

THE NIGERIAN NAVY AND MARITIME SECURITY CHALLENGES IN DELTA STATE OF NIGERIA, 2000-2024: A CONVERSATION

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Abstract

This study situates maritime security as preventive and responsive actions undertaken by states to guard their national waterways against perceived and real threats. This is crucial for safeguarding a nation's marine assets, infrastructure, and economic interests. Nigeria, with its vast coastline and extensive waterways, faces significant maritime security challenges, particularly in Delta State; a key oil and gas-producing state in the Niger Delta region. The objective of the study is to examine the role of the Nigerian Navy in maintaining maritime security in Delta State, highlighting the Navy's efforts in combating piracy, oil theft, and other illicit activities. The study depends on primary and secondary sources of data while utilizing qualitative method of analysis. This provides a nuanced understanding of the Navy's strategic operations such as "TsareTeku" and "River Sweep", undertaken in Delta State are instructive in this regard. The finding shows that despite these efforts, oil bunkering, piracy and other illicit activities remain unabated in the state and are attributed to a web of complex dynamics of the Nigerian Navy, local communities, and multinational corporations. The lack of synergy amongst security agencies undermines the role of the Nigerian Navy for effective maritime security in Delta State and the Niger Delta region at large.

Keywords: Maritime Security, Challenges, Nigerian Navy, Delta State, Niger Delta.

I. Introduction

Maritime Security is the mechanism through which nation-states protect and preserve their maritime space against varying external and internal threats. Maritime security is crucial for safeguarding a nation's marine assets. The waters have a lot of natural resources and are crucial for the economic survival of non-landlocked states, such as Nigeria. Thus, the role of the Nigerian Navy as the chief maritime security organ cannot be overemphasized. The potentials of the maritime space and the accompanying activities informed the birth of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982. This international convention became the legal framework, outlining the rights and obligations of state parties with regard to the usage of the maritime space. One of the primary drivers of international relations is the protection of national interests both at home and abroad. The tripod upon which national interests are founded namely; national security, economic well-being and international prestige. From this perspective, the overriding national interest of any nation can be concretely interpreted as preservation of territorial integrity and national values.¹ Obviously, for littoral nations such as Nigeria, the protection of her maritime front and related activities by a capable naval force is imperative. With Nigeria being a maritime nation with a vast coastline and a maritime domain that is endowed with hydrocarbons and other resources, the sea is essentially the lifeblood of its economy. It also serves as a medium for conveying the vast majority of her trade and many vital resources such as oil and gas resources. Incidentally, the sea is also being exploited by criminals and economic saboteurs, thus, inhibiting national development.

The Nigerian Navy as a branch of the Nigerian Armed Forces charged with the responsibility of protecting the territorial waterways of the country has continued to play a significant role in this direction. The security and protection of Nigeria's maritime domain is a constitutional mandate of the Nigerian Navy. This involves the protection of Nigeria's

maritime environment from multifaceted threats such as piracy, militancy, illegal oil bunkering, illegal or unreported and unregulated fishing,² most of which takes place in inland waters or adjoining sea of littoral states like Delta State.

Geography and Peoples of Delta State

Created in 1991, Delta State is one of the deltaic states of the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The state's physiographic landscape takes the shape of a triangle where the River Niger tributaries empties its waters into the Atlantic Ocean.³ This geographic region is divided into three sub-regions - Eastern, Central and Western Delta. The major rivers in which the River Niger discharges its waters into the Atlantic Ocean through Delta State are the Escravos and Forcados Rivers. This is the sub-region the doyen of Niger Delta studies Prof. E.J. Alagoa refers to as "Western Niger Delta", stretching from the Benin River to Pennington River.⁴ This is where Delta State is located in Nigeria.

Delta State is home to five major ethnic groups in the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria. The ethnic nationalities are Igbo, Ijo, Isoko, Itsekiri, and Urhobo. The diversity in cultures notwithstanding, a common identity is forged amongst the generality of the people. For instance, this is reflected in the way of dressing and other social engagements making it difficult to distinguish between these ethnic nationalities. Despite the differences in language, communication is fostered through a native Pidgin English spoken by the people of the state. Though Pidgin English is a widely use genre of communication in Nigeria, it is more proficiently rooted in Delta State, ⁵ as a second general language. The state has a population of 3.5 million people by the 1991 National Census figures; the dislocation of social and economic equilibrium exerts pressure and strain on the social ecology thereby provoking myriads of social conflict triggers in the state.

Maritime Security: A Conceptual Review

The basic rationale for maritime security is the existence of sea power targeted at protecting and projecting a nation's maritime interests. Hence, the resolve to ensure safer waters. Thayer declared that the existence of a great sea power is the driving force of a country's maritime security, secure trade routes, and exert influence in global economic relations. He defined maritime security as a circumstance in which countries can guarantee security and interests at sea, and that sea power must entail three components such as a strong fleet, adequate sea basis, and policies that sustained the development of sea power.⁷ Maritime environment is connected to marine safety which is tied to blue economy of nations across the globe. While blue economy and national security are linked to sea power, human security codified security in its entirety. Maritime security is a buzz word for the protection of vessels both internally and externally. It is a concept that addresses the opportunities as well as the challenges prevalent in the maritime space. Maritime security presents a nuance understanding of issues of crime in the sea as well as enhancing the governance of the sea and the welfare of people dependent on it.⁸ This is because the highways from which ships and maritime operations take place need protection from terrorism, piracy, robbery, illegal trafficking of goods and persons, illegal fishing and oil theft activities.

The offshore economy is an important sector as majority of global business are being carried out by sea. Furthermore, the sea has being categorized as a hub of natural resources including fish, oil and gas and other minerals. As a result, maintaining maritime security is critical to the live of nations. Threats from transnational illegal activities such as theft, piracy, and maritime terrorism have developed more complex tools concealing their messes in the sea. Above all, transnational crimes including drug and human trafficking pose a serious danger at sea. It follows that countries must strategically improve their maritime security, utilizing modern technology such as satellite and drones monitoring equipment. Naval operational strategies and tactics must accommodate collaborative efforts of other security and maritime agencies such as Nigerian Army, Nigerian Air Force, Nigerian Immigration Service, Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA), Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA) and indeed coastline communities.

Nigerian Navy Activities in Delta State

Delta State maritime domain with network of oil and gas installations with associated shipping is often threatened by offshore crime of varying degree. The Nigerian Navy has been combating with these crimes for decades. The security and protection of the economic interest of the maritime industry worldwide is the primary responsibility of navies or coast-guards.⁹ Nigerian Navy has embarked on several operations in the maritime social ecology of Delta State. Some recent operations embarked by the Nigerian Navy include: "Tsare Teku" and "Rivers Sweep" in 2016 and 2018 respectively against piracy, illegal oil bunkering and pipeline vandalism. For instance, NNS Delta on 9th February, 2017 discovered and subsequently destroyed forty (40) illegal refineries at Jones Creek, Warri South.¹⁰ It is shocking that the team Commander, Commodore Ibrahim Dewu responding to journalists said the destruction of the sites and its products was owing to the fact that the Navy do not have the equipment to evacuate such a large quantity of products. This exemplifies lack of preparedness for the war against illegal oil activities, leaving the environment even more vulnerable to oil pollution and economic wastage.

More recently are the operations of DELTA SANITY. For instance, on 24th October, 2024 the Nigerian Navy on her Facebook official page reported that the NNS Delta operatives discovered and destroyed an illegal refining site with two (2) refining ovens, three (3) storage tanks and sacks containing illegally refined AGO in Bennett Island, Warri South-West L.G.A., Delta State. In the same stead, the Nigerian Navy on 19th November, 2024 reported that Operation Delta Sanity discovered and deactivated two (2) illegal refining sites with dugout pits, several sacks and drums, and a canoe-load of unspecified amount of stolen crude oil around Obodo river, Delta State.¹¹ The Bennett Island had been a spot for illegal oil refining despite the Navy's repeated repressive actions in the area. This is not peculiar to Bennett Island as there had been a growing sentiment of the "oil ownership mentality" amongst the youth of Delta State and the Niger Delta. This is a practical reason for the illegal oil-refining continuum.





Fig. 1 & 2: Illegal Oil Refining Site at Obodo Omadino, Delta State, Nigeria

Source: Nigerian Navy Official Facebook Page.

The naval operations, however, had brought relative peace in the maritime domain of Delta State. The Nigerian Navy is constitutive of three Operational Commands: Western, Eastern and Central Commands. Delta State is under the charge of the Eastern Command. The application of inland surface fast patrol boats and air buses has enabled the Nigerian Navy to extend its reach in support of regional effort to secure the common seas. Thus, it has also enabled the Nigerian Navy to significantly perform her domestic policing role in maritime spaces. This has led to a significant reduction in incidences of crude oil theft and other marine related crimes in Delta State social ecology, as well as policing the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for the multi-billion dollar deep-water businesses.¹² This was elegantly adduced by a former Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Ganiyu T.A. Adekeye asserted that "the Nigerian Navy is the statutory chief custodian of the defense and security of the nation's economic base as most of the resources that contribute immensely to the nation's economy are in the maritime environment."¹³ According to Welch, "economic development facilitates nation building,"¹⁴ hence, the Navy's role in Delta State is pivotal to nation building as the state's offshore oil installations account significantly for Nigeria's oil revenue.

More so, the web of rivers and waterways has necessitated the Nigerian Navy to play critical role beyond securing offshore oil infrastructures to ensuring the safety of electoral officials and sensitive electoral materials during elections in deltaic communities of Delta State since the return of democracy in 1999. The Navy had recorded some commendable success in this regard. It is pertinent to note, however, that the overall achievement of the Navy on the Delta waters is partly owing to the 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme initiated by the Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's administration. The Niger Delta militants, who had hitherto terrorized the waterways, embraced the programme leading to a significant reduction in criminal activities along the Niger Delta waters. The Nigerian state has leveraged on this peace window occasioned by the programme to utilize the rich oil deposits in Delta State and the region in general.

Suffice it to add that the foregoing does not bring to closure militancy and other criminal activities in the Delta waterways. For example, militant groups like Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and Niger Delta Liberation Force (NDLF) continued to threaten and carry out attacks in 2010 and 2011. Practically, some ex-militants continued to execute clandestine criminal activities, as protest against what they considered ill-treatment from their group leaders regarding the implementation of the Presidential Amnesty Programme. Furthermore, the government had left economic and security gaps in

Delta State for the citizens to exploit. There is no gainsaying the fact that little progress has been made on the promise of economic development in Delta State. The government is nowhere present; they have left a vacuum both in terms of development and in terms of security. This sentiment is held amongst majority of Deltans, thereby deepening an already tensed situation. Stressing this further, one interviewee noted that “the boys who were 10 years old in 2009 when the Amnesty Programme was initiated are now 21 years old. Yet, they see the same situation or worse: the economy is collapsing, demography high and criminality is increasing.”¹⁵ Another interviewee argued that the government has “been buying time rather than building peace via not only the cash for weapons, but also various security contracts.”

Challenges of Maritime Security

Without any doubt, Delta State is blessed with numerous natural resources including crude oil and gas. It accounts for over 80% of Nigeria’s foreign exchange earnings. Rather than these resources translating into wealth for the peoples as the goose that lays the golden egg, the reverse is the case. The state continues to wallow in irreconcilable poverty and degraded environment. There had been high level connivance between government and Multi-National Oil Companies (MNOCs) and this had produced results that are inimical to the means of the people’s livelihood. Waterways and farms are no longer suitable for fishing and farming respectively due to unregulated oil exploration and exploitation. The results are oil spillage, gas flaring, land depreciation and shortage of arable farm land. Corporate Social Responsibility performance of MNOCs in the state is unapologetically low. These factors had left most Deltans occupationally impotent. These feelings of age long marginalization, environmental degradation, coupled with massive unemployment created a capricious atmosphere in the 1990s, characterized by frustration, anger and aggression that manifested in violent protests and conflicts in the oil and gas producing areas.

The protests took different dynamics and phases. The first phase was between the early and mid-1980s. Azigbo puts it thus:

The agitation actually began as peaceful protests by Community Development Committees (CDCs) of a range of host communities to multinational oil companies. The period saw the adoption of legal actions against the oil companies by the communities affected by reckless oil explorations. The legal actions basically requested for compensations for the destroyed properties by the oil companies. The second phase of the protests saw the use of peaceful protests and the occupation of flow stations. The objectives of the protest were to get the oil companies to fulfil their promises of providing amenities in the communities and provide employments to the indigenes of Delta State.

Despite the peaceful nature of the protest and the genuineness of demands, the oil companies called the police and military to attack protesters. Security operatives destroyed properties and killed civilians. Following this, peaceful protests however degenerated into forceful agitations from the mid-1990s. The agitations were heightened following the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha, who had ignored all international and local entreaties. By 1998, anarchy overwhelmed most of the Delta State, especially oil producing communities. The Delta State militants arose to take up arms against the government and her MNOC agents. Militants forcefully occupied flow stations, seized tug boats and vessels belonging to oil companies. They also kidnapped oil workers. The next phase saw the demand for resource ownership and control. It is quite unfortunate that the government has for decades remained insensitive to the needs and demands of the oppressed people of the Niger Delta. Well-known among the belligerent groups operational in the area were the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Alhaji Asari Dokubo, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) led by Henry Okah, the Niger Delta Vigilante Force (NDVF) led by Ateke Tom and the Bush Boys, Egbesu boys among others. The underlying issues of contention by the armed militant groups were the greater control of the oil resources in the Niger Delta region by the people, fair allocation of the revenue from oil exploitation, ending the oil spills and gas flaring, compensation for the decades, as well as

ensuring the physical and infrastructural development of the states.¹⁹ However, the Nigerian government saw their protests as acts of sabotage to the revenue generation of the nation.

The activities of these groups in Delta State manifested in diverse ways such as militancy, kidnappings, killings, bombing, hostage taking, and demolition of oil and gas facilities, vandalized pipelines and illegal oil bunkering. The militants launched attacks on the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), Chevron and Total Final Elf (IFE) staff and facilities. The sophistication of the weapons plus the dexterousness of their operations questioned the security apparatuses of the Nigerian State. The aforementioned served as challenges of maritime security as the militant groups have a better understanding of the complexities of the waterways than the Nigerian Navy. It suffices to mention that one chief challenge of waterways security is the underfunding of the Nigerian Navy in terms of operational facilities, hence negatively affecting their morale. Closely related to this is the fact that the Force is poorly staffed when compared to the vast waters within Nigeria's jurisdiction. More so, The Nigerian Navy is also heavy on shore-side organization, draining resources away from the fleet. Hence, the Eastern Naval Command cannot sufficiently police the Delta waters.

Without prejudice to other factors, the two major challenges that the Nigerian Navy faces in maritime security in Delta State are the nature of environment and the use of the 'Egbesu deity' by militant groups. General Grant, an American war hero and former President avers that "operation suited to one region would not be to another entirely dissimilar and for that reason he emphasized the necessity for close study of the local terrain...only eyes a general can trust are his own. He must be able to know the country, the streams, the passes, the hills and the rivers...general know the terrain in which he is operating because in time of peace he has made the minutest study of it." The above assertion is very apt to maritime security in Delta State. This is essentially so as the environment is largely riverine and home to the militants, who understood its peculiarity compared to the Nigeria Navy.

In addition to the foregoing is the militant's reliance on the Egbesu deity for protection. The Egbesu force can only be used in defense or to correct an injustice, and only by people who are in harmony with the universe. The symbols of this spiritual force are the leopard, panther and lion. Egbesu has both philosophical and spiritual dimensions and it's indigenous to the Ijos. Many young men joined the cult during the heydays of militancy in the state undergoing secret initiations by Egbesu priests. Formal initiation into the Egbesu Cult is conducted by the High Priest who invokes the spiritual powers of Egbesu upon them. Initiation of members involves the "scarring" or the incision of "ritual marks and other symbols on their bodies", the sprinkling with or bathing in "Egbesu water," and "an invocation of the Egbesu spirit."²¹ As noted earlier, members of the Cult, otherwise known as the Egbesu Boys took up arms to fight against the Nigerian state, the MNOCs and their agents in tune with dictates of the Egbesu deity as a fighter of injustice.

During militant operations, the Egbesu Boys generally carry guns and ammunition, wearing red or white headbands. Egbesu Boys also wear leaves on their heads, or carry them in their pockets, or under their hats for protection. Where a member of the group is killed in battle, despite carrying a leaf, the death is hinged upon an impure deed committed by the deceased. According to the Secretary General of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), such deeds include "having sex before operation, deceased wife is pregnant, stealing or killing an innocent person amongst others."²² The adherents often believe the talisman and the cult initiations made them invisible and bulletproof. It is a fact that without the Egbesu charm the militants would serve easy breakfast for the Nigeria Navy. Thus, according to one interviewee, "the Egbesu charm is a challenge to the Nigeria Navy in maritime security in Delta State".

Following the conflict in Delta State, the Egbesu Boys grouped, apparently ready for war, having been in possession of sophisticated weapons. They engaged both the navy and the army in fierce battles, with heavy casualties on both sides. In some cases, the militant youths ransacked military formations, terrorize fleeing soldiers and policemen. Besides, the militants were able to close down a number of oil installations in Delta State, thereby

grounding oil production that led government read the riot act. This was followed by further reinforcement of the Navy and the Army with heavy artillery and armored tanks attacks on perceived volatile communities of Ayakuromo and Akrankoko, for example. These incidences rather than halt the war aggravated the situation in Delta State. Despite the increasing deployment of forces to the state. Ijo militant youths have not relented in their armed struggle against the government and oil companies operating in the resource rich state of Delta. For instance, "they have continued to attack and shut down oil installations, and hold oil workers hostage in many communities."

The poor rate of civil-military cooperation has also been cited in some cases as being amongst the maritime security challenge in Delta State and Nigeria in general. That is civil-military cooperation processes of enhancing workability and collaboration between the civilian and military actors in carrying out maritime security lacking in Delta State. In most cases, the civilians do have information that may be utilized by the military in combating the maritime security challenges, however, due to poor cooperation between the civilian (especially host communities) and military, maritime security is being compromised."25 Bashir Jamoh observed inter alia:

...there are perceived military's poor relations with civilians as well as poor interagency cooperation amongst personnel that should ensure maritime security. This poor state of the relationship between the actors is reckoned as one of the major causes behind the incessant challenges of maritime security in Nigeria.

Capacity Limitation of the Nigerian Navy

The Navy forms part of the interagency Joint Task Force (JTF) who currently prosecutes a riverine campaign called Pulo Shield in Delta State and by extension the Niger Delta. For reasons of prestige, both the Navy and the Nigerian Maritime Safety Agency (NIMASA) have long downplayed or denied the threat of piracy in Delta State waters, engaging in semantic games that re-defined piracy as "armed robbery" in territorial waters at international and regional conferences. The point is that the Nigerian Navy lacks a credible coastal enforcement capability in spite of recent capability buildup in modern security gadgets such as NNS OKPABANA, NNS CENTENARY, NNS SAGBAMA, NNS PROSPERITY vessels in 2015. These four offshore patrol vessels supposedly increase its tactical proficiency. The Achilles heel, however, is the dearth of true Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), insufficiently networked assets and ineffective command centers. The organizational restructuring into Western, Central and Eastern Naval Command is suitable for riverine operations, but less so for the centralized approach required for MDA and counter piracy.

Many small and medium-sized Nigerian Navy patrol boats are idle due to lack of spares, crews, and fuel. In August 2015 for example the new Chief of Naval Staff Vice-Admiral Ibok-Ete Ibas conceded that "the Nigerian Navy is unable to fulfill its constitutional obligation of defending and protecting the country's territorial waters because more than half its fleet is in a state of complete decay."28A more or less permanent presence at sea by the Nigerian Navy is provided only by those patrol boats providing oil field security - contracted to private companies, but manned mostly by Nigerian Navy personnel. Under a Memorandum of Understanding between these security companies and the Navy, the patrol boats should remain available for "national security" purposes and share MDA information with the Navy. Contracted escort vessels have been detached from their commercial duties in the past to intervene in ongoing pirate attacks, but the reality in this arrangement deprives the Nigerian Navy of operational reserves and flexibility such as would be necessary for an operation like Tsare Teku. Of the four vessels that was assigned to Tsare Teku only OKPABANA and SAGBAMA can provide meaningful surveillance capability. KYANWA is too old (bought in 1943) with a top speed of 12 knots and ANDONI is a locally built patrol boat with only standard sensors and a top speed of 21 knots. Only OKPABANA has a helicopter flight deck, but no organic helicopter. As in the MAXIMUS case, the Nigerian Navy would rely on the two Air Force ATR-42 Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance Aircraft for aerial reconnaissance. However, both aircraft are stationed in northern Nigeria where they are playing a significant role in the campaign against Boko Haram insurgency.

Three more vessels are slated to join the operation: NNS CENTENARY, NNS BURUTU and NNS ZARIA. Of those three only the recently acquired CENTENARY has a helicopter flight deck and an above average command and communications suite. BURUTU and ZARIA are both Singapore-built fast patrol craft that are suitable for EEZ patrolling and would be a valuable addition as fast responders-provided they join the effort. Effectively, thus, the current offshore surveillance and deterrence element of Tsare Teku relies almost entirely on NNS OKPABANA, a former US Coast Guard HAMILTON-class cutter (ex-USCGC GALLATIN, WHEC-721) that has been in near constant use responding to incidents since January and taking part in the AFRICOM exercise OBANGAME EXPRESS and SAHARAN EXPRESS 2016 are too sluggish for the Nigerian Navy. The 48-year-old vessel is now increasingly struggling with mechanical problems. All of these actually limits naval operations in areas marked as “hot spots” of pirate activity: the sea area off Brass and off Bonny on the south coast of the Niger Delta.²⁹ While the Bonny area will be relatively easy to secure due to the converging traffic and proximity of pirate attacks to the Bonny River Fairway Buoy, pirate attacks off Delta have been more dispersed and out to 120 nautical miles from the coast often at night.

II. Conclusion

The study has appraised the Nigerian Navy and maritime security, and further stressed, the duties and organizational structures of the Nigeria Navy and challenges it faces while carrying out maritime security operations in Delta State. The web of water ways and lack of interagency collaboration are drivers of oil theft, oil bunkering, illegal fishing activities, and pipeline vandalism among others. The use of OPVs seaward defense boats, inshore patrol boats, air buses and fast patrol boat has made the Nigerian Navy to secure the maritime domain better. This has led to a huge reduction of incidences of crude oil theft and other crimes in Delta State's maritime social ecology. This notwithstanding, there are pockets of hostage-taking, oil theft, vessel hijacking and armed robbery at the sea, raising grave concerns over the safety of cargo goods, fishing trawlers and offshore petro-dollar businesses.

As aforementioned, more needed to be done to remedy the challenges of maritime security. The use of advanced technologies – satellite imagery, drones and Automated Identification Systems (AIS) amongst others should be prioritized. More so, stringent port security measures should be placed at Warri, Sapele and Burutu. In addition, same measures (fencing, surveillance cameras) should be effected at the Escravos and Forcados Petroleum terminals. Riverine community engagement, private partnership and periodic training of naval personnel should be adequately utilized to enhance safety at the Delta waters and the Niger Delta region.

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