

# Interorganizational Cooperation and the Fight against Terrorism in West Africa and the Sahel

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## ABSTRACT:

The transnational nature of security threats in the 21st Century are such that interorganizational cooperation is necessary to effectively combat these threats. This article explores a key organization, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), charged with curtailing the threat posed by terrorism in certain parts of the Sahel and West Africa. Using the theoretical framework of Walt's balance of threat and a combination of data obtained from ACLED and expert interviews, the article argues that the MNJTF has not been successful in achieving its mandate. This could be attributed to five lapses in the restructuring of the organization in 2015 to combat terrorism. The article concludes that for interorganizational security cooperation to be successful, the allies must equally acknowledge that they face the same existential threats which will make them commit to the demands of the organisation.

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## Introduction

In the last few decades, the types of threats faced by nation states have increasingly evolved and extended beyond borders, necessitating a change in approach to combat these threats. Although interstate wars have been on the decline since the end of the cold war, threats such as terrorism, trafficking, banditry are not only on the increase but extending beyond the borders of individual nations.

These threats are even more prevalent in countries with porous borders in the Sahel and West Africa regions. The nature and dynamics of these threats are becoming more difficult for individual military organizations to combat because many of the groups have perfected slipping in and out of different countries and operating around the border areas. This is the case with Boko Haram which operates around the borders of Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon.

To combat the changing dynamics and nature of these threats, interorganizational cooperation is now very important and there has been an increase in the number of such collaborations. Organisations such as the G5 Sahel (which is a collaboration between five Sahelian nations—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—established to contain the security threats facing the region) and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF which is a collaboration between Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Republic of Benin – established to combat the threat posed by Boko Haram and its affiliates in the region) are prominent examples. While it is logical to create these types of organizations to combat these increasing threats, it is also important to explore if these organizations are impactful and fit for purpose. The main question this article poses is: How successful is interorganizational cooperation in combating collective threats?

This article explores the impact of interorganizational cooperation in combating collective threats using MNJTF as a case study. While there are several studies which have explored the formation and activities of the MNJTF, a thorough literature review reveals that most of the studies mainly focus on the challenges facing the organization with no recent study critically examining the success or failure of the organization since receiving its new mandate in 2015. A few studies such as the 2016 assessment of the organization conducted for the Institute for Security Studies focused on the organizational capabilities and activities of the organization in examining success.<sup>1</sup> The report concluded that despite the initial challenges, the MNJTF is “gradually gaining grounds.”<sup>2</sup> With the understanding that success (especially in international security) is relative and difficult to measure, this article explores a different technique to explore the impact of the MNJTF since 2015, when its mandate was changed to combat Boko Haram.

The impact of the MNJTF since its restructuring in 2015 was measured using three parameters: the number of attacks by Boko Haram and its affiliates, the fatalities resulting from the attacks and detailed interviews carried out in the region. Comprehensive data from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and a combination of expert and civilian interviews were also used to assess the organisation. In addition, the article explores key lapses with the new mandate given the organisation. This approach was taken because it is important to understand the foundations of the organisation in determining its efficacy. The article concludes that the MNJTF has failed to combat the threats against which it was mandated. A key reason why the organisation has not lived up to expectation is the approach some allies took to the threat when the new mandate was agreed. Some of the countries in the alliance did not believe Boko

Haram posed an existential threat to them, which resulted in a poor structural foundation limiting the impact of the organisation till today.<sup>3</sup>

The first section of the article explores the formation, context, and the initial assessment of the MNJTF. The second section highlights the methodology used and the justification for this type of methodology. Using Walt's balance-of-threat theory of alliance formation, the third section explains the rationale for the formation of the organisation and how the threat posed by Boko Haram "forced the new alliance." The fourth section assesses the impact of the organisation using data from ACLED and interviews conducted in the region. The final section highlights five foundational issues which have limited the impact of the organisation based on the interviews conducted as well as extensive literature review.

### **MNJTF: Understanding the Context**

In 1994, after an increase in banditry, arms trafficking and smuggling around the Lake Chad axis, the Nigerian government along with their Chadian counterpart established the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat the rising insecurity along the countries' borders.<sup>4</sup> After a period of initial success, the mandate of the force was extended in 1998 to cover all aspects of security challenges around the lake Chad region and Niger Republic joined the alliance. After an increase in terrorist activities, especially of Boko Haram and its affiliates, the mandate of MNJTF was extended to combat the new threat facing the region.<sup>5</sup> Boko Haram, which is believed to have been formed in Northern Nigeria as a result of "political (mis)calculation of the northern political elite in their quest to consolidate power in their respective states and to regain power from the south which attained power in 1999 after a long military rule,"<sup>6</sup> has successfully expanded its activities from Nigeria to other countries around the Lake Chad axis. This explains why the mandate of MNJTF was expanded in 2015 to include Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Republic of Benin and given a new mandate.<sup>7</sup>

MNJTF is an interorganizational cooperation between the military of the five nations involved in the new mandate. Despite the threat posed by the terrorist groups operating in the region to all the countries, especially given the general problem of porous borders which allow terrorist groups to operate freely around the borders, the structure of the interorganizational cooperation remains weak. Douhkan argues that the model of cooperation which is "a coalition of the willing" negatively impacts on the operational capabilities of the force. This model of military and security cooperation employed is dependent on the disposition of its members as well as individual states' dynamic interests.<sup>8</sup> The implication of this is that states can decide their extent of contributions (e.g., funds, personnel), the extent to which they want to commit to certain operations and their overall level of cooperation. Although the lack of a strong framework (due to the model adopted) limits the impacts of the interorganizational cooperation, interviews with security operatives reveal that the

structural and varied threats between the countries necessitated such model in order to secure participation of all the countries in the region.

An initial assessment of the new MNJTF mandate one year after the restructuring was carried out by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in September 2016. The organisation carried out several interviews and discussions between March and July 2016 with several actors and observers such as civilians, members of the military, representatives from the countries involved, regional and international institutions, external partners, humanitarian organisations and members of civil society to assess the impact of the interorganizational cooperation. The report concluded that “despite the numerous political, logistical, technical and financial challenges it has been facing, the MNJTF is gradually gaining ground.”<sup>9</sup> The report stated that in the first five months of 2016 operations by the MNJTF have led to the death of at least 675 Boko Haram members, the arrest of 566 suspects and the destruction of 32 training camps and alleged factories used for the manufacture of improvised explosive devices and mines. The report also claimed that the operations resulted in the release of about 5,000 hostages.<sup>10</sup>

A review of literature on the organisation highlights the structural and operational challenges faced by the organisation. According to Abada et al., conflicts in national interests as well as division in individual military strategy explain the challenges faced by MNJTF more than any other factor.<sup>11</sup> The authors argued that historical competition over access to Lake Chad as well as issues of trust over sovereignty limited the initial gains made by the organisation in the first 12 months. Zagga et al. argued that inadequate levels of operational troops, poor funding and corruption impeded the success of the MNJTF.<sup>12</sup> This view was corroborated by Kerins and Mouaha-Bell who argued that issues with resources and conflicts among the national military organisations have impacted on the ability of the MNJTF to end terrorism in the region.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of operations, one of the key strategies employed by the MNJTF to check the activities of Boko Haram was to block a major road believed to be strategic to the supply chain of the group. For over five years, operatives of the MNJTF blocked one of the major roads which connects Maiduguri (Borno state, Nigeria) to Cameroon and Chad Republic. The Dikwa-Gamboru-Ngala road was blocked for over five years in an attempt to curtail the movement of Boko Haram and cut its supply chain.<sup>14</sup> Expert interviews, however, reveal that the blockade had limited impact and at some point became counterproductive.<sup>15</sup> This is because Boko Haram and its affiliates quickly changed their supply routes due to the porous borders between the countries. Furthermore, the trade blockade had more impact on the civilians who could not export their agricultural products and Boko Haram operatives used this to “win the hearts and minds” of vulnerable civilians against the MNJTF. Another strategic operational error made by the MNJTF was banning the production, marketing and distribution of smoked fish, meat and agricultural products in Diffa, Niger republic and other areas around the lake Chad axis.<sup>16</sup> The rationale behind this was to control the flow of cash to Boko Haram and Islamic States (IS) affiliates but it impacted

more on the civilians and worsened their economic situations. This also resulted in the terrorist groups using these examples to sway the civilians towards supporting their movements. These issues arose due to a lack of sound operational structure as operations are often reactive and not proactive.

In addition to these issues are factors such as inability to redefine existing colonial borderline,<sup>17</sup> sole reliance on a concerted military approach in countering terrorism,<sup>18</sup> inadequate efforts to tackle the structural challenges that fuel terrorism,<sup>19</sup> and suspicion over border issues and sovereignty<sup>20</sup> amongst others.

## **Methods**

The data for this research was drawn from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was obtained from qualitative research including informant and expert interviews carried out in the region between 2017 and 2021. Respondents were drawn from the countries that make up the MNJTF and the interviews were drawn from a larger research project on conflict, terrorism, and formation of insurgent groups in the Sahel and West African region. A total of 84 interviews have been conducted so far and about 10 of the interviews were conducted in 2021 specifically to explore the challenges of interorganizational cooperation with particular reference to the MNJTF. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and the potential risks posed to the respondents through their participation in the research, all respondents were fully anonymised to prevent any negative impact from participating in the research.

In view of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions, all the interviews conducted in 2021 were done via WhatsApp calls as this provides a safe, cheap and reliable way to conduct interviews. In addition, there is still ongoing military operation by the MNJTF in the region so face to face interviews are suspended. The interviewees selected fall under four categories: Military officers (serving and retired), Government officials, representatives of Non-Governmental Organisations (including civil societies) and members of the public. The respondents were mostly drawn using a combination of purposive and snowball techniques whereby every interviewee is asked to recommend at least two other potential interviewees. This helped eliminate bias as there was a large pool of potential respondents to pull from. Interviews were transcribed and thematic template analysis was used to analyse the interview transcript. Thematic template analysis is relevant to this research because through the use of the template, themes emerged from the respondents which were then critically explored by first relating them to the literature. Direct quotes from the respondents were also used to illustrate the meanings attached to specific themes. The thematic analysis proved useful while answering the questions posed in this article as the themes were linked to the questions.

In addition to the interviews, comprehensive data was obtained from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). The ACLED database contains most of the conflict and terrorism related events in all the countries which make up the MNJTF. In order to ensure accuracy and like for like comparison, only

attacks carried out by Boko Haram and Islamic states affiliates were recorded as part of this study. This is due to two reasons: First, there are several other insurgent groups operating in the region and many operate only in some of the countries, so it is important to make this clarification. In addition, the 2015 mandate of MNJTF which led to the expansion of the organisation to five countries was to combat Boko Haram and its affiliates, hence, it is logical to measure any success or otherwise on that premise. Other secondary sources including journals, books, reports, and relevant newspaper articles were also utilised.

## Theoretical Framework

The rationale behind interorganizational cooperation especially through the formation of alliances could be explained using Walt's balance of threat theory of alliance formation. In analysing theories of alliance formation, Stephen Walt (1988) built on the initial balance of power theory to postulate the balance of threat theory. He argues that states often form alliances not only to balance power but also to curtail and contain threats. The postulation of the balance of threat theory was based on the premise that popular international relations theory, such as balance of power theory, have not been critically tested empirically.

The core assumption of the balance of power theory is that weaker states will form alliances to oppose stronger powers.<sup>21,22</sup> The theory argues that states may either balance or bandwagon when confronted with significant external threats. Balancing is when states align against the threatening power to dissuade it from attacking them or to defeat it if it does attack. Bandwagoning on the other hand is when states align with the dominant power either to appease it, prevent it from attacking them or to gain from its victory.<sup>23</sup> The structural balance of power theory is a derivative of realism that the world is anarchic and the uncertainties generated by the anarchy encourage balancing behaviour. While exploring the theory, Walt argues that bandwagoning is risky because it requires trust and the weaker states assisting the dominant power in the hope that the dominant power remains benevolent. He argues that balancing is more prudent in case the stronger state becomes aggressive.

In critiquing the balance of power theory, Walt argues that the main issue with the theory is that balancing and bandwagoning are defined solely on capabilities. He stated that the balance of power theory focused on capabilities and ignores other factors that states consider when making choices of alliance. In his seminar work, Walt argued that threat, not power, is at the heart of security concerns. In exploring the factors which explain how alliances are formed, Walt emphasised the role of threat in the formation of an alliance. According to Walt, the balance of power theory does not critically explain why balancing often fails to result in the formation of alliances. He concluded that states seek alliances to balance threats and power is only one element in their calculations, although an important one.<sup>24</sup>

Building on the balance of power theory, Walt's balance of threat theory gives a more detailed analysis of why and how alliances are formed between

states. According to Walt, “Where balance-of-power theory predicts that states ally in response to imbalances of power, balance-of-threat theory predicts that states seek allies when there is an imbalance of threat” (that is, when one state or coalition is especially dangerous).<sup>25</sup> The main difference between the two theories is in the central concept. While the central concept which informs the balance of power theory is the distribution of capabilities (population, economic capacity, military power, political cohesion, etc.), the central concept which underlines the balance of threat theory is the distribution of threats (overall capabilities, proximity, offensive power, and intentions). Exploring how threats result in the formation of an alliance while incorporating the balance of power theory, Walt put forward three types of state behaviours which explain the formation of alliances. First, balancing is alignment against the threatening power (rather than the most powerful one) to deter it. Second, bandwagoning involves alignment with a dominant power, either to appease it or in the hope of profiting from its victory and, third, Détente which involves a voluntary development of peaceful relations to reduce tensions. Unlike bandwagoning, which involves unequal exchange, détente involves roughly equal concessions in which all the sides benefit. Détente also involves a mutual recognition of legitimate interests or threats.

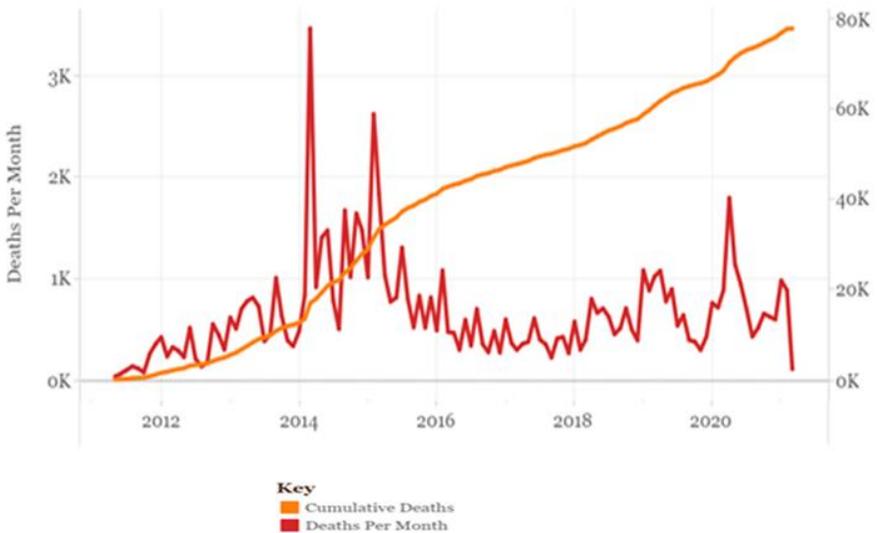
In reference to the balance of threat theory, the MNJTF was formed to combat and curtail terrorist threats and not to balance power. Although the balance of threat theory was postulated to explore the threats some states could pose to other states, the theory could also be applied to explore non-state actors under the context of formation of alliances. Since the end of the cold war, the new forms of threats states faced are gradually shifting from state to non-state actors with threats such as terrorism, banditry, internal rebellion and trafficking posing significant challenges to states. In addition, the central concept which underlines the balance of threat theory: overall capabilities, proximity, offensive power, and intentions are exhibited by terrorist groups operating in the region. For instance, Boko Haram, the main terrorist organisation which necessitated the alliance for the formation of MNJTF, has proven to possess the capability to attack multiple locations with state-of-the-art weapons and with an intention of destabilising the countries. Reports also reveal that they also have an offensive capability to take on the military in these countries due to their fluidity and proximity to the countries. All these show that Boko Haram poses a significant threat to the countries around its areas of operations (the Lake Chad axis) indicating that balancing the threat makes alliance formation and interorganizational cooperation to combat the threat inevitable.

### **Interorganizational Cooperation and Coordination: How Successful is MNJTF?**

There is no consensus on whether the MNJTF is successful. Although scholars such as Tar and Sunday argued that “MNJTF has made remarkable achievement in the fight against Boko Haram,”<sup>26</sup> initial success achieved by MNJTF seemed ephemeral. This is because Boko Haram and its offshoot Islamic State West Af-

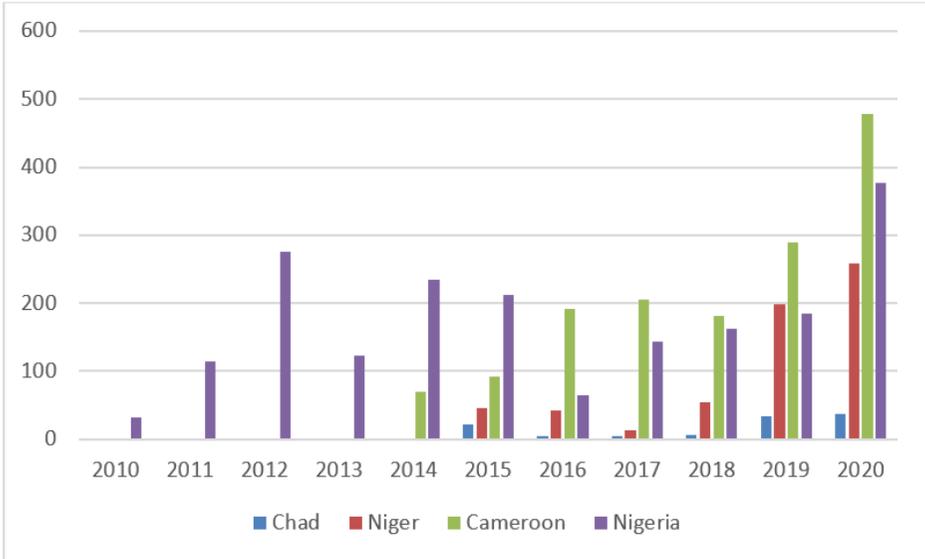
rican Province (ISWAP) have rejuvenated and have increased their activities since 2018. In addition, no study has carried out a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the organisation based on an analysis of the number of attacks carried out by Boko Haram and the resultant fatalities.<sup>27</sup> This article fills that gap and this section explores the impact of the organisation since the change of mandate in 2015 in order to highlight the success or otherwise. Data from the Nigeria Security Tracker (NST), a project of the Council on Foreign Relations’ Africa program reveals that the number of fatalities as a result of terrorist activities have increased since 2018 with 2020 being the deadliest for civilians and military operatives in the region.

Data in Figure 1 shows that the number of fatalities in Nigeria increased sharply in 2020 with thousands of deaths recorded for civilians and military personnel. In order to understand the impact of MNJTF on the threat posed by Boko Haram and its affiliates and to validate the data from NST, I extracted data from ACLED from 2010 to 2020. Figures 2 and 3 show the numbers of attacks carried out by Boko Haram and Islamic state affiliates in the region as well as corresponding number of fatalities in the states that make up the MNJTF.



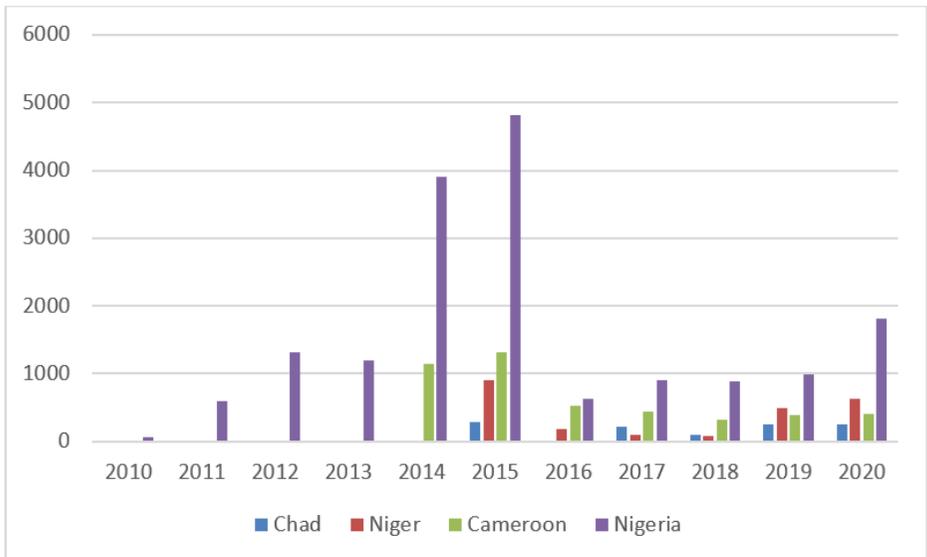
**Figure 1: Number of fatalities in Nigeria.**

*Data source:* The Nigeria Security Tracker (NST), produced by Council on Foreign Relations’ Africa program (2021) <https://www.cfr.org/programs/africa-program>.



**Figure 2: Number of attacks by Boko Haram and Islamic State affiliates per MNJTF contributing country.**

*Data source:* Data compiled from ACLED database. Note that no attacks were recorded in Republic of Benin during this period.



**Figure 3: Number of fatalities per MNJTF contributing country.**

*Data source:* Data compiled from ACLED database.

Data from ACLED highlights the significance of the number of attacks carried out by Boko Haram in portraying the group as a threat not only to Nigeria but to the region as a whole. In an interview with senior personnel of the Nigerian army, the officer stated that Boko Haram was initially seen as a Nigerian problem until 2014 when the group carried out significant number of attacks in Cameroon.<sup>28</sup> In 2014, Boko Haram carried out 69 attacks in Cameroon which resulted in 1139 deaths.<sup>29</sup> Prior to that, most of the attacks were in Nigeria with Cameroon recording only two attacks in 2013 while Chad and Niger experienced none and one attack, respectively. The sudden increase in attacks in Cameroon necessitated the country's decision to join the MNJTF along with other countries in the region which also experienced an increase in attacks in 2015.<sup>30</sup>

Although the definition of success remains problematic when exploring security and counterterrorism, data from ACLED reveals that although the MNJTF achieved an initial success after its creation in 2015, this initial success has not been sustained. While figures 2 and 3 above show the drop in the number of attacks and fatalities in 2016, these numbers have been on the increase since 2018. For the purpose of this article, success is defined as the ability of the MNJTF to achieve its mandate which is to “create a safe and secure environment in the areas affected by the activities of Boko Haram and other terrorist groups, in order to significantly reduce violence against civilians and other abuses, including sexual- and gender-based violence, in full compliance with international law, including international humanitarian law and the UN HRDDP.”<sup>31</sup> In terms of the number of attacks and fatalities recorded, figures 2 and 3 above reveal three key things. First, after a drop in the numbers of attacks carried out by Boko Haram in 2016, there has been a steady rise in the number of attacks and fatalities in all the countries (except Republic of Benin) since 2018. Second, since the emergence of Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS) and Islamic State West African Province (an offshoot of Boko Haram) both in 2015—the same year MNJTF was created—there has been a change of approach by the terrorist groups with multiple cells now able to carry out multiple attacks with a degree of independence.<sup>32,33</sup> Third, the data reveals that terrorism in the region is no longer ‘Nigeria’s problem,’ it is now a ‘collective problem’ of all the affected countries with Cameroon experiencing the highest number of attacks in 2020.

### **Understanding the Balance of Threat: Identifying the Gaps in the Establishment of the MNJTF**

Although Nigeria tends to be relatively stronger economically and militarily than the other countries in the region, the alliance was not based on a balance of power remit but on existential threat. Walt’s balance-of-threat theory posits that states seek allies when there is a significant threat which endanger their existence. Despite the 2015 alliance being formed as a result of threats arising from terrorism, the *détente* element of the alliance was weak right from inception. All the countries in the alliance did not mutually recognize terrorism as a legitimate threat to their national security interests. This was confirmed by most of the military experts interviewed for this research.

This article has established the fact that MNJTF has not been successful (so far) judging by the increase in terrorist attacks and resultant fatalities in all the member states especially since 2018. Without discounting the factors identified above as responsible for the challenges faced by the organisation, this section poses another question: Why is the interorganizational alliance manifestly failing to fulfil its mandate? A clear answer to this question would not only help understand the complexity involved in the creation of security alliance but also highlight the importance of détente and understanding the balance of threat vis-a-vis the internal dynamics and structure of individual states when forming security alliances. This section highlights five foundational issues which have limited the impact of the MNJTF based on the interviews conducted as well as extensive literature review.

### **1. Lack of Clear Mandate and Operational Responsibilities**

In line with the restructuring of the organisation in 2015 to focus on Boko Haram and counterterrorism in the region, the MNJTF was mandated to:

- i. Create a safe and secure environment in the areas affected by the activities of Boko Haram and other terrorist groups in order to significantly reduce violence against civilians and other abuses, including sexual and gender-based violence, in full compliance with international law, including international humanitarian law and the UN HRDDP;
- ii. Facilitate the implementation of overall stabilization programmes by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) Member States and Benin in the affected areas, including the full restoration of state authority and the return of IDPs and refugees;
- iii. Facilitate, within the limit of its capabilities, humanitarian operations and the delivery of assistance to the affected populations.<sup>34</sup>

A major flaw in the mandate was that it is too broad and unclear what role each of the contributing countries should play. Due to the imbalance in threat, individual military organisations participated as they deemed fit and sometimes not in line with the mandate. Many of the foot soldiers were unsure about the mandate and there were poor communications between and within the organisations.<sup>35</sup> One of the interviewees stated: “The mandate given the MNJTF in 2015 was ambiguous and this made it easy for the partners to shift responsibilities as nobody was willing to take leadership. There was also a perspective that taking responsibilities has financial implications and the smaller countries were unwilling to take the financial hit leaving key decisions in the hands of their Nigerian counterparts or international communities.”<sup>36</sup> This view was echoed by several other interviewees who argued that the perceived view of the threat resulted in a situation whereby some countries were more concerned than others depending on how the activities of Boko Haram impacted them. For instance, in 2020 the Chadian president, Idriss Deby threatened to pull out of the MNJTF after 92 Chadian soldiers were killed by Boko Haram in one day. He

stated that “Chad is alone in shouldering all the burden of the war against Boko Haram, our troops have died for Lake Chad and the Sahel. From today, no Chadian soldiers will take part in a military mission outside Chad.”<sup>37</sup>

## **2. *Lack of Understanding/Acknowledgement of the Neo-patrimonial Aspect of Politics in the Fight against Terrorism***

The neo-patrimonial nature of politics in the region plays a significant role in impeding the activities of the MNJTF. Neo-patrimonialism can be defined as a “mixed type of rule combining in various degrees differentiation and lack of separation between public and private spheres.”<sup>38</sup> In a neo-patrimonial system, bureaucratic and patrimonial norms exist side by side. These norms explain how states rely on the extraction and redistribution of resources (which are often privatised) with the redistribution process fully controlled by the political elites. Ajala made a compelling case while explaining the link between neo-patrimonialism and the formation of insurgent groups using the case study of Boko Haram. The author argued that in order to retain the control of resource distribution in neo-patrimonial Nigeria, political elites ‘employ’ groups such as Boko Haram to disrupt the electoral process resulting in such elites attaining or retaining political positions.<sup>39</sup> In an interview with a senior police officer in Nigeria, he stated that “the MNJTF has been ineffective due to political calculations in the country. Politicians in the country devise all means to win elections, including contracting insurgent groups. They also see counterterrorism as a means of winning elections, so they focus on it during campaigns. I think it is in their interest for the war against terrorism to continue because they see it as an opportunity to continue to pillage the country and distribute resources to their cronies.”<sup>40</sup> In addition, military spending in Nigeria due to the ‘war on terror’ has increased tremendously in the last 10 years<sup>41</sup> with several respondents arguing that there seems to be a deliberate strategy to ‘drag’ the counter-terrorism effort in order to continue to raise defence spending.

Neo-patrimonialism is not unique to Nigeria as the commitments of the other countries that form the MNJTF are also determined by local politics. In Niger, for instance, the incumbent president, Mahamadou Issoufou, upon attaining power in 2011 appeased several rebel leaders with political positions in order to end internal conflicts and stabilise the country.<sup>42</sup> A security expert interviewed in Niamey in 2019 explained that many of these rebel leaders are involved in criminal activities and often dictate the extent to which the country can participate in counter-terrorism activities which could threaten their income. In return for stability at home, the government of Niger has not fully committed to the MNJTF as it could distort the ‘security balance’ in the country if it threatens the trafficking business of the rebel leaders.<sup>43</sup> The presidents of Cameroon and Chad have been in power for 45 and 30 years respectively and security experts believe their support for the MNJTF alliance is on the condition that it helps further their political careers. The implication of neo-patrimonialism on politics and the MNJTF alliance is that none of the countries involved are fully

committed to making the alliance a success, as participation is contingent to political calculations.

### **3. *Underestimation of the Threat Posed by Boko Haram and Its Affiliates***

One key factor which has impeded the success of the interorganizational alliance is the underestimation of the threat posed by Boko Haram. Prior to the formation of the MNJTF, several Nigerian leaders in the region dismissed the group as a 'rag-tag' militia. In 2015, prior to the national elections, the former National Security Adviser stated that the Nigeria military will crush Boko Haram insurgency in six weeks. In February 2015, he stated that "all known Boko Haram camps would be taken out by March 28" while referring to the new dates for the rescheduled elections.<sup>44</sup> Interviews further reveal that the top echelon of the Nigerian military did not deploy the right arsenal as Boko Haram was believed to be "another militia group branding light weapons."<sup>45</sup>

In addition, initial thoughts in the region were that Boko Haram was a Nigerian insurgency and did not pose significant threat to the region. Three key issues changed the understanding of the threat posed by the group and highlighted the group's capabilities and intentions. The first was in April 2014 when Boko Haram kidnapped 276 mostly Christian female students. The incident revealed the group's capability to carry out mass abductions and transport victims across countries in the region. The second issue was when Abu-Bakr Shekau pledged allegiance to IS Caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in March 2015. This revealed the intention of the group to expand beyond Nigeria and be relevant internationally. The third issue was the emergence of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in 2015 and the abilities of splinter cells within these groups to carry out multiple attacks in different countries at the same time. A retired military officer interviewed stated that Boko Haram is ahead of the MNJTF in terms of operations and is often on the offensive while the MNJTF are often on the defensive.<sup>46</sup>

### **4. *Unclear Role of Vigilantes in the MNJTF Structure***

Although the MNJTF is composed of military personnel from the countries which formed the alliance, several vigilante groups have been involved in the counter-terrorism initiative against Boko Haram. As part of the military contingents in some of the countries, vigilantes (being locals) were enlisted for reasons such as their knowledge of the local areas, identification of captured fighters, intelligence gathering, translations, etc. Prior to the emergence of Boko Haram, vigilantes have been part of the local security networks in this region. Although the level of involvement of vigilantes varies from country to country, they are now part of the security infrastructure in the region.

The involvement of vigilante groups as part of the MNJTF has been questioned by security experts. This is due to three main reasons: First, there is lack of clarity as to the roles vigilante members are supposed to play as they are not part of the initial MNJTF structure. While they are supposed to be involved primarily in intelligence gathering, the countries utilise their services in different

ways with some vigilante groups involved in combat operations.<sup>47</sup> An officer interviewed argued that vigilantes are not trained to understand the rules of engagement and their involvement within the MNJTF structure in combat roles is questionable. Second, most vigilante members are not documented; hence, it is difficult to ascertain their identity and intentions. A security expert interviewed stated: "I think vigilantes pose a threat to the success of the MNJTF because of the lack of documentations. There have been instances where Boko Haram members have infiltrated vigilante groups in order to harvest intelligence and this could be dangerous because sensitive information could be passed on to the Boko Haram leadership which could foil major operations. I think vigilantes should be restricted to guarding liberated villages and intelligence gathering."<sup>48</sup> Third, vigilantes are often driven by revenge and this could impact on their ability to be objective. Many of the vigilante members have either lost close relatives or were displaced by Boko Haram which results in several extrajudicial killings and retaliatory attacks on villages, towns, and communities. Since they are not part of the initial MNJTF structure, embedding vigilantes, especially in duties more technical than guarding communities, poses a significant risk to the success of the MNJTF.

### **5. *The Inability of the MNJTF to Adapt to New Threats***

When the MNJTF was mandated to fight Boko Haram, the mandate did not include other security threats such as banditry, trafficking and other challenges. This is partly because another interorganizational alliance (the G5 Sahel) was formed in 2014 to combat such threats. The implication of the limited mandate, and in a way a duplication of efforts, is that terrorism is fluid and research has shown that terrorism, banditry and trafficking are all interlinked, and an individual could easily shift roles and participate in more than one of these vices. It is unclear why the G5 Sahel was not expanded to include Nigeria and Cameroon as the other countries are already part of the organisation. Rather than have some countries in both organisations (MNJTF and G5 Sahel), a better approach would have been to form a larger and more unified organisation that would face these changing threats as they impact all the countries in the Sahel and West Africa regions.

The fluidity of the security threat was explored further in a research thesis by Oladuntoye. In an appraisal carried out in 2020, he argued that the mandates for both the MNJTF and the G5 Sahel are too broad and do not take into cognisance the changing nature of threats in the region. He argued that issues such as climate change, banditry and the evolving nature of the terrorist groups has changed the dynamics of the threat and the MNJTF has struggled to curtail these threats.<sup>49</sup>

### **Conclusions**

Stephen Walt (1988) argued that states form alliances to combat threats in what is now a theoretical framework which explains the formation of alliances. What the theory did not explore is the extent to which these alliances are successful

or the outcome of a 'reluctant alliance' which states join without the belief that the issue at stake poses an existential threat to them at the point of joining (i.e., a weak *détente*). This article explores the impact of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) – an alliance mandated in 2015 to combat Boko Haram and other terrorist groups in the Sahel and West African regions.

How successful is interorganizational cooperation in combating threats? This article argues that the extent to which these organizations could be successful depends on the recognition of threats which determines attitudes and extent of collaborations. A strong *détente* is essential in attaining success. While acknowledging that measuring success, especially in regard to security provision, is a heinous task and inherently relative, the article utilised comprehensive data from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and a combination of expert and civilian interviews to assess the impact of the MNJTF. The article concludes that the organisation has not been successful in fulfilling its mandate judging by the exponential increase in the number of attacks carried out by Boko Haram and the resultant fatalities since 2018. A major reason why the organisation has not lived up to expectation was due to the approach to the threat when the organisation was restructured to combat Boko Haram. Most of the countries in the alliance did not believe Boko Haram posed an existential threat to their countries when the alliance was formed, resulting in a poor structural foundation which limits the impact of the organisation so far.

The article highlights five main issues which have impacted on the success of the organisation right from inception. First, lack of a clear mandate and operational responsibilities; second, lack of understanding/acknowledgement of the neo-patrimonial aspect of politics in the fight against terrorism; third, underestimation of the threat posed by Boko Haram and its affiliates; fourth, the unclear role of vigilantes in the MNJTF structure; and, fifth, the inability of the MNJTF to adapt to new threats. For interorganizational cooperation to succeed, members of the alliance must agree that they face the same existential threats which will make them commit to the demands of the organisation. Although the MNJTF may not have been successful so far in eradicating terrorism in the regions, it has created a platform that could be enhanced to combat the common threat.

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