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The EU's Approach to Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea: Business As Usual or Time For a Rethink?

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Background Paper 4

The EU's Approach to Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea: Business As Usual or Time For a Rethink?[1]

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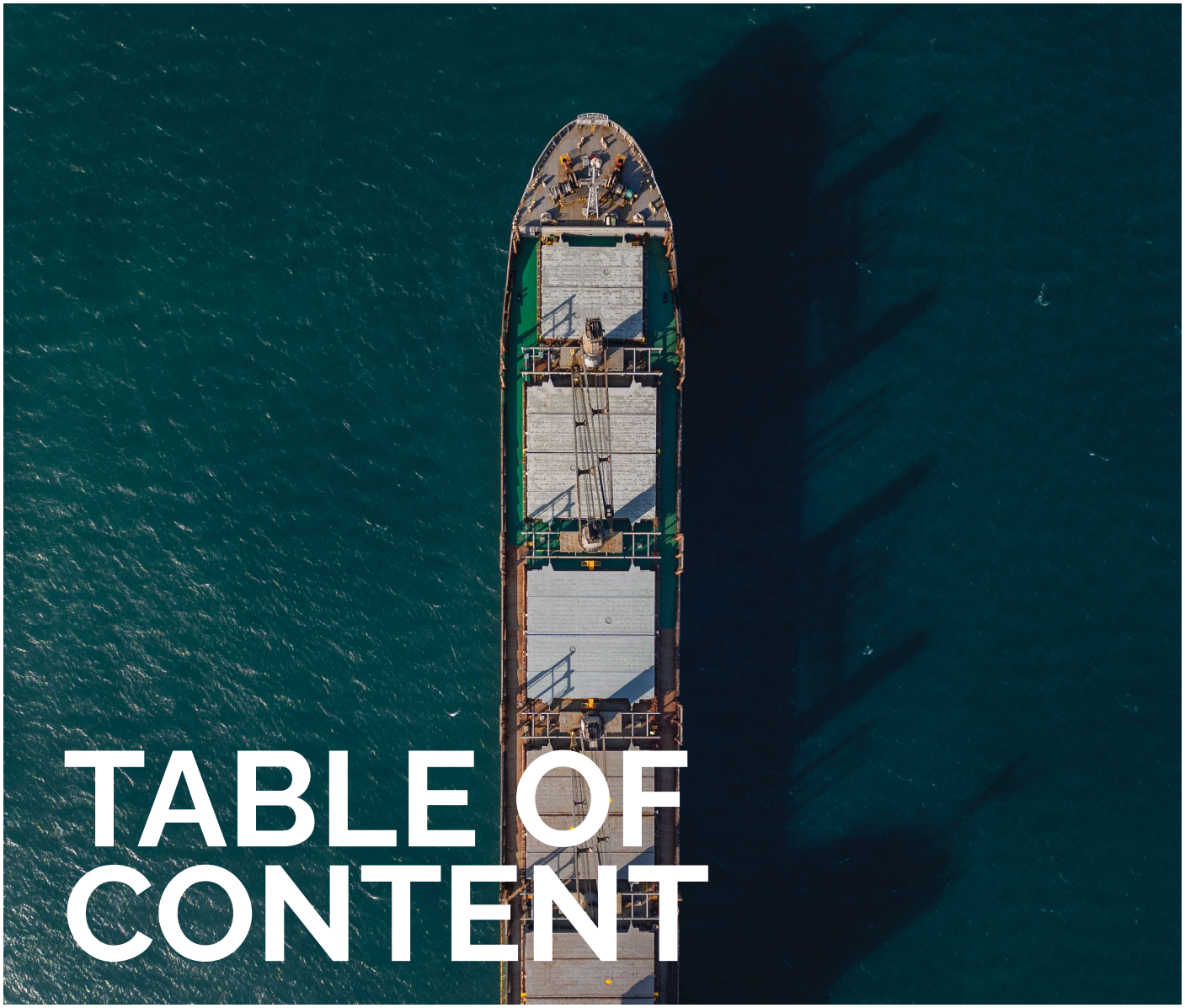


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Background

The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) constitutes one of the most strategically significant maritime regions for the European Union (EU). The region serves as a key corridor for global energy exports, commercial shipping, and fisheries resources, all of which are directly relevant to European markets. As a result, the EU has gradually expanded its engagement in maritime security and ocean governance in West Africa over the past decade, particularly since 2019. Despite notable improvements in some areas—most prominently the significant reduction in piracy incidents in recent years—the maritime security environment in the GoG remains complex and volatile. A range of transnational threats continues to affect the region, including trafficking in arms, drugs, and human beings, illegal oil bunkering, and Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. These activities undermine regional stability, weaken coastal economies, and contribute to broader governance challenges. At the same time, the regional political landscape is undergoing substantial change. Increasing fragmentation within West Africa—particularly the growing divide between the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)—is altering existing security dynamics. Political instability, military coups, and tensions between regional institutions and national governments risk undermining collective approaches to maritime governance.

These developments coincide with intensifying geopolitical competition in the region. External actors such as Russia, China, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates have expanded their engagement with West African states through security cooperation, economic investment, and political partnerships. In many cases, these actors offer bilateral arrangements that are perceived as more flexible and less conditional than those associated with the EU. The growing number of external partners competing for influence in the region raises questions about whether the EU's current approach remains sufficient to safeguard its strategic interests.Against this backdrop, the EU faces increasing scrutiny regarding the effectiveness of its maritime engagement in the Gulf of Guinea. Critics have highlighted challenges related to transparency, coordination, and limited African ownership in several EU-led initiatives. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that a reassessment of the EU's maritime security strategy in the Gulf of Guinea may be necessary to maintain relevance, strengthen partnerships with West African states, and deliver tangible security outcomes.

The EU footprint in the Gulf of Guinea

Over the past decade, the EU has developed a substantial institutional and operational presence in the Gulf of Guinea. In 2022, the European Commission launched a strategy on ocean governance in Africa, followed by a similar strategy jointly developed with the African Union in 2023. These strategic frameworks aim to strengthen cooperation in maritime security, sustainable fisheries management, environmental protection, and maritime governance more broadly. A wide range of both bilateral and multilateral programmes have emerged under these frameworks, addressing various dimensions of maritime security. These include initiatives to combat piracy, improve maritime domain awareness and judicial capacities, strengthen port security, ability to disrupt trafficking networks, and enhance regional cooperation among maritime authorities.

Many of these initiatives operate through multilateral cooperation with regional organisations, most notably the Yaoundé Architecture for Maritime Security (YCoC).[2] Projects such as the Gulf of Guinea Inter-Regional Network (GoGIN)[3], its successor GOGIN II[4], the Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) in the Gulf of Guinea[5], and the Enhanced Maritime Action in the Gulf of Guinea (EnMAR)[6] initiative illustrate the EU's emphasis on regional coordination mechanisms. At the same time, other programmes focus on strengthening operational capacities among maritime law enforcement agencies in West Africa. Initiatives such as the West Africa Integrated Maritime Security (SWAIMS) programme and the SAFE SEAS FOR AFRICA project aim to enhance surveillance capabilities, training, and operational coordination among coastal states[7]. Further projects target specific aspects of maritime crime. The SEACOP programme[8] focuses on maritime trafficking networks, while initiatives such as WeCAPS[9] and SCOPE AFRICA[10] seek to strengthen port security and customs procedures. Within the

[2] IMO (n.d.). Maritime security in West and Central Africa. *International Maritime Organization*. https://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/security/pages/west-and-central-africa.aspx

[3] EEAS (2021). EU Maritime Security Factsheet: The Gulf of Guinea. *European Union External Action*, January 25. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-maritime-security-factsheet-gulf-guinea_en

[4] Expertise France (2025a). EU Action Enhancing Maritime Security in The Gulf of Guinea. *Expertise France*, April 7. https://www.expertisefrance.fr/sites/expertise/files/2025-07/map-eu-action-enhancing-maritime-security-in-the-gulf-of-guinea.pdf

[5] EEAS Strategic Communications Taskforce (2024). Coordinated Maritime Presences, *European Union External Action*, February 21. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/coordinated-maritime-presences_en

[6] Expertise France (2025c). EnMAR – Enhanced MARitime Action in the Gulf of Guinea. Expertise France, November 17. https://www.expertisefrance.fr/en/projects/enmar-maritime-security-gulf-guinea

[7] EEAS (2021). EU Maritime Security Factsheet: The Gulf of Guinea. *European Union External Action*, January 25. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-maritime-security-factsheet-gulf-guinea_en & Expertise France (2025a). EU Action Enhancing Maritime Security in The Gulf of Guinea. *Expertise France,* April 7. https://www.expertisefrance.fr/sites/expertise/files/2025-07/map-eu-action-enhancing-maritime-security-in-the-gulf-of-guinea.pdf

[8] FIAP (2024). Phase VI of the SEACOP port cooperation project begins. *Fundación para la Internacionalización de las Administraciones Públicas,* January 17. https://www.fiap.gob.es/en/noticias/phase-vi-of-the-seacop-port-cooperation-project-begins/

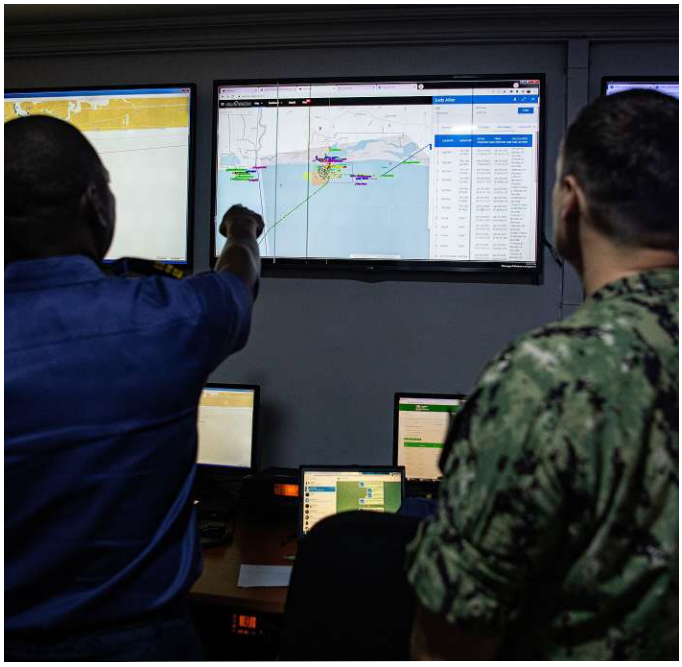
[9] Expertise France (2025b). WeCAPS – Western and Central Africa Port Security. *Expertise France*, July 8. https://www.expertisefrance.fr/en/projects/wecaps-western-and-central-africa-port-security

[10] Directorate-General for International Partnerships (n.d.). SCOPE Africa – Securing Corridors, Ports and Exchanges in Western and Central Africa. *European Commission*. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/programmes/scope-africa_en

fisheries sector, the PESCAO project[11] —implemented with support from ECOWAS and regional fisheries bodies such as the Sub-regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC) and the Fisheries Committee for the West Central Gulf of Guinea (FCWC)—has aimed to improve regional fisheries governance and combat illegal fishing. These initiatives collectively illustrate the breadth of the EU's engagement in the region. A selection of key bilateral agreements and multilateral programmes is presented in Appendix 1. However, while the EU's maritime footprint in the Gulf of Guinea is extensive, the diversity of initiatives and actors involved also present coordination challenges. Many programmes operate across multiple countries with differing institutional capacities, governance structures, and security priorities. As a result, initiatives designed to operate at a regional level can struggle to account for the considerable diversity of challenges faced by individual coastal states.

Furthermore, cooperation conducted primarily through regional organisations may reduce the sense of national ownership among participating states. When programmes are designed and coordinated externally, governments may perceive them as externally driven initiatives rather than as partnerships that respond directly to national priorities. The lack of national and regional ownership and political will to take the lead on these projects has damaged the sustainability of the EU initiatives. A good example of this is the YARIS – Yaoundé Architecture Regional Information System, which the EU has supported to increase maritime domain awareness in the Gulf by connecting maritime coordination centres across West and Central Africa, but which suffers from a lack of regional buy-in and implemenation.





[11] EFCA (n.d.). PESCAO. *European Fisheries Control Agency*. https://www.efca.europa.eu/en/content/pescao

Bilateral efforts

One possible way to address these limitations is to strengthen bilateral cooperation between the EU and individual West African states. Bilateral partnerships can allow EU support to be tailored more precisely to the specific needs, capacities, and security challenges of each partner country. The EU already possesses experience with bilateral arrangements in the region. Since 1979, the EU has maintained Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs)[12] with several West African states. These agreements enable EU fishing vessels to access surplus fish stocks in partner countries' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) while promoting scientific monitoring, sustainability principles, and economic benefits for local communities[13]. Although these agreements incorporate sustainability provisions, they remain primarily economic instruments rather than comprehensive maritime governance mechanisms. Their effectiveness, therefore, depends largely on the presence of mutual economic interests between the EU and partner countries. As such, SFPAs alone are unlikely to address the broader governance and security challenges affecting fisheries management in the Gulf of Guinea. More promising models of bilateral cooperation can be found in the EU's use of the European Peace Facility (EPF)[14]. The EPF[15] enables the EU to provide partner countries with military equipment, infrastructure support, and technical assistance to strengthen their security capacities. In recent years, the EU has used EPF assistance measures to support several West African states, including Ghana, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Mauritania, and Cabo Verde. These measures have included support for maritime surveillance systems, patrol capabilities, and broader defence capacities. In addition, EPF assistance has strengthened the operational capabilities of navies participating in maritime security operations under the Yaoundé Architecture. Examples include support for the Ghanaian and Cameroonian navies to enhance maritime patrol capabilities and situational awareness[16]. An important feature of EPF assistance measures is their flexibility. Each measure typically operates on a three-year timeframe and can be renewed or adjusted based on evolving circumstances. This structure allows the EU and partner states to evaluate outcomes and adapt support to changing security dynamics. Such flexibility makes bilateral security cooperation an attractive complement to broader regional frameworks. However, questions still need to be raised about the regional ownership of the Yaoundé Architecture, which is more of a talk-shop than actual implementation. Should the EU and bilateral donors continue to sponsor structures that the region seemingly lacks the will to develop and secure effective institutions?

[12] SFPAs allow EU vessels to fish surplus stocks in partner countries' waters while promoting fair rules, scientific oversight, community empowerment, and sustainability´. There are two types of SFPAs: **Tuna agreements**: Enable EU vessels to catch migrating tuna and tuna-like species along Africa's coasts, through the Indian Ocean, and in the Pacific Ocean. **Mixed agreements:** Allow access to various fish stocks in a partner country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

[13] Le Menach, F. et al. (2025). A 45-year retrospective of the European Union's fishing access agreements with coastal States of the Global South. *npj Ocean Sustainability,* 4(70). https://doi.org/10.1038/s44183-025-00149-y

[14] Council of the European Union (2024). European Peace Facility. Council of the European Union, December 4. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/

[15] The EPF is an instrument to prevent conflicts, build and preserve peace, and strengthen international security and stability. It operates through missions and operations, as well as through assistance measures benefiting partner countries and regional and international organisations. These measures may include the supply of: military and defence-related equipment, infrastructure, and technical support.

[16] Council of the European Union. (2024). Timeline – European Peace Facility. *Council of the European Union*, January 29. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/timeline-european-peace-facility/



Time for a rethink?

The developments described above raise a broader strategic question about the future direction of EU engagement in the GoG. For many years, the EU's maritime security strategy has relied heavily on regional and multilateral frameworks designed to strengthen collective governance structures. While these approaches have made important progress—particularly in improving coordination and institutional capacity—they now operate in a regional context that is increasingly fragmented. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS and the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) illustrate the growing tensions between regional integration and national sovereignty. Similar dynamics may emerge elsewhere in West Africa, as evidenced by Togo's rapprochement with AES states and political instability in several coastal countries. At the same time, competition from external actors has intensified. Russia, China, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates have expanded their presence in the region through security cooperation agreements, infrastructure investments, and political partnerships. These actors often pursue bilateral arrangements with individual states, offering alternatives to EU-led initiatives. In this context, regional organisations may find it increasingly difficult to serve as the primary platforms for security cooperation. Governments may become less willing to delegate authority to regional institutions, particularly when doing so is perceived to limit national sovereignty.

For the EU, this evolving environment creates a strategic dilemma. A stronger emphasis on bilateral partnerships could enhance responsiveness and strengthen national ownership of security initiatives. However, an excessive shift towards bilateral engagement risks undermining regional organisations such as ECOWAS and the African Union, which remain essential pillars of regional governance. Coordination challenges already illustrate the risks associated with insufficient consultation. For example, the EU's Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) has at times operated without fully informing or involving littoral states, leading to overlaps with regional initiatives such as the Combined Maritime Task Force for the Gulf of Guinea (CMTF-GoG). Such duplication can reduce operational efficiency and weaken trust among regional partners.

To remain an effective security partner in the Gulf of Guinea, the EU must therefore adapt its engagement to the changing regional landscape. Coastal states across the region face highly diverse realities in terms of governance capacity, economic development, and security threats. Uniform policy approaches risk overlooking these differences and may ultimately limit the effectiveness of EU initiatives. In recent years, the EU has begun experimenting with more flexible forms of engagement through EPF assistance measures and targeted cooperation programmes. Best exemplified by the new EU-Ghana agreement on security and defence[17]. These initiatives suggest that a more differentiated approach may be both feasible and desirable.

This paper argues that the EU should continue to develop this approach by combining a broad regional strategy with tailored bilateral implementation mechanisms. Regional frameworks, although more talk-shop than actual implementation, can still provide coordination, information sharing, and institutional support, while bilateral partnerships should be used to address the specific needs and capacities of individual coastal states. Equally important is strengthening African ownership of maritime security initiatives. West African partners should play a more prominent role in shaping the design and priorities of EU-supported programmes. Increased consultation and joint planning can improve coordination, enhance trust, and ensure that initiatives reflect the realities faced by local actors.

A strategy that balances regional coordination with targeted bilateral engagement would allow the EU to respond more effectively to the evolving security environment while reinforcing its role as a credible and reliable partner for West African states.

[17] EEAS (2026). Ghana: Press release on the signing of a Security and Defence Partnership and handover of EPF military equipment. *European Union External Action*, March 24. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ghana-press-release-signing-security-and-defence-partnership-and-handover-epf-military-equipment_en

Conclusion

The EU has become one of the most significant external actors supporting maritime security and governance in the Gulf of Guinea. Through a wide range of initiatives and partnerships, the EU has contributed to improvements in maritime domain awareness, anti-piracy operations, fisheries governance, and law enforcement capacities across the region. However, the strategic environment in which these initiatives operate is changing rapidly. Growing geopolitical competition, increasing regional fragmentation, and the diverse challenges faced by individual coastal states are placing pressure on existing cooperation frameworks. While regional mechanisms such as the Yaoundé Architecture remain essential for coordination and long-term institutional development, they are unlikely to be sufficient on their own to address the evolving maritime security landscape. The regional member states have so far shown no willingness to make the Yaoundé structure the key regional tool to secure maritime security in the GoG.



A more effective EU strategy would combine continued support for regional frameworks with greater emphasis on flexible bilateral partnerships tailored to the needs of individual states. Such an approach would allow the EU to enhance national ownership, respond more effectively to country-specific challenges, and maintain its strategic relevance in an increasingly competitive environment. By adopting a model based on regional coordination and bilateral implementation, the EU can strengthen its partnerships with West African states while improving the effectiveness of its maritime security engagement in the Gulf of Guinea.

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Prof. Thomas Mandrup is Associate Professor and Head of Research at the Section for Security Cooperation, Institute for Strategy and War Studies at the Royal Danish Defence College, and Professor at Stellenbosch University's Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA). His research focuses on African security policy, peace operations, military capacity building, and international stabilisation missions in Sub-Saharan Africa. He has advised the African Union and other regional actors on security policy, military missions, and capacity-building initiatives. His current research examines African-led military operations against insurgencies in regions such as the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Somalia. He has conducted extensive fieldwork across Africa and frequently provides expert analysis on African security and international peace operations.

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Appendix 1: Selected bi- and multilateral EU maritime agreements and projects in West Africa.

Bilateral agreements	Time frame
Sustainable fisheries partnership agreements (SFPAs):	
Cabo Verde Tuna Agreement	23 July 2024 – 22 July 2029
Côte d'Ivoire Tuna Agreement	6 June 2025 – 5 June 2029
Gabon Tuna Agreement	29 June 2021 – 28 June 2026
Guinea-Bissau Mixed Agreement	18 September 2024 – 17 September 2029
Mauritania Mixed Agreement	15 November 2021 – 14 November 2026
São Tomé and Príncipe Tuna Agreement	6 October 2025 – 5 October 2029
Senegal Tuna Agreement	Latest active agreement ended on 17 November 2024
Gambia Tuna Agreement	Latest active agreement ended on 30 July 2025
Liberia Tuna Agreement	Latest active agreement ended on 8 December 2020
Equatorial Guinea Tuna Agreement	Latest active agreement ended on 30 June 2001
Assistance measures under the European Peace Facility (EPF)[2]:	
EU assistance measure to support the Beninese armed forces	25 September 2023
EU assistance measure to support the Yaoundé Architecture and strengthen the capacities of military actors and navies of selected coastal states – Ghana and Cameroon – involved in maritime security operations in the Gulf of Guinea.	27 November 2023
EU assistance measure to enhance the capabilities of the armed forces of Ghana.	4 April 2024
EU assistance measure to support the armed forces of Côte d'Ivoire.	29 April 2024
EU assistance measure to support the armed forces of Senegal.	8 July 2025
EU assistance measure to provide the Beninese armed forces with military equipment.	15 July 2024
EU assistance measure to increase the support for the armed forces of Mauritania.	22 July 2024
EU Assistance measure to provide the Mauritanian armed forces with military equipment.	24 March 2025
EU assistance measure to support the Armed Forces of Cabo Verde.	8 July 2025
EU assistance measure to support the armed forces of Senegal.	8 July 2025

Multilateral projects	Time frame
Member of the G7++ Friends of the Gulf of Guinea Group (G7++FOGG)	2013–
Seaport Cooperation Project (SEACOP)	2015–
The Gulf of Guinea Inter-Regional Network (GoGIN)	December 2016–
Improved regional fisheries governance in western Africa (PESCAO) project	April 2017 – December 2022
The Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community (AFIC) project	2017–2023
Western and Central Africa Port Security (WeCAPS) project	January 2019
West Africa Integrated Maritime Security (SWAIMS)	2019
Support Programme to the Maritime Security Strategy in Central Africa (PASSMAR)	2019
Improvement of Ports' Customs and Operations Efficiency in African ports (IPCOEA)	2019
Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) in the Gulf of Guinea	January 2021
The Migrant Protection, Return, and Reintegration Programme for Sub-Saharan Africa (MPRR-SSA)	August 2022
Enhanced Maritime Action in the Gulf of Guinea (EnMAR)	October 2022
The Gulf of Guinea Interregional Network (GOGIN) II	2023
Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling	November 2023
SAFE SEAS FOR AFRICA project	November 2023
The sixth iteration of the SEACOP project (SEACOP VI)	January 2024
The West Africa Sustainable Ocean Programme (WASOP)	December 2024
Securing Corridors, Ports and Exchanges in Western and Central Africa (SCOPE AFRICA)	February 2025

About the Forum

Since 2022, the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), the Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC), and SIGLA at Stellenbosch University have collaborated under the Danish Peace and Stabilisation Fund's Maritime Security Programme to organise annual fora on maritime security, primarily focusing on the Gulf of Guinea.

The fora provide a platform to examine maritime security challenges, assess existing vulnerabilities, and discuss initiatives and responses to insecurity in the region. In 2025, the forum was held in Stellenbosch, South Africa, with discussions expanded to cover developments in the Red Sea and their implications for littoral countries in Southern and Western Africa.

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