



CONTACT GROUP
on **ILLICIT MARITIME ACTIVITIES**
CGIMA



Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities

Friends of the Chair Meeting

11 April 2026

(on the margins of the 9th Indian Ocean Conference in Mauritius)

Draft Summary of Discussions

Introduction

The Friends of the Chair (FoC) meeting of the **Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities (CGIMA)** was held on the margins of the 9th Indian Ocean Conference, convened under the theme “collective stewardship”, in Mauritius.

The FoC meeting brought together over 60 participants both in person and online from member States: Denmark, Kenya, India, Italy, Mauritius, United Kingdom, United States, Seychelles. As well as regional and international organisations including the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), the European Naval Forces (EUNAVFOR – Operation Atalanta), the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) the International Seafarer’s Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN), the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC), the Regional Coordination of Operations Centre (RCOC), the Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS), the University of Copenhagen, the University of Oxford, the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) and the Indian Ocean Commission as the CGIMA Secretariat.

The meeting was chaired by Major General Michael Rosette, from the Republic of Seychelles in its capacity as current CGIMA Chair. The agenda comprised: (i) opening remarks by the Chair; (ii) an update on maritime security in the region; (iii) contributions from the Shipping industry, the seafarer’s organisation and independent experts; (iv) an open exchange among participants; (v) discussion on the next CGIMA Plenary session; and (vi) closing remarks.

The Chair of CGIMA opened the meeting by acknowledging the gravity of the current maritime environment. The Chair noted that dramatic developments in the Strait of Hormuz, the Red Sea, and around Bab el-Mandeb were already being reflected in shipping patterns, insurance costs, and transit times, with direct consequences for regional and global economies including freight costs, delivery timelines, and access to essential goods and energy supplies across the wider region.

The Chair stressed that the maritime environment across the Western Indian Ocean and adjacent spaces remained under pressure, with familiar challenges — piracy, drugs, arms and human trafficking, and other illicit activities at sea — persisting alongside the new geopolitical disruptions. Particular concern was expressed over the recent increase in piracy-related incidents, which highlighted the need for continued vigilance.

The Chair also drew attention to growing vulnerabilities in critical maritime infrastructure, including undersea cables essential to global connectivity and economic activity. The Chair urged participants toward a forward-looking exchange focused on practical outcomes:



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identifying where coordination can be strengthened, where gaps remain, and where existing mechanisms can be better utilised.

Update on Maritime Security in the Region

The representative of the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR, Operation Atalanta) provided an update on the maritime security situation from Atalanta's perspective. The meeting noted that the mandate of Operation Atalanta remained unchanged; however, the operation had recently been assigned an additional executive task by the European Commission in Brussels: the monitoring of critical submerged infrastructure, including undersea cables, in response to the growing threat posed by deliberate or accidental disruptions to these systems.

EUNAVFOR highlighted three significant incidents since October 2025. These included the cases involving the Maltese-flagged tanker *Hellas Aphrodite* and the Iranian dhow *Issamohamid*, both of which were successfully resolved through close collaboration with the Indian Navy and regional coastal states. The latter provided valuable support through information sharing and the deployment of assets to monitor the situations.

The third incident involved the Iranian dhow *Al Waseemi*, which was resolved in late March this year through close cooperation with the Puntland Police Maritime Forces, resulting in the successful liberation of the vessel and its crew. Additional incidents were also noted as remaining under active investigation.

EUNAVFOR further emphasized on continued year-round operational presence in the Indian Ocean. The meeting noted that cooperation with partner navies — particularly the Indian Navy — had yielded strong operational outcomes. The close coordination between Operation Atalanta, Operation ASPIDES, the EU Training Mission in Somalia (EUTM Somalia), and the broader EU security architecture in the region was also highlighted.

Finally, the upcoming India–EU Steering Meeting (ISM), scheduled to take place in Madrid in June, was identified as an important platform for continued coordination and strategic engagement.

The Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), outlined its structure and current posture, which comprises five Combined Task Forces operating across 3.2 million square miles, supported by 47 member nations. The operational mandate of each task force —CTF-150 (maritime security and weapons smuggling, under Pakistani command); CTF-151 (counter-piracy, under UK command); CTF-152 (Arabian Gulf security); CTF-153 (Red Sea maritime security); and CTF-154 (staff enhancement training under Indian command) — was described.

CMF acknowledged the significant disruption caused by the onset of Operation Epic Fury in late February 2026 and has pre-positioned assets and established alternate command and watchfloors in Tampa and the United Kingdom to ensure operational continuity. CMF representative emphasised that the coalition had not left the region and remained alongside Bahrain and GCC partner nations.



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CMF's Joint Maritime Information Centre continues to coordinate closely with UKMTO and the shipping industry to provide guidance and reassurance. The meeting noted that while CMF was non-state-facing and would not engage in Strait of Hormuz operations, it continued to counter smuggling, piracy, and other illicit activities. It was also highlighted that piracy events had increased over the preceding week and were expected to continue rising as the operational environment evolved.

The Director of the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) presented an analysis of the maritime security landscape as of April 2026. He noted that the kinetic conflict involving Iran, following Operation Epic Fury in late February, had fundamentally altered the maritime security environment in the Western Indian Ocean, transitioning the situation from regional posturing to full-scale maritime confrontation driving a wider poly-crisis.

The RMIFC's threat mapping report identified the following priority areas: Houthi-linked attacks in the Red Sea; a projected return of Somali piracy, driven by the diversion of regional security attention; increased smuggling and contraband activity linked to economic disruption; and threats to marine and chemical safety arising from increased vessel density in the Southern and Eastern African shipping lanes.

The RMIFC reported that shipping traffic through the Mozambique Channel and south of Madagascar remained stable, while Red Sea traffic had declined — indicating that the maritime industry had begun anticipating and diverting around the crisis. Cascading economic impacts, including Egypt's loss of approximately USD 7 billion in Suez Canal revenue (projected further losses if the conflict persisted), and growing risks to submarine cable infrastructure, GPS and AIS systems, and fuel trafficking in the region, were also flagged. The RMIFC and the Regional Coordination of Operations Centre (RCOC), as part of the Regional Maritime Security Architecture (RMSA), have confirmed their operational availability to support partners and the maritime industry.

The International Seafarer's Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) reported on the psychological and welfare impact of the Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz on seafarers. ISWAN's 24/7 free helpline had experienced a significant increase in cases from seafarers and their families affected by the conflict. Approximately one third of calls concerned urgent repatriation needs, as seafarers reported witnessing drone activity, missile interceptions, and explosions from their vessels — situations for which they had no training or preparation.

ISWAN highlighted the need for greater attention to the mental health and safety of seafarers operating in conflict-affected zones, and underscored the important role of shipping companies, governments, and welfare organisations in supporting crew during this period.

Contributions from Independent Experts

The three academic interventions highlighted the growing uncertainty and complexity shaping maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO), while underscoring the need for stronger regional cooperation and more adaptive security frameworks.

Professor Christian Bueger of the University of Copenhagen warned that the ongoing regional conflict would have long-term consequences for maritime stability, with rising uncertainty



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already contributing to increased criminal activity, including the resurgence of Somali piracy. He also noted that an unstable Iran could increasingly become associated with smuggling and illicit maritime activities. Against this backdrop, he questioned the future sustainability of the United States' traditional role as the region's primary maritime security provider and stressed that regional cooperation mechanisms — including the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), the Djibouti Code of Conduct, the Regional Maritime Security Architecture (RMSA), and African Union initiatives — would become more important than ever. He further argued that the CGIMA could regain strategic relevance as a platform for coordination, dialogue, and international advocacy on maritime security challenges.

Professor Kate Sullivan de Estrada of the University of Oxford, speaking on her own capacity, focused on governance, burden-sharing, and the growing need for institutionalised predictability in an increasingly unpredictable global environment. She observed that traditional donor states were facing mounting fiscal pressures, which could reduce their willingness to continue financing maritime security public goods in the region at previous levels. In this context, she highlighted a broader trend toward the regionalisation of global governance, where peace and security would increasingly be pursued through entangled relationships between regional and international institutions. She argued that future governance arrangements in the Western Indian Ocean should therefore become more predictable, scalable, and regionally anchored, allowing investment and support to be more targeted while gradually reducing the burden on external partners.

Dr. Darshana Baruah, from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, questioned whether the traditional/non-traditional security distinction remained useful for understanding the current maritime security picture, and called for a more integrated discussion about what maritime security means today in the Western Indian Ocean. She highlighted that interstate tensions, naval competition, and the protection of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) were once again becoming central concerns. She noted that recent disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea demonstrated a return to traditional naval missions focused on SLOC protection, but in a context where state actors themselves could become disruptors. She raised the question of a potential security vacuum in the Southwestern Indian Ocean as forces and attention were pulled towards active conflict in the Northwest. This vacuum particularly affected the island nations of the region and the alternative maritime routes that had gained strategic importance as a result of the disruptions.

Open Discussion

India highlighted the Indian Navy's significant operational contribution to maritime security since November 2023, including more than 1,000 boarding operations, the escort of over 400 merchant vessels, the rescue of 35 ships, and the protection of approximately USD 7 billion in cargo. The MV Ruen piracy incident, during which the Indian Navy operated 1,400 nautical miles from its coastline and prosecuted 35 Somali pirates under India's Maritime Anti-Piracy Act, was referenced.



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India reaffirmed its continued commitment to regional maritime security, maintaining more than 35 naval vessels deployed across the Indian Ocean and coordinating closely with mechanisms such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct and its Jeddah Amendment (DCoC-JA), ReCAAP Singapore, and the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). The meeting also noted India's leadership of CTF-154 and its intention to lead CTF-150.

India further emphasized the growing importance of the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) as a key regional maritime security platform. Currently hosting 15 international liaison officers representing 36 countries, the Centre is expected to expand significantly by 2027–2028. It was also noted that the IFC-IOR has been listed in the IMO Best Management Practices as a voluntary reporting centre.

Italy reaffirmed its support through an active participation in EUNAVFOR Operation Atalanta and its continued contribution of naval assets to the Western Indian Ocean. Italy underlined the importance of protecting critical submarine infrastructure and proposed that this issue be included as a priority area within the CGIMA strategic roadmap. Italy also expressed its readiness to cooperate closely with regional partners on this matter.

The United Kingdom congratulated Seychelles on assuming the Chair of CGIMA and reaffirmed UK's commitment to regional maritime security. And further highlighted the country's strengthened bilateral engagement in the region, including the deployment of an International Liaison Officer to the RCOC in Seychelles, the accreditation of a non-resident defence attaché and naval adviser to Mauritius, and the participation of the first Mauritian student at the Royal College of Defence Studies.

The United Kingdom reiterated its support for a secure, clean, and prosperous Indian Ocean and encouraged continued efforts to strengthen the Regional Maritime Security Architecture.

Conclusion

The Chair proposed that the next CGIMA Plenary Session be held in Seychelles, in person, in July 2026. No objections were raised. The exact date will be communicated to all members in due course.

In his closing remarks, the Chair expressed sincere appreciation for the substantive engagement of all participants. Members acknowledged the gravity of the current maritime security situation and expressed hope that ongoing diplomatic efforts would restore stability, particularly in the Strait of Hormuz. The Chair reiterated the importance of continued cooperation on piracy, IUU fishing, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and other illicit maritime activities that threaten regional security, economic development, environmental sustainability, and stability.

The Chair called on all members to remain connected, to continue strengthening maritime domain awareness, and to maintain the flow of information and coordination necessary to preserve stability and security in the Indian Ocean.