



The Continuing Threat of Maritime Piracy in Sub-Saharan Africa

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With the recent dramatic decline in Somali piracy, some have been quick to declare victory. To be sure, piracy in the Greater Gulf of Aden has rapidly decreased. In 2011, the International Maritime Bureau reported 160 incidents off Somalia, a slight increase from the 139 incidents in 2010. Only seven attacks occurred in 2013, all unsuccessful. Flotillas of naval vessels and the placement of private security guards on commercial ships have made ship capture more difficult; and domestic and legal conditions in Somalia have improved, due in part to internationally supported efforts.

Would-be pirates face dwindling rewards and increased risks.

But celebration may be premature because pirate actions have shifted, surging in the Gulf of Guinea by over 200% from 2011 to 2013. Piracy and pirates have not yet disappeared from the oceans near Africa. What has driven the recent increase in pirate attacks off the coast of Nigeria, and what can be done to combat piracy in all of Sub-Saharan Africa?

Drivers of Maritime Piracy

Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa often have conditions that encourage maritime piracy.

- **State fragility.** Weak governments facilitate piracy because officials either have too few resources to find and capture pirates or are complicit in the business of piracy. Poor countries confronted with serious piracy lack the coast guard or naval resources necessary to combat piracy efforts. What is more, ship captains and local government officials often collaborate with criminals to divvy up the spoils of piracy.
- **Economic deprivation.** Economic deprivation and high unemployment facilitate piracy and illegal markets more generally. Unemployed youth, especially males, provide willing foot soldiers for insurgencies and pirate gangs alike, and it is difficult to persuade fishermen or farmers to forego opportunities for lucrative payoffs amounting to several thousand U.S. dollars.
- **Target rich environments.** Trade in the greater Gulf of Aden is valued at nearly one trillion U.S. dollars a year, and oil transports in the Gulf of Guinea also provide lucrative pirate targets.
- **Geography.** Long coastlines with many inlets frustrate policing and offer sanctuary for pirates.

Piracy off the Coasts of Sub-Saharan Africa

Southeast Asia once dominated the landscape of maritime piracy, but threats are now on the rise for countries in the Gulf of Guinea.

- Starting in 2008, piracy exploded off the Somali coast – with incidents increasing from approximately 19 in 2008 to 80 in 2009. In 2011 the number of incidents attributed to Somali pirates hit 160, before dropping in 2012 and hitting a recent low of seven in 2013.
- Meanwhile attacks increased in the Gulf of Guinea – rising from ten near Nigeria in 2011 to 31 in 2013, with more reported off Togo, Ghana, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast.
- Sub-Saharan pirates, especially, have become more sophisticated in their methods. They attack ships farther out to sea and increasingly seize ships steaming through open waters.
- Maritime piracy off African coasts is more violent than elsewhere, with more than two-fifths of the incidents involving hijackings and firepower from AK-47s or rocket propelled grenades.

What It Will Take to Counter African Piracy

Piracy endures because the conditions driving it have not been eliminated. Successful attacks against commercial vessels still produce lucrative rewards at little risk for the perpetrators. The average per capita Gross Domestic Product in countries prone to piracy is less than a third of other nations, and the governments of these countries are so weak they cannot enforce order. Despite such conditions, the international community has had some success in countering pirates in the Greater Gulf of Aden. What worked and can it be implemented elsewhere?

- **Counter-piracy naval operations.** Combined Task Force 151, Operation Ocean Shield, and Operation Atalanta increased the first-world naval presence in the Greater Gulf of Aden. But, so far, a similar naval presence has not yet been established in the Gulf of Guinea, despite the fact that West African leaders have agreed to better coordinate their counter-piracy efforts.
- **Armed guards and best practices.** Armed guards have increasingly been placed on board cargo ships transiting the Greater Gulf of Aden, and to date no ship with such guards has been hijacked. Unfortunately, regulations in the Gulf of Guinea currently prohibit foreign armed guards on ships. Alternative measures such as steaming at higher speeds and the installation of rail guards and water cannons could help crews to resist pirate attacks.
- **Strengthening political institutions.** Efforts off the Somali coast have improved law enforcement, set up more prisons for captured pirates, and disrupted the flow of funds from piracy. Countries in West Africa may start off with stronger institutions than Somalia, yet many are beset with instability and insurgency, allowing pirate groups to operate. In Nigeria, for example, conflict events on land increased by over 200% from 2011 to 2013 and terrorist attacks jumped by nearly 250% from 2011 to 2012. Political violence has also been on the rise in Togo, Ghana, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast.

There are, in short, clear-cut steps that can be taken to reduce Guinea Gulf piracy. Permitting foreign-armed guards on merchant vessels transiting Nigerian waters may help, but international efforts must also be made to improve conditions on land. As long as abundant targets sail in waters bordered by weak states full of jobless people, piracy will continue.

Read more in Ursula E. Daxecker and Brandon C. Prins, “**The New Barbary Wars: Forecasting Maritime**

**Piracy.” *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2014); Brandon C. Prins, Ursula E. Daxecker, and Amanda Sanford, “
July 29, 2014 <https://scholars.org>**

Terror on the Seas: Assessing the Threat of Modern Day Piracy." *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* (Summer/Fall 2013); and "Trends in Piracy: Sub-Saharan Africa," The Minerva Project at the University of Tennessee, June 2014.