and Norwegian P-8s, tracked a Russian submarine shadowing an American aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R Ford, on exercise in the North Atlantic.

Then, in November 2025 *Yantar* was spotted again See Figure 1.⁹¹¹

⁹ Jonathan Beale BBC Defence correspondent, Reporting from RAF Lossiemouth

Published 24 October 2025 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cj0ezm8z1d2o/> The P-8 Orion is not to be confused with the original P3 Orion. It is in service with the US, India, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Norway. The first Poseidon MRA-s arrived at Lossiemouth in 2020 and the last in 2022. See [RAF Lossiemouth | Royal Air Force](#)

¹⁰

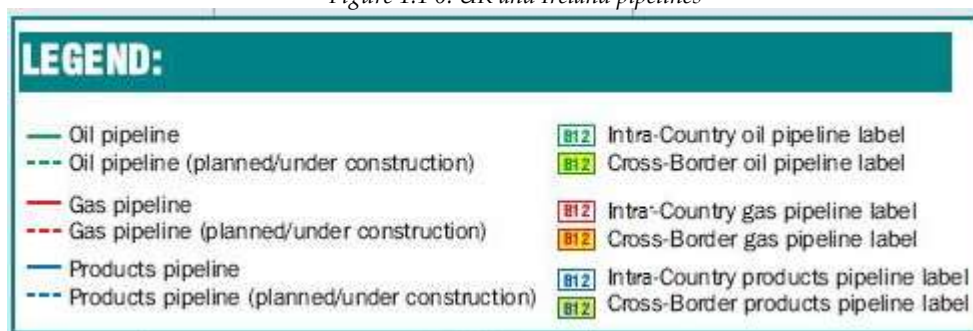
¹¹ Frank Gardner Security Correspondent 19 November 2025 *Yantar: How serious is the Russian spy ship move?* - BBC News



Figure 1.9. *Yantar* (foreground) being shadowed by RFA (Royal Fleet Auxiliary) *Proteus* published by BBC, 24 November 2025. Original source Royal Navy,

Again, *Yantar*'s mission appears to have been to shadow an oil and gas pipeline between. Great Britain and Ireland the relevant pipelines are shown in figure 1.10.

Figure 1.10. UK and Ireland pipelines





From the Legend, you can see that the prominent darker red line from southern Scotland to the Republic of Ireland is a gas pipeline. There are in fact two subsea pipelines which supply gas from southwest Scotland to Ireland, linking the Ireland and UK gas networks. The original interconnector, Interconnector 1 (IC1), had provided Ireland with imported gas supplies since 1993. IC1 initially provided peaking capacity but now provides base load capacity to compensate for the decline in domestic gas production. To relieve a potential gas supply shortage, a second Interconnector, Interconnector 2 (IC2), was given development approval.¹²

Given these developments, during recent years Russian interest in these routes across the Irish Sea has not been surprising. In October and November 2025 British Defence sources indicated that the *Yantar* was being escorted by a Russian *Akula* class nuclear powered attack submarine (SSN).¹³ This led to reports that 'Putin submarines [were] spying in British waters and hence to John Healey's comment that 'we are tracking your submarines' (above).

If Russian submarines were operating under British territorial waters, within 12 nautical miles, that would be flagrantly illegal. Definitions are very important here and we should be aware of media headlines. The rest of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), out to 200 nautical miles, is classified as the high seas.

¹² UK-Ireland Gas Interconnectors Report | Wood Mackenzie also United Kingdom and Ireland Pipelines map - Crude Oil (petroleum) pipelines - Natural Gas pipelines - Products pipelines

¹³ BBC 24 October report.

Warships have the right to exercise 'innocent passage' passing through someone else's territorial sea (out to 12 nautical miles) as long as they pose no threat. In the case of submarines that would mean they have to be on the surface at the very least.

It is likely that we shall see and hear more of these developments which I shall cover in the next issue. Readers are encouraged to co contribute.

Greenland and the high north.

As noted in previous issues, at present NATO and Russia face each other across the North Pole. Greenland is vast and mostly covered in ice, it is also the world's largest island - is located in the Arctic. At about 2.2 million square kilometres (836,330 square miles), it is roughly six times the size of Germany.

It is also the most sparsely populated global territory, with a population of about 56,000 people, mostly indigenous Inuit people.

le. Figure 1.12 shows the current alignment with six NATO countries – the US, Canada, Denmark which owns Greenland, Norway, Sweden and Finland, facing Russia in the Arctic Circle,

Its location between North America and the Arctic makes it well placed for early warning systems in the event of missile attacks, and for monitoring vessels in the region. In particular Russian and Chinese – or Russian and Chinese sponsored – ships. Potentially, the further opening of the Arctic Sea Route could lead to a strategic corridor from the Bering Strait right past Greenland. As seen in Figure 1.12. That assumes that in summer the Arctic Ice Cap completely melts.

Figure 1.11, Confrontation across the North Pole



The key +players in the Greenland debate are shown in Figure 1.11.

During World War II Denmark and Iceland were occupied by Germany. In 1945 the US 'liberated' Greenland and the UK Iceland.

At the height of the Cold War, the US had plans to station nuclear missiles on the island but abandoned the project over engineering problems and objections by Denmark.

The US has operated Pituffik Space Base - formerly known as Thule Air Base ('Too Lee') - since 1951. It was renamed Pituffik in 2003. The base currently provides surveillance against possible missile attack.¹⁴ The base is located on the northwest coast of Greenland in the Kingdom of Denmark under a defence agreement between Denmark and the United States.

Denmark was a founding member of NATO in 1949, and the 1951 Greenland Defence Agreement allowed the United States to operate the base under a NATO framework, as long as both Denmark and the United States remain NATO members. Under the agreement, the United States has exclusive jurisdiction over its facilities at the base, but with the Danish flag being required to be flown over the base alongside the American flag and the Danes having the right to station a consulting liaison officer at the base. The 1951 agreement was modified in 2004 to require that the Greenlandic flag also be flown over the base and gave the Greenlandic government the right to appoint a liaison officer for the base. As of 2025, about 150 United States service members are permanently stationed there, after the United States significantly reduced its presence from 6,000 personnel during the Cold War.

At 76°31'52"N 68°42'11"W Pituffik is the northernmost US Department of Defense installation, See figures 1.11 and 1.12. It is 1,210 km (750 mi) north of the Arctic Circle and 1,524 km (947 miles) from the North Pole. Pituffik's Arctic environment includes icebergs in North Star Bay, two islands (Saunders and Wolstenholme) a polar ice sheet and Wolstenholme Fjord. The base is home to a substantial portion of the global network of missile warning sensors Space Delta 4, and space surveillance and space control sensors of Space Delta 2, providing space awareness and advanced missile detection capabilities to North American Air Defence Command (NORAD), the United States Space Force, and joint partners. The airfield's 3,000 m (10,000 ft) runway handles more than 3,000 US and international flights per year. The base is also home to the northernmost deep-water port in the world.

Figure 1.12. Key players in the Greenland debate. Source: BBC amended by author.



¹⁴ *Why does Trump want Greenland, and what could it mean for NATO and the EU?* - BBC News

Following his taking office in 2025, the new US president escalated suggestions that he wanted to annexe Greenland. Since the beginning of January, the vast, autonomous Arctic territory ruled, albeit as an autonomous territory, by Denmark. As the US President escalated his calls for the United States to take over the sparsely populated and frozen island, the prospect of the NATO alliance's most powerful member annexing territory belonging to another threw Washington's relationship with its European NATO allies into crisis.

When the US President initially voiced such plans in 2019, during his first term, and at the beginning of his second term in 2025, they were mostly dismissed as unserious.

That all changed in subsequent weeks. In the wake of US forces striking the Venezuelan capital and ousting the country's president, Nicolás Maduro, on January 3, 2026, the US President's remarks rang with renewed force, bolstered by a brazen display of US power that European leaders had warned could lead to the demise of the NATO alliance.

The Greenland situation peaked on or around 12 January 2026.¹⁵ In January 2026, the somewhat erratic US President said, "it may be a choice" whether to preserve NATO or seize Greenland and in a text message leaked by the Norwegian Prime Minister, the US President had said that he 'no longer felt an obligation to think purely of peace.'¹⁶ The Greenlandic and Danish prime ministers rejected any US takeover, saying they would defend Greenland in the event of an attack. Both NATO and EU members would be obliged to assist Denmark in the event of an attack. Denmark and eight NATO allies deployed forces to defend the territory in the event of an attack by Russia, China or the US. In response, the US President threatened a trade war against the EU, leading European politicians to suspend a proposed EU-US trade agreement and consider placing sanctions on the US.

Russia and China both said they had no interest in occupying Greenland. Were any need for the US to assist Greenland to arise, the US already has a substantial foothold there at Pituffik (see above) with the space base, airport and seaport.

On 21 January 2026, US President Trump reversed course, first ruling out military force and then abandoning tariff threats after talks with NATO secretary-general Mark Rutte reached what Trump called a "framework of a future deal". Greenland and Denmark ruled out any deal altering the sovereignty of Greenland and Denmark,

The 'Donroe Doctrine', Venezuela and the end of the rules based international system.

There could be no better example of the nexus between maritime crime and maritime security than US policy towards Venezuela. This was based in part on the so-called 'Donroe Doctrine', named after President Donald Trump and the 1823 Monroe Doctrine. That had been articulated by President James Monroe on 2 December 1823 to oppose European colonialism in the Americas at a time when many south American countries were shaking off European colonial rule. Any attempt interfere in south American politics would be regarded as a threat to US national security. By October 2025 the US had killed at least 21 people on board alleged 'narco-boats' originating from Venezuela.¹⁷ The routes for drugs from South America to the US are shown in Figure 1.13.

¹³ N|BC News 12 January 2025 *Trump says U.S. will take Greenland 'one way or the other,' China hits back over Arctic threats*

¹⁶ There was speculation that this comment was a response to the decision not to award the then US President the Nobel Peace Prize. I shall make no comment.

¹⁷ *Why Blowing Up Venezuelan Boats Won't Stop the Flow of Drugs - The New York Times*

Figure 1.13 Main smuggling routes. Source: New York Times 9 October 2025.



In the 1980s and '90s, the Caribbean was the main route for smugglers taking cocaine to the United States. Now, most of that traffic moves through the Pacific.

The Caribbean remains a pass-through point, however. And some countries in the region say that in response to an increased U.S. military presence on the water, some traffickers have started flying their product through the area.

But in recent years, top U.S. officials have rarely mentioned cocaine as a priority. Their focus has been on fentanyl; the drug tied to a national overdose crisis.

Venezuela plays essentially no role in the production or smuggling of fentanyl. The drug is almost entirely made in Mexico with chemicals imported from countries in Asia, including China, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the Justice Department, and the Congressional Research Service.

Describing the boats destroyed by the U.S. military off the coast of Venezuela, Mr. Trump has said they carried enough drugs to kill tens of thousands of Americans.¹⁸

The US attacks on alleged drug-smuggling ships and boats are shown in Figure 1,14, it will be noted that the largest concentration of attacks is in the Pacific. By September 2025 the US Naval presence in the Caribbean was as shown in Figure 1.15.

These forces were far greater than needed and of the wrong type to deal with drug boats and, as can be seen by comparison with Figure 1.14, in the wrong place. It was obvious to reporters that their real purpose was regime change.

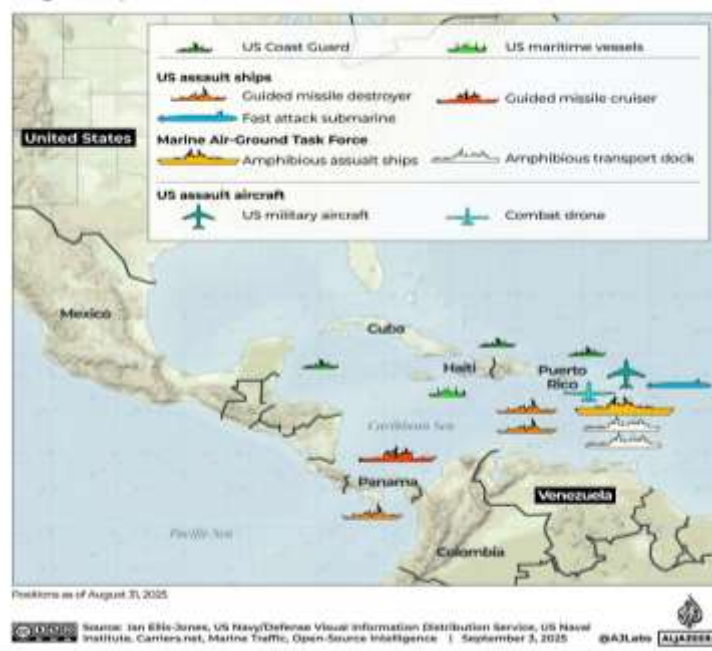
¹⁸ Ibid.

Figure 1.14 US attacks on drug boats to 15 November 2025



Figure 1.15. US Naval presence in the Caribbean 3 September 2025. Source: al Jazeera

The United States has deployed several naval warships carrying more than 4,500 sailors and marines to the southern Caribbean amid tensions with Venezuela over drug cartel operations.

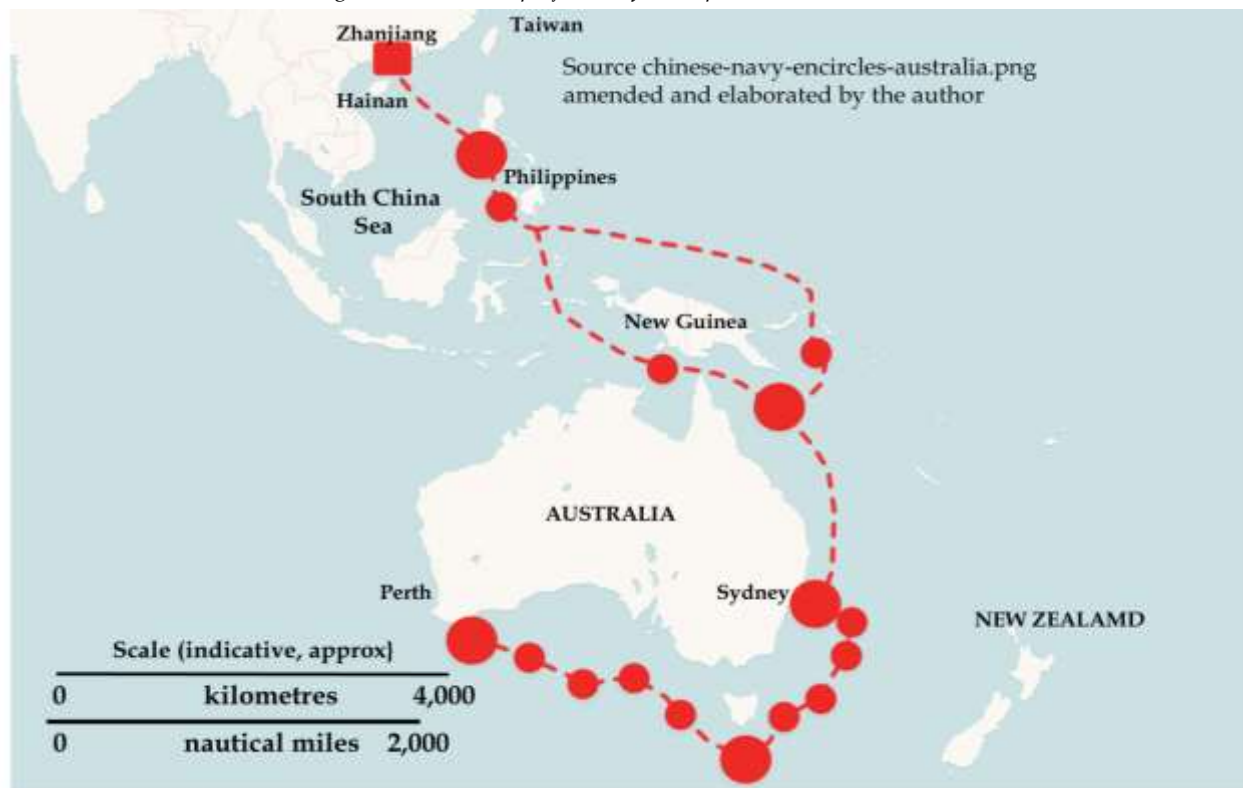


They were right. In December 2025 US operations escalated to include sanctioning tankers carrying Venezuelan crude oil. Then, on 3 January 2026, the US launched a military strike involving all the armed forces and the CIA in Venezuela. After suppressing air defences across the country, they seized the Presidential Palace in Caracas and captured incumbent Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. The US operation, codenamed Operation Absolute Resolve began around 0200 hrs local time, when explosions were observed. Maduro and Flores were transported to New York City by US forces to face trial on narcotics smuggling charges there. It was an exceptionally brief and successful operation. However, whilst it would appear that the operations by the US Coastguard in the Pacific were conducted in accordance with maritime law, the incidents in the Caribbean were conducted by US Navy using Rules of Force that lack clarity.

China encircles Australia

During 2025 Australian media reported that two successive Chinese forces had been noted conducting wide ranging operation around Australia, these were far from the great wall of sand being constructed in the South China Sea.¹⁹ The Chinese deployments are shown in Figure 1.16.

Figure 1.16. Chinese projection of naval power towards Australia 2025



¹⁹ Jennifer Parker, *The Chinese warships Australians never got to debate* Lowy Institutem The Interpreter, 19 February 2026 [The Chinese warships Australians never got to debate](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/2026/02/19/chinese-warships-australians-never-got-to-debate) | Lowy Institute

The first deployment noticed by the Australian Ministry of Defence was by their ships in February and March 2025 and the second in November. The latter comprised At Senate Estimates hearings on 11 February, 2026 the Chief of Defence Force confirmed that the December 2025 task group, comprising a Yushen class amphibious assault ship, a Renhai class cruiser, a Jiangkai class frigate and a Fuchi class replenishment vessel, transited into the Pacific, operating through the southwest Pacific near Noumea and north through the island chains and Papua New Guinea. It then approached Australia's Exclusive Economic Zone, coming within five or seven nautical miles before heading north.²⁰

These Chinese flotillas, especially the second, were powerful and were near Australian waters for a considerable time. They sparked considerable concern, not least because they loitered within Australia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The EEZ is still the high seas so their presence there was completely legitimate. Their precise purposes are unclear, but they were certainly – forgive the pun – testing the waters.

Summary and Conclusions

Apart from the Shadow Fleet, addressed in detail above, the most significant development in the maritime security field during 2025--26 has been the exponential impact of Sixth-generation warfare (6GW). 6GW represents a highly networked, technology-driven form of conflict that integrates Artificial Intelligence [AI], autonomous systems, cyber operations, and precision strikes to achieve strategic dominance with minimal direct human engagement. The use of aerial drones has revolutionised strategic bombardment but more unexpected has been the effect on the war at sea. Following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine has developed a potent uncrewed naval force. Using explosive-equipped uncrewed surface vessels, Ukraine inflicted significant damage on the Russian Navy, forcing it to flee from Sevastopol to seek refuge in mainland Russia. They have also been used to attack Shadow Fleet ships. Without a substantial navy of its own, Ukraine has defeated Russia's Black Sea Fleet and imposed a level of sea denial that would have been inconceivable before 2022. According to analyst H H Sutton, the 'cornerstone of this achievement ... lies primarily in the implementation of uncrewed platforms, this has allowed operations which would not have been viable with crewed vessels. Uncrewed vessels can be smaller and are expendable.'²¹

Russia has been slower to adopt USVs but has been using them in the Black Sea. The main targets are Odesa and the Dnipro River.²²

Full unclassified data and as is available up to the time of publication, information can be gleaned from the sources cited and readers are referred to them, I shall briefly summarise what has been done and their impact on the war. The first Ukrainian maritime drone was the Magura V1, development of which began in May 2022. Four engineers were given the order 'do something with enemy fleet'.²³ They seem to have succeeded.

²⁰ Ibid, See also <https://apnews.com/article/china-tasman-sea-australia-zealand-military-ships-822b6e993d93f27c1501139df5c9acd6>; AFR <https://tics/federal/defense-forces-monitor-chinese-flotilla-20251127-p5niyf>; 9 News <https://www.9news.com.au/national/chinese-naval-flotilla-monitored-adf/58f0b14a-c4b8-4dd1-831d-0ee305138651>; Sydney Morning Herald: <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/departing-intelligence-chief-calls-out-chinese-intimidation-as-australia-monitors-fresh-flotilla-20251202-p5nk0a.html>

²¹ H H Sutton, *Overview of Ukrainian Maritime Drones (USVs) of the Russo-Ukrainian War*. 30 September 2025 [Overview Of Ukrainian Maritime Drones \(USVs\) Of The Russo-Ukrainian War | Covert Shores](#)

²² <https://www.hisutton.com/>

²³ Ref 18 Ibid. By an interesting coincidence the first ever cruise missile (1944) was the German V1.

Once the V1 had been tested, it saw full development as the V2.²⁴ Then in 2023 the existence of the V3 was revealed. It was a bigger version of the V2 and was built in secret workshops in Ukraine. On 29 October 2023 V3s and Unmanned Air Vehicles (UAVs) attacked Sevastopol. The Russian frigate *Admiral Makarov* and the Minesweeper (Mine Counter measures vessel – MCMV) *Ivan Golubets* were damaged.

V4 was an experimental type and little open-source information is available. Magura V5 was revealed on 24 March 2024 after two attacks on Russian Intelligence gathering ships including the *Privyaznoye* on 11 June.²⁵ W6 was used by the GUR – Ukrainian Defence Intelligence. V6 was equipped with Air Defence missiles. Toloki TLK was a large loitering torpedo followed by the affectionately named Sea Baby which may have been used to attack the Kerch bridge which the Russians had built to link mainland Russia with Crimea. Sea Baby II was revealed in early March 2024. More USVs have been developed since, and their details are available in open sources.²⁶

It is no exaggeration that USVs, in combination with UAVs, succeeded in immobilising Russia's prestigious Black Sea Fleet.

In this Editorial I have attempted to highlight key new developments in the new way of war. As in the two previous World Wars, new technology has featured prominently. In World Wars I and II it was tanks, then aeroplanes, poison gas and then. In World War II, jet engines and ballistic missiles. In both, the big war started at sea and with attacks on commercial shipping. So, there is nothing so very new there. But the process has been accelerated by, as Churchill put it, 'the lights of perverted science'. Intelligence, electronic warfare and attacks on civilian infrastructure and attacks on maritime trade featured prominently. European cabinet wars spread, merged and fused with other conflicts. In 6 GW, with AI and robots we take this to a new level, and with an internationally dependent global economy, we must thrive. And the nations that were built from the sea must lead.

The next issue will inevitably focus on the US Iran war and the critical foci of the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab-el Mandeb. 1 by date' of 28 February 2026, this editorial has examined events up to 28 February 2026. In the next issue we will analyse the US-Israel – Iran war 'and, by way of a thousand island dressing, the vexed question of the Chagos Islands...' I should particularly welcome articles on the impact of events relating to these issues and, in particular those two key chokepoints on global energy and fertiliser markets. As stated above, articles for double blind refereeing should be submitted on our system. Comment pieces, identified as such, can be submitted directly to the Managing Editor.

Please send us articles!
Professor Chris Bellamy
Editor in Chief IJMCS
28 February 2026

We do not use Artificial Intelligence (AI) in our content or editing process,



²⁴ These designations bear no resemblance to their World War II namesakes. The German V2 was of course the world's first ballistic missile which fell on Chiswick in west London in September 1944. The V3 was the original 'supergun', designed to deluge London with ten-inch shells. However, the Allies overran the deeply embedded barrels before it could be used.

²⁵ Ref 18 Ibid,

²⁶ Ibid,