

## FINAL COMMUNIQUÉ

ISSUED AT THE 2025 MARITIME SECURITY CONFERENCE ON THE THEME:

THE GULF OF GUINEA, THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN, AND SOUTHERN AFRICAN WATERS:  
CONTEMPORARY AND FUTURE MARITIME SECURITY PERSPECTIVES

HELD IN STELLENBOSCH, SOUTH AFRICA ON 2 AND 3 OCTOBER 2025



### **1. Preamble**

The Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC), the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), and the Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA) of Stellenbosch University, held the Fourth International Conference on Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) on the theme: The Gulf of Guinea, the Western Indian Ocean, and Southern African waters: Contemporary and future maritime security perspectives, on 02 and 03 October 2025, in Stellenbosch, South Africa.

The 2025 Maritime Security Conference convened distinguished participants and stakeholders from maritime authorities from the Yaoundé and Djibouti Architecture, international academia, academia from West and East Africa, academics from South Africa working on maritime security, national maritime

authorities (civilian and military), associations from the fishing industry, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The aim of the conference was to highlight how the African maritime landscape is persistently exposed to various maritime security threats. Secondly, to present high-level, key maritime stakeholders from the West, South, and East coast with a platform to share perspectives, insights, and foster greater mutual comprehension on strategies to address maritime security challenges and capacity-building to address the challenges of the present and tomorrow better.

One of the key areas of this year's conference is to have a forward-looking perspective on maritime matters near the African coastlines. Specifically, the role of artificial intelligence (AI), unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and cybersecurity in enhancing maritime domain awareness (MDA), as well as its role in fostering better cooperative measures between the continents' littoral countries.

## **2. The Communiqué**

The final communiqué is based on presentations, observations, discussions, and conclusions of the 2025 Maritime Security Conference. Participants made the following observations and recommendations during the conference:

### **2.1 The Context**

1. The Gulf of Guinea continues to emerge as a critical hotspot for various forms of transnational organised crime, particularly narcotics smuggling, arms trafficking, and illicit wildlife trade. The region's porous maritime borders facilitate these criminal activities, weak enforcement mechanisms, and the presence of both state and non-state actors who exploit institutional vulnerabilities. The 4th edition of this collaborative maritime security forum brought together experts and practitioners to assess the evolving threats in this region and to foster stronger cooperation between research institutions, maritime governance bodies, and enforcement agencies.
2. The Horn of Africa and Western Indian Ocean face complex maritime security challenges, including piracy, illegal fishing, environmental crimes, and threats to critical infrastructure. The participants and presenters explored how the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) and its expanded framework serve as a foundation for regional cooperation, legal harmonisation, and good maritime governance. Legal gaps, particularly in terms of making the code binding, still remain of the core issues of the Code.
3. There was focus on the operational model of the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre (MAOC), a European initiative that has successfully coordinated real-time intelligence sharing and interdiction efforts among its 10 partner countries. The Center plays a pivotal role in tracking narcotics trafficking at sea, emphasizing cooperation over duplication, and highlighting the importance of intelligence-led, multi-agency responses. While its main operations center around the Atlantic drug routes into Europe, MAOC also engages with West African states to improve capacity-building and intelligence exchange, despite limitations in trust, capacity, and infrastructure among West African states.
4. It was further revealed that there are complex interlinkages among arms proliferation, political instability, and wildlife trafficking. The emphasis was on the dangerous feedback loop created by state leakage of arms and ammunition into illicit networks, with marine routes that play an integral

role in wildlife trafficking, especially where regulatory frameworks such as CITES are limited in scope or poorly enforced. This exposed the porous nature of state boundaries and ports in the region along the Atlantic coast in countries such as South Africa, Namibia and Angola.

5. Effective implementation of international legal frameworks, such as the United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), remains a pressing issue due to inconsistencies in domestic legislation, weak enforcement, and jurisdictional conflicts. The need for harmonised legal definitions of maritime crimes, improved flag state accountability, and stronger institutional mechanisms for enforcement. Best practices, such as the the Economic Community of West African States's (ECOWAS) supplementary act on the transfer of piracy suspects and ship rider agreements, demonstrate the potential of regional cooperation. However, these must be supported by political will, operational strategies, and the inclusion of stakeholders like prosecutors, fisheries officials, and environmental agencies in legislative reform and enforcement efforts.
6. A recurring theme was the importance of capacity building and information sharing as pillars of effective maritime governance. There was a call for expanded training for law enforcement, judiciary, and prosecutors, and for standardised mechanisms to facilitate real-time information sharing beyond the military domain. Examples from Ghana and The Gambia showed how practical enforcement experience can drive legislative reform. As new threats such as cybercrime and environmental degradation emerge, the participants advocated for evolving international instruments and creative reinterpretation of existing laws to maintain legal relevance.
7. The participants also explored the urgent need for African navies, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea, to recalibrate their strategies in response to complex, emerging threats such as transnational organised crime, cyberattacks, and the proliferation of unmanned systems. An emphasis was placed on enhancing cyber resilience, adopting modular multi-mission offshore patrol vessels (OPVs), and establishing joint early warning systems to counter threats posed by cheap drone technologies and non-state actors. The Red Sea crisis in 2024 served as a stark example of how asymmetric tactics, including drone strikes, can disrupt global shipping routes, raise insurance costs, and cause long transit times.
8. Maritime security was again examined through a non-traditional lens, particularly the risks of seabed mining and the spread of drone technologies. Deep seabed mining was presented as a growing frontier of geopolitical and environmental risk, underscoring its potential for militarisation and ecosystem disruption in Southern African waters. Simultaneously, the spotlight was placed on the increasing use of drones by violent non-state actors, such as the Houthis in Yemen and Al-Shabaab in Somalia, who have leveraged drone technology for surveillance, kinetic strikes, and propaganda. The democratisation of drone technology—driven by cost reductions and even 3D printing—was noted as a destabilising factor with the potential to spill over into maritime domains, requiring urgent regulatory and technological responses to mitigate and counter the risk.
9. Further discussions addressed the ambit of oft neglected inland maritime issues, particularly in African lakes like Victoria and Tanganyika. Challenges include unregulated fishing, human trafficking, illegal wildlife trade, and weak vessel registration systems, all exacerbated by fragmented governance and conflicting legal frameworks. The need for a common transboundary lake convention was proposed, with Lake Victoria's cooperative model serving as a potential

blueprint. Throughout the conference, the broader theme of legal ambiguity persisted, especially regarding unmapped maritime boundaries, unregulated drone usage, and cyber legislation.

10. The establishment of the Combined Maritime Task Force (CMTF) in the Gulf of Guinea represents a critical step in addressing persistent maritime insecurity across West and Central Africa. Mandated by the 2022 Port Harcourt Declaration and endorsed by the African Union Peace and Security Council in 2023 the CMTF is designed to complement—rather than replace—the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (YCoC). It aims to offer a rapid, coordinated response to maritime threats by integrating into the African Standby Force framework. Nigeria has led the way by appointing a task force commander and assigning assets, including offshore patrol vessels and aerial support. However, operationalisation remains challenged by funding gaps, diplomatic clearances, and the need for sustained political will. Calls have been made for greater logistical support from both the AU and ECOWAS, alongside discussions around establishing a UN maritime task force to reflect the global implications of security in these waters.
11. The CMTF initiative was praised as a complementary measure to existing frameworks like the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and Djibouti Code of Conduct, underlining growing momentum for regional security integration. Key discussions highlighted the need for interoperability among African navies, joint exercises, and harmonised maritime governance structures. Lessons from the SADC Standing Maritime Committee and trilateral naval agreements were presented as models of successful regional coordination. However, gaps remain in inter-agency cooperation, infrastructure, and trained personnel.
12. Focus was placed on the urgent need for South Africa to adopt a comprehensive, inter-agency maritime security strategy. Although SADC adopted a regional maritime strategy in 2022, South Africa, as a major player with sea borders on 3 oceans, still lacks any significant and credible integrated maritime security strategy or related arrangement to coordinate ways and means to address maritime security risks, threats and responses. Grounded in both historical context and forward-looking imperatives, emphasis was placed on a whole-of-government approach that aligns national security with economic and human security goals. Any such strategy must address a wide range of threats, including illegal fishing, cyber threats, and territorial integrity, while enhancing interdepartmental coordination. Drawing on international examples, the need to align maritime security planning with broader national development objectives—such as those in the 2015 South African Defence Review and Operation Phakisa—emphasises that South Africa’s geographic position and marine economy warrant a robust, integrated maritime security posture.
13. The conference also focused on the critical role of undersea cables in Africa’s data infrastructure, with 95% of international data traffic dependent on them. It was outlined that there is an urgent need for national legislation to protect data infrastructure and the importance of maritime domain awareness, legal clarity, and coordinated responses across sectors. Deliberate sabotage, natural disasters, and infrastructure failure pose major risks to cable systems, with cascading effects on economies and security. There was a call for a bottom-up approach to cyber governance, emphasising regional cooperation, public-private partnerships, and alignment with international norms. The discussion positioned South Africa as a potential leader in regional responses to maritime based cybersecurity due to its geographic and strategic capabilities in the Western Indian Ocean.

14. One presentation from South Africa introduced the USC Prowler. This vessel is a South African domestically developed unmanned surface vessel. It is a game-changing asset for maritime governance and security. Designed to provide a persistent, low-cost presence, the Prowler supports missions ranging from fisheries management and environmental monitoring to maritime surveillance and disaster response. With emphasis on autonomy and technological integration as critical factors to consider for African states with constrained naval budgets, acknowledgment was given to legal and regulatory challenges under UNCLOS and International Maritime Organisation (IMO) frameworks, thus advocating for policy development that enables unmanned systems. The participants further explored the potential for unmanned systems across Africa, the need for harmonised legal frameworks, and the importance of the African Union (AU) leadership in coordinating technological innovation and maritime security strategies continent-wide.

## 2.2 Key Insights

1. The conference underscored that criminalising maritime offences alone is not enough; the real challenge lies in enforcement. This is further exacerbated by the persistent shortcomings in resource allocation, fragmented governance structures, and the limited accountability of flag states. These weaknesses have created operational gaps that continue to be exploited by well-organised transnational maritime criminals. Strengthening enforcement, therefore, requires more than legal instruments—it demands practical implementation through adequately resourced agencies, trained personnel, and efficient coordination among national and regional stakeholders.
2. A consistent theme was the urgent need for African states to domesticate international maritime legal frameworks. Delegates cited instruments such as the UN Fish Stocks Agreement as valuable reference points for crafting robust domestic legislation that not only aligns with global norms but also closes loopholes exploited by illegal actors. Adopting such laws would enhance national resilience to maritime threats, particularly in vulnerable sectors like fisheries, where overexploitation and illegal activity directly undermine food security and economic stability.
3. Resource constraints alongside the ever-present lack of political will remain key limitations to maritime security advancement, prompting strong calls for interoperability, innovative force structuring, and deeper collaboration with industry actors. Developing regional maritime capacity requires adaptive strategies—leveraging technological advancements, sharing platforms, and harmonising operational procedures across navies and coast guards. Alongside these efforts, improving hydrographic surveys and data sharing is critical to enhancing both maritime and inland waterway security across the continent.
4. Participants reiterated that the foundation of Africa’s maritime future lies in political will, strategic foresight, and consistent budgetary support. A secure and prosperous maritime domain cannot be achieved without meaningful cross-border cooperation, the engagement of coastal communities, and enduring financial and institutional commitment. To safeguard regional efforts such as the Combined Maritime Task Force (CMTF), the AU was urged to play a central role—promoting binding agreements that avoid duplication, reinforce inter-state trust, and provide long-term stability to Africa’s maritime governance architecture.

## 2.3 Recommendations

1. Strengthen enforcement capabilities across Africa's maritime domain. Criminalisation must be paired with tangible enforcement capacity to deter maritime crime. National governments should increase investment in maritime law enforcement agencies through targeted training, acquisition of modern surveillance and interdiction assets, and establishing joint inter-agency task forces that include customs, police, navy, and judiciary to ensure end-to-end enforcement.
2. Domesticcate and harmonise international maritime law through aligning domestic laws with international conventions like UNCLOS and the UN Fish Stocks Agreement to close legal loopholes. Ministries of Justice and maritime authorities should conduct legal reviews and work with regional bodies (e.g., AU, ECOWAS, IGAD, SADC) to draft harmonised model laws, ensuring coherence in defining and prosecuting maritime crimes, particularly illegal fishing, trafficking, and sabotage.
3. Promote innovation and interoperability among African navies. Resource-constrained states could adopt cost-effective, modular, and interoperable naval systems. By encouraging joint procurement programs and shared naval infrastructure among regional blocks, key obstacles become less disruptive. Investing in multi-mission offshore patrol vessels (OPVs), unmanned surface vessels, and cyber-resilient systems also came to the fore. These suggestions go together with promoting standardised training and doctrines across navies and collectively culminate in means (systems, platforms and capacity) to respond to threats and other risks.
4. Expand multi-stakeholder maritime capacity building. Capacity building should include non-military stakeholders such as prosecutors, environmental agencies, and port authorities. Potentially through launching or optimally using existing regional maritime training centres of excellence and exchange programs much progress is on offer. Involving civilian and military actors, focused on legal frameworks, cyber threats, environmental crimes, and prosecutorial capacity makes much progress towards the ideal of a whole-of-society approach.
5. Institutionalise real-time maritime information sharing platforms. These platforms must be reinforced with improved coordination and surveillance and trusted, real-time information sharing. By replicating or expanding systems like MAOC in African regions, supported by secure digital platforms and protocols, regional coordination centres (e.g., Yaoundé Architecture) could be digitally upgraded and linked to port authorities and coast guards.
6. Develop comprehensive cybersecurity legislation for maritime infrastructure. Undersea cables and digital infrastructure must be reinforced or protected with robust legal and operational frameworks. In support of this ideal, actors must enact and enforce national laws criminalising intentional damage to subsea cables, build public-private cybersecurity task forces, and engage with the International Telecommunication Union and IMO to implement international best practices.
7. Formalise use of unmanned maritime systems within regulatory frameworks. By leveraging autonomous vessels for maritime governance effectively, they must be legally recognised and operated. The AU and other regional bodies should develop continental standards for unmanned systems, in coordination with agencies such as SAMSA and IMO, covering registration, rules of operation, and data-sharing protocols. Countries should create pilot zones for unmanned operations.

8. Support transboundary governance in inland waterways. Inland lakes and rivers need joint governance structures as they always entail multiple country borders that complicate addressing trafficking and illegal exploitation. One practical suggestion is to create legal frameworks like a "Transboundary Lake Convention" modelled after the Lake Victoria Basin Commission to include mechanisms for vessel registration, joint patrols, data collection, and dispute resolution across lakes' bordering countries.
9. Prioritise political and budgetary commitment at the continental level. Maritime security initiatives require sustained political leadership and financial support. The AU should be approached to support establishing a continental maritime security fund, supported by member state contributions, and oversee the implementation of binding agreements that ensure coordination, resource pooling, and accountability for regional task forces like the CMTF.
10. Integrate maritime security into national development planning through linking maritime governance with national economic and human security priorities. Governments should embed their maritime security strategies into national development frameworks—such as South Africa's Operation Phakisa—by involving finance, development, and planning ministries. Maritime infrastructure, fisheries management, and coastal community engagement must be aligned with broader socioeconomic goals.

**WHEREUPON**, We the under listed, Professor at RDDC, Dean of the Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University, and Director Faculty of Academic Affairs & Research at KAIPTC, append our signatures to this communique on the date below;

Issued in Stellenbosch on 28<sup>th</sup> of October 2025.

SIGNED:



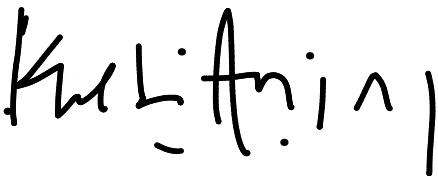
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