

Maritime Security: Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea

Thomas Greminger and Nayef Al-Rodhan
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Introduction

Pirates have existed in different guises since ancient times, from Cilician pirates seizing olive oil cargoes from Roman ships to corsairs seeking spoils along North Africa's Barbary Coast and buccaneers attacking Spanish treasure ships in the Caribbean. Currently the Gulf of Guinea is the world's hotspot for maritime piracy. Over the last 15 years container ships, fishing vessels, and oil tankers in the region have been the targets of numerous armed attacks and kidnappings.

The past year has seen some positive developments regarding global maritime security. According to the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) International Maritime Bureau (IMB), global piracy and armed robbery incidents are at their lowest recorded figure in three decades.¹ The IMB's last annual report showed a 32% drop in overall attacks in 2021 compared to 2020.² These promising trends are also evident in the Gulf of Guinea. Of the 90 global piracy and armed robbery incidents reported between January and September 2022, 13 have been reported in the Gulf of Guinea region, compared to 27 over the same period in 2021.³ The decline in the number of reported incidents in West African waters should be welcomed, but this progress is likely to be short-lived unless the international community increases its focus on the region.

The threat level in the Gulf of Guinea region remains high, as highlighted by United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2634 on Piracy and Armed Robbery in the Gulf of Guinea, which was unanimously adopted in May 2022.⁴ Spearheaded by Ghana and Norway, the resolution expressed the UNSC's deep concern about the "grave and persistent threat" posed by piracy and transnational organised crime in the Gulf of Guinea.⁵ The resolution correctly stressed that unless tackled head-on, piracy will continue to impede international security and navigation, and the sustainable development of states in the region. These challenges are particularly important given the Gulf of Guinea's geopolitical significance.

¹ ICC IMB (International Chamber of Commerce International Maritime Bureau), Piracy and Robbery against Ships – First Quarter 2022, April 2022, <https://www.icc-ccs.org/reports/Q1%202022%20IMB%20Piracy%20Report.pdf>.

² ICC IMB, Piracy and Robbery Against Ships – 1 January-31 December 2021, January 2022, https://www.icc-ccs.org/reports/2021_Annual_IMB_Piracy_Report.pdf.

³ D. Osler, "Piracy Falls to Lowest Levels since 1992", Lloyd's List, 12 October 2022, <https://lloydslist.maritimeintelligence.informa.com/LL1142561/Piracy-falls-to-lowest-levels-since-1992>.

⁴ UNSC (United Nations Security Council), Piracy and Armed Robbery in the Gulf of Guinea, S/RES/2634 (2022), 31 May 2022, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_RES_2634.pdf.

⁵ Security Council Report, "Piracy and Armed Robbery in the Gulf of Guinea: Vote on a Draft Resolution", 30 May 2022, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2022/05/piracy-and-armed-robbery-in-the-gulf-of-guinea-vote-on-a-draft-resolution.php>.

Bordering 20 countries and with 6,000 kilometres of coastline, the Gulf of Guinea is a key shipping route for a region that relies heavily on imports. This is why the costs of piracy weigh so heavily on the region's economic and trade potential, with direct and indirect costs estimated at US\$1.925 billion annually for 12 Gulf of Guinea countries.⁶ Tackling piracy in the Gulf of Guinea will require both sustained political will at the national and regional levels and deeper and more effective cooperation among members of the international community. All sea-faring nations have a stake in improving the security of the region – including Switzerland, which assumes its seat on the UNSC at the start of 2023, with the aim of promoting global peace and security.⁷

⁶C. Bell et al., Pirates of the Gulf of Guinea: A Cost Analysis for Coastal States, Stable Seas Report, 7 December 2021, <https://www.stableseas.org/post/pirates-of-the-gulf-of-guinea-a-cost-analysis-for-coastal-states>.

⁷J. Crawford, "How Switzerland Could Help Restore Some UN Credibility", swissinfo.ch (SWI), 28 October 2022, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/how-switzerland-could-help-restore-some-un-credibility-/47974486>.

Security challenges

The number of incidents in the Gulf of Guinea has steadily decreased in the last few years: from 61 in 2018 to 48 in 2019, 44 in 2020, 27 in 2021 and, so far, 13 this year (January–September).⁸ Despite the decrease in reported incidents in the Gulf of Guinea, the waters off West Africa remain a piracy hotspot. Last year the region accounted for 43% of all reported global piracy incidents and 95% of kidnapping cases, with 57 crew members captured in seven separate incidents in 2021.⁹ Michael Howlett, the director of the IMB, has made clear that “there is no room for complacency”.¹⁰ Key security challenges remain, especially the expanded reach of pirates, their increasingly violent tactics and their potential links to terrorist groups.

Expanded reach of pirates

IMB figures show that in recent years pirates in the Gulf of Guinea have become better equipped to attack vessels steaming at considerable distances from the shore.¹¹ Last year the furthest attack took place approximately 212 nautical miles south of Benin’s economic centre, when 15 crew members were abducted from a Maltese tanker.¹² In April 2022 pirates ventured even further offshore, attacking a vessel 260 nautical miles off the coast of Ghana, before being repelled by a ship of the Italian navy.¹³ It is also important to note that attacks further offshore become more likely between September and March, during the inter-monsoon season.¹⁴

Violent tactics

Despite the current lull in reported incidents, there is legitimate concern that piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is becoming more violent and sometimes deadlier than in other piracy hotspots. According to the IMB, pirates operating in the Gulf of Guinea states – Nigeria in particular – are often “well-armed, violent and ... have a history of attacking crews far from the coast”.¹⁵ This is a dangerous blend, especially considering these pirates’

⁸ ICC Commercial Crime Services, “No Room for Complacency, Says IMB, as Global Piracy Incidents Hit Lowest Levels in Decades”, 12 October 2022, <https://www.icc-ccs.org/index.php/1321-no-room-for-complacency-says-imb-as-global-piracy-incidents-hit-lowest-levels-in-decades>.

⁹ C. Ahrens Teixeira and J. Nogueira Pinto, Maritime Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, GIS Report, 28 March 2022, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/piracy-gulf-guinea/>.

¹⁰ ICC Commercial Crime Services, 2022.

¹¹ Ahrens Teixeira and Nogueira Pinto, 2022.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ ICC IMB, April 2022.

¹⁴ ICS (Institute of Chartered Shipbrokers) et al., BMP West Africa: Best Management Practices to Deter Piracy and Enhance Maritime Security off the Coast of West Africa including the Gulf of Guinea, March 2020, <https://www.maritimeglobalsecurity.org/media/1048/bmp-wa-lo-res.pdf>.

¹⁵ ICC IMB, January 2022.

preferred modus operandi. Unlike their counterparts in South-East Asia, who capture oil tankers and sell their cargo on the black market, pirates in West Africa are more likely to kidnap crews, similar to Somali criminal groups.¹⁶ Even landlocked countries without a navy, such as Switzerland, have been affected. In 2018, 12 crew members of a Swiss cargo ship were taken hostage off the coast of Nigeria while the vessel was transporting wheat from Lagos to Port Harcourt.¹⁷

Potential links to terrorist groups

UNSC Resolution 2634 voiced concerns about potential linkages between pirates in the Gulf of Guinea and terrorist groups in West and Central Africa and the Sahel. Nigeria's ongoing battle with insurgent groups in the north-east of the country has provided some pirates with combat experience while fighting for separatist groups.¹⁸ There are also reports about terrorist groups in the region using piracy to finance their operations. These fears should be taken seriously, because the rise of piracy could cause even great instability at both the national and regional levels.

Policy Implications

To eradicate – or at least control – the scourge of modern piracy, key stakeholders in the public and private sectors will need to learn the lessons from previous piracy hotspots such as the Gulf of Aden and Horn of Africa, where anti-piracy measures have turned a corner and are managing the problem better. This is a timely issue, given the current conflict between Russian and Ukraine: a reduced supply of Russian oil and gas could benefit the Gulf of Guinea's oil producers. This in turn could raise the stakes and shine a spotlight on the maritime security challenges facing the region. As outlined below, the pervasive nature of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has far-reaching policy implications for both regional and international actors.

Cost of piracy

According to a report published by the transnational maritime security research organisation Stable Seas, piracy costs countries in the Gulf of Guinea over US\$500 million annually.¹⁹ The report says that “for every \$1 pirates take from Africans, Gulf of Guinea nations are robbed of around \$170 in port fees lost due to decreased shipping activity and another

¹⁶The Economist, “The Gulf of Guinea Is Now the World’s Worst Piracy Hotspot”, 29 June 2019, <https://www.economist.com/international/2019/06/29/the-gulf-of-guinea-is-now-the-worlds-worst-piracy-hotspot>.

¹⁷D. Andone and V. Cotovio, “Swiss Ship Attacked by Pirates off Nigerian Coast”, CNN, 23 September 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/23/africa/switzerland-ship-attack-nigeria/index.html>.

¹⁸The Economist, 2019.

¹⁹C. Bell et al., 2021.

\$1,200 in lost import tariffs”.²⁰ On a broader level, Stable Seas estimates lost government revenues for countries in the region to be around US\$1.4 billion per year.²¹ The report also stresses that piracy has discouraged many shipping companies from travelling to the Gulf of Guinea: 53% of respondents active in the region reported that they have scaled down their operations due to piracy. There is no doubt that a sustainable solution to piracy would boost shipping volumes, the benefits of which would be felt by coastal states relying on imports.

Impact on global supply chains

The immense geostrategic importance of the Gulf of Guinea region means that piracy not only causes serious economic difficulties for coastal states, it also disrupts global supply chains. Home to almost 20 commercial seaports and with a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$866.343 billion in 2021, countries in the region account for almost 45% of sub-Saharan Africa’s GDP.²² Producing two-thirds of Africa’s oil production, the region holds 4.5% of the world’s proven oil reserves and 2.7% of proven natural gas reserves.²³ This makes the Gulf of Guinea a crucial shipping route to and from Nigeria and Angola, Africa’s largest oil producers: about 30% of US oil imports go through this region.²⁴

Regional cooperation frameworks

The decline in piracy and maritime incidents in the Gulf of Guinea in the last few years overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding restrictions that limited the movement of goods at sea. This suggests that the problem has, for now, been contained – but not solved. This progress cannot be properly cemented without solid and sustainable regional cooperation frameworks. UNSC Resolution 2634 was correct to note the operational shortcomings of the 2013 Yaoundé Code of Conduct.²⁵ Political tensions, sovereignty concerns and long-standing grievances among the 25 West and Central African Yaoundé signatories have hampered regional cooperation. Nonetheless, as Resolution 2634 also points out, the framework remains the region’s main anti-piracy security architecture and could play an important role in tackling policy blockages.²⁶

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ahrens Teixeira and Nogueira Pinto, 2022.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ UNSC, 2022.

²⁶ Ibid.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthen regional cooperation

A decade ago the Horn of Africa was the world's leading piracy hub. Multilateral action and sustained coordination by international navies and have helped to mitigate the problem. In South-East Asian waters, joint patrols and rapid response teams have helped to enforce maritime security. West African governments should take note of this: current regional and international cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea is insufficient. A multifaceted approach is needed aimed at assisting military and civilian actors and regional organisations to strengthen maritime governance and prevent further attacks. In addition to supporting poorly equipped navies in the region, the international community should also redouble efforts to bolster the Yaoundé framework with the aim of improving regional information and intelligence sharing.

Improve governance and tackle underlying causes of piracy

Piracy and other illicit maritime activities are directly linked to weak governance. According to Chatham House, deep-rooted corruption and transnational organised crime fuel piracy in a “complex criminal web” consisting of “foreign oil traders, shippers, bankers, refiners, high-level politicians and military officials”.²⁷ The black market for oil and illegal fishing are key drivers of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. In Nigeria, fuel and oil theft and smuggling result in an estimated loss of 6-10% of the country's output.²⁸ Illegal fishing is estimated to cost local governments US\$1.5 billion, increasing economic instability in the region.²⁹ To successfully mitigate the threat of piracy, the international community needs to tackle the structural problems underpinning maritime crime in the region, in particular weak political institutions, corruption, resource-control-led conflicts and migration flows. Also more needs to be done to generate economic opportunities for young people in the region to deter them from joining criminal groups.

Increase naval presence

The increased presence of international naval vessels in the Gulf of Guinea has helped to deter and sometimes thwart attacks. This was demonstrated in April 2022, when pirates boarded a vessel 260 nautical miles off

²⁷ A. Anyimadu, “Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea: Lessons Learned from the Indian Ocean”, Chatham House, July 2013, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Africa/0713pp_maritimesecurity_0.pdf.

²⁸ Ahrens Teixeira and Nogueira Pinto, 2022.

²⁹ Ibid.

the coast of Ghana. The IMB Piracy Reporting Centre was alerted and immediately liaised with regional authorities and international warships: an Italian warship and its helicopter intervened, rescuing the crew and enabling the vessel to proceed to a safe port under escort.³⁰ The presence of international naval vessels in the region should be increased to a level where they are able to safeguard ships and seafarers.

Improve law enforcement capabilities

The capability of military and law enforcement forces to respond to incidents of kidnapping and armed robbery at sea remains limited.³¹ The Yaoundé architecture lacks an appropriate legislative and judicial framework, without which it is very difficult to enforce the rule of law. Investigating and effectively prosecuting criminal networks, as has been done in Somalia in over 300 cases, is key to guaranteeing that sea lanes are safe. As recommended in UNSC Resolution 2634, states in the Gulf of Guinea should criminalise and prosecute acts of piracy under their domestic laws. More also needs to be done to improve the reporting of piracy incidents, which remain under-recorded.³²

Bolster ship protection measures

Shipping companies can also do more to protect their crews and deter attacks. New guidelines recommended by international shipping organisations based on what worked in the Horn of Africa should be implemented by all vessels travelling to high-risk waters. This includes measures such as protecting ships' railings with razor wire to prevent boarding and obtaining threat information, which is crucial for risk assessment and decision-making.³³ Closer cooperation with other ships, military forces and law enforcement agencies is also key.

³⁰ ICC Commercial Crime Services, 2022.

³¹ ICS et al., 2020.

³² The Economist, 2019.

³³ ICS et al., 2020.

Conclusion

Maritime security has increased in the Gulf of Guinea in the past decade, but achievements in rooting out piracy will be short-lived unless its underlying causes on land are tackled properly. In West Africa this means alleviating chronic lawlessness, tackling transnational organised crime, and improving economic prospects and political stability in the region. The Gulf of Guinea's strategic importance for the stability of coastal states and international maritime trade makes it too dangerous to neglect. Protecting the world's 1.6 million seafarers and eliminating piracy in the Gulf of Guinea will be a momentous challenge that will take years of sustained effort by regional actors and the wider international community. All seafaring countries have an important role to play in these efforts – including landlocked countries like Switzerland, which assumes its seat on the UNSC in January 2023.

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