Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea, threats, and challenges

João Côrte-Real*

Abstract: Maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea is a common concern for regional countries and third states. In 2013, the countries of the region created a collective cooperation mechanism based on the Yaoundé Architecture whose reinforcement has been supported by the international community. The initiatives have been mainly directed towards education and training of the agents responsible for the implementation of security and legality in the maritime domain. Portugal has participated in this collective effort to strengthen maritime security, both at the bilateral and multilateral levels. Notwithstanding the efforts made by regional states and the international community, maritime insecurity continues to be a reality. This situation can only be overcome when the root causes of the problem are addressed. This will require the sustainable development of the coastal communities in the Gulf of Guinea by providing them with better living conditions and livelihoods.

Keywords: Maritime security; Yaoundé Architecture; Regional States; Ownership; International Cooperation.

Maritime security is an absolute priority for Portugal, being both the Atlantic and the Gulf of Guinea of particular interest.

This paper will focus on the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) on the following topics: (i) the current maritime security situation in the region; (ii) the building up of the Yaoundé Architecture; (iii) the GoG coastal states security perceptions; (iv) the role of non-African actors; and (v) relevant concluding remarks.

* Ambassador and Special Representative for Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea. joao.cortereal@mne.pt
The current maritime security situation in the Gulf of Guinea

Recurrent daring and violent pirate attacks on merchant vessels and the kidnapping of crews have drawn the attention of the international media. Today, a small number of well-armed pirates on high-speed boats, manage to board ships and kidnap the crews. The underlying approach to piracy attacks is changing, with cargo theft being no longer the main target.

Last year, the GoG accounted for 95% kidnappings worldwide. Besides, according to the International Maritime Organization (IMO), there were already 23 related incidents (piracy and armed robbery against ships) in the first four months of 2021.

Pirates and armed robbers target a variety of vessels to include tankers, container ships, general cargo vessels, and other vessels supporting oil/drilling production. Most piracy attacks go unpunished. Piracy and armed robbery at sea have become more sophisticated. Attacks can be committed in the maritime zone of one country and criminals may cross the waters of another country, where they have more chances to escape with their loot, due to loopholes in the legal framework.

The lack of a harmonized legal framework and jurisdictional shortcomings in many countries in the region contribute to a very small number of trials, despite the few successful arrests. Also, shipping companies pay ransoms to have their crew back.

Far from the spotlight of the international media that piracy has attracted, other illicit trades and traffics of human beings and substances also have a bearing on security in the GoG. Transnational drug cartels take advantage of porous maritime borders and corruption of law enforcement personnel. It is estimated that 25-30% of South American cocaine drug shipments destined for Europe pass through West Africa.
Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, illicit trade of small arms and light weapons, trafficking of human beings, and dumping of toxic waste also add to the catalogue of a vast array of threats that are detrimental to the security and stability of the GoG.

In short, all these threats emanate from the lack of control and patrolling over coastal waters. IUU fishing has a dire impact on the livelihood of coastal states. Fish is a vital source for the food security of coastal populations. The effect of IUU fishing to local economies is devastating, either in terms of food security, employment, and governments revenues loss.

According to FAO (2020), IUU fishing has cost the countries of Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Guinea 2.3 billion USD per year, between 2010 and 2016.

For Archipelagic States, such as Cabo Verde and São Tomé, countries which have vast Exclusive Economic Zones and whose economies and population heavily rely on the blue domain, all these challenges pose serious problems to prosperity and socioeconomic development.

**The Yaoundé Architecture. The Code of Conduct**

The unstable maritime situation in the GoG is not a recent phenomenon. United Nation Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions 2018 and 2039, adopted in 2011 and 2012, respectively, emphasized the importance of supporting partner countries and regional organizations, to create a better maritime environment in the region.

On a regional level, Heads of State of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) countries met in Yaoundé, in a Summit in June 2013.
The Yaoundé meeting culminated in the adoption of 3 strategic documents: a political declaration, signed by all GoG countries, a Memorandum of Understanding, signed by ECOWAS, ECCAS and the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) and a Code of Conduct, concerning the Prevention and Repression of Piracy, Armed Robbery against Ships, and illegal Maritime Activities in west and central Africa.

An Action Plan for the implementation of the Code of Conduct led to the setting up of an Intra-Regional Coordination Centre, the ICC, in Cameroon, which became operational in 2017.

The ICC, based in Yaoundé, is the body responsible for the coordination and information sharing among GoG states, and establishes the connection between the Regional Maritime Security Centre for Central Africa, CRESMAC and the Regional Maritime Security Centre for West Africa, CRESMAO. The coastal space, across the entire GoG, from Senegal to Angola, was divided into 5 operational maritime zones, where activities are coordinated by five Multinational Maritime Coordinated Centres (MMCCs).

These bodies constitute the bulk of the Yaoundé Architecture. The ICC is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and has overall strategic and political authority to drive the strengthening of cooperation, coordination, pooling, and interoperability of community assets, directing resources from one region to another.

The zonal multinational maritime coordination centres (MMCCs) are entrusted to perform coordinated joint patrols, training exercises, hot pursuit operations, and information sharing.

The Yaoundé Architecture is a mechanism designed for the implementation of the provisions of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct, namely, to
facilitate the regional and international cooperation on common tasks, with a view to strengthen the maritime security in the GoG.

The basic assumption that led to the Yaoundé Summit, in 2013, remains valid. Individual countries in the GoG cannot face, alone, the challenges emanating from maritime security threats, such as illicit trades, piracy, and environmental crimes.

Regional cooperation and international assistance are indispensable to minimize the risks that are more evident in a region with weak functional institutions, fragile maritime enforcement capacity, and a volatile socio-economic situation.

The Yaoundé process has its own merits but continues to face various difficulties and shortcomings due to, inter alia: sovereign concerns on security/defence matters, considered to be strategic; lack of financial resources; lack of training capacities; limited political will of regional states to invest in education and training; disputed maritime borders and cultural/linguistic differences between English, French, and Portuguese speaking countries.

The GoG Coastal States Security Perceptions

Several studies and publications on maritime security in the GoG assume that there is sea blindness, or even political unwillingness, among the GoG states, to prioritize maritime security in their policies.

As it is emphasized in the Report on Maritime Security in the GoG (Jacobsen & Nordby, 2015) published by the Royal Danish Defence College, “it is important to distinguish between political unwillingness and sea blindness”. The former refers to political priorities that reflect a lack of will to prioritize resources for maritime security, and the latter refers to prevalent lack of knowledge about issues related to the maritime domain. There seems to be a
common perception among various analysts and think-tanks that for GoG countries the real threats, those that challenge political regimes, emanate from insecurity on land, and not insecurity in the sea.

The perception that GoG countries suffer from sea blindness seems to be distorted. The vast and diverse GoG region covers two geopolitical and economic areas, ECOWAS and ECCAS, comprising 26 countries, all of which with their own specificities. They hold their own visions and perceptions on maritime security. Each country has developed policies and different levels of engagement towards the maritime domain. Notwithstanding their differences, they all joined the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and entered several commitments on maritime security.

The case of Nigeria is of particular interest, as the country has undertaken several initiatives in the field of maritime security over the years. NIMASA, the Nigerian Maritime Administrative and Safety Agency, plays a key role in such efforts, while the Deep Blue Project, otherwise known as the Integrated National Maritime Surveillance and Security Infrastructure, budgeted at roughly 200M USD, is a tangible effort to reduce maritime threats in both Nigeria’s and GoG’s territorial waters.

Indeed, it seems difficult to consider that political unwillingness is prevailing in the region. Rather, there seems to exist a tendency to confound incapacity to fight maritime insecurity with political unwillingness.

On the importance of securing the maritime domain, historical circumstances, different levels of socio-economic development and maritime governance can explain distinct visions between northern Atlantic countries and southern countries from the GoG.

For non-African states and the shipping industry, fighting piracy and armed robbery at sea is, clearly, the main priority. Without this previous
condition there cannot be open, protected, and secure seas and oceans for free trade and economic development. This perception is not fully shared by GoG countries. Some countries seem to be more concerned, for instance, with other threats such as IUU fishing.

Bearing in mind these sensitivities, building a common understanding about the scale of threats that affect the GoG maritime domain has been considered as a key factor by non-African countries for engaging in cooperation initiatives. Without this precondition, ownership is likely to be affected and efforts for a sounding cooperation with GoG partner countries could become fruitless.

For GoG states, the involvement of international partners in supporting coastal states in fighting maritime criminal activities is a complex and sensitive issue. They have a clear preference for cooperation and coordination on a regional level. The role of non-African states is perceived as subsidiary. A resource to be used, to the extent that no other option among the community of African states is available.

This understanding was underlined in a Global Maritime Security Conference, held in Abuja, in October 2019, organized by Nigerian authorities with the participation of 80 countries and maritime international agencies.

Fighting piracy was one of the topics addressed at the conference. Various speakers emphasized that any support to strengthen the maritime capabilities of GoG countries by non-African countries and organisations should be in line with policies adopted by local countries, while considering their sovereign rights and interests in the GoG.

International cooperation, in so far as required, should concentrate on capacity building and maritime security agencies personnel training.
The role of non-African actors

Maritime Insecurity in the GoG, the negative impact on trade and development worldwide and the lack of maritime assets and enforcement capacities of regional states have been a matter of concern for several countries outside the region, as well as for international organisations. This situation has prompted international partners to engage in extensive efforts to strengthen maritime security in the region, through multinational and bilateral projects, programmes, and initiatives. Creating a better security maritime environment in the GoG has been a concern for the international community.

The willingness of a few international countries and organizations to cooperate was facilitated by the adoption of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and the Yaoundé Architecture, which has provided the foundation and the framework through which most international assistance has been delivered.

The international cooperation has been focused on information sharing and capacity building. Various initiatives and programmes have been carried out. Some of them take a broad approach to the vast threats to maritime security, others have a more narrowed focus and serve a concrete aspect. However, all initiatives have been designed with the common purpose of strengthening local capabilities for maritime domain protection and preservation.

The G7/G8 were the pioneers of these efforts. An increase in the number of pirate attacks in the region created a sense of urgency for providing assistance to local countries and regional organisations. In 2013, the UK Presidency of the G8 proposed to create the G8 Friends of the Gulf of Guinea Group (G8++FoGG), a group that turned G7 after the decision of ousting Russia, following events in the Ukraine.
The G7++FoGG has since then agreed on a number of decisions that proved to be instrumental in setting the tone for further initiatives by the international community. It was decided to include additional states and institutions such as, International Maritime Organization (IMO), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL).

International community effort coordination improvement has been a key objective to strengthen GoG countries and institutions maritime capabilities. Working groups were established, by the annual rotating presidencies, co-chaired by African and non-African states.

In December 2020, G7++FoGG plenary, successfully co-organised by the US and Gabon, took place virtually. Representatives of relevant Shipping Industry organisations, such as Baltic and International Maritime Council (BIMCO) and International Association of Independent Tanker Owners (INTERTANKO), also attended the meeting and stressed the need to coordinate efforts amongst actors and existing strategies in the region more effectively. In addition, they favoured an increase of naval and air forces, as well as increase of external support to the region.

As mentioned before, various cooperation initiatives have been launched with GoG states and organisations, facilitated by the framework of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and the G7++FoGG.

Among the various initiatives, the EU Maritime Security Strategy and the EU Gulf of Guinea Strategy and Action Plan play a special role. The EU contribution to maritime security in the GoG is reflected on a wide range of projects covering subjects as diverse as fisheries, security at ports, fighting drug trafficking routes and law enforcement at sea. These EU projects put an emphasis on cross-sectoral cooperation and functional integrity. Ensuring
complementarity and consistence between civilian and military initiatives has been a clear EU objective. Indeed, it serves no purpose to strengthen the local capabilities of navy personnel and coast guards to fight piracy, smuggling, or trafficking at sea, if shortcomings in the judiciary sector prevent criminal prosecutions.

The recent EU decision to launch, in the GoG, a pilot project on the initiative of Coordinated Maritime Presences continues to show that, for the EU, an integrated strategy is the right approach. This initiative, which is not a military operation, allows the EU to better coordinate and respond to maritime insecurity, and is based upon two pillars: collecting and coordinating assets of member state countries in the region that are involved, on a national basis; and advising and capacity building in support to the Yaoundé Architecture in cooperation with coastal states, though the latter is not yet in place.

Several international and regional organisations are also carrying on programmes and initiatives aiming at strengthening maritime security in the GoG, namely IMO, UNODC and INTERPOL. Several countries are engaged in various initiatives aiming to strengthen the GoG maritime security. Key international and regional players, like the US and France, conduct large naval exercises, such as Obangame Express and Grand African Nemo, involving many regional and international partners. A few European countries with historical, cultural, and economic interests in Africa also engage in several activities to reinforce maritime security. This is the case of Portugal that has special ties and relations with countries in the region, namely Angola, S. Tome and Principe, Cape Verde, and Guinea Bissau, which are members of the Portuguese Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP). Portugal is engaged in contributing to the strengthening of their maritime capabilities. For that purpose, the Portuguese Navy has launched the initiative “Mar
“Open Seas” (Open Seas), in 2008, carrying out a wide range of missions, mainly under the framework of bilateral defence cooperation with these countries. The activities have been focused on capacity building in the fields of surveillance, monitoring, and inspection activities at sea, through joint exercises and boarding of elements from the navies and coastguards of the visited countries. Search and rescue, performance of specialized technical services, humanitarian support for the population and lectures, dedicated to raise awareness and creation of maritime culture are among performed activities.

Also, Zaire, a ship from the Portuguese Navy deployed in the Gulf since the beginning of 2018, has responded to piracy attacks and patrolled the region to prevent further incidents. Very recently, the Portuguese navy vessel, NRP Setúbal, carried out a double mission, bilateral and multilateral. Bilaterally, it undertook activities in the framework of the initiative “Mar Aberto”. Multilaterally, together with other naval assets of EU member states, namely France, Italy, and Spain, the NRP Setúbal participated, for the first time, in the launch of the coordinated maritime presences mechanism.

Another relevant Portuguese contribution to improving maritime security in the Atlantic, namely in the GoG, is the establishment of the Atlantic Centre, on May 14th.

Conclusion

International organisations and GoG countries have engaged in programmes and initiatives to assist regional countries in combating criminal activities in the GoG, having the Yaoundé process as framework.

Despite all efforts, piracy attacks have increased, both in terms of frequency and severity, as well as in their geographic scope. An assessment is
therefore needed on what has been done, the lessons learned, the limits for the actions of international partners, as well as on the way forward.

In brief, it’s been understood that international partners should concentrate their efforts on education and training, strengthening capabilities of local military and civil servants, in a wide range of sectors.

Indeed, mentoring is a necessary condition, but is not a sufficient one. It is indispensable to address the root causes for the proliferation of criminal networks in the GoG.

Reverting this situation, creating lawful livelihood conditions for their populations and the improvement of overall living conditions is the responsibility of local governments and authorities. Without this sine qua non condition, instability in the GoG will remain.

References
