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Are regional coast guards the answer for safeguarding Africa's maritime domain?

Introduction

More than 90% of Africa's trade is carried by sea while fishing contributes to food security for more than 200 million Africans and the African seabed contains vast potential for hydrocarbons. This potential is offset by maritime insecurities such as illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing that is estimated to cost sub-Saharan Africa approximately US$1 billion a year in lost revenue, Somalia-based piracy costing the world economy an estimated US$7 billion in 2011 and an estimated 50-60 tons of cocaine that move through West Africa to Europe annually.

One of the root causes of maritime insecurity in the vast African Maritime Domain (AMD) is the lingering of some sea blindness elements. The resultant inability to fully appreciate the latent benefits within the maritime domain potentially impedes the realisation of Africa's Blue Economy with its inherent benefits to the continent.

AIMS 2050 recommends, amongst others, enhanced maritime security through coordination of effort, developing of synergies through regional bodies, interagency/transnational cooperation, information sharing, and the development of coastal surveillance systems. AIMS 2050 also calls for a continental working group of Chiefs of African Navies and/or Coast Guards to look at matters of maritime domain awareness (MDA) and uphold cooperation between the Navies and Coast Guards of member states. The Lomé Charter further identifies the responsibilities of state parties to organise its actions at sea and to develop its capacity to protect its maritime area and strengthen law enforcement at sea through the training and professionalization of navies, coast guards and agencies responsible for maritime safety and security.

Discussion

Analysis shows that very few of African coastal states have adequate operational naval platforms to substantially promote maritime security. Fewer platforms translate to limited MDA, insufficient patrols and, by extension, a higher likelihood of undetected maritime crime.

In its evaluation of Africa's maritime enforcement, the Stable Seas Index considers the state of African navies and coast guards in order to assess whether they are deemed adequate for monitoring the territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of the particular state. Unsurprisingly, African states generally scored low in the index in terms of monitoring its coastal zones – a direct reflection on a lack of adequate MDA.

In an analysis of the current maritime security situation in Africa, it has been noted that most African maritime security forces are currently misaligned to meet the security threats they face. These forces have mostly naval bureaucratic affiliations and training programmes, but have a high proportion of coast guard missions, operate

in coast guard zones, and require coast guard partnerships. This is further demonstrated by the fact that arguments for the expansion of naval assets and capacity in Africa usually centre on threats and requirements that relate more to coast guard, than actual naval warfighting requirements.

Only five countries in Africa currently have dedicated coast guards, though many navies effectively conduct nothing else but coast guard operations. In South Africa, the Department of Defence indicated in 2017 that it was investigating the possibility of establishing a coast guard over the medium term, but that it would be dependent on funding. In East Africa, Kenya has recently established a coast guard, which was launched in 2018 to counter terrorism, piracy, illegal fishing, human trafficking and other maritime crimes. Indian Ocean island states, such as Mauritius and Seychelles, which are highly reliant on a secured maritime domain, similarly have dedicated coast guards instead of naval forces to tackle their maritime insecurities.

The vastness of the maritime borders and the scope of the threat to maritime security necessitate co-operation between neighbouring countries and regions in order to secure Africa's Blue Economy. The need for regional co-operation has been re-iterated at various fora while co-operation is a common thread that runs through all the Conventions and Declarations that make up the building blocks of the African maritime security architecture.

In West Africa, the Maritime Organisation of West and Central Africa states (MOWCA) in conjunction with the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) established a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2008 on the establishing of a sub-regional integrated coast guard network that proposed joint efforts to deal with maritime security. These envisaged coast guard networks would enhance MDA and improve cooperation between member states while positive spin-offs would include increased safety, improved environmental protection and better law enforcement capacity. As such, the coast guard debate runs deep and wide within African deliberations about securing its oceans.

Conclusion

It is realised that the maritime security situation in Africa would require a larger law enforcement component in order to combat the largely criminal nature of the maritime security threats. In terms of limitations often placed on military operations, a coast guard would be the more viable and legally defensible option given that the oft-quoted threat spectrum is seldom, if ever, military or naval in kind. In this regard, countries are faced with the following choices: navies acting as coast guards, dedicated coast guards that release naval forces from coast guard responsibilities and navies that rotate between coast guard and naval roles/responsibilities.

The security situation in Africa further highlights the need for a regional coast guard function to combat transnational crimes exacerbated by a lack of capability and capacity of individual states. Most States cannot secure their maritime domains on their own and will have to rely on capacity sharing and cooperation. Regional cooperation in West and Central Africa has clearly shown that regional coast guard operations are possible. The legal framework for cooperation already exists and coast guard cooperation (as opposed to naval cooperation) might be a less complex scenario. Operationalisation would ultimately depend on political will to support existing continental and regional declarations and treaties in order to create the international legal framework on which to base the functioning of such regional coast guards.

Strategic components such as the working group of Chiefs of African Navies and/or Coast Guards could prove critical in facilitating a successful regional force. The political will to incorporate such a regional solution may however prove elusive if leadership remains unaware or complacent regarding the destructive impact that weak maritime security governance holds for African societies and for the African continent as a whole.

Further Reading.

Bateman, S. Managing maritime affairs: The contribution of maritime security forces in Bekkevold, J.I. & G. Till. (eds). *International order at sea*. Springer 2016. Pp. 261-282.

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