Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea
Security Overview
6 January 2020
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The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) covers 11,000 square kilometers, stretching from Angola to Senegal. It is one of the world’s most important shipping routes for both oil exports from the Niger Delta and consumer goods to and from Central and West Africa. Piracy is a major security concern in the GoG, which, currently, is the area worst affected by piracy worldwide. This is consistent with a trend observed since 2014 and reaffirmed over 2019 in which the GoG has surpassed East Africa as the primary global piracy hotspot, with incident levels in the region having risen markedly over 2018 and 2019.

The US Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) documented 146 incidents of piracy and armed robbery in the GoG in 2018, a 24% increase over 2017 and the highest level in a decade. Using a different methodology, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), recorded 79 such incidents in the region, representing 40% of all recorded incidents globally in 2018. According to the IMB, reports of attacks in waters between the Ivory Coast and the Democratic Republic of Congo more than doubled in 2018, accounting for all six hijackings worldwide, 13 of the 18 ships fired upon, 130 of the 141 hostages taken globally, and 78 of 83 seafarers kidnapped for ransom. In the last three months of 2018, 41 kidnappings were recorded in waters off Nigeria alone.

In a seemingly positive development, the IMB noted an 18% decrease in the total number of incidents recorded in the GoG in the first nine months of 2019 (50) compared to the same period of 2018 (61). However, various other organizations reported much higher levels of piracy in the region. For example, Constellis recorded 73 incidents in the GoG in the January – September 2019 period. Such discrepancies in these figures occur in large part due to persistent underreporting, partly motivated by shipping firms’ interest in protecting their reputations.

It is noteworthy that despite recording a drop in GoG piracy levels in the January – September 2019 period, the IMB acknowledged that the region continues to be a concern for piracy, with kidnappings of crew members increasing in both scale and frequency. Underlining this, the GoG experienced a sharp rise in hostile activity in the last two months of 2019, with over 50 crew members kidnapped in the region in December alone. Notably, Constellis recorded 24 incidents in the GoG over November and December 2019, bringing the total number of incidents in the region in 2019 to 103. Of particular concern has been the increase in abductions, with kidnappings
and hijackings accounting for roughly 28% of all incidents recorded in the GoG in 2019. The region also accounted for over 80% of global crew kidnappings.

Pirate Action Groups (PAGs)

Most serious maritime crime in the GoG is attributable to Nigerian PAGs. Some of the main PAGs operating in the Niger Delta are located in the creeks near Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, and Abonnema, Rivers State. Other criminal gangs that partake in piracy are also present, sometimes working independently or acting as subcontractors for larger pirate syndicates.

PAGs in Nigeria are reportedly facilitated by port contacts and other informants, including suspected government officials, providing information on the location and contents of vessels transiting the GoG. Moreover, the line between piracy and conventional criminality has become increasingly blurred in Nigeria. Compounding the threat of piracy and armed robbery, pockets of instability and lawlessness on land are providing PAGs with safe havens from which they can operate with relative impunity.

While piracy in the GoG tends to be Nigeria-centric, historical trends indicate the geographic scope of Nigeria-based maritime piracy can quickly expand and contract. At the close of 2017, piracy outside of the “pirate alley” (stretching out to 115 nautical miles off the Niger Delta), including Lagos, was confined predominantly to port-based criminality. Of concern, however, 2018 and 2019 saw Nigerian PAGs reaching further out to sea. Nevertheless, incidents continued to be concentrated within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of the GoG countries due to an array of issues, including local security forces’ poor capacity to respond at sea, the reported existence of multinational networks of pirate informants and sponsors, as well as the lack of a coherent and coordinated regional security response that enables PAGs to operate between national maritime boundaries without restriction.

In general, vessel characteristics such as speed and low freeboard make certain ships more attractive to pirate gangs. However, all vessels remain at risk of being targeted, with 2018 and 2019 having seen attacks on a wider
variety of ships: bulk carriers, container vessels and general cargo vessels. Several local attacks on oil industry support vessels and fishing vessels were also observed.

Regional pirate gangs do not hesitate to use violence to achieve their goals. The use of semi-automatic rifles is common. Vessels are boarded both at anchor and when underway. Pirates use predominantly speedboats and skiffs to launch their attacks. In this respect, piracy remains highly dependent on weather and sea conditions, as the use of speedboats and skiffs make boarding vessels, even those with low freeboards, hazardous or impossible in adverse sea states. For these reasons, piracy levels in the GoG tend to decrease over the rainy season (May – October).

At the lower end of the spectrum, assailants rob crew of their personal belongings and money. At the other end, crew are abducted and held for ransom ashore, typically in the Niger Delta. Not all attacks are violent or pre-planned. Many are opportunistic, with theft as the underlying motivation.

In recent years, Nigerian PAGs have been primarily focused on the kidnap of seafarers for ransom. They are operating predominantly in the waters off Bayelsa and Rivers states, where most active pirate enclaves are located. The gangs typically hold their hostages on small islands in the creeks or in the vicinity of old illegal refineries. Larger gangs are often using fishing trawlers to head out to sea undetected and then launch their attacks from one or more skiffs that are lowered into the water. Both Yenagoa and Abonema-based gangs typically stage negotiations out of Port Harcourt, heading back to the hostages’ holding location to provide proof of life when necessary. Captives are usually unharmed if ransom negotiations are conducted professionally. Additionally, once ransom amounts are settled, the kidnappers frequently ask for other items, such as phones, tablets and laptops.

It is noteworthy that several sources have attributed the piracy up tick in the region over the past two months to at least two PAGs. One of the groups is reportedly using a mothership to operate deep offshore. Satellite imagery has suggested the mothership is possibly the Togo-flagged chemical tanker Determination 2. No ownership, classification or insurance details for the tanker are available. The Nigeria-flagged product tanker Adeline Jumbo is also being treated as a suspect. Meanwhile, the other PAG is allegedly conducting patrols on the margins of Nigeria’s EEZ to identify targets.

Regional Maritime Security Efforts

Regional cooperation is a central mechanism when it comes to fighting maritime crime. Some of the major cooperation efforts in the GoG include the signing of the Code of Conduct (CoC) concerning the Repression of Piracy, Armed Robbery against Ships, and Illicit Maritime Activity in West and Central Africa, also known as the “Yaoundé Code of Conduct,” in June 2013. Its objective is to promote regional maritime cooperation. In accordance with the CoC, signatories created regional centres for information sharing and coordination, including the Interregional Coordination Centre in Yaoundé.

The international community has also provided support to foster greater inter-regional maritime security cooperation. For instance, since 2016, the European Union (EU) has announced more than USD 60 million for...
maritime security capacity building programs in the GoG. Nearly USD 30 million supports the implementation of the Economic Community of West African States’ Integrated Maritime Strategy, an overarching framework that addresses piracy and armed robbery among other issues. Other EU initiatives include programs to improve coordination of maritime security efforts in Central Africa and reinforce port security.

France, a former colonial power in the region, has also played a leading role in international efforts to improve maritime security in the GoG. The country maintains a small, long-term naval deployment in the region and conducts exercises with partner African navies. The US has also launched several assistance initiatives that aim to enhance maritime security capacity and coordination. For example, the US sponsors the annual Exercise Obangame Express, which entered its ninth year in 2019. It is designed to improve regional cooperation, maritime domain awareness, information-sharing, and tactical interdiction expertise to enhance the collective capabilities of West African nations to counter sea-based illicit activity.

Unfortunately, establishing an effective regional anti-piracy response in the GoG is very difficult, given the sheer amount of state actors involved. Unlike the Somali basin where there is a high degree of international coordination and naval patrolling, West Africa’s coastal waters suffer from a lack of piracy prosecutions and poor rule of law.

Other piracy response issues stem from differences in function, applicable national jurisdiction and types of services offered by maritime security providers. For example, the use of armed embarked security teams (AESTs) has been found to be highly effective in deterring pirates in the Indian Ocean High Risk Area, but the use of AESTs is not an acceptable practice in the GoG. While some GoG nations, such as Benin and Togo, have established specific procedures for the embarkation of armed personnel or the provision of security services, the policies of other coastal states are not as clear. For instance, Nigeria does not permit private armed security guards to engage in vessel protection activities in its waters. Instead, the military and/or police forces of the coastal state offer their own security services, in exchange for a fee. The Nigerian Navy is also still providing Navy guards to be embarked directly onto merchant vessels in Nigerian ports, although the legality of this practice is a contentious issue.

Overall, in the absence of more cohesive regional maritime security policies, the piracy and armed robbery threat in the GoG is expected to continue to develop largely unabated.
Constellis’ intelligence analysts and security consultants produce bespoke political and security reports, threat assessments and security risk assessments to inform decisions and to protect people and assets across the world.

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