

Combating Maritime Crime in Modern Times: Jurisdictional Conflicts and Enforcement Dilemmas in the EEZ and on the High Seas

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Introduction

The world's oceans, covering more than 70 percent of the Earth's surface, have long served as avenues for legitimate commerce, exploration, and communication. Yet the very characteristics that make the seas vital to global trade their vastness, their relative lawlessness, and the difficulty of effective surveillance also render them fertile ground for transnational criminal activity. Drug trafficking, human smuggling, and piracy persist as three of the most significant maritime crimes confronting the international community today. Each presents unique legal challenges that expose the tensions between state sovereignty, flag state jurisdiction, and the imperative of collective security.

At the heart of these challenges lies a fundamental question: who has the authority to interdict, arrest, and prosecute when criminal acts occur in maritime zones beyond a state's territorial waters. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides the overarching legal framework, establishing a complex architecture of jurisdictional zones and enforcement mechanisms.⁽¹⁾ Yet the Convention, drafted in an era before transnational organized crime assumed its current dimensions, contains gaps and ambiguities that states have sought to fill sometimes unilaterally, sometimes cooperatively in ways that test the limits of international law.

This article examines the jurisdictional conflicts and enforcement dilemmas that arise in combating drug trafficking, human smuggling, and piracy within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and on the high seas. It analyzes the applicable legal frameworks, identifies the practical challenges confronting law enforcement, and explores emerging trends that may shape the future of maritime crime suppression.

Part I: The Legal Architecture of Maritime Jurisdiction

1.1 Maritime Zones Under UNCLOS

UNCLOS establishes a graduated system of maritime zones, each carrying different rights and obligations for coastal states and other nations. The **territorial sea** extends 12 nautical miles from the baselines, within which the coastal state exercises full sovereignty subject to the right of innocent passage. The **contiguous zone** extends 24 nautical miles, permitting the coastal state to enforce customs, fiscal, immigration, and sanitary laws. The **Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)** extends 200 nautical miles, granting the coastal state sovereign rights over natural resources while leaving other states with freedoms of navigation and overflight⁽²⁾. Beyond the EEZ lie the **high seas**, where no state may exercise sovereignty and where the principle of flag state jurisdiction predominates⁽³⁾.

1.2 The Principle of Flag State Jurisdiction

On the high seas, ships are subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of the state whose flag they fly⁽⁴⁾. This principle, codified in UNCLOS Article 92, is foundational to the law of the sea. It means that, as a general rule, no state may interfere with a foreign-flagged vessel on the high seas without the flag state's consent⁽⁵⁾. The exceptions are limited and precisely defined: piracy, the slave trade, unauthorized broadcasting, ships without nationality, and, under certain treaty regimes, drug trafficking and migrant smuggling⁽⁶⁾.

This jurisdictional framework creates an inherent tension. The flag state often has the primary legal authority to act but may lack the capacity, political will, or resources to effectively police vessels flying its flag. Conversely, states with robust enforcement capabilities may find their hands tied by the requirement of flag state consent, even when they have reasonable grounds to suspect criminal activity⁽⁷⁾.

1.3 The EEZ: A Zone of Ambiguity

The EEZ occupies a unique and contested position in the law of the sea. For purposes of navigation and overflight, the EEZ regime corresponds to that of the high seas⁽⁸⁾. However, the coastal state enjoys sovereign rights over natural resources and certain enforcement jurisdiction. This dual character has generated significant legal controversy, particularly regarding criminal enforcement.

As one UN analysis observes, the EEZ is an area where "the coastal State may construct artificial islands and other installations and works, including those required for surveillance and to combat smuggling of migrants"⁽⁹⁾. Yet the precise scope of coastal state enforcement authority beyond resource-related matters remains contested. Some scholars and courts have treated the EEZ as part of the "high seas" for enforcement purposes, while others argue that the EEZ constitutes a distinct legal regime⁽¹⁰⁾.

Part II: Drug Trafficking at Sea

2.1 The Legal Framework

Maritime drug trafficking is addressed through a web of international instruments. **UNCLOS Article 108** requires all states to "cooperate in the suppression of illicit traffic in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances engaged in by ships on the high seas contrary to international conventions". The provision is noteworthy for what it does not do: it does not authorize unilateral interdiction of foreign-flagged vessels. It merely establishes a duty to cooperate⁽¹¹⁾.

The **1988 Vienna Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances** provides stronger enforcement tools. Article 17 of the Convention permits a state party to request the flag state's authorization to board, search, and take appropriate action against a vessel suspected of drug trafficking. If the flag state grants authorization, or if the vessel is stateless or refuses to show its flag, the requesting state may proceed with enforcement⁽¹²⁾.

The **Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act (MDLEA)**, enacted by the United States, represents a particularly expansive assertion of jurisdiction. The MDLEA criminalizes drug trafficking "on the high seas" and on "vessels subject to the jurisdiction of the United States," a term that includes stateless vessels and vessels whose flag state has consented to U.S. enforcement. The Act has been the subject of extensive litigation, much of which turns on the definition of the "high seas" and whether it encompasses the EEZ⁽¹³⁾.

2.2 Jurisdictional Conflicts: The EEZ Controversy

Perhaps the most significant jurisdictional conflict in maritime drug enforcement concerns whether the EEZ is part of the "high seas" for purposes of criminal jurisdiction. This question has generated a split between the text of UNCLOS and the practice of several states, particularly the United States.

Under UNCLOS, the EEZ is defined as an area "beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea," extending 200 nautical miles, with its own "specific legal regime"⁽¹⁴⁾. The high seas, by contrast, are defined as "all parts of the sea that are not included in the exclusive economic zone, in the territorial sea or in the internal waters of a State, or in the archipelagic waters of an archipelagic State." This textual distinction suggests that the EEZ and the high seas are mutually exclusive categories.

Yet U.S. courts have consistently held that the EEZ is part of the "high seas" for purposes of the MDLEA and the Constitution's Felonies Clause. In **United States v. Sánchez-Matos (2023)**, the court held that "a nation's exclusive economic zone does not constitute territorial waters but rather remains part of the high seas"⁽¹⁵⁾. The court in **United States v. Alfonso** reached a similar conclusion, reasoning that when the Constitution was adopted, "there were two divisions of the sea, territorial waters of nations and the 'high seas'" and that "special carve-out zones, such as the EEZ, did not exist"⁽¹⁶⁾.

The **Alfonso** decision, which concerned a vessel intercepted in the Dominican Republic's EEZ, affirmed that "the EEZ is still part of the 'high seas' within the meaning of the Felonies Clause"⁽¹⁷⁾. The Eleventh Circuit's approach has been followed by the Fourth Circuit and indirectly by the First and Second Circuits. Scholars have noted that this "affirmed the expansive reach of United States territorial jurisdiction" and "may increase the rate of arrests and seizures in international waters near the coasts of other countries".

This jurisprudence has not gone unchallenged. Defendants have argued that "the government's authority to prosecute felonies committed on the high seas under the MDLEA does not extend to conduct that occurs in a foreign nation's EEZ". They have also challenged the MDLEA's definition of "vessel without nationality" as exceeding congressional authority and violating due process by allowing prosecution of foreign nationals with no nexus to the United States. Thus far, these challenges have been largely unsuccessful.

The U.S. position has attracted criticism from international legal scholars. As one analysis notes, "States are not entitled to interfere with foreign-registered vessels on the high seas". The exceptions, including drug trafficking, require flag state consent. The U.S. approach, particularly its use of lethal force against suspected drug vessels, "risks eroding the rule of law". Between September and November

2025 alone, the U.S. carried out 21 military strikes against suspected drug vessels in the eastern Pacific and Caribbean, killing more than 80 people⁽¹⁸⁾. The legal justification—invoking self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter has been widely questioned, as "drug smuggling is clearly a matter for border control and law enforcement".

2.3 Enforcement Dilemmas

Beyond jurisdictional questions, drug trafficking enforcement faces practical dilemmas that complicate effective action.

Stateless Vessels and Flags of Convenience: Traffickers increasingly exploit gaps in the flag state system. They may intentionally leave vessels unregistered, rendering them stateless and thus subject to interdiction by any state. Alternatively, they may register vessels with states that lack the capacity or willingness to exercise effective control. The MDLEA addresses statelessness broadly, defining a "vessel without nationality" to include vessels whose claimed nationality cannot be confirmed or denied by the flag state. Critics argue this definition "unconstitutionally extends U.S. jurisdiction to foreigners on foreign vessels"⁽¹⁹⁾.

The Shiprider Model: To overcome the requirement of flag state consent, states have developed innovative cooperative arrangements. The Shiprider Program, under which law enforcement officials of one state embark on vessels of another state, has been adopted by the United States with 25 countries. These agreements provide a priori authorization for enforcement actions, effectively transforming foreign officers into representatives of the flag state. While praised for operational effectiveness, Shiprider agreements have also raised sovereignty concerns. In 2020, the U.S. Coast Guard detained the crew of a Jamaican fishing vessel on suspicion of drug trafficking, leading to questions about the impact on Jamaican sovereignty⁽²⁰⁾.

The "Constructive Presence" Doctrine: UNCLOS Article 111 recognizes the doctrine of "constructive presence" as an adjunct to the right of hot pursuit. This permits a coastal state to pursue a vessel that, while remaining outside the coastal state's waters, uses a mother ship or other vessel within those waters to commit violations. The doctrine extends enforcement jurisdiction beyond what would otherwise be permissible, but its application requires careful factual and legal analysis.

Part III: Human Smuggling and Trafficking at Sea

3.1 The Legal Framework

Human smuggling and trafficking at sea present distinct challenges from drug trafficking. While drug trafficking involves contraband, human smuggling involves people often vulnerable individuals fleeing persecution, conflict, or economic hardship. The legal framework is correspondingly more complex, encompassing not only criminal law and the law of the sea but also international human rights law, refugee law, and immigration law⁽²¹⁾.

UNCLOS does not specifically address human smuggling or trafficking. However, some academic literature and state practice treat human trafficking as a modern form of the slave trade, which is subject to universal jurisdiction under UNCLOS. Under this interpretation, "every State has the right of visit for any vessel suspected of engaging in human trafficking on the high seas and in the EEZ".

The **Palermo Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Air and Sea (2000)**, supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, provides a more specific framework. The Protocol requires states to criminalize migrant smuggling and establishes procedures for cooperation in maritime enforcement. However, the Protocol does not create new enforcement jurisdiction on the high seas; it relies on flag state consent, similar to the drug trafficking regime.

The **SUA Convention** (1988 Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation) addresses acts of violence against ships and may apply to certain aspects of migrant smuggling, particularly when force is used against crew members.

3.2 Jurisdictional Conflicts

The jurisdictional challenges in combating human smuggling at sea mirror those of drug trafficking, but with added complexity arising from the human rights dimensions.

The EEZ Question: For purposes of immigration and trafficking matters, "the legal regime of the high seas is applicable also to the EEZ of the coastal State". This means that, in the EEZ, vessels and their passengers are generally under the exclusive jurisdiction of the flag state. The coastal state may take enforcement action only with flag state consent, except in cases involving the right of hot pursuit or the right of visit.

Effective Control and Human Rights: A critical legal concept in maritime migration contexts is that of "effective control." When a state intercepts a vessel at sea and exercises control over its passengers, human rights obligations attach even if the interception occurs outside the state's territory. This principle, affirmed by the European Court of Human Rights in **Hirsi Jamaa v. Italy**, means that states cannot avoid their human rights obligations by interdicting migrants on the high seas. The concept of effective control thus creates a tension: states seeking to prevent irregular migration may be reluctant to interdict vessels because doing so triggers human rights responsibilities, including the prohibition on refoulement and the duty to provide a "place of safety" for those rescued⁽²³⁾.

Search and Rescue Obligations: UNCLOS and the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention) impose duties on states to render assistance to persons in distress at sea. These obligations can conflict with enforcement objectives. A vessel engaged in smuggling may also be a vessel in distress, requiring rescue rather than interdiction. States must navigate the delicate balance between law enforcement and humanitarian obligations.

3.3 Enforcement Dilemmas

The Flag State Consent Problem: As with drug trafficking, flag state consent is the primary obstacle to effective enforcement against human smuggling on the high seas. The flag state must authorize boarding and enforcement actions. In practice, this has proven particularly challenging in the Mediterranean, where smuggling vessels often operate from the Libyan coast. The "flag state's consent for maritime enforcement measures on the high seas off the Libyan coasts is one of the main issues relating to the migrant smuggling and human trafficking phenomena".

Disembarkation and Responsibility: Perhaps the most intractable challenge in combating human smuggling at sea is the question of disembarkation. States are often reluctant to accept disembarkation of intercepted migrants, leading to prolonged standoffs at sea. The absence of clear rules on which state bears responsibility for disembarkation the flag state, the coastal state, the state of nationality of the passengers, or the intercepting state creates enforcement paralysis. States may choose not to interdict smuggling vessels precisely because they do not wish to assume responsibility for those on board.

Criminal Jurisdiction and Prosecution: Establishing criminal jurisdiction over smugglers presents additional challenges. "Whether criminal jurisdiction is established over smuggling outside the territory of the State depends on the link between smuggling and domestic laws". States must have a sufficient nexus typically nationality of the offender, nationality of the vessel, or effects on the state's territory to prosecute. For stateless vessels or vessels flying flags of convenience, establishing jurisdiction can be difficult.

Part IV: Piracy

4.1 The Legal Framework

Piracy occupies a unique position in international law. Unlike drug trafficking and human smuggling, piracy is subject to universal jurisdiction: any state may seize pirate vessels and prosecute pirates, regardless of the nationality of the pirates, the victims, or the vessels involved.

The definition of piracy is contained in **UNCLOS Article 101**, which requires: (1) illegal acts of violence, detention, or depredation; (2) committed for private ends; (3) by the crew or passengers of a private ship; (4) on the high seas or in a place outside the jurisdiction of any state; (5) against another ship, aircraft, persons, or property.

Article 100 imposes an obligation on "all States to cooperate to the fullest possible extent in the repression of piracy on the high seas or in any other place outside the jurisdiction of any State". This is a mandatory obligation, applying to all states and calling for cooperation "to the fullest possible extent"⁽²⁶⁾.

Article 105 authorizes any state to seize pirate ships and aircraft, arrest the persons on board, and seize the property. **Article 110** permits the right of visit for ships suspected of piracy. These provisions apply to the EEZ by virtue of Article 58(2), "in so far as they are not incompatible with the provision of UNCLOS relating to the exclusive economic zone".

4.2 Jurisdictional Scope and Limitations

While piracy benefits from universal jurisdiction, its definition imposes significant limitations.

The "Two-Ship" Requirement: Piracy under UNCLOS requires an attack "against another ship." This means that mutiny, hostage-taking on a single vessel, or armed robbery within a state's territorial waters does not constitute piracy under international law, even if the acts are otherwise identical. Such acts may be prosecutable under domestic law or the SUA Convention, but they do not trigger universal jurisdiction.

Private Ends Requirement: Piracy must be committed "for private ends." This excludes politically motivated acts, which may be treated as terrorism or other offenses. The distinction can be difficult to apply in practice, particularly when pirate groups have political as well as financial motives.

Geographical Limitation: Piracy is limited to the high seas and "any other place outside the jurisdiction of any State." Armed robbery against ships in territorial waters is not piracy under UNCLOS and falls under the primary jurisdiction of the coastal state.

4.3 Enforcement Dilemmas

The Prosecution Gap: Despite the availability of universal jurisdiction, many alleged pirates are released rather than prosecuted. This "appears to be in tension with Article 100 UNCLOS, which broadly stipulates that all States shall cooperate to the fullest possible extent in the repression of piracy". The reasons for non-prosecution are varied: evidentiary difficulties, the cost of prosecution, concerns about human rights standards in the prosecuting state, and political considerations.

The Somali Piracy Experience: The piracy epidemic off the coast of Somalia (2008-2012) exposed the limitations of the UNCLOS framework. The Somali state was unable or unwilling to exercise jurisdiction over pirates operating from its territory. The international community responded with a series of UN Security Council resolutions authorizing states to enter Somali territorial waters and use "all necessary means" to repress piracy. These resolutions effectively suspended the requirement of flag state consent and extended enforcement authority into Somali waters. However, the resolutions were specific to the Somali situation and did not establish customary international law.

Counter-Piracy Operations: Naval operations by NATO, the EU (Operation Atalanta), and combined maritime forces successfully reduced piracy in the Gulf of Aden. Yet these operations raised legal questions about the use of force, the detention and transfer of suspected pirates, and the applicable legal paradigm—whether counter-piracy is law enforcement or an armed conflict.

The Ransom Question: The payment of ransoms to pirates, while often necessary to secure the release of hostages, has been criticized as incentivizing further attacks. The question of criminalizing ransom payments remains unresolved.

Private Security: The deployment of private armed guards on commercial ships has become common in high-risk areas. This practice raises legal questions about the use of force at sea, the liability of private security contractors, and the potential escalation of violence.

Part V: Comparative Analysis and Emerging Trends

5.2 The Duty to Cooperate as a "Jurisdictional Multiplier"

Across all three crime types, the duty to cooperate plays a central role. As one UN analysis observes, cooperation "operates within the constraints of the jurisdictional regime established by UNCLOS, particularly the centrality of flag State jurisdiction on the high seas". Yet cooperation also "frequently functions as a jurisdictional 'multiplier,' enabling States to exercise investigative and enforcement powers that they could not lawfully or practically exercise on their own".

The duty to cooperate is "an obligation of conduct rather than an obligation of result". States are required to "exercise reasonable efforts in good faith, taking appropriate legislative, administrative and operational measures," but they are "not legally required to eradicate maritime crime, a goal which would be unattainable even for the most capable States".

5.2 Unilateralism vs. Multilateralism

A growing tension in maritime crime enforcement is between unilateral assertions of jurisdiction and multilateral cooperation. The U.S. approach to drug trafficking particularly its expansive interpretation of the MDLEA and its use of military force has been criticized as pushing "the US away from the consensus on the rules of international law".

Conversely, cooperative mechanisms such as Shiprider agreements, regional arrangements (e.g., the 2003 Caribbean Regional Agreement), and bilateral treaties represent a multilateral approach that respects flag state sovereignty while enabling effective enforcement. The challenge is to balance the imperative of effective enforcement against the principle that "States are not entitled to interfere with foreign-registered vessels on the high seas".

5.4 Technological Developments

Emerging technologies present both opportunities and challenges for maritime law enforcement. **Narco-submarines** (self-propelled semi-submersibles) have made drug trafficking more difficult to detect and interdict. **Drones** are being used for surveillance and, increasingly, for enforcement actions, raising questions about the use of force and the limits of enforcement jurisdiction. **Satellite tracking** and **automatic identification systems (AIS)** provide valuable intelligence but can also be manipulated by traffickers.

Blockchain and digital identity systems may offer new tools for verifying vessel registration and combating the use of flags of convenience.

Conclusion

The suppression of maritime crime in the EEZ and on the high seas is a story of legal ambition constrained by jurisdictional reality. The international community has constructed an impressive legal architecture UNCLOS, the Vienna Convention, the Palermo Protocol, the SUA Convention, and numerous regional and bilateral agreements to address drug trafficking, human smuggling, and piracy. Yet the architecture has gaps, and the gaps have consequences.

The **centrality of flag state jurisdiction** remains the primary obstacle to effective enforcement. On the high seas, and in the EEZ for most purposes, the flag state holds the key to enforcement action. When flag states are unwilling or unable to act, the international community faces a choice: accept impunity or find creative ways to overcome jurisdictional barriers.

States have chosen the latter path. The **MDLEA** and U.S. jurisprudence have effectively redefined the EEZ as part of the high seas for enforcement purposes. **Shiprider agreements** provide a priori flag state consent. **UN Security Council resolutions** have suspended normal jurisdictional rules in specific contexts. The **duty to cooperate** has been invoked as a "jurisdictional multiplier," enabling collective action that no single state could undertake alone.

Yet these innovations come at a cost. Unilateral assertions of jurisdiction strain international relations and risk eroding the rule of law. Military responses to drug trafficking and piracy raise profound questions about the use of force and the boundaries between law enforcement and armed conflict. The human rights implications of maritime interdiction particularly in the context of human smuggling demand careful attention.

Looking forward, the challenge is to build on the cooperative mechanisms that have proven effective while respecting the foundational principles of the law of the sea. The duty to cooperate, embedded in UNCLOS and reinforced by subsequent treaties, provides the normative foundation. The operational experience of counter-piracy in the Horn of Africa demonstrates both the potential and the limits of cooperation-based enforcement. The task ahead is to apply those lessons to drug trafficking and human smuggling, adapting the legal framework to address new threats without sacrificing the principles that have maintained order on the seas for centuries. The oceans belong to no one and everyone. Their governance requires a delicate balance between sovereignty and solidarity, enforcement and cooperation, security and human rights. In navigating these tensions, the international community must remain guided by the principle that maritime crime is a shared challenge requiring shared solutions and that the rule of law, even on the high seas, is the foundation of lasting security.

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