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Strengthening SADC's maritime security architecture

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This report assesses the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) evolving maritime security architecture, showing how geography, national capability gaps and political-economic conditions shape regional ambitions and limitations. By analysing the roles of SADC's Standing Maritime Committee (SMC) and its Integrated Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS), it highlights coordination weaknesses and uneven member-state engagement, which continue to constrain effective regional maritime governance.

Key findings

- Maritime governance is rarely framed as integral to SADC's Industrialisation and Infrastructure Agendas or the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area. The disconnect between blue-economy rhetoric and security planning limits political buy-in from directorates beyond defence and infrastructure.
- Most regional capacity-building efforts, including information sharing and exercises, have been externally funded, highlighting a preference for non-SADC support as a result of its weak internal resourcing and sustainability risks.
- The 2019 IMSS was formally adopted by the SADC Summit in 2022, with a consolidated Action Plan under review, but implementation remains uneven and largely under-resourced.
- Operation Copper remains a nationally funded and focused South African initiative that provides limited de facto regional coverage but lacks shared command or financing as well as a formal linkage to the SADC IMSS.
- The African Union Peace and Security Council encourages regional economic communities and regional mechanisms to explore combined task-force modalities that may be useful for SADC consideration; however, detailed guidance and coordination mechanisms are still under development.
- Existing peace-support doctrine provides only minimal maritime guidance, and SADC lacks a modernised and consolidated operational doctrine for multinational maritime contingents.

Recommendations

- Ensure regional goals are translated into national programming and budget lines by encouraging Member States to incorporate IMSS objectives into their national maritime strategies or security committees.
- Ensure follow-through on SMC decisions and maintain institutional memory beyond the rotating chair by creating a dedicated, full-time maritime desk within the SADC Organ Secretariat, staffed with seconded naval or maritime experts from Member States.
- Ensure archiving of all SMC reports, minutes and correspondence.
- Prioritise implementation of the 2022 IMSS Action Plan by establishing a small technical task team comprising SADC, Indian Ocean Commission, African Union Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) Department and partners to identify milestones, indicators and funding mechanisms by mid-2026.
- Underpin combined maritime operations and exercises by drafting common standard operating procedures for regional operations, covering command and control, communications, information-sharing and joint logistics.
- Adapt best practices on coordination, fusion centres and combined patrol models by facilitating regular exchanges with the centres established in support of the Yaoundé Architecture and those supporting the Djibouti Code of Conduct (Jeddah Amendment).

Introduction

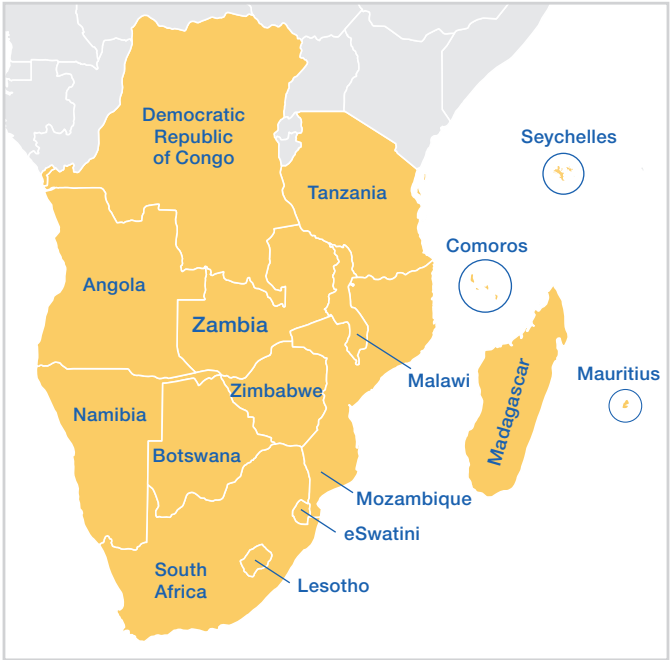
This report examines the Southern African Development Community (SADC) institutional architecture for maritime security, highlighting salient geographic realities, organisational frameworks and political-economic challenges that complicate member-state engagement and strategy implementation. The report profiles each of SADC's 16 Member States to show how geography and politics shape their maritime interests, distinguishing between coastal and land-linked contexts, national capabilities and their implications for regional maritime cooperation.[1]

The report concludes with policy recommendations aimed at strengthening the work of SADC's Standing Maritime Committee (SMC) and the implementation of the SADC Integrated Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS). These recommendations seek to promote more coherent multilateral approaches to maritime security in Southern Africa and reinforce existing continental and regional mechanisms.

SADC's geographic and geopolitical make-up

This section situates SADC's maritime security within its broader geographic and geopolitical context. It shows how the region's physical configuration and uneven access to the sea for several Member States have profoundly influenced the political economy and institutional development of maritime cooperation.

Chart 1: SADC Member States



Southern African maritime spaces have witnessed a significant increase in illicit maritime activities over the past two decades, with a rise in incidents of illegal fishing, smuggling and trafficking. A limited number of piracy and maritime terrorism attacks have also occurred, all of which contribute to maritime insecurity for states and coastal communities.[2]

Southern African maritime spaces have witnessed an increase in illicit maritime activities over the past two decades

Understanding SADC's maritime security trajectory requires recognising how geography and geopolitics intersect to fragment authority, stretch resources and challenge regional cohesion.[3] Of the 16 SADC Member States, 10 are coastal or island nations bordering the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, including four of Africa's six small island or large-ocean states.[4] The region's island states, notably Mauritius and Seychelles, often describe themselves as large-ocean states.[5] This label underscores the scale of their maritime jurisdictions and highlights the frequent mismatch between their patrol and interception capabilities and the breadth of coverage required.

The SADC Atlantic littoral comprises Angola, Namibia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). At the same time, Indian Ocean members include Mozambique, Tanzania, Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius and Seychelles. South Africa occupies a unique position, spanning the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and serving as a significant entry point into the Southern Ocean. The six land-linked members – Botswana, eSwatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe – maintain indirect maritime links via rivers, lakes and corridors connecting to seaports such as Beira, Nacala, Walvis Bay and Durban, underscoring the importance of integrated land–sea transport.[6]

Effective maritime security underpins both Southern Africa's external economic lifelines and the regional integration and development goals articulated by both

SADC and the African Union (AU) in its Agenda 2063 framework. Southern Africa's trade continues to be dominated, in both value and volume, by extra-regional partners in Asia, Europe and the Middle East.[7] This critical reliance on maritime routes for exports, imports and energy supplies makes the security of sea lines of communication, ports and offshore resources a central pillar of stability for most coastal and land-linked economies. Disruptions arising from insecurity at sea, shipping disruptions and congestion or operational bottlenecks can have cascading effects on trade, food security and fiscal revenues.

SADC's maritime geography presents political and jurisdictional challenges that intersect with geopolitical interests

Southern Africa's maritime connectivity is organised around the Cape Route, a globally significant sea lane linking the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.[8] This east–west configuration reinforces the region's strategic role as a maritime gateway linking African, Asian and American markets. Complementing this are several smaller but regionally vital sea routes that connect the subcontinent's ports to overseas and neighbouring partners. These include shipping corridors from South African ports, such as Durban and Cape Town, to South America, Asia and Australia, as well as coastal routes linking Southern Africa with nearby island states, including Mauritius and Madagascar. Many of these routes overlap with or feed into the main Cape Route, sustaining the region's participation in global trade networks.

On the Atlantic side, maritime corridors through ports such as Walvis Bay in Namibia, and Luanda and Lobito in Angola, provide alternative access points for land-linked states. Moreover, through South Africa's jurisdiction over the Prince Edward and Marion Islands, the region maintains a presence in the Southern Ocean, supporting research, fisheries governance and Antarctic logistics, giving Southern Africa a unique strategic triple-ocean reach.

SADC's maritime geography presents several political and jurisdictional challenges that intersect with broader geopolitical interests. The region's position astride major global shipping routes enhances its strategic value, while also drawing attention from external states seeking influence or access. Although most post-colonial maritime boundaries in Southern Africa have been settled, a handful remain disputed or undefined, notably between Angola and the DRC, and between Malawi and Tanzania.[9] Questions of sovereignty persist over several small islands in the Mozambique Channel, particularly those France has claimed and currently administers.[10]

Meanwhile, efforts to clarify continental shelf claims and manage offshore oil, gas and fisheries zones have made maritime delimitation an increasingly complex and politically sensitive concern.[11] Rising sea levels may complicate baselines and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the future, adding new layers of governance challenge to a region already marked by overlapping claims and strategic interests.[12]

The diversity of these maritime and land-linked interests explains much of the institutional fragmentation that characterises SADC's approach to maritime security. The report therefore turns next to the evolution of SADC's institutional architecture, examining how the organisation has sought – with uneven success – to translate shared geography into collective security mechanisms.

SADC's institutional framework

The 1992 Treaty of Windhoek established SADC as the successor to the 1980 Southern African Development Coordination Conference. As with its predecessor, it is an intergovernmental organisation dedicated to economic development but now expanded to include regional integration objectives and collective security mechanisms.

SADC is embedded prominently within Africa's wider peace and security architecture. It is one of the AU's eight recognised regional economic communities (RECs) and functions as a regional mechanism within the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), mandated to translate continental priorities into subregional action. The Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the AU (2002) and the 2008 Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Area of Peace and Security between the AU and the RECs and regional mechanisms identify organisations such as SADC as foundational building blocks of APSA.

These organisations operate according to the principles of subsidiarity, complementarity and comparative advantage.[13]

Regarding maritime security, SADC can also derive legitimacy and policy support from evolving global norms and frameworks. For instance, Action 22 of the United Nations (UN) Pact for the Future, adopted on 22 September 2024, underscores the importance of multilevel cooperation to address transnational maritime threats.[14] UN Member States are committed to strengthening coordination at global, regional and national levels; promoting information sharing; and building maritime law enforcement and governance capacity in accordance with international law. By aligning the APSA's principle of subsidiarity with this renewed UN emphasis on regional implementation, SADC arguably gains reinforced legitimacy as the most significant regional mechanism for all its Member States to collaborate within.

While SADC has adopted regional fisheries and counter-terrorism instruments, coordination between these thematic areas and SMC structures has been minimal

The 1992 SADC Treaty provides for protocols in all areas necessary to achieve the organisation's objectives. SADC's framework for maritime cooperation derives primarily from its general peace and security instruments, complemented by sectoral protocols that have maritime dimensions.[15] In line with this mandate, SADC established the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation under Article 9, whose functions are defined in the 2001 Protocol on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation.

Within SADC, maritime-related functions are dispersed across several directorates. Fisheries and aquaculture fall under the Directorate of Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources; port and shipping under the Directorate of Infrastructure and Services; and marine environmental issues under the Directorate of Climate Change, Environment and Disaster Risk Management. Maritime security is only briefly mentioned in the Strategic Indicative Plan for the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation (SIPO II 2010–2015), under the defence and state security sectors, in reference to piracy, navigation safety and offshore resources.

While the organisation has adopted regional fisheries and counter-terrorism instruments, coordination between these thematic areas and SMC structures has been minimal and, in practice, limited to national and sectoral Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) efforts.

A notable advancement is the establishment of the Regional Fisheries Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Coordination Centre in Maputo, which has been operational since April 2023.[16] The centre enhances information sharing and enforcement against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU)

RISING SEA LEVELS MAY COMPLICATE BASELINES AND EXCLUSIVE ECONOMIC ZONES

fishing.[17] This initiative could serve as a building block for the long-discussed SADC MDA Centre, a proposal that has remained on the agenda for nearly two decades. Regional MDA remains aspirational despite being recognised for over a decade, showing conceptual continuity but implementation stagnation. The SADC Regional Fisheries Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Coordination Centre is becoming the de facto regional surveillance node; however, it is a fisheries-oriented, rather than defence-oriented, initiative.

Multiple externally driven and commercial MDA systems currently operate in parallel. The EU-funded Maritime Security (MASE) programme operates the IORIS platform (Information and Oceanographic Reporting and Information System) under CRIMARIO. In addition, India's Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region as well as private-sector Automatic Identification System and satellite-tracking providers each collect and share maritime data under distinct frameworks and governance models. Consequently, national and regional stakeholders can receive multiple overlapping but non-identical situational awareness feeds, generating information gaps, latency and inconsistent operational interpretations that complicate the coordination of joint SADC maritime activities.

Within this broader institutional framework, the SMC has emerged as the focal mechanism for implementing maritime cooperation. The following section analyses its structure, mandate and limitations to understand how institutional design shapes regional performance.

The Standing Maritime Committee

The SMC is the primary SADC platform for promoting interoperability, advising on maritime security initiatives, and thus planning joint maritime activities.[18] The SMC functions as a specialised sub-committee of the Inter-State Defence and Security Committee (ISDSC), which is the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security's principal forum for defence cooperation. It was established following an ISDSC seminar held in Gaborone in March 1995 and formally inaugurated at its first meeting in July 1995.[19]

While SADC's maritime agenda extends well beyond piracy or naval defence to include governance, trade and environmental concerns, the institutional pathway through which maritime issues ultimately reaches decision makers is narrow. The SMC sits several bureaucratic layers deep within SADC's defence architecture and remains distinct from the organisation's broader, non-military maritime initiatives. Maritime matters lack direct representation at higher political or policy levels, and SMC recommendations must first pass through the Defence Sub-Committee, which has historically been dominated by land-force perspectives, before advancing to the ISDSC and the Organ.

In other words, maritime security now requires a mandate far broader than the SMC's membership, authority or resources. Reviews of SADC's political and security decision making show that maritime issues receive limited and irregular attention at senior levels. Although SADC has endorsed initiatives such as the IMSS, discussions remain infrequent, follow-up is weak and engagement is fragmented across SADC actors. In practice, regional coordination on maritime security occurs mainly in the defence domain, not across civilian or economic areas.

Reviews of SADC's political and security decision making show that maritime issues receive limited attention at senior levels

The SMC's effectiveness has often hinged on the institutional knowledge management and the personal commitment of long-serving Chiefs of Navy and their support staff. Frequent leadership changes and the annual rotation of the SMC chair can undermine momentum, as incumbents must rebuild networks and relearn procedures. Attendance and continuity have also fluctuated due to changing membership – for example, Seychelles withdrew from SADC in 2004 and rejoined in 2008; Madagascar was suspended from 2009 to 2014; and the Comoros acceded only in 2017 – contributing to uneven participation and a loss of institutional memory.

The persistence of implementation gaps is best illustrated by the repetition of identical agenda points and actions year on year.[20] For instance, by 2016, SMC minutes were flagging the same priorities first set in 2011 – establishing a regional MDA Centre, securing dedicated funding, creating a vessel-reporting

framework and appointing a permanent maritime security coordinator at SADC headquarters.

Institutional arrangements alone, however, do not reveal how SADC has acted in practice. To assess implementation, the following section examines the development of the 2011 Maritime Security Strategy (MSS) and its limited operational expression through Operation Copper – the region's longest-running maritime security deployment.

Development of the 2011 SADC Maritime Security Strategy and Operation Copper

The broader impetus for African maritime strategies emerged as Somali piracy surged southwards in the late 2000s. In July 2009, the 13th AU Assembly recognised piracy off the coast of Somalia as a continental crisis and urged the AU Commission to formulate a strategic response through coordination with RECs.

SADC defence chiefs began deliberating on a collective maritime strategy within this context. While there is some evidence of interest before 2009, the 2010 Jubilee Summit marked a turning point in SADC's high-level focus on maritime security.[21]

The Summit acknowledged the economic and security threat piracy posed in the coastal waters of its Member States, especially Seychelles, Mauritius and the United Republic of Tanzania. It mandated the Secretariat to take a strong lead in combating piracy by sending a team of technical experts to establish the extent of the problem and recommend appropriate measures.

Maritime security issues have mainly been addressed outside the framework of SADC through various EU-funded and Indian Ocean Commission (IOC)-coordinated programmes. For SADC Member States along the Indian Ocean, their primary channel for maritime security cooperation has been engagement in parallel international and multinational frameworks. Most have, since January 2009, aligned themselves with two initiatives.

Firstly, the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) originated under the auspices of the International Maritime Organization.[22] The DCoC has provided a framework for countering piracy and, since the 2017 Jeddah Amendment, a wider range of illicit maritime activities.

Secondly, states also participate in regionally focused mechanisms and initiatives coordinated by the IOC. This led to the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre in Madagascar and the Regional Coordination Centre in Seychelles – both established under the MASE programme and now jointly linked with the DCoC – promoting cooperative, intelligence-led maritime security in the western Indian Ocean.[23]

While the 2011 strategy articulated ambitious regional goals, its real test lay in implementation. The South African-led Operation Copper provides a valuable lens through which to evaluate how far SADC's strategic commitments translated into concrete action at sea.

Operation Copper is a long-running example of maritime security cooperation in Southern Africa. Copper is the codename for South Africa's preparation and deployment of capacity to implement a narrow set of the 2011 MSS objectives – namely, deterrence patrols against piracy in the eastern Indian Ocean. Although often portrayed as operating under a SADC mandate, in practice, Operation Copper has remained almost entirely planned and conducted under the South African National Defence Force's Joint Operations Command.[24]

The broader impetus for African maritime strategies emerged as Somali piracy surged southwards in the late 2000s

Mozambique first asked for South African naval support after a series of unexpected attacks in the Mozambique Channel in December 2010.[25] In response, in early 2011, South Africa began deploying, in rotation, several of its Valour-class frigates and South African Air Force maritime patrol aircraft to monitor the waters off Cabo Delgado. These deployments were formalised under a bilateral memorandum of understanding in June 2011 and expanded into a trilateral arrangement with Tanzania by the end of the year.

In practice, implementation remained primarily bilateral (South Africa–Mozambique); Tanzania's participation was limited.[26] Since 2011, the planning, tasking and reporting cycles have been embedded within South Africa's Department of Defence. Prominent official mentions of Operation Copper appear solely in the Department's

Annual Performance Plans and Reports. They are not recorded in SADC's own outputs.[27]

Since its launch, the logistics chain and assets used for Operation Copper have served several purposes, although these missions remain nominally distinct. Sailing to northern Mozambique presents an opportunity to conduct Operation Corona exercises en route from Simonstown and on returning to South African waters. In 2022, South Africa relied on similar logistics for a limited maritime deployment under Operation Vikela – its contribution to the SADC Mission in Mozambique – due to overlapping assets and geography with the Copper area of operations. From March to May 2022, the South African Navy frigate *SAS Spioenkop* (F147) conducted coastal patrols off Cabo Delgado with a Maritime Reaction Squadron element embarked.[28]

Since 2013, new maritime security challenges have emerged including illicit trafficking, insurgent coastal activity and the protection of offshore gas installations

The strategic rationale for maintaining Operation Copper should also be scrutinised as the northern Mozambique Channel is now defined more by violent extremism and coastal insecurity than by piracy.[29] Copper is still labelled an anti-piracy operation – even though piracy attacks are absent and only occasional armed robberies occur outside Cabo Delgado – providing justification for a continuing, largely symbolic, naval presence. While piracy incidents have all but disappeared since 2013, new maritime security challenges have emerged, including illicit trafficking, insurgent coastal activity and the protection of offshore gas installations.

The MSS has also not generated any equivalent missions elsewhere in SADC waters. Without a SADC reporting mechanism, lessons from anti-piracy operations have not been integrated into the development of regional maritime security and peace-support policies. Similarly, SADC members do not reject Operation Copper; rather, regional oversight, coordination and shared learning have not developed, as it remains mainly a national undertaking with limited bilateral dimensions.

This section reiterates that South Africa's anti-piracy patrols in the Mozambique Channel are an ongoing operation, explicitly linked to the implementation of the 2011 SADC MSS. However, despite the absence of verified piracy incidents in the channel for over a decade, policy language has remained unchanged, with threat assessments from 2011 continuing to guide strategic planning.

Few naval platforms in the region can be considered interoperable. The last fully SADC-led maritime exercise, Exercise Golfinho (2009), remains the only large-scale regional naval drill conducted under the SADC Standby Force framework. Subsequent cooperation has focused mainly on riverine and

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2009

THE ONLY LARGE-SCALE REGIONAL NAVAL DRILL UNDER THE SADC STANDBY FORCE FRAMEWORK WAS CONDUCTED

special-forces operations, leaving maritime integration at sea largely aspirational.[30]

The composition of all SADC navies reflects a patchwork of acquisitions and donations from China, India, France, Brazil, the United States (US) and other partners, resulting in diverse technologies, maintenance systems and operational doctrines. External partners have primarily convened major multinational maritime exercises from which SADC Member States have derived several technical and capacity-building benefits.

The US, through the US Africa Command, continues to sponsor Cutlass Express in the western Indian Ocean. This multinational exercise tests information-sharing, boarding procedures and interoperability. Participation from SADC states has been selective: Mozambique, Tanzania, Comoros, Seychelles and Mauritius have joined recent Cutlass Express iterations, while South Africa has generally abstained in favour of bilateral and SADC-centred frameworks. India has recently expanded its naval diplomacy and capacity-building engagement, hosting its first major maritime exercise with African countries – the Africa–India Key Maritime Engagement – in April 2025, signalling growing Indo–African cooperation in the Indian Ocean.[31]

The experience of Operation Copper exposed both the value and the limitations of SADC's first maritime strategy: a framework that was politically endorsed but operationally narrow. These shortcomings prompted calls for a broader and more inclusive approach, culminating in the revision and adoption of the IMSS in 2022.

The 2022 SADC Integrated Maritime Security Strategy

The 2011 SADC MSS was never formally promulgated as an open and publicly available SADC policy document. Instead, it was confined to being an internal, classified report within the defence substructure, understandably a reflection of the sensitivity of maritime security at the time.[32]

Although implemented in part from 2011 onwards, the MSS focused on deterring Somali piracy in the Mozambique Channel – primarily reflecting South Africa's priorities – rather than as a comprehensive regional framework.[33]

By 2016, the SMC recognised the need to review and expand the strategy to address emerging non-piracy threats. Broader issues such as IUU fishing, drug trafficking, search and rescue and environmental security had not been addressed by the MSS.

In 2019, a SADC MSS Review Work Group – comprising the SMC as custodian, the Defence Intelligence Standing Committee and the Defence Legal Work Group – formally undertook to revise and integrate the 2011 MSS. The aim was to align it with the AU's 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy and other REC strategies such as the Economic Community of West African States Integrated Maritime Strategy. In 2019, the DRC led this group in drafting a fully integrated and updated plan, with representatives from Seychelles and Mauritius also participating.[34]

IUU fishing, drug trafficking, search and rescue and environmental security had not been addressed by the MSS

The IMSS was developed through broad consultation and participation by most SADC Member States at various stages of development. Subsequent SMC and Defence Sub-Committee meetings discussed further refinement of the working group's draft strategy. This was to ensure it was clearly aligned with the SADC Industrialisation Strategy and Roadmap (2015–2063) and the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan. The SADC Council of Ministers formally adopted the resulting IMSS in 2022.

The IMSS organises its proposals around five interdependent strategic objectives: strengthening maritime governance, ensuring a safe and secure maritime domain, improving marine environmental management, optimising the maritime economy and promoting maritime awareness and research. In this sense, it shifted its emphasis from reactive anti-piracy measures to an integrated approach encompassing maritime security and safety, environmental protection and sustainable blue economy growth across the Indian and Atlantic seaboards and internal waterways.

Building on this recognition, the IMSS redefined maritime security as a multidimensional issue that

links defence, governance, the environment and economic development. Its structure and priorities reflect this integrated vision and thus, substantively, represent a significant advance on the 2011 framework. It aligns SADC's approach with continental norms under the 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy and the APSA. It calls for better information-sharing, interoperability and coordinated responses to maritime threats such as trafficking, arms smuggling, illegal fishing and environmental crimes.

The strategy also aligns regional maritime stability with the goals of the African Continental Free Trade Area and Agenda 2063, asserting that the security of sea-based trade routes is a precondition for regional economic integration.

The adoption of the IMSS marked a significant normative advance but also highlighted implementation constraints

A SADC blue-economy framework and an IMSS are complementary, representing two sides of the same coin: one focuses on sustainable development, while the other focuses on security and stability. In other words, they co-constitute the conditions in which maritime security underwrites economic growth, and economic growth sustains security investments. These links are largely declaratory rather than operational and depend on project-specific cooperation and collaboration. However, they establish the political basis for integrating blue-economy themes into future SADC programmes.

The adoption of the IMSS marked a significant normative advance but also highlighted persistent implementation and resource constraints. The SMC acts as custodian of the strategy, and Member States are expected to submit progress reports under the IMSS Action Plan. In practice, limited resources, competing national priorities and external influences continue to constrain delivery.

By March 2023, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe had submitted inputs for a consolidated report signed by the SMC chair. Angola indicated that the Action Plan had been integrated across government departments and was awaiting parliamentary approval. South Africa reported 'progressive' interdepartmental implementation. Other states, including Botswana, Mozambique and the DRC, reported limited or delayed progress, reflecting ongoing capacity and governance constraints.

To understand how geographic realities translate into differing national priorities, the following subsection profiles SADC's Member States by maritime type – coastal, island and land-linked – highlighting how geography determines both capability and commitment to regional maritime initiatives.

Maritime profiles of SADC Member States[35]

Land-linked and lake states

Malawi is among the most maritime of SADC's land-linked states. Lake Malawi, also known as Lake Nyasa or Lake Niassa, forms its entire eastern frontier, providing multiple opportunities for fisheries, transport and tourism. It is also the site of one of Southern Africa's most persistent territorial disputes: Malawi and Tanzania contest ownership of its waters under competing interpretations of the 1890 Heligoland Treaty and modern boundary principles.[36] This dispute flares up periodically, notably between 2012 and 2014 during oil exploration licensing.[37]

Beyond the lake, Malawi's economy is outward-oriented. It relies on Mozambican and Tanzanian corridors to the ports of Nacala and Dar es Salaam, with South Africa sometimes serving as an attractive alternative route.[38] Periodic proposals to reopen the Shire–Zambezi waterway reflect its dependence on external corridors.[39] The Malawi Defence Force's Marine Unit, based at Monkey Bay, is tasked with protecting fisheries, combating smuggling and conducting patrols to maintain sovereignty.[40] Naval procurement, including a contentious 2013 agreement with South Africa's Paramount Group, has sparked domestic scrutiny over priorities and transparency.[41]

Zambia's inland waters include Lake Tanganyika to the north, Lake Kariba to the south, Lake Mweru on the DRC frontier and the western reaches of the Zambezi River system. Its maritime presence is expressed through the Police Marine Division, the Fisheries Department and joint patrols with neighbouring countries, notably Tanzania on Lake Tanganyika and Zimbabwe on Lake Kariba.[42] Enforcement on Lake

Mweru has often been politicised amid recurrent fishery disputes with the DRC.[43]

Zambia's external trade relies on multiple corridors: the TAZARA (Tanzania–Zambia Railway) to Dar es Salaam and the Beira and Maputo corridors through Mozambique. Since the 2021 opening of the Kazungula Bridge, access along the North–South Corridor to Durban and via the Trans-Caprivi route to Walvis Bay has improved.[44] Lake Tanganyika exposes Zambia to the security challenges of the Great Lakes region. At the same time, Kariba remains strategically vital for hydropower generation and regional energy cooperation.

Zimbabwe's maritime orientation centres on the Zambezi River and Lake Kariba, the vast artificial reservoir jointly managed with Zambia through the Zambezi River Authority. Though droughts have repeatedly constrained output, the dam remains vital for hydroelectric generation. Kariba also supports fisheries that sustain local livelihoods. However, limited enforcement by the Parks and Wildlife Authority and Marine Police has enabled illegal fishing and smuggling.[45]

The Zambezi forms an ecological and political frontier with Zambia, Mozambique and Botswana. Zimbabwe's trade routes rely chiefly on the Mozambican ports of Beira and Maputo, with South Africa providing an alternative outlet. Historical experience reinforces its maritime vulnerability: the British 'Beira Patrol' (1966–1975), which tried to enforce UN sanctions by blocking seaborne oil supplies heading to Rhodesia, is a reminder that regional sea access has long been a strategic constraint for land-linked countries.[46]

Botswana has no navigable lakes and only limited inland fisheries or shipping. However, the Okavango Delta and Chobe River sustain important ecosystems and local water transport. The country's position between the Okavango, Chobe and Zambezi river basins situates it within Southern Africa's inland maritime politics, where control over watercourses and transit routes carries strategic weight. The 1999 International Court of Justice ruling on the Kasikili (Sedudu) Island dispute averted a potential armed confrontation with Namibia, thereby reinforcing Botswana's commitment to resolving disputes through legal means.[47]

Today, its priority is securing trade corridors – the Trans–Kalahari route to Walvis Bay, the North–South Corridor to Durban and the Kazungula Bridge crossing to Zambia – which collectively make Botswana a pivotal hinge in regional connectivity.

Lesotho is one of only three enclaves in the world, being entirely surrounded by South Africa and making it SADC's most externally dependent member for maritime access and trade. With no navigable waterways or naval forces, its economic and energy lifelines run through South African infrastructure under the Southern African Customs Union framework.[48] Nevertheless, it has shown awareness of global ocean governance by signing the 2023 High Seas Treaty, underscoring its commitment to international waters and marine biodiversity despite being land-linked.[49]

Historical experience is a reminder that regional sea access has long been a strategic constraint for land-linked countries

Eswatini occupies a comparable position to Lesotho but enjoys slightly greater flexibility thanks to its location between South Africa and Mozambique. The country accesses the sea through two main trade corridors: the Maputo Corridor to the east and the Richards Bay–Durban route to the south, which is integral to SADC's transport network. Although Maputo Port is geographically closer, most exporters favour the South African ports for their efficiency and global connectivity.[50] Periodically, Eswatini has proposed arrangements for direct port access through Mozambique, but these have not progressed beyond preliminary discussions.[51]

The country also operates an open international ship registry, which has attracted criticism for its weak oversight and non-compliance with international maritime conventions on safety, labour and environmental standards.[52]

The DRC, though technically a coastal state, functions within SADC primarily as a lake power. Its Atlantic frontage at Banana spans barely 40 km. Despite repeated attempts to construct a deep-water port, it remains underdeveloped. Most recently, a 2018 concession agreement with global port operator

DP World has faced delays.[53] Inland waters dominate the country's maritime geography and regional interactions, particularly Lake Tanganyika.[54]

The DRC Navy's limited resources constrain enforcement against illegal fishing, trafficking and insurgent movements spilling over from Burundi and eastern DRC.[55] The UN Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DRC or MONUSCO intermittently supported lake patrols.[56] Periodic expansive maritime assertions by Congolese leaders, including rhetorical references to waters off Cabinda, have occasionally strained relations with Angola.[57]

Interruptions along the Beira, Nacala or Dar es Salaam routes can raise transport costs, delay exports and constrain access to essential goods

SADC's land-linked Member States maintain an indirect but critical relationship to the maritime domain. Their economies depend on maritime corridors through neighbouring coastal countries, making them highly sensitive to disruptions in port operations or offshore insecurity. Even minor interruptions along the Beira, Nacala or Dar es Salaam routes can raise transport costs, delay exports and constrain access to essential goods such as fuel and food.

Although these states often endorse regional maritime governance frameworks, their participation remains symbolic or rhetorical, reflecting limited operational capacity. Within SADC, water-based concerns affecting land-linked members are primarily addressed under environmental and resource management frameworks, rather than through defence and security structures.

The lake dimension – particularly Lakes Tanganyika, Malawi and Kariba – remains a blind spot. While these waters are central to cross-border trade, livelihoods and fisheries management, SADC lacks dedicated modalities for their security governance. Oversight rests instead with basin authorities and donor-supported projects, leaving these inland maritime spaces at the margins of SADC's regional security planning.

Littoral and coastal Southern Africa

THE PROTECTION OF ANGOLA'S OFFSHORE OIL INSTALLATIONS IS A NATIONAL PRIORITY

Angola occupies a pivotal position between the maritime zones of Central and Southern Africa, reflecting the historical and strategic dualities of its location. Offshore oil production underpins its economy, making the protection of offshore installations a national priority. However, despite its relative stability compared to some Gulf of Guinea states, Angola has faced piracy challenges.[58] The navy remains modest but has steadily modernised with Brazilian support, notably through patrol-vessel construction and training cooperation.[59] Today, Angola participates in the Yaoundé Architecture through the Economic Community of Central African States and the Gulf of Guinea

Commission. However, operational engagement remains limited compared with coastal states to the north.

Its participation in SADC maritime frameworks is similarly constrained, reflecting linguistic and institutional divides more than a lack of interest. Angola also engages in South Atlantic cooperation through ZOPACAS (the South Atlantic Peace and Cooperation Zone) and enduring bilateral ties with Brazil.[60] National threat perceptions centre less on piracy than on oil theft, drug trafficking, pollution and IUU fishing – issues that have prompted cooperation with the EU, US and regional partners.[61]

Namibia's maritime identity is anchored in Walvis Bay, which was under South African control until 1994.[62] It is now the country's principal commercial port and naval base. Namibia's management of Walvis Bay as a regional logistics hub reflects national-level rather than SADC-driven maritime governance. The country's regional influence is constrained by the small size of its fleet and limited resources. Located outside both the Yaoundé and Djibouti maritime coordination systems, Namibia fills an institutional gap by actively participating in SADC's SMC and engaging in bilateral cooperation.[63] It has cultivated longstanding partnerships with Brazil focused on training, vessel maintenance and hydrographic capacity.[64]

The Benguela Current makes Namibia's EEZ highly productive but also vulnerable to IUU fishing and governance scandals, such as the 2019 'Fishrot' case, which reshaped national views on maritime law enforcement.[65] Fisheries protection and coastal surveillance remain the navy's primary missions. Cooperation with South Africa continues through joint patrols and training, despite a minor EEZ boundary delimitation issue at the Orange River mouth.[66]

South Africa occupies a unique tri-ocean position and has increasingly emphasised its Indian Ocean flank since the 1990s.[67] It encompasses key trade routes, strategic partnerships and membership in the Indian Ocean Rim Association and India–Brazil–South Africa Dialogue Forum. The Atlantic seaboard, stretching from Cape Town to Saldanha Bay, remains central to naval operations and training, yet reduced budgets, maintenance backlogs and limited sea hours constrain capability.[68]

At the same time, the South African Navy continues to anchor SADC's maritime presence in the Mozambique Channel through Operation Copper, albeit under financial strain.[69] Diplomatically, Pretoria has sought to reinvigorate South Atlantic cooperation via the Atlasur Exercise with several, South American navies and deepen Indian Ocean ties through the Indian Ocean Rim Association and India–Brazil–South Africa Dialogue Forum.[70] Inconsistent follow-through, resource constraints and regional sensitivities have tempered its ambitions for maritime leadership.

Mozambique has a long coastline along the western Indian Ocean, stretching over 2 400 km, including the strategically vital Mozambique Channel. Offshore gas discoveries in the Rovuma Basin have made Cabo Delgado a focal point for the global energy industry. At the same time, the province has become a zone of insurgency and a target of foreign military intervention.[71] The navy remains small and under-resourced, its development indirectly constrained by the fallout from the 2013–2016 'tuna bonds' scandal,[72] in which hundreds of millions of US dollars in secret, government-guaranteed loans were misappropriated in the name of maritime security for ill-conceived defence and fisheries projects.[73]

Offshore gas discoveries in the Rovuma Basin have made Cabo Delgado a focal point for the global energy industry

Maputo, Beira and Nacala serve as commercial gateways for land-linked neighbours. At the same time, maritime challenges include illegal fishing, drug trafficking and the protection of resources. A controversy arose recently after some reports claimed Mozambique was to lease part of the Port of Nacala to Malawi for 99 years.[74] A bilateral arrangement allowing Malawi to use a section of land near the port for trade facilities was signed. Misreporting quickly fuelled confusion and political criticism over sovereignty over Nacala's critical maritime infrastructure.[75] Mozambique is a signatory to the DCoC but plays a limited operational role, relying more on SADC frameworks and bilateral partnerships.

Tanzania's maritime geography spans both the Indian Ocean and major inland lakes, making it one of Africa's

few states with extensive sea and lake jurisdictions. The country is a member of the East African Community and SADC, acting as a bridge between the two blocs through its involvement in the East African Community maritime and blue economy frameworks and SADC's SMC. Dar es Salaam anchors regional trade, serving Zambia via TAZARA and linking Malawi, Burundi and the DRC through overland corridors.[76]

Tanga and Mtwara are emerging ports, closely linked to proposed pipelines and offshore gas projects, thereby enhancing the strategic significance of Tanzania's Indian Ocean coastline.[77] Inland, Lakes Tanganyika and Victoria connect it to continental security and trade networks. However, challenges persist around IUU fishing, smuggling and the ongoing Lake Nyasa sovereignty dispute with Malawi.[78]

Island states: shifting affiliations and maritime orientations

The four island members – Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles and Comoros – share an Indian Ocean orientation but have maintained uneven and sometimes fragile relationships with SADC. Unlike the continental founders, the island states joined SADC later and remain relatively peripheral: Mauritius in 1995; Seychelles in 1997 (withdrew in 2004, rejoined in 2008); Madagascar in 2004 (suspended 2009–2014); and Comoros in 2017. These shifting affiliations have reinforced a sense of institutional distance from SADC's continent-centred maritime agenda.

Instead, the island states prioritise the IOC and its Regional Maritime Security Architecture, as well as partnerships with initiatives from the EU, India, France and the US. They face threats from Somali piracy, illicit trafficking, climate change, such as rising sea levels, and food insecurity linked to IUU fishing.

While their participation in SADC's SMC remains ad hoc, they exert outsized influence in wider Indian Ocean diplomacy. This has created a structural paradox whereby SADC's most ocean-active and dependent Member States are the least embedded in its collective maritime security frameworks, despite being externally orientated and networked.

Madagascar is the largest island country in the western Indian Ocean. It occupies a pivotal position along the Mozambique Channel, a strategically essential yet often under-analysed sea lane linking the wider Indian Ocean with Southern Africa.[79] With about 4 800 km of coastline and an EEZ of roughly 1.1 million km², it is rich in fisheries and marine biodiversity but acutely vulnerable to IUU fishing and ecological degradation. Sovereignty disputes with France over the Îles Éparses complicate its claims to resources.[80] Although Madagascar was not directly affected by Somali piracy, regional anti-piracy initiatives briefly drew greater attention to its capacity to patrol its surrounding waters.[81] Current threats stem mainly from IUU fishing, smuggling and resource exploitation.

Madagascar's maritime capacity remains modest, relying on support from France, India and the European Union (EU) through initiatives such as CRIMARIO and the MASE programme, which helped establish the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre.[82] Its engagement in SADC maritime processes has been limited. In contrast, its participation within the IOC has been sustained, positioning it as a key voice in regional fisheries management and the blue economy – leveraging geography but outsourcing much of its capacity.

Mauritius maintains one of the region's most capable coastguards and maritime administrations

Mauritius has long punched above its weight in Indian Ocean maritime affairs. Strategically situated adjacent to a major east–west shipping Sea Lines of Communication, it commands an EEZ of more than 2.3 million km². The country maintains one of the region's most capable coastguards and maritime administrations. Its national priorities centre on fisheries management and the blue economy.

However, unresolved sovereignty issues continue to shape its maritime diplomacy. Mauritius persistently presses its claim to the Chagos Archipelago, supported by the 2019 International Court of Justice advisory opinion and a UN resolution calling for the end of United Kingdom administration and maintains a pending claim to Tromelin Island under a 2010 co-management agreement with France.[83] Although a SADC member, Mauritius plays a limited role in the SMC, focusing instead

on IOC-led coordination and partnerships with the EU, India, France and the US to enhance MDA, search-and-rescue operations and counter-trafficking capacities. Mauritius has emerged as a regional leader in blue-economy governance and a visible international advocate for ocean stewardship.[84]

Seychelles is the smallest SADC state by land area, yet one of its most consequential maritime actors. Its EEZ of roughly 1.37 million km² dwarfs its territory, making ocean governance, fisheries and surveillance central to national survival. At the height of Somali piracy, the Seychelles served as a regional anti-piracy hub, hosting European Union Naval Force Atalanta and North Atlantic Treaty Organization detachments, concluding prisoner-transfer and status-of-forces agreements and hosting the Regional Anti-Piracy Prosecutions Intelligence Coordination Centre.[85] With sustained assistance from India, the EU and United Arab Emirates, it has developed one of the most capable coastguards in the Indian Ocean.

The Seychelles uses both its island identity and vulnerability to champion global agendas on the blue economy, climate adaptation and sustainable oceans

Its security focus has since shifted towards IUU fishing, narcotics trafficking – driven in part by widespread heroin addiction linked to maritime smuggling routes to the Southern African mainland – and climate-related threats to its marine economy. Diplomatically, the Seychelles practises a distinctive 'Creole diplomacy'.[86] This means it uses both its island identity and vulnerability to champion global agendas on the blue economy, climate adaptation and sustainable oceans, including through its pioneering Blue Bond initiative. While it remains deeply engaged with the IOC and partnerships with India, the EU and the US, its focus on oceanic rather than continental frameworks keeps it institutionally distinct from SADC's mainland-centred maritime focus.

Comoros, at the northern entrance of the Mozambique Channel, occupies a geographically central but institutionally peripheral position in SADC. Its small economy depends on fisheries and external aid, while sovereignty disputes with France over Mayotte complicate maritime cooperation. The country faces persistent challenges of illegal fishing, smuggling and trafficking; however, its coastguard capabilities remain rudimentary, relying on bilateral and multilateral support – primarily from France, the EU and India – for maritime surveillance and enforcement. Since joining SADC in 2017, the Comoros has played a limited role in its maritime frameworks, focusing instead on the IOC for fisheries, MDA and blue economy initiatives.

The 2008 Anjouan crisis illuminates the centrality of maritime mobility to its national cohesion as well as the depth of its dependence on external actors for maritime reach and security. When Anjouan's leadership rejected national elections and tried to secede, the Union government lacked the naval and airlift capacity to reassert control across its dispersed islands.

COMOROS FACES PERSISTENT CHALLENGES OF ILLEGAL FISHING, SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING

The crisis culminated in March 2008 with an AU-backed intervention, supported by Tanzania and Sudan, which restored federal authority through Operation Democracy in the Comoros.[87] The crisis and its resolution underscored the archipelago's strategic vulnerability and the political sensitivity of France's military presence in nearby Mayotte, which provided logistical support despite being part of the sovereignty dispute.[88]

Although SADC's South Atlantic coast (Angola to South Africa) sees fewer crises such as piracy or armed insurgency, it nonetheless faces persistent threats from IUU fishing, oil-related smuggling and transhipment of illicit goods.[89] A June 2024 analysis highlights the enduring challenges posed by fisheries crime and corruption in South Atlantic states.[90] Angola's increasing involvement in regional collaboration to tackle IUU fishing, notably through the SADC Atlantic initiative, exemplifies how these challenges are real and require coordinated effort.

SADC's peripherality is most pronounced in the south-west Indian Ocean, which spans the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles. These island states maintain strong security ties with France, India, the US and the EU, both bilaterally and through regional bodies such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Contact Group on Piracy off Somalia. Large EEZs and valuable fisheries make them pivotal in global maritime governance, yet SADC has no real operational footprint.[91] Instead, the region is covered by overlapping external arrangements and multinational naval presences. In other words, SADC is almost irrelevant to the maritime security of these states.

Conclusion

This report has showed why, even if SADC underperforms operationally, it remains crucial because it retains several critical structural and political functions within Africa's peace and security architecture. While Southern African states formally endorse regionalism as a core principle for their peace and security policies, few have made sustained investments in SADC institutions and fewer in its maritime ones. SADC's ability to secure its Indian Ocean littorals – and the Atlantic and Southern Oceans – and establish robust regional maritime security mechanisms remains limited, despite institutional foundations from the mid-1990s and strategies adopted in 2011 and 2022.

This report has showed that the Southern African maritime security regime is best understood as an informal constellation of overlapping practices. Patrols, MDA systems and naval exercises have primarily evolved outside SADC's influence and intent, sustaining a level of institutionalisation that SADC itself has not been able to match or replicate. The region's maritime security, apparently meeting the needs of the most vulnerable Member States, is maintained largely outside SADC, through professional practices, ad hoc agreements and external partnerships rather than formalised regional implementation.

Notes

1 In this report, institutional architecture refers to the formal and informal arrangements including the organisational structures, legal instruments, decision-making bodies and coordinating mechanisms through which SADC and its Member States pursue collective maritime security objectives. It thus encompasses both the design of institutions and the patterns of interaction among them. This definition recognises that regional security cooperation in Southern Africa is not limited to one bureaucratic structure but rather unfolds across a network of bodies under the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation. It is supported by functional manuals, operational mechanisms, such as Operation Copper, and normative frameworks aligned with the AU's 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy and the Lomé Charter.

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