



Threat Assessment – North American Maritime Kidnap

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at Lloyd's and Gallagher Skippers' Plan*

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Threat Assessment

Executive Summary

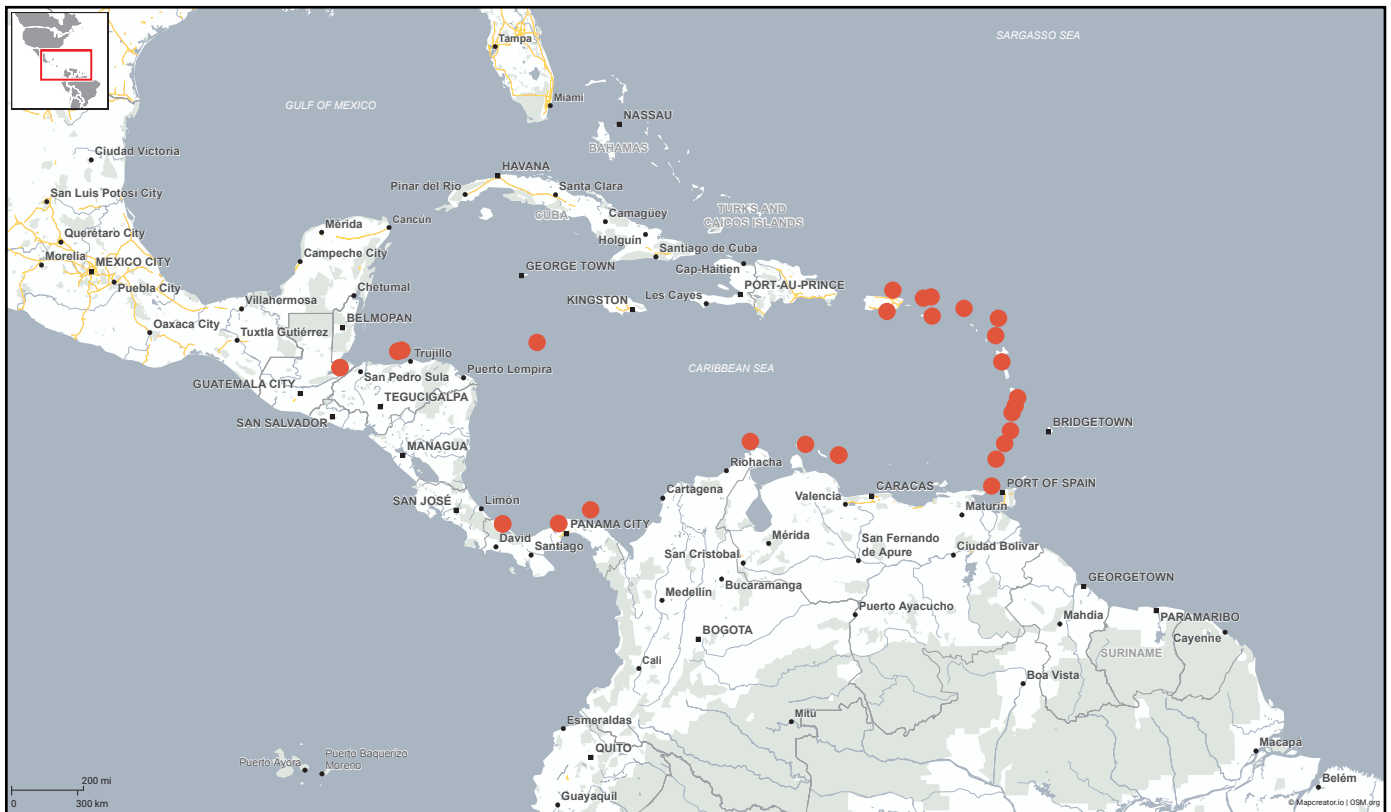
This report examines the threat posed by maritime kidnapping in North America, highlighting areas where it is already present or likely to develop in the near future. Over 2024, maritime kidnap largely remained a latent threat in this region; however, several recent incidents coupled with broader developing socioeconomic trends suggest that this threat is set to be realised more consequentially over the coming months and years. Three main areas of concern regarding the current and future maritime kidnapping risk in North America have been identified: the **Caribbean**, the **Gulf of Mexico**, and the **Great Lakes**. Each of these locales presents a unique set of risks from threat actors capable of engaging in kidnap against private and commercial vessels. The following assessment investigates those regions of concern sequentially, in order of the current salience of their maritime kidnapping threat.

The Caribbean

Presently, out of the three major regions of concern identified, the Caribbean is the area where the threat of maritime kidnap has most matured. 2024 saw several high-profile kidnapping and hostage-taking incidents, involving both local crews and touring US nationals as victims. In February, an experienced American couple holidaying in the eastern Caribbean saw their private yacht boarded and hijacked by escaped convicts from Grenada. The two crew were taken hostage by the criminals, disappearing before the vessel was recaptured by authorities in St. Vincent. The American couple remains missing, possibly thrown overboard.

Alongside this latest high-profile case, the Lesser Antilles have also seen a series of other, less well-publicised criminal kidnapping incidents over recent years, most often targeting local fishermen. In 2018, for instance, three fishermen were kidnapped from their vessel near Trinidad, returned a week later only after the local community had gathered together a \$35,000 (USD) ransom. Such incidents were relatively common in the South Caribbean between 2018 and 2020, a result of maritime smuggling networks having grown substantially. In that period, Venezuelan gangs were both employing and threatening locals to facilitate the flow of clandestine goods towards the United States. Though criminal kidnappings of sailors have dropped in frequency over the past four years, recent economic instability in Venezuela and a negligent attitude from the incumbent regime towards organised crime both look set to foster a return to greater maritime kidnapping threats over the coming months.

The Greater Antilles are another area where political and economic instability look likely to drive a rise in the maritime kidnapping over this year, particularly in Haiti. In April, a Panamanian-flagged cargo ship was raided and captured by criminal gangs from Port-au-Prince amid a wave of violence that drove the president from power. A 5-hour gun battle with police wrested the ship back from criminal hands and freed the crew. Police reports on the rescue mission lack detail and it remains likely collateral damage was experienced by the crew during their assault. While the Kenyan-led UN support mission arrived to aid the government last June, results on the ground in Port-au-Prince continue to be underwhelming and the threat of maritime kidnap by criminal gang threat actors is set to remain present in and around Haiti over the months ahead.



Criminal maritime incidents reported to the Caribbean Safety and Security Network between January and early December, 2024.



The Gulf of Mexico

Moving west from the Caribbean, the neighbouring Gulf of Mexico is another of the identified regions of concern. Unlike the Caribbean, the Gulf saw no recorded incidents of maritime kidnap in 2024; however, similar to the Caribbean, there is a substantial recent history of other piracy-related activity in the area. Political instability and a growth of criminal networks also both look set to drive a higher threat of maritime kidnap in the near future.

Between 2010 and 2022, the Zetas cartel regularly attacked oil installations, supply vessels, and fishermen from their home ports in the Bay of Campeche, causing millions of dollars of damage. Though this activity has subsided over the last two years, correlating with the demise of the Zetas cartel, new local groups and other nationwide cartels have now begun to take an interest in areas adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico, meaning the piracy threat for vessels, particularly those in the oil and gas industry, may return in earnest over 2025. While the Zetas typically avoided kidnapping during their operations in the Gulf, focussing instead on property theft, new cartel threat actors may attempt to transfer their regular land-based kidnapping modus operandi onto maritime operations in the future.

The threat of an expansion of cartel capabilities into the Gulf of Mexico is also set to be exacerbated by socioeconomic developments on land over 2025. Donald Trump's return to the White House has been accompanied by a promise of raising 25% trade tariffs on Mexico, a threat that was justified as a punishment for Mexican government inaction over illegal smuggling into the United States. That threat of tariffs has already sparked a marked increase in Mexican border security efforts: following a boost to public spending on border patrols and a reorganisation of supporting military units in early December, soldiers uncovered over a ton of fentanyl pills near the US border on the same day, their biggest catch of the synthetic drug in the country's history. Mexican cartels already use vessels in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico to transport illicit goods; should this heightened security regime be successful in locking down the land routes leading to the United States, it is likely that the cartels will turn to strengthening their maritime capacities for smuggling purposes. A greater presence of cartel vessels may also cause the threats of assault and kidnap in nearby waters to grow, as criminal groups seek to assert their influence over critical waterways.



The Great Lakes

Finally, the last major region of concern regarding the future of maritime kidnapping in North America is found further north in the Great Lakes. Unlike either the Caribbean or the Gulf of Mexico, there is no recent history of piracy in the Great Lakes. However, the components necessary for a future growth of criminal activity (and, hence, a higher risk of maritime kidnap) are present in the area; namely, a diverse set of local criminal groups and a highly valuable smuggling route in and out of the United States. Canadian mafias and biker gangs have a significant presence across the country and are regularly engaged in illicit smuggling across the US border, mainly involving synthetic drugs. Out of the roughly 2,000 organised criminal gangs in Canada, around 73% are also believed to be involved in violent activities to protect their economic interests. While this activity is usually directed at rival criminal factions, civilians are sometimes caught up in cases of mistaken identity. In the United States meanwhile, local gangs involved in the collection and distribution of illicit goods also have violent modus operandi, at times inflamed by their connections with Mexican cartels. Should smuggling over the US-Canada border move away from land routes in favour of maritime transport options, this violence could be carried over onto the Great Lakes.

Alongside the current existence of these organised criminal groups and their lucrative smuggling practices, the conditions necessary for those components to manifest a higher risk of maritime piracy also appear likely to be provided by political developments in 2025. While Donald Trump's previously mentioned trade tariffs threatened the predictable target of Mexico, somewhat surprisingly they have also been levied against the Canadian government, which also stands accused of facilitating fentanyl smuggling and the movement of Chinese goods across the border into the United States. Following the abdication of Prime Minister Trudeau, whose waning popularity was partly a result of failing to react to Trump's threatened tariffs, a new leader is likely to take action to try and avert their implementation; this may come in the form of appeasing American border concerns by strengthening security personnel and checking regimes. Should criminal groups see their smuggling land routes squeezed by such measures, maritime-based options are likely to be attempted, raising the potential for violent local criminality to spread to the Great Lakes region.

Analysis Summary

There is clear evidence that maritime kidnapping is already a present, though somewhat limited, threat in the Caribbean. There is also evidence that the requisite threat actors and modus operandi needed for the future development of a maritime kidnapping threat are each in place in both the Gulf of Mexico and the Great Lakes. Most concerning, prevailing socioeconomic conditions also appear to suggest an increasing likelihood that these constituent elements will be activated across all three of the regions of concern over the coming months and years. Barring the proactive introduction of stricter maritime security measures, a growth of the maritime threat appears increasingly likely in 2025.



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