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NIGERIA'S REGIONALISM AT ITS PEAK: NAVIGATING FROM PARTICIPATION TO FINDING SECURITY IN THE GULF OF GUINEA

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Abstract

The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) is an economically significant region but it is bedeviled with numerous maritime security challenges, including piracy, illegal, reported and unregulated fishing, and oil theft. These maritime security challenges in the GoG pose significant threats to Nigeria as a regional power house. Consequent upon this concern the Nigerian state has resolved to combat maritime insecurity in GoG headlong. Amongst other individual and collaborative efforts, Nigeria remains influential in the formation and workings of the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) established as a platform for regional cooperation and collaborative efforts to addressing security threats and to promote economic development in the region. This paper examines Nigeria's regionalism at its peak—in its multifaceted efforts and resolve to combat maritime crime and criminality in the GoG. It showcases Nigeria's engagement in the GoG in eliminating maritime security threats in the GoG region. To achieve this objective, the paper employs a mixed research approach in its discourse. The paper concludes that for Nigeria to reap maximally from the vast resources in the GoG, it must engage in diverse forms and efforts to sustain security in the region. Amongst others, the paper recommends that Nigeria should continue to invest in capacity building, training programmes, and technology upgrades to enhance its maritime security capabilities.

Keywords: Gulf of Guinea, Maritime Security, Nigeria, Participation, Regionalism

Introduction

Regionalism is the processes and structures that emerge when states within a particular geographic region form associations and cooperate on various issues. The concept of regionalism places emphasis on cooperation and integration among neighbouring states or regions based on shared interests, goals, and challenges (Soderbaum& Shaw, 2003). These associations often take different forms, such as regional organisations or agreements, and they often aim to promote economic integration, enhance security cooperation, and address common challenges in a specific region.

Regionalism is also defined as the process through which regional institutions and arrangements are created and utilised to manage and govern specific areas of international relations. Regionalism is significant because it provides a platform for states within a region to collaborate on shared interests and address regional challenges in a collective manner. It allows states to enhance their influence, strengthen economic ties, foster peace and stability, and pursue common goals (Keohane & Nye, 2000).

The emergence of regional organisations is attributable to diverse reasons. First, geographical proximity, which leads states to form regional organisations. Proximity fosters interdependence and a shared sense of identity, which can lead to collaboration and cooperation in addressing common security concerns (Acharya, 2017). Second, shared security concerns, which are established to address shared security challenges. By pooling resources, intelligence, and expertise, member states of such organisations can effectively counter security threats such as terrorism, organised crime, and regional conflicts (Hurrell, 2007). Third, economic integration, which triggers drive for regional organisations. By promoting trade liberalisation, investment, and regional economic cooperation, these organisations aim to enhance economic growth, stability, and ultimately security within the region (Soderbaum, 2003). Fourth, cultural and historical ties that provide a foundation for regional organisations. Shared language, religion, or historical experiences can foster regional solidarity, helping to overcome political differences and promote collective security (Weiss &Gordenker, 2016), and fifth, governance and institution building, which contributes to governance and institution-building efforts within their member states. By promoting democratic norms, good governance practices, and human rights standards, they aim to improve stability and security within the region (Borzel & Risse, 2016).

Regionalism plays a crucial role in addressing collective security concerns in different ways, including conflict prevention and resolutions. Regional organisations engage in conflict prevention and resolution efforts through mediation, negotiation, and through peace-building initiatives, they strive to prevent the escalation of conflicts and promote peaceful resolutions (De Lombaerde&Cassiers,2012). Regionalism also plays a crucial role in fostering cooperation among member states by establishing mechanism for intelligence sharing, joint military exercises, and coordination in addressing security threats. This collaboration enhances the collective security capacity of member states (Dupont, 2007). Also, regional organisations have mechanism in place for crisis management, establishing swift response to security crises. They provide humanitarian assistance, facilitate peacekeeping missions, and support post-conflict reconstruction, all contributing to collective security (Hettne, et al., 2009). Lastly, regionalism contributes to the development of regional norms and agreements on security issues. These norms include confidence-building measures, arms control, non-proliferation, counter-terrorism strategies, and human rights standards, in enabling collective actions to address security concerns (Fawcett, 2005).

Thus, regional organisations emerge due to geographical proximity, shared security concerns, economic integration, cultural ties, and governance aspirations. Regionalism plays a critical role in addressing collective security concerns through conflict prevention and resolution, security cooperation, crisis management, and norm development.

Nigeria’s participation in regional organisations, such as the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) is dictated by its foreign policy objectives and priorities, which have over time, reflects its changing domestic and global circumstances as conditioned by several factors. First, economic diplomacy, which focuses on enhancing economic diplomacy by attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), promoting trade relations, and pursuing economic cooperation with other states. The objective is to diversify the economy, boost job creation,

and achieve sustainable development (Agbu, 2012). Second is regional leadership. Nigeria aims to be a regional leader in Africa, playing an active role in regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU).

It seeks to promote regional integration, peace, and stability in West Africa and the African continent as a whole (Adigun, 2019). Third, South-South cooperation, which emphasises cooperation and collaboration among developing states, particularly within the framework of South-South cooperation. It strives to strengthen ties with states of the global South, exchange knowledge, and support one another in areas such as trade, investment, technology transfer, and development assistance (Ukpoki, 2019). Fourth is counterterrorism and security. Nigeria places great importance on countering terrorism and addressing security challenges. This includes combating Boko Haram insurgency, transnational organised crime, piracy, and illicit trafficking. Nigeria seeks cooperation with international partners in intelligence sharing, capacity-building, and collective efforts to enhance regional and global security (Azeez, 2013). Fifth is good governance and human rights. Nigeria recognises the significance of good governance, democracy, and respect for human rights. It promotes these principles within the country and advocates for them in international forums, supporting democratic transitions, electoral processes, and human rights promotion (Ekpe, 2018).

It is important to note that Nigeria's foreign policy objectives and priorities may vary based on the administration in power, domestic considerations, and global dynamics. Nigeria places significant emphasis on regional engagement within Africa, recognising the importance of collective action and cooperation to address shared challenges and harness opportunities for development. Nigeria's regional engagement primarily focuses on regional integration, peace and security. Nigeria actively participates in regional organisations such as the Economic Communities of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) to promote regional integration. It seeks to enhance economic cooperation, trade liberalisation, and infrastructure development within the region. Nigeria's commitment to regional integration is evident through its efforts to harmonise trade policies, remove trade barriers, and facilitate the free movement of goods and people (Ajenla, 2020).

Nigeria also recognises that peace and security are fundamental prerequisites for sustainable development and regional stability. As the largest economy and the most populous state in Africa, Nigeria plays a critical role in promoting peace and security within the West African region and the continent of Africa at large. It actively engages in peacekeeping operations in states like Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, etc., conflict resolution efforts in Mali, Burkina-Faso, etc., and security cooperation initiatives in Niger, Chad, etc. (Duruji, et al., 2019).

Maritime security is of utmost importance to Nigeria's national interests due to its extensive coastline and strategic maritime trade routes. Nigeria's maritime domain faces challenges such as piracy, oil theft, illegal fishing, smuggling, and maritime terrorism, which can hinder economic development and threaten national security. The Nigerian state recognises that ensuring maritime security is crucial for safeguarding its national interests, protecting its offshore oil and gas resources and infrastructure, and promoting economic activities such as maritime trade (Obi, 2019). To address maritime security concerns, Nigeria has developed various strategies and initiatives, such as Nigeria's Deep Blue Sea Project aimed at enhancing its maritime security capabilities through the acquisition of maritime assets, capacity building, and intelligence sharing. It actively cooperates with regional partners, such as other Gulf of Guinea states and international organisations like the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), to enhance maritime domain awareness, conduct joint patrols, and share intelligence. Nigeria has also undertaken initiatives to improve

maritime law enforcement capabilities, training, and infrastructure to combat maritime threats effectively (Isiakpona, 2020).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Following the introduction, Section II examines the necessity for regional cooperation among African states in combating maritime insecurity in the GoG. Section IV concludes the paper.

Rationalising Regionalism in the GoG

The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) region, located in West and Central Africa, has been plagued by a myriad of challenges that necessitate regional cooperation in order to effectively address them. This region is strategically important due to its abundant natural resources, including oil and gas, as well as its crucial position for global maritime trade. However, the GoG is bedeviled with numerous security threats, including piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal fishing, and trafficking in drugs and arms, which have significant social, economic, and political implications for the states in the region.

One of the primary challenges in the GoG is the increase in maritime crime, particularly piracy. Maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has posed a significant threat to maritime trade, crew safety, and regional stability (Benabdallah, 2014). The region has witnessed a rise in pirate attacks on ships, kidnappings, and hijackings, leading to significant economic losses for the affected states. The proliferation of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) underscores the need for coordinated regional responses to enhance maritime security and to protect vital sea-lanes (Onuoha, 2014).

Yet, another major challenge in the GoG is illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUUF), which has been identified as a significant problem in the region. IUUF poses a threat to the region's marine biodiversity, food security, and economic growth. Worrisomely weak governance, lack of enforcement mechanisms, and inadequate monitoring have allowed for the exploitation of fish stocks by unauthorised vessels, leading to overfishing and environmental degradation (Muthiah et al. 2018). This has led not only to depleting fish population, loss of livelihoods for local fishermen, food insecurity, but also a source of tension among coastal communities. Regional cooperation is essential to combat illegal fishing practices, strengthen regulatory frameworks, and promote sustainable fisheries management in the GoG.

Moreso, the GoG region is plagued by oil theft and illegal refining activities, known as bunkering. The illicit extraction of crude oil not only deprives the affected countries of vital revenue but also causes environmental degradation and health hazards for local populations. Sadly, the illicit bunkering activities have contributed to oil spills, pollution of waterways, and land degradation in the region (Akinbogun&Iyede,2019. Addressing this challenge requires collaborative efforts among GoG states to enhance surveillance, enforcement, and regulatory measures to curb oil theft and to protect the environment.

Furthermore, the GoG region also faces shifting security dynamics that have far-reaching implications for regional stability. The intersection of various security threats, including terrorism, transnational organised crimes, and insurgency, has created a complex security environment in the region. This situation is made worse by the presence of armed groups, ethnic tensions, and political instability in some GoG states exacerbate security challenges and hinder efforts to promote peace and development (Rosenau & Long 2018). Regional cooperation is crucial in addressing these unhealthy dynamics, building trust among neighbouring states, and fostering security collaborations to counter shared threats effectively.

To mitigate the challenges bedeviling the GoG region, promoting regional cooperation is paramount. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) have both played key roles in facilitating multilateral engagements, information-sharing, and joint initiatives to address maritime insecurity, illegal activities and environmental concerns. The Yaoundé Code of Conduct, the ECOWAS Integrated Maritime Strategy, and the Africa Union's Lomé Charter are critical frameworks that emphasise the importance of regional collaboration in enhancing maritime governance and security in the GoG.

Thus, the GoG region faces a range of challenges that necessitate regional cooperation to address the security threats in the region, promote sustainable development, and safeguard maritime resources. By fostering collaboration among GoG states, international partners, and regional organisations, the region can enhance security initiatives, strengthen governance frameworks, and build resilience against emerging risks. Through concerted efforts and shared responsibilities, the GoG can overcome its challenges and foster a safer, more prosperous maritime environment for the benefit of all stakeholders.

Nigeria's Navigation from Participation to Finding Security in the GoG

The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) is known for its strategic importance due to its vast natural resources, including oil, gas, and fisheries (see Figure 1). However, the region is plagued by numerous security challenges, such as piracy, illegal fishing, smuggling, and maritime terrorism. These threats not only undermine economic growth and development but also endanger the stability and security of coastal states. Recognising the need for collective action to address these challenges, the Gulf of Guinea states, including Nigeria, established the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC).

Figure 1 Map of the Gulf of Guinea States



Source: Okafor-Yarwood, et al., 2020, p. 1.

The Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) is a regional organisation established to promote cooperation, peace, and sustainable development in the GoG region. It focuses mainly on enhancing maritime security, combating piracy and maritime crimes, and fostering economic integration among member states. A treaty signed in Libreville, Gabon, on July 3 2001, established the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC). Member states of the Commission comprised of the Republic Angola, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Cameroon, the Republic of Gabon, Republic of Ghana, Republic of Equatorial Guinea, Federal Republic of Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of São Tome` and Príncipe. Membership of the GGC remains open to other states in the region, including, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, for purposes of transforming the sub region into a zone of peace and security. The Commission began operations in March 2007, with the establishment of its Executive Secretariat in Luanda, Angola. The current Executive Secretary is Mr. Jose Mba Abeso (Treaty on the Gulf of Guinea Commission, 2001).

The structure of the GGC consists of the Conference of Heads of State and Government, the Council of Ministers, and the Secretariat. The Conference is the highest decision-making body and meets annually to discuss important issues and make policy decisions. The Council of Ministers is composed of representatives from member states, and which meets twice a year and is responsible for implementing the decisions made by the Conference. The Secretariat, headed by the Executive Secretary, provides administrative support and coordinates the activities of the Commission (Sartre, 2014). The GGC plays a vital role in promoting regional cooperation and maritime security in the GoG region. Its aims to strengthen collaboration among member states in addressing common challenges related to maritime piracy, illegal,unreported and unregulated fishing, oil theft, and drug trafficking. By enhancing information sharing, intelligence gathering, and joint operations, the GGC contributes to the prevention and suppression of criminal activities in the region. Additionally, the GGC works towards economic integration and sustainable development in the region. It promotes investment in maritime infrastructure, facilitates trade and transport, and encourages the development of a blue economy. These initiatives aim to foster socio-economic growth, alleviate poverty, and improve the livelihoods of people living in the region (Sartre, 2014).

Nigeria played a significant role in the establishment of the GGC. The Commission is an intergovernmental organisation formed in 2001 to promote cooperation among the Gulf of Guinea states in various areas, including maritime security, economic development, environmental protection, and cultural integration. Nigeria as one of the founding members of the GGC has actively participated in its activities over the years. As the largest economy and most populous state in the Gulf of Guinea region, Nigeria brings considerable influence and resources to the Commission. Nigeria's engagement in the Gulf of Guinea Commission primarily focuses on addressing maritime security challenges, which include piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal fishing, oil theft, and other illicit activities in the Gulf of Guinea (Asante, 2014).

Nigeria has made important contributions to the GGC's maritime security objectives through several initiatives. It has cooperated with neighbouring states in joint naval patrols, intelligence sharing, and capacity building efforts. Nigeria has also led or supported multinational military operations, such as the *ExerciseObangameExpress*, which aimed at enhancing regional maritime security capabilities. Furthermore, Nigeria has actively participated in regional dialogue platforms and international forums to address maritime security issues and promote cooperation (Aning, et al, 2014).

The effectiveness of Nigeria's engagement in the GoG region in achieving maritime security objectives is a subject of an ongoing debate. While Nigeria has made concerted efforts to combat maritime insecurity in the GoG, maritime security challenges in the region persist. Factors such as limited resources, porous borders, corruption, and political instability in some states hinder progress. Additionally, the transnational nature of maritime crimes requires coordinated efforts among all member states to be truly effective (Okolo, 2018). To improve effectiveness, Nigeria, along with other GoG member states, need to strengthen regional cooperation, including intelligence gathering, information sharing, joint operations, and enhancing maritime law enforcement capabilities. Addressing governance and institutional challenges within member states is also crucial for better coordination and implementation of agreed-upon initiatives. Sustained commitment and resources are necessary to achieve lasting impacts in maritime security. Furthermore, addressing the root causes of maritime insecurity, such as poverty, unemployment, etc. is very salient(Oviasu&Labinjo, 2021).

Overtime, Nigeria has implemented various policies and strategies to address maritime security issues and protect its extensive coastline. Amongst other approaches, Nigeria has either adopted or collaborated on the following measures:

a. Legislative Frameworks

A nation's anti-piracy laws are an effective countermeasure against piracy. This measure is strengthened under international treaties that require state parties to take the necessary steps to reduce piracy and maritime offenses against ships, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation, Nigeria, signed the Suppression of Piracy and other Maritime Crimes (SPOMO) Act into law by President Muhammadu Buhari in June 2019.

Thisact,particularly, criminalises piracy, armed robbery at the sea and other maritime crimes, etc., as providing a legal basis for the prosecution of offenders. In its explanatory memorandum, the SPOMO Act states that it is intended for the "suppression of piracy and other maritime offences, give effect to the provision of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the sea (UNCLOS), 1982 convention for the suppression of unlawful acts against the safety of maritime navigation (SUA) 1988 and its Protocols (SPOMO, 2019, p. 1)". The SPOMO Act is a demonstration of Nigeria's determination to end piracy and sea robbery in Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea (GoG).

In a bold attempt to rid the GoG, the Director-General of Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA), Dr. Bashir Jamoh, stated that:

> The Admiralty Law Conference instituted by NIMASA has achieved important milestones in the pursuit of its target of continuously improving maritime law administration in Nigeria. I am happy to announce that the key recommendations captured in the communiqué of last year's conference would be sent to the National Assembly for the necessary legislative actions expected to improve the SPOMO Act. We have made good progress in the implementation of the SPOMO Act. We have secured convictions at the Federal High Court in Port Harcourt and Lagos, and more judgements are expected next month. These prosecutions and convictions have greatly helped to improve Nigeria's image in the international community by producing a better appreciation of the country's role and determination to end piracy and

other maritime crimes in its territorial waters and the Gulf of Guinea. (Kyanet, 2024, para: 5-7)

Unfortunately, despite the enactment of SPMOA, piracy attacks have persisted with several attacks already recorded within Nigerian waters (Emem, 2021; Arugu, 2024).

b. State-centric Measures

Individual states in the region have committed to enhancing their security capacities and capabilities in response to the rise in maritime domain awareness. In states like Nigeria, Ghana, and Benin, where maritime criminality is evident, these state-centric commitments are quite apparent. These states have demonstrated their commitment to these goals by acquiring operational vessels for the purpose of sea patrol and by enacting targeted laws or regulations, strengthening border security, and deploying specialized units to address particular threats.

State-centric measures at tackling insecurity also includeutilising the chances that technology presents to raise security and safety standards. Technology is essential to improving maritime security because it has made it possible to identify, apprehend, and prosecute marine criminals, as demonstrated in Table 1. Consequently, there is no denying the benefits of using it for maritime security.

Table 1 List of Technologies in Use in the Gulf of Guinea

S/N	Name of Technology	No. of Respondents that mentioned it
1	Automatic Identification System	8
2	ElectronicChartDisplayandInformation System (ECDIS)	1
3	RADAR	11
4	VesselMonitoringSystem(VMS)	9
5	Sea Vision	11
6	Falcon Eye	7
7	YaoundéArchitecture RegionalInformation System(YARIS)	11
8	iSailor	1
9	Regional Maritime Awareness Capability (RMAC)	2
10	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)	4
11	Surveillance cameras	3
12	Global Fishing Watch	2
13	Long-range identification and tracking (LRIT)	4

14	Satellite imagery	6
15	Global Positioning System (GPS)	1
16	Command, control, communications, computers and intelligence (C4i)	2
17	Virtual Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite (VIIRS)	1
18	Electronic Monitoring System (EMS)	1
19	Skylight	6
20	SOLARTA	2
21	Ship Security Alert System (SSAS)	2
22	Drone Technology	2
23	Time zero system	1
24	Vehicle Traffic System (VTS)/Very High-Frequency Radio (VHF)	5

Source: Okafor-Yarwood, et al, 2024, p. 6.

c. Regional Cooperation

Aside the aforementioned state measures, quite a number of Regional Maritime Security Initiatives (hereafter RMSIs) exist in the region; of which Nigeria participates appropriately such as the *Yaoundé Code of Conduct*, which aims to enhance cooperation among Gulf of Guinea states in combating maritime crimes. Nigeria also takes part in joint patrols and information-sharing initiatives with neighbouring states (Agubamah, 2024).

RMSIsestablishes alliances between willing countries with different levels of expertise to recognise, track, and stop transnational maritime threats in compliance with current national and regional regulations (Ho, 2004). These kinds of efforts typically take place inside security frameworks. The foundation of the RMSIs is the idea of collective security. This initiative is observable from the framework of the Code of Conduct concerning the Repression of Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden (the Djibouti Code of Conduct) of the Gulf of Aden-Western Indian Ocean maritime domain in the Gulf of Guinea region, as well as the framework of the Asia Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia. These collaborative initiatives take place within the current sub-regional frameworks of the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC), the Maritime Organisation of West and Central Africa (MOCWA), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and the Economic Community of West African States (Aksoy&Robins,2000; Boşilcă, et al, 2022).

Through its maritime security protocol, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) projects a joint maritime security architecture designed to combat maritime security threats. A resolution and a protocol were adopted by the Peace and Security Council of the East Central African Community (ECCAS) in 2008 and 2009 with the aim of establishing a Regional Centre for Maritime Security in Central Africa (CRESMAC) at Pointe Noire, Congo. The Protocol divides the domain into three zones and requires members to work together to improve maritime security by implementing a three-tier security

framework (national, zonal, and regional) for information sharing, coordinating surveillance, and harmonising legal frameworks to eliminate maritime security concerns.

The 2014-adopted ECOWAS Integrated Maritime Strategy (EIMS) contains the framework for maritime security for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). In order to ensure maritime security, member states of the ECOWAS agreement are also required to coordinate their efforts and pool their resources. Designed in accordance with the ECCAS model, the EIMS assigns three zones (E, F, and G) to the ECOWAS covered domain in order to facilitate coordination by multinational maritime coordination centers (MMCCs). To coordinate the actions of the three zones, the EIMS creates a regional center (MRC). Zone E, which includes the coastal waters of Nigeria, Benin, and Togo and is thought to be the choke point for illegal maritime activity in the area, serves as the pilot for the region.

The Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) was established primarily to allow its eight member states to profitably and safely exploit offshore resources. However, one of the goals of the GGC is to address issues pertaining to maritime security that impact its member states. The Commission approved its integrated marine strategy in 2013. The Yaoundé Code of Conduct, a more extensive security framework strategy, was established as a result of the GGC's March 2013 Ministerial Conference on Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea.

The main reason for the creation of the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) was to allow its eight member states to safely and profitably utilise offshore resources. On the other hand, the goal of the GGC includes reacting to issues pertaining to maritime security that impact its member nations. The integrated maritime strategy was adopted by the Commission in 2013. A more thorough security framework plan known as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct was established as a result of the GGC's March 2013 Ministerial Conference on Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea.

With twenty-five member states, the Maritime Organisation of West and Central Africa (MOCWA) has a broad mandate to handle all maritime issues with a regional focus. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) to create an integrated Coastguard Network was adopted by MOWCA in 2008. In respect to Article 7, the objective of the Network is to enable the involved parties to collaborate and advance their maritime activities, specifically those related to safeguarding human life, enforcing legal regulations, enhancing safety, and conserving the environment.

Table 2 illustrates the structure of the Coastguard Network, which is supported by donor countries and agencies and is funded by member states. It is comprised of two coordinating centres (CC) for information sharing and four zones.

Table 2 Maritime Zones for Coastguard Network under the MOCWA MoU

Zone 1	Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde, *Coordinating Centre: Centre Dakar, Senegal*
Zone 2	Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote D'Ivoire and Ghana *Coordinating Centre:* Centre Abidjan, Cote D'Ivoire
Zone 3	Togo. Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea *Coordinating Centre*: Centre Lagos, Nigeria
Zone 4	Gabon, Sao Tome and Principe, Congo, Congo DR, Angola *Coordinating Centre*: Centre Pointe Noire, Congo

Source:Eruaga, n.d., p. 11.

d. Multilateral Engagements

Regional security theory (RST) establishes the nexus of interdependent relationships among states within a region for security purposes. The Gulf of Guinea member states—of which Nigeria plays a dominant role—have reached a number of agreements both with one another and with states outside the area. The 2011 Nigeria-Benin Joint Naval Patrol Agreement (Operation Prosperity), the annual Obangame Express coordinated by the US Naval Forces (Africa Command), the MDAT-GoG (Maritime Domain Awareness for Trade Gulf of Guinea) cooperatively managed by France and the UK, and the GoG Maritime Security Programme (GoG MSP) started by the Danish government are a few examples of these agreements.

Through a variety of strategies, including strengthening the legal framework for handling crimes pertaining to maritime security, promoting information sharing among stakeholders, and developing human and technical capacity building, these agreements seek to eradicate maritime insecurities (Agubamah, 2024).The 2016 capture of pirates and hostage rescue from the hijacked Panamanian vessel MT Maximus demonstrated the critical importance of these understandings. The United States and France provided assistance in locating the vessel during the Obangame 2016 exercise, which allowed for the rescue. The vessel was traveling through the coastal waters of multiple states in the Gulf of Guinea.

Through tight coordination and collaboration with other UN agencies, foreign partners, and development partners, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), the UN specialised agency in charge of safe and secure shipping, continues to make a significant contribution to both individual and regional maritime security (Adesanya, 2023). Measures utilised by the IMO include establishment of a maritime security trust fund for the region to support the integrated coastguard project, capacity building through its integrated technical cooperation programme (ICTP), technical assistance on request by governments in the Gulf of Guinea and assistance in the implementation of IMO maritime security instruments (Agyekum, 2024).

To develop maritime security policies and strategies, Nigeria specifically interacts and works with the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the Interregional Coordination Centre for the Implementation of Regional Strategy for Maritime Safety and Security in West and Central Africa.

e. Capacity Building

The state of Nigeria prioritisesefforts in building the capabilities of its maritime security forces. This it does by means of engaging in peace operations, stability operations, and development initiatives and deployment of military support and capacity-building initiatives as basic tools, measures and strategies. Usually, the goal of these programmes is to give local security forces the toolsneeded to combat insecurity at local and regional levels. Thus, the Nigerian Navyregularly conducts training exercises and cooperates with foreign navies to enhance their skills in maritime surveillance, interdiction, and response to threats. Nigeria also invests in acquiring advanced technology and equipment for maritime domain awareness.

However, these efforts are hampered bywidespread corruption in Nigeria's maritime security industry, which encourages oil theft, piracy, and smuggling(Ostensen, et al, 2018).Worrisomely, there are no definite anticorruption components that is built into tackling maritime corruption in Nigeria’s domain of the Gulf of Guinea that is gravely renowned for illicit maritime activities. This undeniably makes maritime security governance weak more so that the security apparatus is unfit for this onerous task. Thus, if corruption is ignored in favor of capacity building, corruption and related crimes could get worse (Ostensen, et al, 2018).

f. Public-Private Partnerships

Nigeria actively engages private stakeholders, including shipping companies and port operators to collaborate on maritime security issues. This includes the implementation of Best Management Practices (BMP) to enhance the security of vessels operating in Nigeria's territorial waters (Obasi, 2020). In doing these ventures, Nigeria faces several maritime threats such as piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal fishing, and smuggling. Nigerian security agencies play crucial roles in combating these threats in a bid to enhancing regional maritime security in the GoG.

The Nigerian Navy is the primary security agency responsible for maritime security within Nigeria's territorial waters. It conducts patrols, surveillance, and interceptions to deter criminal activities. Additionally, other agencies such as the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA), Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA), Nigerian Maritime Security Agency (NIMASA), and other stakeholdersboth at international and local levels such as Tantita Security Services Limited collaborate to address maritime challenges in the GoG.

g. Establishment of the Deep Blue Sea Project

Nigeria has established the Deep Blue Sea Projectto enhance maritime security in the GoG. The deep blue sea project, launched in 2021, comprises of various components, including the acquisition of maritime security assets, development of a Maritime Security Architecture, and establishment of Maritime Security Coordination centre. These measures aim to deter, detect, and respond to maritime threats effectively. The effectiveness of Nigeria's approach in enhancing regional maritime security is evaluated by analysing key indicators. The reduction in piracy incidents, successful arrests, prosecutions, and the recovery of stolen vessels and cargoes are essential benchmarks (Okolo,2018).

Incidents of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea reduced in the first half of 2021 compared to previous years, reflecting some progress (IMO, 2021). Nigeria's increased collaboration with regional partners, such as Benin, Togo, and Ghana, has also led to joint patrols and information sharing. Nigeria has pursued several avenues and initiatives outside the Gulf of Guinea Commission to address maritime security challenges in the Gulf of Guinea region. For instance, it launched the Deep Blue Sea Project in 2019, being a comprehensive maritime security programme that involves deploying various assets such as patrol vessels, surveillance aircraft, and a maritime domain awareness centre. This project demonstrates Nigeria's commitment to enhancing maritime security in the region (Meregini, et al., 2021).

It is important to note that while Nigeria's engagement has shown positive outcomes, the challenges; however, persist, and continuous efforts are required from all stakeholders to reinforce regional security and stability. So far as maritime criminal activities remain a concern, more efforts are required to strengthen Nigeria's legal framework, improve law enforcement capabilities, address corruption and collusion within security agencies, robust investment in the Nigerian Navy, and encouraging extensive media coverage of maritime activities in the region are sine-qua-non. Cooperation and information sharing among regional stakeholders are prioritised to effectively to combat maritime threats beyond Nigeria's territorial waters.

The foregoing section examines various attempts and efforts invested heavily by Nigeria in ridding the GoG of the inundating security threats it faces. That Nigeria engages in these efforts definitely underscores the geostrategic importance of the GoG to its economic and military sustainability. However, whereas the afore-discussed cooperations and collaborations are germane for Nigeria and its partners, it is being devilled by numerous daunting challenges

concluding corruption, maritime boundary disputes, poor governance, capacity issues, overdue security over onshore insecurity challenges vis-à-vis neglect of maritime-centric approach to security, weak legal frameworks, poor enforcement of existing legal frameworks, and uncoordinated multi-regional security frameworks (Mohammed, 2023; Eruaga, n.d.).

Conclusion

No doubt, the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) is a natural resource-rich region;however, it is bedeviled by multifarious maritime security challenges; including piracy, illegal fishing, and oil theft. These maritime security challenges in the GoG pose significant threats to member states of the region. In an attempt to exterminate the tide of crime and criminality in the GoG, Nigeria as a regional power house, has demonstrated enormous concerns if at all it is going to reap from the geostrategic resources of the region. Nigeria's regional aspirations being propelled by economic incentives available in the GoG, has since compelled it to engage in individual and collaborative efforts such as from ensuring legal frameworks, state-centric measures, regional to multilateral efforts to combat insecurity in the GoG. The influence of Nigeria in the formation and workings of the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC)established as a platform for regional cooperation and collaborative efforts to addressing security threats and to promote economic development in the region remain conspicuous and impressive.

While Nigeria's regionalism at its peak is unquestionable, it has been encumbered by several hiccups that hamper it from achieving its lofty goals in enthroning economic and military security in the GoG. Indeed, while Nigeria has made progress in tackling insecurity in the GoG, the paper underscores challenges in corruption, maritime boundary disputes, poor governance, and capacity issues that debar Nigeria from achieving maximum security goals in the GoG.Nigeria's efforts in combating maritime insecurity while ignoring; especially corruption risks making corruption and maritime-related crimes and criminalityworse in the GoG.

Overall, the paper contributesto the existing academic literature on regionalism, it provides valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders involved in ridding the GoG of maritime insecurity.

Moving forward, the paper makes the following recommendations towards consolidating the role of Nigeria as a regional maritime security leader and further enhancing cooperation among GoG states:

a. Nigeria should continue to invest in capacity building, training programmes, and technology upgrades to enhance its maritime security capabilities. Strengthening naval and coast guard operations, improving surveillance and monitoring systems, and enhancing coordination among relevant agencies are crucial for Nigeria to effectively combat maritime threats in the region,
b. Nigeria should work closely with other GoG states to establish common maritime security frameworks, standard operating procedures, and more effective information-sharing mechanisms. Promoting greater cooperation among regional stakeholders fosters a more cohesive and effective response to maritime security challenges in the GoG,
c. Nigeria should prioritise the implementation of regional maritime security initiatives and agreements to enhance the legal and regulatory frameworks governing maritime activities in the GoG. Ratifying and implementing relevant international conventions, such as the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the

Yaoundé Code of Conduct, helps to strengthen the legal basis for maritime security cooperation and promote a rule-based maritime order in the region,

d. Nigeria should also seek to mobilise international support and assistance to complement its efforts in enhancing maritime security in the GoG. Engaging with bilateral and multilateral partners, such as the United Nations, the African Union, and the European Union, provides valuable resources, technical expertise, and capacity-building opportunities to support Nigeria's maritime security initiatives and strengthen regional cooperation, and
e. Nigeria should addressits capacity constraints, funding limitations, and institutional weaknesses, in order to consolidate its role as regional maritime security leader, promote economic development, and contribute to lasting stability and prosperity in the GoG region. Through sustained commitment, collaboration, and engagement, Nigeria can further strengthen regional maritime security cooperation and enhance the security and prosperity of the Gulf of Guinea.

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