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## **The Nexus of Piracy in the Indian Ocean and Terror Threats: The Need for an Enhanced Security Structure in the East African Community**

By

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*This article examines the prospect for the establishment and enhancement of a security structure in the East African Community (EAC). It is meant to respond to the emerging maritime and terror threat nexus. Terror and piracy have impacted the different states in the East African region in the recent past these threats were examined Through the lens of collective security theory using interviews with key stakeholders the EAC have been a member of the East African Standby Force (EASF) and the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) for peace and security, new dimensions in the EAC have emerged presenting new threats to the bloc. the nexus of maritime piracy and terrorism calls for the EAC to formulate a security structure to deal with the emerging security threat especially when the Gulf of Aden is seen as having influence in the Indian Ocean with terrorism of Al-Shabaab [and the Islamic State](#) in Somalia. The challenges of political rivalry must be tackled to share the benefits of having an EAC security structure.*

*Key Words: Maritime piracy, Terror, security structure, counter terrorism, threats*

### **Introduction**

Latest developments in the East African region have indicated increasing regional cooperation between states observed with new states of; South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia being admitted into the regional East African Community (EAC) from the original three of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and then Rwanda and Burundi. the increased shared interests of the states in the region including the protection from both traditional and non-traditional security threats or traditional and human security threats. This further implies that the EAC states are seeking to strengthen their cooperation which could lead to a stronger security structure.

Despite the collapse of the original EAC in 1977 and the current suspicion and uncertainty among the states in surrendering part of their sovereignty to the EAC body, the benefits to be gained in economic, social, security matters through mutual cooperation of the EAC and the emergence of multinational institutions like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have afforded members numerous opportunities and incentives for cooperation. The manifest and lateral political anxieties like the ones between Somalia and Ethiopia, or between DRC and Rwanda and fights for

influence and supremacy will prospectively inhibit the EAC from forming a broad all-embracing security regime but the foundation has already been laid.

The EAC has laid a foundation on tackling external security threats that impacts each state from Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania on the Indian Ocean coast to DRC on the Atlantic Ocean coast, with time it is hoped that the EAC will create an operationist regime that will deal with the nexus of terrorism and piracy.

This article examines the prospect for the establishment and enhancement of a security structure in the EAC that is meant to respond to the maritime and terror threats that have impacted the different states in the East African region in the recent past (Kaniki, 2022). While the nexus of piracy and terrorism has not been considered a serious security threat for some EAC states, almost all EAC states have been victims of terrorism in the recent past these attacks if not responded to properly could overwhelm the regional bloc's stability and endanger its economic advancement as anticipated in the treaty of the EAC. This threat can exacerbate the vulnerabilities that are already seen happening in DRC, the unrest in Kenya, the presence of negative elements in Somalia, the economic stress in EAC member states and the ever-present political tension during election times.

Though the EAC countries have been members of the East African Standby Force (EASF) (Desmidt & Hauck, 2017) and the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) (Nelleke van de Walle, 2022) for peace and security, new dimensions in the EAC have emerged presenting new threats to the bloc. (Halkano, 2023). The formation and utilization of the EAC mechanism to tackle of the emerging nexus of maritime piracy and terrorism requires that states recognize the threat as severe and therefore commit to a united effort. This goal faces several problems, however as domestic concern about regional balance of power, permissible jurisdiction, mistrust among and within states and societal threats like poverty, inequality, migration and political unrest. (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 2016) are common in several east African states and could be prevented with a unified response.

Compared to other regions in the contemporary international system, the EAC has been exposed to serious civil conflict, acts of terrorism, intra-ethnic community fighting, and transboundary organized crime which are referred to in the current framework on cooperation in interstate security of the EAC as stipulated in the sectoral council on interstate security in the peace and security strategy.

### **The piracy-terrorism nexus.**

the maritime piracy threat is growing and appears to be increasingly connected to terrorism groups (Reagan, 2019). For example, the Yemeni Houthis are ideologically distinct from the Somali Al-Shabaab the two groups appear to have developed a lucrative trade of money and guns (Milliken, 2024; Lillis, Atwood and Bertrand, 2024). [And the Islamic State's Somali franchise also maintains its own links with Somali pirates and Yemeni arms dealers \(Kriel & Dugan, 2017; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022\).](#) These alliances present a distinct threat of extremist groups from different geographical regions like the Gulf of Aden and the Horn of Africa that have the ability to combine and form regional security threats. Different authors think that conceptual problems can limit the way this nexus is dealt with or the way maritime piracy and terrorism are perceived (Nelson, 2012).

The differences notwithstanding, piracy and terrorism in the contemporary times both feature modern technology and planned operations (Bulkeley, 2003). The both also target a wide range of people with the primary victims being innocent civilians from innocent civilians but there is a problem of prosecuting pirates and terrorists as they are often viewed as being between civilians and military combatants (Kontorovich, 2010).

### **Causes of maritime piracy and terrorism**

Comparable to other regions in the contemporary international system, the EAC has been exposed to serious civil conflict, acts of terrorism, intra-ethnic community fighting, and transboundary organized crime (4 Sub-Saharan Africa, 2023) which are referred to in the current framework on cooperation in interstate security of EAC as stipulated in the sectoral council on interstate security in the peace and security strategy.

Contemporary piracy and terrorism threats have their roots in multidimensional issues including economic hopelessness (Gilmer and Dewey, 2024), youth in particular have been hit hard by poverty, unemployment and inflation which, when they see the financial benefits possible from stealing consignment, kidnap for ransom and illicit trade, can push some of them towards maritime piracy (Arnold, 2024). Economic denial and alienation, weak governance (Shortland and Varese, 2016; Bueger, 2015), and geographical vulnerabilities (Zhang et al. 2024; McNeill, 2023) contribute to these problems for example weak governance sometimes can lead to widespread insecurity and ineffective law enforcement which pirates and terrorists exploit with little detection. In other instances, weak governance cause piracy such as corruption (Percy & Shortland, 2013; Bekir, 2017), stalls the formal economy and creates shadow economies (Choi & Thum, 2005; Kim, Lahiri & Dey, 2018) such challenges combined with deficient maritime security structure in regions characterized by political instability have given room for maritime piracy and terrorism.

Some of the unique roots to terrorism include; ethnicity, nationalism, secular ideology and extreme psychological issues (Azar, 2003). It is important to state, however that different factors are often interlinked. Where there is observed political injustices about occupation, there may be poverty, religious influence and military oppression and sometimes these can be drivers into terrorism (Sageman, 2017). The victims who join terrorism often try to respond by inflicting harm on even the innocent just to send a message and attract both attention and recognition (Gupta, 2020). Ideological causes are in fact the beliefs and values on which terrorism is built using terrorism as the method or approach. These ideologies can be Social and economic and political (Azar, 2003). While these ideologies might determine the motive of a person's attack, it is the method terrorism that decides on how and what to target. This is where the intersection of terrorism can meet maritime piracy as terrorism can push people to target civilians including those on the ships (Azar, 2003).

Terrorism and insecurity can provide pirates with a vacuum in which to carry out their operations (Bilgin, 2019). This can also be facilitated by proximity to international trade routes, low levels of maritime surveillance, and isolated and inaccessible areas. Once these factors are concentrated around narrow shipping lanes, pirates and terrorists can further their activities (Arnold, 2024). Economics of cost efficiency which leads shipping companies to prefer small crews can also

motivate maritime pirates to as they believe they can easily overpower the crew and secure hostages for ransom (Hendel, 2018; Gawliczek & Nowakowska-Krystman, 2016).

### **Effects of piracy and terrorism in the East African community**

It is observed that terror often start in alienated populations (Ungah, 2023) and can divide people, countering terror can improve cooperation among states which is fortunate since piracy and terror threats cannot be dealt with by a single state (Bulkeley, 2003). The cost of failing to deal with maritime piracy in the Indian Ocean and the terror in the interior of the region can be huge from losing access to key imports to communication blackout and population displacement furthermore the potential for development in the region could be compromised as political alienation pushes into terror and maritime piracy.

The Gulf of Aden, the narrow passage through the Suez Canal connecting Mediterranean Sea, and the Indian Ocean, key shipping lane that links Asia to Africa, Europe, Australia and the Americas. The attacks by the Houthis (14 vessels since November 2023 to April 2024) and the hijacking in the western Indian Ocean (Somali pirates hijacked 18 ships) have disrupted the shipping lanes which are key to the passage of approximately 20,000 ships every year (Vrey & Blaine, 2024).

These disrupted shipping lanes can also be very detrimental to food security in the EAC region considering the number of IDPs and refugees who are in almost every EAC state. Food aid to all these people is transported through the red sea. In the same way oil products and almost all the imports into the EAC go through the Indian ocean. Any disruption in food can easily cause economic uncertainty which can lead to violence (Vrey & Blaine, 2024) similarly such as oil and imports into EAC go through the Indian ocean.

With the growth of EAC the disruption of communication cables on which economic activities depend can lead to economic distress and the extended disruption of the internet like that which happened in May 13-14 in the EAC region (BBC, 2024) while this event lasted only for two days it demonstrates the region's vulnerabilities to types of attacks, a more sustained outrage could lead to economic hardship as businesses are severely disrupted which in turn could lead to political unrest and violence.

Finally the fear of terror and piracy exacts a huge human capital cost to the region as they push people to migrate, risking death on the seas to flee instability at home this is particularly true among the youth who already accounted for 68% of the total population among six original states (Christophe, 2022) before Somalia, South Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo joined the community. The regional efforts to tackle the threats posed by piracy and terror which date back to before 1998 twin bombings of the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salam (Anthony, 2023) and to challenges to the security must start on the strong regional formulation of the security structure to deal with these emerging security threat.

### **The establishment and enhancement of a security structure in the East African Community (EAC)**

The EAC region's vulnerability in relation to terrorism, piracy arms, drugs, human trafficking can be easily seen by what is currently happening in the Gulf of Aden through Somali waters and then get extended to the whole of the EAC where terrorism has been experienced (Van de Bunt & Zaitch, 2014). Its key to understand coastline or maritime borders when dealing with the crime-terror nexus that has attracted minimal attention despite being a serious site for terrorist activities (Ginga, 2021). Almost every state of the EAC has been hit with terrorism activities. The DRC has tested the threat of the ISIS-DRC sometimes referred to as Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), and locally known as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which has killed over 4000 people (National Counterterrorism Center, 2022). Out of such extensive penetration of terrorism from the coast on the East African coast to the West African coast in DRC, the need for a structure is long overdue. The states in the South African Development Community (SADC) saw the need and formulated the Interstate Defense and Security Committee (ISDC) to see how to deal with piracy using the regional body guidelines (Dua, 2019; Borges Coelho, 2013).

EAC security structure against the merging threat of the nexus of maritime piracy needs the structure for information gathering and this should be a component of the strategy for the established security structure. Information on the maritime pirates connecting with Al-Shabaab is something that must worry the states of EAC. There are reported assertions that Al-Shabaab in Sanaag region of Somalia have links with pirates with exchange of protection and a payment of 30 percent of the ransom collections. It is further reported that local security armed forces have observed pirates are using modern weaponry that is suspected to be sourced from Al-Shabaab through its complex network (Milliken, 2024). [Beyond Al-Shabaab, the Islamic State's franchise in Somalia, which is largely based in the northern Puntland region, is also known to maintain ties to both Somali pirates and Yemeni arms dealers \(Kriel & Dugan, 2017; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022\). This further raises the overall threat dynamic, as the Islamic State in Somalia could utilize either of these connections to also conduct maritime attacks.](#)

It is out of such information that the EAC states can build a structure with an element of maritime piracy and terror counter intelligence driven like the one established by SADC. This can be supported by all states through funding but run from the coastal locations from where SADC stops. Locations can be strategically created along the coast from Tanzania to Somalia. While the EAC has not established an EAC security structure to deal with the threat of maritime piracy and terrorism some states in the EAC like Kenya and DRC have maritime intelligence hubs in support of efforts run by the SADC strategy of fighting piracy (Hosken, 2012; João Paulo Borges Coelho (2013).

Another component of the security structure strategy could be military deterrence to achieve this, states train a force to patrol the part from Tanzania to Somalia, this could be done in coordination with SADC since Tanzania is already a part of the SADC structure that intended to fight maritime piracy. In Southeast Asia there is another lesson where the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) laid a foundation for regional naval cooperation. EAC has already created the EACRF which can be expanded to have a naval component to deal with this emerging threat in the Indian ocean and within the EAC on land. In the SADC case, a ship from South Africa is permanently stationed on the coast of Pemba, Tanzania, and aircraft for surveillance (Hosken, 2012).

Given the nexus of piracy and terrorism, these proposed counter piracy efforts could smoothly transition into counterterrorism collaboration and assistance with reservations from some states which would guarantee that partnership partnerships, advanced surveillance intelligence technology and competencies can easily be acquired as compared to when one single state is seeking such technology. The same can be useful in bringing together SADC and EAC to deal with maritime piracy and terrorism (Africa Defense forum, 2024) given that Mozambique has suffered terrorism (Cardoso, 2021). As information is shared between states in the different regional security arrangements like SAD, there is the likelihood that intelligence on the nexus of maritime piracy and terrorism threat will be shared.

A foundation of the EAC security structure will have to be a Mechanism to secure harbors and ports against piracy. Once this is in place ports protection will likely become easier and more effective limiting opportunities for infiltration by sea. Consequently, the security structure must also address security at international airports of east African states and strengthen counterterrorism efforts targeting non-maritime routes together these efforts should choke the financial flow from maritime piracy on sea and land.

### **Are there challenges?**

The collective security theory has shown that maritime piracy and terrorism are non-traditional security threats which may not be dealt with using traditional methods that have been used in international relations (Bennett Jr, 2009). Like what Bolaji (2010) has stated on collective security and good governance, collective security is called in an environment where different states suffer from small and weak structures like those experienced in the EAC. If such systems have struggle to tackle terrorism alone, they will have harder time in dealing with dual threat of maritime piracy and terrorism. There must be a mechanism of merging good governance and collective security in the EAC because of the challenges of the two. This is in addition to the challenges of political rivalries, political hegemonic interests (Mwaura, 2013) in the region, poverty (Maingi, 2021) and economic stresses which can make it harder to fund patrolling and supporting a strong naval force.

### **Recommendations**

To deal with the emerging nexus of maritime piracy and terrorism in the EAC, the states in the community must act first in information gathering, surveillance and intelligence gathering to have data which will necessitate the formation of a strategy for a force meant to deal with the problem. The EAC should start partnerships in the fight against maritime piracy and terrorism, strengthen the EACRF and start working on independent funding of their EAC policy actions also ensuring every state passes laws on money laundering, piracy and terrorism not for domestic political gains but regional benefits.

### **Conclusion**

While there is information on the emerging nexus on maritime piracy and terrorism in the EAC little has been done create a robust EAC structure to deal with it, There is the surge in calls for states in the EAC to improve cooperation but the threats current EAC faces can challenge the existing structure. If the nexus of piracy is left to merge with the terrorism which has expanded

across east African community, the gains from economic cooperation will be lost and a cycle of violence will ensue.

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