

Topic Brief: Topic 1:

Committee: UNCLOS

Topic: Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea in the Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa



Figure 1 (Map showing the Horn of Africa): [Ahmed, Sundus, and Sundus Ahmed. "The Horn of Africa." BlackPast.org, 12 Aug. 2021. www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/the-horn-of-africa/. Accessed 17 Aug. 2025.](#)

Background of the Issue:

Maritime piracy and armed robbery at sea pose significant threats to international commerce and regional stability. The Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa present some of the most dangerous maritime areas in the world.

Gulf of Guinea. Including the coastal states of Senegal to Angola, the Gulf of Guinea is often considered the piracy movement's global epicentre, with, in recent years, 1320 reported crew kidnappings, the majority occurring in the Gulf of Guinea. Pirates generally seek oil tankers, cargo vessels, and fishing vessels and will hold the crew members for ransom.

Horn of Africa. Waves of piracy began off Somaliland and the Gulf of Aden in the mid-2000s, with Somali pirates typically hijacking ships in transit through this critical shipping corridor between the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean. In 2011, estimated pirate activities were over 200, which contributed to the loss of billions to the economy.

The two major factors that drive piracy in both of these maritime areas are the social conditions of poverty, ineffectiveness of state institutions, political instability, and the lucrative economic opportunities that global shipping capabilities afford. Both of these significant areas of maritime importance support international trade: the Gulf of Guinea is a major oil-exporting region, and the Horn of Africa's maritime access controls the Red Sea access to the Suez Canal.

Key Stakeholders and Actors:

- **Regional States:** Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, and Ghana are heavily affected in the Gulf of Guinea. Somalia, Djibouti, and Kenya are central in the Horn of Africa.
- **International Shipping Nations:** Countries whose trade relies on secure passage, such as China, the United States, EU member states, Japan, and India.
- **International and Regional Organizations:** The United Nations (through UNCLOS and the UN Security Council), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).
- **Private Sector:** Shipping corporations, oil companies, insurers, and seafarers' unions are all financially and directly impacted.

Prior International Action:

- The framework for piracy was established in UNCLOS (1982), which codifies the international legal definition of piracy and the jurisdiction of states over the high seas, and is still the starting point for counter-piracy.
- In 2008-2011, a series of United Nations Security Council Resolutions authorised foreign naval forces to enter Somali waters in response to piracy, resulting in multinational deployments of naval forces.

Current Condition of the Gulf of Guinea

- The Gulf of Guinea has replaced Somalia as the world's most dangerous area for maritime crime.
- In the period 2018-2021, more than 80% of global crew kidnappings were in this area.
- While the attacks are concentrated off of Nigeria's coast, incidents have expanded to include neighbouring waters.
- These criminal networks are well organised, often operating from land bases in the Niger Delta. While the Yaoundé Architecture is meant to facilitate coordination between West and Central African navies, and while there has been some coordination, enforcement is usually weak.

Current Situation in the Horn of Africa:

- Somali piracy is now low, with perhaps two or three incidents a year since 2017, down from a peak of 200 or more piratical attacks per year.
- This improvement is mostly attributed to continued international or multi-national naval patrols, better security on commercial vessels, as well as better coordination among coastal states.
- Despite Somalia's ongoing political instability, poverty, and inadequate law enforcement capabilities of the coast guard, the threat of piracy remains.
- The Gulf of Aden is strategically important. In terms of maritime trade, maritime cargo includes human traffic! Over 20000 ships navigate the Gulf of Aden every year, carrying oil, cargo, and humanitarian aid. The impact of piracy is a global one when it comes to trade.

Timeline:

Gulf of Guinea

- Early 2000s to 2010s: Piracy and armed robbery began to rise significantly, becoming a major threat by 2011.
- In 2012, the highest number of vessel attacks was reported globally in West African waters, with 966 seafarers attacked.
- In 2013, around 100 attempted hijackings were reported, making this area the second most affected, after the Strait of Malacca. In the late 2010s, there was a shift from cargo theft to kidnapping crews for ransom.
- In 2017, a total of 1,726 seafarers were affected by incidents at sea, including 21 kidnappings. The overall cost of these events was approximately \$818 million.
- 2019: More than 80% of crew kidnappings worldwide happened in this region.
- 2020: Peak piracy incidents reached a total of 123, with 130 seafarers kidnapped across 22 separate incidents.
- 2021-2022: There has been a notable decline in incidents, down to approximately 45, attributed to naval patrols, convictions, and international cooperation.

Horn of Africa

- In the 1980s, piracy off the coast of Somalia began as a result of poverty and lawlessness in the region.
- In the 1990s, there was a rapid increase following the collapse of the Somali government.
- In 2007, a "period of organization" began, characterized by large-scale pirate operations taking place far offshore.
- 2008: 111 attacks recorded, including 42 successful hijackings.
- In 2009, there was a record-setting year with 217 attacks and 48 hijackings, as pirates operated over 1,000 nautical miles from Somalia.
- From 2008 to 2010, there were approximately 420 attacks in the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea, and Somali waters, during which Somali pirates held 18 ships and 379 crew members for ransom.
- Ransom amounts averaged \$3.5 to \$4 million per ship.

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