CHAPTER ELEVEN

BELOW DECK: THE CRIMINAL MARKETS OF AFRICA'S SOUTH ATLANTIC

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INTRODUCTION

The Atlantic is the second largest of the world's ocean basins, with the South Atlantic connecting Africa to South America and Antarctica. These continents are separated by vast distances covered only by the ocean. States have always attempted to control human movement by setting up borders, monitoring movement and enacting laws to control human behaviour. Yet, enforcing these measures has proven near-impossible on land. The challenge is even more pronounced at sea, where borders are imaginary and state presence limited. Because criminal networks thrive in areas with limited government presence, it is unsurprising that they gravitate towards the ocean, where oversight of human activities is limited to what can be detected through physical inspections in ports, or by monitoring vessel behaviour using technology. As technology increasingly enables vessels to travel further, faster and deeper, state and private actors, (like merchant vessels) are extending their reach into larger areas of the ocean, bringing them into conflict not only with each other, but also with criminal actors who have traditionally operated in far-off places undisturbed.

No longer home to only pirates and slave traders, the South Atlantic is also a highway for illegal fishing and trafficking in drugs and other illicit commodities. Vessel traffic through the region is also increasing due to instability around key shipping lanes, such as the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz (Vreÿ 2026). As this chapter illustrates, these factors, among others, are forcing states to expand their presence in the maritime domain to protect their national interests (Bruwer 2025a). Illegal markets present both regional and global threats: illegal fishing off

the coast of Angola, Namibia and South Africa deplete their coastal waters, while drug traffickers use Southern Africa as a transit route to consumer states. These interests are crucial for understanding who responds and how.

SELECTED ILLICIT TRADES IN AFRICA'S SOUTH ATLANTIC

Illegal fishing in the border region between Angola and Namibia

Illegal fishing plagues most, if not all, of Africa's 38 coastal states. This is no different in Southern Africa, where Angola's, Namibia's and South Africa's large legal fishing industries are also subject to large-scale illegal fishing, targetting species including abalone, rock lobster and horse mackerel, among others (Bruwer 2025a).

In 2019, Namibia was rocked by the 'Fishrot' scandal. Under this elaborate scheme, companies with links to Iceland's biggest fishing business, Samherji, paid millions in bribes to the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) to secure preferential access to Namibian horse mackerel quotas via the state-owned National Fishing Corporation. This resulted in hundreds of Namibian fishers losing their jobs. Those accused of this crime, including government ministers, are still on trial (Corruption Watch 2024; Links and Mbathera 2024). In addition to the company's corrupt dealings, some Icelandic vessels have also illegally fished horse mackerel in Namibia's marine protected area (VesselTracker 2025).

These are not the only illicit actors targeting horse mackerel. While Fishrot made international headlines, a lesser-known illegal market involves the routine plundering of horse mackerel in the border region between Angola and Namibia. Angola, Namibia and South Africa are bordered by the Benguela Current, which separates the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. The Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem is one of the most productive ocean regions globally and holds rich, high-value fish stocks (The Economist 2014; Willima, Reva and Walker 2022) on which hundreds of thousands of people rely for their livelihoods.

Horse mackerel, which occurs primarily along the coast straddling the border of Angola and Namibia, is targeted both legally and illegally, primarily by foreign vessels licensed to fish in Angola. Both Angola and Namibia license foreign-flagged industrial vessels to fish in their waters, provided that such vessels operate

in joint ventures with local companies. In Namibia, the majority ownership must be vested in a Namibian company, but in Angola, some of these vessels are registered under front companies, making them *de facto* owned by foreign entities in countries like Japan, Russia, China, Spain, South Korea, and Poland (Gorez 2023). These vessels also often try to conceal their true (beneficial) ownership, which complicates attributing responsibility for the illegal activities, putting crews and the environment at risk when vessels are in a dilapidated state or when labour, safety and insurance standards are not complied with (North Atlantic Fisheries Intelligence Group and INTERPOL 2017). These foreign-flagged industrial vessels target horse mackerel both legally and illegally in Angolan waters, using tactics such as fishing during closed seasons and underreporting their catch (Mark 2023). Illegal fishing activity is concentrated in the south, bordering Namibia and Angola's Namibe and Benguela provinces, where it has resulted in declining fish stocks. This illicit practice has also impacted the livelihoods of local artisanal fishers, as it takes place even in the restricted near-shore areas reserved for them (Bruwer 2025a).

Due to the proximity of Namibia's rich fishing grounds, vessels licensed to fish in Angola also cross into Namibian waters to illegally harvest large quantities of horse mackerel. While some of the offending vessels are Angolan, many are Cameroon-flagged foreign vessels, which in recent years has become popular with foreign fishing vessels and vessels trying to evade controls, including sanctioned Russian oil vessels (Bruwer 2025b; Environmental Justice Foundation 2023; Martin 2023). To avoid detection, these vessels deactivate their automatic identification systems (AIS) when entering Namibia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), illegally tranship their catch in Angolan waters, and then enter Angolan ports with their AIS reactivated (Bruwer 2025a). A fleet of repeat offenders has been pursued by law enforcement in Angola and Namibia, but many such offenders continue to operate without consequence. After being increasingly targeted and denied port entry by Namibia, some vessels have begun to use Cape Town as a port of convenience. They change crews, resupply and refuel, but arrive without any catch on board and thereby avoid law enforcement scrutiny. Many of these illegal fishing vessels have also been apprehended for labour-related violations in the region (Bruwer 2025a; MRAG 2023).

Other species illegally targeted in the region's waters include sharks and South African abalone, a marine mollusc endemic to the South African coast, which has been targeted for decades for its high value in Asian markets. Abalone fishery is a near-shore operation, with local divers harvesting the abalone from the shore or from small boats, and then moving the catch onwards into transnational trade

chains run by Asian networks. Unlike shark fins, which often reach consumer markets by sea, abalone is primarily transported from South Africa via inland routes to neighbouring countries, from where it departs by air. The illegal harvesting of near-shore species like abalone highlights the difficulty of securing even the near-shore coastlines.

Illegal fishing has caused certain fisheries to close, total allowable catch (TAC) limits to decline sharply and legal catch to become unsustainable, even though it remains an economic necessity. The impact of illegal fishing in the region, therefore, extends well beyond species decline—it threatens food security, livelihoods and in some instances fuels transnational organised crime networks. Abalone, for example, is often traded in exchange for drug precursors, fuelling violent drug markets in South Africa (Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment 2023; Okes et al. 2018; Smit 2023).

To further compound the problem, those extracting resources illegally have a competitive advantage because they can avoid regulations to which the legal industry has to adhere, pushing legal fishers out of the market (Witbooi et al. 2020). High value fisheries also incite corruption, from small-scale on-the-ground bribes paid to turn a blind eye to fisheries and labour violations, to grand corruption facilitated by government officials, as was the case with Namibia's Fishrot scandal, where government officials facilitated widespread plunder. When vessels flout safety violations, they also pose a risk to crews and the environment.

Drug trafficking

Drug trafficking in the South Atlantic illustrates the importance of geography to criminal network operations. Nowhere is this as obvious as in tri-oceanic South Africa, which has long been a regional transit hub for licit and illicit goods moved globally, including drugs en route to consumer markets.

While drugs moved via the South Atlantic have expanded to include synthetics and precursors, cocaine remains the primary drug moved via this corridor (Duarte and de Barros 2019; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2024). Colombia and Peru are the world's largest producers of cocaine, with Brazil serving as the key departure point to world markets, often via West, central and southern Africa. Cocaine is primarily moved to southern Africa on board shipping vessels, hidden in containers among vast quantities of legal trade (UNODC 2023b).

African seizures of containerised cocaine reached record levels in 2021. Although West Africa has served as the preferred transit region to markets in Europe, Australia and Asia (Eligh 2022), the 2023 Global Report on Cocaine warns about central and Southern Africa's increasing importance as transhipment nodes (UNODC 2023b). While South Africa has historically served as a key transit point, other southern African countries are also increasingly being used. As is typical of transhipment regions, cocaine consumption in these regions might also be on the increase (UNODC 2023b; UNODC 2025). South Africa is the region's primary cocaine transit point, acting as a primary transit point globally, and it also has the highest number of cocaine consumers in Africa (ENACT 2023b). In 2021, over 5.3 tonnes of cocaine were seized in South Africa, with record-size maritime seizures becoming more common (UNODC 2023a).

Criminal networks making use of container trafficking tap into existing trade routes, as is illustrated at South Africa's busiest ports, which serve as key ports for cocaine trafficking. Durban harbour is South Africa's premier cocaine transit point and is part of an established legal trade route from Brazil. Cape Town port is also a popular entry and exit point (Bruwer 2025a). The benefit of using legitimate shipping for container trafficking is that it provides cover for illicit shipments. Few containers are subjected to risk profiling and concealment methods are bountiful. Drugs are also often placed into sealed containers or loaded onto vessels after the ships depart from port. Some shipments are parasitically attached to vessels' hulls by divers who also collect the shipment once the vessel reaches its destination. Containers often transit through multiple ports, where they are transhipped. This not only provides potential opportunities for interception, but it could also hide the origin of a shipment, raising less suspicion. A 400kg cocaine seizure in Walvis Bay in 2018, when a shipment from Brazil passed through Cape Town before being seized in Walvis Bay, illustrates how transhipped illicit shipments can be missed in port (ENACT 2023b; Dolley 2023; Legg, 2014).

Illicit shipments are also transhipped or dropped off at sea for collection by smaller vessels. While container vessels' cargo passes through ports, smaller vessels and pleasure craft like yachts and rubber ducks used to move drugs remain out at sea or dock at unsecured areas along the coastline, including beaches, small harbours and marinas. The use of these vessels and others is regularly observed in South Africa. Over a tonne of cocaine was seized from a converted fishing vessel in Saldanha in 2021, exposing a Bulgarian trafficking network (McCain 2021; Jesperson and Verrier 2024), and in 2024, cocaine was seized from a rubber duck in sleepy Still Bay, a holiday town on South Africa's Garden Route.

Cocaine shipments from Mozambique have also passed through South Africa, as cocaine is increasingly being moved via Mozambique and Angola. This is likely the result of Lusophone links with Brazil (UNODC 2023b), and weak governance and law enforcement. This could also be due to the oversupply of cocaine, causing networks to seek new markets.

Angola acts as a transit point for cocaine to both Southern and West Africa (ENACT 2023a; Duarte and De Barros 2019; UNODC 2023b). The Global Report on Cocaine warns that although there are currently limited incidents of cocaine trafficking via Namibia, its location between transit zones could make it vulnerable to increased drug trafficking (UNODC 2023b; UNODC 2025). At present, most interceptions in Namibia are made from containers in the port of Walvis Bay, which is Namibia's busiest port. Walvis Bay also serves as a feeder port, which risks allowing illicit shipments to be missed as containers in transit are not scrutinised.

In addition to cocaine, precursors used to manufacture synthetic drugs are increasingly being seized in the region. Precursors intended for drug manufacturing are, however, difficult to identify because they have other, legal uses. According to the United States Department of State: Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (2023), South Africa is one of the premier precursor importers globally. Precursors typically arrive from China and India (Dolley 2024b) and have been seized at both Cape Town and Namibia's Walvis Bay, which is a transit point to Cape Town (Eligh 2021b). As with cocaine-linked corruption, corrupt officials in South Africa and Namibia are suspected of facilitating the diversion of legally imported precursors to drug manufacturers (Eligh 2021a; Eligh 2021b).

Methamphetamine is also increasingly being seized in Southern Africa, particularly in Mozambique and South Africa (UNODC 2023a; UNODC 2024). Although methamphetamine produced in Mexico has been seized in South Africa after being trafficked along the same route as cocaine from Brazil (Eligh 2023; Eligh 2021b), most methamphetamine moving through South Africa arrives from Nigerian supply chains, transiting through countries like the DRC, Angola and Namibia (United States Department of State: Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs 2023; Eligh, 2021a). From Walvis Bay, it is usually moved to Cape Town for onward distribution (Eligh, 2021b), including to other African countries, Europe, Australia and Asia (UNODC 2023a; UNODC 2024).

Methamphetamine manufacturing labs are increasingly being identified in South Africa and the United States has warned that Mexican cartels are increasingly present in Southern Africa (Matibe 2025b). Methamphetamine consumption is also increasing, with South Africa possibly being one of the biggest methamphetamine consumers globally (Dolley 2024b; South African Police Service 2024; Eligh 2021a). Precursors used to manufacture methamphetamines are exchanged for abalone, conflating the two seemingly unrelated illegal markets and encouraging local consumption, methamphetamine production and associated drug-trade violence (Witbooi et al. 2020). The impacts of drugs trafficked to Africa via the South Atlantic therefore extend beyond rising consumption and failing health, fuelling violence, corruption, and other illegal markets.

NATURAL RESOURCES MOVED FROM LAND

While the region's waters hold a wealth of minerals, oil and gas, Southern Africa's coastal Atlantic states also serve as transport hubs for their landlocked Southern African neighbours exporting commodities, including natural resources like timber and critical minerals. These transport hubs include the Lobito Corridor, which acts as a gateway for minerals from Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Both the Lobito Corridor and Port are being developed with investment from the United States (US) and China, and could eventually rival Walvis Bay, where goods travelling via the Walvis Bay corridor are exported from Namibia (NAMPORT 2023). While this development will greatly benefit and facilitate legal trade, it could equally benefit illegal trade through expanded transport options, potentially exacerbating security threats posed by countries experiencing instability, like the DRC (Ngorora 2025).

The route is already used for illicit exports, such as the 3000 tonnes of quarts, destined for illegal export to China, which was intercepted in Luanda (Southern African Times 2025). Timber is also regularly seized, including species regulated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), like rosewood and kiaat. Due to its size, timber is moved on board container vessels, primarily leaving the region from Walvis Bay on route primarily to China (Rooikat Trust 2025), but also Europe and Vietnam (Bruwer 2025a). Regular seizures are also made in Angola (Nott, Nott and Newton 2019). Illicit exports include timber from Namibia, Angola, the DRC and Zambia (Rooikat Trust 2023; Nott, Nott and Newton 2019; Lukumbuzya and Sianga 2017). Due to parallel legal and illegal timber markets, illegal timber is laundered

through legal shipments by forging CITES export permits or misdeclaring shipments.

The illegal trade in natural resources via the ocean illustrates how Africa is not only the recipient of illicit maritime markets, but also a driver thereof.

THE RESPONSE TO ILLICIT MARKETS IN AFRICA'S SOUTH ATLANTIC

Criminal networks operating in Africa's oceans have been the subject of multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions, highlighting their far-reaching impacts on both coastal and landlocked states, security and navigation, in Africa and globally (see, for example, United Nations Security Council 2022). The unique nature of vessels at sea, however, makes countering illicit activities using vessels extremely challenging. In addition to having to identify illicit activities in the vast maritime domain, responses are dictated by the complex and limited jurisdiction applicable at sea. In addition, vessels move between jurisdictions, carry goods and crew from across the globe and can be registered in countries to which they have no link or accountability. States struggle to control activities in their own waters, especially in their large EEZs. Furthermore, half of the ocean consists of the high seas, where there is even less governance and more limited jurisdiction regimes (see, for example, Bruwer 2023; Bruwer and Ojewale, 2025; Jacobsen et al. 2026).

The United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS) regulates human activities at sea and provides for jurisdiction applicable to criminality. With the exception of a few crimes, like piracy and human trafficking, vessels on the high seas are subject only to the jurisdiction of their flag state. This is challenging for most states since vessels typically operate far from their flag state, but it is especially problematic when a vessel is registered to a flag of convenience, a country which has neither the ability nor the intention to control it.

This does not, however, mean that states do not wish to control human activities at sea. As states increasingly enter the maritime domain to exploit its extractive, trade and security prospects, they are expanding their military and law enforcement reach. This is regulated through international instruments like UNCLOS, the Food and Agriculture Organisation Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported Fishing (PSMA), the Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC), and the Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and

Psychotropic Substances. There are also International Maritime Organisation (IMO) resolutions, such as the resolution on the dark fleet (IMO 2023), which is aimed at vessels attempting to avoid controls, and the IMO guidelines to prevent and suppress the smuggling of wildlife on ships engaged in international traffic (IMO 2022). Most recently, states have adopted the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Treaty, which aims to protect areas beyond national jurisdiction from overexploitation and to ensure equal access to ocean resources.

Although illicit trade in Africa's South Atlantic is not the key focus of any instruments or forums, there are general regional efforts like the Zone of Peace and Cooperation of the South Atlantic (ZOPACAS) and the African Atlantic States Process. None of these are, however, primarily aimed at criminal activity. There are also African instruments aimed at human activities at sea, including the African Union (AU) African Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS), Southern African Development Community (SADC) Integrated Maritime Security Strategy, SADC Transnational Organised Crime Strategy, the Code of Conduct concerning the Repression of Piracy, Armed Robbery against Ships, and Illicit Maritime Activity in West and Central Africa (Yaoundé Code of Conduct/ YCOC), the Djibouti Code of Conduct concerning the Repression of Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden (DCOC) and its Jeddah Amendment, SADC Atlantic and the Benguela Current Convention (BCC). While South Africa and Angola are both members of the BCC and the DCOC and the YCOC, respectively, Namibia is a member of only the BCC. This means that there is gap in regional security architecture collectively addressing maritime security challenges in Africa's South Atlantic.

Regional states also engage in exercises and cooperative forums with foreign states, reflecting the region's strategic importance to these external entities, but also Southern African states' reliance on relationships with external powers. The US has engaged with Namibia (Matibe 2025a) and Angola (Matibe 2025b) on maritime security and will contribute to developing the Angolan coast guard (Matibe 2024; DefenceWeb 2024b). The Indian Navy visited Namibia in 2023 and has participated in regular exercises with South Africa and Brazil (Pereira 2013; Wingrin 2024). The US and Portugal have trained Angola's marines, and Brazil has a standing capacity-building relationship with Namibia's navy. There have also been naval exercises between South Africa, China and Russia (DefenceWeb 2024a; Martin 2024), which, in 2026, included the United Arab Emirates and, controversially, Iran. Then there are also the annual US-led Obangame and Cutlass Express military exercises. The US has suggested that Cutlass Express might be expanded to include Southern Africa (Matibe 2025a).

The challenge for African countries aiming to protect their coasts from criminal infiltration is therefore not the lack of instruments attempting to regulate and guide the response, or even relationships with other partners. Instead, it is their limited capability to operate at sea, to establish and maintain a maritime presence and maritime domain awareness (MDA). This is coupled with a lack of national maritime security strategies, which is linked to the failure to recognise the far-reaching impacts of maritime criminality on citizens and the state.

As more vessels frequent the Cape Sea route, carrying both licit and illicit goods, the task at hand will become increasingly difficult. Yet Southern Africa's navies remain small. South Africa's naval chief regularly cites a severe lack of capability due to underfunding, leaving them ill-equipped to monitor South Africa's EEZ. Despite their large EEZs, Namibia and Angola experience similar constraints, not only limited to navies, but also maritime law enforcement units and border management authorities.

But the PSMA is only effective if all regional states collectively deny foreign-flagged illegal fishing vessels port entry. Drug trafficking vessels can only be stopped if they are pursued by law enforcement, including along coastlines and small harbours. Mutual legal assistance can only take place if legal frameworks allow it, and thorough vessel profiling can only happen if maritime agencies have a shared vessel platform, like a maritime single window, and if surveillance and coordination centres have MDA capability. Unlike the Gulf of Guinea and the Western Indian Ocean, the region lacks dedicated coordination and information-sharing centres.

CONCLUSION

Southern Africa bordering the Atlantic is a recipient, a participant and a departure point for illicit activities facilitated by the sea. The transnational nature of the ocean, and indeed maritime trade, means that no country in Southern Africa can counter these illicit offshore trades alone. Without cooperation and pooling of resources between neighbouring African countries, trans-Atlantic neighbours and flag states, the criminal markets along Africa's South Atlantic coast will persist.

The region must leverage its geographic and strategic importance in order to protect the interests of regional African states and the vessels and goods critical to global trade that pass through their waters (El Aynaoui 2025). But Southern Africa's states can only do so if directed by sound strategies guiding their priorities

and their cooperation. National maritime security strategies can provide a roadmap and an evidence base to channel much-needed funding to securing maritime domains, provided they are enforced at sea and in ports. Greater MDA, bigger navies and expanded maritime law enforcement units are, however, only one part of the plan. Security interventions cannot exist in isolation and should form part of holistic, whole-of-society interventions to address the drivers and impacts of maritime crime.

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