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Issue Brief

IUU Fishing and Human Security in the Western Indian Ocean

Sharvari Devendra Patil

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Summary

Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the Western Indian Ocean undermines food security, livelihoods and marine sustainability. Regionally owned governance frameworks, supported through equitable India–Africa cooperation, are essential to strengthen monitoring, community participation and sustainable fisheries management.

Introduction

The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) coastal area, stretching from Somalia to South Africa, is home to approximately 60 million people. The region is home to one of the world's richest ecosystems in terms of biodiversity, with more than 2,200 fish species and more than 350 coral species.[1] According to a report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the ocean-based industry in the Western Indian Ocean Region generates around US$ 20 billion annually.[2] The oceans thus support the food security, trade and livelihoods for millions residing in the region. In the fisheries sector, which accounts for a relatively small share of regional exports—under 5 per cent overall, 17 per cent in Mauritius, and 71 per cent in Seychelles—it still employs millions of East Africans.[3]

Rapid coastal urbanisation in the Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR) has intensified pressure on already fragile marine ecosystems, increasing demand for fish while weakening local resource management. The Regional State of the Coast Report notes that unsustainable fishing practices, compounded by population growth and inadequate governance, are accelerating the depletion of fish stocks critical to coastal livelihoods and nutrition.[4] In this context, IUU fishing further undermines food security by removing fish from local markets and eroding artisanal livelihoods, transforming environmental stress into an emerging human security challenge.[5] The combined impact has led to food insecurity in the East African coastal countries.[6]

IUU fishing has also adversely affected the economies of coastal countries in Eastern Africa, with annual losses amounting to approximately US$ 415 million.[7] Thus, IUU fishing in the WIO has already strained fragile marine resources, pushed coastal communities into deeper economic hardship, and exploited weak maritime oversight. Subsequently, IUU fishing in the WIO has emerged as a serious human security challenge that directly threatens the food supplies and livelihoods of coastal residents.

This brief frames IUU fishing as a human security and governance challenge that threatens food security and coastal livelihoods in the Western Indian Ocean. Drawing

[1] **"Western Indian Ocean's Pristine Ecosystems, Valued at US $25 Billion Annually, Under Threat"**, UN Environment Programme (UNEP), 23 June 2015.

[2] **"Rocking the Boat: The Socio-Economic Impact of Maritime Threats in the Western Indian Ocean"**, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), 9 December 2025, p. 17.

[3] Ibid.

[4] **"Regional State of the Coast Report: Western Indian Ocean"**, UNEP, 2015, pp. 24–26.

[5] Ibid., pp. 86–88.

[6] **"Hunger Map: Mapping Undernourishment and Food Insecurity Worldwide"**, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

[7] **"East African Pact Aims to Turn the Tide Against Illegal Fishing"**, Africa Defense Forum, 23 September 2025.

on human security approaches to fisheries management, it highlights the dependence of vulnerable communities on marine resources. India–Africa cooperation is presented as vital, given shared maritime realities, complementary capacities and common development priorities.[8] India's surveillance capabilities and experience in community-based governance make it a credible partner in promoting collaborative, inclusive and sustainable solutions.[9]

Conceptualising IUU Fishing

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), IUU fishing, inter alia, refers to fishing carried out by vessels or operators without authorisation, in violation of national laws or the conservation and management measures of a relevant regional fisheries management organisation, as well as activities that are not reported or that take place in unregulated areas of the high seas.[10] Beyond threatening marine ecosystems, IUU fishing can undermine national and international efforts to conserve and manage fish stocks.[11] Consequently, it impedes the progress towards achieving the goals of long-term sustainability.

While the Food and Agriculture Organization's definition of IUU fishing provides a necessary legal framework, its application in the Western Indian Ocean reveals region-specific dynamics that require tailored policy responses. In the WIO context, IUU fishing manifests not only through flagrant violations by distant-water fleets but also through the exploitation of weak monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) infrastructure, corruption in licensing regimes, and the use of flags of convenience that enable regulatory arbitrage.[12] As Okafor-Yarwood demonstrates in the Gulf of Guinea context—a situation with striking parallels to the WIO—IUU fishing thrives where governments lack awareness of their maritime domain, reflected in insufficient human and financial resources for effective oversight.[13]

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[8] Abhishek Mishra, **"India-Africa Maritime Cooperation: The Case of Western Indian Ocean"**, Occasional Paper, Observer Research Forum (ORF), 2019.

[9] Jyoti Sharma and Sunil Kumar Varshney, **"Role of India in South-South Cooperation to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals"**, in Vijay Kumar Chattu (ed.), *Science, Technology and Innovation Diplomacy*, Springer, Singapore, 2023, pp. 189–206.

[10] **"Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing"**, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2025.

[11] **"Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing"**, International Maritime Organization.

[12] Robert McCabe, **"Environmental Drivers of Maritime Insecurity: Governance, Enforcement and Resilience in the Western Indian Ocean"**, *Conflict, Security & Development*, Vol. 23, No. 5, 2023, pp. 531–554.

[13] Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood, **"Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing, and the Complexities of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for Countries in the Gulf of Guinea"**, *Marine Policy*, Vol. 99, 2019, pp. 414–-422.

Furthermore, the regional dimension is critical: in the WIO, political instability in states such as Somalia spills into the maritime domain, creating ungoverned spaces where illegal operators flourish, while formal artisanal fishers are displaced and, in extreme cases, turn to piracy as an alternative livelihood strategy.[14] Understanding IUU fishing in the WIO, therefore, requires moving beyond generic international definitions to recognise how regional political economies, governance deficits and socio-economic vulnerabilities intersect to create enabling environments for illegal extraction.

Causes of IUU fishing in WIOR

IUU fishing occurs in almost every type of fishery, from coastal waters to the high seas, and affects every stage of the capture and utilisation of marine resources. In some cases, it is also linked to organised criminal activity, including money laundering, tax crimes and the trafficking of forged fishing licenses.[15] When illegal operators capture fish that should ideally be available to legitimate fishers, local stocks decline more rapidly. In WIOR, illegal fishing by foreign industrial and semi-industrial vessels, particularly Chinese trawlers (China has the world's largest distant-water fleet, also operating along the East African coast), threatens the livelihoods of 3 million people.[16] For instance, Kenyan waters have attracted foreign fishing fleets from countries such as the Seychelles, Spain, France, China and Taiwan, which together harvest 68,000 tonnes of fish annually, exceeding the prescribed fishing guidelines by 80 per cent.[17] Due to the practices of these trawlers, Africa is becoming a hotspot for illegal fishing.

The extensive use of fish-aggregating devices (FAD) by some European fishing fleets has accelerated the depletion of already stressed fish stocks, leaving smaller Indian Ocean coastal states with fewer resources to support local diets and livelihoods.[18] At the same time, powerful private and transnational fishing companies, often backed by foreign capital, exploit regulatory gaps and weak enforcement.[19] Operating with

[14] Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood, **"The Cyclical Nature of Maritime Security Threats: Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing as a Threat to Human and National Security in the Gulf of Guinea"**, *African Security*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2020, pp. 116–146.

[15] **"Links between IUU Fishing and Crimes in the Fisheries Sector"**, Food and Agriculture Organization by the United Nations, 2025.

[16] **"East African Pact Aims to Turn the Tide Against Illegal Fishing"**, no. 7.

[17] Amy McAlpine, **"Foreign Fishing in Kenya Threatens Food Security"**, The Borgen Project, 23 April 2023.

[18] Saurav Kumar, **"IUU Fishing as Maritime (In)Security in the Indian Ocean Region & Analyses of Palk Bay Conflict"**, CESCUBE, 22 September 2025.

[19] Ibid.

limited oversight, their activities place disproportionate pressure on marine ecosystems and undermine the food security and economic stability of coastal communities.

Another driver of IUU fishing is corruption and the inadequate implementation of management regimes in countries that lack the capacity and resources for effective monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS).[20] This is particularly true in the Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR), where land conflicts have manifested in the maritime domain. For instance, political instability in Somalia has spilt into the maritime domain, affecting regional fishing activity.[21]

In the Western Indian Ocean Region, weak governance, limited monitoring capacity and political instability have fostered conditions conducive to IUU fishing. By undermining conservation efforts and depleting shared fish stocks, these practices erode the foundations of sustainable fisheries.

Economic Costs and Impact on Food Security

Fish caught through IUU practices are often sold in international markets, further reducing domestic food availability.[22] According to the South African Development Community (SADC), the region produces approximately 2.5 million tonnes of fish. In Madagascar, for instance, fisheries constitute approximately 7 per cent of GDP, whereas in Tanzania they account for 1.8 per cent of mainland GDP and 4.8 per cent in Zanzibar.[23] Seychelles stands out, with fisheries accounting for 16 per cent of GDP, one of the highest shares in the region.

However, widespread IUU fishing severely undermines economic resilience. In Tanzania, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique and South Africa, the losses attributable to IUU fishing amount to approximately US$ 142.8 million annually.[24] However, this figure considers only tuna, prawn and shrimp fishing, as the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific are the world's largest producers of these species. Such losses drain national revenues, reduce the availability of fish in domestic markets, and erode the livelihoods of artisanal fishers. As stocks decline and prices rise, communities already facing high levels of undernutrition become increasingly vulnerable.

[20] Amy McAlpine, **"Foreign Fishing in Kenya Threatens Food Security"**, no. 17.

[21] Munyaradzi Makoni, **"How Rampant Illegal Fishing Is Destabilizing Somalia"**, *Hakai Magazine*, 6 February 2020.

[22] **"Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing"**, no. 10.

[23] **"Tanzania: New Financing to Empower Communities, Improve Conservation, and Generate Economic Opportunities"**, World Bank Group, 11 June 2025.

[24] **"US$142.8 million Potentially Lost Each Year to Illicit Fishing in the South West Indian Ocean"**, WWF Our News, 4 May 2023.

Consequently, IUU fishing emerges not only as a maritime governance challenge but as a direct and escalating threat to regional food security.

The above economic indicators directly translate into dietary dependence. Fish accounts for 30–90 per cent of total protein intake in countries such as Tanzania, the Seychelles and the Comoros, making it indispensable to daily nutrition and food security.[25] In Madagascar, Mozambique, Tanzania, the Seychelles and the Comoros, fish contribute to more than 20 per cent of total protein intake. Simultaneously, around 20 per cent of their population is affected by undernourishment.[26] Despite efforts to address malnutrition, one in nine people goes hungry every day in these countries.[27]

Thus, IUU fishing not only affects the economies of East African nations but also has ramifications for the dietary patterns of the population. Governance-related challenges in the WIOR impede efforts to address IUU fishing and food insecurity in the region.

Governance Challenges

To address food security concerns in East Africa, IUU fishing must be addressed first. To this end, there are pre-existing international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA), and the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) Voluntary Guidelines for Catch Documentation Schemes (VGCDS). These frameworks provide the foundation for States' obligations to conserve marine resources, cooperate in managing shared stocks, and ensure that vessels flying their flag comply with conservation and management measures (CMMs). The poor implementation of these mechanisms, especially the weak flag-state control and limited monitoring of distant-water fleets, continues to enable IUU fishing in WIOR.[28] Despite adopting a range of CMMs, including rebuilding plans for overfished stocks and catch limits for key species, compliance remains uneven.

[25] **"Tanzania: New Financing to Empower Communities, Improve Conservation, and Generate Economic Opportunities"**, no. 23.

[26] **"Protecting our Fisheries: Working Towards a Common Future"**, South African Development Community (SADC), 2021, p. 7.

[27] Ibid.

[28] **"Unregulated Fishing on the High Seas of the Indian Ocean: Impacts on, Risks to, and Challenges for Sustainable Fishing and Ocean Health"**, WWF & Trygg Mat Tracking, 2020, pp. 10–12.

IUU fishing also encompasses a wide range of activities, resulting in a lack of consensus on its definition.[29] This has contributed to weak cooperation among the states to curb IUU fishing. Inadequate systems for tracking fishing operations and verifying the origin of fish products allow illegally caught fish to move easily through supply chains and reach markets without detection.[30] Prosecution mechanisms and legal frameworks are also constrained by limited financial and human resources, thereby further undermining states' ability to secure the social and economic benefits that responsible fisheries management should provide.

Weak compliance with national and regional fisheries rules, compounded by the use of flags of convenience, allows vessels in the WIOR to evade oversight and accountability. Fishing licences are often issued to private operators without the cooperation required by the flag state under UNCLOS, resulting in weak monitoring and poor reporting of fishing activities—even when vessels breach the laws of coastal states.[31] For instance, IUU fishing has often been cited as a trigger for piracy off the Somali coast, with Somali pirate groups portraying their actions as efforts to protect local waters from external exploitation.[32]

Some fishing vessels operate within the 12nm zone at night, regularly sweeping local artisanal fishing quotas. These are generally foreign vessels facilitated by local agents, often in cooperation with government or quasi-government actors—the pirate activities spike during the off-seasons, when there are fewer activities by artisanal fisherfolk. Organised pirate groups have also taken over the informal licensing scheme. In Somali waters, illegal fishing by foreign vessels, often operating close to shore with local support, has pushed artisanal fishers out of their livelihoods and provided pirate groups with a narrative to justify their actions, especially during periods when legitimate fishing activity is low.

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) sets global standards for maritime safety, navigation and pollution control through instruments such as the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), 1974, and the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL), 1973/78. It addresses IUU fishing through its subcommittee on the implementation of IMO instruments. However, its effectiveness in tackling IUU fishing remains limited by structural weaknesses. IMO frameworks primarily emphasise vessel

[29] Mayank Mishra, **"The Challenges of IUU fishing: A First Look at Indian Responses"**, National Maritime Foundation, 14 May 2024.

[30] **"Establishment of and Strengthening of Existing Regional Fisheries Monitoring Control and Surveillance Mechanisms in the Eastern Africa, Southern Africa and Indian Ocean Region"**, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Jay Bahadur, **"Fishy Business: Illegal Fishing in Somalia and the Capture of State Institutions"**, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2 July 2021.

condition and equipment standards, assuming IUU vessels are substandard, even though many are technologically sophisticated. In addition, the system relies heavily on flag state compliance, leaving port states to compensate when flag states fail, a gap that weak governance environments often exploit.

Within this governance landscape, Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) such as the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) and the Nairobi Convention have emerged as primary bodies promoting sustainable fishing practices. The IOTC 2024 report indicates that members' compliance with its regulations decreased from 65 per cent in 2022 to 56 per cent in 2023.[33] Recently, the East African nations reached an agreement on regional collaboration to combat IUU fishing at a roundtable hosted by the Jahazi Project in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Although it is still in its nascent stage, its thorough implementation would secure the WIOR.

These governance gaps directly translate into reduced fish availability, lost income and heightened food insecurity in the WIOR. Addressing these governance gaps would help tackle IUU fishing and, in turn, ensure adequate fish supplies for food security in the region.

Addressing Governance Challenges

Member state compliance with RFMOs is the bedrock of effective fisheries management and the foundation for tackling IUU fishing. There have been recent efforts by the RFMOs to streamline compliance mechanisms, which have been received positively by the member states. However, their adherence by the contracting parties and cooperating non-contracting parties (CPCs) remains inconsistent. For accountability to be credible, all signatory countries must fully meet the obligations of their RFMOs and take timely corrective measures when non-compliance is identified.

To ensure strict compliance and effective corrective action, there is a growing need for a leading regional actor such as India to assume greater responsibility and provide stewardship within the RFMO framework. One reason India is better positioned for this is that it has previously collaborated with RFMOs to develop measures for community participation to address IUU fishing. For instance in November 2019, the Ministry of External Affairs and the Federation of Indian Commerce and Industries, in collaboration with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Secretariat, hosted the second Somalia-Yemen Development Programme

[33] **"Summary Report on the Level of Compliance"**, Indian Ocean Tuna Commission and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 29 April 2024, pp. 1–2.

workshop in Kochi to build the capacity of small-scale fisheries stakeholders by improving the quality, value, governance, financing and market access of fisheries products to support food security and coastal livelihoods.[34] In addition, ICAR-Central Institute of Fisheries Technology (CIFT), in collaboration with the African-Asian Rural Development Organisation (AARDO), organised an international training programme on 'Advanced techniques in fishing and fish processing' in 2021.[35]

The traditional focus of India–Africa engagement has been on anti-piracy patrols, capacity-building, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. Through naval initiatives like MAHASAGAR, India has also strengthened its security engagement with Africa.[36] In terms of engagement with Africa, IUU fishing is increasingly a concern for African nations, particularly due to substantial economic costs, including the loss of billions in revenue, harmful effects on fragile ecosystems, food insecurity among coastal populations, depleted fish stocks and governance challenges. The naval operational capability strengthens India's ability to support compliance and enforcement initiatives endorsed by RFMOs.

Building on advances in satellite technology, the Indian Navy has leveraged capabilities developed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to enhance maritime communications across the Indian Ocean. The Rukmini satellite, a seventh-generation geosynchronous platform, provides coverage of more than 2,000 nautical miles, enabling secure, real-time connectivity among naval vessels, aircraft, submarines and shore-based assets.[37] In parallel, under the Quad's Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), the Navy is finalising an arrangement with the US satellite firm Hawkeye 360. Its constellation of 21 satellites will support global monitoring by accurately geolocating radio-frequency emissions, strengthening the detection and deterrence of illegal maritime activities.

Addressing IUU fishing in the WIO requires governance frameworks that balance maritime security imperatives with human security concerns, ensuring that enforcement measures do not further marginalise vulnerable coastal communities already impacted by stock depletion. African maritime security strategies must move beyond state-centric, militarised approaches to incorporate the livelihoods, food security and environmental concerns of ordinary people.[38] This perspective is

[34] **"The Somalia and Yemen Development Program (SYDP)"**, Indian Ocean Rim Association, 2025.

[35] **"ICAR-CIFT Organizes Online International Training with AARDO Ccollaboration"**, ICAR-Central Institute of Fisheries Technology.

[36] **"MAHASAGAR"**, Indian Navy, Government of India.

[37] Ajay Kumar and Charukeshi Bhatt, **"Hidden Tides: IUU Fishing and Regional Security Dynamics for India"**, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 June 2025.

[38] Thembisile Ramachela, **"African Maritime Security: A Human Security Approach to Maritime Securitisation—The Case for an Alternative Analytical Framework"**, PhD dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2023.

particularly relevant, given that small-scale fisheries in Africa provide employment and food security for millions. Yet these communities often bear disproportionate costs from resource depletion caused by industrial IUU operators.[39]

Effective governance must therefore integrate community participation, ensure equitable benefit-sharing from marine resources, and strengthen artisanal fishers' capacity to engage in co-management arrangements. India has been a member of IOTC since 1996 and plays a central role in managing tuna fisheries across the region. Strengthening this mandate requires improved knowledge of tuna migration and fishing effort, which can be achieved through satellite tracking, electronic tagging and vessel monitoring systems (VMS). India's growing technological and maritime surveillance capabilities position it well to partner with other IOTC member states to share data, enhance monitoring, and collectively address IUU fishing affecting these highly migratory stocks. Further, India could collaborate with African states under the FISH-i initiative to increase regional cooperation and information and intelligence sharing to enable enforcement actions against illegal fishing operators.

India's potential contributions to WIO fisheries governance should be understood within a framework of partnership and South–South cooperation, rather than as a unilateral provider of solutions. While India possesses significant technological assets—including satellite surveillance systems, vessel monitoring capabilities and naval operational reach—the sustainability of any governance intervention depends on African ownership, regional leadership and collaborative institutional frameworks.[40]

India's role is most constructive when it is positioned among multiple partners contributing to capacity-building, technology transfer and knowledge-sharing within existing regional mechanisms, such as the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the FISH-i initiative.[41] As Odakkal and Manhas emphasise, India–Africa maritime cooperation must be grounded in collaborative competence-building that respects African agency and prioritises mutual benefit over unilateral strategic interests.[42] This approach recognises that sustainable fisheries governance in the WIO ultimately depends on strengthening

[39] Antaya March and Pierre Failler, **"Small-Scale Fisheries Development in Africa: Lessons Learned and Best Practices for Enhancing Food Security and Livelihoods"**, *Marine Policy*, Vol. 136, 2022.

[40] Serena F. W. Taylor, Michelle J. Roberts, Bernadette Milligan and Raoul Ncwadi, **"Measurement and Implications of Marine Food Security in the Western Indian Ocean: An Impending Crisis?"**, *Food Security*, Vol. 11, No. 6, 2019, pp. 1395–1415.

[41] Bhoopendra Bolaky, **"Operationalising Blue Economy in Africa: The Case of South-West Indian Ocean"**, Issue Brief, Observer Research Foundation, 2020.

[42] Joshy Odakkal and Neeraj Singh Manhas, **"Collaborative Competence Building for a Better India–Africa Maritime Order"**, *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2023, pp. 47–70.

African institutional capacity, enhancing regional cooperation among coastal states, and ensuring that solutions are contextually appropriate and locally legitimate.

Conclusion

IUU fishing in the Western Indian Ocean constitutes a complex nexus of human security, governance failures and environmental degradation that requires multi-dimensional responses grounded in regional cooperation and human-centred frameworks. As this brief has demonstrated, weak governance structures, uneven compliance with RFMO mandates, predatory distant-water fishing pressures, and inadequate monitoring capacity have combined to accelerate stock depletion and impose severe economic costs on coastal states—losses that fall most heavily on artisanal fishing communities and nutritionally vulnerable populations.[43] Addressing this crisis requires moving beyond narrow maritime security paradigms to embrace governance approaches that prioritise food security, livelihood protection, and community participation alongside enforcement and surveillance. Regional fisheries management organisations, such as the IOTC, must strengthen compliance mechanisms, enhance transparency in catch documentation, and ensure that conservation measures are implemented and effectively and equitably enforced.

India's potential contributions to strengthening fisheries governance in the WIO are significant but must be carefully calibrated within frameworks of South–South cooperation, African ownership and multilateral partnership. India's maritime surveillance capabilities, technological assets developed through ISRO and naval platforms, and experience in community-based fisheries management provide valuable resources for capacity-building and knowledge transfer.[44] However, sustainable solutions depend on positioning India as a contributing partner within broader regional coalitions centred on African leadership and priorities. Ultimately, combating IUU fishing and securing marine food systems in the WIO requires integrated governance frameworks that bridge human and maritime security concerns, strengthen regional institutional capacity, and ensure that the benefits of sustainable fisheries management reach coastal communities whose livelihoods and food security depend on healthy ocean ecosystems.

[43] Patrick D. Doherty, Brice C. Atsango, Guy Ngassiki, Renaud Fulconis, Solène Derville and Brendan J. Godley, **"Threats of Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported Fishing to Biodiversity and Food Security in the Republic of the Congo"**, *Conservation Biology*, Vol. 35, No. 5, 2021, pp. 1405–1415.

[44] Abhishek Mishra, **"India-Africa Maritime Cooperation: The Case of Western Indian Ocean"**, no. 8.

About the Author

Ms. Sharvari Devendra Patil is Research Intern at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
New Delhi 110 010 India
T +91-11-2671 7983 F +91-11-2615 4191
www.idsa.in
Twitter @IDSAIndia
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