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Maritime strategy in Africa: strategic flaws exposing Africa to vulnerabilities from food insecurity to external domination

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ABSTRACT

Is maritime strategy in Africa fit for purpose? Africa has generally sought maritime security through international law, cooperation and diplomacy in the post-Cold War US-led international order. However, the rise of China and the resurgence of Russia challenge the US-led order, raising questions about the fitness of Africa's strategic orientation in the maritime domain. This article evaluates Africa's maritime strategy, theory and practice, to determine its suitability for Africa's maritime strategic environment, at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century. It argues that Africa's current maritime strategy is unsuitable for its maritime security – as an element of national and regional security. The argument rests on the findings that: (1) Africa suffers from low maritime domain awareness, (2) it has not shaken off its historical seablindness, (3) Africa in general and individual African states retain little or no seapower and take few practical steps to address the situation, and (4) Africa suffers persistent challenges in exploiting and securing maritime wealth. The AU's Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy is a wish list with no realistic or practical steps to its realisation.

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Introduction

When Prince Henry the Navigator began his voyages down the West African coast, and with the increasing development of transoceanic seapower in Europe, African states considered themselves lords of the land and Europeans lords of the sea (Vandervort 2015). The African position was not entirely non-strategic. Sir Julian Corbett argued that

since men live upon the land not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided, except in the rarest of cases, either by what your army can do against your enemy's territory and national life or else by fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do. (cited in Gartzke and Lindsay 2020, 605)

The Africans had their forests, mountains, deserts, malaria and land armies to defend them against the Europeans on land. For the most part, the inner African empires maintained supremacy on land, and the Europeans rarely dared to venture out of their ships or coastal

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forts. However, absent maritime strategy and seapower in Africa allowed transatlantic slavers to crisscross African waters largely unmolested, exacerbating the slave trade that indirectly destabilised political order on land. Europe's dominance of African and international waters near Africa – commercially and militarily – beginning in the sixteenth century eventually paved the way for outright colonialism in the nineteenth century.

Africa's failure to appreciate the sea as a strategic domain and keep pace with changing maritime technology was a monumental strategic error that changed history. A changing international system at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century raises questions about the fitness of Africa's maritime strategic orientation. This article analyses the current nature of African maritime strategy to determine whether it is fit for purpose. In other words, is maritime strategy in Africa – in individual states and collectively – fit for purpose? Is maritime strategy adequate to the full spectrum of Africa's strategic threats and opportunities in and from the maritime domain? The answers to these questions will contribute to advancing the debates on the direction of maritime strategy in Africa and thinking about African waters in the emerging global strategic competition in the maritime domain.

Sound maritime strategy in Africa is important because of the dire nature of its maritime security and the need to exploit maritime opportunities to address poverty and fiscal challenges (The AU's AIM Strategy 2012). Thirty-eight out of Africa's 55 states (close to 70%) are either coastal or island states where a better-managed maritime domain would provide immense opportunities. Instead, 'bad order at sea' (piracy, armed robbery at sea, maritime terrorism, theft of African maritime resources, smuggling) negatively impacts hundreds of millions of people, directly or indirectly (The International Maritime Bureau 2020; Vreÿ 2010). Africa's major gulfs, Guinea and Aden, are the first and second most dangerous maritime regions in the world, respectively.¹

It is also important for international security because great powers would compete to access African and international waters near Africa and its resources on land and sea. The US pivot to the Indo-Pacific makes it the epicentre of geostrategic competition in the twenty-first century. European access to the Indo-Pacific is primarily through Africa's maritime domain or international waters near Africa, making Africa's maritime domain strategically relevant because the US European allies remain critical to US global power. The ongoing oil and gas crunch has highlighted the importance of African hydrocarbons as an alternative to Middle Eastern and Russian. The hydrocarbons are predominantly located in and transported through the maritime domain. The longstanding efforts at global energy transition and the rise of computers have increased the strategic relevance of African minerals necessary for computer and battery technologies. Most of Africa's mineral resources go to China, the US and Europe, important nodes of global strategic competition in the twenty-first century. African states cannot, therefore, assume that in heated global strategic competition, international law, diplomacy and transnational governance schemes would prevail in providing maritime security. African states must develop strategies that reflect challenges arising from the changing nature of the international system.

The growing literature on maritime security in Africa generates two broad strands; the first focuses on maritime security challenges – issues that cause 'a bad order at sea'. For example, Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood highlights illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing as a threat to human and national security in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) (Okafor-Yarwood 2020).¹ Freedom Onuoha discusses piracy in the GoG (Onuoha 2013). Kraska and

Wilson (2009) examine piracy in East Africa. Vreÿ (2012) outlines oil bunkering in the Niger Delta. Walker (2013) discusses piracy, armed robbery at sea and IUU fishing, linking to human security issues such as food security. Beseng and Malcolm (2021) discuss the securitisation of fisheries in Cameroon.

The second strand focuses on the regimes of attempts at 'maritime security governance' or to achieve 'a good order at sea' – the safety of trade, cost-effective exploitation of natural resources, food security and employment opportunities (Till 2013). It discusses attempts to address the issues raised by the first strand of literature. For example, Bueger (2013) highlights the 'piracy momentum' as the stimulant of an emerging African Maritime Security Regime. Vreÿ (2010) invokes the concept of 'good order at sea' to highlight maritime security threats and discuss the attempts at addressing African maritime security challenges. They mainly discuss 'solutions' that are invariably transnational or involve a degree of international (donor) collaboration (Jacobsen 2017).

The literature has four main gaps. First, it insufficiently discusses seapower and strategy. Scholars principally justify ignoring national seapower and strategy in the Global South context using the argument that most Global South states are poor and lack the state capacity to pursue national security in the traditional sense. Critical security theories that assume the diminished relevance of states and national power and a focus on human security undergird such arguments (Booth 2005). On the contrary, realists believe that seapower – an element of national power that combines coast guard, naval and commercial shipping capabilities – is the principal means to maritime security (Till 2013). It enables states to achieve effective sovereignty in their territorial waters, contribute to a good order at sea (a desired order at sea), and pursue their strategic objectives – to deter or defend against adversaries and exploit opportunities (seen in Gartzke and Lindsay 2020). It is also not true that poor states cannot pursue strategy in the traditional sense. Strategy belongs to all states – big or small, rich or poor. Goliath uses the Goliathan strategy, and David does the Davidian strategy – referring to the Bible story. The quality of strategy may vary, in time, geography, culture and resources, but it always exists, whether written, acknowledged or not (Gray 1999). 'Poor strategy is expensive, bad strategy can be lethal, while when the stakes include survival, very bad strategy is almost always lethal' (Gray 1999, 1). Success or failure depends on the superiority or inferiority of an adversary's strategy. Limited resources could determine a state's strategy, but they do not preclude a state from pursuing a strategy.

Second, little in both strands sufficiently discusses the links among power, wealth and security. Instead, the discussion is issue-specific, itemising threats like piracy, IUU fishing and smuggling, to name a few. This risks creating tunnel vision in a strategy that chases symptoms (itemised threats) instead of causes. It mentions 'the blue economy' but fails to establish the link between seapower and wealth. Sir Walter Raleigh contended that 'whoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world and consequently the world itself' (cited in Gartzke and Lindsay 2020, 604). The word *command* comes before the words *trade* and *riches of the world*. Perhaps it is impossible to enjoy maritime wealth – using the maritime domain for trade, exploitation of natural resources, and customs revenue – without maritime power. Extensive scholarship has shown that wealth (especially maritime wealth) and military power (seapower) are mutually reinforcing (Howe 1994). Alfred Thayer Mahan linked maritime trade to a nation's wealth, survival and course of history (Mahan 1890). Maritime wealth offers significant opportunities

to enhance overall national wealth as a function of national power. Conversely, the failure to realise or, worse, lose the maritime element of national wealth deprives the state of resources to seek seapower as a means to security. No seapower, no security and wealth.

Third, the existing literature, especially the second strand, presents the maritime domain as largely a zone of cooperation, diplomacy and international law (Bueger and Edmunds 2017). That view is historically inconsistent. The maritime domain is largely a zone of competition where interests often clash (Mahan 1890; Corbett 2008; Brodie 2015). International law has changed the nature of competition and the use of force in the maritime domain to a certain extent but has not eradicated it (Till 2013). Despite the rise in internationally collaborative approaches to maritime insecurity in Africa, maritime insecurity is worsening in parts of Africa. Maritime security in the GoG continues to deteriorate, though Africa hosts several important transnational maritime governance initiatives (Adibe et al. 2019). Brits and Nel (2018) argue that 'in spite of global and regional support, Africa has not been able to establish a secure maritime environment' (230).

Finally, the critical and traditional literature, globally and in Africa, do not sufficiently conceptualise rising sea levels as a security threat. However, realists consider territory and territoriality as critical components of statehood. They see maintaining territorial integrity as an important strategic objective of states (Walt 1991, 2010). The number of low-lying territories and the coastal position of strategic and commercial centres means that some states could find it difficult to survive after the significant inundation of coastal territories. This article shows that rising sea levels threaten states' territorial integrity and survival, making rising sea levels an important national security threat.

To answer the overarching research question, I evaluate maritime strategy in Africa – written, professed and in behaviour – against features of good maritime strategy from a realist perspective. This evaluation is primarily qualitative, using quantitative data to strengthen the evidence. The data come from (1) semi-structured interviews with government officials (with portfolios related to the maritime domain); navy and coast guard officers, security analysts and scholars (experts) who shape opinion/policy on maritime issues; (2) security-relevant government officials' speeches; (3) reports; (4) scholarly publications; (5) observations on how African states respond to security-related incidents or developments in the maritime domain; and (6) published strategy documents such as national maritime strategy documents, Regional Economic Communities' (RECs') maritime strategy documents and the African Union (AU)'s Africa's Integrated Maritime (AIM) strategy as the blueprint of Africa's maritime strategic thinking.

The research took an Africa-wide approach because (1) Africa's historic seablindness (the failure to conceive and use the maritime domain as an important strategic domain, a space to prepare and fight wars); (2) the ongoing continent-wide seapower deficit, and high maritime insecurity; (3) the lack of national maritime strategy documents; and (4) the AU's AIM strategy provide a source to capture continent-wide thinking. The AIM strategy is clear about the political ends of the continent, making it easy to research the fitness of the current strategy to deliver such ends. I used convenience sampling in the data collection because of the difficulties of securing documents and interviews.

The analysis rests on the logic that sound strategy (theory and practice) results from high maritime domain awareness (MDA) – 'the effective understanding of anything associated with the maritime domain that could impact security, safety, the economy, or the marine environment' of a state, no seablindness, appropriate seapower, and effective exploitation

of maritime wealth (The International Maritime Organization 2018, np). Deficiencies in these four key areas demonstrate absent or faulty strategy. The logic springs from four fundamental realist-leaning propositions: (1) security is a product of power, but power needs strategy for its generation and application in peace and war. Power needs wealth, and wealth needs power. Absent or faulty strategy and national wealth explain the lack of power and insecurity; (2) in the absence of a world government, multiple states with interests (that often clash) populate the world. Preparing to compete or cooperate where necessary demonstrates sound strategy. Failure to prepare demonstrates absent or faulty strategy; (3) historically, competition between states has often involved war. That situation has not changed. Good strategy requires states to appropriately classify the maritime domain as a strategic domain, specifically identifying and differentiating between adversaries and friends. Such precision requires high MDA. (4) Action in any domain requires good domain knowledge. Low MDA shows that states cannot develop effective strategy, therefore, subject to certain insecurities (Till 2013).

The article argues that Africa's current maritime strategy is unsuitable for its maritime security – as an element of national and regional security. It is unfit for purpose. The situation exposes Africa to significant maritime insecurity, from food insecurity to external domination – the use of significant influence in the maritime domain to constraint Africa's strategic choices, even without physical occupation/colonisation. In other words, faulty or absent maritime strategy partly accounts for Africa's bad order at sea – the high levels of IUU fishing, armed robbery at sea, piracy, smuggling, trafficking and maritime terrorism, and the persistent external domination of African waters with diverse implications on politics on land. The argument rests on the findings that: (1) Africa suffers from low MDA, (2) it has not shaken off its historical seablindness, (3) Africa in general and individual African states retain little or no seapower and take few practical steps to address the situation and (4) Africa suffers persistent challenges in exploiting and securing maritime wealth. The AU's AIM Strategy is a wish list with no realistic or practical steps to its realisation.

The article proceeds from here, thus: the first section presents the findings on the current nature of maritime security in Africa. The second section, 'Unfit for purpose', answers the central research question and discusses the implications of the findings. The paper ends with a brief conclusion that restates the key takeaways.

Faulty or absent maritime strategy in Africa

This section presents the results of evaluating the current maritime strategy in Africa against important features of sound maritime security strategy as an element of the national strategy of a state. It shows limited MDA, significant seablindness, loss and under-exploitation of maritime wealth and lack of seapower as indicators of faulty or absent maritime strategy.

Maritime domain awareness

This sub-section focuses on MDA to ascertain whether levels of MDA in Africa can support a suitable maritime strategy. It answers the question, does Africa have appropriate levels of MDA for effective maritime strategy? It shows that MDA in Africa is significantly limited at the individual and state levels; hence, it cannot support a suitable maritime strategy.

Maritime domain awareness in several African states is limited to opportunities related to maritime subsistence.² African naval officers put it this way: 'the sea is a fishing ground to Africans, that is it'; 'people do not value the sea.'³ 'Africans have used the sea as a fishing ground for millennia.'⁴ The exploitation of the maritime domain remains principally the preserve of coastal ethnic groups, aside from hydrocarbon exploitation and port facilities, which are mainly international operations. Several non-coastal cultures, even within coastal African states, associate the maritime domain with a 'demonic world' – a place to be feared, not explored. Some traditional opinions see coastal towns as domains of decadence, immorality and demonic activities.⁵ As a result, the maritime population is even smaller than the generally small population of African states. The limited number of people interested in working in or researching the maritime domain negatively impacts MDA.

Few schools in African states teach maritime geography and history. Technologies to explore and exploit Africa's maritime domain remain largely in foreign hands (non-African states). The use of the maritime domain is principally through crude and artisanal technologies of previous eras in several African states.⁶ Though with some exaggeration, memes of a small excavator trying to free the giant Evergreen container ship that blocked the Suez Canal in March 2021 demonstrate Egypt's limited technology in the use of the maritime domain. African proprietorship of maritime knowledge remains extremely limited.

Most maritime strategy documents lack a holistic conception of the maritime domain as an integrated part of national life. There is limited holistic capture of the complex relations between phenomena in the maritime domain and national life. Instead, they enumerate maritime security challenges related to 'pirates, fish, armed robbers at sea, traffickers, and smugglers' or potential benefits from the 'blue economy' (The AU's AIM Strategy 2012). When asked 'what are the major maritime security challenges facing Africa', most interviewees responded with similar lists to those found in the documents.⁷ Most existing literature on Africa's maritime security itemises threats similarly: IUU fishing in the GoG; piracy in the GoG; piracy in East Africa; oil bunkering in the Niger Delta (Okafor-Yarwood 2020; Onuoha 2013; Vrej 2012; Kraska and Wilson 2009).

Situational awareness, as an element of MDA, is improving with new radar, surface and air equipment in several states. For example, Nigeria commissioned 118 craft in December 2021, including helicopters and speed boats for intelligence and surveillance (Usman 2021). Nigerian Navy's Falcon Eye surveillance system greatly improves situation awareness. Cameroon naval officers were keen to show off a 'maritime situational awareness' centre in Douala.⁸ Egypt has embarked on a comprehensive military modernisation programme, which includes improving maritime situational awareness, since 2015 (Gamal 2019). However, situational awareness technology is largely imported (some old, second-hand equipment) with complex maintenance contracts prohibiting maximum exploitation. There is limited knowledge and technology transfer in the sales deals. Also, inherent operational problems in African navies limit action even when navies are situationally aware. Furthermore, operational coordination remains in the hands of senior officials from external powers like the US, France, the UK and a host of EU nations in maritime insecurity hotspots such as the Gulf of Aden (GoA) and the GoG. African navy officers are involved much lower in the command chain. There is little transfer of senior leadership skills needed to operationalise information and knowledge derived from situational awareness technologies.⁹

Seablindness

This sub-section focuses on seablindness. It answers the question, does Africa suitably conceive of and treat the maritime domain as a domain of war or competition that could require force? It shows that Africa's legendary seablindness has not changed.

Historically, there is little indication of African maritime strategists conceptualising and utilising the maritime domain in inter-state war, especially with non-African states. As a result, European powers and later the US have dominated African waters and international waters near Africa since the fifteenth century. External domination of African waters facilitated 'gunboat diplomacy' and wars that exacted exorbitant costs, from trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism to current neo-colonialism (Stavridis 2018). Decolonisation created the opportunity for African states to develop effective sovereignty over their waters, contribute to good order at sea and prepare for maritime wars. Nevertheless, the literature, documents, interviews and observed behaviour show little evidence that Africa has changed its tendency to ignore the sea as a strategic domain.¹⁰

Many African states still allow external powers to retain significant influence in their maritime territories. Naval bases and different naval 'exercises' give external powers almost year-round access to African waters.¹¹ For example, Djibouti doubles as a French military base and China's first overseas military base. Russia recently announced its intention to establish a naval base in Sudan. The US Navy, under its Africa Command (AFRICOM), uses the maritime insecurity in the GoA and GoG as a pretext for a year-round presence in African waters (Vreÿ 2010, 125). An African naval officer quipped, 'they [Americans] say that they do not have a base here, but they are always here in the name of "exercises" and capacity building. They are technically here all year round; are they not based here?'¹² Other naval officers echoed similar sentiments.¹³ No African state can deny access to African waters in war conditions to an external major or great power.

Few African states can wage a maritime war. The threat of war (overt and conventional) between two African states or an African and non-African state remains limited but not absent. Territorial and jurisdictional challenges in the maritime domain remain a critical potential source of conflict in Africa's maritime domain (Vreÿ 2010, 125). The historical *mare nullius* nature of the maritime domain and Africa's historical lack of maritime capabilities exacerbates the phenomenon in Africa. For example, Nigeria and Cameroon almost went to war over the Bakassi Peninsula, which involved a maritime boundary dispute (Bekker 2003). Kenya and Somalia have a longstanding maritime dispute (Kadagi et al. 2020). Kenya's rejection of the recent the International Court of Justice (ICJ) declaration on the maritime boundary dispute between Kenya and Somalia demonstrates that it is difficult to resolve such issues legally or diplomatically.¹⁴ Egypt continues to have maritime boundary disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean. The longstanding conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia over the removal of water from the Nile makes Egyptian action against Ethiopia in the maritime domain (where Egypt has an advantage as a coastal state and Ethiopia is not) not unthinkable. The threat of war remains small but existent.

Seapower

This sub-section focuses on seapower. It answers the question, does Africa have enough seapower to pursue a maritime strategy that provides sustainable security in war and peace? It shows that Africa lacks the power to pursue an effective maritime strategy in its current maritime strategic environment.

Materially, no African state has the naval capability to prevent its domination by a major or great power in or from the maritime domain.¹⁵ Africa's largest navy (in terms of personnel, with 25,000 active personnel), the Nigerian navy, has no submarine and minimal surface combat and landing capabilities. South Africa and Egypt have more submarine, surface combat, amphibious and maritime air capabilities. However, South Africa and Egypt retain small navies of only 6800 and 8500 active personnel, respectively (including the Coast Guard) (The Military Balance 2021a, 2021b).¹⁶ A maritime security analyst familiar with the South African navy argued that South Africa's overall naval power is increasingly declining due to poor investment.¹⁷ An African naval officer stated that 'everything we are doing is experimental, we do not know if it would work. We have to wait and see ... without naval power, nothing flourishes ... there is no political will to spend on equipment.'¹⁸ Poor-quality or lacking equipment, skill shortages, corruption and complex management contracts on foreign-procured equipment drive up inefficiencies in African navies that affect all operations, even the simplest.¹⁹

Logistics (using commercial and naval assets) remain significantly underdeveloped. Global commercial shipping power remains in a few corporations based outside of Africa. Africa controls minuscule commercial shipping power. None of the top 10 world's largest – based on their total 20-foot equivalent unit (TEU) capacity – shipping companies in 2019 were African (Shiptechnology 2020). Africa would not be able to trade with itself without non-African commercial sealift. Significant naval sealift is almost absent across the continent. Only Egypt has a helicopter carrier. No African state has an aircraft carrier.

Ineffective control of the maritime domain indicates Africa's limited quality of seapower. The almost free use of the sea by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) demonstrates the poor quality of African seapower. NSAGs have used the maritime domain to supply weapons to ongoing insurgencies,²⁰ and for irregular migration and contraband smuggling (Vreÿ 2012; Okafor-Yarwood 2020, 11). There are increasing pirate and 'maritime terrorism' activities in the Atlantic Ocean, Mediterranean Sea and Western Indian Ocean (Curran et al. 2020). Terrorist groups such as Ahlu-Sunna Wa-Jama (ASWJ) demonstrated their 'island-hopping' capabilities in attacks and transportation of fighters through maritime routes in 2020 (Columbo 2020). Al-Shabab took over parts of the Mogadishu and Kismayo ports in 2012 and continues to use the sea to transport recruits and weapons (Curran et al. 2020, 88).

There is little preparation to control the sea in the event of rising sea level or to mitigate its negative implications.²¹ Strategic behaviour demonstrates little to show that African states are taking appropriate measures to prevent significant territorial loss or mitigate the fallout of rising sea levels. For example, sea level rise threatens Egypt's survival (an important objective of states from a realist perspective). The Mediterranean and the Red Sea coasts host most of Egypt's natural resources, particularly energy and mineral resources, significant industrial and economic centres and most of Egypt's population (Hereher 2015, 343). A rise in the Mediterranean Sea level of 100 cm would inundate 31% of the Nile Delta, causing the relocation of millions of people, contaminating water resources and destroying fertile agricultural land. Also, 25% of Nigeria's population lives in the coastal zone, and the coastal zone hosts 85% of the country's industry (Hereher 2015). Without mitigation, Nigeria would warm to between 2.5 °C and 4.5 °C by 2100, leading to a 1 m sea level rise. Such a rise would threaten 18,000 km² of territory, including important cities such as Lagos, Port Harcourt, Warri and Calabar.

Rising sea levels are significantly consequential in Kenya because its ports on the Indian Ocean coast supply several landlocked East and Central African states such as Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo and South Sudan. The coastal zone has significant low-lying areas vulnerable to increased flooding, landward saltwater intrusion and shoreline erosion. About 94% of Mombasa (Kenya's second-largest city and home to major ports) is considered a low-lying coastal zone (LLCZ). In 2010, an estimate showed that a 30-cm sea level rise could submerge 17% of Mombasa (Kebede et al. 2012). Hence, the inundation of Mombasa has national security implications far beyond the borders of Kenya. Even landlocked states' national security strategies cannot afford to ignore events at sea. Failure to fully appreciate the threat of rising sea levels and prepare mitigating strategies indicates faulty or absent strategy.

In a nutshell, absent material capabilities, ineffective sovereign control of territorial waters, African inability to contribute to a good order in international waters, and poor preparation for the negative implications of rising sea levels, demonstrate insufficient seapower in Africa.

Wealth

This sub-section evaluates Africa's ability to exploit its maritime wealth as a key element of strategy. It shows that several challenges impede the optimal exploitation of maritime wealth, leaving African countries with insufficient national wealth to pursue an appropriate maritime strategy in the twenty-first century. The persistence of these challenges for several decades demonstrates absent or faulty strategy.

Rampant IUU fishing challenges the contributions of fishing to individual lives and national coffers. Fish is a source of nutrition and income for many Africans in several states. Some groups may depend on fish for 100% of their animal protein in impoverished coastal communities in Africa (Okafor-Yarwood 2020). Fishing and activities around fishing constitute a significant employer in many coastal African regions. Life in these communities is directly linked to fish or fishing (Adibe et al. 2019). Fishing exports are also an important revenue earner for several African states such as Morocco, Namibia, South Africa, Mauritius and Senegal (Tall n.d.). Africa's annual economic loss from illicit seafood trade (including IUU fishing) amounts to USD 7.6–13.9 billion. The income impact is between USD 1.8 and 3.3 billion in losses annually (Sumaila et al. 2020).

Africa does not enjoy the full benefits of its hydrocarbon wealth, located in or mainly transported through the maritime domain. The companies and technologies that exploit African hydrocarbons are largely non-African. Little value added occurs in the African hydrocarbon industries. Crude oil exporters are often net importers of refined petroleum products. As a result, local economies benefit little from hydrocarbon wealth. Instead, some societies suffer because of their maritime hydrocarbon wealth. Several groups in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, for example, suffer high levels of air, land and water pollution that destroys their livelihoods because of hydrocarbon exploitation (Okafor-Yarwood 2020, Adedokun 2018). Additionally, oil bunkering steals wealth from states and legitimate private businesses operating in the sector.

Maritime terrorism, piracy, port inefficiency and lack of capacity negatively impact Africa's maritime trade as a means to national wealth necessary for strategy and security (Vreÿ 2010). Piracy is both a direct and indirect threat to national wealth. Piracy can lead to the direct

theft of resources, such as the seizure of oil tankers for the oil or other vessels for ransom, as seen in the GoG and GoA (Onuoha 2013). Indirectly, piracy (and other insecurities such as robbery at sea and kidnapping for ransom) increases shipping costs through high insurance premiums. A former Supreme Allied Commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) argued that one of the key reasons for NATO's involvement against piracy off the coast of Somalia was 'money', referring to the implications of piracy for insurance and shipping costs (Stavridis 2018). The high dependence of these economies on exports and imports means disruption or blockage of trade has systemic implications. For example, frequent piracy attacks lead to high shipping costs in the GoG. High shipping costs negatively impact export profits and increase the cost of imports.²² Such conditions translate to less national wealth from exports and the high cost of imported necessities for individuals in a state like Nigeria, reducing living standards and fiscal strength.

Similar to piracy's negative impact on prices, port inefficiency and limited port capacity negatively impact prices and government revenue. Limited port capacity and management inefficiency affect consumers directly through high prices. Also, they affect the state through loss of revenue (failure to collect revenue), negatively impacting national wealth. African port inefficiencies contribute to Africa's globally uncompetitive industries (Raballand et al. 2012). The impact of port inefficiency extends to the whole economy because a state's uncompetitive industries negatively impact national wealth. Africa lacks the computing power to maintain the complex logistics of international trade. It also lacks the capability to protect the computer networks it relies on for organising its maritime logistics. Behind global trade in the twenty-first century is complex global maritime logistics reliant on unprecedented computing power, needing cybersecurity power to secure computer networks. Cyberattacks on port management systems in South Africa recently demonstrated a new layer of vulnerability in Africa (Africa News 2021).

Furthermore, Africa's general political underdevelopment in the maritime territories results in a large informal sector in the maritime domain. African states lose important custom revenue in this sector, with an overall impact on maritime wealth as an element of national wealth. African economies often have sizeable informal sectors. The maritime economy is no different. The informal sector is not necessarily criminal. Genuine economic activity happens in the informal sector. The 'informal' designation means an economic sector 'not recorded in official data' (Bensassi, Jarreau, and Mitaritonna 2019). The persistence of the informal sector on land and sea demonstrates the underdeveloped nature of African states and statecraft.

The failure to realise, or the loss of, the maritime element of national wealth for several decades indicates inherently faulty or absent strategy. The link between wealth and national security means the failure to derive maritime wealth and loss of maritime wealth affects the ability of states to achieve maritime security.

Unfit for purpose

This section answers the central research question and discusses the policy and literature implications of the findings outlined earlier. It argues that the current maritime strategy in Africa is unfit for its purpose because it does not deliver maritime security, wealth or effective sovereignty in African waters, nor does it contribute to good order in international waters. It leaves Africa exposed to vulnerabilities ranging from food insecurity to external domination.

First, maritime strategy demonstrates a failure to take a holistic joined-up approach in theory and in practice. It has not shown a holistic appreciation of Africa's maritime strategic environment. The limited and threat-specific view of the maritime domain creates tunnel vision in maritime strategy development, resulting in strategies chasing itemised threats and ignoring systemic causes and implications. It reduces African maritime security to mostly maritime policing. For example, an African naval officer argues that 'most of what we do is firefighting; states are reacting, not acting.'²³ Brits and Nel (2018, 230) agree that focusing on symptoms instead of structural causes contributes to the under-resourcing of maritime security provision in Africa, leading to the eventual collapse of regional cooperative efforts.

IUU fishing is an excellent example to demonstrate the deficiencies of Africa's maritime strategic approach because it is tantamount to an external attack on African states, orchestrated by states that often pretend to be friends of Africa, but is not conceived as such in theory and behaviour. The physical removal of fish directly affects food security by reducing fish availability. It destroys the local fishing industry, affecting related jobs and economic activity. Despite its slow impact, protein deprivation resulting from IUU fishing is an attack on a state's population. A good proportion of the illicit activity is due to foreign industrial fleets (Sumaila et al. 2020) acting under the sending nation's diplomatic cloud, and organised criminals.²⁴ It is a form of theft of the wealth of African nations, similar to robbing the national treasury. It transfers African wealth to the national wealth of the offending states. A suitable response cannot be limited to maritime policing activities. It requires a holistic approach that identifies the nations stealing African fish as adversaries and develops seapower and diplomacy capabilities to prevent the loss of revenue from the maritime domain.

Second, there is nothing to suggest that the link between security and power no longer exists, despite the rise in critical security literature. Africa's lack of seapower coincides with higher maritime insecurity. It shows that the realists are right to continue to insist that seapower is an important means to maritime security. It takes seapower in navies and coast guards to provide effective sovereignty in a nation's territorial waters and contribute to a desired order in international waters. All states must retain the power to exercise choice in any strategic domain without self-injury.

States need seapower to ensure beneficial trade. Africa is currently ill-prepared to close its ports to dangerous trade. While open seas, freedom of navigation and trade play a crucial and positive role in a nation's life, African history teaches an important lesson on seapower deficit. The lack of seapower in several African empires meant they could not prevent the transoceanic slave trade when they realised it endangered their national security. Continuous extraction of Africans for slavery in the Americas eventually hollowed African states, weakening them and paving the way for outright colonisation. Elsewhere, Chinese history has shown that trade could endanger national security, as in the opium trade in the 1800s. The inferiority of Chinese seapower compared to Britain's resulted in the forced opening of Chinese markets to opium, contributing to China's century of humiliation (Jones 2021). States must, therefore, retain the ability to close ports to dangerous trade.

Seapower is necessary even for cooperation and diplomacy. Though 'collaborative' gives a positive vibe, coming to the table with empty hands does not resolve problems. An alliance of incapable states cannot enhance individual or collective security, irrespective of the number of states involved. Insecurity in the maritime domain does not automatically fabricate necessary power resources and state capacity. Instead, it could worsen the ability of a state to develop seapower for its security). Alliance theory and practice demonstrate that

capable states can cluster to enhance individual and collective security. Debates within NATO – a quintessential and long-lasting security alliance – show that collective security requires individual members to maintain a minimum level of strength, albeit with inbuilt interoperability. Recent empirical research shows that states with disproportionately large navies are given more diplomatic recognition. The findings support long-held realist views that one should ‘speak softly and carry a big stick’, which the navy is very good at demonstrating (Gartzke and Lindsay, 2020).

Good maritime strategy must develop seapower to limit excessive external influence in a strategic domain such as the maritime domain. The lack of seapower in Africa maintains its dependency on external powers. Disproportionate external influence in the maritime domain often leads to political dependency on land (Kevin Falk, cited in Till 2013, 127). Good strategy would dictate that Africans learn from history and limit their dependence on external powers in all domains, especially maritime ones. Continuous dependence on other governments – especially European states with neo-colonial tendencies – increases Africa’s risk of continuous or tighter external domination. The French conglomerate Bolloré Group controls almost all the ports in the GoG. The group’s significant influence in the maritime domain has implications for politics on land. For instance, the Bolloré Group channelled funds to the presidential campaign of Faure Gnassingbé. The funds influenced an electoral outcome for a family that has been in power for all of Togo’s independence history except for only three years (France 24 2021). While this is only one example, such influence mainly goes unreported. It is the court case in the Togo incident that enabled public knowledge. Such activity deepens France’s existing neo-colonial tendencies in West Africa. So-called internationally collaborative efforts to tackle maritime insecurity could, in effect, be schemes to secure paths of continuous exploitation. The involvement of Europeans in IUU fishing in Africa demonstrates that dependence on Europe for maritime security could be tantamount to depending on a thief to guard your house.

The lack of seapower also has developmental implications. The ability to effect sovereign control of the maritime domain and contribute to international order at sea is particularly important to developing states, such as African states, because building state capacity in the maritime domain impacts overall political development in all its dimensions. Governing the maritime domain contributes to overall statecraft. Overall US strategy has significantly developed since it adopted Mahanian ideas of seapower, trade and influence on history (Stavridis 2018). Several African states, individually and collectively, cannot control their territorial waters and contribute to the desired order in international waters. The failure to do so demonstrates a component of political and economic development that African states have largely ignored, to their detriment.

The arguments favouring seapower do not mean states should pursue entirely independent seapower. The cost of entirely independent navies is prohibitive to most states. However, a degree of independent essential capabilities is necessary for maritime security as an element of national security in a self-help world. Each state needs to retain a degree of seapower because maritime insecurity does not affect all states equally, nor do all states benefit from the fruits of maritime security equally. Maritime interests vary between states. Therefore, states have different priorities, some with no pressing incentive to invest in seapower to contribute to collective maritime security. A sound collaborative strategy would require that states come to the table with an offer that collaboration could enhance, not

with empty hands. Africa's collaborative approach (written, professed and in behaviour) demonstrates bad strategy.

Third, it is foolish for states to assume transnational cooperation (diplomacy) and international law as a means to maritime security in all conditions and at all times. The world remains anarchic; there are several states in the world; therefore, competition that could escalate to violence remains an inherent feature of the international system. International orders change. The post-Cold War order in which Africa sought maritime security through transnational cooperation and international law is changing. There is no guarantee that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a product of the US-led order, would still be valid in future international orders. China, a rising global power, has already demonstrated its disregard for UNCLOS through its activities in the South China sea. It refuses to recognise the rulings of the International Maritime Tribunal. Even the US, the architect of the order, is not a party to UNCLOS, indicating that it will disregard the convention if it clashes with US interests.

Strategic competition does not have to involve Africa directly to impact Africa. Food insecurity in Africa related to the Russo–Ukrainian war in 2022 shows that even when Africa is not directly involved in a major war, it suffers its negative fallout. Rising strategic competition in a multipolar world increases the likelihood of events such as the Russo–Ukrainian war. The China–US rivalry, or Cold War II, would impact African states. The questions are 'how' and what Africa could do to mitigate the negative implications. For example, the need to ensure uninterrupted access into and out of the Indo-Pacific and the potential strategic importance of Africa's mineral resources to China and the EU, US and UK increases competition for great power influence in Africa, on land and sea. As a result, on the one hand, the US and its European allies have no incentive to relinquish the dominance of Africa to ensure access to the Indo-Pacific. On the other hand, China could seek the capability to disrupt European access to the Indo-Pacific in African waters. Rumours of China's desire to build a naval/military base in Equatorial Guinea in the GoG demonstrate that China strategically thinks about African waters. Uranium in the Congo during World War II and the Cold War encouraged the US capture of the Congo through irregular tools of external domination (Helmreich 1998). Blindness to this reality is a flaw in Africa's maritime strategy because it would lead to the failure to exploit opportunities or take necessary steps to insulate Africa from the negative consequences.

Fourth, it is unwise not to prepare for maritime warfare, despite the highly unlikely event of an overt and conventional interstate maritime war in Africa. Good strategy never assumes the impossibility of war. As shown earlier, the remoteness of war does not mean guaranteed absence. African states must prepare for conventional and overt war between two African states or between an African and non-African state. They must also prepare against irregular warfare in the maritime domain. A good strategy must take all of these realities into consideration.

Conclusion

This article shows that Africa's current threat/issue-specific approach (lack of a holistic joined-up approach) to maritime strategy, the lack of seapower and poor appreciation of the potential negative implications of a changing international system demonstrate that strategy in Africa is unfit for its purpose. The implication is that Africa suffers

disproportionately high levels of maritime insecurity, loss of maritime wealth, and a high risk of external domination. In a nutshell, the flaws in maritime strategic thinking and practice expose Africa to vulnerabilities ranging from food insecurity to external domination.

Africa needs fundamental changes in its thinking about maritime security and significant and wide-ranging reforms in its strategic behaviour to avoid deteriorating maritime security as an element of African security. African maritime strategy requires more research to identify the best possible options for combining means to achieve ends in maritime security as an element of African security. Failure to act perpetuates Africa's vulnerabilities.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. In terms of pirate attacks.
2. Interviews (multiple).
3. Interview: African Naval Officer G-1, October 2021.
4. Interview: African Naval Officer N-1, October 2021.
5. Interviews (multiple).
6. Interview: African Naval Officer G-1, October 2021.
7. Interviews (multiple).
8. Interview: African Naval Officer C-1, April 2021.
9. Interview: African Naval Officer G-1, October 2021.
10. AU's AIM, The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Southern African Development Community (SADC) strategy documents.
11. Interviews (multiple).
12. Interview: African Naval Officer G-1, October 2021.
13. Interviews: African Naval Officer N-1, October 2021; African Naval Officer C-2, October 2021.
14. Interview: African Maritime Security Analyst, S-1 October 2021.
15. Interviews (multiple).
16. Interview: African Maritime Security Analyst, S-1 October 2021.
17. Interview: African Maritime Security Analyst, S-1 October 2021.
18. Interview: African Naval Officer C-2, October 2021.
19. Interview: African Naval Officer G-1, October 2021.
20. Interview: African Maritime Security Analyst, S-1 October 2021.
21. Interviews (multiple).
22. Interview: African Maritime Security Analyst, N-1 October 2021.
23. Interview: African Naval Officer C-2, October 2021.
24. Interview: African Maritime Security Scholar C-1, October 2021.

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