

# UNIMO - INTERNATIONAL MARITIME ORGANIZATION



**Issue:** Exploring Solutions to Combat Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea

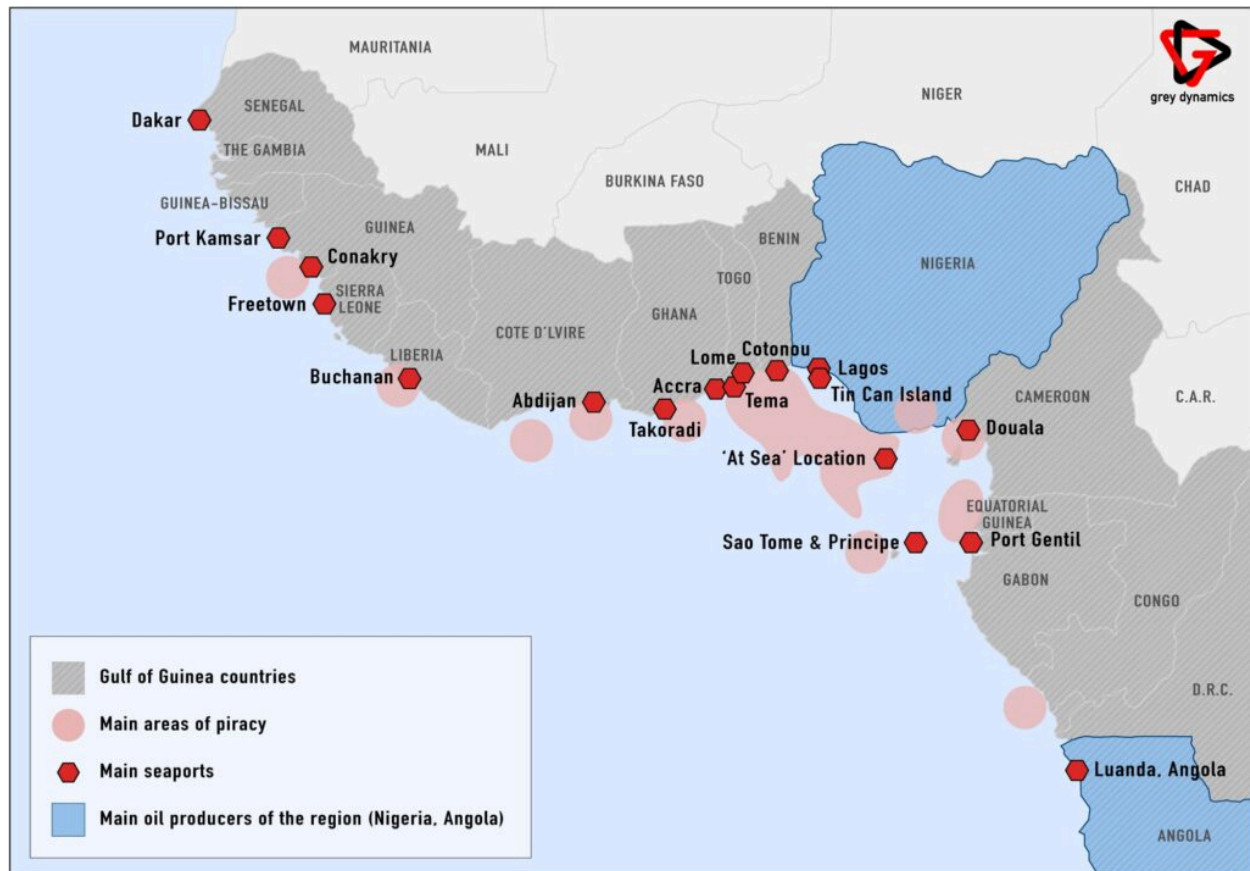
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## Introduction

The Gulf of Guinea, along the coast of West and Central Africa, is an important area for global trade, especially for oil. Since the early 2000s, it has faced serious problems with piracy, including stealing oil, robbing ships, and kidnapping crews for ransom. Although attacks have dropped since 2020, piracy continues because of poverty, corruption, and weak government systems. Many countries and organizations, like Nigeria, ECOWAS, ECCAS, the African Union, the EU, and the United States, are working together through agreements such as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct to make the region safer. However, poor cooperation, lack of resources, and weak laws still make progress difficult. To stop piracy for good, the region needs to reduce poverty, create more jobs, strengthen laws, and improve teamwork between countries while relying less on foreign help.

## General Overview

The Gulf of Guinea is an area of the Atlantic Ocean stretching from Senegal to Angola and encompassing more than twenty coastal states. Over time, it has become an essential trade route for oil and other natural resources. The early 2000s saw an increase in acts of piracy in this region. This includes illegal oil theft, armed robbery, and kidnapping crewmembers for ransom. While there has been a significant decline starting in 2020, it remains essential to address the root causes of the issue at hand.



## Methods

According to UNCLOS, piracy at sea refers to “any act of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship” against another ship. Illegal oil bunkering and ransom are generally the most used tactics in the Gulf of Guinea. Following an oil price crash in 2014, an increase in kidnapping for ransom was observed, as ransom prices are less likely to fluctuate. Typically, the hostages are held in camps offshore and are subject to various forms of mistreatment, including violence and abuse.

## Causes

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea stems from systemic poverty. Indeed, according to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, 34% of inhabitants of this region live in extreme poverty. Thus, piracy and crime become an alluring source of income. Ironically, armed robbery in the Gulf of Guinea deters investment in that region, worsening its everpresent economic problems.

Other factors facilitate piracy in this region. Indeed, in the past, this region has often lacked adequate security measures to protect trade routes. Other security concerns in this region

such as terrorism are often prioritized, and therefore allocated more funding and resources. Furthermore, while many anti-piracy frameworks exist in different countries of the Gulf of Guinea, regional and international cooperation regarding this topic is often inadequate.

Corruption of security forces and politicians in this region allows for criminals to avoid prosecution, thus enabling piracy to continue. In the past decade, only three piracy cases have gone to trial. In addition, election periods often coincide with an increase of piracy: they threaten the arrangements that pirates have made with corrupt local authorities, therefore inciting pirates to display their influence by increasing their activity. Moreover, political instability caused by transfers of power creates conditions in which acts of piracy are more likely to go unpunished.

Finally, governmental structuring can also facilitate piracy in the region. When regional political power is centralized into a large local government, there are fewer alternative local authorities to step in when one is ineffective.

## Effects

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has alarming effects on international maritime trade. First, as 25 percent of African maritime traffic and 30 percent of American oil imports pass through this region, it has a significant impact on global oil supply. Economically, piracy causes an increase in the price of shipping: marine insurance prices increase and the Gulf of Guinea's instability causes ships to adopt longer trade routes, thus causing shipping companies to spend more money on fuel and increasing carbon emissions. Some studies estimated that piracy in the Gulf of Guinea was costing the world economy 7 to 12 billion dollars annually in the 2010s (Oceans Beyond Piracy), directly impacting prices for consumers.

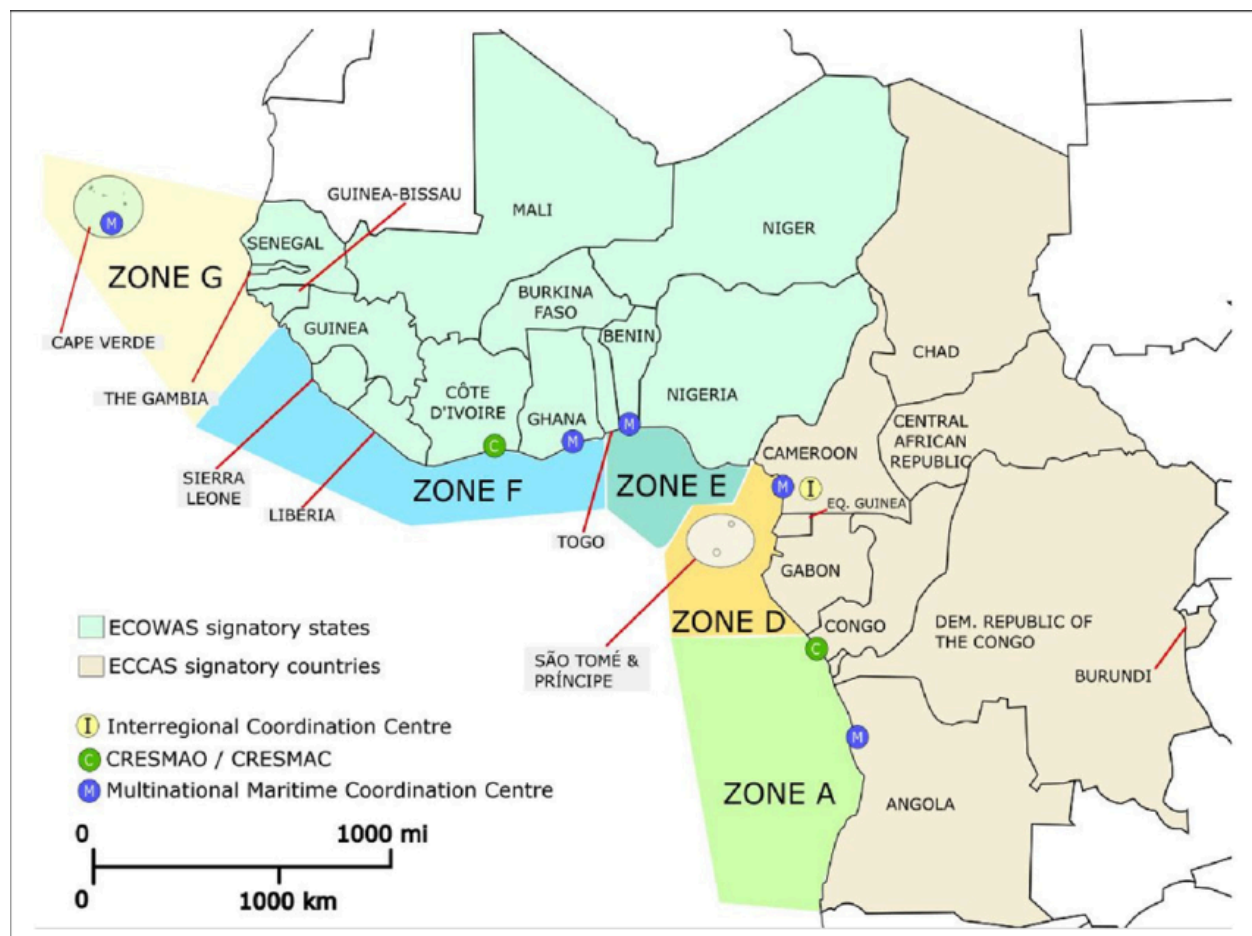
Furthermore, piracy also deters investment in this region, therefore increasing poverty rates in that area and making the population more susceptible to participating in other acts of piracy, drug trafficking, and other Transnational Organized Crime (TOC): the cycle of poverty and instability continues. In turn, this stifles the development of tourism and the oil and gas industry.

Oil theft and illegal oil bunkering also has a significant environmental impact, as it can cause oil spills in the area. In turn, this damages the livelihoods of fishing communities and incite them to turn to maritime crime as a source of income.

Finally, kidnappings and acts of violence can have disastrous psychological impacts for the victims, who are subject to abuse and malnutrition when held captive. Victims often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In addition, the threats of piracy in the Gulf compels fishermen to avoid certain areas, leading to a loss of income and prompting their displacement.

## Existing solutions

Certain solutions have already been put in place. Most notably, in 2013, members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) adopted the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and put in place the Yaoundé Architecture, which aimed to create an international framework to coordinate responses to piracy in this region. An example of a successful operation is the operation to save the kidnapped crew of the Portuguese MT *Tommi Ritscher* in 2020. Nigerian and Beninese special forces worked together and rescued the crewmembers. However, greater cooperation and a greater exchange of information between ECOWAS and ECCAS countries is necessary. In addition, the Yaoundé Code of Conduct's influence remains to be limited, as it is not legally binding.



The Group of Friends of the Gulf of Guinea, including European and Asian countries, was created the same year to support the implementation of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct. It encourages the involvement of foreign navies in the Gulf of Guinea and international

investment to solve the crisis. The 2016 MT *Maximus* incident is an example of successful international cooperation against piracy.

## Future challenges

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is an issue that continues to evolve. For example, while in the past, piracy was mainly concentrated off the coast of Nigeria, the issue has now spread out along the coast. Indeed, in the fourth quarter of 2021, 62 percent of incidents occurred in ECCAS regional waters, whereas, earlier in the year, only 20 percent of the incidents had occurred in that same area. Thus, new military training and frameworks will be necessary to combat the issue. In addition, the involvement of foreign military - and private military companies - in the area raises concerns regarding national sovereignty. Furthermore, as other global issues raise concerns, certain countries are considering reducing their involvement. The question of instilling a proper framework to prosecute pirate groups has also garnered attention in recent years.

## Key terms

### High Seas

The high seas are areas of the ocean that are not owned or controlled by any country. According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), they begin 200 nautical miles from a country's coast. Countries have the freedom to sail and trade there, but no one can claim them as their own.

### Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

An EEZ extends 200 nautical miles from a country's coastline. Within it, the country has the right to use and manage marine resources like oil, gas, and fish. However, it cannot block other countries' ships from passing through.

### Piracy

Under Article 101 of UNCLOS, piracy means any illegal act of violence, detention, or theft done by a private ship or aircraft for personal gain on the high seas, outside any country's jurisdiction. Attacks that happen in an EEZ are treated the same way as high seas piracy.

### Yaoundé Code of Conduct (2013)

A regional agreement between West and Central African states to improve cooperation against piracy, armed robbery at sea, and other maritime crimes such as illegal

fishing and oil theft. It established a shared information and coordination system known as the “Yaoundé Architecture.”

### **Illegal Oil Bunkering**

The theft of crude oil by breaking into pipelines and illegally selling or refining it. This is common in the Niger Delta and provides major funding for criminal networks.

### **IUU Fishing**

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing threatens fish stocks and marine ecosystems. It also hurts coastal economies and can be linked to other crimes like smuggling.

### **Ransom**

Money paid to pirates or kidnappers to release captured crew members or ships. It is one of the main sources of income for pirate groups in the Gulf of Guinea.

### **Transnational Organized Crime (TOC)**

Criminal groups that operate across borders to gain profit or influence. In the Gulf of Guinea, TOCs are involved in smuggling, oil theft, and human trafficking.

### **G7++ Friends of the Gulf of Guinea (FoGG)**

An international group launched in 2013 to coordinate efforts among G7 countries, the EU, and regional partners to fight piracy and improve maritime security in West and Central Africa.

### **Interregional Coordination Centre (ICC)**

Headquartered in Yaoundé, Cameroon, the ICC is responsible for coordinating regional maritime security operations and information sharing between ECOWAS, ECCAS, and the Gulf of Guinea Commission.

### **ECOWAS**

The Economic Community of West African States is an economic and political union of twelve states of West Africa: Benin, Cabo Verde, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bassau, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

### **ECCAS**

The Economic Community of Central African States is an economic and political union of eleven states of Central Africa: it includes Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African

Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and São Tomé and Príncipe.

## Timeline

Year	Number of reported Pirate attacks in Gulf of Guinea (Taken from the IMB's Piracy Reporting Centre)	Cumulative Average
2010	39	39.0
2011	53	46.0
2012	62	51.3
2013	51	51.3
2014	41	49.2
2015	31	46.2
2016	54	47.3
2017	36	45.9
2018	82	49.9
2019	64	51.3
2020	84	54.3
2021	35	52.7
2022	19	50.1
2023	22	48.1
2024	18	46.1

**2011** - Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea becomes a global concern.

**2013** - Yaoundé Code of Conduct is instilled and the G7++FoGG is established.

**2016** - The Dubai-owned *MT Maximus*, carrying 4,700 tons of fuel, is seized by a pirate group. Through international cooperation, the hijackers are found.



**2020** - The amount of pirate attacks in the Gulf of Guinea reaches a record high (84 attacks).

**2020** - The crew of the Portuguese MT *Tommi Ritscher* is kidnapped. Thanks to the Yaoundé Architecture, Beninese and Nigerian navies work together to rescue all members of the ship.

**2021** - The *Mozart* is captured: 15 crewmembers are kidnapped, one is attacked. The IMO calls for renewed effort to combat piracy in this region.

**2024** - The amount of pirate attacks in the Gulf of Guinea reached a record low (18 attacks) in recent years.

## Major parties involved

The fight against piracy in the Gulf of Guinea involves a diverse range of actors, each with distinct motivations and capabilities. Understanding these stakeholders is key to identifying areas of potential cooperation or tension.

### Nigeria

Nigeria is the epicenter of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and the country most affected by attacks on vessels and kidnappings for ransom. As Africa's largest oil and gas producer and a regional power, Nigeria's economic and energy infrastructure are major targets. The country plays a leading role in regional maritime security efforts through the Nigerian Navy and its participation in the Yaoundé Architecture. However, corruption, weak law enforcement, and socio-economic challenges in the Niger Delta continue to fuel maritime crime.

### France

France maintains a strong security footprint in West and Central Africa, with military bases in countries such as Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire. It regularly organizes regional naval exercises like "Grand African NEMO," aimed at strengthening cooperation and readiness among coastal states. France's involvement reflects both its strategic interests in protecting shipping lanes and its historical ties to its former colonies in the region.

### United States

The United States maintains a naval presence in the Gulf of Guinea and frequently conducts joint exercises, including “Obangame Express,” which trains regional navies in counter-piracy and maritime domain awareness. Washington’s involvement is driven by its interest in protecting international shipping, energy security, and promoting regional stability. The U.S. also provides technical and logistical assistance through AFRICOM and various capacity-building programs.

## **China**

China’s growing influence in the Gulf of Guinea is driven by its investments in oil, mining, and port infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing has built and financed several commercial ports and is increasingly involved in maritime security cooperation. While it officially promotes anti-piracy collaboration, China’s deeper goal is to secure its economic interests and establish a lasting strategic presence in West African maritime trade routes.

## **Russia**

Russia is reasserting its presence in the Gulf of Guinea through arms sales, security partnerships, and investments in energy projects. Moscow seeks to expand its geopolitical influence and counter Western dominance in the region. Russian private military contractors have been reported operating in parts of West Africa, adding a layer of political tension to the maritime security environment.

## **Turkey**

Turkey has rapidly expanded its diplomatic and economic reach in West Africa, including the Gulf of Guinea. Through trade, defense agreements, and maritime cooperation, Ankara seeks to position itself as an alternative partner to Western powers. Turkish shipping interests in the region have also faced piracy risks, motivating greater engagement in security dialogues.

## **Norway**

Norway’s involvement is driven by its expertise in maritime safety, governance, and the oil industry. Norwegian firms and agencies provide technical assistance, training, and promote best practices for safe shipping and offshore operations. As a global maritime leader, Norway contributes to improving regional standards for maritime regulation and environmental protection.

## **Italy**

Italy contributes to anti-piracy missions and naval exercises in the Gulf of Guinea, reflecting both its oil interests and its broader commitment to international maritime security. Rome often advocates a balanced approach, emphasizing capacity building and avoiding excessive militarization of the region. Italian naval vessels occasionally patrol or cooperate under EU frameworks.

## **Denmark**

Denmark has become one of the most active European actors in the Gulf of Guinea, known for its naval deployments and capacity-building efforts. Its involvement intensified after Danish shipping company Maersk suffered multiple piracy incidents. Denmark provides training, supports local maritime centers, and promotes a European approach to security that focuses on partnership and local ownership rather than colonial legacy.

## **United Kingdom**

Although not as active as before, the UK still supports maritime security through training programs, naval visits, and collaboration via the Royal Navy and the UK Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) network.

## **European Union**

The European Union views the Gulf of Guinea as strategically vital for trade and energy, importing significant volumes of oil from the region. Through its 2014 EU Strategy on the Gulf of Guinea and the Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) initiative, the EU supports regional capacity building, governance, and coordination under the Yaoundé Architecture. Its focus is on long-term maritime security and sustainable economic growth.

## **African Union AU**

The African Union serves as the main continental body promoting maritime security and cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea. Through its 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy, it encourages African-led responses to piracy and illegal activities while linking West and Central African states under the Yaoundé Architecture. The AU emphasizes regional ownership, coordination, and the development of a sustainable blue economy as key pillars of long-term stability in the region.

## **Regional African Frameworks**

Organizations such as ECOWAS, ECCAS, and the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) are key in coordinating regional responses. They work through the Yaoundé Architecture to

share information and organize joint naval patrols. However, limited resources and uneven politics will remain obstacles to full regional cooperation.

## Possible solutions

Although piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is a complex challenge, addressing its root causes, improving prosecution, and strengthening regional cooperation are essential steps toward lasting maritime security.

### Addressing the root causes

One long term solution is to tackle the root causes of piracy, such as unemployment, poverty and weak governance. Many young people turn to piracy to support themselves and their families due to a lack of economic opportunities. Expanding education, vocational training, and coastal employment initiatives could offer viable alternatives. Public-private partnerships, especially with oil and shipping companies, could fund community development projects and training programs for youth. Governments could also introduce microcredit systems for small coastal enterprises and invest in sustainable fishing industries to reduce economic dependence on illegal activities.

### Providing legal framework

Weak and inconsistent persecution allows piracy to continue. Over the last decade, only three cases of suspected pirates have gone to court, despite 84 cases of piracy occurring in 2020 alone. Another issue is that some nations still lack legal definitions of piracy aligned with international standards UNCLOS. Harmonizing anti-piracy laws across the Gulf of Guinea States, under the Yaoundé Code and UNCLOS and establishing a regional maritime tribunal to help pave the way for a more consistent persecution of Piracy, ensure swift and fair trials. Specialized training for judges and maritime law enforcement officers, along with anti-corruption oversight, would make justice more predictable and credible across borders.

## **Improving coordination**

Although piracy cases have decreased in the past years, it remains a persistent issue that could very well resurge. Strengthening coordination could ensure the situation remains stable and prevent new outbreaks. Rather than relying primarily on foreign navies, countries could focus on autonomous regional surveillance. This could include deploying AI-powered satellites, maritime drones, and predictive data systems to identify high-risk areas in real time. Shared digital platforms could enable faster communication between coastal patrols, and secure mobile applications could allow ship crews to report threats instantly. Collaborative naval exercises should aim not only to deter attacks but also to build trust and interoperability among regional forces.

## **Balancing foreign involvement and Regional ownership**

Balancing international assistance with regional ownership will be essential for long-term success. Future cooperation should focus on empowering local actors rather than creating dependence. Foreign investment could be directed toward building regional maritime academies, developing locally produced surveillance technologies, and strengthening financial transparency. Partnerships with private stakeholders, including insurers, energy companies, and technology firms, can also promote sustainable maritime security by aligning economic incentives with regional stability.

Ultimately, combating piracy in the Gulf of Guinea requires both innovation and ownership: investing in people, technology, and governance so that coastal nations can protect their waters independently and sustainably.

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