

# IS SOUTH AFRICA A MARITIME NATION?

**“From what base do we look at the world?”  
Ngugi wa Thiong’o**

Between 7 and 11 April 2024, a group of researchers from the Ocean Regions Programme (ORP) in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria, went on an experiential research trip to Cape Town. The visit included a trip to Maersk (shipping and logistics), Koeberg Nuclear Power Station, the South African Navy, the Institute for Maritime Technology (IMT), iThemba Labs, and the Arne Soderland Museum. The aim of the visit was to gain a terraqueous snapshot of the maritime environment, that is, to gain a better understanding of the link between the ocean and the land. Alfred Mahan described countries as having either a “maritimity” or “continentality” perspective. Despite the strong connection to the oceans displayed by the places we visited, South Africans nevertheless tend towards “continentality,” emphasising terrestrial considerations over maritime dimensions. This visit prompted critical introspection, fuelling inquiries into whether South Africa's identity aligns more with that of a maritime nation or a continental one.

## Is South Africa a maritime nation?

What is it that makes a nation a “maritime country?” According to the dictionary definition, a maritime country is one that has a coastline, irrespective of length. In this regard, South Africa, with its over 3000km coastline, is by definition a maritime country and more so when taking into consideration its jurisdiction over the Prince Edward Islands (including Marion Island) in the Southern Ocean. Other interpretations suggest that a maritime country is one that is heavily reliant on the maritime environment for its trade. With South Africa conducting between 80 and 90 per cent of its trade via sea, it would once again qualify as a maritime country. However, in a piece written for The Diplomat, Wey suggests that it is not only geography but also whether the people of a country see themselves as a maritime nation that determines this ‘maritimity’.



It is not immediately clear that South Africans see themselves as maritime people. In this sense, it might be argued that South Africa is a *de facto* maritime country, but not necessarily a maritime nation since it seems to lack a maritime identity in the sense of the sea strongly influencing the way of life of people. On that note, a further characteristic of a maritime identity is maritime consciousness - the “inherent knowledge a people possess and demonstrate of a history that is rooted in the sea, and of a future that is inextricably linked with it”. When considering people’s cultural connection with the sea one must look at history and what role the oceans have played for people. South Africa’s interaction with the ocean has historical roots. For instance, the Xhosa people traditionally maintained profound ties with the sea, evident in their ancestral beliefs portraying the ocean as a place of healing. However, periods of colonialism and apartheid led to the dispossession of many black South Africans from both prime land and coastal areas. Even in contemporary times, initiatives like Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), such as those in Tsitsikamma, have restricted access for many black South Africans due to financial barriers.

Other interactions with the sea can be traced to South Africa’s establishment of the South African Naval Service (SANS) in 1922, which was re-organised as the South African Naval Forces (SANF) during the Second World War and renamed the South African Navy (SAN) in 1951. Apart from the joint naval exercises carried out by the SAN and the Royal Navy during these periods, Simon’s Town was of pivotal importance during the Second World War, since it hosted many Allied warships. Before the end of apartheid, the SAN controlled the seas around Southern Africa and allowed the South African Army to project its power into areas such as Southwest Africa and Angola. In post-apartheid South Africa, the SAN has been marked by the participation of joint exercises with other navies and cooperation in apprehending illegal fishing vessels. The examples, while not exhaustive, highlight South Africa’s historical connections with the ocean. However, as noted earlier, South Africa largely lacks a comprehensive awareness of its maritime potential.





## What contributes to this perspective?

There are various challenges to South Africa's development as a maritime nation. On the one hand, there is the lack of a maritime identity or maritime consciousness, as discussed above. While there could be many reasons for this, it must be noted that "people have a natural tendency to orient themselves to their surroundings and take affinity to what is proximate to them". Considering the fact that in South Africa it is estimated that only 30 per cent of the population lives within 60km of the coast, this geographical disparity could indeed contribute to the limited development of maritime awareness. Along with this, there are also other issues, perhaps more practical in nature, which plague the maritime environment in South Africa.

The first relates to the dire state of South African ports, frequently mentioned during our visits, where delays are often over 21 days long (take for instance Durban Pier 2). The state of South Africa's ports are linked to Transnet's lack of capacity. Currently, Transnet's container ports, situated in Durban and Cape Town, are rated in the bottom 10 of the 328 ports ranked by the World Bank. Between 23-30 November 2023, more than 61 000 containers were forced to remain at an outer anchorage due to operational challenges. Entities such as Maersk envision a role for these harbours as transshipment hubs, however, this is not currently a reality, considering that many of South Africa's ports were mainly designed to handle rail cargo and not truck-borne cargo. Furthermore, from a security perspective: the longer a ship is waiting at a port, the more susceptible it is to maritime crimes such as smuggling and trafficking.

Closely linked to this is a lack of funding for innovative research and capacity support. The restraints of funding were a concern that surfaced in many of the group's visits, but especially prominent at the Navy. In a speech in December 2023, the Chief of the SA Navy, Vice Admiral Monde Lobese already made clear that the Navy was underfunded and that the three new multi-mission inshore patrol vessels acquired under Project Biro, were hardly sufficient to fulfil South Africa's constitutional mandate to protect its vast 1.52 million square kilometre Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).



In another speech, Lobese mentioned that the current geopolitical tensions in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea have resulted in the diversion of shipping around South Africa's coastline, dramatically heightening the importance of South Africa's coastlines, with Lobese explaining that the country's largest external security threats will not come from the land but from the sea. However, the cuts in the Navy's budget and the South African Defence force more broadly means that it is severely constrained in securing its waters from threats such as terrorism and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

### **What accelerates South Africa as a maritime nation?**

Despite operational difficulties, the Durban and Cape Town ports are still the best developed in the southern tip of Africa. While alternatives like Maputo in Mozambique, or Walvis Bay in Namibia exist, they lack sufficient development to replace South Africa's ports. Amongst other things, South Africa has one of the world's biggest coal terminals in Richards Bay and the deepest and biggest natural harbour in the southern hemisphere, namely Saldanha. Expanding on South Africa's maritime advantages, it is essential to note that the country is strategically located along one of the busiest international shipping trade routes. Situated at the crossroads of major shipping lanes, South Africa serves as an ideal halfway station for vessels traveling between Europe, Asia, and the Americas. This geographic advantage enhances South Africa's appeal as a maritime hub, offering convenient access to global markets and facilitating efficient trade routes. Consequently, despite current operational challenges, South Africa's strategic location and well-developed port infrastructure position it as a key player in global maritime commerce.

While other countries actively promote themselves as maritime nations – the United Kingdom (UK), for example, has stated that “the UK is a maritime nation and our [...] maritime status, is part of who we are” and Indonesia has formulated a Global Maritime Axis doctrine - South Africa has not promoted its maritime image with the same enthusiasm as other images, such as that of being a “Rainbow Nation”. As long as this is the case, South Africa's potential to be a maritime nation remains only exactly that – potential.





## The imperative of a terraqueous perspective

Based on the analysis above, this piece suggests that currently, we look at the ocean from a terra-centric perspective. However, such a view fails to understand that what happens at sea impacts what happens on land. For example, the swells of the sea and the wind impact the ability of ships to dock at a harbour. That is, changing weather conditions, impacts trade directly. In 2021, the Cape Town Container Terminal efficiency (measured in moves per ship working hour) decreased by 28 per cent due to strong winds in the summer and high swells in the winter. In another instance, jellyfish and other marine life have caused Eskom's nuclear power station at Koeberg to trip. Being 'maritime conscious' complements terrestrial endeavours, fostering a balanced and comprehensive approach to national growth and security.

Furthermore, disruptions on land, such as strikes, can directly affect maritime operations, consequently impacting the economy. The 2022 Transnet strikes served as a pertinent example of how labour disputes in the maritime sector can reverberate across terrestrial infrastructure. Strikes could disrupt not only port operations but also rail networks and pipelines, affecting the smooth movement of goods and resources inland. The South African Association of Freight Forwarders (SAAFF) estimated that the 11-day strike resulted in South Africa losing the opportunity to transport R65.3 billion worth of goods. Embracing maritime aspects complements terrestrial endeavours, fostering a balanced and comprehensive approach to national growth and security.

Our thinking is too often characterised by dichotomies, one of which is between land and sea. However, there is a need to move away from such thinking, and perhaps to adopt alternative concepts such as "merritoire", which derives from the French words mer (sea) and territoire (territory). Such concepts point to the symbiotic relationship between land and sea that, based on our visits and deliberations during this trip, visibly exists, but fails to be communicated and reflected in the broader South African consciousness.



*This Op-ed was compiled by Daniela Marggraff, with contributions by Yu-Shan Wu and Angela Kapato within the context of the Ocean Regions Research Programme of the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria. The opinions and findings expressed in this Report are those of the author(s) and the NIHSS accepts no liability in this regard.*



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