

---

**Sara Alneyadi**

**TRENDS UAE**

**Transcript of paper read at the webinar on maritime security on 12 March 2025**

I'm a researcher in the Department of Strategic Studies at Trends Research and Advisory. First, I would like to thank Stellenbosch University for inviting me to participate in this esteemed panel discussion.

It is truly a pleasure to share this session with such distinguished experts in the field, and I hope to add value to today's discussion.

My theme is maritime crime and maritime trade in the western Indian Ocean. I will discuss three main ideas: the key maritime contexts in the western Indian Ocean, East African events that are of concern at the moment, and responses and risk mitigation strategies, including some policy recommendations.

Let's start with the first topic, key maritime contexts in the western Indian Ocean which is the key maritime context in the western Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean has become a key geopolitical zone due to its vital trade routes, energy supply chains, and its role in connecting Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The western Indian Ocean remains a hotspot for maritime crimes ranging from piracy and armed robbery at sea to illicit trafficking in drugs, weapons, and humans. While piracy in the Horn of Africa has declined in recent years, new forms of maritime threats have emerged, including cyber threats targeting shipping operations and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing depleting coastal economies. Environmental crimes such as oil dumping and waste trafficking are also significant issues. Additionally, geopolitical tensions and power rivalries contribute to an unpredictable security environment, making it difficult for regional stakeholders to enforce effective maritime governance. Understanding these evolving threats and their policy implications is crucial for shaping the agenda to ensure both security and economic stability in the region.

Moving to the second topic, East African events that are of concern at the moment, let's talk about the impact of maritime crimes on trade and economic stability. Maritime crime poses a direct risk to shipping companies, leading to increased insurance premiums, rerouting costs, and supply chain disruptions. Governments in the region perceive these threats as both a national security challenge and an economic risk, prompting investments in naval capabilities and regional patrols, as well as legal frameworks to combat illicit activities. Regional organisations and intergovernmental bodies such as the African Union and the Indian Ocean Rim Association advocate for multilateral cooperation and legal harmonisation to improve maritime governance. International trade partners, including BRICS Plus nations and Gulf economies, recognise the strategic importance of securing maritime routes and push for strengthened law enforcement mechanisms.

Now, I will discuss some examples and events. The East African maritime conflict involves territorial disputes, particularly over resources, ports, shipping lanes, and the Indian Ocean. For example, the ownership dispute over the Chagos Islands has implications for regional security dynamics, particularly with the growing influence of China in the Indian Ocean and the strategic

competition between China and the US in the region. A change of ownership of the Chagos Islands could alter the balance of power in the region, with potential consequences for maritime security and freedom of navigation. China has been expanding its presence in the Indian Ocean, building a network of ports and infrastructure through its Belt and Road Initiative. Any shift of control of the Chagos Islands could potentially give China more influence over this maritime area, which could destabilise security arrangements and create tension between competing powers. The current situation is that the US military base on Diego Garcia, the largest island in the Chagos Archipelago, is a crucial asset for US and allied naval and air operations in the Indian Ocean. If Mauritius gains sovereignty over the island, it would have the legal authority to determine the future of the US military base on Diego Garcia. While Mauritius has not explicitly rejected the US presence, it might seek to renegotiate or even terminate the lease agreement between the US and UK that currently governs the military presence on Diego Garcia. This could lead to a reduction or alteration of US military activities in the region and could have a ripple effect on naval operations in the region.

Another example is the Tanzanian political landscape, which has become increasingly violent as the 2025 election approaches, with rising incidents of political violence and repression. Some of the key factors contributing to the increased violence include the escalation of political violence, which could have significant implications for maritime security in the region, especially in East Africa, where Tanzania is a key player in managing sea routes and trade. Tanzania is home to major ports such as Dar es Salaam, which is a critical hub for trade not just for Tanzania but for neighbouring countries like Uganda and Rwanda. Election-related violence could lead to disruption of port operations due to strikes, roadblocks, or damaged infrastructure. This disruption could impact the flow of goods, increase shipping delays, and affect regional trade. In times of political unrest, security forces may be spread thin trying to control violence, leaving vulnerable areas, including maritime zones, less protected. This could increase the risk of piracy or other maritime crimes, particularly in the Indian Ocean region. As Tanzania is a strategic gateway to East and Central Africa, its maritime infrastructure plays a crucial role in ensuring the security and stability of important shipping routes in the Indian Ocean. Election-related violence leading to political instability could affect regional maritime cooperation, hindering efforts to secure key trade routes and increasing vulnerability to outside threats such as international piracy or geopolitical tension.

Another example is the political unrest in Mozambique, which began escalating in late 2020 and 2021. This unrest has led to disruption in shipping and trade in the country. Protests and border closures have caused significant delays at the Port of Beira, which is a crucial hub for exports like minerals and coal. Several vessels have been delayed or cancelled due to the unrest. The unrest has also affected global shipping routes, especially in the Mozambique Channel, which is a key route for international trade. DP World, a global leader in ports and logistics, has experienced delays and disruptions in its projects in Mozambique due to the unrest. As a result, the Mozambican government reported that it has lost over \$54 million due to disruptions at the Port of Beira. This is a major example of the impact of maritime crime on trade and economic stability. This is why I mentioned earlier that governments in the region perceive these threats as both a national security challenge and an economic risk.

Another factor is the 90-day suspension of US humanitarian and development aid, which could undermine maritime security in the Indian Ocean region by reducing counter-piracy efforts and weakening maritime security cooperation. While the 90-day suspension may not be a long-term

strategy, its temporary impact can still disrupt critical maritime security efforts and place more strain on already vulnerable regions.

Moving on to the final topic, which is responses and risk mitigation strategies, efforts to combat maritime crimes require a multi-stakeholder approach that integrates regional cooperation, law enforcement, and technological innovation. Countries in the region, along with international actors like the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and BRICS Plus members, play a crucial role in maritime security governance. Current strategies include enhanced naval patrols, the use of satellite surveillance for real-time threat detection, and legal frameworks that enable effective prosecution of maritime criminals. Additionally, the establishment of maritime domain awareness centres has enhanced real-time information exchange and intelligence sharing, enabling faster responses to illegal activities. However, several challenges hinder these efforts. First, the fragmented legal framework and jurisdictional limitations often slow down the prosecution of maritime criminals. Second, limited financial and technical resources among coastal states further restrict their ability to sustain long-term security operations. Third, geopolitical rivalries and competing national interests sometimes obstruct cohesive regional strategies, making it difficult to establish uniform security protocols.

I would like to discuss policy recommendations for strengthening good order at sea to ensure safe trade routes. Policymakers should prioritise three key areas. First, strengthening regional legal frameworks to ensure consistent enforcement of maritime laws and prosecution of criminals. Second, enhancing public-private partnerships to integrate commercial shipping interests with security measures such as data-sharing agreements and coordinated crisis response mechanisms. Third, expanding international cooperation, particularly through BRICS Plus nations and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, to secure funding, training, and technological support for regional maritime forces. By adopting a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach, the western Indian Ocean states can achieve a more resilient maritime security framework that safeguards trade and economic stability.

With these policy recommendations, I would like to conclude. Thank you all for your time