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COVID-19 IN AFRICA: FROM DISRUPTION TO OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE INTRA-AFRICAN MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION

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IN SUMMARY

- One evidential impact of COVID-19 on the region's maritime governance is in the way it has shaped (limited) cooperation with international partners.
 - In a way, the COVID-19 pandemic exposes the neo-colonial and exploitative logic of maritime cooperation and collaboration by international partners in the Gulf of Guinea and Africa at large.
 - There is evidence to suggest that maritime enforcement is improving across the region and that enhanced intra-Africa maritime cooperation could negate the need for over reliance on donor partner support.
 - The COVID-19 pandemic presents a rare opportunity for enhanced intra-African cooperation in the history of maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, and indeed coastal states throughout the African continent.
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The onset of COVID-19 in Africa triggered national lockdowns as the default response strategy by most African governments. For some coastal states in the Gulf of Guinea such as [Ghana](#), [Angola](#) and [Nigeria](#), these measures included the closure of national air, land and sea borders, and restrictions on port activities. Enforcing these measures even for a short period is clearly a 'game-changer' in terms of the priorities of government and how resources and capabilities are deployed. Not unexpectedly, other aspects of governance, including efforts to mitigate maritime crimes and insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea are hampered or likely to be constrained as COVID-19 spread in Africa.

Indeed, it could be too early to holistically assess the impact of COVID-19 on maritime safety and security in the Gulf of Guinea. Nonetheless, the region's maritime domain remains highly vulnerable to [illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, drugs trafficking, piracy, armed robbery at sea and other illicit](#) maritime trade activities. This is partly due to the lack of effective mitigation strategies and limited co-ordinated security responses to maritime crimes. There has been [several incidents](#) of piracy, armed robbery and kidnappings at sea since the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in early February 2020, with the most recent incident occurring on [May 3, 2020](#).

One evidential impact of COVID-19 on the region's maritime governance is in the way it has shaped (limited) cooperation with international partners. Since the onset of COVID-19, external partners have systematically withdrawn their navies or scaled-down the support they provide to regional partners. A good number of these projects are from partners in the West, as countries concentrate their attention on containing the spread of COVID-19 at home. In a way, the COVID-19 pandemic exposes the neo-colonial and exploitative logic of maritime cooperation and collaboration by international partners in the Gulf of Guinea and Africa at large.

The first notable shift was the French Navy's suspension of its Mission Corymbe in [March 2020](#). Since 1990, French vessels deployed as part of the Mission patrolled the West African coast to protect French economic interests in the region, particularly oil exploration. The vessels combated piracy and other maritime crimes. Relatedly, in March 2020, The United States African Command cancelled the annual Obangame Express exercise designed to improve regional cooperation, maritime domain awareness, information

sharing practices and tactical interdiction expertise to enhance the collective capabilities of participating nations to counter sea-based illicit activity. Similarly, the European Union Critical Maritime Route (CMR) suspended the GOGIN and the EUWeCAPs projects, aimed at enhancing maritime security and improving ports security, respectively.

Beyond the panic and disruptions occasioned by COVID-19, there are opportunities for transforming intra-African maritime cooperation and collaboration inherent in the pandemic. The raft of reduced commitment and support by international partners provides opportunities to revisit and inject the requisite political will into intra-African regional maritime cooperation agreements and frameworks. The Yaoundé Code of Conduct signed in 2013 by 25 heads of states of coastal and landlocked countries in West and Central Africa, made way for a regional response to maritime safety and security issues and culminated in the [establishment of the Yaoundé Architecture](#). It provides the structure for joint operations, intelligence sharing and harmonized legal frameworks. It gave way to the establishment of Interregional Coordination Centre, the centres for maritime security for West Africa (CRESMAO) and for Central Africa (CRESMAC) responsible for coordinating regional efforts and five multinational maritime [coordination centres \(MMCCs\), Zones A, D, E, F and G](#). Zone D, comprising Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and São Tomé and Príncipe aims to enhance collaboration between partners, including engagement in joint patrols by the navies and coast guards from each zone. It is the only one that is functioning at full capacity. Zones A and G which are scheduled to be in Angola and Cape Verde, respectively, are yet to commence any form of activities. The [lack of funding from member states](#) have delayed Zones E (Benin, Niger, Nigeria and Togo) and F (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea-Conakry, Liberia and Sierra Leone) from commencing regional patrols and the establishment of Zones A (Angola, Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo) and G (Cabo Verde, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Senegal).

Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that maritime enforcement is improving across the region and that enhanced intra-Africa maritime cooperation could negate the need for over reliance on donor partner support. At the national level, the seizure [of 411kg of cocaine by the navy of Côte d'Ivoire on February 3, 2020](#), is evidence of enhanced monitoring of the

country's maritime borders. Relatedly, on April 28, 2020 [the Senegalese navy seized six tonnes](#) of cocaine, more than double the total amount of cocaine seizures in the country in 2019. In addition, the seizures of an estimated [9.5 tonnes of cocaine in Cabo Verde, 3 tonnes in Guinea-Bissau and 1.9 tonnes in Senegal in 2019](#), are other indicators of positive outcomes from collaboration by regional and international partners.

At the zonal level, the incident involving the Portuguese flagged vessel, Tommi Ritscher, indicates that with the right support from regional government the current structure can be an effective tool for maritime safety and security in the Gulf of Guinea. Specifically, on the April 19, 2020, in response to the call for support by their [Beninese counterpart, the Nigerian Navy deployed 10 naval special boat service operatives](#) and proceeded to the objective area. They worked with the Benin navy and were able to rescue the 11 crew members hiding in the ship's citadel. Admittedly, this might not be classified as a classic example of a successful interdiction because the criminals succeeded in taking eight crew members hostage. However, the cooperation between the two navies under the Zone E structure, is evidence of the importance of effective cooperation and collaboration on maritime safety and security in the region.

For so long, scholars and activists have talked about African solutions to African problems, especially in the context of unsustainable, unreliable and sometimes imposed security cooperation agendas by external actors. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a rare opportunity for enhanced intra-African cooperation in the history of maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, and indeed coastal states throughout the African continent. National governments, regional institutions and other stakeholders in Africa can evolve and strengthen 'home grown' solutions, including re-setting their maritime security agenda. While some of these solutions are already in view, it is pertinent to fast-track agreements that would optimise inter-state cooperation and inter-agency collaboration on maritime security issues. The COVID-19 pandemic presents littoral states in the Gulf of Guinea with a rare opportunity to shape and truly own the maritime security agenda in the region and Africa broadly.

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