

Maritime security in Africa's Western Indian Ocean

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The Western Indian Ocean contains a multitude of threats to inhabitants' maritime security, ranging from climate change and pollution to piracy, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, maritime violence and increasing militarisation. This report emphasises a policymaking approach that addresses issues through a cyclical rather than linear lens, recognising how one threat can lead to the emergence of another.

Key findings

- ▶ The Western Indian Ocean's (WIO) inconsistent geographical demarcation results in divergent policies that frustrate collective efforts to address maritime insecurity.
- ▶ The WIO's wide spectrum of maritime security challenges (ranging from 'soft' to 'hard' threats) cannot be addressed in isolation.
- ▶ The indirect impacts of diverting shipping around the Cape of Good Hope (i.e., risks of accidents and pollution), due to Red Sea instability, has been under-addressed.
- ▶ The concentration of naval forces in the Red Sea is exposing other regions to piracy.
- ▶ Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing remains a major challenge, with the WIO consistently ranking as one of the worst performing regions for enforcement.
- ▶ Continued militarisation in the WIO cannot be reconciled with the principle of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace.
- ▶ Climate change acts as both a multiplier and accelerator in the WIO. Shorter monsoon periods open longer trafficking windows, while shifting fish stocks alter fishing patterns, impacting the economic security of littoral and island states.
- ▶ The Southern Ocean plays a critical role in regulating global climate, but faces multiple threats, such as climate change and the failure of states to reach consensus on regulating krill overfishing and establishing Marine Protected Areas. Reckless and inadequate policies may potentially have spillover impacts on WIO security.

Recommendations

- ▶ Regional organisations like the African Union, Indian Ocean Rim Association, and Indian Ocean Commission should pursue a coordinated African-led framing of the Western Indian Ocean – anchored in continental strategies and sensitive to local vulnerabilities. This would both establish a shared definition for addressing challenges and ensure that shaping the security agenda remains a prerogative for African states.
- ▶ Climate change and related environmental concerns should be better integrated into maritime security discussions, recognising their interdependence.
- ▶ Regional platforms, such as Southern African Development Community summits, should be used to emphasise Africa's stake in the Antarctic and Southern Ocean.
- ▶ Tackling illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing must be a priority for regional organisations, and emphasis must be placed on exploring how existing capacity-building initiatives can be strengthened.
- ▶ The slight resurgence of WIO piracy since 2024 requires a nuanced international response that recognises different forms of piracy and strengthens existing frameworks to enable sustainable solutions.
- ▶ African states should accelerate the finalisation of maritime boundaries before disputes emerge or become subject to external interference, with the increasing significance attached to possession of territorial waters and exclusive economic zones for economic and security interests.
- ▶ The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace and free from militarisation should remain a guiding objective, as preventing militarisation is essential to safeguard regional stability and long-term security.

Introduction

This report outlines the emerging maritime security threats facing the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region. For the purposes of this work, the WIO's geographical scope begins in Antarctica. It includes the Southern Ocean, and stretches up the eastern coast of Africa to include the continent's littoral states. It emphasises the Small Island Developing States (SIDS), or Large Ocean States (LOS) as some states, such as Seychelles, alternatively label themselves, of the Southwest Indian Ocean or Indianocéania, and extends upwards to include the littoral states of the Red Sea (see Chart 1).

This geographical demarcation, although expansive, captures the broad perspective required, providing a foundation for further debate on what and who the WIO should endeavour to encompass.

The report begins by discussing the contested framing of the WIO, and the discursive hierarchy that exists in discussions on maritime security at a global level. This sets the scene for the ordering of the rest of the report, starting with highlighting the threats of climate change, maritime pollution, and navigation safety, and the central role of the Southern Ocean. It then discusses blue crime,

territorial and maritime disputes, maritime violence and increasing militarisation.¹

Framing the WIO: contestations and security hierarchy

The WIO, as an established and clearly defined region, is contested. In the broadest sense, it refers to the Western part of the Indian Ocean.² Such a view is adopted by the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre in Madagascar, which considers its area of interest the entire ocean spanning from India's west coast to Africa's east coast.³

The way the Western Indian Ocean is conceptualised directly affects how its security challenges are understood

The Djibouti Code of Conduct includes the Red Sea and its bordering states in its consideration, but is not as expansive as Madagascar's Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre, since it excludes states like Iran and Pakistan.⁴

Bodies such as the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association limit their understanding of the WIO to span from South Africa, up Africa's east coast to Somalia, and include the WIO islands (Seychelles, Mauritius and Comoros). States like Djibouti and areas such as the Red Sea are not of primary consideration in that context.⁵

These conceptualisation differences of the WIO do not reflect operational, but rather political, preferences. Christian Bueger explains that states like India have expressed opposition to conceptualising a WIO, instead advocating for the broader construct of the Indian Ocean.⁶ Similarly, South Africa and Australia primarily address maritime security through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), highlighting their preference to refer to the broader construct of the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean Commission chooses to brand its region, formally known as the Southwest Indian Ocean, as Indianocéania.⁷

The way the WIO is conceptualised directly affects how its security challenges are understood. A broader view that includes the Red Sea would highlight maritime

Chart 1: Map of the WIO (shaded grey block), including states' exclusive economic zones



Source: ISS

violence incidents. A narrower focus on Africa's east coast and the Southwest Indian Ocean islands would foreground illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and climate vulnerabilities.

The current contestation therefore is not purely geographical, but an act of shaping the reality of what constitutes a security concern.

Although the process of drawing boundaries may echo a land-centric logic, the absence of a shared definition of the WIO poses its own risks. Without an agreed regional framing, the space is opened for external powers to project their preferences onto the region, enabling them to set the agenda for maritime security. This risks marginalising African perspectives and approaches.

While differing demarcations of the WIO accentuate some issues and overshadow others, a discursive ordering of threats at the 20 May 2025 United Nations Security Council (UNSC) High-Level Open Debate on Maritime Security⁸ suggested a global threat hierarchy already exists.

'Hard security' threats – defined here as those involving force – were consistently mentioned first. 'Softer security' issues such as climate change and marine pollution were relegated to the last part of the sentence, statement or address.

This sequence seems to reflect that even when threats such as climate change and pollution are acknowledged, they are deprioritised.⁹ Considering this, and in an attempt to reverse this discursive hierarchy, this report intentionally begins with outlining and discussing the existential and critical threats of climate change and maritime pollution in the WIO. It then moves on to other threats like blue crime, maritime violence, piracy and militarisation.

Climate change

Why climate change matters in the WIO

In the WIO region, over 69 million people live within 100 km of the coastline, making them acutely exposed to ocean changes.¹⁰ Nearly a fifth of South Africa's 3 000 km coastline has some form of development within 100 m of the shoreline. However, this region is susceptible to climate change, where climate change is also recognised as a major risk to development.

The latter is particularly significant given that the WIO comprises almost entirely of developing and least-developed countries, with just a handful of exceptions, such as Seychelles. And if the definition of the WIO is extended to correspond to Djibouti Code of Conduct membership, it includes states like Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.

The Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative illustrates the severity of the threat of climate change to the region. The most recently available data (2023) ranks WIO countries near the bottom globally both in terms of their vulnerability to climate threats and their adaptive capabilities.

Without an agreed regional framing, the space is opened for external powers to project their preferences onto the region

Somalia, Madagascar, Comoros, Tanzania, Djibouti, Kenya and Mozambique are ranked in the bottom 30% of countries most vulnerable to climate change.¹¹ More concerningly, these seven fall within the bottom 30% in terms of their adaptive capabilities. Even the strongest performers in this region, Seychelles and Mauritius, remain in the bottom half globally, highlighting just how sensitive this region is to climate change.¹²

Considering the region's reliance on the oceans, with over 90% of Africa's trade occurring through ports,¹³ and the number of people living close to the coastline, climate change presents a significant threat to the region.

Climate change and maritime security

Climate change directly undermines maritime security by destabilising the maritime domain itself. For example, intensifying storms damage coastal infrastructure that is critical for trade.¹⁴ In Mauritius, Port Louis – responsible for 99% of the country's external trade – had to close in 2018 and 2019 due to cyclones Berguitta and Calvinia.¹⁵

According to the International Monetary Fund's PortWatch climate risk forecaster, the South African Port of Gqeberha has the highest risk globally of downtime due to climate change (15.72 days annually).¹⁶ The Durban Port is presently set to incur US\$13.52 million in damages due to flooding, while Mauritius's Port Louis is

expected to incur US\$13.95 million in damages annually due to tropical cyclones.¹⁷

Climate-driven changes in ocean temperature also lead to shifting fish stocks, disrupting fisheries and the economies dependent on them. After the high ocean temperatures of 1997/1998, there was significant migration of fish stocks; and vessels that traditionally operated from Port Victoria, Seychelles, instead began operating from Asian ports.¹⁸

This harmed the country's economy, which relies on the fisheries sector.¹⁹ Climate impacts continue to threaten fish stocks, with Fisheries and Blue Economy Minister Jean-Francois Ferrari noting in 2024 that climate change was impacting purse seiners, who had to fish elsewhere. There has been a 40% drop in tuna caught in Seychelles waters.²⁰

Furthermore, as the WIO warms due to climate change, it threatens the ocean's biodiversity, leading to a loss in aquaculture, which has knock-on effects for food security. In Mozambique, more than half of the population's protein originates from fish, while in Madagascar, over 70% of fisheries are small-scale, making the fisheries vital to livelihoods.²¹

A loss in biodiversity threatens the livelihoods of those dependent on the ocean, which can lead to communities resorting to other measures, sometimes illegal, to secure their livelihoods, as was the case initially in Somali piracy.²² This demonstrates the importance of understanding the cyclical nature of security, namely how climate change can impact fishing activities, which can lead to illicit activities.

Impact on ecosystems

Considering that the WIO is one of the most biodiverse areas worldwide, the risk climate change poses to this area is especially profound, with coral reefs especially representing a critical area of concern. The WIO contains approximately 5.6% of the world's coral reefs, covering 15 180 square kilometres and valued at an estimated US\$18.1 billion.

These reefs support around 25% of all marine species and provide coastal protection against cyclones and rising sea levels.²³ However, the coral reefs in the WIO are under immense threat, with a 2021 study warning that

all coral reefs in this region faced a high risk of collapse within the next 50 years.²⁴

The WIO reportedly suffers the most from global bleaching events – such as in 1997–98 when 30% to 50% of the corals were estimated to have died.²⁵ Coral bleaching refers to the process whereby coral turns white as a result of too warm water. Bleaching puts coral under stress and makes it vulnerable to disease. If conditions don't improve, the coral can die.

While coral reefs have been showing signs of resilience, such recovery requires long intervals between bleaching events. Concerningly, trends indicate reduced intervals between these events. In Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique and Tanzania, studies show that 62% of fish species saw a decline in their abundance within three years of coral bleaching events.²⁶

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Similar to coral reefs, mangroves, which comprise 745 518 hectares, play a central role in the WIO. Forming part of the ecosystem, mangroves provide resources to over 40 million people in the WIO, contributing several billion US dollars a year, since they support fisheries and other harvestable resources. However, the WIO has lost almost 4% of mangroves in the past 24 years, due partly to cyclones and flooding. Besides the support they offer fishermen, mangroves play an important role in blue carbon storage, sequestering up to 16% of the WIO's fossil fuel emissions annually.²⁷

The loss of coral reefs and mangroves due to climate change have far-reaching implications for the WIO. Both contribute to tourism, local fishing (more than 80% of fish catches are dependent on mangroves), and protect against erosion and rising sea levels.²⁸ Mangroves offer shoreline protection that saves coastal communities the costs of repairing coastal infrastructure in the aftermath of natural disasters.²⁹

Furthermore, mangroves sequester carbon at a much faster rate than tropical forests. The loss of such ecosystems would therefore have multiple effects,

ranging from reduced economic revenue to increased vulnerability to natural disasters.

Sea level rise and geopolitical implications

Finally, another major threat to the WIO is the rise in sea level. In Comoros, estimates show that by 2050, the sea level is expected to rise 25 cm, in Djibouti 22 cm, Mauritius 19 cm, Mozambique 18 cm, Seychelles 25cm, and Yemen 25 cm.³⁰ Rising sea levels have an impact on coastal societies, especially in areas where there has been unplanned coastal building.³¹

However, a further threat also arises – that is, whether states are at risk of having a reduced exclusive economic zone (EEZ) due to the potential submersion of islands. While the International Court of Justice (ICJ) recently released an Advisory Opinion suggesting that maritime boundaries do not move, this decision is not legally binding.³²

This leaves room for policy uncertainty that makes disputes more likely as states may be compelled to act in unilateral ways to secure their interests. This could increase tensions between states and encourage resource competition.

Maritime pollution

Alongside climate change, maritime pollution constitutes a fundamental, albeit often underemphasised, maritime security threat. Pollution, for example, was not considered in the Paris Agreement, and has since received inconsistent attention. This threat is essential to consider at a time when, due to insecurity in the Red Sea, increasing volumes of ship traffic are making their way around the Cape of Good Hope.³³

In 2024, a potential disaster was averted when the MV Sounion, carrying a million barrels of crude oil, was successfully salvaged after being struck by Houthi attacks.³⁴ The aversion of such a disaster was hugely important, considering the impact that oil pollution can have on the marine environment.

One of the most striking examples of the impact of marine pollution was the MV Wakashio, a bulk carrier that ran aground in an ecologically sensitive area of Mauritius on 25 July 2020.³⁵ Over 1 000 tonnes of oil

leaked into the ocean, damaging over 300 m of coral reef and causing a decline in local fish stocks.³⁶

While such instances usually receive significant media attention, the pollution emanating from smaller vessels often disappears beneath the radar. The South African Maritime Safety Authority annually publishes data related to the number of pollution incidents occurring in South African waters.

There has been a steady increase in the number of pollution events, increasing from eight and seven events in the reporting period 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 to 16 in 2022/2023. In 2022, for instance, two oil tankers, the MT Lefkas and the Umnenga II, were involved in an oil spill while they were attempting to conduct a ship-to-ship transfer.³⁷ In 2024, the MV MSC Apollo was involved in an oil leak that left six penguins along the coast covered in the substance.³⁸

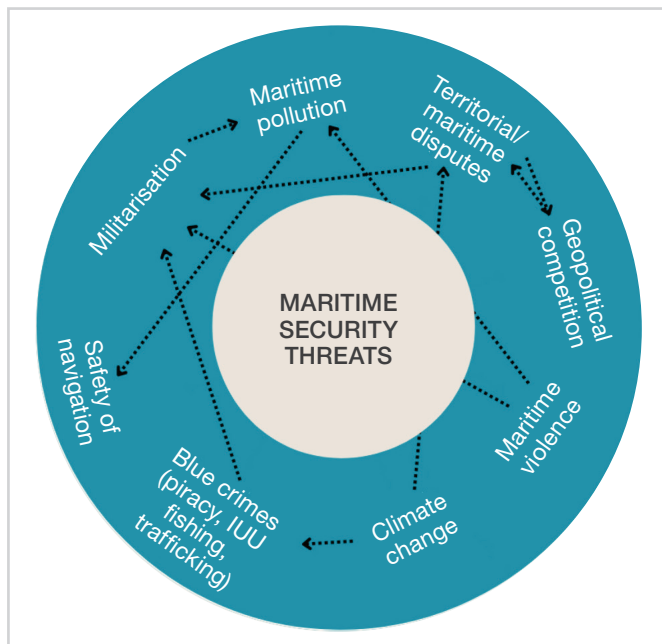
Oil spills are not the only concern. Container losses have also become increasingly frequent. In July 2024, the CMA CGM Benjamin Franklin lost 44 containers off the coast of South Africa. A month later, the MSC Antonia lost 46 containers, and the CMA CGM Belem lost 99.³⁹

While maritime pollution is often framed as an environmental issue, it should be recognised as a maritime security threat

The increase in container losses has been attributed to the rerouting of trade around the Cape of Good Hope – an area notorious for hazardous maritime conditions and extreme weather.⁴⁰

Importantly, container loss risks sinking or damaging other ships, which threatens navigation through the region in general, demonstrating that pollution is a threat multiplier. That is, while maritime pollution is often framed as an environmental issue, it should be recognised as a maritime security threat. This is because pollution (such as oil spills) destroys marine habitats and reduces fish stocks, which threatens the economic stability of WIO coastal and island communities (see Chart 2).

Chart 2: Maritime security threats viewed through a cyclical lens



Source: Author

Safety of navigation

As mentioned, the general trend in the WIO is an increase in ship traffic around the Cape of Good Hope. This has direct implications for the WIO. Starting in the north, the Red Sea is becoming increasingly unstable. Apart from the attacks on commercial ships by the Houthis, there have also been increasing events of Global Positioning System (GPS) jamming. GPS jamming, which refers to the intentional blocking or interference with GPS signals by stronger unauthorised signals,⁴¹ can lead to navigational errors, operational disruptions, and emergency response delays.⁴²

During such events, navigators must rely on other methods of navigation, which may increase the risk of collisions, with severe humanitarian, economic and environmental impacts.

In 2025 alone, there have been a notable number of GPS interference events, particularly in the Red Sea, Strait of Hormuz, Persian Gulf, and Gulf of Oman. According to the weekly threat assessment reports published by the European Union's (EU) Maritime Security Centre in the Indian Ocean, in May 2025 there were at least four reported incidents, with three of those occurring in the Red Sea.⁴³ In June, there was a spike with over 29 incidents taking place.

Since July, there has been a decrease in reported incidents; however, in August, there were at least two reported. In some instances, this has been said to stem from the Iranian coastlines.⁴⁴ While there can be several causes for GPS interference, including natural events like solar flares, the interference in the afore-mentioned areas could be attributed to the Israel-Hamas conflict.

There has also been an increase in GPS spoofing incidents, which is when false GPS signals are intentionally transmitted to deceive the actor receiving the transmissions.⁴⁵ In May this year, the MSC Antonia ran aground in the Red Sea. While the cause of this has not been confirmed, it is suspected that this was a result of GPS spoofing, where the ship received a false signal, leading it to interpret that it was sailing through seaweed when, in fact, it was coral, which led to it being grounded.⁴⁶

The other impact of the Houthis' activities in the Red Sea is the resultant diversion of traffic around the Cape of Good Hope. This route leads to increased volumes of shipping traffic in an oceanic region that is known to have dangerous weather conditions.⁴⁷ This surge in traffic, as noted by Tim Walker, increases the chances of collisions, groundings and similar accidents.⁴⁸ As mentioned in the section above, numerous ships have lost containers off the coast of South Africa, while on 17 May 2024, MFV Lepanto – a fishing trawler – capsized off the coast of Cape Town, killing at least 11 people.

Southern Ocean

The increasing traffic around this South African route makes evident an important fact: South Africa borders not only the Indian and Atlantic, but also a third ocean, the Southern Ocean. Although not usually considered when discussing the WIO, the interconnected nature of oceans warrants its inclusion. The Southern Ocean is a hugely important body of water, and is responsible for 40% of the global anthropogenic carbon uptake.⁴⁹

Within the Southern Ocean is the Antarctic Circumpolar Current – which is the strongest current on Earth, and plays a crucial role in regulating the Earth's climate and nutrients.⁵⁰ However, due to climate change, this ocean is under immense threat. New research indicates that by 2050, this current may be 20% slower, which has widespread implications globally. Apart from climate



Krill fishing poses a severe environmental threat as it is the primary food source for species such as whales, penguins and seals

concerns, the ocean has also become a dumping ground for rubbish and a hotspot for IUU fishing.⁵¹

One of the most concerning developments in this region is the fishing of krill, which poses a severe environmental threat. Krill is the primary food source for species such as whales, penguins and seals, constituting the largest biomass of any other animal worldwide. Furthermore, it removes carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, making the Southern Ocean one of the world's largest carbon sinks. Without krill, the Antarctic ecosystem would collapse.⁵²

Recent data shows that there is an increased demand for krill, with the industry set to grow from \$531 million to \$941 million by 2026.⁵³ In the 2025 krill season, over 518 000 tonnes were pulled from the Southern Ocean, which equates to approximately 450 million kg of sea life. This increase in krill fishing can be linked to the expiry of zone-based protection in 2023, with attempts since then to reach new agreements having failed.⁵⁴

In 2024, the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) had the historic opportunity to establish the largest act of marine protection in history by approving the new Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) along the Antarctic Peninsula.⁵⁵ However, at the 44th meeting held in 2025, the 27 member states failed to reach consensus on the establishment of a new MPA.⁵⁶

The Southern Ocean is effectively a largely rules-free fishing zone in terms of krill. While most krill fishing has taken place in the Antarctic Peninsula, a re-establishment

of fisheries is occurring in the eastern part of Antarctica, which brings it physically closer to the Indian Ocean.

When considering maritime security in the WIO, the Southern Ocean needs to be taken into account. If the Southern Ocean's carbon absorption weakens, climate change impacts will intensify globally, affecting the already fragile WIO region.

Over 518 000 tonnes were pulled from the Southern Ocean in the 2025 krill season, equating to 450 million kg of sea life

Furthermore, the CCAMLR's failure to establish MPAs in the Southern Ocean risks creating a governance vacuum. This subsequently raises maritime security issues, such as IUU fishing, competition over resources,⁵⁷ and, in the long term, even militarisation as states deploy fleets to patrol and secure access to the region. Potential seabed mineral extraction in the Southern Ocean should be considered.⁵⁸

Finally, several major players are heavily invested in Antarctic governance, although African representation and involvement are severely lacking. South Africa is the only African state that is party to the Antarctic Treaty System.⁵⁹ Antarctica, despite its remote location, has numerous geographical advantages, such as satellite monitoring and possible commercial exploitation.⁶⁰ Such geopolitical contestation could have a spillover impact on Indian Ocean politics or vice versa.

Blue crime

The concept of blue crime as used in this report refers to serious organised crime or offences that occur transnationally, either in, on, or across the maritime domain.⁶¹ Crimes constituting this category include piracy, trafficking, and IUU fishing, among others. While these crimes have their respective differences, the main advantage of classifying them as blue crimes is it promotes enhanced linking and understanding of how they relate to and interact with one another.

IUU fishing

According to the IUU Fishing Risk Index, the WIO has consistently ranked among the worst performing regions worldwide in terms of its response to IUU fishing. In 2019, the WIO had the lowest response score, particularly to its port responsibilities. In 2021 this region was, along with the worst performing region for their response to IUU fishing in terms of their port responsibilities, also the worst performing in terms of their flag responsibilities. Even more concerning, in 2023, the WIO was the worst performing region across all three responsibilities in terms of its response, namely, coastal, flag and port.⁶²

IUU fishing remains a significant security concern in the WIO. Here, it is important to refer back to the origins of Somali piracy. It is widely believed that one of the contributing factors to piracy was the prevalence of foreign IUU fishing vessels in Somalia's EEZ, where Somali pirates portrayed themselves as protectors against foreign exploiters.⁶³ While this was not the only reason, it does highlight the link between maritime security threats like IUU fishing and piracy, emphasising the need to view these maritime threats as occurring on a cycle.

There are other important trends to note. In terms of the prevalence of IUU fishing, for 2023, the global average sat at 1.62 (for all responsibilities). Notably, apart from Oman, Tanzania and Mozambique, the following WIO states were all above the global average:

- Somalia
- Kenya
- South Africa
- Madagascar
- Comoros
- Seychelles

- Mauritius
- Reunion (French territory)
- Mayotte (French territory)
- Yemen

This demonstrates that these states, and the region in general, are experiencing a higher degree of IUU fishing than the global average. In terms of their vulnerability, the global average for 2023 sat at 2.82. The following states were all above the global average:

- Somalia
- Mozambique
- South Africa
- Madagascar
- Comoros
- Reunion (French territory)
- Mayotte (French territory)

In particular, Somalia (3.32), South Africa (3.20) and Reunion and Mayotte (3.92) were significantly above this global average, suggesting an acute vulnerability to IUU fishing.

The most important aspect to consider is whether there has been an improvement in the IUU fishing situation in the WIO. In terms of its vulnerability to IUU fishing, there has been a slight improvement from 2019 (2.87) to 2021 (2.71) and 2023 (2.70). Concerningly, however, there has not been an improvement in the prevalence of IUU fishing, which may well be linked to the deteriorating response score.

In 2019, the prevalence score for the WIO was at 1.5, in 2021 at 1.54, and in 2023 at 1.6, indicating an increase in the score, which implies a worsening score. Similarly, in terms of response, the score went from 2.72 in 2021 to 2.81 in 2023, indicating once again that the response of WIO states to IUU fishing is not improving. Essentially, while on paper it appears as though the WIO is becoming slightly less vulnerable to IUU fishing, actual IUU prevalence has not declined.⁶⁴

Trafficking and smuggling

A further blue crime that the WIO is increasingly exposed to and affected by is the flow of illicit products, most notably drugs and wildlife. The drug trade in particular has become entrenched in the region, with four significant routes in the WIO.⁶⁵

Chart 3: Key transnational maritime drug flows in East and Southern Africa

Route	Description	
Southern Route	Channels heroin out of Afghanistan, around the Omani coast, and towards the Somali coastline, with landing points stretching from Kenya to Mozambique.	
Lusophone Route	Originates in Latin America and crosses the South Atlantic towards Southern Africa, before continuing northward along the coast through South Africa, Tanzania, and Kenya.	
Indo-Pacific Route	Drugs are moved from East and Southern Africa to markets in Australia and New Zealand	
Asian Route	Precursors for synthetic drugs flow out of the Southeast Asian region towards several landing ports in Southern Africa.	

Source: ESACD⁶⁶

The consequences for WIO countries positioned along these routes are severe. Seychelles, for example, largely being used as a transshipment hub and destination marker, has faced devastating social effects. Roughly 10% of the population is estimated to be addicted to heroin, the highest rate of heroin addiction globally.⁶⁷ In Mauritius, drug addiction ranked as the country's second most serious national problem in 2024.⁶⁸ Cost of living is listed as the country's biggest problem.

Efforts have been made to address drug trafficking. In the WIO, though, enforcement efforts remain largely uneven and regional states are severely hampered by their limited capabilities in patrolling both their areas of national jurisdiction and the high seas. However, SIDS/LOS like Seychelles have reached creative agreements with the EU to pool resources.

A French warship seized over 2 265 kg of heroin and 242 kg of methamphetamine while patrolling in regional waters

In 2023, Seychelles ratified an agreement that would allow EU Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Somalia – or Operation Atalanta – to intercept and catch suspected drug traffickers, while Seychelles would take over the responsibility of prosecuting the traffickers.⁶⁹ Seychelles followed a similar role when it prosecuted pirates.

The northern Indian Ocean has seen sustained interdiction operations by the Combined Maritime Forces. Combined Task Force (CTF)-150 had some success in intercepting shipments along the Southern Route. Between 19 April and 18 May 2023, a French warship operating in support of the CTF-150 seized over 2 265 kg of heroin and 242 kg of methamphetamine while patrolling in regional waters.⁷⁰

However, such interdiction operations are not without challenges. First, such operations often displace the problem, with traffickers now increasingly bypassing the Red Sea and instead taking a longer passage around Seychelles, placing strain on such small island states, which have limited capabilities. Disembarkation points for vessels carrying drugs have also shifted downwards from Kenya to Tanzania, to northern Mozambique and now central Mozambique.⁷¹

Second, navy forces are often hesitant to return captured traffickers to their country of origin, with many countries, such as Sri Lanka, Iran and Pakistan, still imposing the death penalty. Third, interdiction operations are strictly bound by their mandate. For example, the CTF-150 may not board a vessel that is suspected of being involved in criminal flows unless it can be established that there is a link to terrorist financing.⁷²

Arguably, the most significant issue is that there is a deep dependence on assistance from foreign actors, with little evidence, barring the example of Seychelles, that regional states have the capabilities to address the drug trade. This is due partly to the limited technical, human and financial capacities of regional states, especially in law enforcement.

However, there also seems to be a lack of political will among stakeholders to address the growing threat.⁷³

It is therefore vital that African states recognise the need to address the threat of drug trafficking, and especially focus on building region-led initiatives to combat trafficking.

Piracy

Both trafficking and piracy illustrate how weak enforcement in vast African maritime domain spaces creates multi-layered insecurity. On 1 September 2022, Operation Atalanta, alongside the Combined Maritime Forces, observed that piracy incidents off Somalia's coast had decreased significantly.

On 22 August that year, the shipping industry and the International Chamber of Shipping notified the International Maritime Organization (IMO) about the cancellation of the Indian Ocean High Risk Area designation, effective from 1 January 2023.⁷⁴ Such a decision was supported by statistics that showed that from 2013 onwards, the number of attacks had significantly dropped.⁷⁵

According to the IMO, no incidents of piracy were reported off Somalia's coast in 2019,⁷⁶ 2020,⁷⁷ 2021⁷⁸ or 2022.⁷⁹ However, since the end of 2023, there has been a resurgence of piracy. According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) Piracy and Armed Robbery Map, in 2023, there were at least three incidents.⁸⁰ Notably, two of these occurred in the ports of Mozambique. 2024 saw a further notable increase, with at least nine

incidents reported to the IMB.⁸¹ Seven of these occurred off Somalia. In 2025, there have been at least six reported incidents.⁸²

In the WIO, most of these attacks occur off Somalia's coast, although since 2023 there have been at least three in Mozambique. Importantly, however, these incidents all happened while the ships were anchored and, therefore, constitute an act of robbery. In all instances, items were stolen from the ship.

Further trends show that when attacks occur close to the shore, they are usually not about hostage money but rather about pilfering provisions or stealing the ship to be used as a mothership in future operations. However, the attacks carried out further at sea are generally with the aim of hijacking vessels for ransom.

Piracy has mostly been addressed through naval interventions, but the reliance on naval deployments has proven costly and is a short-term solution

A further observation can be made, namely, in terms of what type of vessels are targeted. Between 2023 and 2025, fishing vessels were the most targeted, followed by bulk carriers. In terms of pirates' modus operandi, attacks are typically carried out by skiffs with between four and seven pirates onboard, which are launched by motherships. Another method is to hijack a dhow, which is used by a mothership. A dhow is strategically hijacked since it can blend in with regular traffic.⁸³

In terms of the response, in several instances, international navies patrolling the water have assisted the attacked vessels. In January 2024, the Indian Navy was involved in at least three incidents where it responded to distressed vessels.⁸⁴ The Seychelles Coast Guard played an important role when it intercepted a Sri Lankan fishing trawler that had been hijacked by Somali pirates. The pirates surrendered and were eventually arrested by the Indian Navy.⁸⁵ In several instances, the onboard security teams have been able to deter pirates by firing warning shots.

Piracy has mostly been addressed through naval solutions. However, the reliance on naval deployments has proven costly and is a short-term solution. In 2011, international anti-piracy operations were estimated to cost around US\$2 billion.⁸⁶ While such missions may deter pirates in the short term, they do little to address the underlying drivers of piracy.

Military spending of this magnitude could arguably be put to better use by supporting Somalia in rebuilding its governance capacity and establishing mechanisms to monitor its EEZ and stop foreign vessels from plundering its waters.

The increase in piracy has largely been attributed to the instability in the Red Sea. The Houthi attacks on commercial ships there have prompted major powers to move their intelligence assets and warships from the Indian Ocean

IN 2011, INTERNATIONAL ANTI-PIRACY OPERATIONS WERE ESTIMATED TO COST AROUND

US\$2
billion

to the Red Sea, thus increasing the vulnerability of ships passing through Somalia.

This has been amplified by the fact that many ships are rerouting to use the passage past the Cape of Good Hope, increasing the number of ships in Somali waters.⁸⁷ This provides more opportunities for Somali pirates, and increases stress on the environment. More shipping equates to more pollution, and possible rises in overfishing – factors cited by Somali pirates as motivating them to engage in piracy.

Importantly, piracy in Somalia needs to be addressed with nuance. As argued by Abdi Samatar et al., not all pirates are the same.⁸⁸ Four distinct pirates can be identified, yet international responses have largely concentrated on just one type – ransom pirates. Recent trends indicate that Samatar et al.'s 2010 observations remain relevant.

For instance, IUU fishing off Somalia continues to cost the country US\$300 million annually.⁸⁹ In particular, Chinese vessels have been implicated in illegal harvesting of tuna, while other foreign operators employ aggressive tactics, such as ramming Somali boats and cutting their nets. These practices align with the behaviour of resource pirates.

According to RiskIntelligence, the hijacking of three vessels in 2023 can be linked to Somali fishers attempting to defend their EEZ from such intrusions – examples of what can be classified as defensive pirates.⁹⁰ While ransom piracy remains an issue, defensive and resource pirates underscore the importance of treating piracy as a diverse phenomenon rather than a single, uniform category. Without such a nuanced understanding, efforts to combat piracy will remain largely ineffective.

Territorial and maritime disputes

Worldwide, less than half of the world's maritime boundaries have been agreed on. In Africa, such charts are even lower than the average.⁹¹ Of the over 55 African states, 39 have access to the sea, as they are either littoral or island states.⁹² Accordingly, there is the opportunity for almost 100 maritime boundaries to be delimited, although, as it stands, only about a third of those have been established.⁹³

In 2010, the African Union set a deadline for these boundaries to be delimited (this was extended to 2017). Despite this, the majority of maritime boundaries in Africa remain undelimited.⁹⁴ Consider the case of Madagascar. Madagascar has only one confirmed maritime boundary with Reunion, while the rest of its boundaries, of which there could be at least seven, are not yet confirmed.

In the WIO, there are several maritime disputes involving both territory and maritime boundaries (see Chart 4).

Overwhelmingly, France is involved in the most disputes – with Comoros, Mauritius and Madagascar. While France has at times framed this in terms of improving the livelihoods of those living on these contested islands, such as in the case of France vs Comoros over Mayotte, the real motivation likely lies in the strategic value of the positioning of these islands.

On the one hand, these islands provide France with an extended EEZ, with its overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific accounting for 93% of its EEZ,⁹⁵ and the Indian Ocean specifically 27%.⁹⁶ On the other hand, they allow France to exercise control over vital sea lines of communication.

Chart 4: Disputed territories and maritime boundaries in the WIO

Claimant	Disputed territory	Administering power
Comoros	Mayotte	France
	Banc du Geyser	France
Madagascar	Banc du Geyser	France
	Bassas da India	France
	Europa Island	
	Glorioso Islands	
	Juan de Nova Island	
Mauritius	Tromelin Island	France
	Disputed maritime boundary	
Kenya	Maritime boundary with Somalia (ICJ awarded oil and gas-rich region to Somalia) ⁹⁷	Somalia (ICJ ruling, rejected by Kenya)

Source: Sovereign Limits⁹⁸

The present threat in these regions in terms of disputes does not manifest in the same way it does in the South China Sea, where ships and patrol vessels confront one another. This raises interesting questions, such as why African states (and France to some extent) do not engage in disputes as in the South China Sea.

This could be attributed to a lack of capacity. Whereas the Philippines and Chinese have a large number of vessels that can be used to exercise power over contested boundaries, states such as Mozambique, Madagascar, and Comoros lack these capabilities. Alternatively, it could be argued that African states hold themselves to certain norms and laws of mediation and negotiation as explained in Article 45 of the Lomé Charter.⁹⁹

In April 2024, the Houthis announced they would start targeting ships diverting around the Cape of Good Hope

Regardless of the reason, disputes in the WIO are not yet at a stage where they might lead to violence or conflict, or draw another state, such as the United States (US), into having to intervene due to security alliances. However, there are several implications that are paramount to consider.

One, these contestations may draw in other major players and become a proxy war of sorts. For example, Russia supports one of the claims of Madagascar.¹⁰⁰

Two, this may impede the cooperation of states to work towards addressing the issues really requiring attention, namely, protecting the waters from IUU fishing, etc.

Finally, the fact that maritime boundaries are not clearly delineated means lines are blurred regarding what activities may be conducted in what waters. In the context of Africa specifically, many wars have been fought over resources. In an era where deep-sea mining is gaining increasing attention, it is important that boundaries do not again become a source of conflict.

Maritime violence

One of the most significant maritime security threats in the WIO has been the emergence of attacks by the

Yemen-based Houthi rebel group on vessels in the Red Sea. According to Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre Director Captain Harifidy A Alex Ralaivony, the maritime extension of conflict is undeniably the most salient new kinetic threat.¹⁰¹

The Houthis, who claimed Palestinian solidarity, originally started by targeting ships that had links to Israel. However, since launching attacks on ships in late 2023, the Houthis have attacked vessels owned by the US, as evident on 24 April and 9 July 2024 (see Chart 5).

Furthermore, while attacks have largely occurred in the Red Sea, there have been indications that the Houthis are expanding their area of influence. In April 2024, the Houthis announced they would start targeting ships diverting around the Cape of Good Hope.¹⁰² On 26 April 2024, the first attack on a vessel in the Indian Ocean was reported, when an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) targeted a merchant vessel southeast of the Horn of Africa.

In 2024, there were at least 40 confirmed attacks on vessels in the Red Sea. While 2025 has not seen the same number of incidents, three so far have been extremely violent. On 6 July, a Liberian-flagged bulk carrier, *Magic Seas*, was attacked by the Houthis, who used unmanned surface vessels and missiles. It was the first attack on commercial shipping since 26 December 2024. On 7 July, *Eternity C* was attacked by sea drones, and at least three seafarers lost their lives.¹⁰³ The 29 September attack on *Minervagracht* led to one death.¹⁰⁴

The attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea have two major implications.

First, they raise serious environmental concerns. In 2024, a major environmental disaster was narrowly averted when the *Sounion* – an oil tanker that had been burning in the Red Sea after a Houthi attack – was successfully salvaged by the EU's Operation Aspides.¹⁰⁵ However, the *Eternity C* and *Magic Seas* incidents resulted in oil slicks. In the case of *Eternity C*, by 15 July there was a 104 km-long slick.¹⁰⁶ That from *Magic Seas* was recorded to be 45 km long and moving in the direction of a protected nature reserve.

These incidents highlight the severe environmental risk posed by attacks on commercial vessels. They also

Chart 5: Attacks by Houthis on commercial vessels in the Red Sea since January 2024

Date	Ship name	Flag	Type	Location	Description
2025					
29 September	Minervagracht	Netherlands	Cargo ship	Gulf of Aden	Struck by UAV, fire caused, one death, crew abandoned ship.
31 August	Scarlet Ray	Liberia	Chemical/ products tanker	Northern Red Sea	Attacked by UAV, no reported injuries or damage.
6 July	Magic Seas	Liberia	Bulk carrier	Southern Red Sea	Attacked by small craft; sank; oil spill.
7 July	Eternity C	Liberia	Bulk carrier	Southern Red Sea	Attacked by small craft; three dead, five missing; abandoned.
2024					
17 November	Anadolu S	Panama	Bulk carrier	Southern Red Sea	Attacked by two UAVs; no damage.
28 October	Motaro	Liberia	Bulk carrier	Southern Red Sea	Attacked by three UAVs; no damage.
10 October	Olympic Spirit	Liberia	Chemical/ product tanker	Southern Red Sea	Hit by UAV; continued voyage.
1 October	Cordelia Moon	Panama	Crude oil tanker	Southern Red Sea	Struck by USV; ballast tank punctured; continued voyage.
20 July	Pumba	Liberia	Container ship	Southern Red Sea	Hit by UAV and USV; explosions near ship; crew safe.
19 July	Lobivia	Singapore	Container ship	Gulf of Aden	Struck by UAV; onboard fire; extinguished.
15 July	Chios Lion	Liberia	Crude oil tanker	Southern Red Sea	Hit by USV; major damage; crew safe.
15 July	Bentley I	Panama	Product tanker	Southern Red Sea	Hit by USV, UAVs and skiffs; no casualties/damage.
9 July	Maersk Sentosa	US	Containership	Eastern boundary of the Gulf of Aden	UAV exploded near vessel; no damage.
27 June	Seajoy	Malta	Bulk carrier	Southern Red Sea	UAV fell near vessel; no damage.
23 May	Yannis	Malta	General cargo ship	Southern Red Sea	UAV exploded near port side; no damage.
29 April	Cyclades	Malta	Bulk carrier	Southern Red Sea	Multiple UAV strikes; minor damage.
26 April	Andromeda Star	Panama	Crude oil tanker	Southern Red Sea	Multiple UAV strikes; vibrations/sparks; no damage.
26 April	MSC Orion	Portugal	Container ship	Indian Ocean	UAV strike; no major damage.
24 April	Maersk Yorktown	US	Container ship	Gulf of Aden	UAV intercepted by warship; no damage.
6–7 April	Hope Island	Marshall Islands	Container ship	Southern Red Sea	Three UAV attacks; one intercepted; no damage.
23 March	Huang Pu	Panama	Crude oil tanker	Southern Red Sea	UAV strike; minor damage.

Date	Ship name	Flag	Type	Location	Description
15 March	MADO	Marshall Islands	Liquid petroleum gas tanker	Southern Red Sea	Three UAV attacks; no damage.
11 March	Pinocchio	Liberia	Container ship	Southern Red Sea	UAV strike near vessel; no damage.
8 March	Propel Fortune	Singapore	Bulk carrier	Gulf of Aden	UAV strike near vessel; no damage.
6 March	True Confidence	Barbados	Bulk carrier	Gulf of Aden	UAV strike; fire/abandonment; three dead, four injured.
4 March	MSC SKY II	Liberia	Container ship	Gulf of Aden	Two UAV strikes; container fire; no casualties.
24 February	Torm Thor	US	Tanker	Gulf of Aden	UAV attack; no strike.
22 February	Islander	Palau	General cargo ship	Gulf of Aden	Two UAV strikes; suspected damage; one injured.
18 February	Rubymar	Belize	General cargo ship	Southern Red Sea	Two UAV strikes; abandoned; later sank; no casualties.
19 February	Sea Champion	Greece	Bulk carrier	Gulf of Aden	UAV explosion near ship; minor damage.
19 February	Navis Fortuna	Marshall Islands	Bulk carrier	Gulf of Aden	UAV strike; minor damage.
16 February	Pollux	Panama	Tanker	Southern Red Sea	UAV attack; no damage.
15 February	Lycavitos	Barbados	Bulk carrier	Gulf of Aden	UAV explosion near ship; minor shrapnel damage.
12 February	Star Iris	Marshall Islands	Bulk carrier	Southern Red Sea	UAV explosion near starboard; no major damage.
6 February	Morning Tide	Barbados	General cargo ship	Southern Red Sea	UAV strike near ship; no damage.
6 February	Star Nasia	Marshall Islands	Bulk carrier	Gulf of Aden	UAV strike; minor damage.
26 January	Marlin Luanda	Marshall Islands	Tanker	Gulf of Aden	UAV strike; fire onboard; no casualties.
24 January	Maersk Detroit	US	Container ship	Gulf of Aden	Three UAV attacks; no damage.
18 January	Chem Ranger	Marshall Islands	Bulk carrier	Gulf of Aden	UAV strike; no damage.
17 January	Genco Picardy	Marshall Islands	Bulk carrier	Gulf of Aden	UAV strike; no damage.
16 January	Zografia	Malta	Bulk carrier	Southern Red Sea	UAV strike cargo hold; no injuries.
15 January	Gibraltar Eagle	Marshall Islands	Bulk carrier	Gulf of Aden	UAV strike; no damage.
11 January	Khalissa	Panama	Crude oil tanker	Gulf of Aden	Missile strike near vessel and small craft trailing; no damage.
2 January	CMA CGM Tage	Malta	Container ship	Southern Red Sea	Three explosions near vessel; no damage.

Sources: All information was derived from the Secretary-General's monthly reports to the President of the UN Security Council as well as the Lloyd's list

reinforce the importance of understanding the spillover effects of one maritime security threat, namely maritime violence, onto another – pollution.

Second, the attacks on commercial vessels have led to a decrease in trade through the Suez Canal and an increase in trade around the Cape of Good Hope. In the first two months of 2024, the traffic through the Suez Canal dropped by 50% compared to the previous year.¹⁰⁷

The instability in the Red Sea therefore has the potential to strengthen the position of littoral African states with docks along the Cape of Good Hope route, with the rise in demand for bunkering and restocking services at African ports.¹⁰⁸

Despite this strategic opportunity, though, increased trade has highlighted the limited logistical capacities, notably in South Africa. The Port of Durban ranks at 341 out of 348 ports worldwide, while the Port of Cape Town ranks at 344.¹⁰⁹ So while the Red Sea crisis has enhanced the strategic importance of African ports along this route, it has simultaneously called into question the capacity of the region's ports with the increased trade.

Militarisation

One of the goals of the 1971 UN Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace was to ensure the halting of 'the further escalation and expansion of [great powers'] military presence in the Indian Ocean.'¹¹⁰ In contrast to this, one of the notable trends in the dynamics of the WIO is the increase in geopolitical competition and subsequent increased militarisation. The US and United Kingdom host the jointly run military base of Diego Garcia, while the US also has a military base in Djibouti, a small presence in Somalia and Kenya, and previously had a drone base in Ethiopia.¹¹¹

The US also engages in military drills in the WIO through Operation Cutlass Express.¹¹² China,¹¹³ a US rival, also has a military base in Djibouti and has similarly engaged in joint military drills, through participation in Exercise Mosi in 2019 and 2023, with the third (postponed) iteration originally scheduled for November.¹¹⁴

France is without doubt a major military presence in Africa, most notably through its territories of Reunion and Comoros. Alongside the US and China, it also operates a military base and five naval bases in Djibouti.¹¹⁵ In both

Reunion Island and Mayotte, the French Armed Forces in the Southern Indian Ocean Zone are permanently deployed.¹¹⁶ France also has a military garrison on Europa Island, the Glorioso Islands, and Juan de Nova Island.¹¹⁷

Furthermore, France participates in military operations, such as the EU's Operation Aspides and Operation Atalanta, and it has most recently deployed an aircraft carrier, its air fleet and escort vessels as part of Mission Clemenceau 25 in the Indian Ocean.¹¹⁸ While Russia does not have a military base in Djibouti, it did sign a deal with Sudan in 2020 to allow it to keep four navy ships, including nuclear-powered ones, in Sudan for 25 years. In 2025, it was confirmed that Russia would establish its first naval base in Sudan.¹¹⁹

One of the notable trends in the dynamics of the WIO is the increase in geopolitical competition and militarisation

Beyond the typical 'powers', Türkiye and India have both made inroads into Africa. Since 2017, Türkiye has hosted Camp TURKSOM in Somalia, and it will soon launch satellites from the spaceport under construction in the East African country. This will make Somalia the first African state to launch satellites from its soil.¹²⁰ The facility will also serve as a long-range missile testing facility.

Such developments build on the deals signed between Somalia and Türkiye in 2024. In 2024, Türkiye signed a comprehensive maritime and defence pact with Somalia. Under this agreement, Türkiye will rebuild, equip and train the Somali Navy in exchange for 30% of the revenue generated from Somalia's EEZ.¹²¹ India signalled its enhanced presence in the region in 2021 after signing a deal with Mauritius to build a 3 km-long runway capable of taking a large military aircraft.¹²²

More recently, in 2025, under the Africa India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME) exercise, India took part in military exercises with Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, and South Africa.¹²³ It has also participated in Exercise IBSAMAR – a multinational maritime exercise involving South Africa, Brazil, and India.¹²⁴

The arrival of new partners in Africa, through Türkiye and India, along with the traditional actors involved in

the region, must be viewed critically. It seems in keeping with the trend of non-African naval or military facilities being built in the region under the guise of anti-piracy or anti-IUU fishing measures.¹²⁵ At last year's inauguration of the new airstrip built by India on Agaléga Island, the development of the port was described as a 'jetty'.¹²⁶ But this draws attention away from the fact that it is a deepwater port that has the potential for military use.

Considering the increasing attention on the WIO islands, African states must be cognisant of the strategic value the region holds and identify islands that may become the subject of interest. The numerous islands that currently have existing airstrips are examples (see Chart 6).

Based on the images in Chart 6, the WIO is undoubtedly an area that could become of even greater interest to external powers. While France has maintained the largest military presence in the region through its WIO territories, players such as India are also increasing their presence.

If leaders of the Indian Ocean, and the WIO specifically, want to abide by the normative goal of a demilitarised Indian Ocean, they will have to be scrupulous in analysing the actions of external actors in the region. This will also require them to be proactive in identifying the strategic relevance of the region, to ensure it does not become subject to geopolitical rivalries and antagonistic competition.

Addressing maritime security in the WIO

The WIO hosts a range of mechanisms, strategies, and institutions aimed at addressing maritime security threats. At the broadest level, the 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (2050 AIM Strategy) provides a continental framework for addressing numerous threats, ranging from climate change and illicit activities to piracy, maritime terrorism and maritime boundaries.¹²⁷

Complementing initiatives specifically targeting environmental threats include for example the Nairobi Convention for the Protection, Management and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the Western Indian Ocean (the only legally binding maritime treaty in the region). They also include the IORA Strategic Framework of Action on Marine Debris in the Indian Ocean,¹²⁸ Protocol on Integrated Coastal Zone

Management of the Western Indian Ocean¹²⁹ (adopted in 2023 and undergoing ratification), and Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association.

While these initiatives hint that states in the WIO are paying attention to the environment, most maritime security frameworks, such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct, have not mainstreamed environmental threats into their approaches.

The Djibouti Code of Conduct, through the 2017 Jeddah Amendment, has broadened its mandate to address a wider array of threats, beyond just piracy, such as IUU fishing. This has been complemented by the Indian Ocean Commission's ECOFISH Programme¹³⁰ and Sustainable Western Indian Ocean Regional Programme.¹³¹

While such programmes focus on deterring IUU fishing through increased regulations and monitoring, harder approaches to addressing IUU fishing have been sought through EUNAVFOR's Operation Atalanta.¹³² Operation Atalanta and the Combined Maritime Forces¹³³ have also been used to combat piracy, as has the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia.¹³⁴

The Djibouti Code of Conduct is complemented by the Regional Maritime Security Architecture (RMSA), which focuses on building the operational and institutional capacities to implement such strategies. In particular, the RMSA has led to the establishment of two vital centres in the WIO – the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre in Madagascar and the Regional Coordination Operations Centre in Seychelles.

In response to growing instability and maritime violence in the Red Sea, initiatives such as EUNAVFOR Operation Aspides¹³⁵ and Operation Prosperity Guardian¹³⁶ have been deployed. While these military-based operations have disrupted key trafficking routes, such as the Southern Route used for drug smuggling, challenges remain along other stretches of the East African coastline.

In 2023, the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia was succeeded by the Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities, which is supported by the Indian Ocean Commission and specifically tasked with addressing the threats of drug and human trafficking. The strength of the platform is that there is no formal

Chart 6: Islands in the WIO with militarisation potential

Country	Island	Airstrip length	Image
France <i>Disputed by Madagascar</i>	Grande Glorieuse	1.4 km	
France <i>Disputed by Madagascar</i>	Tromelin	1 km	
France <i>Disputed by Madagascar</i>	Juan de Nova	1.2 km	
France <i>Disputed by Madagascar</i>	Europa Island	1.5 km	
Seychelles	Astove	1.2 km	
Seychelles	Poivre	1 km	
Seychelles	Platte	1 km	
Seychelles	Coëtivy	1.4 km	
Seychelles	Assumption Island	1.3 km	
Seychelles	Rémire Island	1.2 km	

Source: Google Maps

membership criterion, and a variety of actors can convene and discuss issues of interest.¹³⁷

Finally, a pivotal actor in the WIO has been the Indian Ocean Rim Association. Notably, although IORA's initial goal was to promote economic cooperation, it has evolved to include addressing non-traditional and traditional security threats, with maritime safety and security forming one of its six priority areas. The strength and relevance of the organisation to the WIO lies in its broad membership: as a Pan-Indian Ocean organisation, it is able to unite a variety of states, and address the security threats that transcend borders in the region.

In particular, IORA has emphasised capacity building. This is particularly important given the asymmetries in resources available for maritime security among WIO states. However, here it must be noted that capacity building should not be used as a catch-all phrase that addresses all issues. Capacity-building efforts must account for the unique constraints of WIO island states, which often have very small, ageing populations, unlike mainland Africa.

Simply providing training is insufficient if there are not enough human resources to implement security measures. Such issues speak to the importance of always considering the context of individual states.

Conclusion

Maritime security in the WIO is best understood through a cyclical framing, as this highlights interdependence and feedback loops. Seeing it on a linear continuum can illustrate how one threat morphs into another, but it fails to capture the way threats reinforce and feed off one another.

For example, increasing IUU fishing is probably largely due to maritime violence in the Red Sea diverting resources away from Somalia, which could make piracy more attractive again. Simultaneously, increased instability in the Red Sea leads to more traffic around the Cape of Good Hope, which raises risks of collisions and marine pollution. When these environmental pressures end up exacerbating food insecurity, communities are more vulnerable to the actions of transnational illicit criminality.

Concurrently, climate change acts as both a multiplier and accelerator within this cycle. Shorter monsoon periods open longer trafficking windows, while shifting fish stocks alter fishing patterns, impacting the economic security of littoral and island states.

Each of these dynamics amplifies the others: resource scarcity fuels crime; crime deters investment and weakens governance; weakened governance leaves maritime spaces more vulnerable to climate and conflict pressures.

Notes

- 1 The time span under consideration for this brief differs from threat to threat, depending on the availability of data. For example, in the case of IUU fishing, the IUU Fishing Risk Index has not yet released its 2025 charts, and so the brief refers to the 2023 database. However, in terms of piracy and maritime violence, the latest charts are used, representing trends in the past two years. In all instances, attempts are made to provide the most recent developments in a particular threat, although for some threats, 'recent' may refer to the past 10 years, while in other instances, 'recent' refers to the past two years.
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