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Maritime Governance in International Law: A Critical Analysis of UNCLOS and Contemporary Ocean Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The governance of the world's oceans represents one of the most sophisticated achievements of international legal architecture. This article examines sea laws particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982) through the prism of public international law, analyzing how maritime legal norms have evolved from customary practice into a comprehensive treaty-based regime. The paper systematically surveys the historical antecedents of the modern law of the sea, dissects the jurisdictional architecture of UNCLOS including territorial seas, exclusive economic zones, continental shelf entitlements, and the high seas regime, and critically assesses the mechanisms for dispute resolution, including the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). Contemporary challenges examined include piracy, disputed maritime boundaries, deep-seabed resource governance, climate change implications for sea-level baselines, and freedom of navigation tensions in semi-enclosed seas. The analysis draws on treaty texts, ICJ and ITLOS jurisprudence, state practice, and doctrinal literature. The article concludes that, despite ongoing tensions and enforcement deficits, UNCLOS remains the indispensable cornerstone of maritime international law, necessitating adaptive interpretation and institutional strengthening to address twenty-first-century challenges.

Keywords: UNCLOS · Law of the Sea · Maritime Jurisdiction · ITLOS · EEZ · Piracy · Freedom of Navigation · Continental Shelf · Deep Seabed · International Law

1. INTRODUCTION

The oceans cover approximately 71% of the Earth's surface and have been the arteries of human civilization since ancient times carrying trade, facilitating cultural exchange, sustaining fisheries, and latterly yielding vast mineral and hydrocarbon wealth from their floors. Yet for most of recorded history, the legal ordering of oceanic space was fragmentary, contested, and largely custom-based. The transformation of these customary norms into a systematic, codified framework of international law represents one of the most ambitious exercises in multilateral lawmaking of the twentieth century, culminating in the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982, which entered into force in 1994.

International law understood as the body of rules, norms, and principles that govern relations among states and, increasingly, other international standards has long grappled with the special character of the sea. Unlike territorial land, no single state can exclusively claim the whole ocean; yet each coastal state exercises vital interests in adjacent waters. This tension between exclusivity and openness, between coastal state sovereignty and freedom of navigation, is the animating dialectic of the entire law of the sea.

This article examines sea laws as an integral and distinctive domain of public international law. It proceeds in six main parts: (1) a historical survey of the law of the sea's development; (2) an analysis of UNCLOS's jurisdictional architecture; (3) an examination of maritime boundary delimitation; (4) a review of dispute settlement mechanisms; (5) an assessment of contemporary challenges including piracy, environmental protection, and geopolitical tensions; and (6) conclusions on the future of the maritime legal order. Throughout, the article is grounded in treaty texts, ITLOS and ICJ jurisprudence, and leading scholarly commentary, with reference to statistical data illustrating the empirical dimensions of maritime governance. The overarching argument is that UNCLOS constitutes a "constitution for the oceans" (Koh, 1983, p. xxxiii), providing the essential normative scaffolding for maritime order, but that its effectiveness depends critically on state compliance, institutional adaptation, and interpretive evolution in response to challenges unanticipated by its drafters.

2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SEA LAWS

2.1 Classical Origins: Mare Liberum versus Mare Clausum

The foundational debate in the history of the law of the sea was posed with stark clarity by the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius in his seminal 1609 tract *Mare Liberum* (The Free Sea). Grotius argued that the sea, being by nature incapable of occupation and necessary for the commerce of all mankind, was incapable of appropriation and must be free to all nations. His thesis arose as a practical brief for the Dutch East India Company's claim to trade freely in Asian waters against Portuguese monopolistic assertions, but its doctrinal implications were universal (Grotius, 1609/2004).

Grotius's argument was challenged most directly by the English jurist John Selden in *Mare Clausum* (1635), which asserted that the seas adjacent to England—and by extension, seas generally—could be subject to sovereign dominion. While Selden's specific claims have long since been abandoned, the principle of coastal state authority over adjacent waters survived in modified form as the doctrine of the territorial sea.

By the eighteenth century, a pragmatic compromise had emerged in state practice. The cannon-shot rule—formalized in the three-nautical-mile limit defined the extent of coastal state authority as the range of defensive artillery. Beyond that narrow belt, the high seas were free: open to navigation, fishing, and commerce by all states. This binary regime territorial sea/high seas formed the backbone of the pre-UNCLOS customary law of the sea (Churchill & Lowe, 1999).

2.2 The Truman Proclamation and the Emergence of the EEZ

The classical bilateral architecture began fracturing after World War II. In 1945, U.S. President Harry Truman issued two proclamations claiming jurisdiction over the natural resources of the continental shelf adjacent to U.S. coasts and asserting authority to establish fishery conservation zones. The Truman Proclamations (1945) ignited a wave of unilateral coastal state claims—particularly from Latin American states, which asserted 200-nautical-mile zones of exclusive fishery or resource jurisdiction (McDorman, 2010).

The resulting chaos of overlapping and conflicting claims made clear that the existing legal framework was inadequate. The international community responded through a series of codification conferences under the auspices of the United Nations.

2.3 The Three Geneva Conferences and the Road to UNCLOS III

The first UN Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS I) was convened in Geneva in 1958, producing four conventions: on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone; on the High Seas; on the Continental Shelf; and on Fishing and Conservation of the Living Resources of the High Seas. While these instruments codified important customary rules, they failed to resolve the politically charged question of the breadth of the territorial sea.

UNCLOS II (1960) similarly failed to reach agreement on this question, deadlocking over the

competing interests of maritime powers (favoring a narrow three-mile limit) and coastal states (seeking wider zones). The impasse, combined with the emergence of newly decolonized states eager to maximize national resource jurisdiction, set the stage for the comprehensive negotiating process that would produce UNCLOS III.

Opened for signature in Montego Bay, Jamaica in December 1982, UNCLOS entered into force on November 16, 1994 (one year after the 60th ratification). It now has 169 state parties (as of 2024), making it one of the most widely ratified international conventions in history (United Nations, 2024). Even states that have not formally ratified—most notably the United States—generally accept its rules as reflecting customary international law.

Figure 1: UNCLOS State Parties Ratification Growth (1994-2024)

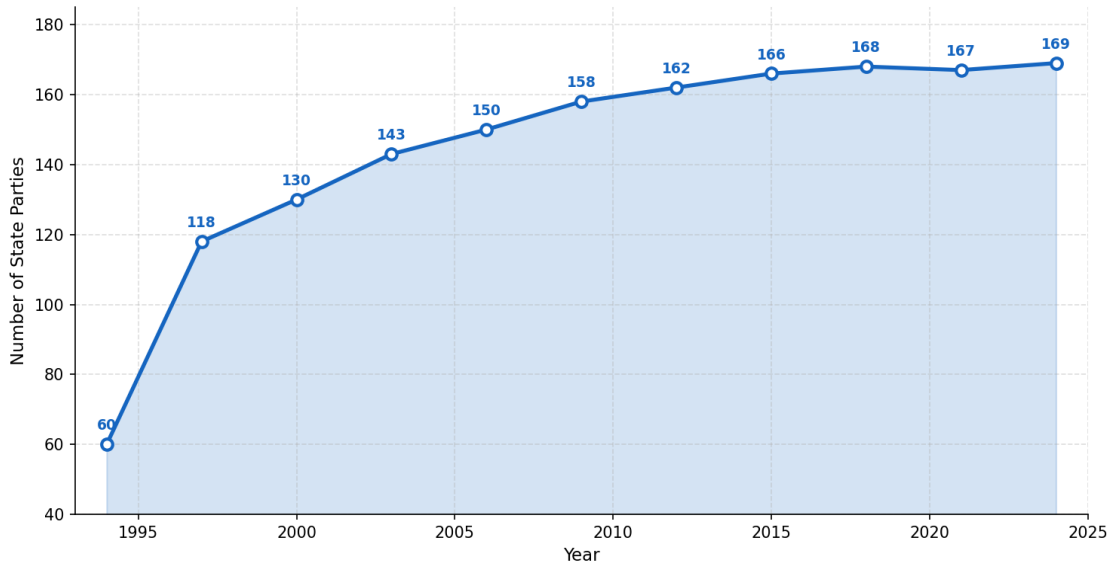


Figure 1: Growth in UNCLOS State Party Ratifications (1994–2024). Source: United Nations Treaty Collection (2024).

3. THE JURISDICTIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF UNCLOS

3.1 Overview

UNCLOS establishes a sophisticated spatial ordering of maritime jurisdiction, allocating different bundles of rights and duties to coastal states and other states across a series of concentric zones measured from baselines drawn along the coast. This zonal system reflects a careful balance between coastal state interests in resource exploitation and security, and the international community's interest in freedom of navigation and access to the global commons.

Table 1 below summarizes the principal maritime zones established by UNCLOS, their outer limits, the nature of coastal state rights, and the relevant treaty provisions.

Table 1: UNCLOS Maritime Jurisdiction Zones

Maritime Zone	Outer Limit	Coastal State Rights	Legal (UNCLOS)	Basis
Internal Waters	Baselines	Full sovereignty; no right of innocent passage	Art. 8	
Territorial Sea	12 NM	Sovereignty; subject to innocent passage	Art. 2–32	
Contiguous Zone	24 NM	Customs, fiscal, immigration enforcement	Art. 33	
Exclusive Economic Zone	200 NM	Resource sovereignty (fisheries, hydrocarbons); navigational freedoms persist	Art. 55–75	
Continental Shelf	200–350 NM	Seabed/subsoil resource rights; ipso facto and ab initio	Art. 76–85	
High Seas	Beyond 200 NM	Freedom of navigation, overflight, fishing, scientific research	Art. 86–120	
Area (Seabed)	Beyond national jurisdiction	Common heritage of mankind; managed by ISA	Art. 133–191	

Note: NM = nautical miles. ISA = International Seabed Authority. Source: UNCLOS (1982), Parts II–XI.

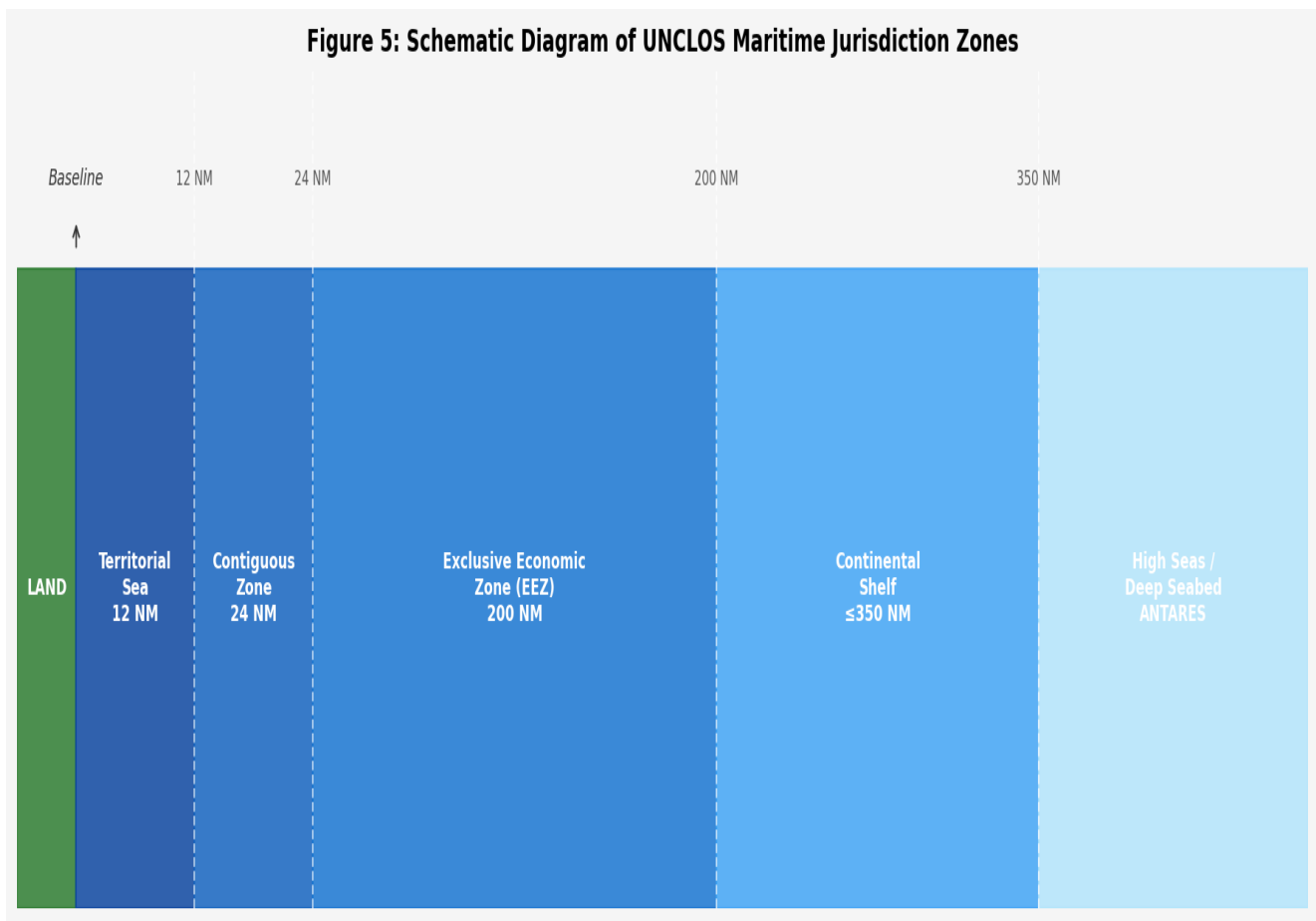


Figure 5: Schematic Diagram of UNCLOS Maritime Jurisdiction Zones. Source: Author's illustration based on UNCLOS (1982).

3.2 Baselines

The entire system depends upon baselines, which are the low-water lines along coasts from which maritime zones are measured (UNCLOS, Art. 5). For straight coastlines, the normal baseline is the low-water line. For deeply indented coastlines or coastlines fringed with islands, Article 7 permits straight baselines connecting appropriate points—a rule whose liberal application by coastal states has been a recurrent source of controversy. The ICJ addressed the legitimacy of straight baselines in the *Anglo-Norwegian Fisheries Case* (1951), holding that Norway's system was consistent with international law given the special character of its coastline.

3.3 The Territorial Sea

The territorial sea extends up to 12 nautical miles from baselines (Art. 3). Within it, the coastal state exercises sovereignty subject to the right of innocent passage—the right of foreign ships to traverse the territorial sea continuously and expeditiously without prejudice to the peace, good order, or security of the coastal state (Art. 17-19). The coastal state may not hamper innocent passage and may not levy charges merely for passage, though it may adopt laws on a defined list of subjects (safety, environmental protection, fisheries conservation, etc.) applicable to innocent passage (Art. 21).

A distinct regime applies to international straits used for international navigation, such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca. Ships and aircraft enjoy the right of transit passage through such straits, which

cannot be suspended by the bordering state (Art. 38). This rule was a key concession secured by maritime powers during UNCLOS III negotiations, ensuring freedom of navigation through strategically vital chokepoints.

3.4 The Exclusive Economic Zone

The EEZ, extending up to 200 nautical miles from baselines, was the most innovative juridical contribution of UNCLOS. Within it, the coastal state has sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring and exploiting, conserving and managing the natural resources of the waters, seabed, and subsoil (Art. 56). The coastal state also has jurisdiction over marine scientific research, artificial islands, and marine environmental protection. Critically, however, the EEZ preserves high-seas freedoms of navigation, overflight, and laying of submarine cables and pipelines for all states (Art. 58). This dual character—coastal state resource sovereignty coexisting with navigational freedom—has given rise to persistent interpretive disputes about what activities are permissible within another state's EEZ without consent. Military activities, intelligence gathering, and hydrographic surveys are particularly contested (Rayfuse, 2004).

The EEZ has revolutionized the geography of global fisheries governance. Approximately 90% of commercially exploitable marine fish stocks lie within EEZs. Coastal states have used their resource management authority to establish licensing regimes, impose catch quotas, and, in many cases, enforce these through coast guard operations against foreign fishing vessels. Conflicts over EEZ fishing rights—between distant-water fishing states and coastal states—have been among the most common sources of maritime disputes.

Figure 2: UNCLOS Maritime Jurisdiction Zones - Spatial Extent

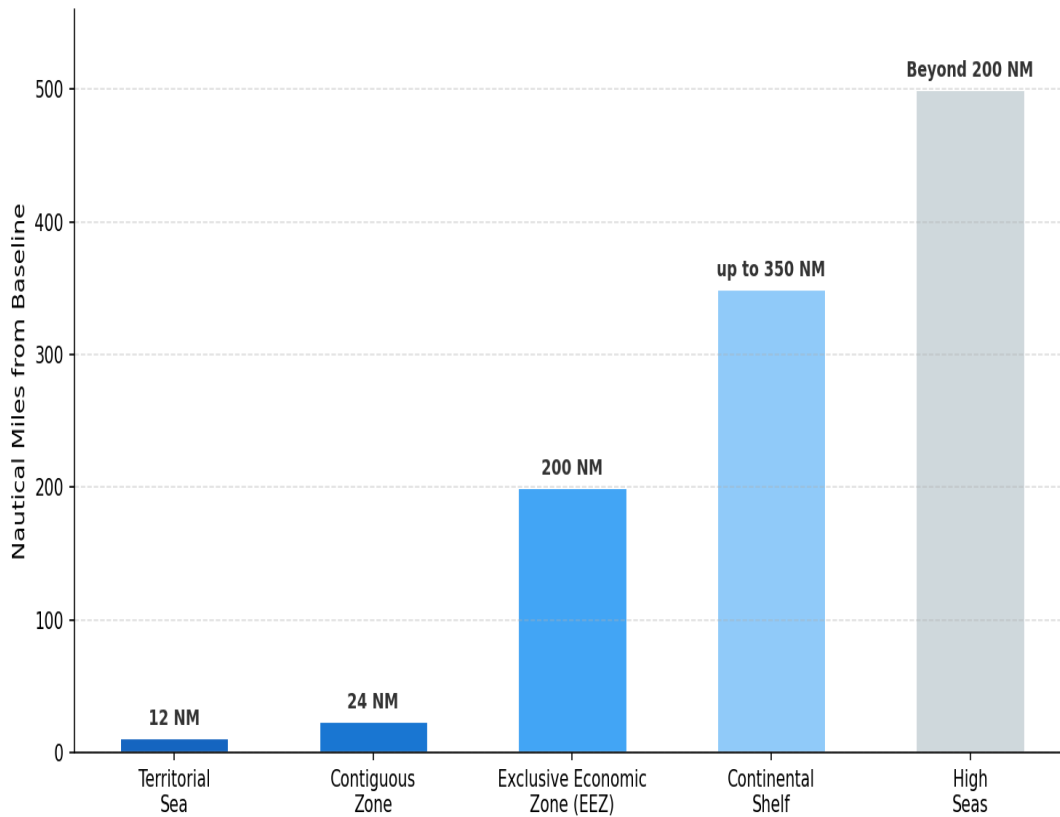


Figure 2: UNCLOS Maritime Jurisdiction Zones – Spatial Extent in Nautical Miles. Source: UNCLOS (1982), Parts II–VIII.

3.5 The Continental Shelf

The continental shelf regime confers on the coastal state sovereign rights over the seabed and subsoil for the purpose of exploring and exploiting their natural resources, including sedentary species (Art. 77). Uniquely, these rights exist *ipso facto* and *ab initio*—they do not depend on formal proclamation or effective occupation. The continental shelf extends to the natural prolongation of the land territory to the outer edge of the continental margin, or to 200 nautical miles where the margin does not extend that far (Art. 76).

Where the margin extends beyond 200 nautical miles, the coastal state may claim extended continental shelf rights up to a maximum of 350 nautical miles or 100 nautical miles beyond the 2,500-metre isobath. These extended claims must be submitted to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), an expert body that provides technical recommendations on the outer limits. As of 2024, over 90 submissions have been made to the CLCS, with significant submissions from states including Russia (claiming extensive areas of the Arctic seabed), Australia, and Norway (CLCS, 2024).

3.6 The High Seas and the Area

Beyond national maritime zones, the high seas remain the global commons, governed by the principle of freedom: freedom of navigation, overflight, fishing, scientific research, construction of artificial islands, and laying of submarine cables and pipelines (Art. 87). The flag state principle requires that every ship on the high seas be registered in a state and fly that state's flag; the flag state exercises exclusive jurisdiction over the ship except in defined circumstances (piracy, slave trade, etc.).

The deep seabed and ocean floor beyond national jurisdiction—designated "the Area"—is proclaimed the "common heritage of mankind" (Art. 136). Its mineral resources are not subject to national appropriation; instead, they are administered by the International Seabed Authority (ISA), an autonomous international organization. The ISA issues licenses for exploration (and eventually exploitation) of polymetallic nodules, seafloor massive sulphides, and cobalt-rich crusts in the Area. As of 2024, the ISA has approved 31 exploration contracts but is still developing the regulatory framework (Mining Code) for commercial exploitation—a process fraught with controversy over environmental safeguards and benefit-sharing (ISA, 2024).

4. MARITIME BOUNDARY DELIMITATION

4.1 Legal Framework

Where the maritime zones of adjacent or opposite states overlap, a boundary must be delimited. UNCLOS provides the basic normative directive: delimitation of the territorial sea (Art. 15), EEZ (Art. 74), and continental shelf (Art. 83) between states with opposite or adjacent coasts shall be effected by agreement on the basis of international law in order to achieve an equitable solution.

The ICJ and ITLOS have developed a three-stage methodology for maritime delimitation. First, a provisional equidistance line is constructed. Second, the court examines whether there are relevant circumstances justifying adjustment of the equidistance line. Third, a disproportionality check is performed to ensure the result is not grossly inequitable (Maritime Delimitation in the Black Sea, ICJ, 2009).

4.2 Contentious Boundaries and Geopolitical Disputes

Despite the legal framework, dozens of maritime boundary disputes remain unresolved, often because competing sovereignty claims over islands, rocks, or shoals determine the location of baselines and thus the extent of maritime entitlements. The South China Sea dispute is perhaps the most internationally prominent: China's expansive nine-dash-line claim, asserting historic rights over most of the South China Sea, was rejected as incompatible with UNCLOS by an arbitral tribunal in *The South China Sea Arbitration* (Philippines v. China, 2016). The tribunal held that China had no legal basis for claiming historic rights to resources within the nine-dash line, and that features claimed by China as islands were legally reefs or low-

tide elevations generating no EEZ entitlements (PCA, 2016).

China declined to participate in the proceedings and has refused to accept the award—a striking example of the limits of international adjudication when the respondent state does not consent to jurisdiction and refuses compliance. Similar disputes persist in the East China Sea (Japan-China-Korea), the eastern Mediterranean (Greece-Turkey-Cyprus), and the Arctic (Russia-Norway-Canada-Denmark-United States), where competing continental shelf claims intersect with geopolitical rivalry.

The delimitation of maritime boundaries thus reveals the inherent tension in international law between the normative aspiration of law-governed resolution and the political reality of state power. Where states have the political will to negotiate, international law provides a workable framework; where they do not, disputes may persist for decades.

5. DISPUTE SETTLEMENT MECHANISMS

5.1 The UNCLOS Dispute Settlement System

One of UNCLOS's most significant contributions to international law is its elaborately designed compulsory dispute settlement system (Part XV). Unlike most multilateral treaties, UNCLOS requires state parties to submit disputes concerning its interpretation or application to binding third-party procedures if they cannot resolve them by negotiation or other agreed means. States may choose among: ITLOS; the ICJ; Annex VII arbitration (the default); or Annex VIII special arbitration for technical disputes (Art. 287).

The system includes important limitations: coastal state discretion over fisheries, marine scientific research, and military activities is excluded from compulsory jurisdiction (Art. 297-298). Nonetheless, it has been invoked frequently, generating a substantial body of jurisprudence on issues ranging from prompt release of arrested vessels to environmental obligations and fisheries conservation.

5.2 The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea

ITLOS was established by Annex VI of UNCLOS and sits in Hamburg, Germany. It has 21 judges serving nine-year terms, elected by state parties to represent the principal legal systems and equitable geographical distribution. ITLOS has jurisdiction over disputes submitted under UNCLOS and other agreements conferring jurisdiction, including the ISA Agreement and bilateral fisheries treaties.

Particularly notable is ITLOS's prompt release jurisdiction (Art. 292): if a coastal state detains a foreign vessel and refuses to release it on reasonable bond pending full proceedings on the underlying dispute, the flag state may apply to ITLOS for prompt release. ITLOS has issued prompt release orders in numerous cases, establishing that bond must be set at a level reflecting the gravity of the alleged offences but cannot be used as a de facto punitive measure.

Table 2: Selected Landmark ITLOS Cases

Case No.	Case Name	Parties	Year / Significance
Case 1	M/V Saiga (Prompt Release)	Saint Vincent & the Guinea v.	1997 – First ITLOS judgment
Case 3	Southern Bluefin Tuna Cases	Australia & NZ v. Japan	1999 – Provisional measures; fisheries
Case 10	MOX Plant Case	Ireland v. United Kingdom	2001 – Environmental obligations
Case 21	Request for Advisory Opinion (SRFC)	Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission	2015 – Flag State obligations

Case 31	Advisory Opinion on Climate Change	COSIS Request	2024 – Climate obligations under UNCLOS
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Note: This table presents a selection of landmark cases. Source: ITLOS (2024).

Figure 3: Cumulative ITLOS Cases Filed (1998-2024)

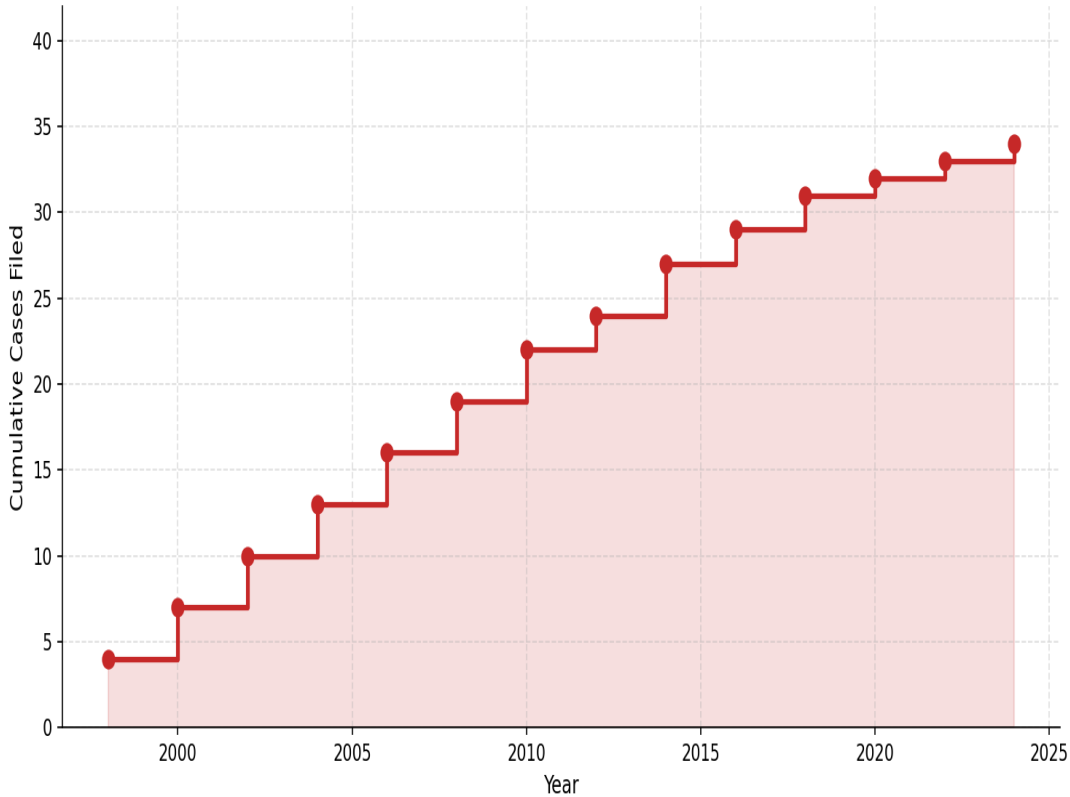


Figure 3: Cumulative ITLOS Cases Filed (1998–2024). Source: ITLOS Case List (2024).

5.3 Advisory Opinions and the Climate Change Frontier

A landmark development occurred in 2024 when ITLOS delivered its advisory opinion on the obligations of states under UNCLOS with respect to climate change, requested by the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law (COSIS). The Chamber held that greenhouse gas emissions constitute marine pollution under UNCLOS Article 1(4), and that state parties have legally binding obligations under Articles 194 and 207 to reduce GHG emissions to protect the marine environment (ITLOS, 2024). This advisory opinion has profound implications for the intersection of climate law and the law of the sea, potentially strengthening the legal basis for Small Island developing states to hold major emitters accountable.

6. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO THE MARITIME LEGAL ORDER

6.1 Piracy and Maritime Security

Piracy defined under UNCLOS Article 101 as illegal acts of violence, detention, or depredation committed for private ends on the high seas—remains a significant threat to maritime security and the international

trading system. Under Article 110, warships of any state may exercise the right of visit on suspected pirate vessels, and under Article 105, seize pirate ships and arrest the persons on board for prosecution by any state. The most acute piracy crisis in recent decades erupted off the coast of Somalia between 2008 and 2012, when Somali pirates launched hundreds of attacks on merchant shipping in the Gulf of Aden and western Indian Ocean. At its peak in 2011, Somali pirates were holding some 740 seafarers hostage simultaneously. The international response involved naval coalitions (EU Naval Force Atalanta, NATO, Combined Task Force 151), UN Security Council resolutions authorizing hot pursuit into Somali territorial waters, and the prosecution of pirates in numerous national courts. The crisis receded significantly after 2012 due to naval patrolling, industry protective measures, and improved Somali governance—though residual risks persist (IMB, 2024).

West Africa—particularly the Gulf of Guinea—has emerged as the new epicenter of maritime crime. Unlike Somali piracy, which typically targeted ships for ransom, Gulf of Guinea piracy is primarily focused on stealing cargo (particularly petroleum products) and kidnapping seafarers for ransom. The legal response has been complicated by the fact that attacks frequently occur within states' EEZs, implicating coastal state jurisdiction rather than the high-seas piracy regime.

Figure 4: Global Maritime Piracy & Armed Robbery Incidents (2010-2023)

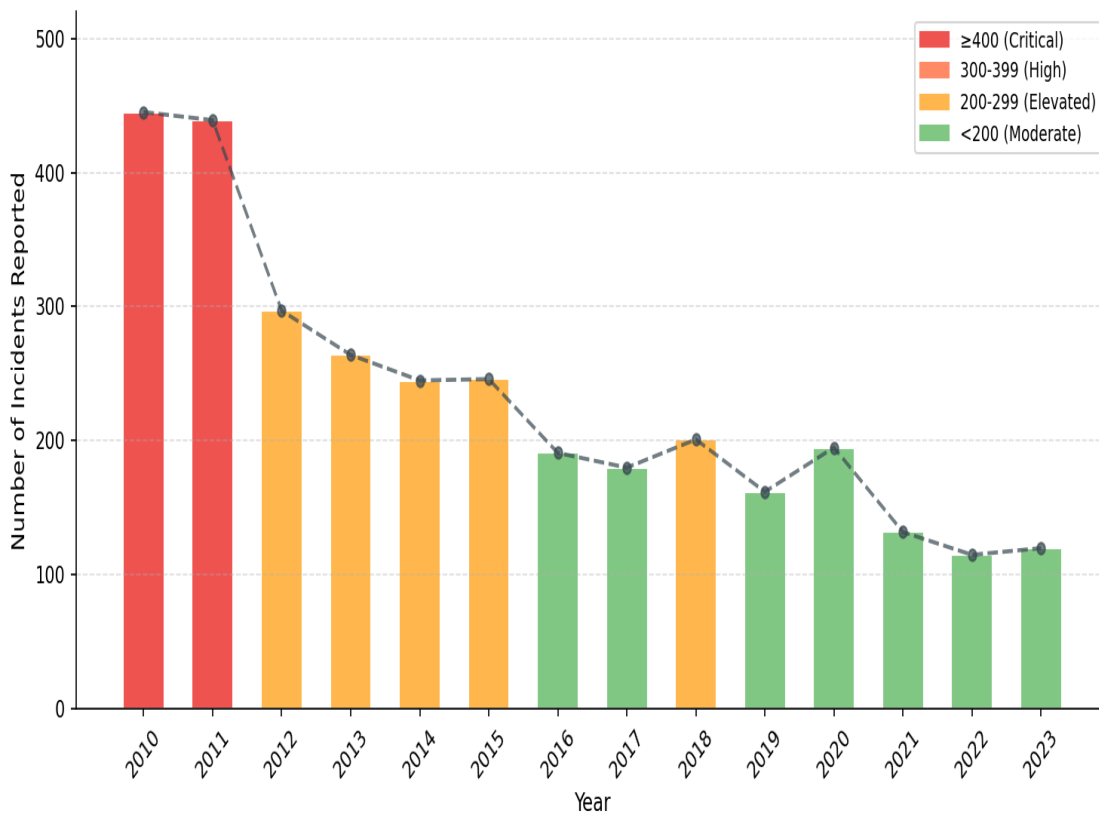


Figure 4: Global Maritime Piracy and Armed Robbery Incidents (2010–2023). Source: IMB Piracy Report (2024).

6.2 Freedom of Navigation and Geopolitical Tensions

Freedom of navigation—the right of ships of all nations to traverse the high seas and EEZs without interference—is a foundational principle of international maritime order. In recent years, it has been the subject of intense geopolitical contestation, particularly in the South China Sea, where China has constructed

artificial islands and militarized features claimed as Chinese territory, challenging the navigational freedoms of other states in those waters.

The United States, as the world's preeminent maritime power, has conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs)—deliberate naval transits challenging what it considers excessive maritime claims—not only against China but also against states as diverse as Iran, Russia, and Indonesia. These operations reflect a deliberate strategy of maintaining navigational freedoms through active state practice and protest against claimed customary law derogations. Critics, however, argue that FONOPs can be destabilizing and may escalate tensions in volatile maritime regions (Pedrozo, 2018).

6.3 Environmental Protection of the Marine Environment

Part XII of UNCLOS imposes a comprehensive framework of obligations on state parties to protect and preserve the marine environment. States must prevent, reduce, and control pollution from all sources—land-based sources, seabed activities, dumping, vessels, and atmospheric deposition. The coastal state has enforcement jurisdiction over vessel-source pollution in its EEZ. The port state may inspect and detain foreign vessels that fail to comply with international pollution standards (MARPOL) (Art. 218-220).

The BBNJ Agreement (Agreement under UNCLOS on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction), adopted in June 2023 and opened for signature in September 2023, represents a significant advance in the governance of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. It establishes a framework for area-based management tools (including marine protected areas), environmental impact assessments, sharing of marine genetic resources, and capacity building. The BBNJ Agreement has been hailed as the most significant addition to the law of the sea since UNCLOS itself (UNGA, 2023).

6.4 Deep Seabed Mining Governance

The prospect of commercial deep seabed mining—exploiting the vast polymetallic nodule fields of the Clarion-Clipperton Fracture Zone and other areas—has generated intense legal and environmental debate. The ISA's mandate under UNCLOS Part XI is to ensure effective protection of the marine environment while promoting the orderly development of seabed resources for the benefit of mankind as a whole. The ISA has issued 31 exploration contracts to a range of contractors, including private companies sponsored by Pacific island states (notably Nauru's sponsorship of The Metals Company) and state-owned enterprises from China, India, South Korea, and Russia.

In 2021, Nauru triggered the "two-year rule" under UNCLOS Annex III, Article 5, requiring the ISA to finalize mining regulations by July 2023 or provisionally consider applications under existing exploration regulations. This created an intense political crisis within the ISA, as the Mining Code remained deeply contested on issues including environmental baseline requirements, liability for environmental damage, and benefit-sharing. As of 2024, the ISA has not finalized exploitation regulations, and a moratorium movement—supported by the EU, Canada, New Zealand, and many Pacific island states—has gained momentum (ISA, 2024).

6.5 Climate Change and Sea-Level Rise

Perhaps the most structurally disruptive long-term challenge to the maritime legal order is sea-level rise driven by climate change. As sea levels rise, the low-water lines from which territorial seas, EEZs, and continental shelves are measured may shift inland, potentially reducing the maritime zones of coastal states—and in the most extreme cases, submerging the land territory of small island states altogether.

The human and legal implications are profound. If the land territory of an island state disappears, does it continue to exist as a state? Do its maritime zones persist? UNCLOS as currently written does not address these questions. A growing body of scholarship argues for interpreting UNCLOS to permit "ambulatory

baseline fixation"—the legal freezing of baselines at their current positions to protect island states' maritime entitlements as sea levels rise (Caron, 2009; Freestone, 2020). Some states, including Tuvalu and Fiji, have enacted domestic legislation or entered treaties purporting to fix their baselines, though the international legal validity of such measures remains unsettled.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The law of the sea, as codified in UNCLOS and supplemented by ancillary treaties and customary international law, represents a monumental achievement in the governance of global commons. It has transformed the anarchic seascape of competing national claims into a largely rule-governed order, established the institutional infrastructure for maritime dispute settlement, and provided the normative framework for addressing threats from piracy to environmental degradation.

Yet UNCLOS is not a static document. Its 320 articles and nine annexes were the product of nine years of diplomatic negotiation (1973–1982), reflecting the political compromises and technological horizons of their time. Forty years of implementation have exposed gaps, generated interpretive disputes, and confronted challenges—from deep seabed mining to climate change—that its drafters could not have fully anticipated. The adaptive capacity of the treaty, as exercised through state practice, ITLOS and arbitral jurisprudence, and supplementary agreements like the BBNJ Agreement, has been remarkable.

The most pressing challenges for the coming decades cluster around three axes. First, geopolitical: the contestation of navigational freedoms and maritime boundaries in the South China Sea and elsewhere requires sustained diplomatic engagement and adherence to dispute settlement mechanisms, even when compliance is politically inconvenient. Second, environmental: the existential threats posed by climate change, ocean acidification, and biodiversity loss demand an ambitious and coordinated international response that UNCLOS provides only the legal skeleton for; implementation requires national legislation, regional cooperation, and adequate financing. Third, technological: deep seabed mining and emerging technologies (autonomous vessels, undersea drones) create novel regulatory demands that the ISA and UNCLOS institutions must address urgently.

Ultimately, the law of the sea, like all international law, depends on the political will of states to comply, cooperate, and develop it in good faith. The oceans are too important—to global trade, food security, climate regulation, and biodiversity—for their legal governance to fail. UNCLOS provides the indispensable constitutional framework; its further development and faithful implementation are obligations that fall upon the entire international community.

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