

Security situation in the Gulf of Guinea: Robust Response to combat Maritime Insecurity and Piracy

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Tomorrow (18 April), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will consider the Security situation in the Gulf of Guinea Robust Response to combat Maritime Insecurity and Piracy, as one of the agenda items of its 1209th session.

Following opening remarks by the Permanent Representative of The Gambia and PSC Chairperson for April, Jainaba Jagne, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye, is expected to deliver a statement. It is also expected that statements will be delivered by Florentina Adenike Ukonga, Executive Secretary of the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC), the Representative of the Inter-Regional Coordination Centre, Yaoundé (CRESMA0/CRESMAC), and the Coordinator of the Experts for the Establishment of the Combined Maritime Task Force (CMTF). Additionally, the representatives of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as well as the representative of United Nations (UN) Office to the African Union (UN0AU) and European Union (EU) are expected to make statements.

Since 2013, the PSC has held various sessions addressing maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) region. The outcome documents from these sessions bear witness to the significant progress and collective efforts made by the countries in the region with the support of international

partners worldwide. Therefore, tomorrow's session will serve as an opportunity for the PSC to reflect on the positive strides made in the region, while also considering recurring challenges and emerging threats to the GoG's maritime security.

During the last PSC session on the issue that was held on 18 September 2023 ([1174th session](#)), the PSC revisited the issue of increasing insecurities in the region, a concern that attested to the slight increase of incidents in 2023. The session was marked by the PSC's deep concern over the threats posed by pirates and organized crime networks in the GoG region. Despite a decrease in the number of reported incidents in the GoG in 2023 there were 22 reported incidents, which shows an increase from 19 in 2022. The International Maritime Bureau [reported](#) that these waters remain perilous, as the Gulf accounted for three out of four global hijackings, all 14 reported kidnappings of crew members, and 75% of crew members held hostage in 2023. Additionally, two crew members were injured, reinforcing the GoG's reputation as treacherous waters for seafarers.

Despite a notable decrease, remnants of hijackers and pirates continue to linger on the waters of the GoG region. This maritime threat has evolved from the looting and hijacking of oil cargos to the kidnapping of seafarers, bringing the root cause of the problem sharply into focus. The mid-2000s witnessed a surge in piracy, largely driven by the rapid expansion of the oil industry, particularly in Nigeria and Angola, which together account for approximately 3% of global oil production. The region as a whole account for more than 35% of the world's total petroleum reserves, attracting extensive energy company presence. However, this prosperity has been accompanied by socio-economic challenges, disrupting the livelihoods of local artisanal fishers and driving youth to join militant groups as a result of environmental pollution. These groups hijack oil tankers and interfere with

commercial oil extraction, perpetuating instability. In spite of a decrease in the ransom for oil tanker in the mid-2010s, the dire living conditions persist, leading to a shift towards kidnapping seafarers. In this context, it is crucial to consider the recent surge of Somali pirates in the Gulf of Eden region, which has prompted the question among [observers](#): are the pirates truly 'back,' or have they simply never left? These commentators highlight the insufficient efforts to address the root causes and the inefficiency of highly militarized responses that offer only short-term relief.

In recent years, the strategies implemented in the GoG region have displayed a more collaborative approach, relying less on international partners compared to the Gulf of Eden region. However, it is crucial to consider addressing the root causes of the problem. It is therefore anticipated that tomorrow's session will provide an opportunity for the PSC to evaluate whether the successful efforts in the GoG region are temporary fixes or the foundation for sustainable change. The PSC may consider whether these strategies are enhancing the capabilities of regional maritime agencies, investing in education, creating jobs, elevating social infrastructure in coastal communities, and establishing effective legal frameworks.

Maritime hijacking and piracy are few of the numerous threats to maritime security in the GoG region. Another significant challenge is illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which resulted in [estimated](#) losses averaging \$10 billion in the GoG region in 2023. Reports indicate that fishing vessels are frequently implicated in various other crimes. Beyond the substantial economic losses incurred, IUU fishing leads to the depletion of fisheries, driving coastal communities into poverty and often fostering their involvement in acts of piracy and other transnational crimes, including drug and human trafficking, illicit trade, and arms trafficking. As such, the PSC is expected to receive updates

on efforts being implemented to address the growing threats of IUU fishing and various other maritime crimes in the region

Tomorrow's session is also expected to address the recent spread of terrorism to littoral states like Benin and Angola, as a threat posing an additional threat to the region. In previous years, military rule has emerged in three Western African countries – Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea – contributing to increased insecurity and the proliferation of terrorism. Weak governance and lax security structures have created vulnerabilities that terrorist groups may exploit, posing risks to maritime trade, navigation, and safety. Additionally, the PSC may consider the threat of maritime cybersecurity as a pressing concern for the continent. While technology has greatly enhanced maritime safety and security, it also brings significant challenges. Cyber threats have the potential to disrupt not only maritime operations and infrastructure but also extend into inland internet-dependent sectors, underscoring the interconnectedness of cybersecurity across various domains. Thus, the PSC may deliberate on how to develop proactive measures to safeguard against cyber threats.

In response to these persistent insecurities and emerging threats, the upcoming session is expected to review progress on the decisions made during the [1012th session](#), which emphasized the importance of ensuring that the African Standby Force (ASF) possesses adequate naval capabilities to promote maritime security and safety in Africa. Additionally, the PSC expressed anticipation, during the 1174th session, for the successful organization of the inaugural maritime exercise under the ASF. However, [our analysis](#) of the 1174th session revealed a lack of mention regarding the assessment of financial, logistical, and institutional implications, potentially contributing to a lack of follow-up on organizing the exercise. Therefore, during the upcoming session, updates from the AU Commission on the planning of the maritime command

post exercise, including financial, logistical, and institutional implications, are expected to be presented to the PSC.

Furthermore, in its endeavor to mitigate maritime insecurity in the GoG region, the PSC may revisit its [1128th session](#) decision, which emphasized the importance of strengthening national navies, law enforcement, and border control agencies, alongside advocating for continuous sea presence of African naval forces. Notably, in May 2022, a gathering of African Naval Staff and Coast Guard chiefs convened in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, resulting in the adoption of the Port Harcourt Declaration. This declaration called for the establishment of a CMTF in the GoG. Subsequently, during its previous session (1174th), the PSC directed the AU Commission to engage with the CMTF and the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) to facilitate alignment of their activities, while urging expedited activation of the Committee of the Heads of African Navies and Coastguards (CHANS). Therefore, it is anticipated that the PSC will follow up on these requests to reinforce the regional mechanism for swift responses to maritime threats in the region.

Another aspect of previous requests of the PSC that requires follow-up relates to the creation of an expert panel or Task Force. This group's role would be to synchronize efforts, disseminate knowledge, and make recommendations on maritime security. Additionally, the establishment of a Maritime Security coordination mechanism or unit within the AU Commission is also a pending matter that requires the attention of the PSC. It remains to be seen whether the AU Commission will offer an update on this matter.

Lastly, tomorrow's session is expected to consider the recent developments in the implementation of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and its associated security architecture, which encompasses regional, interregional, and multinational coordination centers, as well as national maritime operations

centers. The notable decrease in piracy and maritime hijacking is credited to the effectiveness of the Yaoundé security architecture. Nonetheless, several challenges hinder its full implementation, notably the inadequacy of funding and varying levels of commitment among member states in the region. In this regard, the European Council in November 2023 has [adopted](#) an assistance measure under the European Peace Facility, allocating €21 million to bolster the Yaoundé Architecture and strengthen the capacities of military actors and navies in selected coastal states.

The outcome of the session is expected to be a communique. The PSC is expected to encourage further collaboration among GoG states and international partners to enhance maritime security capabilities, intelligence-sharing, and joint maritime patrols. The PSC may stress the need for Member States to devise all-encompassing solutions to the grievances driving piracy and maritime crime, including poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation in coastal areas. In this regard, it may also underscore the need for security and military actions to be components of a holistic, well-rounded approach to tackling maritime insecurity. The PSC may further encourage Member States to invest in education, job creation, and social infrastructure in coastal communities to reduce vulnerability to recruitment by militant groups and criminal networks. The PSC may also emphasise the need to strengthen maritime governance frameworks, law enforcement capacities, and border control measures to deter illicit activities and improve maritime domain awareness. In relation to this, the PSC may encourage GoG states that have developed and enforced domestic legislation to prosecute maritime crimes, notably piracy and armed robbery and call on those states that have not done so to enact national laws that allow for the prosecution of pirates and maritime criminals. The PSC may also stress the need to develop proactive measures to safeguard maritime infrastructure and communication networks from cyber threats, ensuring the resilience of maritime

operations and information systems. The PSC may call for support for the activation and operationalization of regional mechanisms such as the CMTF and the Committee of the CHANS to facilitate coordinated responses to maritime threats.