



AFRICA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

WEST INDIAN OCEAN REGIONAL MARITIME SECURITY SEMINAR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ANTANANARIVO, MADAGASCAR | FEBRUARY 24-28, 2025

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) convened a five-day workshop to assess efforts coastal and island states have made to develop and operationalize a shared regional maritime security architecture to combat illicit maritime security threats in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). These efforts aim to improve the security of critical sea lines of communication from threats such as piracy, narcotics, arms and human trafficking/smuggling, terrorism, and attacks of shipping vessels. The seminar brought together over 60 uniformed and civilian participants from Comoros, Djibouti, India, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, the United States as well as representatives from the following organizations: the African Union (AU), East African Community (EAC), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center (RMIFC), the Regional Coordination Operations Center (RCOC), International Maritime Organization (IMO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Participants assessed the progress made by African coastal and island states in formulating and implementing their national maritime strategies. They also explored approaches to advance and implement a regional maritime security strategy and shared best practices and lessons learned to effectively combat transnational organized crime across land and sea. Participants were divided into three working groups which produced recommendations on actions that can be taken at the national, regional and international levels to further develop a regional architecture and improve coordination to address shared maritime security threats.

This document provides a summary of key insights from the workshop and recommendations offered by the participants.

OVERVIEW OF THE INITIATIVES IN THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN (WIO)

The WIO is faced with significant security challenges, including illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, human, drug, and wildlife trafficking and smuggling, piracy, and armed robbery at sea, among other concerns. Many of these threats are forms of transnational organized crime (ToC) with implications on both land and sea. Thus far, responses to these threats

have focused on enhancing the capacity of states in the region and developing a regional maritime security architecture to facilitate coordination across national, regional and international levels.

Though there exists consensus on the need to develop a regional architecture to improve maritime security coordination in the WIO, stakeholders diverge in their visions of what such an architecture ought to look like and how it should function.¹ As Christian Bueger explains, “(t)he landscape of maritime security initiatives in the Western Indian Ocean is characterized by a patchwork of overlapping and sometimes competing projects, each with its own scope, focus, and level of formality.”² Accordingly, coordination in the region is primarily facilitated through various multilateral and bilateral partnerships, institutions and international agreements including the Djibouti Code of Conduct and Jeddah Amendment (DCoC/JA) agreement, the Nairobi Convention, the IOC and its programs (the Safe Seas Africa (SSA) program and the recently concluded Maritime Security program (MASE)), the UNODC’s Indian Ocean Forum on Maritime Crime (IOFMC), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and the Combined Maritime Force (CMF).

The DCoC/JA brings together several African states (from Egypt to South Africa), along with several states from the Arabian Peninsula to address the full spectrum of maritime crimes.³ Facilitated by the IMO, the DCoC/JA as an international agreement has made significant progress in fostering regional cooperation and enhancing maritime security. The Nairobi Convention, on the other hand, is a binding maritime treaty promoting regional coordination among governments, civil society and the private sector.⁴ However, it is limited to states in Eastern and Southern Africa.

The IOC is more limited in its geographical scope, with five member states.⁵ Through European Union-funded programs like the concluded MASE program and recently launched SSA programme,⁶ the IOC has developed a regional maritime security architecture covering Eastern and Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean region with two regional centers at its core: the RMIFC and the RCOC. The RMIFC is focused on improving maritime domain awareness through the exchange and sharing of maritime information with national and international stakeholders, while the RCOC uses the information provided to coordinate operations at sea. Together these

¹ Christian Bueger, “Who Secures the Western Indian Ocean? The Need for Strategic Dialogue,” *Center for Maritime Strategy*, September 19, 2024, <https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/who-secures-the-western-indian-ocean-the-need-for-strategic-dialogue/>

² Ibid.

³ DCoC, “Who we are,” *Djibouti Code of Conduct*, <https://dcoc.org/about-us/>

⁴ Nairobi Convention, “Who we are,” *Nairobi Convention*, <https://www.nairobiconvention.org/nairobi-convention/who-we-are/>

⁵ These states include Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, France (for Réunion), and the Seychelles. For more information, please see IOC, “Maritime Security (#MASE Programme),” *Indian Ocean Commission*, <https://www.commissionoceanindien.org/en/portfolio-items/maritime-security-mase-programme/>

⁶ In July 2024, the IOC and EU signed an agreement to implement the SSA programme. Please see Sedrick Nicette and Betymie and Bonnelame, “**Seychelles and IOC countries partner with EU for Safe Seas Africa programme**,” *Seychelles News Agency*, July 05, 2024, <http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/20836/Seychelles+and+IOC+countries+partner+with+EU+for+Safe+Seas+Africa+programme>

two centers have achieved notable operational results, coordinating several maritime operations each year.

The United States-led CMF is a more military-focused initiative that coordinates military operations, information sharing, as well as capacity-building efforts. In this capacity, CMF brings together the navies of several international actors from outside of the region.⁷ In contrast, the UNODC's IOFMC forum promotes regional coordination among Indian Ocean countries through improved information sharing and forums for prosecutors and maritime law enforcement agencies, among other activities.⁸ India, on the other hand, promotes its own vision of an Indian Ocean region through IORA and IONS.⁹ Both have member states spanning South Asia, West Asia, East Africa, South East Asia and Australia. While IORA promotes economic cooperation, IONS is a voluntary initiative designed to enhance cooperation among the navies of littoral states in the Indian Ocean region.¹⁰

Additionally, there also exist four primary regional fusion centers focused on addressing maritime crimes. Located in India, Madagascar, the Seychelles, and Singapore,¹¹ these centers play a critical role in sharing vital information used to enforce maritime security. There do exist several other national and sub-regional centers, such as the National Maritime Information Fusion Centre (NMIFC) in Madagascar and the Joint Operations Centre (JOC) in Kenya, that coordinate bilaterally.

While the various regional coordination bodies and initiatives play a crucial role in addressing the complex maritime threats in the WIO, their diversity also creates confusion regarding the region's maritime security architecture. Efforts have been made to enhance collaboration around shared objectives, but without strong coordination or a clearly defined hierarchy, these initiatives risk redundancy, conflicting priorities, inconsistent approaches to threat management, and gaps in coverage.

This seminar provided a platform for relevant stakeholders to discuss and assess efforts to continue to develop and operationalize a shared regional maritime security architecture to combat maritime threats among WIO African states. Participants also assessed local, national and regional efforts to improve coordination to address ToC maritime threats.

⁷ Combined Maritime Forces, "About CMF," *Combined Maritime Forces*, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/about/>

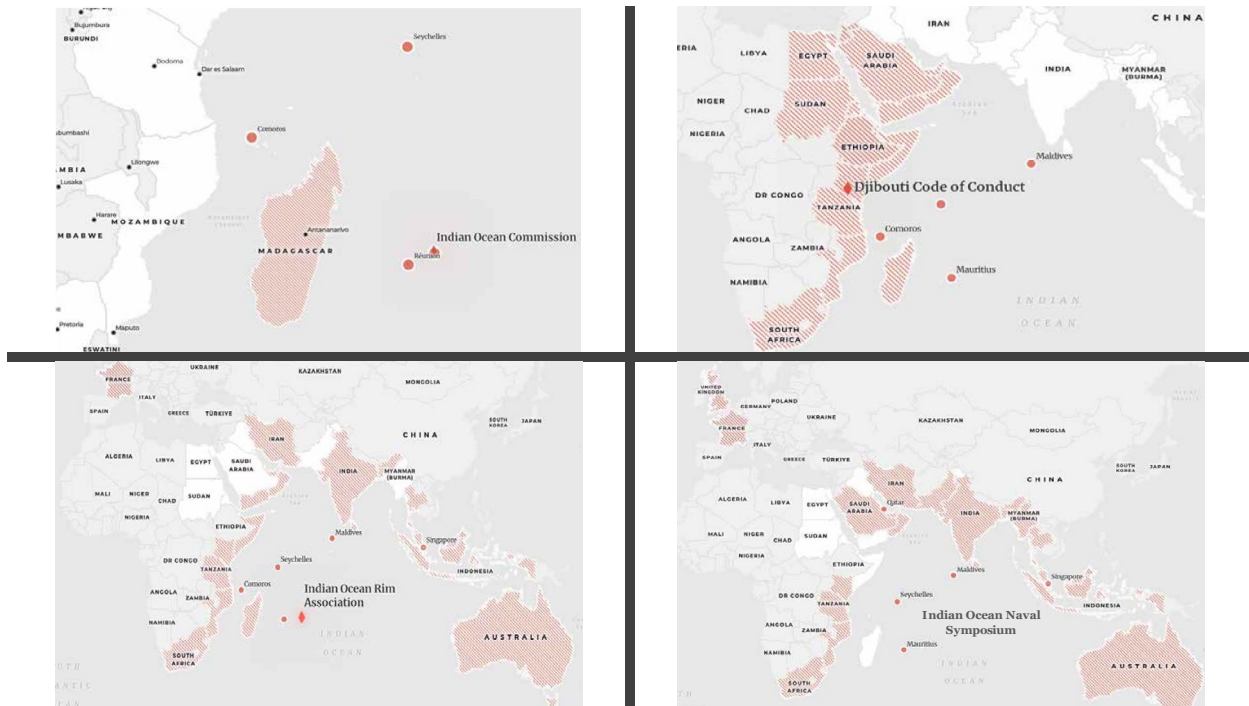
⁸ UNODC, "Global Maritime Crime Programme," *UNODC*, <https://www.unodc.org/easternafrika/global-programmes/global-maritime-crime-prevention/index.html>

⁹ Ranendra Singh Sawan, "Problems and prospects of maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region: a case study of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)," *Royal Australian Navy Sea Power Soundings*

¹⁰ Darshana M. Baruah, Nitya Labh and Jessica Greely, "Mapping the Indian Ocean Region," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 15, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/mapping-the-indian-ocean-region?lang=en>;

¹¹ These regional fusion centers include the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center (RMIFC) in Madagascar, the Regional Fusion and Law Enforcement Center for Safety and Security at Sea (REFLECS 3) in the Seychelles, the Information Fusion Center—Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in India, and the Information Fusion Center (IFC), Changi Command and Control Center in Singapore.

FIGURE 1: Indian Ocean Regional Cooperation Initiatives, Partnerships and Institutions
 (Source Baruah, Labh & Greely, 2023)



Key Takeaways:

1. *The majority of WIO states either do not have national maritime strategies (NMS) or they are still in draft form and not formally validated.* National strategies are fundamental to harmonize and coordinate implementation of maritime security measures. However, many African states face significant challenges in developing NMS. Among those without a strategy, a key obstacle is "sea blindness" – a lack of awareness about the strategic importance of the maritime domain. Additionally, the development of sector-specific strategies has often reduced the urgency or interest in creating a comprehensive NMS. For states with draft strategies that have yet to be validated, a common challenge is the lack of ownership over both the process and content. Several seminar participants noted that these strategies were developed without adequate consultation with all relevant maritime stakeholders, leading to gaps in inclusivity and effectiveness. Without a well-defined maritime strategy, national and regional coordination becomes difficult, and states struggle to allocate adequate resources to maritime safety and security. Kenya and the Seychelles emerged as a notable example of effective maritime security strategy development, demonstrating a multistakeholder approach and strong buy-in.

2. *Most states in the region lack national maritime information sharing centers (NMISCs).* Related to challenges surrounding the lack of national maritime strategies, most WIO states have yet to fully develop NMISCs. These centers can play a critical role in enhancing national and regional maritime domain awareness by facilitating coordination among key maritime stakeholders. However, many maritime ministries and agencies operate in silos, limiting effective collaboration. Additionally, security sector actors often hesitate to share sensitive information, further complicating integration efforts. As a result, maritime security remains fragmented across multiple agencies, leading to overlapping mandates and inefficiencies.
3. *Most states in the region experience resource and capacity constraints.* Several WIO states have limited surveillance assets, personnel and funding to effectively monitor their maritime domains and enforce actions at sea on their own. Budget constraints limit the ability to establish and maintain maritime security structures and necessary technologies to ensure maritime domain awareness (MDA). Corruption weakens enforcement, while reliance on external partners is not sustainable in the long run. The lack of national ownership due to sea blindness among political leadership makes it difficult to dedicate limited resources to the necessary technology, personnel and other means needed to improve MDA and enforcement capabilities. Countries like Kenya and Seychelles have made notable strides in addressing capacity constraints, while external partners such as the IMO, UNODC, the EU, India, and the United States have been offering bilateral and international support to strengthen national capabilities.
4. *Many WIO states lack comprehensive legal frameworks and judicial capabilities to prosecute maritime crimes.* Most states in the region lack the comprehensive legal frameworks and/or prosecutorial and judicial capabilities to effectively prosecute maritime crimes such as piracy, illegal fishing, smuggling, and trafficking. For many states the punishments for illicit maritime activities, such as narcotics trafficking, are not severe enough. Several states struggle with outdated laws and judicial inexperience prosecuting maritime crimes. In some cases, if a vessel does not carry a national flag, states lack the legal mechanisms to prosecute maritime crimes, resulting in “catch and release” scenarios. Inconsistencies in regional coordination also inhibit efforts to achieve legal finish. While some countries – e.g., Comoros, Kenya, and Seychelles – have developed formal agreements and standard operating procedures (SOPs) for evidence handling and prosecution with neighboring states, others rely on informal cooperation, leading to inconsistencies in legal processes. Nevertheless, progress is being made by some countries in the region, most notably Kenya and Seychelles, which have made significant legal reforms, strengthening their maritime laws and judicial processes to enhance prosecution and enforcement efforts.

5. ***States in the region recognize the need for a fully integrated regional maritime security architecture, but obstacles remain.*** A fully integrated regional architecture can enable African coastal and island states to more effectively consolidate resources, improve information and intelligence sharing, coordinate operations, and ensure legal finish across complex jurisdictional frameworks. The IOC has advocated for a collaborative approach to developing a regional maritime security architecture for Eastern and Southern African states, as well as the broader Indian Ocean region, yielding some meaningful operational outcomes. However, the region's maritime security environment remains complex, with numerous overlapping and sometimes competing bilateral and multilateral initiatives. Some of these initiatives, led by external powers, further complicate coordination efforts and undermine regional ownership, creating barriers to the development of a truly integrated regional security architecture among African states.

6. ***States support efforts to develop a regional maritime security strategy but acknowledge that challenges remain.*** Related to the challenges surrounding the regional architecture, developing a regional maritime security strategy with detailed action plans is crucial for establishing a clear and cohesive vision for maritime security in the WIO, enabling coordinated efforts at sea. This includes regional initiatives to pool limited resources, enhance maritime domain awareness, and promote joint operations. The IMO is currently leading efforts to develop a regional strategy, and the consultation process has already begun. However, how far in geographic scope the strategy intends to cover and the extent to which it would encompass the patchwork of different bilateral and multilateral initiatives, including those that are led by external powers, raises questions around feasibility. The WIO region is large and includes states with complex and at times distinct cultural, historic and geopolitical backgrounds and priorities, making the formulation of a unified strategy challenging. Broadening the scope of the strategy to include the Arabian Peninsula, where several states are members of the DCoC/JA, makes the picture even more complicated.

7. ***Regional information sharing and joint operations continue to face coordination challenges.*** Despite the existence of regional information fusion centers in Madagascar, Seychelles, India, and Singapore, as well as bodies like RCOC that coordinate operations at sea, regional cooperation remains weak, hampered by sovereignty concerns, limited interoperability, lack of sustainable resources, and gaps in human capacity at both the national and regional levels. There is a common need for better technology integration to enhance maritime domain awareness, focusing on interoperable systems. The use of technologies such as drones, radars, artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning are acknowledged as a way to improve operational capabilities. However, mutual trust and transparency between states are critical to avoid misunderstandings, particularly in sensitive maritime zones like the Mozambique Channel. The IOC's regional bodies are taking positive steps towards addressing these gaps. For instance, the RCOC has begun to compensate signatory states that contribute vessels to joint operations as an incentive

for regional coordination. The RMIFC in Madagascar has also engaged in meaningful exchanges with the IFC in Singapore.

8. *External partner-led initiatives can inadvertently undermine regional efforts to improve coordination among African states.* Externally led initiatives, such as the U.S.-led maritime exercises like Cutlass Express, have contributed to improving cooperation and interoperability among partners. However, participants pointed out that these initiatives, along with other bilateral and trilateral exercises led by external actors, have unintentionally disrupted historically established regional exercises among African states. For example, exercises involving South Africa, Mozambique, and Tanzania have been affected, highlighting the unintended consequences of external engagements. Additionally, assistance from external actors – such as the European Union, United States, France, India, China, Japan, and the United Nations—lacks coordination and sustainability due to the absence of a unified regional strategy and architecture that aligns external interests with the shared priorities of African states.

Recommendations:

1. Develop integrated national maritime strategies based on a common vision and local expertise.

Coastal and island states emphasized the importance of developing integrated national maritime strategies that can evolve over time to address the dynamic maritime environment in the WIO. These strategies should be created through a systematic process. Initially, states should establish structures like the National Maritime Security Committee (NMSC) in Kenya which is comprised of representatives from all relevant maritime stakeholders across government, industry, and civil society. Such structures should lead and take ownership of the strategy formulation process, ensuring a shared vision for maritime safety and security. Additionally, states should designate a national focal agency to oversee the NMSC's functions. Furthermore, participants stressed the need for national strategies to include provisions for regional and international coordination and collaboration, ensuring complementarity across efforts.

2. Strengthen and harmonize legal mechanisms to address maritime crimes. The WIO states agreed on the need to establish robust legal frameworks that impose sufficiently severe penalties to effectively punish criminals involved in maritime crimes and deter future offenses. This should include harmonizing national laws with international conventions, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation (SUA), and the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), ensuring consistency in prosecuting maritime crimes across the region. Strengthening judicial and law enforcement capacities through specialized training for judges, prosecutors, and maritime security personnel is equally important. Additionally, standardized training on evidence collection is essential to ensure legal completion across varying jurisdictions and to prevent cases from being dismissed. For example, Kenya's Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions runs a Prosecution Training Institute which, with support from

UNODC and IMO, offers structured legal training to enhance prosecution capabilities and address evidence-handling gaps at sea. Governments should also establish regional legal cooperation mechanisms, including extradition agreements, mutual legal assistance (MLA) treaties, and evidence collection and chain-of-custody arrangements, to effectively tackle cross-border maritime crimes. Furthermore, creating specialized maritime courts and prosecutorial units, improving interagency coordination, and leveraging international support from organizations such as UNODC, INTERPOL, and IMO will significantly strengthen legal enforcement.

3. *Improve information sharing and coordination at the national and regional level.* WIO states agreed on the need for national and regional actors to formalize information-sharing mechanisms and strengthen cooperation. At the national level, this can be achieved through the commitment of more assets to maritime safety and security, as well as the establishment of NMISCs and multi-agency operation centers. At the regional level, states should continue to assign international liaison officers (ILOs) to regional centers like the RMIFC, RCOC, and IFC-IOR and ensure that existing regional bodies are equipped with the necessary human, material and technological resources to execute their responsibilities. National and regional information fusion centers like the RMIFC should also consider diversifying their data sources to include sources from land. For instance, they should examine how insurgent threats in Somalia and Mozambique, and conflicts like in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, create opportunities for arms and human trafficking and smuggling with implications for security at sea. Furthermore, operational centers like the IOC-led RCOC should also expand coordinated operations at sea to non-signatory states to further improve regional coordination. Meanwhile, regional information fusion centers in the Seychelles, Madagascar, India and Singapore should better coordinate to ensure they have a common maritime picture. Efforts currently undertaken by the RMIFC and the IFC in Singapore to establish a memorandum of understanding is a positive step towards building a common maritime picture. Such efforts ensure a more comprehensive maritime picture of movement of all maritime vessels in the region. Across these national and regional efforts, states and regional institutions should reinforce standard operating procedures (SOPs) for collaboration and coordination.

4. *Support ongoing efforts to develop and implement an integrated regional maritime security strategy.* WIO states agree that any effort to develop an integrated strategy needs to first leverage available maritime expertise from the region and secure the political will of coastal and island states. The formulation process needs to adopt a holistic approach involving regional maritime national experts and stakeholders to include national governments, relevant private sectors, and civil society. Best practices on developing and implementing a regional strategy that will support a regional architecture should also be drawn from other sub-regions of the continent, such as the Gulf of Guinea, and from external partners such as the European Union. However, participants from the WIO region expressed differing views on whether coastal and island states should first develop their national strategies before formulating a regional one or if both national and regional strategies should be developed concurrently. Regardless of the approach, WIO states agreed that

both national and regional strategies should be guided by a unified vision with maritime security as the top priority.

5. Empower African Union's role in the WIO's maritime security. *Regional* states agreed that the African Union must take a more proactive role in maritime security. To establish a unified vision for the continent, the AU should prioritize the implementation of the 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS 2050). WIO states can support this effort by assigning liaison officers from coastal and island nations, as well as regional centers like the RMIFC and RCOC, to the recently staffed maritime desk at the AU, ensuring stronger coordination and collaboration.

6. Optimize external partnerships and deconflict patchwork of initiatives. WIO stakeholders agree that the future of maritime security in the WIO must focus on greater national ownership of maritime initiatives, including the formulation on national and regional strategies as well as the continued development of a regional architecture. Moving beyond reliance on international donors and organizations will involve enhancing local capacity and aligning external support with the priorities of WIO states for more effective and sustainable outcomes. Accordingly, external actors engaged in the region should take appropriate action to align their efforts with the shared priorities of their African partners. This will involve deconflicting externally led bilateral and multilateral initiatives. Reconvening coordinating mechanisms like the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) mechanism could help improve coordination among naval operations. External partners should also continue to engage local stakeholders early in the process of developing bilateral and multilateral programs, thereby ensuring relevance and sustainability while allowing initiatives to be better tailored to specific national and regional needs. Coastal and island states also stressed the need for maritime exercises like Cutlass Express to evolve beyond training drills into joint operations and encouraged African states to independently organize bilateral and multilateral joint exercises. Lastly, the integration of maritime surveillance technologies should be designed to enhance local capacity rather than overwhelm existing structures. Training programs and technological integration should be driven by local needs and resources, ensuring that technologies such as drones, radars, and AI are accessible, effectively used by national and local agencies, and interoperable across neighboring states.