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Unlocking Africa's maritime potential: Does Africa need an African-wide maritime organisation?

Background

The African continent's maritime domain holds significant economic potential, yet it faces numerous challenges including security and safety threats, governance gaps, environmental pollution, and inadequate positioning in the global maritime landscape. While there is evidence of increasing national and regional collaboration on maritime matters, there is a demand for a stronger continental presence in addressing maritime issues. The existing governance structures are limited in their effectiveness in addressing key maritime issues. Will a continent-wide maritime organisation with the vested mandate, power, and resources catalyse unlocking Africa's maritime potential and position the continent as a key player in the global maritime economy?

The African Maritime Landscape

Africa's maritime landscape boasts vast economic potential with approximately 30,500 kilometres of coastline across 38 of its nations. Rich in resources like fish stocks, oil, minerals, and biodiversity, coastal regions also serve as vital trade hubs and tourist destinations. However, challenges such as fragmented governance, piracy, illegal fishing, and pollution hinder development.

Historically, piracy in the Gulf of Aden characterised threats to Africa's maritime industry. This prompted international intervention, leading to a decline in attacks. Yet, piracy and armed robbery continued in the Gulf of Guinea, accompanied by other blue crimes like oil theft and smuggling. Meanwhile, sea piracy is showing signs of a return off Somalia in the wake of attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. Turning back to the Gulf of Guinea, the Yaoundé Code of Conduct was signed in 2013 and aims to address these issues in the Gulf of Guinea through regional cooperation but struggles with enforcement due to sovereign control. In addition, illegal fishing poses a significant threat, causing annual losses of US$2.3 billion in some West African countries and impacting food security and employment.

Efforts to combat maritime security threats off Africa have been widespread and include capacity building, regional commissions, and setting up the Djibouti Code of Conduct in the Western Indian Ocean, but further collaboration is essential. Persistent marine pollution also exacerbates the challenges in the maritime sector in

Africa, with some West African countries, for example, generating millions of tons of plastic waste annually, harming marine ecosystems and economies.

In addition to the endogenous issues affecting the African maritime sector, exogenous challenges exacerbate the situation for African nations and cause undue burdens on the continent. Disproportionately higher surcharges on routes to Africa, volatile freight rates, high insurance costs and unpredictable costs of emissions allowances compound financial instability and inhibit economic development. Furthermore, the absence or vagueness of African maritime priorities in international climate change strategies highlights a critical gap in global governance frameworks, underscoring the urgent need for a unified approach to maritime governance. Currently, there is a conspicuous lack of continent-wide leadership and coordination in maritime affairs, leading to a fragmented governance landscape that undermines effectiveness. While initiatives like the African Maritime Transport Charter (AMTC) and Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS-2050) exist, they fall short of collating or driving an overarching maritime logic to keep the continent's maritime interests, opportunities and programmes visible on regional, continental and international agendas. Establishing a continent-wide maritime organisation could provide the necessary coordination and leadership to address these pressing issues effectively.

The African Maritime Vision

The African Maritime Vision expressed in AIMS-2050 aims to unlock economic growth, enhance security, and safeguard the marine environment. Leveraging abundant coastal resources, it seeks inclusive growth through job creation, trade stimulation, and innovation. Strategic investments in infrastructure, port modernisation, and sustainable practices can boost Africa's GDP and global competitiveness. Achieving this requires integrated governance, capacity-building, and collaboration among states.

Africa's representation at international maritime forums must be better coordinated to achieve the desired effects. Leveraging collective expertise, resources, and networks, can amplify Africa's voice on the global maritime stage and advocate for its interests. Presenting a unified front and articulating common priorities will embolden Africa to exert greater influence on global maritime policies, standards, and initiatives, and presents an opportunity to counter the balkanisation of Africa's maritime affairs.

An African Maritime Organization : Points to Ponder

The proposal for establishing an African Maritime Organization (AMO) draws upon the theoretical framework of neoliberal institutionalism, emphasizing the pivotal role of international institutions in fostering cooperation among states through institutionalising norms, rules, and mechanisms for governance and dispute resolution. This theoretical underpinning provides a solid foundation for advocating the creation of an AMO, especially considering the shared challenges and opportunities in the African maritime domain.

African states face common threats and challenges in the maritime realm, ranging from piracy and illegal fishing to environmental degradation, loss of economic opportunities and governance gaps to military attacks against shipping on its maritime boundaries in the Red Sea and the Northwestern Indian Ocean. These challenges hold common threats and necessitate collective responses that transcend individual state capacities. However, while acknowledging the existing initiatives and organisations focusing on maritime issues in Africa, such as the Maritime Organization of West and Central Africa (MOWCA), it is essential to articulate how the proposed AMO differs and complements these existing frameworks. One significant challenge for the AMO lies in ensuring the active participation and commitment of all African states, considering the diverse interests and capabilities across the continent. Overcoming political, bureaucratic, and financial obstacles is crucial to garner support for the establishment and operation of the AMO. Moreover, addressing apprehensions regarding institutional proliferation and its accompanying downsides is vital for building consensus and trust among stakeholders.

The AMO should be positioned as an operational organisation focused on implementing concrete measures to address maritime challenges, rather than solely strategic or policy oriented. It should complement existing regional initiatives by providing overarching coordination and support, without supplanting regional

organisations. Rather than supplanting regional organisations, the AMO can work in tandem with them, forming a hierarchical structure where regional chapters or sub-organizations focus on specific regional challenges while the AMO provides overarching coordination and support. Such regional chapters can help overcome the continental drag of the AMO being perceived as "too big" to have a continental impact by decentralising decision-making and implementation, thereby enhancing effectiveness and responsiveness while ensuring continental cohesion and coordination.

To be effective, the AMO must have robust legal and regulatory frameworks that provide clarity on its mandate, powers, and responsibilities, along with mechanisms for enforcing maritime laws, resolving disputes, and promoting compliance. Leveraging already established regional bodies as localised arms of the AMO can ensure that expertise and specific contextual knowledge are effectively integrated into the broader continental maritime governance framework.

Capacity building is critical for the success of the AMO, involving investment in the training and development of maritime professionals, enhancing technical capabilities, and fostering research and innovation in maritime affairs. Prioritising inclusivity and representation from all African countries, including island, coastal and landlocked states, is essential. Meaningful participation and engagement from stakeholders across government, industry, academia, and civil society should be facilitated. Active involvement of African leadership at all levels, including heads of state, ministers, legislators, and maritime experts, is indispensable for the establishment and operation of the AMO. This requires political will to support financial resources, and sustained commitment to overcoming challenges and achieving shared objectives.

Conclusion

Africa stands at a pivotal juncture in unlocking its maritime potential and charting a course towards sustainable development and prosperity. As articulated in the AMTC and the AIMS, the vision for Africa's maritime industry embodies the collective aspirations of the continent, rooted in principles of cooperation, governance, and sustainability. However, the realisation of this collective vision hinges upon continent-wide leadership and stewardship of Africa's vast maritime domain, in the form of an African Maritime Organisation. The AMO must be characterized by clear mandates, robust legal frameworks, the commitment of African resources, capacity-building initiatives, and inclusive participation from all, or at least a critical mass of African countries and stakeholders, inclusive of landlocked states. This position is captured by the wisdom encapsulated in the African proverb, *"If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."*

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