

Chad's Pivotal Role in the Regional Crisis

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In the eyes of Western partners, the value of Chad's political regime has decisively increased during the past decade, especially after France's intervention in Mali in 2012. Having occupied the country's highest position for nearly three decades, President Idriss Déby Itno is viewed by his international allies not only as a willing and reliable partner but also as an acute observer of the turbulent political landscape in the Sahel. N'Djamena was able to define a tailored military and security strategy to cope with the region's terrorist threat and therefore pursue its own political agenda. In the framework of the 2013 Malian crisis, the credibility acquired by Chadian army, deployed in support of French troops fighting against militant groups in Azawad, enabled N'Djamena to overcome the short-falling Nouakchott

Process and to set-up the G5 Sahel initiative in February 2014, directly involving Chad, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to enhance regional security cooperation. In the same year, Déby negotiated with his French counterpart the installation in N'Djamena of France's 3,500-strong *Opération Barkhane*^[1] – an anti-terror military deployment, successor to the long-lasting (1986-2014) and multi-purpose *Opération Épervier*.

Chad's military involvement in the region – an indirect recognition of its pivotal role and strong commitment – upgraded with the renovation of the moribund Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) initiative on Lake Chad. Developed in 1994 by Sani Abacha's government as a solely Nigerian initiative to thwart banditry and criminal activities in a mainly rural area, the MNJTF was extended to neighbouring Niger and Chad in 1998. Such an involvement appeared to be only nominal as both the Nigerian and Chadian contingents retired after hearing news of an imminent attack in 2015, when the MNJTF headquarters in the Borno State city of Baga were overrun by jihadi militants belonging to Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah li'l Da'wah wa'l-Jihad (vulgarly known as "Boko Haram") that dislodged the remaining Nigerian contingent present in the camp. Such a blow pushed Nigeria's Goodluck Jonathan administration to implement some important changes, recognizing the limited successes achieved by his army and demanding a stronger involvement of neighbouring partners via the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the African Union (AU). The MNJTF headquarters were moved to N'Djamena – matching the greater involvement of the LCBC – and Chadian combat forces (counted as some 3,000 troops) were then deployed in Nigeria's Borno State, while the necessary financial, organizational and resource support was provided by the African Union. Given the regional framework, underpinning the task force, and the precarious financial funding provided by member states, the commitment of international donors – such as the African Union and the European Union – became a key driver in accelerating the kick-off of the project and not turning the MNJTF into just an empty shell.

The first large-scale operation undertaken by the Joint Force was ordered only in February 2016 (*Operation Arrow Five*) in the Nigerian town of Ngoshe, on the Mandara Mountains. It was followed in March by an operation

conducted in the Madawya Forest, close to Cameroon's border. With the beginning of the rainy season in June a more prolonged operation was set up around Lake Chad (*Operation Gama Aiki*, 'finish the job' in Hausa), supported by the active involvement of Nigerian, Nigerien and Chadian troops.

In recent times, the 2018 Operation Amni Fakhat sought to take back positions lost by the contingent at the hand of the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), a Boko Haram splinter group led by Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi and (formerly) by *mallam* (teacher) Mamman Nur, that gained capacity operating in the tri-border Niger-Chad-Nigeria zone. Despite efforts, the coming of the rainy season made virtually worthless most of the operation's achievements. ISWAP was able to reoccupy positions and reprise both military and governance activities. A new large-scale offensive, *Operation Yancin Takfi*, was delivered, partly anticipating the seasonal change and taking advantage of important factional rifts that took place within ISWAP's command leadership in late 2018 and early 2019. In August 2018, indeed, the murder of Nur by some dissident militants, critical of his leadership and the strategic choice to negotiate with the Nigerian authorities,^[2] was hailed by Mustapha Kirmima, an emerging leader. Despite this, Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi formally remained in charge as *wali* (governor) until March 2019, when he was *de facto* deposed and replaced by Abu Abdullah al-Barnawi, allegedly following an IS order. The combined action of internal rifts within the jihadi militant organization and the counter-insurgency operation (heavy artillery and aerial attacks) conducted by national and regional security forces fostered ISWAP's fragmentation in smaller units. The conclusion of *Operation Yancin Takfi*, for instance, led to the growth in numbers of the so-called "Bakoura" faction, a group potentially willing to reunite with the earlier Abubakar Shekau leadership^[3] which reportedly between March and May 2019 attacked the trade hubs of Darak and Blangoua, those inner Lake Chad trading centers formerly under Nur's influence.

Despite such escalation of violent events, in early January 2020, 1.200 Chadian troops formally returned to the N'Djamena base from Gajiganna (Borno) after having been deployed in the framework of *Operation Yancin Takfi*. Having lost military protection and fearing to be newly targeted by

jihadists, civilians residing in Gajiganna and its environs fled from rural areas to Borno's capital of Maiduguri. In front of such an emergency, few days later on 21 January, Borno State Governor Babagana Zulum, along with two members of the State's House of Assembly representing the concerned rural areas, paid a visit to LCBC headquarters in N'Djamena. Zulum recognized the indispensable role played by Chadian troops in securing rural constituencies in his state and pleaded for the return of Chadian troops to Borno. His request was softened by the claim that his government was committed to re-open the frontier (the border had been closed since 2015): being a landlocked country, Chad's internal market has heavily suffered from the halt of mobility with neighbouring Nigeria and Cameroon, which supply the vast majority of Chad's commodities. Thereby, few days later, Chadian troops were reportedly re-deployed to Borno.

Chad's strongly centralised power system has been able to effectively project its military power on the regional scale, avoiding a territorial expansion of jihadi militant organisations on the ground. All of this, while having difficulty in navigating the terrains of economic stagnation and burgeoning protests. The authoritarian and clientelist grip of Déby's government, though, is paying increasingly higher dividends to an army that is acutely politicized and highly dependent on external resources in a cash-starved context. As long as Déby remains in power and is willing to negotiate the set of shifting internal and international alliances supporting him, the country will be able to maintain, and even reinforce, its military projection in the Sahel. Nonetheless, the lack of foreseeable heirs and consolidated institutions makes both Chad's internal political development and its military commitment in the region a veritable enigma in the long-term.

NOTES:

[1] The Barkhane force is currently made up of 5,100 soldiers.

[2] Nur was executed ostensibly because the group's governing council did not approve of the negotiations he was conducting with Nigerian state representatives for the liberation of a hundred female students, who were abducted by ISWAP earlier that year in Yobe State.

[3] *Mallam* Abu Bakr Shekau is the leader of Jama'at Ahl as-Sunna li-da'wa wa l-Jihad, the jihadi organization commonly referred to as Boko Haram. In opposition to his authoritative leadership and contesting his claim as presumed 'caliph', a splinter group went on to form the Islamic State West Africa Province.

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