Publication: MaritimeReviewAfrica (Inside)
Publication Date: 01 Nov 2018
Page: 16

AVE: 13643.96
Circulation: 3000
Part: 1 of 1

THE WATCHKEEPER | Industry Opinion

The emergence of a maritime security community in Africa and the role of academia in finding solutions to piracy

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By Francois Vreÿ

The Somali piracy wave off the Horn of Africa during the early 21st century caught the scholarly, as well as the international community, including African governments and their maritime agencies off-guard. Serving as the catalyst for African rulers and their decision-makers to respond to events in their ocean territories, piracy off Somalia also led to an extensive international naval response to suppress piracy.

Pirate syndicates attacking merchant vessels, and naval vessels intercepting or chasing them off have become the face of Somali piracy. So did extensive international efforts to bring in food by sea to Somalia's displaced populations; push back Al-Shabaab insurgents to fend off a perceived piracy-insurgency nexus, and assist Somalia to extend increased governance over their land and maritime territories. In addition, broader maritime security threats and vulnerabilities became more topical.

Amidst all of this, and although skewed by an overwhelming piracy fixation, maritime security remains a primary tenet of debate. Maritime security threats now resonate clearly with the scholarly community, African policy-makers and the interests of a broad international audience beyond Africa.

By 2018, maritime security has gone through an intense revision by policy- and related decision-makers, navies, scholars and analysts cooperating with non-governmental institutions. For Africa in particular, mutual engagements, new meeting formats, a shared repertoire or agenda and joint enterprises identified in scholarly works serve as possible indicators of an emergent and much-needed maritime-oriented security community on the African continent.

Only from 2002 onward did maritime security become more prominent, and primarily as a result of the 9/11 threat of terrorism; terrorist attacks against ships and the piracy surges off the Horn of Africa and in the Strait of Malacca.

The collective outcome of the growing interest in maritime security has elicited academic interests from an array of disciplines such as Security and Strategic Studies, Law, Economics and Information Technology, and Sociology and Psychology. Scholars from these disciplines are united in their common search for understanding in developing responses and in using scientific methods to do so.

Scholars collaborate with policy makers

Scholars are now collaborating to provide policy-makers with the information they need to address broader maritime security threats. Academics from various universities worked in teams to address particular topics that contribute to practitioners' programmes and decisions on security in the oceans off Africa.

Academia has a responsibility to extend knowledge products to assist decision-makers to secure and use Africa's oceans in a responsible and sustainable manner.

This is all happening against the backdrop of post-truth societies, post-factual politics, twisted knowledge and quests for quick solutions that clutter the research-policy interface. A certain element of mistrust or even disdain between scholars and policy-makers, as well as self-imposed isolation or aloofness, further muddles the setting of research informing policy decisions.

Overcoming barriers

Overcoming these barriers is important if scholarly work is to help protect Africa's oceans. Safe

and secure oceans are absolutely fundamental for Africa's development and prosperity of societies, and scholars are pivotal to organise and provide knowledge that assists decision-makers.

Researchers use scholarly publications, symposia, dedicated projects or immersed membership as well as accepted credibility and expertise to influence policy decisions on maritime security.

They prepare knowledge products that help decision-makers to formulate and populate programmes directed at maritime security in flashpoints such as the Gulf of Aden, and the Gulf of Guinea. In this regard scholarly work on maritime security capacity building helps governments and their maritime agencies to better manage their maritime environments over the longer run.

Academic contributions have a role to play by way of exploration, description and explanation of complexities facing decision-makers at national, regional and international levels. They also help with informed decisions about future maritime programmes, or explain actions within theoretical frameworks for later reference and decisions. Scholars help to order and store information and to ensure it is accessible to all.

Examples of such efforts include maritime security publications stored in depositories like piracy-studies.org held by Cardiff University, and Seychelles University. Open access to work done by the British Academy funded Safe Seas Project is another example.

Policy-decisions on programmes and actions regarding maritime security off Africa can only be addressed practically and efficiently if the research interface between scholars and decision-makers functions optimally and should least of all be disrupted by ignorance.

Countries must work together to protect Africa's oceans and this co-operation must recognise and include the key role of research.

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