

THE ZONE OF PEACE AND COOPERATION OF THE SOUTH ATLANTIC: A CONTRIBUTION TO MARITIME SECURITY IN THE GULF OF GUINEA

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Abstract

The Zone of Peace and Cooperation of the South Atlantic (ZOPACAS) was established in 1986 by the countries on the east coast of South America and the west coast of Africa to promote regional cooperation and the maintenance of peace and security in the region. The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) is a part of Brazil's strategic neighbourhood, but the threats that have plagued it in this century, particularly piracy and armed robbery at sea, jeopardise freedom of navigation and international trade in the region. The irregular activity of ZOPACAS since its inception has not allowed it to develop specific measures to combat insecurity in the GoG. However, there has been a shift in Brazil's foreign policy since January 2023 as the country seeks to increase its influence on the international arena, and particularly with countries in the Global South. In this sense, ZOPACAS appears to be an opportunity for Brazil to take on a growing role in the GoG. It is understood that the academic importance of this article is centred on the evolution of ZOPACAS since its launch and its potential to become an important regional organisation in the pursuit of maritime security in the GoG region. In these circumstances, this study aimed at analysing ZOPACAS as an initiative capable of positively influencing maritime security in the GoG region, using an interpretivist epistemological framework, inductive reasoning and a qualitative research strategy, with a case study as the research design. For that purpose, it was defined the following research question: how can the ZOPACAS contribute to improve maritime security in the region of the GoG? The findings show that ZOPACAS has indeed the potential to play an important role in combating the main maritime threats in the GoG.

Keywords

ZOPACAS, GoG region, Maritime security, East coast of South America, West coast of Africa.

Resumo

O lançamento da Zona de Paz e Cooperação do Atlântico Sul (ZOPACAS), em 1986, teve como propósito promover a cooperação regional e garantir a manutenção da paz e da segurança



dos países da costa oriental da América do Sul e da costa ocidental de África. O Golfo da Guiné (GdG) faz parte do “entorno estratégico” do Brasil, mas tem sido fustigado ao longo deste século por ameaças diversas, em particular a pirataria e o assalto armado no mar, que podem colocar em causa a liberdade de navegação e o comércio internacional naquela região. O funcionamento intermitente da ZOPACAS ao longo dos anos não permitiu o desenvolvimento concreto de medidas para combater a insegurança sentida no GdG. Todavia, tem-se assistido a uma mudança na política externa brasileira desde janeiro de 2023, procurando alcançar maior relevância internacional, em particular junto de países do Sul Global. Neste sentido, a ZOPACAS surge como uma oportunidade para o Brasil reassumir protagonismo crescente no GdG. Entende-se que a importância académica deste artigo se centra na evolução da ZOPACAS desde o seu lançamento e no seu potencial para se tornar uma organização regional importante na prossecução da segurança marítima na região do GdG. Nestas circunstâncias, este estudo teve como objetivo analisar a ZOPACAS como uma iniciativa capaz de influenciar positivamente a segurança marítima na região do GdG, utilizando um quadro epistemológico interpretativista, um raciocínio indutivo e uma estratégia de investigação qualitativa, tendo como desenho de investigação um estudo de caso. Para o efeito, foi definida a seguinte questão de investigação: como pode a ZOPACAS contribuir para melhorar a segurança marítima na região do GdG? Os resultados mostram que a ZOPACAS tem, de facto, potencial para desempenhar um papel importante no combate às principais ameaças marítimas no GdG.

Palavras-chave

ZOPACAS, Golfo da Guiné, Segurança marítima, Costa oriental da América do Sul, Costa ocidental de África.

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1. Introduction

On 27 October 1986, on Brazil's initiative – with the support of Argentina –, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) approved resolution 41/11, which established ZOPACAS with the goal of strengthening international peace and security (Governo do Brasil, 2023a). In this resolution, the General Assembly called upon all South Atlantic states¹ to promote regional cooperation for social and economic development, the protection of the environment, the conservation of living resources and the peace and security of the whole region (UNGA, 1986). ZOPACAS has 24 member countries from South America and West Africa². Since then, and until 2023, it has held eight meetings between national officials from the signatory countries. However, only three of those meetings took place in the 21st century – in 2007, 2013 and 2023 (figure 1).

Figure 1 – Ministerial Meetings of Zopacas Member Countries

1988	1990	1994	1996	1998	2007	2013	2023
Rio de Janeiro	Abuja	Brasília	Sommerset West	Buenos Aires	Luanda	Montevideu	Mindelo

Source: Adapted from (Marinha do Brasil, 2023a)

Nevertheless, ZOPACAS has been addressed in Brazil's defence framework documents. It is set out in Brazil's National Defence Policy issued in 2020 that one of the pillars of

¹ The waters between Africa and South America (United Nations General Assembly, 1986, p. 21).

² South Africa, Angola, Argentina, Benin, Brazil, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, Liberia, Namibia, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Uruguay (Governo do Brasil, 2023a).

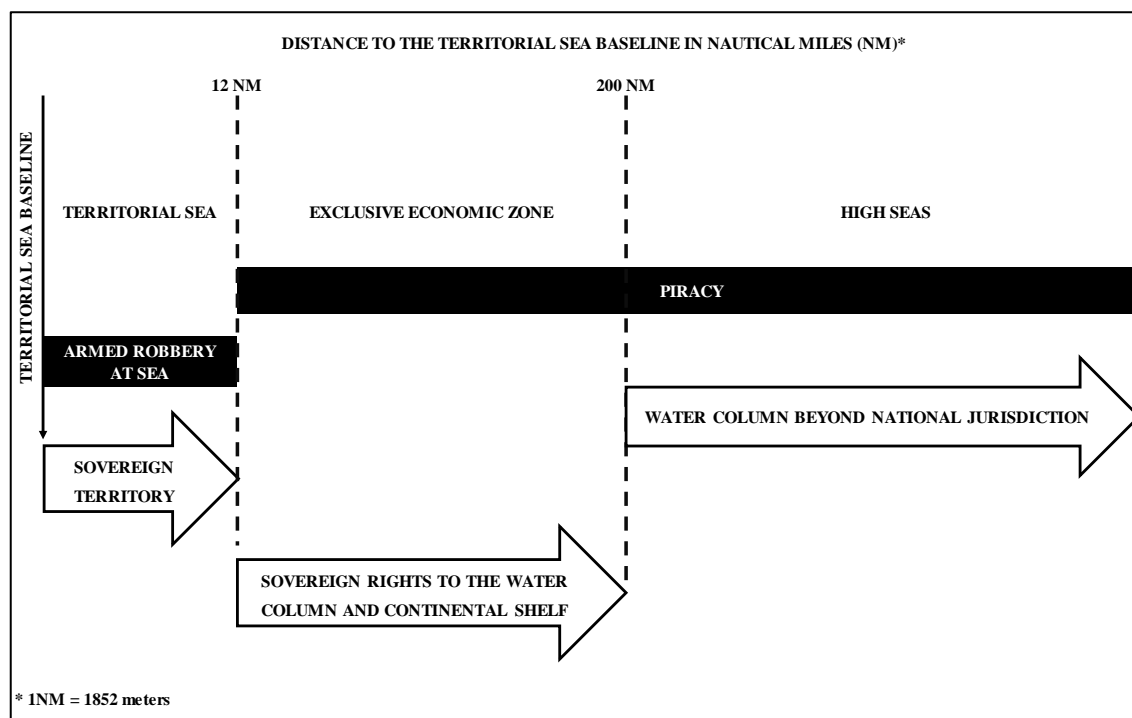


the national defence concept should be “to maintain the South Atlantic as a zone of peace and cooperation” (Governo do Brasil, 2020, p. 21). The Strategy also states that:

Strengthening the Zone of Peace and Cooperation of the South Atlantic – Zopacas will help affirm Brazil as a relevant regional actor, increasing its influence over its strategic environment and reducing the possibility of military interference by extra-regional powers in the South Atlantic (Governo do Brasil, 2020, p. 33).

ZOPACAS’ irregular calendar of activities, especially during the 21st century, coincided with the surge of the two most relevant maritime security threats in the GoG³: piracy and armed robbery at sea against ships. According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO)⁴, the main difference between these threats is where the act is perpetrated. Figure 2 shows the areas – territorial sea, high seas and exclusive economic zone – where these crimes are carried out.

Figure 2 – Areas Where Acts of Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea Occur



Source: Adapted from (UNCLOS, 1982) and (IMO, 2009)

Armed robbery at sea against ships occurs in the sovereign territory of states, that is, in internal waters, in the territorial sea (up to 12 nautical miles) or in the archipelagic waters of an archipelagic state; piracy occurs on the high seas (beyond 200 nautical miles), but

³ The GoG includes the region’s 17 coastal countries, from Senegal in the north to Angola in the south, and the two island states of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe (Council of the European Union, 2014).

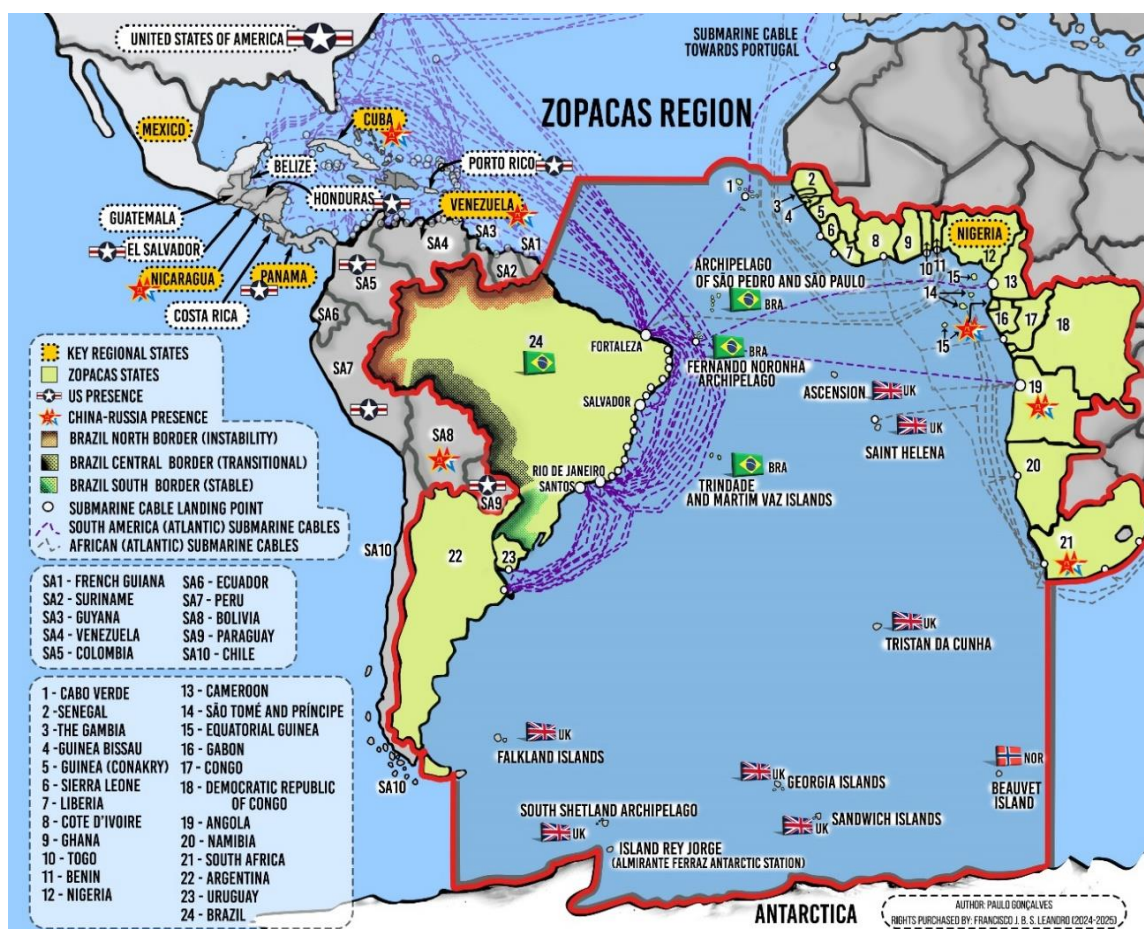
⁴ Specialised United Nations agency that deals exclusively with maritime issues.



this area can be extended to include the exclusive economic zones of coastal states (in practice, it concerns incidents that occur beyond 12 nautical miles).

However, one of Brazil's priorities must be to maintain the security of a large maritime space with the geo-economical and geo-strategic importance of the GoG, especially because it is a part of Brazil's strategic environment⁵, which matches the ZOPCAS region, as it can be seen in the figure 3.

Figure 3 – Zopacas Region



Source: Paulo Gonçalves (2024) (Rights granted by Francisco Leandro in written)

This is the motivation behind Brazil's efforts to revitalise ZOPACAS since President Lula da Silva was inaugurated on 1 January 2023. On 17 and 18 April 2023, after ten years during which the initiative was essentially ignored, ZOPACAS held its 8th ministerial meeting in Cape Verde, in Mindelo. The meeting was attended by sixteen of the 24 member states. In his opening speech, the Prime Minister of Cape Verde Ulisses Correia

⁵ This strategic environment consists of the priority areas of interest for Brazil: the South Atlantic and the countries of the west coast of Africa (Marinha do Brasil, 2023b).



e Silva highlighted the need to “strengthen our commitment to fight transnational organised crime – drug trafficking, human trafficking, piracy – illegal fishing, terrorism and cybercrime. This is vital for countries’ economic development, social peace and stability” (Governo de Cabo Verde, 2023). During the meeting, the Brazilian Foreign Minister said that “the time has come to unleash the potential of ZOPACAS” and proposed “three main lines of action [...]: cooperation, institutionalisation and engagement” (Governo do Brasil, 2023c).

The Action Plan of Mindelo (2023d) established at the ministerial meeting listed several actions that should be taken to address some of the main maritime security threats in the South Atlantic: “[...] deterring, preventing and combating IUU fishing [...]” (2023d, p. 7); and “[...] strengthening cooperation in the prevention and repression of piracy and armed robbery [at sea] against ships [...]” (2023d, p. 12).

Therefore, given the recent changes to Brazil’s foreign policy, which intends to be more proactive in the international arena, it is relevant to analyse ZOPACAS’ short-term potential to become a relevant initiative capable of implementing concrete lines of action that contribute to increase maritime security in the GoG.

The following research question was defined to guide the investigation: how can the Zone of Peace and Cooperation of the South Atlantic contribute to improve maritime security in the region of the GoG?

This study used an interpretivist epistemological framework, inductive reasoning and a qualitative research strategy, with a case study as the research design. With regards to the temporal, geographical and content delimitations, the study covers the period from 2013-2023 (during which the two most recent ministerial meetings of ZOPACAS member countries took place), focuses on the GoG region, and analyses how ZOPACAS can contribute to the maritime security of that region.

The chapter is divided into three subchapters, an introduction and a conclusion section: the first subchapter discusses the most relevant frameworks for analysing maritime security; the second addresses the securitisation of piracy in the GoG and the role that ZOPACAS could play in the process; the third analyses the security practices that have been implemented in the GoG and identifies how ZOPACAS could contribute to further develop them. The findings show that ZOPACAS could play a relevant role in maintaining maritime security in the GoG.

2. Analysis

2.1 Maritime security: frameworks of analysis

2.1.1 The concept of maritime security

This subchapter addresses maritime security and describes the most common frameworks for analysing this concept – the semiotic approach, securitisation theory, security practice theory and the good order at sea approach. However, in this study, only the securitisation and security practice theories will be used to analyse the research question.



Maritime security is a relatively recent term⁶ – it emerged and was added to the conceptual edifice of international relations at the end of the 20th century – but it quickly became widespread, making it a complex, perhaps ambiguous, disputed and even somewhat contentious concept which can be interpreted through different approaches.

One approach which has been adopted by several theorists who have dedicated themselves to its study⁷ links maritime security to threats in the maritime domain – such as maritime disputes between states, maritime terrorism, piracy, trafficking of drugs, arms, people and illicit goods, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, environmental crimes, and maritime accidents and disasters. Their main argument, according to Bueger (2015), is that “maritime security should be defined as the absence of these threats” (p. 159). However, this approach has been criticised as insufficient, because “it does neither prioritize issues, nor provides clues of how these issues are interlinked, nor outlines of how these threats can be addressed”. It also creates enduring puzzles over which threats should be included” (p. 159). Bueger (2015) also refers to a different conceptualisation, which he calls ‘positive’, and which projects a desired “end state”, “in contrast to the ‘negative’ definition of maritime security”. Some proponents of this view see maritime security as a “good” or “stable” order at sea⁸ (p. 159).

Given the lack of international consensus on the concept of maritime security, which is reflected in the fact that it can have a multitude of meanings and is often motivated by political interests and different interpretations of the law, Bueger identified three frameworks of analysis that he used to explain the similarities and differences of the various approaches to this concept:

(1) ‘semiotics’ which intends to map different meanings by exploring the relations between maritime security and other concepts, (2) the ‘securitization’ framework which provides the means to understand how different threats are included in maritime security, and (3) security practice theory which aims at understanding what actions are undertaken in the name of maritime security (Bueger, 2015, p. 160).

2.1.1.1 The semiotic approach

One of the frameworks of analysis proposed by Bueger (2015) is the semiotic approach, which focuses on the relationships between concepts. This approach is based on the idea that the meaning of a term can be discovered by exploring how it relates to other terms. That is, concepts take on relational meaning through their similarities and differences.

⁶ According to Germond (2015), “Before the end of the Cold War it was rarely used and primarily in reference to sea control over maritime areas in the context of the superpower confrontation, that is to say in a naval context” (p. 138).

⁷ Such as Klein (2011), who believes that maritime security includes the protection of a territory’s infrastructure, economy, environment and society from illegal acts that occur at sea, or Feldt et al. (2013), for whom maritime security is “the combination of preventive and responsive measures to protect the maritime domain against threats and intentional unlawful acts” (p. 2).

⁸ Including Till (2009), who argues that “The importance of this ‘good order’, and the corresponding threats of disorder, are such that navies around the world are focusing much more on their role in helping to preserve it” (p. 286), and Kraska and Pedrozo (2013), who see maritime security as “a stable order of the oceans subject to the rule of law at sea” (p. 1).



To explore the concept of maritime security, Bueger (2015) created a matrix with four concepts – seapower⁹, marine safety, resilience and blue economy –, each pointing to a different dimension of maritime security (national security, the marine environment, human security and economic development). The semiotic approach implies that, to understand the meaning that the different actors ascribe to maritime security, one must analyse the relationships between the four concepts.

2.1.1.2 The securitisation approach

The second framework of analysis is securitisation, a theory proposed by Buzan et al. (1998), who defined it as “the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics” (p. 23). In a spectrum that represents the degree to which the state is involved in resolving public issues, the issues at one end of the spectrum are non-politicised, that is, they are not a part of public debate, and the state does not make decisions about them (it simply does not deal with them). Issues can also be politicised, which means that the government analyses them, makes decisions about them and allocates resources to address them. At the other end of the spectrum are securitised issues, that is, issues that are presented as existential threats which require emergency measures and justify actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure (Buzan et al., 1998).

2.1.1.3 The security practice theory approach

The third framework of analysis focuses on the concrete actions of the actors involved in maritime security. That is, what type of activities are involved when actors say they are producing maritime security? Bueger (2015) called it an “understanding of security politics in which practice, understood as organised patterns of doing and sayings, is the central unit of analysis” (p. 162). This approach is similar to the securitisation approach inasmuch as it deals with the implementation of measures that can result from the securitisation of issues that have been deemed existential. There is a broad range of practices involved in maritime security, more specifically in what has become known as maritime situational awareness¹⁰. Security practices include a wide range of tasks that are carried out at sea, such as maritime patrolling, area interdictions, searches of vessels

⁹ In the words of Mahan (1890), who coined this concept in the 19th century, “The history of Sea Power is largely, though by no means solely, a narrative of contests between nations, of mutual rivalries, of violence frequently culminating in war” (p. 1). However, the concept has evolved significantly during the 20th century. Till (1984) listed the sources and elements of a state’s sea power. The sources are: its maritime community; its resources; its style of government; and its geography. The elements are: merchant shipping; logistical bases, and; the military instrument (p. 13). In 2009, Till introduced a new approach to the concept, in which seapower (now a single word) was something that maritime powers possessed and that should be seen as both an input and an output. The input included navies, coastguards and the shipbuilding and ship repair industries. The output referred to the ability to influence the behaviour of others through their actions at sea (or from the sea) (p. 21).

¹⁰ The term is based on the fact that knowing exactly what activities are taking place at sea is vital for maritime security. It involves a broad range of surveillance and information-sharing capabilities, including intelligence-gathering systems – such as the Automatic Identification System – to monitor ship movements and active surveillance through naval patrolling, aerial reconnaissance, satellite imagery and coastal radar systems (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017, p. 1303).



when there are strong suspicions of illicit practices, naval exercises and law enforcement activities at sea – such as arrests, the transfer of suspects, prosecution, trials and convictions. Finally, this includes coordination activities at different levels (Bueger, 2015).

2.1.1.4 The good order at sea approach

The last framework of analysis focuses on good order at sea as a requirement for the maritime security of a given area. According to Vreÿ (2010) “The approach of good order at sea highlights the importance and utility of safe and secure access to what the oceans offer countries and the global community at large” (p. 122). For Till (2009), good order at sea consists of a series of attributes – which include the good order that must exist on land and the sea as a source of resources, as a means of transport and as an area of domination – as well as a broad range of threats. And the sea has such relevance that the responsibilities of the authorities and security organisations must include its protection.

2.2 The securitisation of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea

This subchapter analyses the ongoing process to securitise piracy in the GoG – the most relevant threat to maritime security in those waters in the 21st century – and explores the role that ZOPACAS may play in this process.

2.2.1 Securitisation theory

The discussion that took place after the Cold War regarding the content and priorities of security and defence policies led to the recognition that there was a need to analyse the process by which threats were constructed and issues were added to the security agenda (Bueger, 2015). During this period, new frameworks of analysis emerged in the field of security studies, which had, until then, focused almost exclusively on the military instrument and on states. Buzan et al. (1998) – the main proponents of the Copenhagen School¹¹ –, created a new framework to analyse the character of security dynamics across five different sectors: military, political, economic, environmental and societal. This framework rejected the traditional approach, in which security was only applicable to one of those sectors, and argued that security was a particular type of politics applicable to a wide range of issues. Furthermore, it provided a constructivist operational method of distinguishing the process of securitisation from politicisation to understand who could securitise what and under what conditions (Buzan et al., 1998).

¹¹ Mcsweeney (1996) described the publication of Barry Buzan’s book *People, States and Fears* in 1983 as marking the beginning of a new field of security studies. Not long after, in 1985, the establishment of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Research in Copenhagen triggered a period of intense exploration of the problem of security, and several works on the subject were published that were sufficiently interrelated to be dubbed “the ‘Copenhagen school’ of security studies” (Mcsweeney, 1996, p. 81). The work produced by the Copenhagen School put innovative concepts and ideas into practice, including that of “securitisation” (Huysmans, 1998, p. 480).



Thus, the first step is to define what makes an event a security issue in international relations. Buzan et al. (1998, p. 21) argue that “The answer to what makes something an international security issue can be found in the traditional military-political understanding of security. In this context, security is about survival”. And that happens “when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object”. Therefore, “The special nature of security threats justifies the use of extraordinary measures to handle them” (p. 21). As for what distinguishes securitisation from politicisation, these theorists assert that “Securitization can [...] be seen as a more extreme version of politicization” (in the latter, the issue is part of public policy and requires a decision by the government and the allocation of resources (p. 23). But the fact that politicisation and securitisation are related does not imply that securitisation is always carried out by the state, as it can be done through other forums. According to Buzan et al. (1998, p. 24), “other social entities [may] raise an issue to the level of general consideration or even to the status of sanctioned urgency among themselves”. That is, when a securitising agent (which may or may not be the state) describes a threat as existential, removing the issue from the sphere of normal politics, we are dealing with a case of securitisation. Therefore, the most salient feature of securitisation is “a specific rhetorical structure (survival, priority of action “because if the problem is not dealt with now it will be too late, and we will not exist to remedy our failure”)” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 26). The key concepts of this theory are “the securitising actor” (who frames an issue as a threat through a securitising move), “the referent subject” (the entity posing the threat), “the referent object” (the entity being threatened), “the audience” (who must agree to confer an intersubjective status to the threat), “the context and the adoption of distinctive policies” (which may or may not be exceptional) (Balzacq et al., 2016, p. 495).

2.2.2 The process of securitising piracy in the GoG

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has always asserted that piracy (and armed robbery at sea against ships) was a regional issue that should be dealt with by coastal states and by the African regional organisations of the GoG. This would require an integrated response by states which involved the creation of laws and regulations to criminalise piracy and armed robbery at sea against ships; and the development of a regional framework for combating these threats, including information-sharing and coordination mechanisms in the region (UNSC, 2011). The following year, the UNSC reiterated that the GoG states had the primary responsibility to combat piracy and armed robbery at sea against ships in the region (UNSC, 2012).

On the other hand, both threats have been on the IMO’s agenda since the 1980s. The IMO currently has 88 international non-governmental organisations with consultative member status, including major international maritime transport and trade associations and organisations¹² (IMO, 2019). It would be only natural that these important entities would influence the policies adopted by the IMO. However, almost all the resolutions issued by this organisation during the 21st century have either served to implement

¹² Such as the Baltic and International Maritime Council, the International Association of Dry Cargo Shipowners or the International Association of Independent Tanker Owners, among many other organisations.



general codes of conduct or were only approved for the Horn of Africa region. Therefore, the IMO's contribution to the securitising of piracy in the GoG has fallen short of expectations, especially when compared to its decisive role in securitising piracy in the Horn of Africa.

On the other hand, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB)¹³ has been an important securitising agent in combating the threat of piracy in the GoG by highlighting the attacks that occur in those spaces and publishing reports on how the phenomenon is evolving.

Thus, it can be inferred that political decision makers do not see the problem of piracy and armed robbery at sea against ships in the GoG as an existential threat, and as such have not felt the need to implement any emergency measures, including the use of the military in operations to contain these threats.

2.2.3 The role of ZOPACAS

As shown in the previous subchapters, various securitising agents have endeavoured to securitise piracy in the GoG during the 21st century. What is still lacking is a discourse that clearly presents piracy in the region as an existential threat to important referent objects, including international shipping, freedom of navigation, the safety of the crews of merchant ships travelling through the region and all those who use the sea lawfully, especially fishers. According to Buzan et al. (1998):

A discourse that takes the form of presenting something as an existential threat to a referent object does not by itself create securitization—this is a securitizing move, but the issue is securitized only if and when the audience accepts it as such (p. 25).

In this sense, audiences have not been receptive to the arguments presented by securitising actors. Furthermore, ZOPACAS is not even included in the range of actors that have made the most significant efforts to present the problem of piracy in the GoG in the 21st century as more important than other issues, and as such should be given absolute priority. First, because in the first 23 years of this century there were only three ministerial meetings of its member states, which is itself an indication of their lack of commitment to the goals of this multinational partnership. On the other hand, the fact that piracy in the GoG poses a threat to the maritime security of the entire region was not addressed in all meetings. In fact, in the sixth ministerial summit of ZOPACAS member states – the first in the 21st century –, maritime security issues in the South Atlantic were barely mentioned, and the final declaration and action plan focused on the need to revitalise the organisation and called for a reform of the UNSC to “give more representation to developing countries” (Caldas, 2013, p. 14). Paragraph 108 of the declaration of the 7th ministerial meeting (UNGA, 2013) held in January 2013 in

¹³ A specialised division of the International Chamber of Commerce established in 1981 to act as a focal point in the fight against all types of maritime crime. One of the IMB's main areas of activity is the repression of piracy.



Montevideo, Uruguay, states that the ZOPACAS signatory states: “Express concern at the threat that piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Gulf of Guinea pose to the international navigation, maritime security and economic development of States in the region, and recognize the leadership role that the States in the Zone should play in this regard and the need for a regional coordination of efforts to counter activities of piracy and armed robbery at sea” (p. 15).

On the other hand, paragraph 110 of the declaration (2013) reads: “Urge international partners to assist States and organizations in the region to enhance their capabilities to counter piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Gulf of Guinea, including their capacity to conduct regional patrols, to establish and maintain joint coordination centres and joint information-sharing centres, and in the effective implementation of the regional strategy, once adopted, as mandated in United Nations Security Council resolutions 2018 (2011) and 2039 (2012)” (p. 15).

However, after this, there was another long period without ministerial meetings, and it was only in 2021 that a new effort to revitalise the multinational partnership was spearheaded by Brazil at the United Nations (Governo do Brasil, 2023a). As a result of this initiative, the United Nations General Assembly issued resolution A/RES/75/312 on 5 August 2021, which highlighted the role of ZOPACAS as a forum of interaction, coordination and cooperation between its members and encouraged them to hold ministerial meetings every two years, as well as to create a follow-up mechanism (UNGA, 2021). At the 8th ministerial meeting held in Mindelo, Cape Verde, in April 2023, the member states “reaffirmed [their] determination [...] to prevent and eliminate piracy, in particular [...] in the states located on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, in compliance with international law” (Governo do Brasil, 2023b, p. 9). The action plan outlined at the Mindelo ministerial meeting includes a critical task related to maritime security cooperation, which consists of “strengthening cooperation efforts to prevent and repress piracy, armed robbery against ships and illegal maritime activities and to protect critical [maritime] infrastructure” (Governo do Brasil, 2023d, p. 12).

This shows that, for several years during this century, ZOPACAS played a limited role in the process of securitising piracy in the GoG region. However, the visible efforts to revitalise the organisation (led by Brazil) since 2021 – which led the organisation to hold its eighth ministerial meeting in Mindelo in 2023 – and Brazil’s offer to host the ninth meeting means that the organisation could be more committed to address the maritime security issues in the GoG and to contribute to the securitisation of piracy in that region.

2.3 Security practices in the Gulf of Guinea

This subchapter addresses the most relevant (maritime) security practices that have been implemented in the GoG in the 21st century, and explores ZOPACAS’ role as a maritime security community with the capacity to become a key agent in containing the threat of piracy in the region.



2.3.1 Security practice theory

Security practice theory definitely entered the international relations lexicon after the Cold War, as the most advanced theories about practice as a concept were developed in the early 1990s with the introduction of constructivist ideas. In general terms, this theory is based on the idea that an actor (in international relations) observes the practices of other actors regarding a particular social phenomenon, speaks and reflects (about them) and is able to participate in them. The aim is not only to provide an abstract explanation of social phenomena, but to understand how the world works through these practices (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014).

In addition, after the Cold War, Booth (1994) asserted that "Security is concerned with how people live" (p. 19). For Booth, both theory and practice were politically relevant. He argued that security studies could benefit from a variety of approaches, as long as the focus was on people and the problems they faced on a daily basis. In essence, in Booth's words, "thinking about thinking is important, but so is thinking about doing" (Booth, 1994, p. 19).

Therefore, security practice theory – now applied to the maritime domain – aims to understand "What kind of activities are conducted when actors say that they are doing maritime security" (Bueger, 2015, p. 162). This theory is also related to the framework of analysis discussed in the previous chapter – securitisation –, as some of the (emergency) measures that were implemented may stem from the process of securitising a specific threat to a given referent object in a concrete space. According to Bueger and Stockbruegger (2013, p. 102): "A successful securitization is organized by three elements: an issue which is accepted as threat, a collective whose survival is threatened by the issue, and a script for action followed by the actors of the collective or those representing it".

Considering the emphasis that is usually given to the representation of threats and the use of language, the theory has focused on understanding the processes by which issues are framed and accepted as threats and on the identity of the communities that are built when something is presented as a threat – both of which are related to the first two elements listed by Bueger and Stockbruegger. As a result, there is less (academic) interest in analysing issues related to the activities that actors engage in when following the scripts involved in successful securitisation processes (which constitute the third element presented by Bueger and Stockbruegger). However, these authors argue that the gap is being filled by academics who follow "practice theory". This approach "takes patterns of actions (practice) as the basic unit of analysis and sees questions of threat construction and identity formation (representation) as a secondary aspect of practice" (Bueger & Stockbruegger, 2013, p. 103). Briefly, securitisation deals with how security "is constructed" and security practice theory examines how security "is practised" (Krause & Williams, 2007, p. 137).



2.3.2 Security practices implemented in the GoG

Several actors have implemented maritime security practices in the GoG in this century. The role of the European Union (EU) – perhaps one of the most relevant regional organisations involved in this process in the region – has been particularly important. It has launched several programmes to develop the legislation, promote information sharing, provide training and support capability building. Some of the most relevant are the Critical Maritime Routes Monitoring, Support and Evaluation Mechanism, which provides information, monitoring, policy analysis and expert recommendations for projects covered by this general programme; the Gulf of Guinea Inter-Regional Network, which supports the creation and development of the regional information-sharing network known as the Yaoundé Architecture¹⁴; the Support to West Africa Integrated Maritime Security, which aims to support the implementation of the Integrated Maritime Strategy of The Economic Community of West African States and improve law enforcement in GoG; the Support Programme to the Maritime Security Strategy in Central Africa, which aims to strengthen the institutional, legal and operational framework for cross-border maritime cooperation in Central Africa; the Improved Regional Fisheries Governance in Western Africa, which aims to enhance the regional contribution to the sustainable use and management of fisheries resources; and the West and Central Africa Port Security, which aims to improve port security in West and Central African countries (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2021). Other important programmes include the Coordinated Maritime Presences project implemented in January 2021, which aims to strengthen the coordination of the EU's activities in the GoG, and specifically to improve maritime situational awareness¹⁵ and cooperation at sea through the naval capabilities of EU member states in the region (EEAS, 2024).

On the other hand, several programmes to support maritime capability building have been implemented and are ongoing in the GoG, involving multilateral exercises and information sharing. Obangame Express¹⁶, an annual naval aviation exercise sponsored by the US Africa Command, is one of the most important. It is designed to improve regional cooperation in support of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and provide maritime domain awareness, information sharing between the maritime operations centres in the GoG and maritime interdiction, as well as increase capabilities to counter crimes at sea in order to strengthen safety and security in the GoG (Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, 2024). Grand African NEMO is another large-scale exercise conducted by the French navy since 2018 in the waters of the GoG. The fourth edition took place in 2022 and its aim was to share knowledge and improve the operational skills of participants in the fight against illegal fishing, piracy, maritime pollution, illegal

¹⁴ Intra-regional commitment to combat maritime crime in the GoG region signed by the Economic Community of West African States, the Economic Community of Central African States and the Gulf of Guinea Commission during the Yaoundé Summit of Heads of State in June 2013 (European External Action Service, 2021).

¹⁵ Which consists of the fusion of data required to produce a robust depiction of maritime areas and provide relevant intelligence to identify trends in threats, as well as areas of concern for all those who use the sea lawfully (Alexandre, 2022).

¹⁶ The largest multinational maritime exercise in West and Central Africa (United States Africa Command, 2023). The 12th edition was held in 2023 and 19 of the 29 participating nations were also members of ZOPACAS.



trafficking and rescue at sea. About forty naval units and five aircraft were used in Grand African NEMO 2022 (Naval News, 2022). Seventeen of the 19 GoG countries and Brazil as a guest nation (a total of 18 ZOPACAS member countries) participated in the exercise. In October 2023, the French Navy organised Grand African NEMO 2023, under the auspices of the Yaoundé Architecture. Eighteen GoG nations and 10 partner nations participated in the exercise, which covered a vast area of the ocean from Senegal to Angola (Ministère des Armées, 2023). Once again, a significant number of ZOPACAS member states were present at this edition.

2.3.3 ZOPACAS' efforts to improve security practices in the GoG

As shown above, ZOPACAS has been mostly absent from the initiatives to strengthen security in those areas of the ocean developed by various actors – both from the GoG region and others. Most African states that are members of the organisation (such as Brazil) have been involved in different maritime security practices over the last years, both autonomously and integrated in partnerships, showing that these states are greatly concerned about security in the GoG. However, they have not done so through the organisation to which they belong – ZOPACAS –, which was set up to maintain the security of the entire South Atlantic (which includes the GoG).

This suggests that ZOPACAS member states are convinced that they will be better equipped to respond to the maritime security challenges posed by threats such as piracy and armed robbery at sea against ships if they do so outside the organisation. This has been largely due to the irregular manner in which ZOPACAS has been operating.

To identify what role ZOPACAS could actually play in terms of implementing maritime security practices in the GoG region, two decisive factors should be considered: the collective identity of its member states – which is linked to their colonial legacy; and a common ideal – the maintenance of peace in the vast maritime space (the South Atlantic) that unites them. However, this project will require an unequivocal leader. And, in this regard, Brazil – which spearheaded the creation of ZOPACAS – is a key player for the very survival of the organisation. Therefore, ZOPACAS must be revitalised, as Brazil will obtain (other) important benefits from it, such as the opportunity to affirm itself as a relevant regional actor and to increase its influence in a maritime space where extra-regional actors are increasingly present – China being the most recent (Edwards, 2021). The boost that President Lula da Silva has sought to lend the organisation during his current term of office reflects Brazil's renewed interest in revitalising ZOPACAS, and could even change the status quo by making it the main forum of cooperation in the field of security between the South American countries and West African coastal countries.

However, other member states such as South Africa and Argentina (which are fellow G20 members and have well-equipped armed forces) or Nigeria and Angola (African regional powers with large oil and natural gas reserves) and Uruguay (which makes a significant contribution to United Nations peacekeeping operations) also play a relevant role (Edwards, 2021). Some of the maritime security practices that ZOPACAS could implement in the near future in the GoG region will not be possible without the support



of these states. Those practices include the commitment of military naval capabilities to surveillance missions in the waters of the GoG and the collection, fusion and sharing of maritime information, and supporting the law enforcement agencies of the coastal states of the GoG in building their maritime capabilities.

Conclusion

After years during which it was practically absent from Brazil's foreign policy, ZOPACAS has been given a much higher priority since early 2023 – influenced by President Lula da Silva –, and is poised to become a key initiative in strengthening Brazil's foreign policy by making the country a key actor in South Atlantic geopolitics.

The security of an area of the ocean can be studied using different frameworks of analysis that approach it from different perspectives: from semiotics (in which the meaning of a concept can be derived by exploring its relationships with other concepts) to good order at sea (which focuses on the importance of the sea as a source of resources, a means of transport and an area of domination), securitisation theories (in which threats to the security of a referent object are presented as existential and require exceptional measures by decision makers) and security practice theory (which focuses on the specific activities of the actors involved in the maritime security of a region).

This article examined ZOPACAS' role in increasing maritime security in the GoG using two of the analysis frameworks presented above: the securitisation of the threats in that region of the South Atlantic (piracy in particular); and the security practices that have been implemented there.

During most of the 21st century, ZOPACAS has not played an active role in the securitisation of piracy in the GoG. However, it could be considerably more involved in the short term, not only because the process to securitise piracy in the GoG is far from consolidated, but also due to Brazil's ongoing efforts to revitalise the organisation. But for this to happen, ZOPACAS must adopt a discourse that presents piracy as an existential threat to all those who use the GoG waters lawfully, as this will allow it to contribute to a securitising movement that brings the issue to the audiences that must accept it for it to become securitised.

Brazil also plays an instrumental role in the security practices that ZOPACAS could implement in the GoG, as most of the organisation's African member states, with a few exceptions (such as Nigeria and South Africa), generally lack naval capabilities to deploy in maritime security operations to combat the threats in the GoG. This means that not only must Brazil be able to deploy naval capabilities in the GoG more often (and over longer periods), it must persuade its African partners (especially Nigeria and South Africa) to create a multinational task force capable of addressing the security challenges in the region through maritime surveillance missions and the collection, fusion and sharing of relevant operational information and by supporting the law enforcement agencies of African coastal states in building their maritime capabilities.

The study's research question has thus been answered: ZOPACAS can play a relevant role in improving maritime security in the GoG by contributing to the securitisation of the



most important threat in those waters (piracy) and by adopting concrete security practices to address the challenges currently facing the region.

In terms of limitations to this research, some difficulty was identified in accessing information from certain ZOPACAS member states, particularly African states, in order to better understand their future commitment to the organisation.

Due to the fact that in this article only the securitisation and security practice theories were used to analyse the research question, it seems appropriate to propose approaching this issue using different frameworks of analysis, namely the building of good order at sea in the Gulf of Guinea region.

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