MARITIME SECURITY ANALYSIS

Best Management Practices in 2026

A gap analysis of BMP against the 2026 threat set: where the core still holds, where the threat has outrun it, and what to add by theatre.

MARITIME SECURITY DESK

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Best Management Practices earned their reputation against a specific enemy. Through the late 2000s and 2010s, the threat in the Gulf of Aden and the wider Indian Ocean was Somali piracy: skiffs, ladders, grappling hooks, and men trying to climb aboard a moving ship to take hostages for ransom. The guidance that grew up around that problem, refined across successive editions and still best known to most crews as BMP5, was built to detect, deter, delay, and report a boarding. It worked. Hardened ships were harder to board, alert watchkeepers spotted approaches earlier, and disciplined reporting brought naval forces to the right place at the right time.

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

1. The core of BMP, watchkeeping, reporting, and hardening against boarding, remains sound and was vindicated again by the late-2025 Somali piracy resurgence.
2. The 2026 threat is blended and different in every sea. A single attack can be both a boarding and a bombardment, and what works in the Somali Basin can be nearly irrelevant in the Red Sea.
3. The right posture is to keep doing the proven basics, read the threat by theatre and by the ship's own profile, and lean on routing and naval coordination where standoff weapons are in play.

The question for 2026 is whether that body of guidance still fits the threat, or whether it is a well-drilled answer to a problem that has partly moved on. The answer is mixed, and the mix is what this report sets out. Some of the core practices are as sound as they ever were and apply to almost any threat. Others were shaped by an adversary who wanted to board and survive, and they bend awkwardly against an adversary who wants to damage a ship from a distance and does not care about climbing aboard.

One housekeeping point first, because it affects how operators should talk about this. The standalone BMP5 booklet was withdrawn in March 2025 and folded into a consolidated publication, BMP Maritime Security, supported by a separate threat picture called the Maritime Industry Security Threat Overview that is refreshed every few months. The newer structure is deliberately built around threat and risk assessment rather than one named enemy, which is a sensible response to a more varied threat set. For most crews, though, the practical content they have internalised is still the BMP5 lineage of self-protective measures, so that is what this gap analysis weighs.

01 The durable core that holds almost everywhere

Three pillars hold up well, and operators should resist any temptation to treat them as dated.

Watchkeeping is the first. Early warning is valuable against every maritime threat, not just a skiff. A vigilant bridge and dedicated lookouts buy the seconds that matter whether the inbound contact is a pirate boat, an explosive drone boat, or a small aircraft. The 2025 attacks in the southern Red Sea reinforced this rather than undermined it. Crews that spotted approaching craft early had at least the chance to manoeuvre, alert naval forces, and get non-essential people to safer parts of the ship.

Reporting is the second pillar, and arguably the most important. The discipline of registering with the regional reporting bodies and sending position and incident reports to the military coordination cells is what connects a ship in trouble to the naval forces that can help it. Every recent rescue, from a pirated tanker freed by European naval forces to the survivors pulled from the water after ships were sunk in the Red Sea, depended on someone knowing where the ship was and what was happening to it. Reporting is cheap, it is within every crew's power, and it remains the backbone of the whole system.

Hardening against boarding is the third, and it retains real value because the boarding threat has not gone away. It has returned. Somali pirate action groups resumed long-range operations in late 2025, reaching vessels hundreds of nautical miles offshore using captured dhows as motherships. In the most serious recent case, a tanker's crew followed contingency procedures, stayed secured in the citadel, and were all safe when European naval forces arrived. That is BMP doing exactly what it was designed to do, and it happened months ago, not a decade ago.

02 The new reality: blended, and different in every sea

The temptation is to sort threats into two neat boxes, boarding that BMP handles and standoff weapons that it does not. Real attacks refuse to cooperate with that tidiness. The defining feature of the 2026 threat is the blend. When the bulk carrier Magic Seas was attacked in the Red Sea in 2025, it was fired on by manned skiffs with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades and struck by multiple uncrewed surface vessels in the same engagement. The Eternity C was hit over two days by a mix of small boats, sea drones, and missiles before it sank.

> A single event was simultaneously a boarding attempt and a bombardment.

BMP's real weakness is not that it fails against standoff weapons. It is that it has no organising concept for an attack that is both at once, where the citadel answers the men coming over the rail while doing nothing about the warhead closing from a mile away.

It is worth being precise about what is genuinely new, because the explosive boat itself is not. A small craft packed with explosives struck the USS Cole in Aden in 2000, and waterborne improvised explosive devices were named as a threat in the BMP5-era guidance. What changed is scale, range, and autonomy. Cheap uncrewed boats can now be sent in numbers, from several directions, with no one aboard to deter or to risk, launched by a state-backed actor who also has missiles and aerial drones. The guidance acknowledged the boat-bomb as a marginal case. The 2025 attacks moved it to the centre and added a swarm dimension the older advice was never structured to meet.

Just as important, the threat is not one thing, and it is not the same in every sea. The two active theatres in 2026 call for almost opposite responses. In the Red Sea and Bab-el-Mandeb, the danger is a state-backed campaign using missiles, aerial drones, and uncrewed boats, and the targeting is political: whether a ship is struck often depends on its ownership, flag, and recent port calls rather than on how well it is hardened. In the Somali Basin and the wider Indian Ocean, the danger is commercial hijack-for-ransom by pirates who still need to board, and against that, hardening and citadel discipline remain highly effective. A measure that is decisive in one sea can be nearly irrelevant in the other. An operator's question is never whether BMP is useful in general. It is whether BMP is useful for this transit.

A further gap sits underneath both theatres: navigational and electronic interference. Persistent GPS jamming and spoofing degrades position-keeping and complicates the very reporting the system relies on. It is also a warning sign in its own right, since jamming often precedes an engagement rather than merely inconveniencing it.

03 A calibrated view of what to add, by theatre

Not every supplementary measure deserves equal weight, and operators with finite attention and budget need a sense of priority. The starting point is the same everywhere: strengthen the threat assessment for each voyage using current, area-specific intelligence rather than a generic template, since the consolidated guidance is built around exactly this and the threat now varies sharply by location. Watch the right indicators, including GPS degradation as a possible precursor, small craft pacing or shadowing the ship, and the vessel's own risk profile, which in the Red Sea is the single biggest driver of whether it is a target at all.

For a Red Sea or Bab-el-Mandeb transit

The most effective decisions are made before the ship is in range. Routing and timing come first, informed by current advisories, because no self-protective measure on a merchant hull substitutes for staying outside an active engagement zone. Naval coordination and escort arrangements come next, since against missiles and drone swarms the decisive protection for a civilian ship is to move under the umbrella of forces that can actually defeat those weapons. Crew preparation is third and specific: brief and drill for standoff and drone scenarios, get non-essential personnel below the waterline and into protected spaces, and confirm that reporting still works when electronic navigation is degraded. Hardening matters least here, because razor wire does not stop a warhead, though the citadel still answers the boarding element of a blended attack.

For a Somali Basin transit

The order roughly inverts. The proven self-protective measures are the core of the answer: hardening, razor wire, secured access points, lookouts, and citadel readiness, all of which were vindicated again in late 2025. Reporting and registration with the regional bodies remain essential so that naval forces can respond, as they did when the citadel bought time off Eyl. Routing still matters, since pirate action groups now range far offshore, but the merchant ship's own measures carry real weight against an adversary who has to climb aboard.

In neither theatre does hard-kill or specialist counter-drone equipment aboard a merchant ship belong near the top of the list. Active defeat of missiles and drones is properly a naval function. Even electronic warfare, which navies do field, is beatable by frequency-hopping and inertial guidance, so expecting a merchant crew to perform counter-drone defeat is neither realistic nor, in most cases, lawful. It is worth understanding and worth watching as technology and rules evolve, and it should sit below the procedural and routing measures that deliver more protection per unit of effort today.

04 The human dimension

One change deserves separate mention because it falls outside the usual hardware framing. The 2025 attacks killed and injured seafarers, left crews in the water after their ships sank, and saw survivors taken hostage. A standoff weapon you cannot fight imposes a psychological load that a boarding attempt, for all its danger, does not, because there is nothing the crew can do to the incoming threat except endure it. That argues for two things the older guidance underweights: clear, rehearsed abandon-ship and post-attack survival procedures suited to a sudden sinking, and honest crew briefings about the nature of the threat in the chosen route. Treating cyber and physical security as

a duty of care to people, rather than only as protection of the hull, is the right lens for a threat that now routinely puts seafarers in the sea.

05 Bottom line

Best Management Practices are not obsolete, and treating them as a relic would be a mistake that gets crews hurt. Their core, watchkeeping, reporting, and hardening against boarding, remains sound and was vindicated again by the 2025 piracy resurgence, which the guidance handled more or less as designed. What has changed is that this core now covers only part of the threat, and that the threat is blended and different in every sea. The right posture for 2026 is neither to discard the practices nor to trust them to do work they cannot. It is to keep doing the proven basics well, to read the threat by theatre and by the ship's own profile, to lean hard on routing and naval coordination where the serious weapons are in play, and to remember that against missiles and drone swarms the decisive protection for a merchant ship is staying out of reach and staying connected to the forces that can defend it.

CLASSIFICATION	DESK	DATE	SCOPE
ILLUSTRATIVE ANALYSIS SAMPLE	MARITIME SECURITY DESK	REV. A · JUN 2026	RED SEA & SOMALI BASIN

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