



Beauty and the Thief: Why the Gulf of Guinea Attracts Maritime Insecurity

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SUMMARY

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has risen considerably over the last few years. This policy brief aims to explain why this region has become attractive to pirates and what lessons can be learnt from another Gulf that used to be a pirate's haven.

Introduction

In 2013, piracy at sea reached its lowest level in six years with 264 attacks recorded worldwide, constituting a 41 percent drop since the peak of Somali piracy in 2011.¹ This was attributed to the decrease in piracy along the coast of East Africa and Somali waters due to the continuous presence of international navies in the region; the usage of private and armed security teams by these vessels; the hardening of the vessels; and the improving stability of Somali central government.

Nonetheless, the 2013 Global Piracy Report highlighted that more than 300 persons were taken hostage, with 21 of them injured by knives or guns. The most violent of the pirates were the Nigerians who killed a crew member and kidnapped 36 crew members for ransom.² Indeed, attacks in the Gulf

of Guinea, particularly the West African section, constituted 19 percent of worldwide piracy attacks in 2013. Nigerian pirates and armed robbers at sea made 31 of the 51 attacks in the region. These pirates took 49 hostages, 36 more than any previous year. They were also recorded to be venturing further away from the Nigerian coastline into Gabon, Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire waters.³

The increasing reports of piracy and armed robbery at sea along West African waters and the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) continues to be a cause of worry for the international and regional communities as well as the states involved. Questions are being raised as to why this region is slowly becoming pirate infested and why the Somali approach cannot be adopted to respond to this crisis. This policy brief attempts to answer these questions and offer some practical solutions.

¹ ICC International Maritime Bureau (2014). Piracy and Armed Robbery against ships. Report for the period 1 January- 31 December 2013. London: ICC.

² Mukundan, P. (2014). Somali pirate clampdown caused drop in global piracy, IMB reveals. Available at: <https://icc->

ccs.org/news/904-somali-pirate-clampdown-caused-drop-in-global-piracy-imb-reveals [Accessed 4 July 2014]

³ Mukundan, op. cit.

What makes the GoG Region Attractive?

The GoG region is a vast stretch of unbroken coastline (approximately 6,000 km) that covers about 16 countries from Senegal to Angola. Aside from the vastness of this region, its economic importance cannot be underrated. It serves as a crucial access point for landlocked countries like Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso to carry out the export and import of goods and services. It is estimated that about 90 percent of global shipping is carried out by sea and the GoG is used to connect the Far East with the Americas and Europe via the Atlantic. Though a longer route, it is preferred to the shorter but war and piracy-infested Arab Gulf, Middle East and North Africa route.

The GoG also has several established oil and hydrocarbon producers: Nigeria, Angola, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. Additionally, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Senegal have also discovered oil in commercial quantities. This has brought predictions of the total estimated production to about 50.4 million barrels per day. Currently, the region produces about 5.4 million barrels a day.⁴ In addition, the region is famous for extensive reserves of bio-diversity of marine and rain forest resources.

Factors Influencing Maritime Insecurity in the GoG

The geopolitical position of the region enables its oil-producing nations to enjoy proximity to major export partners. Additionally, the GoG profits from the absence of maritime choke-points (the narrow shipping lanes) between it and other parts of the world. The greater proportion of the world's crude oil trade passes through these choke-points posing a danger to huge oil tankers in narrow lanes. This makes them susceptible to accidents, blockades and pirate attacks. In the general absence of these

choke-points in the GoG, ships can sail freely,⁵ resulting in marine travel being seen as the most affordable means of transporting commodities between the region and other parts of the globe.

The region's possession of this high number of countries producing the best quality of crude oil has generated continuous interest from Western countries. United States oil companies, in particular, prefer this light crude as it contains considerably less sulphur than other types of crude oil.⁶ Furthermore, the oil from this region is extracted from mainly offshore fields. This enables oil companies to keep their business away from any inland instability. However, this advantage of the region has now become its disadvantage as most pirate or armed robbery attacks have been against oil tankers. The commodity that attracts investors and revenue is the exact one attracting criminal activities into the region. This aspect of oil exploration is raised every time a GoG country begins to explore for the mineral. And yet nations have not taken the full proactive measures needed to provide security for production of the commodity.

Another contributing factor to the insecurity in the region is the absence of a full appreciation of the valuable role the maritime domain plays in a nation's stability and security. Almost all the nations along the GoG cannot boast of any noteworthy navy or coast guard capable of maintaining a presence at sea and providing effective deterrence or counter-measures to any attack.⁷ This weakness could be attributed to another contributing factor, which is the absence of a good and functioning governance structure. The majority of GoG nations are either hosting a peacekeeping mission or currently facing internal conflicts. GoG pirates or armed robbers at sea have compared the vast resources in the region with the

⁴ Ukeje, C. and Mvomo Ela, W. (2013). *African Approaches to Maritime Security - The Gulf of Guinea*. Abuja: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

⁵ Mañe, D.O. (2005). Emergence of the Gulf of Guinea in the Global Economy: Prospects and Challenges. IMF Working Paper: Office of the Executive Director- Africa, WP/05/235

⁶ Mañe, op. cit.

⁷ Researcher's observation and interviews conducted during field research in 2012-2013

weak national or regional security presence and have decided to make as much economic gain as they can from the identified gaps.

Why the Gulf of Aden (GoA)/Somalia Solution cannot work in the Gulf of Guinea

Piracy along the Gulf of Aden (GoA) or Somali waters began in the early 1990s with groups of local fishermen fighting to protect their territorial waters against illegal fishing, pair trawlers and illegal dumping of hazardous waste materials.⁸ By 2008 there were 184 pirate attacks⁹ off the Somali waters and the pirates had become bolder, and venturing further out into high seas to attack ships and take hostages.

Somali pirates unlike GoG pirates did not carry out their activities in national or territorial waters but wandered into international waters. They hijacked vessels, kept the crew and commodities on board and began negotiations for ransom. Once the ransom was paid, the vessel, its crew and commodities were released unharmed. GoG pirates, however, are more interested in the commodities on board the vessels. They hijack the vessel, sail it to an undisclosed location, offload all the commodities and then release the vessel and the crew. If the crew tries to interfere with their activities, they do not hesitate to harm the crew members.

Since the activities of Somali pirates tended to occur in international waters, it was possible for the international community to send in ships to address the situation. Additionally, it enabled shipping companies to employ the services of

armed security guards on board their vessels to deter pirates and ward off attacks.

However, in the case of the GoG, since most of the attacks occur in territorial waters under the jurisdiction of the nations involved, the international community cannot send in vessels or warships to repel attacks unless at the invitation of the host nation. Additionally, companies cannot place armed security guards on board their vessels sailing through the region but are obliged to pay for the national navy to offer protection and escort through Nigerian, Beninois or Togolese waters.¹⁰

Lastly, to combat the piracy attacks in Somali waters, a conscious effort was made to build capacity within the region. This included international support to improve the legal systems of all countries affected. In addition, the correctional services for the eastern and southern African littoral states were improved to allow for increased prosecution and imprisonment of convicted pirates.¹¹

Lessons for the Gulf of Guinea

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that the GoG region has become a haven for pirates and armed robbers at sea. However, the remedies and mechanisms that were adopted in the Somali situation cannot be adopted holistically in the GoG region. Some modifications will have to be made.

First, since attacks in the GoG are occurring in territorial waters, there is an urgent need for nations affected to beef up their presence at sea and offer their security agencies all the support needed to maintain a constant presence. As it is illegal for

⁸ Waldo, M. A. (2009). The Two Piracies in Somalia: Why the world ignores the other? Available at: http://wardheernews.com/Articles_09/Jan/Waldo/08_The_two_piracies_in_Somalia.html . [Accessed 18 May 2009].

⁹ Osei-Tutu, J. (2011). The Root Causes of the Somali Piracy. Accra: Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Occasional Paper No. 31.

¹⁰ Anyimadu, A. (2013). Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea: Lessons Learned from the Indian Ocean. London: Chatham House, Africa 2013/02

¹¹ Anyimadu, op. cit.

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armed private security to operate in the GoG region, the nations need to offer vessels in their waters a sense of security and the assurance that they can carry out their operations in ease and comfort.

One measure that was adopted in the GoA that can be adopted in the GoG is regional capacity building. The operations of GoG pirates affect not only the nations under attack but also their neighbours and the economic powers of the entire region. There is therefore the need for the nations to collectively mobilise their law enforcement agencies to work efficiently and effectively. The navies, coastguards, marine police, judiciary and private industries must forge an understanding of cooperation, communication and coordination. Increasing cooperation and information sharing across domestic and regional agencies can help combat corruption and bad governance by preventing only one entity from having full control over resources for combating maritime insecurity.

Lastly, the majority of countries in the GoG have all signed international and regional treaties aimed at fostering collaboration and protection of their seas and coastlines. Unfortunately, many of these treaties and conventions have been signed but not ratified and enacted as national laws. Countries need to establish national laws that will ensure the full protection of territorial waters. These laws should be supplemented with the capacity enhancement of personnel to ensure effective implementation of these laws.

About the Author

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