



FUTURE SPLASH: South Africa is playing its role in patrolling Africa’s waters as President Jacob Zuma launches the tug Mvezo in Port Elizabeth. Zuma launched Operation Phakisa: Oceans Economy in 2014 as a results-driven multi-sector approach to development. PICTURE: GCIS

Proper policing can unlock continent’s blue economy

An increase in violent crime threatens Africa’s latent potential for wealth

AFRICA is a continent of about 77.7million km² bordered by even larger interconnected ocean spaces along its estimated 30 500km coastline. Given that several of the 38 African coastal states and six island states also claim an exclusive economic zone extending 200 nautical miles from their coastlines, this significantly increases the extent of territory under African jurisdiction.

In Africa, peace, conflict and violence coexist on land and at sea. At sea, however, an increase in violent crime threatens the unlocking of the full economic potential of Africa’s oceans.

As a backdrop to Africa’s potential vested in resources and its people, vast maritime transport corridors, living resources, minerals, information and human development opportunities reside at sea and must be policed and defended.

Crime syndicates are equally aware of the latent potential for exploiting the wealth locked into the seas, and the African maritime domain is no exception. Africa’s coastal regions portray their own hubs of stability and instability as crime syndicates from within, as well as beyond the continent extend their activities into largely unpoliced African waters in several ways.

Piracy off Somalia including the hijacking and attempted hijacking for ransom of ocean vessels has enjoyed significant international attention, which over time masked three important developments elsewhere.

First, the rise in petro-piracy off West Africa where vessels with petroleum products are regular targets of violent attacks, and second, the rise of other crimes at sea that impact more directly upon people such as human smuggling and the exploitation of vulnerable women and children.

The danger of human cargo as a smuggling commodity is visible off Libya where criminals profit from desperate people on land and cause large numbers of innocent deaths at sea.

A third activity on the maritime security agenda is illegal fishing that holds dire consequences for African societies.

Illegal fishing practices can lead to environmental degradation, economic downturns, and food insecurity.

According to the 1994 UN Report on Human Security, all tie in or exacerbate basic vulnerabilities that collectively threaten human security.

Africa’s seas are thus not exempted from crime syndicates and other non-state actors that exploit African landscapes if found devoid of jurisdiction and proper governance.

Although West Africa, North Africa and the region around the Horn of Africa are known for a particular cluster of threats at sea, each of these regions also threaten spill-overs to adjacent mari-

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time areas.

Off West Africa, the concern is a southward spill of the general and alarming rise of maritime crime manifesting in the Gulf of Guinea.

Off East Africa, South Africa took the lead to do limited patrolling north of Mozambique as a precautionary measure to prevent Somali piracy moving further southward under the pressure of international naval deployments off Somalia.

Events off North Africa reflect the crisis proportions migration at sea takes on when facilitated by criminal syndicates and the consequent pressures of the crisis on Western Europe.

Of note is the cumulative effect of the three developments alongside obscured and ongoing criminal practices that ebb and flow simultaneously, and feed off the prominent piracy and migration threats.

All this raises questions on why we should be concerned, and what can be done about it.

Concerns stemming from the interdependent global economy rest upon secure maritime trade and the uninterrupted flow of goods by sea – a maritime-based trade network tied into African waters.

Any perception of or real interference raises red flags, whether real or perceptual. Both hold financial consequences due to ships being hijacked, stopped, re-routed, higher insurance risks, or penalties.

The sea also serves as a base for information flow through submarine cable networks around, and to, Africa.

Transport and information infrastructure, together with vast energy infrastructure at sea off West Africa, and upcoming off East Africa, including the coast, imply that exposure to large transnational criminal bodies holds risks of

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existential proportions for business communities and vulnerable African states.

Add to this the direct or collateral and dangerous environmental pollution, as well as devastation of marine life, and the scene is set for the plundering of productive coastal zones of Africa – zones that are only now being valued for their vast potential to augment the rather pessimistic socio-economic growth, and stability outlooks on landward Africa.

For Africa, the blue economy is probably a game changer – the value of which so many African decision-makers are only now grasping and factoring into their national and regional planning strategies.

This rather bland outlook raises the next question of what is being done.

Responses to deteriorating African maritime landscapes reflect strong co-operative patterns bringing together international, regional and national actors, including multinational corporations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Maritime complexities require actor versatility, and this emerges from the collective actor profiles off East and West Africa in particular – from modern naval vessels to small NGOs assisting fishing communities.

The AU formulated and accepted the African Integrated Maritime Strategy-2050, which aims to drive a continent-wide strategy to contain elements of bad order at sea, and foster responsible and sustainable practices in using the seas off Africa.

Another development is how African countries mobilised to arrest the slide towards maritime insecurity by strengthening their own agencies, recognising the co-operative imperative, and driving new initiatives.

South Africa’s Operation Phakisa is one initiative explicitly framing the importance of the sea to foster growth in the lacklustre third largest African economy.

A further response is an aggressive drive to secure maritime assets like the Nigerian programme for new naval and other platforms to patrol their waters.

In a sense, it is no longer a question of whether threats to African maritime assets of all kinds are worth considering.

The call is out: police and contain maritime threats and foster a profitable and safe African maritime landscape for people and industry along sustainable lines for the sake of future generations.

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