

OBANGAME EXPRESS - A “STRATEGIC BRIDGE” TO THE GULF OF GUINEA

Moreno de Queiroz Figueiredo¹
Marcos Valle Machado Silva²

SUMARRY

Maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea is a problem affecting international trade in that region. Several initiatives are being implemented to mitigate the problem, among them the operation Obangame Express, conducted by the United States of America (USA). Brazil has participated since the second edition of this initiative, in 2012. However, in 2017, it was invited by the US to take control of the entire exercise in one of the five zones that divide the Gulf of Guinea. The central question to be analyzed in this article is how the participation in the Obangame Express contributes to a greater insertion of Brazil in its strategic environment. The main objective is to present the relevance of this invitation to Brazil, understood as a strategic opportunity to exert greater influence in that Gulf. Official unclassified primary sources from the 2016, 2017 and 2018 editions of the operation were also accessed, as well as updated reports in April 2021 on the incidents that occurred in the region. It is understood that it is a rare opportunity to increase influence in the strategic environment, taking advantage of the political gains of participating in a large-scale, low-resource operation. Keywords: Obangame; Gulf of Guinea; strategic environment.

¹ Centro di Alti Studi della Difesa (Italy), Rome — Italy. Email: Morenoqfigueiredo@gmail.com -ORCID <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7125-6498>.

² Program in Maritime Studies (PPGEM) of the Escola de Guerra Naval (EGN), Rio de Janeiro — RJ, Brazil. E-mail: valle@marinha.mil.br - ORCID <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0367-8899>

INTRODUCTION

Since the first decade of the Twenty-First Century, Brazil has expressed its strategic interests in the area of defense in two documents: the National Defense Policy (PND) and the National Defense Strategy (END). These documents, in their various editions, point to the part of the African continent as an area of strategic interest inserted in the so-called "Brazilian strategic environment", which "includes South America, the South Atlantic, the countries of the West African coast and Antarctica" (BRASIL, 2020a, P.11).

However, since the 1960s, Brazil's relations with African countries, including the neighboring states that make up the Gulf of Guinea region, have alternated moments of rapprochement and retreat, both due to ideological constraints and economic circumstances.

In 2021, Brazil's seven main trading partners in Africa accounted for about 80% of the amount traded between Brazil and the countries of the African continent. Among these main trading partners, two are in the Gulf of Guinea region: Nigeria and Angola. Trade with these two countries corresponds to approximately 16% of trade between Brazil and Africa. However, in terms of the amount of Brazilian foreign trade, relations with Nigeria and Angola corresponded, in 2021, to about 0.52% of total Brazilian Foreign Trade (see Brazil, Comex Vis: Africa). But, the initial point to be highlighted is that Brazil's strategic interests in Africa, in particular in the Gulf of Guinea are centered on trade relations. The common denominator among the policies for Africa of the last four Brazilian governments was the search for trade relations that preferentially generated a surplus in the trade balance (SILVA, 2020, P.121).

A possible obstacle to the growth of these trade relations between Brazil and African countries, especially those located in the Gulf of Guinea, is maritime insecurity resulting from piracy and armed robbery at sea. As will be evidenced throughout this article, between 2016 and 2020, more than 90% of incidents of armed robbery at sea recorded in the Gulf of Guinea occurred off the coast of Nigeria. In this context, maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea, with the recurrent practice of various crimes against ships and cargo, is a problem that affects international trade in that region. Brazil has participated in several international maritime initiatives to contribute

to mitigating the problem. Among these initiatives, the most important is the operation Obangame Express (OE). Therefore, it is worth asking: How can the Brazilian participation in this multinational military operation contribute to the national projection in the African portion of it's strategic environment? Seeking to answer this research problem, the article focuses on presenting the relevance of the participation in the OE operation, in the context of the Brazilian strategic environment. Initially, it is proposed to use the metaphor of the bridge to illustrate that such participation would facilitate national projection on the African continent.

To achieve the proposed goal, the text is structured in three sections. The first of these contextualizes the strategic environment and points out the geopolitical steps that were necessary for its construction. It is hoped that, after this section, the reader will understand the limits of that region of the South Atlantic, as well as the reasons that led Brazil to delimit it.

The second section presents the results of a Gulf of Guinea maritime risk trends report. Such a primary document was generated through the system SeaVision and it presents all the records of maritime incidents reported by the navies of the states bordering that Gulf, from 2016 to April 2021. It is intended to contextualize the current figures that permeate the maritime challenge of the region, to update the reader, highlighting the states that have shown improvement trends and those that have degraded their maritime performance.

Next, the third structuring section presents the operation Obangame Express, initially contextualizing its historical origin and the other U.S. programs and projects on the West African coast. It is intended to denote the nature of the operation, mentioning the numbers involved, whether of participants, resources applied, or investments in the support infrastructure for the increase of maritime situational awareness (CSM) in that Gulf.

Finally, in the final considerations, we seek to highlight the OE as a "strategic bridge" with the potential to amplify Brazil's influence on the West African coast. But to understand the reasons that led Brazil to project itself on the African continent, it is initially necessary to present the concept of strategic environment.

As stated in the National Defense Policy (PND), submitted to the National Congress on July 22, 2020 (BRASIL, 2020A), the South Atlantic

is an area of geostrategic interest for Brazil. In the same document, the concept of the Brazilian strategic environment is presented, which, as pointed out in the introduction of this article, comprises "South America, the South Atlantic, the countries of the West African coast and Antarctica" (BRASIL, 2020a, P.11).

This version of the PND, not yet approved by Congress, follows the trend of the last three versions (2012, 2008 and 2005) that include the limits of the South Atlantic as part of the Brazilian strategic environment. But this has not always been the understanding of Brazilian geopoliticians and strategists. The following is a theoretical review of how the geopolitical gaze was transferred from a purely continental focus to a vision that flew over the ocean and today is concerned with influencing friendly states in Africa. First, however, there is a basic observation in relation to the concept of geopolitics. The word geopolitics is not a simple contraction of political geography. General Carlos de Meira Mattos, one of the greatest Brazilian scholars on this topic, points out the differences between geopolitics and political geography. For Meira Mattos, political geography concerns the political-geography relationship. Geopolitics, on the other hand, "is a branch of Political Science that was formed by the dynamic interaction of three branches of knowledge: geography (physical space), politics (application of power to the art of governing) and history (human experience)". (MATTOS, 2002, p.29).

Once this basic consideration about the concept of geopolitics is made, it is necessary to return to the process that took Brazilian geopolitical thought from a continental perspective to a much broader vision expressed in the current concept of Brazilian strategic environment.

Much of this strategic vision, which looks beyond the horizon seen from the beach sand, is due to Therezinha De Castro (1930-2000) and her contribution to the Brazilian projection on the Antarctic continent and in the South Atlantic itself. However, before reaching this vision of the sea, it was necessary for Brazilian geopolitical studies to travel a path in the interior, guaranteeing the borders, integrating the territory, and developing the state.

As the scholar of geopolitics Meira Mattos (2002) introduced us, the first geopolitical works in Brazil concentrated their efforts on the continent. This was expected, as the region it still lacked stabilization

and especially integration. One can mention, already in the 1930s, the studies of Mario Travassos (1891-1973) and his search for greater fluidity in the flow of products with various proposals for interconnected transport modes.

Travassos saw in the heart of the continent, in the region of Bolivia, a similar importance to the *Heartland*³ proposed by Mackinder for Eurasia. According to Travassos, as the Bolivian region had connections to the Andes, to the Amazon rainforest and to the rivers of the Southeast, it was the geopolitical center point of the region. Travassos applied the method systematized by Everaldo Backheuser (1879-1951) in the 1920s, which can be considered the precursor of geopolitics in Brazil (MATTOS, 2002).

The greatest contribution of Backheuser, according to Mattos (2002), was the relevance given to borders, being fundamental for the creation of federal territories in the confines of Brazil, such as, among other examples, those of Amapá, Roraima, and Foz do Iguaçu. The proposal was to populate and occupy the territories to strengthen the national presence in the limits of Brazil.

After the guarantee of borders, the integration line of thought comes back to the fore. As Brazil had continental dimensions, and its population was concentrated on the Coast, regional Integration was seen to consolidate the territory. In this sense, Lysias Rodrigues (1896-1957) emphasizes the importance of aviation in the development of depopulated and distant inland lands. This work was launched in 1947 and, even after almost 30 years of geopolitical studies, there was not even a mention of the Atlantic Ocean (MATTOS, 2002).

The concept of the sea front, proposed by Golbery do Couto e Silva (1911-1987), breaks this silence about the importance of the sea in geopolitics. Despite shedding light on the Atlantic and the relevance of that maritime border, Golbery admits that Brazil occupies a somewhat marginal position in the world's oceans and that, for him, the South Atlantic would be nothing more than a "still eccentric golf" (MATTOS, 2002). With this vision of little oceanic relevance, Golbery restricts the concept of the maritime front to the coast and concentrates his efforts

3 Halford Mackinder (1861-1947) proposed the concept of Heartland, which would be the pivot of world politics. For Mackinder, the position occupied by Russia would be ideal for the development of a land-based economic and military power (MATTOS, 2002).

on delimiting the five geopolitical regions in the Brazilian territory, following the line of his predecessors who focused on continental integration and development.

In the 1970s, Therezinha's first works appear de Castro and the Brazilian geopolitical eyes advance on the waters of the South Atlantic. Having as its central theme the proposal that Brazil should project itself on the Antarctic continent, Therezinha De Castro thus inserts the South Atlantic into the National geopolitical debate (CASTRO,1997).

At this moment, the first sketches of what would be the concept of the Brazilian strategic environment appear in an unprecedented way. For the first time, the studied object, in a geopolitical context, went beyond the continent, beyond the Golbery sea front, penetrating the sea. As Mattos (2002) summarized, Therezinha De Castro highlighted the strategic importance of occupying Antarctica, integrating the Southern Cone, being present in the Caribbean Basin and facing the Amazon problems.

After publishing several books and articles, as well as acting as lecturer and full professor in some military academies, Therezinha aroused academic and political interest in the Brazilian maritime environment. This more persistent look at the ocean has fostered some initiatives in the region, especially the one that has the potential to bring the entire South Atlantic together.

In the 1980s, as a result of the growing focus on the ocean, there was the Brazilian initiative of the zone of peace and cooperation of the South Atlantic (ZOPACAS). According to Fonseca (1993), the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), in 1987, approved the creation of ZOPACAS, giving rise to a regional identity that has not yet been explored. Fonseca presents the reflection that the oceans and seas bring people closer, while forests and mountain ranges push and distance. The South Atlantic could then serve as a factor of rapprochement between the States bathed by it.

Finally, Fonseca points out that the distance between Natal and Guinea - Bissau is 3,500 kilometers, while the distance between Natal and Rio Branco, in Acre, is 4,400 kilometers. The concern with the relative distances and the need to guarantee a region of peace were the argument used for the construction of ZOPACAS, which was born in a context of the Cold War (1947-1991).

Mentioning This Cold War context is also fundamental to

understand why the only vote against the creation of ZOPACAS in the UNGA was from the United States of America (USA). There was, at that time, an American concern that the zone could limit the capacity of that state to act in the region (MYAMOTO, 1987).

The distancing of the United States is also part of a conjuncture of independence in Brazilian foreign policy. As Cervo (2011) pointed out, even in the 1970s, Brazil sought to strengthen diplomatic and economic ties with newly created independent African states. In this way, the efforts to exert influence in the region, crossing the Atlantic begin to become more present with the celebration of various technical-scientific cooperation agreements, in addition to closing deals in the commercial sphere. Cervo (2011) points out that, by being the first state to recognize Angola's independence, Brazil gives a clear message to the world that it had reoriented its foreign policy towards Africa.

Although the moment of Brazilian insertion in Africa coincided with the context of bipolar hegemonic dispute, it should be noted that the strategic vision on the South Atlantic was incorporated as a state vision, and not a government vision. Thus, the ideological concern of the United States, by voting against ZOPACAS, was not perceived by the other member states of this Cooperation Zone.

Such behavior is observed in the Brazilian case, as Edwards (2021) reinforces, since the Bolsonaro government has been giving the same relevance to the project as previous governments, even though they are of opposite ideologies. Despite this continuity, one can see a reduction in bilateral rapprochement between Brazil and African states, especially those on the West Coast. It remains to be seen how this stance will impact ZOPACAS's performance and whether, in the future, it will not be the case of a rapprochement.

It can be inferred that with the advancement of offshore studies, the perception of the Brazilian society about the importance of the South Atlantic increased and, with it, political initiatives for the region. It is also necessary to mention, as the last vector of propagation of oceanic importance for Brazil, the concept of Oceanopolitics, introduced by Admiral Ilques Barbosa Júnior, in 2009.

In this proposal, there is a clear intention to distinguish geopolitics from Oceanopolitics. If the first is born in the northern hemisphere, continental, in a context of land disputes in Eurasia, the second arises in the southern hemisphere, Oceanic, in a context

of cooperation and interdependence. Barbosa Júnior (2009) cites some differences between oceans and continents, without intending to exhaust them, such as: their own legal systems, Meteorological influence and Border limits defined only by power interactions.

Due to so many differences, Barbosa Júnior (2009) proposes that the way to analyze the political relationship of societies, bathed by the same ocean, should not be the same as the continent. For the author, it is from the concepts of Oceanopolitics, and not geopolitics that one should understand the importance of ocean spaces.

In line with the relevance of ocean spaces, and in order to put into practice what is proposed in the theory of Alfred T. Mahan⁴, on maritime power, the Brazilian Navy has acted on oceanic islands and off the coast of Africa with projects of a diplomatic nature. The Naval advisory mission in Cape Verde and the Technical Advisory Groups (TAG) in Namibia and São Tomé and Príncipe stand out. Such initiatives, indicated with yellow cones in Figure 1, are even more important when analyzing the South Atlantic and oceanic islands, highlighted in dark red.

Figure 1-Brazilian strategic environment



⁴ Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), also known as the evangelist of Sea Power The Influence of Seapower upon History, 1660-1783, argued that it was necessary to have support points in strategic places in order to allow the Navy to operate in regions distant from its bases. (MAHAN, 1890).

The yellow line delimits the strategic surroundings, the black line delimits the waters under Brazilian jurisdiction and the red line signals the chains of British Isles of the South Atlantic.

The “entry points” in yellow are the locations with naval missions (Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe and Namibia, north to South).

Source: prepared by the authors.

The points in yellow (Figure 1) were named as “entry points”, since they are the initiatives that allow greater naval influence on the continent. It is through these initiatives that it will be possible to strengthen the bonds of camaraderie between the navies, contribute to African military training and reinforce the presence of Brazilian naval power on that continent.

The oceanic approach must include understanding that, today, in addition to most products circulating through the oceans, most information also does so. As Clark (2016) exposed, the submarine cable network is responsible for almost all voice and data traffic, including military and financial transmissions.

In this sense, initiatives such as ZOPACAS, which seek to ensure ocean space as a peaceful space, justify themselves even more. In addition, although it can be said that the proposal to pacify the region has been successful, such an initiative has not been enough to prevent disruptive agents from endangering the flow of goods on the African coast, for example.

The occurrence of pirate attacks and other crimes in the maritime environment has drawn the attention of the international community to the Gulf of Guinea. The maintenance of good order at sea is essential for the fluidity of goods and data to be guaranteed. For this reason, several international initiatives have been implemented in the region, especially by the USA and France and, to a lesser extent, by Brazil, Portugal, Spain and Italy.

It is intended to present, however, a new “bridge” to Africa, which was unveiled to Brazil in 2012 and increased in 2017, as will be discussed in Section 4. But before that, it is necessary to understand the region under study. It is necessary to detail the aspects of the Gulf of Guinea and contextualize, with current data, the real situation of that Gulf.

THE GULF OF GUINEA

The geographical shape of a Gulf brings with it some peculiarities.

The most notable, for maritime security, concerns the divisions of the jurisdictional waters of each state (Figure 2). Because they are very close, they facilitate the evasion of criminals from one area to another, which reinforces the need for coordination for more effective action at sea. For this, inexorably, it is necessary to have the ability to know the that occurs in the maritime area and thus increase the CSM.

Figure 2-Exclusive Economic Zones in the Gulf of Guinea.



Source SEAVISION⁵, 2021.

While understanding that the causes of piracy and violence in African waters may have their origins in socio-economic issues on land, this article will restrict itself to analyzing U.S. initiatives to mitigate their maritime effects. But to do so, it is first necessary to know the maritime governance policy document in force in that region.

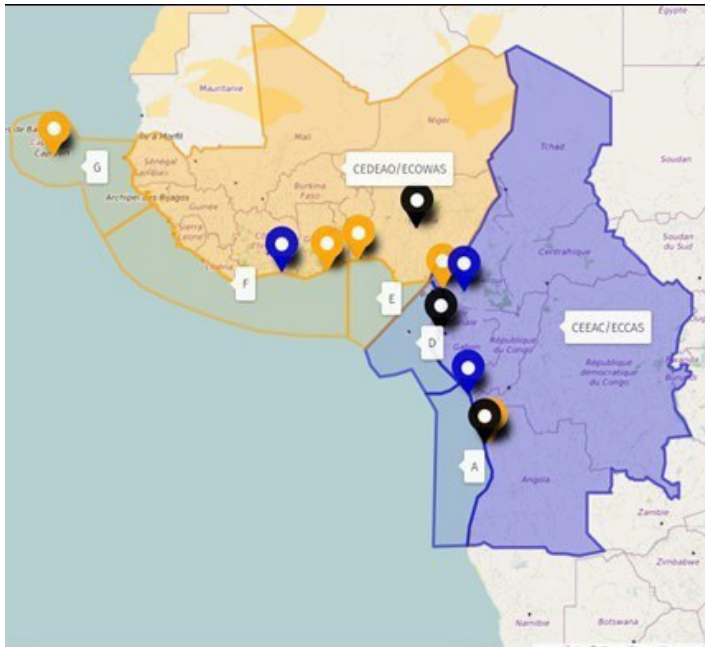
THE YAOUNDÉ CODE OF CONDUCT PROPOSAL

Seeking to coordinate resources and efforts, the Gulf countries signed the Yaoundé Code of conduct in 2013. This document divided the region into zones of responsibility (Figure 3), presenting a command-and-control architecture (C2) to optimize maritime response. In this division,

⁵ It should be noted that the SeaVision it is a system developed by the Department of transportation of the Government of the United States of America and its access is through login and password (authors note).

each of the 19 Gulf countries will have a Maritime Operations Center (MOC)⁶. These Mocs were grouped into five zones, each zone having a multinational Maritime Coordination Center, which monitors and coordinates surveillance and interception actions in order to optimize the means and resources of the countries components (NWANGWU, 2015).

Figure 3-Division of zones of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct.



Source: UMap. Architecture of Yaoundé.

At the regional level, the zones are grouped into two large regions, which mirror the two previously existing economic regions of Central and West Africa⁷. The Central African Regional Maritime Security Centre (CRESMAC⁸) coordinates the actions of the states of Zones A and D. And the West African Regional Maritime Security Centre (CRESMAO⁹) coordinates the states of zones E, F and G. Both

6 MOC, from English Maritime Operational Center (Note by the authors).

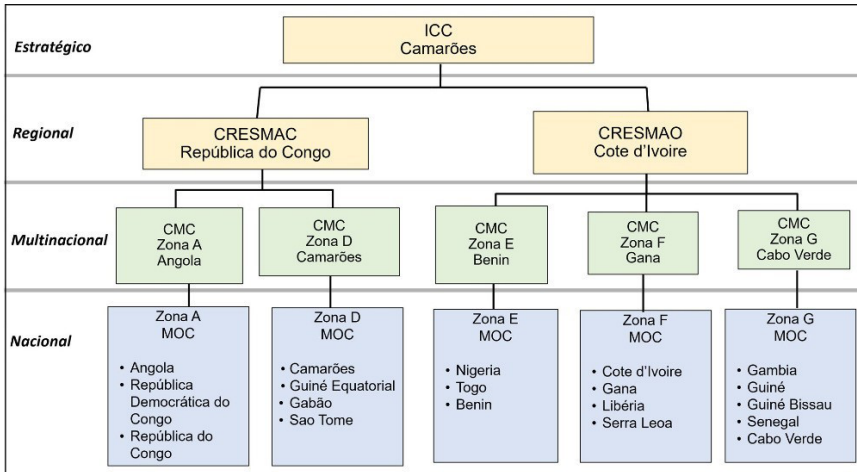
7 The Economic Community of Central African States and The Economic Community of West African states (authors' note).

8 CRESMAC is a French acronym: Centre Régionale de Sécurité Maritime de l'Afrique Centrale (Authors' note).

9 CRESMAO is a French acronym: Centre Régionale de Sécurité Maritime de l'Afrique de

regions report to the Interregional Coordination Centre (ICC) which concentrates all data from the Gulf of Guinea.

Figure 4 - Maritime Security Architecture in the Gulf of Guinea proposed by the Yaoundé Code of Conduct.



Source: adapted by the authors based on data from the INTERREGIONAL COORDINATION CENTRE (ICC), Yaounde Architecture, 2021.

EVOLUTION OF INSECURITY IN THE GULF OF GUINEA FROM 2016 TO 2021.

As will be explained in the next section, one of the US tools for the increment of CSM in the region is free access to the platform SeaVision¹⁰, awarded to African MOC operators. As all data from maritime events began to be trafficked and coordinated through this system, it became possible to generate reports of maritime risk trends.

Maritime risk, for the purposes of this article, is characterized by the actual occurrence, or attempt, of kidnapping of crew members, insurgent actions, theft, armed robbery, hijacking of the ship or political

l'ouest (Note by the authors).

10 SeaVision it is a web-based CSM tool that allows users to view and share a wide range of information to improve maritime operations. The system also provides user-defined rule-based analytics to assess and report on defined maritime activities or events (see SeaVision, 2021).

activism. If there is, for example, a suspicious approach to a merchant ship, and this action has been reported or observed by an operator of one of the Mocs, it is then entered in the SeaVision as a maritime risk event. It should also be noted that the events that occurred with the ship moored or anchored, they are also counted as incidents of maritime risk.

One of these reports, generated on May 28, 2021 at the request of Naval Forces Africa¹¹ (NAFAF), presents the evolution of the records of these risk events that occurred between January 01, 2016 and April 30, 2021 (NAFAF, 2021a). The general trend observed is neither improving nor worsening, but stabilizing, since 2017, with an average of 113 incidents per year.

In these almost five years of observation, African operators recorded, on the platform SeaVision, a total of 796 Marine hazard events. Included in this number are both the attempts and the events carried out. Incidents with insurgents¹² they are considered non-criminal events and have been disregarded due to falling occurrences. As an example, it is cited that the maritime risk actions of insurgents fell from 83 in 2016 to only one incident in 2020, being the last until then. Thus, excluding the non-criminal events, as well as the 85 reported only as suspicious activity, the number of 506 incidents from January 2016 to April 2021 was obtained.

Also, according to the report, 243 of the 506 incidents were reported as failed attempts, and it is possible to associate how much the defensive measures practiced by the merchant ship were decisive in the effective occurrence of the attacks. If at least one defensive measure is implemented by the crew, the chance of success in the attack is reduced to 21%, but in the events in which no defensive measures were taken, the success in the attacks was 71%. Also, according to the report, the defensive measure that proved most effective was to concentrate the entire crew in the Citadel¹³.

11 As will be discussed in the next section, NAFAF is a subdivision of the U.S. Sixth Squadron, headquartered in Naples, Italy (authors' note).

12 According to the NAFAF report, maritime incidents generated by insurgents are those that are politically motivated, usually related to opposition groups to the current regime (NAFAF, 2021a).

13 It is understood by Citadel, the set of onboard compartments that can be isolated from the rest of the ship, making it difficult for pirates or hijackers to access. This measure is the most effective because, as shown in TAB.1, the incidence of kidnappings of persons is higher than the other modalities of crimes (note by the authors).

Another highlight of the report is that, although risk events are recorded in the vicinity of land, whether with the ship moored or anchored, the highest incidence of attacks occurs with ships sailing (Table 1). It should be noted that both armed robbery and robbery events occur less than 10 nautical miles from the coast, being the occurrence of hijackings of people or ships at greater distances. It can be inferred that the practice of kidnappings is carried out by criminals who are better structured than those who practice robbery or theft, since they have the means to intercept their targets at greater distances from land.

Table 1-location, type and failed attempts of marine hazard events reported in the system SeaVision, in the Gulf of Guinea, from 1 January 2016 to 30 April 2021.

Estado / ZEE	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021/ até abril	Total por Estado	% em relação ao total
Nigéria	100	94	87	68	48	10	407	69%
Gana	11	7	12	6	19	3	58	10%
Benim	3	0	6	2	11	0	22	4%
Camarões	0	1	4	9	5	1	20	3%
ZEECNSTP ¹	2	1	2	3	6	3	17	3%
Cote D'Ivoire	4	5	1	2	4	0	16	3%
Togo	3	0	0	5	4	0	12	2%
São Tomé e Príncipe	2	0	0	2	2	6	12	2%
Guiné Equatorial	2	0	0	4	4	0	10	2%
Gabão	0	0	2	2	4	1	9	2%
Fora das ZEE	1	0	3	0	2	2	8	1%
Total Geral	128	108	117	103	109	26	591	100%

Source: NAVAF, 2021A (our translation).

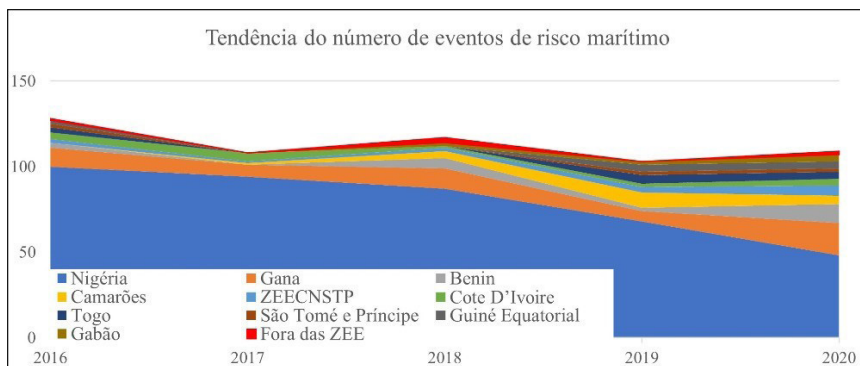
Although more than half of the incidents in the period were concentrated in Nigeria's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), as evidenced in Table 2 and Graph 1, a downward trend can be observed, as a result of that state's efforts to increase security in its waters. On the other hand, Benin, Ghana and São Tomé and Príncipe show an increase in reported events, raising greater attention to those coastlines.

Table 2-maritime risk events reported in the system SeaVision, in the Gulf of Guinea, from 1 January 2016 to 30 April 2021.

Tipo de evento	Atracado	Fundado	Navegando	Fracassado	% Fracassado	Totais
Sequestro de pessoas	1	10	113	133	52%	257
Furto	19	28	1	78	62%	126
Roubo armado	6	5	65	30	28%	106
Atividade suspeita	-	-	-	-	-	85
Sequestro de navio	-	-	15	2	12%	17
Totais	26	43	194	243	48%	591

Source: NAVAF, 2021A (our translation).

Chart 1-trend of the number of maritime risk events by state, reported in the SeaVision system, in the Gulf of Guinea, from January 01, 2016 to April 30, 2021.



Source: prepared by the authors based on data obtained from NAVAF, 2021A.

Despite showing a significant reduction trend in the period analyzed, it should be emphasized that the greatest concentration of maritime problems in the Gulf of Guinea is located on the coast of Nigeria. There, 91% of armed robberies and 69% of all incidents occurred. Figure 5, below, illustrates this concentration of incidents off the Nigerian coast.

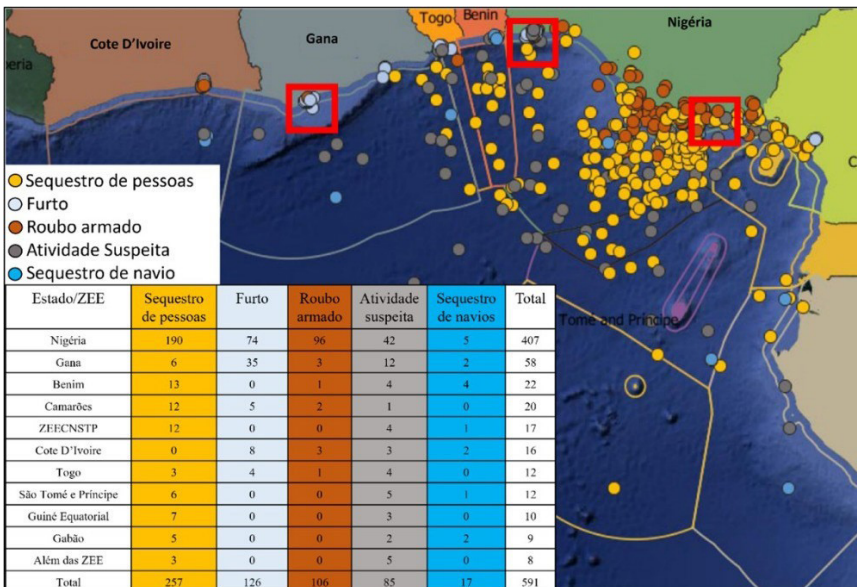
Three areas of high concentration of maritime incidents are highlighted in red squares (Figure 4). The first is in the vicinity of the port of Apapa and Tin Can Island, located in the city of Lagos, accounting for 80 events, most of them armed thefts and robberies. The second is located on the eastern part of the Nigerian coast, in the vicinity of FPSO Mystra

and FPSO Usan¹⁴, and concentrates 74 incidents. The third is located in the Port of Takadori, Ghana, with a total of 37 incidents reported.

Regarding the periodicity of maritime incidents, it was possible to verify that it follows an inverse trend to the rainy season in the region. The driest months from November to March concentrate an average of almost twice as many reported incidents as the rainy months from April to October. This information is considered important, especially in the case of future planning of Brazilian operations in the region.

Regarding the days of occurrence, it stands out that fewer events occur on Sunday and the numbers increase throughout the week until a peak on Friday, reducing again on Saturdays. It should be noted that all theft incidents occurred between 21:00 and 08:59, with 91% of events reported between 23:00 and 05:59.

Figure 5-geographical distribution of maritime risk events reported in the system SeaVision, in the Gulf of Guinea, from 1 January 2016 to 30 April 2021.



Source: adapted by the authors based on data obtained from NAVAF, 2021A.

14 FPSO is the acronym for Floating, Production, Storage and Offloading. They are vessels that function as platforms for the exploration of hydrocarbons at sea (note by the authors).

All the information exposed was only produced because African Mocs had access to the system SeaVision and, more than that, they were engaged in using it as the main CSM tool, in addition to having an implemented communications structure. The following will present how this structuring and engagement was possible, contextualizing U.S.-led investments in infrastructure and training in the region. It will be possible to observe how was the historical evolution of the American involvement with the region and its importance for the increase of CSM.

THE OPERATION OBANGAME EXPRESS

Although there is a large role in the Gulf of Guinea, isolated and multinational, among several European and South American actors, this article focuses on the most significant and major effort, which is that of the United States.

“[...] a secure and stable Africa is essential for America’s security”¹⁵. This statement was delivered by General Stephen Townsend, commander of Africa Combatant Command (AFRICOM), before the US Senate Committee on military services (TOWNSEND, 2020). AFRICOM was created in 2007 and, since then, has carried out various operations, security investments and partnerships on the African continent with ties to 53 countries on the continent, except Egypt (STEINBECK, 2021). Its mission is to protect and defend U.S. Interests by strengthening the defense capabilities of African states.

Despite having part of its attention focused on the containment of terrorist groups in Africa, such as the al-Shabaab and the Boko Haram, AFRICOM also aims to disrupt illicit trafficking in the Gulf of Guinea in partnership with coastal African states. With a focus on increasing security on the continent, it annually conducts a series of military exercises, among which the following stand out: Phoenix Express, Cutlass Express, Obangame Express, African Lion, Justified Accord and Flintlock (USA, 2021).

The naval assets employed in AFRICOM missions are from the U.S. 6th Squadron, based in Naples. This station, also called U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa, divides into Naval Forces Africa (NAVAF) and Naval Forces Europe (NAVEUR). Its areas of responsibility cover all of

15 “A secure and stable Africa is essential to America’s security” (TOWNSEND, 2020, our translation).

Europe, northern Russia, and most of Africa, reaching 105 distinct states.

In 2006, the U.S. initiated the RMAC project: (Regional Maritime Awareness Capability) that sought to increase CSM in São Tomé and Príncipe, Nigeria, Gabon, Togo, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire¹⁶ and Sierra Leone. The RMAC has a more structuring character, through which many materials were donated, and systems implemented. Highlights donation of two U.S. Coast Guard ships to Nigeria in 2006 NNS Okpabana and NNS Thunder (USA, 2020).

In the context of the RMAC, mention is made of the implementation, in 2017, of the communications system that connected the MOC of Benin, Togo and Nigeria, enabling the Coordination of maritime efforts in Zone E. Antennas, radios, installation and testing services were provided by RMAC personnel, structuring a link microwave independent internet¹⁷. The creation of AFRICOM is directly related to that proposed in the cooperative strategy for Twenty-First Century Sea Power, published in October 2007 by the US (USA, 2007). In that document, a change of attitude was perceived aiming at greater integration and collaboration, in view of the more diffuse characteristics of the new threats.

In this sense, this Combatant Command established, in 2008, the concept of African Partnership Station (APS) and, since then, has been carrying out bilateral and multinational operations in order to enable African solutions to African problems (SOHN, 2009). According to Sohn, the creation of the APS was encouraged by a conference held in 2006 in Benin, when eleven states belonging to the Gulf of Guinea pledged to address the problem of local, national and regional maritime governance.

The first operation conducted in the context of PHC, following the concept of Global Fleet Station¹⁸, was the sending of the USS Fort McHenry (LSD 43) for a seven-month mission off the West African coast in 2008. In that operation, officers from eight European navies joined the U.S. in

16 It is suggested not to use "Ivory Coast" or any other form of translation. As noted by one of the authors of this article, Ivorians do not like it when trying to translate the name of their country. During the 2017 and 2018 OE planning meetings, the U.S. coordinator was sometimes gently interrupted by mentioning "Ivory Coast", being diplomatically corrected for Côte d'Ivoire (authors' note).

17 This information was personally passed on to one of the authors of this article by Captain David Rollo during the execution of the operation Obangame Express 2017 in Luanda.

18 Global Fleet Station it is a concept, stemming from the cooperative strategy for Twenty-First Century sea power, that Navy ships and other government resources to establish self-sufficient bases that can support in conducting stabilization and cooperation operations (authors' note).

exercises with Senegal, Liberia, Ghana, Cameroon, Gabon, São Tomé and Príncipe and Togo.

Then in 2009, Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain sent warships to the Gulf of Guinea. The following year, two British warships flew the APS flag to the region, and in 2011, Italy, Spain and Belgium did the same (HUEBER et DUNLOP, 2011). This trend of international participation, in coordination with the US, will show an increasing trend in subsequent years.

Among the CSM increment efforts implemented by NAVAF in the region, the largest is the operation Obangame Expresss.

OBANGAME EXPRESS

Also in 2010, a pilot edition of the OE took place, conducted by NAVAF, in partnership with Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Nigeria and the Republic of Congo (KEEN, 2010). About eight navaf officers were assigned to a Gabonese, an equato-Guinean, and a Cameroonian patrol vessel and to the respective command centers of those navies. Initially, the objective was to verify the quality of communications between naval assets and their command centers. At this time, some weaknesses have already been identified, in equipment and technological resources, which would be remedied in the next editions of the exercise. Also according to Keen (2010), the greatest difficulty alleged by African navies was the Coordination of actions involving more than one coastal state.

The name of the operation was chosen by the Africans themselves, at one of the preparatory meetings for the first edition of the multinational exercise. Obangame¹⁹ it means union in the language Fang.²⁰ The Yaoundé Code of Conduct, whose signature takes place in this context of joint efforts, proposes an operational architecture that is quickly incorporated into the planning of the OE. Thus, the goal of the OE is to test the ability of West African navies to monitor their jurisdictional waters for illicit activities, share their CSM, and coordinate with neighboring navies to interdict illegal activities (GRAY, 2021).

In 2019, Brett Walker took stock of the ten editions of the operation, pointing out that, although there is a focus on classic maritime threats,

19 Obangame pronounce /obangâme/ (Authors ' note).

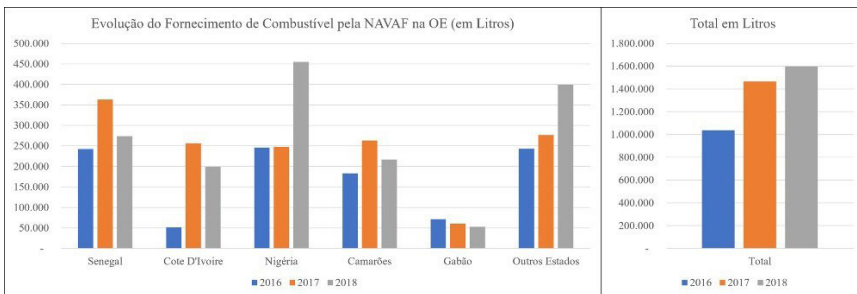
20 The language Fang it is spoken in Equatorial Guinea, in regions of Gabon and Cameroon (see BRITANNICA, Fang).

such as piracy, almost half of the simulated events are illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (WALKER, 2019). The demands of the types of exercises conducted are proposed by the Gulf of Guinea countries themselves, during the planning meetings, and it is possible to customize the scenarios in each of the zones of the OE.

According to Walker, the complexity of the exercises has evolved from simple approaches at sea, in 2011, to complex scenarios of information sharing across borders, in a context of interagency operations and with legal analysis of the actions, in 2019. Walker ends his decade-long review by declaring that if all continues to go well, by 2029, it will be possible to transfer the leadership of the exercise to some African partner.

With regard to the number of human and material resources of the OE, it is pertinent to highlight that their numbers have grown every year, from the naval and air means involved to the number of personnel on the ground to coordinate the various exercises and scenarios. In addition to the number of navies involved, another point that makes the OE the largest multinational effort in the region is the resources employed by the US. It stands out the evolution of the investment in fuel, donated annually by USNAVY, to enable the participation of African navies in training (graph 2).

Graph 2-Evolution of fuel supply by NAVAF, in the OE from 2016 to 2018.



Source: collection of one of the authors and ostensible information obtained as a result of participation in planning of the OE 2017 and 2018.

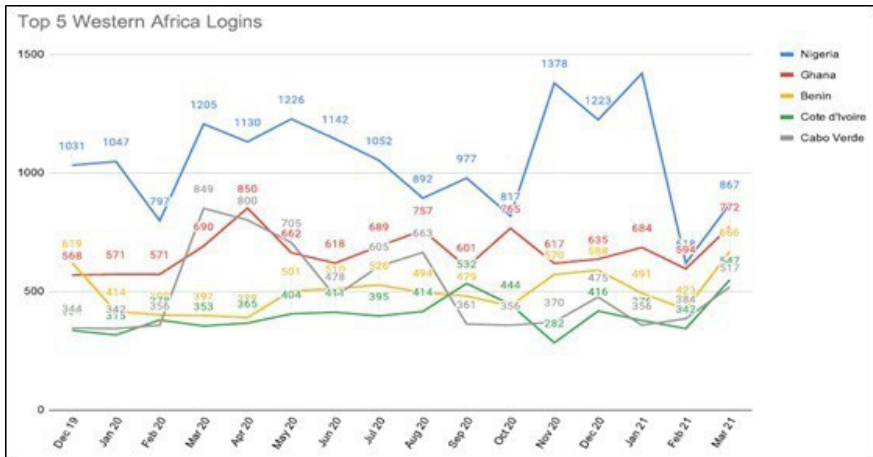
In addition to the fuel contribution, there is also a significant technological contribution to the increase of CSM. All Gulf navies received access to the system SeaVision, user training and support for the effective use

of the tool. Currently, the SeaVision it is the main tool of CSM and Maritime Information Sharing, being used by all countries of the Gulf of Guinea.

In addition to making access more flexible and providing training, audits are carried out throughout the year to verify the frequency and quality of access, as evidenced in graphs 3 and 4, which present reports on the number of accesses to the system by African countries. Through these audits, training is intensified in countries that are few accesses or with low interactions in the system.

It can be inferred that the number of hits is a good indicator²¹ the degree of government engagement to respond to maritime challenges, since countries such as Nigeria and Ghana are among those that access the most, while São Tomé and Príncipe and Cape Verde figure in the last positions. It should be noted that the sharp drop in the number of accesses in Nigeria in February 2021 (graph 3) is due to an adjustment in the system due to duplicate registrations.

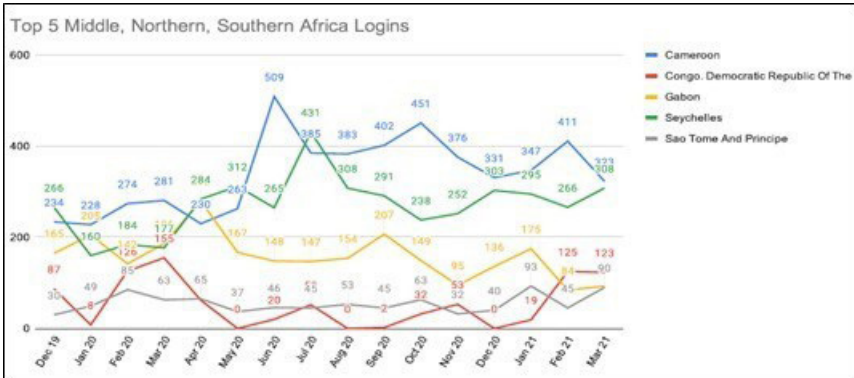
Figure 3-Report of the number of accesses to the *SeaVision* generated in March 2021.



Source: NAVAF, 2021B. SeaVision Login Report.

21 Although it is possible to obtain a high number of accesses and still not explore and extract the resources made available by the system, it is understood that the number of accesses can be an indicator of the engagement of operators in the search for a better CSM (authors' note).

Figure 4-Report on the number of accesses to the SeaVision generated in March 2021.



Source: NAVAF, 2021B. *SeaVision Login Report*.

Another point of emphasis in the OE is the effective employee in the coordination and execution of the operation. The number of US personnel almost doubled between 2016 and 2018, from 67 to 157²² and accompanying the increased involvement of African states. Figure 5 shows the evolution of the number of participants and the increase in difficulty of the simulated scenarios. It should be noted that there was no participation of US warships in any of these editions.

²² Data obtained by one of the authors during the participation of the 2017 and 2018 editions of the OE (authors ' note).

Figure 6-evolution of participants and operational focus from OE 2011 to OE 2017.

OE & SE 11	OE & SE 12	OE & SE 13	OE & SE 14	OE & SE 15	OE/SE 16	OE 17
Participants						
ECCAS, CMR, CPV, GNO, GAB, GMB, LBR, MRT, MAR, NGA, COG, SEN, ESP (12)	ECCAS, BEL, BRA, CMR, CPV, CIV, FRA, GAB, GMB, GHA, MRT, MAR, NGA, COG, STP, SEN, SLE, ESP, TGO, GBR (19)	ECCAS, ECOWAS, BEL, BEN, BRA, CMR, CPV, CIV, GNO, FRA, GAB, GMB, GHA, MRT, MAR, NLD, NGA, PRT, COG, STP, SEN, ESP, TGO, GBR (22)	ECCAS, ECOWAS, OCIMF, AGO, BEL, BEN, BRA, CMR, CPV, CIV, GNO, FRA, GAB, DEU, GHA, LBR, MRT, MAR, NLD, NGA, PRT, COG, STP, SEN, SLE, ESP, TGO, TUR, GBR (26)	ECCAS, ECOWAS, OCIMF, IMO, MAOC-N, AGO, BEL, BEN, BRA, CMR, CPV, CIV, COD, DNK, GNO, FRA, GAB, DEU, GHA, LBR, ITA, MRT, MAR, NLD, NGA, NOR, PRT, COG, STP, SEN, ESP, TGO, TUR, GBR (29) <small>DNK, LBR, and SLE did not participate due to force inclusion errors</small>	ECCAS, ECOWAS, IMO, MAOC-N, AGO, BEL, BEN, BRA, CIV, CMR, COD, COG, CPV, DEU, DNK, ESP, GIN, FRA, GAB, GBR, GHA, LBR, MAR, NGA, NLD, NOR, PRT, SEN, SLE, STP, TGO, ZAF, TUR (29)	ECCAS, ECOWAS, IMO, MAOC-N, NOAA, AGO, BEL, BEN, BRA, CIV, CMR, COG, CPV, DEU, DNK, ESP, GIN, FRA, GAB, GBR, GHA, LBR, MAR, NGA, NLD, NOR, PRT, SEN, SLE, STP, TGO, TUR (27)
Operational Focus						
Interoperability, Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) / Maritime Interdiction Operations (MIO)	Interoperability, VBSS/MIO, Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), MOC to MOC Comms, Air Ops	Interoperability, VBSS/MIO, MDA, MOC to MOC Comms, PSI, illegal cargo, bunkering, non-compliant boarding, counter-piracy scenarios, Task Force	Interoperability, VBSS, MDA, MOC to MOC Comms, Non-compliant boarding, Counter-piracy scenarios, regional coordination, interagency, detainee ops, evidence disposition, and self assessment	Interoperability, VBSS, MDA, MOC to MOC Comms, Non-compliant Boarding, Interagency, Detainee Ops, Counter-Piracy Scenarios, Evidence Disposition, Self Assessment, Implementation of the Yaounde Code of Conduct, Rule of Law, and Public Affairs	Interoperability, VBSS, MDA, MOC to MOC Comms, Non-compliant Boarding, Interagency, Detainee Ops, Counter-Piracy Scenarios, Evidence Disposition, Self Assessment, Implementation of the Yaounde Code of Conduct, Rule of Law, Public Affairs, Operational Planning and Communication Strategy	Interoperability, VBSS, MDA, MOC to MOC Comms, Non-compliant Boarding, Interagency, Detainee Ops, Counter-Piracy Scenarios, Evidence Disposition, Self Assessment, Implementation of the Yaounde Code of Conduct, Rule of Law, Public Affairs, Communication Strategy

Source: presentation made during the planning meetings of the OE 2018. Ostensive data obtained as a result of the participation of one of the authors in the launches of the 2017 and 2018 OE.

Since 2018, the number of OE participants has been around 30 navies, being around 20 African navies and an average of 10 European navies, in addition to the USA and Brazil. Specifically with regard to Brazil, it should be noted that the first invitation for its participation occurred in the 2012 edition, with an officer being sent as an observer to monitor the exercises in Zone A.

The Brazilian participation takes place in the city of Luanda, Angola. In that city, the headquarters of the multinational Coordination Center is located, which concentrates the actions of Zone A²³. Facilitated by the language in common with Angolans, Brazil's performance was praised and, in 2016, the U.S. invited Brazil to take control of the exercise in that zone. It should be noted that the OE is composed of five zones and that all are commanded by a US Captain. According to Barreto (2019), Brazil has participated since 2017 as an exercise control group in Zone A, being the only Navy to control an OE zone, besides the USA.

23 Also part of Zone A, in addition to Angola, are the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (authors' note).

WHY IS THE OE A "STRATEGIC BRIDGE" TO BRAZIL?

Since 2017, the Brazilian Navy has annually sent a Navy Staff, commanded by a Brazilian Captain, who is responsible for all OE events in Zone A. This means that during the 17 Days of operation, all security, coordination, and execution of the events that occur with the navies of Angola, the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are the responsibility of the Brazilian Captain. In addition, the planning of the events is also in charge of the Staff, to be conducted during the previous meetings with the navies of Zone A.

Being the only one to independently direct an OE zone, since the other four zones are directed by the US, Brazil's visibility and projection have increased from 2017. There is an opportunity to manage the sequence of events and training formats in order to customize the dynamics of OE in Zone A. It is also a chance to introduce the African navies to the Brazilian way of operating and conducting training, which from the author's experience has greatly pleased the members of Zone A.

The cultural proximity between Brazilians and Angolans is also noteworthy, facilitating performance and interaction during the exercise. Since Luanda is the headquarters of the controlling group of the OE, the Brazilian staff operates immersed in a Lusophone context, allied to an Angolan society that intensely consumes Brazilian culture, be it music or soap operas.

Thus, a very interesting opportunity presents itself: the largest initiative to increase maritime security ever carried out on the West African coast invites Brazil, which has a strategic interest in acting in the region; since acting directly in the organization and execution, Brazil is now seen as co-responsible for the success of the project.

There is no pretension in this article to defend that the invitation to the OE is the only way to increase the Brazilian influence of the strategic environment. All other initiatives must continue, either with the Technical Advisory Groups (TAG) in Namibia or in São Tomé and Príncipe, or with the Naval advisory mission in Cape Verde or with the participation of the Brazilian Navy in other international maritime operations in the region, such as the french operation NEMO²⁴.

24 The French Navy annually conducts operation NEMO aimed at combating piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and interaction with African navies. The Brazilian Navy has been invited to

But, after observing the importance and successes already achieved by AFRICOM's initiatives, either with the PHC, RMAC or the OE, it is understood that Brazil should strengthen its participation in the controlling group of the exercise in Zone A. Thus, in addition to increasing its activities by sending liaison officers to the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, other members of Zone A, Brazil should expand its activities beyond the limits of Zone A. A request to be authorized to send liaison officers and training teams to the remaining zones could expand influence in the region and signal to the U.S. an intention to gradually assume overall coordination of the operation. The image of the Brazilian Navy and, consequently, of Brazil has the potential to be increased if associated with the successes and improvements offered by U.S. investments.

Reinforcing what was exposed by Walker (2019), the possibility that the US will leave the conduct of exercises only with African States from 2029 is another point for Brazil to value the OE. By continuing to be active and participatory, and with the U.S. increasingly decreasing its participation, it may be that Brazil's role in this transition is even more relevant.

Brazil proposed a strategic environment and with it a series of objectives and goals. The Gulf of Guinea is a region that has been gaining a lot of attention due to the high sense of maritime insecurity. This region presents itself as a strategic challenge, since it demands large amounts of resources for its effective mitigation. In the current Brazilian economic context, an opportunity to present itself as co-responsible for a significant operation, being necessary to spend relatively few resources for this, is strategically interesting.

FINAL REMARKS

This article aims to present the relevance of participation in the operation Obangame Express, in the context of the Brazilian strategic environment. The metaphor of the bridge was used to illustrate that such participation would reduce the distances between Brazil and the African continent.

Starting from the concept of strategic environment, initially

participate in this initiative (author's note).

published in the National Defense Policy in 2005, as well as the theoretical frameworks of national geopolitical production, emphasizing the contribution of Therezinha De Castro and Ilques Barbosa Júnior, the boundary conditions and the evolution of the importance of the South Atlantic for the strategic interests of the Brazilian state were presented.

In this context, the maritime space called the Gulf of Guinea stands out, which for years has been the scene of numerous illicit acts that generate insecurity to maritime traffic in that region. Data from the last five years of marine hazard events in the Gulf of Guinea were collected. This data was generated through the system SeaVision which is operated and powered by African military. The downward trend in events in Nigerian waters stands out, although they are still high compared to other coastal states. It should be emphasized that the three sites that most concentrate maritime risk incidents are located in Nigeria and Ghana (see Figure 4).

Subsequently, this article highlighted and analyzed the conception, purpose, means and results of the operation Obangame Express. Thus, initially, it was contextualizing its historical origin, as well as the other US programs and projects on the West African coast. We sought to highlight the nature of the operation, pointing out the numbers involved, in terms of participants, resources applied and investments in support infrastructure for the increase of maritime situational awareness in that vast maritime space.

Finally, the research carried out to achieve this article points out that Brazilian participation in the OE should be maintained and, whenever possible, increased. The OE should be seen as a "strategic bridge" that can amplify Brazil's influence on the West African coast. The increase in local maritime situational awareness, maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea and effective action in the proposed strategic environment are some of the reasons for crossing this "bridge".

OBANGAME EXPRESS - A “STRATEGIC BRIDGE” TO THE GULF OF GUINEA

ABSTRACT

Maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea is a matter that affects international trade in that region. Several initiatives are being implemented to mitigate the problem, including the Obangame Express operation, led by the United States of America (USA). Since 2012 – the year of the second edition of this operation-Brazil has participated in this initiative. In 2017, Brazil was invited by the USA to take control of the entire exercise in one of the five zones that divide the Gulf of Guinea. The issue to be analyzed in this article is how participation in Obangame Express contributes to a greater insertion of Brazil in its strategic environment. The main objective is to present the relevance of this invitation for Brazil, understood as a strategic opportunity to exert more significant influence in that Gulf. Official primary sources from 2016, 2017 and 2018 editions Obangame Express operation were accessed, as well as updated reports from April 2021 on the incidents in the region. It is understood that it is a rare opportunity to increase influence in the strategic environment, taking advantage of the political gains of participating in a large-scale operation with low input of resources. Keywords: Obang; The Gulf of Guinea; strategic environment.

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