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Addressing maritime Security off Africa: From debates to acquisitions

In Africa 38 states are coastal and thus have always needed to consider acquisitions for maritime security and development. A further impetus for all African states stems from [the African Integrated Maritime Strategy \(AIMS-2050\)](#) of the African Union (AU) adopted in January 2014 as an initiative and reaction to existing and emerging threats.

AIMS-2050 places great emphasis on arrangements and regulating matters at the sub-regional level like for instance the 2009 [Djibouti Code of Conduct](#) (DCoC) in East Africa, the 2013 [Yaoundé Declaration](#) in West and Central Africa and efforts by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) through its [Standing Maritime Committee](#).

To support or heed AIMS-2050, each African state will need to reflect on their acquisitions for maritime security operations, as there is a general lack of maritime resources such as appropriate sea-going vessels on the continent. Subsequently, forms of international funding and support, national acquisitions and cooperation between and among states on the local, regional and international level are essential.

The acquisition of systems for maritime security is a very complex task even with unlimited funding and more so when budgets are restricted. As a departure, some models show that it is possible for a state to balance acquisitions with a realistic budget. A system and platform approach have longevity that enables new components to be added in order to enhance the functionality and tasks that can be changed to suit different roles. Small versatile and dual purpose civil and military platforms are often adequate for most inshore and offshore capabilities.

A state must not be apprehensive to ally with other states whose capability can serve a more sophisticated or wider objective. Furthermore, to ensure compatibility and hence collaboration among and between the branches of the military and among and between allies, rationalisation, standardisation and inter-operability (RSI) is a critical operational requirement. Only a system and platform approach in acquisitions can satisfy the operational requirements to serve RSI.

The initial departure of this paper refers to states that have or have had large and powerful navies to project power, for example the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union. Despite their own maritime coastal defence and deterrence, they have emphasised acquisitions using the approach of system, platform, dual-purpose and RSI whilst considering the operational requirement.

Portugal, one of the founding members of NATO in 1949, offered little else but ports and a merchant (civil) navy that had appeal for example for troop transport. Another example is Iran that has displayed how multiple small vessels that equals the cost of one frigate/corvette can block the Strait of Hormuz with its oil shipping routes while posing a very difficult threat to counter. It is thus not only about naval platforms capable of warfighting at and from the sea.

States in Africa must set out to meet national operational requirements. Regardless if it is to replace aging equipment for the same roles, to meet current threats, acquiring new equipment due to new threats or to take advantage of new technologies for defensive/offensive capabilities or deterrence. In all cases the available budget to do so may constrain acquisitions. To meet the operational requirement joint ventures with other countries that have sought after capabilities is one option. Another viable option is to use an existing platform not originally constructed for military purposes and to convert or modify it to suit the operational requirement that may have little to do with warfighting at sea.

The first stage of acquisition flexibility would be to include a system and/or platform approach. Parts of the system can be changed over time and a platform can be used for different purposes. Examples are upgraded electronics and a platform that can carry variable or updated armaments, for example missiles or a combination of soldiers and equipment. In the maritime arena such a platform could be a basic seaborne vessel that would permit a dual merchant (civil) and military capability or modular approach.

A modular approach means a multi-purpose hull can serve as a platform for both civil and military roles. In a (semi-) military role, it can be adjusted to undertake patrols, surveillance, monitoring, escort, ship reporting/traffic management, and survey and chart waterways. Acquisition of such a basic platform would suit the budget of some African states' needs to restore and maintain good order at sea in their immediate maritime domains.

With added systems such as information and communication technologies (ICT), platforms gain information gathering and sharing capabilities. The vessel can also do search and rescue. Fast fishing boat models available on the commercial market are examples of such a basic vessel that holds a certain cost-benefit over a pure naval hull. They can reach speeds of 25 knots, have a capacity for 12 people (soldiers), a range of 900 nm at 20 knots and often priced at under \$1 million.

Some operational requirements of the majority of Africa's maritime protection lend themselves to vessels not embedded in naval warfighting capabilities. If selected with care, such vessels could meet the many routine tasks that include benign tasks. Routine patrols and surveillance to ensure law enforcement in trade and fishing, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and assisting ships in distress due to mechanical faults or adverse weather conditions become possible, albeit with limitations. Pollution control, illegal migration, crude oil theft and narcotics smuggling are matters that come to mind. Vessel acquisitions residing below the naval warfighting spectrum to operate along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea demonstrate that naval vessels are not the only option to maintain good order at sea.

Given budgetary constraints and the lack of universal experience for some African states to employ and maintain advanced modern naval vessels, decision-makers must consider forging alliances outside of Africa. At the end of 2018 the most willing are states in [NATO](#) and the [European Union](#) (EU) stemming from their own agenda and interests because they also suffer from piracy and insurgents off the African coasts.

Western partners do not have exclusivity in assisting African states. Some African states are also reluctant to cooperate with Western partners due to historical experiences. Some other options suited to assist in patrolling and enforcing good order at sea off the west coast of Africa, could be South

American navies – [Brazil](#) in particular. Other states with naval capability such as [Russia](#), [China](#), [India](#) and certain Middle East states could well be suited to assist in patrolling and enforcing maritime security and stability off the east coast of Africa.

To amalgamate the suggestions on acquisitions for maritime security offered, one must emphasize that the process commences with the operational requirements of each state to meet its own inshore, offshore, coast guard and (where applicable) blue water missions. This is whilst also looking towards AIMS-2050 to see how to strengthen, develop and shape a cooperative, coherent African maritime security community. Irrespective of allies or partners, there is clearly a need for RSI to ensure that the combined efforts would be an effective force multiplier.

To meet national operational requirements, one prudent option in the maritime arena could be a basic seaborne vessel with a dual merchant (civil) and military capability. It has cost-benefit advantages by allowing the purchase of more units and diverse roles or tasks within a system and modular approach. Dedicated and expensive naval vessels do not hold an absolute monopoly on role diversity. Yet for both national needs and those matters suggested in AIMS-2050, a chosen approach should incorporate RSI to promote transnational collaboration, role designation and longer-term utility of platforms.

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