
**NIGERIA'S STRATEGIC POSITION AND THE GULF OF GUINEA: A
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH ANGOLA AND GABON**

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Abstract

The Gulf of Guinea is a critical maritime domain that underpins the geopolitical and economic interests of Nigeria, Angola and Gabon. This study investigates the strategic importance of the Gulf for Nigeria by comparing its maritime security challenges and responses with those of Angola and Gabon. It addresses how Nigeria's geographic and economic profile contrasts with its counterparts, the distinct threats it faces and how it can align national interests with regional cooperation. Drawing on Maritime Security Governance Theory, the study conceptualises maritime security as a decentralised but coordinated effort involving multiple actors at various levels. This framework provides analytical depth to explore Nigeria's institutional strengths and constraints within a dynamic regional security environment. The research employs a qualitative documentary analysis, relying on secondary sources, including policy documents, academic publications and maritime security reports. It examines key threats such as piracy, illegal fishing, oil theft and smuggling, and evaluates state responses across the three countries. Findings reveal that Angola and Gabon have effectively utilised international partnerships, particularly with AFRICOM, to enhance maritime governance. Nigeria's potential, however, remains limited by policy incoherence, resource misallocation and inter-agency rivalry. Yet its strategic location and economic scale position it as a natural regional leader. The study recommends a comprehensive approach for Nigeria that balances sovereignty with multilateral engagement, invests in institutional reforms and leverages civil society and private sector support. These insights are vital for policymakers aiming to strengthen Nigeria's leadership and promote sustainable maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea.

Keywords: Gulf of Guinea, Maritime Security, Regional Cooperation, Piracy and Illegal Fishing

Introduction

The Gulf of Guinea, encompassing the coastal states of West and Central Africa, remains a maritime zone of immense geopolitical and economic significance. Rich in hydrocarbons, fisheries, biodiversity and straddling vital global trade routes, it is central to Africa's maritime development agenda. Nigeria, Angola and Gabon are pivotal actors in this maritime space, with each facing shared and distinct security challenges. While Angola and Gabon have advanced through robust international partnerships—particularly with the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM)—Nigeria's strategic geography, economic scale and political capital place it at the heart of regional maritime dynamics (Ukeje & Ela, 2013).

Piracy, illegal fishing, smuggling and oil theft continue to erode the economic and security fabric of Gulf of Guinea states. Onuoha (2010) argues that maritime insecurity stifles foreign investment and impedes the extraction and transportation of hydrocarbons. Ukeje and Ela (*Ibid.*) further emphasise the “existential threat” posed by maritime crime to the sovereignty and stability of coastal nations (p. 87). Despite multilateral initiatives such as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct, the region's response remains fragmented, largely due to institutional limitations and coordination failures.

Nigeria's domestic governance constraints are a key factor in its maritime underperformance. Policy incoherence across overlapping agencies such as the Nigerian Navy, NIMASA, Ministry of marine and Blue Economy and Customs undermines cohesive strategic direction. Inter-agency rivalry fosters duplication and turf battles, while chronic resource misallocation impairs operational efficiency and response readiness (Agbenyega, 2023; Mohammed, 2023). These systemic weaknesses inhibit Nigeria from fully actualising its maritime leadership potential.

Moreover, while partnerships with entities like AFRICOM offer technological support, training and deterrence capabilities, they are not without risks. Bueger and Edmunds (2021) caution that heavy reliance on foreign military collaborations can foster dependency, erode local autonomy and politicise national security frameworks. Nigeria must therefore engage with international actors from a position of strategic clarity, ensuring that partnerships reinforce—not replace—domestic capacity.

In charting a new path, Nigeria must also expand the maritime security discourse to include non-state stakeholders. Civil society organisations, the media and community-based associations such as the Artisanal Fishermen Association of Nigeria (AFAN) can serve as grassroots security monitors and legitimacy anchors. Furthermore, private maritime

industries—including shipping and port operators—can be enlisted as partners in surveillance, logistics and resource mobilisation.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Maritime Security Governance Theory as its analytical lens to examine Nigeria's strategic role in the Gulf of Guinea. This theory shifts the focus from traditional state-centric models to a governance-based understanding of maritime security, where multiple actors—state, regional, international and non-state—interact through both formal and informal arrangements (Bueger & Edmunds, *Ibid.*).

At its core, the theory contends that maritime security outcomes are not determined solely by naval power or national policies but by how effectively various actors coordinate, share responsibility and align objectives (Bueger *et al.*, 2019). This is particularly relevant to the Gulf of Guinea, where national efforts are constrained by fragmented institutions, overlapping mandates, and policy incoherence, as seen in Nigeria's maritime agencies (Agbenyega, 2023).

Maritime Security Governance Theory also highlights the importance of regional cooperation and the growing role of international partnerships, such as AFRICOM. While these partnerships offer critical support—training, deterrence and surveillance—they may also create dependency, weaken sovereign control, and politicise security architecture (Yarhi-Milo *et al.*, 2016). The theory provides tools to critically assess such risks and explore how Nigeria can engage international actors without compromising strategic autonomy.

Additionally, this framework acknowledges the role of non-state actors in shaping maritime governance. Civil society groups, media, artisanal fishing associations like AFAN and private maritime industries are essential components of a pluralistic governance system that promotes legitimacy, accountability and sustainability (Yüsel, 2023).

By applying this theory, the study interrogates how Nigeria's internal governance, external alliances and stakeholder dynamics influence its leadership potential in securing the Gulf of Guinea.

Geopolitical and Economic Significance of the Gulf of Guinea

The Gulf of Guinea, an expanse of maritime territory stretching from Senegal to Angola, stands as a critical node in the geopolitical and economic architecture of the African continent. Its waters, rich in hydrocarbons and diverse marine life, serve as an essential lifeline for regional

economies and a significant artery in global trade networks. This unique positioning has made the Gulf a focal point for international diplomacy and strategic competition.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the Gulf of Guinea's location is pivotal. Its proximity to major transatlantic trade routes has transformed it into a global maritime corridor. Scholars such as Ukeje and Ela (ibid) emphasize that this region “functions as a gateway for global commerce and energy flows,” connecting Africa with Europe, the Americas, and beyond (p. 87). Furthermore, its coastal states possess abundant natural resources, including crude oil, natural gas, and valuable minerals, underscoring its economic significance. According to Asuquo (2020), the Gulf produces approximately 5% of the world's crude oil, with Nigeria, Angola, and Gabon playing prominent roles in this output. This abundance of energy resources attracts foreign investment while simultaneously rendering the region vulnerable to external exploitation and internal mismanagement.

The Gulf of Guinea is not just an economic powerhouse but also a region fraught with maritime insecurity. Piracy, illegal fishing, and smuggling undermine its economic potential and pose threats to regional stability. Onuoha (*Ibid.*) contends that these activities impose a “cumulative financial burden” on littoral states, depleting resources that could otherwise be allocated toward development efforts (p. 40). The piracy epidemic, particularly notable in the early 2010s, saw the Gulf of Guinea emerge as one of the most dangerous waterways globally, accounting for over 90% of global maritime kidnappings by 2020 (Aniche, 2023). These security concerns not only disrupt economic activities but also erode investor confidence, complicating efforts to harness the region's potential.

The Gulf's economic significance extends beyond hydrocarbons. Its fisheries provide sustenance and livelihoods for millions of Africans. However, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing depletes fish stocks, exacerbating food insecurity and fuelling local tensions. As Asuquo (2020) highlights, “illegal fishing incurs economic losses amounting to billions annually,” representing a direct threat to sustainable development goals (p. 52). These overlapping challenges necessitate robust regional frameworks and collaborative international interventions to secure the Gulf's maritime domain.

Nigeria's strategic role in the Gulf of Guinea cannot be overstated. As Africa's largest economy and a dominant oil producer, Nigeria is both a stakeholder and a potential leader in addressing the region's challenges. However, as Ukeje and Ela (ibid) observes, Nigeria's leadership aspirations are often constrained by institutional inefficiencies and policy inconsistencies. By

adopting best practices from Angola's and Gabon's partnerships with AFRICOM, Nigeria could strengthen its maritime security infrastructure and enhance its regional influence.

The Gulf of Guinea's geopolitical and economic relevance stems from its strategic location, resource endowments, and centrality to global trade. However, its potential remains undermined by persistent security threats and governance challenges. For Nigeria, Angola and Gabon, addressing these issues through regional cooperation and leveraging international partnerships could unlock the Gulf's full promise, fostering stability and prosperity across the region.

Comparative Analysis of Maritime Security Challenges

The Gulf of Guinea, while endowed with considerable economic and geostrategic assets, remains plagued by multifaceted maritime security threats that compromise state authority, economic development, and regional stability. Piracy, illegal fishing and smuggling are the most persistent security challenges, though the responses of Nigeria, Angola and Gabon have varied based on their respective institutional capacities and strategic partnerships.

Nigeria has long been the epicentre of piracy in the region, accounting for the majority of maritime kidnappings and hijackings between 2010 and 2020 (Ukeje & Ela, 2013). These activities are largely concentrated in the Niger Delta, where socioeconomic grievances, environmental degradation, and political marginalisation have fostered insurgent and criminal groups (Onuoha, *Op.Cit*). The implications are severe: disrupted oil production, increased shipping insurance premiums, and declining investor confidence. Yet despite Nigeria's formidable naval infrastructure, its response has been hindered by governance challenges, including policy incoherence, inter-agency rivalry, and resource misallocation (Agbenyega, 2023). Overlapping mandates between the Navy, NIMASA, and Customs have led to duplication of efforts and ineffective operational coordination.

In contrast, Angola has recorded significantly fewer piracy incidents, owing largely to coherent maritime policies and its proactive engagement with international partners, particularly AFRICOM. Through joint naval exercises and intelligence-sharing initiatives, Angola has successfully enhanced maritime domain awareness and protected its offshore oil platforms (Matibe, 2024). However, scholars such as Yarhi-Milo et al, (*Ibid.*) caution that such military partnerships, while beneficial, carry risks of dependency and may limit sovereign decision-making in the long term.

Gabon, with its smaller maritime footprint, has experienced a moderate increase in piracy, especially near offshore installations. Like Angola, Gabon relies heavily on external assistance for maritime enforcement. This reliance, while necessary due to limited domestic capacity, raises concerns about the sustainability and autonomy of its security architecture (Matibe, 2024). Still, Gabon has made commendable efforts by establishing marine protected areas and strengthening surveillance systems through partnerships with European and American agencies.

Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing also remains rampant across the region. Nigeria's vast exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is heavily targeted by foreign industrial fleets, resulting in losses estimated at \$2.7 billion annually (Asuquo, 2020). Weak enforcement, corruption, and lack of inter-agency coordination further compound this issue. Conversely, Gabon's use of marine conservation policies has curtailed IUU activities, while Angola's better-regulated fisheries, supported by international institutions, face relatively lower impact.

Smuggling—including narcotics, arms, and contraband—poses another layer of complexity. Nigeria's porous borders and insufficient maritime patrols have allowed it to become a transshipment hub for illicit goods bound for Europe and South America (Onuoha, *Ibid.*). Smuggling not only undermines state legitimacy but also fuels local violence and corruption. Angola and Gabon face similar risks, albeit on a smaller scale, with recent seizures indicating a rise in arms trafficking and regional criminal networks (Matibe, *Ibid.*).

While all three countries face similar maritime threats, Nigeria's challenges are magnified by institutional fragmentation and underutilised strategic potential. To reposition itself as a maritime leader in the Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria must enhance governance coherence, rationalise its security architecture, and approach foreign partnerships with a focus on capacity-building and sovereignty preservation.

Table 1: Major Maritime Security Challenges in Nigeria, Angola, Gabon and the Gulf of Guinea (2023)

Country/Region	Piracy Incidents	Estimated IUU Fishing Losses (USD millions)	Smuggling Activity Impact	Security Infrastructure Rating (1–10)	Level of International Collaboration
Nigeria	2	2,700	High	4	Moderate (AFRICOM, EU, Deep Blue Project)
Angola	3	400	Moderate	7	High (AFRICOM, ICC, EU CAPE Verde Mission)
Gabon	1	150	Moderate	6	High (AFRICOM, EU, France)
Gulf of Guinea	22	~2,900 (aggregated estimate)	High (regional scale)	5	Varies by country; improving under Yaoundé Code

Sources: IMB Annual Report, 2023; Okafor-Yarwood, I. M., & Onuoha, F. C. (2023) and DryAd Global, 2023. Tabulation by the author.

The cumulative impact of these maritime security challenges extends beyond economic losses to erode national sovereignty and regional stability. For Nigeria, piracy and illegal fishing threaten its economic lifeline, particularly the oil sector, while smuggling undermines internal security. Angola’s more coordinated approach has mitigated these threats, enabling it to maintain relative stability and secure its maritime assets. Gabon, despite its smaller size, faces significant challenges in securing its waters, necessitating reliance on international partnerships to bolster its maritime capacity.

Addressing these threats requires a coordinated and multi-faceted approach that integrates national strategies with regional cooperation. As Ukeje & Ela (ibid) and Okafor-Yarwood & Onuoha (2023) asserts, collaborative frameworks remain the cornerstone of effective maritime governance in the Gulf of Guinea, underscoring the need for shared responsibility and trust among littoral states. By leveraging their comparative strengths and learning from each other’s experiences, Nigeria, Angola, and Gabon can collectively enhance maritime security and unlock the region’s full potential.

International Collaborations and Regional Security Frameworks

The complex landscape of maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea necessitates coordinated international collaborations and robust regional frameworks. Angola and Gabon have demonstrated notable progress in enhancing their maritime capacities through strategic engagements, particularly with the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM). While these partnerships have yielded measurable benefits, they also warrant critical interrogation regarding long-term sustainability, national autonomy, and geopolitical alignment. This section evaluates the dual nature of AFRICOM engagements and offers lessons and strategic pathways for Nigeria to leverage international support without compromising its sovereignty or institutional independence.

Angola and Gabon's Partnerships with AFRICOM

Angola and Gabon have actively collaborated with AFRICOM to strengthen maritime security. Angola's engagement includes joint naval drills, intelligence cooperation and infrastructural development. According to Matibe (2025), Angola has significantly enhanced its maritime surveillance and response mechanisms through sustained AFRICOM support, leading to a marked reduction in piracy incidents along its coastline. Gabon, with a more limited naval footprint, has benefited from technical support, law enforcement training, and UAV-assisted surveillance systems.

Yet, while effective, these partnerships are not without caveats. Yarhi-Milo et al, (*op. cit.*) caution that extended reliance on external security architectures may inadvertently foster dependency, reduce national control over strategic sectors and expose domestic security agendas to foreign policy interests. As Bueger and Edmunds (*Op. Cit.*) observe, "international military partnerships must complement—rather than replace—local capacity, lest they erode sovereign agency or politicise maritime governance" (p. 159).

Outcomes of AFRICOM Partnerships

In practical terms, AFRICOM has contributed to declining piracy trends and improved maritime domain awareness in Angola and Gabon. In Angola, enhanced surveillance systems and rapid response mechanisms have been central to protecting offshore oil installations. Gabon's adoption of UAV and AIS technologies has similarly improved threat detection and enforcement (Msheliza, et. al. 2023). However, the effectiveness of these outcomes must be

balanced against the structural risk of external dependency, especially in countries with limited domestic security infrastructure.

Lessons and Opportunities for Nigeria

As Africa's most populous country and economic hub, Nigeria holds untapped potential to lead Gulf of Guinea maritime security efforts. The experience of Angola and Gabon offers several instructive lessons:

a) Comprehensive Capacity Building

Angola and Gabon have strengthened their human and technical capabilities through sustained training and capacity-building programs. Nigeria must adopt similar initiatives, focusing on inter-agency coordination, intelligence analysis, and naval strategy (Ukeje & Ela, 2013).

b) Technological Integration

Adopting advanced surveillance tools such as UAVs, AIS, and integrated Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) systems can significantly boost Nigeria's monitoring capacity (Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2024). Such tools enhance coordination and threat responsiveness across agencies.

c) Strategic Partnerships with Caution

Nigeria should actively pursue beneficial collaborations with AFRICOM, IMO, and the EU, but these partnerships must be structured to avoid strategic overreach or donor-dependence. Agreements should be framed within a clear national security doctrine, ensuring mutual respect for autonomy and strategic priorities (Yarhi-Milo et al, *op. cit.*).

d) Policy and Governance Reforms

Robust maritime governance requires eliminating overlapping mandates and improving accountability. As Ukeje and Ela (*Op. Cit*) assert, "coherent governance structures are central to the effective implementation of maritime strategies" (p. 96). Nigeria must streamline maritime agencies and enhance resource allocation for long-term sustainability.

e) Community Engagement and Civil Society

Security is not solely a state enterprise. Nigeria should deepen engagement with civil society, the media, coastal communities, and professional associations such as the Artisanal Fishermen

Association of Nigeria (AFAN). These actors can serve as informal monitors, public awareness channels, and enablers of local legitimacy (Asuquo, 2020).

Opportunities for Leveraging International Collaborations

Nigeria's strategic position affords it unique leverage in shaping regional maritime policy. By framing partnerships within the principles of mutual respect and self-reliance, Nigeria can access external expertise while preserving strategic independence. Furthermore, Nigeria can attract foreign direct investment into maritime infrastructure, improve diplomatic clout within regional organisations, and contribute to the operationalisation of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct.

The dual reality of international collaborations—as enablers of capacity and potential sources of dependency—necessitates a carefully calibrated approach. Nigeria must absorb the practical benefits of partnerships, while reinforcing domestic institutions and pursuing inclusive, sovereign-driven security strategies.

Nigeria's Strategic Position: Strengths and Constraints

Nigeria's geographical, economic and political resources position it as a pivotal actor in the Gulf of Guinea. However, these strategic advantages remain undermined by deep-seated institutional constraints and governance inefficiencies that inhibit its maritime security leadership. This section critically assesses both Nigeria's strengths and the underlying limitations, with particular focus on structural fragmentation, weak policy coherence, and operational resource gaps.

Geographic, Economic and Political Strengths

Nigeria's geographical location at the nexus of West and Central Africa gives it direct access to critical global shipping lanes and an expansive exclusive economic zone (EEZ). As Chatham House Report (2013) asserts, this positioning allows Nigeria to serve as a vital gateway for maritime trade and energy flows across the Gulf of Guinea. Nigeria's offshore oil infrastructure, located predominantly in the Niger Delta, contains an estimated 7% of global crude oil reserves (Owuda, & Zhizh, 2021), underpinning the country's relevance in international energy markets.

Economically, Nigeria is the largest economy in Africa, with its maritime sector playing an increasingly important role in non-oil diversification; spanning fisheries, maritime logistics,

and port services. According to Mohammed (2023), “if well-governed, Nigeria’s maritime domain could become a driver of regional growth and trade integration” (p. 76).

Politically, Nigeria exercises leadership within regional bodies such as ECOWAS and the Gulf of Guinea Commission. (Yüsel, *Ibid.*) notes that Nigeria’s diplomatic clout makes it well-positioned to coordinate multilateral maritime security efforts—provided institutional and policy reforms are pursued in tandem.

Governance Constraints: A Deeper Critique

Despite these inherent strengths, Nigeria’s maritime governance is impaired by entrenched structural weaknesses:

- a) **Policy Incoherence:** Nigeria lacks a unified national maritime security strategy. Overlapping mandates among agencies such as the Nigerian Navy, NIMASA, and the Nigerian Customs Service result in duplicated efforts and regulatory confusion. As Bueger and Edmunds (*Op. Cit.*) argue, “a fragmented institutional landscape reduces policy effectiveness and weakens state responsiveness” (p. 159).
- b) **Inter-agency Rivalry:** Turf wars between security agencies hamper coordinated responses to maritime threats. There are frequent disputes over jurisdiction and operational roles, which delay decision-making and fragment intelligence sharing (Agbenyega, 2023). These rivalries create accountability vacuums and operational inefficiencies at critical moments of maritime threat response.
- c) **Resource Misallocation:** While Nigeria allocates budgetary resources to maritime security, much of this funding is lost to corruption or administrative inefficiency. As Nweke (2025) observes, procurement irregularities and opaque spending often divert resources from frontline enforcement to bureaucratic maintenance. The result is under-equipped agencies with limited surveillance, response, and interdiction capabilities.

These constraints are exacerbated by weak implementation of existing laws, low morale among personnel, and the lack of real-time data-sharing platforms among relevant stakeholders.

Efforts of the Nigerian Navy in Combating Piracy

Despite these constraints, the Nigerian Navy has taken commendable steps in reducing piracy through intelligence-led operations and the deployment of multi-domain platforms. The 2021 launch of the Deep Blue Project—which integrates air, land, and maritime surveillance—

marked a turning point in Nigeria's response to maritime threats. Elsie (2024) notes that "piracy incidents have dropped significantly, due in part to more structured naval presence and rapid-response units" (p. 11).

The deployment of the **Falcon Eye** surveillance system has also expanded maritime domain awareness, allowing for quicker interception of criminal vessels. Additionally, collaboration with international partners such as AFRICOM and the EU has contributed to capacity building and information exchange (Chatham House, *Ibid.*).

Addressing Constraints and Unlocking Potential

To achieve its full potential as a regional maritime leader, Nigeria must embark on a series of systemic reforms that address the foundational weaknesses within its maritime governance framework. Central to this is the urgent development of a comprehensive national maritime strategy. Such a strategy should clearly delineate agency mandates, eliminate overlaps in jurisdiction, streamline coordination, and establish measurable performance metrics that hold institutions accountable.

Beyond strategic planning, institutional reform is imperative. Rather than continuing to operate in silos, maritime agencies must embrace a whole-of-government approach. This entails coordinated inter-ministerial task forces, integrated training programs, and the adoption of shared surveillance and communication platforms to enable real-time response and intelligence sharing across departments.

Optimising the allocation and use of resources is also critical. For Nigeria's maritime strategy to be effective, funding must not only be increased but managed with transparency and rigour. Regular audits, public reporting mechanisms, and anti-corruption safeguards should be institutionalised to ensure that budgetary allocations are directed toward frontline operations rather than lost to administrative inefficiencies or mismanagement.

Meaningful investment in the socio-economic development of Nigeria's coastal communities must form part of any long-term maritime security strategy. Addressing the root causes of maritime crime requires tackling the structural inequalities that foster local grievances and criminal opportunism. This includes targeted spending on education, job creation, youth empowerment and infrastructure development in littoral areas.

Balancing National Sovereignty with Regional Cooperation

The dual imperatives of safeguarding national sovereignty and fostering regional cooperation present a complex challenge for Nigeria in the Gulf of Guinea. This strategic region, characterized by extensive maritime resources and security vulnerabilities, demands a careful balancing act between unilateral actions to secure national interests and multilateral efforts to promote collective security. The interplay of trust, coordination and shared responsibility underscores the dynamics of regional cooperation in this context.

Sovereignty remains the bedrock of Nigeria's national security policy. As articulated by Ukeje & Ela (*ibid*), "Nigeria's assertion of control over its maritime domain is intrinsically linked to its identity and autonomy as a sovereign state" (p. 85). This principle underpins Nigeria's efforts to secure its waters against piracy, illegal fishing and other transnational maritime crimes. Nigeria's economic lifeline, notably its oil and gas industry, is heavily dependent on maritime security. The Gulf of Guinea accounts for 70% of the country's revenue through hydrocarbon exports, making the protection of offshore assets and shipping lanes a strategic priority (Bueger & Edmunds, *Op.Cit.*). This economic dependence creates a tension between unilateral measures to safeguard these interests and the need to collaborate with regional and international actors.

Regional Cooperation Imperatives

The Gulf of Guinea has witnessed a proliferation of multilateral initiatives aimed at addressing maritime security. The Yaoundé Code of Conduct (2013), signed by regional states, including Nigeria, Angola, and Gabon, exemplifies efforts to foster collaboration through information sharing, joint patrols and capacity building (Chatham House, *Ibid.*). Similarly, the imperative of having strong and enduring regional cooperation was exemplified by Tinubu (2025) at the 38th African Union Summit in Addis Ababa, where he put forward an ambitious proposal for the creation of a Combined Maritime Task Force for the Gulf of Guinea, with Lagos as its headquarters. However, as Onuoha (*Ibid.*) notes, the effectiveness of these frameworks depends on the willingness of states to prioritize collective goals over individual preferences. Trust deficits among Gulf of Guinea states often hinder meaningful cooperation. Historical rivalries, resource competition and diverging strategic priorities create barriers to effective coordination. According to Agbenyega (2023), overcoming these trust deficits requires transparent mechanisms for information sharing and equitable burden-sharing arrangements. Nigeria's prominent role within ECOWAS, coupled with its diplomatic engagements with Angola and

Gabon, presents a strategic opportunity to foster trust through collaborative initiatives and equitable resource distribution. By leveraging these partnerships, Nigeria can further consolidate its regional influence, continuing its long-standing position as the Gulf of Guinea's *primus inter pares* (Babalola, Akinrinde & Osuwa, 2024).

AFRICOM Partnerships as a Model

The partnerships that Angola and Gabon have developed with the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) offer useful reference points for Nigeria in navigating its maritime security strategy. These engagements have contributed to enhanced situational awareness, strengthened naval logistics, and reduced maritime criminality in both countries (Owuda & Zhizh, 2021). Gabon's incorporation of satellite-based monitoring systems and Angola's success with joint tactical exercises illustrate the operational value of external support mechanisms in managing shared maritime risks. For Nigeria—geographically situated at the heart of the Gulf of Guinea and economically indispensable to regional trade—the opportunity to assume a leadership role in a cooperative maritime order is substantial.

However, while AFRICOM-assisted programs may yield short-term gains, they are not without their complexities. Overreliance on foreign-led security initiatives can dilute national ownership of defence policy and shift strategic decision-making towards external interests. Moreover, when international military collaborations shape the institutional logic of security governance, there is a risk that national security frameworks become reactive rather than strategic. Nigeria must therefore treat such engagements as supplementary—tools for capacity enhancement rather than cornerstones of maritime security architecture. Nigeria's effective leadership will depend on how well it positions itself within regional frameworks while maintaining strategic self-determination.

Challenges to Balancing Sovereignty and Cooperation

Nigeria's ambition to lead Gulf of Guinea security efforts is hindered by unresolved domestic administrative and institutional contradictions. The lack of a unified maritime security policy, compounded by fragmented agency mandates, continues to obstruct cohesive participation in multilateral arrangements. As Nweke (2025) rightly points out, systemic inefficiencies and underinvestment in maritime infrastructure have constrained Nigeria's regional credibility.

A particularly illustrative case is the government's recent proposal to establish a Nigerian Coast Guard, which has drawn criticism from maritime stakeholders. As reported by *BusinessDay*

(2024), the proposed body risks duplicating the functions of the Nigerian Navy and NIMASA, further complicating an already congested institutional landscape. Rather than layering new agencies onto existing structures, the emphasis should be on reforming and adequately resourcing the institutions already tasked with maritime enforcement.

Balancing sovereign authority with cooperative obligations is inherently complex. Nigeria's efforts to align itself with regional security initiatives are often challenged by concerns over operational autonomy, especially when collective agreements entail shared command structures or pooled intelligence resources. In such contexts, sovereignty must not be mistaken for isolationism. Effective regional integration demands a nuanced strategy—one that protects national prerogatives while contributing meaningfully to transnational objectives. As Mohammed (*Ibid.*) aptly asserts, “a pragmatic approach to balancing these interests is necessary to ensure sustainable cooperation” (p. 73). Nigeria's ability to manage this balance will be crucial to its success as a maritime leader and credible regional actor.

Recommendations for Nigeria

Nigeria should deepen her participation in regional mechanisms like the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) and the Maritime Organization of West and Central Africa (MOWCA). Collaborative efforts, such as joint patrols and intelligence sharing, can enhance the region's collective security architecture. Transparent communication and equitable resource-sharing mechanisms are vital for building trust among Gulf of Guinea states. Nigeria could spearhead initiatives to establish a regional fund for maritime security, demonstrating its commitment to collective goals.

Nigeria can draw lessons from Angola and Gabon's AFRICOM engagements to develop tailored partnerships with global actors. These partnerships should focus on capacity building, technology transfer and joint operations to address shared threats. Investing in maritime infrastructure, technology and human resources is essential for Nigeria to fulfil its commitments under regional agreements. Streamlining the mandates of maritime agencies and ensuring adequate funding will improve their operational efficiency (Bueger & Edmunds, *Op. Cit.*).

Balancing national sovereignty with regional cooperation is a delicate but necessary endeavour for Nigeria in the Gulf of Guinea. While sovereignty remains central to its security policy, the interconnected nature of maritime threats demands collaborative solutions. By addressing trust deficits, enhancing institutional capacity, and leveraging international partnerships, Nigeria can

align its national interests with regional goals. This balanced approach not only reinforces Nigeria's leadership role in the Gulf of Guinea but also contributes to the broader objective of regional stability and economic growth.

Policy Recommendations for Enhanced Regional Leadership

Enhancing Nigeria's regional leadership within the Gulf of Guinea requires a multifaceted approach that bridges national interests with regional aspirations. This section outlines a series of policy recommendations designed to elevate Nigeria's leadership profile, strengthen maritime security frameworks, and foster sustainable regional cooperation.

Streamlining Maritime Governance

Nigeria's maritime governance structure is fragmented, with overlapping mandates among agencies such as the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA), the Nigerian Navy, the Ministry of Defence, and the proposed establishment of coast guards. Consolidating these functions under a unified command structure would enhance efficiency and responsiveness. Such a framework should include a central coordinating body to oversee policy implementation and interagency collaboration. In a related effort, capacity gaps in technology, personnel, and infrastructure continue to undermine Nigeria's maritime security initiatives. Continuous, targeted investments in training programs, the acquisition of modern surveillance equipment, and the establishment of regional maritime research institutes would help address these deficits. Such initiatives could position Nigeria as a knowledge hub for maritime security in West Africa.

Strengthening the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC)

As a founding member and major financier of the GGC, Nigeria has a unique opportunity to revitalize this platform by championing reforms that emphasize actionable outcomes. This includes pushing for more robust monitoring mechanisms, periodic evaluations of member states' commitments and greater alignment with international standards.

Active Engagement in ECOWAS and AU Initiatives

Nigeria's leadership within ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) provides a platform to advocate for integrated maritime policies. By aligning its national strategies with ECOWAS's Integrated Maritime Strategy and the AU's Agenda 2063, Nigeria can promote a cohesive regional approach to security challenges. In addition, historical rivalries and resource

competition among Gulf of Guinea states often impede regional cooperation. Nigeria can lead efforts to establish transparent mechanisms for information sharing and joint resource management. Initiatives such as shared surveillance data platforms and equitable revenue-sharing agreements can foster trust among member states.

Expanding AFRICOM and Other Actors' Collaboration

Angola and Gabon have demonstrated the strategic utility of partnerships with the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), particularly in strengthening operational readiness and enhancing maritime domain awareness. Nigeria can pursue similar collaborations through carefully negotiated frameworks that prioritise capacity building, technology transfer and context-specific solutions. However, such partnerships must be approached with caution to avoid overdependence, strategic misalignment, or the erosion of national security autonomy. Heavy reliance on foreign actors can politicise Nigeria's maritime architecture and compromise sovereign decision-making. Beyond AFRICOM, Nigeria should diversify its external engagements by leveraging European Union initiatives such as the Critical Maritime Routes in the Gulf of Guinea (CRIMGO) and seeking bilateral cooperation with emerging powers like China and Japan. These diversified partnerships can bring technical expertise and logistical support while safeguarding Nigeria's strategic independence and long-term regional leadership aspirations.

Developing a Regional Blue Economy Strategy and Private Sector Engagement

Nigeria can leverage its economic influence to advocate for a Gulf of Guinea-wide blue economy strategy. This would involve harmonizing policies on fisheries, offshore oil exploration, and maritime trade. By leading such initiatives, Nigeria can align economic interests with security imperatives, ensuring long-term sustainability. Encouraging private sector participation in maritime security, such as through public-private partnerships (PPPs), can unlock additional resources. For instance, shipping companies can be incentivized to invest in security infrastructure like port surveillance systems and rapid response units.

Establishing Regional Surveillance Systems

Investing in satellite technology and drone surveillance systems can enhance maritime domain awareness across the Gulf of Guinea. Nigeria should collaborate with regional and international partners to develop a centralized surveillance system that provides real-time data on maritime activities. Supporting research and development in maritime technology, including the

development of indigenous solutions to security challenges, can boost Nigeria's leadership in this domain. Partnerships with academic institutions and tech start-ups should be encouraged to drive innovation.

Climate change poses significant risks to the Gulf of Guinea's maritime ecosystem. Nigeria should advocate for region-wide policies that address environmental challenges, such as rising sea levels and coastal erosion. Integrating climate resilience into maritime security strategies can enhance regional stability. In addition, Sustainable exploitation of the region's fisheries and oil resources is essential for long-term security. Nigeria should lead efforts to implement quotas, prevent overfishing, and promote renewable energy projects in the maritime domain.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Nigeria's leadership in the Gulf of Guinea hinges not only on strategic geography and economic weight but on its ability to confront entrenched institutional weaknesses. By addressing policy incoherence, inter-agency rivalry and resource misallocation, Nigeria can strengthen its maritime governance framework. Equally important is maintaining a balanced approach to international military collaborations; leveraging external support while guarding against dependency and politicisation. A convergence of robust institutions, pragmatic diplomacy and inclusive stakeholder engagement will enable Nigeria to safeguard national interests, assert regional leadership and contribute constructively to long-term maritime stability and prosperity in the Gulf of Guinea.

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