

COMBATING MARITIME INSECURITY: EU AND NATO'S STRATEGIC ROLE AGAINST SHADOW FLEET IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

by
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Shadow fleet – also referred to as dark or ghost fleets – describe a specific type of illegal maritime activity carried out by states to evade sanctions, improve their economies, and broadly disrupt the international order. Their deployment is not [new](#): Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela were previously the main nations engaged in such activities following international sanctions imposed against them. However, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the number of vessels associated with shadow fleets and the range of their activities have increased worldwide. It is estimated that [17 percent](#) of the world's tanker vessels now operate as part of a shadow fleet, engaging in activities ranging from illegal trade and sanctions evasion – arms smuggling, oil importation, and ship-to-ship (STS) activities – to intelligence operations, including the destruction of undersea cables, intimidation of foreign fleets, and espionage, as well as illegal fishing. Today, the main actors involved are Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela. Between January 2021 and November 2023, the firm [Vortexa](#) estimated that 1,649 tankers were part of the “opaque market”, of which 75 percent transported oil from Russia, Iran, and Venezuela.

This situation presents an escalating threat that states, international organizations, and institutions need to address by detecting, preventing, and countering the activities of these vessels. This blog piece argues that the EU and NATO should enhance their actions against shadow fleets in the Indo-Pacific region, in cooperation with local actors.

What Are Shadow Fleets, and Why Are They a Threat?

In December 2023, the [International Maritime Organization](#) adopted resolution A.1192(33) on shadow fleets, which defined them as “ships that

are engaged in illegal operations for the purposes of circumventing sanctions, evading compliance with safety or environmental regulations, avoiding insurance costs or engaging in other illegal activities”. Most [shadow fleet](#) vessels are old ships that turn off their Automatic Identification System (AIS) to become invisible to others. They rarely possess adequate insurance and operate with ambiguous or opaque ownership arrangements, as they frequently change their names and flags.

[The main threats](#) posed by these vessels are:

- Increased insecurity for maritime routes:*** The growing presence of a shadow fleet contributes to increasingly congested and crowded strategic areas, raising the risk of collisions as the vessels remain undetectable. The risk of vessels breaking down or catching fire is increased by their age and the activities they conduct, such as unauthorized STS transfers.
- Environmental risks:*** The probability of collisions heightens as the number of vessels grows, leading to potential oil spills, in addition to vessel breakdowns, increased carbon emissions, and unregulated fishing; all of which negatively impact maritime biodiversity.
- Disruption of international trade:*** As more ships navigate the same strategic routes, the risk of collision increases, which can disrupt trade and slow down legitimate shipping operations. Illegal fishing and the smuggling of sanctioned or embargoed goods amplify competition with legal market actors, impacting industries and stocks.
- Heightened tensions between states:*** All these impacts intensify tensions between states, as environmental, economic, and maritime insecurity grow due to the disregard for regulations and international sanctions. Other hostilities linked to military activities also escalate, such as espionage, destruction of critical infrastructure, and intimidation, thereby inducing regional and international insecurity.

Shadow fleets pose a [threat](#) not only to coastal or port states but to the wider international system; their existence demonstrates a willingness among some states to violate international jurisdiction and conduct activities that jeopardize economic activities, military infrastructure, and the environment.

The Current Shadow Fleet Situation in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific region is one of the most strategic maritime regions in the world, mainly for its trade routes, but also for its rich biodiversity, which adds to already existing international rivalries and tensions. Consequently, the deployment of shadow fleets in the Indo-Pacific has increased in recent [times](#), mainly by China, North Korea, and Russia.

China reportedly deploys a shadow fleet to destroy undersea cables, particularly in Taiwan's waters.

For example, the [Shun Xing 39](#) targeted the Trans-Pacific Express cable in January 2025, and the [Hong Tai 58](#) is linked to the sabotage of Taiwan's undersea internet cables in February 2025. China also conducts intimidation in [contested waters](#) and [illegal fishing](#), especially near the [Galapagos Islands](#), and in [North Korea's waters](#).¹ North Korea's shadow fleet dates back to the beginning of UN sanctions and embargoes, which have pushed activities such as illegal smuggling of products, arms, and oil, as well as illegal fishing, especially in [Russian waters](#).

Russia operates mainly in the Baltic Sea, Red Sea, and North Sea, but it also has implications in the Indo-Pacific, as China and India are its [main oil buyers](#).

[Windward's Maritime AI™ platform](#) tracked 10 UK-flagged vessels tied to Russia's shadow fleet and found that, between January 2022 and September 2024, they carried out 88 'dark' activities: 51 percent in Russia's EEZ, 29 percent near the Russia-Japan Pacific zone, and 13 percent in Turkey's EEZ. As its ties with China grow, some Russian fleets support China's interests in the [Indo-Pacific](#), and vice versa, with Chinese vessels operating in the [Baltic Sea](#).²

Why EU and NATO Should Increase Cooperation Against Shadow Fleets in the Indo-Pacific

Recently, Russia, China, and North Korea have become more [interconnected](#) in each other's activities and strategies, both military and economic. Many of these undertakings are related to the shadow fleet, specifically through oil trade and arms smuggling, especially between North Korea and Russia.

Additionally, they have engaged in shared [hybrid activities](#) in both Taiwanese waters and the Baltic Sea, especially between Russia and China. These growing

connections increase NATO's and the EU's interest in the Indo-Pacific, as reflected in various official NATO statements mentioning China since [the London declaration](#) in 2019. NATO's ties with IP4³ have also strengthened, particularly since [NATO's Madrid Summit](#) in 2022. At the same time, the EU has increased its engagement in the Indo-Pacific with the launch of its [2021 Strategy for Cooperation](#), focused on strengthening partnerships, promoting a rules-based order under the UN Charter, and supporting stability and prosperity in the region.

These shifts underscore the increasing interconnection between the Transatlantic and the Indo-Pacific regions, indicating that stability and security in one area directly affect the other. Today, shadow fleets are a prime example of this connection, serving not just as tools to counter sanctions or increase national economic interests, but also as mechanisms employed mainly by authoritarian regimes to disrupt the international system, destabilize democracies, and demonstrate defiance against the West. Experts consider this 'new wave' of shadow fleet a rising and long-lasting threat.

NATO's role in protecting its members' security and the EU's commitment to upholding a rules-based order now clearly extend into the [Indo-Pacific](#), as it is increasingly linked – economically, environmentally, and in security – to the Transatlantic region. Stepping up EU and NATO cooperation with regional partners against shadow fleets directly supports their core missions, despite their geographical distance.

Furthermore, increasing countermeasures against shadow fleets is also beneficial for improved regional security through shared information and knowledge. This means not solely sharing information regarding shadow fleet activities but also conducting practical military training to protect critical infrastructure, global trade, and the maritime environment. In parallel, establishing shared standards in military activities, research, and innovation will enhance preventive and protective measures against shadow fleets in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, expanding NATO and EU initiatives can empower regional powers to enhance their negotiating leverage with larger entities, such as China or Russia.

What Can the EU and NATO Do?

For these partnerships to be sustainable and respectful of regional actors' sovereignty and agency, the EU and NATO should follow the regional approaches rather than imposing or replicating their initiatives or methods onto regional actors. As the EU and NATO are not regional actors, these anti-shadow fleet partnerships must put regional powers first with the EU and NATO acting as supporters or advisors.

The goal of these partnerships is to enhance collaboration between the EU and NATO, rather than increase their military presence in the region. By supporting regional actors, they seek to promote stability and security, creating a balanced environment among the EU, NATO, and the Indo-Pacific. This approach improves their countermeasures against shadow fleets while respecting the unique structures of the Indo-Pacific. For instance, EUNAVFOR's Operation Atlanta conducts joint maritime exercises and port calls and facilitates information exchange.

Additionally, increasing presence in the Indo-Pacific region is not solely about military means. Enhanced collaboration among the EU, NATO, and regional partners can focus on training, knowledge sharing, research programs, and technology transfer rather than military deployments. For example, the EU could involve new regional actors in its Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific maritime capacity-building project (CRIMARIO), which focuses on information sharing, tailored training, and exercises to enhance maritime awareness and response to threats.

Additionally, expanding tools like IORIS and SHARE. IT to include new participants would be beneficial. NATO can also enhance regional integration through its Science for Peace and Security Programme 4 and its Maritime Security Centre of Excellence.

Similarly, EU and NATO personnel can support regional actors interested in developing initiatives, projects, or regulations similar to their own. For instance, the EU's European Maritime Safety Agency, the EU's Action Plan on Cable Security, or the EU's rules on illegal fishing and environmental protection. The EU has also amended its Vessel Monitoring

Directive within the IMO, which mandates reporting systems for ships. Similarly, NATO's various programs, such as the Baltic Sentry initiative focused on cable security, and its Standing Naval Forces, as well as the UK's Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), also play a role in fostering collaborative security efforts.

Shadow fleet expansion in recent years highlights the importance of international collaboration to safeguard regional security and stability. It reflects the willingness of some nations to pursue their national interests without considering environmental, economic, or military risks. Furthermore, the shadow fleet represents an additional tool that these actors use to pursue their political goals by disrupting adversaries' infrastructure, sovereignty, and economy.

Increasing the EU's and NATO's countermeasures against shadow fleets in the Indo-Pacific region is crucial for global actors, as long as they respect regional methods and interests. Enhancing collaboration on this issue on an equal basis will improve detection, prevention, and counteraction against shadow fleet deployments and reduce their impact. This approach will help regional stakeholders bolster their resilience, security, and defense systems against actors willing to disrupt peace, stability, and security for their own interests and political goals.

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Endnotes

1 An interesting shift observed by experts is that while China used to conduct most of these activities by displaying the Chinese flag, it now uses other nations' flags. This increases its power of deniability and hardens the process of accountability.

2 For example, the [Vasili Shukshin](#), flagged under Belize, operated under a Russian company and registered in Hong Kong, navigated in late 2024 in the Hengchun Peninsula, criss-crossing Taiwan's Fangsahn undersea cable. And the [Yipeng-3](#), accused in November 2024 of being responsible for cutting two Baltic undersea communications cables.

3 Indo-Pacific Four or IP4: Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea.

4 IP4 are already participating in the program.