



# A PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR MARITIME STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT



**UNODC**  
Global Maritime Crime Programme

**HANDBOOK**

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# INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

# INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Life on land in the 21st century is heavily reliant on the maritime domain. The oft-repeated statistics that [90% of world trade is by sea](#) and that [99% of international communication traverses submarine cables](#) really only give a small indication of how connected our terrestrial existence is to maritime activities and infrastructures. This global reliance on the maritime domain necessitates increased attention to maritime security, as any number of seemingly low-level concerns could easily have global impact. The March 2021 [closure of the Suez Canal](#) due to the grounding of the container ship EVER GIVEN provides an example of how a single incident involving a single vessel can have logistical, economic and security consequences that are felt around the world. It is for this reason – the inextricable connection between maritime activity and life on land – that maritime strategy has become a major focus in almost every coastal, island and archipelagic state.

While naval strategy remains an important discipline, the wisdom of the great naval strategists like Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan or Sir Julian Corbett does not often translate into the missions of today's navies, coast guards and marine police forces. Maritime security requires a fundamentally different mindset to that for naval warfare; most maritime forces are unlikely to ever engage in the sort of activities on which traditional naval strategy is primarily focused. While academic arguments could examine how Mahan's concept of sea control ties to the economic development of states or how Corbett's emphasis on the relationship between land and naval forces applies to addressing the littoral divide, neither they nor most naval strategists have considered the constabulary functions of modern maritime forces. Simply put, the main role of most modern navies, coast guards and marine police forces is less about fighting wars and more about fighting crime, maintaining order, protecting the environment and securing the economic benefits of the maritime domain. In other words, maritime security is the means to other ends, not the end itself.

Despite a recent surge in activity around the development of maritime strategies, there is limited guidance on how to create them and even less guidance on how to use them. Furthermore, the literature on maritime strategy either extolls the virtues of having a strategy or critiques a specific one that has already been adopted. Regrettably, those critiques are also typically focused on the finished document rather than the process that produced it. Those who work in the space can instantly point to examples of failed processes where, for one reason or another, the strategy never reached adoption, but the literature generally does not cover them, nor does it address why so many have failed to cross the threshold from development to implementation. Beyond failure, however, the literature also does not cover the benefits of the process itself, regardless of whether any document is actually produced. A growing number of states and regions have found tremendous benefit just in bringing agencies and experts together to assess the maritime domain and discern collectively how to better secure, govern and develop it together. The value of the process cannot be overstated but, in much of the existing literature, has not been stated at all.

Most of that literature also fails to distinguish between: 1) a maritime security strategy that just focuses on securing the maritime domain; 2) a whole of government maritime strategy or "state action at sea" strategy that focuses both on securing and governing the maritime domain; and 3) an integrated maritime domain strategy that addresses economic development of the maritime space, as well as security and governance. Maritime strategies can have more pillars than those three, but security, governance and the maritime economy are the three key elements in terms of discerning the strategic posture. Which type of strategy a state is pursuing is not something that can be decided along the way – it needs to be a preliminary determination, as the process for strategy development differs greatly between each type. These distinctions hold at both the national and the regional level.

The purpose of this Framework, therefore, is to both provide a resource and reference point for thinking about maritime strategy, and offer procedural and substantive guidance on how to develop and implement each core variant of maritime strategy at both the national and regional levels.

## THE LITERATURE

Given that the focus of this Framework is more practical than academic, this is by no means intended to be a comprehensive literature review. Rather it highlights key nuggets from the literature whose wisdom can help inform the strategy development and implementation processes. There are, however, some useful works that explore the more theoretical and historical aspects of maritime strategy development. Most of these works contextualize maritime strategy in relation to naval strategy, but a few help tease out how to approach maritime strategy today.

For a comprehensive, albeit concise, primer on maritime strategy, Dr. James R. Holmes' "[A Brief Guide to Maritime Strategy](#)" (Naval Institute Press: 2020) looks beyond the doctrinal elements of Mahan and Corbett, as well as the historical debates between Hugo Grotius and John Selden on "free" versus "closed" seas, to explore what maritime strategy requires today. While the work is more focused on the naval components and less on law enforcement, it contains vital analysis for understanding why maritime strategy is so important to security, governance and economic activity.

Similarly, Dr. John B. Hattendorf provides a historical context for the evolution of modern maritime strategy. In "[What is a Maritime Strategy?](#)" (Soundings: 2013), he writes:

Both our experience of practicing maritime strategy and our historical examination of other maritime strategies during the last hundred years show that maritime strategy is a subset of a nation's grand strategy because it touches on the whole range of activities and interests at sea. In its broadest sense, grand strategy is the comprehensive direction of power to achieve particular national goals. Within those terms, maritime strategy is the direction of all aspects of national power that relate to a nation's interests at sea. The navy serves this purpose, but maritime strategy is not purely a naval preserve. Maritime strategy involves the other functions of state power that include diplomacy; the safety and defence of merchant trade at sea; fishing; the exploitation, conservation, regulation and defence of the exclusive economic zone at sea; coastal defence; security of national borders; the protection of offshore islands; as well as participation in regional and world-wide concerns relating to the use of oceans, the skies over the oceans and the land under the seas.

This list of extra-naval actors and elements is critical to understanding how to develop a maritime strategy. Furthermore, he continues with a critical insight: "The fundamental focus of the military element in maritime strategy centres on the control of human activity at sea through the use of armed force in order to contribute to the broad ends established in a national maritime policy. There are two parts to this: establishing control against opposition; and using control, once it has been established." This is a crucial element: a maritime strategy cannot simply focus on stomping out undesirable activity; it must also provide a vision for what should be happening in the maritime domain.

This thinking is echoed by Dr. Christian Bueger in "[What is Maritime Security?](#)" (Marine Policy: 2015). In it, he depicts maritime security as existing in dynamic tension with four cardinal factors: national security, the marine environment, economic development and human security. Maritime strategy has a tendency to focus on different elements and Bueger analyses the center of gravity of different regional strategies including NATO's Alliance Maritime Strategy, which excludes the "high end tasks" of national security, and the African Union's Africa Integrated Strategy 2050, which "centers on the blue economy and argues that maritime security challenges are primarily relevant because they hamper economic growth." As strategy is a subsidiary focus to his exposition on maritime security as a concept, it is worth noting his heavy emphasis on the term "blue economy" as a subset of the maritime economy.

This nexus between maritime security and economic development is a theme developed by Chris Trelwany in his chapter, "The IMO: Maritime Security: An Essential Feature for Sustainable Maritime Development and Global Ocean Governance" in [The IMLI Treatise on Global Ocean Governance: Volume III: The IMO and Global Ocean Governance](#). Trelwany argues that many of the main maritime crimes like piracy and armed robbery at sea are land-based crimes with maritime symptoms. To that end, he argues that the development of sustainable economic activity - both on land and at sea - is a key element for combating maritime crime. Thus maritime security and the maritime economy, particularly the blue economy, become inextricably linked and mutually supportive.

The blue economy also features in Dr. Ian Ralby's ["Making Maritime Strategy Work: A New Taxonomy"](#) (NMIOTC Journal: 2020). He argues that to be effectively implemented, a maritime strategy must have political will behind it. To get that political will, and thus the resources needed to pursue an articulated strategic vision, leaders must understand the nexus between security, governance and development. He writes:

"Maritime security" cannot just be about protecting the state against the unending array of maritime threats. That is an expensive proposition that will drain the state's economy and focus attention on a part of the state where no one lives. Instead, maritime security must be seen as protecting the maritime space for the enrichment of the state and the betterment of life on land. It must be understood as the process of creating a safe and secure maritime domain to allow the blue economy to flourish. Only then will politicians be willing to spend both their own political capital and the state's economic resources on maritime security. Understanding this reality is a prerequisite for identifying a strategic approach that will succeed.

From this starting point, Dr. Ralby goes on to identify the key differences between 1) a maritime security strategy, 2) a state action at sea strategy and 3) an integrated maritime strategy. While the analysis focuses on the national context, the concepts are equally applicable at the regional level. This short article also bridges the divide between literature about maritime strategy and a guide on how to develop one. It is helpful preliminary reading to ground the practical process of strategy development and implementation.

## GUIDES

Despite all the literature on naval strategy and strategy writ large, there is relatively little in the way of direct guidance on developing and implementing maritime strategy that is not focused on warfare and sea control. Much of the guidance is specific to policy, rather than strategy, and is focused on one issue or another. It is important to note the difference between technical work and strategic work. For example, the "Model Maritime Service Code" is a US-developed guide on how to address a wide spectrum of issues necessary for a navy or coast guard to perform the range of maritime security functions. Similarly, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's National Submarine Cable Resilience Framework provides practical guidance on how to develop a national resilience plan which could be part of a maritime strategy, but is not a strategy in and of itself. More broadly, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa has produced an excellent guide focused on Africa, but applicable elsewhere, titled: ["Africa's Blue Economy: A policy handbook."](#) Particularly for those pursuing integrated maritime strategies that have an economic pillar, that handbook can be useful.

The International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (ISPS Code) is a critical element of security for every coastal, island or archipelagic state, and thus for every region. While maritime security covers far more than what is covered by the ISPS Code, it is a competence that can effectively nest within that wider focus on maritime security. Consequently, the 2012 International Maritime Organization (IMO) [Guide to Maritime Security and the ISPS Code](#) is a useful, practical guide to addressing a major area of necessary compliance.

While Dr. Ralby's ["Making Maritime Strategy Work"](#) does discuss the process of strategy development, one of the few guides is the Africa Center for Strategic Studies ["National Maritime Security Strategy Toolkit."](#) Available in English, French and Portuguese, this is a useful resource, tailored to the African context, but applicable globally. It does not, however, differentiate between the different strategy options, nor does it address the regional context. It has, however, been used by a number of countries in pursuing national maritime security strategies.

## **APPROACH TO THIS FRAMEWORK**

Rather than reviewing individual national or regional maritime strategies, this Framework will draw on experiences from around the world to highlight practical points that may be helpful for future strategy development and implementation. The point is not to champion one approach or another but to provide examples of what has worked elsewhere to give inspiration for what might be good practice to follow. As much as the literature is full of analysis of individual strategies, this Framework seeks to be as expansive as possible. This should not be seen, therefore, as a formula for how to create a strategy, but rather a set of questions that should be answered and topics that should be considered during the strategy development and implementation process. It is more of a toolkit than a template. While there are important variations in the various sorts of strategy, they all begin with the same core approach.

# CORE APPROACH

This Framework seeks to provide practical assistance for engaging in maritime strategy development. While there are different options for what sort of maritime strategy will be developed at the national and regional levels, the initial steps, as well as some of the guiding principles, are identical between them. This section, therefore, provides the uniform starting point for developing a maritime strategy of any description.

## Non-Duplication

Even before deciding what sort of strategy a state or region wishes to pursue, a set of threshold questions must be asked:

- What maritime strategic work has been done in the past?
- Is there any maritime strategic work that is currently underway?

It is a common mistake to think that any strategic undertaking is the first of its kind. In countless cases – at both the national and regional levels – there is already an extensive history of prior strategic efforts. Furthermore, stovepiping and lack of communication between agencies or even regional organizations can sometimes mean that at the outset of a strategy development process, there may already be one underway by a different agency or even a different arm of the same agency. A key principle, therefore, must be:

- **Do Not Duplicate Effort**

This does not mean that there is no scope for developing a new strategy if one has already been produced in the past. It also does not mean that there cannot be concurrent strategies. For example, there is no problem with concurrent development of a broader maritime security strategy at the same time as a maritime cybersecurity strategy. This is where the concept of “nesting,” discussed below, comes in. Before getting to that, though, another set of threshold questions must be asked:

- If there has been previous maritime strategic activity, what happened to it?
- Was it implemented?
- Did it have any impact?
- What may have made it either succeed or fail?

Simply cataloguing prior efforts is not sufficient – the full history of those efforts should help inform the starting point for the present undertaking. If the previous strategy was successful, then the starting point should be to build on that success, making necessary adjustments as needed. If the previous strategy failed to produce meaningful results, that cautionary tale should help inform how to avoid the same pitfalls. If the previous strategy never got implemented at all, its content may still be valid, but bridging the divide from paper to practice must be a major focus. A hard look at the past will help with navigating the present. For example – did the strategy not get implemented because the government changed or because it was impractical? This brings up another core principle:

- **Learn From Past Successes and Failures Alike**

There is a tendency to learn from failures in the sense of avoiding the same mistakes. But there is often less rigor applied to understanding and emulating past successes. Both can be equally instructive and building on success can be very helpful in overcoming some of the hindrances that often curtail the impact of a strategy.

## Nesting

As already noted, a strategy development process should never be considered in isolation. No matter how many pillars a maritime strategy has, it must always exist in relationship with other strategies—both national and regional. This is the concept of nesting. For example, a maritime security strategy must nest within the wider national security strategy, which itself should ideally nest within the regional security strategy. Furthermore, the economic pillar of an integrated maritime domain strategy cannot be incompatible with the national economic strategy. If the former sees fisheries as the main maritime contribution to the economy, while the latter focuses on ship building, the strategic visions are irreconcilable, making implementation impossible. A fundamental principle that should be remembered at all times, therefore, is:

- **A Maritime Strategy Must Be Able to Nest Seamlessly Within Other National and Regional Strategies**

This is particularly important at the national level. If the national strategic vision is slightly out of line with the regional strategy, that is less problematic than if different national entities are moving in incompatible directions. While this concept is simple, it is easy to forget, and efforts should be made throughout the strategy development and implementation processes to remain cognizant of wider strategic aims.

## Scope

With an understanding of what has been done and what is being done, the scope of the strategic undertaking can be determined. This effectively means choosing between the three main types of maritime strategy. Each one implicates different stakeholders and different assessments, so this is a preliminary decision that is not easy to change later. As a practical matter:

1. A Maritime Security Strategy is a single pillar strategy that is usually led by the maritime security and law enforcement agency or agencies. It can incorporate other stakeholders, but the focus is on security and law enforcement.
2. A State Action a Sea or Interagency Strategy may or may not also have security as its main focus, but it is broader in nature, and necessarily includes the full spectrum of government agencies that have maritime responsibilities including port authorities, maritime administrations, fisheries departments, customs, immigration and tax authorities. It has two pillars of security and governance.
3. An Integrated Maritime Strategy encompasses security, governance and the maritime economy. This means that not only must all the government agencies with maritime responsibilities be involved, but private sector and civil society groups must be as well. They can be involved in the other varieties of strategy, but they absolutely have to be involved in a credible integrated maritime strategy.

A lot of factors can go into deciding which sort of strategy to pursue. For a more extensive exploration of the different variants, see “Making Maritime Strategy Work: A New Taxonomy.” Generally, though, with each additional pillar comes additional challenges in terms of the amount of time it takes, the complexity of both drafting and implementing, and the amount of political agreement that is needed for adoption. That said, based on experience, the more extensive the strategy, and the more that security is tied to economic activity, the more likely it is to garner the political will needed to be adequately resourced and implemented. Each state and region, therefore, must decide, based on its unique context, which approach makes more sense. Under no circumstances, however, does it make sense to attempt a strategy that is unlikely to actually be implemented. This is not about making a document, it is about developing a common vision for the maritime space and then making that vision a reality. This is a critical principle:

- **A Strategy is Not Merely a Document; It is the Process of Developing a Common Vision for the Maritime Space and then Making that Vision a Reality**

The point of any maritime strategy should be to improve the maritime domain, at least in some way. What that looks like will vary greatly depending on the context, but a strategy should not be considered either a paper exercise or a “tick in the box” matter. It is a process of continual improvement.

## Core Considerations

Before embarking on any of the varieties of maritime strategy, there are some additional core considerations and principles, common to all of them.

### Purpose

The first is the purpose of the strategy. Some will say that it sets forth the strategic ends, ways, and means – in other words it provides the vision and the process of achieving it. Another way of thinking of it, however, is that it answers the question as to “why” something is being done. In other words, any action that is taken should be related to the vision expressed in the strategy.

- A Good Strategy Should Provide an Answer to The Question “Why” Any Given Action is Being Taken.
- Any Action Being Taken Should be Done “In Order To” Accomplish or Uphold A Specific Portion of the Strategy.

When asking: “Why is X being done?,” the answer should be able to be expressed as “In order to” accomplish or uphold a specific portion of the strategy. This dynamic should be kept in mind throughout the development process.

### Agility and Fitness for Purpose

Given this inextricable tie between the strategy and the real-world operations and activities on the water, two related considerations arise: the need for agility, and the importance of fitness for purpose. The world is always changing and the maritime context can evolve quite rapidly for any number of reasons. The 2020 global pandemic should serve as a long-term reminder of how dramatically things can shift in a very short period. Since a maritime strategy is not an academic exercise but a process with tangible consequences and implications, remaining agile is vital to maintaining its relevance.

- Agility is a Constant Requirement Throughout The Strategy Development and Implementation Process.
- A Maritime Strategy Must Always Be Fit for Purpose in the Particular Maritime Domain To Which it Applies.

A brilliant maritime strategy for one country may be largely useless to its neighbor – it has to actually apply to the specific country or region at issue. This is why there is a long list of failed “copy and paste” strategies that have not been sufficiently derived to meet the needs of the state or region for which they are supposed to apply.

### Inclusiveness and Ownership

This issue of “copy and paste” brings up two further matters that are of critical concern. Based on experiences, inclusiveness is vital to the strategy development process. The more inclusive it is, the more the strategy becomes distinctive to the voice of the people and entities for whom it is developed. When people are excluded, no matter how good the document is, they do not feel ownership of it, and they are likely to attack it, criticize it or simply ignore it. Failure to include people and failure to engender ownership are the most common ways that a strategy process fails.. External advisors can be very helpful in providing an objective assessment and a menu of options based on what has and has not worked elsewhere, but the state or region for whom the strategy applies must “hold the pen.”

- The Strategy Development Process Must Be Inclusive.
- The State or Region to Which the Strategy Applies Must Hold the Pen; They Must Own It.

Even if some leaders feel ownership of the strategy, it will not be as effectively realized unless the people who have to implement it feel that ownership, too. As strategy is not a top down directive; it is a collective and actionable vision that everyone must come together to achieve.

### **Implementation and Resourcing**

Given the need for the strategy to be applied in the real world, a strategy development process will always be incomplete until there is an action plan attached to it that, at a minimum, sets realistic benchmarks for moving the state or region toward implementation. One of the biggest mistakes, however, is to apply resource constraints too early. In other words, a strategy should be realistic, but it should not start with a budget. A resource-driven strategy will always lack imagination and fall far short of what could be achieved. The maritime domain presents perhaps as many opportunities as it does constraints, so focusing on monetary limitations often creates a form of wealth blindness where the preliminary constraints prevent those involved from truly exploring the possibilities.

- A Strategy Must Also Have an Action Plan.
- A Strategy Should Never Be Resource Driven.

Even having a strategy that expresses a vision for the maritime domain and the initial steps to realizing it can help attract resources that the state or region would never have considered. For example, it may be in line with certain private sector interests where a public-private partnership could more quickly and affordably manage what both the government and industry want, but what neither could achieve in isolation.

### **The Goal**

Finally, it is vital to make sure that the perfect does not become the enemy of the good—or more accurately, that the perfect does not become the enemy of the effective. It is better to have an “imperfect” strategy that is owned and implemented than a “perfect” strategy that sits on a shelf. Ultimately, a good process will produce tangible effect. In that respect, the goal of a strategic undertaking is neither the strategy itself nor an actionable implementation plan. Both are critical, to achieving the real goal:

- The Goal is not to Draft A Strategy or Even to Implement One; It is to Achieve the Strategic Vision.

Ultimately, there are many ways to arrive at a safe, secure, sustainable and prosperous maritime domain. Further, there are many variations on what a safe, secure, sustainable and prosperous maritime domain could look like, particularly as new technologies and economic activities allow for new engagement with the maritime domain. Regardless of the specific path, however, the most effective maritime strategic process will get there. As simplistic as it sounds, therefore, the most effective maritime strategy is the one that produces results: it has to work.

### **The Options**

Building off this Core Approach, states and regions should proceed with the strategic variant most suited to their needs.

- For those focused primarily on security, the National or Regional Maritime Security Strategy may be most efficient.
- For those focused on both security and governance the National State Action at Sea Strategy or the Regional Maritime Interagency Strategy may be most effective.
- For those working to simultaneously address security, governance and the economy in the maritime domain, a National or Regional Integrated Maritime Strategy is most advisable. This may also be best suited to states and regions working to build political will toward investing in the maritime space, as the nexus between security, governance and prosperity will be a key focus.

States and regions should carefully consider the options and the likelihood of success before making the final decision, and may wish to consult with advisors through that decision-making process.

Once the decision is made, the state or region may proceed with the guidance contained in one of the following Annexes:

<b>National</b>	<b>Regional</b>
1. Maritime Security Strategy	4. Maritime Security Strategy
2. State Action at Sea Strategy	5. Maritime Interagency Strategy
3. Integrated Maritime Strategy	6. Integrated Maritime Strategy



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