To patrol is to control: Ensuring situational awareness in Africa’s maritime exclusive economic zones

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‘... African navies presently cannot protect African trade for lack of sea power’
– Renfrew Christie

Threats in Africa’s exclusive economic zones

A variety of threat situations exist in Africa’s waters, most of which are well known, while others such as maritime terrorism are still emerging. The contemporary threats are manifest in the form of piracy and sea robbery; organised crime; including gun-running, smuggling, human and drug trafficking; illegal exploitation of marine resources; and the destruction of marine resources through dumping and pollution. These threats cut across

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Commentaries

virtually the entire African maritime domain. For instance, instability in states in the Horn of Africa arising from persistent intra-state and inter-state conflicts has generally led to neglect of security in the maritime domain, which is largely characterised by illegal fishing, dumping of hazardous waste and piracy. In 2008, no fewer than 60 vessels were attacked by pirates off the coast of Somalia. This led to international action with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1846 on 2 December 2008 to fight piracy and armed robbery at sea off the Somali coast. Similarly, the Indian Ocean region has been described as an inherently unstable region where piracy, drugs and arms smuggling are well-entrenched phenomena. Threats in the Mediterranean region encompass arms smuggling to fuel conflict in North and Central Africa’s troubled spots as well as the infamous illegal migration of thousands of Africans into the southern fringes of Europe annually. It is estimated that up to 3,000 African migrants have died en route to Europe through the Mediterranean in the last five years. Additionally, available data on emerging threats in the Gulf of Guinea region indicates a rise in the phenomenon of militancy, particularly in the Nigeria–Cameroon–Equatorial Guinea maritime corridor. The activities of the criminals in this area, notably, piracy/sea robbery, kidnapping/hostage taking and oil theft, if left unchecked, could threaten the sea lines of communication; disrupt commerce as well as access to energy supplies in the region. Perhaps it is in recognition of this that foreign powers have now increasingly sought to play more active role on security issues of the region.

Terrorist groups have demonstrated a capacity to use the seas as a means of conveying and positioning their agents and logistics to wreck havoc including the use of explosives-laden suicide boats as weapons to ram other vessels, port facilities, or offshore platforms. The vastness of Africa’s maritime domain provides great opportunities for exploitation by terrorists. Terrorist activities therefore constitute a latent threat to Africa’s maritime domain.

The dumping of nuclear/toxic wastes in the sea area has become a multi-billion dollar enterprise involving various unscrupulous agencies. Besides that, oil spillage has also become a serious threat to the maritime environment. The resultant effect is the destruction of the natural habitat for several species of fish, thereby in turn threatening food security.

The economic and social consequences of the prevailing threats in African waters could be grave if they are allowed to persist, as they would flourish and ultimately undermine political stability and economic development of the region. In particular, piracy and armed robbery against ships present a serious threat to the lives of seafarers, the safety of navigation, the marine environment, the security of coastal states, and the right of innocent passage in areas under the sovereignty of a coastal state. In this regard, increased insurance cost of shipping or even outright boycott of some African ports by shipping lines cannot be ruled out. This scenario is already playing out in the Niger Delta where,
as a result of insecurity, the costs of development projects are almost double of what obtains for projects of similar quality internationally. In 2008, insecurity in this region, amidst a global energy crisis, reduced crude oil output by 25 per cent and oil prices rose to more than US$100 per barrel.

Likewise, the scourge of illegal and unregulated fishing by foreign fishing fleets constitutes a serious threat to the realisation of the benefits derivable by many African nations from these resources. In addition to the depletion of fish stocks due to illegal and unregulated fishing, there are also economic and social costs which include loss of foreign exchange earnings and the loss of livelihoods of several fishing communities in Africa. To address these threats, situational awareness of the maritime domain is of utmost importance as it would provide the knowledge base required to advise African leaders in taking the right decisions that would enhance maritime security in the continent.

The need for situational awareness in Africa’s exclusive economic zone

Modern-day transnational criminal groups are well organised and well equipped, often possessing advanced communications, sophisticated weapons, and high-speed craft for smuggling contraband goods, drugs and arms and for human trafficking, as well as for piracy. Also, systematic destruction of Africa’s marine resources and environment, conflict between African nations over maritime resources, and mass illegal migration flows through the seas all have potential security implications for Africa’s stability. Moreover, the sheer vastness of Africa’s EEZ makes it imperative for African nations to harness or develop the means to detect illegal activities, deter unscrupulous groups – African and foreign collaborators alike – from taking advantage of the maritime domain, and neutralise the threats posed by their activities or at least make it difficult for them to exploit the vulnerabilities of Africa’s maritime domain to further their illegal activities. Dealing effectively with these realities require a new mindset that sees the total threat through an understanding of situational awareness of the maritime environment. This is considered a sine qua non to developing a comprehensive system necessary to achieve security of Africa’s EEZ and African navies have an important peacetime function in support of efforts to combat these threats.

Challenges to effective situational awareness in Africa’s exclusive economic zone

Systems to enhance situational awareness in Africa’s EEZ would of necessity include the capacity to obtain adequate knowledge of events in the environment as well as the capability to prevent or contain any untoward event. Unfortunately, through the actions of several criminal gangs and inaction of governments both within and outside the
continent, the people of Africa are being denied the full benefit derivable from the seas to enhance development. At present, little is being done by African governments to protect their maritime interests and resources in the areas of adequate investment in systems and structures for effective maritime security. When such structures do exist, they are hardly effective for several reasons, which border mostly on lack of interest in the maritime domain and the subsequent lack of political will to act on issues concerning maritime security in the continent. Some of the challenges to effective situational awareness in Africa’s EEZ therefore include inadequate capacity to effectively cover the vast area of Africa’s EEZ; lack of political will by African governments; inadequate synergy between maritime security initiatives of various sub-regional organisations; and an increasing influence of extra-regional powers in the continent.

Inadequate capacity to effectively cover Africa’s vast EEZ

About 74 per cent of African countries are littoral states, which translates into a significant maritime EEZ. At least 40 of them have some form of law enforcement structure charged with maritime security. Added to this is the fact that there are no physical boundaries at sea in which the countries often claim sovereignty in accordance with international maritime law. More so, an assessment of Africa’s naval/coast guard capabilities indicates that their capacity and capability to effectively carry out enforcement duties within the maritime areas claimed by their countries are often weak. This vulnerability is often exploited by criminals to perpetrate illegal activities. Surmounting this challenge demands a re-assessment of the roles of maritime organisations and naval forces to develop a holistic approach in supporting Africa’s security efforts of the vast EEZ.

Lack of political will by African governments

Many African governments lack the will to adequately invest in measures and structures for maritime security. This stems from the poor maritime culture of many African nations and awareness of the maritime domain. For instance, investment in several African navies/coast guards is so insignificant that the effect of their presence is seriously undermined and they are therefore ineffective. Apart from the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, no large peacekeeping operation within Africa had involved naval forces.

Inadequate synergy between maritime security initiatives of various sub-regional organisations

There are various security initiatives in the different African sub-regions, many of which have not been operationalised due mainly to difficulties in surmounting the national claims of sovereignty. Members of the Gulf of Guinea Commission for instance have been
unable to operationalise the Gulf of Guinea Guard Force in order to secure the region. At the continental level, little attention has been given to the maritime dimensions in the Common African Defence and Security Policy (CADSP) aimed at addressing threats to peace, security and development of the continent. The African Standby Force, as an instrument for the implementation of the CADSP, also does not clearly address the roles and contribution of maritime forces to African security and development. An effective system of situational awareness of Africa’s maritime areas would assist in galvanising the collective will and capacity of sub-regional bodies to act in concert for the common good.

**Increasing influence of extra-regional powers in Africa**

There is a discernable increasing influence of foreign powers in the security of Africa’s maritime domain. The reason often adduced, perhaps justifiably, is the lack of capacity of national governments to exercise effective control over the maritime areas. However, African nations must recognise that the main driving force is the protection of the interests of these foreign powers, over and above every other consideration. This scenario is already playing out in Somalia and the Horn of Africa region in general. The United States, in furtherance of its global ‘war on terror’, has established the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) and is maintaining a substantial naval presence in the Gulf of Guinea region. This tendency presents a challenge to African nations due to the propensity of foreign powers to come between African countries’ attempts to forge a common front.

**Systems for effective situational awareness in Africa’s exclusive economic zone**

Combating maritime threats in Africa’s waters requires the development of systems that would ensure that African countries have the capacity to exercise control over the continent’s maritime domain. Taking the challenges to effective situational awareness in Africa’s EEZ into account, integration of national and regional efforts are essential to exercising the desired level of control. Owing to the international nature of the sea and the general lack of maritime capacity in Africa, the support of extra-regional powers or institutions may sometimes be required. However, African nations must take the lead and ensure that such assistance is anchored in a well-articulated set of Africa’s interests and priorities. Accordingly, situation awareness aimed at controlling the maritime domain effectively should be based on developing and integrating civil and naval capacities at both the national and regional level.

**Cooperation and unity of efforts**

Situation awareness in the maritime domain requires a coordinated effort within and among African nations, including public and private sector organisations and international partners. The need for security is a mutual interest requiring the
cooperation of industry and government. The grave challenges to Africa’s maritime security demand that civil and naval authorities cooperate more closely in their collective peacetime roles of maritime policing and optimise resource management. To this end, the major role of African navies may have to be reviewed in order to advance Africa’s maritime interests. However, the effectiveness of the desired cooperation, both at national and regional levels, would to a large extent depend on the political will of African nations to embrace an integrated regulatory framework for maritime security. To this end and because of the enormous area of Africa’s EEZ, it is important that African countries share intelligence and coordinate their maritime surveillance and reconnaissance activities. Accordingly, regional cooperation must transit from policy and intent to action.

**Command and control systems for situational awareness**

Situational awareness in the maritime domain would, among other things, enhance early detection, which would allow for accurate decisions and responses to neutralise threats within the full spectrum of the maritime domain. African littoral states must individually and collectively upgrade and integrate their maritime Command Control Communications Computers and Intelligence (C4I) systems – including interoperable long-range communications – in order to improve situational awareness. The basic principle is to ensure that stakeholders at all levels know what they can do and how they can do it most effectively. They should also realise that situational awareness is in their best interest. However, this will demand a common purpose and agreed-upon procedures. Promoting awareness of maritime security threats and issues is necessary to inform decision-makers of the need to continuously build capacity. This, in turn, would enhance situational awareness, which is crucial to effective maritime control. Adequate maritime assets with the right capability, together with integrated C4I systems and procedures, are necessary tools for a holistic and near real-time approach to effective control of the maritime domain. Effective C4I systems would entail the development of standard reporting procedures, as well as the development of global and regional information bases.

**The way forward**

The way forward for African states is ‘multilateral naval cooperation’, which is defined by Joel J Sokolsky, Professor of Political Science at the Royal Military College of Canada, as follows:

> ... an instrument used by a coalition of nations who deem it in their national self-interests to make use of sea power. The same also applies to other contributors to coalition efforts at sea, including small and medium
power navies. Therefore, the tactical, strategic and above all political effectiveness of multilateral naval cooperation will always be dependent upon the cohesiveness of the coalition that stands behind, and especially upon, the will of the major contributing naval powers.\(^7\)

Regional and sub-regional initiatives aimed at promoting regional action to address piracy and armed robbery against ships in the wider context of maritime security seem to be a viable option. The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), which was concluded in November 2004 by 16 countries in Asia and includes the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ISC) for facilitating the sharing of piracy-related information, is a good example of successful regional cooperation which deserves commendation and could be replicated in Africa. Also in Asia, we have the Five Power Defence Agreement involving countries from South-East Asia and Oceania. It is pertinent to note the contributions of the ECOMOG Naval Task Force during the Liberia/Sierra Leone crises. One can safely conclude that having achieved this humble feat in the 1990s, Africa can actually achieve multilateral naval cooperation in this century. This could involve multilateral staffing and procurement of C4I systems which would be of mutual benefit. The acquisition of collective C4I systems, which would be held and operated at a combined headquarters is a cheaper and more realistic option to achieve situational awareness.

Mahan made a prophetic remark that ‘the ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters.’ It is time for Africa to rethink its destiny by embracing multilateral naval cooperation to secure the potential of its waters.

**Conclusion**

Africa’s EEZ should be safe for navigation, commerce, and sustainable exploitation of its natural resources. However, the challenge of securing Africa’s waters is enormous and requires great effort. Situation awareness in the maritime domain is a continuum that begins far beyond the borders of individual African nations and requires a critical blend of tangible resources such as equipment and personnel, along with intangible items such as useful intelligence and strong partnerships. Situation awareness provides the basis to make near-real-time strategic and tactical decisions on response to maritime threats in Africa’s EEZ. Effective control will include the use of, among others, sensors, rapid response capable maritime or land-based platforms, and effective command and control systems. Integration of situational awareness platforms in order to control Africa’s EEZ effectively and unifying the security initiatives of African sub-regions are critical to success.
Notes


4 UNSCR 1846 authorised states and regional organisations cooperating with the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) to enter Somalia’s territorial waters and use ‘all necessary means’ such as deploying naval vessels and military aircraft, as well as seizing and disposing of boats, vessels, arms and related equipment used for piracy in accordance with relevant international law for 12 months from 2 December 2008.


6 It was recently reported that the cost of establishing a gas-to-liquid plant in Escravos is more that twice that of a similar plant in Dubai by the same company, having factored in what it called ‘costs incidental to the security environment’.