
PIRACY AND WATERWAYS SECURITY IN NIGERIA

Emmanuel Ugbedeojó Ameh

Department of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution

National Open University of Nigeria, Nigeria

eameh@noun.edu.ng

Abstract

Piracy poses a significant maritime security challenge in Nigeria, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea region, impacting vessel safety, crew welfare, and economic activities. This research examines the root causes, patterns, and impacts of piracy on Nigerian waters, as well as the effectiveness of existing security measures. The study employs a qualitative research design, conducting a comprehensive analysis of literature and empirical evidence. Rational Choice Theory serves as the theoretical framework, suggesting that pirates weigh the potential gains against the risks of engaging in criminal activities. Key findings from the literature review highlight the prevalence of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, driven by factors such as poverty, unemployment, weak law enforcement, and the lucrative nature of maritime crime. Current security measures, while showing some progress, face challenges due to resource constraints, coordination gaps, and limited regional cooperation. The implications of piracy extend beyond immediate security concerns, inflicting significant economic costs on Nigeria's maritime industry, deterring investment, and hampering regional development efforts. In conclusion, addressing piracy in Nigerian waters requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach. The study recommends increasing maritime surveillance and patrols, strengthening regional collaboration and information-sharing, amongst others.

Keywords: Piracy, Waterways, Security, Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria

Introduction

Piracy remains a persistent global threat to maritime security, with significant consequences for international trade, regional stability, and human welfare. Historically, piracy has plagued various regions, from the Barbary Coast in the 19th century to the Malacca Straits in the 20th century (Chalk, 2008). In recent decades, the Gulf of Guinea, particularly the waters off the coast of West Africa, has emerged as a hotspot for piracy, with a surge in attacks that has attracted international attention and concern (Nnadi *et al.*, 2016; Shane, Piza, and Silva, 2018).

The prevalence of piracy in sub-Saharan Africa, and specifically in the Gulf of Guinea region, is a complex issue rooted in socio-economic disparities, weak governance, and the lucrative nature of maritime crime (Nnadi *et al.*, 2016). Nigeria, as the regional economic powerhouse and a major player in the global oil trade, has been disproportionately affected by this scourge (Abdelfattah, 2017). Incidents of piracy, including armed attacks and crew kidnappings, have disrupted maritime trade and investment, jeopardized the lives of seafarers, and hindered socio-economic development in Nigeria and the surrounding region (Abdelfattah, 2017; Onuoha, 2013).

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has been on the rise since the early 2000s, with Nigeria being the epicenter of these attacks (Onuoha, 2013). The region has surpassed the waters off Somalia as the world's most dangerous for piracy, accounting for over 90% of global kidnappings for ransom at sea (Onuoha, 2013; Daxecker and Prins, 2015). Factors such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of economic opportunities in coastal communities, coupled with weak law enforcement and corruption, have contributed to the growth of piracy in the region (Onuoha, 2013; Daxecker and Prins, 2015).

The impact of piracy on Nigeria's maritime security and economic development cannot be overstated. Piracy has led to increased insurance premiums for vessels operating in the region, higher costs for goods and services, and a decline in foreign direct investment (Onuoha, 2013; Daxecker and Prins, 2015). Moreover, the threat of piracy has forced shipping companies to adopt costly security measures, such as hiring armed guards and rerouting vessels, further increasing the costs of maritime trade (Onuoha, 2013).

In response to these security threats, this research aims to examine the phenomenon of piracy and waterways security in Nigeria comprehensively. This study aims to: (1) examine piracy in Nigerian waters and the Gulf of Guinea; (2) assess the impact of piracy on maritime safety and economic activities; (3) evaluate existing security measures and frameworks; and (4) propose strategies and policy recommendations to combat piracy and promote sustainable maritime development in Nigeria.

Through a comprehensive analysis of the literature, empirical evidence, and theoretical frameworks, this research endeavours to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of piracy in Nigerian waters. The existing literature highlights the prevalence of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and its impact on Nigeria's maritime security and economy. However, this study aims to address key gaps, including the need for a deeper understanding of the drivers and patterns of piracy in the Nigerian context, a comprehensive assessment of its multifaceted impacts, an evaluation of current security measures and frameworks, and the development of collaborative strategies for enhancing regional cooperation to combat this challenge. By identifying gaps in current knowledge and synthesizing existing research findings, the study aims to inform policy recommendations and practical interventions for improving waterways security and combating piracy effectively. Ultimately, the goal is to foster greater collaboration and coordination among stakeholders and develop sustainable strategies for safeguarding Nigeria's maritime domain and ensuring safe and secure navigation in the Gulf of Guinea region. The main argument of the research is that piracy poses a significant threat to maritime security in Nigeria, impacting economic activities, endangering lives, and undermining regional stability. Effective measures to combat piracy and enhance waterways security are crucial for safeguarding maritime interests and promoting socio-economic development in the region.

Methodology

This systematic qualitative study examined piracy in Nigerian waters and the Gulf of Guinea. Data was collected through a comprehensive review of relevant literature from secondary sources, including academic journals, government reports, and industry publications published within the last 20 years. The materials were selected based on their relevance to the study, with a focus on empirical studies that served as data for analysis and discussion. The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which identified recurring themes and patterns related to piracy's root causes, evolving patterns, and impacts on Nigeria's maritime sector. The study also developed strategies for enhancing waterways security through regional cooperation and international partnerships.

Literature Review

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea

Piracy, in the context of maritime law, refers to criminal acts committed at sea, typically against ships, crews, or passengers, with the intent to steal property, extort ransom, or cause harm (Joubert, 2013). Piracy encompasses a range of illicit activities, each with distinct characteristics and motives (Ibrahim,

2019). It comes basically in three forms: hijacking, robbery, and kidnapping. Hijacking involves seizing control of a vessel by force or threat of force, with the aim of diverting its course or commandeering its cargo or passengers for ransom or political purposes. Hijackers may use weapons, coercion, or deception to gain control of the ship and exert influence over its crew and occupants (Schoeman and Haefele, 2013). Maritime robbery entails theft or unlawful taking of property from ships or maritime facilities, often through armed robbery or boarding (Nnadi, et al, 2016; Beckman, 2023). Pirates target vulnerable vessels, such as fishing boats, cargo ships, or oil tankers, to steal valuable commodities, equipment, or personal belongings. Robbery may occur during transit, anchorage, or port operations, posing significant security risks to maritime commerce and navigation (Shane, Piza, and Silva, 2018). Piracy-related kidnappings involve the abduction of crew members, passengers, or other individuals aboard ships or at sea, usually for ransom or political leverage. Kidnappers may target specific individuals for their nationality, occupation, or perceived value, aiming to extract monetary or strategic concessions from ship owners, governments, or international organizations. Hostages may endure captivity, abuse, or exploitation until their release is negotiated or forcibly secured (Adedanya, 2023).

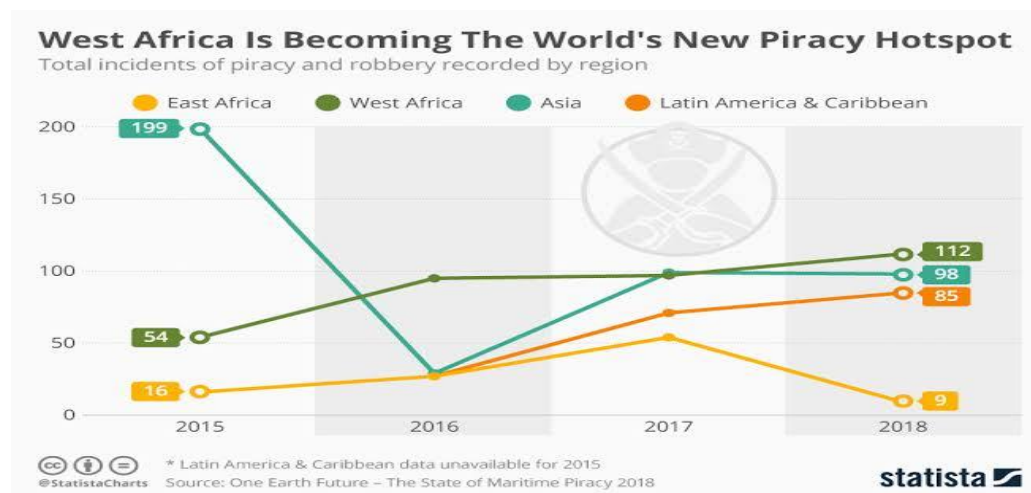


Figure 1: Chart showing the line graph on piracy trend in the world. Source: Statista, 2024.

The motives behind piracy are diverse, driven by economic incentives, political grievances, territorial disputes, and criminal involvement (Tominaga, 2017). Common motivations include financial gain, resource depletion in regions with scarce maritime resources, political instability fostering lawlessness and corruption, and piracy intersecting with geopolitical rivalries and state-sponsored activities (McCook, 2020).

Impact of Piracy on Waterways Security in the Gulf of Guinea

Waterways security plays a pivotal role in facilitating maritime trade, economic development, and regional stability in the Gulf of Guinea by ensuring the safe and efficient movement of goods, people, and resources through maritime routes (Okeke and Ezeji, 2023; Ogonnaya *et al.*, 2023). However, the persistent threat of piracy in the region poses significant challenges to maintaining secure waterways.

Piracy disrupts the flow of maritime trade and commerce, deterring investment and hampering economic growth in coastal communities and nations dependent on maritime activities (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2019; Lane and Pretes, 2020). The targeting of vessels, kidnapping of crew members, and disruption of shipping operations create uncertainty and increase the costs associated with maritime trade in the Gulf of Guinea (Onuoha, 2013; Daxecker and Prins, 2015). This, in turn, undermines the competitiveness of regional ports and maritime industries, limiting their potential for growth and development.

Moreover, piracy poses a direct threat to the safety and security of seafarers, passengers, and maritime infrastructure in the Gulf of Guinea. The increasing sophistication of pirate tactics, such as the use of advanced technology and the shift towards kidnap-for-ransom operations, has heightened the risks faced by vessels operating in the region (Adedanya, 2023; Beckman, 2023). This not only jeopardizes the well-being of individuals working in the maritime sector but also undermines confidence in the region's ability to provide secure waterways for international trade and investment.

Prevalence and Patterns of Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea

The Gulf of Guinea is a large geographical region located off the western coast of Africa, stretching from Senegal in the north to Angola in the south. It is bordered by numerous countries, including Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Sao Tome and Principe, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola (Kamal-Deen, 2015; Popoola and Olajuyigbe, 2023). It is a strategic region but despite its economic significance, the region still faces challenges such as piracy, illegal fishing activity, and inadequate maritime governance. Efforts to address these challenges require regional cooperation and sustainable management of marine resources (Nnadi, et al, 2016; Beckman, 2023; Adedanya, 2023). Several factors contribute to this prevalence, including weak law enforcement and governance structures, socio-economic disparities, and complex geopolitical dynamics (Nnadi et al, 2016; Popoola and Olajuyigbe, 2023).

Weak law enforcement and governance in coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea create fertile ground for pirate activities. Inadequate maritime law enforcement capabilities, including limited patrol vessels, insufficient training, and corruption within maritime agencies, contribute to the inability to effectively police maritime territories and deter pirate attacks (UN, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). Additionally, porous borders and vast maritime territories make it challenging to monitor and control illicit activities, providing pirates with opportunities to operate with impunity (Adedanya, 2023; Beckman, 2023). Socio-economic conditions also play a significant role in fueling piracy in the region. High levels of poverty, unemployment, and limited economic opportunities in coastal communities drive individuals to engage in piracy as a means of livelihood. The lure of quick financial gain from ransom payments, stolen goods, and illegal trade further incentivizes piracy activities, especially among marginalized and vulnerable populations (Abubakar, 2016).

Geopolitical dynamics, including territorial disputes, ethnic tensions, and competition for maritime resources, contribute to the prevalence of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. Disputes over fishing rights, oil exploration, and maritime boundaries create tensions between neighboring states, leading to insecurity and instability in the region (Onuoha, 2010; Osinowo, 2015). Non-state actors, such as rebel groups and criminal syndicates, exploit these vulnerabilities to engage in pirate attacks and other illicit activities, exacerbating maritime security challenges (Gana, et al, 2023; Okafor-Yarwood, et al, 2024).

Gaps in the Literature

The existing literature provides valuable insights into the prevalence of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and its impact on Nigeria's maritime security and economy. However, several gaps in the literature warrant further investigation. First, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the drivers and patterns of piracy in the Nigerian context. While existing studies have examined the general factors contributing to piracy in the region (Nnadi *et al.*, 2016; Onuoha, 2013), a more in-depth analysis of the specific dynamics of piracy in Nigerian waters is required.

Second, the literature lacks a comprehensive assessment of the multifaceted impacts of piracy. The existing studies highlight the disruption to maritime trade, investment, and seafarer safety (Onuoha, 2013; Daxecker and Prins, 2015), but a more holistic evaluation of the economic, social, and regional

implications is needed. Third, the effectiveness of current security measures and legal frameworks remains unclear. The literature suggests challenges in the implementation and enforcement of anti-piracy efforts (Onuoha, 2013; Daxecker and Prins, 2015), warranting a closer examination of the strengths, limitations, and areas for improvement in Nigeria's approach to waterways security. Finally, the literature has an insufficient focus on collaborative, multi-stakeholder strategies. While the need for a coordinated response involving government authorities, industry stakeholders, and international partners is acknowledged (Onuoha, 2013; Daxecker and Prins, 2015), the specific mechanisms for enhancing regional and global cooperation require further exploration.

Empirical Review

Piracy threatens maritime security in Nigerian waters. This report analyzes piracy incidents to understand their frequency, location, and nature. Hijackings, robberies, kidnappings, and other criminal activities were noted (Joubert, 2013; Ibrahim, 2019). Numerous piracy incidents occurred, mainly hijackings and robberies targeting commercial vessels. The Gulf of Guinea saw the highest activity, with hotspots including specific maritime routes. Trends fluctuated due to seasonal variations and law enforcement efforts. Persistent piracy threatens maritime activities (Nnadi, et al, 2016; Beckman, 2023). Enhanced maritime security, law enforcement, and regional cooperation are crucial for combating piracy and ensuring safety. Addressing piracy requires collaborative efforts to mitigate risks and promote safe maritime trade in Nigerian waters (Tominaga, 2017; McCook, 2020). Piracy inflicts significant economic costs on Nigeria's maritime industry, encompassing losses for shipping companies, insurance providers, and port operators. Disruptions caused by piracy, including vessel hijackings, cargo theft, and ransom payments, result in substantial financial losses (Abubakar, 2016; UN, 2021). These disruptions impede trade flows, deter investment in maritime infrastructure, and hamper regional development efforts. Quantifying the economic impact reveals the urgency of addressing piracy through enhanced maritime security measures and international cooperation (Gana, et al, 2023; Okafor-Yarwood, et al, 2024).

Nigeria's maritime enforcement agencies, particularly the Nigerian Navy, play a crucial role in combating piracy and protecting maritime assets. Despite possessing adequate vessels and trained personnel, resource constraints and coordination gaps hinder optimal performance (Abubakar, 2023; Oyewole, 2023). While employing strategies like patrols and joint operations with international partners, challenges such as insufficient resources and governance issues persist. Enhancing effectiveness requires investment in infrastructure, inter-agency coordination, and regional cooperation to address piracy threats comprehensively in the Gulf of Guinea (Nwalozie, 2020; Kalu, 2021).

Nigeria collaborates internationally to enhance maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, partnering with neighboring countries, regional organizations, and multilateral initiatives (Garba, 2022; Eruaga, 2023). While joint patrols and information-sharing improve coordination, challenges remain in operationalizing agreements and addressing resource constraints. Sustainable progress demands ongoing commitment and capacity-building to effectively combat piracy threats and promote regional stability (Osinowo, 2015; Hasan and Hasan, 2017). Nkomadu (2022) examines legal prosecutions related to piracy in Nigeria, focusing on frameworks, processes, outcomes, challenges, and areas for improvement. Nigeria's SPOMO Act of 2019 provides the legal basis for prosecuting piracy and maritime crimes perpetrators (Ibrahim, 2019).

Piracy in Nigeria has profound humanitarian consequences, affecting seafarers, coastal communities, and vulnerable populations. Incidents involving crew injuries, fatalities, hostage-taking, and ransom payments inflict physical harm and emotional trauma on victims and their families. Seafarers endure prolonged captivity, psychological distress, and uncertain futures, while coastal communities face disruptions to livelihoods and increased insecurity (Kalu, 2016; Alvarez, 2020). Vulnerable populations, including fishermen and residents of remote coastal villages, are particularly susceptible to piracy-related

violence and extortion. Documenting these humanitarian concerns underscores the need for concerted efforts to address piracy and safeguard human security in Nigeria's maritime domain (Udensi, Etu, and Chieke, 2014; Oyewole, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Rational Choice Theory, developed by various scholars such as Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Gary Becker, suggests that individuals make decisions based on rational assessments of the costs and benefits associated with different courses of action (Beaudry-Cyr, 2015; Mehlkop and Graef, 2010). Applied to piracy, this theory implies that pirates weigh the potential gains from engaging in criminal activities, such as theft, hijacking, or kidnapping, against the risks of getting caught or facing retaliation (Ibrahim, 2019). Factors influencing these calculations include the expected value of loot, the likelihood of successful attacks, the presence of law enforcement or security measures, and the severity of potential penalties (Mehlkop and Graef, 2010).

In the context of the Gulf of Guinea, where piracy is prevalent, pirates may target vessels carrying valuable cargo, such as oil or minerals, with the expectation of significant financial rewards (Mehlkop and Graef, 2010). Additionally, weak law enforcement, limited maritime surveillance, and political instability may reduce the perceived risks of piracy and increase the likelihood of successful attacks (Nkomadu, 2022).

By understanding the rational calculations made by pirates, policymakers and security agencies can develop more effective strategies to combat piracy. These may include enhancing maritime surveillance and patrols, improving coordination among regional navies and law enforcement agencies, implementing stricter penalties for piracy-related offenses, and addressing underlying socio-economic factors that contribute to criminal behaviour. Overall, Rational Choice Theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing the decision-making processes of pirates and devising targeted interventions to enhance waterways security in the Gulf of Guinea.

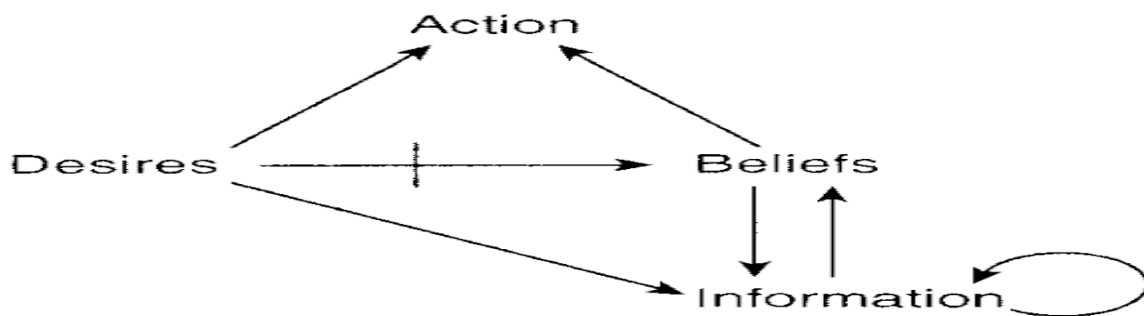


Figure 2: A model showing the components of Rational Choice Theory. Source: Web.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The research on piracy in Nigerian waters highlights frequent incidents targeting commercial vessels, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea. Factors contributing to piracy include economic motivations and governance issues within maritime enforcement agencies. Despite possessing resources, challenges hinder optimal performance. Enhanced maritime security, law enforcement, and regional cooperation are crucial for combating piracy, which inflicts significant economic costs and humanitarian consequences. Legal frameworks provide the basis for prosecution, but collaboration with neighboring countries and multilateral initiatives are essential for sustained progress in ensuring safety and stability in Nigerian waters.

Analysis of Piracy Incidents

The analysis of piracy incidents in Nigerian waters, as documented by Joubert (2013), Ibrahim (2019), Nnadi *et al.* (2016), and Beckman (2023), provides valuable insights into the trends, patterns, and underlying factors contributing to these attacks. Hijackings, robberies, kidnappings, and other criminal activities are prevalent, with commercial vessels being the primary target. The Gulf of Guinea emerges as a hotspot for piracy, with specific maritime routes experiencing higher levels of activity. Seasonal variations and law enforcement efforts contribute to fluctuations in piracy trends.

Factors contributing to piracy in Nigerian waters are multifaceted. Economic motivations, including cargo theft and ransom payments, are significant drivers, as highlighted by Abubakar (2016) and the UN (2021). Additionally, governance issues, resource constraints, and coordination gaps within Nigeria's maritime enforcement agencies, as discussed by Abubakar (2023) and Oyewole (2023), create vulnerabilities that pirate groups exploit. To address these factors, it is crucial to increase the presence of maritime surveillance vessels and conduct regular patrols in piracy-prone areas, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea. This will enhance the ability to detect and deter pirate attacks, as well as respond quickly to incidents. Additionally, strengthening collaboration and information-sharing mechanisms among regional navies, coast guards, and law enforcement agencies will improve the coordination and effectiveness of anti-piracy efforts.

Assessment of Security Measures

The effectiveness of current security measures and initiatives to combat piracy in Nigerian waters is assessed based on findings from Abubakar (2023), Oyewole (2023), Nwalozie (2020), and Kalu (2021). While Nigeria's maritime enforcement agencies, particularly the Nigerian Navy, possess adequate vessels and trained personnel, resource constraints and governance issues hinder their optimal performance. Strategies such as patrols and joint operations with international partners are employed, but challenges persist due to insufficient resources and coordination gaps.

Enhancing the effectiveness of security measures requires investment in infrastructure, inter-agency coordination, and regional cooperation. Nwalozie (2020) and Kalu (2021) emphasize the importance of addressing these underlying issues to comprehensively combat piracy threats in the Gulf of Guinea. Sustainable progress demands ongoing commitment and capacity-building to effectively deter piracy and promote regional stability, as highlighted by Osinowo (2015) and Hasan and Hasan (2017). To support these efforts, it is essential to enact and enforce legislation with harsher penalties for piracy-related offenses to serve as a deterrent to potential pirates. This should be accompanied by the allocation of resources to invest in maritime infrastructure and technology, such as surveillance systems and communication networks, to enhance the capabilities of maritime enforcement agencies.

Implications for Maritime Security

The broader implications of piracy on maritime security, as discussed by Gana *et al.* (2023), Okafor-Yarwood *et al.* (2024), Garba (2022), and Eruaga (2023), extend beyond immediate security concerns. Piracy inflicts significant economic costs on Nigeria's maritime industry, disrupting trade flows, deterring investment, and hampering regional development efforts. The quantification of these economic impacts underscores the urgency of addressing piracy through enhanced maritime security measures and international cooperation.

Moreover, piracy has profound humanitarian consequences, affecting seafarers, coastal communities, and vulnerable populations. Incidents involving injuries, fatalities, hostage-taking, and ransom payments inflict physical harm and emotional trauma, as documented by Kalu (2016) and Alvarez (2020). Vulnerable populations, including fishermen and residents of remote coastal villages, are particularly susceptible to piracy-related violence and extortion, highlighting the need for concerted efforts to safeguard human security in Nigeria's maritime domain, as emphasized by Udensi, Etu, and Chieke (2014) and Oyewole (2023).

To address these implications, it is crucial to implement socio-economic development programs in coastal communities to provide alternative livelihoods and reduce the incentives for engaging in piracy. Additionally, strengthening partnerships with neighboring countries, regional organizations, and multilateral initiatives will enhance maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea through shared resources, expertise, and intelligence. Finally, providing support and assistance to victims of piracy, including medical care, psychological counseling, and legal aid, is essential to mitigate the long-term impacts of these incidents on individuals and communities.

Implications for Theory

The findings from the research on piracy in Nigerian waters provide implications for Rational Choice Theory in understanding criminal behavior, particularly in the context of maritime piracy. Pirates in Nigerian waters, as rational actors, weigh the potential gains from engaging in criminal activities against the risks of getting caught or facing retaliation. Factors such as the expected value of loot, the likelihood of successful attacks, the presence of law enforcement or security measures, and the severity of potential penalties influence their decision-making process. In the Gulf of Guinea, where piracy is prevalent, pirates target vessels carrying valuable cargo, expecting significant financial rewards. Weak law enforcement, limited maritime surveillance, and political instability further reduce the perceived risks of piracy and increase the likelihood of successful attacks. Implications for Rational Choice Theory include the need for policymakers and security agencies to develop more effective strategies to combat piracy. These strategies should focus on enhancing maritime surveillance and patrols, improving coordination among regional navies and law enforcement agencies, implementing stricter penalties for piracy-related offenses, and addressing underlying socio-economic factors that contribute to criminal behavior.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has examined the issue of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and its impact on Nigeria's maritime sector. The findings reveal complex drivers behind these criminal activities, including economic motivations, governance issues, and resource constraints within maritime enforcement agencies. The assessment of current security measures highlights both strengths and limitations in Nigeria's efforts to combat piracy. While agencies possess adequate resources, coordination gaps, insufficient funding, and regional cooperation challenges have hindered their ability to effectively deter and respond to piracy threats. Addressing these underlying issues is crucial for strengthening waterways security. The broader implications of piracy on Nigeria's maritime sector and regional stability are far-reaching. The economic costs associated with disrupted trade flows, deterred investments, and increased operational expenses have undermined the competitiveness of the country's ports and maritime industries. Moreover, the humanitarian consequences, including trauma inflicted on seafarers and coastal communities, have exacerbated social and developmental challenges. The main argument of the research is that piracy poses a significant threat to maritime security in Nigeria, impacting economic activities, endangering lives, and undermining

regional stability. Effective measures to combat piracy and enhance waterways security are crucial for safeguarding maritime interests and promoting socio-economic development in the region.

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