CHAPTER TWELVE

SADC MARITIME INSECURITY: MAPPING THREATS, STAKEHOLDERS AND SOLUTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The Southern African Development Community (SADC), with its extensive coastline and considerable maritime wealth, faces complex maritime insecurity that cuts across sovereignty, governance, socio-economic development and regional integration (see Figure 12.1). The Indian and Atlantic Ocean littorals, linked by vital chokepoints such as the Cape of Good Hope and the Mozambique Channel, are central to global trade and energy flows. While the sea is an 'inextricable part' (Potgieter 2021: 24) of the maritime history of both sub-regions, their trajectories differ: the Indian Ocean coast is defined by an ancient Swahili heritage, with its legacy of coastal and ocean trade, migration, slavery, conquest and enduring patterns of piracy and smuggling, whereas the Atlantic coast was largely shaped by transatlantic trade, slavery, colonialism and resource extraction. These diverse histories and their overlapping colonial legacies continue to influence economic activities, security risks and approaches to maritime governance. Although insecurity along the Indian Ocean coast is more frequently analysed, the Atlantic coast is increasingly experiencing maritime security challenges (Bruwer 2025; see also Bruwer, Chapter 11 in Part II). Despite their differences, both regions require a shift from more land-oriented perspectives towards reclaiming maritime consciousness and moving

beyond immediate issues such as overfishing and mineral extraction, to instead focus on long-term environmental health and effective governance of their shared maritime interests (Potgieter 2021).

The SADC maritime domain is destabilised by illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, trafficking, piracy and environmental degradation, amongst others. These threats are no longer merely in the sphere of criminal operations—they are structural issues of resource governance, environmental degradation and transnational crime that have become existential concerns to states and societies. This is essentially what Buzan and Wæver refer to as the 'impact of geographic proximity on security interaction' and 'securitisation', which elevates non-traditional domains to the centre of regional security agendas (Buzan and Wæver 2003: xvi, 4, 44—48). Our understanding of security must therefore be more holistic and move beyond an outdated, state-centric or military perspective to bridge five interlocked sectors—military, political, economic, societal and environmental—that represent this deeply interconnected and complex contemporary security network (Buzan [1983] 1991: 112-142).



Figure 12.1: SADC Member States[61] (SADC 2022c).

[61] The Southern African Development Community (SADC) comprises sixteen countries. Of these ten are coastal and island member states bordering the Atlantic or Indian Oceans, namely Angola, Comoros, Democratic

Due to the multiplicity of state and non-state actors active in the maritime domain, diverse governance frameworks and the absence of a strong regional authority in the maritime sphere, security challenges in the SADC region are highly complex (Walker 2019). States, navies, policing agencies, private security firms and regional and international organisations operate with overlapping mandates and divergent interests, resulting in a fragmented security architecture where coordination remains a persistent challenge. Addressing insecurity, therefore, requires a layered approach, combining hard security measures with broader governance, environmental and developmental strategies. Naval, policing, private security and environmental protection efforts must be reinforced by technological innovation, good governance and effective regional cooperation. Reconciling traditional security requirements with the pursuit of human and ecological well-being is imperative. This chapter thus examines the dynamics of maritime insecurity, the roles of key stakeholders and potential responses to strengthen security in the SADC maritime domain.

The research approach utilised is qualitative and interpretive, drawing on a critical analysis of relevant security and strategic matters. The multidimensional nature of maritime insecurity in the SADC region was examined through an extensive review of official documents, policies, scholarly literature and news material. Within this framework, maritime insecurity is understood as not only a material threat but also as a wider societal issue embedded in governance discourses. By integrating political, institutional, socio-economic and operational perspectives with existing and emerging security realities, a comparative analysis of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean coastal regions was positioned within the SADC regional context, with due consideration of the diverse responses required to address maritime insecurity.

CHARACTERISING INSECURITY

Due to the vastness of SADC's maritime domain, with an estimated combined Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) exceeding 8.5 million km^2 (SADC Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Coordination Centre 2026a), and limited enforcement capacity, the region faces significant and complex maritime security challenges across its largely unpoliced waters. Historically, the dominant maritime threat paradigm centred on interstate conflict, ranging from naval battles and maritime power projection to blockades (Bueger and Edmunds 2017: 1298). Today,

Republic of Congo (DRC), Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa and Tanzania. The six landlocked countries are Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

threats once considered non-traditional (such as piracy, terrorism, IUU fishing and trafficking) are central concerns for naval and coast guard establishments worldwide. Because there is no universally established definition, maritime security remains fluid and context driven. It is increasingly influenced by non-state actors, 'directly linked … with human security and development' and expands as challenges broaden (Chapsos 2016). Furthermore, emerging vulnerabilities, ranging from climate change and environmental security to threats against digital infrastructure and cybersecurity, are being compounded by artificial intelligence and autonomous vehicles. A lack of consensus therefore persists regarding definitions and prioritisation, which is exacerbated by the uncertainty over the adequacy of traditional regulatory systems and official state mechanisms to combat these threats (see the debate in Chapsos 2016; Pandey and Stuart 2024; Martin 2025). Viewed through the ocean regions framework adopted in this volume, these challenges are not simply a collection of maritime security problems occurring at sea. Rather, they are produced by the interactions between governance institutions, regional political dynamics, economic dependencies, environmental change and transnational networks that together constitute the SADC maritime domain as an ocean region.

The likelihood of traditional threats, such as interstate war or maritime power projection into the SADC region by an external power, remains very low. Nevertheless, states share obligations under international law to safeguard freedom of navigation, secure sea lanes of communication and uphold maritime security both within their territorial waters and collectively on the high seas (United Nations 1982: UNCLOS Parts II and VII). Although these responsibilities are clear, SADC states lack the capacity to fully meet them (Walker 2019: 55-56). While no direct conventional threat to safe navigation currently exists, complex maritime insecurity persists.

The traditional hotspots for piracy and armed robbery at sea around Africa remain the Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa. However, these threats have spread southwards. Piracy and maritime crime are reported along the coasts of Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), while Namibia is considered to be at very low risk. With incidents in the Gulf of Guinea declining in 2023 and 2024, Angola emerged as the country with the most recorded incidents against berthed and anchored vessels, as well as infringements involving fuel smuggling and other oil-related crimes (Gard 2025; Bruwer 2025: 9). Many pirate attacks have historically occurred along the East Coast of Africa, across the Western Indian Ocean and in the Mozambique Channel. Although Somali piracy has declined due to sustained anti-piracy efforts, similar incidents have

also occurred in SADC waters (Marggraff 2025: 11—13; Vreÿ and Blaine 2024). The Mozambique Channel, a critical artery for global trade routes, has become an area of heightened concern. Pirates and armed robbers have targeted commercial vessels and recreational craft between Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar, Mozambique and South Africa (Vesseltracker 2025). On 28 November 2025, two experienced sailors were discovered dead aboard their drifting yacht *Acteon* in the Mozambique Channel, approximately 200 miles northeast of Beira, Mozambique. As the vessel had sent a distress signal two days earlier, the incident prompted an investigation into possible piracy, but no official link has been made at the time of writing (Fretter 2025; Vesseltracker 2025).

Due to its unique biodiversity, the SADC coastline is very rich in both living and non-living ocean resources. Hydrocarbon extraction from offshore installations is critically important to various SADC countries, acting as a key driver for energy security, economic growth and industrialisation. An increase in regional and local production will reduce the impact of fluctuating global oil prices and import dependence (Africa Energy Chamber 2025). Angola is a mature producer with major offshore facilities, while the DRC is collaborating in the development of shared offshore cross-border zones, enhancing the potential of future security challenges (Energy Capital & Power 2024). In March 2021, an attack by an Islamic State-backed group on the town of Palma, Cabo Delgado province, Mozambique, disrupted the operations of a major natural gas project. SADC countries collectively condemned the 'barbaric acts of terrorism that will continue to destabilise our Region' (SADC 2021) and deployed a military mission to quell the insurgency and secure the gas-rich zones. Although insurgents currently do not focus on maritime terror, it is certainly a future possibility in a region with a deep maritime culture (Potgieter 2024a). However, it must be noted that West African examples show that attacks and interference with hydrocarbon infrastructure often trigger environmental disasters and ecological damage, stimulating further insecurity (Mokgonyana 2024).

As SADC fish stocks span diverse Atlantic and Indian Ocean waters, IUU fishing (effectively the theft of marine resources) is serious and pervasive, posing severe socio-economic and environmental threats. Moreover, crimes associated with fishing vessels extend beyond IUU fishing to include supply chain violations, smuggling, human trafficking and forced labour (Bruwer 2025: 12). The fisheries sector is vital to food security, income and employment, contributing an average of 3.5% to the regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and providing roughly sixteen per cent of the total animal protein intake (SADC 2022a; United Nations Industrial Development Organisation 2024: 30; see also Bruwer, Chapter 11,

and Alexandre, Chapter 9 in Part II). The depletion of fish stocks threatens both food security and the livelihoods of coastal communities. IUU fishing not only creates unfair competition but also inflicts significant harm to ecosystems and biodiversity. It contributes to the collapse of fish stocks and the potential extinction of high-value species (SADC 2019). Species such as South African abalone and West Coast rock lobster are relentlessly targeted by poachers and organised crime networks. This has fuelled the growth of transnational criminal networks, criminalised vulnerable coastal communities and led to the severe depletion of fish stocks—the abalone population, for example, has declined to just one per cent of its 1990 levels (DFFE 2025b).

Annual losses to IUU fishing across SADC are staggering, estimated at 26 million tonnes, valued at approximately US$11 billion in revenues. Namibia alone suffers annual losses of around 400 000 tons, equivalent to 1.5 billion Namibian Dollars (Bruwer 2025: 14–16; SADC Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Coordination Centre 2026a). Because IUU fishing is often linked to wider transnational organised crime networks, it undermines governance and the rule of law in the maritime sector.

With traffic through SADC ports projected to reach 500 million tonnes by 2027, the region faces a critical bottleneck as many ports are operating at maximum capacity, suffering from delays and facing security challenges that cause them to fall short of global standards. To address these issues, improvements are required to sustain regional integration and economic development (SADC 2022b). Port security is a significant and multifaceted challenge in the SADC region and is considered 'a strategic determinant of economic sovereignty' (Africa Security Analysis 2025). It deals with a wide range of criminal activities, from theft, smuggling and human trafficking to terrorism and emerging digital threats, exacerbated by poor port management, corruption and crumbling or poor infrastructure (Blédé 2016). For example, the Mozambican port of Mocimboa da Praia in the Cabo Delgado province was captured by insurgents in August 2020 and recaptured a year later by a joint Rwandan and Mozambican force (*The Mozambique Times* 2025). While the Mozambican ports of Beira and Nacala face challenges due to criminality and infrastructure constraints, political instability exacerbates their risk potential. Although the threat of sea mines or underwater explosive devices in the SADC region remains low, such an asymmetric danger cannot be dismissed, particularly if linked to acts of terrorism (Potgieter 2024a). A single well-placed device could shut down a major port and cause significant economic disruption, while its clearance would demand highly specialised equipment and expertise.

Despite the substantial potential of South Africa's ports, they are amongst the lowest-ranked ports in the world according to reliable global indexes such as the Container Port Performance Index of the World Bank and S&P Global Market Intelligence (World Bank 2025). Complex security challenges are compounded by low productivity, old infrastructure, corruption and poor management. Various *force majeure* closures have occurred at the Port of Durban due to civil unrest and rioting (2021), cyberattacks and system failure (2021) and labour unrest (2022). In addition, severe weather conditions, operational challenges, as well as theft and sabotage, have repeatedly halted shipping or hampered the movement of goods to and from the port between 2022 and 2024. This resulted in the Port of Durban ranking 'dead last' out of 403 global ports in the 2024 Container Port Performance Index (Ryan 2025). South Africa's other busy ports did not fare much better with the Port of Ngqura (Coega) placed 402nd, the Port of Cape Town 400th and the Port of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha) 359th (World Bank 2025). The Southern African Association of Freight Forwarders, however, questioned the accuracy of these measurements and ranked South African ports between 250th and 280th globally (Thorne 2024).

While human life depends on the oceans for climate regulation, food, hydrocarbons and global trade, there is sufficient scientific evidence to justify global concerns regarding the serious threat to ocean health. Climate change is altering the physical and chemical composition of ocean ecosystems, shifting seasonal patterns, disrupting marine habitats and impacting on the availability of fish, leading to dire consequences for coastal communities. Compounded by anthropogenic pressures like pollution, IUU fishing and inappropriate coastal developments, these factors present a significant challenge to global ocean health and the fragile marine ecosystems in the SADC region. Given that ocean resources are vital for economic growth and development, food security and livelihoods, sustained economic benefits require good governance, security and sustainable environmental management (Cooley et al. 2022: 381—397, 410—415, 456—469).

The increasing frequency of extreme weather events, such as severe storms and flooding in coastal areas, together with rising sea levels and widespread environmental degradation, has become a defining feature of the region's coastal environment, specifically along the Indian Ocean coast (Trisos et al. 2022: 1333, 1357). When these ecological stresses are coupled with poor governance and unsustainable ocean management, they intensify competition over scarce resources and contribute to maritime insecurity, manifesting in fishing infringements, poaching, piracy and various other maritime crimes.

Vulnerabilities are particularly acute in areas where state institutions lack adequate law enforcement and security capacity, and are further exacerbated by socio-economic stressors such as poverty and inequality (Potgieter 2018: 51). These threats to marine resources, coastal infrastructure and ecosystems directly endanger human health, livelihoods and food security—core pillars of human, national and regional security. Consequently, such adverse and tangible conditions in the region must be understood not only as environmental concerns but also as fundamental maritime security challenges (Potgieter 2024b). As maritime security is indispensable to sustainable ocean development, the interconnectedness between environmental degradation and security risks underscores the need for integrated, holistic approaches to ocean and security governance in the SADC maritime domain. This view is in line with critical understandings of security that move beyond strict military threats and reinforce the value of ocean regions as an analytical concept to address these integrated challenges.

Increasing digitisation, automation and reliance on information and communication technologies (ICT) have introduced critical vulnerabilities in the maritime domain. Cyber criminals endeavour to obtain access to sensitive data on financial arrangements, vessel movements, cargoes, as well as naval, coast guard and maritime security operations. Africa has limited national and regional capacity for addressing cybersecurity (Sime 2023). Given their strategic and economic value, ports have become prime targets. With cyberattacks emerging as a growing threat to regional security, economic stability and critical infrastructure, SADC leaders maintain that cybersecurity must be improved (Mungadze 2019). A major incident could have severe consequences. This was demonstrated by the 2021 cyberattacks on South Africa's Transnet, which caused considerable economic loss and disrupted port operations at Cape Town, Durban, Ngqura and Port Elizabeth (Gesami and Kasembeli 2022). Although global records acknowledge hundreds of maritime cyberattacks annually, the true extent is unknown, as incidents are significantly underreported due to concerns over trust and insurance liabilities.

Enduring global geopolitical tensions and Middle East conflicts have impacted SADC maritime security as shipping traffic is increasingly diverted around the Cape of Good Hope. This rerouting places considerable pressure on regional ports and infrastructure, straining resources and increasing operational risks. This can be demonstrated by the sinking of the Panama-registered *Ultra Galaxy* off the SADC Atlantic Coast on 11 July 2024 and the loss of 200 containers from six ships along the coastal region during the winter storms of 2024 (Schuler

2024; Lepic 2024). Moreover, monitoring the route has become more difficult due to its potential exploitation for transnational illegal activities, including cyber threats (Bruwer 2024). Consequently, the region has seen increasing naval deployments and 'diplomatic signalling' by major powers (Nel and Blaine 2026).

Some traditional threats remain relevant in the region, yet they are increasingly compounded by emerging challenges, making a dual focus on both categories essential for maritime security. Within SADC, these concerns are consistently highlighted in maritime security dialogues. Despite ongoing efforts at national and regional levels, programmes designed to mitigate maritime insecurity and advance the blue economy agenda have not delivered as anticipated, emphasising the link between economic development, governance and security. The verdict is clear: maritime insecurity remains, it is intensifying in some areas, and the growing influence of climate change on security is evident. The persistent questions regarding sufficient capacity and capability within SADC to address maritime insecurity and the pressing need for effective action will be explored in the following sections.

STAKEHOLDERS AND MECHANISMS

The preceding section highlights the fact that SADC's maritime security challenges play out in a complex geopolitical landscape moulded by the strategic sea lines of communication (SLOC) of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, layered regional relationships, and significant external influences. The SADC Indian Ocean littoral states face high-volume trade routes and historical threats like piracy that drive cooperation through frameworks such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct and regional maritime domain awareness (MDA) initiatives linked to the African Union's (AU) Integrated Maritime Strategy (Mafwila 2023: 9–11). This maritime geography remains important not only for regional trade but also for great-power competition. As an example, India seeks to position itself as a 'net security provider' in the Western Indian Ocean and has launched joint exercises with African navies to enhance interoperability and counterbalance China's expanding naval and commercial footprint in the region (Reed and Schipani 2025; see also Vreÿ, Chapter 10 in Part II). Coastal states on the Atlantic, meanwhile, are more concerned with South Atlantic maritime security, where SADC's mechanisms are less mature. SADC's Integrated Maritime Security Strategy and the Standing Maritime Committee seek to harmonise these diverse priorities under the AU's peace and security architecture. External players such as the European Union (EU), France, China and India exert influence by providing

capacity-building, supplying surveillance systems and conducting naval diplomacy, which may complicate African governance but offer resources and strategic partnerships (Walker 2025). This section will deal with SADC, national governance and regulatory frameworks as well as the array of actors involved in the maritime security domain.

Maritime governance and regulatory frameworks

The blue economy is significant to the African continent, generating approximately US$300 billion in economic value and supporting around 49 million jobs, while simultaneously serving as a key driver of sustainable development. On a regional level, it remains a fundamental component of economic development within SADC, sustaining millions of livelihoods while increasingly being prioritised within national and regional development frameworks. Fisheries represent about 3.5% of the region's GDP, provide direct employment to an estimated 3.5 million people (with one million in indirect employment roles), while annual exports are valued at around US$152 million, and imports at around US$100 million (SADC 2022a; United Nations Industrial Development Organisation 2024). Although precise and reliable figures are unavailable, considering the extent of economic activities associated with the sea in SADC, the blue economy has substantial economic growth and development potential as a mechanism for poverty alleviation, food security and sustainable marine management (United Nations Industrial Development Organisation 2024).

Improving maritime governance in the SADC region has become increasingly important due to the potential of the blue economy, evolving maritime security challenges, the imperative to protect the environment and surging international trade. Sustainable maritime governance requires a multi-layered approach to protect ocean resources, enable economic activity and secure the maritime domain (Walker 2025). Although the regional body does not have one single maritime authority with binding legal jurisdiction, SADC maritime security mechanisms and frameworks are a range of structures, regulatory policies, strategies and cooperative mechanisms aimed at providing strategic direction, promoting cooperation and enhancing safety and security in the SADC maritime domain.

The SADC Standing Maritime Committee (SMC), established in 1995 under the SADC Inter-State Defence and Security Committee (ISDSC), serves as the primary mechanism for coordinating regional naval cooperation and maritime security efforts among SADC member states. Its mandate includes promoting

regional peace, protecting SLOC, strengthening naval capacity and facilitating unified responses to maritime threats across the Indian and Atlantic Ocean regions, including island states (Walker 2019: 55-57). Although the SMC provides an important platform for dialogue and policy recommendations, maritime security has received inconsistent high-level attention within SADC structures. Implementation has been constrained by fragmented institutional coordination, leadership rotation, fluctuating participation and weak institutional memory. Persistent gaps remain evident in the recurring prioritisation of unresolved initiatives, including the establishment of regional MDA centres, sustainable funding mechanisms, vessel-reporting frameworks and a permanent maritime security coordination function (Walker 2025).

The SADC Integrated Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS) aims to harmonise regional maritime security efforts through enhanced coordination, naval cooperation and the development of joint operational capacity, providing a comprehensive framework for maritime surveillance, response and governance. The initial 2011 Maritime Security Strategy, largely driven by counter-piracy concerns in the Indian Ocean, adopted a narrow operational focus and faced significant implementation challenges, including limited institutional coordination, funding constraints and slow establishment of MDA structures. Recognising its declining relevance, the SADC SMC called for a strategic review, leading to the development of the IMSS through extensive member state consultation. Formally adopted in 2022, the IMSS introduces an integrated approach centred on governance, security, environmental management, maritime economic development and maritime awareness, marking a shift toward holistic and forward-looking regional maritime governance, while retaining the maritime security governance structure of SADC (DefenceWeb 2022; Coelho 2013).

The SADC Protocol on Fisheries realises the crucial role of fisheries in the social and economic spheres of the region while highlighting the need for the sustainable use and protection of living marine resources. It seeks to harmonise domestic legislation and ensure effective management of shared resources whilst enhancing cooperation in the maritime domain. Its key objectives include sustainable use of marine resources, the protection of fishing community livelihoods, regional cooperation and capacity building (SADC 2006).

Due to the major threat posed by IUU fishing in the region, SADC ministers pledged in 2008 to combat it by creating the SADC Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Coordination Centre (MCSCC) (2026b). Its charter was approved in 2017, entering into force in 2023. The MCSCC was designed to combat IUU

fishing and underpin blue economy growth in the region. Based in Maputo, Mozambique, the centre is expected to become operational in 2026 (Stop Illegal Fishing 2023a; MRA 2024).

SADC does not have an MDA policy or coordinating platform; however, guidelines are provided by the IMSS as well as the MDA Study Report completed in 2023. This report contains proposals which include the following: developing an MDA strategy, strengthening current MDA systems, investing in technology, developing a common information sharing platform, providing training and capacity building, and encouraging national and regional cooperation and coordination (Mafwila 2023). Various SADC environmental protocols on pollution, biodiversity conservation and climate adaptation include coastal and marine dimensions[62]. These contribute to regional policy coherence on environmental protection in maritime spaces. SADC further promotes alignment with international law and conventions (such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and International Maritime Organisation (IMO) regulations) and encourages members to develop national laws and policies to enforce these.

It must be noted that although SADC provides platforms for member states to co-operate on maritime issues, its ability to enforce regional maritime governance is restricted by uneven/limited resources, national capacity disparities, limited surveillance infrastructure, insufficiently trained personnel, and a weak presence at sea (Ndinga-Muvumba and Pharoah 2008).

The national legislation, policies and strategies that individual member states have developed to align with SADC, the AU and International bodies are summarised in Table 12.1 below.

[62] See for example protocol on Fisheries 2006, Protocol on wildlife conservation and law enforcement and Protocol on environmental management for sustainable development. Available at: https://www.sadc.int/pages/sadc-protocols (Accessed 19 March 2026).

Table 12.1: Maritime legislation by SADC littoral and island states. Source: compiled by the authors.[63]

Country	Legislation and Policies	Comment
DRC	Code of Maritime Navigation	Basic framework for marine transport
	Code of River and Lake Navigation	Backbone of legislation in this sector
Angola	Law 29/22 of 29 Aug 22	Established the power of courts, including jurisdiction over maritime matters
	Law 27/12 of 28 Aug 12	Merchant Navy Law, the main statute on port state control
	Law 14/10 of 14 Jul 10	Maritime Zones under the jurisdiction of Angola
	IMO Implementation Strategy (2025-2029)	Implement applicable international maritime treaties to comply with flag, port and coastal state obligations
Namibia	Merchant Shipping Act 1951	Primary legislation governing merchant shipping in Namibia
	Marine Traffic Act, Act 2 of 1981	Regulates maritime traffic, including innocent passage
	Law of the Sea, Act 3 of 1990	Territorial Sea and EEZ of Namibia
	Namibian Ports Authority Act, Act 2 of 1994	Established the Namibian Ports Authority, for ports and lighthouses
	Marine Resources Act, Act 27 of 2000	Conserve marine ecosystem, utilise, protect and promote sustainable marine resources

[63] Maritime legislation, policies and regulations. Sourced from the websites of the governments of the SADC member states listed.

Country	Legislation and Policies	Comment
South Africa	SAMSA Act, Act 5 of 1998	Established SAMSA, to ensure safety of life at sea, combat pollution and promote national maritime interests
	Merchant Shipping Act, Act 57 of 1951	Governs registration and inspection of all ships
	Marine Traffic Act, Act 2 of 1981	Regulates marine traffic
	Marine Pollution (Prevention) Act, Act 2 of 1986	Regulates marine pollution
	Maritime Zones Act, Act 15 of 1994	Established the territorial zones
	Wreck and Salvage Act, Act 94 of 1996	Framework for salvaging, assisting endangered ships, and compensation
	National Ports Act, Act 12 of 2005	Established National Ports Authority
	Marine Living Resources Act, Act 18 of 1998	Regulates fishing
	Integrated Coastal Management Act, Act 24 of 2008	Sustainable coastal management and conservation
Mozambique	Law 10/2022	Established the authorities of maritime courts
	Law 20/2019	Law of the Sea
	Law 22/2013	Fisheries Law

Country	Legislation and Policies	Comment
Tanzania	Tanzania Shipping Agencies Act of 2017	Established the Tanzania Shipping Agencies Corporation
	Ports Act 17 of 2004	Established the Tanzania Ports Authority
	Merchant Shipping Act of 2003	Applicable to Tanzanian mainland
	Merchant Transport Act of 2006	Applicable to Zanzibar
Mauritius	Merchant Shipping Act 2007	Security of ships in Mauritius
	Piracy and Maritime Violence Act 2011	To prosecute persons suspected of piracy in Mauritius
	Maritime Zones Act 2005	To enact UNCLOS
	Ports Act of 1998	Established the Mauritius Ports Authority
	Fisheries Act of 2023	Sustainable use of fisheries
Seychelles	Seychelles Maritime Safety Authority Act 2019	Established the Maritime Safety Authority
	Seychelles Maritime Zones Act 1999	Framework for maritime zones
	Merchant Shipping Act 1995	Established the Port and Marine Services Division
Madagascar	Fisheries Act 1993	Created local advisories of fisheries
	Decree 2020-137 of 2010	Regulates Integrated Coastal Zone Management
	Decree 63-131 of 1963	Limits the Territorial Sea
Comoros	Merchant Shipping Act 2000	Established the Comoros Maritime Administration
	Maritime Zones Act 82-005	Delimitation of maritime zones

Along the Atlantic coast, maritime legislation in the DRC primarily concerns navigation. Angola is unique in having a specialised chamber within its ordinary

court system to address maritime disputes, but despite pressure, this chamber has not become a specialised maritime court (Oliveira et al. 2024). As Namibian maritime legislation and policies are outdated and could negatively affect the offshore oil and gas industry, there is constant pressure to fast-track the Namibian Maritime Authority Bill (drafted in 2013), which aims to create a dedicated maritime regulator for safety, security, environmental protection and ship registration (Kaimbi 2026).

South Africa operates under a complex statute-heavy, court-driven system, shaped by maritime, environmental and socio-economic laws and policies (see Table 12.1). This regulatory framework is continuously evolving to address emerging maritime challenges and opportunities (MLASA 2026; SAMSA 2025). For example, following extensive inter-departmental consultations, the second draft regulations for environmental management of offshore ship-to-ship transfers were published on 27 June 2025 (DFFE 2025a). These aim to mitigate environmental risks emanating from offshore ship-to-ship transfers associated with increased maritime traffic around the coast.

Along the Indian Ocean coast, experts in Mozambique caution that the lack of enforcement capabilities and financial independence will hamper implementation and the rule of law in the maritime sector (Bove and Justino 2025). Tanzania's maritime legislation faces challenges due to dual legislation (on the mainland and in Zanzibar), administrative inefficiencies and coordination gaps among various maritime authorities (Chegere, Ngongi and Gurumo 2024).

The Indian Ocean island states represent a mixed bag. Mauritius has a comprehensive, modern legislative framework aimed at the sustainable use of marine resources. It is regularly updated to align with international standards (Nairobi Convention n.d.). Maritime legislation in the Seychelles and Comoros aims to protect the marine environment, promote sustainable development and ensure the responsible use of marine resources. Madagascar's maritime legislation is a blend of domestic and international regulations to manage its vast maritime spaces.

The plethora of laws and policies in Table 12.1 depicts a work in progress to strengthen maritime security through integrated national governance, regional cooperation and international partnerships. Even though SADC has the IMSS in place to harmonise regional maritime security efforts, regional coordination and capabilities, as well as national maritime security strategies, are lacking. Individual countries generally address maritime security through law enforcement processes, defence strategies, port security programmes and other regional initiatives such as the AU Integrated Maritime Strategy 2050.

Table 12.1 also shows that most SADC member states have established legislation and institutions to govern maritime safety and security. These bodies manage a wide range of functions, including safety and security, pollution prevention, law enforcement, customs and international compliance. In addition, they regulate maritime traffic, port authorities, fisheries and environmental agencies.

SADC member states co-operate through bilateral, regional, interregional and international maritime frameworks to enhance maritime security and sustainable ocean management. Key initiatives include the Benguela Current Convention (2013), which fosters cooperation between Angola, Namibia and South Africa on sustainable ecosystem management of all maritime areas under national jurisdiction. It is supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the largest multilateral global environmental fund (Benguela Current Commission 2026). In the Indian Ocean, all littoral states participate in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), while the island states also engage with the Indian Ocean Commission. The purpose is to collectively co-ordinate trade, blue economy development, fisheries management and MDA (IORA 2026; IOC 2019).

Combatting illicit activities in the Indian Ocean is further reinforced by information sharing and capacity-building under the Djibouti Code of Conduct (IMO 2017), while on the Atlantic side, Angola and the DRC are aligned with the Yaoundé Code of Conduct to address maritime crime in the Gulf of Guinea (Heads of State of West and Central Africa 2013). In addition, cooperation with the IMO ensures SADC's alignment with international maritime regulatory frameworks (IMO 2022). While these mechanisms facilitate important capacity building, cooperation and information sharing, they are peripheral to the core focus of this discussion.

Navies, coast guards and state-sponsored maritime security apparatus

Navies perform core roles in maritime warfare and defence through naval combat operations, the protection of SLOC, power projection and the safeguarding of maritime resources. Beyond combat functions, they contribute to national security through diplomacy, search and rescue, hydrographic services, scientific research and disaster response across the surface, subsurface and aerial maritime domains (Blaine and Nel 2019). As naval mandates have broadened to include maritime security operations, disaster relief, environmental protection and the

safeguarding of ocean economic assets, adjustments in operational, strategic and policy planning are required. These changes are also reshaping force design, doctrine, capabilities, governance and diplomacy (Bueger 2015).

Table 12.2: State of SADC maritime forces. Source: Compiled by the authors from DefenceWeb 2026.

Country	Navy/Coast Guard	Primary Roles	Platforms/ Equipment	Operational Capacity
DRC	Brown water navy	Inland waterways, limited sea capability	River/lake patrol craft, coastal patrol assets	Low
Angola	Navy-centric	Protect offshore oil, territorial defence, maritime patrol	Patrol vessels, fast attack craft, OPVs, coastal radar	Moderate to high
Namibia	Small navy performing coast guard functions	Fisheries enforcement, EEZ patrol, Search and Rescue (SAR)	Patrol boats, OPVs, small craft	Moderate
South Africa	Navy-led, multi-agency model (no coast guard)	Naval defence, EEZ patrols, maritime security, SAR, support to civilian agencies	Frigates, submarines, OPVs, IPVs, maritime helicopters, coastal radar, AIS	High (regional blue water)
Mozambique	Hybrid system (navy, maritime police, state security)	Coastal security, fisheries protection, port and offshore protection	Patrol boats, interceptor craft, limited aviation, radar	Low to moderate

Country	Navy/Coast Guard	Primary Roles	Platforms/ Equipment	Operational Capacity
Tanzania	Navy and maritime police units	Coastal patrol, border control, fisheries protection, SAR	Patrol vessels, small craft	Low to moderate
Madagascar	Navy-led with limited coast guard capacity	Coastal patrol, fisheries protection, SAR	Patrol boats, small craft	Low
Mauritius	National Coast Guard under police	EEZ enforcement, SAR, counter-smuggling, fisheries protection	OPVs, patrol boats, aircraft, UAVs, radar	Moderate to high
Seychelles	Strong coast guard with a light naval role	EEZ surveillance, counter-piracy, fisheries protection, SAR	OPVs, patrol boats, maritime patrol aircraft, UAVs	High
Comoros	Minimal (police/ navy)	Coastal policing, SAR	Small patrol boats	Very low

As shown in Table 12.2, South Africa maintains the most advanced navy in the region, with frigates, submarines, inshore patrol vessels and a well-developed maritime command and control structure. Instead of a single coast guard service, it relies on a multi-agency model involving the navy, police, environmental authorities and maritime safety agencies.

Angola has a growing navy geared towards offshore oil protection and wider Atlantic maritime security. Namibia, by contrast, operates a compact navy primarily tasked with fisheries protection and maritime law enforcement, supported by civilian agencies.

Tanzania and Mozambique maintain small fleets, oriented toward coastal patrol, EEZ surveillance, and regional cooperation. Given its extensive coastline and offshore resource interests, Mozambique has moved toward a coast-guard-type model, integrating naval and police maritime units. Tanzania likewise uses a combination of naval forces and maritime police to enforce fisheries, immigration and related laws. For the island states, the core focus is on fisheries protection and securing coastal regions.

Across several SADC states, coast guard functions are shared among navies, marine police units, fisheries inspectors and port authorities. While this creates fragmented governance, it also represents pragmatic hybrid models geared to national circumstances. Importantly, as the right-hand column in Table 12.2 highlights, the availability of naval hardware does not necessarily translate into operational capability and capacity.

Non-state actors in maritime security

Although naval and coast guard institutions constitute the primary instruments of maritime enforcement within SADC, non-state actors increasingly shape the region's maritime security landscape in both constructive and destabilising ways. These actors often operate across maritime domains and include commercial stakeholders, civil society organisations, private security providers, research institutions, and transnational criminal networks (Liss 2020).

Commercial maritime stakeholders play a central role in supporting MDA and regulatory compliance. Shipping companies, port authorities, offshore energy operators, fisheries enterprises and private terminal operators are integral to vessel traffic management, cargo screening and the implementation of the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code. Major regional ports, including Durban, Maputo, Walvis Bay and Port Louis, rely substantially on private logistics and maritime service providers to maintain security standards and operational continuity. Offshore oil and gas operators in Angola and Mozambique, as well as fisheries operators in Namibia and Mauritius, frequently invest in private surveillance and protective measures within their EEZs, often coordinating with state authorities through reporting mechanisms and joint monitoring arrangements (Vreÿ and Mandrup 2015).

Private maritime security companies significantly bolstered counter-piracy efforts in the Western Indian Ocean, particularly at the peak of Somali piracy. No vessel carrying private security has ever been successfully hijacked. However, their deployment in high-risk areas introduced complex legal and regulatory challenges regarding rules of engagement, armaments and jurisdictional accountability—areas in which SADC member states exhibit uneven regulatory clarity (Bueger and Edmunds 2017). While effective, private security remains costly and is constrained by international law, which creates tension between operational efficacy and long-term legal integration.

Beyond the commercial sphere, civil society and environmental organisations (such as maritime research institutes, training academies, environmental organisations and community fishing associations) bolster capacity building, governance reform and surveillance reporting. However, the positive contribution of non-state actors is often countered by transnational criminal networks. These illicit groups exploit governance gaps and limited patrol capabilities to engage in piracy, narcotics trafficking, human smuggling, illegal fishing and insurgent-linked maritime logistics. Consequently, non-state actors function as both force multipliers and risk multipliers, a duality that underscores the urgent need for integrated, multi-stakeholder maritime security governance within SADC (Liss 2020; Bueger and Edmunds 2017).

RESPONDING TO MARITIME INSECURITY

Maritime insecurity in the SADC region is exacerbated by uneven responses from member states, driven by significant disparities in capacity, capability, surveillance systems and resources. While countries such as South Africa maintain comparatively advanced naval assets, infrastructure and MDA capabilities, others face more constrained budgets, outdated equipment and persistent personnel shortages. These imbalances create enforcement and surveillance gaps across the region, enabling illicit activities to persist. Although progress has been made in strengthening cooperation and developing strategies, the pervasive unevenness in national capabilities continues to hinder the effectiveness of SADC's maritime security responses (Walker 2019; Walker 2025).

A useful African example of a successful response to maritime insecurity comes from the Gulf of Guinea. The remarkable decline in piracy and maritime crime, from 81 incidents in 2020 to 18 in 2024, was the cumulative result of strengthened regional cooperation between states and maritime security structures, institutional consolidation and enhanced naval presence (Gard

2025). States in the region deepened collaboration through mechanisms such as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct, aimed at reducing and managing the adverse effects of piracy, IUU fishing, maritime crimes and illicit activities in the Gulf of Guinea through intelligence sharing and coordinated naval patrols across national boundaries (United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel 2023).

The most visible naval contribution South Africa has made to regional maritime security within SADC is the anti-piracy deployment of the SA Navy, Operation Copper, in the Mozambique Channel. It commenced in 2011 after Somali pirates attacked two vessels off Mozambique and hijacked a Mozambique-flagged fishing trawler (Martin 2014). The SA navy's only combat incident occurred in April 2012 when the *SAS Drakensberg* assisted the European Union Naval Force by preventing a suspected pirate vessel from escaping. The operation is seen as largely successful in preventing the southward spread of Somali-linked piracy. South Africa carried most of the burden alone, reinforcing the perspective that the SA Navy is the 'solely credible naval force in the SADC region' (Ndawana 2022: 170). President Ramaphosa authorised the extension of Operation Copper to the end of March 2026. However, due to limited resources, ageing vessels, a shrinking fleet and maintenance challenges, sustainability remains a challenge (DefenceWeb 2025).

SADC states, as signatories to UNCLOS, bear a collective responsibility to ensure maritime security and the safe passage of vessels through their waters. This responsibility is reinforced through frameworks which emphasise cooperative maritime security and the protection of SLOC. Many regional states face persistent challenges in fulfilling these obligations due to limited capacity, such as insufficient and inefficient naval and coast guard assets, ageing platforms and constrained financial resources, which undermine effective maritime presence, awareness and enforcement (ACCORD 2017; Martin 2021). These shortcomings are aggravated by capability gaps such as weak institutional coordination, limited technical expertise and inadequate MDA systems, which collectively hinder the achievement of maritime security objectives (Bueger 2015; Centre for Maritime Law and Security 2023). As a result, there remains a significant gap between maritime obligations and the practical ability of SADC states to govern and secure their maritime domains.

The 2008 pledge of SADC ministers to combat the scourge of IUU fishing has evolved into the MCSCC, designed to improve regional cooperation through information sharing, fisheries data, vessel registration, observer coordination, legal support, enforcement capabilities and capacity building (SADC

Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Coordination Centre 2026b; Stop Illegal Fishing 2023b). Scheduled to become operational in 2026, the Centre represents a significant step towards addressing maritime insecurity, though its effectiveness will depend on sustainable funding, strong political commitment, real-time data exchange, robust operational capacity and a willingness to take decisive action.

The impact of climate change, anthropogenic factors, poor governance and unsustainable ocean management, are closely linked to maritime security challenges in the SADC region. Consequently, greater emphasis should be placed on a 'whole of ocean governance' model that integrates security, environmental management and social inclusion to more effectively address the multifaceted threats to blue economy growth and development (Potgieter 2018).

Inadequate port security remains a critical vulnerability that must be addressed across the SADC region. The Port of Douala, Cameroon, offers a valuable blueprint, with traditional security augmented by drone surveillance, biometric access controls and specialised staff training (Africa Security Analysis 2025). For SADC member states to secure this vital economic pillar, they must adopt a rigorous, multi-pronged approach that combines technological solutions with robust law enforcement, improved human capacity and the requisite institutional and political will (Africa Security Analysis 2025).

The use of technology can greatly augment the capacity of SADC member states. Unmanned systems, including aerial and surface drones, substantially enhance maritime surveillance, reconnaissance and patrol capabilities by enabling persistent monitoring at reduced cost and risk to personnel. Satellite-based platforms further strengthen MDA through real-time vessel tracking, Automatic Identification System (AIS) monitoring and detection of anomalous behaviour across extensive EEZs (Bueger and Edmunds, 2017). Coastal radar networks and distributed sensor arrays contribute to multi-layered surveillance architectures capable of identifying illicit maritime activities, including piracy, trafficking and IUU fishing (Klein 2011). Integration of information from drones, satellites and sensors into networked command-and-control systems improves operational coordination and decision-making efficiency (Till [2004] 2018). Remotely operated and precision-enabled weapon systems further enhance deterrence and response effectiveness while reducing reliance on large surface fleets. For developing maritime states, particularly within the SADC region, the adoption of such technologies partially mitigates limitations in fleet size and manpower, thereby reinforcing monitoring, enforcement and maritime governance capacity.

While emerging maritime threats often fall outside traditional naval mandates, navies remain essential for supporting broader security responses. The current absence of a major incident does not absolve states from preparing for wide-ranging future risks. Persistent cyberattacks underscore the urgent need for systemic resilience, countermeasures and collective action. Although the AU has prioritised cybersecurity through the 2014 Malabo Convention and in Agenda 2063, progress has stalled (Sime 2023). Only fifteen states have ratified the Malabo Convention, with Angola and Namibia as the sole SADC signatories (Sheik 2023). To bridge these gaps, maritime cybersecurity must be formally integrated into the AU's peace and security architecture, and included in the review of Africa's 2050 Integrated Maritime Strategy (Reva 2020). Given the borderless nature of digital threats, SADC states must align their national frameworks with both global standards and AU-led regional initiatives.

Addressing maritime insecurity in the SADC region requires a shift in how defence budgets are allocated and managed. Spending needs to be more strategic, guided by a rigorous assessment of the most pressing capability and capacity gaps to address maritime insecurity. Due to multiple emerging threats, targeted investment is required in cybersecurity, drone defence and advanced surveillance capacity. But defence budgets should go beyond equipment procurement and aim at building sustainable capacity by empowering local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to supply components, develop drone technologies and provide specialised training. This will strengthen resilience, reduce reliance on external investments and suppliers, and stimulate local innovation (see relevant notes on defence budgets and prioritisation in Coetzee 2025; Walker 2025; Mafwila 2023). Although these are not quick fixes, a smarter, needs-driven approach to resource allocation with an emphasis on technology and local capacity will, over time, ensure a more robust response to maritime security.

Within the SADC context, non-state actors can act as force multipliers, either mitigating risks or exacerbating maritime insecurity. Although private security companies contribute to port security and anti-piracy operations, amongst others, their effectiveness is constrained by legal and jurisdictional compliance, specifically in environments where transnational criminal networks exploit weak governance (Mafwila 2023: 17). The dominance of multinational and state-owned companies in resource extraction links commercial and national interests with geopolitical agendas, creating potential security dilemmas amid growing militarised competition (Walker 2019: 55–56). This dichotomy emphasises the need for integrated, cooperative multi-stakeholder governance frameworks, seeking holistic solutions rather than purely security-based responses (Blaine and Nel 2019: 116; Ndawana 2022: 172, 178).

SADC and many of its members have established frameworks to address maritime insecurity, yet its ability to adequately and consistently respond to maritime security challenges across the whole region is hampered by perpetual shortcomings. These are primarily weak national capabilities, limited coordination and a lack of sustained political will. Regional initiatives such as the IMSS, joint patrols and the soon to be operational MCSCC, amongst others, show potential for effective mitigation, but the reality is that they are often reactive, not proactive, and constrained by uneven commitment from member states.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The SADC maritime domain faces complex security challenges, including depleted ocean resources, vulnerable ports, environmental risks and cybersecurity breaches, across largely unpoliced waters. Although many national and regional responses are ongoing and capacity remains limited, managing the critical interconnectedness between blue economy development, governance and maritime security is crucial. Effective maritime governance in the SADC region is increasingly important due to the potential of the blue economy, evolving threats, the need for environmental protection and rising international trade. Although key regional frameworks and institutions, such as the SMC, the IMSS, the IUU fishing MCSCC and other frameworks provide structure, implementation gaps remain. This is mainly due to weak regional coordination and governance, fragmented policy frameworks, a lack of strategic clarity, limited regional MDA and resource and capacity disparities among member states.

Legislative and institutional capacity for maritime governance is inconsistent and varies considerably across SADC states. While some countries have modern frameworks, others struggle with outdated laws and weak enforcement mechanisms. Non-state actors, such as private security companies, commercial stakeholders and civil society, play growing roles in enhancing surveillance, but as transnational criminal networks exploit gaps, it also introduces new risks. Persistent disparities in naval and surveillance capabilities limit the potential effectiveness of regional maritime security responses. Although initiatives such as Operation Copper and the new Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Coordination Centre show progress, responses remain uneven and essentially reactive. Lessons from successes in other regions, such as the Gulf of Guinea, underscore the need for sustained cooperation, intelligence sharing and integrated governance approaches. In essence, stronger political commitment and multi-stakeholder collaboration are essential for effective and sustainable maritime security in the SADC region.

Oceans are crucial to socio-economic growth and development in the SADC region as they contribute significantly to GDP and food security. But they are increasingly threatened by climate change, poor governance, unsustainable ocean management and maritime insecurity. Anthropogenic pressures, such as overharvesting and pollution, are detrimental to ocean ecosystems, heighten insecurity and undermine the ability of communities to benefit from ocean wealth. This highlights the need to broaden the traditional definition of maritime security to include global warming and ocean health, reflecting the diverse interactions between human and non-human processes through which ocean regions are constituted.

The current realities of the Indian and Atlantic Ocean coasts of the SADC region were shaped by distinct historical legacies: a trans-Atlantic legacy along the Atlantic Ocean coast, and a Swahili cultural legacy along the Indian Ocean coast. Both are strategically vital to global trade, resource-rich and prone to maritime insecurity, but this divergence necessitates a nuanced approach to regional maritime vulnerabilities. Addressing maritime insecurity in the SADC region therefore calls for more strategic, needs-based defence funding allocations, sustained and resilient maritime capabilities, technologically advanced surveillance and response systems, enhanced cybersecurity frameworks, strengthened intelligence sharing mechanisms and improved coastal infrastructure and port security. Beyond such measures, it is crucial for SADC to improve regional cooperation through harmonised legal frameworks and joint operations to ensure that wide-ranging maritime threats can be addressed in a more integrated manner, in line with the intent of the SADC IMSS. By improving collaboration with international partners and private stakeholders, specifically in the fisheries and shipping sectors, collective MDA and the capacity to respond could be improved.

Although SADC has demonstrated a capacity for sporadic and reactive responses to maritime insecurity, its current ability to provide perpetual and fully adequate maritime security is limited by inherent systemic deficiencies. Long-term maritime security in the region also depends on overcoming seablindness, enhancing political commitment, clarifying strategic objectives, and securing consistent funding to effectively implement regulatory frameworks and strategies. Ultimately, safeguarding the region's maritime economic potential requires building a proactive rather than reactive regional maritime security architecture and sustainable ocean governance.

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