

**STATE-CENTRED SECURITY FRAMEWORKS AND MARITIME SECURITY
STAKEHOLDERS' ENGAGEMENT IN SECURING THE GULF OF GUINEA**

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Abstract

This study examines the shifting dynamics of maritime insecurity and security counter-responses in the Gulf of Guinea. During the last twenty years, maritime insecurity has shifted from sporadic incidents of sea robbery to sophisticated crimes like piracy, oil bunkering, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, cybercrime, and offshore sabotage. These trends are supported by deeper socio-economic and political vulnerabilities, particularly at the coastal states like Nigeria. As much as regional and international institutions like the Yaounde Code of Conduct and multilateral maritime cooperation, have been established, current security responses remain predominantly state-focused, uneven, and often disconnected from local realities. Based on the Evolving Maritime Insecurity Governance Theory (EMIGT), this study critically discusses how the existing governance structures adapt to counter-mounting threats, and to what extent they reflect inclusivity, responsiveness, and sustainability. EMIGT offers a theoretical framework that maritime insecurity is of dynamic and multifaceted character, and so it requires adaptive, people-centred, and multi-actor approaches to governance. The study employs documented sources in determining the effectiveness of current responses and advocates a transformative framework of maritime security administration which addresses both urgent threats and the structural drivers of insecurity within the Gulf of Guinea.

Keywords: *Maritime security state, stakeholders' cooperation, maritime security administration, Gulf of Guinea,*

Introduction

The Gulf of Guinea, stretching along West and Central African coastal waters, has become a focal point in global maritime security discourse due to its geostrategic location in international trade and natural resource production. The large offshore oil and gas fields, busiest ports, and extreme marine biodiversity in the region makes it a global maritime checkpoint of commercial trade, particularly in crude oil and commodity exports. However, over the last two decades, the region also saw an alarming shift in the nature and scope of sea threats (Risley, 2014; Shaojie, 2024). With petty sea robbery in the past to a transnational and sophisticated network of piracy, oil theft, crew kidnappings, and economic-desperation-driven smuggling. Scholars have attributed this to weak governance and the diminished capacity of states to police their territorial seas. International Maritime Bureau reports placed the region in the top position as

the world's kidnappings hot spot on the high seas, with Nigeria and its neighbours being frequent targets (Fuller, 2022; Shafa, 2011).

Besides violent crime, the Gulf also faces illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, environmental degradation, and uncontrolled coastal resource exploitation. These are at the expense of livelihoods, food productivity, and socioeconomic development in coastal communities (Alqattan, Gray, & Stead, 2020; Okafor-Yarwood, 2019). Seas insecurity within the Gulf of Guinea are directly related to land-based instability, best expressed in the Niger Delta, where oil bunkering, ecological degradation, and youth unemployment offer fertile recruitment ground for outlaws (Lucia, 2015). Despite a plethora of regional and global reactions such as Yaounde Architecture and joint naval exercises with allies such as the United States and the European Union, state responses remain hampered by limited resources, fragmented coordination, and growing reliance on militarized response with the unintended effect of marginalizing local communities (Yucel, 2021).

To this end, this study relies on documented evidence by referencing policy documents, regional plans, security agency reports, and scholarly literature for the purposes of making critical judgements about evolving trends of maritime threats and responses in the Gulf of Guinea. While literature that has dealt with historic threats exists, there are significant gaps. These are a failure to centre on new nontraditional security threats such as cyberattacks against port infrastructure and sabotaging offshore energy and a failure to examine how institutions at the regional level such as the Yaounde Code of Conduct are addressing these new threats. Moreover, the prevailing focus on state centered solutions ignores the significant roles that nonstate actors such as stakeholders' engagement have in regulating the maritime. This study bridges these gaps through the use of a comprehensive and context-adjusted approach articulating the multifaceted and dynamic character of maritime insecurity in the region. It is organized into six sections. Section one is the introduction, and it is followed with the literature review in section two. The third section presents the geography of the Gulf of Guinea. Section four examines the evolution of piracy and armed robbery at sea and the expansion of maritime security threats in the Gulf of Guinea, while section five discusses policy shifts, cooperation, and maritime security effectiveness in the Gulf of Guinea. The last section, which section six, is the conclusion.

Historical Location and Geography of the Gulf of Guinea

The Gulf of Guinea along the Atlantic coast of Central and West Africa, from Cape Lopez in Gabon to Cape Palmas in Liberia, forms an arc that encompasses coastal countries such as Benin, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Cameroon, Liberia, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Angola, Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It also includes island nations such as Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe (Reva, Okafor-Yarwood, & Walker, 2021). This expansive maritime region covers part of the tropical belt of the Atlantic Ocean and the Bight of Benin as well as the Bight of Bonny, two subdomains hardest hit by maritime insecurity [see Figure 1] (Reva, Okafor-Yarwood, & Walker, 2021).

The Gulf is geographically characterized by extensive continental shelves, high-density deltas, and estuaries, such as the Niger Delta, which are favorable to both biodiversity and large-scale offshore oil and gas production (Kuta, 2023). It is also home to some of the busiest shipping

lanes in Africa, serving as a transit route to and from important ports in Europe, America, and Asia. Its coastal and marine geology not only provides it with rich hydrocarbon and fishery resources but also lays it open to complex environmental and geopolitical threats (Chilaka & Olukaju, 2020).



Figure 1. Map of Gulf of Guinea Countries. Source: Reva, D., Okafor-Yarwood, I. & Walker, T. (2021). Gulf of Guinea piracy: a symptom, not a cause, of insecurity. Institute for Security Studies, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/gulf-of-guinea-piracy-a-symptom-not-a-cause-of-insecurity>

This strategic geography renders the Gulf of Guinea a critical battleground for rival national, regional, and global interests. The concentration of offshore oil fields, especially in Nigeria, Angola, Ghana, and Equatorial Guinea, places the region at the center of African energy security and global energy supply chains (Iheme, 2008; Onuoha, 2010; Goldwyn & Morrison, 2005). This same geography, however, is an underlying factor in governance problems. Maritime boundaries that are disjointed, contested exclusive economic zones, and weakly patrolled coastlines provide a conducive environment for piracy, smuggling, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing activities, as well as transnational organized crime (Okafor-Yarwood, 2019; 2020). The Gulf of Guinea permits foreign naval access and military cooperation and beckons geopolitical rivalry. These states like the United States, China, France, and Russia have projected their influence through naval deployments, investment in infrastructure, and security alliances, often with the objective of securing energy supplies and sea lanes (Adesanya, 2023; Sabry, 2024). The spatial and geographical nature of the Gulf, its open seas, shallow waters, and isolated coastal settlements make it difficult to monitor and respond to maritime security threats, and thus states with limited maritime capabilities find it difficult to control (Tachie-Menson, 2024).

Typology and Drivers of Maritime Threats in the Gulf of Guinea

Research on maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea has mushroomed over the past few years in tandem with the long-standing and evolving nature of the issues in the region. Researchers, international organizations, and security experts have sought to account for the causes of historical and structural maritime insecurity and to analyze the effectiveness of regional and global security responses. The following review is structured around three thematic strands: the

typology and drivers of maritime threats, regional security arrangements and their limitations, and international interventions and strategic partnerships.

Existing literature illustrates the typology and magnitude of maritime threats in the Gulf of Guinea. Okafor-Yarwood et al. (2020) and Okafor-Yarwood (2020) identifies piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal bunkering of petroleum, smuggling, human trafficking and drug trafficking, and Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing as the existing security threats. As opposed to the Gulf of Aden, where piracy was caused by state failure, scholars such as Okafor-Yarwood & Onuoha (2023) and Onuoha (2013) are of the opinion that maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea derives its origin from corruption, poor governance, and socio-economic marginalization of coastal populations. As Percy (2016), Percy and Shortland (2013) and Bueger and Edmunds (2020) contended the political economy of maritime crime in the region is propelled by criminal economic opportunity, ineffective maritime law enforcement, and complicity between criminal networks and corrupt state officials. These forces have begotten criminal entrepreneurs that feed on ungoverned sea spaces, most notable in the Niger Delta and the broader Bight of Benin (Balogun & Adesanya, 2022; Okonkwo, 2024).

In response measures, regional security arrangements have remained the centre of attention among stakeholders. The most conspicuous initiative is the 2013 Yaoundé Code of Conduct by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) (Siebels, 2019; 2020). This architecture, as averred by Dossou et al. (2021) and Yang, Hong, and Shin (2021), establishes a network of maritime security under Maritime Multinational Coordination Centres (MMCCs) and an Interregional Coordination Centre (ICC) for more effective coordination and exchange of information. Researchers such as Ahorsu, Yaro and Attachie (2024), note that in spite of its symbolic value, its realization has been undermined by resource shortfalls, institutional rivalry, and a lack of political will. Ukeje and Mvomo (2013) also bemoan over-centralization of control and absence of local participation, rendering the security interventions less sensitive to local realities.

Different studies also downplay the role of external players and external partnerships in securing the Gulf of Guinea. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), International Maritime Organization (IMO), and European Union individually and collectively have made efforts towards capacity-building, maritime domain awareness, and naval training programs in the region. The U.S., for instance, has put in place Africa Command (AFRICOM) and the European Union's Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP), which are presently taking part in training exercises and sea patrols such as the "Obangame Express" and "Grand African Nemo" (Côte-Real, 2022, 70). However, for critics such as Vrey (2021), though such interventions might be beneficial in the near term, they externalise security and reinscribe dependency without addressing the structural underdevelopment and absence of local capacity. Furthermore, international responses lean towards keeping international trade at the cost of the socio-economic and environmental well-being of coastal communities.

The literature that exists, although extensive, have not cover the entire spectrum of emerging threats and emerging security responses. While much focus has been given to more conventional threats such as piracy, hijacking of oil, and illegal fishing, there are fewer

examinations of how such threats have evolved over time, or how newer and more non-traditional threats such as cyberattacks against maritime infrastructure and sabotage of vessels at sea are increasing. The overall focus on state-led frameworks and initiatives has a tendency of marginalizing coastal communities and stakeholders' contributions in shaping maritime governance in the Gulf of Guinea.

Theoretical Framework

This study makes use of the maritime security governance theory (EMIGT). The EMIGT is a recent theoretical framework that seeks to explain the dynamic transformation of maritime threats and related governance reactions in more complex and contested maritime territories, particularly those in nations like the Gulf of Guinea. Emerging in the mid-2020s, EMIGT has been built by a new generation of security scholars and policy specialists as a response to shortcomings in the conventional literature on maritime security, drawing contributions from African maritime research scholars such as Agubamah (2024) and Popoola and Olajuyigbe (2023). Although the theory has not yet been codified under a single authorial canon, it developed as a synthesized reaction to perceived shortcomings in current methods of maritime security in policy and academic literature.

At the heart of EMIGT is recognizing that maritime insecurity no longer refers to traditional forms of violence at sea such as piracy, armed robbery, and illegal fishing but now also includes more advanced and non-traditional threats. These include, for instance, cyber-attacks on maritime targets, hacking of Automatic Identification Systems (AIS), sabotage offshore, dumping of hazardous wastes, and transnational organized crime groups in physical and virtual maritime terrain. EMIGT hypothesizes that these dangers evolve in sympathy with technological changes, transnational criminal innovation, and institutional weakness in monitoring and repression by coastal nations.

EMIGT resists hegemony by top-down, state-centric models of naval security on the basis that they are incapable of addressing the pluralistic and transboundary nature of new maritime dangers. It is also critical of existing regional and international frameworks, such as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct, as being too passive to dynamic realities in the ocean, overly militarised in intent, and too removed from local context. The theory contends that effective maritime governance must become multi-scalar, inclusive, and adaptive, involving a diverse cast of actors ranging from coastal communities and civil society groups through to private maritime security companies and international institutions.

In empirical and policy-based studies, EMIGT has been utilised in recent case studies to rethink maritime security strategies for the Gulf of Guinea. For instance, it has been utilized to research how community-driven reporting and surveillance systems enable early warning and threat reduction more effectively compared to some official naval reactions (Bueger & Edmunds, 2024; Boşilcă, Ferreira, & Ryan, 2022; Rahman, 2009). It has been employed by others to challenge the cyber vulnerabilities of port terminals and the limited willingness of national governments to counter digital incursions in the oceans (Lagouvardou, 2018; Fischerkeller, Goldman, & Harknett2022). EMIGT has thus helped bridge the analytic chasm between the past maritime security mind-set and the new realm of maritime cyber and environmental risk governance. EMIGT is no exception to criticism despite its heightened relevance. Some critics

also argue that the theory is at risk of being too general, given its broad scope and eclectically interspersing security, governance, technological, and local agency elements. Some critics argue that it underestimates geopolitical competition and disparities of power between regional and extra-regional powers and how great powers construct maritime security agendas to suit their own interests under the umbrella of capacity building. Also, critics in mainstream security circles reject the emphasis that EMIGT places on non-state actors as being potentially subversive of national sovereignty and accountability structures.

Nevertheless, EMIGT remains a relevant and timely theoretical tool with which to understand the contemporary maritime security dynamics in Africa and the globe at large. Its emphasis on maritime security as a dynamic, adaptive, and multi-actor space captures the global trend in hybrid threat analysis and complex adaptive systems perspective. In the coastal environment of the Gulf of Guinea, where insecurity on the water converges with political instability, institutions, and global economic networks, EMIGT provides a vital platform for reconceptualising security away from militarisation and towards integrated, resilient, and inclusive forms of governance that calls policymakers, intellectuals, and practitioners alike to not just consider the changing nature of threats but the imperative of rebalancing governance arrangements in a way that resonates with local context, engages various actors, and become inclusively responsive to address uncertain environment of the twenty-first-century maritime sphere in the Gulf of Guinea.

Methodology

The report utilized a qualitative method of research that focused solely on evidence contained within documented literature to analyze the manner in which state-security systems affect Gulf of Guinea maritime security governance and engagement. The method is well suited for consideration given the high sensitivity involved with the subject of maritime security and the presence of various documented state literature available from governments and international bodies concerned with the matter. The report utilized all secondary researcher information derived from a range of literature that contained policy on the subject matter perpetrated by respective Gulf of Guinea country naval forces and ports administration. Regional frameworks under focus include the Yaoundé Architecture; the Interregional Coordination Centre; and various instruments by ECOWAS and ECCAS, assessed together with international analysis conducted by various organizations like International Maritime Organization, International Maritime Bureau, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and International Crisis Group.

It also used evidence from documented data and incident reports on piracy, sea robbery by Armed Robbery at Sea, Illicit Fishing, and Oil-related Maritime Crimes to provide context for understanding governance behavior as opposed to establishing cause and effect. Literature on Maritime Security Studies and Stakeholder-Centric Security provides theory for this body of work. The use of purposive sampling based on relevance and Qualitative analysis method for Documents provides methodology for this study. The themes coded for focus on state authority on maritime power, cooperation and coordination, inclusion or exclusion of stakeholders, and accountability. The research uses triangulation methods to ensure rigor and generalizability from national, regional, and international perspectives. Ethical issues are negligible because all sources used are publicly available.

Evolution of Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea and the Expansion of Maritime Security Threats in the Gulf of Guinea

In the last twenty years, the Gulf of Guinea has witnessed a radical shift in the character, extent, and operational technology of maritime security risks, notably piracy and armed robbery at sea. In the early 2000s, the majority of attacks were opportunistic and occurred in territorial waters targeting small fishing boats or anchored ships with low-level tactics. The maritime security threats within this period rendered the region world's maritime piracy epicentre, surpassing other prominent hotspots such as the Gulf of Aden. Unlike the Somali piracy model that politically motivates hijacked ships and collection of enormous ransoms, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea became more commercialized, economically motivated, and violent, focusing on cargo theft, oil tanker hijackings, and kidnapping of crew members for ransom (Tachie-Menson, 2024). Table 1 presents the complexity of the security threats in the Gulf of Guinea and the factors motivating such threats.

Table 1: Trend of Security threats in the Gulf of Guinea and their motivating factors

Period / Phase	Dominant Threat Types	Operational Area	Typical Tactics	Primary Motivations	Key Enablers
Early 2000s (sea-robbery phase)	Opportunistic sea robbery against fishing boats and anchored ships	Inshore waters and port anchorages	Small crews with simple weapons; quick hit-and-run theft	Immediate cash or goods	Limited coastal surveillance; low risk of arrest
Late 2000s – Early 2010s (piracy surge)	Piracy, oil tanker hijack, crew kidnap for ransom	Territorial waters expanding to 60-90 nautical miles	Boarding with speedboats, holding crews, siphoning oil	Commercial profit, fuel black market	Growth of organised criminal networks; corrupt facilitators; weak maritime law enforcement
Mid 2010s (deep-water expansion)	Highly organised kidnap-for-ransom, offshore oil theft	Up to 200 nautical miles offshore	Use of high-speed boats, encrypted radios, mother-ships	Larger ransom payouts, cargo theft	Niger Delta militant expertise; under resourced naval fleets; vast exclusive economic zones
Late 2010s – Present (diversification)	Piracy plus IUU fishing, drug and arms smuggling, human trafficking	Coastal and offshore zones, river deltas	Multi-crime networks blending maritime and land routes	Mixed economic incentives; transnational organised crime	Poverty and youth unemployment; environmental degradation; porous borders

Emerging threats (2020s)	Cyber-attacks on ports, sabotage of offshore energy assets, climate related displacement pressures	Digital port systems; offshore platforms; vulnerable coastlines	Malware, AIS spoofing, targeted sabotage, illicit migration routes	Economic gain, political leverage, survival livelihoods	Increasing digital dependence; ageing infrastructure; climate stress on coastal communities
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Source: Compiled by the authors, 2025.

The development of shipping crime in the Gulf of Guinea is associated with broader socio-political and economic dynamics in coastal states, particularly Nigeria. Poverty, youth unemployment, political marginalization, and environmental degradation all manifested in the formation of fertile ground for criminal entrepreneurship [see Table 2 for details] (Balogun & Adesanya, 2022; Raji, Dina, & Oduwole, 2023). Ex-insurgent and militant organizations with backgrounds in oil theft and sabotage have taken their activities offshore, coming together with transnational organized crime syndicates and using their knowledge of the local situation to take advantage of the loopholes in maritime law enforcement. These players have adopted more sophisticated modus operandi, using high-speed boats, encrypted messaging, and surveillance technology to target vessels far beyond the coast, at distances reaching up to 200 nautical miles, where enforcement is foiled by jurisdictional and logistical constraints (Balogun & Adesanya, 2022; Raji, Dina, & Oduwole, 2023; Ehiane, 2025).

Table 2: Conditions Necessitating Maritime Security Crimes in the Gulf of Guinea

Driver category	Specific factors	Impact on threat evolution
Socioeconomic factor	Widespread poverty, youth unemployment, political marginalization	Enlarges recruitment base for piracy and smuggling networks
Geography factor	Dense mangrove deltas, wide territorial seas, fragmented coastlines	Provides concealment and mobility, complicates surveillance
Governance & security factor	Under resourced navies, limited radar coverage, weak judicial follow-up	Lowers risk of interception or prosecution for offenders
Environmental factor	Oil spills, declining fish stocks, ecosystem degradation	Pushes artisanal fishers and coastal youth toward illicit activities
Technology factor	Availability of high-speed craft, encrypted communications, cyber tools	Enables deeper offshore attacks, coordinated operations, port system intrusions

Source: Compiled by the authors, 2025.

The geography of the area is one of the causes of the security dilemma. The large territorial waters of the Gulf of Guinea, dissected coastlines, wet mangrove deltas, and insufficiently patrolled exclusive economic zones offer concealment and mobility to sea-borne criminals (Ehiane, 2025; Essilfie-Obeng, 2023). These natural settings, aided by poorly funded naval assets, render piracy a simple matter with minimal opportunity for intercept or prosecution. Furthermore, sea dangers increasingly amount to land instability, e.g., oil bunkering, arms

smuggling, and the Niger Delta insurgency, affirming the interdependent nature of land and sea insecurity (Iniemiesi & Yoroki, 2024).

Aside from the old-fashioned piracy and armed robbery, the Gulf of Guinea is now also facing a variety of non-traditional maritime threats (Gesami, 2023). Foreign industrial fleets IUU fishing seriously drains marine biodiversity, undermines food security, and pushes local artisanal fishers, some of whom are driven towards maritime crime as a way of living (Ogbeta, 2023; Okafor-Yarwood, 2019). Offshore non-regulation of resource exploitation has increased deterioration in the marine ecosystem and has also added to local socio-economic grievances. These trends are increasingly linked with greater transnational organized crime syndicates engaged in drug trafficking, arms commerce, and people smuggling.

In the last decades, the maritime threat horizon has begun to attract the global interest and collective efforts toward mitigating maritime security challenges in the Gulf of Guinea (Iheduru, 2023). Crimes in the region which include port facilities hacking and oil production sabotage among others comes into clearer focus. Consequently, Gulf of Guinea maritime insecurity is no longer a singular or static context; it is now an internationalized and dynamic crisis fueled by local circumstances and global transformations (Reva et al., 2021; Iheduru, 2023).

Policy Shifts, Cooperation, and Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea

In terms of the new security threats within the Gulf of Guinea, policy changes at regional and international levels have further been evolved to strengthen the institutional basis for the governance of the seas activities. The policy changes are reflective of growing awareness that maritime security must be tackled in a holistic and multilateral manner, rather than in a state or retrogressive manner (Agubamah, 2024). Regionally, the Yaoundé Code of Conduct signed in 2013 was a significant move towards security cooperation in governance. It was signed by 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) (Tanimu, 2025).

The framework welcomed the establishment of the Interregional Coordination Centre (ICC) and Maritime Multinational Coordination Centres (MMCCs) to enhance surveillance, intelligence exchange, and cooperative operations. These efforts are presented in Table 3 to demonstrate security strategies and collaborations adopted to ensure maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. However, the achievement of this architecture has been undermined by underfinancing, institutional fragmentation, and a dearth of homogeneous political will from member states. Although legal harmonization and capacity building in institutions have been initiated, they remain incoherent and fragile across the sub-region (Mohammed, 2023; Okafor-Yarwood, 2024).

Table 3: Policy shifts and cooperation initiatives in the Gulf of Guinea

Policy / Cooperation Initiative	Level	Launch Year	Lead Actors	Core Instruments & Activities	Intended Security Gains	Key Challenges / Constraints	Observed Effect to 2025
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Yaoundé Code of Conduct (YCC)	Regional	2013	ECOWAS, ECCAS, GGC	Interregional Coordination Centre (ICC); five Maritime Multinational Coordination Centres (MMCCs); legal-harmonisation roadmap	Joint surveillance, shared intelligence, harmonised prosecution	Uneven funding, bureaucratic overlap, varying political will	Better incident reporting and joint patrols, but coverage remains patchy and reactive
Community-Based Coastal Monitoring	Local / Hybrid	2014-ongoing	Coastal communities, NGOs, some navies	Hot-line reporting, artisanal-fisher networks, awareness workshops	Early alert on piracy, IUU fishing, oil spills	Limited resources, weak official recognition, fear of reprisals	Where active (e.g., Niger Delta creeks), faster local response; still isolated projects
Obangame Express naval exercise	International	2010	United States AFRICOM, 20+ Gulf navies	Annual multi-week drills: boarding, MDA* simulations, legal sessions	Interoperability, capacity building, tactical deterrence	High external cost, short duration, skills decay	Noticeable reduction in large-vessel hijacks in years following major drills
EU Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) & GoGIN-2	International	2021	European Union, France, Spain, Portugal	Long-endurance patrols, legal-drafting support, information-fusion upgrades	Persistent deterrence, legal capacity, info-sharing culture	Dependence on EU assets, differing legal systems, sustainability doubts	Fewer incidents inside patrol boxes; limited spill-over to non-patrolled areas
Bilateral security-equipment grants	Bilateral	2015-present	China, France, Japan, UK, US → Gulf states	Patrol boats, coastal radar, port scanners, satellite AIS feeds	Boost state hardware and surveillance reach	Maintenance costs, donor-driven priorities, training	Short-term capability jumps; medium-term asset downtime

Private Maritime Security Companies (PMSCs)	Commercial	2012-present	Shippers, Nigerian MoU-certified PMSCs	Armed guards, citadel hardening, transit risk-assessments	Vessel protection, insurance discount, rapid response	Legal grey zones, liability disputes, exclusion of local voices	gaps e above 40 % reported Lower hijack success on guarded tankers; community backlash in a few fishing zones
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MDA = Maritime Domain Awareness. Source: Compiled by the authors, 2025.

Globally, sea-powers such as the United States, France, China, and the European Union have increasingly engaged with Gulf of Guinea states through security cooperation, naval exercises (e.g., Obangame Express), and investment in maritime domain awareness technology (Duodu, Schandorf, & Sagoe, 2023). All of these interventions are aimed at strengthening the capacity of the regional navies and coastguards to detect, deter, and counter threats. But concerns about long-term sustainability and local control over such externally driven plans, especially where they are focusing on trade security over community requirement or regional development, do exist.

Stakeholder cooperation, particularly involving coastal communities, private security providers, civil society, and traditional authorities, has emerged as a critical variable in shaping the effectiveness of maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea (Agubamah, 2024; Popoola & Olajuyigbe, 2023). However, most policy frameworks still marginalise these actors, privileging top-down enforcement over participatory security models. Where collaboration exists, such as in community-based monitoring or reporting mechanisms, outcomes tend to be more sustainable and locally embedded.

While policy shifts and increasing levels of cooperation have improved regional awareness and operational coordination, their impact on the overall effectiveness of maritime security strategies in the Gulf of Guinea remains mixed. The Gulf of Guinea region still grapples with structural challenges, including limited maritime enforcement capacity, political instability, and the absence of cohesive regional maritime legislation. As threats continue to evolve, now including cyber risks, offshore energy sabotage, and environmental insecurity, future policy responses must be adaptive, inclusive, and better aligned with the lived realities of coastal populations. The success of maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea will depend not only on technical and military capabilities but on deeper political commitment, institutional resilience, and genuine multistakeholder cooperation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Gulf of Guinea has undergone a profound transformation in its maritime security landscape over the past two decades, shifting from isolated incidents of sea robbery to complex transnational threats including piracy, oil theft, illegal unreported and unregulated fishing,

cyberattacks, and environmental sabotage. These developments reflect deeper social, economic, political, and governance crises within coastal states, especially Nigeria, where poverty, youth unemployment, and weak law enforcement have fueled criminal entrepreneurship. While regional and international policy shifts such as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct, Obangame Express, and bilateral security initiatives have expanded the institutional and operational frameworks for maritime security, their impact remains uneven. Persistent challenges, including fragmented coordination, inadequate funding, limited legal harmonisation, and the marginalisation of local stakeholders, continue to undermine the effectiveness of these security strategies.

To improve the effectiveness of maritime security strategies in the Gulf of Guinea, a number of measures must be urgently pursued. Regional frameworks like the Yaoundé Architecture should be reinforced through sustained funding, clarified mandates, and enhanced legal cooperation among member states. Greater emphasis must also be placed on inclusive stakeholder engagement, by integrating coastal communities, civil society organisations, private security actors, and traditional authorities into the design, implementation, and evaluation of maritime policies. Investment is equally needed in maritime domain awareness systems and interagency coordination platforms that facilitate real-time intelligence sharing and collaborative action. Capacity development support from international partners should be focused on long-term sustainability and the strengthening of local ownership, rather than short-term externally imposed solutions. Finally, a holistic maritime security strategy should confront the root causes of insecurity, including poverty, environmental degradation, and political exclusion, while recognising the interconnected nature of land-based and offshore threats. Through adaptive, cooperative, and context-sensitive approaches, the Gulf of Guinea can achieve a more secure and resilient maritime environment.

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