



UNIVERSITEIT  
iYUNIVESITHI  
STELLENBOSCH  
UNIVERSITY



*saam vorentoe · masiye phambili · forward together*

---

## RESEARCH BRIEF 15/2019

Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa

[SIGLA @ Stellenbosch](#)

---

**Author:** Professor Francois Vreÿ (SIGLA)

**Series Editor:** Professor F. Vreÿ

### **Pursuing maritime security off Africa: From navies to private security to activism**

#### **Introduction**

Although navies remain primary state instruments for naval warfighting and maintaining good order at sea during times of peace, a proliferation of security actors characterise the oceans off Africa. Private security contractors are now a set feature in the international security landscape through their provision of an extended range of security services. Narratives map their use, entrapments and inherent utility, as well as their hybridisation to be more security than military oriented. Private security contractors nonetheless remain instruments for governments and large business entities to respond to threats and vulnerabilities. As of recent, the [Russian entry](#) of Wagner into the international scene of private military security services (also in Africa), offsets the Western face of private security contractors. A further development with a particular African connection is the way that private security contractors stepped in to assist with [maritime security matters](#) off Africa. Although too often framed by piracy along the African coast, the environment and living resources drew the attention of a different grouping of non-state actors including a strong Non-Governmental Organisation and emergent activist audience, including Sea Shepherd.

#### **Discussion**

By 2010, international naval task groups off Somalia operated alongside other international initiatives to help African countries fight piracy and set up [capacity-building programmes](#) to extend governance over their maritime spaces. Private maritime security contractors also stepped in to help strengthen maritime security on Africa's oceans. The piracy focus remained primary as state actors grappled to mitigate threats emanating from non-state actors at sea raiding ships for private gain on a security landscape often ignored by African leaders. Within a short time-span however, the economic impact of violence at sea forced cognition and responses from the African Union and [regional communities](#) such as ECOWAS in West Africa and ECCAS in Central Africa off the Gulf of Guinea.

More recently, Namibia announced that they partnered with an activist environmental organisation [Sea Shepherd](#) to assist with policing fishery crimes in their territorial waters. Sea Shepherd teamed up with the Namibian Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources to force illegal trawlers out of Namibia's Exclusive Economic Zone. Sporting Namibian law enforcement officers on board, the Sea Sheppard vessel *MY Ocean Warrior* served as platform for the operation over the period 26 April to 15 June 2019. A [video](#) of the operation shows how Namibian officials board a fishing vessel to inspect various aspects of its fishing equipment and storage facilities to enforce the [Namibian Marine Resources Act](#).

According to the Namibian Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources, cooperation with Sea Shepherd enjoys the support of the Southern African Development Community ([SADC](#)). Earlier, Sea Shepherd also cooperated with Benin, Gabon, Liberia, Sao Tomé & Príncipe and Tanzania to combat illegal and unregulated fishing by providing training and civilian platforms to enforce maritime governance. A similar arrangement underpinned cooperation with [Gabon](#) in 2016 to increase sea patrols in the rich fishing grounds in the Gulf of Guinea off Gabon. The Sea Shepherd-Gabon cooperation shows a partnership similar to that with Namibia to promote a physical policing presence to enforce rule of law in territorial waters focussed on illegal fishing.

As African governments increasingly extend policing over their maritime territories, both traditional as well as non-traditional ways take shape to enforce maritime security. While some African countries focus on the naval response and mixing naval responses with coast guard duties, others extended the actor-response spectrum further into the non-traditional ambit.<sup>1</sup> Private maritime security contractors abound off Somalia and in the Gulf of Guinea, with a focus on more dangerous aspects of insurgency, armed robbery, piracy and armed violence at sea. As maritime threats off Africa are increasingly understood as more than [piracy and armed violence](#), actions against crimes that encircle piracy and armed attacks matured. While Somalia enjoys the semi-permanent presence of naval vessels, some West African coastal states benefit from regular naval support from the USA, the European Union and individual states like China. What remains marginal is tending to softer environmental security threats within the fishing and environmental landscapes and partnering with capable or specialised non-state actors to prevent the plundering of living resources and their environmental landscapes.

Moving beyond partnerships between governments and private security contractors like in the case of [Benin](#), and tolerating private security actors cooperating with international shipping and commercial entities in the oil and gas industry, in particular, African countries partnering with Sea Shepherd add a further dimension to strengthening maritime security governance over Africa's oceans. Labelled as a private navy by some, Sea Shepherd's partnering with African governments add a state-environmental activism dimension to the maritime security actor mix.

### **Concluding remarks**

Sea Shepherd's presence calls for reflection on policing Africa's sovereign maritime territories. First, the mentioned African governments show a much-needed concern with action to reinforce their fishing and environmental responsibilities as opposed to the stark piracy focus of some other coastal states. Second, bold initiatives to draw upon willing partners to protect environmental and sustainability aspects at sea could well pave the way for similar initiatives by African coastal states that have neither a credible naval, nor a coast guard capability. Thirdly, for Sea Shepherd with its often [acrimonious relations with states](#), more amicable partnerships with governments are encouraging given the success of the recent Namibian and earlier African ventures. Fourthly, the said cooperation resonates with the blue economy notion and its emphasis on responsibility and environmental protection. Understanding Africa's oceans as productive landscapes tied to resources, climate control and economic livelihoods, cooperation with the likes of Sea Shepherd should be viewed as a somewhat unfamiliar, but welcome maritime capacity-building initiative to extend rule of law over Africa's ocean territories.

---

Francois Vreÿ is the Research Coordinator at SIGLA @ Stellenboch. E-mail: [fvrey@sun.ac.za](mailto:fvrey@sun.ac.za)

---

<sup>1</sup> See Berube, C. & Cullen, P. 2012. Maritime private security: Market responses to piracy, terrorism, and waterborne security risks in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Oxon: Routledge.