

Maritime Security Threats in the Gulf of Guinea: Revisiting Effective Anti-Piracy Mechanisms between AFRICOM and the Gulf of Guinea Commission

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Abstract:

The study evaluates the growing prevalence of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea region. It reveals that trade and regional integration efforts among Gulf countries would be impeded in the absence of formidable security measures aimed at ensuring the security of the Gulf. Some scholars suggest the presence of a powerful military command base like the U.S.-African Military Command (AFRICOM) proposed by the American government as a suitable deterrence and approach to combating pirate activities and other maritime criminalities due to its sophistication compared to those of Gulf countries combined. Others criticize it, arguing that while a U.S. military base would serve the overall interests of America, it would pose serious security threats to Gulf countries. In light of the inadequate maritime security arrangements by the Gulf states, this paper suggests military cooperation between the U.S.-AFRICOM and those of the Gulf countries be established to deal with piracy threats. This will mitigate the security threat within the Gulf region and foster an environment conducive to the growth of trade and commerce. Secondary data from textbooks, journal articles, and other archival materials is utilized, and an exploratory approach is used to analyze it.

Keywords: AFRICOM, Gulf of Guinea, Maritime Security, Piracy, Regional Integration.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The threat of transnational crimes at sea has led to an increased development in maritime security in the modern era. For this reason, countries had to strengthen their maritime defense capabilities in order to thwart threats to their national security and sovereignty (Leorocha, Widodo, Sukendro, Saragih, & Suwarno, 2023: 456). The Gulf of Guinea has undoubtedly become the epicenter of pirate activity and a hotbed of violent attacks on ocean liners in modern times. Given the regular occurrences of pirate activity in the region, one could legitimately argue that it is second only to the Gulf of Aden in terms of notoriety. James Kraska claims that violence emanating from the Horn of Africa typically has worldwide ramifications and requires international intervention (Kraska, 2009: 198).

It is challenging to pinpoint the exact beginnings of piracy. However, for many ages, piracy has persisted among humankind. Indeed, pirates have taken advantage of sailors for as long as people have engaged in marine trade. Berlusconi (2014), for instance, states that the Lukkans, who were located in Asia Minor, raided Cyprus in the 14th century, marking the first known instance of piracy. Since then, piracy has evolved into a persistent security threat that humanity must deal with. As a result, even after Athens and Rome attained political and naval dominance, their navies were never able to totally eradicate the pirates that plagued their own regions of the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea (Berlusconi, 2014). When the Romans conquered Carthage and Rhodes in the Mediterranean in 146 and 166 B.C., respectively, piracy increased rather than decreased.

Roger IV (2014) traces the origins of piracy back to the Sea Peoples, a loose confederation of tribes that invaded the eastern Mediterranean nations of the late Bronze Age. He also links these pirates to those who operated in Ancient Greece and Rome, Europe, the Caribbean, and Asia.

In Africa, during the French conquest of North Africa in 1830, 1.5 million Europeans were taken prisoner by Barbary pirates, who sold the majority of them into slavery and held some for ransom. In their games of balance of power, European powers tried to use the Barbary pirates as a wild card against one another (Onuoha, 2012). According to Kraska (2009), pirates have always worked as a thorn in the side of almost every seafaring culture, either in cooperation with or independent of governmental power.

Despite stories of pirate operations across civilizations, their activities in Africa and the Gulf of Guinea in particular were rather insignificant prior to 1990 (Kraska, 2009). Kraska believed that maritime security concerns in Africa's Gulf of Guinea only became noticeable in the middle of the 1990s when armed organizations began patrolling Somalia's exclusive economic zone and claimed to be the official "coast guard" tasked with defending the country's fishing resources. Since then, foreign investors and Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) member states have expressed grave concerns about piracy and insecurity in the Gulf's maritime environment. These concerns were largely due to significant multinational oil corporations operating in the region following the discovery of abundant mineral resources, particularly hydrocarbon deposits. As a result, Osinowo (2015) argued that the area becomes plagued by sophisticated pirate gangs in addition to other maritime criminal elements.

2. GULF OF GUINEA: THE STUDY AREA AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Situated in the South Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of Guinea region comprises approximately twenty-three African nations, including Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, the Central African Republic, Chad, and the Congo. Additional countries include Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Wide and level, spanning 8,200 km, the region's highlands culminate in Mount Cameroon, rising to a height of 4,095 meters (Osinowo, 2015). It functions as a high ground and a boundary between the interior and coastal planes (Shambhavi, 2005). The region is "almost too obtuse to be a gulf," according to Onuoha (2012: 3). Besides, it can be precisely found at the point where Latitude 00 (Equator) and Longitude 00 (Greenwich Meridian) converge (Anene, 2006: 40).

The Gulf of Guinea encompasses eighteen landlocked and eight coastal states, spanning approximately 53 hundred miles along Africa's west coast. The Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), spanning two hundred nautical miles, constitute a maritime jurisdiction with several borders and more than one million square nautical miles of open water. The Gulf is fed by many streams, some of which, like the River Niger, are accessible for commercial shipping inland. Deep-draft vessels are served by more than 200 ports; there is no marine choke point in the Gulf of Guinea. The semi-arid Sahel region, which

lies between the Savannah and the Sahara desert, makes up the northern portion of the Gulf of Guinea. Between the Savannah and the shore, a third belt of equatorial forest is formed (Shambhavi, 2005). The sub-region contains significant natural resource and hydrocarbon deposits. The Gulf of Guinea has enormous potential, both in terms of its wealth of resources and its geopolitical significance as a trade route that has connected Europe, Asia, and Latin America for more than 500 years.

Below is the map of the Gulf of Guinea area showing the Gulf of Guinea Commission member states in blue.

Map of the Gulf of Guinea Area



Source: Reva, D., Okafor-Yarwood, I. Walker, T. (2021, online). *Gulf of Guinea piracy: a symptom, not a cause, of insecurity*. Institute for Security Studies (ISS). Available at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/gulf-of-guinea-piracy-a-symptom-not-a-cause-of-insecurity>.

Large hydrocarbon fossil deposits can be found in the Gulf of Guinea, according to Onuoha (2012), Karande (2014), and Nwoke (2014). Approximately 70% of Africa's oil production is concentrated on the Gulf of Guinea's West African coast, and experts predict that the region's oil production will account for 25% of global production by 2020. Nonetheless, it has attracted both local and foreign investors to the maritime resource development and exploitation process (Forest & Sousa, 2006). It also has an abundance of non-hydrocarbon resources, including as seafood and other marine foods. These characteristics offer enormous possibilities for resource exploitation, shipping, maritime

commerce, and development. In fact, since 1995, container traffic in West African ports has increased at the quickest rate of any sub-Saharan African region—14% annually (African Infrastructure Country Diagnostic Project, 2008; Osinowo, 2015). The region's fast economic growth, which has averaged 7 percent since 2012, is facilitated by the broader Gulf of Guinea, which stretches from Cape Verde to Angola. With a large portion of all petroleum products used in Europe, North America, and Asia passing via this canal, the Gulf of Guinea has also developed into a hub for the world's energy supplies (Adjao, 2013).

Aside terrorism, illegal bunkering, banditry, kidnapping and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, etc., the region has the highest number of reported cases of piracy attacks in the world, which are reportedly more violent, but this economic boom has been threatened since 2012 when it surpassed the Gulf of Aden in terms of high-seas hijackings (Kraska, 2009; and Adjao, 2013). Adding to the difficulties is the fact that drug dealers and traffickers from South America have discovered that West Africa offers an alluring alternative path to Europe due to the region's weak maritime security presence. Nigeria alone loses 40,000 to 100,000 barrels of crude oil every day as a result of pirate activity, according to a 2014 assessment by the Council of the European Union. Indeed, West African waterways see the greatest rate of illicit fishing globally, with an estimated 40% of the region's yearly catch being illegal, unreported, or unregulated (Martini, 2013). Nearly the whole \$10.2 billion in regional trade with the UK passing through the Gulf of Guinea was expected to be at danger of theft in 2013 (UK Chamber of Shipping, 2014). Insurance rates have skyrocketed as a result of the increased risk to ships, cargo, and seafarers. Businesses have also had to shoulder more costs in order to secure their ships. It is challenging to determine the precise number of economic losses suffered by the region due to insufficient state presence in the Gulf of Guinea. These are certainly substantial; however, estimates of the annual cost of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea range from \$565 million to \$2 billion (Madsen et al., 2014).

Many nations in the region rely on hydrocarbon resources coming from the Gulf or passing through it for 60% of their revenue, as stated in their strategic development plans (Moudouma, 2014). Governments in the region have been late to realize how their absence in the maritime domain not only costs them untold revenue but also undermines security on land, as criminal activities on the sea start and end onshore. To the extent that

the global economy relies on increasingly interdependent shipping and energy supply networks, the maritime threats in the Gulf of Guinea constitute a collective challenge to all stakeholders in the region and globally.

It's interesting to note that the Gulf of Guinea Commission, a regional organization created to address the persistent piracy in the region, was founded on November 19, 1999, in Libreville, following the Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Gulf of Guinea.

Thus, the thrust of this paper is to determine whether the anti-piracy war can be better combated with the AFRICOM framework, a foreign mechanism, or the indigenous GGC.

3. THE GULF OF GUINEA – CONCEPTUALIZING THEMATIC ISSUES

In this section the study's objective is to conduct a conceptual examination of ideas that are essential to the issue being examined. Thus, concepts like marine security, regional integration, and piracy would be investigated.

3.1 Maritime Safety and Security

According to the African Charter on Maritime Security and Safety and Development in Africa called the *Lome Charter*, adopted by the Extraordinary Session of the African Union Assembly of Heads of State and Government in Lomé, Togo, on 15th October 2016, maritime safety means “all measures taken for the safety of ships and offshore installations, their crews and where appropriate, their passengers, the safety of navigation and the facilitation of maritime traffic, maritime infrastructure, maritime facilities and maritime environment”. It further explains maritime security to mean “the prevention of and fight against all acts of threats of illicit acts against a ship, its crew and its passengers or against the port facilities, maritime infrastructure, maritime facilities and maritime environment” (AU Lome Charter, 2016: 10).

In terms of scope, the Lome Charter covers: a) the prevention and control of all transnational crime at sea, including terrorism, piracy, armed robbery against ships, drug trafficking, smuggling of migrants, trafficking in persons and all other kinds of trafficking, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, prevention of pollution at sea and other unlawful acts at sea, under the jurisdiction of a State Party in its area of

responsibility; b) all measures to prevent or minimize accidents at sea caused by ships or crew or aimed at facilitating safe navigation; and, c) all measures for the sustainable exploitation of marine resources and optimization of the development opportunities of sectors related to the sea.

To accomplish this, Articles 30 – 40 of the Lome Charter impose responsibility to cooperative on state parties (including members of the GGC) at national, regional and continental levels in diverse areas like the exploitation of the maritime domain (*Article 30*), fishing and aquaculture (*Article 31*), combating crimes at sea (*Article 32*), maritime information sharing (*Article 33*), intelligence sharing (*Article 34*), and strategies for awareness on maritime related issues (*Article 35*). Other areas are scientific and academic cooperation (*Article 36*), continental cooperation framework (*Article 37*), regional cooperation structures (*Article 38*), national coordination framework (*Article 39*), and judicial and legal cooperation (*Article 40*) (AU Lome Charter, 2016: 24-27). All of these cooperative responsibilities on state parties are geared towards guaranteeing maritime security and safety especially in the Gulf of Guinea.

The goal of port security is to lessen the likelihood of an incident that could jeopardize the safety of people, property, ships, or the general public. The regulations bring together resources inside port limits to offer a framework for exchanging information, identifying hazards, and allocating resources to lessen dangers and their effects. Vessel security pertains to the designation of security officers for vessels, the creation of security plans based on security assessments, the implementation of operationally-specific security measures, and adherence to existing Marine Security levels by vessel owners or operators. In order to ensure facility security, owners and operators must appoint security officers, create security plans based on security assessments, put in place security measures unique to the operation of the facility, and adhere to the most recent maritime security standards (see Kraska, 2009; Onuoha, 2012; and Karande, 2014).

The states' maritime domains are insecure due to acts of terrorism, armed robbery, and piracy against ships involved in seaborne trade, all of which have a detrimental influence on the potential for the growth of the blue economy subsectors in the affected coastal nations. The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) has noted a marked increase in ship attacks and maritime insecurity along several African trade routes, including the

east coast of Africa and the Gulf of Guinea (GOG), the west coast of Africa, and the coast of the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden (GOA). The increase in attacks directly jeopardizes supply networks, maritime operations, and economic flows, endangering the stability of the maritime regions of the world. The IMB recorded 2,513 pirate attacks on ships engaged in commerce in all of the world's marine regions between 2011 and 2020, or an average of 251 attacks annually. The report did point out that not every incident during that time was documented (Nwokedi, *et al*, 2022: 133; International Maritime Bureau, IMB, 2020; IMB, 2015).

3.2 Piracy

The word “piracy” comes from the Latin word *piratia*, which in turn derives from the Greek word *peirates* meaning “sea robber.” The Greek word comes from *peira* meaning “attempt” or “trial”. Which is related to the verb *peiran*, meaning “to attempt” or “to attack”. Thus, a pirate is literally “someone who attacks (ships) or makes a hostile attempt to attack”. Considering that various people and organizations have differing opinions about what constitutes piracy, precisely defining the term can be quite difficult. To support this assertion, James Maxeiner stated that academics have been debating the many definitions of maritime piracy and their lack of agreement for a considerable amount of time (Maxeiner, 2008). Because many contemporary forms of piracy fall outside of certain existing definitions, Bob Kao argues that the lack of a universal definition of piracy raises concerns that an act may be classed as pirate under one definition but not under another (Kao, 2016). This is particularly true given that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which contains the most widely recognized definition of piracy, is extremely limited and leaves out a large number of contemporary acts of piracy. For example, Chuk Mason claims that Congress has the authority to define and punish crimes and misdemeanors that are committed on the high seas as well as offenses against the law of nations under the provisions of the U.S. Constitution (Mason, 2010).

According to the Lome Charter (2016: 11), piracy is “Any illegal act of violence or detention committed for private ends by the crew or passengers of a private ship or a private aircraft, and directed: on high seas against another ship or aircraft, or against persons or property, on board such ship or aircraft; against a ship, aircraft or property in

a place outside the jurisdiction of any State; any act of voluntary participation in the operation of a ship or of an aircraft with knowledge of facts making it a pirate ship or aircraft”.

The U.S. law has defined piracy “as defined by the law of nations” since 1819, rather than as a particular act. The United States Supreme Court has maintained Congress's authority to define piracy in terms of the law of nations in the cases of *United States v. Palmer* and *United States v. Smith*. According to the Court, piracy necessitates a maritime robbery in order to comply with international law. Contemporary international agreements that address piracy include the UNCLOS, the Convention on the High Seas, and the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation (SUA Convention), in addition to U.S. law. The UNCLOS, which is often regarded as embodying customary international law, is the third agreement to which the United States is a party (Mason, 2010).

Additionally, as per Article 101 of the 1982 UNCLOS, piracy is defined as any of the following actions: (a) any unlawful acts of violence, detention, or depredation carried out for personal gain by the crew or passengers of a private ship or private aircraft, and directed: (i) against another ship or aircraft, or against persons or property on board such a ship or aircraft; (ii) against a ship, aircraft, persons, or property in a location outside the jurisdiction of any State; (b) any voluntary participation in the operation of a ship or aircraft with knowledge of facts rendering it a pirate ship or aircraft; (c) any intentional facilitation of an act covered by sub-paragraph (a) or (b) (see UNCLOS, 1982) or conduct inciting such an act.

According to Kao (2016), the definition of maritime piracy can be categorized into four main perspectives, namely, *public international law*, *domestic criminal law*, *commercial law*, and *piracy prevention*. But for the purpose of this paper, piracy is seen as a maritime threat and violent actions taken by armed criminal elements against persons, sea trade, cargoes, oil facilities, ships, vessels, and other legal investments in high seas. These actions are considered acts of maritime terrorism, which pose operational challenges to security within the Gulf of Guinea and the national economic growth of the littoral states contiguous to the GOG because most domestic and foreign investors, as well as potential investors, are not willing to continue their operations in the region.

Therefore, Article 1 of the AU Lome Charter (2016: 9) perceives anti-piracy or anti-piracy mechanism as a concerted, deliberate and conscious marine governance system vis-à-vis the national and international, legal and regulatory framework and associated enforcement processes that ensure the peaceful and sustainable use of the seas for commerce, food, energy and raw material.

3.3 Regional Integration

Different scholars have given different definitions to the concept of regional integration. Renowned integration expert Ernst Haas described regional integration as "the process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations, and political activities toward a new center whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over pre-existing national states. The end result of a process of political integration is a new political community, superimposed over the pre-existing ones" (Haas, 1968: 16). Thus, as Kaarbo and Lee-Ray (2011) so eloquently point out, regional integration is essentially about purposeful efforts made to promote regional cooperation among state actors in order to seek and achieve shared objectives and advantages. Or even better, as Jon Pevehouse and Joshua Goldstein have claimed, integration "refers to the process by which supranational institutions replace national ones, with the hope of gradually shifting upward of sovereignty from state to regional or global structures with the overall objective of deepening relations and achieving common goals" (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2009).

Therefore, one way to characterize regional integration would be as a process whereby governments cooperate with one another in an effort to create a united front against obstacles and/or problems that jeopardize their shared interests. Although integration can have other dimensions as well, these definitions place a strong emphasis on the political one. As Lindberg defined political integration, it is evident that integration is not restricted to states working together in a political domain or to the gradual development of a system of collective decision-making among states (Lindberg 1971, 46). Rather, regional integration can also occur in other areas, such as the environmental, security, and economy. One example of the security component of a regional integration initiative is the Gulf of Guinea Commission.

4. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In this research, three theories are integrated and accepted to explain both maritime piracy activity and anti-piracy actions implemented or to be implemented in the region. Thus, self-control, rational decision, and cooperative game theories were applied. The first two ideas come primarily from sociology and anthropology, whereas the third is a dominating paradigm in political science.

First, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) popularized self-control theory, generally known as the General Theory of Crime (GTC). Scholars consider it one of the dominant theories of crime (Agnew, 1995; Tibbetts & Gibson, 2002). As a result, this theory stressed the importance of low self-control in the development of criminal inclinations such as piracy in humans (Hinduja, 2012). Sameer Hinduja believes that low self-control is the key factor of deviant behavior in individuals. Individuals with inadequate self-control, according to him, are most likely the product of ineffective or poor parenting techniques early in life, primarily before the age of eight. According to this view, adult criminal behavior stems from a lack of parental attention and moderation in the early lives of delinquent children and teenagers. Thus, it expressly stated that parents who are ineffective or inconsistent in creating an emotional relationship with their child may struggle to monitor their child's behavior. The difficulty of monitoring the child's behavior diminishes the likelihood that the parents will detect their child's aberrant behavior. This will limit parents' ability to use non-corporal punishment for deviant behavior.

Cooperative game theorists such as Neumann & Morgenstern (1944), McLean & McMillan (1996), and Theodore & Bernhard (2001) believe and suggest that interactions of more than one rational player in any game (which in this instance includes the anti-piracy war in the Gulf of Guinea) require the cooperation of both the GGC and AFRICOM to bring about the end of maritime crimes in the region. The implication is that as they grow older, these people are more likely to prefer taking risks and engaging in criminal behaviors such as piracy, and as a result, they are more likely to ignore the long-term consequences of their decisions for themselves and others. In other words, low self-control can appear in a variety of ways. One such technique is through criminal activity. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), crimes, which are acts of force or deception committed by an individual to meet their interests, are appealing to people with low self-

control since crime shares many features with low self-control. Crimes, for example, are risky, rewarding, easy, and simple to commit.

Furthermore, Cornish and Clarke (1986) proposed the rational choice theory, which argued that people would engage in illegal behavior if they believed they would benefit from it. This type of determination requires a straightforward decision-making mechanism, which the criminal considered rational. Limited information would limit decision-making (Higgins, 2007). Criminal decision-making, on the other hand, requires a reasonable assessment of the act's costs (i.e., pain) and benefits (i.e., pleasure, thrill, or excitement). When an individual believed that the criminal behavior would result in more gain than harm, he or she would commit the crime.

5. EXAMINING PIRACY IN THE GULF OF GUINEA: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION

The Gulf of Guinea currently faces an array of very pressing security challenges, such as piracy, bunkering, drug trafficking, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and marine pollution. Since the attack on the *Sea Bourn Spirit* off the Somali coast in November 2005, the incidence of piracy in Africa as a whole has assumed a rather disturbing proportion. Between 2005 and 2011, a total of 237 ships were attacked by pirates, with millions of dollars collected as ransom payments (Schubert & Lades, 2013). With the increase in international anti-piracy naval operations along the Somali coast, this trend has reduced significantly, but Schubert demonstrates that the average ransom (per vessel), however, continues to grow: from around 150,000 USD in 2005 to approximately 4.7 million USD in 2011, with the total ransom payments reaching an all-time high of 135 million USD in 2011 alone (Schubert & Lades, 2013).

The Gulf of Guinea is gradually beginning to see an increase in pirate activities. According to the United Nations Security Council (2012), incidents of piracy and related criminal activities have risen significantly, making the region the second-most dangerous piracy zone on the African continent. A Security Council Report (2012) shows that a total of 58 attacks were reported in the region during the first 10 months of 2011, which was an increase from the 45 attacks recorded in 2010. Twenty-one of the reported attacks in 2011 occurred off the coast of Benin, 14 off the coast of Nigeria, 7 off the coast of Togo, 4 off the coasts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2 off the coast of Ghana, and 1 off the

coasts of Angola and Côte d'Ivoire. In 2010, Nigeria reported 25 attacks: Guinea 6, Cameroon 5, Côte d'Ivoire 4, the Democratic Republic of the Congo 3, and Congo and Liberia 1, respectively. This increase in frequency, apart from being alarming, is made more paradoxical by the fact that, relatively unlike the rather lawless situation in the Horn of Africa, the countries bordering the Gulf region have relatively stable and functioning governments in place, a situation that should make it very difficult for this canker to be entrenched in the region.

As already highlighted, the Gulf of Guinea plays a very crucial role in the socio-economic activities of countries in the region and ensures the direct survival of millions of artisanal fishermen and thousands of communities along its 6,000-mile stretch. The recent discovery of more crude oil in commercial quantities in different parts of the gulf and the rather disturbing increase and sophistication in criminal activities in the area warrant very swift actions. The resultant impact of these activities, if not checked, will have very far-reaching consequences for countries in the region. On October 19, 2012, during an open debate in the Security Council on the subject of 'Peace and Security in Africa: Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea', convened by Nigeria in its capacity as President of the Security Council, the devastating effects of piracy on maritime navigation and on the economies of the countries in the region were well highlighted. During the deliberations, it was concluded that the fight against piracy should be a collective responsibility. The Permanent Representative of Benin to the United Nations also stressed that "If piracy was not addressed properly, it could jeopardize socio-economic development and foreign investment in the region". (see Okai, 2014: 13).

The most disturbing scenario is well highlighted by the work of Jensen-Jones, who establishes a possible link between piracy and criminal actors engaged in the smuggling of people, arms, and narcotics within West Africa and other criminal and terrorist organizations in the region, such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Boko Haram, and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Jenson-Jones, 2012). Piracy attacks (and armed robbery at sea) (UNCLOS, 1982) in the Gulf of Guinea comprised a fifth of all recorded maritime incidents globally in 2013. These figures represent only a fraction of the actual attacks in the region, as ship owners and governments downplay incidents to avoid increased shipping costs or a reputation for insecurity. Incidents reported to the International Maritime Bureau indicate that the

affected area is substantial. Anchorages and approaches to the ports of Bonny and Lagos (Nigeria), Cotonou (Benin), Lomé (Togo), Tema (Ghana), and Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) are particularly vulnerable, with large numbers of merchant ships often loitering in these areas (UNOSAT, 2014). In the busy port, hundreds of vessels loiter for days along the roadsteads (calm areas of water near harbors where ships can anchor) due to the limited capacity of West and Central African ports for offloading. Control measures in the approaches to ports remain weak. The beaching of 25 ships on the Lagos coast following a rough, 2-hour storm in 2010 revealed that many vessels in harbors are unmanned and unmonitored. The then Director-General of the Nigeria Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) suggested that such boats may also serve as hideouts and blinds for pirates and robbers (Osinowo, 2015). When a vessel is boarded by pirates, equipment and cargo are often stolen. Occasionally, members of the crew are kidnapped for ransom. Ships may be hijacked and sailed to distant locations across maritime borders, where cargo is transferred to other vessels.

Recent attacks in the Gulf of Guinea indicate a preference for ships laden with crude oil and oil products. Such attacks are known to have occurred along the Ghana-to-Angola and Nigeria-to-Côte d'Ivoire axes. For example, the MT Kerala was found in waters near Ghana's Tema Port on January 28, 2014, with a sizable amount of her oil cargo missing after being seized near Luanda eight days earlier. In other cases, support vessels to offshore installations are attacked, sometimes with such speed and precision as to raise suspicion of complicity of the offshore crews in the theft and illicit sale of oil.

Therefore, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is increasingly characterized by violent assaults against vessels and hostage takings; 1,871 seafarers were victims of attacks, and 279 were taken hostage in 2013 (Osinowo, 2015). Incidents of fierce resistance to naval patrols have also increased. Pirates on a passenger boat opened fire on a Nigerian Navy (NN) craft during a routine patrol along the Cameroonian border in August 2013. Six pirates were killed in the exchange. In another incident just weeks prior, pirates tried to flee the gasoline tanker MT *Notre* after eight NN vessels surrounded it. Twelve of the 16 pirates were killed, and their boat sank during the 30-minute gun battle. In April 2013, two crew members were killed after pirates boarded the SP *Brussels* off Nigeria's coast. Just 18 months earlier, five crew members were taken hostage when pirates robbed the same vessel while it was 40 miles off the coast of the Niger Delta. Oil theft is often the

result of collusion among local gangs, compromised elements in the oil industry and security agencies, and organized criminal networks from Eastern Europe and Asia (Cocks, 2012). While Nigerian nationals have been most involved in the region's piracy, other Africans, Eastern Europeans, and Filipinos have been arrested in Gulf waters for crude-oil theft, illegal bunkering, and attacks on shipping. In March 2014, two Britons, employees of a UK-based maritime security firm, were arrested with 12 Nigerians for attempting to offload crude from a vessel that itself had been seized for stealing oil (Oyadongha, 2014).

Frank (2014) observed that there exist some socio-economic issues that trigger piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. According to him, some of these triggers include large-scale unemployment, a lack of social services, political frustrations that prompt more people to join these criminal organizations, etc. These triggers are prevalent among the Gulf countries; hence, the incessant and increasing acts of piracy within the Gulf. Furthermore, David (2013) highlights governance issues and widespread corruption as other factors contributing to piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. These factors, he averred, have led to an unfair distribution of energy income (as well as other negative externalities such as pollution), hampered development, and fuelled piracy. Similarly, Ejiofor (2010) shared a similar argument with those of David (2013) and Rider (2013) that piracy has its roots in poverty; criminality feeds on lack of opportunities, unemployment, and a frail political environment; eradicate poverty, and piracy will be eradicated.

6. CURBING PIRACY IN THE GULF OF GUINEA: AFRICOM OR GGC SECURITY FRAMEWORK?

Indeed, the Gulf of Guinea Commission, set up in Libreville, Gabon, on July 3, 2001, is for the purpose of transforming the subregion of African member states bordering the Gulf of Guinea into a zone of peace and security. In the wake of incessant incidents of armed robbery at sea and piracy (which legally refers to attacks beyond territorial waters) now on the rise in the Gulf of Guinea, most of the attacks target vessels connected to the oil industries, disrupting trade and transport in the region as a whole, thereby posing a security threat to the international community, and more importantly, African states, such as a regional outfit like the Gulf of Guinea Commission, have become a priority.

On the other hand, African Command (AFRICOM), with its headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, is uniquely structured to promote regional security, stability, and prosperity in its areas of operations (Okai, 2014). AFRICOM forms one of the six geographical combatant commands of the United States Defense Department and has successfully partnered with several African countries and other regional bodies in the rollout of very successful joint military exercises such as African Lion, Africa Endeavour, and the Accord Series, which are designed to improve the capability of regional armies in operational areas such as peacekeeping, disaster relief, and logistics planning, among others. Naval Forces Africa (NAVAF), based in Naples, Italy, is one of the six subordinate commands of AFRICOM specifically tasked with improving the maritime security capability and capacity of African navies (Okai, 2014). Together with personnel drawn from different countries in West Africa, NAVAF has conducted several operational-level training exercises aimed at improving the skill sets and maritime readiness of naval personnel within the Gulf region.

The importance of ridding the Gulf of Guinea of the rapidly creeping scourge of piracy and making it a very difficult area for criminal actors cannot be overemphasized. This calls for strong and tightened maritime security and good order at sea. Francois Vrey has demonstrated that maritime security warrants deeper cooperation between different actors in the realization of national and international interests in securing the seas (Vrey, 2010). The sub-region has witnessed several good initiatives on the part of stakeholders aimed at addressing issues pertaining to maritime security; these include the African Maritime Transport Charter, the Maritime Transport Plan of Action, and the Durban Resolution on Maritime Safety, Maritime Security, and Protection of the Marine Environment in Africa (Okai, 2014).

Nonetheless, there have been arguments about the viability and ability of the GGC multilateral security framework alone to curb piracy in the region. Hence, this school of thought calls for such security assistance from a more formidable force like the United States, which has experience in naval warfare and the means in terms of materials and personnel to rid the GOG of pirate activities. In this respect and in the face of escalating insecurity among countries within the area, collaborative military assistance like the US AFRICOM to help address the issue becomes a necessity. For instance, as observed by Nicole and Marie (2009), most Gulf of Guinea nations actually do not have the capabilities

to launch comprehensive counter-piracy operations. The piracy problem is nothing new, but the Gulf of Guinea nations' authorities failed to address the problem in a timely manner. They went further to argue that there is really no excuse for the fact that they have not been able to deal with it, and ships will not be safe until authorities strengthen police capacity to investigate and prosecute criminal networks, as well as enforce a zero-tolerance policy for corruption in security services. Furthermore, Stefan (2011:07) observes that effective counter-piracy requires more or less functioning statehood. Countries in the Gulf of Guinea are mostly far from stabilizing their state apparatuses; therefore, there may be a need to seek international cooperation from AFRICOM to improve maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. Daniel (2008, in Frank, 2014) also identified cost as an obstacle to counter-piracy. From Daniel's observation, it could be argued that the cost of fighting piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is beyond the capacity of the GGC countries, hence the need for international assistance and/or collaboration from the United States Government through AFRICOM.

The AFRICOM proposal by the United States in the final leg of President George Bush Jr. in the White House to provide a plausible security framework that would mitigate myriads of security concerns on the African continent, including the maritime security challenges in the Gulf, is highly controversial. Hence, even though "AFRICOM is the U.S. military command tasked with promoting democracy, good governance, and solving transnational problems in Africa, in the opinion of Major Alan Hardman, it is reported that the most cursory research effort uncovers a litany of articles outlining opposition to AFRICOM" (Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights 2011; Hardman, n. d.: 1).

In fact, as Mboub, Mihalka, and Lathrop (2010) have observed, apart from smaller countries on the continent like Liberia that showed enthusiasm for the AFRICOM project, mainly because they believed the U.S. military presence would serve as an effective counterweight to the local regional hegemonies, countries like Nigeria, South Africa, Algeria, and Libya were among the early vociferous critics of the American military base in Africa. For this reason, Mboub et al. (2010) observed that "Africans themselves met AFRICOM with skepticism and suspicion." This was despite a number of programs, including the Millennium Challenge Account, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the Africa Education Initiative, the President's Malaria Initiative, the Congo Basin

Forest Partnership, and the Initiative to End Hunger in Africa, launched by former President Bush Jr. to help the continent tackle insecurity, HIV/AIDS, and underdevelopment.

For example, opinions expressed in South Africa indicated that the expansion of an American strategic geopolitical military base on the continent would worsen many of the problems Africa was grappling with at the time. Also, in Algeria, a newspaper in Algiers, *Le Reporter*, said, “The African countries should wake up after seeing the scars of others (Iraq and Afghanistan).” In Nigeria, a journalist, Dulue Mbachu, opposed the move of America because to him, “increased U.S. military presence in Africa may simply serve to protect unpopular regimes that are friendly to its interests, as was the case during the Cold War, while Africa slips further into poverty” (Mboub et al. 2010). These reveal that from the onset, Africa’s reception of AFRICOM was with staunch opposition and criticism from across Africa.

In view of the foregoing pessimistic perception about AFRICOM by Africans, many African countries like Nigeria believed that instead of having a combat military base in the Gulf of Guinea, the American government should rather support them in the training of their armies and supply them with the necessary equipment to get the job done. Nigeria’s former President Musa Yar’Adua expressed Nigeria’s position at the end of the meeting he had with state governors and several of the country’s leading political figures (VOA, 2009). Despite his invitation to the White House by the Bush administration in December 2007, Nigeria’s position remained unchanged until the death of Yar’Adua.

While these concerns by Africans are genuine in the face of possible external interference from the United States through its AFRICOM military base in Africa, prevailing current security realities and events in the Gulf of Guinea region in particular and across Africa clearly show that AFRICOM in Africa is a necessity in view of the fragility of African militaries to curb the rising incidence of insecurity, maritime or otherwise. To buttress this point, following the spate of insecurity weighing heavily not just on Nigeria but on West and Central Africa, the Gulf of Guinea, the Lake Chad region, the Sahel, and all of Africa, President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria pleaded with the United States during the virtual meeting with the then U.S. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, on April 27, 2021, to reconsider relocating AFRICOM headquarters from Stuttgart, Germany, to Africa near the ‘Theatre of Operation’ (Ayitogo, 2021).

This further underscore our contention that strategic military cooperation and partnership between the Gulf states and the American government through AFRICOM is a better option for securing the Gulf of Guinea from maritime security challenges than an AFRICOM military base without the involvement of the militaries of African Gulf states and vice versa.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Several recommendations are offered based on the study's findings. Given the Gulf's importance as a vital commerce route for vessel transit, the study urges concentrated measures to provide adequate security to ensure the safety of seafarers and their boats. This ensures the preservation and protection of their economic interests, as well as those of the African countries in the region. It is our contention that given the fragility of the GGC member nations' security architecture, the United States' security support through US-AFRICOM must operate in tandem with the existing GGC security framework to address regional security problems.

Based on the preceding analysis of pirate activities in the Gulf of Guinea and their implications for trade, commerce, and socioeconomic growth, as well as the individual and collective security of the countries in the region, including global peace, this paper concludes that the fight against piracy in the region cannot be won solely by GGC member states, given their weak security apparatuses, except with military assistance from a powerful military force such as the United States. It also adds that, given the risk that entrusting the Gulf of Guinea's security to an external security facility such as the US-AFRICOM may raise severe national security issues among GGC member states, partnership is the most viable option.

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