



## The Gulf of Guinea at the Heart of an Unavoidable Maritime Trade Route

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In recent years, the Gulf of Guinea has become a key strategic region for European economies. In 2023, threats from the Houthis against international shipping around the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, combined with potential destabilisation in the region surrounding the Suez Canal due to various conflicts in the Middle East, have led to a diversion of up to 60% of trade shipping from the Red Sea route to the Cape of Good Hope route<sup>2</sup>. As a result, much of the trade shipping heading towards European markets is now transiting around South and West Africa, passing by the Horn of Africa and then moving north through the Gulf of Guinea. This maritime zone spans 5,700 km along 19 African coastal states, from Angola to Senegal. Currently, the Gulf of Guinea is the safest route for international maritime trade, as a global transit zone at the intersection of European, Asian and Latin American markets.

### Piracy in the Region

Since 2005, the Gulf of Guinea has faced significant issues with piracy and armed robbery at sea, including crew kidnappings for ransom. The peak year for incidents was in 2020, with a recorded 123 incidents<sup>3</sup>. Between 2005 and 2024, the patterns of piracy in this region have evolved. In the initial years, incidents primarily involved classic 'boarding and robbery' actions, targeting oil and gas support vessels. After 2010, a

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<sup>2</sup> Nick Savvides, "Concerns over Cape re-routes and West African piracy," *Seatrade Maritime News*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/piracy/concerns-over-cape-re-routes-and-west-african-piracy>.

<sup>3</sup> Security Council Report, *June 2023 Monthly Forecast: Gulf of Guinea Piracy* (New York: 2023), <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2023-06/gulf-of-guinea-piracy-2.php>.

new trend known as ‘petro-piracy’ emerged, targeting tankers loaded with refined products and other oil infrastructures in response to significant fluctuations in oil prices. From 2016 on, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea increasingly focused on ‘kidnapping crews for ransom’ as it seemed more lucrative for pirates compared to robbery. In 2021, it was reported that 95% of worldwide individuals kidnapped at sea were taken in this region, totalling 140 crew members<sup>4</sup>. In 2022, in response to the surge in piracy activities, the UN Security Council (UNSC) issued Resolution 2634, which aimed to harmonise the criminalisation of piracy and armed robbery at sea among domestic laws. The same year, the UN Secretary General reported that the financial losses due to piracy in the Gulf of Guinea amounted to approximately \$1.925 billion annually<sup>5</sup>. However, in the years that followed, incidents of piracy and armed robbery significantly decreased, with reports indicating 19 incidents in 2022, 22 in 2023<sup>6</sup> and 18 incidents in 2024<sup>7</sup>. Compared to the figures from 2018 to 2021, the number of piracy incidents and acts of armed robbery in this region has dropped markedly.

These achievements can largely be attributed to the successful mobilisation of international and regional actors. Coastal African states have come together under the ‘Yaoundé Architecture’, a non-binding framework established in 2013 during a joint summit of the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)<sup>8</sup>. Above all, this collaboration has improved maritime surveillance and information sharing among the regional states and fostered constructive dialogue and progress regarding the criminalisation of piracy in national legislation.

Since 2013, various international actors have also become involved in the region, notably the European Union (EU), which launched its first ‘Coordinated Maritime Presence’ (CMP) pilot project in 2020. This initiative included active participation from several member states, such as Italy, Spain, France, Denmark, Portugal and Belgium. The CMP, along with a Maritime Areas of Interest Coordination Cell, established within the EU Military Staff (EUMS), made it possible for the EU and its Member States to position themselves as consistent players in the region. Additionally, other international actors such as the United States, India, China, Canada, Japan and Brazil have shown interest in supporting the coastal states<sup>9</sup>.

## Persisting Issues – Uncertain Stability

The Gulf of Guinea remains vulnerable to a surge in piracy. Although piracy incidents have decreased since 2021, the threat in itself has certainly not disappeared.

The resurgence of piracy could be exacerbated by ongoing maritime-related persisting issues in the region. One issue is the rise in international illicit trafficking, including narcotics, counterfeit goods, arms and human trafficking, which transit through the Gulf of Guinea before being rerouted inland or to other regions of the world. This spread of illegal trafficking sustains parallel economies, leading to significant money laundering and fuelling armed groups and other criminal organisations in West Africa and the Sahel region. Another

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<sup>4</sup> UN Secretary-General, *Situation of piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Gulf of Guinea and its underlying causes: report of the Secretary-General* (New York: 2022), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3993689?ln=en&v=pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> UN Secretary-General, *situation of piracy and armed robbery*.

<sup>6</sup> Gard, “Is the decline in global piracy over?” April 16, 2024, <https://gard.no/insights/is-the-decline-in-global-piracy-over/> (also available through: <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/is-the-decline-in-global-piracy-over/>).

<sup>7</sup> North Standard, *2024 Jan – Dec IMB Piracy and Armed Robbery Report* (Newcastle upon Tyne: 2025), <https://north-standard.com/insights-and-resources/resources/news/2024-jan-sep-imb-piracy-and-armed-robbery-report#:~:text=Activity%20remains%20relatively%20lower%20in,crew%20taken%20hostage%20in%202024>.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Laifer, “Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and the Effects of Unstable Governance,” *Security Outlines*, March 11, 2024, <https://www.securityoutlines.cz/piracy-in-the-gulf-of-guinea-and-the-effects-of-unstable-governance/>.

<sup>9</sup> Rossella Marangio, “Deep Waters: The maritime security landscape in the Gulf of Guinea,” *Brief 1* (European Union Institute for Security Studies), January, 2025, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief\\_2024-22\\_Gulf%20of%20Guinea.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_2024-22_Gulf%20of%20Guinea.pdf).

persistent maritime-related issue is illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, as approximately 20% of the world's fisheries come from the Gulf of Guinea<sup>10</sup>. In the short run, illegal fisheries have negative impacts on local fishing-communities' economies and on food security. In the long term, overfishing will lead to serious environmental risks with far-reaching social and economic repercussions, ultimately impacting regional stability. In other words, persisting maritime issues such as the above-mentioned examples can destabilise coastal states, potentially leading to a resurgence of piracy that threatens maritime trade routes.

As UNSC Resolution 2634 (2022) highlighted, it is important to acknowledge the relationship between stability on land and security at sea<sup>11</sup>. The prevailing security situation in the Sahel region – specifically in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – has deteriorated significantly over the past decade. This decline is now extending into the northern borders of the coastal states of West Africa, thereby increasing pressure on local security forces and threatening social and economic stability. As a result, there is an elevated risk of destabilisation characterised by the decline of public services, rising unemployment, increased poverty and heightened corruption rates. This inland threat acts as a multiplier, fostering a fertile environment for the resurgence of piracy and other illicit maritime activities throughout the region. It is imperative to highlight that both piracy and armed robbery have not been eradicated; they continue to pose substantial threats exacerbated by the worsening security conditions emanating from inland, up to deep inside the Sahel.

## Way Ahead

The socio-economic stability of neighbouring coastal states is closely tied to the security challenges within their maritime zones. In the context of the Gulf of Guinea, enhancing security requires a strategic policy focus on Western African states, reaching up to the Sahel region. Addressing these interconnected issues is crucial for promoting regional stability and economic prosperity.

**Fostering cooperation at various levels is essential.** As it proved to be effective in recent years, European states should continue to actively support and engage in collaborative efforts regarding maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. This can be achieved by prioritising international and regional frameworks to tackle ongoing legal issues related to the criminalisation of piracy and enhancing swift information sharing and maritime surveillance among all involved parties. In this context, European states could explore ways to further use the EU Coordinated Maritime Presence mechanism and increase synergies with the EU Security and Defence Initiative (EUSDI) deployed in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, as well as with bilateral initiatives between EU Member States and West African coastal states.

**Promoting coastal states' ownership** by supporting existing interregional cooperation efforts with the implementation of the information sharing network via the 'Yaoundé Code of Conduct' under the lead of regional organisations such as ECOWAS/ECCAS, which are important African-led mechanisms to strengthen collaboration among local partners. Additionally, local ownership should have a community dimension, involving awareness campaigns to ensure that local coastal communities are included in efforts to address insecurity at sea.

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<sup>10</sup> Lucas Martin, "Le Golfe de Guinée, un problème supplémentaire," *Atalayar*, May 31, 2024, <https://www.atalayar.com/fr/articulo/reportages/golfe-guinee-probleme-suplementaire/20240531090000200782.html>.

<sup>11</sup> UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 2634 (2022) [on acts of piracy and armed robbery at sea off the coast of the States of the Gulf of Guinea]* (New York: 2022), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3975658>.

**Stimulating a multidimensional approach to investment in key areas.** This approach should create synergies between military and civilian multilateral and bilateral initiatives and actors. Future investments should focus on enhancing the resilience and efficiency of critical maritime infrastructures, both onshore – such as harbours and maritime operation centres – and at sea, including energy facilities and undersea cables. In these efforts, the private sector can play a significant role by investing in the capacity building of African partners to improve their maritime situational awareness. This can be achieved by enhancing surveillance capabilities for both civilian and military use, prioritising investments in new technologies, particularly unmanned aerial systems (UASs) and satellite-based systems.

A successful case study of a Belgian 3D approach (Diplomacy – Development – Defence) was implemented at the Port of Cotonou in 2018. This initiative involved the ‘PASPort’ project, led by ENABEL since 2018, aimed to enhance the overall maritime sector in Cotonou.<sup>12</sup> Belgian Defence also contributed to the PASPort project by training Beninese military and harbour security staff in various areas, including operational navigation and boarding techniques.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, a public-private partnership (PPP) between the Port of Antwerp and the Port of Cotonou was agreed, which resulted in the management of the Port of Cotonou being transferred to Port of Antwerp International (PAI).<sup>14</sup> These initiatives exemplify the potential of aligned public-private collaboration with West African coastal states. Belgium and other like-minded states could build on this successful case study to initiate similar initiatives with other coastal states in the Gulf of Guinea.

**Acknowledging that human activities at sea and on land are deeply connected.** Future policy initiatives in the region should ensure a balanced approach that addresses the root causes to security challenges. It is important to keep in mind that, in the case of the Gulf of Guinea, maritime security extends far beyond the coastal zone. This final point could be considered in the perspective of a potential revision of the Belgium’s Integrated Strategy for the Sahel Region<sup>15</sup> (2023), which might take place during the new legislature.

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<sup>12</sup> Open.Enabel, “Projet PASPort au Bénin : Après 28 mois d’exécution, près de 60% du budget déjà engagé!” December 13, 2021, <https://open.enabel.be/fr/BEN/2364/1496/u/projet-pasport-au-benin-apres-28-mois-d-execution-pres-de-60-du-budget-deja-engage.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Sten M., “De Marine in Benin: training the trainers,” *Beldefnews*, November 28, 2024, <https://beldefnews.mil.be/de-marine-in-benin-training-the-trainers/>.

<sup>14</sup> Bernardin Aligbonon, “Cotonou fait appel au savoir-faire de Port of Antwerp pour se forger un avenir durable,” Port of Antwerp-Bruges, November 28, 2019, <https://newsroom.portofantwerpbruges.com/cotonou-fait-appel-au-savoir-faire-de-port-of-antwerp-pour-se-forger-un-avenir-durable>.

<sup>15</sup> Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, *The Council of Ministers adopts the Belgian government’s Sahel Strategy* (Brussels: 2023), <https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/news/council-ministers-adopts-belgian-governments-sahel-strategy>.



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