



# Maritime Piracy and its Implications on Security in the Gulf of Guinea

<sup>1</sup> Ken Ahorsu, <sup>2</sup>David Suaka Yaro & <sup>1</sup>Derrick Attachie

<sup>1</sup>University of Ghana

<sup>2</sup>University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Ghana

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## Abstract

The purpose of the study is to determine how piracy poses security challenges in the Gulf of Guinea. Document analysis method was used to analyse literature related to piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. The theory employed is the securitization of pioneered by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde (1990). Also, a retrospective cohort design is used for the study. The findings of the study revealed that the domestication of the Code of Conduct and other legal frameworks will ensure that national laws align with international maritime laws and provide a legal basis for addressing maritime crimes, including piracy. The proffered recommendation is that the government should actively engage pirates and other stakeholders in dialogue and contribute significant resources to ameliorate the environmental and economic damage caused by the oil industry.

## Introduction

The contemporary threat of Maritime Piracy to the world re-emerged in the Gulf of Aden in 2000. The protracted Somali Civil War, the absence of effective government, and unregulated seas witnessed the invasion of Somali territorial waters by poaching foreign fishing vessels and the dumping of toxic waste. Fishing communities constituted armed groups to address the illegal activities that threatened their livelihoods by capturing invader ships. However, this metamorphosed into a sophisticated money-spinning enterprise as vessel crews were kidnapped for large ransoms. In 2011, over 220 piracy attacks worldwide were attributed to Somali pirates operating in the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, costing the world between \$13 and \$16 billion yearly (Alessi, 2012).

In 2007, while the world concentrated on containing the Somali piracy menace, the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) - an emerging petroleum and gas geostrategic region with a busy maritime route and a trade hub for numerous commodities - surfaced as a piracy-buffed region. Since 9/11 and the continued instability in the Middle East, the GoG has emerged as the most promising alternative global energy



source. Nevertheless, the region is notorious for its land-based intra-state threats, and recently, the spectre of piracy threatens to add marine-based threats to its security weaknesses. The central question is to find out the implications of piracy and security for the Gulf of Guinea.

The GoG has been identified as one of the top piracy hotspots in the world, with pirates targeting all kinds of vessels for illegal activities such as cargo theft, kidnapping for ransom, and hijacking. The pirates typically target vessels operating in the region's offshore oil and gas industry, where they can demand high ransoms for the release of kidnapped crew. They have been known to use sophisticated weapons to intimidate crew members and facilitate their illicit activities. The activities are concentrated in Nigeria and Benin waters; however, many pirate attacks have been reported off the coasts of other West African states (Cornell, 2018). For example, in April 2023, Al Jazeera reported the rescue in Nigeria of 6 crew members who were kidnapped by pirates on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2023 from a Danish oil tanker off the coast of the Republic of Congo. The Liberian-flagged vessel, MT Monjasa Reformer, had sixteen sailors on board when pirates attacked her (IMB Reports from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2023).

The International Chamber of Commerce's (ICC's) International Maritime Bureau (IMB) has observed with concern in its 2023 half-yearly report about the resurgence of increasing incidents of piracy and armed robbery in the GoG. It recorded 14 incidents from 1st January to 30th June 2023; out of this number, 12 were classified as armed robbery and two as piracy in the territorial and international waters of the countries in the region. In these attacks, a total of 45 crewmembers were either taken hostage or kidnapped (IMB Reports from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2023). As compared to last year, IMB reported 11 incidents of piracy and armed robbery recorded in the first half of 2022, with 17 crewmembers either taken hostage or kidnapped. The most notable trend here is the high increase in hostage-taking and kidnapping for ransom incidents.

The research is guided by the securitisation theory, pioneered by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde (1990). Securitisation theory examines how specific concerns, such as sea piracy, are presented as security challenges, contending that security issues are not inherent but shaped by societal and political forces. In the Gulf of Guinea, sea piracy has been securitised by regional stakeholders, international bodies, and external actors due to perceived threats to maritime trade, economic stability, and human well-being. Securitisation theory in international relations aims to understand how certain issues are identified and framed as urgent security risks, analysing how non-traditional security matters are treated as existential threats requiring immediate and exceptional responses. Securitisation theory highlights how sea piracy is depicted as a security concern and its implications. Multiple actors, including governments, international organisations, and media, portray piracy as a threat to global trade, maritime security, and coastal stability. The process involves constructing narratives emphasising piracy's severity, violence, and economic impact. Various actors, such as governments and international bodies like the UN, have specific roles, aiming to elevate the urgency of addressing piracy through measures like military deployment and enhanced cooperation. This often leads to extraordinary actions, such as military interventions and international collaborations to combat piracy effectively.

Securitisating sea piracy has both positive and negative outcomes. It can mobilise resources and international cooperation to decrease piracy incidents, yet it may also lead to militarised responses, human rights violations, and neglect of underlying socioeconomic factors. Securitisation theory offers a crucial perspective on how sea piracy becomes a security concern, shaping policies, strategies, and global partnerships to address it.



## **Methodology**

This section of the study discusses the study's methodology, which includes the design of the study, sources of data, data collection methods, data analysis methods, validity, and reliability.

The study adopted the retrospective cohort design, which commences the investigation after the incident without any involvement from the observer. The choice of the ex post facto design stems from its systematic empirical nature, where the independent variables cannot be controlled or altered since the investigation circumstances have already occurred. The qualitative data collected for this study is sourced from secondary outlets, indicating that it comes from existing materials, publications, and external references. The study followed ethical research standards in Ghana, securing approval from relevant institutions. Consent and confidentiality are meticulously handled to safeguard the documents' well-being.

A broad range of data compilations was gathered from diverse outlets, encompassing books, scholarly journals, online platforms, and unpublished resources. The study utilised the document analysis method to analyse the collected data. Document analysis entails identifying particular words, subjects, or ideas within qualitative datasets (Hodder, 1994). Researchers employ this technique to evaluate and interpret the significance, interpretations, and connections of these terms, subjects, or ideas.

The study heavily depended on data from published sources to reduce bias. Validity was enhanced by ensuring the collected data directly addressed the main study objectives, resulting in a trustworthy resolution to the research inquiry. The data collection process encompassed diverse sources, including academic journals, newspapers, magazines, and reliable documentation, all aligned with the research objectives. This comprehensive approach notably mitigated bias risks and improved precision. Consequently, the study's data demonstrated reliability, validity, and satisfaction, yielding dependable outcomes.

## **Maritime Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea**

Maritime piracy has been a significant issue in the GoG, with attacks increasing. According to the IMB, there were 132 piracy incidents reported in the Gulf of Guinea in 2021, making it the most dangerous area for maritime piracy. Of these incidents, 55 involved kidnappings and 8 included violence against the crew. The IMB also reported that most attacks occurred in waters off Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Ghana. (IMB, 2022). However, the hotspots for piracy in the Gulf of Guinea are Nigeria, Benin, and Togo (Olasukanmi & Osuala, 2020). Pirate attacks often involve the hijacking of ships and the kidnapping of crew members for ransom (MERS, 2020). This has resulted in significant economic losses for shipping companies and increased maritime insurance costs (IMB, 2020). Efforts to combat piracy in the region are ongoing, with several international organisations, including the United Nations and the European Union, working to improve maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. Nevertheless, piracy remains a significant threat to the safety and security of ships operating in the region (IMB, 2020).

## ***Evolution of Maritime Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea***

The GoG has a long history of maritime piracy dating back to the 15th century when European powers would raid coastal towns and villages along West Africa. However, the current form of piracy in the region can be attributed to instability, unemployment, and corruption. The menace gained momentum in the early 2000s, with Nigeria being the epicentre of such incidents (Oluwale, 2013). The rise in attacks coincided with the proliferation of illegal arms and the emergence of militant groups in the Niger Delta region. These groups use piracy as a means of funding their operations by hijacking vessels and kidnapping crew members for ransom. In addition, the region's vast oil resources have added to the problems, providing both a motive and an opportunity for piracy. This is evident in the



changing of tactics employed by the pirates – from the hijacking of vessels as the common modus operandi to siphoning fuel to kidnapping crew for ransom when they discovered states' implementation of more stringent security measures on ships. They are also notorious for acts of violence, with many crew members being subjected to physical and psychological abuse. Moreover, the economic crisis in the region also played a significant role in the emergence of piracy. The decline in oil prices in the late 2000s hit the region's economies hard, leading to high levels of unemployment and poverty Stupples (2017). This situation forced many young people to turn to piracy as a source of income.

### ***Causes of Maritime Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea***

The causes of piracy in the GoG include poverty, lack of economic opportunities, poor governance, ineffective law enforcement and other illicit criminal activities. Tepp (2012) identifies “legal and jurisdictional weakness, favourable geography, conflict and disorder, underfunded law enforcement, inadequate security, permissive political environments, cultural acceptability, and the promise of reward” as conditions that promote piracy. The difficulty of weak states - with high unemployment rates, poverty, inequality, and poor governance amidst endemic corruption - effectively policing ‘ungoverned’ territorial waters of almost 3500 miles, stretching from Senegal to Angola, cannot be underestimated.

However, piracy in the GoG is mainly Nigerian in origin and orientation, resulting from the Niger Delta Crisis of resource politics, identity crisis, the proliferation of sophisticated arms, youth violence, and socio-economic grievances (D. Hassan & S. Hassan, 2017). The prosecution of the Niger Delta Crisis served as a hotbed where militant groups practised illegal oil bunkering, theft, destruction, violence, and piracy. Many of the youth have laid down their weapons under Nigerian governments' reconciliation programmes; however, some have turned to piracy and armed robbery, given their knowledge in the oil industry, for income. Thus, the insecurity in the Niger Delta spilt over to fan piracy in the region. Piracy and armed robbery in the GoG have become widespread and sophisticated, with other criminal groups developing their criminal networks for this purpose (D. Hassan & S. Hassan, 2017).

Existing collusion between pirates, rogue oil companies and corrupt government officials in the region allows piracy to thrive with near impunity (D. Hassan & S. Hassan, 2017). The argument is that crude oil is a bulky product and the oil industry is very specialised, where few actors and clients are well known, marketing procedures are detailed, and activities of major actors are often documented. Pirates, aided by regulatory officials of the oil industry, hijack oil tankers and syphon crude oil and sell the commodity to refineries often undetected.

Factors undermining the fight against piracy in the region include the poor state of maritime security architecture. Most countries' navies and coastguards are not well equipped to safeguard the territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) against pirate activities. The lack of coordination and collaboration among countries in the region and the capacity of maritime security agencies have been identified as major challenges in addressing these issues (Ayotunde & Adeyemi, 2020).

### **Impact of Maritime Piracy on the Economies of Countries**

Piracy in the GoG has severely impacted the economies of the countries in the region. According to a report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), piracy off the coast of West Africa cost the global economy approximately \$2 billion per year in the period between 2013 and 2017 (UNODC, 2018). Piracy has also caused a decline in maritime activities, such as fishing and shipping,



which are critical to the economies of the coastal states in the GoG. Limited data on the statistics of maritime activities in the GoG, both pre- and post-piracy, makes the exact impact difficult to quantify. These kinds of detailed statistical data are not readily available in open sources. However, according to a report by Oceans Beyond Piracy, the cost of piracy to the global economy was estimated to be between \$7 billion and \$12 billion per year in 2014, with many of the attacks taking place in the Gulf of Guinea (OBP, 2015). The report also noted that the number of attacks on ships in the region increased from 55 in 2012 to 97 in 2013. In Nigeria, piracy has disrupted the oil and gas industry, leading to significant losses in revenue. This has a ripple effect on other sectors of the economy, leading to increased unemployment and poverty (Olayinka, 2020). Similarly, in the Republic of Benin, piracy has reduced income for fishermen and their families and negatively affected tourism and other industries (Ayinde et al., 2020).

Piracy has also had a significant impact on the shipping industry. According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), the Gulf of Guinea accounted for more than 95% of all kidnappings at sea in 2020, with pirates targeting both commercial and private vessels (IMB, 2021). This has increased costs for shipping companies, which are forced to take extra security measures to protect their vessels and crew. Additionally, piracy has led to a decline in trade and investment in the region, as companies are hesitant to do business in areas where piracy is widespread. This has negatively impacted the coastal states' economies and hindered their ability to attract foreign investment (Onuoha, 2020). Additionally, piracy in the GoG has increased insurance premiums for shipping companies, contributing to higher consumer costs (IMB, 2021).

The impact extends beyond the region, linking to broader international implications, including other Transnational Organized Crime (TOC), such as drug smuggling and human trafficking, which pose a global threat to security (UNODC, 2018). Furthermore, it can potentially disrupt global oil supplies, as a significant percentage of the world's oil passes through the region's waters (Onuoha, 2020). This could have a cascading effect on the global economy and increase consumer energy costs worldwide.

### **Implications of Piracy for West Africa**

Contemporary piracy has added a marine dimension to the proverbial state weakness in West Africa that had hitherto been largely land-based (Buzan, 1987). The violence characterising a pirate attack is not limited to foreign oil vessels. Seafarers have been abducted, have had their cargo seized and are beaten when they cannot pay ransoms to pirates. Between 2008 and 2010, the Nigerian Trawler Owners Association recalled over 200 fishing vessels from the sea, over 20,000 workers were laid off, and, resulting in seafood shortages, seafood prices doubled due to criminal extortion and harassment from pirates. Piracy and armed robbery, thus, threaten investments, employment, livelihoods, food security, and personal safety.

West Africa's coastline boasts excellent natural, historical, and scenic landscapes ideal for tourism development. However, insecurity along the coast disincentivises investors interested in developing hospitality and sea transport, undermining the potential for jobs and employment. Piracy threatens the emerging geo-strategic oil and gas economy of the sub-region. Owing to instability in the Middle East, the US and Europe turn to Africa as an alternative source of their oil requirements. However, West Africa's rich natural resources, most of which are in the GoG, cannot attract the necessary financial and technological investments for development without security at sea. Also, piracy often increases the cost of production and transportation via additional security measures and high insurance premiums that are often transferred to consumers.



Egregious piracy can potentially undermine good neighbourliness, diplomatic relations, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of West African states. States like Nigeria are apprehensive about foreign troops having a foothold in their territorial waters. However, as was the case in Somalia, should the threat posed by piracy worsen and threaten the core interests of the West, the use of foreign navies and private security firms presents the most probable solution to curbing the menace. The piracy crisis can potentially cause a diplomatic crisis between West African states since contemporary piracy in the sub-region is perceived as having originated from Nigeria, and there is collusion between some government officials and the pirates (Hassan, D. & Hassan, S., 2017). A potential diplomatic crisis with Western partners who deploy forces in the Gulf of Guinea as part of the European Union's Combined Maritime Presence (CMP) initiative is also crucial. Memories of the deployment of Danish Frigate HDMS Esbern Snare to the GoG in November 2021 that led to the arrest and killing of some suspected pirates and the diplomatic row that ensued between Denmark and Nigeria cannot be overemphasised.

### ***Role of International Organizations***

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the United Nations (UN) have significantly addressed piracy in the GoG. As a specialised agency of the UN, the IMO is responsible for ensuring the safety and security of international shipping (IMO, 2021). The IMO has developed several conventions and guidelines, such as the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (ISPS Code), to enhance maritime security and combat piracy. In the GoG, the IMO has supported regional initiatives, such as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct, to enhance the capacity of regional governments and organisations to address maritime insecurity (Olawuyi, 2020). Similarly, the UN has been crucial in addressing maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea, particularly through its Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The UNODC has provided technical assistance to GoG countries to develop legal frameworks and enhance law enforcement capabilities to combat piracy and other forms of maritime crime (UNODC, 2021).

Despite the efforts of these international organisations, piracy remains a significant challenge in the GoG. According to the IMB Piracy Reporting Centre (PRC), the number of reported incidents of maritime incidents in the GoG increased by 40% in 2020 (IMB, 2021). The major challenge faced by these initiatives developed by international organisations is the limited capacity of GoG states to implement them to enhance maritime security. The UN and IMO have identified the need for increased technical assistance and capacity-building efforts to enhance the capacity of GoG countries to address maritime insecurity (Olawuyi, 2020).

### ***Comparative Analysis of the Gulf of Guinea and Other Regions***

The GoG, the Red Sea, and Somalia are some piracy-affected regions. These regions have varied piracy threats, characteristics, and responses. The GoG is known for hostage-taking and kidnapping for ransom, whilst in the Red Sea and Somalia, it often involves hijacking and robbery of vessels (Bueger, 2015). Local political and economic factors, such as poor governance, poverty, and conflict, influence piracy in all three regions. In terms of characteristics, piracy in the Red Sea and Somalia is often associated with the Somali pirate model, where pirates use small boats to attack large commercial vessels. In contrast, piracy in the GoG is carried out by well-armed criminal networks that target specific types of vessels (Olawuyi, 2020).

In terms of responses, the three regions have adopted different strategies. In Somalia, international naval forces were deployed to escort vessels and disrupt pirate activities, significantly decreasing piracy incidents. In contrast, the GoG has relied on regional and international cooperation to address piracy. Still, the response has been limited by the capacity of coastal states to implement anti-piracy measures (IMO, 2020). The Red Sea region also implemented other security measures, such as armed



guards on vessels and deploying naval forces to deter piracy (Momsen & Sum, 2020). Despite these varied approaches to piracy, progress has been made in reducing piracy incidents in the regions. For instance, piracy incidents in the GoG decreased by 33% in 2020 compared to the previous year (IMB, 2021). In the Red Sea, armed guards on vessels have significantly reduced piracy incidents (Momsen & Sum, 2020). Similarly, deploying international naval forces in the seas off Somalia has significantly reduced piracy incidents in the region (Bueger, 2015).

### ***Global Solutions to Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea***

The GoG has been a hotbed for piracy for many years, with criminal gangs operating in the region, particularly targeting vessels such as tankers and cargo ships. Global solutions have been proposed and implemented to stem the rising tide, including technology, naval cooperation, capacity building, legal frameworks, and other security measures. In the case of technology employment, drones, enhanced communication technology, and satellite imagery are constantly recommended to improve situational awareness and increase the response time of naval forces (Yorke, 2019). According to the IMB, technology has played a critical role in reducing the number of piracy incidents in the region (IMB, 2021).

Naval cooperation is another solution to piracy in the GoG. This involves the joint efforts of regional maritime security stakeholders and international partners. Through joint maritime security exercises like the Obangame Express and patrols like the ECCAS Zone D multinational joint maritime patrols, naval cooperation has helped deter pirate attacks and improve regional coordination efforts (Alao & Kuforiji, 2018). There is a need to enhance further the involvement of international navies in the joint regional patrol schedules. Other critical global solutions to piracy in the GoG include using armed guards on board vessels, establishing secure anchorages, and implementing onboard security measures (e.g., water cannons and electric fencing). Armed guards have been particularly effective in deterring pirates from attacking vessels travelling through the waters of other regions like the Red Sea (Poothicote & Sreekumar, 2020).

To mitigate maritime piracy in the region, the regional states and international partners continue to prioritise international cooperation and collaboration. The joint efforts of regional maritime security stakeholders and international partners have successfully reduced piracy incidents in the region. Therefore, it is important to continue to work together to improve the maritime security infrastructure of the region. Additionally, it is recommended that technology be expanded to support regional maritime security. Using drones, enhanced communication technology and satellite imagery can provide situational awareness and increase the response time of naval forces. This can help deter pirate attacks and improve regional coordination efforts.

Additionally, it is recommended that onboard security measures such as using armed guards on board vessels, establishing secure anchorages, and implementing onboard security measures continue to mitigate piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. These measures have been effective in deterring pirate attacks and protecting vessels. It is, therefore, critical to prioritise maritime security in the region to ensure that it remains safe and secure for all maritime trade.

Furthermore, there is a need to adopt measures to counter pirates and their support structures on land, which is the origin of all sea threats. Governments, businesses and civil society must create conducive socio-economic and political environments through job creation, good governance, poverty alleviation programmes in deprived areas and corporate social responsibility programmes in oil and gas-producing areas. Good governance will help combat piracy. States should use their proceeds to address issues of unemployment and poverty. The fight against corruption should be prioritised since



it fosters pirate' activities. Ethnic, religious, and other group cleavage relations should be addressed through peaceful conflict resolution and good neighbourliness to avoid instabilities that serve as safe havens for pirates and other criminals. Similarly, national security agencies and judicial services should be well-resourced to handle instances of piracy.

Again, concerning the cause of piracy, the government should actively engage pirates and other stakeholders in dialogue and contribute significant resources to ameliorate the environmental and economic damage caused by the oil industry. By creating viable employment, providing social amenities, and recovering farmlands and polluted water sources, governments will help improve the livelihoods of affected communities. Illegal maritime practices should be prevented and punished severely to discourage criminal activities as an excuse for loss of livelihood.

In addition, the fight against piracy can be won by dealing with the financiers of piracy and not only the pirates. Pirate activities are funded by powerful financial backers who earn the lion's share of the loot. It would be ideal to pursue them until they cease their involvement. The only way to deal with maritime security issues on the global level is to cooperate fully on various levels, from civilians, military, state institutions, law enforcement agencies, and the global shipping industry. Finally, states, civil society, the private sector, and the international community should deepen their intelligence gathering and coordination on the activities and modes of operation of pirates and related groups. These will help identify and eradicate piracy in the region.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the foregoing discussions, piracy in the GoG remains a significant security challenge for the region and the global maritime industry. However, several effective solutions to mitigate piracy have been implemented. Technology, naval cooperation, and other security measures have played a critical role in reducing the number of piracy incidents in the region. International frameworks and regional strategies like the Yaoundé Code of Conduct are crucial to mitigating piracy in the GoG. The Yaoundé Code of Conduct, adopted in 2013, is a regional initiative to encourage cooperation among regional states to address maritime security challenges, including piracy. The Code of Conduct calls for signatory states to harmonise their national legal frameworks to prosecute piracy and other maritime crimes effectively. The domestication, therefore, of the Code of Conduct and other legal frameworks will ensure that national laws align with international maritime laws and provide a legal basis for addressing maritime crimes, including piracy. This will also enable states to prosecute pirates and their accomplices effectively, deterring others contemplating piracy. Implementing regional arrangements like the Yaoundé Code of Conduct will further enhance regional cooperation and collaboration to address maritime security challenges. The Code of Conduct calls for signatory states to share information and intelligence and cooperate in joint maritime patrols. Such cooperation will increase situational awareness, enhance vessel monitoring, and equip maritime security stakeholders to respond to piracy incidents promptly.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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