Maritime Crime Pathways in the Gulf of Guinea and Their Effects On Nigeria's Economic Interests

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Abstract
The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) remained one of the world's most strategically important maritime regions because of its vital role in global trade, energy transportation, fisheries, and maritime commerce. As the largest economy and leading oil producer in the region, Nigeria had significant economic interests that depended on the security and stability of the Gulf. However, persistent maritime crimes including piracy, armed robbery at sea, crude oil theft, illegal fishing, drug trafficking, and human trafficking continued to undermine maritime governance and economic development. This study examined the effects of maritime crimes on Nigeria's economic interests in the Gulf of Guinea using a qualitative research design and thematic analysis of secondary data. Data were drawn from reports and publications of the European Commission (2025), International Maritime Bureau (2024), International Maritime Organization (2025), United Nations Conference reviews (2024), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2021), and other relevant scholarly sources. The findings revealed that maritime crimes significantly reduced oil revenues, disrupted maritime trade, discouraged foreign direct investment, depleted fisheries resources, and constrained the realization of Nigeria's blue economy objectives. Although initiatives such as the Deep Blue Project and regional maritime security frameworks contributed to improved surveillance and enforcement, challenges including illegal fishing, crude oil theft, and transnational organized crime remained prevalent. Guided by Routine Activity Theory, the study argued that the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and inadequate maritime guardianship created conditions that facilitated these crimes. The study concluded that strengthening integrated maritime governance, enhancing law enforcement capacity, addressing the socioeconomic drivers of maritime crime, expanding regional and international cooperation, and promoting sustainable blue economy policies were essential for safeguarding Nigeria's economic interests in the Gulf of Guinea.

Keywords: Maritime crimes, Gulf of Guinea, piracy, maritime security, blue economy.

Introduction

The maritime domain has become increasingly important in the contemporary global economy due to its role in facilitating international trade, energy transportation, fisheries, and resource exploitation. The Gulf of Guinea is one of Africa's most economically significant maritime regions, extending from Senegal to Angola and serving as a major route for global shipping and petroleum exports. Nigeria occupies a strategic position within the Gulf of Guinea and derives substantial economic benefits from maritime activities. Nigeria's maritime sector contributes significantly to national development through crude oil exports, port operations, shipping services, fisheries, and emerging blue economy initiatives. Approximately 90 percent of Nigeria's international trade is conducted through maritime transportation, making maritime security essential to national economic growth (Mohammed & Dalaklis, 2024). However, maritime crimes continue to threaten these economic interests.

The Gulf of Guinea has historically been associated with piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal fishing, oil theft, human trafficking, and smuggling activities. These crimes increase shipping costs, reduce government revenue, discourage foreign investment, and undermine regional stability. Despite significant improvements in maritime security and a reduction in piracy incidents in recent years, maritime criminal networks continue to adapt and exploit vulnerabilities within the region (Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2024). The economic implications of maritime crimes extend beyond direct financial losses. Maritime insecurity negatively affects foreign direct investment (FDI), which is essential for economic growth and development. Investors generally seek stable and secure environments where business operations can be conducted with minimal risk. Persistent reports of piracy, oil theft, and maritime criminality may create perceptions of instability, discouraging investment in sectors such as shipping, oil and gas, fisheries, tourism, and port infrastructure.

Consequently, understanding the relationship between maritime crimes and Nigeria's economic interest is therefore essential for effective policy formulation and sustainable maritime governance. A secure maritime environment is critical for protecting oil infrastructure, facilitating international trade, attracting foreign investment, supporting fisheries, and advancing the country's blue economy agenda. Policymakers ought to adopt a comprehensive approach that combines maritime security operations, legal reforms, technological innovation, regional cooperation, and socio-economic

development initiatives. Such an approach will not only combat maritime crimes but also create conditions for long-term economic growth and stability in Nigeria and the wider Gulf of Guinea region (Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2025).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology based on thematic analysis to examine the relationship between maritime crimes and Nigeria's economic interest in the Gulf of Guinea. The study relied exclusively on secondary data obtained from credible and authoritative sources. These include peer-reviewed academic journals, books, government publications, policy documents, reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), and other relevant institutional publications relating to maritime security and economic development in the Gulf of Guinea.

The study analyzed data using qualitative thematic analysis, reviewing and interpreting documentary evidence to identify recurring themes, patterns, and relationships concerning maritime crimes, their economic consequences, and the effectiveness of maritime security responses. Through this approach, the study synthesizes existing knowledge. It evaluates trends in maritime governance and security initiatives to provide a comprehensive understanding of how maritime crimes affect Nigeria's economic interests in the Gulf of Guinea.

Conceptual Clarifications

Maritime Crimes in the Gulf of Guinea

Maritime crimes encompass a broad range of illegal activities occurring within maritime spaces. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), maritime crimes include piracy, armed robbery against ships, illegal fishing, trafficking in persons, drug trafficking, and maritime terrorism (UNODC, 2024). Recent studies indicated that although piracy incidents have significantly declined, other forms of maritime crimes remain prevalent in the Gulf of Guinea. Mohammed and Dalaklis (2024) argue that maritime insecurity continues to affect shipping operations and maritime governance despite improved regional security frameworks. Similarly, Okafor-Yarwood et al. (2024) emphasized that technological advancements have improved maritime surveillance, but challenges relating to enforcement and institutional capacity remain significant. Technological developments have transformed both the methods used by maritime criminals and the tools available to law enforcement agencies. Criminal groups increasingly exploit modern navigation systems, encrypted communications, and sophisticated logistics networks, while governments employ satellite monitoring, automatic identification systems, unmanned aerial vehicles, and integrated maritime domain awareness platforms to detect suspicious activities. Effective maritime governance therefore depends on continuous technological adaptation and institutional capacity building.

The legal understanding of maritime crimes is shaped by international instruments such as

the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which provides the legal framework for the use and governance of the world's oceans. Under UNCLOS, piracy consists of illegal acts of violence, detention, or depredation committed for private ends on the high seas against another ship or persons or property on board. However, the broader concept of maritime crimes extends beyond piracy to include offences occurring within territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) that may not satisfy the strict legal definition of piracy but nonetheless threaten maritime security and economic activity (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023).

Within the Gulf of Guinea, maritime crimes have evolved into a complex security challenge with significant regional and international implications. The region is strategically important because it serves as a major route for global shipping and contains some of Africa's largest oil and gas reserves. Consequently, criminal groups are attracted to the economic opportunities presented by maritime trade, offshore energy infrastructure, and marine resources. Over the years, the Gulf of Guinea has been identified as one of the world's most dangerous maritime regions due to the prevalence of piracy and other maritime-related crimes. These activities have affected not only coastal states such as Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, and Benin but also international shipping companies and foreign investors operating in the region.

Piracy and armed robbery against ships have historically been the most visible forms of maritime crime in the Gulf of Guinea. Unlike Somali piracy, which primarily focused on hijacking vessels and demanding ransom for ships, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has often involved violent attacks on vessels, theft of cargo, kidnapping of crew members for ransom, and attacks on offshore oil facilities. These attacks create insecurity along vital shipping routes and increase the cost of maritime transportation. Shipping companies are often compelled to invest in additional security measures, including private security personnel, vessel hardening technologies, and specialized insurance coverage. The resulting increase in operational costs is frequently passed on to consumers through higher transportation and commodity prices (Mohammed & Dalaklis, 2024).

Piracy and Economic Development

Piracy has historically represented one of the most persistent and visible maritime threats in the Gulf of Guinea, posing significant security, economic, and governance challenges for coastal states and the international shipping community. According to Anyika, Obuah, and Asuk (2024), piracy generates both direct and indirect economic costs through increased insurance premiums, security expenditures, loss of cargo, delays in shipping operations, and disruptions to regional and international trade routes. Beyond these immediate financial implications, piracy undermines investor confidence, threatens the livelihoods of coastal communities, and weakens the ability of governments to maximize the economic potential of their maritime resources (Anyika et al., 2024).

Beyond its direct impact on shipping and maritime commerce, piracy significantly affects national economic development by increasing the cost of doing business in affected regions. Maritime transport is the backbone of international trade, with over 80 percent of global merchandise trade by volume carried by sea (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024). Consequently, persistent piracy in the Gulf of Guinea creates uncertainty for international shipping companies, insurers, and investors. Ships transiting high-risk waters often incur additional war-risk insurance premiums, employ private security personnel, or alter their routes to avoid dangerous areas. These measures increase operational costs, which are ultimately reflected in higher freight charges and commodity prices borne by businesses and consumers.

The increased cost of maritime transportation can have ripple effects throughout Nigeria's economy. Import-dependent industries face higher costs for raw materials and machinery, while exporters encounter reduced competitiveness in international markets due to increased logistics expenses. Delays caused by piracy-related security measures may also disrupt supply chains, affecting manufacturing output and commercial activities. In this way, piracy imposes indirect macroeconomic costs that extend beyond the maritime sector and influence inflation, productivity, and trade performance (World Bank, 2023).

The Gulf of Guinea occupies a strategic position in global maritime commerce, serving as a major corridor for the transportation of crude oil, liquefied natural gas, agricultural commodities, and manufactured goods. Nigeria, with its extensive coastline and major seaports, accounts for a substantial share of maritime trade in West Africa. However, the region's economic importance has also made it vulnerable to criminal activities, including piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal bunkering, kidnapping for ransom, smuggling, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2024). For many years, the Gulf of Guinea was regarded as one of the world's most dangerous maritime regions, recording numerous attacks against merchant vessels and offshore installations (International Maritime Bureau [IMB], 2024).

The economic consequences of piracy extend well beyond the immediate costs of stolen cargo or damaged vessels. Shipping companies operating in high-risk areas often incur elevated insurance premiums due to increased exposure to attacks. Vessel owners may also invest heavily in private maritime security personnel, defensive technologies, rerouting strategies, and compliance with enhanced security protocols. These additional expenditures are ultimately transferred to consumers through higher transportation and commodity prices. Furthermore, frequent piracy incidents discourage foreign direct investment in maritime infrastructure and reduce the competitiveness of regional ports compared to safer alternatives (Anyika et al., 2024).

Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing in the Gulf of Guinea

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing remains a major challenge within the Gulf of Guinea. Phayal et al. (2024) found a strong relationship between illegal fishing and maritime piracy, arguing that declining fish stocks and reduced livelihoods among coastal populations can contribute to maritime criminality. The region's abundant marine resources support the livelihoods of millions of people through artisanal and commercial fisheries, while also contributing substantially to national economies through exports, employment, and food supply. However, persistent illegal fishing practices have depleted fish stocks, undermined regulatory frameworks, and weakened the capacity of coastal states to derive maximum benefits from their marine resources (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2024). As a result, IUU fishing has emerged not only as an environmental and economic challenge but also as an important maritime security concern.

Illegal fishing encompasses activities conducted in violation of national laws or international obligations, such as fishing without authorization, operating in prohibited areas, or using banned fishing gear. Unreported fishing refers to catches that are not declared or are misreported to relevant authorities, while unregulated fishing involves activities undertaken in areas or for fish stocks where management measures are absent or ignored (FAO, 2024). Collectively, these practices undermine conservation efforts, distort market competition, and reduce the effectiveness of fisheries management systems.

The Gulf of Guinea has become particularly vulnerable to IUU fishing because of its rich biodiversity, expansive exclusive economic zones, and limited maritime surveillance capabilities in some coastal states. Foreign industrial fishing fleets, domestic operators acting outside regulatory frameworks, and organized criminal networks have all been implicated in exploiting fisheries resources beyond sustainable limits (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). Weak enforcement mechanisms, inadequate monitoring technologies, corruption, and limited institutional capacity further complicate efforts to detect and prosecute offenders.

Nigeria's Economic Interest in the Gulf of Guinea

Nigeria's economic interest in the Gulf of Guinea are extensive and strategically significant, encompassing offshore oil and gas production, maritime trade, fisheries, marine transportation, port operations, coastal tourism, and the emerging blue economy. As the largest economy in West Africa and one of Africa's leading crude oil producers, Nigeria relies heavily on the Gulf of Guinea as a source of national revenue, international trade, and economic development. The country's offshore oil fields contribute a substantial share of government revenue and foreign exchange earnings, making the security and sustainability of the Gulf of Guinea a matter of national strategic importance (Anyika et al., 2024). Consequently, threats to maritime security, including piracy, illegal fishing, oil theft, and smuggling, have direct implications for Nigeria's economic

performance and long-term development prospects.

The Gulf of Guinea occupies a central position in global maritime commerce, stretching along the Atlantic coast of West and Central Africa. Its waters serve as major shipping routes connecting African economies with Europe, the Americas, and Asia. Nigeria's location along this corridor provides considerable economic advantages by facilitating imports, exports, and international investment. Major ports such as Lagos, Onne, Warri, Calabar, and Port Harcourt handle significant volumes of cargo annually, supporting industries ranging from manufacturing and agriculture to energy and consumer goods (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024). Efficient maritime transportation through the Gulf therefore underpins both domestic economic activity and Nigeria's integration into global markets.

One of Nigeria's most important economic interests in the Gulf of Guinea is offshore petroleum production. The country possesses extensive offshore oil and natural gas reserves in shallow and deep-water fields that contribute significantly to hydrocarbon production and export earnings. Petroleum exports remain a major source of government revenue and foreign exchange, financing public expenditure and economic development (World Bank, 2023). The operation of offshore platforms, pipelines, and export terminals depends on a secure maritime environment, as piracy, sabotage, and attacks on offshore infrastructure can disrupt production, increase operational costs, and reduce investor confidence (Anyika et al., 2024; International Maritime Organization, 2025).

Maritime Security

Maritime security is a dynamic and multidimensional concept that encompasses the protection of the maritime domain including oceans, seas, territorial waters, ports, shipping lanes, offshore installations, and marine resources from threats capable of undermining national security, economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and international peace. The concept extends beyond the traditional military protection of coastal territories to include the prevention and mitigation of piracy, armed robbery at sea, maritime terrorism, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, human and drug trafficking, cyber-attacks on maritime infrastructure, marine pollution, and other transnational crimes that affect the safe and lawful use of the seas (Fabinyi et al., 2025).

Historically, maritime security was largely interpreted through a state-centric lens that emphasized naval power, territorial defense, and the protection of sovereign waters. However, the increasing interconnectedness of global trade, technological advancement, and the emergence of non-state actors have significantly broadened its scope. Contemporary perspectives conceptualize maritime security as a governance framework that integrates national defense, economic resilience, environmental stewardship, human security, and international cooperation. In this regard, maritime security is not merely the absence of threats at sea but also the presence of institutional capacities and collaborative mechanisms that ensure the sustainable and lawful use of maritime spaces (Wu, 2026).

The importance of maritime security has grown considerably because maritime

transportation constitutes the backbone of the global economy. More than four-fifths of international merchandise trade by volume is carried by sea, making secure maritime routes indispensable for global supply chains, energy distribution, and international commerce (Fabinyi et al., 2025). Disruptions to maritime activities through piracy, terrorism, or organized crime can therefore generate cascading economic consequences, including increased shipping costs, supply chain interruptions, inflationary pressures, and reduced investor confidence. Consequently, maritime security has become an integral component of national development strategies and international economic governance.

In the context of the Gulf of Guinea, maritime security assumes even greater significance because the region contains major shipping corridors, abundant offshore hydrocarbon resources, productive fisheries, and strategically important ports that support both regional and global trade. Maritime security in this region encompasses the protection of vessels, offshore oil and gas infrastructure, fisheries, ports, and coastal communities from threats such as piracy, armed robbery at sea, crude oil theft, illegal fishing, human trafficking, narcotics smuggling, and maritime terrorism. Although reported piracy incidents have declined significantly from their peak levels in the early 2020s, recent assessments indicate that criminal networks have adapted their methods, and the region continues to experience complex and evolving security challenges that require sustained regional and international cooperation (Atlantic Council, 2025; Yercan et al., 2026).

An important feature of contemporary maritime security scholarship is its recognition that many maritime threats originate from conditions on land. Socioeconomic inequality, youth unemployment, weak governance institutions, corruption, political instability, and ineffective law enforcement create environments in which maritime crimes flourish. In the Gulf of Guinea, for example, persistent developmental challenges in coastal communities and the Niger Delta have historically contributed to piracy, oil theft, and organized criminal activities. This demonstrates that maritime insecurity cannot be addressed solely through naval deployments or military patrols but requires integrated governance approaches that address the political, economic, and social drivers of criminality.

Furthermore, the concept of maritime security increasingly incorporates environmental and human security dimensions. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing depletes fish stocks, threatens marine biodiversity, and undermines the livelihoods of millions of people dependent on coastal resources. Oil spills and illegal bunkering contribute to environmental degradation with long-term ecological and economic consequences. Climate change has also emerged as a maritime security concern because rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and extreme weather events threaten ports, maritime infrastructure, and vulnerable coastal populations. Accordingly, many scholars now argue that protecting marine ecosystems is inseparable from ensuring long-term maritime security and sustainable development (Fabinyi et al., 2025).

From an institutional perspective, maritime security depends heavily on effective governance and international collaboration. Given the transnational nature of maritime threats, no single state can adequately secure the maritime domain in isolation. Regional information-sharing mechanisms, joint naval

patrols, harmonized legal frameworks, intelligence cooperation, and partnerships among governments, international organizations, and the private sector are increasingly recognized as essential components of successful maritime security governance. Recent scholarship emphasizes that resilient maritime security systems require a balanced integration of technological innovation, legal enforcement, environmental management, and multilevel cooperation rather than reliance on coercive power alone (Wu, 2026).

Overall, maritime security should be understood as a comprehensive governance paradigm that safeguards maritime spaces, protects economic interests, preserves marine ecosystems, and promotes international stability. It transcends conventional notions of naval defense by incorporating economic, environmental, technological, and humanitarian considerations. Particularly in strategically significant regions such as the Gulf of Guinea, strengthening maritime security demands coordinated action to address both immediate operational threats and the underlying structural factors that enable maritime crime. This holistic understanding provides a stronger conceptual foundation for analyzing maritime governance and developing sustainable policy interventions capable of enhancing regional and global maritime resilience.

Blue Economy

The blue economy represents a holistic and sustainable approach to the utilization of oceans, seas, rivers, lakes, and other aquatic resources to foster economic growth, enhance livelihoods, generate employment opportunities, and preserve the ecological integrity of marine and freshwater ecosystems. Unlike conventional resource exploitation models that prioritize short-term economic gains, the blue economy advocates for a balance between economic development and environmental stewardship, ensuring that aquatic resources are managed responsibly and remain available for future generations. Contemporary scholars further emphasized that the blue economy extends beyond the exploitation of marine assets to encompass sustainability, technological innovation, inclusive governance, and ecosystem resilience as central pillars of long-term development (Yuan & Failler, 2025).

The growing recognition of climate change, biodiversity loss, and increasing pressure on natural resources has elevated the blue economy to a strategic priority within global sustainable development agendas. As coastal populations expand and demand for food, energy, and maritime services continues to rise, governments and international organizations increasingly regard the blue economy as a viable framework for achieving economic prosperity while safeguarding environmental sustainability. Recent reports published in 2025 and 2026 underscore its potential to stimulate inclusive economic growth, strengthen food security, accelerate the transition to renewable energy, and enhance climate resilience through the sustainable management of marine and freshwater resources.

The scope of the blue economy encompasses a diverse array of sectors and industries linked to aquatic environments. These include fisheries and aquaculture, maritime transport and logistics, coastal and marine tourism, offshore renewable energy, marine biotechnology, seabed resource management, and coastal infrastructure development. In contrast to traditional ocean-based industries that often prioritize resource extraction and immediate financial returns, the blue economy promotes integrated management practices designed to protect ecosystem

health, conserve biodiversity, and ensure the long-term sustainability of economic activities (European Commission, 2025).

From a socio-economic perspective, the blue economy constitutes a significant driver of global development and human well-being. Millions of people depend directly or indirectly on marine-related sectors for employment, income generation, and food security. Sustainable governance of these industries has the potential to reduce poverty, stimulate innovation, and improve resilience among coastal communities while maintaining the productivity and ecological functions of aquatic ecosystems (World Economic Forum, 2026).

Moreover, the blue economy plays an indispensable role in mitigating and adapting to climate change. Healthy oceans function as major carbon sinks, regulate global climate systems, and support diverse biological communities that underpin ecosystem services essential to human survival. Strategic investments in offshore renewable energy technologies, sustainable aquaculture, habitat restoration, and nature-based solutions can simultaneously generate economic opportunities and reduce environmental degradation. Consequently, the blue economy has emerged as a critical component of international efforts to achieve sustainable development and meet global climate objectives.

For developing coastal nations such as Nigeria, the blue economy presents a transformative opportunity to diversify economic activities beyond dependence on the petroleum sector. Harnessing the country's extensive coastline and inland waterways through sustainable fisheries management, modernization of port infrastructure, expansion of maritime trade, promotion of eco-tourism, and investment in renewable marine energy could significantly enhance economic productivity, create employment opportunities, and strengthen national resilience. By integrating environmental conservation with economic planning, Nigeria and similar economies can leverage the blue economy as a catalyst for inclusive growth, regional competitiveness, and long-term sustainable development.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the Routine Activity Theory (RAT) developed by Cohen and Felson (1979) as its theoretical framework. Originally formulated within environmental criminology, the theory explains that criminal activities are more likely to occur when three essential elements converge in time and space: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. Unlike traditional criminological theories that focus primarily on the motivations or personal characteristics of offenders, Routine Activity Theory emphasizes the situational conditions that create opportunities for crime. It argues that changes in everyday social and economic activities can increase or decrease opportunities for criminal behaviour by influencing the interaction between offenders, targets, and guardians. Routine Activity Theory remains highly relevant in contemporary criminological research. For example, Gesser and Wight (2026) applied the theory to examine relapse into substance use, arguing that relapse opportunities emerge when motivated actors encounter suitable opportunities in the absence of effective guardianship. Their study demonstrated that the core principles of Routine Activity Theory extend beyond conventional crime analysis to explain opportunity-driven behaviours in other social contexts (Gesser & Wight, 2026).

The theory provided a highly relevant framework for understanding maritime

insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea because the region contains all three conditions identified by Cohen and Felson. The first element, motivated offenders, consists of pirate groups, oil thieves, traffickers, illegal fishers, smugglers, kidnappers, and organized criminal networks operating within the maritime domain. These actors are motivated by economic gain, exploiting opportunities presented by valuable cargoes, petroleum resources, and maritime commerce. Weak socioeconomic conditions in some coastal areas, combined with the profitability of illicit maritime activities, may further encourage participation in criminal enterprises.

The second component of the theory is the existence of suitable targets. The Gulf of Guinea contains numerous high-value targets that attract criminal activity. These include crude oil tankers, offshore oil platforms, merchant vessels, container ships, fishing vessels, liquefied natural gas carriers, port facilities, underwater pipelines, and other critical maritime infrastructure. Nigeria's status as one of Africa's leading oil-producing countries makes its offshore assets particularly attractive to criminal organizations seeking financial gain through theft, sabotage, ransom, or illegal exploitation of resources. The concentration of valuable economic activities within relatively accessible maritime areas increases the attractiveness of these targets from the perspective of offenders.

The third element, the absence of capable guardianship, refers to inadequate mechanisms for preventing or deterring crime. In the maritime context, capable guardians include naval forces, coast guards, maritime law enforcement agencies, surveillance technologies, port security systems, judicial institutions, and regulatory authorities responsible for monitoring and protecting maritime activities. Where surveillance is weak, patrol coverage is limited, institutional coordination is inadequate, or legal enforcement is ineffective, opportunities for maritime crime increase substantially. Historically, challenges relating to limited maritime domain awareness, insufficient patrol assets, corruption, and jurisdictional complexity have created vulnerabilities that criminal organizations have exploited in parts of the Gulf of Guinea.

Routine Activity Theory helps explain why Nigeria's maritime environment has historically experienced persistent threats such as piracy, Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, crude oil theft, kidnapping for ransom, and maritime smuggling. The coexistence of valuable offshore petroleum infrastructure, extensive shipping routes, and periods of inadequate maritime enforcement created conditions conducive to criminal activity. In this context, offenders did not necessarily require extraordinary capabilities; rather, they capitalized on available opportunities where guardianship was perceived to be insufficient and profitable targets were readily accessible.

Despite its strengths, Routine Activity Theory has certain limitations when applied to maritime security. The theory focuses primarily on immediate situational factors that facilitate crime and pays comparatively less attention to broader structural influences

such as poverty, unemployment, political instability, corruption, environmental degradation, or historical grievances. In coastal regions of the Gulf of Guinea, socioeconomic deprivation and limited livelihood opportunities may influence individuals' decisions to engage in piracy or other maritime crimes. Consequently, while increasing capable guardianship can reduce opportunities for crime, long-term solutions may also require addressing underlying economic and social conditions that contribute to offender motivation.

Another limitation is that the theory assumes offenders are motivated without fully explaining the origins of that motivation. It therefore provides stronger explanatory power regarding how crimes occur than why individuals become involved in criminal activities in the first place. Integrating Routine Activity Theory with broader political economy or development perspectives may therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding of maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea. Nevertheless, Routine Activity Theory remains highly appropriate for this study because it directly links security conditions to criminal opportunities within Nigeria's maritime domain. It offers a practical framework for examining how weaknesses in surveillance, law enforcement, and institutional capacity can expose valuable economic assets to criminal exploitation. The theory further supports the proposition that strengthening maritime governance through enhanced naval presence, improved monitoring technologies, effective legal enforcement, and regional cooperation can significantly reduce maritime crimes and protect Nigeria's economic interests in the Gulf of Guinea.

Results and Discussions

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of the Nature and Dynamics of Maritime Crimes

Representative Quote	Initial Code	Category	Theme	Interpretation
Maritime crimes include piracy, armed robbery, illegal fishing, trafficking, drug trafficking, and maritime terrorism.	Multiple maritime offence	Scope of maritime crime	Multidimensional nature of maritime crime	Maritime crime comprises diverse but interconnected illegal activities that threaten security and economic development.
Maritime insecurity continues despite improved	Persistent insecurity	Security challenges	Persistence of maritime insecurity	Existing interventions have reduced but not

regional security frameworks.				eliminated maritime crime in the Gulf of Guinea.
Criminal groups increasingly exploit modern navigation systems and encrypted communications.	Criminal technological adaptation	Criminal innovation	Evolution of maritime crime	Maritime criminals continuously adapt to technological advances, complicating enforcement efforts.
Piracy involves violent attacks, cargo theft, kidnapping, and attacks on offshore facilities.	Violent piracy; kidnapping	Characteristics of piracy	Piracy as a dominant maritime threat	Piracy remains a major threat to maritime safety, commerce, and offshore infrastructure.

Findings: The findings from Table 1 indicated that maritime crimes in the Gulf of Guinea is a multifaceted and evolving phenomenon encompassing piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal fishing, trafficking, drug trafficking, and maritime terrorism. Despite the implementation of regional security initiatives, maritime insecurity remains persistent, suggesting that existing measures have not been sufficient to eliminate criminal activities in the region. The findings further revealed that maritime criminal groups have adapted to technological advancements by exploiting modern navigation and communication systems, thereby increasing the complexity of enforcement efforts. Additionally, piracy continues to represent a dominant threat, characterized by violent attacks, cargo theft, kidnapping, and assaults on offshore facilities, with significant implications for maritime safety, regional commerce, and the protection of critical economic infrastructure.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Maritime Crimes and Nigeria's Economic Interest

Representative Quote	Initial Code	Category	Theme	Interpretation
Shipping companies invest in additional	Security expenditure	Corporate response	Higher operational costs	Businesses incur significant expenses to

security measures.				mitigate maritime security risks.
Piracy generates insurance costs, delays, and trade disruptions.	Insurance premiums; trade disruption	Financial impacts	Economic costs of maritime crime	Maritime insecurity imposes substantial direct and indirect financial burdens on economic actors.
Persistent piracy creates uncertainty for investors.	Investor uncertainty	Investment environment	Reduced investor confidence	Maritime crime discourages domestic and foreign investment in the maritime sector.
Importers face higher costs while exporters lose competitiveness.	Increased logistics costs	Macroeconomic effects	Negative effects on economic performance	Maritime insecurity reduces productivity and weakens Nigeria's international trade competitiveness.
Nigeria relies heavily on the Gulf of Guinea for revenue and trade.	Economic dependence	Strategic interests	Importance of maritime assets	The Gulf of Guinea is central to Nigeria’s economic prosperity and fiscal sustainability.
Threats to maritime security directly affect economic performance.	Economic vulnerability	Security–economy nexus	Maritime crime threatens national development	Criminal activities at sea undermine Nigeria’s long-term economic growth objectives.

Findings: The findings from Table 2 indicated that maritime crimes impose significant economic costs on Nigeria by increasing security expenditures, insurance premiums, transportation costs, and trade disruptions, thereby raising the overall cost of maritime business operations. The evidence further suggests that persistent maritime insecurity undermines investor confidence, weakens the competitiveness of Nigerian exports, and threatens critical sectors such as offshore petroleum production, maritime trade, fisheries, and port operations. Consequently, maritime crime poses a substantial challenge to national development by adversely affecting government revenue, foreign exchange earnings, trade performance, and long-term economic growth.

Table 3: Thematic Analysis of Maritime Security

Representative Quote	Initial Code	Category	Theme	Interpretation
Maritime security is a dynamic and multidimensional concept that encompasses the protection of the maritime domain… from threats capable of undermining national security, economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and international peace.	Multidimensional security; protection of maritime assets	Definition of maritime security	Maritime security as a multidimensional governance framework	The literature conceptualizes maritime security as extending beyond naval defence to include economic, environmental, and governance dimensions relevant to Nigeria's maritime interests.
The concept extends beyond the traditional military protection to include the prevention and mitigation of piracy, armed robbery at sea, maritime	Piracy; terrorism; trafficking; illegal fishing	Forms of maritime crime	Complex and evolving maritime threats	Maritime crimes are diverse and interconnected, requiring integrated and adaptive policy responses.

terrorism, and trafficking.				
More than four-fifths of international merchandise trade by volume is carried by sea	Trade dependency; global shipping	Economic importance	Maritime security underpins economic prosperity	Secure sea lanes are fundamental to trade, investment, and economic stability, making maritime security central to Nigeria's development.
The Gulf of Guinea contains major shipping corridors, abundant offshore hydrocarbon resources and strategically important ports.	Strategic resources; shipping corridors	Regional significance	Strategic importance of the Gulf of Guinea	Maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea directly threatens Nigeria's energy exports, port operations, and regional competitiveness.
Persistent developmental challenges have historically contributed to piracy, oil theft, and organized criminal activities.	Poverty; unemployment; weak governance	Drivers of insecurity	Structural causes of maritime crime	Socioeconomic inequalities and governance failures create enabling conditions for maritime criminality.
Maritime insecurity cannot be addressed solely through naval deployments, it requires integrated governance approaches.	Integrated governance; institutional reform	Policy responses	Need for holistic security governance	Effective maritime security depends on combining enforcement with governance reforms and socioeconomic development.
No single state can adequately secure the maritime domain in isolation.	Cooperation; joint action	International governance	Regional and international collaboration	Multilateral cooperation and information sharing are indispensable for

				combating transnational maritime crimes.

Findings: The findings from Table 3 showed that maritime security has evolved into a multidimensional governance concept encompassing economic protection, environmental sustainability, and international cooperation. It highlighted that maritime crimes in the Gulf of Guinea extend beyond piracy to include oil theft, illegal fishing, trafficking, and maritime terrorism, all of which undermine regional stability. The findings further reveal that socioeconomic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, and weak institutions are key drivers of maritime criminality. As a result, military interventions alone are inadequate to address these threats effectively. The analysis emphasizes the need for integrated governance approaches that combine legal reforms, intelligence sharing, and regional collaboration. Additionally, maritime security is identified as essential for safeguarding trade, offshore resources, and national economic interest. Overall, strengthening maritime governance is critical to protecting Nigeria's economic prosperity and ensuring sustainable development in the Gulf of Guinea.

Table 4: Thematic Analysis of Blue Economy

Representative Quote	Initial Codes	Category	Theme	Interpretation
The blue economy represents a holistic and sustainable approach to foster economic growth while preserving the ecological integrity of marine and freshwater ecosystems.	Sustainable growth; ecosystem protection	Definition of blue economy	Blue economy as sustainable development	The blue economy integrates economic advancement with environmental sustainability, providing a framework for long-term national development.
The blue economy advocates for a balance between economic development and	Sustainability; stewardship	Governance principles	Balancing growth with conservation	Sustainable management of marine resources is essential for maintaining long-term

environmental stewardship.				economic productivity and ecological resilience.
Governments increasingly regard the blue economy as a viable framework for achieving economic prosperity while safeguarding environmental sustainability.	Economic prosperity; sustainability agenda	Development strategy	Blue economy as a strategic policy framework	The literature positions the blue economy as a mechanism for achieving inclusive growth and sustainable resource management.
The scope of the blue economy encompasses fisheries and aquaculture, maritime transport and logistics, coastal tourism, offshore renewable energy.	Fisheries; shipping; tourism; renewable energy	Economic sectors	Diverse marine-based economic opportunities	Maritime crimes threaten multiple sectors that contribute to economic diversification and national income.
Millions of people depend on marine-related sectors for employment, income generation, and food security.	Employment; livelihoods; food security	Socioeconomic benefits	Blue economy supports human development	Sustainable marine industries strengthen livelihoods, poverty reduction, and economic resilience.
For developing coastal nations such as Nigeria, the blue economy presents a transformative opportunity to diversify economic	Diversification; transformation	National development	Blue economy as a catalyst for Nigeria's economic transformation	Strengthening maritime governance and reducing maritime crimes are essential for unlocking Nigeria's blue economy potential and

activities beyond dependence on the petroleum sector.				reducing overreliance on oil.

Findings: The thematic analysis of the blue economy showed that it is widely viewed as a sustainable development framework that balances economic growth with environmental conservation. The findings identify fisheries, maritime transport, tourism, renewable energy, and aquaculture as key sectors with significant potential for economic diversification and job creation. The analysis emphasized that environmental sustainability and responsible resource management are fundamental to long-term blue economy success. It also highlights that healthy marine ecosystems are essential for food security, climate resilience, and coastal livelihoods. However, maritime crimes such as piracy, illegal fishing, and oil theft pose serious threats to these opportunities by discouraging investment and degrading marine resources. For Nigeria, the blue economy offers a viable pathway to reduce dependence on the petroleum sector and stimulate inclusive growth. Overall, achieving this potential depends on strengthening maritime security and governance to ensure the sustainable use of marine resources.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between maritime crimes and Nigeria's economic interests in the Gulf of Guinea through a thematic analysis of the extant literature. The findings demonstrated that maritime crime is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, trafficking, smuggling, and other transnational criminal activities that collectively undermine maritime security and economic development. Although regional and international initiatives have contributed to improvements in maritime surveillance and cooperation, persistent institutional weaknesses, inadequate enforcement capacity, and evolving criminal tactics continue to create opportunities for illicit activities within the region.

The review further established that maritime crimes have profound implications for Nigeria's economic interests. Beyond the immediate losses associated with piracy and theft, these crimes increase shipping and insurance costs, disrupt trade routes, discourage foreign investment, threaten offshore oil and gas infrastructure, and weaken the competitiveness of maritime-dependent sectors. Given Nigeria's strategic reliance on the Gulf of Guinea for petroleum production, maritime commerce, fisheries, and port operations, sustained insecurity in the maritime domain poses a significant constraint to economic growth, revenue generation, and long-term national development.

The application of Routine Activity Theory provided a useful explanatory framework by demonstrating that maritime crimes are more likely to occur when motivated offenders encounter valuable economic targets in the absence of effective guardianship. This theoretical perspective highlighted the importance of strengthening maritime surveillance, law enforcement, and institutional capacity while simultaneously addressing structural drivers such as poverty, unemployment, and limited livelihood opportunities in coastal communities that may contribute to criminal behaviour.

Overall, the evidence suggests that protecting Nigeria's economic interests in the Gulf of Guinea requires a comprehensive and integrated governance approach. Such an approach should combine advanced maritime technologies, strengthened legal and institutional frameworks, enhanced naval and coast guard capabilities, regional and international cooperation, and targeted socioeconomic interventions that reduce the incentives for maritime criminality. By adopting these measures, Nigeria can improve maritime security, safeguard critical economic assets, promote investor confidence, and unlock the full potential of the blue economy as a driver of sustainable national development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen maritime security and safeguard Nigeria's economic interest in the Gulf of Guinea:

1. Strengthen Integrated Maritime Governance and Law Enforcement

The Nigerian government should adopt a comprehensive maritime governance framework that integrates the efforts of the Navy, Marine Police, Customs, immigration authorities, port authorities, and other relevant agencies. Beyond increasing naval patrols, reforms should focus on improving intelligence gathering, prosecuting maritime offenders, modernizing surveillance technologies, and eliminating institutional corruption that weakens enforcement. Strengthening legal and judicial mechanisms to ensure swift investigation and prosecution of piracy, oil theft, illegal fishing, and trafficking offences will enhance deterrence and reinforce confidence among domestic and international investors operating in the Gulf of Guinea.

2. Address the Socioeconomic Drivers of Maritime Crimes

Given that poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, and weak governance contribute significantly to maritime criminality, the government should implement targeted socioeconomic interventions in vulnerable coastal communities, particularly in the Niger Delta. Such interventions should include vocational training, youth empowerment programmes, access to education, support for small-scale fisheries and aquaculture, and investments in local infrastructure and entrepreneurship. Improving livelihoods and creating legitimate economic opportunities will reduce dependence on illicit maritime activities and contribute to long-term security and stability.

3. Enhance Regional and International Cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea

Since maritime crimes transcend national borders, Nigeria should strengthen collaboration with neighbouring coastal states and international partners through joint naval operations, coordinated patrols, intelligence sharing, and harmonized legal frameworks. Existing regional mechanisms should be expanded to facilitate real-time information exchange and coordinated responses to piracy, trafficking, and illegal fishing. Partnerships with international organizations and private maritime stakeholders can also support capacity building, technology transfer, and the adoption of global best practices, thereby improving collective maritime domain awareness and security across the Gulf of Guinea.

4. Promote a Secure and Sustainable Blue Economy

To maximize the economic benefits of its maritime resources, Nigeria should integrate maritime security into its broader blue economy strategy. This requires protecting critical infrastructure such as ports, offshore oil and gas facilities, shipping lanes, and fishing grounds while promoting sustainable investment in fisheries, aquaculture, maritime transport, coastal tourism, renewable marine energy, and marine conservation. Policies should encourage environmentally responsible resource management and private-sector participation, supported by effective regulatory oversight. A secure maritime environment will attract investment, stimulate economic diversification beyond petroleum, create employment opportunities, and strengthen Nigeria's long-term economic resilience in the Gulf of Guinea.

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