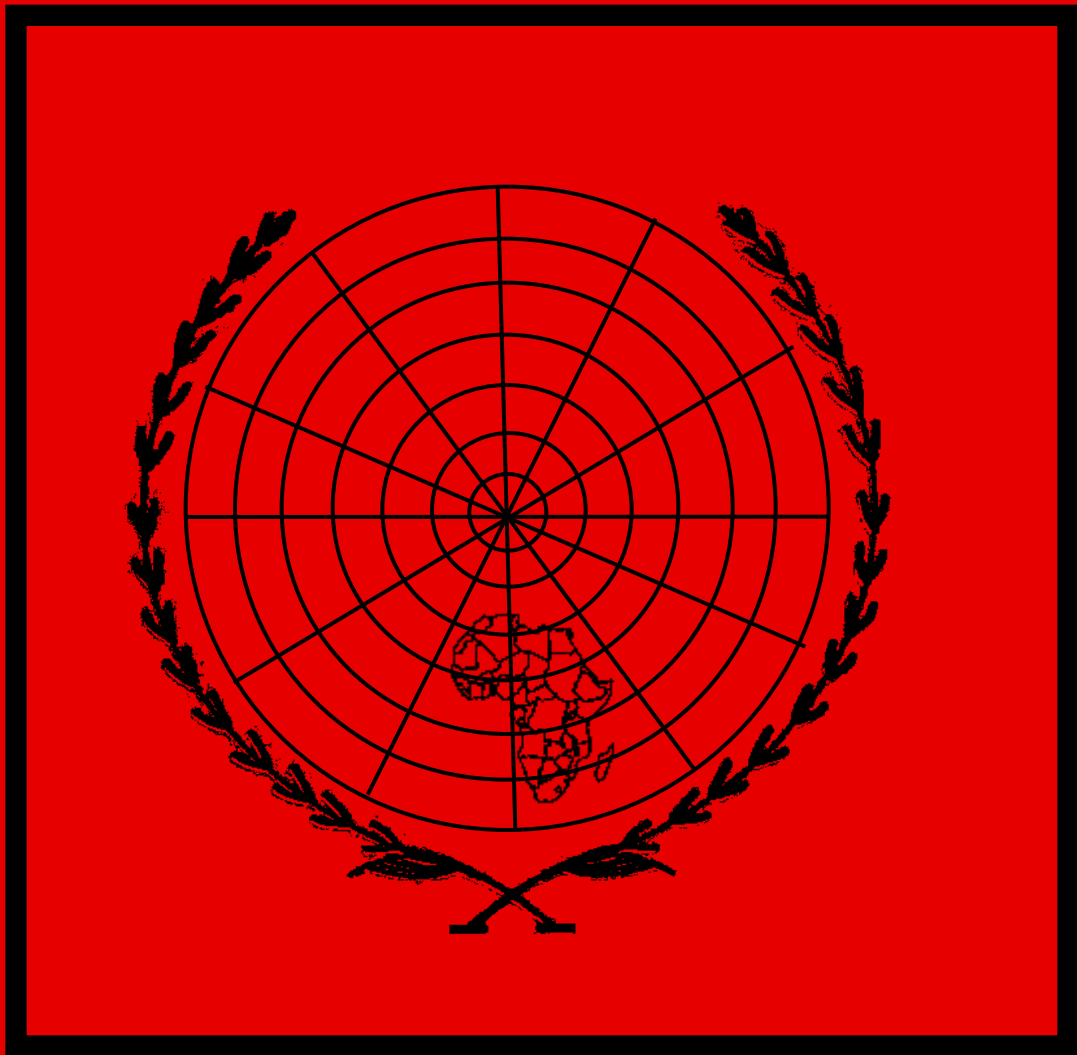


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The United States Africa Command and Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea, 2010-2023

Mbaeze, Netchy Christian

Department of Political Science
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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) and maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) between 2010 and 2023. It investigates the rising incidence of piracy in the region in terms of frequency, intensity, and operational range, and how these threaten seafarers, international commerce, and the shipping industry. The study also explores the dynamics of drug trafficking through the Gulf of Guinea as a transit route to European drug markets, with implications for regional and global stability. Anchored on Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), the study adopts a qualitative methodology using secondary data from books, journal articles, official publications, and policy documents. Content analysis and transcript-based analysis of interviews and Focus Group Discussions were employed. Findings reveal that AFRICOM's intervention through Exercise Obangame contributed to a reduction in piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, while the African Partnership Station (APS) enhanced the capacity of Gulf of Guinea states to combat drug trafficking. However, inadequate synergy among regional actors undermined AFRICOM's operational efficiency during the study period. The study recommends prioritising national-level capacity building to enable Gulf of Guinea states to assume greater ownership of maritime security initiatives.

Keywords: AFRICOM, Drug Trafficking, Gulf of Guinea, Maritime Security, Piracy, Security

Introduction

The seas and oceans are central to global economic prosperity, with over 90 percent of world trade transported by sea. Beyond facilitating international commerce, oceans support livelihoods through fishing, shipping, hydrocarbon exploration, mineral extraction, and recreation (Garba, 2020). However, the strategic importance of maritime trade makes it vulnerable to criminal activities such as piracy, cargo theft, and terrorism, thereby threatening ships, port facilities, and human lives (Usoh, 2008; Kumuyi, 2019).

The Gulf of Guinea (GoG), stretching approximately 6,000 kilometres along the Atlantic coast from West to Central Africa, is a vital maritime corridor for global

trade and energy transportation. It hosts about 20 commercial seaports and accounts for roughly 25 percent of Africa's maritime commerce (Morcos, 2021). The region is also rich in oil, gas, and strategic minerals, making it geopolitically significant. Nigeria and Angola, for instance, rank among the world's leading crude oil exporters (Garba, 2020). Despite its strategic importance, maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea has deteriorated considerably. The region has become notorious for piracy, sea robbery, oil theft, drug trafficking, and human smuggling. In 2019, the International Maritime Bureau described the Gulf of Guinea as one of the world's most dangerous shipping routes, accounting for over 90 percent of global kidnappings at sea (Africa Times, 2020). In 2020, the region was responsible for 95 percent of global maritime kidnappings, with 130 crew members abducted in 22 separate incidents (IMB, 2020).

Given the strategic importance of Gulf of Guinea oil to the United States—supplying approximately 12–15 percent of U.S. oil imports—the region has become a focal point of U.S. security and foreign policy (Hagel, 2004). In response, the United States established AFRICOM in 2007 to coordinate military and security operations across Africa. Under AFRICOM, several programmes, including Exercise Obangame and the African Partnership Station, were introduced to strengthen maritime security and counter criminality in the Gulf of Guinea.

Debate persists over the utility of AFRICOM's intervention in the region. While some regard its presence as essential to regional security, others argue it advances U.S. strategic interests more than African security priorities. Against this backdrop, this study assesses AFRICOM's contribution to maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea.

Statement of the Problem

The Gulf of Guinea is strategically significant to the global political economy due to its vast natural resources and critical maritime trade routes. However, the region has become one of the most insecure maritime domains in the world, with escalating incidents of piracy, kidnapping, armed robbery at sea, drug trafficking, and other transnational crimes.

Between 2017 and 2021, the Gulf of Guinea consistently recorded the highest number of global maritime kidnappings. The sophistication of pirate operations has also increased, with attacks extending up to 100 nautical miles offshore, demonstrating improved operational capacity (UNODC, 2020). The economic cost of piracy in West Africa between 2015 and 2017 averaged approximately \$777.1 million annually (UNODC, 2020).

In addition to piracy, the region serves as a major transit corridor for international drug trafficking. Estimates suggest that 25–35 percent of Andean

cocaine consumed in Europe passes through the Gulf of Guinea (Garba, 2020; Morcos, 2021). This illicit trade threatens state institutions, fuels corruption, and undermines regional stability.

Although existing scholarship has examined piracy, maritime insecurity, and drug trafficking in the Gulf of Guinea, limited attention has been given to evaluating the direct impact of AFRICOM's interventions—particularly Exercise Obangame and the African Partnership Station—on reducing piracy and strengthening counter-narcotics capacity in the region. This study addresses that gap using the following questions: Has AFRICOM's intervention through Exercise Obangame reduced piracy in the Gulf of Guinea? Has AFRICOM's African Partnership Station programme increased the capacity of Gulf of Guinea states to combat drug trafficking? Has the lack of synergy among regional actors undermined AFRICOM's operational efficiency in the Gulf of Guinea between 2010 and 2023?

AFRICOM Intervention and Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea

Piracy constitutes a major threat to international maritime security and global trade. Under Article 101 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), piracy refers to illegal acts of violence or detention committed for private ends on the high seas against another ship or persons/property onboard. Since 2011, the Gulf of Guinea has emerged as a global piracy hotspot, surpassing the Gulf of Aden in reported incidents (Osinowo, 2015). Unlike Somali piracy, which historically focused on hijacking ships for ransom, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea initially centred on cargo theft and oil bunkering but has increasingly shifted toward kidnapping for ransom (Oceans Beyond Piracy, 2018).

Pirate groups operating in the region have become more sophisticated, employing mother ships, advanced boarding equipment, and long-range operational capabilities. Their attacks now extend far beyond coastal waters, reaching vessels over 100 nautical miles offshore (Morizur, 2020). The increasing range and violence of attacks have significantly raised insurance premiums, shipping costs, and security expenditures.

To counter these threats, AFRICOM has supported several maritime security initiatives, particularly Exercise Obangame Express—an annual multinational naval exercise designed to improve interoperability, intelligence sharing, and regional maritime coordination among Gulf of Guinea states. Evidence suggests that these interventions have contributed to improved regional maritime awareness and operational readiness.

However, AFRICOM's effectiveness remains constrained by structural and institutional challenges, including weak regional coordination, corruption, inadequate legal frameworks, and limited domestic political will among some Gulf of Guinea

states. Consequently, while AFRICOM has improved tactical responses to piracy, sustainable maritime security depends on broader governance reforms and stronger regional cooperation.

AFRICOM's African Partnership Station and the Containment of Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking through maritime routes has become a major transnational security challenge in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG). Although maritime drug smuggling has historical antecedents, the contemporary concern lies in the region's emergence as a strategic transit corridor for cocaine and other narcotics moving from Latin America to Europe. This shift reflects broader structural changes in global trafficking patterns, including rising European demand for cocaine, tighter enforcement on traditional trafficking routes, and traffickers' preference for weakly governed transit zones (Wylter & Cook, 2009).

The Gulf of Guinea has become attractive to drug trafficking networks due to weak maritime surveillance, porous borders, corruption, under-resourced law enforcement institutions, and limited judicial capacity. Estimates suggest that between 25 and 35 percent of Andean cocaine destined for Europe transits through West Africa, much of it through the Gulf of Guinea maritime corridor (Garba, 2020; Morcos, 2021). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that cocaine worth over \$1 billion passes through the region annually.

Drug trafficking in the Gulf of Guinea poses serious threats beyond the illicit movement of narcotics. It undermines governance, fuels corruption, strengthens organised criminal networks, and creates opportunities for collaboration between traffickers, insurgents, and other violent non-state actors. In fragile states, the financial scale of the drug trade can exceed national budgets, thereby compromising state institutions and political stability. Guinea-Bissau's characterization as a "narco-state" illustrates the destabilising effects of this phenomenon in West Africa.

The maritime dimension of trafficking has evolved significantly. Initially dominated by Latin American cartels using West African intermediaries, the trade is increasingly managed by indigenous West African criminal networks that now control segments of transportation and distribution. Traffickers utilise fishing vessels, commercial shipping containers, and small maritime craft to move narcotics through the Gulf of Guinea with reduced risk of interdiction (UNODC, 2013).

In response, the United States, through AFRICOM, introduced the African Partnership Station (APS) to strengthen maritime governance and counter-narcotics capabilities among Gulf of Guinea states. APS focuses on training naval, coast guard, customs, and law enforcement personnel; improving maritime domain awareness;

enhancing interdiction and boarding capabilities; and supporting legal and institutional reforms necessary for prosecution of maritime crimes.

Evidence suggests that APS has contributed to improving regional counter-narcotics capacity. Participating states have enhanced maritime interdiction capabilities, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and prosecution frameworks for maritime offences. For example, Nigeria's enactment of the Suppression of Piracy and Other Maritime Offences Act (SPOMO Act) in 2019 strengthened the legal framework for prosecuting maritime crimes, including trafficking-related offences. Regional improvements in maritime coordination have also facilitated successful interdictions and seizures linked to transnational trafficking networks.

However, APS effectiveness remains constrained by structural and institutional weaknesses. These include inconsistent inter-agency coordination, limited political will, corruption within security institutions, inadequate judicial follow-through, and uneven commitment among Gulf of Guinea states. While APS has improved operational capacity, its long-term impact is undermined where arrests and interdictions are not matched by effective prosecution and sustained domestic enforcement.

Existing literature on drug trafficking in West Africa has extensively examined the causes, routes, and consequences of the illicit trade, but has paid limited attention to AFRICOM's direct contribution—through APS—to strengthening maritime counter-narcotics capacity in the Gulf of Guinea. This study addresses that gap by evaluating the extent to which APS training, assistance, equipment provision, and institutional support have enhanced the ability of Gulf of Guinea states to detect, interdict, arrest, and prosecute drug traffickers within the maritime domain.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Hegemonic Stability Theory, which posits that international stability is most likely when a dominant power possesses both the capability and willingness to enforce order in the international system. Proponents such as Kindleberger, Gilpin, and Keohane argue that hegemonic powers promote stability by using their economic and military capabilities to secure trade routes, deter threats, and shape international norms.

Applied to this study, the theory explains AFRICOM's role in the Gulf of Guinea as part of the United States' broader strategy to secure strategic maritime routes, protect energy flows, and preserve international economic stability in line with its national interests. U.S. intervention through AFRICOM reflects the hegemon's effort to maintain order in a strategically significant maritime region threatened by piracy, drug trafficking, and weak governance.

However, the theory also suggests that hegemonic intervention is rarely altruistic. Rather, hegemonic powers embed their strategic interests within the global order they seek to preserve. In this regard, AFRICOM's maritime security initiatives in the Gulf of Guinea may be understood not solely as support for African security, but as mechanisms for protecting U.S. strategic, economic, and geopolitical interests in a region central to global trade and energy flows.

At the same time, hegemonic power is not unlimited. As scholars such as Layne and Rourke note, military and institutional superiority do not guarantee policy success. Local political resistance, weak partner-state institutions, corruption, and limited regional coordination can constrain hegemonic effectiveness. This helps explain why AFRICOM's interventions, while impactful, have produced mixed outcomes in the Gulf of Guinea.

Thus, the Hegemonic Stability Theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding both the rationale behind U.S. maritime security engagement in the Gulf of Guinea and the limits of AFRICOM's effectiveness in addressing piracy and drug trafficking in the region.

Trends and Transformations of Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea

Piracy remains one of the most persistent threats to maritime activities globally, posing significant risks to trade, transportation, and the security of global waterways (Till, 2004; Gould, 2013; Payne, 2010). As Nwalozie (2020) observes, piracy is a multilayered transnational crime with economic and security implications for the movement of ships, goods, and people. It commonly involves hijacking, kidnapping, hostage-taking, and ransom demands. Maritime piracy broadly refers to criminally orchestrated violent activities at sea, including robbery, kidnapping, and attacks against ships (Garner, 1256 in Moneke, 2016). It is distinct from armed robbery at sea, which typically occurs within territorial waters (Moneke, 2016).

Historically, piracy has existed since ancient times, from the Cilician pirates of the Mediterranean to the Barbary Corsairs and Caribbean buccaneers (Greminger & Al-Rodhan, 2022). In contemporary times, however, the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) has emerged as one of the world's principal hotspots for maritime piracy. Over the past two decades, attacks on container ships, fishing vessels, and oil tankers have increased significantly, with violent armed attacks and kidnappings for ransom becoming defining features of maritime insecurity in the region (Greminger & Al-Rodhan, 2022).

The Gulf of Guinea spans approximately 5,000 nautical miles and possesses favorable shipping conditions, numerous natural harbors, and strategic access to global trade routes (Osinowo, 2015). It is also rich in hydrocarbons, fisheries, and other marine resources, making it central to maritime commerce and global energy

supply. The region serves as a major transit corridor for petroleum exports to Europe, North America, and Asia. Despite this strategic importance, rising piracy and maritime insecurity threaten the Gulf's economic viability and maritime governance (Murphy, 2009).

The Gulf of Guinea stretches from Senegal to Angola and includes several strategically significant coastal states, notably Nigeria, Angola, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo (Anyimadu, 2013). These states contribute significantly to global oil production, thereby heightening the geostrategic relevance of maritime security in the region.

Despite its economic significance, the Gulf of Guinea has become synonymous with maritime insecurity. It is widely regarded as one of the most dangerous maritime regions globally, characterized by a high rate of successful pirate attacks and extreme violence against seafarers (Kamal-Deen, 2015; UN Security Council, 2012). Following the decline of Somali piracy, global attention shifted to the Gulf of Guinea as the leading global hotspot of maritime piracy (Kamal-Deen, 2015).

Although piratical acts have historically occurred in the region, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea transformed into a major transnational security concern between the 1990s and 2010s (Onuoha, 2013). According to Onuoha (2013), between 1991 and 2012, the Gulf recorded over 734 piracy incidents, with Nigeria accounting for approximately 46 percent of total attacks. Between 2005 and 2013, piracy incidents increased significantly, drawing sustained international concern (IMO; UNODC, 2019).

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has evolved from localized sea robbery into a sophisticated transnational criminal enterprise. Initially characterized by petty theft and opportunistic attacks, piracy has transformed into organized criminal operations involving intelligence gathering, advanced weaponry, hijacking, kidnapping for ransom, and cargo theft (Jimoh, 2015). Willet (2014) notes that Gulf of Guinea pirates are highly organized and often target oil tankers and energy infrastructure based on prior intelligence.

This transformation is closely linked to the political economy of the Niger Delta and the broader regional oil industry. Militant activities associated with the Niger Delta insurgency—particularly between 2005 and 2009—contributed significantly to the militarization and professionalization of pirate networks (Kraska, 2011). Groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) utilized maritime attacks as part of broader campaigns against the Nigerian state and oil corporations, thereby blurring the lines between militancy, organized crime, and piracy.

The oil sector remains central to understanding piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. According to UNODC (2019), much of the piracy affecting West Africa is tied to the disorder surrounding the regional oil economy. Tankers carrying petroleum products are attractive targets due to the existence of thriving black markets for stolen fuel. Oil theft, illegal bunkering, extortion, and kidnapping of oil personnel form part of a broader criminal ecosystem that sustains piracy in the region.

The increasing lethality of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is also linked to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW). The widespread availability of weapons such as AK-47s, G3 rifles, FAL rifles, and other assault weapons has significantly enhanced pirates' operational capacity (Duquet, 2011). As Boyle (2015, p. 27) notes, "violence is a trademark of the West African pirates." Armed with sophisticated weaponry, pirate groups have become increasingly bold and violent in confronting vessels and security forces.

By 2020, the Gulf of Guinea accounted for over 90 percent of global sea kidnappings, with 84 recorded piracy incidents and 130 seafarers taken hostage (IMB, 2020). In 2021, the region accounted for all reported global crew kidnappings at sea during the first half of the year (ICC-IMB, 2021). These figures underscore the extent to which piracy in the Gulf has become a major global maritime security concern.

Beyond attacks on vessels, piracy imposes severe economic costs on the region and global trade. It increases insurance premiums, rerouting costs, and private security expenditures for shipping companies while discouraging foreign investment and disrupting maritime commerce (Anyika et al., 2022; Ofosu-Boateng & Jiping, 2020). The International Maritime Organization estimates that maritime piracy costs the global economy billions of dollars annually, with the Gulf of Guinea accounting for a significant portion of this burden (Hu et al., 2023).

Piracy also undermines local livelihoods, especially among coastal fishing communities. Frequent attacks on fishing vessels and the general insecurity of maritime spaces reduce fishing activities, thereby threatening food security and deepening economic vulnerability in coastal communities (Asua et al., 2021). In addition, piracy and related maritime crimes reduce state revenues through disruptions to oil production, theft of petroleum products, and weakened investor confidence.

The persistence of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is rooted in multiple structural drivers. Weak governance, endemic corruption, inadequate maritime law enforcement, and ineffective judicial systems create permissive conditions for piracy (Lopez-Lucia, 2015). High youth unemployment, poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment—particularly in coastal communities—make piracy an attractive livelihood alternative for marginalized populations (Ezeozue, 2021; Chen, 2023).

Environmental degradation and illegal fishing also contribute to piracy by undermining traditional livelihoods. Pollution from oil exploration, overfishing, and environmental destruction have devastated artisanal fishing economies, particularly in the Niger Delta, thereby pushing some affected populations toward maritime criminality.

Another major challenge is the weak coordination among regional states. Despite shared threats, Gulf of Guinea states often struggle with intelligence-sharing, mutual distrust, language barriers, and disparities in naval capabilities (Adesanya, 2020). Although joint operations between states such as Nigeria and Cameroon have demonstrated the value of cooperation, regional coordination remains insufficient to comprehensively address maritime insecurity (Kindzeka, 2017).

International legal constraints further complicate anti-piracy efforts. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), naval forces cannot pursue pirate vessels into another state's territorial waters without authorization, thereby limiting cross-border maritime enforcement (Talmon, 2016). Criminal groups exploit these jurisdictional gaps by operating across multiple maritime boundaries.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated piracy in the region by deepening poverty, increasing unemployment, and diverting state resources away from maritime security (Gold et al., 2023). The socio-economic dislocations caused by the pandemic heightened desperation in already vulnerable coastal communities, contributing to increased maritime criminality.

Overall, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has undergone significant transformation—from localized opportunistic robbery into a complex, organized, and transnational criminal enterprise deeply embedded in regional political economy, oil theft networks, arms proliferation, weak governance, and socio-economic deprivation. Its persistence reflects not merely maritime security deficiencies but broader governance and developmental failures across the region. Addressing piracy therefore requires more than naval patrols; it necessitates integrated strategies combining maritime enforcement, regional cooperation, legal reform, economic development, and governance strengthening.

African Partnership Stations and Enhancement of Maritime Law Enforcement in the Gulf of Guinea

The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) has long been recognised as a strategically vital region for maritime trade and security in Africa. However, the area continues to face

significant maritime threats, including piracy, armed robbery at sea, and drug trafficking, all of which undermine economic stability and endanger international shipping routes. In response to these threats, the United States Africa Command's (AFRICOM) Africa Partnership Station (APS) programme was launched to strengthen the maritime law enforcement capacity of Gulf of Guinea states. This section evaluates the extent to which AFRICOM's APS programme has enhanced the ability of Gulf of Guinea countries to combat drug trafficking and other maritime security threats. It critically examines the hypothesis that APS has improved regional capacity for maritime law enforcement, identifies persistent challenges, and offers recommendations for improving programme effectiveness.

The Gulf of Guinea is a strategically significant maritime region whose coastal states rely heavily on oil exports, fisheries, and maritime commerce. However, it has increasingly become a hotspot for criminal activities, including piracy and drug trafficking (Abdel Fattah, 2017). APS was established to foster cooperation between Gulf states and international partners in addressing these threats through capacity-building initiatives, training, and joint maritime operations. By deploying naval assets and providing technical assistance, APS seeks to improve the capacity of Gulf states to patrol their waters and enforce maritime law (Gilpin, 2007). The programme has facilitated partnerships among regional navies, coastguards, and international organisations, thereby promoting collective maritime security.

The impact of APS on maritime law enforcement in the Gulf of Guinea is evident in several areas. First, APS has delivered critical training for maritime security personnel, equipping them with operational skills to counter piracy and drug trafficking. Exercises such as *Operation Obangame Express* have brought together multiple Gulf of Guinea states in simulated maritime security scenarios, thereby improving regional readiness and interoperability (Africa Defense Forum, 2020). Second, the programme has supported the provision of advanced maritime surveillance technology, including radar systems and monitoring equipment, which have enhanced states' maritime domain awareness and improved their ability to detect and intercept illicit activities (Egede, 2021). The French Navy's interception of over 10 tons of cocaine worth approximately \$755 million off the African coast demonstrates the potential effectiveness of collaborative maritime operations supported by APS-linked frameworks (Hoijs, 2023).

Despite these gains, major challenges remain. Drug trafficking networks in the Gulf of Guinea have become increasingly sophisticated, exploiting corruption, governance weaknesses, and institutional gaps to evade detection (Harvard International Review, 2022). Porous borders and inadequate law enforcement resources further complicate interdiction efforts. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the diversification of drug markets across

Africa has created a growing public health and security challenge, thereby intensifying the complexity of maritime enforcement (UNODC, 2023). Although APS has improved operational capacity, it has not adequately addressed these structural vulnerabilities, limiting its long-term effectiveness.

APS has also faced criticism for its dependence on external support, raising concerns about sustainability. While APS-provided training and resources have strengthened local capabilities, Gulf of Guinea states remain reliant on external assistance for maintaining and expanding maritime security operations (Brits & Nel, 2018). The Lomé Charter, adopted by the African Union, provides a framework for regional maritime governance, but implementation has remained slow, reflecting limited political commitment among coastal states (Danso & Allotey-Pappoe, 2021). Moreover, overlapping institutional mandates and poor coordination under the Yaoundé Code of Conduct have generated inefficiencies in regional maritime governance (Barrios, 2013).

A further limitation is APS's insufficient attention to the root causes of maritime crime. While the programme focuses heavily on operational capacity-building, it does not adequately address the socio-economic and political drivers of drug trafficking and piracy, including poverty, youth unemployment, weak governance, and corruption. Addressing these structural drivers requires broader interventions beyond maritime law enforcement. Strengthening judicial systems, improving anti-corruption measures, and creating alternative livelihoods for vulnerable populations are essential to reducing the appeal of criminal networks (Abudu, 2021; Asuni, 2009).

Actors in Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea

The Gulf of Guinea constitutes a critical maritime domain for global energy security, trade, and fisheries. Nevertheless, it remains plagued by persistent maritime threats, including piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, oil theft, human trafficking, and environmental crimes, with 132 incidents reported in 2021 alone. Maritime security governance in the region operates across national, regional, and international levels, emphasising cooperation, capacity-building, and legal harmonisation.

National Security Frameworks: National maritime security frameworks form the foundational layer of enforcement in the Gulf of Guinea, focusing on domestic surveillance, interdiction, and prosecution within territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). These frameworks vary considerably in capability and effectiveness, with Nigeria possessing the most robust maritime security infrastructure despite implementation challenges. Prominent national actors include

the Nigerian Navy, Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA), Nigeria's Deep Blue Project, and the national navies of Ghana, Benin, and Togo.

Regional Security Frameworks: The cornerstone of regional maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea is the Yaoundé Architecture (2013), which integrates sub-regional efforts under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). The Yaoundé Code of Conduct (2013) established a regional coordination framework involving ECOWAS, ECCAS, and the Gulf of Guinea Commission. It created operational institutions such as the Interregional Coordination Centre (ICC) in Yaoundé, CRESMAO in Abidjan, CRESMAC in Pointe-Noire, and Multinational Maritime Coordination Centres (MMCCs) across Zones A–F. Regional frameworks emphasise interoperability, burden-sharing, and addressing root causes of maritime insecurity. Between 2012 and 2021, implementation of the Yaoundé framework contributed to a 50% increase in maritime security vessels and a doubling of naval personnel across the region.

International Security Frameworks: International actors provide legal support, funding, naval deployments, and technical assistance while respecting the sovereignty of coastal states. Major international partners include the United Nations, European Union, France, China, Portugal, Spain, and the United States. Programmes such as GoGIN and SWAIMS have contributed to coordinated maritime operations, helping reduce piracy incidents significantly between 2020 and 2023.

Security Collaboration and Effectiveness of AFRICOM Interventions in the Gulf of Guinea

The effectiveness of AFRICOM's maritime interventions in the Gulf of Guinea between 2010 and 2023 remains contested. Although APS and related programmes have enhanced regional maritime capacity, experts argue that inadequate coordination between international and regional actors continues to undermine operational effectiveness (Africa Defense Forum, 2020). Persistent pirate activity, illegal fishing, and transnational organised crime indicate that available resources have not translated into fully effective maritime security outcomes.

AFRICOM's APS programme has sought to improve regional security primarily through training, joint exercises, and capacity-building. However, APS faces serious limitations due to weak regional coordination and poor implementation of existing collaborative frameworks. Although mechanisms such as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct were established to facilitate cooperation, maritime insecurity

remains high because intelligence-sharing and joint patrol operations remain inconsistent and fragmented (Kouakou et al., 2022). Okafor-Yarwood et al. (2021) argue that the operational gains from APS-supported initiatives are often unsustainable over time.

Government oversight deficiencies and widespread corruption further undermine APS effectiveness. For example, a 2021 joint U.S.–Ghanaian maritime task force operation targeting illegal fishing encountered major obstacles due to jurisdictional disputes and legal inadequacies (Abudu, 2021). Such incidents demonstrate that capacity-building alone cannot overcome institutional and governance deficiencies.

Regional unwillingness to integrate naval operations also constrains maritime security cooperation. Several Gulf of Guinea states prioritise land-based security threats over maritime concerns, delaying implementation of joint security mechanisms (Mitchell, 2018; Charles & Wullson, 2013). In 2019, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Benin failed to operationalise a proposed joint naval patrol arrangement due to disagreements over funding and leadership (The Nation, 2019).

The increasing use of private maritime security companies further complicates regional security governance. Commercial shipping operators frequently employ private security personnel rather than relying solely on state naval protection (Fiorelli, 2014; Hassan & Hasan, 2017). While this provides immediate vessel protection, it undermines coordinated state-led security frameworks. Tensions between Nigerian naval personnel and private security actors in 2023, which resulted in fatalities, further intensified distrust between state and non-state security providers (Harvard International Review, 2022).

Global geopolitical developments have also complicated AFRICOM's position in the region. The growing presence of Chinese and Russian naval and security interests has introduced strategic competition into Gulf of Guinea maritime governance (Brits & Nel, 2018). African states increasingly balance multiple external partnerships, creating competing priorities that can undermine U.S.-led initiatives. For example, a planned U.S.–Ghanaian maritime security exercise in 2023 was reportedly disrupted after Ghana entered a separate maritime security agreement with China (Katarina, 2023).

Information-sharing challenges remain another persistent obstacle. Although the Yaoundé Code of Conduct was designed to enhance regional intelligence-sharing, implementation remains inconsistent due to technical, political, and institutional barriers (DCAF, 2023). While piracy incidents declined from 45 in 2021 to 11 in 2022 (ACCORD, 2023), other maritime crimes such as drug trafficking and arms smuggling have increased (UNODC, 2023a), indicating that maritime criminal networks continue to adapt faster than regional security systems.

Capability disparities among regional navies further weaken joint operations. While Nigeria and Ghana have modernised aspects of their naval forces (Garba, 2022), smaller states such as Togo and Benin continue to face resource and institutional constraints (Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2021). This imbalance undermines interoperability and complicates burden-sharing during regional operations.

Despite these constraints, successful collaborative operations demonstrate the potential of coordinated maritime security. In 2022, U.S., French, and Nigerian forces jointly disrupted illegal weapons and narcotics trafficking operations through intelligence-sharing and coordinated interdiction (United Nations, n.d.-b). Likewise, the *Obangame Express 2023* exercise demonstrated improved interoperability among participating forces, particularly Ghanaian and Sierra Leonean personnel (AFRICOM, 2023).

Overall, while AFRICOM's APS has made measurable contributions to maritime capacity-building in the Gulf of Guinea, its long-term effectiveness remains constrained by fragmented governance structures, weak regional cooperation, institutional corruption, capability disparities, and geopolitical competition. Sustainable maritime security improvements will require stronger regional integration, harmonised legal frameworks, enhanced intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and deeper political commitment from both African governments and international partners.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that AFRICOM, through initiatives such as the Africa Partnership Station (APS) and Exercise Obangame Express, has made significant contributions to maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. These interventions have strengthened regional naval interoperability, improved maritime domain awareness, enhanced operational readiness, and deepened cooperation among Gulf of Guinea states. In particular, APS-supported capacity-building programmes have contributed to the professionalisation of maritime security forces and improved their response to piracy, armed robbery at sea, and related maritime crimes. In this regard, AFRICOM has played a constructive role in supporting the evolution of regional maritime security architecture and reinforcing broader international maritime governance frameworks.

However, despite these operational gains, the effectiveness of AFRICOM's interventions remains constrained by persistent structural and institutional weaknesses within the Gulf of Guinea. While APS has enhanced tactical maritime law enforcement capacity, its impact on combating drug trafficking and transnational organised maritime crime has been more limited. This limitation stems from its primary focus on operational capacity-building, without sufficient engagement with

the deeper governance, political economy, and socio-economic conditions that sustain maritime insecurity. Enduring challenges such as corruption, weak institutions, inadequate legal frameworks, poor inter-agency coordination, limited political commitment, and widespread socio-economic deprivation continue to undermine maritime security outcomes across the region.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of AFRICOM's engagement is inherently dependent on the willingness and capacity of regional actors to cooperate. As a partnership-based framework rather than a direct enforcement mechanism, AFRICOM's outcomes are shaped by domestic political will, institutional strength, and the degree of regional coordination among Gulf of Guinea states. Where these conditions are weak or fragmented, the impact of external security assistance is significantly reduced.

Overall, the study concludes that while AFRICOM has strengthened maritime security capacity in the Gulf of Guinea, it has not provided a standalone or comprehensive solution to the region's maritime insecurity challenges. Sustainable security requires a more integrated approach that combines external capacity-building with deep domestic institutional reform, sustained regional political commitment, and long-term socio-economic development. AFRICOM's role should therefore be understood as an enabling framework rather than a substitute for internal governance transformation.

Ultimately, the Gulf of Guinea's maritime insecurity reflects not only operational weaknesses but also deeper governance and development deficits. AFRICOM's interventions have demonstrated that external support can enhance maritime security capacity, but such gains remain fragile without corresponding domestic reform and regional political will. Sustainable maritime security will only be achieved through institutionalised cooperation, strengthened governance systems, and an integrated security-development framework that addresses both symptoms and root causes of maritime crime.

Recommendations

To ensure sustainable maritime security outcomes and maximise the effectiveness of AFRICOM's interventions, this study advances three integrated policy recommendations:

1. Strengthen Domestic Maritime Governance and Institutional Capacity

Gulf of Guinea states must prioritise the consolidation of national maritime institutions as the foundation of long-term security. This requires investment in

indigenous training academies, enhancement of technical and operational expertise, and improved maintenance and sustainability of surveillance and patrol assets. Equally important are reforms aimed at strengthening legal and judicial frameworks, enhancing anti-corruption mechanisms, and ensuring effective prosecution of maritime offenders. Building resilient domestic institutions will reduce dependence on external assistance and improve long-term operational autonomy.

2. Deepen Regional Integration and Security Coordination

Effective maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea depends on stronger regional cooperation under existing frameworks such as the Yaoundé Architecture. States must improve interoperability through standardised communication systems, integrated intelligence-sharing platforms, and sustained joint patrol operations. Regional organisations—including ECOWAS, ECCAS, and the Gulf of Guinea Commission—should play a more coordinated role in harmonising mandates and reducing institutional fragmentation. Stronger political commitment and compliance among member states are essential to closing operational gaps exploited by maritime criminal networks.

3. Adopt an Integrated Security–Development Strategy Targeting Structural Drivers

Maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea is deeply rooted in socio-economic and governance conditions that cannot be addressed through military and law enforcement measures alone. A sustainable response must therefore integrate security operations with development-oriented policies that address poverty, youth unemployment, environmental degradation, and limited economic opportunities in coastal communities. In parallel, counter-crime strategies must extend beyond interdiction at sea to dismantle land-based financial, logistical, and political networks that sustain piracy and drug trafficking. This requires coordinated intelligence-led policing, financial tracking, and stronger institutional collaboration among security agencies and international partners.

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