



# THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF PEACE OPERATIONS II: A DIALOGUE WITH WEST AFRICA

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On 16–18 September 2015, the meeting ‘New Geopolitics of Peace Operations II: A Dialogue with West Africa’ took place in Abuja, Nigeria. The dialogue focused on four main lines of discussion: (a) the conflicts and security challenges expected in the region in the next 5–10 years; (b) the appropriate peace operations and conflict management response to these challenges; (c) the current regional capacity to address such challenges; and (d) the assistance required from external actors.

This workshop report outlines four key themes that emerged during the regional dialogue: (a) addressing the primacy of governance challenges to peace operation efforts in the region; (b) reinforcing long-term approaches and the role of civil society in multidimensional operations; (c) managing the challenges of external peace and security partnerships in the region; and (d) reassessing the militarization of peace operations.

## ADDRESSING GOVERNANCE ISSUES IN PEACE OPERATIONS

Weak governance was generally seen as both a cause of conflict and the main inhibiting factor to effective conflict management in the region. Many participants stressed the scale of public corruption among ruling elites. Insufficient investment in public welfare and the insufficient provision of basic services to populations are fuelling poverty and displacement, which in turn exacerbate the degradation of social cohesion and solidarity in the region. Some noted that vulnerable segments of the population, such as the unemployed and marginalized youth, are potential recruits for criminal and insurgent groups. Such groups operate particularly in the ungoverned or weakly governed spaces in and around porous borders. At the same time, election-related conflict is possible in countries such as Burkina Faso, Ghana and Guinea, particularly when ruling elites are unwilling to relinquish power. Several participants noted that the legitimacy deficit of elected officials incubates a hotbed for instability in the region.

Some participants viewed peace operations in general as an insufficient tool for addressing these challenges, and in some ways as an aggravating factor. For one, peace operations, whether at the international or the regional level, work with host states as their main partner and often fail to challenge the state to push it to reform. Peace operations in the region have not done enough to address the lack of trust in military and police forces, which the

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

● The ‘New Geopolitics of Peace Operations II: African Outlooks on Conflict Management’ was launched with support from the Finnish and Dutch foreign ministries and in continued partnership with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES).

The project aims to enhance understanding of how to best prepare peace operations for the diverse security environments in Africa, while promoting local and international dialogue on the future of peace and security.

In order to achieve these aims, a series of five regional dialogue meetings were organized in five African regions, followed by a global dialogue event and a variety of SIPRI publications.

This report summarizes a workshop that brought together a range of leading experts, military and government officials, and representatives of civil society and international organizations to discuss the future of peace operations and conflict management in West Africa. It was jointly organized by SIPRI and FES.

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populations often view as corrupt and abusive. The insufficient focus by both the international community and the states in the region on building stronger institutions for civilian oversight perpetuates the lack of trust in security forces. Several participants also suggested that the international community has, at times, supported states that have committed atrocities or ruling elites that have refused to hand over power, thereby reinforcing a culture of impunity.

Some participants stressed that these governance issues are crucial since the population is losing its patience, particularly the segment of the population that is unable to find employment or access basic services. One participant felt that what is ultimately required is a 'whole society reform' focused not only on the military and police aspects of security, but also on the judiciary and the political domain, including the creation of a system of checks and balances for the defence sectors. Others noted that the proper governance frameworks and regimes are already in place at both the national and the regional level. Therefore, the problem lies not with how to create these but with state compliance and political will. Some argued, however, that states in the region have the political will but lack the capacity to follow through. How can states provide services to their populations, for example, when they lack basic census data and therefore do not know who their population is and where it is located? Nonetheless, there was a general consensus that strengthening state institutions, creating more opportunities for marginalized populations and consolidating the state should be key priorities moving forward.

### **REINFORCING LONG-TERM APPROACHES AND THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN MULTIDIMENSIONAL PEACE OPERATIONS**

There was a consensus in the meeting about the need to reinforce the multidimensionality of peace operations. Specifically, participants noted two main aspects of multidimensionality that require improvement: (a) more investment in long-term programmes and exit strategies; and (b) better inclusion of civil society and local communities. Several participants believed that only long-term, more comprehensive peacebuilding efforts, rather than short and targeted peace operations, could guarantee sustainable peace in the region. One participant asserted, for example, that the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) are not adequately addressing post-conflict national reconciliation or small weapon disarmament. Some participants asserted that current operations are favouring state building and economic development while neglecting to incorporate a comprehensive peacebuilding agenda. In order to address the root causes that drive youth to join insurgency groups, for example, peace operations would have to tackle unemployment and political representation, as well as focus more on issues of identity, social marginalization, deradicalization and reintegration.

A number of participants stressed the need for proper exit strategies and sustainable mandates. Peace operations should anticipate the need for post-conflict reconstruction and the transfer of knowledge and capacity through continual collaboration with local actors and institutions. One participant from Liberia noted with concern that despite the fact that the UN Mission



in Liberia (UNMIL) has been hailed a success, there is a chance that the country will relapse into conflict once the mission leaves. The Ebola crisis, which mostly affected post-conflict countries, illustrates the fragility of the relative stability achieved by peace operations in the region.

Most participants agreed that in order to create a more long-term approach, peace operations in the region should be more inclusive of local communities and civil society actors. Current operations do not adequately engage local communities and assume that a state-centric mandate will create local ownership. An Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) official suggested that in order to create local ownership, peace operations should capacitate and support civil society. Not everyone agreed, however, that civil society could bridge the gap between the state and local communities. One participant noted that civil society does not have the political power to move beyond representing the needs of local populations to ensuring that their needs are met.

### **MANAGING EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS IN THE REGION**

The relationship between the region and external actors and funders was discussed at length. External support might include development aid, bilateral partnerships with countries such as France—that might provide tactical support to missions or deploy a support mission—and multilateral partnerships with the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU) and the UN, among others. Several participants noted that such external partnerships should, first and foremost, foster capacity in the region.

Donors and external partners should assist with building sustainable local capacities through training, financial and material support, and by helping to strengthen institutions. Countries in the region should identify areas of need, and assistance should be coordinated to prevent duplication. Participants identified areas such as (a) assistance with the crisis of internally displaced persons in the region; (b) provision of services to vulnerable populations; (c) the protection and rehabilitation of child soldiers; (d) support for strengthening the rule of law; and (e) institutional and financial support for long-term disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, security sector reform and small arms and light weapons programmes. Specifically for military operations, there is still a need for airlift capabilities and intelligence.

The relationship between the region and external partners can still be improved. In the case of ECOWAS, one participant noted that critical enablers for the Regional Standby Force were promised by international partners, but were never delivered. He added that when the need arises regional actors are forced to fall back on internal capacities. However, if the international community is seeking to strengthen regional capacities to tackle international security challenges, it will have to invest in them. A number of participants also stressed that burden sharing between African and international actors should be more equitable, since the security challenges facing the continent have a global impact. Yet the issue of donor fatigue was also raised as a concern, and one participant warned that countries in the region should maintain respectful relationships with donors.

Some participants noted that external assistance comes at a price: it can limit the ability of African stakeholders to influence the mandate and

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implementation of an operation. Others stressed that donor expectations and demands can at times be unrealistic or intrusive as donors also have their own interests, which may sometimes be at odds with those of the region. One participant from Nigeria suggested that the EU spends too much money on training for financial accountability in relation to the actual donation it gives. Another participant noted that some donors are threatening to cut development aid if too much of the state's budget is spent on the armed forces, thereby unethically forcing beneficiary states to choose between basic development needs and security. He also noted that partnership agreements with external actors, such as France, are sometimes signed on the personal whim of leaders, rather than with the long-term implications of accepting such aid in mind. For these reasons, some reflected on the importance of increasing African capacity to deploy and maintain operations at the regional level. External military interventions in the region, such as France's Operation Serval in Mali, for example, may be helpful in the short term but do not increase the ability of regional actors to address future conflict.

## REASSESSING THE MILITARIZATION OF RESPONSES TO SECURITY CHALLENGES

A discussion on the response to Boko Haram raised the question of whether responses to security threats in the region are excessively military in nature and, if so, whether international and regional stakeholders should refocus their West African agenda in response. Several participants saw the current regional approach to terrorism as waging war instead of using other means, such as the legal system. In some cases, this approach enables human rights violations by security forces that ultimately perpetuate negative attitudes among local populations and fuel the conflict further. Others asserted that restoring security and providing humanitarian aid in all the regions affected by Boko Haram must be prioritized and are prerequisites for any reconstruction. A number of participants from Nigeria felt that the tactics used by Boko Haram justify a robust response. Some participants believed that insufficient regional capacity to carry out the civilian-development aspects of counter-insurgency explains the predominantly military response.

Overall, the debate about the need for a more comprehensive approach to conflict resolution implied that the current balance has tipped too far towards military solutions. However, militarized responses are sometimes needed and countries appear to receive some benefits from participation in military operations. Contribution enhances the capacity of national militaries to address security challenges in the region. Participants from Burkina Faso and Togo, for example, noted that their engagement in peace operations has enabled them to professionalize, train and modernize their armed forces, which has ultimately helped to improve human rights standards.