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Between Promise and Peril: Blue Economy Development and Maritime Security in Africa-a Critical Review

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This paper examines the relationship between blue economy development, maritime security, and governance in Africa, with a focus on the Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa. It highlights how maritime insecurity affects key sectors such as fisheries, maritime transport, offshore energy, and coastal tourism.
Design/methodology/approach – The study applies a comparative regional approach using peer-reviewed literature and policy reports published between 2000–2025. The analysis focuses on issues of piracy, maritime terrorism, smuggling, and trafficking, as well as governance responses in Africa's major maritime regions.
Findings/Results – The findings indicate that maritime insecurity creates significant economic and social costs for blue economy sectors through higher risks, disrupted trade routes, and livelihood instability. Although regional cooperation and maritime governance frameworks have expanded, their effectiveness is limited by legal fragmentation, unequal institutional capacity, and weak maritime monitoring systems. In addition, factors such as IUU fishing, youth unemployment, coastal marginalization, and state fragility continue to drive insecurity.
Originality/Value – The study concludes that sustainable blue economy development depends on integrated governance that combines maritime security, legal reform, and development policy. The paper emphasizes that maritime security should not only be understood as an enforcement issue, but also as a governance and human security challenge linked to broader socio-economic conditions.

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1. Introduction

Agricultural Africa's renewed emphasis on the "blue economy" has become a prominent feature of continental and national development planning (Idoko et al., 2025; Spamer, 2015). Policy strategies identify fisheries and aquaculture, shipping and port logistics, offshore hydrocarbons and renewables, coastal tourism, and marine biotechnology as potential drivers of diversification and employment (Chen, 2010; Maes & Messing, 2025). In many African maritime spaces, the ocean remains a contested political arena where criminal violence, insurgent networks, and governance deficits reshape who benefits from maritime resources and who bears the risks (I. M. Okafor-Yarwood & Onuoha, 2023; Pérouse de Montclos, 2012). This review addresses a core tension: blue economy development presupposes predictability—secure sea lines of communication, credible law enforcement, transparent licensing and taxation, and stable coastal livelihoods, while many African littorals experience persistent maritime insecurity and weak governance capacity (Nagy & Nene, 2021). Economically, maritime insecurity inflates the costs of trade and investment via risk premiums, rerouting, private security expenditure, and disrupted fishing and tourism value chains (Burns, 2013). The Gulf of Guinea's prominence in crew kidnappings in the late 2010s and early 2020s illustrates how violence at sea translates into higher freight costs, reduced port competitiveness, and reputational damage for coastal states (Jacobsen, 2022; Uchenna et al., 2025). Human security concerns are equally salient: maritime violence harms seafarers and coastal communities, undermines food security through illegal fishing and market disruption, and contributes to the entrenchment of violent patronage networks (Kendall & Kendall, 2010; Küçük et al., 2025). Africa's maritime domain faces a complex constellation of security threats with common underlying governance drivers. In West Africa, particularly the Gulf of Guinea, piracy and armed robbery at sea have intersected with oil theft, kidnapping, port insecurity, and multi-commodity trafficking (Husted, 2019). In the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean, the peak of Somali piracy (2008-2012) generated major international naval responses and legal innovations, demonstrating both the vulnerability of global shipping lanes and the capacity for coordinated counter-piracy operations (Bueger, 2015; Kraska & Wilson, 2009). While successful hijackings have declined dramatically since 2012, the region continues to face complex threats involving arms trafficking, human smuggling, and the maritime dimensions of violent extremism (Kaunert & Zwolski, 2014; Ploch et al., 2010).

Terrorism interfaces with maritime spaces primarily through political economy mechanisms rather than stand-alone attacks at sea. In the Horn of Africa, Al-Shabaab generates revenue through coastal taxation, facilitation of IUU fishing, and smuggling networks connecting sea-based activities to territorial insurgency (Kraska & Wilson, 2009). In West Africa, Sahelian insurgencies exploit coastal trafficking routes for weapons and logistics, while port vulnerabilities create convergence points between terrorist financing and transnational organized crime (Bala & Tar, 2021). In response, Africa has developed a layered architecture of governance instruments. In West and Central Africa, the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (2013) institutionalizes regional cooperation through information-sharing, coordination centers, and operational zones, though implementation remains constrained by inconsistent funding, fragmented mandates, and legal limits on cross-border pursuit (Aning & Lartey, 2019; Schandorf, 2024). In the Western Indian Ocean, the Djibouti Code of Conduct (2009) and its Jeddah Amendment (2017) broadened maritime security cooperation to cover trafficking, IUU fishing, and transnational crime (Gikonyo, 2019; Menzel, 2018), supplemented by sustained external naval engagement including EU NAVFOR Operation Atalanta and Combined

Maritime Forces (Bueger & Liebetrau, 2023; Germond, 2015). At the continental level, the AU's 2050 Integrated Maritime Strategy, the Lomé Charter (2016), and the AU Blue Economy Strategy (2019) collectively frame maritime security as foundational to sustainable ocean development (Biloa, 2023; Brits & Nel, 2018; Nagy & Nene, 2021). Scholars nonetheless note a persistent "implementation paradox": frameworks set integrative objectives but operate in institutional environments where budgets and accountability remain predominantly national (Fagbayibo, 2017).

Scholarship on maritime security in Africa has evolved through three overlapping phases. Early work adopted state-centric framings focused on naval capacity, territorial integrity, and piracy suppression as a law enforcement problem (Ong-Webb, 2006; Vreÿ, 2010). The peak of Somali piracy generated a response architecture consistent with this framing, emphasizing naval interdiction, vessel protection measures, and international prosecution agreements (Guilfoyle, 2013; James & Brian, 2011). However, a significant conceptual shift occurred as researchers recognized that naval suppression alone could not address root causes. Human security frameworks broadened the agenda to include livelihood security, food security (through fisheries), and the protection of coastal communities from violence and exploitation (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017; Doumbouya et al., 2017). In the Gulf of Guinea literature, this shift is evident in analyses treating IUU fishing and coastal marginalization as security issues requiring preventive development interventions alongside enforcement (Belhabib et al., 2015; Doumbouya et al., 2017). More recently, "blue justice" perspectives have gained traction, foregrounding distributional equity, participation rights, and protection against "ocean grabbing" in ocean governance (Bennett & Dearden, 2014). This framework critiques blue economy narratives that prioritize aggregate growth while obscuring who benefits and who bears costs. Critical scholarship argues that securitizing the ocean without addressing justice may produce counterproductive outcomes: enforcement that criminalizes small-scale livelihoods while failing to disrupt elite corruption, or blue economy investments that exacerbate inequality and generate new grievances (Barbesgaard, 2018; Silver et al., 2015).

Three analytical premises drawn from this literature inform the review's approach. First, maritime security is constitutive of the governance conditions under which blue economy sectors can function; security and development must be analyzed as mutually constitutive rather than sequential (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017; Germond, 2015). Second, illicit maritime activities are politically embedded, shaped by state-society relations, patronage networks, and coastal development pathways (Dua & Menkhaus, 2012; Vreÿ, 2010). Third, conceptual debates matter: definitions of maritime security influence policy priorities and determine whether interventions address symptoms or structural drivers (Bueger, 2015; Bueger & Edmunds, 2017).

Building on these premises, this critical review is organized around four analytical propositions:

Proposition 1: Maritime insecurity—including piracy, armed robbery, smuggling, trafficking, and terrorism-related risks—imposes direct and indirect costs on blue economy sectors through risk premiums, route diversion, supply chain disruption, livelihood insecurity, and deterred investment.

Proposition 2: Regional cooperative frameworks (Yaoundé Architecture, Djibouti/Jeddah Code, AU strategies) have expanded maritime security cooperation but face persistent implementation gaps arising from legal fragmentation, capacity asymmetries, limited maritime domain awareness (MDA), and sovereignty sensitivities.

Proposition 3: Root drivers including IUU fishing, youth unemployment, coastal marginalization, state fragility, and environmental degradation connect maritime security outcomes to broader governance failures, particularly in the distributive dimensions of coastal resource management.

Proposition 4: Maritime security concepts are evolving from state-centric interdiction frameworks toward human security and "blue justice" perspectives, with implications for how success is measured, whose security is prioritized, and how interventions are designed.

This article is guided by the following research questions: First, this paper investigates how piracy, maritime terrorism, and smuggling/trafficking undermine key blue economy sectors including fisheries, shipping, and tourism in West Africa and the Horn of Africa; Second, it examines how regional and national governance architectures, including laws, institutions, and cooperative frameworks, shape the effectiveness of maritime security responses in these regions; Third, it explores the root causes and political economy drivers, such as IUU fishing, state fragility, youth unemployment, and environmental degradation, most consistently linked to maritime insecurity; and Lastly the study analyzes how the concept of "maritime security" has evolved in the African context and considers the implications of a shift toward human security and "blue justice" perspectives for future research and policy. This review contributes to the literature by: (1) synthesizing dispersed evidence across two major African maritime regions; (2) integrating security, governance, and development perspectives often treated separately; (3) tracing conceptual evolution toward human security and blue justice; and (4) identifying specific research gaps to guide future inquiry.

2. Literature Review & Hypothesis Development

The review draws on peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and authoritative policy reports published between 2000 and 2025. This timeframe captures contemporary dynamics in blue economy policy and post-2000 security agendas while allowing inclusion of foundational piracy scholarship from the early 2000s. Sources were identified through a combination of targeted database searches (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar) and iterative citation tracking, with emphasis on works that substantively address the intersections among maritime security threats, governance responses, and blue economy sectors. Policy documents were retrieved from repositories of the African Union, International Maritime Organization, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, World Bank, FAO, and relevant regional bodies. Only English-language sources were included due to feasibility constraints, a limitation acknowledged in the conclusion.

3. Methodology

Approach and scope

This article offers a critical review of scholarship on blue economy development, maritime security, and governance in Africa. Critical reviews aim to assess, synthesize, and critique existing literature, identifying key debates, conceptual tensions, and research gaps rather than pursuing exhaustive coverage following systematic review protocols (Hulland, 2020). The

analysis integrates insights from academic and policy literatures to identify patterns and implications across two major maritime regions.

Analytical Approach

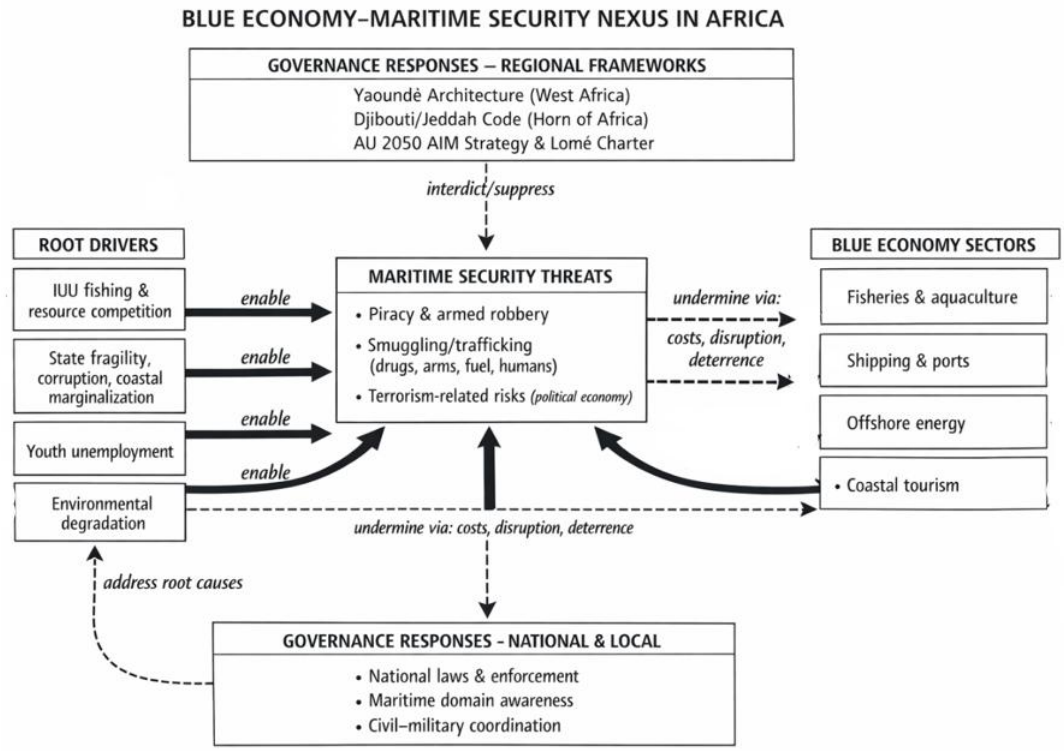
The analysis employs qualitative thematic synthesis, organizing findings around five analytical themes derived from iterative engagement with the literature: (1) the security–development nexus as an operational constraint on blue economy sectors; (2) Maritime terrorism, the conceptual clarification and empirical evidence; (3) governance architectures and implementation gaps; (4) root causes and political economy drivers; and (5) conceptual evolution in maritime security thinking. Comparative analysis is integrated throughout, contrasting dynamics in the Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa to illuminate both convergent patterns and region-specific particularities.

4. Result and Discussion

Result

Across themes, the comparison between the Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa shows both convergence (transnational crime, governance capacity challenges) and divergence (threat modalities, international naval presence, and institutional maturation pathways).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the blue economy–maritime security nexus in Africa



Source: Authors' own Illustration

Root drivers enable maritime security threats, which in turn undermine blue economy sectors through increased costs, disruption, and investment deterrence. Regional governance frameworks focus primarily on threat interdiction and suppression, while national and local governance mechanisms address both threats and, where effective, can mitigate root causes. The dashed feedback loop indicates that inequitable blue economy development may reproduce drivers, creating a vicious cycle that requires integrated governance responses

Four interconnected components structure the analysis. First, root drivers—IUU fishing and resource competition, state fragility and corruption, youth unemployment, and environmental degradation, operate as enabling conditions that facilitate maritime insecurity (Agnew & Barnes, 2004; Liddick, 2014). These are not deterministic causes but rather configure environments of opportunity and grievance within which criminal entrepreneurship can flourish (Dholakia, 2025). Second, these drivers enable a range of maritime security threats: piracy and armed robbery, smuggling and trafficking across multiple commodities, and terrorism-related risks understood through political economy mechanisms rather than conventional stand-alone attacks at sea (Dua & Menkhaus, 2012; Okeahalam & Otwombe, 2016). Third, these threats directly undermine blue economy sectors including fisheries, shipping, offshore energy, and coastal tourism, through elevated operational costs, supply chain disruption, livelihood insecurity, and deterred investment (Elentably et al., 2022; Harley et al., 2006). Fourth, governance responses operate at multiple levels: regional frameworks (Yaoundé Architecture, Djibouti/Jeddah Code, AU strategies) primarily target threat interdiction, while national and local mechanisms (legal frameworks, enforcement capacity, maritime domain awareness) address both threats and, where functioning effectively, can mitigate root drivers (Midlen, 2025; Muhammed et al., 2024; I. Okafor-Yarwood, 2020). Crucially, the framework incorporates a feedback loop: inequitable or exclusionary blue economy development may reproduce or exacerbate the very drivers that enable maritime insecurity in coastal marginalization, unemployment, and resource competition which creates a vicious cycle that governance architectures must actively disrupt (Singh, 2022).

Discussion

The security–development nexus: How piracy, terrorism-related risks, and smuggling undermine blue economy sectors

A consistent finding across the literature is that maritime insecurity functions as a "shadow cost" on blue economy activity. For shipping and ports, piracy and armed robbery raise operational costs through higher war-risk premiums, private maritime security contracting, route adjustments, and delays attributable to enhanced security protocols (Min, 2011). In the Gulf of Guinea, the kidnapping economy and attacks on vessels operating near anchorages and offshore infrastructure have been linked to concentrated impacts on commercial shipping and the offshore energy supply chain, with spillover effects for port revenues and coastal service industries (Uchenna et al., 2025). In the Horn of Africa, Somali piracy at its peak produced global cost externalities and triggered an extensive counter-piracy architecture involving naval patrols, best management practices, and legal innovations, demonstrating how maritime insecurity can rapidly reshape the governance of sea lanes central to international trade (Gilmer, 2017; Winn & Lewis, 2017).

For fisheries, the security–development link is frequently mediated by IUU fishing and fisheries crime. In West Africa, IUU fishing undermines state revenue, depletes fish stocks, and generates livelihood insecurity for artisanal fishers, conditions repeatedly identified as enabling environments for piracy recruitment and maritime criminal entrepreneurship (Agnew & Barnes, 2004; Liddick, 2014). The fisheries–security nexus is increasingly understood as bidirectional: insecurity reduces enforcement capacity and deters monitoring, while weak fisheries governance and inequitable access to resources sustain grievances and illicit livelihoods. In the Horn of Africa, scholarship has emphasized how coastal marginalization, contested resource access, and the collapse of effective maritime governance contributed to early pirate narratives of "coast guard" vigilantism, even as piracy evolved into

a complex criminal enterprise. While the "defensive piracy" narrative is contested, it underscores the political significance of distributive claims over marine resources (Dua & Menkhaus, 2012; Ploch et al., 2010).

Tourism and coastal economies are also affected, though with region-specific mechanisms. In the Horn of Africa, piracy perceptions influenced cruise itineraries, coastal investment, and perceptions of safety in adjacent destinations, while coastal insecurity interacted with broader conflict dynamics (McCabe, 2019). In West Africa, insecurity is more often associated with crime risks around ports and coastal cities rather than offshore transit corridors alone, linking maritime violence to urban governance and organized crime networks (Hastings & Phillips, 2015).

Maritime Terrorism: Conceptual clarification and empirical evidence

The relationship between terrorism and maritime security in Africa requires careful conceptual specification. Rather than constituting a distinct threat category of stand-alone attacks at sea, terrorism interfaces with maritime spaces primarily through political economy mechanisms. In the Horn of Africa, Al-Shabaab's maritime strategy exemplifies this pattern: the group generates revenue through 'taxation' of charcoal exports from Kismayo, levies on fishing vessels, facilitation of arms smuggling across the Gulf of Aden, and protection rackets operating along the Somali coastline (Kraska & Wilson, 2009). These activities do not constitute maritime terrorism in the conventional sense (e.g., hijacking of passenger vessels) but rather represent the maritime dimension of a territorial insurgency—using coastal access to extract resources, sustain logistics, and contest state authority. This distinction matters for policy: counter-terrorism maritime interventions that focus solely on intercepting attacks miss the governance and revenue dimensions that sustain insurgent presence. In West Africa, the connection is more indirect but equally significant: Sahelian insurgencies (Boko Haram, JNIM, ISIS-GS) exploit coastal trafficking routes for weapons and logistics, while port vulnerabilities create potential convergence points between terrorist financing and transnational organized crime (Aning & Pokoo, 2014). The policy implication is that maritime security strategies must address land-sea linkages, including customs integrity, port governance, and the political economy of coastal-peripheral relations.

Beyond the group's on-land insurgency, Al-Shabaab has used Somalia's long and weakly-ruled coastline to generate revenue, exert its coercive power, and disrupt the blue economy's future (Helfman & O'Shea, 2011; Ploch et al., 2010). The source of the illegal "taxes" Al-Shabaab collects from coastal communities, fishing vessels, ports, and maritime-related businesses (including levies on charcoal exports from Somalia, livestock shipments, and imported goods transiting through coastal landing sites or secondary ports) allows the group to maintain an ongoing presence in these areas (Levy & Yusuf, 2021). Al-Shabaab has also indirectly profited from illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU) by providing protection rackets to foreign fishing vessels or by providing access to trawlers in exchange for payment (Elmi et al., 2015). Al-Shabaab's involvement with arms smuggling, human trafficking, and logistics from small dhows across the Western Indian Ocean connects Somalia's maritime domain to regional illicit networks reaching from Yemen and the Gulf to East Africa (Mahajan, 2019).

Terrorism in West Africa is not as evidently maritime but is an integrated phenomenon, converging effects in which the insurgencies of the Sahel meet the maritime trade routes, vulnerabilities of ports, and financial flows brought by maritime trade (Idoko et al., 2025; Julien, 2011).

Smuggling and trafficking—drugs, arms, fuel, and humans—are widely described as integrative threats because they link sea-based logistics to land-based corruption, border governance, and political violence (Aning & Pokoo, 2014). The Gulf of Guinea's maritime crime complex often includes oil theft and illegal bunkering alongside piracy and armed robbery, blurring categories of "piracy" and "organized crime" in ways that complicate legal responses. In the Horn of Africa, human smuggling routes across the Gulf of Aden and the Western Indian Ocean have been connected to mixed migration dynamics and exploitation economies, with implications for human security and regional diplomacy (Kraska & Wilson, 2009; Petrig & Geiß, 2011). In both regions, trafficking economies undermine blue economy governance by incentivizing regulatory capture, weakening customs integrity, and diverting security resources toward reactive interdiction rather than preventive development.

Governance architectures: Regional policies, national laws, and implementation gaps

In West and Central Africa, the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (2013) and associated Yaoundé Architecture represent a significant attempt to institutionalize regional maritime cooperation through information-sharing, coordination centers, and operational zones (Uchenna et al., 2025). Yet the literature also highlights implementation obstacles: inconsistent funding, fragmented mandates across agencies, limited interoperability, and legal constraints on cross-border pursuit and prosecution.

In the Horn of Africa and Western Indian Ocean, the Djibouti Code of Conduct (2009) was designed to repress piracy and armed robbery through capacity-building, information-sharing, and legal cooperation (Menzel, 2018). The Jeddah Amendment (2017) broadened its remit to cover a wider set of illicit maritime activities, reflecting recognition that piracy suppression alone is insufficient without addressing trafficking, IUU fishing, and governance drivers (Agnew & Barnes, 2004; Gikonyo, 2019). While external naval presence contributed to reductions in successful hijackings, several authors caution that deterrence effects may be contingent and reversible if coastal governance and economic conditions remain fragile (Singh, 2022).

Across both regions, national legal frameworks remain a central bottleneck. Maritime law enforcement requires not only patrol assets but also legal authority, trained investigators, admissible evidence chains, and functional courts (James & Brian, 2011). Legal analyses emphasize problems of jurisdictional ambiguity and definitional mismatch, particularly where domestic criminal codes do not adequately incorporate UNCLOS piracy provisions, or where offenses occur in territorial waters and thus fall outside strict UNCLOS "piracy" definitions (Singh, 2022). As a result, states often rely on alternative charges (robbery, kidnapping, weapons offenses) that may not capture the transnational dimension of maritime crime. In the Gulf of Guinea, where many incidents occur within territorial waters or exclusive economic zones, definitional and jurisdictional issues are especially acute (Husted, 2019). The Horn of Africa, by contrast, saw extensive international legal experimentation, including prosecution agreements and capacity-building for regional courts; however, these arrangements raised questions about sustainability, burden-sharing, and the politics of externalized criminal justice (Ploch et al., 2010).

A further governance gap concerns maritime domain awareness (MDA) and civil–military coordination. The literature increasingly frames maritime security as a "whole-of-government" and "whole-of-society" challenge requiring integration of navies/coast guards with fisheries agencies, customs, port authorities, and local communities (Doumbouya et al., 2017). Technology-enabled MDA, coastal radar, AIS monitoring, satellite surveillance, can

improve detection and deterrence, but effectiveness depends on human capacity, maintenance, data governance, and trust among agencies (Bateman, 2016; Jacq & Michel, 2006). In West Africa, cooperation has expanded through regional coordination centers and information-sharing, yet distrust and competition among national agencies can reduce intelligence quality and response speed (Doumbouya et al., 2017; Mahajan, 2019). In the Horn, coordination among international naval forces and regional states improved tactical disruption but translating that capacity into long-term governance improvements remains uneven and politically contingent (McCabe, 2019).

The AU's 2050 AIM Strategy articulates a vision of wealth creation from Africa's seas through a secure and environmentally sustainable blue economy, positioning maritime security as foundational to prosperity. The Lomé Charter (2016) similarly frames maritime security, safety, and development as mutually reinforcing and seeks to strengthen cooperation against diverse maritime threats (Biloa, 2023; Brits & Nel, 2018). The AU Blue Economy Strategy (2019) extends this agenda by identifying priority sectors and governance challenges that include security and illegal activities (AU, 2019). However, continental frameworks often face an "implementation paradox": they set integrative objectives but operate in institutional environments where budgets, authority, and accountability remain predominantly national, and where regional organizations may lack enforcement power (Islam & Kieu, 2020).

Root causes and drivers: Illegal fishing, state fragility, youth unemployment, environmental degradation

a. IUU fishing and resource competition

IUU fishing is widely identified as both an economic harm and a security driver, especially in West Africa where distant-water fleets, weak licensing oversight, and limited enforcement capacity undermine sustainable fisheries and coastal livelihoods. Where artisanal fishers experience declining catches and market instability, illicit maritime activity can become an alternative livelihood or a complementary revenue stream within broader criminal networks (Jama et al., 2022; I. Okafor-Yarwood, 2020). This dynamic is not deterministic, most affected communities do not turn to violence but it contributes to an enabling environment in which criminal entrepreneurs can recruit, coerce, or purchase collaboration. In the Horn of Africa, the collapse of effective fisheries governance after state failure created both real economic grievances and discursive justifications used by early pirate groups; subsequent piracy evolution into a sophisticated business model illustrates how grievances can be instrumentalized within criminal political economies (Dua & Menkhaus, 2012; Ploch et al., 2010).

b. State fragility, corruption, and coastal marginalization

State fragility features strongly in Horn of Africa scholarship because piracy emerged in the context of prolonged governance collapse and conflict in Somalia (Gilmer, 2017). Yet the concept is also relevant to West Africa when interpreted not as "absence of the state" but as selective state presence, patronage, and corruption in maritime sectors. In the Gulf of Guinea, oil theft and illegal bunkering are frequently linked to politically protected networks, highlighting that maritime crime can be embedded within governance systems rather than merely occurring outside them (Mohammed, 2023). More broadly, coastal regions may experience political marginalization in budget allocations and development planning, producing spatial inequalities that intersect with maritime crime opportunity structures. Corruption amplifies these effects by reducing enforcement credibility and enabling trafficking and illegal extraction through bribery and regulatory capture (Ingwe et al., 2013).

c. Youth unemployment and environmental degradation

High youth unemployment and underemployment appear as cross-cutting risk factors that increase the supply of labor for illicit economies, especially where coastal livelihoods are insecure and formal employment in ports, fisheries, and tourism is limited (Agnew & Barnes, 2004; Liddick, 2014). Environmental degradation including coastal erosion, pollution (notably oil pollution in parts of the Gulf of Guinea), and climate variability affecting fish stocks, further undermines livelihoods and can intensify competition over resources. In the Horn, drought and broader climate stress interact with conflict dynamics, while in West Africa environmental harms often compound governance deficits in fisheries regulation and coastal development (Karani & Failler, 2020).

Smuggling and trafficking dynamics, while sometimes treated as separate from piracy, are increasingly interpreted as part of the same political economy landscape. Maritime trafficking networks take advantage of porous borders, weak customs integrity, and the logistical infrastructure of ports, fishing fleets, and small craft (Dua & Menkhaus, 2012; Hastings & Phillips, 2015). Where extremist groups or insurgents gain access to trafficking rents, the boundary between terrorism and organized crime can blur, complicating policy responses that rely on strict categorical separation.

Conceptual Evolution: From State-centric security to human security and Blue justice

Our synthesis identifies three overlapping conceptual phases in the African context.

Phase 1: State-Centric Security (circa 2000-2010)

Early scholarship and policy framing emphasized territorial integrity, naval capacity, and the suppression of piracy as threats to interstate commerce. The peak of Somali piracy generated a response architecture focused on naval interdiction, vessel protection measures, and prosecution frameworks (Dua & Menkhaus, 2012).

Phase 2: Human Security Integration (circa 2010-2018)

A significant conceptual shift occurred as researchers and policymakers recognized that naval suppression alone could not address root causes. Human security frameworks broadened the agenda to include livelihood security, food security (through fisheries), and the protection of coastal communities from violence and exploitation. In the Gulf of Guinea literature, this shift is evident in analyses treating IUU fishing and coastal marginalization as security issues requiring preventive development interventions alongside enforcement (Husted, 2019; Jacobsen, 2022).

Phase 3: Blue Justice and Distributive Equity (emerging 2018-present)

Most recently, "blue justice" perspectives have gained traction, foregrounding distributional equity, participation rights, and protection against "ocean grabbing" in ocean governance. This framework critiques blue economy narratives that prioritize aggregate growth while obscuring who benefits and who bears costs (Barbesgaard, 2018; Engen et al., 2021). Critical scholarship argues that securitizing the ocean without addressing justice may produce counterproductive outcomes: enforcement that criminalizes small-scale livelihoods while failing to disrupt elite corruption, or blue economy investments that exacerbate inequality and generate new grievances. The emerging research agenda asks: whose security is protected, whose livelihoods are secured, and who participates in decisions about ocean resource allocation?

Implications for Policy and Research

This conceptual evolution carries concrete implications. First, success metrics must expand beyond incident counts to include livelihood indicators, equitable access measures, and governance accountability. Second, legal frameworks must address the full spectrum of maritime harms—fisheries crime, environmental offenses, labor exploitation—not only piracy. Third, institutional design must balance security mandates with development coordination, preventing the "securitization" of development challenges while ensuring that security operations do not undermine local livelihoods.

Table 1. Key regional policy frameworks for maritime security in Africa

Framework Name (Year)	Signatory States/Region	Core Objectives	Reported Challenges
Yaoundé Code of Conduct (2013)	West & Central Africa (ECOWAS/ECCAS and Gulf of Guinea states)	Repress piracy/armed robbery and illicit maritime activities; strengthen cooperation and information-sharing	Funding constraints; sovereignty sensitivities; interoperability gaps; uneven legal harmonization
Djibouti Code of Conduct (2009)	Western Indian Ocean & Gulf of Aden regional states	Counter piracy and armed robbery through capacity-building and cooperation	Capacity asymmetries; reliance on external support; uneven prosecution capability
Jeddah Amendment to the Djibouti Code (2017)	Western Indian Ocean & Gulf of Aden regional states	Expand scope to broader illicit maritime activity (e.g., trafficking, IUU) and address enabling conditions	Coordination complexity; mandate expansion without commensurate resources
AU 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (2012)	Continental (AU member states)	Link maritime security, safety, and environmental stewardship to prosperous blue economy development	Implementation gaps; translation to national budgets; institutional fragmentation
Lomé Charter (2016)	Continental (AU member states; ratification varies)	Legal framework integrating maritime security, safety, and development; address transnational maritime threats	Ratification/implementation delays; enforcement capacity; monitoring and accountability
AU Blue Economy Strategy (2019)	Continental	Guidance on sustainable blue economy sectors and enabling governance conditions including security and illegal activities	Financing; data deficits; balancing investment with equity and sustainability

Source: Authors' synthesis

Comparative synthesis: Gulf of Guinea vs Horn of Africa

Comparatively, the Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa illustrate different configurations of threat modality and governance response. The Horn's piracy crisis catalyzed an unusually large international naval and legal response, producing rapid operational suppression but

leaving persistent concerns about structural drivers and potential recurrence. The Gulf of Guinea has experienced a more regionally driven governance model under the Yaoundé Architecture, with growing coordination but ongoing challenges in capacity, legal harmonization, and corruption. Both regions demonstrate that maritime insecurity is not merely a sea-based problem: it is sustained by land-based political economies and governance incentives. The comparative lesson for blue economy development is that sectoral growth strategies must be designed with security and governance conditions in view, including justice and inclusion to prevent the reproduction of insecurity through inequitable ocean development.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of maritime security challenges: Gulf of Guinea vs. Horn of Africa

Security Threat	Primary Drivers	Key Economic Sectors Impacted	Primary Policy Response
Piracy/armed robbery/kidnapping	Coastal unemployment; weak MDA; corruption; criminal entrepreneurship; proximity to offshore assets	Shipping/ports; offshore energy logistics; coastal services	Yaoundé Code of Conduct & Yaoundé Architecture; joint patrols; information-sharing centers
Oil theft/illegal bunkering (West Africa emphasis)	Rent-seeking networks; weak oversight of petroleum value chain; collusion across maritime–land interfaces	Offshore energy; coastal revenue systems; port integrity	National petroleum security measures; maritime task forces; regional cooperation under Yaoundé
IUU fishing/fisheries crime	Weak licensing/enforcement; distant-water fleet pressures; livelihood stress; poor data governance	Fisheries/aquaculture; food security; coastal employment	Fisheries MCS reforms; regional coordination; integration into broader maritime security agendas
Arms/drug trafficking (both regions, different routes)	Corruption; porous borders; transnational networks; demand in external markets	Ports/logistics; governance legitimacy; investment climate	Multi-agency interdiction; customs reforms; regional intelligence cooperation

Human smuggling/trafficking	Migration pressures; conflict; exploitative networks; weak coastal policing	Human security; coastal governance; reputational effects	Regional coordination; border management; victim protection frameworks
Maritime terrorism risk (more prominent in Horn narratives)	Insurgent presence; weak coastal governance; trafficking finance; port vulnerabilities	Ports/shipping; tourism; critical infrastructure	Security hardening of ports; intelligence-led policing; regional frameworks (Djibouti/Jeddah)

Source: Authors' synthesis

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

Conclusion

This critical review shows that blue economy development, maritime security, and governance in Africa are mutually constitutive rather than sequential policy domains. Regarding RQ1, piracy, terrorism-related risks, and smuggling/trafficking undermine fisheries, shipping, and tourism by increasing transaction costs, disrupting livelihoods, and distorting maritime markets through violent and corrupt rent extraction. Regarding RQ2, regional architectures especially the Yaoundé framework in West Africa and the Djibouti/Jeddah framework in the Western Indian Ocean have expanded cooperation and operational capacity, yet outcomes remain constrained by fragmented mandates, legal and prosecutorial gaps, funding shortfalls, and persistent corruption. Regarding RQ3, the most consistently identified drivers are IUU fishing and weak fisheries governance, state fragility and coastal marginalization, youth unemployment, and environmental degradation; these drivers connect insecurity to distributive governance failures. Finally, maritime security concepts have evolved toward human security and emerging blue justice perspectives, implying that "success" must include livelihood protection, equitable access to marine resources, and accountable governance alongside interdiction and prosecution.

Three policy implications emerge from this synthesis. First, maritime security strategies must adopt 'fish-to-finance' approaches that integrate fisheries governance, customs integrity, and financial intelligence rather than treating piracy and trafficking as isolated enforcement challenges. Second, regional frameworks require sustained investment in implementation capacity, including legal harmonization, prosecutorial training, and sustainable financing mechanisms—beyond declaratory commitments. Third, blue economy investments should incorporate conflict-sensitive design, assessing how infrastructure development, licensing regimes, and benefit-sharing arrangements may affect coastal political economies and either mitigate or reproduce insecurity drivers.

Suggestion

Future research should pursue four directions. First, causal pathway testing: under what conditions do blue economy investments reduce versus exacerbate insecurity? This requires comparative case designs and longitudinal data. Second, subnational political economy

studies: how do local governance arrangements, patronage networks, and coastal-elite relations shape maritime crime opportunity structures? Third, legal and institutional evaluation: which harmonization strategies, prosecution models, and oversight mechanisms prove effective across different legal traditions and capacity contexts? Fourth, blue justice metrics: how can distribution, participation, and rights be operationalized in maritime security governance assessments? Theoretically, this review advances understanding of the blue economy-maritime security nexus by demonstrating their mutual constitution through governance architectures, moving beyond linear conceptions of security as a prerequisite for development.

As a critical rather than systematic review, it does not claim exhaustive coverage. Reliance on English-language sources may introduce geographic and publication bias toward high-profile piracy episodes, potentially underrepresenting francophone West African and Indian Ocean scholarship. The evidence synthesized varies in data quality and causal identification across studies, and the review's comparative regional framing may obscure important subnational variation.

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