

UNITED STATES' AFRICA COMMAND AND MARITIME SECURITY IN THE GULF OF GUINEA, 2007 – 2020

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of US Africa Command on maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa, between 2007 and 2020, with specific emphasis on the core maritime security challenges in West Africa. The study was anchored on the World Systems Theory, while data were generated using documentary and survey methods. Data collected were analysed using content analysis. The study found that maritime security challenges in West Africa include piracy, armed robbery, and drug trafficking. It also found that maritime insecurity has remained endemic in the Gulf of Guinea, despite the establishment of US Africa Command. The study locates the limited effectiveness of AFRICOM in mitigating maritime security challenges to its establishment without adequate consultation with West African leaders which triggered suspicion and resistance among countries in the Gulf of Guinea. The study posits that the geostrategic importance of the sub-regional maritime has remained the U.S government's strategic interest. The study, therefore, recommends, among others, that the U.S. government should strengthen inter-state collaboration through existing security agencies in the sub-region.

Key words: US Africa Command, Gulf of Guinea, maritime security, piracy, strategic interest

Introduction

Providing security assistance and other stability supporting operations in Africa was an essential component of the United States government's security strategy during the Cold war, due to ideological confrontation between her and the former Soviet Union. However, at the end of the Cold War, the U.S. security assistance to Africa drastically declined due to de-ideologization of the international politics. In 1995, for example, the Department of Defence (DOD) outlined its view of Africa in its U.S. Security Strategy for sub-Saharan Africa, asserting that "ultimately we see very little traditional strategic interest in Africa" (Ploch, 2009, p.4).

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However, the U.S. security assistance to Africa, which had declined at the end of the Cold War, picked up in the late 1990s in response to the threat of terrorism and other forms of political instability on the continent. In 1998, following terrorist attacks on two U.S. Embassies in East Africa; the United States conducted a retaliatory attack against a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan that was at the time believed to be linked to Al Qaeda. The Embassy bombings, and the retaliatory strike against Sudan, were thus seen as a turning point in U.S. strategic interest in Africa (Ploch, 2010).

In 2002, the George W. Bush administration, in its National Security Strategy, outlined a more focused and strategic approach toward Africa, which emphasized that “U.S. security strategy must focus on building indigenous security and intelligence capabilities through bilateral engagement and coalitions of the willing” (The White House, 2002, p.5). As a result, the U.S. military planners and their civilian counterparts, who historically had not regularly identified issues on the African continent as strategic priorities for the U.S. military, began to engage in a wide array of activities aimed at protecting trade interests, reducing armed conflict, and countering terrorism. It was in line with this shift of strategic actions that the United States government provided development programmes and security assistance to help strengthen security in Africa, particularly the waterways. To this end, the Bush Administration, in 2005, introduced the National Strategy for Maritime Security, with the facilitation and defence of commerce as top national priorities (Feldt, Roell & Thiele, 2013). In 2007, U.S. Naval Forces Europe launched the African Partnership Station (APS). Under this new initiative, a navy ship was deployed to the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) for seven months not only to serve as a sea base of operations and a floating schoolhouse from which to provide assistance and training to the Gulf states, but also to conduct maritime security operations to protect shipping routes in the Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean (Feldt, Roell & Thiele, 2013). Above all, the U.S. government, on February 7, 2007, announced officially the decision to create a Unified Combatant Command for Africa, known as United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) as a new U.S. government approach to protect its trade interests and national security objectives in Africa and its surrounding waters (Pham, 2014).

Created ostensibly to address concerns over the administrative division of responsibility for U.S. military efforts and engagement in Africa, AFRICOM's establishment reflects an evolution in American perceptions of its strategic interests in Africa. Hence, the U.S.-Africa Command

operations cover all parts of the African continent except for Egypt. It also includes all island countries commonly associated with Africa such as Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles (Crawley, 2017). It also seeks to enhance maritime security in Africa since Africa's coastlines and waterways, particularly the GoG, have been volatile and highly susceptible to illegal fishing, trafficking, piracy and other forms of criminality in recent years. The rising insecurity in waterways is seen to potentially constitute a threat to the U.S. interests, including how to secure access to energy resources in Africa (Okumu, 2017).

Since its establishment, AFRICOM has engaged in capacity building, pursued through the implementation of three programmes, namely, the Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA), Africa Partnership Station (APS), the African Maritime Law Enforcement Partnership Program (AMLEP), and the International Military Education and Training Program (IMET) with a view to improving African militaries' capabilities by providing selected training and equipment necessary for multinational peace support operations and to strengthen maritime safety and security in Africa, improve the interoperability between maritime forces of the participating nations, as well as the skills of individual sailors and develop participant nations' capabilities to monitor and enforce their own territorial waters and exclusive economic zones. More than ten years after its establishment, it has become imperative to examine the operations and activities of AFRICOM against the background of the objectives it was created to achieve.

Given the dynamics and orientation of the U.S. government security strategy in Africa, the establishment of AFRICOM has attracted the attention of scholars and pertinent issues bordering on formation, composition and objectives of AFRICOM, among others have been highlighted. Although this study tends to agree with some of the above-enumerated viewpoints, it observes, however, that the impact of AFRICOM on maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa has not been adequately and systematically studied. This study is poised to fill this knowledge gap by examining the impact of U.S. Africa Command on maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea between 2007 and 2020.

Theoretical Perspective: World Systems Theory

This study adopts the world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein. The theory was enunciated in response to some criticisms levelled against

dependency theory. Unlike dependency theory, which divides the world into bi-modal system comprising the centre and periphery; world systems theory divides the world into tri-modal system or trinitarian structure consisting of the core, semi-periphery and periphery (Wallerstein, 2004).

World-systems theory stresses that the world-system and not nation states should be the primary, but not exclusive unit of social analysis. World-system refers to the inter-regional and transnational division of labour, which divides the world into core countries, semi-periphery countries and the periphery countries. Core countries focus on higher skill, capital-intensive production, and the rest of the world focuses on low-skill, labour-intensive production and extraction of raw materials. This constantly reinforces the dominance of the core countries (Chase-Dunn & Grimes, 1995).

For Wallerstein (1989), world-systems analysis is, above all, a mode of analysis that aims to transcend the structures of knowledge inherited from the 19th century. In this system, the semi-periphery lies between the core and periphery and is exploited by the core as it, in turn, exploits the periphery. It is therefore possible that the periphery suffers double exploitation from the centre and semi-periphery. This tri-modal division or trinitarian structure according to Wallerstein (2004) aims to explain the level of industrialization within less developed countries (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2008).

The link between US Africa Command and maritime security in West Africa is explained in the light of the world systems theory. There are two key geopolitical changes that gave rise to AFRICOM. One is the continent's growing economic importance to the US government, both as a source of strategic natural resources and increasingly as a market. The other is the rise in post-September 11, 2001, of non-state actors in Africa, particularly terrorists and criminals who presented asymmetric threats to the US government's interests in Africa (Brown, 2013). This is why AFRICOM's mission statement states that:

United States Africa Command, in concert with other U.S. government agencies and international partners, conducts sustained security engagement through military-to-military programmes, military-sponsored activities, and other military operations as directed to promote a stable and secure African environment in support of U.S. foreign policy.

Africa, particularly the Gulf of Guinea has emerged as a major player in global energy security and therefore is of immense economic importance

to the U.S. government. For example, the volume of Nigeria's oil supply to U.S. which dropped from 15% in 2014 to 12% in 2015 clearly shows the extent violence and political instability affects oil production (Pham, 2018; Punch Newspaper, 16 Oct. 2016). AFRICOM, therefore, is part of the strategic attempt to protect the oil and energy security of the United States.

The study is qualitative and analytical. Relevant secondary data were generated from relevant documents evidence using documentary method based on logical deduction, while primary were generated from selected key informants using Key Informant Interview (KII). The key informants were drawn from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Transport and the Nigerian Navy. Also interviewed were maritime experts from the Nigerian Maritime Academy. Content analysis was adopted as the method of analysis.

Geo-Strategic Importance of the Gulf of Guinea

West Africa is a collection of 16 countries. The land area is over 6,140,000km², which is approximately one-fifth of Africa (UNODC, 2013). West Africa is geo-strategically significant to the world due to her geographical location and natural endowment. Economically, the sub-region harbours strategic natural resources such as oil, gas, minerals, flora and fauna, among others. In West Africa, new offshore oil and gas fields have been discovered in some countries like Ghana (2007) Cote D'Ivoire (2021), among others (<https://northafricapost.com/59426-cote-divoire-eni-discovers-new-offshore-oil-and-gas-deposits-expanding-reserves-by-25.html#:~:text=In%20September%202021%2C%20ENI%20announced,exploration%20by%20>). With an estimated population of over 349 million, the sub-region is both a large market for finished products and a source of raw material for the industrialized countries and this is made possible through maritime channels which have become increasingly important for international economic relations, especially in the era of globalization. As noted by Emmanuel-Marie Peton (cited in Ukeje & Ela, 2013: 13), "80% of trade in hydrocarbons is conducted through marine channels and mineral resources transported by sea are used for production in factories and industries". This underscores the strategic importance of West African maritime, which is better appreciated when attention is drawn to the Gulf of Guinea (GoG).

The GoG is an area found on the north-eastern part of the tropical Atlantic Ocean of West Africa and extends north to Cape Lopez in Gabon and west to Cape Palmas in Liberia. The GoG which was sometimes referred

to as the “Bight of Benin” constitutes about 16 West African and Central African countries along roughly 6,000 kilometres of unbroken coastline (Meredith, 2005). These countries include Senegal, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Sao Tome and Principe, Central African Republic, the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola produce and sell in commercial quantities. Thus, much of the countries in the GoG are rentier states depending on huge revenue derived from oil and gas sector. In addition to the oil deposits and productions, the GoG is also a home to marine and rain forest resources such as fish and timber, all of which are prone to illicit exploitation (Vreÿ, 2013; Meredith, 2005).

The main rivers of the GoG are the Niger and the Congo both of which are rich in crude oil and natural gas. The Congo River which is about 4,700 kilometres long possesses the second strongest streams in the world after the Amazon River in Latin America and represents the main commercial artery of equatorial Africa. The Niger River is 4,200 kilometres long and it takes its source in Guinea and crosses nine countries—is essential to the life of 110 million people in Western Africa (Mane, 2005). The GoG is one of the top oil and natural gas hotspots across the globe and is also rich in forestry, metal ore and mineral deposits. Furthermore, the Gulf of Guinea is not only a major shipping route for global trade, but already the source of 18% of U.S. oil imports and 14% of its liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports (Vreÿ, 2013).

With the challenges of globalization, the West African sub-region is fast becoming central to international navigation as the GoG provides a relatively safer route connecting the Far East to countries in the North and South of the Atlantic. Hence, given that over 90% of global freight is by sea, the GoG has become an important sea-route for international trade and commerce (Vreÿ, 2013). It is also important to note that the geographical position of the Gulf of Guinea represents an important comparative advantage for oil supply. Indeed, despite its relative proximity to the world’s main consumers of energy, North America and Western Europe, the Gulf of Guinea benefits from the absence of narrow-shipping maritime lanes known as chokepoints, between the region and those parts of the world. Major portions of world crude oil pass through these maritime transit chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz in Iran. All these channels are important passages for important oil tankers. However, the narrowness of the chokepoints makes them susceptible to blockades, pirate attacks, and shipping accidents. The Gulf of Guinea is free of these risks. Moreover, the region is relatively close to the main markets of Europe

and the Americas. For instance, while it takes eight hours to fly from New York to Paris, it requires only six hours and 30 minutes to fly from New York to Dakar, Senegal. By the same token, the maritime distance between Luanda in Angola and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil is 3,489 miles. Likewise, its geographical closeness to Western Europe relative to the Middle East and Asia adds to the region's comparative advantage for the movement of goods and people, through reduced costs of sea transportation (Mane, 2005).

The Gulf of Guinea bears numerous advantages for the U.S. First, the crude oil from the region is of better quality than that from Latin America, with API gravity typically above 30° and often close to 40°, while that of Latin America rarely exceeds the 30° mark. Second, the region's oil contains little sulfur by international standards, an appreciable characteristic for U.S. oil companies. Third, oil in the region is mostly extracted from offshore fields, far from grounds of political instability and wars, and as such, can be easily protected from turmoil. Fourth, the numerous transit chokepoints facing other world oil suppliers add to the comparative advantage of producers in the GoG, in terms of shipping ease, lower transportation costs, and less environmental hazards (Goldwyn & Morrison, 2005).

In addition to its strategic importance as an alternate supply of energy, the GoG also has political importance for the United States in their efforts to safeguard world security. A greater presence of the United States in the region bears political advantages for the U.S. government, given terrorism concerns that have arisen in the aftermath of 9/11. Again, the natural gas production potential of the GoG is another reason for the increased interest of the world's major energy consumers.

Maritime Security Challenges in West Africa and the Establishment of AFRICOM

Maritime security challenges refer to threats prevalent in the maritime domain. In West Africa, a number of these threats exist. They included: piracy, armed robbery, smuggling, and illegal fishing among others.

Piracy under the 1958 Geneva Convention on the High Seas as was adopted by the United Nations Convention on the High Seas (UNCLOS) 1982 refers to any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship. Thus, piracy is confined to the:

acts committed on the high sea only, with the other elements of a presence of a private ship or an aircraft, and the commission should be against another ship or persons or property therein committed for the private ends not public ends or gain and any inciting acts or an intentional facilitation of the piratical acts (Mandanda & Ping, 2016, p. 48).

Piracy has emerged as a growing problem in the GoG area. In fact, the gulf has witnessed a sharp rise in total incidence of pirate attacks from 28 in 2009 to 50 in 2018 (ICC, 2019). The pirates usually target the cargoes, especially the oil laden tankers for their cargo. This usual disrupt shipping in the sea lane.

Aside from piracy, organized criminal activities such as drug trafficking in West Africa became an international security concern in the mid-2000s, due to the detection of large cocaine shipments transiting the region on their way to Europe (UNODC, 2013). West African maritime has become notorious as a preferred transit hub in the global trade in narcotics and psychotropic substances largely from South America, as well as destination for fake and sub-standard pharmaceuticals coming from Asia. The sub-region has become a major hub in the global drug trade as evident in how people are becoming addictive users of narcotics such as cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine (Ukeje & Ela, 2013). The foregoing maritime security challenges among others prompted the establishment of AFRICOM.

The journey to the establishment of AFRICOM could be traced to 1999, when the Department of Defence (DoD) opened the African Center for Security Studies to support the development of U.S. strategic policy toward Africa - a move that was seen as a precursor to its creation of AFRICOM. At the time AFRICOM was conceived, DOD stressed that there were no plans to have a significant troop presence on the continent as the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) located at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti provided the only U.S. military base in Africa (<https://www.africom.mil/article/34251/us-africa-command-in-2021-driving-shared-goals-through-engagement>).

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, however, marked a turning point in U.S. strategic policy toward Africa. The events of 9/11 forced a reassessment of and placed greater attention on the presence of extremists on the continent. One result was the creation of the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa in 2002, ostensibly to capture Islamic fighters fleeing from Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Some other factors that necessitated the creation of AFRICOM include the distraction and overstretching of existing Combatant Commands. For instance, by the mid-2000s, the European and Central Commands had become overstretched due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The European Command was primarily focused on relations with European allies and Russia, while the Pacific Command was primarily focused on China, India, and North Korea. Hence, in 2006, Congress authorized a feasibility study on the creation of a new command for Africa to consolidate current operations and activities on the continent under one commander (Ploch, 2011). In the same year, General James L. Jones of the European Command pointed out that his Command's staff was spending more than half its time on African issues, up from almost no time three years earlier (Brown, 2013). General Bantz Craddock, Jones's successor, also remarked that Africa in recent years had posed one of the greatest security challenges to the U.S. European Command and that a separate command for Africa was needed to provide better focus and increase synergy in support of U.S. policy and engagement. In line with the advice of General Craddock, President Bush decided in 2007 to create AFRICOM (Brown, 2013)

AFRICOM was officially launched as a sub-unified command under EUCOM on October 1, 2007, and became a stand-alone command on October 1, 2008 (Ploch, 2011). AFRICOM's first commander, Army General William E. Kip Ward, former Deputy Commander of EUCOM, retired in 2011, transferring command authority to General Carter F. Ham, formerly Commanding General of U.S. Army Europe, on March 9.

The mission statement of AFRICOM specifies that the:

United States Africa Command, in concert with interagency and international partners, builds defense capabilities, responds to crisis, and deters and defeats transnational threats in order to advance U.S. national interests and promote regional security, stability, and prosperity (cited in Ploch, 2011, p. 34).

AFRICOM is responsible for all DoD operations, exercises, and security cooperation in 54 of 55 nations on the African continent, its island nations, and surrounding waters. As of the end of fiscal year (FY) 2012, AFRICOM had approximately 2,300 assigned personnel, including U.S. military, civilian, and contractor employees and about 1,500 personnel works at the command's headquarters at Kelly Barracks in Stuttgart. Others are assigned to AFRICOM units at MacDill Air Force Base near Tampa, Florida, and the Joint Analysis Center in Moles.

AFRICOM has several service component commands and theatre Special Operations Command component. AFRICOM's other forward operating site besides Combined Joint Task Force—Horn of Africa is on UK's Ascension Island in the south Atlantic. It also has Cooperative Security Locations in Algeria, Botswana, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Namibia, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Tunisia, Uganda, and Zambia.

Maritime security strategies of AFRICOM in the Gulf of Guinea include but not limited to capacity building. This is pursued through the implementation of Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance program (ACOTA), Africa Partnership Station (APS), the African Maritime Law Enforcement Partnership Program (AMLEP), and the International Military Education and Training Program (IMET) (Pham, 2008; Ukeje & Ela, 2013).

The Impact of AFRICOM on Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea

In 2015, the International Maritime Organization rated the Gulf of Guinea second only to the Straits of Malacca in number of piracy attacks (Goldwyn & Morrison, 2019; International Organization for Migration, 2020). Meanwhile, Jacobsen and Nordby (2015) identified four types of piracy in West African maritime. One type of piracy activity in the Gulf of Guinea is kidnapping-for-ransom. It is considered as recording “the biggest increase in activity in 2013 actually related to offshore kidnapping-for-ransom, focused around the Niger delta region” (Hart, 2014, cited in Jacobsen & Nordby, 2015, p.21). Reports from former hostages reveal that the hostages of pirates in West Africa have often been fed with take-away food such as burgers and pizzas, which indicates that they have been kept in the vicinity of towns and cities. It is also important to stress though that kidnapping-for-ransom is neither the only nor the main form of piracy in West African maritime.

Another type of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is theft of cargo, mainly oil. There are three key aspects to oil-related piracy activities. Firstly, such theft of cargo – also referred to as “petro- piracy” or “hijacking-for cargo” – has increasingly come to be associated with violence against crewmembers. In the case of kidnappings-for-ransom, the crew is ‘valuable’ (without them, there is of course no ransom). However, in the case of hijacking-for-cargo, pirates are only interested in the cargo and are therefore less reluctant to use violence against crewmembers that get in the way. Secondly, these

activities are very well organised and involve “tasks of considerable logistic complexity”.

Emptying a vessel of tons of oil is not a simple task but requires sophisticated equipment and know-how. It not only requires navigational knowledge to manoeuvre a merchant vessel around for days, but, since an oil tanker has a complicated pipe system, it also requires the knowledge of an engineer to understand where to open and close various pipes, how to start pumps etc. Finally, it also requires the requisite logistics and a good network to be able to sell oil illegally to refineries or to re-circulate it back into the market through an oil terminal in the region. Indeed, questions about where to transport the stolen cargo and where to sell it are also indicative of the high levels of organisation and sophistication, something, which characterizes this type of piracy.

A third type of piracy which usually goes unreported is when pirates rob other criminals of their stolen goods. A key informant from the Nigerian Navy further explained this viewpoint. According to him:

We have seen instances where pirates in the Gulf of Guinea have attacked a boat which had already been involved in a criminal activity at sea – such as petro-piracy, petty piracy, illegal fishery or the like – and then have robbed this boat of its stolen cargo. Such instances will obviously never be reported through any official channels. In short, a considerable number of piracy incidents thus go unreported, and it is therefore extremely difficult to determine the extent of them (Personal Communication, 2021).

A fourth type of piracy is theft from vessels, often whilst in harbour or at anchor close to shore. “Petty theft from anchored or berthed vessels is the most common but least significant form of piracy that affects vessels across West Africa” (Bridger 2013 cited in Jacobsen & Nordby, 2015). It is characterised by theft of stores and equipment from ships docked in ports such as Pointe-Noire in the Congo or anchorages such as Lagos. Yet, even if this form of piracy is perhaps more widespread, it could be seen as less detrimental when compared with the other types of piracy mentioned above (Jacobsen & Nordby, 2015).

According to Mandanda and Ping (2016), incidents of robbery in West Africa waters are normally happening towards the anchored vessels. The several occasions involve pirates armed with guns and knives that are used to threaten crew members during the robbery as well as defending themselves in case of any attempt to capture them. In some instances, the robbers do not intend to engage the crew but rather to sneak inside and

steal some cash, property and other valuable things and then slip away. In other instances, the robbers engage crew members of the hijacked vessel, holding them for some time during their operation in the vessel and later, after they finish their activities, free them while themselves abandoning the vessel. The Ocean Beyond Piracy 2012 report referred to this as ‘subsistence piracy’. The research by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (as cited in Global Financial Integrity, 2017) estimates that between \$10,000 and \$15,000 worth of goods are stolen per pirate attack in the GoG. Basing on this, the Ocean Beyond Piracy 2013 report estimated that a total value of between \$180,000 and \$270,000 were lost per a total number of 18 incidents during the material year. In addition to that “\$364,000 and \$1,131,000 for stolen ship stores and equipment and personal effects respectively was recorded for the year 2014. Moreover, \$400,000 is estimated to be cost involving the stolen goods and valuables happening in different 8 robbery incidents reported during robbery in 2015” (Personal Communication with a key informant from the Nigerian Navy, 2021).

Hostage-taking is extended to the employees of foreign oil companies operating in West African countries rich in oil such as Nigeria, and released after those companies have paid some requested amount of money. However, this is typically associated with the class struggle of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) against the Nigerian government. A total number of 73 crewmembers were held hostage during the year 2013. The Ocean Beyond Piracy 2013 report came up with an estimate of \$1.57 million as a total cost of ransom and recovery. Also, the report shows that a total ransom amount of \$1,680,000 was paid to pirates for the release of 21 out of 27 crew members estimated to be taken hostage during the year 2014. Apart from that, \$1.6 million is estimated as costs for ransom paid to pirates for the release of 44 crew members who were taken hostage in 12 different piracy incidents that occurred during the year 2015.

In 2020 the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), which has been tracking the incidents of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, indicated that the region accounted for 95% of all kidnappings at sea, with a record of 130 crew members kidnapped during 22 separate incidents. It further demonstrated that the furthest attack from shore involved the incident of crew kidnapped from a single vessel during which eight pirates armed with machine guns who boarded a tanker around 196 nautical miles southwest of Bayelsa, Nigeria held all 19 crew members hostage, stole ship’s documents and valuable items, and escaped with 13 seafarers (Global Trade Review,

2021). Figure 1 indicates the trend in kidnapping in the Gulf of Guinea between 2000 and 2020.

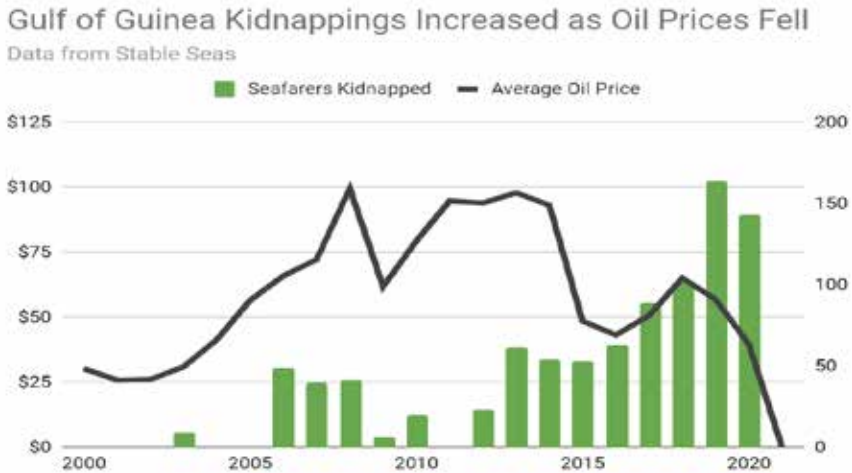


Figure 1: Trend in kidnapping in the Gulf of Guinea between 2000 and 2020

Source: UNODC (2021). *Pirates of the Gulf of Guinea: A Cost Analysis for Coastal States*

https://www.unodc.org/documents/Maritime_crime/UNODC_Pirates_GoG_A_Cost_Analysis_for_Coastal_States.pdf. Accessed 17/09/2022.

The foregoing UNODC statistics confirm the increased capabilities of pirates in the Gulf of Guinea with more and more attacks taking place further from the coast.

The Gulf of Guinea is an increasingly busy maritime region for the transportation of a number of valuable commodities such as gold, iron ore, agricultural products, et cetera. It is as well the primary route to and from major oil producing countries such as Angola and Nigeria. In addition, with new discoveries of offshore oil in Ghana, Ivory Coast and Liberia there is an expectation of an increase in tanker traffic. Therefore, pirates in the Gulf of Guinea are mainly focusing on oil theft due to the presence of black market for fuel. The ships are hijacked for the purpose of stealing the vessel and unloading its cargo.

Oil theft has been the primary target for the Gulf of Guinea pirates, and it is widely operated, whereby the pirates, normally armed by machine guns and other fire weapons hijack vessels underway or anchored and siphon the refined oil cargo carried on board. Once the vessel is hijacked,

the crew members are normally forced to “navigate the same to unknown places where the oil cargo can either be siphoned to another vessel or to a storage facility on land. The stolen oil is directed to the black market to be sold there” (Personal Communication with a key informant from the Nigerian Navy, 2021). The stolen goods range between \$10.1 million to \$30.27 million with the majority taken from estimates of the oil theft from tankers stolen in 2013 (Mandanda & Ping, 2016). The underwriting representatives from Lloyds and International Underwriting Association’s company comprised in the Joint War Committee estimates that between \$2 million and \$6 million worth of oil is stolen per one pirate attack in the Gulf of Guinea. In 2014 the oil theft by pirates is estimated to be between \$11,519,000 and \$13,038,000. In 2013, two seafarers incurred death, while in 2014, one seafarer was reported dead. In 2015, forty-four (44) of 1,225 crew members were kidnapped, fifteen (15) were exposed to minor injuries (Mandanda & Ping, 2016).

Pirates’ attacks in the Gulf of Guinea mainly occur within territorial waters and in ports area though not restricted only to territorial waters and ports area. The statistics of actual attacks show that in 2014 events taken place in the high seas exceeded those happened in territorial waters and within the ports, but in the remaining years events occurred within ports area are many compared to those in the high seas (Mandanda & Ping, 2016).

Resistance and Suspicion of AFRICOM by West African Leaders

U.S. AFRICOM faced serious suspicion and resistance from West African countries from the time of its establishment especially concerning location of the AFRICOM Headquarters on West African soil. Many West African opinion leaders were concerned in 2007 that AFRICOM is nothing but a growing militarization of U.S. relations with West Africa. There were suspicions that AFRICOM would incite rather than deter, terrorist attacks in West Africa. Thus, as aptly captioned by a key informant from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nigeria:

There was strong opposition by most West African countries to AFRICOM’s creation in 2007 such that the AU issued a nonbinding resolution asking member-states not to host AFRICOM on the continent. Similarly, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), one of the AU’s most important Regional Economic Communities, declared that none of its 14 member-states would be willing to host U.S. forces (Personal Communication, 2021).

In Nigeria, the government and media were generally negative. In fact, Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and a regional powerhouse in West Africa, endeavoured to block AFRICOM from establishing its headquarters in the Gulf of Guinea region.

Meanwhile, throughout 2007, African resistance to AFRICOM grew, partly due to the looming prospect that a US combatant command of hundreds of military personnel would be placed on the continent. This prospect came in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the 2006-7 US-backed Ethiopian invasion of Somalia. In addition, many African leaders were upset that they had not been consulted before the February 2007 announcement.

In 2007, Nigeria refused to host AFRICOM for several reasons including a fear that the United States would infringe upon Nigeria's sovereignty over oil. In contrast, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf took a positive position toward AFRICOM and stated that its role would be conflict prevention, rather than intervention. The Liberian president was the only African leader to openly extend an invitation to establish AFRICOM headquarters on African soil. In response, the newly elected Nigerian President Umaru Yar'adua warned Liberia not to accept AFRICOM, and Nigeria as the regional hegemon influenced ECOWAS not to accept the new command.

Conclusion

This geostrategic importance of West African maritime has reinforced the U.S strategic interest in the sub-region and the need to secure one of the sources of her energy. To protect her strategic interest, the U.S. established AFRICOM. Meanwhile, despite the emergence of AFRICOM, insecurity has remained endemic in the GoG. The establishment of AFRICOM without adequate consultation with West African leaders has not only triggered suspicion and resistance among West African leaders who see AFRICOM as a meddling organization. This remains one of the challenges of AFRICOM in maintaining maritime security challenges in the GoG.

Based on its findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. The U.S. should strengthen inter-agency collaboration with existing security agencies in the sub-region to adequately address the rising maritime security challenges in West Africa.

2. African leaders should be adequately consulted at every stage of its (AFRICOM) implementation, such as maritime security decisions and operations across West Africa.

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