



MARITIME SECURITY AND TERRITORIAL DISPUTES IN NIGERIA: THE GULF OF GUINEA CONFLICT

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Article history:

Received: 05/02/2026

Accepted: 20/03/2026

Published: 27/03/2026

Keywords: *Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria, maritime security, territorial disputes, Bakassi Peninsula.*

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Abstract

The Gulf of Guinea, and especially the maritime zone of the Niger Delta, have remained notorious in terms of security as it experiences piracy, armed robbery in the sea, drug trafficking, transnational organized crime, illegal fishing, and territorial conflicts. Such threats are very dangerous to the stability and development of the regions. The research design presented in this study is a qualitative, descriptive study that were based on secondary data collected in the form of policy documents, scholarly literature, official reports, and news outlets. The paper analyzes the attempts by Nigeria to improve maritime security as a multi-lateral co-operation structure using documentary analysis. The results show that the insecurity at sea in Nigeria is naturally a multidimensional phenomenon that includes criminality, lack of governance, environmental destruction, and the conflicts over sovereignty. The Bakassi Peninsula conflict between Cameroon and Nigeria is one of the illustrations of the geopolitical aspect of maritime insecurity as arguably, competing territorial claims gave rise to long-term diplomatic tensions, which were resolved eventually upon a decision arrived at by international arbitration. In addition, despite the establishment of institutional measures like the Maritime Trade Information Sharing Centre Gulf of Guinea (MTISC-GoG), and other regional cooperation systems, success depends on the lack of implementation, institutional inefficiency and technological constraints. The research concludes that enhancing maritime security in Nigeria to attain sustainability is a complex task that needs a comprehensive approach that integrates enhanced cooperation by the region, latest technologies in maritime domain awareness, harmonization of laws, and governance reform. This is necessary not only to control the maritime space in Nigeria but also to control the stability of the strategic waterways in West Africa.

Original Research Article

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How to cite this article: Adetunberu Oludotun & Fasuan E. Olawale (2026). Maritime security and territorial disputes in Nigeria: the Gulf of Guinea conflict. EIRA Journal of Arts, Law and Educational Sciences (EIRAJALES), 2(1). 34-40.

Introduction

The issue of maritime security has become the major strategic issue in West Africa, especially the Gulf of Guinea. The region is one of the most resourceful and strategically important sea routes in the world, which connects the African economies with Europe, the Americas, and Asia via the vital sea traffic routes. It is significant in hydrocarbon exports, offshore oil production, liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports, and commercial fisheries and, as such, is invaluable to the energy security of the region and the globe as a whole (Bueger, 2015; UNODC, 2021). Nigeria is the largest economy in Africa and one of the major exporters of crude oil in this maritime region, and the country is strategically located in this region. It has Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), long Atlantic coastline and band of offshore oil infrastructure, thus rendering maritime stability a fundamental component in

national revenue generation and macroeconomic stability (Onuoha, 2013).

In spite of this geo-strategic centrality, the maritime space of Nigeria has been typified by a long history of insecurity. It is also notable in the last twenty years that the Gulf of Guinea has become a world piracy and armed robbery hotspot and that Nigeria has recorded a large share of reported cases (International Maritime Bureau [IMB], 2020). In comparison to the high seas, which were the main area of Somali piracy, attacks in the Gulf of Guinea are constantly carried out in the territorial waters and are accompanied by acts of violence and ransom kidnapping. Besides piracy, crude oil theft, also known as so-called bunkering, has greatly undermined the fiscal integrity of Nigeria as it funnels billions of dollars a

year of oil through illegal pipelines that overlap into organized criminal networks (Onuoha, 2013).

Arms trafficking, narcotics trafficking, unauthorized migration pathways and Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing also contribute to the problem of maritime insecurity in Nigeria. These transnational offenses are guided by insufficient coastal monitoring, lack of maritime domain awareness, and weak governance in maritime regulatory structures (UNODC, 2021). These threats are multidimensional: they challenge state authority, discourage Foreign Direct Investment, weaken environmental sustainability and reveal systemic weaknesses in the frameworks of maritime governance.

Along with criminality, territorial disputes have also influenced maritime security in Nigeria. The Bakassi Peninsula crisis between Nigeria and Cameroon is one of the most far-reaching boundary conflicts in the area. It was based on colonial boundary demarcations and aggravated by the discovery of hydrocarbon resources and culminating in the 1990s in diplomatic and military tensions before the case was adjudicated by the International Court of Justice in 2002 (ICJ, 2002). The case of Cameroon discussed by the Court has highlighted the significance of international law in the context of settling maritime boundary disputes as well as demonstrated the political, social, and security consequences of changes in sovereignty on disputed territories.

The intersection of resource competition, sovereignty and international adjudication shows that maritime insecurity is not only limited to criminality but also to the geopolitical contest. Maritime boundaries have usually been a point of control to offshore oil fields, fisheries and strategic sea trade routes. Therefore, unresolved territorial conflicts may increase the level of regional tension, interfere with the delivery of economic activities, and make cooperative maritime governance more difficult (Bueger, 2015).

In this paper, maritime insecurity in Nigeria has been explored with reference to the wider Gulf of Guinea situation and with specific reference given to matters of territorial conflicts and responses by the international community. It asks the question of what are the structural agents of maritime threats and assesses how much regional cooperation regimes have enhanced maritime governance in West Africa.

Conceptual Clarifications

Maritime Security

Maritime security is a multidimensional concept which involves protection of maritime space, critical infrastructure, sea lines of communication, and marine resources against both conventional and non-conventional threats. It comprises protection against piracy, maritime terrorism, human and narcotics trafficking, environmental destruction, and interstate war (Bueger, 2015). Maritime security in operational sense entails naval protection, coast guard protection, port security protection, surveillance, and

regulatory control in the territorial waters and the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).

The current body of literature defines maritime security as a combined issue of governance that needs to be coordinated by the military, law enforcement, environmental, and economic authorities. The maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea cannot be considered outside the issues of the state capacity, the rule of law, and economic governance (Onuoha, 2013).

Territorial Disputes

Territorial disputes are the disputes among states regarding their sovereignty and jurisdiction over land territories, maritime or boundary delimiting. In the maritime setting, these conflicts are normally related to the demarcation of the territorial seas, adjacent areas, continental shelves, and the EEZs as enforced by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

These conflicts are often based upon the corrupt colonial-era treaties, conflicting cartographic interpretations or new oceanic resources. In resource endowed areas like the Gulf of Guinea, ownership of the maritime borders defines access to the hydrocarbon deposits, fisheries resources, and other strategic shipping channels thus increasing the geopolitical interests of the boundary disputes (ICJ, 2002).

Gulf of Guinea Strategic Environment

The Gulf of Guinea runs along the Atlantic coastline between Senegal and Angola and serves as a key maritime energy supplier and vessel transportation route within the worldwide energy networks. This maritime space is a convergence of offshore oil platforms, deep-water ports and transnational trade routes.



PresidentvistVB (2014)

Nonetheless, the maritime governance capacity in the region has not been commensurate to the strategic significance of the region. Piracy, trafficking, and illegal fishing have traditionally prevailed due to weak coastal surveillance systems, open maritime borders, limited naval capacity, and

inter-agency coordination (UNODC, 2021). Further, there is the presence of socioeconomic marginalization of communities living at the coastline leading to the formation of criminal networks that actively steal oil and maritime criminals.

Therefore, the Gulf of Guinea strategic environment has been paradoxical; a huge economic potential is present alongside the lack of structural governance. This duality is the key to viewing the problem of maritime security in Nigeria and the global security framework.

Theoretical Orientation

The paper is pegged on the Maritime Security Governance Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which offer an analytical methodology of explaining the multidimensional nature of maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea.

The conceptualisation of maritime security as a joint venture with a number of actors at varying governance tiers is what makes Maritime Security Governance Theory. Instead of considering the maritime threats only through the prism of a classic state-centric or a naval-defense, the governance approach focuses on national navies, coast guard, port authorities, regional organizations, international institutions, and individual maritime stakeholders (Bueger, 2015). Within this paradigm, maritime insecurity is not merely an outcome of criminal opportunism but also a failure of governance, in the form of weak regulatory implementation, poor awareness of maritime domains, corruption, and disjointed institutional imperatives.

When applied to Nigeria, this theoretical lens emphasizes the role of deficiencies in inter-agency coordination between Nigerian Navy, maritime regulatory agencies, and the law enforcement institutions in undermining the enforcement capacity in the past. It further highlights the significance of multilateral arrangements like the Yaoundé Architecture on Maritime Security in information exchange and collective patrolling of West and Central Africa (Onuoha, 2013). Therefore, the governance of maritime security cannot be narrowed down to the naval force; it mandates the harmonization of policies, technological ability, and institutional responsibility.

The concept of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) developed by Buzan and Waever (2003) is a complement to the theory. RSCT assumes that there is a clustering of security dynamics in the region due to the fact that states that are geographically close interact with each other in terms of perception of threats, interdependence, and past interactions. Within this kind of complex, insecurity within one state tends to cause spill over effects to the other.

An example of such interdependence in the region is the maritime insecurity in Nigeria. Ships that are sailing near Benin, Togo, and Ghana have fallen victims to piracy that originated in the waters of Nigerian waters. On the same note,

trafficking organizations take advantage of porous maritime borders, connecting criminal organizations in West Africa. In case of RSCT, bilateral security steps are not adequate; collective regional systems are invaluable in curbing common threat.

Combined, both theoretical frameworks help to shed light on the structural logic of maritime insecurity in Nigeria. This is because domestic institutional weaknesses together with porous transnational criminal networks generate externalities in the security of the region in combination with the porous maritime borders. This means that sustained maritime stability must have collective governance structures that go beyond the territorial narrow enforcement.

Maritime Security Problems in Nigeria

Piracy and Armed Robbery

Nigeria is also historically known as a pirate hot region in the Gulf of Guinea. According to the reports provided by the International Maritime Bureau, the region has always contributed to the global kidnapping-for-ransom cases at sea during the period of 2015 to 2020 (IMB, 2020). As opposed to piracy off the Horn of Africa, especially along the Somali coast, where high seas attacks were common, Gulf of Guinea piracy is usually centered on territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). This jurisdictional fact makes enforcing it complex since it leaves much to the coastal states, which have less capability in the sea. In addition, there is the propensity of attacks by Nigerian waters, including the kidnapping of crewmen, the kidnapping of oil tankers and stealing of petroleum cargo.

The financial effects are enormous. Rerouting expenses and security expenses incurred by shipping companies increase the cost of conducting transactions in the maritime trade through increased insurance premiums. These are the cumulative impacts which undermine the competitiveness of Nigeria as a maritime hub, and burden regional trade (Onuoha, 2013).

Oil Theft and Unlawful Bunkering

One of the most economically harmful types of maritime crime in Nigeria is oil theft which is also known as illegal bunkering. Criminal gangs drain pipelines, siphon offshore facilities and run illegal refineries in shore creeks. The stolen crude is sold either in the black market locally or smuggled through the sea routes to foreign markets.

It has been reported that Nigerians have been losing billions of dollars each year in revenues due to this activity which has implied a lack of fiscal stability and investment in the public sector. In addition to economic loss, illegal bunkering is among other causes of environmental degradation through pipeline vandalism and oil spills, which adds to the issue of ecological insecurity of the Niger Delta area. The continuation of the oil theft is an indication of overlap between organized crime, militant networks, and political patronage networks. Governance wise, the phenomenon

exposes loopholes in surveillance, coordination of enforcement and responsibility of institutions in control of maritime.

Drug and Arms Trafficking

The West African region has been gradually turning into a narcotics route between Latin America and the European market. Cocaine and other illegal substances are transshipped via maritime routes along the coast of Nigeria, and due to the absence of stringent coastal surveillance mechanisms, there is no challenge (UNODC, 2021). At the same time, there has been the use of maritime routes to traffic arms, the provision of small arms and light weapons into the hands of criminal gangs and insurgency groups that have been operating in Nigeria and other neighboring states. The spread of illegal weapons raises the level of domestic insecurity and adds to the cycles of violence especially in areas where militancy and organized crime already takes place. These trafficking networks explain why maritime insecurity is transnational. Criminal organizations use lax maritime regulation in one location to influence the overall stability in the region.

Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing

Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) is an unsightly, but strategically important, maritime threat. Nigeria has a significant number of foreign industrial trawlers and domestic operators who have been flouting her EEZ laws, which have reduced the stocks of fish and are compromising the livelihood of the artisanal fishing communities. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), IUU fishing loses West African states hundreds of millions of dollars each year of expected revenue. In Nigeria, the effects go beyond the loss of the economy to food security issues and social unrests in the coastal areas. Besides, ecological vulnerability is also compounded by the environmental degradation as a result of oil spills, illicit trawling, and destruction of habitats within the Nigeria maritime environment. The synergizing nature of resource loss and environmental destruction strengthens grievances as local populations, which are likely a root cause of additional criminal behavior.

Territorial Disputes: The Bakassi Peninsula Case

The Bakassi Peninsula conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon is one of those territorial disputes that had the most significant impact in the West African contemporary nautical history. The battle focused on control of sovereignty of a strategically located and resource-endowed coastal land, at the eastern part of the Gulf of Guinea. The peninsula was also important because it led to the fisheries and other local economic activities as well as the distance to the offshore hydrocarbon reserves and delimiting the boundaries of the maritime edge in the neighbouring waters (ICJ, 2002).

History of the conflict dates back to the boundary agreements during the colonial period especially the Anglo-German Treaty in 1913, which was vague in defining the territorial boundaries between British-ruled Nigeria and German

Kamerun. After the independence, the two states inherited these colonial boundaries on the principle of *uti possidetis juris* but there were different interpretations of treaty provisions that was used to create conflicting sovereignty claims (Bassey, 2008). The situation intensified in the 1990s to military clashes and caused fatalities and a boost in diplomatic tensions. In 1994, Cameroon brought a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), asking it to arbitrate the land and maritime boundary dispute. The ICJ, in 10 October 2002, in its landmark ruling ruled in favour of Cameroon, confirming it to be a sovereign state over Bakassi, and established maritime boundary demarcations between the two states (ICJ, 2002).

The fact that Nigeria was willing to accept the ruling despite its controversial nature domestically was a big step in terms of adhering to the international law and the peaceful mode of resolving disputes. The process of implementation reached its climax in the signing of the Green Tree Agreement brokered by the United Nations in 2006 that provided a gradual withdrawal of the Nigerian administration and military forces in the peninsula. Although the agreement had a significant effect of eliminating interstate tensions and enhanced the diplomatic links of the region, it created internal dissatisfaction in Nigeria especially among the displaced people who considered themselves to be the nationals of Nigeria and were intimidated of political sidelining under the Cameroonian governance (Bassey, 2008).

The case of Bakassi shows the complex overlay of maritime delimitation, the hydrocarbon stakes, sovereignty assertions, and the international adjudication. It shows that geopolitical contestation through historical treaties, resource competition, and legal interpretation is also involved in maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea other than criminality. Significantly, the non-violent settlement of the conflict created a precedent of conflict management by the rule in West Africa that strengthens the normative powers of the international judicial system in the stability of the region.

The Multilateral and Institutional Responses of Nigeria

The Nigerian effort to combat maritime insecurity has integrated regional cooperation models, institutional capacity-building efforts, and internal legal reforms. These initiatives are an indicator that the maritime threats that the Gulf of Guinea is facing are transnational in nature and they will not be solved effectively by unilateral enforcement.

Regional Frameworks

Nigeria is on the forefront of maritime security coordination in Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Gulf of Guinea Commission. One of the major achievements of the collaboration between the regions was the 2013 Yaounde Code of Conduct which was signed by West and Central African states. The Code introduced an information sharing interregional structure, coordinated responses to piracy, armed robberies, as well as other illegal maritime activities (Onuoha, 2013). The Yaounde

Architecture proposed a system of Maritime Multinational Coordination Centres (MMCCs) that would help to increase operational synergy within states of the coastlines. The framework aimed to minimize jurisdictional fragmentation through institutionalizing channels of communication and exchange of intelligence and enhance collective maritime domain awareness. However, there are still issues of implementation such as resource limitation, unequal political devotion, and technological differences among the involved states. Although the framework constitutes normative advancement, the success of the operations depends on the ability to maintain their funding and institutional change.

Maritime Trade Information Sharing Centre (MTISC-GoG) 6.2

The Gulf of Guinea Maritime Trade Information Sharing Centre (MTISC-GoG) was set up to enhance maritime domain awareness and provide real time information exchange between the national maritime operational bases and the international law enforcement agencies like INTERPOL. The Centre has a 24-hour reporting system where vessels report suspicious activities and get security advisory. MTISC-GoG helps to improve the situation awareness and early warning systems to help in enhancing coordinated response to piracy and trafficking activities.

Governance-wise, the project depicts the move towards the networked management of maritime security whereby the central focus of deterrence is the transparency of information and the inter-agency working together. Nevertheless, it is limited in its effectiveness due to the poor technological integration between national systems and institutional capacity difference between the participating states.

National Legal Reforms

On the domestic front, in 2019, Nigeria issued the Suppression of Piracy and Other Maritime Offences (SPOMO) Act, which is a notable legal move. The Act also criminalizes piracy, armed robbery in the sea, and other related maritime crimes in line with the international standards of law especially as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Before the enactment of the SPOMO Act, the country of Nigeria did not have a legal framework that provides a specific legal remedy on the issue of piracy, and this restricted the ability to prosecute the involved parties and generated jurisdictional confusion. The law empowered the judiciary to prosecute maritime-related offenses, and it is an indicator that Nigeria is determined to harmonize national laws with the conventions of maritime law (UNODC, 2021).

Nevertheless, the legislative reform is not enough. Implementing this effectively needs the capacity of the prosecutor, independence of the judiciary, sufficient training of the personnel involved in maritime law enforcement and enduring political good will. The difficulty, however, is not so much in codification of the law but in a matter of institutional translation.

Persistent Challenges

In Nigeria and the greater Gulf of Guinea, institutional and legal changes have not succeeded in removing systemic factors that limit maritime security despite the significant institutional and legal reforms currently in place. These limits are structural and not occasional due to their entrenched governance and capacity limits.

Scurry Naval Resources and Intelligence Surveillance

The maritime enforcement agencies of Nigeria are experiencing gap in operation capacity such as an underprivilege of offshore patrol vessels, old-fashioned fleets, lack of aerial reconnaissance platforms, and incomplete radar coverage. Even though efforts like the Deep Blue Project have enhanced maritime domain awareness (MDA), it is still unevenly distributed along the entire coastline and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Nigeria. Inadequate coordination among satellite intelligence, coast radar and command and control facilities undermines the ability to respond quickly (UNODC, 2021).

Corruptness among Maritime Regulatory Institutions

Enforcement credibility has been undermined by point in port authority as well as custom services and maritime regulatory bodies. Anti-smuggling and anti-bunkering efforts are weakened by informal payments, cooperation with criminal networks, regulatory capture and the like. The existence of such institutional weaknesses minimizes deterrence and enables illegitimate networks to evolve rapidly to the enforcement strategies (Onuoha, 2013).

Poor Inter-Agency Co-ordination.

There are various players in the maritime governance in Nigeria with the navy, marine police, customs service, and maritime administration agencies being among the actors. The overlapping of mandates, bureaucratic rivalry and lack of coordination in intelligence sharing mechanisms make operations ineffective in most of the cases. Lack of an integrated maritime command system also makes it difficult to undertake joint operations, and also compromises strategic coherence.

Towards the Margins of the Coastal Communities

Coastal regions, especially the Niger Delta, are areas of economic degradation, unemployment of youths, environmental degradation, and low state presence, which provide favorable conditions of piracy and oil stealing networks recruiting. Maritime crime as a part of this is not necessarily opportunistic but rather part of grievances in political economy with resource extraction and distributive injustice.

Poorly coordinated Implementation of Environmental Laws

Lack of effective enforcement of environmental protection policies particularly in relation to oil spills and illegal

trawling is a contributor to the degradation of the ecology. The environmental insecurity is one of the factors that contribute to maritime crime indirectly by destabilizing fisheries livelihoods and aggravating the community grievances.

In a broader sense, maritime insecurity in Nigeria cannot be disaggregated with the lack of governance in the Niger Delta. Due to oil money, countries have obtained a considerable amount of revenue on a national level, but the outcomes of local development are not even. The enforcement-oriented maritime approaches stand a chance of addressing symptoms over structural causes of those without employment, inadequate infrastructure and political marginalization. Durable maritime stability, according to the governance theory, necessitates the institutional legitimacy and the coercive capability (Bueger, 2015).

Policy Recommendations

To develop a sustainable maritime security architecture of Nigeria, technological modernization, legal harmonization, governance reform and socioeconomic inclusion have to be integrated. The policy directions that are important include the following:

- **Enhance Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)**

To enhance situational awareness of its EEZ, Nigeria has to increase the number of integrated coastal radar systems, the use of unmanned aerial systems (UAS), and increase its ability to monitor its waters through satellite surveillance. The investments should focus on interoperability on the naval command centers and on regional coordination platforms that are set under the Yaounde Architecture. The predictive threat assessment would be improved with the help of advanced data analytics and automated systems of vessel tracking.

- **Enhance Legal Harmonization in the Region**

The situation in which there are gaps in anti-piracy laws across states in the Gulf of Guinea provides loopholes to criminal gangs. Consistency and harmonization of domestic maritime laws with international conventions (especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)) and the maintenance of similarity in prosecution standards in the countries within each region would enhance the deterrent effect. This needs more judicial cooperation in terms of extradition agreements and mutual legal assistance systems.

- **Encourage Maritime Governance at the Community Level**

Commercial fisheries operators, along with youth groups and local leaders in communities should be involved in community based ways of engagement with artisanal fisheries through surveillance and reporting systems. Clearly, intelligence collection can be enhanced by establishing formal community liaison units connected to maritime operational centers, and the levels of

hostility between the enforcement agencies and the local populations could be decreased. Security measures should be supplemented with socioeconomic development programs to reduce the process of entering criminal networks.

- **Anti-Corruption Reform and Institutional Accountability**

The maritime agencies need to have better oversight systems, procurement procedures and autonomous auditing arrangements. The institutional integrity would be reinforced with the help of professionalization of staff, specialized training on maritime law enforcement, and performance-related assessment mechanisms. The frameworks related to anti-corruption must be incorporated into the maritime governance frameworks to decrease their collusion with illegal actors.

- **Sustainable Resource Management**

To increase the fight against the Illegitimate, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, it is necessary to have the following procedures, which are: vessel monitoring systems (VMS), a tougher licensing regime, and joint patrols with the neighboring states. The measures of environmental monitoring should be strengthened to deal with oil spills, destruction of habitats, and pollution of the marine environment. The use of sustainable fisheries governance would lead to less ecological degradation and food security in the coastal communities.

Together, these actions are an indication of a transition between reactive enforcement and preventative governance, namely, by incorporating technology, law, community involvement, and institutional change into an expression of a broad maritime security approach.

Conclusion

To analyse maritime security in Nigeria, it cannot be analytically isolated to the wider geopolitical and economic processes of the Gulf of Guinea. The interaction between criminal networks, ecological degradation, and deep-rooted structural inequalities is the combination of historical territorial conflicts that creates a complex and multifaceted security environment. The Bakassi Peninsula conflict highlights the geopolitical and legal aspects of the maritime governance, and it shows how regional stability is defined by the elements of sovereignty, competition over resources, and international adjudication. At the same time, piracy, oil theft, trafficking, and IUU fishing demonstrate that there are continued enforcement and governance issues.

Nigeria has shown dedication in legislative reform, adherence to international decisions by the judiciary and its membership in multilateral security structures. But sustained maritime security cannot be achieved by just successful episodes of enforcement. It requires a unified governance framework that incorporates technological update, local coordination, institutional responsibility and social-economic participation.

The need to have stability in the maritime sphere in Nigeria is not only a domestic security aim but it is a strategic priority to the collective security system of West Africa. The provision of a secure maritime environment in the Gulf of Guinea would contribute to easing the trading process, safeguarding energy infrastructure, enhancing the ecological sustainability, and the normative power of cooperative regional security governance.

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