The Gulf of Guinea: the Most Pirate-Ridden Place on the Planet

To many people, it seems as if piracy is something that took place in history, and is obsolete and not of immediate interest nowadays. Nonetheless, as long as ships with valuable cargo that can be appropriated are sailing across the seas of our planet, this type of criminal activity is unlikely to definitively become a thing of the past. Pirates operate in Southeast Asia, and are particularly active in the Strait of Malacca and the Gulf of Aden off the Arabian Sea (although in recent years the number of attacks in this area has subsided down to virtually nothing due to the actions taken by local and foreign security services).

Another center of modern-day piracy is the Gulf of Guinea, off the western coast of Africa. The waters in this gulf wash the shores of countries such as Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and São Tomé and Príncipe. The presence of a large number of countries that have access to the Gulf of Guinea plays into the hands of pirates: after committing a crime in territorial waters that belong to one country, they can hide in the waters of another one, and if the security forces pursuing the pirates follow them there, this could lead to diplomatic complications. And the size of the gulf itself - its area, the length of its coastline, etc. - are such that it is very difficult to control it even using large naval vessel groups, especially when it comes to picking up the boats pirates use, which are small in size and great in number. There are many areas of land along the gulf’s shoreline that local governments do not fully control, for example the river estuaries overgrown with forest. In these places, pirates can easily find concealment. In addition, there is information that they collude with corrupt security forces around the Gulf of Guinea that help the pirates escape being brought to justice.

Another complication is created by the fact that pirates, unlike hostile military service personnel, do not have any specific tactical or strategic objectives. While troops from opposing sides try to strike important enemy targets during hostilities, and they also pay particular attention to protecting those, pirates can attack any facility with a sufficiently weak security system. This explains the inability of professional naval personnel to quickly put an end to piracy on the seas. Experience gained in Somalia, which became the worldwide capital of piracy a decade ago and then gave the laurel wreath to the Gulf of Guinea and the Strait of Malacca, shows that fighting piracy on the shores is much more effective by having infantry units execute strikes on their bases on land. However, doing that in the Gulf of Guinea would be extremely complicated, since it would require conducting an operation over an enormous area in many countries at once that would most likely not sanction this kind of invasion.

For now, the only way to more or less make sure that the vessels sailing in the Gulf of Guinea are secure is to place professional armed guards on each of them. There are many organizations in countries around the gulf that are ready to offer these kinds of services. However, this service is very expensive, and vessels that belong to wealthy companies and carry valuable cargo are not the only ones that can be subjected to pirate attacks - this goes for any small fishing boat or maintenance ships. In addition, armed guards can protect ships in neutral waters, but international law prohibits entering a country’s territorial waters with armed fighters on board. And inside the boundaries of the territorial waters of a country like Benin, whose navy had just two vessels in 2019, is exactly where the risk of being attacked by pirates is the greatest.

Besides that, even armed guards cannot always cope with the attacks in the Gulf of Guinea. For example, most of the sensational news related to pirates that comes out of there has to do with Nigerians. This country has been suffering from armed conflicts for many years: various groups operate on its territory, from ethnic groups that wish to secede from Nigeria to the well-known Islamist terrorist organization Boko Haram, which became part of the even more infamous group DAESH in 2015 (both organizations are banned in the Russian Federation). In Nigeria, armed
clashes regularly occur that claim the lives of both members of government security services and civilians. That kind of situation has persisted there for many decades and, among other things, has influenced the specifics inherent in local piracy. Most pirates in Nigeria have combat experience gained by fighting on various sides. Some pirate teams belong to extremist groups, and some are composed of former Nigerian security forces. Therefore, while the pirates of Southeast Asia are generally poorly armed, preferring to attack unprotected ships, avoid human casualties, and usually flee at the first hint of any organized resistance from the crew of the ship under attack, Nigerian pirates are armed to the teeth with modern firearms, and are good at handling them. They are persistent, well-motivated, and often ready to engage in long, bloody battles with ships that are not at all inferior to them in terms of the firepower that they possess.

In general, experts say that the problem of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea will not be resolved anytime soon. All the conditions in the gulf exist for this form of criminal activity to flourish. Nonetheless, some people believe that recently the number of pirate attacks in the Gulf of Guinea has decreased slightly, and, some experts affirm that the main reason for that is increased social and economic development in Nigeria. The small increase in prosperity, decrease in poverty, and growth in the number of jobs has been inversely proportionally reflected in the number of pirate attacks, even though it is not very significant for the time being. This gives rise to hope that in the future piracy in the Gulf of Guinea will gradually diminish and then disappear on its own, without any external military intervention, as countries in the region develop socially and economically.

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