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From Pirates to Power Plays: Geopolitical Strategies and Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea and Beyond



A Togolese boarding team member boards the German navy target vessel FGS Brandenburg (F215) during a simulated drug smuggling and human trafficking scenario during Obangame Express 2015, March 26. (Photo by SPC Raul Pacheco, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. Sixth Fleet)

Boundaries of the Gulf of Guinea

The territory of the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) is associated with two common definitions. The geopolitical region of the GoG spans over 2.3 million square kilometers (888,034.6 square miles) with a coastline of over 6,000 kilometers (3,728.23 miles) extending from Senegal to Angola.¹ The United States Geological Survey (USGS) geographically defines the area as extending from Cape Palmas in Liberia to Cape Lopez in Gabon.² See Figure 1.

The gulf is a global transport hub for commodities from West Africa to Central Africa, Southern Africa, and Europe.³ Furthermore, the GoG is critical for the exporting of oil from the Niger Delta.⁴ Over several

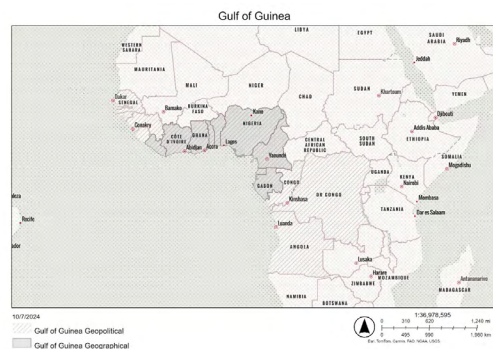


Figure 1. Map of the Gulf of Guinea outlining the larger geopolitical definition and geographic territory and associated coastal countries, as defined by the USGS. Author (Data from Michael E. Brownfield, "Assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas Resources in the Gulf of Guinea Province West Africa," Geologic Assessment of Undiscovered Hydrocarbon Resources of Sub-Saharan Africa, United States Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey, 2016.)

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decades, the region has seen many transnational security challenges, both terrestrial and maritime, such as terrorism; illegal trafficking of various commodities, including drugs, humans, weapons, piracy, and armed robbery; and crude oil theft.⁵ In 2024, the maritime security concerns in the GoG threaten the safety of approximately 1,500 ships that traverse the Gulf daily.⁶ Furthermore, these crimes obstruct the socio-economic advancement of the region's countries and people.⁷

Piracy and Armed Robbery: Definition and Scope

Piracy and armed robbery at sea cause enormous damage to international commerce and tourism because they target ships, freighters, trawlers, artisanal fishing boats, cruise liners and their personnel and passengers, and the local economy. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) defines the term “piracy” (see Fig. 2) narrowly, therefore, discussions continue regarding which criminal acts do or do not constitute “piracy.”⁸

In the GoG, four types of piracy are common. Offshore kidnapping for ransom, primarily involving taking captives frequently being held near local towns and cities.⁹ Kidnapping for the purpose of stealing loads of cargo—oil being a primary target.¹⁰ These activities are termed “hijacking-for-cargo” or petro-piracy.¹¹ Another form of piracy involves pirates appropriating the stolen goods from other criminals; this theft usually goes unreported.¹² Finally, thieves targeting ships harbored or anchored close to shore.¹³ Overall, the narrow official definition blurs the line between armed robbery and kidnapping, but hijacking-for-cargo is generally characterized by officials as armed robbery.¹⁴ In addition, the location of the incident plays a role in its classification. Piracy is an act associated with the high seas, while armed robbery denotes an incident that took place in territorial or internal waters.¹⁵

At times, robbers are locals who engage in petty theft or burglary, slipping unnoticed onto the ship and stealing valuables on sight without engaging the crew.¹⁶ This

U.N. Law of the Sea (1982)

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was signed in 1982. Article 101—retaining the language of the 1958 Convention on the High Seas—defined piracy in international law as follows:

- any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or passengers of a private ship or a private aircraft, and directed—
- on the high seas, against another ship or aircraft, or persons or property on board such ship or aircraft;
- against a ship, aircraft, persons, or property in a place outside the jurisdiction of any State;
- any act of voluntary participation in the operation of a ship or of an aircraft with knowledge of facts making it a pirate ship or aircraft;
- any act inciting or intentionally facilitating an act described (above).

Figure 2. Text box highlighting the definition of “piracy” as determined by UNCLOS. Source: Author (Data from Peter Swartz, “Piracy and the US Navy,” CNA Historical Paper Series, Center for Naval Analysis, 2006.)

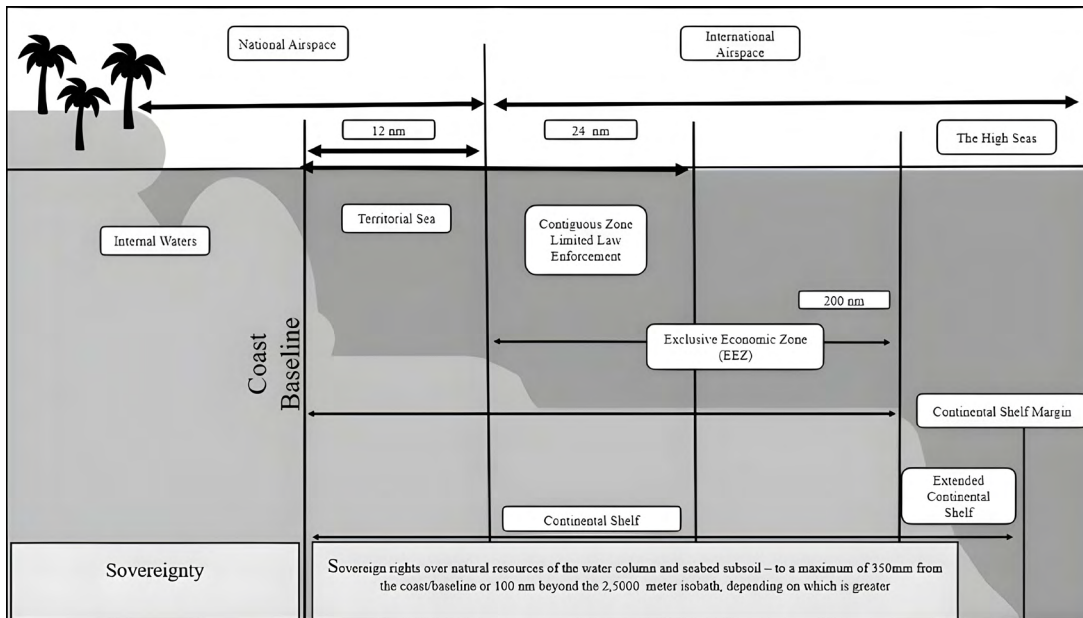


Figure 3. Image depicting different maritime zones as described by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Source: Author (Data from “Maritime zones and boundaries,” National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, March 25, 2024; and “What is High Seas Governance?” National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, July 20, 2022.)

type of theft is often referred to as “subsistence piracy.”¹⁷ Survival drives subsistence piracy, while organized criminal groups exploit vulnerabilities for profit on a grand scale.

Organized Crime Groups and Maritime Crimes

Organized crime groups and militant networks often engage in marine offenses transitioning between these activities according to necessity or opportunity.¹⁸ In 2022, observers determined the GoG region accounted for most ransom kidnappings worldwide.¹⁹ Prior to 2020, oil theft activities evolved into larger-scale armed robberies of a variety of cargo which then escalated to the kidnapping of ships and crews for ransom.²⁰ Since 2022, increased national, regional, and international patrols have resulted in a decrease in the kidnapping incidences (see Fig. 3).²¹ As the local navies and other forces increased patrols, kidnapping for ransom became riskier and criminal networks focused once more on oil-related crimes.²² The groups changed their modus operandi for two reasons: fiscal and security

advantages. The theft of oil is a multi-million-dollar business, which on a grand scale requires an organization of facilitators and expertise. Yet these offenses draw less international attention than boarding ships to kidnap sailors and, if lucky, receive a ransom payment.²³

Gulf of Guinea versus Horn of Africa: A Regional Comparison of Maritime Incidents

Oil theft is a constant factor in the GoG, yet overall maritime crimes have declined since 2020.²⁴ Conversely, the Horn of Africa (HoA) region is experiencing a sharp rise. Incident trends are not static and the current, welcomed trend in the GoG may face a reversal in the future.²⁵ See Figure 3 and Figure 4. As piracy declined in the HoA between 2016 and 2023, international anti-piracy initiatives, such as the European Union’s (EU) Operation ATLANTA and NATO’s Operation OCEAN SHIELD, scaled back their efforts in this region. Subsequently, the GoG—

then a hotbed of piracy—became the focus of counter-piracy efforts.²⁶ Coincidentally, an increase in oil prices typically leads to a decrease in ransom piracy incidents as the profitability of oil theft increases.²⁷

Overall, since 2020, there has been a decrease in acts of piracy and armed robbery in the GoG partly due to the rise of oil prices.²⁸ Increased patrols and concerted security efforts by national, regional, and international parties resulted in a decline in maritime security events from 98 incidents in 2020 to 14 incidents in 2024 (see Fig. 3).²⁹ The number of hijackings has fluctuated since 2020, with no reported incidents in 2024.³⁰ The gulf historically has been a region with an elevated number of kidnappings, which decreased from a high of 27 kidnappings in 2020 when oil prices rose to seven kidnappings in 2024 (see Fig. 3).³¹ Since 2023, there has been a decline in oil prices with uncertain effects. If oil prices continue to fall, kidnapping for ransom may

again become a lucrative endeavor.

In the HoA, there were no hijacking incidents from 2020 to 2022, yet the number rose from six incidents in 2023 to 11 incidents in 2024 (see Fig. 4).³² In 2024, the area experienced an increase from seven to 17 maritime security events.³³ Thus, maritime security in the HoA region will again become a concern to the maritime community. This development is troubling because the HoA is near the Bab-el Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden which are globally important shipping lanes. Meanwhile, the GoG, with its vast hydrocarbon reserves, faces the unique threat of petro-piracy.

Petro-piracy, an Organized Energy Crime

The Niger Delta, located in southern Nigeria, is one of the world’s richest oil-producing regions.³⁴ The area supplies a large portion of Nigeria’s crude oil exports.³⁵ The delta is characterized by a unique socio-ecologically valuable

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Gulf of Guinea Maritime Security Events by Type 2020-2024

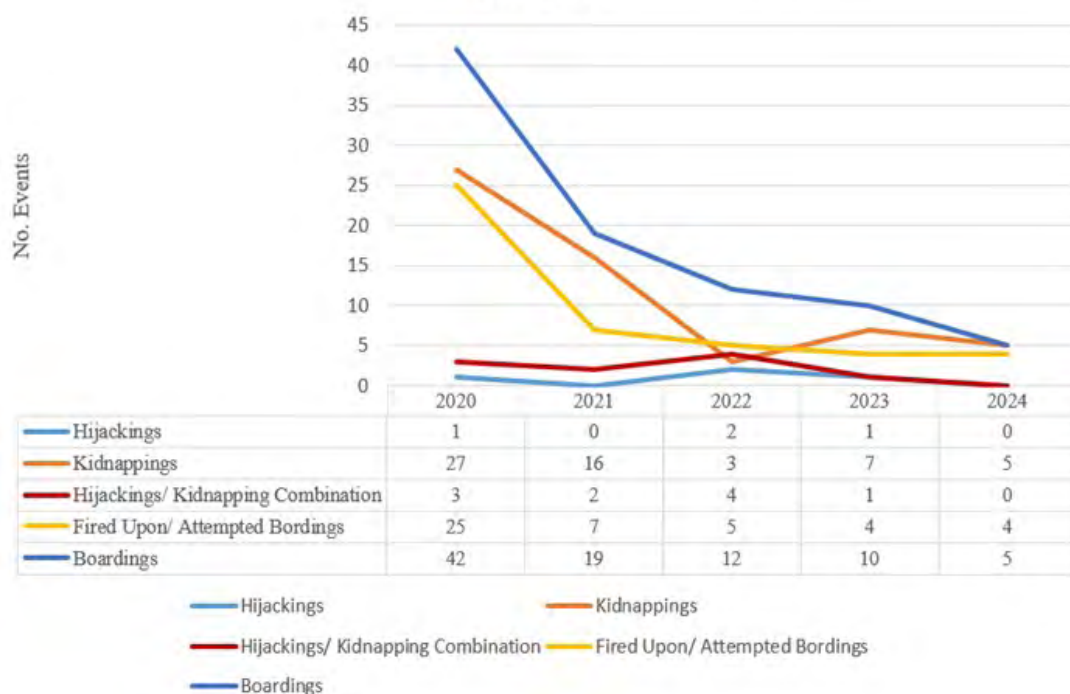


Figure 4. Maritime security incidents GoG 2020-2024. Source: Author (Data from “World-wide Threat to Shipping (WTS) Report,” Office of Naval Intelligence, August 28, 2024.)

Horn of Africa Maritime Security Events by Type
2020-2024

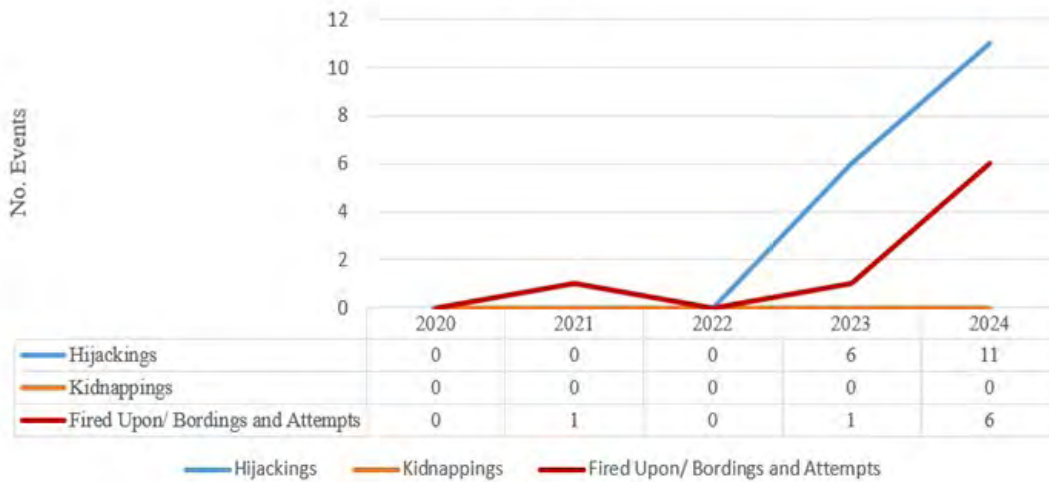


Figure 5. Maritime security incidents along the HoA 2020-2024. Source: Author (Data from “Worldwide Threat to Shipping (WTS) Report,” Office of Naval Intelligence, August 28, 2024.)

ecosystem of rivers, mangrove forests, and swamps.³⁶ For a multitude of reasons, despite its vast natural wealth, the Niger Delta faces challenges such as environmental pollution, poverty, and socio-political unrest. The last of which, in part, exacerbates artisanal oil-refining activities which support livelihoods and a flourishing black market for fuel.³⁷ In particular, artisanal oil refining pollutes the delta’s water, air, and soil.³⁸ Thus, the line between environmental degradation caused by the exploitation from multinational corporations and local illegal practices is blurred.

Oil bunkering and artisanal oil refineries are a threat to the region’s economic stability and security. Local, regional, and international organized crime syndicates facilitate oil theft and bunkering with local communities providing a force of facilitators.³⁹ Bunkering refers to the act of diverting oil from an illegally tapped pipeline, possibly refining it locally, and then loading and transporting it using unauthorized ships.⁴⁰ An array of artisanal refineries located along the shoreline, particularly in Nigeria’s coastal provinces, support the trade.⁴¹ Hence, the GoG is a transit point in the black market for oil out of Africa;

and criminals sometimes steal oil directly from tankers in territorial and international waters.⁴² Ships, including fishing boats, play a central role in illegal bunkering operations.⁴³ Large-scale oil bunkering and theft require technical expertise and investments and, thus, are often the work of organized crime groups.⁴⁴

The impoverished socio-economic conditions in the GoG provide few opportunities for legal work, and endemic corruption render oil theft a means of survival. Participation in oil bunkering, either as a member of a criminal group or for subsistence, offers significantly higher earnings than traditional livelihoods such as fishing or agriculture. Additionally, the black-market trade in fuel creates a vicious cycle where the environmental pollution due to artisanal oil refining destroys legitimate means of earning a living, such as fishing and farming, leaving few choices for locals.

Security of the GoG via Counter-Piracy and Policing Initiatives

Given that the GoG spans multiple national coastlines, counter-piracy and general policing efforts require bilateral, multilateral, regional, and

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international coordination and engagement. In part, the trend of decreasing piracy and robberies at sea in the GoG results from an investment into initiatives made during the last decade.⁴⁵ In 2013, the GoG states developed a regional maritime security framework to combat maritime insecurity and develop a blue economy.⁴⁶ Blue economy is a term with a variety of definitions, many of which focus on sustainability, improved socio-economics, and ocean health.⁴⁷ Blue economy activities include maritime shipping, aquaculture, coastal development, undersea cabling and so forth.⁴⁸ The Yaoundé Code of Conduct architecture framework aims to combat maritime crime and promote a blue economy.⁴⁹ This initiative promotes cooperation and coordination of resources, including monitoring efforts and intelligence sharing.⁵⁰ In 2021, Nigeria developed a \$195 million Integrated National Security and Waterways Protection Infrastructure effort known as the Deep Blue Project.⁵¹ The Deep Blue Project included acquiring command-and-control systems; intelligence systems; and over 100 ships and drones, including two special mission aircrafts.⁵²

As of 2024, multiple ongoing international efforts are underway. Ghana and Norway sponsored the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2634 on Piracy and Armed Robbery in the Gulf of Guinea, adopted in 2022.⁵³ The EU which imports West African crude oil and exports gasoline to the region, has a long-standing role as a maritime security provider focusing on its Coordinated Maritime Presences concept, which allows, among other initiatives, for the coordination of existing air and naval assets in locations the EU determines “areas of interest.”⁵⁴ The U.S. supports local capacity buildings via several coordinated

efforts: the Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance Program, the African Partnership Station, the African Maritime Law Enforcement Partnership Program, and other educational and training opportunities.⁵⁵

International law guides international engagement in the region, requiring states to cooperate in counter-piracy and granting universal jurisdiction over piracy. However, this legal clause also leads to conflict as countries along the GoG believe or experience that their sovereignty is being violated, necessitating mutual trust among stakeholder nations.⁵⁶

Geopolitical Competition and Terrorist Expansion

The geopolitical dynamics of the GoG include global powers like China and Russia vying to gain access to or establishing naval bases in the region.⁵⁷ China has a “String of Pearls” strategy for establishing naval bases worldwide and actively organizes and participates in military exchanges in the GoG.⁵⁸ Moreover, the Kremlin seeks to secure access to an Atlantic seaport.⁵⁹ A naval base in Togo, or any other GoG coastal nation, would support logistics from Libya to the GoG.⁶⁰ In late 2021, Russia deployed a maritime task group to the region for counter-piracy drills.⁶¹ Both countries see the GoG as a burgeoning sphere of influence.⁶² The Ukraine-Russia conflict, the turmoil in the Levant, and the issues surrounding Taiwan’s sovereignty consumed the U.S. and NATO in late 2024. Meanwhile, the Kremlin and Zhongnagai are keen on pushing forward with their strategies for West Africa and broader global agendas.

In addition, the potential spread of terrorism towards the coast by groups like Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin and other al-Qaeda or Islamic State affiliates may destabilize

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the region, as these groups may transform maritime security from a piracy, organized crime syndicate-driven issue into one influenced by terrorism. A lasting positive decline in piracy in the GoG requires continued NATO and U.S. engagement. Furthermore, peer competitor influence strategies and the prevention of infiltration by terrorist groups highlight the region's geopolitical importance.

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CHRISTIANE THOMPSON is an assistant professor of interdisciplinary studies at JSOU. She holds a master's degree in political science from the University of Akron; a master's degree in military arts from the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies; a Master of Liberal Arts (MLA) degree in extension studies focusing on socio-ecological security from Harvard University, Harvard Extension School, and has completed advanced military education at the U.S. Army Command and

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This is part two in a two-part series. For an in-depth understanding of socio-economic maritime issues in the Gulf of Guinea, check out JSOU Quick Look: Gulf of Guinea: A Primer.

Scan here to see an associated StoryMap



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