CHAPTER 3

The Sea as the Geostrategic Essence of the Gulf of Guinea: A Historical and Contemporary Overview

*If we flow with life’s lessons, we learn that the sea is what it is*

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3.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter foreshadowed how the maritime profile of the Gulf of Guinea has shaped global interest in the region. Indeed, it is the maritime estate, more than anything else that has influenced the history and socio-economic dynamics of the region as well as its strategic outlook. This chapter develops that theme by examining the historical and contemporary significance of the Gulf of Guinea. It starts with a historical account of the importance of the Gulf of Guinea from a maritime perspective. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to an analysis of the contemporary relevance of the Gulf of Guinea focusing on offshore oil and gas resources, marine living resources, trade and shipping, and the use of the maritime domain of the Gulf of Guinea for the laying of submarine cables and pipelines.

3.2 A Geopolitical History from the Ocean

This part summarises the strategic importance of the Gulf of Guinea from a historical perspective by plotting the Gulf of Guinea in the map of key developments in the maritime realm. The argument underlying the analysis is that the Gulf of Guinea has been part of, and in some cases, at the centre of, major transformations in the history of the world, and that the maritime domain of the Gulf of Guinea has been pivotal in the process. The discussion will focus on three selected developments: the Dutch-Portuguese commercial rivalry in the Gulf of Guinea and its influence on the evolution of the doctrine of *Mare Liberum*; the centrality of the Gulf of Guinea to eighteenth century industrial revolution which was essentially a maritime driven enterprise; and finally, the role of the Gulf of Guinea in the evolution of the concepts of seapower and maritime power.
3.2.1 Gulf of Guinea and the Birth of Mare Liberum Doctrine

The treatise or doctrine of Mare Liberum, articulated in 1609 by Hugo Grotius, remains the most celebrated development in maritime strategic and legal thinking. Although historical narratives underscore that Mare Liberum was borne out of commercial and shipping contest between the early European powers—Dutch and Portuguese, the crucial role of the Gulf of Guinea in the evolution of doctrine is often neglected.

Proper context analysis would, however, reveal that Mare Liberum has its antecedents in events in the Gulf of Guinea. As in the case of earlier empires, Portugal built its wealth and power by dominating trade and in order to retain its supremacy, Portugal tried to limit the trading opportunities of other nations. This assertiveness of Portugal was partly grounded in the 1493 declaration by Pope Alexander VI, which divided the world’s oceans between Portugal and Spain. However, the Dutch, as commercial competitors of the Portuguese, went on to establish trade relations with the Gold Coast in 1598, and started spreading trade posts to the rest of the Gulf of Guinea. The effective assertion of Dutch trade in the Gulf of Guinea heightened tensions between Portuguese and Dutch trading companies in other parts of the world. Portugal persisted with the enforcement of monopolistic methods in the East and West Indies and as part of their scheme of retaliatory measures, the Dutch seized a Portuguese ship, the Santa Catarina, in the Strait of Malacca in 1603. This resulted in the famous treatise Mare Librium (Freedom of the Sea) by

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1 Mare Liberum (The Free Sea or The Freedom of the Sea) was written by the Dutch jurist and philosopher Hugo Grotius in 1609. The full title of the treatise, which is Mare liberum sive de iure quod Batavis competit ad Indicana commercia, dissertation, canvassed the principle that the sea is incapable of being appropriated by any State, and that all nations are free to use it for seafaring trade. Later, in 1635, the Englishman John Selden wrote Mare Clausum, which literally translates as ‘closed seas’, to legitimise British control of the seas around Great Britain.


3 The declaration, Inter caetera or Papal Bull, was modified by a series of subsequent treaties between the two powers: Treaties of Alcáçovas (1479), Tordesillas (1494) and Saragossa (1526).
