

# West Africa's Regional Force Against Boko Haram Is a Political Prop

Alex Thurston | Tuesday, April 26, 2016

In March, the small West African nation of Benin announced that it would contribute 150 soldiers

(<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-attacks-benin-idUSKCN0WH1P8>) to the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNTJF), a West African coalition whose main mission is to fight the militant group

Boko Haram. The task force has approximately 9,000 total troops, but nevertheless it is primarily a political prop rather than an integrated military outfit. The region's national militaries largely pursue their own campaigns, while the optics of regional integration serve a political purpose: They explicitly support narratives about so-called African solutions to African problems, yet implicitly facilitate greater Western involvement in the fight against Boko Haram, often on a bilateral rather than truly multilateral basis. The regional approach also strengthens the political positions of authoritarian rulers in the region.

The task force was originally founded in 1998 by Nigeria, Chad and Niger to address banditry around Lake Chad. From 2013 to 2015, pressure grew to restructure the MNJTF as an anti-Boko Haram force as the group's insurgency transformed. That transformation involved several features: Boko Haram's open bid for territorial control in northwestern Nigeria, the corresponding escalation of the attendant humanitarian crisis, and an increasing spillover of Boko Haram's violence into Cameroon and other neighboring countries. All of these developments evoked pressure for a regional response. Meanwhile, African and Western governments increasingly lost confidence in the capabilities of Nigeria's then-president, Goodluck Jonathan, who served from 2010 until May 2015, when he left office after losing an election to former military head of state Muhammadu Buhari.

In January 2015, as a military campaign began to retake territory from Boko Haram, the MNJTF received formal authorization (<http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/psc-489-rpt-boko-haram-03-03-2015.pdf>) from the African



*U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Samantha Power with Multinational Joint Task Force Commander Maj. Gen. Lamidi Adeosun at its headquarters, N'Djamena, Chad, April 20, 2016 (AP photo by Andrew Harnik).*

Union. The reconstituted task force was organized partly under the auspices of the Lake Chad Basin Commission, which is made up of Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger, with Benin as an honorary member.

The actual campaign to dislodge Boko Haram in early 2015, however, was marked more by ad hoc decisions and poor coordination than by true regional integration. Chadian and Nigerien soldiers operated together, but Chad's president, Idriss Deby, expressed open frustration with Nigeria's military ([http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/28/world/africa/chad-strongman-says-nigeria-is-absent-in-fight-against-boko-haram.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/28/world/africa/chad-strongman-says-nigeria-is-absent-in-fight-against-boko-haram.html?_r=0)) and its frequent failure to occupy towns that Chad and Niger had liberated from Boko Haram.

Meanwhile, the formalization of the MNJTF proceeded slowly. Its headquarters in Chad's capital, N'Djamena, was not inaugurated until March 2015 (<http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/inauguration-of-the-headquarters-of-the-multinational-joint-task-force-against-the-boko-haram-terrorist-group>), five months behind schedule. In August, regional defense chiefs met in N'Djamena to “deliberate on an agreement to accelerate the deployment” of the force. The same month, as one Nigerian commander handed over to another as head of the task force, he still spoke of it in partly aspirational terms (<http://allafrica.com/stories/201508032572.html>): “The task force has commenced operation, the headquarters is established, the staff officers are there and all the necessary structures needed for take-off are also in place.”

In October, MNJTF leaders again expressed their optimism that the force would become operational. As of January 2016, however, Nigeria had only released \$21 million of the \$100 million (<http://dailypost.ng/2016/01/29/nigeria-will-fully-redeem-its-100m-pledge-for-mnjtf-buhari/>) it had promised to the force. Amid repeated reassurances about the MNJTF's imminent launch, widespread critiques—that Nigeria ultimately lacked interest in the regional approach (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31695508>), and that the MNJTF merely “rehashed” existing deployments (<https://warisboring.com/the-african-union-readies-an-army-to-beat-boko-haram-694150ba6ebb#.a4sx349yp>)—appeared well-founded. By early 2016, expert assessments of the MNJTF were pessimistic (<http://www.inonafrica.com/2016/01/05/anti-boko-haram-task-force-begins-to-unravel/>). Meanwhile, Nigerian military spokesmen occasionally highlight operations under the MNJTF framework, but more often privilege Nigeria's own reported successes.

*The regional approach has another political downside: It entrenches authoritarianism around Lake Chad.*

Western powers have spoken enthusiastically of the MNJTF, trumping up what they call the broader regional approach to Boko Haram. This enthusiasm continued after Buhari took office in Nigeria in May 2015, promising greater competence in security and other domains. But even as the United States, for example, declares its support for the MNJTF in public statements, the most concrete and consequential forms of U.S. assistance against Boko Haram are bilateral, such as bases for unarmed surveillance drones ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-set-to-open-second-drone-base-in-niger-as-it-expands-operations-in-africa/2014/08/31/365489c4-2eb8-11e4-994d-202962a9150c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-set-to-open-second-drone-base-in-niger-as-it-expands-operations-in-africa/2014/08/31/365489c4-2eb8-11e4-994d-202962a9150c_story.html)) in Niger and Cameroon (<https://theintercept.com/2016/02/25/us-extends-drone-war-deeper-into-africa-with-secretive-base/>), and special forces deployments (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/26/world/africa/us-plans-to-help-nigeria-in-war-on-boko-haram-terrorists.html>) in Nigeria, Niger (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-niger-boko-haram-idUSKCN0RI0C020150918>) and Cameroon (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/14/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-10142015>). The benefits of apparently multilateral approaches often accrue to countries on a bilateral basis, which helps explain why Benin is making its token contribution to the MNJTF.

Western enthusiasm for regional approaches is political. American generals may say that training exercises are “all about African nations finding African solutions to their problems.” But the wider pattern of intelligence-sharing, drone surveillance, special forces deployments and other measures—bilateral and multilateral—suggest that Western powers’ emphasis on “regional approaches” and “African solutions” provides rhetorical cover for deeper Western involvement in the fight against Boko Haram.

What goes for the U.S. goes for France, as well. French President Francois Hollande held a heads of state summit for Lake Chad countries in May 2014 in order to “support this regional cooperation” against Boko Haram—but also to deepen French involvement. In 2015, France increased its troop deployment in Chad, offered military equipment to the MNJTF and promised to step up economic investment in Nigeria.

The regional approach has another political downside: It entrenches authoritarianism around Lake Chad. The leaders of Nigeria, Benin and Niger were democratically elected, though in Niger the recent re-election of President Mahamadou Issoufou proceeded under a cloud of intimidation against the opposition. The leaders of Chad and Cameroon, meanwhile, have been in power since 1990 and 1982, respectively, and their repeated re-elections are not credible. Chad’s April 10 presidential election this year, for example, occurred amid widespread protests and an internet blackout. Western powers’ enthusiasm for regional approaches places these leaders, and particularly Chad’s Deby, at the center of the strategy (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/for-fighting-jihadists-chad-has-the-go-to-army-1453372372>). That is definitely true for France, which headquartered its West Africa-wide anti-jihadi force in Chad, and it is increasingly the case for the United States as well.


It is no accident that when U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power announced her trip to Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad earlier this month, she did not wait for the results of Chad's election to be announced; Deby ultimately won by around 61 percent. The implication is that American policymakers know that Deby is there to stay, and that they plan to work with him over the long term.

The MNJTF remains a good idea in principle: Boko Haram has become a regional problem, and it would be impossible now to contain it without significant regional cooperation. At the level of politics and implementation, however, the task force is a distraction from other pressing issues in West Africa—and not the true center of the action.


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