Challenging Eurocentrism: An Afrocentric Appraisal of the Cape Sea Route

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Abstract

The Cape Sea Route is often presented in policy, academic and media discourses as an alternative to the preferred, but always troubled, Red/Mediterranean Sea Route. Deeply rooted in the history of Europe-Asia/Africa relations, this Eurocentric perspective prioritises foreign interests above those of Africa along the route. It underestimated the strategic importance of the Cape as a primary route for the immediate locations (South Africa, Southern Africa and the continent) and their relations with some other parts of the world, thereby undermining Africa's initiatives to maximise opportunities and address challenges along this and other complementary trade corridors. From an Afrocentric perspective, and with priority given to the immediate locations, this article examines the strategic importance, opportunities and challenges along the Cape Sea Route. It assesses the viability of this trade route for different parts of Africa and other continents and categorises them into primary and secondary users. The article argues that the prospect of intra-African trade is key to a reliable, consistent and sustainable Cape Sea Route strategy. Beyond trade, it is a promising African corridor for maritime investment and services, including ship-building, repairing, operations, insurance and related employment. To fully exploit such opportunities, however, the political, economic and security challenges along this and other African trade corridors must be addressed with improved institutional capacity for good governance, political stability, onshore and offshore law enforcement, socioeconomic transformation, human development, regional cooperation and global partnership.

Keywords: Cape Sea Route; Africa; South Africa; trade; maritime security; development

1. Introduction

The strategic importance, prospects and viability of the Cape Sea Route have been historically, knowingly or unknowingly and intentionally or unintentionally premised and connected to the fortunes and misfortunes of the Mediterranean/Red Sea Route in academic, media and policy debates and considerations. From the European sailing and exploration around Africa in the 15th century to the frequent rerouting around the continent in the 20th and 21st centuries, the Cape Sea Route is mostly considered an alternative to the often-troubled Red/Mediterranean Sea Route (Bendall 2010; Boucher 1974; Reader 1999; Martínez-Zarzoso 2013; Oyewole 2017, 2024a; Yap and Yang 2024). Similarly, many observers have proposed or forecasted the Northern Sea Route as a secure and shorter alternative to, or possible replacement for, the troubled Red Sea and the longer Cape Sea Route in the future (Blair 2024; Guo et al. 2022). These and related hegemonic narratives are premised on the Eurocentric notion that the Cape Sea Route primarily served foreign interests, while the African interests and perspectives are secondary, irrelevant, inconsequential or merely complementary at best (Boucher 1974; Dorning 1979; Meyer 1988).

Within the framework of prevailing global narratives on the externally driven strategic importance of the Cape Sea Route, national (primarily South African) and sub-regional (other coastal Southern African countries) perspectives have emerged on the opportunities and challenges of occasional surges in Cape Sea Route traffic (Dorning 1979; Walker 2024). According to Walker (2024a), "South Africa needs to take advantage of the Cape Sea Route's resurgence in the wake of Red Sea route instability". Accordingly, these perspectives rarely challenge the prevailing global narratives, but rather fall victim to the notion that the Cape Sea Route becomes relevant primarily because of foreign interests and as an alternative to the troubled Red Sea Route. These perspectives deny Africa and particularly the countries along this route, the motivations and initiatives to own and drive the opportunities, reliably and consistently assess the strategic importance, collectively plan and implement proactive strategies to exploit potential benefits and address the challenges along the Cape Sea Route. Amid these, however, there are some limited reflections on local and subregional importance and opportunities of the Route (Boshoff and

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Fourie 2010; Santos and Santos 2024). More importantly, Notteboom (2012) assesses the global prospects of the Cape Sea and Red Sea Routes based on the distance between major ports and shows some of their most viable scenarios.

Against this background, the current article explores an Afrocentric perspective on the national (South Africa), subregional (Southern Africa), continental, intercontinental and global dimensions of the strategic importance, opportunities and challenges of the Cape Sea Route. The article reflects on the following questions: What are the interests, opportunities and challenges along the Cape Sea Route? Whose interests, opportunities and challenges? Without prejudice to other interests, the article prioritises African interests, opportunities and challenges along the Route. Hence, it avoids narratives that reduce two major African Seas to mutually exclusive Routes in opportunities, while exploring the unique strategic importance of the often-marginalised Cape Sea Route in its own rights, in addition to its complementary values to the Red Sea. In this manner, this article seeks to reevaluate the strategic importance of the Cape Sea Route and facilitate a better understanding of its strategic opportunities and challenges for South Africa, Southern Africa, the African continent, and other parts of the world. Accordingly, this article is further divided into four sections: the evolution of prevailing perspectives on the Cape Sea Route; the Afrocentric perspective on its strategic importance; the opportunities and challenges of the Route; and concluding reflections.

2. Eurocentrism and the Evolution of the Prevailing Narratives on the Cape Sea Route

The strategic importance of the Cape Sea Route at the global level has always been tied to the search for an alternative to the preferred, however, often troubled Mediterranean/Red Sea Route. This prevailing narrative of the strategic importance of the Cape Sea Route is historically rooted in the Eurocentric worldview, which is conceived to advance the interests of Europeans. Starting from Prince Henry's pioneered expedition around West Africa and Bartolomeu Dias's first Cape expedition and Africa's round trip to Vasco da Gama's sailing through the Cape Sea Route to India, the search for an alternative route to connect Europe with Asia (Indies) and East Africa (Ethiopia) other than the Mediterranean and Red Seas was one of the primary reasons for the European Southward exploration of Africa in the 15th century (Hall 2005; Reader 1999).

The Mediterranean Sea has a long history of geopolitical tension, war, piracy and slave raid/trade. Piracy in the Mediterranean Sea has been documented since the 13th century BCE, with its prevalence fluctuating throughout history and enduring threats persisting up to the 19th century (Mark 2019; Tinniswood 2010; White 2018). Since the Battles of Alashiya (1210-1205 BCE), the first recorded naval warfare in human history, the Mediterranean Sea has been a theatre of geopolitical tension and wars among states and empires of the Egyptians, Greeks, Persians, Phoenicians, Romans, Carthaginians, Europeans, Arabs and the Ottomans across history, a trend that has endured to date (Gilbert 2008; Hall 2005; Mahan 1889; Oyewole and Duyile 2021; Russell 2021; Theotokis and Yıldız 2018; Thucydides 1928). It is, therefore, not surprising that the search for an alternative trade route to the Mediterranean Sea was one of the primary motivations for European exploration around Africa and the Cape coastline in the 15th century. Around the time of European exploration and navigation around the continent of Africa, the Mediterranean Sea was marked by geopolitical tension between Christian Europe and Muslim Arab and North Africa, following centuries of religious wars (Coffin and Stancy 2005; Reader 1999). Equally, the Barbary pirates of North Africa threatened shipping in the Mediterranean Sea between the 16th and 19th centuries (Tinniswood 2010; White 2017).

The enduring threats along the Mediterranean/Red Seas have not only reinforced the Eurocentric view of the Cape Sea as an alternative route, but also globalised this perspective in recent history. In the first half of the 20th century, the involvement of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and Italy in World War II made the Mediterranean Sea a major theatre of these deadly wars (Ball 2009; Ehlers 2015; Halpern 2012). After the World Wars, new geopolitical competition and wars emerged along the Mediterranean and Red Seas, with the Cold War and the decolonisation of Africa and Asia. These included the Arab-Israel wars, the French war in Algeria, the French and British-supported Israeli invasion of Egypt over the Suez Canal, the Libyan conflict with the West and the Greco-Turkish conflict over Cyprus, among others. All these conflicts undermined the viability of the Mediterranean/Red Sea Route and forced many ships to reroute around Africa. Amid these, the Arab-Israel conflicts between the 1950s and 1970s had the most disruptive effects on ship traffic along the Red Sea and Suez Canal, as many vessels were rerouted around the Cape (Dorning 1979; Meyer 1988). Hence, the enduring Palestinian question in Arab-Israel relations remains a source of frequent threats to shipping along the Red Sea and Suez Canal, even in 2025.

Between 2023 and 2025, the Yemen-based Houthis movement launched a campaign of terror against vessels that are connected to Israel, the USA and their allies, with attendant collateral targets in and around the Red Sea (Oyewole 2024a; Raydan and Nadimi 2025). The campaign was designed as a form of solidarity for Hamas, which is a fellow member of the so-called Iranian-linked 'axis of resistance', and the support of the Palestinians, who paid heavily for the Israeli military operations in Gaza, following the October 2023 militant attacks against Israel. This rebellious maritime campaign raised the risk and cost of shipping and disrupted the global supply chain along the Red Sea, an important trade route that connects Asia with Europe and some parts of Africa. Between December 2023 and January 2024, this crisis caused a 42 per cent decrease in shipping traffic along the Suez Canal, which accounted for 12 to 15 per cent of the total global trade in 2023 (UNCTAD 2024b). Consequently, many ships diverted their course from the Red Sea toward the Cape Sea Route and around Africa (Notteboom et al. 2024; Yap and Yang 2024). This development inspired much sensational news and debates around what was presented as a newly found or renewed strategic importance of the Cape Sea Route (Walker 2024b).

The recent development with Houthis is not the first time that the Cape Sea Route is at the centre of global sensational news with newly found strategic importance in the 21st century. Between 2007 and 2013, when Somali piracy was at its peak in and around the Red Sea, many ships chose to reroute along the Cape Sea Route (Bendall 2010; Martínez-Zarzoso 2013; Onuoha 2009). Incidents of Somali piracy rose from 141 out of 4 855 globally between 1993 and 2006, to 939 out of 3 093 globally between 2007 and 2016 (Oyewole 2017). It was estimated that merchant ships sailing through the Red Sea spent US$290 million on re-routing along the Cape Sea Route in 2012, US$6 million as hazard pay for seafarers transiting the risky areas, and US$185.7 million on piracy-related insurance in 2013 (Ocean Beyond Piracy 2014). Despite the relative decline of Somali piracy since it peaked in 2011, the threat has endured (Oyewole 2017, 2024a). These, among other factors, account for the prevailing, but Eurocentric, narratives of the strategic importance of the Cape Sea (Africa-round) Route, as an alternative to the Mediterranean/Red Sea Route in Europe-Asia trade relations. This equally explains why many observers consider the Northern Sea Route as an alternative and possible replacement for both the Red- and Cape Sea Routes (Blair 2024; Guo et al. 2022).

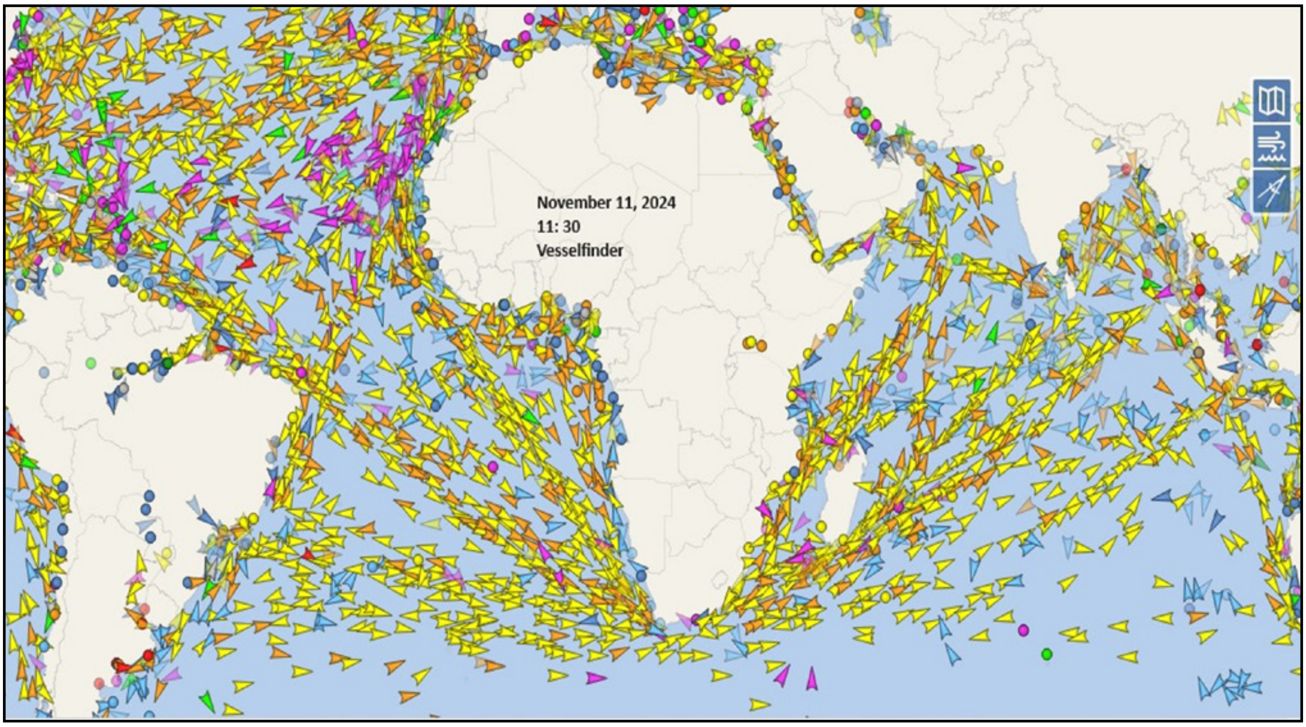
Against this background, the prevailing Eurocentric narratives of the Cape Sea Route deny, ignore, downplay and underestimate the African and other interests and utilities of the route as well as their strategic importance. This tends to present the route as unviable, worthless or less useful when European trade has safe passage in the Red Sea. Accordingly, the route is often assessed or judged for its complementary role rather than its primary role to the continent, and based on the extent of satisfaction derived by Europeans rather than Africans. As the next section shows, however, the Cape Sea Route is also strategic in its own right, as a primary and the most economically viable route for many countries in Africa and beyond, with all its attendant opportunities and challenges.

3. Afrocentric Perspective on the Cape Sea Route and its Strategic Importance

Afrocentrism is a perspective that places Africa at the centre of analysis, serving as a counter to the marginalisation of the continent in global knowledge production and the hegemonic position of Eurocentric views in understanding African affairs (Ogunnubi and Oyewole 2020). It is an intellectual perspective that prioritises location in defining what constitutes primary and secondary interests and contexts of a subject. This means the quality of location is essential in the analysis of African history, geography, politics, culture and other subjects (Adeleke 2009). In this case, the Cape Sea Route is primarily located in Africa, and the continent's interests and contexts should be prioritised in defining its strategic importance, opportunities and challenges. Moreover, Afrocentrism involves ontological engagement with the African existence in relevant contexts, epistemological understanding of how to approach it and axiological examination of various underlying interests and values (King and Swartz 2015). This perspective, therefore, allows for a better understanding of African interests, contexts and approaches to the Cape Sea Route.

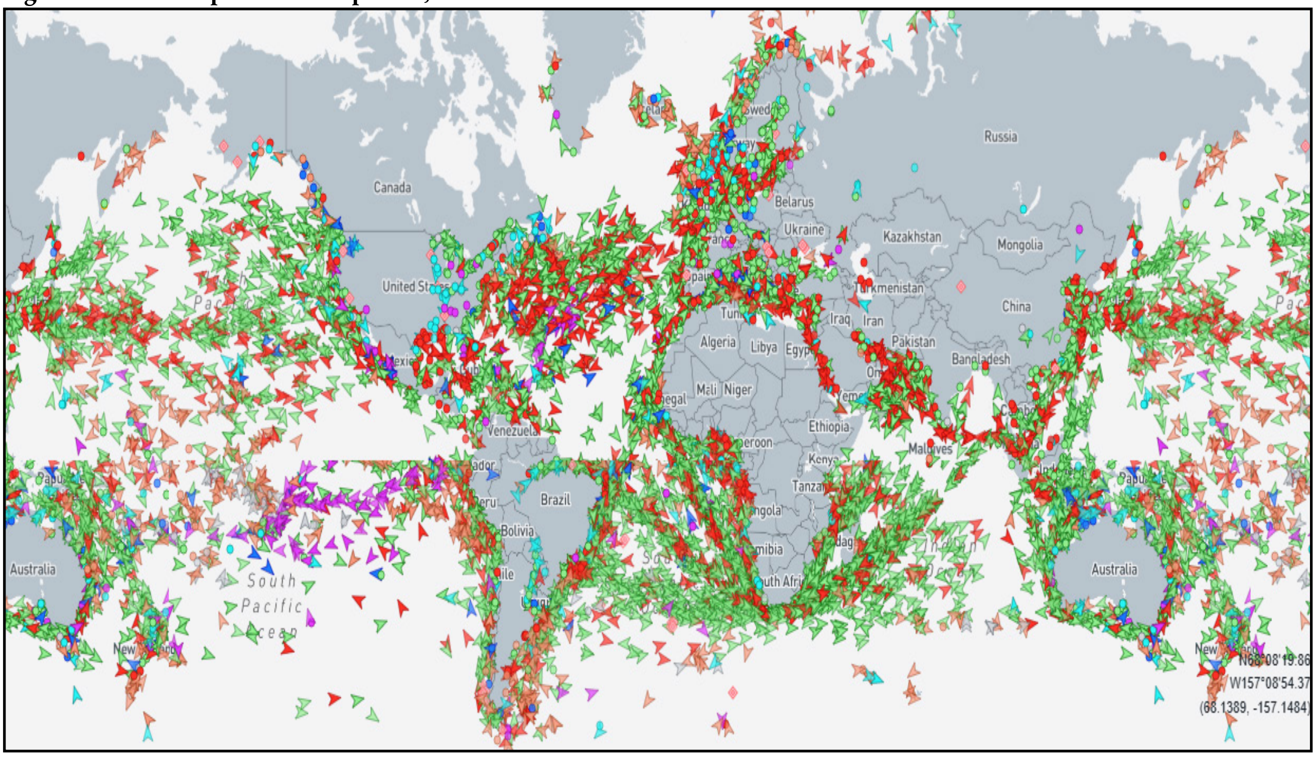
The Cape Sea Route is not an occasional route of choice as many sensational news outlets often depict it every time a crisis incident or situation occurs in the Red Sea. As Figures 1 and 2 indicate, the route does not conform to the unwanted and unworthy images that are intentionally or accidentally constructed and promoted by sensational news media. It is the primary route that connects the Atlantic and Indian Oceans around Southern Africa and a key lane to sub/regional trade. Moreover, it is a viable route for Central and Western Africa's trading with Eastern and Southern Africa. Similarly, it is a viable route for North Africa's trade with some Southern African partners, and Asia's trade with Southern and Western African partners. Besides Europe-Asia trade rerouting, the Figures show several vessels en route to the Cape from the West Coast of Latin America, and vice versa. The route is viable for Latin America's trade with South and East Africa as well as South and some parts of West Asia. It is also relevant in European and North American trade with Southern Africa. With or without crisis in the Red Sea, therefore, the Cape Sea Route holds varying degrees of strategic importance to different countries across the world, from its immediate location, that is, South Africa, Southern Africa and the continent of Africa, to major economies, such as Europe, China, India, Japan, the USA, Australia and Latin America. The stakeholders include seafarers, shipping firms, international businesses and insurance companies.

Figure 1: Ship traffic around Africa on November 11, 2024



Source: *VesselFinder's Ship and Container Tracker on November 11, 2024 (11:30 South African Time)*

Figure 2: Global ship traffic on April 10, 2025



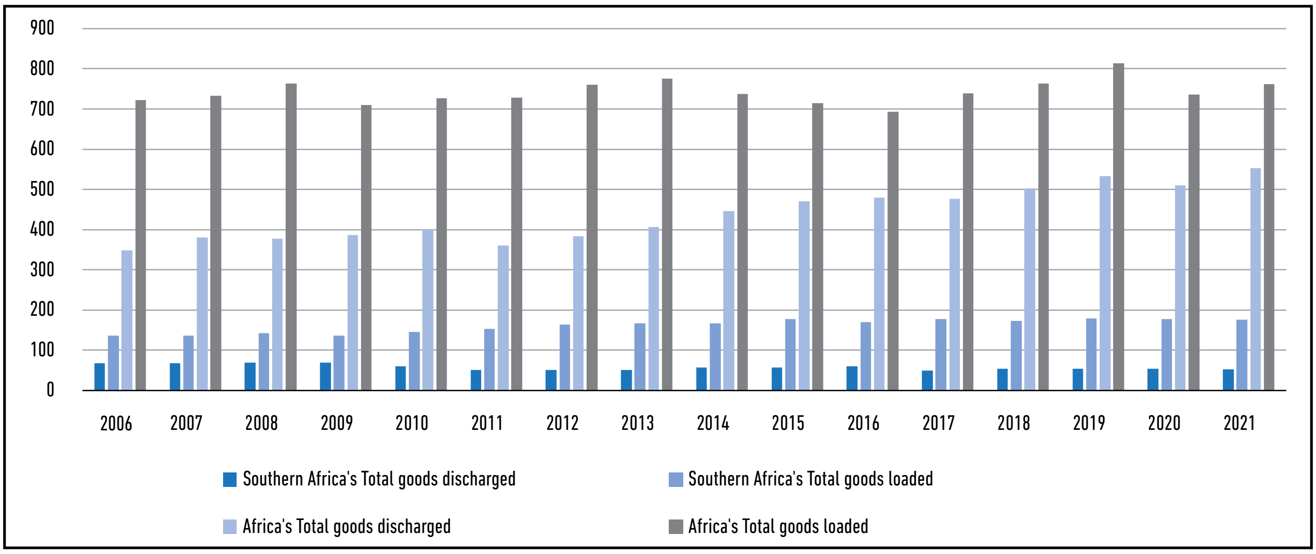
Source: *MarineTraffic Tracker on April 10, 2025 (09:00 South African Time)*

On one hand, a sea route is arguably as important as the economies of the immediate regions around it. For instance, the global strategic importance of the Red Sea revolves around its oil and gas-rich economies in the Middle East and their supplies to Europe and the West Coast of North America; and on the other hand, in connecting South and East Asia with Europe on the other (Dorning 1979; Meyer 1988; Oyewole 2017, 2024a). At the core of the strategic importance of the Cape Sea Route is South Africa, the continent's largest economy. For an economy of US$377.952 billion, South Africa's merchandise imports were US$130.747 billion, while merchandise exports were

US$110.855 billion in 2023 (UNCTAD 2025). Between 2015 and 2021, South Africa accounted for between 13 and 14 per cent of intra-African imports and between 27 and 35 per cent of intra-African exports (African Union [AU] 2023). This indicates the strategic importance of trade to South Africa's economy and the country's indispensable role in intra-African trade relations and economy. Amid these, the Cape Sea Route is primary to South Africa's trade relations and economic survival.

Furthermore, as the immediate regions of the Cape Sea Route, Figure 3 shows the maritime trade worth of Southern Africa and Africa between 2006 and 2021. The total goods discharged by Southern Africa were between 60 and 70 million metric tons from 2006 to 2010, which then dropped to below 60 million metric tons from 2011 to 2021. Amid these, the lowest goods discharged for the subregion were 49.3 million in 2017, and the highest were 69.44 million in 2009. At the same time, the total goods loaded in Southern Africa for export were between 135 and 153.2 million metric tons from 2006 to 2011, before jumping to above 163 million from 2012 and 170 million metric tons since 2015. Similarly, the total goods discharged in Africa, which were between 349 million metric tons and 400.8 million metric tons from 2006 to 2012, rose to between 406 million and 480 million metric tons from 2013 to 2017, and above 500 million metric tons from 2018 to 2021. At the same time, the total goods loaded in Africa were between 710 million and 776 million metric tons from 2006 to 2021, except for 693.7 million in 2016 and 814 million metric tons in 2019. Although not all these goods pass through the Cape Sea Route, a considerable number do, as subsequent analysis tends to show.

Figure 3: Southern African and African seaboard trade (metric tons in millions)



Source: *Author's own, with data extracted from UNCTAD's (2024g) dataset on World seaborne trade by types of cargo and by group of economies, annual*

Figure 4 provides better insight into the viability of the Cape Sea Route in intra-African trade. Using the port-to-port distance from the Ports (2024), it shows three economically viable intra-African trading routes that feature the Cape Sea Route. At the average speed of 10 knots, a ship's round trip around Africa, which is calculated to be 14 702 nautical miles (NM) or 27 228 kilometres (km), will last for 61.2 days. In the light of these, the Cape Sea Route is more viable than the Red Sea for shipping from the farthest African port in the North of the Atlantic, that is, the Moroccan Port of Tangier, to the Southernmost African ports in the Indian Ocean, including the South African Port of Durban up to the Mozambican Port of Maputo (see the grey line around Africa in Figure 4 below). Tangier to Durban is 6 804 NM and could be covered in 28.4 days at an average speed of 10 knots. From Northern to Southern Africa, this trade corridor connects the Ports of 23 littoral and island African countries, including five of the ten largest African economies, that is, Morocco, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Angola and South Africa.

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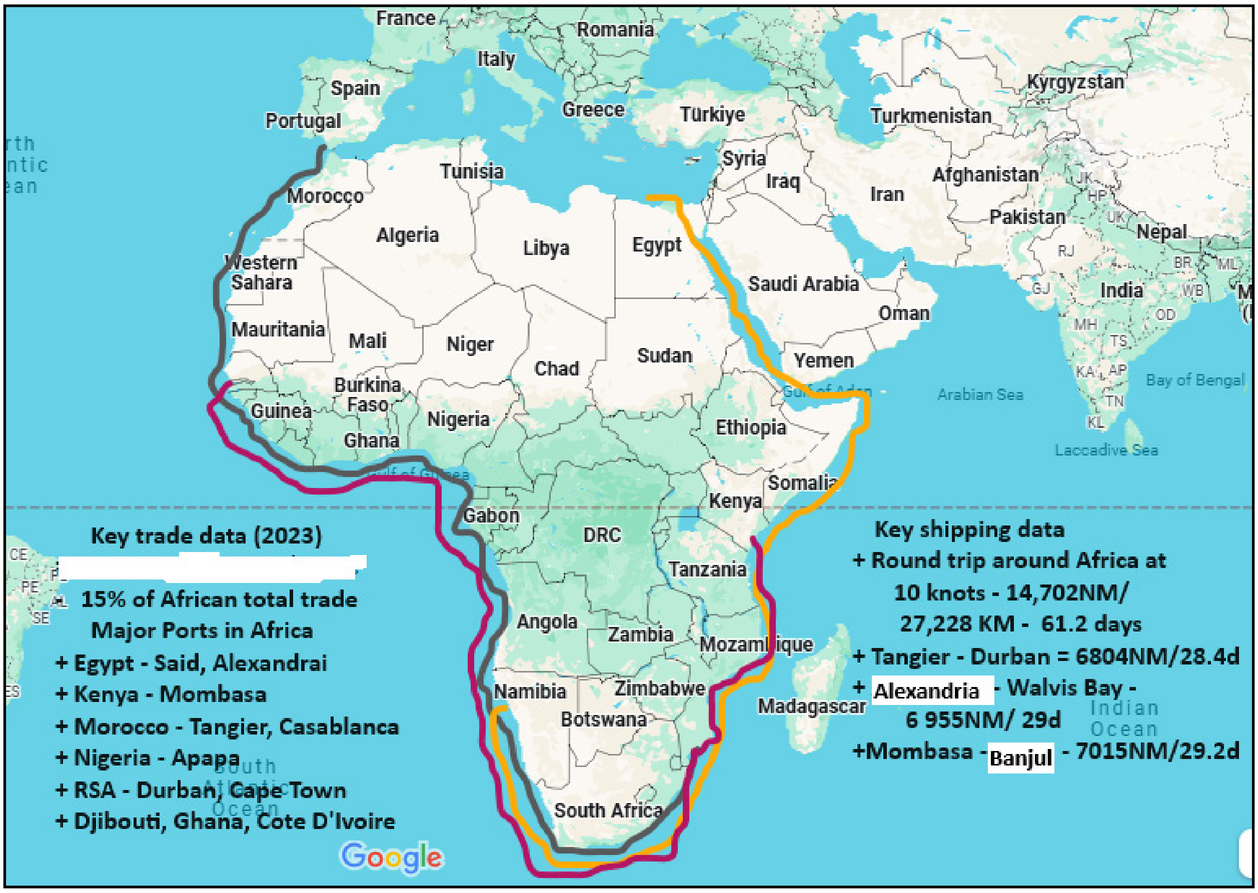
Figure 4: The Cape Sea Route in the Intra-African trade corridors



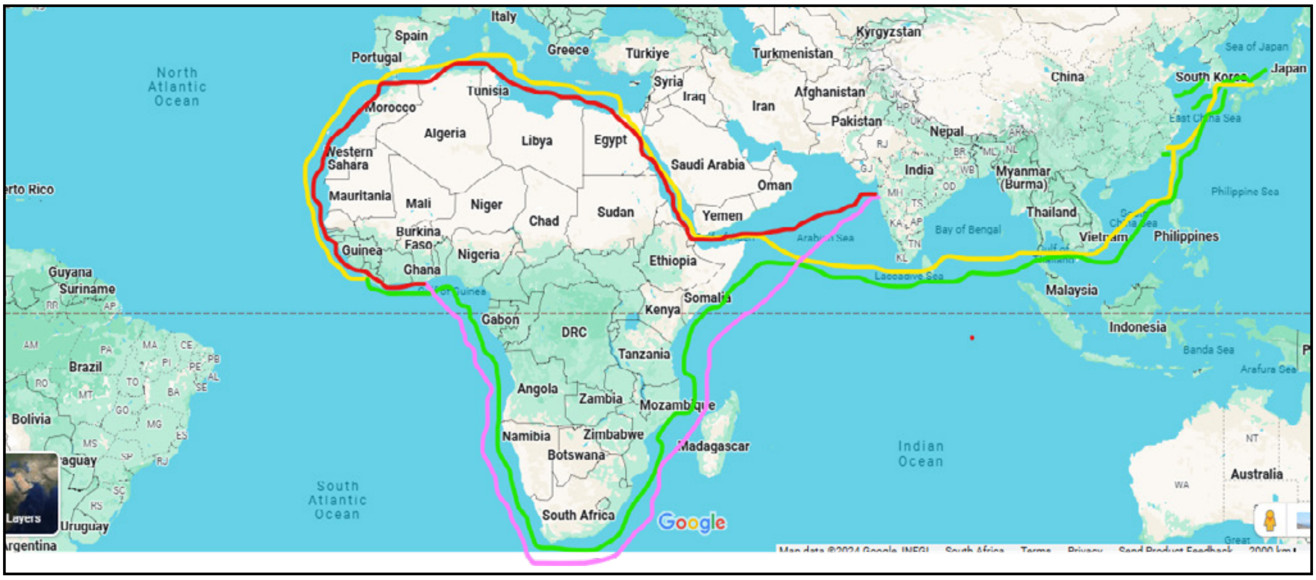
Source: *Author's own design with a map extracted from Google Maps and port-to-port data extracted from Port (2024)*

As evident from the deep pink line around Africa in Figure 4, the Cape Sea Route is more viable than the Red Sea for shipping from the Gambian Banjul Port, one of the farthest Ports in West Africa, to the Kenyan Port of Mombasa in East Africa, as the 7 015 NM journey takes 29.2 days on average. This shows the most viable route for most East African trade with Central African countries and most Southern and Western African countries. From Western to Eastern Africa, this trade corridor connects the Ports of 24 littoral and island African countries, including six of the 10 largest African economies, that is, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Angola, South Africa, Tanzania and Kenya. The orange line around Africa in Figure 4 also shows the viability of the Cape Sea Route from the Egyptian Port of Alexandria in the Mediterranean Sea through the Red Sea and Indian Ocean to Walvis Bay in Namibia on the Atlantic side of the continent. From Southern to Northern Africa, this trade corridor connects the ports of 12 African littoral and island states, including four of the continent's ten largest economies, that is, South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya and Egypt. These, among other things, show the strategic importance of the Cape Sea Route to the continent of Africa.

Beyond intra-African trade relations, the Cape Sea Route also serves African interests as a viable corridor in trade relations with the rest of the world. Notably, 88.5 percent of Africa's trade was with the rest of the world in 2023 (UNCTAD 2024a). Asia, Europe and America are Africa's largest trading partners by region, since they accounted for 47.5 percent, 28.3 percent and 8.5 percent, respectively, of the continent's external trade relations in 2021 (AU 2023). Amid this, the Cape Sea Route plays a limited role in Africa-Europe trade. Its viability is mainly in connecting South Africa and perhaps Namibia through the Indian Ocean-Red Sea-Mediterranean Sea Route, and Mozambique and Madagascar through the Atlantic to Europe. The Cape Sea Route, however, is not viable for other African states' trade with Europe, except for the East Coast of Africa during the peak of the Red Sea crisis.

The Cape Sea Route is strategically important to many African countries and their partners in the continent's largest trade relations with Asia. Notably, China and India are Africa's largest trading partners by country, since they accounted for 17.8 per cent and 6.2 per cent, respectively, of the continent's external trade in 2021 (AU 2023). As evident in Figure 5, the yellow line shows that the Red/Mediterranean Sea Route is the most viable trading route between Africa, from Liberia in West Africa to North Africa, and East Asia, including China, Japan and South Korea. This trade corridor connects leading African economies, including Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and the Ivory Coast, to East Asia. Equally, the Cape Sea Route is the most viable trading route between Africa, from Liberia in West Africa to Central and Southern Africa, and East Asia. This trade corridor connects leading African economies, including South Africa, Angola, the DR Congo and Nigeria. For instance, sailing from the Apapa Port of Lagos, Nigeria, to the Port of Shanghai, China (and vice versa) through the Red Sea is 13 890 NM, and will take 57.9 days at an average of 10 knots. The same journey is 12 164 NM through the Cape Sea Route and could be covered in 50.6 days at 10 knots. Beyond China, the viability of these routes also applies to other leading African trade partners in East Asia, including Japan (the 13th largest trading partner), Singapore (18th-), South Korea (19th-), Indonesia (20th-), Malaysia (22nd-), Thailand (23rd-), Hong Kong (26th-), Vietnam (27th-) and Taiwan (34th-) (AU 2023).

Figure 5: Cape/Red Sea Route in Africa's trade relations with Asia



Source: *Author's own with a map extracted from Google Maps and port-to-port data extracted from Port (2024)*

As evident in Figure 5, the red line shows that the Red/Mediterranean Sea Route is the most viable trading route between Africa, from Ghana in West Africa to North Africa, and India in South Asia. The Cape Sea Route, however, is the most viable trading route between Africa, from Ghana in West Africa to Central and Southern Africa, and India in South Asia. For instance, from the Port of Mumbai, India, to the Port of Lagos (Apapa), Nigeria is 8 460 NM, a journey of 35.2 days through the Cape Sea Route at an average speed of 10 knots. The same journey will take 37.8 days on the Mediterranean/Red Sea Route of 9 065 NM. These provide relevant insights into the viability of the Cape Sea Route in trade relations between African states on the South-Western Coast of the Atlantic, on one hand, and South Asia and the Persian Gulf on the other. Besides India, South Asia and the Persian Gulf are home to other leading African trading partners, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (6th), Saudi Arabia (12th), Pakistan (32nd), Oman (33rd), and Kuwait (39th) (AU 2023).

The Cape Sea Route is also relevant in connecting the East Coast of Africa with America, and most importantly, South America. While most coastal African countries in the Indian Ocean are better connected with the North American and Caribbean countries through the Mediterranean/Red Sea Route, the Cape Sea Route is viable for those in the Southernmost part, such as South Africa, Mozambique and Madagascar. North America is home to the USA, Africa's third largest trading partner, as well as Canada (24th) and Mexico (43rd) (AU 2023). However, leading African trading partners in South America, including Brazil (14th), Argentina (30th) and Chile (52nd), are better connected to the East Coast of Africa through the Cape Sea Route. Moreover, the West Coast of Africa is better connected to major regional trading partners in Oceania, including Australia (29th) and New Zealand (54th), through the Cape Sea Route. Furthermore, the Cape Sea Route is a considerable route around Africa for trade relations between the West Coast of South America and some parts of Asia. Against the Eurocentric reductionism of the Cape Sea Route as an alternative to the Red/Mediterranean Sea Route, all these cases reflect the viability and strategic importance of the Cape in trade relations of South Africa, Southern Africa, Africa and the rest of the world.

4. The Strategic Opportunities of the Cape Sea Route

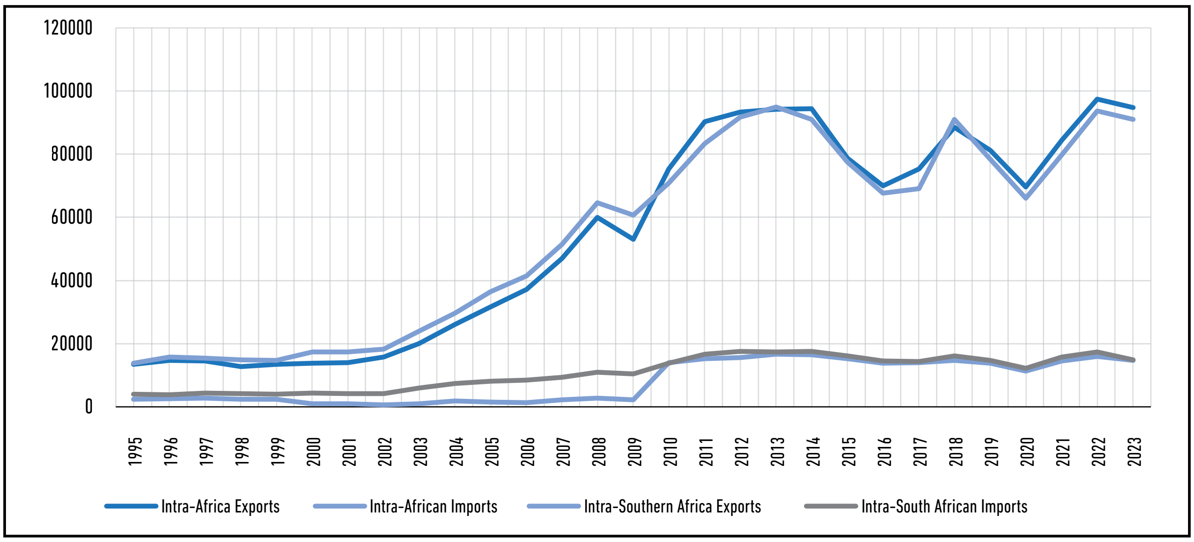
As identified in the previous section, the Cape Sea Route presents varying degrees of trade opportunities to different countries worldwide. In addition to trade, however, it also offers opportunities in the areas of maritime investment, manufacturing and services, including employment, which are relevant to poverty alleviation, especially in Africa. In line with Afrocentrism, any discussion of strategic opportunities of the Cape Sea Route must prioritise the immediate location, South Africa, Southern Africa and the continent ahead of other regions of the world. In contrast, most existing academic and media analyses of the Route have prioritised foreign interests and relevant opportunities for Europe and the rest of the world along the Cape.

In trade, the Cape Sea Route provides opportunities for both primary and secondary users. The primary users are the countries that are best connected through the route, or where the route is the most viable sea route for their trade relations. However, the secondary users are those countries that are better connected through other routes but rerouted through the Cape to avoid or minimise risk. The previous section of this article has mapped out countries and regions that fall under the two groups. Leastways, a consistent and sustainable Cape Sea Route strategy should prioritise the interests and opportunities for the primary users. The earlier section provided insights into South Africa's trade profile and the merchandise trade relations of Southern Africa and the continent. Building on earlier discussions of the Cape in African trade corridors, one of the most strategic opportunities this route offers is in advancing intra-African trade. For South Africa, Southern Africa and many other African countries, the Cape Sea Route is not an alternative or option, it is an opportunity to realise the pan-Africanist dream in trade and to connect with the world.

Figures 6 and 7 show the dynamics of intra-African trade relations and the potential opportunities of the Cape Sea Route as a strategic corridor. As evident in Figure 6, intra-African exports were between US$13 billion and US$20 billion between 1995 and 2003, but jumped above US$90 billion between 2011 and 2014, as well as between 2022 and 2023. Similarly, intra-African imports were above US$90 billion between 2012 and 2014, in 2018, and from 2022 to 2023. Amid these, intra-Southern Africa's exports of between US$625 million and US$2.67 billion between 1995 and 2009 rose to between US$11.2 billion and US$16.7 billion between 2010 and 2023.

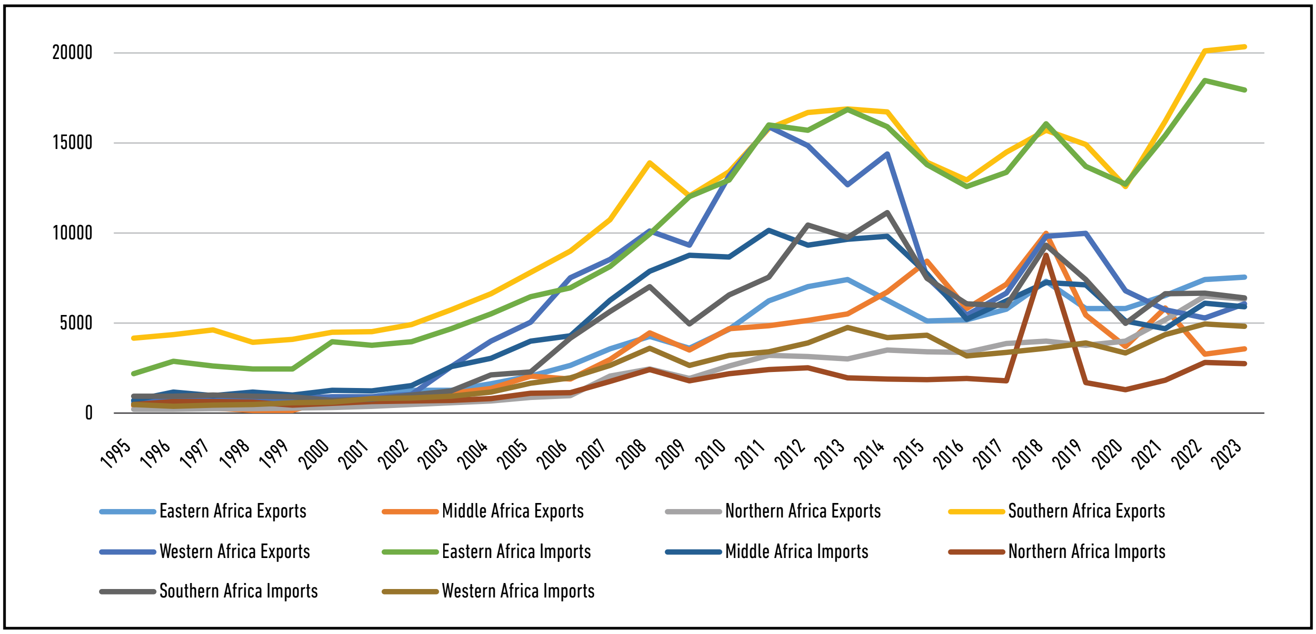
Furthermore, Figure 7 shows the trade relations between different African sub-regions and the rest of the continent. Notably, Southern Africa's exports and Eastern Africa's imports have dominated the trend since 2011, when Western Africa's exports started to decline from their peak. Between 2022 and 2023, Southern Africa's exports to the rest of Africa were over US$20 billion, while Eastern Africa's imports from the rest of the continent were between US$17.9 billion and US$18.5 billion. In 2023, Northern and Western Africa's exports to the rest of the continent were over US$6 billion, while those of Eastern and Middle Africa were US$7.6 billion and US$3.6 billion, respectively. Between 2021 and 2023, Middle Africa's imports from the rest of the continent were between US$4.7 billion and US$6.2 billion, while those of Southern and Western Africa were above US$6 billion and over US$4 billion, respectively. While Eastern Africa's imports from the rest of the continent were the highest since 1995 being between US$15.4 billion and US$18.5 billion from 2021 to 2023, those of Northern Africa were the lowest since their decline from over US$8.8 billion in 2018 to between US$1.3 billion and US$2.9 billion.

Figure 6: Intra-Southern Africa and Intra-Africa exports and imports (in current US$ million)



Source: *Author's own, with data extracted from UNCTAD (2024a)*

Figure 7: African sub-regions, their imports and exports to the rest of the continent (in current US$ million)

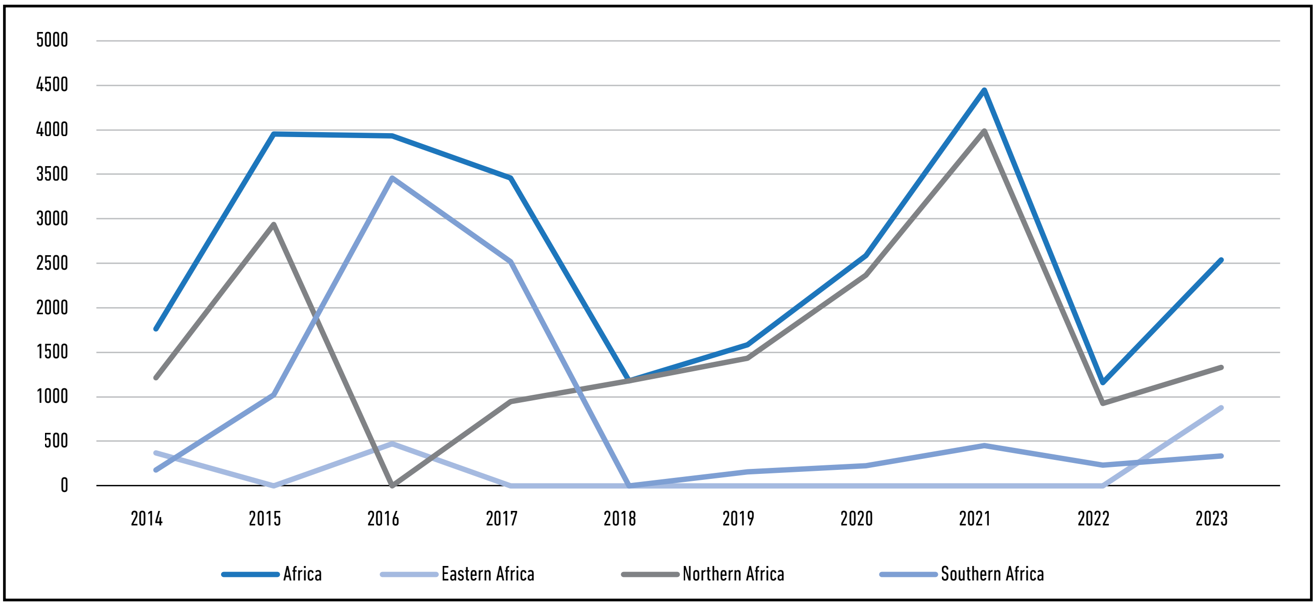


Source: *Author's own, with data extracted from UNCTAD (2024a)*

These data provide insightful trend analysis on trade opportunities (and challenges examined in the latter section) around Africa, from which one can partly gain some insights into the strategic relevance of the Cape Sea Route to different African subregions. They also indicate the traffic and trade opportunities that commitments to the intra-African trade and implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) will bring along the Cape Sea Route. In addition, this is also a primary route connecting many African countries to Asia, South America and Oceania. Based on these understandable opportunities, a sustainable economy could be developed with a reliable projection and a long-term strategic plan around the Cape Sea Route by South Africa, Southern Africa, the continent of Africa and their major trading partners with shared benefits.

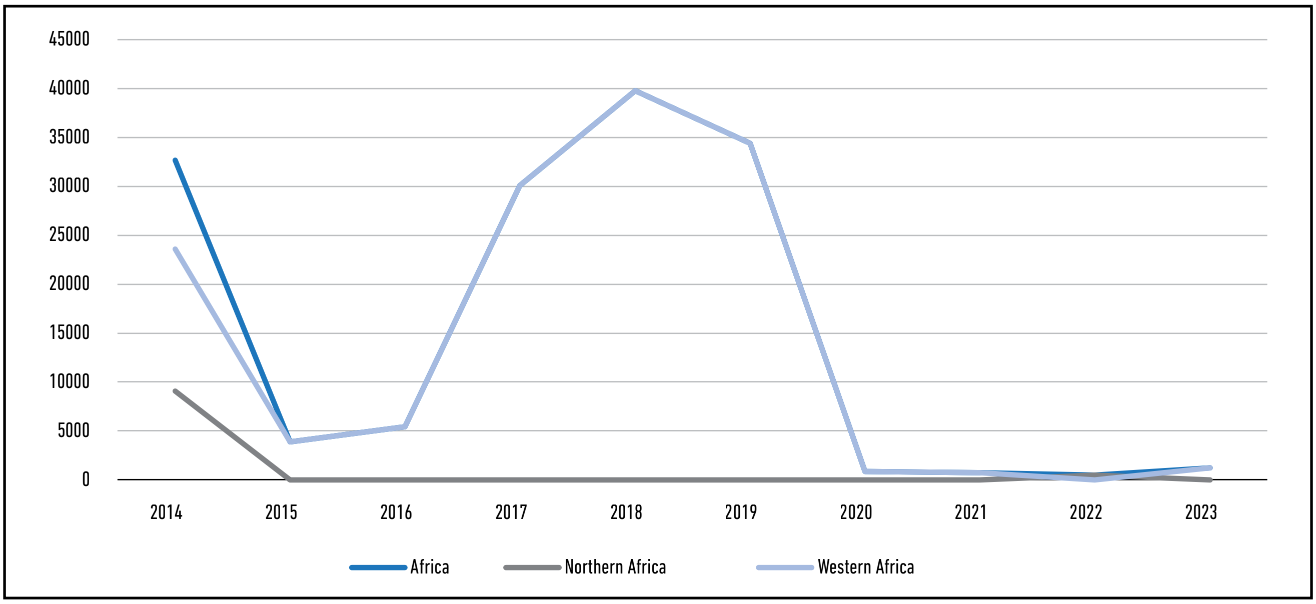
Beyond trade, policy commitment to intra-African trade and investment has the potential to boost maritime investment, as well as production and services along different trade corridors of the continent, including those that involve the Cape Sea Route. As such, ship-building, recycling and maintenance industries are prominent among maritime investments that could be boosted through policy commitments to intra-African trade along the Cape and other corridors. As evident in Figure 8, out of the total 26 601 gross tonnages of ships built in Africa between 2014 and 2023, 1 719 were in Eastern Africa, 16 308 were in North Africa and 8 574 were in South Africa. Amid these, South Africa, Egypt and Mauritius accounted for the total production of Southern Africa, Northern Africa and Eastern Africa, respectively. Figure 9 also shows the ship recycling capacity of Nigeria in West Africa and Egypt in North Africa, as they respectively accounted for 139 976 tonnages and 9 582 tonnages of recycled ships between 2014 and 2023. Development and commitment to an African-led strategy on trade and investment, especially along the Cape Sea Route, will benefit the existing shipbuilding hubs and encourage more investment in this sector in these and other countries along these trade corridors. There are also implications for African ship ownership and related maritime services.

Figure 8: Ship building in Africa by gross tonnage



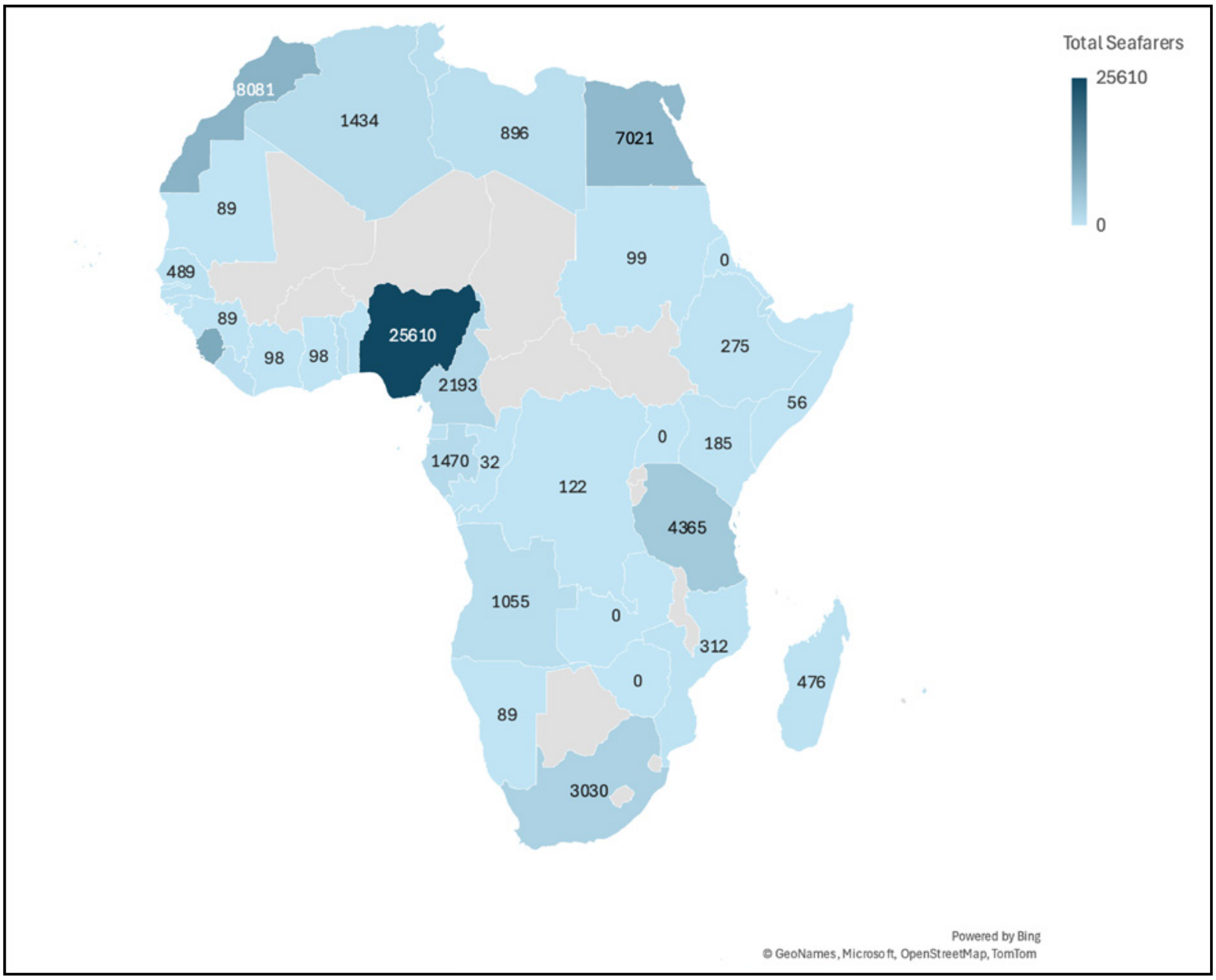
Source: *Author's own, with data extracted from UNCTAD (2024d)*

Figure 9: Ship recycling in Africa by gross tonnages



Source: *Author's own with data extracted from UNCTAD (2024e)*

Figure 10: African seafarers by country



Source: *Designed by author with data extracted from the UNCTAD (2024f)*

With necessary policy commitment, the Cape Sea Route has the potential to boost ship ownership and seafarer supply in South Africa, Southern Africa and the continent. In 2023, South Africa had 110 ships with 546 thousand deadweight tonnage (TDWT) under its national flag, and owned ships with 834 TDWT (UNCTAD 2025). At the same time, South Africa had 3 030 seafarers. Afrocentric trade and maritime strategies, including along the Cape Sea Route, have the potential to encourage more African ship ownership and seafarers. As evident in Figure 10, Africa had a total of 73 875 seafarers in 2021, with most coming from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Morocco, Egypt, Tanzania and South Africa. As such, improved commitment to economic transformation and intra-African trade, without undermining the continent's external trade relations, has the potential to boost maritime services and employment along the Cape and other trade corridors. This potential further includes the opportunity for investment in maritime freight insurance and risk management.

5. The Strategic Challenges of the Cape Sea Route

Despite the opportunities for maritime trade and investment (in production and services) along the Cape Sea Route in South Africa, Southern Africa and Africa, many challenges have limited the potential benefits of this and other corridors around the continent. Most of the challenges revolve around three broad themes: politics; economy and security. Stemming from the inherent colonial legacy, post-colonial African states are bedevilled by challenging institutional capacity that has undermined political stability, socioeconomic development and security (Clapham 1996; Meredith 2005; Oyewole and Amusan 2020). This accounted for inadequate and inconsistent policy commitments to industrialisation, socioeconomic transformation, human development and regional cooperation. Hence, these interconnected challenges have limited African abilities to fully exploit the relevant opportunities presented by their human and natural resources and geographical advantages. Amid these, South Africa and the continent, especially other countries along the East and West Coasts of Africa, are yet to fully maximise the maritime trade and investment benefits and opportunities of the Cape and other corridors.

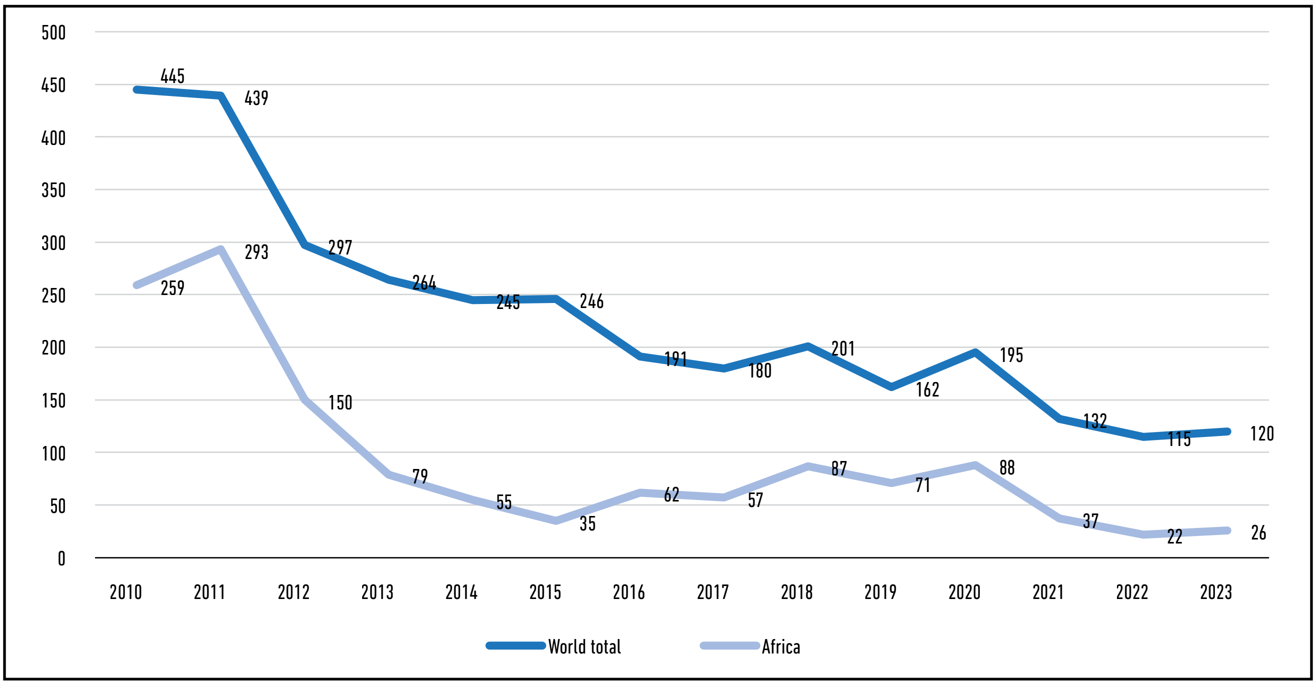
Africa only accounted for 5.28 per cent of the global economy and 2.7 per cent of global trade in 2023 (World Bank 2025). These marginal economic positions often undermine Africa's capacities to take strategic initiatives in defining and pursuing its interests, especially when they compete with those of major economic powers. This challenge extends to the idea and pursuit of Afrocentric trade and investment initiatives, including those that benefit the Cape and other maritime corridors and related narratives. This explains the popularity of the Eurocentric perspective that premised the viability of the Cape Sea Route on foreign interests, which are inconsistently tied to the ups and downs of the Red/Mediterranean Sea Route and unsustainably linked to the North Sea Route.

Another economically related strategic challenge of the Cape Sea Route and other trade corridors around Africa is that the continent has limited say in deciding what is viable or not. Of the 35 countries with 93.9 per cent of the global share of flag registration of ships by deadweight tons in 2023, there were only three African countries. In the first position globally was Liberia with 17.3 per cent of the total, while Cameroon and Nigeria were in 27th and 33rd positions, respectively, with 0.3 per cent each (UNCTAD 2024c). The positions of Liberia and Cameroon, however, are the product of the flag of convenience, a practice of registering a ship outside the country of its ownership to avoid taxes and regulations. Hence, decision-making on such registered ships is done by owners from their states, and stricter regulation by the flag states could be avoided by switching flags. At 0.4 per cent and in 32nd position, Nigeria is the only African country among 35 countries with 94.2 per cent of the global share of ship ownership by deadweight tons in 2023 (UNCTAD 2024c). Moreover, Africa only accounted for 3.9 per cent of the global seafarers (UNCTAD 2024f). Furthermore, most ship and freight insurance coverage globally is provided outside the continent. Consequently, major decisions on shipping, their routes and viable global trade corridors are not made in Africa, given the continent's limited share of such assets and services.

Some of the African options to turn the challenging situation around are also marked by challenges. For instance, Africa can build or recycle more ships to increase ownership and boost maritime investment in production and services. However, the continent is currently limited in production capacity. With 2 541 total tons of ships built and 1 252 total tons of ships recycled in Africa in 2023, the continent only accounted for 0.00392 per cent and 0.01675 per cent of the global total, respectively (UNCTAD, 2024d, 2024e). Moreover, Africa has more opportunities for ownership and control of relevant decisions on investment, shipping services, routes and their viability in the context of intra-African trade than global trade in the immediate and intermediate terms. Intra-African trade, however, only accounted for 14.57 per cent of the continent's total trade in 2023 (UNCTAD 2024a). Despite the lofty ideas behind AfCFTA and other initiatives to promote intra-African trade and investment, the colonial legacy, neocolonialism, nationalism and protectionism have undermined regionalism, which is necessary for economies of scale, growth and transformation that the continent needed to boost human development (Adenuga et al. 2024; Boysen 2024).

Due to inadequate institutional capacity, many African states, especially along the East and West coasts of Africa, have become sources of threats to maritime security along the Cape Sea Route and other corridors around the continent. Due to failure or inadequate capacity in promoting welfare, human security and good governance, many African countries have witnessed an increase in criminal activities and political violence that have extended to the seas, to the detriment of maritime trade along different trade corridors, including those that connected the Cape Sea Route. The threats of piracy, terrorism, insurgency, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, smuggling and trafficking of humans, drugs and weapons are notable in Africa. Amid these, piracy and armed robbers off the East and West Coasts of Africa are among the biggest threats to the Cape and other African sea routes in the 21st century (Onuoha 2009; Siebels 2019; Vreÿ 2009). As evident in Figure 11, Africa accounted for 41 per cent of the global record of piracy between 2010 and 2023. Despite these challenges, many African states have limited capacities and capabilities in maritime security law enforcement and governance (One Earth Future 2018; Oyewole 2016, 2024b). Despite their willingness and commitments to African solutions to African problems, the African regional powers are limited in their capacity for regional hegemonic stability, leaving the continent up for grabs by competing great and medium foreign powers (Amusan and Oyewole 2017; Clapham et al. 2006; Isike and Schoeman 2023; Ogunnubi 2014; Oyewole 2020).

Figure 11: Incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships, 2010-2023



Source: *Author's own, with data extracted from ICC (2024)*

While the involvement of foreign powers in African maritime affairs has contributed to security, it has also complicated it. Military deployment and operations by the USA, UK, France, China, India, Iran and others off the East Coast of Africa contributed significantly to the decline of piracy in the region (Oyewole 2017; Siebels 2019). Weapons transfer, training and joint military exercises with African countries have also boosted their capabilities to respond to onshore and offshore security threats. Nevertheless, some of these activities have militarised African maritime security, with negative implications for governance, human development, conflict resolution and regional stability. Moreover, the enduring Arab-Israel conflict and the roles of the USA and its allies in the Arabian Peninsula have inspired popular and sometimes unpopular grievances, terrorism and insurgency that have extended offshore in the Western Indian Ocean. This explains the Houthis' maritime campaign against ships since 2023 (Oyewole 2024a; Raydan and Nadimi 2025). Furthermore, the geopolitical competition that involves China, India, Iran, the USA and its allies is threatening to turn African seas, especially the Indian Ocean, into a conflict theatre. These, among other factors, are notable strategic challenges for the viability of the Cape Sea Route.

6. Conclusion

This article challenged the Eurocentric perspective on the strategic importance of the Cape Sea Route, which prioritises foreign interests, initiatives and approaches above those of Africa along this trade corridor. It rejected the historical construct of the Cape Sea Route as an alternative to the Red/Mediterranean Sea Route and an avoidable route with the growing viability of the Northern Sea Route. In contrast, this article provides an Afrocentric re-evaluation of the Cape Sea Route, prioritising the immediate locations, namely South Africa, Southern Africa and Africa, in assessment of its strategic importance, opportunities and challenges. Beyond its primary importance for South Africa, the route is strategic for intra-Southern African trade and viable for intra-African (East and West coasts) trade connections. The route's viability is further notable in critical Afro-Asian trade relations, and to some extent, in connecting Europe, America and Oceania with the Southernmost parts of Africa. The route is also relevant in connecting America with some parts of Asia. These, among others, have challenged the Eurocentric reductionism of the strategic importance of the Cape Sea Route to an unwanted and inconsistent route tied to the Red/Mediterranean Sea Route crisis. In addition to trade, the route offers various opportunities in maritime investment and services, including shipbuilding, recycling, repairing, servicing, operations, insurance and related employment.

Despite the opportunities offered by the Cape Sea Route and connected trade corridors, issues of limited state institutional capacity in industrialisation, economic transformation, human welfare, development and law enforcement are notable challenges that have undermined their potential benefits. With its limited share of global production, trade, economy, ship ownership and related services, Africa's capacity is inadequate to influence the viability of international shipping routes. However, inconsistent policy commitments to regional integration, investment, trade and development undermine the prospect of shaping regional trade routes in Africa. These have denied Africa the initiative to fully exploit the opportunities from the Cape and other trade corridors. Again, the viability of the Cape and other African sea routes has been threatened by maritime piracy, armed robbery, terrorism, insurgency, IUU fishing, smuggling and trafficking in drugs, humans and weapons. Despite these challenges, many African countries, including the regional powers, lack the capacity and capabilities for maritime law enforcement and security around the continent, thereby leaving their troubled waters up for grabs to competing foreign powers.

To achieve a predictable outcome, such as a sustainable economy around the Cape Sea Route, the people and governments in the immediate locations must articulate, align and pursue their national, subregional and regional interests. This requires a consistent policy commitment to an Afrocentric strategy in trade and investment to boost intra-African trade for long-term capacity to fully maximise the opportunities around the Cape Sea Route and other trade corridors around the continent. Moreover, policy commitments to relevant institutional capacity building to promote human welfare, political stability, good governance, onshore and offshore law enforcement, security and regional cooperation are important to address maritime security challenges and boost the viability of the Cape Sea Route and other trade corridors that are key to Africa's socioeconomic transformation. All domains and the whole of government approaches are required nationally, with regional cooperation and capacity building as well as global partnership to address maritime security and governance challenges and boost prosperity along the Cape and other African Sea Routes.

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