Stellenbosch UNIVERSITY IYUNIVESITHI UNIVERSITEIT

ROYAL DANISH DEFENCE COLLEGE

KAIPTC ...where peace begins

South Africa as a maritime security provider in SADC waters

Professor Francois Vreÿ
Captain(N) Mark Blaine (ret)



Background Paper 3

South Africa as a maritime security provider in SADC waters[1]

Professor Francois Vreÿ and Captain(N) Mark Blaine (ret)

Copyright © 2026 KAIPTC

The opinions expressed in this background paper do not necessarily reflect those of the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, its Governing Board or partners. Authors contribute to KAIPTC publications in their individual capacity.

Picture Credits: Images sourced from various online platforms; respective ownership and copyright remain with the original creators and rights holders.

Design and Typesetting: DARIPS Editorial Team



[1] Paper presented at the Fourth International Conference on Maritime Security in African Waters, Stellenbosch, South Africa, October 2025.



TABLE OF CONTENT

Introduction 1

Pathways towards maritime security provision 2

Maritime security provision in SADC waters 3

Summary & recommendations 6

About the Authors 7

About the Forum 7

Introduction

A Maritime Security Provider (MSP) is often seen as a unitary actor operating independently to extend security benefits over an extended ocean landscape. Multiple parties (state and non-state) benefit from the security services offered as public goods. Several countries (including China) also express ambitions to be seen as an MSP, deliver maritime public goods and reap resultant benefits.[2] Possible benefits relate to image, status improvement as well as partnerships, and cooperation in MSP fields with selected actors. In brief, actors operating as MSPs extend security related goods over a given oceanic expanse with both the range of goods and intended maritime landscape limiting what the MSP can afford and deliver within its overall capacity. Whether global, regional or national, maritime security provision remains an important maritime benefit necessary for using the world's oceans safely, productively and responsibly. Threats to the latter are accentuated in the 2024 UNIDIR report Securing the Seas: A comprehensive assessment of global maritime security that contrasts the use of the oceans against the persistent and growing threats to maritime security.[3]



[2] Guo, Z. 2025. What China's 2025 White Paper says about its maritime Strategy, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 19 August. Available https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/what-chinas-2025-white-paper-says-about-its-maritime-strategy 20 January 2026.
[3] Bueger, C. Edmunds, T. & J. Stockbruegger. (2024). Securing the seas: A comprehensive assessment of global maritime security, UNIDIR, Geneve Switzerland.

Pathways towards maritime security provision

Several outlooks dot the MSP landscape. Ambitions for being recognized as a global MSP are probably overambitious while regional ambitions could hold more potential. India for example pursues the MSP label within the larger Indian Ocean but seems to drift towards an MSP through partnerships, rather than as an independent player.[4] The EU operates as a collective to fulfill the roles with aspirations of a global MSP.[5] China, in turn, in its 2025 White Paper, appears to be moving towards using its maritime footprint regionally to extend maritime related services to the South China sea region.[6] At a much lower level, even private maritime security companies form a layer of maritime security provisions to countries, companies and down to individual vessels to become players in the MSP architecture.[7] The effect of what an MSP offers is tempered by geographic scope, vulnerability aspects and threat proliferation that compete for time, attention and resources set within the MSP's capacity hubs.[8]

While China, the USA, India and the European Union aspire towards roles as MSPs over large ocean territories, and even global recognition, lower order ambitions in this regard also have a role to play. Africa for example is constantly subjected to maritime risks and threat proliferation when maritime security provision is lax or absent.[9] Different MSP aspects play a role as entities such as India, China, the USA, the EU all extend elements of security provision (physical assets, capacity building and maritime or naval exercises) to Africa's coastal waters. The EU for example operates in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Guinea. China and India operate in the Gulf of Aden and Brazil, Iran, China, India and Russia cooperate with South Africa in naval exercises to extend security provision off SADC's coast.[10] The EU and India also play a range of security roles by way of capacity building programmes with African coastal states.[11] Much of their presence off Africa rests upon naval assets while operating as an MSP requires more than naval contributions. Having a strong or effective navy is not the sole precondition for acting as an MSP to extend security goods to actors using the oceans.

[4] Rahul Roy-Chaudhury (2022) From 'net security provider' to 'preferred security partnerships': the rhetoric, reality and result of India's maritime security cooperation, Journal of the Indian Ocean Region, 18:2, 87-98.
[5] Bueger, Christian and Edmunds, Timothy (2023) "The European Union's Quest to Become a Global Maritime-Security Provider," Naval War College Review: Vol. 76: No. 2, Article 6.
[6] Guo, Z. 19 August 2025 What China's White Paper says about its maritime strategy, Center for Strategic and International Studies, What China's 2025 White Paper Says About Its Maritime Strategy | New Perspectives on Asia | CSIS 26 January 2026.
[7] Bello, M.T., 2023. The roles of private military and security companies in addressing maritime security threats. Presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of International Masters in Security, Intelligence and Strategic Studies. Charles University. 8-9
[8] Campbell, L. M., Gray, N. J., Fairbanks, L., Silver, J. J., Gruby, R. L., Dubik, B. A., & Basurto, X. (2016). Global oceans governance: new and emerging issues. Annual review of environment and resources, 41(1), 517-543.
[9] Gesami, B. (2021). Maritime security threats in Africa. *Academia Letters, 3564*(3).
[10] Fabricius, P. 2026. Iran pulls out of SA's joint naval exercise amid political tensions, Daily Maverick, 12 January, Available https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-01-12-iran-pulls-out-of-sas-joint-naval-exercise-amid-political-tensions/ 20 January 2026.
[11] Mishra, A. (2019). India-Africa Maritime Cooperation: The Case of Western Indian Ocean. *ORF Occasional Paper, 221*.

Maritime security provision in SADC waters

Maritime interdependence and cooperation represent the gold standard for extending good order at sea and call for actors to play constructive roles to promote order at sea as a strong catalyst for maritime security. Africa is no exception and must contribute by also extending or promoting the required good order at sea. Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Egypt are prominent coastal states in their respective regions and probably perceived as lead actors to take up the MSP mantra. While Nigeria operates as a lead actor in maritime security provision in the Gulf of Guinea, South Africa in the SADC region remain a marginal player in the regional maritime landscape off Southern Africa.[12] However, Egypt and South Africa are BRICS members while Nigeria is a partner state which opens a different avenue for considering MSP partnerships.

Drawing upon literature pointing to work done by India and the EU, analysts attribute the following roles to their ambitions and activities as MSPs.

Table 1

No	India[13]	European Union (EU)[14]
1	Humanitarian and disaster relief operations	Fighting blue crime in the Gulf of Guinea, Western IO, and the Mediterranean
2	Building relations for MDA with partners	Counter extremist violence
3	Security cooperation with partners	Capacity building programmes
4	Strengthen elements of EEZ surveillance	Information sharing programmes
5	Intelligence sharing on illegal maritime activities	Protecting critical maritime routes
6	Naval & maritime exercises	Port security & safety of navigation
7	Transfer of platforms	Enhancing maritime security
8	Coastal infrastructure updates	Naval missions to counter maritime threats off Africa
9	Credit lines to selected countries	Address climate change risks and threats

[12] Garba, B. (2022). Maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea with emphasis on Nigeria. Dissertation for Master of Science in Maritime Affairs, World Maritime University, 28.
[13] Roy-Chaudhury, R. (2022). From 'net security provider' to 'preferred security partnerships': the rhetoric, reality and result of India's maritime security cooperation, Journal of the Indian Ocean Region, 18:2, 87-98, DOI
[14] Bueger, Christian and Edmunds, Timothy. (2023). "The European Union's Quest to Become a Global Maritime-Security Provider," Naval War College Review: Vol. 76: No. 2, Article 6.

SADC on the southern tip of Africa bordering the South Atlantic, the Southern Ocean, and southwestern Indian Ocean, connects to an important sea route[15] that holds a daily as well as emergency maritime value. The daily value is about large southward shipping flows along SADC's eastern and western coastlines before entering the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The emergency value is vested in the fact that any crisis constraining the shipping routes in the Northern Indian Ocean and Red Sea, as well as in the Mediterranean causes a rapid rise in shipping numbers being rerouted around the Cape Sea Route and thus along SADC's coastlines.[16] It is therefore important that the seas surrounding SADC must be kept safe and secure. This flags the question of maritime security provision in SADC waters.

States and regions represent two levels of actorness with the potential to operate as interdependent MSPs. Actorness points to capacity and roles to extend security provision over a said maritime landscape – whether national, regional and even beyond. In the SADC region, attention tends to first turn to South Africa as a national MSP to the region. However, given the roles outlined in Table 1 and the scope of SADC's territorial waters alone (estimated at 47 000 km2) South Africa can play a limited role and probably only as a national and not a regional maritime security provider. Although SADC employs naval vessels to maritime related exercises in SADC waters, daily security provision is not sustainable. Of note is the general lack of platforms with the South African Navy best illustrating the dissonance between having modern naval platforms but a very limited ability to keep them operational and at sea to sustain a maritime presence.[17] In addition, only Seychelles and Mauritius operate coast guards, but not a navy. The naval – coast guard mix in SADC is thus marginal at best with much of the security burden residing with small navies of the littoral and island states.

Ambitions to function as a maritime security provider calls for more than a seagoing navy. Considering South Africa as a maritime security provider, one can also select from Table I non-naval contributions at play that collectively build the roles and capacity to move towards a maritime security provision in SADC waters. Table 2 below points to potential and real roles to consider which would include naval as well as non-naval cooperation and assistance with maritime security promotion for SADC as the focus.

[15] Oyewole, S. (2025). Challenging Eurocentrism: An Afrocentric Appraisal of the Cape Sea Route. The Strategic Review for Southern Africa, 47(1), 21-37.
[16] Rodriguez-Diaz, E., Alcaide, J. I., & Garcia-Llave, R. (2024). Challenges and security risks in the Red Sea: Impact of Houthi attacks on maritime traffic. Journal of Marine Science and Engineering, 12(11), 1900.
[17] Martin, G. (2024). Air Force and Navy 'hardly' operational as SANDF performance declines. DefenceWeb 21 November. https://defenceweb.co.za/editors-pick/air-force-and-navy-hardly-operational-as-sandf-performance-declines/ 16 January 2026.

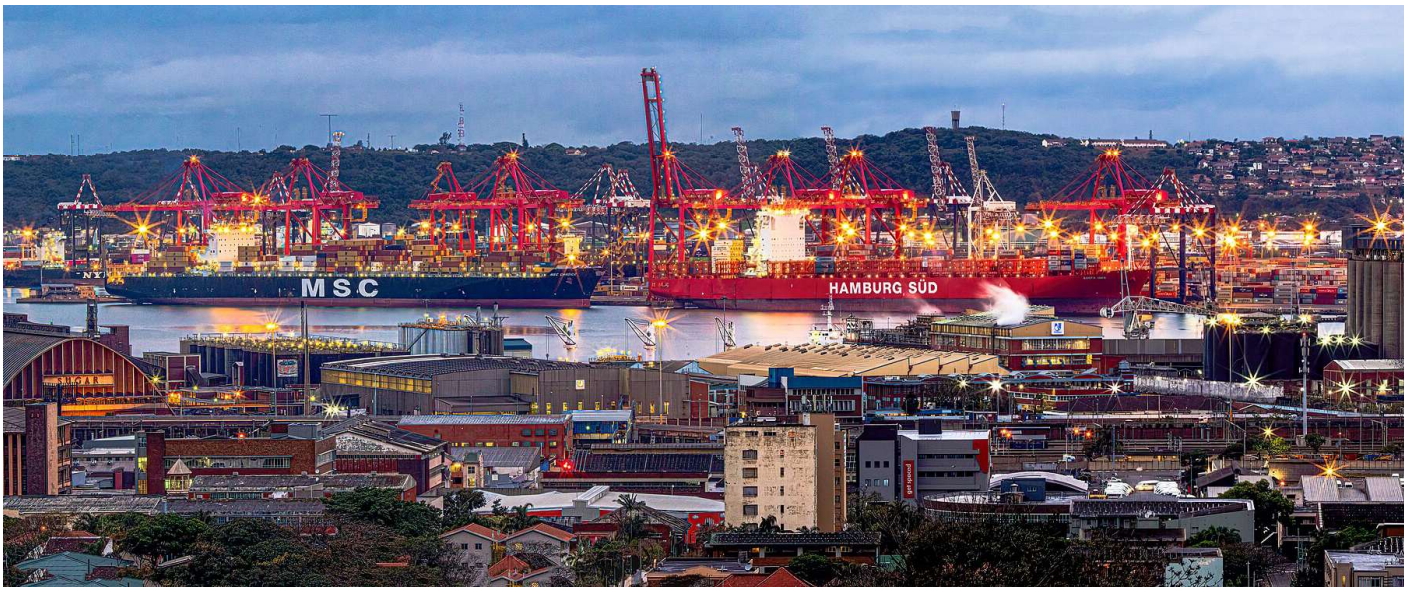
Table 2

No	Roles	Active (A) or Potential (P)
1	Building partnerships for maritime domain awareness	P – Beyond SADC A – SADC Maritime Standing Committee A – Djibouti Code of Conduct A – Yaoundé Code of Conduct
2	Security cooperation with partners in the region	A – SADC bodies P – Operationalise SADC maritime strategy
3	Intelligence sharing on criminal activities	P – A SADC body? P – Better integrate with Djibouti and Yaoundé Codes of Conduct
4	Coastal infrastructure upgrades	P – SA Operation Phakisa
5	Capacity building programmes	P – Training naval personnel A – IMO and UNODC maritime programs
6	Strengthen EEZ surveillance	P – New Radar systems?
7	Naval and maritime exercises	A – SADC and non-SADC partners A – Naval exercises with BRICS navies

The roles in Table 2 hold mixed implications as they suppose national as well as regional capacities and participation. The idea of South Africa as a maritime security provider probably plays out in practice as the very limited provision of maritime security goods. One alternative is to view South Africa's role against the backdrop of India's shift from an exclusive naval expectation to that of high-profile political outreaches and diplomatic posturing that culminates in preferred security partnerships. In this vein South Africa must turn to SADC's maritime architecture[18] to extend maritime security provision as a regional, but also a wider good to international shipping and related ocean users.

For South Africa one major dilemma is that by 2025 the matters addressed above are not embedded in or directed by a coherent maritime security strategy and thus bound to stem from a scattering of existing arrangements and personal influences ultimately culminating in a mix of ad hoc and muddling through outcomes.[19] Currently the SADC maritime security strategy and Standing Maritime Committee are the only two instruments available and further reinforces the argument that a regional partnership is the better option.

[18] Walker, T. (2025). Rebuilding SADC's maritime security architecture, Published in CIMSEC 19 June 2025 and originally prepared for African Maritime Forces Week held in Mauritius 16-20 June 2025. https://cimsec.org/cimsec-launches-african-maritime-forces-summit-topic-week/ 16 January 2026.
[19] Parliamentary Monitoring Group, SA National Maritime Security Strategy; DoD/Armscor Service Level Agreement, Joint Standing Committee on Defence, 10 November 2022 Available https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/35993/ 26 January 2026.



Summary & recommendations

South Africa remains a prominent member of SADC, but this prominence can only with great difficulty and costs be extended to the security of the region, least of all its maritime spaces. Security provision to SADC's Ocean spaces is limited and expectations that South Africa can shoulder the burden of a security provider is too optimistic. This leaves some pathways to ponder. First, South Africa gets its maritime house in order by setting in place a credible integrated national maritime security strategy to frame and direct its maritime ambitions, priorities, regional role and the security underpinnings required. Second, cooperates more strategically with other SADC members to operationalise the regional integrated maritime security strategy and offer maritime security goods collectively for the benefit of member states, as well as international maritime players traversing the Cape Sea Route. A third pathway is that South Africa leverages its BRICS membership to build a collective capacity to play some of the roles of a regional maritime security provider by way of partnerships akin to the MOSI and IBSAMAR range of maritime exercises and bring more BRICS members and partners such as Nigeria, the UAE and Indonesia into play.

About the Authors

Prof. Francois Vreÿ

Francois Vreÿ is Emeritus Professor (Military Science) at Stellenbosch University. He holds a PhD in Futures Studies from the Stellenbosch University Business School and heads up the Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA).

Capt (SA Navy) Mark Blaine (ret.)

Mark Blaine is a retired South African Navy Captain and a research fellow with SIGLA at Stellenbosch University. He holds a Masters in Maritime Security from Coventry University.

About the Forum

Since 2022, the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), the Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC), and SIGLA at Stellenbosch University have collaborated under the Danish Peace and Stabilisation Fund's Maritime Security Programme to organise annual fora on maritime security, primarily focusing on the Gulf of Guinea.

The fora provide a platform to examine maritime security challenges, assess existing vulnerabilities, and discuss initiatives and responses to insecurity in the region. In 2025, the forum was held in Stellenbosch, South Africa, with discussions expanded to cover developments in the Red Sea and their implications for littoral countries in Southern and Western Africa.

Stellenbosch
UNIVERSITY
IYUNIVESITHI
UNIVERSITEIT

ROYAL DANISH
DEFENCE COLLEGE

KAIPTC
...where peace begins