
RESEARCH BRIEF 1/2022

Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa

[SIGLA @ Stellenbosch](#)

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The growing need for a South African national maritime security strategy¹

Background

As Africa's maritime agenda grows as a pathway to bring maritime stock and flow resources into the African developmental agenda to underpin [Agenda 2063](#), an ever-growing urgency for national maritime security strategies (NMSS) arises. Africa is a crossing point for global maritime traffic and houses lucrative living and non-living stock resources attracting international actors of all kinds. It is therefore not surprising that [China's maritime silk road initiative](#) includes landing points on the eastern African littoral. Simultaneously, much is said about piracy costs off Somalia, but an in-depth 2021 report of [piracy costs in the Gulf of Guinea](#) should shock African governments into rethinking any *laissez-faire* approach to securing their maritime interests. It is time to speak less and do more about African NMSS formulation and execution practices.

Discussion

A [2021 RUSI Journal article](#) argues that a NMSS serves several purposes. One critical contribution is its consolidative role in bringing together government departments and specialist agencies to rethink and align their contributions in setting up and executing a NMSS – also called an integrated NMSS given the multiplicity of actors and roles that now characterise maritime security initiatives. A further purpose served is showing national commitments to safe and productive seas and assuring partner countries and other maritime players of one's national intent.

Discussing a NMSS is often convoluted with naval strategy and naval diplomacy. In the case of Africa, the naval dimension within an overall NMSS is often too small, expensive, and weakly developed to be seen as the primary or lead actor. Decision-makers must therefore master the art of devising a NMSS through the optimal mix of actors, ways and means. This reality brings modern maritime diplomacy to the fore with its growing emphasis on a smart mix of coercive, persuasive, and co-

¹ A word of acknowledgement to Mr H.R. Heitman for his comments on the brief.

operative pathways to pursue national maritime interests. For African governments this points to [their behaviour in pursuit of maritime interests, usually by combining and/or applying the instruments of state power](#).

Formulating an integrated NMSS requires the art of collation to account for increasing actor and issue proliferation with African coastal states at the centre stage of this phenomenon. This complicates matters and casts much doubt on continuing with ad hoc or a *laissez-faire* tactics. Getting it right at home first is also more important than seeking relevance by dappling primarily in regional and continental strategies. When done, however weak or nascent, a NMSS becomes a building block and information setting to connect national security strategy to a maritime strategy and eventually also inform regional arrangements on the security of maritime interests. For Africa, the regional dimension of maritime security and the ways and means to ensure safety and security remain relevant as so aptly demonstrated by the uncertainty pestering naval support to SAMIM in Mozambique despite [the recommendations of the technical committee](#).

Limited African naval capabilities are easy to criticize, but as in South Africa, this drawback also results from an absent NMSS. However, an integrated NMSS holds the potential to pool more resources and skills to support South Africa's maritime interests. [Le Miere \(2014\)](#) for example points to coercion, persuasion, and cooperation in pursuit of maritime interests that necessitates actor diversity to allow for softer and smarter responses and the all-important cooperative demand. This implies a logic of more state and non-state actors, their resources, and skills in the pursuit of national maritime interests. Accepting actor and skills proliferation, as well as growing threat diversity, increases the pressure for an integrated NMSS to keep in step with this ever-expanding security space.

Africa houses productive oceans, but also dangerous hubs of maritime insecurity. In turn, this compels governments to align their maritime and security strategies. Reviewing existing maritime security policies and strategies and embarking on a new strategy for example informed the [New Zealand](#) option. To understand, engage, prevent and respond underpin their 2021 NMSS that in essence also directs where and how government departments and agencies revise, update and play their roles. Also, programmes on maritime interests as in [Nigeria](#) and partnerships for maritime security in [Ghana](#), are examples of African governments busy ordering their maritime interests and attempting alignment with strategies, programmes and scarce resources.

A NMSS is also a platform to merge national capabilities, departmental responsibilities, skills, and promote greater role clarity amongst national role players. It serves to counter the oft-found disruptive dissipation of responsibilities and helps actors and agencies to confirm their roles, allocate new roles, redirect resources and funding, set up dedicated programmes and plan for alternative futures. South Africa for example has a [maritime roadmap](#) to position the country as a recognised maritime player by 2030. This roadmap is not over-ambitious and ties in well with the oceans leg of [Operation Phakisa](#) launched in 2015. Collectively, both initiatives are important islands of thought and practice pointing to aspects of what South Africa's maritime pursuits should include. The dangerous void is the absence of the NMSS backdrop for such national aspirations and initiatives. As argued by [Rotberg](#), defence and security form the indispensable bedrock for political, economic, and social sectors to prosper and it is no different for their maritime equivalents. This interface requires a strategy and programmes to make the actor-resources-skills connection in pursuit of maritime interests. It also ties in with the benefits of launching or upgrading a country's NMSS and so respond to changing political, economic, social, and security environments at sea.

Concluding remarks

South Africa remains a pivotal player on the African continent but lacks a NMSS and thus projects a somewhat opaque maritime security commitment. As far as maritime affairs and Africa goes, South Africa as a lead African country appears to be strangely out of step or late in bringing its national maritime security house in order and so limits the optimal use of coercive, persuasive, and cooperative pathways to secure its maritime interests. South Africa must more fully cloak its maritime interests in an integrated NMSS to become a recognised maritime player by 2030, back Operation Phakisa with credible and smart security arrangements and so project the country as a credible maritime security partner and maritime player on the African continent and beyond.

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