

Book Review: Maritime security in East and West Africa: A tale of two regions

Dirk Siebels

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This elegantly written, frank and concise book confronts two complex and challenging maritime security situations head-on. Siebels has a refreshing perspective, saying things others have not or will not say, for whatever reason. A common trait of less experienced counter-piracy pundits is to attempt to force a square peg into a round hole by slightly refining the tactics for fighting pirates off the coast of Somalia, and then attempting to apply them in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) and failing miserably; they have failed to appreciate the contrasting complexities. Admittedly, the act of boarding a ship underway on both sides of the African continent is common, but that is where the similarities stop. Siebels defines the differences and challenges, dismissing any inclination to look at them as similar problems. As Douglas Guilfoyle has wisely commented “piracy is a single label for a diverse phenomenon which is highly contingent on local conditions.”

Siebels is as much a practitioner as he is an academic, especially with regards to the GoG. As a member of the German Naval Reserve, he has taken part in several naval exercises in the waters off the west coast of Africa, allowing him to experience the situation in its raw state. He is also a research analyst for the maritime security information provider, Risk Intelligence, based in Denmark, who specialise in the GoG region. Consequently, Siebels has approached this subject from a practitioner/academic hybrid perspective, leveraging his personal in-country and maritime experiences along with extensive research. He is therefore well positioned to question the Westphalian international relations standpoint based on Euro-centric understanding of the African continent that some less adventurous commentators revert to.

The basis of the book is the PhD thesis Siebels comprehensively researched and meticulously referenced. The book is laid out in seven succinct chapters, each one focusing on a fundamental contributory factor he has experienced in Africa and that together lead to failing maritime security. This is the ideal book for newcomers to the region, it avoids much of the prevarication and politics, getting straight to the point. The emphasis of the book is on the GoG, as an uncontained or unresolved situation, whereas piracy off the coast of East Africa is currently managed; but some comparisons are useful.

The introduction provides the essential background for both regions and defines the reasoning why the coastal states prioritise land security over maritime security. Siebels also introduces a number of recurring themes throughout the book that manifest a range of obstacles to finding solutions, including that maritime security is not perceived, by Sub-Saharan governments, to significantly affect the domestic population and therefore is not politically important; and that most African nations interpret the phrase “maritime security” to mean naval power, which African countries don’t possess and therefore they largely discount it as being unattainable. However, African nations on both the East and West coasts do see the enormous potential of sustainable blue economies¹ but, possibly through a lack of appreciation, fail to see the establishment of a secure maritime domain, as a critical step to fulfilling this aspiration.

¹ Blue economy is a term in economics relating to the exploitation and preservation of the marine environment.

Siebels also proposes that the creation of partnerships between governments, domestic security agencies and private providers could be a possible way forward in the GoG.

Despite the shipping industry being the principle victim of piracy and armed robbery at sea, and therefore the primary driver for an international naval presence in the GoG, Siebels laments, from personal experience I assume, that most naval officers fail to appreciate the structure, efficacy or working practices of the merchant navy, which to all intent and purposes are their client. He also emphasises the lack of cross-border and inter-agency cooperation and collaboration, which is seriously detrimental when attempting to counter transnational criminals who ignore national borders and boundaries. The omnipresent post-colonial legacy, which African states cope with differently, remains an orientation point across both regions. None of this is revolutionary or new but is rarely appreciated as an amalgam of factors that define some very challenging obstacles to developing maritime security solutions in East and West Africa.

In the second chapter, Siebels clarifies definitions and geographical boundaries for both regions. He defines the voluminous list of institutions and agencies involved in attempting to find solutions, which prompts one to think “too many cooks spoil the broth”? When looking at some of the answers to piracy off the coast of East Africa, he observes that the international community’s creation of three international naval task forces to conduct only counter-piracy operations was the “equivalent of creating a police force that is solely responsible for bank robberies but does not investigate other crimes”, especially when considering the interconnected nature of maritime crime evident in the region.

Revisiting the conflict of interests between coastal States and the shipping industry, Siebels accepts the anxieties of ship owners and their crews visiting the GoG, where piracy/armed robbery at sea and the prospect of kidnapping is understandably their primary concern. However, coastal communities see Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing by foreign fishermen as their overriding fear. Their point being, oil reserves are finite, whereas a sustainably managed fishing stock are self-replenishing.

Siebels examines the much debated but undefined meaning of maritime security. He outlines how different parties use this ambiguity to their own advantage but also suggests that it is a desired end state rather than a rigid regime. To this end, he provides two very helpful diagrams which dissect maritime security, from negative and positive perspectives, offering six prisms from which the positive attributes can be assessed using economic and environmental viewpoints. He then assesses each of these six areas, outlining examples and emphasising the economic and environmental advantages to justify investment rather than looking upon establishing maritime security purely as a cost.

The third chapter examines the “lubricants for development”; Siebels describes many of the challenges that exist in Africa generally, which stand in the way of development of maritime security and thereby the development of a mutually beneficial blue economy. In January 2014, the African Union launched the “2050 Africa’s Integrated Maritime (2050 AIM) Strategy” demonstrating the Union’s desire to maximize the potential of the continent’s maritime assets. Indeed, the reviewer’s own research reveals that 37% of sub-Saharan coastal States have a larger maritime Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)² surface area than they do within their national land borders, offering enormous economic potential. However, the omnipresent colonial hangover and the physical challenges of the ocean engenders a cultural antipathy for the maritime domain that is very difficult to overcome.

² The Exclusive Economic Zone is an area of territorial and high seas that extend up to 200 nautical miles from the low water mark, from which the “coastal state has sovereign rights for the purposes of exploring and exploiting, conserving and managing the natural resources whether living or non-living ..and of the seabed and its subsoil ... for the economic exploitation”

Chapter 4 is dedicated to a victimless crime, the sorry state of IUU fishing and the devastating impact it has on the coastal states of sub-Saharan Africa. Coastal State fishing is principally artisanal in nature, creating thousands of jobs and providing the primary source of protein for a significant proportion of many countries' population. However, it is the industrial level of fishing conducted by foreign nations, utilising large ocean-going trawlers and factory ships, landing their catches in Europe, North America and Asia who are the main protagonists of this multi-billion-dollar crime. As Siebels has ably demonstrated in previous chapters, the coastal States of both East and West Africa lack the capability to patrol their extensive EEZs, resulting in unmonitored waters rich in seafood. Consequently, the waters are plundered by alien fishing vessels, destroying African livelihoods, and decimating the regional fish stocks to potentially irretrievable levels. There is a solution; IUU fishing should be addressed as a transnational crime, and the ports where the catches of IUU fishing are landed should take the requisite action. But the reality is, that requires significant political will in countries detached from the fishing grounds where the continuance of a fishing industry has greater short-term domestic political value than thousands African livelihoods on the other side of the world.

The fifth chapter looks at some of the inherent challenges of "growing together". Siebels describes how there are no two nations, on either side of the African continent, that face the same security problems, either on land or at sea. He observes that ratifying multilateral treaties not the same as implementing them and that Africa generally suffers from statements made by international organisations which are often driven by a desire to satisfy the organisation's own political ambitions rather than offer realistic solutions for Africa. The security and defence priorities of African nations are brought into sharp focus by an illuminating table which compares 15 nations from East and West Africa and the pitifully small percentage of their naval personnel as part of their respective armed forces total, averaging out at just 5.8%, which amplifies their defence priorities and is a reality check. Part of this dramatic imbalance could be historical; colonial powers characteristically used native soldiers under colonial leadership to maintain domestic security, whilst managing the sea areas and ports with their own navies, for economic control reasons. And whilst various Western nations have gifted "hand-me-down" vessels, many of the ageing craft require difficult to source or obsolete spares resulting in a serviceability burden. This apparent "generous gifting" has also conveniently allowed the presenting nations to avoid expensive vessel disposal costs. Colonial roots penetrated deeply in many African countries. The methodology employed to give nations their independence in the 1950s and 1960s was often more disruptive uprooting, tearing out key elements of institutions, rather than a thoughtful transition process to help launch the new nation and the results remain evident today.

In chapter six, Siebels draws some direct comparisons between the two regions, focusing initially on the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) and the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (YCoC) that have provided both regions with a similar path to maritime security in structure but are different in content. The DCoC was agreed quickly in January 2009, when Somali piracy seemed almost out of control and therefore only relates to counter piracy, whereas the YCoC (June 2013) took much longer to agree and is much broader in the aspects it covers. He also makes the point that "there is no 'one size fits all' type of maritime strategy" and acknowledges the challenges presented by widespread corruption which "dog the development" and the inter-agency fighting that slows progress. Even though maritime security issues are linked to land-based problems, security at sea is still not a primary concern for governments. Siebels opines that the resistance to confronting maritime security may require a partial culture change by both regional countries and the contributing nations to meet at a mutually beneficial point in order to develop a common way forward.

The concluding chapter bemoans the lack of transparency in both regions but points out that the prevailing ambiguity works to some organisation's benefit and undermines the prevention of crimes and

corruption. Siebels points out that corruption in Africa doesn't necessarily take place in a vacuum but can be linked to global actors, albeit in complex ways, and quotes a Nigerian Customs official who commented that smuggling is "the mother of many crimes." (Nigeria is a global node for narcotics trafficking). As a concluding remark on colonial legacies he quotes Lord Salisbury, British Prime Minister between 1885 and 1902: "We have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew exactly where the mountains and rivers and lakes were", which is indicative of the way colonies were managed by the distant powers. On a positive final note, Siebels highlights the great potential of the blue economy to both regions and how beneficial it could be if correctly and sustainably managed. But he also reinforces that for the plan to work it must primarily satisfy domestic needs.

This is an excellent untarnished view of two complex and contrasting parts of the same continent. Whilst both regions suffer from similar types of maritime security challenges, the local conditions are hugely different, requiring different solutions. This book is candid and crisp, dealing with many of the sensitive issues that exist in both regions. Siebels has been objective, dispassionate, and pragmatic, taking advantage of his personal experiences and observations. He raises some oft overlooked or conveniently ignored challenges that continue to persist in Africa, reminding the reader that history is written by the victors who, in the case of African colonial history, were the colonists. The book also demonstrates that when looking at a complex problem, particularly from afar, it requires a good understanding of the unrefined truth about a region's history, its people, their culture and being cognisant of misleading but prevailing perceptions. Throughout the book Siebels suggests the use of private companies to assist with the implementation of maritime security, which may overcome the deep-rooted, tarnished relationships with former colonial powers and avoid the imposition of donor countries' concepts to fulfil domestic political aspirations. It is also important to accept that there is no quick fix to long standing problems and in order for the solutions to be credible and workable they must have an organic origin.

About Peter Cook

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