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Thinking Beyond Borders: Understanding the Domestic and External Sources of Maritime Insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea

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KAIPTC Occasional Paper 60

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	1
Introduction	1
Globalization, State Capacity and Maritime Security/Insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea	2
Domestic Sources of Maritime Insecurity in Gulf of Guinea	4
<i>Situating the Argument</i>	5
Nature of Responses to Maritime Criminality in the Gulf of Guinea	6
Conclusion and Recommendations	8

Abstract

This paper critically examines the relationship between state capacity deficits, the global political economy and maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG). While prevailing discourses attribute maritime crimes in the region to domestic dysfunctions, they overlook the influence of globalization on state capacity and its impact on maritime security. The paper argues that the inability of GoG states to effectively address maritime insecurity is not solely a result of internal factors but also a consequence of the imbalanced global political economy. The analysis critiques the reductionist perspective and elitist responses to maritime criminality, which prioritize the protection of international commerce over the security interests of African states. External interventions often militarize maritime spaces without addressing the underlying causes of insecurity embedded in the global political economy. The paper proposes a comprehensive understanding of the terrestrial sources of maritime insecurity in the GoG; integrating external influences within the global political economy. It emphasizes the need for transformative approaches at both state and global levels to enhance maritime security in the region. A focus on domestic sources of insecurity, elitist responses and the impact of globalization on state capacity provides a nuanced perspective on the complex dynamics shaping maritime security in the GoG.

Keywords: Maritime security, Political economy, Gulf of Guinea, Piracy, IUU fishing, Maritime criminality.

Introduction

A critical reflection on maritime crimes in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) suggests that they are as much an outcome of state capacity deficits in the region as they are a product of the interactions of GoG states with the global political economy. Yet, most scholarly and policy discourses on the sources of maritime insecurity in the region and on how they could be best understood and addressed,¹ have tended to focus attention on the domestic dysfunctions of these

littoral states while omitting the effect of globalization on state capacity in the GoG. A recurring conclusion often drawn is that insecurities at sea essentially originate from land.² This conclusion has been summed up in the pithy observation that “pirates are not born at sea, they are born on land;”³ suggesting that maritime crimes in the GoG, and elsewhere in Africa, are the result of fundamental challenges emanating from the state and reflecting the lack of effective central control as well as the absence of meaningful economic opportunities.⁴ Invariably, dysfunctionality or the capacity deficit narrative is employed to explain how political and economic imbalances internal to the state, account for the prevalence of crime in the GoG maritime domain. Weak law enforcement, corrupt state officials and sluggish criminal justice systems together with pale naval presence are, according to the dominant narrative, manifestations of domestic structures that allow maritime criminality to thrive.⁵ João Piedade observes that:

Where the state is unable or failing to maintain good order at sea, the list of crimes that have a maritime dimension increases and includes maritime terrorism, trafficking of narcotics, people and illicit goods, arms proliferation, illegal fishing, dumping and other environmental crimes, with the effects of these crimes felt by coastal communities, seafarers and the maritime industry at large.⁶

Certainly, state incapacity, state failure or outright state collapse—as Somalia clearly shows—provide favourable conditions for maritime criminality. Undoubtedly, state capacity has critical implications for maritime security because it reflects the ability of the state to allocate resources efficiently and implement policies effectively. State capacity deficit, nonetheless, impedes the delivery of effective maritime governance and, by extension, the

¹Nikolaos Biziouras, “Piracy, State Capacity and Root Causes: Lessons from the Somali Experience and Policy Choice in the Gulf of Guinea,” *African Security Review* 22, no. 3 (2013): 111–122; Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, “Maritime Security and Capacity Building in the Gulf of Guinea: On Comprehensiveness, Gaps, and Security Priorities,” *African Security Review* 26, no. 3 (2017): 237–256; Anna Triantafyllou et al., “Maritime Piracy: Determining Factors and the Role of Deterrence,” *African Security Review* 32, no. 2 (2023): 166–183.

²Katja Lindskov Jacobsen and Julie Høy-Carrasco, “Navigating Changing Currents: A Forward-Looking Evaluation of Efforts to Tackle Maritime Crime Off the Horn of Africa,” University of Copenhagen, September 19, 2018, https://cms.polsci.ku.dk/publikationer/navigating-changing-currents/download-rapport/CMS_Rapport_2018__4_-_Navigating_changing_currents__final__digital_19092018__pdf; Triantafyllou et al., “Maritime Piracy,” 167.

³Mireille Affa’a-Mindzie and Fiona Blyth, “Insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea: Assessing the Threats, Preparing the Response,” International Peace Institute, January 16, 2014, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/ipi_e_pub_gulf_of_guinea.pdf

⁴Triantafyllou et al., “Maritime Piracy,” 167.

⁵Christina Barla and Nitin Agarwala, “Comparing Maritime Piracy Along the Coasts of Africa: In Search of a Solution for the Gulf of Guinea,” *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 16, no.2 (2020): 13–29; Triantafyllou et al., “Maritime Piracy,” 167.

⁶João Piedade, “From Politicization to Securitization of Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea,” *Croatian International Relations Review* 22, no.75 (2016): 69–85.

maintenance of good order at sea by hindering the ability of the state to secure maritime borders and institute effective preventive and countermeasures against crimes at sea. In short, state capacity matters.

Yet, in the ongoing context of globalization, which has been described as “a central determining factor in building the capable state in Africa,”⁷ where the state remains largely “poor, weak and subordinate”⁸ and locked in lopsided power relations that continue to reproduce and reinforce structural inequalities in the current global political-economic framework, it seems misleading to attribute maritime criminality and insecurity in the GoG maritime space wholly to dysfunctional domestic structures; however important they are. On the contrary, the skewed focus on state dysfunctionality obscures how the unbalanced nature of globalization curtails the policy choices and options opened to states in Africa and how it further works to close off their developmental prospects and institutional viability to mitigate crises, including those occurring in maritime spaces. Moreover, it elides how the globalization of world markets has been a source of state weakness; hollowing the capacity of the state to deliver public goods, including the maintenance of law and order in the context of growing inequality gaps both within and among states.⁹ Not only, therefore, is the mainstream explanation unable to provide the basis for a lasting solution to the maritime security challenges in the GoG but the responses it inspires reflect a narrow problem-solving imperative, which focuses on the immediacy of crisis without addressing its external sources.

This paper examines the terrestrial sources of maritime insecurity in the GoG with a particular focus on external influences located within the global political economy. The paper contends that insecurity in the waters of the GoG states is as much an outcome of state capacity (deficit) as it is a product of the lopsided structuring of the global political economy into which states in the GoG are integrated. For, while enabling foreign entrepreneurs to further their economic interests, the unbalanced nature of

the liberal economy does not allow the GoG states to be self-sufficient. Rather, the ongoing approach accords African security a subsidiary status that represents the state in Africa as an object of security rather than the subject of security with agency.

Following this introduction, the rest of the paper is structured into four parts. The first part analyses how the liberal economic order, sustained through the problem-solving logic, influences maritime security/insecurity in the GoG. The second part discusses the main domestic sources of maritime insecurity in the GoG. The third part examines the nature of responses to maritime criminality in the region. The fourth and concluding part discusses and summarizes the key points as well as suggests specific policy-relevant recommendations for enhancing maritime security in the region.

Globalization, State Capacity and Maritime Security/Insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea

The assertion that globalization has facilitated increased connectivity and interdependence among countries and regions, including the GoG, seems incontrovertible. Although this interconnectedness has expanded trade, investment and maritime activities globally, its effects have been unbalanced and less positive for the majority of low-income countries including those in African locales. This imbalance is largely due to the unequal nature of the integration that opens up their economies within the competitive context of free market capitalism. Thus, while GoG countries continue to interact with the rest of the world through the integrated global economy, the making of critical decisions that condition the choices and options opened to them has been dominated by governments of the global North and powerful international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO), which are essentially under the control and influence of the North. The roots of these lopsided relations can be traced to the historical context of extraction, which saw

⁷L. Adele Jinadu, “Globalization and State Capacity in Africa,” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, no. 5 (2010): 6751-6761.

⁸Christopher Clapham, *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3.

⁹Nana K. Poku, Neil Renwick and Jaoa Gomes Porto, “Human Security and Development in Africa,” *International Affairs* 83, no. 6 (2007): 1155-1170.

¹⁰Jinadu, “Globalization and State Capacity,” 6751–6761.

African states divided and balkanized with lingering effects that continue to weaken the capacity of African states to assure security within their territories and act collectively and effectively while engaging the challenges and opportunities of globalization.¹⁰ Put differently, there is a sense in which the crisis of capacity, often employed to explain insecurities in the waters of the GoG, is itself an outcome of globalization and of the contradictions and injustices embedded within it. As Ryerson Christie argues, “the promise of a global marketplace had not been realized by many peoples within the South, and ever-increasing gaps between the rich and poor were opening up both within states and across regions.”¹¹

A particularly insidious effect of globalization derives from unfavourable trading regimes that result in huge balance of payment deficits and concomitant weakening of state capacity. The crisis of capacity is produced and reinforced by the powerful transnational financial and economic networks that continued and hollowed out the state through their evasion of formal borders.¹² Their environmental footprints have equally been destructive as the case of Shell and Chevron in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria clearly shows. According to some accounts, “there were almost 7000 oil spills between 1970 and 2000, more than one each day (the real figure might be twice or three times that number)A back of the envelope calculation suggests that an equivalent of one gallon of oil has been spilled for every 100 sq. meters of the Niger Delta.”¹³ Hence, the emergence of piracy as a critical threat to security in the GoG cannot be detached from the operations of multinational corporations and the implications of their unethical practices for the livelihoods of coastal communities. Maritime insecurities are, therefore, manifestations traceable, even if partly, to stresses in globalisation for which corporations and international

financial institutions are partly responsible.

In the context of state enfeeblement, responses to maritime criminality have tended to focus on the immediacy of a crisis while eliding the underlying causes of insecurity firmly located in the workings of the liberal world economy. Foreign insurance companies and private military companies have particularly been cited as having a vested interests in the GoG piracy problem that is informed mainly by the quest for profit.¹⁴ Thus, responses to maritime insecurity in the GoG, as discussed later in this paper, have largely been skewed, and often fail to acknowledge the broader sources of the problem and neglect the key external and global factors that contribute to the issue.¹⁵ One such factor is the eagerness of vessel owners, employers and families of victims to engage in negotiations and pay ransoms for the release of abducted mariners. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), pirates successfully boarded 39 vessels in the GoG in 2020; leading to abductions from 25 vessels, with ransoms likely paid for all cases except one.¹⁶ This eagerness, an outflow of a global profit-oriented business model, creates a significant incentive for the thriving ‘kidnap for ransom’ business.¹⁷ Yet, its contribution to maritime insecurity in the region regrettably remains disregarded in response efforts.

The oversight in recognizing this aspect is further evident in the existing legislation intended to counter the threat. For instance, the Suppression of Piracy and Other Maritime Offences (SPOMO) Act, 2019 in Nigeria criminalizes the demand or receipt of ransom or other monetary payments related to piracy and maritime offences.¹⁸ However, it ignores the external contribution to piracy, which is ransom negotiations and payments. In fact, most GoG nations lack specific laws that prohibit ransom payments. This legal gap

¹⁰Ryerson Christie, “Critical Voices and Human Security: To Endure, to Engage or to Critique?” *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 2 (2010): 169-190.

¹²Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

¹³Michael Watts, “The Political Ecology of Oil and Gas in West Africa’s Gulf of Guinea: State, Petroleum, and Conflict in Nigeria,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of the International Political Economy of Energy*, eds. Thijs Van de Graaf et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 566.

¹⁴Neil Winn and Alexandra Lewis, “European Union Anti-Piracy Initiatives in the Horn of Africa: Linking Land-Based Counter-Piracy with Maritime Security and Regional Development,” *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2017): 2113-2128.

¹⁵Afua Lamptey and Frank Okyere, “The Political Economy of Maritime Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea: Dissecting the Kidnap for Ransom Menace,” KAIPTC – Danish Maritime Security Project, March, 2022, <https://kaiptc-danishmaritimesecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-Political-Economy-of-Maritime-Piracy-in-the-Gulf-of-Guinea.-Dissecting-the-Kidnap-for-Ransom-Menace-3.pdf>

¹⁶“Pirates of the Niger Delta: Between Blue and Brown Water,” UNODC Maritime Crime Global Programme, 2021, https://www.unodc.org/res/piracy/index_html/UNODC_GMCP_Pirates_of_the_Niger_Delta_between_brown_and_blue_waters.pdf

¹⁷Interview with naval officer, Lagos, November, 2021.

¹⁸National Assembly of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Suppression of Piracy and Other Maritime Offences Act*, 2019, <https://nimasa.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Suppression-of-Piracy-and-Other-Maritime-Offences-Act-2019-01.pdf>

enables shipping and insurance companies to bring in significant foreign exchange to 'conduct' ransom transactions with pirates. Consequently, they are able to operate within 'legal' boundaries while indirectly supporting the financial interests of criminal actors for the eventual benefit of the shipping and insurance companies. Maritime policymakers and stakeholders should recognize the incentives created by the unfettered desire to negotiate and pay ransoms, and consider the impact of these dynamics on the region's security landscape.

The role of private maritime security companies represents another significant aspect of the influence of globalization on current understanding and response to maritime insecurity in the GoG. Private security firms, often employed by vessel owners, play a complex and ambiguous role in the region. While they are intended to provide security and protection for ships, their activities essentially hinge on insecurity and thus, inadvertently may be contributing to the perpetuation of insecurity or engagement in unlawful practices. The UNODC analysed the business model of engaging private maritime security companies in the region and questioned "if some businesses have an interest in maintaining a certain level of insecurity to sustain their services."¹⁹

These challenges clearly show that the popular dominant narrative premised on domestic structures does not afford a fuller account of the real factors and actors shaping maritime security/insecurity in the GoG. Clearly, it is a reductionist perspective that finds fault with GoG states and their incapacities but not with the unjust structures of the global political economy that either weaken or allow them to fail.²⁰ Among other limitations, it overlooks, if not totally obscures, the power of financial and economic networks in the framework of globalization that contribute to the hollowing out of the State.²¹ By constructing its threat narrative around state capacity/incapacity,

the dominant narrative highlights the immediacy of crisis while helping to deflect attention away from the underlying causes of insecurity embedded in the workings of the global political economy.²² In other words, the popular narrative occludes the complicity of powerful global commercial interests in the structural injustices that foster incapacity within the GoG while advancing response approaches aimed at containing disorder rather than resolving it.²³

The preoccupation with domestic dysfunctionality leads to the perception that international commerce, most obviously shipping, requires protection in African waters that only extra-continental actors can provide. At the same time, external interveners, including the European Union (EU), have tended to elevate sea-based approaches to countering piracy over land-based development approaches "precisely because this is not in their interests."²⁴ In the same vein, the high-income countries have not demonstrated a genuine commitment to restructure the global political economy on the basis of mutuality and reciprocity that enables African states to mobilize the resources needed to address the issue of state incapacity, and hence; the delivery of effective maritime governance and security. On the contrary, external responses to insecurity in the GoG are underpinned by a problem-solving imperative that works to secure the economies of the powerful states by containing specific instances of disorder without transforming the current liberal capitalist order. This manifests in the tendency on the part of extra-continental actors to police or militarize maritime spaces in African locales.

Domestic Sources of Maritime Insecurity in Gulf of Guinea

The GoG region, despite its vast economic potential in the maritime domain, faces numerous challenges stemming from domestic sources of maritime insecurity. These insecurities, manifesting as crimes, significantly

¹⁹UNODC Global Maritime Crime Programme, "Pirates."

²⁰Pinar Bilgin, "The 'Western-Centrism' of Security Studies: 'Blind Spot' or Constitutive Practice?" *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 6 (2010): 619.; Kwaku Danso and Kwesi Aning, "African Experiences and Alternativity in International Relations Theorizing about Security," *International Affairs* 98, no. 1 (2022): 67–83.

²¹Duffield, *Global Governance*.

²²Michael Pugh, "Peacekeeping and Critical Theory," *International Peacekeeping* 11, no. 1 (2004): 39.

²³Mark Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending war: Governing the World of Peoples*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

²⁴Winn and Lewis, "European Union Anti-Piracy Initiatives."

impact states, societies and international maritime commerce in the region, with particular emphasis on illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, illegal oil bunkering and maritime piracy, which includes kidnapping for ransom. Until 2022, the region was described as a hotbed of pirate activity due to the upsurge in acts of piracy often directed at ships and crews. Maritime piracy, including kidnapping for ransom, poses a grave threat to the security and stability of the GoG.²⁵ Pirates target vessels operating in the region; hijacking ships, robbing crew members and abducting individuals for ransom. These criminal acts not only endanger the lives of seafarers but also disrupt maritime trade, raise insurance costs and deter investment in the region. Pirate attacks in the region more than doubled in 2018 relative to 2017 figures while the region accounted for all six hijackings worldwide, 13 of the 18 ships fired upon, 130 of the 141 hostages taken globally, and 78 of 83 seafarers kidnapped for ransom.²⁶ There was, however, a sharp decline in the incidence of piracy in 2022 with Nigeria, which had been the hotspot of piracy in the GoG, reporting no attacks in the year. The decline in maritime criminality has been attributed to “the concerted efforts of national authorities and support received from regional and international partners.”²⁷ In Nigeria, such efforts have included the adoption of the SPOMO Act, which provides a broader framework for the prosecution of maritime crimes, as well as the Deep Blue Project, which is designed to secure Nigerian waters and leverage the benefits of the country’s Blue Economy. A report issued by International Maritime Bureau (IMB) in April 2023 indicates that just five incidents were reported in the first quarter of 2023 compared to eight in 2022 and 16 in 2021.²⁸ Although piracy appears to have taken a downward trend, critical questions remain regarding the whereabouts of the pirates and whether the current lull in their activities does not afford them the space to re-strategize and relaunch attacks or switch to other modes of criminality

altogether.

Situating the Argument

Meanwhile, marine plunder in the form of IUU fishing continues unabated. IUU fishing poses a major threat to the sustainability of marine resources and the livelihoods of coastal communities in the GoG. This illicit activity involves fishing practices that violate regulations such as fishing without licenses, using banned gear or exceeding catch limits.²⁹ IUU fishing depletes fish stocks, disrupts ecosystems and undermines the economic potential of legitimate fishing activities in the region.³⁰ According to the Africa Defense Forum, in West Africa alone, IUU fishing robs coastal states of USD 2.3 billion a year and has contributed to the loss of 300,000 jobs.³¹

Drug trafficking also remains a particularly insidious threat that has multiple implications for security. According to UNODC, seizure data suggests that the role of West and Central Africa (or the GoG) as a transit zone for cocaine on its way to markets in Europe, has picked up substantially since 2019.³² Both the total quantity seized in Africa and the number of large seizures appear to have reached record levels during 2021. Maritime states in West Africa account for much of the volume of cocaine seized.³³ Over the period 2019-2021, 13 cocaine seizures of 100kg or more were documented in the GoG.³⁴ Some of the largest seizures occurred in Côte d’Ivoire (six tons in March 2021), Senegal (5.1 tons in April 2020) and The Gambia (three tons in January 2021). Brazil continues to be an important country of departure for cocaine trafficked to destinations in Africa.³⁵

Illegal oil bunkering, another crucial domestic source of maritime insecurity, involves the theft and smuggling of oil and petroleum products. Criminal networks tap into oil pipelines, siphon off oil from vessels or engage in

²⁵UNODC Global Maritime Crime Programme, “Pirates.”

²⁶“Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships Report for the Period of 1 January – 30 June 2018,” ICC-International Maritime Bureau, 2018, <https://www.icc-ccs.org/reports/2018-Q2-IMB-Piracy-Report.pdf>

²⁷“Ongoing Decline in Gulf of Guinea’s Piracy, Armed Robbery Encouraging, but Support Needed to Fully Implement Yaoundé Architecture, Briefers Tell Security Council,” United Nations, June 21, 2023, [https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15331.doc.htm#:~:text=ISHIKANE%20KIMIHIRO%20\(Japan\)%20noted%20the,naval%20patrols%20and%20piracy%20convictions.](https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15331.doc.htm#:~:text=ISHIKANE%20KIMIHIRO%20(Japan)%20noted%20the,naval%20patrols%20and%20piracy%20convictions.)

²⁸“Incident Report from the Gulf of Guinea and the Rest of Africa from 2018-2022,” ICC-IMB Piracy Reporting Centre, 2022, [downloaded from] <https://iccwbo.org/news-publications/news/imb-records-lowest-level-of-q1-piracy-since-1993-in-2023-report/>

²⁹David J. Agnew et al., “Estimating the Worldwide Extent of Illegal Fishing,” PLOS ONE 4, no. 2 (2009).

³⁰“Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing,” FAO, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://www.fao.org/iuu-fishing/en/>; U. Rashid Sumaila and Mahamudu Bawumia, “Fisheries, Ecosystem Justice and Piracy: A Case Study of Somalia,” *Fisheries Research* 157, (2014): 154–163.

³¹“ECOWAS Urges Cooperation to End Illegal Fishing,” Africa Defense Forum, February 1, 2022, <https://adf-magazine.com/2022/02/ecowas-urges-cooperation-to-end-illegal-fishing/>

³²“Global Report on Cocaine 2023: Local Dynamics, Global Challenges,” UNODC, March, 2023, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf

³³UNODC, “Global Report on Cocaine.”

³⁴UNODC, “Global Report on Cocaine.”

³⁵UNODC, “Global Report on Cocaine,” 105.

illegal refining operations. This activity not only leads to significant revenue losses for governments but also causes environmental damage such as oil spills, which harm marine ecosystems and impact the livelihoods of coastal communities.³⁶ The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), for example, estimates that the country loses about 470,000 barrels per day, which translates into about USD 700 million worth of crude oil stolen monthly.³⁷

The challenges posed by these crimes are often complex to address not only because they are invariably interlinked but also because they are difficult to address as they usually overlap and intersect with multiple economic and political imbalances that find expression in such challenges as high rates of youth unemployment, extreme poverty, institutional malaise, political instability, and corruption among ruling elites.³⁸ The interlinked nature of maritime crimes means that IUU fishing, which is often traced to corrupt officials in the national fisheries licensing regime, provides cover for other transnational crimes that include trafficking in humans, small arms and light weapons (SALW), drugs, and other ancillary crimes. Though the threats prevail, the capacity for maritime law enforcement remains particularly weak with most of the countries in the region lacking appropriate legislation to prosecute maritime crimes.³⁹ The criminal justice system of most countries in the GoG is characterized by inadequate and inappropriate legislation that undermine the basis for due process and effective prosecution. In the absence of appropriate legal frameworks, occasional instances of arrests are hardly prosecuted.

Nature of Responses to Maritime Criminality in the Gulf of Guinea

The analysis from the foregoing section shows that maritime insecurity in the GoG is a complex issue that encompasses both land and sea-based issues. Needless to say, maritime criminality is a manifestation of carefully planned criminal enterprises that are initiated, partly executed and liquidated on land. Concerns about the strong linkage between on-land and sea-based criminality led the United Nations (UN) Security Council to task the Secretary-General to investigate the incidence of piracy and armed robbery in the GoG and their potential connections with terrorism in West and Central Africa as well as the Sahel.⁴⁰ Hence, it is common wisdom that “piracy needs to be tackled onshore.”⁴¹ In spite of this recognition, the responses to maritime insecurity in the GoG have been elitist in nature; focusing on mainly offshore and military measures in the form of counter-piracy interventions, at the expense of other maritime crimes such as IUU fishing and marine pollution, which have direct implications for livelihoods and food security within coastal communities.

A deeper reflection reveals that current responses to maritime insecurity in the GoG are informed by the need to prioritize the interests of Western countries in the region rather than attending to maritime security challenges in a sustainable manner. For instance, Western countries’ concerns over the safety of their maritime trade routes have informed a sustained focus on piracy, as the GoG remains a strategic shipping route for oil and other commodities from Europe and elsewhere. As a result, the responses have been skewed towards piracy, and even so, it has been primarily securitized to enable the deployment of military strategies. And while the absence of effective government control over both land and sea creates a conducive environment for

³⁶Eric Adishi and Hunga M. Oluwagbenga, “Oil Theft, Illegal Bunkering and Pipeline Vandalism: It’s Impact on Nigeria Economy, 2015 – 2016,” *International Journal of Economics and Business Management* 3, no. 2 (2017): 47-65.

³⁷Anthony O. Okungbowa, “Crude oil theft: Whither Nigeria?” *This Day*, accessed April 24, 2022, <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/12/06/crude-oil-theft-whither-nigeria>

³⁸Jacobsen, “Maritime Security.”

³⁹Naila Saliyu and Kwaku Danso, “Ensuring Effective Prosecution of Maritime Crimes in the Gulf of Guinea: A Focus on Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone,” KAIPTC – Danish Maritime Security Project, March, 2022. <https://kaiptc-danishmaritimesecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Ensuring-Effective-Prosecutin-of-Maritime-Crimes-in-th-GoG.-A-Focus-on-Cote-dIvoire-and-Sierra-Leone.pdf>

⁴⁰“Adopting Resolution 2634 (2022), Security Council Calls on Gulf of Guinea Countries to Criminalize Piracy, Armed Robbery at Sea under Domestic Laws,” United Nations, May 31, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14915.doc.htm>

⁴¹Christian Bueger, “Drops in the Bucket? A Review of Onshore Responses to Somali Piracy,” *WMU J Marit Affairs* 11, no. 5 (2012): 15–31.

piracy,⁴² the main approaches to addressing maritime insecurity have ignored land-based interventions and focused on sea-based responses that include naval patrols, maritime escort initiatives, protection of maritime transit corridors, vessel fortification, and the deployment of private guards on ships. The EU has rolled out the Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) in the GoG, which enables it to better coordinate the activities of its Member States' naval and air assets already operating in regions of significance to the EU.⁴³

The EU has also declared the GoG as a maritime area of interest; informing its decision to deploy the first pilot of the CMP in the region.⁴⁴ In the GoG, additional attention has been dedicated to building the response capacities of regional and national navies and other security agencies under the Yaoundé Architecture for Maritime Safety and Security (YAMSS) initiative. Through this initiative, Western countries have deployed naval assets and have been conducting joint naval exercises and patrols with Member States in West and Central Africa, including improving search and rescue operations and information sharing. The United States (US) Africa Command (AFRICOM) also conducts the largest multinational maritime exercise—Exercise Obangame Express—in West and Central Africa to boost regional collaboration, enhance information-sharing protocols and develop tactical interdiction skills.⁴⁵ Even though these military responses are necessary, they mainly further the interests of the West and do not necessarily address the underlying causes of maritime insecurity in the GoG, making them unsustainable in the long run.⁴⁶

Another dimension of the skewed responses to maritime insecurity in the region reflects in the neglect of other pressing challenges such as IUU fishing. IUU fishing is a major contributor to the depletion of fish stocks in the region; affecting the livelihoods of millions of people who depend on

fishing for their income and food security.⁴⁷ It is widely acknowledged that piracy at sea is connected to marine resources and that economic disruptions that affect coastal communities play a crucial role in explaining the occurrence of piracy.⁴⁸ Destructive and illegal fishing practices create an expectation of reduced income among small-scale fishers; leading to a behavioural response that increases the likelihood of turning to piracy.⁴⁹ Essentially, there is a direct correlation between the economic well-being of coastal communities and the prevalence of piracy. During a 2022 UN Security Council meeting, the EU representative highlighted the substantial costs of piracy and IUU fishing in the GoG. The former incurs expenses of USD 1.9 billion annually while the latter results in costs of USD 1.6 billion per year for the region.⁵⁰ Considering that almost 97 per cent of small-scale fishers reside in remote regions of developing countries, where there are limited alternatives for livelihood,⁵¹ and nearly 20 per cent of them subsist on less than USD 1 a day,⁵² it could be contended that the ancillary effect of IUU fishing is more catastrophic for the region than piracy.

Despite the close parallel between the disruptive economic effects of piracy and IUU fishing, the response to the latter has been relatively subdued; pointing to how current responses to maritime insecurity in the GoG have been skewed towards addressing piracy. Reflecting on the disparities in the global commitment to counter piracy, which, at the same time, ignores IUU fishing—an issue that has implications for food security in the GoG. Okafor-Yarwood and Onuoha describe such international responses as “elitist” in that they favour threats that undermine foreign interests while relegating the security interests of African states to the margins.⁵³ Consequently, states in the region, through both national and regional mechanisms such as the Yaoundé Architecture, have been co-opted into fighting piracy whereas their interests lie in

⁴²Ursula Daxecker and Brandon Prins, “Insurgents of the Sea: Institutional and Economic Opportunities for Maritime Piracy,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57 no. 6 (2013): 940-965.

⁴³“Maritime Security: Coordinated Maritime Presences,” European Union External Action, March 12, 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/coordinated-maritime-presences_en

⁴⁴European Union External Action, “Coordinated Maritime Presences.”

⁴⁵United States Navy, “International Exercise Obangame Express 2023 Set to Begin,” January 9, 2023, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3262556/international-exercise-obangame-express-2023-set-to-begin/>

⁴⁶Bueger, “Drops in the Bucket?”

⁴⁷FAO, “(IUU) Fishing.”

⁴⁸Gabriella Richardson Temm, Ruba Marshood and Pamela Stedman-Edwards, “The Global Fisheries Crisis, Poverty and Coastal Small-Scale Fishers” World Wide Fund For Nature, 2008, https://wwf-eu.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/2009_small_scale_fisheries.pdf

⁴⁹Raj M. Desai and George E. Shambaugh, “Measuring the Global Impact of Destructive and Illegal Fishing on Maritime Piracy: A Spatial Analysis,” *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 2 (2021).

⁵⁰“Piracy, Armed Robbery Declining in Gulf of Guinea, But Enhanced National, Regional Efforts Needed for Stable Maritime Security, Top Official Tells Security Council,” United Nations, November 22, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc15113.doc.htm>

⁵¹Desai and Shambaugh, “Destructive and Illegal Fishing.”

⁵²World Bank, *Hidden Harvest: The Global Contribution of Capture Fisheries*, (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2012).

⁵³Ifesinachi M. Okafor-Yarwood and Freedom C. Onuoha, “Whose Security is It? Elitism and the Global Approach to Maritime Security in Africa,” *Third World Quarterly* 44, no. 5 (2023): 946-966.

addressing other insecurities, which affect their local economies. Indeed, addressing piracy eventually benefits the economies of countries in the region by making the region safer and more accessible and trade less costly. Nonetheless, the prioritization of piracy over other maritime crimes such as IUU fishing and land-based criminality that impact economies and regional security in more significant ways, calls attention to how external interests influence security framing in the region.

Effective responses to maritime insecurity in the GoG necessitates a comprehensive multi-faceted approach that acknowledges the interdependence of land-based and sea-based criminal activities. Such an approach should involve tackling the underlying causes of the issue, which may include poverty, inadequate alternative livelihood options and deficient governance systems, while also promoting sustainable practices that facilitate economic growth and alternative livelihood opportunities. Such measures demand a sustained long-term commitment on land to achieve meaningful and enduring benefits at sea. It also requires a recognition of the role of economic globalization, including trade on state capacity and insecurity in low income countries such as those in the GoG.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The phenomenon of globalization has engendered a complex interplay of favourable and adverse consequences for maritime security in the GoG. On one hand, the enhanced levels of trade and interconnectedness facilitated by globalization have brought forth valuable prospects. On the other hand, the integration process within the global economy has given rise to systemic inequities that perpetuate structural injustices; ultimately, undermining the capacity of African states.

Consequently, the region faces a confluence of challenges manifested as a crisis of capacity and maritime insecurities—both of which are directly attributable to the effects of globalization. The situation is further exacerbated by the unscrupulous conduct of multinational corporations and the complicit involvement of influential global commercial interests. Moreover, the prevailing discourse predominantly attributing maritime insecurities to the perceived incapacity of GoG states, neglects the underlying root causes of insecurity embedded within the broader global political economy. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize the multifaceted nature of the impact of globalization on maritime

security in the GoG. So, while acknowledging the positive aspects of increased trade and connectivity, it is crucial to confront the persisting structural injustices arising from unequal integration into the global economy. It is essential to move beyond the prevailing narrative that attributes maritime insecurities solely to the incapacity of GoG states and instead delve into the underlying causes rooted in the dynamics of the global political economy. In other words, it is important to address the external sources of state incapacity in the region through more balanced and mutually rewarding economic and political relations.

In light of these insights, policy interventions should be oriented towards addressing the asymmetries generated by globalization and mitigating the negative consequences on maritime security in the GoG. Efforts should be made to foster a more equitable integration process within the global economy; ensuring that African states are empowered to participate meaningfully and assert their interests. There is a need for enhanced corporate accountability wherein multinational corporations are held responsible for their actions and encouraged to adopt sustainable practices. Stricter regulations and enforcement mechanisms should be implemented to counteract exploitative behaviours and ensure that corporations operate in an environmentally sustainable and socially responsible manner.

Additionally, addressing the issues of ransom payments and negotiations is crucial. Legislation should be enacted to explicitly prohibit ransom payments while concerted international cooperation is required to discourage and penalize companies involved in such practices. By disrupting the profitability of the 'kidnap for ransom' business model, incentives for piracy in the region can be significantly reduced. It is paramount to adopt comprehensive approaches to maritime security that extend beyond immediate crisis management and encompass the resolution of underlying causes. This necessitates investment in land-based development initiatives such as sustainable livelihood opportunities, education and infrastructure development in coastal communities. By addressing the root drivers of insecurity, these approaches can contribute to long-term stability and diminish the allure of criminal activities.

International assistance should prioritize empowering African states to develop their own security capacities and governance frameworks; reducing reliance on external actors. The role of private maritime

security companies warrants critical examination with regulations and oversight mechanisms put in place to ensure ethical conduct and adherence to international standards. Any potential conflicts of interest between security providers and the perpetuation of insecurity should be vigilantly monitored and effectively addressed.

holistic and inclusive approach required to tackle the underlying issues of maritime insecurity in the GoG. Recognizing the influence of globalization and the power dynamics within the global political economy, is essential in formulating policies that promote sustainable development, corporate accountability and the empowerment of GoG countries to effectively govern their maritime spaces.

Adopting these recommendations will facilitate the

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About the Project

The five-year project on “Integrated Responses to Threats to Maritime Safety and Security in the Gulf of Guinea Maritime Domain in West and Central Africa (2022-2026),” is being implemented through three key approaches; namely—research, dialogue and capacity building. The project is primarily aimed at promoting a safer maritime security domain in the Gulf of Guinea. Knowledge-based products highlighting key maritime

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