STONE PEAK SYSTEMS

The Contested Coastline

Migrant flows, seabed infrastructure and the case for uncrewed vessels

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STONE PEAK SYSTEMS · WEEKLY BRIEF

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FEATURE PILLAR · GEOPOLITICAL · STORY 1

Fewer Boats, More Bodies: The Mediterranean Mortality Paradox

~60,000

Sea arrivals, 2026 YTD

Down about 39% from 98,040 in the same period of 2025 (Mediterranean and Atlantic, to 15 Sept).

2,292+

Dead or missing

Up about 15% from 1,999. IOM says the true toll is likely higher: whole boats can vanish unrecorded.

1 in 26

Arrivals-to-deaths ratio

About 1 death per 26 arrivals, against about 1 per 49 a year earlier. Stone Peak calculation from the figures above.

What Is Happening

Control measures and route displacement are shrinking volumes, but the flows that remain are moving through longer, less observed and less seaworthy channels. The Central Mediterranean is still the deadliest route despite a 55% fall in arrivals.

Strategic Implication

Falling arrivals are being read in capitals as policy success. The mortality data says something different: the problem has become **harder to see**, not smaller. A coastline that cannot observe what approaches it cannot manage either the humanitarian or the security risk.

Sources: EU Perspectives, Europe migrant sea arrivals and deaths (Sept 2026), citing IOM data as of 15 Sept 2026.

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FEATURE PILLAR · GEOPOLITICAL · STORY 2

Routes Are Lengthening and Going Dark

Route	Arrivals 2026 (2025)	Dead / missing 2026 (2025)
Central Mediterranean (Libya, Tunisia to Italy, Malta)	21,393 (48,231), down 55%	996 (844), up 18%
Eastern Mediterranean (Greece)	20,428 (about 25,400)	417 (284), up 47%
Western Med and Atlantic (mainly Spain)	16,794 (22,855), down 27%	879 (n/a)

The Drivers

Longer crossings, such as departures from eastern Libya toward Crete, mean more hours at sea. Overcrowded, unseaworthy hulls remain standard. IOM also cites reduced transparency from maritime authorities and "invisible shipwrecks" that never enter official statistics.

Why It Matters Now

Every new departure corridor is a new approach vector toward coastline, ports and landing sites. Low-signature, unregistered boats on long routes are precisely the target set that crewed patrols and fixed radar cover poorly. **The surveillance gap is the shared variable.**

Sources: EU Perspectives (Sept 2026), citing IOM. Reuters and IOM DTM pages could not be retrieved for this brief.

FEATURE PILLAR · GEOPOLITICAL · STORY 3

Ceuta and the EU Pact: Pressure Moves, It Doesn't Disappear

72,000+

Crossings into Ceuta, July

From Morocco, largely over the land and coastal border; most later returned. IOM recorded at least 97 deaths during the crisis. Excluded from the sea-arrival totals.

June 2026

EU Migration and Asylum Pact in force

Mandatory registration and screening, faster asylum and return procedures. Rules for return hubs outside the EU also agreed.

Strategic Implication

Tighter controls change **where and how** people move before they change whether they move. A single episode like Ceuta shows how fast border pressure can concentrate on one small coastal point, with no sea-arrival statistic recording it.

The Caveat

The fall in arrivals does not prove deterrence caused it. Brussels still lacks a way to measure whether controls shift patterns, while accounting for deaths on the routes that remain in use.

IOM recommends: stronger international search-and-rescue cooperation, action against smugglers and traffickers, and more safe and regular entry routes.

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Sources: EU Perspectives (Sept 2026), citing IOM.

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The Other Half of the Coast: Seabed Infrastructure Under Strain

Date	Incident	Damage
Sept 2022	Nord Stream attack	Pipelines
Oct 2023	Balticonnector incident (two vessels involved)	Estonia-Finland gas pipeline; Sweden-Estonia data cable
Dec 2024	Tanker *Eagle S*, Russia-linked "ghost fleet"	Estlink 2 power cable plus four telecom lines. Case later dismissed
Dec 31, 2025	Cargo ship *Fitburg*, anchor apparently dragged	Helsinki-Tallinn cable and two Sweden/Estonia/Finland links. Ship seized

Attribution Is the Weak Point

Fitburg: Romanian-built, Korean-owned yard, two former names, Turkish operator, Georgian and Kazakh crew. Finland has made no accusation and NATO declined to. Russia reportedly runs up to 600 "ghost fleet" vessels, often falsely registered.

Strategic Implication

Anchors, trawling and storms cause many faults, so most incidents are probably accidental. Deliberate attacks are rising, though, and the deniable cases are indistinguishable at the moment of damage. The infrastructure threat is a **vessel-behaviour problem**.

Sources: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Seabed Zero (Feb 2026).

FEATURE PILLAR · GEOPOLITICAL · STORY 5

Same Water, Same Blind Spot

The Scale Problem

The Dutch North Sea alone is 58,500 km^2 at about 80 m depth, in pitch black, with 160 platforms, about 4,000 km of cables and a planned 11 GW of wind by 2030 (2.5 GW built). Roughly 97% of global communication runs through undersea fibre. Cables also come ashore at landing points that are exposed on land.

The Governance Problem

Cables are privately owned, and under existing law owners carry repair liability for what is a public good. No "wall" is possible at sea. Europe's undersea surveillance atrophied after the Cold War and is only now being rebuilt. NATO's Baltic Sentry fuses aircraft, ships and drones to remove deniability.

Stone Peak Assessment

The sources treat irregular migration and infrastructure sabotage as separate problems, and none links migrant boats to cable damage. They converge anyway: both are **low-signature vessels operating in poorly observed coastal waters**, where detection depends on persistent presence rather than periodic patrols. That shared sensing deficit, not a shared threat actor, is what makes one answer relevant to both.

Sources: TNO, Diving into seabed security; Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (Feb 2026); EU Perspectives (Sept 2026).

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THEMATIC PILLAR · AUTONOMOUS SYSTEMS · STORY 1

Why Uncrewed: Persistence Is the Capability

30 days
Endurance claimed for an 8.4 m class USV (650 nm range, up to 55 kn)

1,200 mi
Range claimed for a 12 m+ class USV with weeks of endurance, 40+ kn

2 months
Endurance claimed for a long-endurance ISR USV with onboard AI processing

The Logic

A crewed patrol vessel delivers presence for days and at high cost per hull-day. The gap described in the previous pages is continuous observation of wide, shallow, dark waters. Uncrewed surface vessels trade speed-of-reaction and rescue capacity for **weeks of low-cost loiter**, which is what vessel-behaviour monitoring requires.

All figures are manufacturer-stated and not independently validated.

Strategic Implication

Persistent sensing converts a deniable act into an observed one. A vessel loitering near a cable corridor or a departure approach changes both smugglers' and saboteurs' risk calculus without a warship on station.

Sources: NextGen Defense reporting, Sept to Oct 2026 (used for capability context only).

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THEMATIC PILLAR · AUTONOMOUS SYSTEMS · STORY 2

Cost, Risk and the Seabed Layer

Cost and Scale

Allies are being urged to "step up" use of lower-cost, scalable uncrewed systems to patrol European waters rather than rely on crewed warships alone. A US Fleet Forces official framed it as spreading capability across an area **without buying large manned vessels and their refuelling support**.

Crew Risk

Uncrewed radar and sensor hulls add "an extra set of eyes" without placing another crewed asset in harm's way, which matters near contested waters and in the shallow Baltic, where seabed targets are exposed.

Hybrid Fleet

Navies are moving toward mixed crewed and uncrewed fleets. USVs work alone or as a sensing layer for conventional ships, which keep the authority to board, seize or rescue.

Surface Plus Subsurface

Seabed protection needs the water column covered, not just the surface. UUV concepts now reach 6,000 m, with about four days of active movement and **weeks in passive seabed listening mode**. A surface vessel can launch and recover aircraft and dock UUVs to recharge and offload data, linking air, surface and underwater sensors into one operating picture. Sea trials are still pending, and no costs or unit numbers have been published.

Sources: NextGen Defense (Sept to Oct 2026); TNO on unmanned tools as part of a wider technology mix.

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THEMATIC PILLAR · AUTONOMOUS SYSTEMS · STORY 3

The Binding Constraint Is Logistics, Not Sensors

400 gal
Fuel transferred

~100
Successful connection cycles

A US Navy demonstration off Virginia had a towed robotic device capture a remotely controlled USV, refuel it and release it, across several days of testing.

USVs that must return to port to refuel are capped in time at sea and distance from base. Removing that limit is what turns weeks of endurance into **sustained presence**.

Strategic Implication

Whoever solves at-sea resupply and recharge for small uncrewed hulls unlocks the persistent coastal picture that the Mediterranean and Baltic gaps demand.

Not Yet Autonomous

The tests were operator-assisted. The next step is a full autonomous sequence (rendezvous, capture, fuel, release, return to mission), plus lower command-link latency and better local positioning.

Quote

The capability "will allow us to have greater reliance on unmanned vessels": Ronald Raymer, US Fleet Forces Command.

Sources: NextGen Defense, US Navy drone boat refuelling demonstration (Sept 9, 2026).

Where Autonomy Stops: Detect, Cue, Decide

UNCREWED

Detect

Loiter, listen and scan across surface and seabed for weeks.

›

UNCREWED + AI

Classify

Separate fishing, cargo and anomalous patterns, such as anchor drags or slow loitering over cables.

›

HYBRID

Cue

Alert coast guard, navy or SAR assets, and share data between military and civilian users.

›

HUMAN, CREWED

Decide and act

Rescue, board, seize, prosecute or escalate.

Limits

Uncrewed hulls cannot rescue people, and a migrant boat in distress is a SAR case before it is a security case. Performance claims are unproven until sea trials report. Some platforms carry strike payloads, which sits badly with a coastal-protection role and raises escalation risk in contested waters. Autonomy also does not fix attribution: Eagle S collapsed on evidence, not detection.

Stone Peak View

The defensible case for autonomy here is narrow and strong: **persistent detection and cueing, with humans owning every legal and humanitarian decision**. Programmes that blur that line will meet political resistance faster than technical failure.

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Sources: Stone Peak assessment, drawing on all sources cited in this brief.

RAPID SCAN

Defense Technology & Defense Investments

Defense Technology

Counter-UAS Goes Maritime

A lightweight 3D air-surveillance radar has been put on an uncrewed hull, going from concept to a working vessel in under seven months. No sea-trial or detection-range data has been published, so the claim is still unproven.

Cross-Domain Integration

Air, surface and underwater systems are being tied into one software architecture and a single operational picture. The unit of value is shifting from the platform to the network.

Defense Investments

Exercises as Demand Signals

NATO's REPMUS exercise and a Portugal exercise co-organised with the European Defence Agency are where uncrewed maritime systems are being shown to buyers. Watch for these demonstrations to convert into programmes of record, since no costs, unit numbers or deployment dates exist yet.

Enablers Over Hulls

Resupply, positioning and data-fusion layers may carry steadier value than any one hull design, because every operator of persistent fleets hits the same logistics wall.

WATCH LIST

Developing Stories to Monitor

01

Fitburg Case and the Deterrence Ladder

Watch how Finnish courts handle the Fitburg seizure after the Eagle S dismissal. A second failure on attribution would strengthen the case for real-time monitoring over after-the-fact prosecution, and for stronger responses.

02

Libya-to-Crete Corridor

Longer crossings mean more deaths per arrival. Track whether the eastern Libya route grows as controls tighten on the Central Mediterranean, and whether authorities increase their sea and air coverage there.

03

First Autonomous Resupply and USV-UUV Trials

The end-to-end autonomous refuelling run and the first sea trials of integrated surface and underwater systems are the proof points. Until they report, endurance claims remain claims.

Weekly Summary



Migrant routes and seabed infrastructure are separate threats that share one weakness: coastal waters are watched episodically by crewed assets. Long-endurance uncrewed vessels address that gap, but logistics, validation and the line between sensing and acting remain open.

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