



# The Nature and Utility of Maritime Diplomacy to African Littoral and Island States

Lisa Otto, SARChI Chair: African Diplomacy and Foreign Policy

[lisao@uj.ac.za](mailto:lisao@uj.ac.za)



UNIVERSITY  
OF  
JOHANNESBURG

# Introduction

- Maritime issues gaining more prominence on international agenda – acts as a strategic theatre for cooperation and conflict – maritime diplomacy is thus an increasingly important tool for states
- Maritime diplomacy = “the behaviour of a nation in pursuit of its maritime interests, usually by combining and/or applying the instruments of state power” (van Nieuwkerk and Manganyi, 2019)
- Three types: cooperative, persuasive, and coercive maritime diplomacy (Otto, 2022)



# Types of maritime diplomacy

1

## Cooperative

Involves collaborative efforts between states to address shared challenges or to advance mutual interests.

E.g.: joint naval exercises, joint efforts on IUU fishing / piracy

Effective for building trust and fostering regional stability, reduces the likelihood of conflict

2

## Persuasive

More subtle and involves the use of naval forces and maritime activities to influence states, incl. use of soft power

E.g.: diplomatic monologue / dialogue, port visits, int'l fora

Used when cooperation not immediately possible and persuasion could result in momentum towards a goal, also useful for enhancing standing, attracting investing, and building alliances

3

## Coercive

Use or threat of naval force to achieve a diplomatic objective, intended to compel compliance or deter aggressive behaviour

E.g.: blockades, maritime sanctions

Used where diplomacy has failed or state wants to assert dominance, useful for achieving short-term goals but carries risk



# Maritime Diplomacy by African States

Yaoundé Code of Conduct 2013 – serves as a maritime security protocol, enabled the est of maritime coordination centres, facilitated legal reform

Partnering with EU to address IUU fishing – joint monitoring, surveillance operations, capacity building exercises

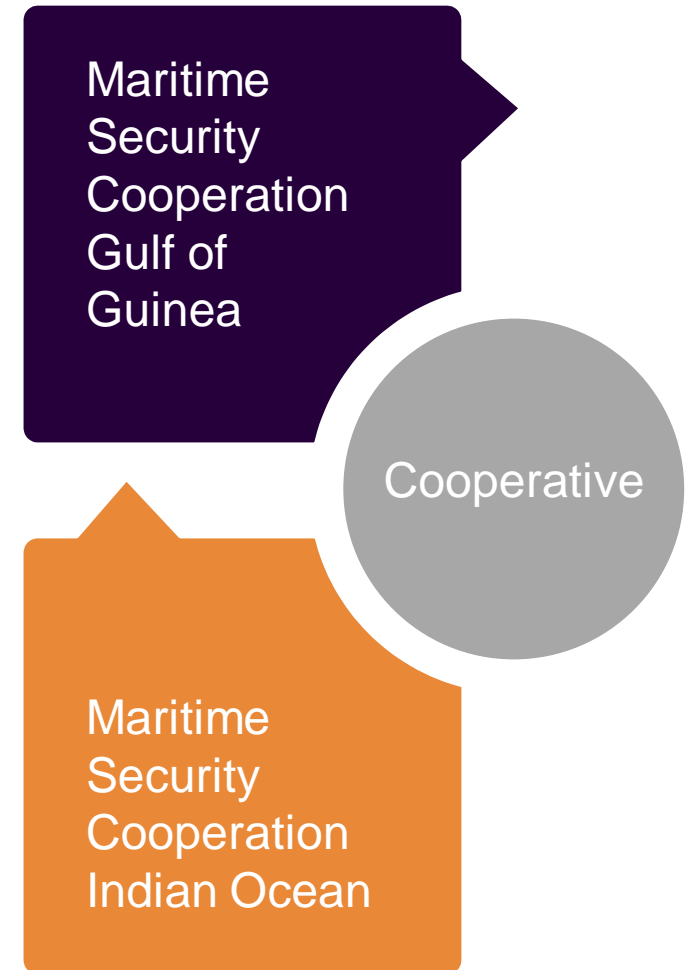
Trilateral pact on IUU fishing funded by EU – Benin, Ghana, Togo

Seychelles took a cooperative approach to address piracy in the 2000s

- facilitated information sharing, coordinated joint naval operations

Mauritius and Seychelles – joint patrols and surveillance to enforce fishing regulations, protect marine resources

WIO states cooperation with larger regional powers – India as key eg



# Maritime Diplomacy by African States

IBSAMAR – joint naval exercises

SADC – cooperation with Tanzania & Mozambique / Operation Copper

IORA – using chairship (2017-2019) to prioritise maritime safety and security, improve disaster risk management responses, and enhance fisheries management

Participation in Indian Ocean Naval Symposium

Used geostrategic location to cast itself as a sustainable maritime hub

Hosts bases in return for “rent” – US (\$63m p/a), China (\$20m p/a), France (\$30m p/a), Saudi Arabia, Spain, Italy, Japan etc

Missions perform various roles, expands influence and power projection, form of deterrence

SA Naval  
Diplomacy  
in Southern  
Africa

Persuasive

Djibouti as a  
Hub for Naval  
Bases



# Maritime Diplomacy by African States

In context of large-scale discoveries of gas and tensions with Turkey - some competing maritime claims

Medusa - joint naval exercises with Greece and Cyprus intended to send a message to Turkey over its aggressive stance

Libya unilaterally claimed the Gulf of Sidra as part of its territory, warning against crossing the “line of death” - engaged in aggressive posturing to enforce this claim

Led to clashes with US forces conducting freedom of navigation operations – Gulf of Sidra incident in 1981

Egypt's  
Gunboat  
Diplomacy in  
the  
Mediterranean

Coercive

Gaddafi's  
Line of Death  
in the Gulf of  
Sidra



# Comparing the Use of Different Maritime Diplomatic Strategies

- Effectiveness and strategic impact
  - **Cooperative maritime diplomacy** can create a stable environment conducive for economic growth and investment while also leading to improved management of marine resources
  - **Persuasive maritime diplomacy** is effective to showcase naval abilities and in building long-term relationships to promote peace and stability, and can serve as a platform for asserting maritime interests and generating support for those interests
  - **Coercive maritime diplomacy** can achieve immediate tactical objectives but its strategic impact is limited by the risk of escalation and the challenge of maintaining long-term stability, and could further exacerbate underlying tensions
- Risks and challenges
  - **Cooperative maritime diplomacy** requires high levels of trust and coordination, which can be difficult to achieve, while rivalries can impact levels of commitment, while multilateral decision-making can be slow
  - **Persuasion** may be difficult for smaller / poorer states and requires smart, targeted action, but may be slow to yield results
  - **Coercive maritime diplomacy** is inherently risky given the potential for escalation
- Long-term implications
  - **Cooperative maritime diplomacy** can result in strong regional institutions capable of addressing a range of challenges
  - **Persuasive maritime diplomacy** contributes to long-term stability by enhancing soft power and int'l standing
  - Reliance on **coercive measures** can detract from cooperative efforts and can lead to cycles of instability / conflict



# Policy Recommendations

1

## A Balanced Approach

---

Integrate different types of diplomacy, while making cooperative efforts a cornerstone of security strategies, while persuasion and coercion are used to address specific challenges

2

## Regional Cooperation

---

Strengthen existing cooperative frameworks to enhance collaboration on maritime issues  
Support this via increased resource allocation and capacity building

3

## Soft Power

---

Invest in soft power initiatives to build influence and secure non-military benefits, notably economic benefits

4

## Coercion

---

Coercive maritime diplomacy should be used sparingly, and should be designed to avoid escalation and ensure synergy with broader diplomatic efforts

5

## Development Goals

---

Integrate maritime diplomacy with development strategies, esp in environmental protection, sustainable development, and economic growth objectives

