10. Kenya as an Indian Ocean State: Maritime Security, External Partnerships, and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of Kenya's maritime security strategy and situates it within wider regional and Indo-Pacific dynamics. It argues that Kenya has transitioned from decades of sea-blindness to an increasingly outward-looking approach shaped by the rise of piracy off the coast of Somalia, the expanding importance of the blue economy, and intensifying geopolitical competition in the Western Indian Ocean. The analysis highlights three pillars of Kenya's response: investments in maritime capacity-building, the development of more coherent governance and information-sharing architectures, and deeper participation in multilateral and bilateral security frameworks. It also links Kenya's expanding engagement with external partners to broader normative and strategic debates. In particular, it shows how cooperation with Japan—framed through its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision—has provided Kenya with a coherent set of principles and partnerships that complement national efforts to strengthen maritime security and contribute to a stable regional order.

Keywords: Kenya maritime security, Western Indian Ocean, Blue economy, External security partnerships, Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)

1. An overview of Kenya's Maritime Environment

Kenya has a vast maritime territory, with a coastline of about 600km stretching from the Kenya-Somalia border to the Kenya-Tanzania border. The country has an exclusive economic zone of approximately 142,000 km² and an extended continental shelf of 103,320 km².[1] Maritime resources are spread over an estimated 245,000 km², which is equivalent to about 42 per cent the country's total land area.[2] Kenya also has sizeable inland waters in the form of lakes and rivers, totaling between 10,500 and 11,500 km². The largest is Lake Turkana, the world's largest permanent desert lake. Inland waters contribute to about 72% of the country's total fish catch. [3]

2. A History of Neglect of Maritime Security, but a Shift towards Increased Focus on Maritime Security after 2005

A major part of Kenya's post-independence history was characterized by a limited attention to maritime matters, including maritime security.[4] For decades, policymakers failed to fully appreciate the economic potential of Kenya's maritime resources. This reality was powerfully highlighted by the fact that the country's first national economic and development blueprint, Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965 on African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya, lacked any mention of the maritime sector.[5] Commercial agriculture, particularly the export of tea and coffee, became the mainstay of the country's post-independence economy. A prioritization of landward security ahead of maritime security was a product of the post-independence strategic environment. Kenya grappled with threats to its territorial

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[1] Republic of Kenya (2017) Defence White Paper 2017
[2] Kihara, G (2022) What is Ruto's Agenda in the Blue Economy? The Elephant
https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2022/11/21/what-is-rutos-agenda-on-blue-economy/
[3] Kenya Fisheries Service (2024) Fisheries Statistical Bulletin 2023
[4] Mboce, H and McCabe (2021) Kenya from 'Sea-Blind' to 'Sea-Vision' in Bueger, C., Edmunds, T., & McCabe, R. (Eds.). (2021). Capacity building for maritime security: The Western Indian Ocean experience. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland; Safe Seas (2017) Maritime Security in Kenya- A Policy Area under Development. Safe Seas Concept Note no. 5
[5] Republic of Kenya (1965) Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965 on African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya

integrity after several of its neighbors challenged its land borders.[6] Kenyan policy makers embraced and promoted a self-image of the country that was primarily shaped by the country's hinterland. Kenya was as an anchor state whose strategic importance lay in part on its stability and location compared to its several   landward neighbors. As one observer put it;

> '... Kenya is strategically geolocated in an active 'political volcano' of the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region'.[7]

Kenya began to significantly focus on maritime security after 2005, following the coming together of various factors. The first was the upsurge in maritime piracy in the Horn of Africa.   The second was the result of several geopolitical and other developments, including the discovery of crude oil in Uganda and Kenya in 2006 and 2012, respectively, growing efforts by landlocked Ethiopia to diversify access to the sea, and South Sudan's gaining of independence in 2011.[8] The combined effects of these developments prompted Kenyan policymakers to revive proposals abandoned in the 1970s for major infrastructure projects across several parts of Kenya. These, it was hoped, would position Kenya as the major regional hub connecting its landlocked neighbors to international markets through the existing port of Mombasa as well as a new port in Lamu.[9] In the ensuing years, Nairobi's eventual embrace of

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[6] Within fifteen years of Kenya gaining independence, two neighbouring countries; Somalia and Uganda laid claim to significant parts of Kenya's territory. An important objective for Kenya became the building of a strong army and air force to deter aggression and safeguard the country's territorial integrity. See- Hornsby, Charles (2012) Kenya: A History since Independence. Bloomsbury Academic

[7] Brigadier Wilson Boinett (rtd), Kenyan Army, 2008 cited in Chau, Donovan   (2012) Historical Island in a Political Volcano: Origins and Implications of the United States-Kenya Strategic Relationship. African Security Review, Volume 21:1, Institute for Security Studies

[8] Cannon, B. J., & Mogaka, S. (2022). Rivalry in East Africa: The case of the Uganda-Kenya crude oil pipeline and the East Africa crude oil pipeline. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, *11*, 101102.

[9] Browne, Adrian (2015) LAPSSET: The History and Politics of an Eastern Africa Megaproject. Rift Valley Institute

the blue economy concept, which it identified as an important resource to drive Kenya's transformation into a middle-income country, further underscored the importance of maritime security.[10]

The recognition of the importance of maritime security has impacted on the promotion of Kenya's self-image. While Kenya continues to promote itself as a significant actor in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region, its self-image has expanded to highlight its littoral character. Kenya increasingly identifies as an Indian Ocean state and whose strategic geography and infrastructure make it a natural maritime bridge between East and Central Africa and the fast-growing economies of Asia. [11]

3. The Maritime Security Landscape and the Key Maritime Security Threats

The complexity of Kenya's maritime security landscape stems from several factors: its geographic-littoral position in the Western Indian Ocean; the effects of weak statehood in neighbouring Somalia; a maritime border dispute that hampers security cooperation between Kenya and Somalia; and the absence of a regional maritime strategy within the East African Community.[12] Several observers have in particular argued that increased regional integration is crucial for improved maritime security in East Africa and the Horn of Africa regions. There is a need to assuage the concerns of landlocked states and move beyond zero-sum logic when it comes to maritime matters, and also to draw upon the successful lessons of regional integration in managing maritime welfare and security, such as the Council of Baltic Sea States and the Arctic Sea Council.[13]

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[10] Republic of Kenya (2018) Sector Plan for the Blue Economy. Vision 2030
[11] President Uhuru Kenyatta (August 17, 2013) What we see when we look to the 'East'. Daily Nation
https://nation.africa/kenya/blogs-opinion/opinion/what-we-see-when-we-look-to-the-east--885158

[12] Hamad,H (2016) Maritime Security Concerns of the East African Community (EAC), WIO Journal of Marine Science 15 (2) 2016 75-92
[13] Discussion during the ROLES-ILA Research Seminar, November 2025

In a bid to address some of the challenges Kenya faces it has finalized a national maritime security risk register and is working to complete its national maritime security strategy. The register, in particular, is important to gain a more fulsome understanding of its maritime security environment. In the Kenyan context, the purpose of such a register is to 'assess the threat, impact, and vulnerability criteria of all security threats to Kenyan national maritime security interests'.[14]

Kenyan policymakers and officials have also catalogued what they consider to be the country's key maritime security challenges. These include '... smuggling of contraband, human trafficking and smuggling, pollution, IUU fishing, maritime terrorism and piracy....'[15]

A detailed discussion of these maritime security threats follows.

3.1 Maritime Piracy

A major increase in incidents of maritime piracy after 2005 off the coast of Somalia was an important factor, as noted, in pushing Kenya to focus to maritime security after decades of relative neglect.[16] Indeed, maritime security could no longer be ignored given the heavy economic costs borne by Kenya, which, at the peak of the crisis, led to estimated losses by the Kenyan shipping industry of between US$300 million and US$400 million per annum. Tourism, an important economic mainstay, was also significantly affected by a precipitous decline in the number of cruise liners arriving in Kenya: from 35 in 2008 to zero in 2012. This resulted in an estimated loss of about 15 million dollars per year.[17]

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[14] The Djibouti Code of Conduct – Supporting Kenya to develop National Maritime Security Risk Register
https://dcoc.org/supporting-kenya-to-develop-national-maritime-security-risk-register/
[15] Republic of Kenya (2023) President William Samuel Ruto, PhD., C.G.H Annual Report to Parliament on the State of National Security
http://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2024-02/2023%20REPORT%20ON%20STATE%20OF%20NATIONAL%20SECURITY.pdf
[16] Charo, S. (2021). Role of maritime policies and strategies in shaping the maritime security threats in Kenya. *African Journal of Empirical Research, 2* (1), 115-131; McCabe, R. (2019). Policing the seas: Building constabulary maritime governance in the Horn of Africa–the case of Djibouti and Kenya. *African Security*, *12*(3-4), 330-355.
[17] Otto, L (2012) Kenya and the Pest of Piracy: A Prospective Partner for Peace. Situation Report. Institute for Security Studies

According to the World Bank, between 2008 and 2012, Kenya was losing an estimated 58.9 million dollars annually because of the crisis.[18] On top of this, large ransom amounts paid to pirates were also blamed for the major increase in illicit financial flows to Kenya and other countries in the region. Some of the illicit cash was reportedly funneled into criminal activities including human trafficking and the funding of armed groups in the region.[19]

After 2012, the situation in the region improved significantly following a decline in the number of maritime piracy incidents—a development attributed to the internationally led counter-piracy initiatives. Ten years later, in 2022, the global shipping industry removed Kenya's maritime waters from its high risk category. Unfortunately, in 2023, the situation again deteriorated following a resurgence in maritime piracy in the Horn of Africa.[20] The situation was blamed on the shift in international attention and naval assets away from the Horn of Africa to littoral Yemen and the Red Sea following an upsurge in attacks on shipping.[21] The resurgence of piracy underscored a long-standing argument that only sustained attention to the land-based drivers of insecurity could produce a durable solutions.[22]

The result was devastating: five major shipping companies announced they would avoid operating in the Kenya's territorial waters.[23] Because of the Red Sea crisis, Kenya experienced delays in the import and export of vital commodities. The costs of transporting of tea, one of Kenya's major export commodities, nearly tripled as a result of the crisis.[24] It also doubled transit times between

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[18] Safe Seas, Cardiff University and University of Bristol (2018). Mastering Maritime Security: Reflexive Capacity Building and the Western Indian Ocean Experience. A Best Practice Toolkit

[19] World Bank. 2013. Pirate Trails: Tracking the Illicit Financial Flows from Pirate Activities off the Horn of Africa. A World Bank Study. Washington, DC: World Bank

[20] Omolo, V and Okumu, W (2025) Local and global cost of illegal tuna fishing off Somalia's coast. Institute for Security Studies

[21] Walker, T (2024) New Somali piracy threats require partnerships and holistic responses. Institute for Security Studies

[22] Walker, T (2024) New Somali piracy threats require partnerships and holistic responses. Institute for Security Studies

[23] The Emirates Policy Center (2024) Disruption vs Expansion: African Ports and the Red Sea Crisis Challenges, Opportunities

[24] Kitimo, A (2024) Tea export costs nearly triple on Red Sea shipping disturbances. *Business Daily*

Kenya and important European markets, which significantly affected the export of fresh produce.[25] Kenya scrambled to find new markets in Asia for its avocadoes, for instance, as the detour around the Cape of Good Hope—rather than the shorter route through the Suez Canal—negatively impacted exports to Europe.[26]

A final challenge related to maritime piracy in the Western Indian Ocean is reliance on deployments of navies from powerful external powers. Given the limited maritime capacities of regional countries like Kenya, sustained naval operations and presence by the US, China, European states, Japan, and others have contributed to a militarisation dilemma. This means that while various international naval patrols are credited with the reduction in maritime piracy; their presence has also raised the spectre of great-power rivalries, tensions and potential conflict in the region.[27]

Kenyan policymakers are aware of this and have expressed concerns about the risks increased militarisation and geopolitical rivalries. Accordingly, several measures have been suggested, including better coordination of international maritime security initiatives, strengthening of institutions tasked with combatting maritime insecurity, and building the maritime security capacities of countries in the region.[28]

3.1.2 Maritime Terrorism

Concerns about the threat of maritime terrorism have been growing in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean region. The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) defines maritime terrorism as:

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[25] Xinhua (2024) Kenyan fresh produce exporters urge end to Red Sea tensions amid rising costs
[26] Africa Intelligence (12/03/2025) Kenya's avocado industry tees up new markets as Red Sea crisis squeezes exports to Europe
[27] Bueger, C & Stockbruegger, J (2022) Maritime security and the Western Indian Ocean's militarization dilemma, *African Security Review*, 31:2, 195-210
[28] [28] Statement by H.E. Uhuru Kenyatta, CGH President of the Republic of Kenya during the High-level open debate on "Enhancing Maritime Security: A Case for International Cooperation" 9 August 2021 https://www.un.int/kenya/statements_speeches/statement-he-uhuru-kenyatta-cgh-president-republic-kenya-during-high-level-open

'...the undertaking of terrorist acts and activities within the maritime environment, using or against vessels or fixed platforms at sea or in port, or against any of their passengers or personnel, against coastal facilities or settlements, including tourist resorts, port areas, and port towns or cities'. [29]

According to the Rand Terrorism Database, only about two percent of terrorist attacks in the past 30 years fall under the category of maritime terrorism.[30] The attack on the *USS Cole* in 2000 stands out as among the first major acts of maritime terrorism in the modern age. The Indian Ocean region, however, has seen several other attacks, including the Mumbai attacks of 2008 that were launched from the sea, and the September 2014 attempted takeover of the Pakistani navy vessel PNS *Zulfiquar* by members of Al-Qaeda.

Experts warn that maritime terrorism is likely to increase significantly in the future from a combination of improved security on land, gaps in maritime security and the presence of many soft targets in the maritime environment, including ports and other maritime infrastructure, cruise ships and large oil tankers.[31]

The threat of maritime terrorism has, firstly, become a concern for Kenya and its neighbours on account of a history of militant groups using the maritime domain to raise funds and for logistical purposes. Al-Qaeda used the Indian Ocean to smuggle explosives used in the 1998 US Embassy bombings and a 2002 attack of a hotel in Mombasa.[32] Since 2011, Al-Shabaab has conducted charcoal smuggling from Somalia to the Arabian Peninsula using dhows that has earned the group an estimated

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[29]   Steele, K (2017) Maritime Terrorism in the Indian Ocean Rim: Peering into the Darkness. California State University Maritime Academy, p. 25

[30] Gandhe, U (2024) Maritime Terrorism as an Evolving Threat. Modern Diplomacy

[31] Greenberg, M et al (2006) Maritime Terrorism: Risk and Liability. Rand Corporation;
   Steele, K (2017) Maritime Terrorism in the Indian Ocean Rim: Peering into the Darkness. California State University Maritime Academy

[32]   Badurdeen, F, (2024) Cross-border Dynamics in Terrorist Mobility and Infiltration along the East African Coastlines, *Ifri Studies*, Ifri.

US$7million a year.[33] In 2011, foreign tourists were kidnapped in the Kenyan Coast and taken to Somalia by boat in incidents the Kenyan authorities blamed on the militant group Al-Shabaab.[34] This prompted, in part, concerns about the security of ports and other important strategic maritime infrastructure, particularly the ports of Mombasa and Lamu. Past security audits at Mombasa port have highlighted gaps in security and the government has responded by putting into place enhanced security measures.[35]

Secondly, there are concerns that terrorist groups in the region could carry out attacks on land by using the sea, as Al-Shabaab did in Lamu in 2011. Such groups can also draw upon lessons from ISIS Mozambique, which, in 2020, carried out a complex series of attacks from both land and the sea against gas facilities and coastal population centres.

A matter of particular disquiet for the region is the emerging partnership between the Houthi militants of Yemen and Al-Shabaab and other groups in the Horn of Africa.[36] In 2024, Al-Shabaab requested 'advanced weapons and training' from the Yemeni group.[37] There are concerns that the Houthis might share even more significant expertise with Al-Shabaab than they have already done, particularly in the arena of maritime drones, both uncrewed surface vessels or USVs as well as uncrewed underwater vehicles or UUVs.[38] Such a move would fundamentally alter the threat environment for Kenya and its neighbours.[39]

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[33] Van Zyl, I and Lycan, T (2020) East African terror groups are exploiting the seas. Institute for Security Studies

[34] Daily Nation (15th September 2011) Bid to assure tourists Kenya is safe after British couple attack in Lamu

[35] Hamad, H (2016) Maritime terrorism: Why the East African Community is the Next Potential Target of Maritime Terrorism. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.6, No.6, 2016

[36] Jalal, I and Al-Jabarni (2025) Dhows, Drones, and Dollars: Ansar Allah's Expansion into Somalia. Carnegie Middle Eastern Centre

[37] Allen, K (2025) Houthis in Somalia: friends with technological benefits? Institute For Security Studies https://issafrica.org/iss-today/houthis-in-somalia-friends-with-technological-benefits
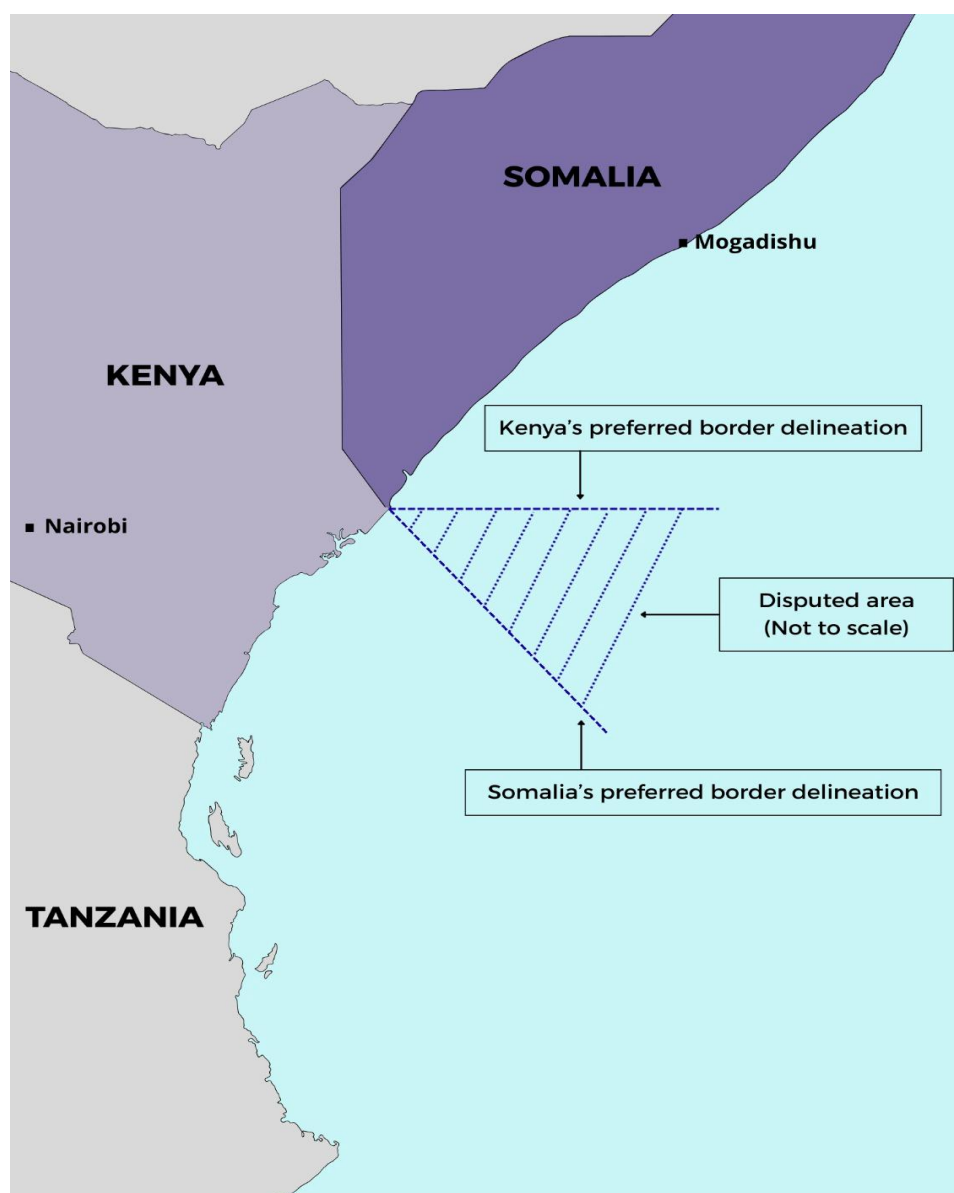
[38] Horton, M. (2024). Looking West: The Houthis' Expanding Footprint in the Horn of Africa. *CTC Sentinel*, 17:11, 16.

[39] Allen, K (2025) Houthis in Somalia: friends with technological benefits? Institute For Security Studies https://issafrica.org/iss-today/houthis-in-somalia-friends-with-technological-benefits

To address this rising potential threat, the Kenya Navy Base at Manda Bay, Lamu, was upgraded, in 2021, to a fully-fledged base with the objective of strengthening maritime security in particular to contain the threat of maritime terrorism to the Lamu Port and other important infrastructure.[40]

3.1.3 Disputes over Maritime Borders

Kenya has two maritime disputes with its neighbours. The first is with Uganda over the Migingo Island in Lake Victoria. The second is between Kenya and Somalia over their maritime borders.

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[40] Kenya Defence Forces (2022) Majeshi Yetu: Swift and Bold. Volume 23

Figure 1 – The disputed maritime zone   (created by the authors)

The existence of such disputes has been shown to contribute to maritime insecurity in several ways, ranging from outright conflict to a lack of transboundary cooperation in the management of maritime security threats.[41]

Kenya's maritime border dispute with Somalia continues, despite the 2021 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling on the delineation of the border. Kenya strongly criticised the ruling while Somalia welcomed it.[42] The result is that the border issue remains unresolved but stable, with each party attempting to gain the upper hand. There were reports, for example, in 2023, that Kenya had proposed third-party mediation led by Djibouti. This was rebuffed by Somalia, which insisted that the dispute had already been settled by the ICJ. [43]

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[41] Walker, Timothy (2015) Why Africa must resolve its maritime boundary disputes. Institute of Security Studies. Policy Brief 80

[42] Ogembo, A and Ichani, X (2024) The Centrality of Blue Economy Resources in the Kenya-Somalia Maritime Border Dispute. *Path of Science. 2024. Vol. 10. No 8*

[43] Goobjoog (2023) Somalia rejects mediation offer in maritime dispute with Kenya
https://en.goobjoog.com/somalia-rejects-mediation-offer-in-maritime-dispute-with-kenya/
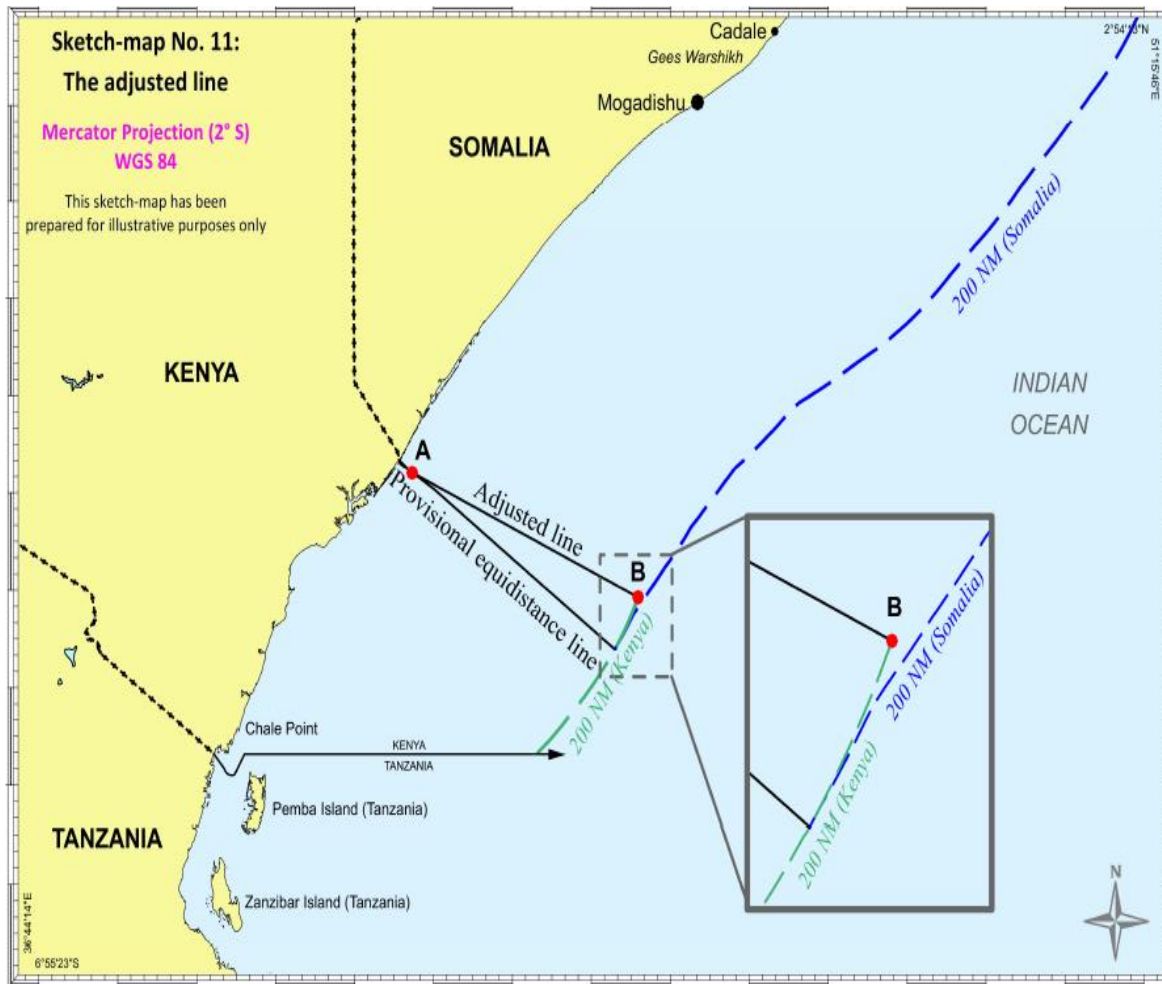
Figure 2- ICJ adjusted maritime border between Kenya and Somalia

Source- International Court of Justice (2021) Maritime Delimitation of the Indian Ocean (Somalia v. Kenya)

The concern is that future clamours for maritime resources, particularly hydrocarbons, could lead to tensions.[44] The disputed region is believed to contain   large reserves of hydrocarbons and other important minerals.   The expiry of licences for offshore oil blocks that Kenya had awarded to Italian company Eni in the disputed maritime zone has thus led to concerns about a potential reawakening of

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[44] Katumanga, M (2023) Strategic Security Challenges of the Somalia-Kenya Maritime Conflict. Institute for Regional Security

tensions.[45] The situation has been further complicated by the fact that powerful external actors from Europe and the Middle East are pursuing their own interests in relation to the resources in the maritime zone. This further undermines the prospects for compromise between Kenya and Somalia and undermines cross-border maritime security dialogue and cooperation. The resulting gap fosters an environment that is conducive for maritime insecurity. [46]

3.1.4 Illicit Maritime Trafficking of Narcotics, Wildlife, Human Beings and Counterfeit Goods

Kenya faces challenges stemming from maritime-based illicit trafficking, largely due to its location within the wider Indian Ocean region—a major global hub for transnational crime. Narcotics trafficking in the Indian Ocean stems from the fact that the ocean region incorporates two global centres of narcotics production; the "Golden Crescent" and the "Golden Triangle". [47] The Western Indian Ocean region also forms an important part of the southern route through which heroin and methamphetamine produced in Afghanistan is transported to European markets.[48]

Narcotics trafficking in Kenya erodes of rule of law and governance, finances the activities of terrorist and criminal groups, and contributes to a growing public health crisis linked to addiction. Drug trafficking networks exploit gaps in maritime surveillance, corruption, and congestion at the port of Mombasa, enabling large quantities of narcotics to transit through the port city.[49] As a result, Mombasa has developed a reputation as a key transit point for heroin originating in Asia and cocaine originating

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[45] Mutua, J (2024), Kenya oil block licenses expiry rekindles Somalia border row. *Business Daily* https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/bd/corporate/industry/kenya-oil-block-licences-expiry-rekindles-somalia-border-row-4866862

[46] Katumanga, M (2023) Strategic Security Challenges of the Somalia-Kenya Maritime Conflict. Institute for Regional Security

[47] Hangzo, P (2011) Non-traditional security challenges in the Indian Ocean region. ASEAN and the Indian Ocean: The Key Maritime Links. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

[48] Moss,K et al (2022) Stable Seas: Western Indian Ocean. One Earth Future and the Stable Seas

[49] France 24 (2019) Kenya's second-largest city becomes world's new drug trafficking hub https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20191018-kenyan-port-of-mombasa-becomes-world-s-new-drug-trafficking-hub

in Latin America. Illicit networks also use small boats and dhows to move heroin along the coast, making landings at informal ports in Lamu, Kilifi, and Malindi.[50]

Kenya has taken significant actions over the years to stem the illicit flow of narcotics. In October 2025, the Kenyan navy intercepted a dhow carrying a tonne of methamphetamine with a street value of approximately 8.2 billion shillings, about 600 kilometers off the coast of Mombasa. The interdiction was a multiagency operation involving the Kenya Navy, the Seychelles government, the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC) in Seychelles, and the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar. [51] Earlier, in 2014 and 2015, the Kenyan navy, acting on intelligence, conducted two large interdictions of narcotics shipments originating from Asia.[52]

Human smuggling is also a significant challenge. Kenya is classified as both a destination and transit point for trafficked persons from neighboring states. Smuggling groups take advantage of limited maritime surveillance and the economic vulnerabilities of local fishermen, paying them to smuggle people from the Kenyan Coast to Tanzania.[53]

The port of Mombasa has also been identified as an important transit point for the trafficking of various types of counterfeit goods and stolen motor vehicles. A United Nations study ranked the port of Mombasa as among the major hubs for the trafficking of counterfeit medicines in Africa, with significant negative impacts on public health.[54] Kenyan authorities have periodically intercepted large volumes of various illicit and counterfeit products. In April 2020, authorities intercepted 12 tonnes of

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[50] Interpol, ENACT and Institute for Security Studies (2020) Illicit goods trafficking via Port and Airport Facilities in Africa.

[51] Kenya Ministry of Defence (October, 2025) Kenya Navy intercepts narcotics trafficking dhow in Western Indian Ocean
 https://www.mod.go.ke/news/kenya-navy-intercepts-narcotics-trafficking-dhow-in-western-indian-ocean/

[52] Kenya Defence Forces (2022) Majeshi Yetu: Swift and Bold. Volume 23

[53] Badurdeen, F (2024) Cross-border Dynamics in Terrorist Mobility and Infiltration along the East African Coastlines, *Ifri Studies*, Ifri.

[54] Murumba, S (2017) Fake China, India Drugs put Kenyans at Risk. *Business Daily*

dry fish from Somalia, valued at US$45,000.   In another incident, the Kenya Coastguard Service (KCGS) intercepted Khat worth US$222,000 smuggled from Somalia. [55]

The trafficking of wildlife products is also a challenge. Ivory smuggling has been a significant challenge historically. Authorities have intercepted other endangered wildlife products, including shark fins and pangolins.[56]

3.1.5 Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing poses significant threats to marine ecosystems, economic sustainability, and the socio-economic welfare of coastal communities. IUU fishing also directly impacts maritime security because it can act as a gateway to other types of maritime crimes. This is particularly important for coastal Kenya, where a sizeable number of people depend on the ocean for nutrition and livelihoods and where a deep-rooted sense of historical injustices in the past has been mobilized towards violence. [57]

Kenya's maritime waters are located within the tuna belt of the Western Indian Ocean, where a quarter of the world's tuna is harvested.[58] Kenya has not fully exploited the resource because of reliance on high levels of artisanal fishing. As a result, Kenya produces about 9,000 metric tonnes of fish a year compared to a potential of about 150,000 to 300,000 metric tonnes.[59] Several gaps have allowed foreign vessels, particularly from Europe and Asia, to exploit Kenya's waters through illegal fishing.

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[55] Simon, D, Daghar, M and Okumu, W (2021) Maritime / Port expansions could open Kenya to more crime. ENACT
https://enactafrica.org/enact-observer/port-expansions-could-open-kenya-to-more-crime
[56] Traffic (2019) Mombasa seaport stakeholders agree on measures to address illegal wildlife trade.
https://www.traffic.org/news/mombasa-seaport-to-address-illegal-wildlife-trade/
[57] Knote, C. (2024) '11 Facing Change at the Margins of the Kenyan Nation: The Promise of the Lamu Port', in F. Topan et al. (eds) *Governance and Islam in East Africa: Muslims and the State*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press
[58] Business Daily (December 5, 2016) The strategy to stir up Kenya's rich untapped blue economy
[59] Business Daily (December 5, 2016) The strategy to stir up Kenya's rich untapped blue economy

It is a reflection of the importance that the Kenyan state attaches to the threat posed by IUU fishing that when the Kenya Coast Guard Service (KCGS) was established in 2018, President Uhuru Kenyatta highlighted its mandate to stop foreigners from stealing the country's fish.[60] The Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute estimates that Kenya loses between 30-40 % of its total fish catch to IUU fishing activities.[61] According to estimates, the economic costs is an estimated Kenya Shillings 45 billion (€ 330 million).[62]

The KCGS credits increased patrols for a recent decrease in IUU fishing in Kenya's territorial waters.[63] However, IUU fishing remains a significant challenge. Observers note persistent gaps between Kenya's vast maritime territory and its existing surveillance and interdiction capabilities. The KCGS is a relatively young organization and currently has a single offshore patrol vessel, the MV *Doria*, and dozens of patrol boats. While the Kenyan Navy is strong and has capable vessels; the legal framework under which it operates hampers its ability to carry out constabulary tasks.[64]

In 2021, the Vessel Monitoring System programme (VMS)—a platform used to monitor and surveil IUU fishing—became inaccessible because of unpaid fees.[65] There are also challenges arising from the fact that IUU fishing is a challenge with significant transboundary dimensions. While there are

[60] Mwanza, K (2018) New Kenyan coastguard to stop foreigners stealing 'our fish' https://news.trust.org/item/20181120175514-zpyfi

[61] Go Blue (2023) Combating Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing in Kenya: Expertise France and the Bandari Maritime Academy making waves

[62] Maina, J (2025) Illegal fishing endangers Kenya's economy and environment. Development and Cooperation https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/illegal-fishing-putting-kenyas-fishing-industry-risk-threatening-both-livelihoods-and

[63] Cameron C. E (2023) Trawling, Trafficking, Smuggling and Spoilage: East Africa's war on illicit maritime trade, and how exercise Cutlass Express 2023 is changing the narrative. U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa / U.S. Sixth Fleet https://www.c6f.navy.mil/Press-Room/News/Article/3332878/trawling-trafficking-smuggling-and-spoilage-east-africas-war-on-illicit-maritim/

[64] McCabe, R. (2019). Policing the seas: Building constabulary maritime governance in the Horn of Africa–the case of Djibouti and Kenya. *African Security*, *12*(3-4), 330-355.

[65] Olingo, A (2022) Low tide for local fishermen as trawlers harvest in high seas. *The East African* https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/sustainability/low-tide-for-local-fishermen-as-trawlers-harvest-in-high-seas-3745248

frameworks for maritime security cooperation between Kenya and its maritime neighbours, they overlap and lack hierarchy.[66] In addition, the frequent lack of political will and coordination between littoral and island states hampers action. An episode in 2024 in which a Sri Lankan owned, Kenyan flagged vessel, *Maab Aqua*, was intercepted while carrying out illegal fishing in the Mozambique Channel, provides a powerful snapshot of the challenges associated with multiple jurisdiction of ships when it comes to IUU fishing.[67]

Finally, further difficulties stem from the lack of transparency in the awarding of large-scale fishing licences, coupled with a significant degree of mistrust between the authorities and fisher communities. Fisher communities accuse authorities of being in cahoots with foreign vessels and allege that they sometimes impose conditions that favor foreign vessels to detriment of local fisher communities. [68]

3.1.6 Maritime Pollution

Maritime pollution poses significant challenges to Kenya's territorial waters and the wider Indian Ocean region. The negative effects of pollution on food security and livelihoods can contribute to social and economic instability, particularly in contexts where there are long-standing historical grievances, such as in coastal Kenya. The causes of maritime pollution in Kenya's territorial waters include the release of waste from land based sources, oil and chemical spills, toxic dumping and plastic pollution. In Lamu County the age old practice of fishermen abandoning old boats at sea has had significant environmental

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[66] Bueger, C. (2024, September 19). *Who Secures the Western Indian Ocean? The Need for Strategic Dialogue*. Arlington, VA: Center for Maritime Strategy. https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/who-secures-the-western-indian-ocean-the-need-for-strategic-dialogue/

[67] Bascomb, B (2024) Foreign ship caught illegally fishing endangered sharks off Madagascar. Mongabay

[68] Olingo, A (2022) Low tide for local fishermen as trawlers harvest in high seas. *The East African* https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/sustainability/low-tide-for-local-fishermen-as-trawlers-harvest-in-high-seas-3745248

impacts.   The pollution from these boats has negatively affected marine life while also undermining tourism.[69]

Kenya's maritime environment has been the setting for several environmental disasters. Major oil spill incidents in Kenya include the 2005 MV *Ratna* incident which resulted in about 200 tonnes of oil spilling into the ocean. In another significant incident in 2012; an oil spill from the KenGen Kipevu diesel power station resulted in an estimated 10,000 litres of oil leaking into the marine environment.[70] Indicative of ongoing governance and enforcement challenges, there have been media reports of increased oil spills in the waters off the Lamu port. [71]

Kenya has sought to play an important role in global discussions about maritime pollution, which is in keeping with the prominent role of protection of the environment has in Kenya's foreign policy. Kenya is a member of the Nairobi Convention which provides a framework for countries to protect the maritime environment in the Western Indian Ocean. While Kenya has ratified a number of international conventions on maritime pollution including the MARPOL 1973 Convention; there have been significant delays in the enacting of the Marine Pollution Bill 2014, which would pave the way for the domestication of the international treaties. [72]

3.1.7 Climate Change as a Threat Multiplier

Climate change is not a threat in itself but acts as a threat multiplier for maritime security because it can exacerbate vulnerabilities. The effects of climate change—ranging from increased ocean acidification, escalating sea temperatures, and a rise in sea levels—will negatively affect the marine

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[69] Kazungu, K (2025) Abandoned boats become toxic waste in Lamu's pristine waters. *Daily Nation*
[70] WWF (2017) Early Oil Transportation Risks on People, Economy, and Biodiversity-Focus on Oil Spills
[71] The Star (2021) Alarm over Increased Oil Spills as more ships dock at Lamu Port
[72]   Mwangura, A (2023) World Maritime Day: Kenya in the spotlight over lack of marine pollution law. Africa Eco News
 https://africaeconews.co.ke/opinion-world-maritime-day-kenya-in-the-spotlight-over-lack-of-marine-pollution-law/

ecosystem and the livelihoods that depend on it. [73] According to experts, the effects of climate change are likely to increase resource competition and contribute to heightened tensions in the world's oceans.[74]

There are concerns about the impact of rising sea levels on maritime infrastructure in Mombasa, a city in which about 94% lies within a low-lying coastal zone. [75] Kenya has recognized the challenges posed by climate change to its maritime environment. Kenya has at the national level adopted several policies including the National Climate Change Strategy (2010) and the National Climate Change Action Pillar (2015-2030). Kenya is also a signatory to several international agreements such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Kyoto Protocol.

4. Responses by the Kenyan State to Maritime Ssecurity Challenges

The responses by the Kenyan state to maritime security threats can be grouped under three categories: capacity building programs; the establishment of a framework for maritime security governance; and participation in international maritime security cooperation institutions and frameworks. As noted, the Western Indian Ocean region is characterised by a significant variety of often-overlapping maritime security initiatives, with differences relating to scope and degree of formality.[76] Kenya has capitalised on the increased international attention to the region to draw upon external resources and expertise to

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[73] Gesami BK and Nunoo J (2024) Artificial intelligence in marine ecosystem management: addressing climate
threats to Kenya's blue economy. *Front. Mar. Sci.* 11:1404104
[74] Spijkers, J., Morrison, T. H., Blasiak, R., Cumming, G. S., Osborne, M., Watson, J., & Österblom, H. (2018). Marine fisheries and future ocean conflict. *Fish and Fisheries*, *19*(5), 798-806.
[75] Manu, L (2022) Maritime strategy in Africa: strategic flaws exposing Africa to vulnerabilities from food insecurity to external domination, Third World Quarterly, 43:12, 2852-2868
[76] Bueger, C. (2024, September 19). *Who Secures the Western Indian Ocean? The Need for Strategic Dialogue*. Arlington, VA: Center for Maritime Strategy. https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/who-secures-the-western-indian-ocean-the-need-for-strategic-dialogue/

strengthen its maritime security.[77] In particular, Kenya positioned itself to benefit from external capacity-building assistance by embracing a model of burden sharing to improve maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean region.[78]

Early on, Kenya recognized the important role that international navies were playing in capturing pirates. It joined Seychelles, in 2012, in offering to prosecute and jail pirates including those detained outside its territorial waters.[79] In 2024, Kenya announced it would establish a new cooperation agreement with the European Union for the prosecuting of perpetrators of maritime crimes captured by the European Union naval force.[80] However, the jailing and prosecution of pirates is still contested, with many states refusing the responsibility despite their statements.[81] Kenya joined the Combined Maritime Forces partnership, nevertheless. While its early contributions have taken the form of intelligence and other support, Kenya has expressed its willingness to broaden its future contribution to include the contribution of naval assets.[82]

4.1 Capacity building

The context in which maritime security capacity building took place in Kenya was two-fold. Firstly, because of historical sea blindness, the country's maritime security capacities had some significant gaps and limitations. Secondly, the major global impacts of heightened piracy in the Horn of Africa led to a focus on the region by various external actors. The international actors settled on a policy of

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[77] McCabe, R. (2019). Policing the seas: Building constabulary maritime governance in the Horn of Africa–the case of Djibouti and Kenya. *African Security*, *12*(3-4), 330-355.

[78] Zach, D. A., Seyle, D. C., & Madsen, J. V. (2013). Burden Sharing Multi-level Governance: A Study of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia.

[79] Obuah, E (2012) Outsourcing the prosecution of Somali pirates to Kenya, *African Security Review*, 21:3, 40-61

[80] Kitimo, A (2024) Kenya gets EU mandate to help fight maritime crime. *Business Daily*

[81] Bueger, C., Adeline, R., & Cannon, B. J. (2024). Anti-Piracy Lessons from the Seychelles. *War on the Rocks*, *23*. https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/anti-piracy-lessons-from-the-seychelles/

[82] Danish Defence (2024) Denmark and Kenya Continue Cooperation to Strengthen Maritime Security https://www.forsvaret.dk/en/news/2024/danmark-og-kenya-fortsatter-samarbejde-om-styrkelse-af-maritim-sikkerhed/

strengthening national and regional maritime security capacities as a long-term and sustainable solution.[83] The resulting capacity building measures are a convergence of interests between Kenya and the various external actors.

Capacity building encapsulates a wide variety of activities and programmes and that includes 'the building of new institutions, forms of coordination, writing of laws, creating of new forces, or training and enhancing existing ones, or the investment in new equipment, buildings, or vessels'.[84] Such programs aim to build the capacities of security forces, civil servants, the private sector, and coastal communities.[85] Capacity building initiatives can be broadly divided into multilateral and bilateral programs.

The breadth and focus of capacity building efforts has shifted across time in Kenya. Early capacity building efforts mostly took the form of procurement of physical naval assets to combat piracy, the adoption of technology for maritime surveillance, and the establishment and strengthening of prosecution and detention capacities to prosecute maritime pirates.[86]

After 2012, with a decrease in maritime piracy in the region and a full embrace of the blue economy concept, capacity building programs began to incorporate other maritime security threats.[87] This resulted, as noted, in the establishment of the Kenya Coast Guard Service in 2018.

4.1.1 Multilateral and Bilateral Programs

[83] Bueger, C., Edmunds, T., & McCabe, R. (Eds.). (2021). Capacity building for maritime security: The Western Indian Ocean experience. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland

[84] Bueger, C., Edmunds, T., & McCabe, R. (Eds.). (2021). Maritime Security, Capacity Building, and the Western Indian Ocean in Bueger, C., Edmunds, T., & McCabe, R. (Eds.). (2021). Capacity building for maritime security: The Western Indian Ocean experience. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, p.4

[85] Bueger, C. (2017) The Concept of 'Capacity Building' SAFE Seas
https://www.safeseas.net/the-concept-of-capacity-building/

[86] McCabe, R. (2019). Policing the seas: Building constabulary maritime governance in the Horn of Africa–the case of Djibouti and Kenya. *African Security*, *12*(3-4), 330-355.

[87] McCabe, R. (2019). Policing the seas: Building constabulary maritime governance in the Horn of Africa–the case of Djibouti and Kenya. *African Security*, *12*(3-4), 330-355.

Kenya has drawn extensively on both multilateral and bilateral partners to strengthen its maritime security capacities. Among the key multilateral actors are the International Maritime Organization *(IMO – support for the Djibouti Code of Conduct- Jeddah Amendment)*, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime *(UNODC – Global Maritime Crime Program; IOFMC)*, the European Union *(EU – Go Blue; CRIMARIO; CRIMARIO II; Operation Atalanta; Usalama Baharini)*, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development *(IGAD – IMSS 2015–2030)*.

The IMO has played a key role in capacity-building programs in Kenya, including training programs, the provision of technology, and the strengthening of institutional capacities. The UNODC has strengthened Kenya's judicial and law-enforcement capacities, enabling it to better combat various maritime crimes, including IUU fishing, narcotics trafficking, trafficking of persons, and environmental crime.[88]

The European Union has supported Kenya through the Go Blue program, [89] which enabled the establishment of the KCGS operations center, enhanced maritime domain awareness, and developed the Usalama Baharini (*safety at sea*) community-watch platform [90] as well as the CRIMARIO/CRIMARIO II information-sharing initiatives built around the IORIS system.[91] Additionally, EU Operation Atalanta has contributed through joint exercises such as Operation Usalama Baharini (2024). At the regional level, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)'s IMSS strategy provides a

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[88] UNODC- Global Maritime Crime Programme
https://www.unodc.org/easternafrica/global-programmes/global-maritime-crime-prevention/index.html
[89] Go Blue Maritime Security Fact Sheet
https://www.goblue.co.ke/resources/downloads
[90] Go Blue (2023) Usalama Baharini (safety at sea): strengthening the relationship between coastal communities and Kenyan maritime safety and security agencies
https://www.goblue.co.ke/media-center/news/usalama-baharini-safety-sea-strengthening-relationship-between-coastal
[91] The Djibouti Code of Conduct- Report of the maritime coordination group meeting held on 13 September 2024 in Nairobi. MCG Meeting No 11
https://dcoc.org/wp-content/uploads/Report-of-the-MCG-meeting-held-on-13-Sep-2024-Nairobi.pdf

framework for regional dialogue and cooperation on maritime safety, security, and economic development.

Bilateral partnerships have reinforced these efforts. Denmark has been a leading supporter since 2011, offering naval training, equipment including a decompression chamber, the seconding of a maritime adviser, and support for Kenya's candidacy into the Combined Maritime Forces.[92] [93] The United States has supplied assets, surveillance technologies, port-security enhancements, and training for Kenyan forces and fisher communities, while supporting Kenya's full membership in the Combined Maritime Forces. [94] The United Kingdom has cooperated with the US in establishing and equipping the Kenya Marine Commando Unit.

Japan is also an important bilateral partner in the strengthening Kenya's maritime security capacities and the development of the blue economy as part of the country's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Policy. Among important contributions include the support for the construction of the Dongo Kundu Special Economic Zone in Mombasa. Japan is among the most generous supporters of the Kenya Coast Guard Service and has to date donated dozens of patrol boats worth millions of US dollars. The potential for further cooperation exists following the first military-to-military dialogue taking place between Kenya and Japan in January 2024. Kenya and Japan have also strengthened naval diplomacy with visits by Japanese naval vessels to Mombasa in March 2025. India, Canada, France and other partners have supplemented these programs with additional training and equipment.

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[92] McCabe, R. (2019). Policing the seas: Building constabulary maritime governance in the Horn of Africa–the case of Djibouti and Kenya. *African Security*, *12*(3-4), 330-355

[93] Jacobsen, K and Nordby, J (2013) Danish Interests in Regional Security Institutions in East Africa. Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS; Danish Defence (2024) Denmark and Kenya Continue Cooperation to Strengthen Maritime Security
https://www.forsvaret.dk/en/news/2024/danmark-og-kenya-fortsatter-samarbejde-om-styrkelse-af-maritim-sikkerhed/

[94] The Djibouti Code of Conduct- Report of the maritime coordination group meeting held on 13 September 2024 in Nairobi. MCG Meeting No 11
https://dcoc.org/wp-content/uploads/Report-of-the-MCG-meeting-held-on-13-Sep-2024-Nairobi.pdf

These combined efforts have significantly enhanced Kenya's maritime patrol, interdiction, and domain-awareness capacities. [95] Key advances include modernization of the Kenyan Navy, establishment of the KCGS, expanded use of surveillance platforms such as Sea Vision and IORIS, and integration of community-based reporting systems. Nevertheless, persistent challenges remain, including difficulties in coordination, duplication of externally driven programs, sustainability gaps, and the continued delay in finalizing a national maritime security strategy—an essential framework for aligning external support with Kenya's long-term priorities. [96]

4.2 The Establishment of a Framework for Maritime Security Governance

Kenya has increasingly prioritized the creation of a coherent maritime security governance framework grounded in international best practices. A central focus has been the promotion of inter-agency coordination and a whole-of-government approach to overcome the bureaucratic fragmentation that historically characterized maritime governance. [97]

The establishment of the Border Control and Operations Coordination Committee under the 2014 Security Laws Amendment Act strengthened information-sharing across land, air, and maritime borders. [98] To further consolidate this approach, Kenya created a National Maritime Security Committee, alongside county-level maritime security committees that integrate local administrations and relevant stakeholders. [99]

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[95] Nitz, D. et al (2024) United States Coast Guard Academy Advanced Research Project Africa on Combatting East Africa's Illicit Drug Trade
https://dcoc.org/uscg-research-project-on-combating-east-africas-illicit-drug-trade/
[96] Mboce, H and McCabe (2021) Kenya from 'Sea-Blind' to 'Sea-Vision' in Bueger, C., Edmunds, T., & McCabe, R. (Eds.). (2021). Capacity building for maritime security: The Western Indian Ocean experience. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland
[97] Mbugua, J and Mwachinalo, S (2017) An Assessment of Maritime Insecurity in the Kenyan Maritime Domain. Series 8, No.1, Occasional Paper. International Peace Support Training Centre, Nairobi, Kenya
[98] Safe Seas (2017) Maritime Security in Kenya- a policy area under development
[99] Mbugua, J and Mwachinalo, S (2017) An Assessment of Maritime Insecurity in the Kenyan Maritime Domain. Series 8, No.1, Occasional Paper. International Peace Support Training Centre, Nairobi, Kenya

In keeping with the whole-of-government approach, plans have also been announced for the establishment of a multi-agency National Maritime Information Sharing Centre (NMISC) to be co-located with the Mombasa-based Regional Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (RMRCC).

Kenya, as a member of the Djibouti Code of Conduct and Jeddah Amendment, has also benefited from the International Maritime Organization assistance programs aimed at strengthening maritime security governance. The IMO has supported Kenya in the formulation of a national maritime risk register and in the development of a national maritime security strategy.

At the regional level, Kenya has assumed leadership roles intended to strengthen security governance in the Western Indian Ocean. Its 2023–2024 chairmanship of the Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities (CGIMA) highlighted Kenya's role in advancing coordination among the numerous actors involved in addressing maritime insecurity. Some commentators have argued that organization is uniquely placed to play an important role in improving coordination among the many actors involved in maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean.[100]

4.3 The participation in International maritime security cooperation frameworks and institutions.

Kenya, having recognized the need to draw upon the expertise of countries with strong maritime security capabilities, has become a frequent participant in international maritime security training exercises. Notable multinational maritime exercises in recent years include the 2024 Usalama Baharini, mentioned above. In 2025, Kenya participated in the US-led Cutlass Express alongside more than 20 partners, the Africa-India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME) exercises, and the Exercise Komodo (MNEK) in Bali, Indonesia.   The various exercises provide an important platform for joint training, sharing of knowledge and intelligence and enhanced interoperability.

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[100]   Bueger, C (2024) Who Secures the Western Indian Ocean? The Need for Strategic Dialogue. Centre for Maritime Strategy
 https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/who-secures-the-western-indian-ocean-the-need-for-strategic-dialogue/

Kenya has also become an active member of international maritime security partnerships. In 2023, Kenya became a full-time member of the US led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) a multinational maritime security collaboration partnership composed of 46 member states and committed to upholding the rules based maritime order by combating trafficking of narcotics, smuggling and counter-piracy.[101] In 2024, Kenya also joined Operation Prosperity Guardian, an international naval initiative focused on containing maritime insecurity in the Red Sea.[102]

Together, these engagements signal Kenya's growing commitment to the cooperative security mechanisms that help stabilize the Western Indian Ocean, diversify Kenya's security partnerships, and reinforce support for principles such as freedom of navigation and adherence to international law.

5. Maritime security and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)

Kenya's deepening engagement with a wide range of external maritime-security partners has gradually connected its security priorities in the Western Indian Ocean to the wider Indo-Pacific strategic landscape. As Kenya has modernized its naval and coast-guard capacities, expanded participation in multinational exercises, and embraced the governance principles championed by its partners, its maritime outlook has increasingly aligned with the norms underpinning the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework.[103] It is within this broader evolution that Japan's extensive support for Kenya's maritime security and blue economy should be understood: not as an isolated bilateral effort, but as

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[101] Combined Maritime Forces-About CMF
https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/about/
[102] Odongo, M & Jos, L (2024) Kenya's Security Landscape: A Case Study of Kenya's Domestic and Foreign Political Security Actions. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
[103] Cannon, B. J. and Mogaka, S. (2023).) *Kenya and the Indo-Pacific: The Rationale for an 'Outlook' and Why Kenya (And East Africa) Matters*. Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy. https://www.isdp.eu/publication/kenya-and-the-indo-pacific-the-rationale-for-an-outlook-and-why-kenya-and-east-africa-matters/

part of a wider convergence between Kenya's Indian Ocean identity and the FOIP's normative and strategic vision.

The FOIP concept entails the upholding of certain values across the vast Indian and Pacific Oceans, particularly democracy, rule of law and multilateralism. It is thus a geography of both strategies and normativity—a flexible hold-all approach grounded in classical geopolitics, which privileges rule-of-law as well as *Realpolitik*.[104] Interestingly, Kenya occupies a special place in the evolution of Japanese political thought and the promulgation of the FOIP: Nairobi was the setting, in 2016, where Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe unveiled it during the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI).[105]

While Kenya has not formulated an Indo-Pacific strategy policy the broad outlines of the country's vision can be gauged from a series of statements and speeches made by senior officials. Firstly, there is the recognition that Kenya is geographically located in the Indian Ocean region and therefore by extension is part of the Indo-Pacific geographical construct.[106] From this viewpoint, Kenya is uniquely positioned through a combination of geography and infrastructure to act as important gateway linking Africa to Eurasia,[107] the supercontinent or "World-island," as British geographer and the father of classical geopolitics termed it.[108]

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[104] Cannon, B. J., & Hakata, K. (Eds.). (2022). *Indo-Pacific strategies: Navigating geopolitics at the dawn of a new age*. Oxon: Routledge.

[105] Cannon, B. J. and Mogaka, S. (2023). *Kenya and the Indo-Pacific: The Rationale for an 'Outlook' and Why Kenya (And East Africa) Matters*. Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy. https://www.isdp.eu/publication/kenya-and-the-indo-pacific-the-rationale-for-an-outlook-and-why-kenya-and-east-africa-matters/

[106] Sankalp Gurjar (2021) How Kenya Views the Indo-Pacific. Indian Council for World Affairs https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=6424&lid=4415

[107] Presidential Communication Service (2019) Uhuru urges Asia to use Kenya as gateway to Africa's vast market https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2019/09/uhuru-urges-asia-to-use-kenya-as-gateway-to-africas-vast-market/

[108] Cannon, B. J. (2025). Hegemony in Eurasia, the Joining of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific, and the Enduring Relevance of Mackinder's Heartland Theory, Seychelles Research Journal 17 (2), 1-17.

At the core of this understanding of the Indo-Pacific is interconnectedness, interdependence, and globalization and the need for countries to collaborate for their mutual benefit. To this end, Kenya has participated in several regional forums, including the 2023 Indo–Pacific Army Chiefs Conference in India, which aimed to 'advance a common vision for an Indo-Pacific region that is free and open, connected, secure, and resilient, reinforcing the region's capacity and resilience to address the opportunities of the 21st century'. [109]

Secondly, Kenya identifies with the normative underpinnings of the FOIP concept, such as the rule of law, multilateralism, and adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea as the foundation for stability and prosperity in the maritime domain.[110] In 2016, in a joint statement during a state visit to Kenya by Japan Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the two countries 'reaffirmed the importance of maintaining a maritime order based upon principles of international law, including those reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The two leaders recognized the importance of freedom of navigation and overflight as well as dispute resolution by peaceful means in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law including UNCLOS'. [111] The support for these norms and values have been long-standing feature of Kenya's foreign policy. Furthermore, Kenya's membership of the Combined Maritime Forces is also an important indicator of support for these values as the partnership is based on support and preservation of the rules based order.[112]

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[109]   Ministry of Defence- Kenya Website. Indo-Pacific Army Chiefs Conference
https://www.mod.go.ke/news/indo-pacific-army-chiefs-conference/
[110] Republic of Kenya Office of the National Security Advisor Amb. Dr. Monica Juma At the official opening of the symposium on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific for Peace and Development in Eastern Africa to held be on February 28, 2023 at the Kempinski hotel, Nairobi
https://gloceps.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NSA-Amb.-Dr.-Monica-Juma-OxonEGH-Key-Note-Address-FOIP-Joint-Symposium-Feb-28th-2023.pdf
[111] Joint Statement between the Republic of Kenya and Japan on the occasion of the state visit to Kenya by the Prime Minister of Japan, H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, from 26 to 28 August 2016, p.6
[112] Combined Maritime Forces-About CMF
https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/about/

Finally, Kenya's conceptualization of the FOIP is a broad one, which means it is not geographically limited to the countries located in the Indo-Pacific region. The potential in the concept is that it can act as a 'vehicle for driving the pursuit of shared international public goods that would guarantee stability and prosperity for every country and secure peace and prosperity for all humanity'.[113] Japan has also supported an expansive vision of FOIP and its potential role in providing the basis for the future of the international order at a time in which there are significant divisions among countries. [114]

6. Conclusion

This paper examined the major maritime security threats facing Kenya and assessed the responses undertaken by the Kenyan state. It showed that Kenya's approach to maritime security has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades. For most of its post-independence history, Kenya's strategic orientation was overwhelmingly landward; maritime security was peripheral, under-resourced, and institutionally fragmented. That began to change after 2005, when the rise of Somali piracy, renewed competition over offshore hydrocarbons, and the growing recognition of the blue economy's economic potential forced a reassessment of national priorities. Kenya's responses have since taken three interlinked forms: capacity-building, the establishment of a more coherent

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[113] Republic of Kenya Office of the National Security Advisor Amb. Dr. Monica Juma At the official opening of the symposium on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific for Peace and Development in Eastern Africa to held be on February 28, 2023 at the Kempinski hotel, Nairobi, p.10
https://gloceps.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NSA-Amb.-Dr.-Monica-Juma-OxonEGH-Key-Note-Address-FOIP-Joint-Symposium-Feb-28th-2023.pdf
[114] Hakata, K, Aizawa, T and Cannon, B (2024) Japan's Evolving Strategic Messaging to the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Raisina Debates. https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/japans-evolving-strategic-messaging-to-the-indo-pacific-and-beyond
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2023) New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific FOIP'
https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100477660.pdf

governance architecture, and active participation in international maritime-security cooperation frameworks.

The significance of these developments extends far beyond Kenya's immediate maritime domain. As the Western Indian Ocean becomes increasingly central to global trade, energy flows, and strategic competition, Kenya's ability to police its waters and cooperate with regional and international partners has direct implications for the stability and resilience of a broader maritime order. The resurgence of piracy in 2023, the spillover of insecurity from the Red Sea, and the acceleration of climate-related threats underscore the fragility of past gains and the urgency of sustained investment in maritime governance. At the same time, great-power competition is intensifying across the wider Indo-Pacific, and Kenya—situated at the hinge between the African continent and the Indian Ocean—finds itself newly implicated in debates about connectivity, rules-based order, and the provision of regional public goods. Japan's FOIP vision, Kenya's growing naval diplomacy, and its participation in multilateral security initiatives demonstrate that Kenya is no longer a peripheral actor but an increasingly active contributor to Indo-Pacific maritime stability.

This makes Kenya's maritime-security trajectory both timely and analytically important. It illustrates how an African littoral state can recalibrate its strategic identity, leverage international partnerships, and position itself within emerging geopolitical frameworks while managing complex domestic and regional challenges that inhibit, at times, the political will to take concrete action in the maritime domain. As threats evolve and external rivalries sharpen, nevertheless, Kenya's experience offers insights into how middle and emerging powers in the Western Indian Ocean can craft adaptive, outward-looking maritime strategies that support national development, enhance resilience, and reinforce a cooperative and lawful maritime order. As such, Kenya's case is not simply a case of domestic political developments, but offers a window into the shifting architecture of security and governance across the Indo-Pacific and the supreme importance of the global maritime commons to safety and security.

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and Africa / U.S. Sixth Fleet. https://www.c6f.navy.mil/Press-Room/News/Article/3332878/trawling-trafficking-smuggling-and-spoilage-east-africas-war-on-illicit-maritim/

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