

Atlantic piracy, current threats, and maritime governance in the Gulf of Guinea

Written by Maisie Pigeon

A drop in attacks the Gulf of Guinea does not necessarily mean piracy has been resolved. Pirates have adapted their tactics, and the potential for resurgence remains high; this issue remains a critical security and development concern. It is not just a regional priority, it is an international imperative.

Bottom lines up front

- Increased onboard security measures and other steps have reduced the incidence of piracy, but captains and crews must remain vigilant in the face of what is now a widespread, complex security challenge rooted in persistent poverty and onshore insurgencies, particularly in oil-rich Nigeria.
- The threat extends to neighboring countries—including Benin, Togo, Ghana, and eventually to Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon—where incidents are typically classified as armed robberies at sea and occur inside territorial waters.
- Dismantling the networks that sustain piracy through targeted prosecutions of financiers and organizers of the crimes is crucial, along with programs to build alternative livelihoods.

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) remains a critical security and development concern, despite recent declines in reported incidents. Stretching from Senegal to Angola, the Gulf of Guinea is one of the world's most strategically significant maritime regions, serving as a vital corridor for international shipping, hosting major oil and gas export routes, and supporting regional commerce and livelihoods for millions in coastal communities. Coordinated international and regional efforts—such as the Yaoundé Architecture for Maritime Security, the regional cooperative and information-sharing agreement to combat piracy and maritime crime in

West and Central Africa—have contributed to enhanced maritime governance and a drop in piracy attacks. Nevertheless, the underlying drivers of maritime crime persist, including weak law enforcement, high youth unemployment, and limited economic opportunities in the coastal zone.

But a drop in attacks does not necessarily mean piracy has been resolved. Pirate groups have adapted their tactics, and the potential for resurgence remains high; the economic and psychological impacts on seafarers, shipping companies, and local communities continue, undermining

investor confidence and regional development. Sustained attention, investment, and political will are essential to secure the maritime domain.

This study seeks to assess the current state of piracy in the GoG, analyze trends in criminal activity, evaluate the effectiveness of regional and international responses, and explore pathways toward lasting maritime security. A comprehensive response is required: incorporating enforcement mechanisms, good governance, community resilience, and economic development. As global dependence on maritime routes persists, ensuring the safety and sustainability of the Gulf of Guinea is not just a regional priority—it is an international imperative.

History of piracy and armed robbery

Piracy and armed robbery in the Gulf of Guinea has been shaped by maritime trade, political instability, and weak coastal governance that have made the region a persistent hot spot for maritime crime. These crimes have evolved from opportunistic incidents into a complex security challenge, rooted in onshore insurgencies, particularly in oil-rich Nigeria.

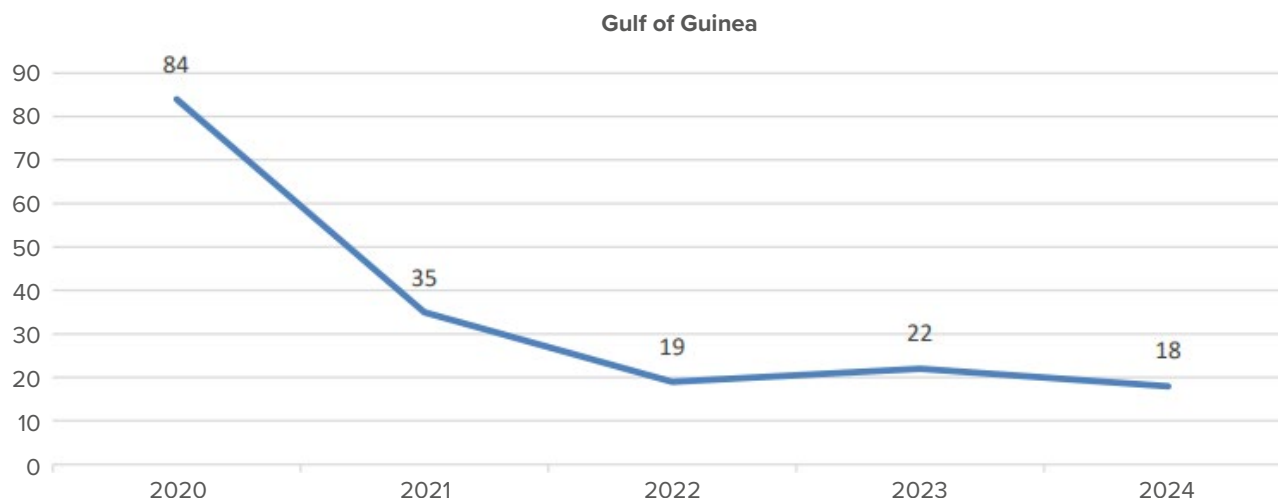
Piracy and armed robbery in the GoG have drawn international concern over the past two decades, with some analysts comparing the region to the earlier crisis off the coast of Somalia, due to its frequency, violence, and destabilizing impact on maritime security. However, unlike East African piracy, the majority of incidents occurring off West Africa are classified as armed robbery at sea, rather than piracy, as most incidents take place inside territorial waters, as opposed to piracy, which occurs in international waters.¹ Further, actors employ a variety of tactics in West Africa—including illegal oil bunkering and kidnapping for ransom—whereas Somali pirates

generally adhere to hijacking and kidnapping for ransom, holding both ship and crew hostage until a ransom is paid.² In Somalia, a combination of political instability and extreme poverty fueled the piracy crisis, whereas in West Africa, incidents are historically connected to the region's oil wealth and on-shore insurgencies aimed at disrupting multinational oil companies.³ The volume of oil industry vessels transiting the Gulf of Guinea provided the opportunity for illegal oil bunkering, which enabled criminal actors to hijack a vessel to siphon off its oil product for sale on the black market.⁴ In West Africa, crude oil theft is linked to a legacy of economic inequality, corruption, and criminal networks within the region.⁵

Criminal oil bunkering can present perpetrators with an enormous return on investment, if the conditions are right. However, it is also an involved process, which allows authorities a substantial window of time to respond to incidents. Because of this, following the global crash in the price per barrel of oil in 2014, pirate groups in the region pivoted to kidnapping for ransom. In these incidents, pirate groups target high-value members of the crew, such as the captain, first mate, or chief engineer as hostages. These crew members are removed from the vessel and held in camps onshore, often in the Niger Delta, as the pirates await payments from shipping companies or family members.⁶ Pirate groups in the region are highly adaptable and have been known to alternate between the tactics, depending on the risk-reward ratio.

On average, hostage situations in West Africa are resolved much faster than those along the Somali coast, in a matter of days or weeks, versus years in Somalia. But while shorter in duration, hostage events in the GoG tend to be more violent, with former hostages reporting physical violence and abuse while in captivity.⁷

1. "Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships," United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Article 101, 1982, <https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Security/Pages/PiracyArmedRobberydefault.aspx>.
2. Ken Ahorsu, David Suaka Yaro, and Derrick Attachie, "Maritime Piracy and Its Implications on Security in the Gulf of Guinea," *Eastern African Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no. 2 (March 2024): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.58721/eajhss.v3i2.470>, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.
3. Lamir Mohammed and Dimitrios Dalaklis, "The Current Status of Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea," *Journal of Maritime Research*, January 2024.
4. Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, *Pirates of the Niger Delta: Between Brown and Blue Waters*, UNODC Global Maritime Crime Programme and Ministry of Foreign Affairs Denmark, 2021, 21.
5. Mohammed and Dalaklis, "The Current Status of Maritime Security."
6. Maisie Pigeon and Kelly Moss, "Why Piracy Is a Growing Threat," *World Politics Review*, June 2020.
7. Pigeon and Moss, "Why Piracy Is a Growing Threat."

Figure 1: West Africa - Gulf of Guinea - Total number of reported incidents

Source: International Chamber of Commerce's International Maritime Bureau (IMB) Piracy Reporting Centre, *Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships Report for the Period 1 January – 31 December 2024*.

Overview of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea: 2020–2025

Following a peak in the mid-2010s, pirate activity in the Gulf of Guinea has declined over the last several years. (See figure 1.) This decrease in overall incidents is often attributed to a combination of efforts from regional and international actors, including the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA), the Nigerian Navy, and Group of Seven Friends of the Gulf of Guinea (G7 ++ FoGG) navies,⁸ and some analysts predict a “stabilization” of the security situation in 2025.⁹ However, according to others, the Gulf of Guinea remains at high risk.¹⁰

While the number of incidents has declined, the activity has spread across the region. Between 2010 and 2015, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea was heavily concentrated off the coast of Nigeria.¹¹ As Nigerian security forces stepped up patrols and international naval cooperation increased, the area of piracy operations has gradually mushroomed. From the period

between 2015 and 2018 onward, there was a notable spread of attacks to neighboring countries, including Benin, Togo, Ghana, and eventually to Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon.

Root causes and enabling factors

Though maritime risk experts note a recent decline in piracy activity in the Gulf of Guinea, the underlying socioeconomic factors that spurred it haven't gone away.¹² Therefore, maritime crews transiting the region should remain vigilant.

Indeed, a confluence of factors make piracy and armed robbery at sea a perpetual threat to the Gulf of Guinea region. Among them are competing security priorities that divert attention and resources away from maritime threats, leaving vast coastal areas vulnerable. Extreme poverty drives many coastal communities to view piracy as a viable economic alternative in the absence of sustainable livelihoods. Corruption and limited enforcement capacity weaken the

8. Mohammed and Dalaklis, “The Current Status of Maritime Security.”

9. Dryad Global, “Maritime Trends for 2025,” January 2025.

10. Dryad Global, “Maritime Security Threat Advisory,” February 25, 2025.

11. Mohammed and Dalaklis, “The Current Status of Maritime Security.”

12. Dryad Global, “Maritime Trends for 2025.”

rule of law, allowing pirate groups to operate with relative impunity. While multinational cooperation has improved in recent years, the lack of a cohesive regional strategy continues to undermine the effectiveness of joint maritime security initiatives.¹³

Endemic regional poverty

Poverty across the region remains a severe risk for persistent criminal activity, which can create a cycle that hobbles prospects in the region. Pigeon and Moss describe the problem:

Because piracy can be highly profitable, individuals living along the coast without jobs may turn to crime for income and the sense of purpose and even dignity that comes with those better prospects. Yet criminality merely perpetuates the economic problems in these communities, while creating incentives for others to turn to crime as well.¹⁴

Notably, pirate operations require significant investment—in skiffs, engines, weapons, bribes, and personnel—by what a UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report refers to as high-level facilitators.¹⁵ These sponsors and investors back pirate group operations and in turn “earn the lion’s share of the loot.”¹⁶ Disrupting these financial networks is just as important as targeting pirates at sea. Breaking this cycle requires addressing the socioeconomic challenges in the region that make maritime crime appealing. Coastal communities face a host of pressing and complicated external threats to livelihoods including climate change and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing which put significant pressure on legal livelihoods like fishing. Maritime crime further compounds these challenges, deterring investments in legitimate businesses and weakening governance.

Weak enforcement capacity and competing security priorities

Most citizens in the region are unlikely to name piracy and armed robbery as the most salient security threat to everyday life in the littoral countries of West Africa. State security forces in Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Nigeria are dealing with a persistent and increasing threat of terrorism from the north, which diverts attention and resources away from the coastline.¹⁷ Other criminal networks, such as for trafficking in drugs and people, also strain maritime security efforts in the region and there is concern about the nexus between terrorism and transnational organized crime, as evidenced by UNODC and UNICRI launching a capacity building project to address this very thing across Africa. Government officials have finite budgets and must determine the priorities on which to spend, and the retrenchment of international support from countries like the United States, France, and the United Kingdom further strain resources for addressing maritime security shortfalls.

Corruption and lack of legal follow-through

Corruption and weak legal enforcement enable piracy in the GoG, allowing criminal networks to operate with near impunity. Pirate groups routinely bribe members of security forces and politicians to buy protection and ensure that their illicit activities are overlooked.¹⁸ Complicity from inside state institutions undermines the rule of law and fosters a climate which enables piracy, allowing these groups to thrive and expand their reach throughout the region.

Systemic corruption compounds under-functioning enforcement mechanisms and legal systems, which results in near

13. Ahorsu, Suaka Yaro, and Attachie, “Maritime Piracy and Its Implications.”

14. Pigeon and Moss, “Why Piracy Is a Growing Threat.”

15. Jacobsen, *Pirates of the Niger Delta*, 48.

16. Ahorsu, Suaka Yaro, and Attachie, “Maritime Piracy and Its Implications.”

17. Rossella Marangio, “Deep Waters: The Maritime Security Landscape in the Gulf of Guinea,” European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brief/1, January 2025.

18. Jacobsen, *Pirates of the Niger Delta*, 77.

total impunity for pirates. Despite ongoing efforts to integrate maritime security laws into national legal frameworks, prosecutions remain rare. According to the UNODC, only three piracy cases have gone to trial in the past decade—in Togo, Nigeria, and Denmark—even though 115 piracy incidents were recorded in 2020 alone.¹⁹ Procedural delays, lack of legal capacity, and frequent refusals to transfer suspects to national jurisdictions have all contributed to the paucity of prosecution.²⁰ Without robust, coordinated legal frameworks and the political will to hold perpetrators accountable, piracy will remain a persistent threat in the region.

Insufficient regional cooperation

Individual GoG states lack the enforcement capacity to address piracy and armed robbery on their own.²¹ These maritime crimes require a regional, cross-sectoral response, yet these countries are not sufficiently equipped to defend their territorial waters and expansive exclusive economic zones. Though regional cooperation has improved, more coordination and collaboration are needed to bolster the capacity of maritime security agencies to address piracy and armed robbery in this region.²²

Regional and international responses

Multiple approaches share credit for reducing the number of observed incidents over the last few years in the Gulf of Guinea: increased usage of onboard security measures (including embarked armed guards), secure anchorage areas and more frequent patrols of high-risk areas.²³ Additionally, the development of frameworks that bring together regional leadership, navies from outside of the GoG, multilateral organizations, and the shipping industry have yielded impressive results.

The UN has been an important partner of the region for many years, and the Security Council's attention and engagement on piracy in the GoG culminated in the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (YCOC), which divided the region into five zones, each with its own coordination center; the five centers share information and coordinate responses across the wider region.²⁴ The YCOC addresses a wide range of maritime crimes across the region, including piracy and armed robbery at sea.²⁵ In an oft-cited example of successful regional coordination, the YCOC's effectiveness is perhaps best-illustrated by the 2016 MT *Maximus* incident in which six GoG governments coordinated to track the hijacked vessel's location, resulting in the Nigerian Navy capturing it and freeing the hostages onboard.²⁶

However, the implementation of the YCOC has not been without its challenges, including heavy dependence on external partners for funding, slow-moving information-sharing mechanisms, and the absence of harmonized laws and legal frameworks to prosecute incidents of piracy and armed robbery at sea.²⁷ While the European Union (EU) has been a consistent partner for the YCOC, security challenges in Europe and acute conflict elsewhere in the world may reduce the international attention paid to piracy in the Gulf of Guinea.

Recommendations

To sustainably combat piracy, armed robbery, and other maritime crimes in the Gulf of Guinea, a multifaceted and collaborative approach is essential. The following recommendations reflect key priorities that address both immediate security concerns and the root causes of maritime insecurity. First, continued and enhanced regional collaboration and information sharing must remain a

19. Marangio, "Deep Waters."

20. Marangio, "Deep Waters."

21. Liu Shaojie, "Evolution of Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea," *Kashere Journal of Politics and International Relations* 2, no. 2 (December 2024).

22. Ahorsu, Suaka Yaro, and Attachie, "Maritime Piracy and Its Implications."

23. Ahorsu, Suaka Yaro, and Attachie, "Maritime Piracy and Its Implications;" and Mohammed and Dalaklis, "The Current Status of Maritime Security."

24. Stephanie Oserwa Schandorf, "Reimagining Counter-piracy Efforts in the Gulf of Guinea: Lessons from the Theory of Infrastructure for Coordination and Information Sharing," *African Security Review* 33, no. 4 (2024).

25. Pigeon and Moss, "Why Piracy Is a Growing Threat."

26. Pigeon and Moss, "Why Piracy Is a Growing Threat."

27. Oserwa Schandorf, "Reimagining Counter-piracy Efforts."

cornerstone of counterpiracy efforts. GoG states should also prioritize harmonization of national legal frameworks, as outlined in the Yaoundé Code of Conduct, to facilitate more effective prosecution of piracy and related crimes.

Targeted prosecutions must focus not only on those carrying out attacks at sea but also on the financiers and organizers behind them—those who profit the most from incidents of piracy. At the same time, long-term solutions require programs to build alternative livelihoods in coastal communities affected by poverty and marginalization, which drive recruitment into piracy. Targeting criminal activities which challenge legal coastal livelihoods, which includes IUU fishing by international distant-water fleets, is a vital piece of the puzzle. Further exploring public-private partnerships can foster job creation and encourage corporate social responsibility, particularly in oil- and gas-producing regions.

Finally, international partners, including the EU, must sustain and expand support for regional security frameworks and technological innovations such as drones and satellite systems to enhance naval response and coordination capacities. It is in their strategic interest to continue investments in these initiatives to both protect a critical trade route and related economic interests and development, as well as to combat the transnational crime that can impact outside regions like the EU directly.

1. **Continue and enhance regional collaboration and information sharing:** Such collaboration and information sharing are essential to effectively track, deter, and respond to piracy incidents that often cross maritime borders. Enhanced regional coordination allows for faster response times, better intelligence, and more efficient use of limited maritime security resources. Harmonizing legal frameworks—as recommended in the Yaoundé Code of Conduct—is equally critical to ensure that pirates can be

prosecuted consistently and effectively, closing legal loopholes that allow offenders to evade justice.

2. **Target prosecutions:** Targeting high-level pirate actors, including investors and facilitators, is crucial because they enable and profit from maritime crime yet remain largely insulated from direct risk. Prosecuting these key figures can dismantle the financial and logistical networks that sustain piracy, making it harder for operations to continue or regroup, and reducing the political leverage that these groups can wield through bribery or coercion.
3. **Create programs to foster alternative livelihoods:** Efforts to strengthen naval response and legal follow-through are insufficient to eliminate piracy if the underlying socioeconomic conditions driving coastal communities toward crime go unaddressed. Programs that build sustainable livelihoods are essential to reducing the appeal of piracy by offering viable economic alternatives.
4. **Garner continued support of international partners:** The EU and other international partners should maintain support for Gulf of Guinea regional security frameworks and consider increasing funding to support regional partners to adopt new technology such as drones, satellite imagery, and enhanced communication technology, which can provide real-time updates and increase the response time of naval forces. Investments would both strengthen maritime domain awareness and empower sustained regional ownership of maritime security responses.

These measures form a comprehensive strategy that addresses both the symptoms and root causes of maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea. Sustained commitment from regional governments, industry actors, and international partners is critical for long-term success of counterpiracy efforts.

Maisie Pigeon is the Director of the Coalition for Fisheries Transparency, an international network of civil society organizations working to advance data transparency and accountability in the global fisheries sector. For nearly fifteen years, she has worked on issues of maritime security and ocean governance with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa, and has authored research for the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's Global Maritime Crime Programme, the International Maritime Organization, and the UN Economic Commission for Africa. She holds an MA in international studies from the University of Denver and a BA in political science from James Madison University.

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About the center

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