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RESEARCH BRIEF 9/2021

Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa

[SIGLA @ Stellenbosch](#)

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Series Editor: Prof F. Vreÿ (SIGLA)

Countering insurgent threats off the coast of Cabo Delgado: No time for pedantic politics

Introduction

The arrival of a [South African naval vessel in Pemba](#) as part of the SADC's military contribution to counter the impact of insurgents in the northern part of Mozambique is hopefully a harbinger of a larger maritime response. While the arrival of Rwandan, South African and Botswana landward military elements caught most of the attention, the maritime domain should receive due attention. Botswana, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe as a potential troop contributing country are landlocked states. Angola on the Atlantic seaboard has a large military with hardly any naval assets to commit but consequently made a small contribution of [20 special forces soldiers and a transport aircraft](#). Given that Tanzania also contributes [landward forces](#), this probably leaves South Africa to shoulder most of the maritime burden alongside certain support elements from Mozambique. This is not an insignificant responsibility and one not to be overlooked given the high impact of leaving threats at sea to escalate.

Discussion

Insurgencies tend to accentuate landward threats and largely depend on land forces in countering insurgent-styled threats. However, three cases remind us of how dangerous and destructive insurgencies and adjacent threats become if the insurgents manage to leverage the sea as an additional field for insurgent activities. The most prominent example stems from the [seaward wing of the Tamil Tigers](#). The Sea Tigers fought a destructive campaign against the government of Sri Lanka and managed to successfully leverage the maritime domain for supplies; attacks on shipping and stretching the Sri Lankan Navy to its limits; forcing them to adapt to; and build a counter-insurgency navy to face the insurgent threat in its coastal waters. A second threat of a similar kind took place in the Philippines with the [Abu Sayyaf movement's attacks on shipping](#) that included violent attacks on passenger ferries.

In Africa, the most visible case where [dissatisfaction with local conditions](#) spills offshore is in the Niger Delta region in the southeast of Nigeria stemming from a clash between local communities, foreign energy companies and a distant government in Abuja upholding a strong local military presence. In the Nigerian case, the unrest and armed actions that often manifest offshore against shipping and energy infrastructure not only drained away valuable oil production and foreign currency, but

militarised the region and contributed towards perceptions of Nigerian [waters being the most dangerous in the world](#).

The growing military reaction to events in Cabo Delgado must include a maritime response. This emphasis is reinforced by the following. Firstly, [liminality](#) underpins the relationship between events on land and their impact at sea. This currently plays out in the Cabo Delgado unrest with attacks on [harbours](#) and threats to [economic infrastructure on the coast](#). Secondly, a recent insurgency in Sri Lanka warns decision-makers just how effective and destructive an insurgency becomes if the insurgents are left to leverage the surrounding waterscapes to their advantage. The Sea Tigers of the Tamil insurgent movement inflicted significant [damage on the navy of Sri Lanka](#) by sinking several vessels to gain freedom of action at sea that favoured their supply routes for some time. Thirdly, in the Philippines Abu Sayyaf attacks high-value targets at sea with heavy [civilian casualties](#) making use of sea transport to move people and goods between the islands of the Philippines archipelago. Civilian casualties keep Abu Sayyaf in the picture given their remote locality in the scattered archipelago of the Philippines. Fourthly, events in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria stem from strong local sentiments against marginalisation and exclusion from energy incomes that fuel civilian protests, attacks on local oil infrastructure and armed rebellion with regular ripples into the oil-rich waters of the Niger Delta and adjacent littoral. The [local dissatisfaction with government and energy players](#) resonates with the local grievances said to drive insurgent actions in Cabo Delgado, given the accusations of neglect in an outlying province far from Maputo and international attention. Similar to accusations of officials being complicit in the criminal activities in the Niger Delta case, comparable allegations about official involvement in the [illegal activities in Cabo Delgado](#) persist.

Nigeria and Sri Lanka responded to the offshore spillovers of instability and armed responses on land by strengthening their capacity to respond by way of rule of law, international cooperation, and enforcement. [Sri Lanka reorganized its navy](#) with smaller vessels and increased maritime domain awareness to meet insurgent threats at sea. This was, however, only done after heavy losses to naval vessels. Nigeria in turn responded by [increasing its air-maritime assets and international cooperation](#) to better enforce the rule of law at sea. In both cases, the respective responses to police littoral waters more effectively played an important role to blunt the insurgent-styled spill over from the land to sea.

The above arguments direct decision-makers on Mozambique to note seaward challenges during an insurgency. The Sea Tigers in Sri Lanka and the local dynamics of dissatisfaction and perceptions of exclusion in the Niger Delta region reinforcing perceptions of the Gulf of Guinea as the most dangerous waters for shipping, collectively flag the importance of not neglecting the potential of insurgency and civil unrest also endangering littoral waters. Add the risk of attacks on high-value targets to capture international attention as in the case of the Abu Sayyaf, and a dangerous, but outlying event with the potential to undermine bilateral or multilateral agreements to stabilise Cabo Delgado should be kept in mind.

Mozambique's naval response is largely embedded in a very limited coastal patrol capability vested in a small number of modern, but [largely unserviceable coastal patrol vessels](#). This limited naval capability to police the waters off Cabo Delgado shifts the burden to the SADC and perhaps other international players such as Portugal and perhaps France while the [UNODC](#) already placed a maritime training team in Maputo. Ignorance is bound to open opportunities for insurgents in Cabo Delgado to extend their campaign offshore thus placing undue pressure on government and its allies to keep in step. Simultaneously, lack of action also allows for infiltrated extremist elements to attack high-value targets with disproportional repercussions considering how the Tamil Tigers shifted their use [of suicide attacks on land offshore](#) and sank several naval vessels of the Sri Lanka Navy.

Concluding remarks

Insurgency and unrest stemming from local dissatisfaction hold the potential to manifest in insurgent-led actions at sea for littoral countries. Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines illustrate the dangers of local dissatisfaction and instability leading to armed attacks and extremist actions finding their way into the littoral landscape. Off Cabo Delgado, the insurgency already includes attacks on harbours, small island communities, and risk perceptions culminating in the shutdown of coastal energy infrastructure developments. In a similar fashion, insurgent-styled events in Sri Lanka and the Niger Delta also slowly encroached on the surrounding sea with systematic armed attacks by militants on maritime infrastructure and shipping. In both cases, the authorities had to engage in huge capital and resource outlays to contain the maritime threat. In Cabo Delgado, bringing about a maritime response by cooperating with international partners, deploying assets to maintain the rule of law at sea and help the Mozambique Navy to police the waters off Cabo Delgado are now imperative. Mozambique must prevent an offshore expansion of the insurgency and at all costs mitigate perceptions of a threatened maritime landscape in the southwestern Indian Ocean and disruption of trade, the rising energy industry, and general maritime stability in the SADC region.

Suggested reading: Fish, T. Sri Lanka learns to counter Sea Tigers' swarm tactics. *Jane's Navy International*. March 2009. Available: [Sri Lanka learns to counter Sea Tigers' swarm tactics \(readkong.com\)](http://readkong.com)

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