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## **Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea: Those trying to curb it, and those standing in their way**

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Gulf of Guinea basin countries have been grappling with piracy attacks for more than a decade, in national territorial waters as well as further away at sea. With the covid-19 crisis continuously reducing global transportation (less vessels at sea), there was a decline in the number of these attacks in 2021 compared with previous years. Still, international bodies caution that the region continues to be particularly dangerous.<sup>1</sup>

The Gulf of Aden region in the Red Sea, off the Somalian coast, an important maritime route, had grappled with similar phenomena of piracy from 2005 and until 2016-2017. Strong counterattacks by Russia, China, and the European Union, especially the 2008 French-led Atalanta operation,<sup>2</sup> succeeded in reducing these attacks considerably and even stopping them altogether. By comparison, large-scale piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is a more recent phenomenon, which emerged in the past ten years or so, gaining momentum just as the piracy in the Gulf of Aden was halted. And while piracy has declined recently, the phenomenon is not over yet.

In this article, we look into the contemporary situation, and examine whether the current decrease in piracy incidents in the Gulf of Guinea is sustainable. Should further

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<sup>1</sup> ICC - International Chamber of Commerce, "[Piracy and armed robbery incidents at lowest level in 27 years, but risks remain to seafarers, IMB cautions](#)," December 7, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Operation ATALANTA see: [Home | EUNAVFOR](#).

decrease be expected, as international anti-piracy operations succeeded in limiting attacks in the Gulf of Aden, or is the decline a temporary result of the pandemic?

### **Local factors**

What exactly is modern piracy? The phenomenon goes back as far as mankind started using fishing boats, but with changes in the global economy and technology, piracy at sea evolved dramatically. Pirates nowadays use advanced weapons and light motorboats to quickly reach their targets. Their attacks are planned, and the attackers are well informed about their targets. Typically, a "mothership" would wait at sea from a short distance, to back up the pirates. These sea assailants usually take one or more of three possible courses of action. They kidnap seafarers for ransom, mostly, but not exclusively, foreign 'bankable' nationals (i.e., "westerners" in the broader sense). They hijack vessels to use them as "motherships" for future operations. They steal transported goods and fuel.

The Gulf of Guinea presents 'natural conditions' for the development of piracy. This region, part of the eastern tropical Atlantic Ocean off the western African coast, spans almost 6,500 kilometers. It stretches from Guinea-Conakry in the north, and includes the coastal areas off Nigeria, Ghana, Sao Tome and Principe, Ivory Coast, Equatorial Guinea, Liberia, Benin, Togo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola to the south. Its major tributaries include the Volta and Niger rivers. The Gulf constitutes an important maritime route for international commerce, linking three continents, but it is also strategically important for its high concentration of hydrocarbons. Nigeria is Africa's leading oil producer, but other countries in the Gulf of Guinea, such as Equatorial Guinea, DRC, Ghana and Angola, have also developed offshore oil-extraction fields in the past two decades.

### **Poverty and corruption as root-causes for growing piracy**

While many of the countries in the Gulf of Guinea are blessed with crude oil and mineral resources, their wealth has not trickled down to the villages on the coast or the populations as a whole. Gulf of Guinea's oil-rich countries have invested over the years relatively small portions of the income from these natural resources in development and infrastructure, with much of the benefits reaching a newly rich elite. In this respect, some of these countries could be defined as kleptocracies. Thus, widespread corruption contributes to the socioeconomic gaps in the region.

In addition, the expansion of industrial fishing has left the traditional fishermen jobless, pushing them towards other alternatives, namely piracy. Most of the pirates are in fact former local fishermen or jobless youngsters, often guided by organized criminal groups.

Another piracy-favoring factor is the fragility of Gulf of Guinea states and their respective institutions, especially law-enforcement. Armies and police agencies of several Gulf of Guinea countries are ill-prepared, ill-equipped, or ill-trained for confronting piracy. In other cases, when corruption is involved, security forces are simply instructed not to act. Reports over the years demonstrated<sup>3</sup> that in several cases

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<sup>3</sup> Jakob Paaske Larsen, "[NIGERIAN PIRACY CAN BE MANAGED](#)," *BIMCO*, June 19, 2019.

of hijacking or kidnapping, the pirates received in advance specific instructions on which vessel to attack and which crew member or seafarer to kidnap, or they received warnings about security vessels in the area. This points to a level of complicity at the state level in some cases.

Piracy reflects the weakness of the local authorities' control over coast and offshore areas, discouraging foreign investments in the region, and particularly in oil-platforms and port activities. As consequence of insecurity and lack of investments, blue economy<sup>4</sup> policies are sidelined in favor of mass fishery and illegal fisheries, which are often controlled by foreign groups and even by international consortiums. It is a vicious cycle.

### **National and International engagements**

International experience in combatting piracy in the Red Sea demonstrated the necessity and the efficiency of multi-actor-concerted actions. Parallel to international initiatives, countries along the Gulf of Guinea basin, especially Nigeria, also launched their own programs to curb maritime assaults.

In 2008, the Maritime Organization of West and Central Africa (MOWCA) created the Sub-regional Integrated Coastguard Network,<sup>5</sup> aimed at coordinating maritime security policies.

In 2011, the UN security Council adopted resolution S/RES/2018,<sup>6</sup> condemning threats of piracy and armed robbery on the seas of the Gulf of Guinea and calling for strengthened regional cooperation. A second resolution on this issue was adopted by the UN Security Council in 2012<sup>7</sup>. Together, these resolutions encouraged members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC), to jointly counter piracy and armed robbery at sea in the region by means of bilateral or regional maritime patrols. The two resolutions urged Gulf of Guinea states to collaborate with the African Union and to convene an annual summit aimed at developing a comprehensive joint regional maritime strategy, and to establish an inter-regional coordination center in Cameroon.

Currently, the central declarative tool elaborated by countries in the region is the 2013 Yaoundé Code of Conduct,<sup>8</sup> committing its 25 signatories (MOWCA members) to repress piracy, armed robbery against ships, and illicit maritime activity in west and central Africa. It constituted a maritime security framework prioritizing regional

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<sup>4</sup> The World Bank defines Blue Economy as: "Sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystem." For more see: The World Bank, "[What is the Blue Economy?](#)," June 6, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> AMSSA - African Maritime Safety and Security Agency, "[Integrated Coastguard Network – West-Central Africa](#)".

<sup>6</sup> UN Security Council, "[Resolution 2018 \(2011\)](#)," Adopted by the Security Council at its 6645th meeting, on 31 October 2011.

<sup>7</sup> UN Security Council, "[Resolution 2039 \(2012\)](#)," Adopted by the Security Council at its 6727th meeting, on 29 February 2012.

<sup>8</sup> "[CODE OF CONDUCT CONCERNING THE REPRESSION OF PIRACY, ARMED ROBBERY AGAINST SHIPS, AND ILLICIT MARITIME ACTIVITY IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA](#)," June 25, 2013.

information-sharing and cooperation. The framework went beyond piracy, hijacking of boats, and kidnaping of crew members to include also illegal and unregulated fishing, maritime terrorism, trafficking in narcotics and wildlife products, and maritime pollution.<sup>9</sup> On the practical side, it brought about the development of two regional information-sharing centers: one for central Africa states, situated in the Republic of the Congo, and one in the Ivory Coast, assisting western Africa states.

The European Union launched in 2019 its Coordinated Maritime Presences program, commencing its implementation in 2020. In the past two years, five EU member states (Denmark, France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) deployed naval forces in the region, granting a continuous presence there of at least one ship permanently in the zone. Last November, the Danish naval patrol killed four pirates in an exchange of fire off the coast of Nigeria, outside Nigeria's territorial waters. The EU decided to extend the program for two more years (starting January 2022).<sup>10</sup>

Out of all the Gulf of Guinea basin countries, Nigeria is the largest crude oil exporter, thus the most vulnerable to maritime insecurity. In 2015, it announced an inter-ministerial maritime security project titled Deep Blue. Its first stage started in 2018, officially launched in 2021. Its objective is to secure Nigerian waters along the Gulf of Guinea and the country's oil infrastructure with a coordinated combination of land, sea, and air forces. As part of these efforts to boost maritime policing capabilities, the Nigerian navy acquired 173 assorted boats in 2018<sup>11</sup> and upgraded its surveillance equipment. In a show of power, it deployed warships last November, as well as two helicopters and 1,500 troops for the Grand African NEMO military exercise against piracy in the region.<sup>12</sup>

While the pandemic has reduced the number of commercial vessels in seas, partially explaining the very recent decline in piracy, it is this non-exhaustive list of international and national moves against piracy that explains the ongoing structured trend of decline. The Gulf of Guinea region recorded 28 incidents of piracy and armed robbery between January and September 2021, in comparison to 46 incidents for the same nine-month period in 2020.<sup>13</sup> Taking, for example, the third yearly quarter (July to September), 11 incidents were recorded in the Gulf of Guinea in 2018, 13 incidents in 2019, 7 incidents in 2020 and only 5 incidents in 2021. The number of crew members kidnapped also dropped, with 12 people kidnapped in the third quarter of 2018, 30 kidnapped during the same period in 2019, 31 kidnapped in 2020, and only one crew member kidnapped in the third quarter of 2021.

The IMB Piracy and Armed Robbery Map for 2022, has so far recoded three attacks in the region since the beginning of the year: two incidents, in Liberia and in Angola, where robbers bordered tankers and stole equipment and property of the crew, and one more serious incident in Abidjan, where about a dozen of armed pirates hijacked a

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<sup>9</sup> Stable Seas, "[Gauging Maritime Security in West and Central Africa, Stable Seas](#)," August 24, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> The Maritime Executive, "[EU Renews its Commitment to Anti-Piracy Patrols in Gulf of Guinea](#)," January 22, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Ships and Ports, "[Navy reiterates commitment to secure Nigeria's maritime domain](#)," May 16, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> *Premium Times*, "[Pirates' Attacks: Navy deploys 13 warships, 1,500 troops in Gulf of Guinea](#)," November 4, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> ICC-CCS, "[Piracy and armed robbery incidents at lowest level in decades, but IMB cautions against complacency](#)," October 14, 2021.

drifting tanker, holding crew members hostage for several hours before disembarking the ship with part of the vessel's cargo and cash belonging to the crew.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, out of the three incidents, no attack was registered off the Nigerian coast, reflecting the downward trend detected in 2021, with Nigeria reporting only four incidents in the first nine months of 2021, compared with 17 incidents in the same period of 2020.

### **What factors could slow the decline of piracy?**

The corona-generated global economic crisis affects piracy as well as the effort to curb it. We have already mentioned the reduced number of commercial vessels when the pandemic first broke out leading to fewer vessels that could be attacked. On the other hand, the poor Gulf of Guinea population is becoming even poorer because of the crisis. It is pushing more people to extreme/criminal solutions for livelihood. Moreover, the crisis has accelerated the decrease of oil prices, at least before the present Russia-Ukraine crisis, hitting especially the single-product-economies of several of the Gulf of Guinea countries.

But there is also another geopolitical scenario that could hinder the further decline of piracy, which is growing Chinese involvement in the region. The Stable Seas non-profit, in partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the UN missions of Ghana, Norway and Nigeria, initiated a report last December on the Cost of Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. In the days after the publishing of the report, Ghana and Norway began circulating a UN draft resolution, designed to push for an international response to the Gulf of Guinea piracy and armed robbery. The report was presented to the UN security Council on January 10, 2022,<sup>15</sup> but to date, no official resolution has been adopted. Western diplomatic sources claimed<sup>16</sup> that China was behind the failure.

This move by China to block such a resolution could be explained by two policies pushed forward in the past few years.

The first would be Chinese overfishing off the African coast, which effectively destroys fishery resources, depriving local fishermen of their livelihoods. As far as Beijing is concerned, too much international attention on piracy issues in the Gulf of Guinea (such as a UN resolution) would inevitably shed light on these unsustainable, possibly undeclared, Chinese fishing practices.

The second policy would be Chinese security interests in Africa. In 2017, as part of its efforts to increase its regional geopolitical influence, China established in Djibouti its first-ever overseas naval military base. For the past year and a half, American defense officials have been warning that China now considers establishing a second naval military base in Africa, perhaps in Equatorial Guinea. In a 2021 report to Congress,<sup>17</sup> the US defense department warned that China could add military facilities along the African Atlantic coastline in the coming years. If built, the Equatorial Guinea naval

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<sup>14</sup> ICC-CCS, [IMB Piracy and Armed Robbery Map 2022](#).

<sup>15</sup> Ghada Waly, "[Security Council Briefing on UNOWAS](#)," UNODC, January 10, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> In talks with the press, on condition of anonymity.

<sup>17</sup> US Office of the Secretary of Defense, "[Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China](#)," Annual report to Congress 2021.

base would be China's first Atlantic-shore military facility,<sup>18</sup> offering Beijing a unique strategic set up vis-à-vis the US east coast. China did not confirm or deny any of these American suspicions. Still, such Chinese security interests could also explain why no concrete resolution for international security measures in the Gulf of Guinea have been adopted so far by the UN Security Council.

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<sup>18</sup> Michael M. Phillips, "[China Seeks First Military Base on Africa's Atlantic Coast, US Intelligence Finds](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2021.