

NIGERIA'S SECURITY INTEREST IN THE GULF OF GUINEA IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

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Abstract

Gulf of Guinea is an important maritime area of strategic concern in Nigeria due to its abundance of oil and gas and global trade routes. However, this region is bedeviled with numerous challenges. This paper entitled "Nigeria's Security Interest in the Gulf of Guinea in the Twenty first Century" focuses on the strategic significance of the gulf of Guinea to Nigeria with special consideration on the benefits enjoyed by the region and the security challenges facing Nigeria. Political realism was adopted as theoretical framework. The paper utilised a qualitative research approach and a historical research design. The primary sources of data were secondary sources such as archives, newspapers, scholarly journals, books and published reports. The Findings reveals that the security interests in the Gulf of Guinea by Nigeria is seriously threatened by political instability due to poor governance, oil theft and illegal artisanal refining in the Niger Delta, the vast maritime space combined with the lack of effective surveillance devices, lack of co-ordinated security patrols, the increased cases of piracy and insufficient legal provisions to prosecute the sea criminals on arrest. The paper concludes that the challenges will need a multifaceted and multi-subject solution. The paper recommends the revitalization of the industries and creation of jobs to prevent the youth engagement in the criminal activities, enhanced intelligence exchange between the agencies, proper training and budgeting of the security organs, and enhanced inter-regional coordination of maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea.

Keywords: *Gulf of Guinea; Maritime Security; Nigeria's Security Interests; Piracy; Oil Theft; Political Realism*

1. Introduction

The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) is the major gulf in the African region of the Atlantic Ocean located in the north-eastern part of the tropical Atlantic Ocean from Cape Lopez in Gabon, north and west to Cape Palmas in Liberia. ³ It is a vast maritime region which stretches from the north-west coast of Africa downwards to Angola on the southern fringes. It is said to include eight countries bordering the Atlantic Ocean – Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Sao Tome and Principe; with Angola and Congo as newest comers.⁴ Counting from Liberia to Angola will give us thirteen (13) countries as follows: Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo (Brazzaville), Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola and Sao Tome and Principe. Four official languages are spoken in the region namely French, English, Portuguese and Spanish of which three are official languages of the United Nations (Olaoluwa, 2023).

The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) has increasingly attracted attention in global maritime discussions due to its strategic location, abundant natural resources, and growing relevance to international trade and energy supply. Situated along the Atlantic coastline of West and Central

Africa, the region connects several coastal states to major global shipping routes linking Africa with Europe, the Americas, and other international markets. Because of its economic and geopolitical relevance, the Gulf of Guinea has become one of the most important maritime regions in Africa (Mañe, 2005; Gilpin, 2007).

Although the boundaries of the Gulf of Guinea are sometimes defined differently by scholars, the region generally refers to the maritime space extending across the Atlantic coast of West and Central Africa. In institutional terms, the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) provides a clearer political framework for understanding the region, bringing together countries such as Angola, Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Nigeria, and São Tomé and Príncipe. The creation of this regional body reflects the recognition among member states that cooperative approaches are necessary for managing maritime resources, addressing boundary issues, and strengthening maritime governance in the region (Ukeje & Mvomo Ela, 2013).

The economic importance of the Gulf of Guinea is closely linked to its vast reserves of natural resources, particularly oil and natural gas. Several coastal states in the region depend heavily on offshore hydrocarbon production for national revenue and economic development. Nigeria, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea are among the major oil producers whose offshore energy resources are located within this maritime zone. As a result, the Gulf of Guinea has become an important centre for global energy supply and maritime trade, attracting the interest of major international powers and multinational energy companies (Osinowo, 2015; Mustapha, 2020). For Nigeria in particular, maritime activities within the Gulf of Guinea are central to the country's economic structure, especially in relation to crude oil exports and international shipping.

Regardless of these economic advantages, the Gulf of Guinea has in recent years become increasingly associated with serious maritime security challenges. Various forms of maritime crime including piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal fishing, oil theft, and smuggling—have emerged as major threats to maritime safety and regional stability. These criminal activities disrupt maritime transportation, threaten offshore infrastructure, and create significant risks for seafarers operating within the region (Onuoha, 2013; Hassan, 2017). Reports from international maritime monitoring institutions have repeatedly identified the Gulf of Guinea as one of the areas most affected by piracy and maritime attacks on commercial vessels (International Maritime Bureau, 2021; International Maritime Organization, 2021).

The consequences of maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea extend beyond maritime operations. Piracy, oil theft, and illegal fishing generate substantial economic losses for governments and private investors while also undermining the sustainable use of marine resources. These security challenges have increased the cost of maritime insurance, raised operational risks for shipping companies, and reduced investor confidence in the maritime economy of the region (Anyimadu, 2013; Asamoah Agyekum, 2024). Consequently, maritime security has become an important policy concern for both coastal states and international stakeholders interested in safeguarding global trade routes and energy supplies.

Notwithstanding, Nigeria occupies a particularly significant position within the Gulf of Guinea maritime environment. With one of the largest coastlines in West Africa and extensive offshore oil infrastructure, the country depends heavily on the security of its maritime domain for economic stability and national development. A large proportion of Nigeria's crude oil production is located in offshore fields within the Gulf of Guinea, making maritime security

essential for protecting national revenue and energy infrastructure. At the same time, Nigeria has played a prominent role in regional maritime security initiatives aimed at addressing piracy, illegal fishing, and other transnational maritime crimes (Mustapha, 2020; Mohammed, 2023).

In response to the growing security challenges in the region, several regional and international initiatives have been introduced to strengthen maritime governance and cooperation. One of the most notable efforts is the Yaoundé Code of Conduct, which promotes collaboration among West and Central African states in combating piracy and other maritime crimes. However, despite these efforts, maritime insecurity remains a persistent challenge due to factors such as weak institutional capacity, limited surveillance technology, and inadequate coordination among security agencies (Ukeje & Mvomo Ela, 2013; Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2024). This study thus becomes imperative as it seeks to examine Nigeria's security interests in the Gulf of Guinea.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In the 21st century, the Gulf of Guinea has emerged as a growing security threat, plagued by armed robbery at sea, oil theft, illegal bunkering, piracy, and kidnapping activities (Onuoha, 2013; International Maritime Bureau, 2021). The security challenges have persisted to continue to cripple maritime trade, offshore oil exploration and maritime stability in the Gulf of Guinea, especially Nigeria whose economy is highly reliant on crude oil export and maritime movement (Mustapha, 2020; Osinowo, 2015). In addition to the economic consequences, the long-term insecurity in the maritime environment poses a risk to the strategic interests and foreign policy aspirations, and regional influence of Nigeria in West Africa.

Various initiatives have been launched at the regional and international level to tackle these threats, but insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea is becoming a problem (Eruaga, 2022; Monteh, 2025). Previous studies have identified weak maritime governance mechanisms, weak surveillance systems, corruption, poor inter-agency coordination, and weak regional cooperation as the causes of this (Anyimadu, 2013; Mohammed, 2023; Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2024). Thus, the frontline between crime and law remains porous in the region, and criminal networks have been able to leverage institutional vulnerabilities in the region's legal framework to keep operating.

Although the study of piracy, maritime governance and regional security cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea has been the subject of extensive scholarly research, Nigeria's overall security concerns in the region in the twenty first century remains under-researched. Specifically, the link between maritime insecurity and Nigeria's economic, strategic and geopolitical interests in the Gulf of Guinea has not received much attention. There is a need for more scholarly research on this issue that is currently lacking in the literature. In view of this, this study explores the security interest of Nigeria to the 21st century challenge in the Gulf of Guinea.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine Nigeria's Security Interest in the Gulf of Guinea in the Twenty First Century. The specific objectives are to:

- i. examine Nigeria's economic interests in the Gulf of Guinea;
- ii. assess Nigeria's strategic and security interests in the Gulf of Guinea;
- iii. investigate the major maritime security threats affecting the Gulf of Guinea; and

- iv. examine the institutional and governance challenges affecting maritime security management in the Gulf of Guinea.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Clarifications

2.1.1 The Gulf of Guinea

The Gulf of Guinea has become one of the most strategically important maritime regions in Africa due to its economic potential, energy resources, and role in international maritime trade. Located along the Atlantic coast of West and Central Africa, the region provides access to major global shipping routes and serves as an important corridor for the transportation of crude oil, natural gas, and other commodities to global markets. Scholars have therefore increasingly emphasised the geopolitical and economic significance of the Gulf of Guinea within the broader context of global maritime security and international political economy (Mañe, 2005; Gilpin, 2007).

One of the key factors contributing to the strategic relevance of the Gulf of Guinea is the presence of extensive offshore oil and gas reserves. Several coastal states, including Nigeria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon, rely heavily on hydrocarbon resources extracted from offshore fields located within the region. As a result, the Gulf of Guinea has emerged as an important energy hub within the global energy supply system (Osinowo, 2015; Mustapha, 2020). The growing demand for energy resources has also increased the interest of international actors and multinational corporations in the region, further highlighting its global economic importance.

In addition to energy resources, the Gulf of Guinea is also rich in fisheries and other marine resources that support the livelihoods of millions of people living in coastal communities. Maritime activities such as fishing, shipping, offshore oil production, and maritime trade contribute significantly to the economic development of the region. However, the growing dependence on maritime resources has also made the region vulnerable to various security threats that undermine the sustainable management of these resources (Nwamuo et al., 2021).

In respect of its economic importance, the Gulf of Guinea continues to face a number of structural challenges related to governance, security, and regional cooperation. Weak institutional capacity, limited maritime surveillance, and overlapping maritime boundaries have complicated efforts to effectively manage the maritime environment. These challenges have created opportunities for transnational criminal networks to operate within the region's maritime domain (Mohammed, 2023). Scholars increasingly view the Gulf of Guinea not only as a zone of economic opportunity but also as a complex security environment requiring coordinated regional responses.

2.1.2 Concept of Maritime Security

The concept of maritime security has gained increasing prominence in international security studies due to the growing importance of oceans and maritime spaces for global trade, energy transportation, and economic development. Maritime security generally refers to the protection of maritime spaces from threats that could disrupt maritime activities, threaten national sovereignty, or undermine economic interests. These threats include piracy, armed

robbery at sea, illegal fishing, maritime terrorism, and other forms of transnational maritime crime (Gilpin, 2007).

Maritime security is defined as the freedom from or absence of those acts which could negatively impact on the natural integrity and resilience of any navigable waterway or undermine the safety of persons, infrastructure, cargo, vessels and other conveyances legitimately existing in, conducting lawful transactions on, or transiting through territorial and international waterway. It is concerned with the prevention of unlawful acts in the maritime domain which cuts across the oceans, seas, islands, coastal areas, and the airspace above these, including the littorals. It covers those measures employed by states and other maritime organizations and establishments to protect against seizure, sabotage, piracy, theft, terrorism activities and hostile interference with lawful operations in the maritime space. Maritime insecurity on the other hand, are threats or acts that negatively impact the natural integrity and resilience of any maritime domain or undermine the safety of persons, asset, cargo, vessels, and other conveyances legitimately existing in, conducting lawful transactions on, or transiting through the domain. Threats entail any incident, issue or entity that can cause disruption, harm or damage to an asset, system or entity pertaining to the maritime domain. This maritime insecurity comes in forms of maritime crimes or threats perpetuated on the high sea which in turn frustrates states and investors from use and benefits of the sea (Olaoluwa, 2023).

Contemporary discussions of maritime security extend beyond traditional naval defence to include broader governance mechanisms designed to regulate activities within maritime spaces. Maritime security therefore encompasses not only the protection of ships and ports but also the management of maritime resources, the enforcement of maritime laws, and the protection of marine ecosystems. In this broader sense, maritime security involves cooperation among multiple stakeholders, including naval forces, maritime law enforcement agencies, coastal communities, and international organisations (Okafor-Yarwood, 2021).

Within the Gulf of Guinea, maritime security has become an important policy priority due to the increasing frequency of maritime crimes affecting the region. Piracy attacks, oil theft, illegal fishing, and smuggling activities have significantly undermined maritime safety and economic development in the region. These security threats have prompted regional governments and international partners to implement various maritime security initiatives aimed at strengthening surveillance, law enforcement, and regional cooperation (Anyimadu, 2013).

Recent studies also emphasise the role of technological innovation and information-sharing mechanisms in improving maritime security governance. Advances in maritime domain awareness systems, satellite monitoring, and digital surveillance technologies have created new opportunities for enhancing maritime security coordination among regional states (Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2024).

2.1.3 Concept of National Security Interest

The concept of national security interest refers to the fundamental priorities that guide a state's efforts to protect its sovereignty, territorial integrity, economic stability, and political institutions. Within international relations, national security interests often shape foreign policy decisions, defence strategies, and diplomatic engagements with other states. These interests are particularly important for states whose economic survival and geopolitical influence depend heavily on strategic resources and trade routes.

For coastal states, maritime spaces represent critical components of national security interests because they provide access to natural resources, international trade routes, and strategic military positions. The protection of maritime infrastructure, offshore energy facilities, and shipping lanes is therefore considered an essential aspect of national security policy. In this regard, maritime security becomes closely linked to economic security and national development.

Nigeria's national security interests in the Gulf of Guinea are largely shaped by its economic dependence on offshore oil production and maritime trade. A significant proportion of Nigeria's crude oil exports are transported through maritime routes within the Gulf of Guinea, making the protection of these routes essential for the country's economic stability. Consequently, Nigeria's maritime security policies have increasingly focused on safeguarding offshore oil installations, protecting shipping routes, and addressing maritime criminal activities that threaten national revenue (Mustapha, 2020).

Furthermore, national security interests often influence regional cooperation and diplomatic engagement among neighbouring states. Countries within the Gulf of Guinea frequently collaborate through regional security initiatives designed to combat piracy and other transnational maritime threats. Such cooperative frameworks demonstrate how national security interests can encourage collective security arrangements within shared maritime environments (Ukeje & Mvomo Ela, 2013).

2.1.4 Strategic Importance of the Gulf of Guinea

The Gulf of Guinea holds considerable strategic importance due to its role in global energy supply, maritime trade, and regional economic development. The region's offshore oil reserves have made it one of the most significant petroleum production zones in Africa. As global demand for energy resources continues to increase, the Gulf of Guinea has attracted growing interest from international energy companies and global powers seeking access to stable sources of oil and natural gas (Osinowo, 2015).

In addition to energy resources, the Gulf of Guinea serves as a vital maritime transport corridor connecting African economies with international markets. Major shipping routes pass through the region, facilitating the movement of crude oil, agricultural products, manufactured goods, and other commodities between Africa and the rest of the world. The security of these shipping routes is therefore essential for maintaining global trade flows and protecting the economic interests of both regional states and international stakeholders (Anyimadu, 2013).

The strategic importance of the Gulf of Guinea is also reflected in the growing involvement of international actors in regional maritime security initiatives. External powers have increasingly participated in maritime security cooperation programmes aimed at strengthening naval capacity, improving maritime surveillance systems, and supporting regional security frameworks. These initiatives highlight the global significance of the Gulf of Guinea in maintaining maritime stability and protecting international trade routes (Asamoah Agyekum, 2024).

2.1.5 Maritime Insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea

Even though the gulf of guinea has economic potential, it has become increasingly associated with maritime insecurity over the past two decades. Various forms of maritime crime have emerged within the region, including piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal fishing, oil theft,

smuggling, and trafficking. These activities pose serious threats to maritime safety, economic development, and regional stability (Onuoha, 2013).

One of the issues are issues of piracy and armed robbery at sea have been among the most widely reported maritime security challenges affecting the Gulf of Guinea. Criminal groups operating within coastal areas frequently target commercial vessels, oil tankers, and fishing boats. These attacks often involve the theft of cargo, kidnapping of crew members for ransom, and the hijacking of vessels. Reports by international maritime organisations have repeatedly highlighted the Gulf of Guinea as one of the regions most affected by maritime piracy incidents (International Maritime Bureau, 2021; International Maritime Organization, 2021).

There are also challenges of illegal fishing and oil theft also represent major threats to maritime security and economic sustainability in the region. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities have resulted in significant losses for coastal states that depend on fisheries resources for food security and employment. Similarly, crude oil theft and illegal bunkering operations have generated substantial financial losses for governments and have contributed to environmental degradation in coastal areas (Phayal et al., 2024; Olaoluwa, 2023).

The persistence of these maritime security challenges reflects deeper structural problems related to governance, economic inequality, and institutional capacity within the region. Weak law enforcement mechanisms, limited maritime surveillance infrastructure, and corruption within some state institutions have created conditions that allow criminal networks to operate with relative impunity. Addressing these challenges therefore requires not only maritime patrols and security operations but also broader institutional reforms and regional cooperation.

2.2 Empirical Review

There are gamuts of empirical studies that documented on the drivers and consequences of maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea. For instance, Onuoha (2013) conducted a comprehensive analysis of piracy trends in the Gulf of Guinea and observed that maritime criminal networks in the region often exploit weak maritime governance structures and limited surveillance capacity. The study emphasised that many piracy incidents originate from coastal areas where economic marginalisation and unemployment provide incentives for participation in maritime crime.

Similarly, Anyimadu (2013) analysed maritime security challenges in the Gulf of Guinea by comparing the region with anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean. The study concluded that effective maritime security requires coordinated regional responses, improved naval capabilities, and stronger legal frameworks for prosecuting maritime crimes. Without such institutional arrangements, individual states may struggle to address transnational security threats within shared maritime environments.

In another separate study, Mohammed (2023) examined maritime security governance in the Gulf of Guinea and found that fragmented institutional arrangements and limited cooperation among maritime security agencies often undermine the effectiveness of security initiatives. The study recommended stronger coordination mechanisms and improved information-sharing among regional states.

Research has also documented on the importance of technological innovation in strengthening maritime security systems. Okafor-Yarwood et al. (2024) analysed the implementation of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and observed that technological tools such as maritime surveillance systems, satellite monitoring, and information-sharing platforms could significantly improve maritime domain awareness across the region. However, the study noted that many coastal states still face capacity limitations that hinder the effective use of these technologies.

In another independent paper, Eruaga (2022) explored the strength of maritime security measures put by the Nigerian and other coastal states in dealing with the problem of piracy and maritime crime in the Gulf of Guinea. Based on documentary analysis of reports provided by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), maritime security agencies, and international organizations, the study identified that co-operative efforts like joint naval patrols and regional maritime security systems have helped to reduce the number of piracy incidences in the past years. Nevertheless, the paper has also reported that issues that include, poor prosecution systems, inadequate technology and poor coordination among maritime security organizations still persist in impeding proper maritime governance in the area.

Moreover, Babalola and Mbachu (2025) made a comparative study of maritime security policies in Nigeria and the strategies of the countries of Angola and Gabon in the gulf of Guinea. Their research found out that despite the fact that Nigeria has great strategic potential owing to its geographical position and economic potential, institutional flaws and the inter-agency conflicts tend to reduce the efficiency of maritime security activities. The authors found that the failure of the Nigeria government to effectively tackle the maritime insecurity in the region has been hindered by policy inconsistency, inadequate funding and a broken institutional responsibility.

The cooperation of the regions, as well as the maritime governance in the Gulf of Guinea, was also explored by Monteh (2025) through the prism of a historical and policy analysis. The research observed that various regional security structures have been put in place to combat maritime security even though there are cooperative maritime security initiatives by the states in the Gulf of Guinea as well as human resources, distrust among the states, and poor institutional coordination have limited the success of these arrangements. Monteh further concluded that the maritime governance institutions in the region in addition to the need to strengthen collaborative security frameworks can help in improving maritime stability in the region.

Finally, Abdulkadir (2025) explored the contribution of Nigeria to enhancing maritime security as part of the Gulf of Guinea Commission. The research established that Nigeria has been in the forefront of the regional maritime security measures in the form of diplomatic initiatives, monetary assistance, and also in the collective naval patrols to fight piracy and other maritime crime. Despite such input, the paper has observed that the leadership role of Nigeria is normally limited due to the political issues in the country, economic pressure and regional conflicts among the states of the Gulf of Guinea.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts political realism as the theoretical framework for analysing Nigeria's security interests in the Gulf of Guinea. The theory is usually connected with the early scholars like Thucydides and Niccolò Machiavelli, but the modern roots of this theory have been created

by Hans J. Morgenthau. Other prominent supporters of the theory are Kenneth Waltz, Thomas Hobbes and E. H. Carr. Political realism given that the international system is one of competition between states, whose national interests are pursued in a quasi-tacit anarchic world where there is no central authority to enforce rules or guarantee security. Well, this means that the pursuit of survival, power and protecting strategic resources are integral to the national security policies of states.

Political realism is one of the most influential theories in international relations and security studies. The theory assumes that the international system is characterised by competition among states pursuing their national interests in an environment where there is no central authority to enforce rules or guarantee security. It states that the states prioritise survival, power, and the protection of strategic resources as core elements of their national security policies. Classical realist scholars argue that states act primarily in pursuit of power and national interest in order to safeguard their sovereignty and territorial integrity. In the context of maritime security, realism explains why states place significant emphasis on protecting strategic maritime spaces, shipping routes, and offshore resources. Maritime domains are often viewed as extensions of national territory that require strong defence mechanisms and strategic management in order to prevent external threats and economic disruption.

Within the Gulf of Guinea, the realist perspective helps explain why coastal states including Nigeria place strong emphasis on protecting maritime resources and trade routes. The region contains significant reserves of oil and gas, which are vital to the economic survival and political stability of several states in West and Central Africa. Because these resources generate substantial revenue, states view the maritime environment as a strategic space that must be protected from both internal and external threats. Consequently, maritime security policies often reflect broader national security priorities aimed at safeguarding economic assets and maintaining regional influence (Osinowo, 2015).

Political realism also provides insight into the growing involvement of external powers in the Gulf of Guinea. Global actors such as the United States, China, and European countries have demonstrated increasing interest in the region due to its energy resources and strategic shipping routes. From a realist perspective, this involvement reflects the pursuit of national interests by powerful states seeking to secure access to critical resources and protect international trade routes. As a result, the Gulf of Guinea has gradually become a space where regional and international interests intersect, creating both opportunities for cooperation and potential areas of geopolitical competition.

Furthermore, realism highlights the importance of state capacity and power projection in maintaining security within strategic regions. States with stronger naval capabilities, surveillance systems, and institutional coordination are better positioned to defend their maritime territories and deter criminal activities such as piracy and oil theft. In contrast, states with weaker institutions and limited security resources often struggle to effectively manage maritime security threats. This dynamic is evident in the Gulf of Guinea, where challenges such as limited maritime surveillance, inadequate law enforcement capacity, and weak institutional coordination have contributed to persistent maritime insecurity (Ukeje & Mvomo Ela, 2013). Realist paradigm is thus quite applicable in the analysis of Nigeria involvement in the maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. Nigeria, being the biggest economy and one of the most powerful states in the West African region, has a lot of economic as well as strategic interest in

ensuring that the region remains stable. The offshore oil installations, sea trade routes, and fisheries resources are important national resources that should be safeguarded in the country. Therefore, the maritime security policies of Nigeria such as naval patrols, regional cooperation programs, and international maritime security organizations may be interpreted as the attempts to ensure national interests and preserve the influence in the region. Through the realist perspective, the study can offer an effective analytical perspective of how economic priorities, strategic issues, and security problems of Nigeria influence its policies towards the Gulf of Guinea. The framework also assists in explaining why the issue of maritime insecurity in the region has become a critical policy issue among Nigeria and other coastal states whose economic viability largely relies on the maritime resources.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine Nigeria's security interests in the Gulf of Guinea. Qualitative methods are appropriate for analysing complex political and security issues where contextual interpretation is required.

The research employs a historical and descriptive research design to analyse the evolution of maritime security challenges and Nigeria's strategic interests in the region. This design enables the study to examine existing patterns of maritime insecurity and the institutional responses adopted to address them.

Data were collected through desk-based documentary analysis. Relevant information was obtained from scholarly journals, books, policy reports, institutional publications, and international organisation documents relating to maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. The study adopts a comparative analytical approach, where information from different sources was cross-checked to ensure consistency and reliability of findings. This approach helps reduce potential bias associated with the use of secondary data. Although reliance on secondary sources may introduce limitations related to author bias or data gaps, the study mitigates this by using multiple reputable academic and institutional sources to ensure credible analysis.

4. Results

The findings of this study are presented under four major themes: Nigeria's economic interest in the Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria's strategic and security interests, major maritime security threats, and institutional challenges affecting maritime security in the region.

4.1 Nigeria's Economic Interest in the Gulf of Guinea

The findings show that the Gulf of Guinea plays a crucial role in Nigeria's economic development due to its abundant natural resources and strategic maritime trade routes. The region contains substantial offshore oil and gas reserves, which form the backbone of Nigeria's economy. A large proportion of Nigeria's petroleum production occurs in offshore fields located within the Gulf of Guinea, and crude oil exports transported through maritime routes contribute significantly to the country's foreign exchange earnings (Mustapha, 2020; Osinowo, 2015).

Beyond hydrocarbon resources, the Gulf of Guinea also supports other important economic activities, including maritime transportation and fisheries. Major international shipping routes connecting Africa with Europe, the Americas, and other global markets pass through the region. These routes facilitate the transportation of crude oil, refined petroleum

products, manufactured goods, and agricultural commodities. In addition, fisheries and other marine resources provide livelihoods for many coastal communities in Nigeria and neighbouring countries (Nwamuo et al., 2021).

However, the study finds that maritime criminal activities significantly undermine these economic benefits. Illegal oil bunkering, piracy, and maritime smuggling result in substantial financial losses for the Nigerian government and private sector operators. Oil theft in particular has become a major challenge, as criminal networks siphon crude oil from pipelines and offshore installations for sale on the black market. These activities reduce government revenue and weaken Nigeria's economic capacity to invest in development initiatives (Olaoluwa, 2023).

4.2 Nigeria's Strategic and Security Interests

The findings indicate that the Gulf of Guinea holds significant strategic importance for Nigeria's national security and foreign policy. As the largest coastal state in West Africa, Nigeria occupies a central position within the maritime environment of the region. The country relies heavily on maritime routes for energy exports and international trade, making the protection of its maritime domain a key national security priority (Mustapha, 2020).

Nigeria's strategic interest in the Gulf of Guinea is largely driven by the need to protect offshore oil infrastructure, secure maritime trade routes, and maintain regional stability. Disruptions within the region could have serious consequences for Nigeria's economic stability and political security. Consequently, maritime security has become a central component of Nigeria's defence and foreign policy strategies (Osinowo, 2015).

The study also reveals that Nigeria's strategic interests are influenced by its relationships with neighbouring coastal states within the Gulf of Guinea. Competition over access to offshore resources and maritime boundaries has occasionally generated diplomatic tensions among countries in the region. Nevertheless, regional cooperation frameworks such as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct have encouraged collaborative approaches to addressing maritime security challenges (Ukeje & Mvomo Ela, 2013).

Furthermore, the presence of external powers within the Gulf of Guinea has increased the geopolitical significance of the region. Countries such as the United States, China, and several European states have demonstrated growing interest in the region due to its energy resources and maritime trade routes. While international involvement can support maritime security cooperation, it also introduces elements of geopolitical competition that may influence regional security dynamics (Asamoah Agyekum, 2024).

4.3 Major Maritime Security Threats in the Gulf of Guinea

The findings reveal that the Gulf of Guinea faces multiple maritime security threats that directly affect Nigeria's economic and strategic interests. Among the most significant challenges are piracy and armed robbery at sea, which have become widespread in the region. These attacks often involve the hijacking of vessels, theft of cargo, and kidnapping of crew members for ransom (Onuoha, 2013).

Piracy incidents in the Gulf of Guinea frequently target oil tankers, commercial vessels, and supply ships operating near offshore oil installations. Criminal groups typically operate from coastal areas and exploit gaps in maritime surveillance systems to conduct attacks on vessels navigating the region's busy shipping lanes (International Maritime Bureau, 2021).

Oil theft and illegal bunkering also constitute major maritime security threats in the region. Criminal networks siphon crude oil from pipelines and offshore facilities and transport it through illegal maritime channels for sale in international markets. These activities generate substantial profits for criminal organisations and contribute to environmental degradation in coastal areas (Olaoluwa, 2023).

More so, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing has become a serious challenge affecting the Gulf of Guinea's marine ecosystem and regional food security. Illegal fishing vessels often operate without proper authorisation, depleting fish stocks and reducing income opportunities for local fishing communities (Phayal et al., 2024).

Other transnational crimes affecting maritime security in the region include drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and other illicit maritime activities. These criminal networks often exploit weak law enforcement capacity and porous maritime borders to conduct illegal operations across national boundaries (UNODC, 2013).

4.4 Institutional and Governance Challenges Affecting Maritime Security

The study also identifies several institutional and governance challenges that hinder effective maritime security management in Nigeria and the wider Gulf of Guinea region. Weak governance structures, corruption, and limited institutional capacity often undermine the ability of governments to enforce maritime laws and combat criminal activities (Mohammed, 2023). Limited maritime surveillance infrastructure is another major challenge affecting the region. Many coastal states lack adequate naval assets, monitoring technologies, and personnel required to effectively patrol their vast maritime territories. As a result, criminal networks are often able to operate within maritime spaces with minimal interference from security agencies (Ukeje & Mvomo Ela, 2013).

Poor coordination among maritime security institutions also contributes to the persistence of maritime crime in the region. Effective maritime security requires cooperation among multiple agencies, including naval forces, maritime law enforcement authorities, port authorities, and intelligence agencies. However, bureaucratic fragmentation and overlapping institutional responsibilities frequently limit the effectiveness of these security efforts (Eruaga, 2023).

The findings further reveal that political instability in some West African countries can weaken institutional responses to maritime security threats. Political crises and governance disruptions often divert government attention away from maritime security issues, creating opportunities for criminal networks to expand their operations within the region.

5. Discussion of Findings

This research indicates that the Gulf of Guinea continues to form the heart of economic and strategic computations of Nigeria since it is not only one of the prime energy corridors, but also a significant trade route by sea. Gulf of Guinea according to Olu-Oluwa (2023) follows the route that spans approximately 6,000 kilometres of coastline, is a key shipping area of oil, gas, and goods entering and leaving Central and Southern Africa, and provides an estimated five million barrels of daily crude oil to the global energy chain. In real sense, this fact implies that the economic fortunes of Nigeria are pegged on the stability of the Gulf since the offshore petroleum production, maritime trade and marine resources rely on secure sea lanes. This helps

prove the thesis of your paper that the interest of Nigeria in the Gulf of Guinea is not a mere abstraction, but based on tangible revenue, trade, and resource-security issues.

This economic significance is also supported by broader literature in the uploaded files which reveals the Gulf of Guinea as a region of geopolitical and economic significance of immense magnitude. According to Babalola and Mbachu (2025), the region is said to be endowed with a lot of hydrocarbons, fisheries, biodiversity, and key international trade routes with Aniche and Ugwu noting that the Gulf is a geo-economically and geo-strategically significant region to not only littoral states but also extra-continental powers that are interested in energy security and accessibility. Similarly, according to Piate (2025), the Gulf of Guinea is the most significant strategic and security location to Nigeria since it is susceptible to sea attacks, besides Nigeria having a significant portion of its oil and gas, maritime trade, and coastal economic activity. Combined, these works affirm that the Gulf of Guinea is a vital part of the economical existence and impact of Nigeria in the region.

Nevertheless, the article also shows that maritime insecurity continues to compromise these advantages. Eruaga (2022) demonstrates that maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea is not isolated to the attacks of vessels and is a much wider problem that encompasses energy security, food security, financial security, environmental security, and transnational organised crime. Her research also indicates that in 2015-2017 the region incurred approximately US\$777.1 million and about US\$1.3 billion in piracy and armed robbery of ships and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, respectively. Such numbers explain why the current research discovered that maritime insecurity has impacted on maritime transportation, the security of ships, the shipping procedure, fishery sectors, and investment opportunities in Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea region in general. What this means is that, insecurity is not only threatening to ships, but it is actually directly undermining economic development and government income.

Similarly, the results on piracy, oil theft, trafficking, and illegal offshore transactions are consistent with the stance of Olu-Oluwa (2023) that defines piracy, illegal fishing, kidnapping for ransom, drug trafficking, and illegal oil bunkering as the prevalent maritime offenses in the Gulf of Guinea. Babalola and Mbachu (2025) also note that piracy, illegal fishing, smuggling, and oil theft continue to weaken the economies and the overall security of the Gulf of Guinea states, and Onuoha (as cited by the authors) suggests that maritime insecurity will never encourage foreign investment and will hinder the extraction and transportation of hydrocarbons. This confirms your conclusion that the security crisis in the Gulf has impacted on cargo shipping, crude oil tankers, fishing trawlers, and the overall investment climate in Nigeria and other neighbouring regions.

One of the most significant aspects of the results is the development of unlawful offshore trading of crude oil and refined products of petroleum. This is aligned with the literature that insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea is also tightly linked with the network of oil theft and bunkering. According to Aniche and Ugwu, the Deep Blue Project of Nigeria was initiated following piracy and sea robbery among other crimes in the Nigerian waters and the entire Gulf such as theft of oil and illegal bunkering. They also indicate that Nigerians are still doing their part in addressing the issue of maritime insecurity, although trans-boundary problems like weapons of mass destruction, oil theft, terrorism and migration call on more than state response. This reinforces your observation that maritime crime in the Gulf of Guinea is transnational,

organized and is becoming entrenched in the illegal economic systems which have undermined legal trade.

The organizational aspect of the results is also important. Your research established that ineffective civil-military coordination, poor inter-agency coordination, ineffective staffing, lack of training, insufficiency of funding, corruption, and lack of utilization of the latest security equipment continues to frustrate successful maritime security. This is highly held by Babalola and Mbachu (2025) who list policy incoherence, inter-agency competition and misallocation of resources as fundamental factors that have led to Nigeria performing not as per its strategic capacity in the Gulf of Guinea. The same research continues by saying that interagency fragmentation undermines the effectiveness of policies, slows down the decision-making process, and restricts intelligence dissemination. These observations reflect yours, and indicate that the Niger Delta problem in the sea is not merely one of maritime crime, but also one of bad governance and poor coordination of institutions on the land.

Poor governance is also reflected in the analysis of the region. Mane (2005) opines that weak institutions and failure of governance systems is one of the greatest challenges that have ensured the Gulf of Guinea does not reap the full benefits of its enormous natural endowment, which worsens the dangers of the resource curse. Monteh (2025) is also of the view that political instability, suspicion among states, poor coordination, poor capacity, and funding are significant barriers to working maritime governance in the Gulf of Guinea. This implies that there is not just a matter of insecurity, but a structural one. It is grounded in the lack of governance rendering enforcement weak, coordination more challenging and criminal opportunism more probable.

The political implications of the findings are also strong to Political Realism which was used as the framework of the current study.

Piate (2025) clearly presents his argument that realism applies in explaining the security interest of Nigeria in the Gulf of Guinea since it focuses on the power of states, survivability, national interest, and self-help character of the international system. In this regard, the maritime policies of Nigeria may be understood as the attempts to protect the offshore oil resources, to possess the shipping routes, to defend the foreign incomes and to maintain the influence in the region. The current results fit this realist interpretation rather well: the fact that Nigeria is concerned with piracy, oil theft, foreign intervention, and maritime boundary conflicts is referred to as the behaviour of a state which attempts to defend its strategic interests in a place where dangers are constant and cooperation is never sure.

Simultaneously, the paper demonstrates that the concept of realism is not the sole reason that led to the adoption of a purely unilateral policy. Since the threats in the Gulf of Guinea are transnational, the national interest of Nigeria is best achieved through more effective cooperation in the region. Eruaga (2022) believes that the maritime security issues of Gulf of Guinea states are mostly overlapping and thus result in necessitating a close security partnership, whereas Amadi (2024) believes that the coastal states of the region should develop a unified and strong front in case they intend to fight piracy, terrorism, organized crime, and other transnational challenges. This helps you conclude that more effective intelligence sharing, inter-agency coordination, increased funding, and more robust regional maritime collaboration are not matters of choice but of necessity as far as your policy is concerned.

6. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the security interests of Nigeria in the twenty-first century in the Gulf of Guinea focusing on the economic significance of the region, strategic and security interests, maritime threats, as well as institutional issues that have been involved in the maritime security governance. The results indicate that the Gulf of Guinea is a very strategic area in the sea to Nigeria owing to its large offshore oil deposits, parallel international shipping highways, and economic potential in marine. This maritime domain is therefore critical towards securing the economic stability of Nigeria, energy resources as well as maritime trade. Nevertheless, it is shown that the maritime security challenges including piracy, oil theft, illegal fishing, and smuggling among other transnational crimes still devastate the capacity of Nigeria and other coastal states to enjoy the full potential of the Gulf of Guinea. These operations interfere with the maritime transport, pose threats to offshore infrastructure, undermine the confidence of the investors and promote unlawful economic practices in the region.

Weak maritime security coordination, poor surveillance ability, lack of training of security staff, and inadequate funding of maritime security operations are also cited by the study as some of the challenges in the form of institutional and governance issues. These obstacles lower the efficiency of the current security policies and provide the possibility of the criminal networks working in the maritime setting. Conclusively, although the Gulf of Guinea has great economic and strategic potentials to Nigeria, there has remained maritime insecurity and institutional failure that had impeded the full potential of such gains. To manage these challenges, it is necessary to enhance maritime governance, enhance coordination among the security agencies, and strengthen regional cooperation in a bid to achieve a safer and more secure maritime environment in the Gulf of Guinea.

7. References

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