Everyday Piracy: Routine Practices and Work Cultures Within Gulf of Guinea Pirate Groups

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Abstract: Maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea has taken a different form where piracy has become one of the most recalcitrant maritime security issues in the world. Although a lot of emphasis has been laid on the frequency of incidents and the counter-piracy measures, this research discusses the daily activities and working cultures of the pirate gangs in the region. Based on the current empirical data, this paper addresses the modes of operation on a daily basis, social organization, economic motivation, decision making, and cultural typology as well that supports the existence of piracy activities. The results indicate that local socioeconomic structures incorporate piracy and that local cultures of pirate work are both organizationally sophisticated and adaptive and peer governed. The study helps in understanding further how the pirate organizations can be described as quasi-organizational entities and where it has an implication on the policies of the maritime security and intervention policies.

Keywords: Counter-Piracy, Gulf of Guinea, Maritime Security, Socioeconomic, Quasi-Organizational.

INTRODUCTION

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) is a security issue as well as a complex socio-economic phenomenon. Piracy in the region is defined by most of its activities being kidnapping ransoms, cargo theft, and hijacking, and the cases in this region have surpassed the cases of global events (Jacobsen, 2022). The conventional maritime security studies focus on tactical reaction and naval operations. Nevertheless, it is also important to know the daily activities and internal societies of the pirate gangs to formulate proper long-term strategies. In this study, it is examined how the crews of pirate organizations structure their everyday activity, assign roles and ranks, and preserve group cohesion in the conditions of high risks.

The geography of the Gulf of Guinea, ineffective coastal authority, and economic exclusion all add to the fact that the issue of piracy persists. In contrast to stereotypical versions of piracy, modern-day pirates have complex work cultures, which are similar to informal enterprises, which divide labor, adopt norms of risk-sharing, and localized economic logics (Denton & Harris, 2022). The study of these cultures allows one to study piracy on a larger scale than temporary attacks.

This paper will combine the latest research results in order to develop a conceptual framework of the study of pirates practices and cultures. The framework combines sociology, criminology, and maritime security research. Our mixed methodology approach is based on secondary data, incidents reports, ethnographic interviews and economic analyses with an aim of providing a rich description of daily piracy in the GoG.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions and Historical Context

Contemporary piracy in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) is quite different to classical piracy as written in historical and early modern sea narratives. Piracy used to be traditionally understood as robbery and violence at sea with the aim of obtaining personal gain by non-state actors, who usually did not pay attention to national borders and territorial jurisdiction. Conversely, the modern piracy within the GoG system is similarly entrenched in the local politics economics and state fragility, as well as the global maritime trading networks (Ahorsu, Yaro & Attachie, 2024). It is not an isolated criminal activity but a multidimensional relationship between lapse of governance, marginalization, and the commercial interests of transnational bodies that defines contemporary pirating activities.

In history, piracy thrived during times of a weak naval presence and intense marine commerce, e.g. during the 16 th -18 th centuries in the Mediterranean and Caribbean. These previous types of piracy were romanticized or politically acceptable by means of privateering. Contemporary piracy, though, is no longer shrouded in any legal ambiguity and is universally criminalized by the international law, especially using such an instrument as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Although clear in this law, enforcement in the GoG is not uniform because of the limited maritime capacity, corruption, and overlapping jurisdictional issues (Peters, Paoli & Pemberton, 2025).

The historical background of the development of piracy in the GoG also has to be interpreted in the framework of the post-colonial formation of states and extraction of resources. The area has long suffered environmental degradation, unemployment, and lack of inclusion in the offshore oil production benefits by the coastal communities. The said structural conditions have led to the emergence of illicit economies, such as oil theft, smuggling, and sea kidnapping. Coakley, Kwan and Wilson (2025) contend that this type of opportunistic violence is both a strategy to survive and a form of opportunistic violence because as far as the GoG is concerned, there is not a strong separation between political grievance and organized crime.

In comparison to Somali piracy that was mostly defined by ransom-motivated hijackings, piracy in the GoG has changed to short-lived and highly violent actions aimed at the crew, cargo, and petroleum products. This development is a result of the changes in international shipping, the protection of ships on board, and the regional naval patrols, which changed the incentives and methods of pirates (Peters, Paoli & Pemberton, 2025).

Its growing penetration into the world of crime further sets GoG piracy apart compared to the previous paradigms of piracy, where it is considered a part of transnational illegal market instead of single-market maritime predation.

On the whole, the contemporary piracy in the GoG can be interpreted not as the only threat to the security at sea but as a sign of more significant structural and historical dynamics. The governance, economic inequality, and the global energy resource demand have turned piracy into hybrid phenomenon with a mixture of protest, profit, and crime business. Appreciating such historical and contextual complexity is a key to the creation of sustainable and effective counter-piracy measures in the region (Ahorsu, Yaro & Attachie, 2024).

Routine Practices

The Routine Activities Theory can be helpful to explain the way in which the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) pirates maintain their activity by perpetuating patterns and routine. The theory suggests that crime is committed when all three components are put together; the motivating criminals, appropriate targets, and the lack of effective guardians. These conditions are highly compatible in the maritime setting like the GoG, where the amount of commercial traffic, predictable routes, and the absence of strong links in the surveillance and enforcement along the coastlines is continuous (Joubert, 2023). This has led to piracy in the region becoming a system of routinized practices as opposed to infrequent or occasional criminal activities.

The GoG pirate groups operate organized surveillance missions that enable the pirate groups to locate weak ships. Such routines are normally aimed at policing the shipping lanes, anchorage area and offshore systems especially at night when visibility is low and the response time is slow. Pirates use local information about geography and shipping routes to predict the movements of vessels and choose them with very low defensive potential (Okee, Ajoku, & Andrew, 2025). This surveillance is an acquired process that is taught inside a group of pirates and perfected in the course of more than one operation.

Basic radar systems, GPS and radio communications are also used as operational routines to track vessels and to coordinate the attack. Pirate organizations have a disadvantage in terms of technological capability compared with state navy forces, but compensate their weakness with adaptability and local knowledge. The use of standardized boarding techniques, including the approach to vessels using high-speed skiffs, paralyzing communication equipment, and quick neutralization of the crew members, proves that the level of learning and training is high (Simonds, 2022). Such practices decrease unpredictable situations in the event of attacks and maximize the chances of success, which strengthens piracy as a legitimate routine behavior.

The lack or sporadicity of competent guardians is a key in maintaining these practices. The perceived risk of interception is reduced through limited naval patrols, overlaps in jurisdiction of the various coastal states, and the time lag in responding. Corruption and collusion also undermine enforcement in certain instances, as pirate groups are planned to act relatively unchecked (Simonds, 2022). This non-guarantianship, according to the routine activities view, reduces the cost of indulging in piracy and institutionalizes criminal activities among the coastal living communities where other means of livelihood are few and far in between. Notably, the common pirate activities in the GoG are not fixed but dynamic due to variations in maritime security. This action usually causes pirates to change their tactics, like increase kidnappings as a ransom rather than complete hijacking of a ship, which is likely to be the result of increased naval patrols or the implementation of security measures by shipping companies on their vessels. This flexibility emphasizes the dynamism of daily activities and emphasizes the fact that the actions of offenders adapt to the differences in the target and guardianship (He, Wang, Gao & Xie, 2023).

In general, the GoG piracy can be explained as the outcome of habitual practices that are influenced by the opportunity structure and the environmental factors. Using these practices as the prism of Routine Activities Theory, one can conclude that the successful counter-piracy strategies have to interfere with not only the specific cases of attacks but also with the very pattern whereby maritime crime is predictable and sustainable.

Work Cultures and Social Structures

The work culture in pirate gangs in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) is constructed by intricate informal codes, organizational activities, and social processes that sustain operational efficiency and also enhance group unity. In contrast to the stereotypical portrayals of chaotic groups of criminals, empirical studies of piracy networks, specifically in the Niger Delta and other littoral areas, indicate that people engaging in maritime piracy live in organized social ecosystems that govern the recruitment, behavior, and retention patterns (Tachie-Menson, 2023). These systems are centred around shared values, expectations, and tacit codes of conduct that in addition to regulating interpersonal interactions, keep groups intact in the face of no formal institutional power.

The creation of informal norms and communal practices that lay stress on the aspects of loyalty, mutual support, and survival skills is one of the key factors of the pirate work culture. Such norms are formed as a result of recurring interactions and joint operations in the sea, where it is necessary to rely on one another and coordinate the activities that are risk-heavy, such as boarding ships and kidnapping the crew. Even though formal hierarchies of leadership can depend on both groups, peer control and socially agreed roles can put in place official command structures, providing flexible yet stable forms of organization, which may adjust to the evolving conditions in the sea and on the shore (Iheduru, 2023). This interaction is indicative of larger trends of community of practice in maritime meetings of criminals in which shared experience and learning together create a sense of identity and operating ethics.

Besides norms, the social networks within which the pirate groups are based are also important to the study of recruitment and retention. Piracy network studies have been conducted in places like the Niger Delta and this has been recorded on how old personal relationships and community identities affect the people who join in piracy and the ways in which they are still incorporated in criminal networks. Arrested members of Nigerian piracy networks have come out to testify that the activities are not operated in isolation and are linked to a broader social network, such as relationships with militant networks, bribery, and other domestic business networks that offer information, logistical support, and financial inducement (He & Wang, 2025). They fulfil functional and social purposes: these networks of interlocking make available material resources and at the same time strengthen social connections, which render engaging in piracy not an individual act, but a group activity.

Social network analysis also shows the way in which pirate groups use the current community connections to recruit and maintain members. The young men in the coastal settlements, who have little to offer and gain as a legitimate way of earning a livelihood, can be enticed into piracy either by family, friendship or by association with some local militia outfits. These associations not only open access to the activities of pirates, but it also gives social legitimacy in some local situations, where involvement in piracy can be considered (although controversial) as a rational economic response to apparent state abandonment or even protest against state abandonment (Chilaka, 2025).

Internal governance is also influenced by the way the local social structures entangle piracy. Formal leadership positions, codes of honor, and informal dispute resolution systems are typical which allow the crews of pirates to deal with day-to-day conflicts and coordination among themselves through back-channels without a legal framework in place.

This helps in establishing a work culture that values reciprocity and reputation, whereby people would be expected to conduct themselves in accordance with group expectations and interests (Egobueze & Ajieh, 2024).

Lastly, new evidence on the spatial and social aspects of piracy incidents is available in the data initiatives and large datasets created in 2023 that demonstrate the organised nature of organizational patterns, rather than arbitrariness. Such datasets contribute to our perception of the way in which the maritime criminal culture is preserved and managed in the context of the wider socio-economic and political environment.

Overall, the social worlds and work traditions of pirates in the GoG are highly social phenomena, which are preconditioned by unofficial norms and negotiated leadership models, informal community networks. These structural and cultural advantages not only increase the operating capacity but also establish a system to support piracy as a collective practice in the long term.

METHODOLOGY

The study will use mixed- methods research design to investigate the pirate routines and work cultures in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG). The methodology aims to combine both the operation pattern and the socio-economic rationality of contemporary maritime piracy by using quantitative incident data and combining it with qualitative interpretation analysis and simple economic modelling. This three-pronged methodology is a method that adds to the depth of analysis and the credibility of the findings through the use of several, complementary data sources.

The secondary data analysis is the first part of the methodology. The primary source of quantitative data were the reports published by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) on piracy and armed robberies incidents of 2021-2023. The information presented on such reports is standardized by the frequency of the occurrence, the location of the pirate attack, the time of occurrence, and the character of the pirate attack resulting in the ability to identify spatial and temporal patterns in the activity of the pirates. Other secondary sources were regional maritime security briefs established by international bodies and coastal state agencies and anonymized maritime insurance claims of piracy incidences. Combination of these datasets made it possible to cross-verify incidents reported and minimize the chances of underreporting or bias reporting. Trends were summarized using descriptive statistics and comparative analysis was used to show how the pirates change their tactics and preference of targets over time.

The second methodological pillar will be based on qualitative content analysis. A systematic review of the scholarly publications on piracy in the GoG was conducted to identify a theoretical and contextual background based on peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and doctoral theses. Also, the study involved the declassified field interviews with former combatants and associates of the pirates, and also the recordings of testimonies by the maritime security experts, the naval officers, and other regional analysts. Thematic coding of these qualitative sources was done through an inductive process involving the use of codices to identify patterns in the data and this does not force a priori patterns on the data. The important themes were organizational structure, recruitment pathway, operational routine, leadership practices and views on risk and reward. It was an eye opener

that enabled the researcher to understand the social norms and work culture that informs the actions of pirates better than quantitative data can.

The study also used simple economic modelling to supplement the descriptive and interpretive analyses and understand the financial incentive that is involved in piracy. Simple economic graphs were developed to explain pirate income distribution, operational cost and opportunity cost in comparison with other livelihood activities like fishing, informal trade or casual labor. These models did not aim at giving accurate estimates of incomes but to show the relative appeal of piracy when there is a lack of job opportunities and the inability of state control. The economic component contributed to putting piracy into perspective as a rational (yet unlawful) economic decision in restricted local economies by imagining the costs and benefits behind it.

Thematic coding and triangulation were used to conduct the data analysis. The IMB reports provided quantitative results that were compared to qualitative results obtained through interviews and academic literature to determine the areas of convergence and divergence. This repeated procedure enhanced the internal validity of the research because observed trends were verified by several types of evidence. In case of discrepancies, further reading was done to address the contextual issues or research constraints.

The research design was based on the ethical considerations. The direct interaction with the members of the active pirate groups was also avoided because it was considered to be rather dangerous and legally, as well as ethically speaking. Rather, the research based itself on declassified interviews gathered earlier and proven secondary accounts. There was also a confidentiality and sensitivity to the context of all sources especially those that addressed sensitive coastal communities. Through the implementation of the ethical guidelines in criminological and security research, the study provides a balance between the analytical rigor and the responsible scholarship.

In general, this approachology offers a strong model of analyzing piracy in the GoG as a structured social and economic process, which is supported by empirical data and a high ethical standard of research.

FINDINGS

Routine Practices of Gulf of Guinea Pirate Groups

The activities of pirate gangs in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) indicate the presence of a highly structured and predictable cycle of operations that is indicative of planning, coordination and organizational learning. In opposition to the description of piracy as spontaneous or unruly crime, these customs suggest intentional acts that have been polished over time by the repeated maritime activities (Robertson, 2023). This type of routinization will improve efficiency in the operation and minimize uncertainty in the encounters of high risk at sea.

Pre-Attack Reconnaissance

Piracy activities start with the initial step of pre-attack reconnaissance that is systematic. Pirate groups watch Automatic Identification System (AIS) signals to track the movement of vessels and determine the slow-moving or unguarded ships. This technological surveillance is added to the radar scanning and intelligence collection by local informant systems
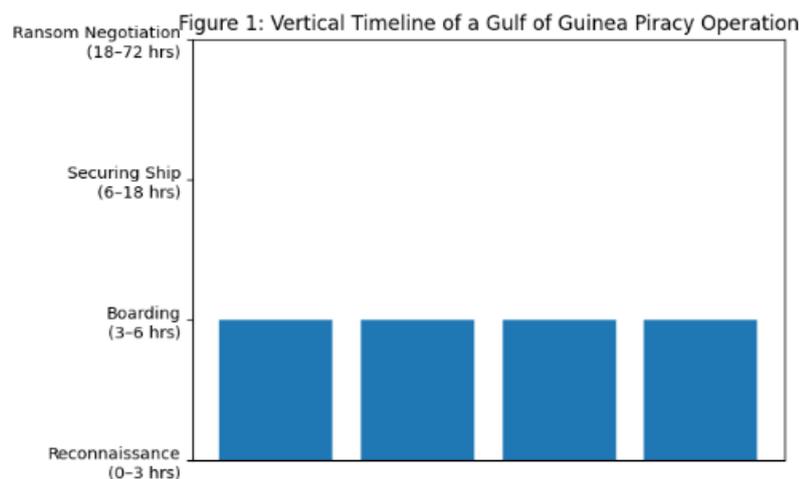
implanted into ports, fishing communities, and logistical centers. Reconnaissance can take a few hours and enable the members of a pirate crew to determine the type of ship, the number of crew, the value of cargo, and resistance possibilities before investing resources.
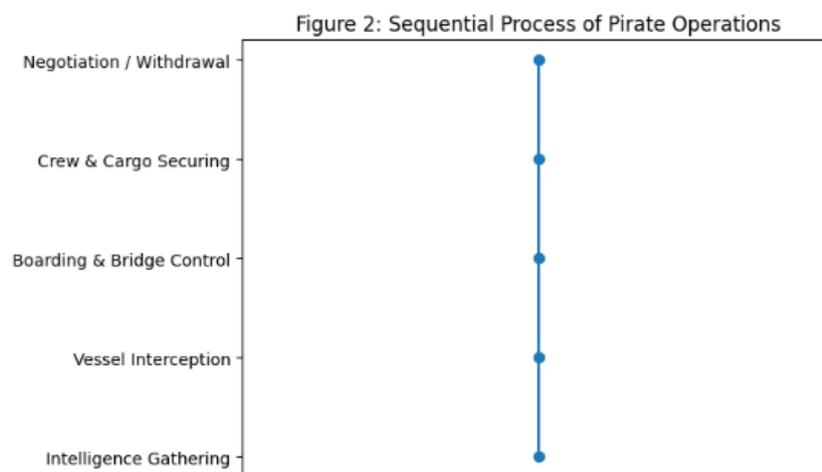
Boarding Procedures

After identifying a good target, the crews of the pirates will proceed to the standard boarding operations, which are usually done in the dark. Vessels are approached using speed boats and hence the response and detection time is minimal. The access to the deck is also fast with grappling hooks and ladders, and the bridge is secured first in order to control navigation and communications. These steps show a tactical discipline and division of roles, and people are put in the positions of navigators, lookouts, or assault team members depending on experience and abilities (Abubakar, 2023).

Post-Boarding Practices

In the post-boarding activities after successful boarding, the pirate groups are involved in post-boarding whereby they seek to extend their control and maximise profits.

Figure 1: Vertical Timeline of a Gulf of Guinea Piracy Operation

Source: Author's compilation (2026)

Figure 2: Sequential Process of Pirate Operations

Source: Author's compilation (2026)

The ransom demands are often coordinated and the crewmembers are segregated to prevent coordinated resistance, whereby specific negotiators have opened communication lines to the demands. There is security of valuable cargo, cash, and personal belongings and operational decisions are changed according to the presence of the naval or responses of the ship owners. These rituals indicate the organizational hierarchy and the adaptive decision making.

The classical sequence of a piracy operation in the Gulf of Guinea, as shown in Figure 1, includes all the stages such as reconnaissance and ransom negotiation. The vertical format shows the time-based structure of the activities of pirates and shows that attacks are not spontaneous but are planned processes. All stages are associated with more and more control over the ship and its crew, with an additional focus on planning, coordination, and the discipline of operations.

The operational phases of pirate attacks are represented in Figure 2 in form of a structured process model. The figure theorizes piracy into a chain-reaction of interdependent processes, between the spending money on intelligence and the negotiation or withdrawal, highlighting the routinized and systematic processes of piracy in the area.

Social Governance and Work Cultures

In addition to work processes, pirate organizations in the GoG have unique work cultures and social governance structures. Informal norms govern the behavior and assist in the regulation of the internal relations when the formal law is not used. These conventions entail a ban on unjustifiable violence which might invite increased military reaction and organized income-sharing schemes on the foundation of contribution and risk-taking.

Some rituals like oath-taking or symbolic affirmation are popular in ensuring the loyalty and solidarity among the crew members. These customs are consistent with the social identity theory, which underlines the enhancement of the collective identity and group cohesion with the help of mutual experiences, especially dangerous and highly emotional ones such as maritime attacks.

Graph 1: Pirate Crew Income Distribution
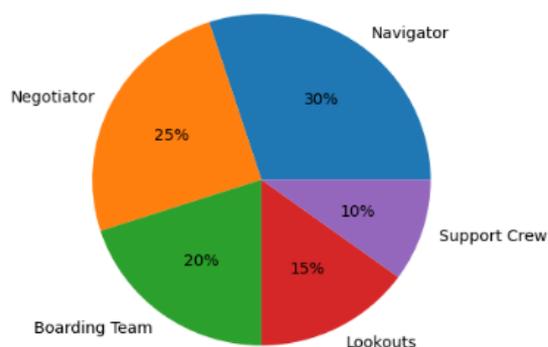
Source: Author's compilation (2026)

Graph 2: Crew Role Composition in Pirate Operations
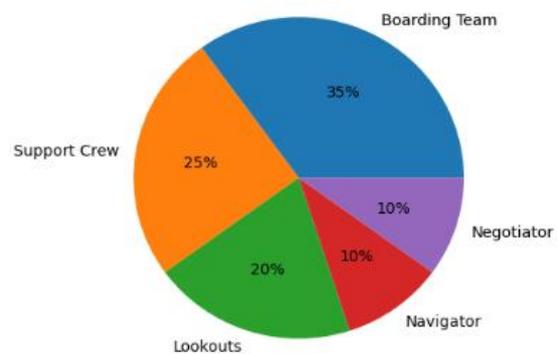
Source: Author's compilation (2026)

Graph 1 is the income distribution of the pirates' crew roles in the Gulf of Guinea. As seen in the graph, navigators and negotiators are entitled to the highest portion of ransom

income as they are responsible and strategic in nature, and hence possess professional experience. The shares of boards team and lookouts are moderate, and support crew workers get the smallest division. This distribution emphasizes a system of reward in pirate groups which rewards specialisation of skills and taking of risk.

Graph 2 shows the crew composition of pirates by position of operation. The biggest proportion of the personnel is made up of boarding teams, which shows that vessel seizure activities are labour-intensive. The crews of support and lookouts constitute important secondary groups, and seamen are also minor, specialized, positions within pirate groups, negotiators and navigators.

DISCUSSION

Motivations and Rationality

The results of the study support claims that piracy in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) is not as impulsive to criminality, but rather a calculated economic choice. Although popular narratives portray pirates as opportunistic or irrational actors, there are some indications that most people who pursue this activity in the forms of pirate attempt to make deliberate cost-benefit in making the decision. According to Gold, Phayal and Prins (2023), the expected returns of piracy are frequently higher than those of other legal activities like artisanal fishing, informal trade, or unofficial labour, especially in coastal areas where unemployment, environmental destruction and poor state presence are significant. Piracy is a logical, though unlawful, economic choice in combination with the lack of social mobility and weak welfare services, instead of an aberrant behavior. The current rational choice view meshes with larger criminological theories which stress on opportunity structures and limited decision-making contexts.

Conflict and Competition

Although the common goals, along with shared identity and the lack of internal conflict and rivalry are present, pirate groups are not resistant to internal strife and competition. There are often intra-group tensions that are related to leadership control, apportionment of the ransom, and varying exposure to operational risk. Holding such high-risk positions as the boarding teams, members might disagree with income distributions that they believe are not fair, especially when the negotiators or the leaders have been given disproportionate bigger distributions. According to Feldman and Taylor (2025), these tensions may be further developed into violence in case the systems of dispute resolution fail or in case of the intervention of other external actors who try to break into pirate networks. The rivalry between competing groups also exacerbates these processes, particularly in conflict maritime areas where different crews pursue shipping lanes. Such results cast doubt on the premise that pirate organizations are unified and developmentally stable, but rather undermines their weak internal systems of control.

Maritime Security Implication

The study of pirate practices, workplace cultures and internal dynamics hold significant significance to maritime security policy. The conventional counter-piracy measures based

on naval protection and reactive enforcement might not be effective in cases where they do not deal with the routines on which the operation of pirates depends. Knowledge about the reconnaissance carried out by pirates, their attack coordinating and negotiating ransoms gives the security players an opportunity to exploit gaps in these routines. As an example, target suitability can be diminished and perceived risk augmented through disruption of reconnaissance practice, e.g. by changing the pattern of AIS transmissions, or creating even greater uncertainty regarding the shipping route. As Osadume, Okene and Ikubor (2024) stress, this method of tactical disruption is most successful in case of association with regional collaboration and intelligence information exchange.

In addition to operational interventions, the results highlight the significance of community-based interventions. The recruitment pipelines of the pirates are frequently based on the coastal communities whereby social networks can be used to become part of the maritime crime. Employment activities, the cleanup of the environment, and inclusive maritime governance can destroy the social legitimacy of piracy and its economic attractiveness. The transformation of piracy as a socio-economic and organizational phenomenon but not as a security threat allows more sustainable and proactive measures.

In general, this discussion shows that the GoG piracy is a logical, systematic, and socially entrenched practice that is influenced by economic factors, intra-company competition, and structural limitations. The most efficient counter-piracy measures should therefore consider integrating both tactical disruption and the long-term socio-economic engagement in order to lower the opportunity and motivation.

Policy Recommendations

The problem of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) needs a multidimensional response, which is a combination of maritime security enforcement and socio-economic and cultural interventions. Considering that the practices of piracy in the area are perpetuated through a combination of normal economic calculations and social networks, the responses of the policies need to address both operational and structural predispositions of the maritime crime.

Enhancing the governance of the coastal areas is a priority. States of the region ought to invest in the development of naval and coast guard capabilities, such as better maritime domain awareness, shared patrols, and sharing mechanisms of intelligence. Continuous lapses in surveillance leave uncontrolled maritime areas which pirate groups use to carry out reconnaissance and planning missions. The potential solution to this problem is the coordinated regional efforts like legal standards and command structures to minimize jurisdictional fragmentation and enhance response times. Notably, anti-corruption measures have to be placed in capacity-building initiatives to help make sure that, in case of increased enforcement, the criminal networks will not be strengthened by mistake.

Economic development programs, in addition to security, would be necessary in order to deal with the causes of piracy. As it has been established in the earlier parts, piracy can be a logical economic decision in situations of little or no jobs and survival. Potential alternatives to maritime crime may be through vocational training programs, employment-based interventions as well as access to microfinance especially among young men in the coastal communities. According to Eski and Wright (2023), economic interventions can be

useful best when they are locally customized and associated with the already established maritime economies, including fishing, port services, and logistics. In the absence of plausible economic alternatives, enforcement based policies can have only the effect of replacing piracy as opposed to shutting it down.

Cultural outreach programs by which the social legitimacy of piracy is undermined are equally important. The GoG system of piracy work is supported by financial gains as well as by common norms, identities, and survivance and resistance narratives. Delegitimization of the piracy as an acceptable labor and advancement of legal forms of maritime identities can be achieved through collaboration with traditional leaders, religious organizations, and community organizations. Awareness campaigns overseen by communities can also break the recruitment pipeline by re-packaging piracy into being a high-risk and socially negative practice instead of a viable means of livelihood. Culturally based interventions like these are more sustainable in terms of security intervention since they contribute to ownership and local trust.

CONCLUSION

This paper has revealed that the Gulf of Guinea piracy is not a spontaneous and disorganized phenomenon but a systematic and rational operation supported by lifestyle operation modes and well-developed internal cultures. Pirates groups are disciplined and have role specialization and mechanisms of governance that help them to have a sense of cohesion and economic motivation. All these aspects highlight the drawback of the methods that view the issue of piracy as merely a maritime security issue. Efficient reaction to maritime insecurity in the GoG should thus be incorporative of tactical disturbance with socio-economic and cultural insight. By acknowledging that pirates are organized players within the local economic structures, the policymakers have an opportunity to create a set of interventions that would decrease the motivation and opportunity. The future research interest must focus on increasing the fieldwork in ethnography, further exploring the social network of the pirates and the evaluation of policy interventions as a systematic method to evaluate their long term effectiveness in stopping piracy in the region.

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