

Policy Brief 25 MAR 2024

## Responding to Security Threats from the Sahel: What Role for External Security Partnerships in Coastal West African States?

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**Today, the Sahel region is one of the most important global centres of terrorism. This policy brief examines the implications for the coastal states of West Africa, particularly Ghana, Benin and Togo: How are the incumbent governments responding to the growing threat of jihadism? It investigates the strategies these countries are adopting to diversify their security partnerships and enhance external security cooperation. The analysis shows that states are expanding their security networks beyond traditional allies. However, this has led to the emergence of a complex web of bilateral and regional security arrangements, raising concerns about their compatibility and the overall coherence of external security assistance. The brief argues for a more integrated approach to security cooperation, highlighting the need for coordination among different security partners to effectively address the multifaceted challenges posed by terrorism in the Sahel and more broadly in West Africa.**

The Sahel region has gradually become one of the most important centres of terrorism in the world. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are among the 10 most affected countries, according to the Global Terrorism Index.<sup>1</sup> Vast parts of their territories escape the control of state authorities, while the number of internally displaced populations has been on the rise for a decade. This growing insecurity destabilises political regimes, as manifested by the number of coups against democratically elected but also military regimes in the three countries.

The deterioration of the security situation in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso has also allowed the armed jihadist groups to increasingly operate in the northern regions of Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Togo. Although these countries were already facing internal multidimensional threats in several crisis zones, the number of terrorist attacks in their northern regions have increased in recent years. By focussing mainly on Ghana and Benin – and to some extent Togo – this policy brief explores the following questions: How are the evolving dynamics in the Sahel affecting coastal West African states? How are incumbent governments reacting to the increase in jihadist threats? Finally, how then do the governments of these countries diversify their security partnerships and engage with external security cooperation? This brief argues that these West African coastal states are expanding their security

<sup>1</sup> *Global Terrorism Index* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023), section 4, accessed 19 January 2024.

partnerships beyond traditional partners but the ensuing emergence of multiple security arrangements at the bilateral and regional levels raises questions about the compatibility of the various existing mechanisms and security assistance being provided by external security partners.

## The spillover effects of terrorism in the Sahel on coastal West Africa: Ghana and Benin

Since 2011, the Sahel has been plagued by terrorist attacks. Beginning at the border of the Sahara, they have spread across the central part of Sahel and onwards to the northern regions of several countries of the Gulf of Guinea, including Ghana, Benin, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire.

### Ghana as a fallback territory for armed groups?

An immediate consequence of the violence in the Sahel is the forced cross-border displacement of populations. For example, since November 2022, more than 60,000 Burkinabè asylum seekers have fled to neighbouring coastal countries.<sup>2</sup> In the Upper East (Garu district) and Upper West regions of Ghana in particular, there has been an influx of Burkinabè asylum seekers.<sup>3</sup> According to the mayor of Bawku, a town close to the border with Burkina Faso, more than 6,000 Burkinabè arrived in his constituency following jihadist attacks and the coup d'Etat of January 2022.<sup>4</sup> These refugee movements are a matter of concern to local authorities and communities as well as the national government, all of whom fear terrorist infiltrations as well as social and economic strains. Although Ghana has so far avoided the wave of Islamist violence that has destabilised neighbouring countries, the situation in a place such as Bawku illustrates the substantial risks, given that long-standing local conflicts could provide jihadists with opportunities to exploit local cleavages, as has happened in Mali and Burkina Faso, for example.<sup>5</sup> The Burkinabè region of the Cascades, the north-east of Côte d'Ivoire and the Togolese region of the Savanes, which border Ghana, were also theatres of terrorist attacks. Everything suggests that the presence of terrorist cells in these areas constitutes a threat to Ghana and facilitates the recruitment of extremists in a context of enduring socio-economic challenges in northern Ghana. Several parts of the region – areas such as Bawku, Saboba, Chereponi, Gushiegu and Karaga – are characterised by significant deficits in governance, which increase the risk of vulnerability and recruitment among young people.<sup>7</sup>

Ghana's proximity to the areas of jihadist operations in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo also makes it a fallback territory. This is because jihadists are able to exploit

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, "Rising Violence Drives Refugees from Burkina Faso to Neighbouring Countries", 20 July 2023, accessed 11 January 2024.

<sup>3</sup> "Thousands of Burkinabes Arrive in Doves, Seek Refuge in Garu", *Modern Ghana*, 19 July 2023, accessed 11 January 2024; "High level dialogue on Burkinabe Refugees in Ghana held in Accra", Ministry of the Interior, Republic of Ghana, accessed 29 February 2024.

<sup>4</sup> "A Decades-long Ethnic Conflict in Ghana Is at Risk of Escalation from Foreign Fighters", *Semafor Africa*, 18 February 2023, accessed 11 January 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Banga, *L'implantation des groupes terroristes au nord du Ghana* (Paris: Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques, May 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Felix Y. T. Longi, "The Kusasi-Mamprusi Conflict in Bawku: A Legacy of British Colonial Policy in Northern Ghana", *Ghana Studies* 17 (2014): 157–76.

<sup>7</sup> Abubakari Ahmed, *Farmer-herder Conflicts in Northern Ghana Amid Climate Change: Causes and Policy Responses*, Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief (December 2022).

weaknesses in the coordination of West African security services as well as cross-border family and religious connections. For example, a report by Promediation has revealed a strategy of terrorist groups that facilitated the recruitment of an estimated 200 young Ghanaians in the ranks of the jihadist groups.<sup>8</sup> Poverty and other economic difficulties are exploited by the armed groups to carry out these recruitments.<sup>9</sup>

Ghana's response to the terrorist threat takes three main forms: strengthening the presence and capabilities of its security and defence forces, strengthening socio-economic conditions and also regional cooperation. Faced with increasing pressure from armed groups, the Ghanaian government decided to bolster its presence in the north of the country. This has included the deployment of more than 900 soldiers to the region. Additional intelligence made it possible to improve the coverage and control of the area.<sup>10</sup>

As part of their response, Ghanaian authorities have decided to involve communities in their response through the "See Something, Say Something" flagship campaign from the Ministry of National Security, which encourages citizens to report suspicious acts or individuals potentially linked to terrorism to security forces in order to strengthen relations between the army and the citizens.<sup>11</sup> It is accompanied by a social development plan for the northern areas, the aim of which is to fight poverty and youth unemployment, strengthen infrastructure and support the pastoral sector.

Another pillar of the Ghanaian response to transnational jihadist threats is regional cooperation. This has been an important driver behind the establishment and operationalisation of the Accra Initiative, which was established in 2017 under the leadership of Ghana; the founding members are Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo. Mali and Niger were initially added as observers before becoming members during a second phase. The Accra Initiative was created as an inter-governmental security mechanism based on three axes: (1) the sharing of information and intelligence to initially combat transnational organised crime and then also terrorist groups, (2) the training of security and intelligence personnel and (3) the organisation of multinational cross-border military operations, with four joint operations being carried out to date.

Unfortunately, Ghana's current economic woes – notably an escalating debt crisis and a high inflation rate, as well as tensions existing within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – have so far limited the effect of the proposed solutions, even if the country has not yet been directly affected by international jihadism.

## Increasing terrorist attacks in Benin

Since 2019, northern Benin has been the scene of repeated terrorist attacks, though it also constitutes a transit zone for jihadist groups for traffic and resupply between the Sahel and Nigeria. Several international jihadist groups in the Sahelian countries are trying to make inroads into Benin's territory in the border areas with Burkina Faso. According to the Beninese army, three groups are behind the attacks on Beninese soil: the GSIM/JNIM (the Groupe de Soutien à l'Islam et aux Musulmans / Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen –

<sup>8</sup> Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Ed.), *The Jihadist Threat in Northern Ghana and Togo: Stocktaking and Prospects for Containing the Expansion*, Promediation (Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, March 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Banga, *L'implantation des groupes* (see note 5).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "See Something, Say Something Campaign Hits North East Region", *Ghanaian Times*, 7 August 2023, accessed 11 January 2024.

the support group for Islam and Muslims), Ansaroul Islam, and the Islamic State Sahel Province, formerly known as Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (EIGS).<sup>12</sup>

The jihadists' modus operandi has evolved over time. Although they first targeted defence and security forces, they have also attacked civilians, as when around 15 people were killed in Kérou in May 2023.

At the end of 2021, the GSIM – which occupied a wide strip of around 20 kilometres beyond the Pendjari River, the natural border between Benin and Burkina Faso – stepped up its incursions into Beninese territory, seeking to extend its influence towards the Gulf of Guinea, for example in Togo and Côte d'Ivoire. According to the Beninese authorities, around 20 attacks have been recorded since, leading to the deaths of 43 civilians and 25 soldiers.<sup>13</sup>

GSIM fighters have also occupied the “neutral zone”, a disputed border area between Benin and Burkina Faso that is less than 3 kilometres from the Beninese town of Porga in the Atakora department. Terrorists and traffickers have taken advantage of the withdrawal of thinly stretched Burkinabé defence forces to infiltrate the area, which is where most of the attacks on Benin's territory have come from.<sup>14</sup>

Just as in Ghana, the flight of populations due to terrorism has become an issue. Following attacks in northern Togo perpetrated by groups linked to international terrorist groups, 750 people sought refuge in Materi in northern Benin.<sup>15</sup> Benin's military response has since evolved significantly.<sup>16</sup> To address the jihadist threat, the government has put in place a dedicated military strategy.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning of 2022, following the attack on a military post located on the border with Burkina Faso, the Beninese army launched Operation Mirador to fight jihadist groups and secure its borders. This includes the positioning of troops in specific zones where the army was not initially present as well as the acquisition of new material, including drones, armoured vehicles and helicopters.<sup>18</sup>

Other measures include initiatives aimed at involving populations in the search for solutions, in particular to provide intelligence. The Ministry of Interior and Public Security, with the support of local authorities, has organised awareness sessions, particularly in departments affected by attacks. The objective is to encourage populations to collaborate with security forces and dissuade them from joining extremist groups.

Moreover, since 2018, the Beninese authorities have adopted a community policing approach, based on a partnership between the police and the population, in order to better take into account, the security needs of local communities. The Beninese armed forces have implemented social projects, such as the provision of care to the populations, as part of their strategic objectives to increase their visibility at the national level, strengthen relations with local communities and encourage them to collaborate through intelligence

<sup>12</sup> Thierry S. Bidouzo, Expédit B. Ologou, *Le terrorisme au Bénin – perceptions, actions et perspectives* (Cotonou: Christon, 2023), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> “Bénin: conseil des ministres spécial après de nouvelles attaques terroristes”, *ORTB*, 11 February 2022, accessed 11 January 2024) and “Comment le Bénin répond depuis 2022 aux activités terroristes au nord de son territoire”, *RFI*, 14 September 2023, accessed 11 January 2024.

<sup>14</sup> “Comment le Bénin” (see note 13).

<sup>15</sup> “Des centaines de Togolais fuyant le terrorisme trouvent refuge au Bénin”, *RFI*, 26 February 2023, accessed 29 February 2024.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, and “Comment le Bénin répond depuis 2022 aux activités terroristes au nord de son territoire”, *RFI*, 14 September 2023, accessed 11 January 2024.

<sup>17</sup> “Comment le Bénin” (see note 13).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

### The spread of disinformation networks

In addition to the spread of jihadist groups, coastal states face another set of risks that can be traced to the Sahel crisis. The growing relationship between Russia and Mali, Burkina Faso and to some extent Niger has also been manifested by the rise of Russian-backed local disinformation networks. Initially localised in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and to some extent Chad, demonstrations have also taken place occasionally in some West African coastal states. In August 2023, for instance, investigators identified a network of individuals disseminating and promoting pro-Russian and pro-Wagner Group ideologies in a number of countries, including Ghana. Five Ghanaians believed to be leading a group linked to the Wagner Group were arrested by the police at Diabene Park in Takoradi, the capital of the Western Region of Ghana.<sup>19</sup> They were apprehended after they helped some young people to stage a demonstration in which the youths held placards with various inscriptions – including “Long live Russia” – as well as flags of several Sahelian countries and Russia. Some of the activities undertaken by the network included driving pro-Russian political narratives, funding and organising pro-Russian events, and then subsequently amplifying these activities on social media using a network of handles.<sup>20</sup> In a statement on social media, the Russian Embassy in Ghana rejected claims of being involved in disseminating Russian flags, shirts and placards among the protestors, and it also denied having had any contact with possible sponsors of the group. Yet, this demonstration highlights the growing risk of the spillover of local disinformation and Wagner Group-backed networks from the Sahel to coastal West African states.

sharing.<sup>21</sup> However, there is a risk that strengthening collaboration between the state and populations will make the latter more vulnerable, as they face the threat of reprisals from jihadist groups if they collaborate with the state.

## Diversifying security partnerships beyond traditional partners

The spillover effects of terrorism from the Sahel to the northern regions of West African coastal states have led various governments to reconfigure and broaden their security partnerships.

In Benin, the government is diversifying partnerships by bringing in both African and western partners. The presidency of Benin has been in talks about military and logistical cooperation with Rwanda, whose troops Paul Kagame has already dispatched to support Mozambique and the Central African Republic to combat unrest and insurgencies. Although nothing has been formalised so far, the cooperation could include supervision, coaching, training and the joint deployment of troops.<sup>22</sup> Benin has also requested a non-lethal aid

<sup>19</sup> “REPORT: Police Arrests 5 Involved in Wagner-backed Shadowy Online Network after Organising Protest in Ghana”, *Ghana Fact*, 18 September 2023.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Jeannine Ella Abatan, “La collaboration population-État contre l’extrémisme au Bénin et au Togo: une arme à double tranchant”, *JSS Today*, 12 June 2023, accessed 11 January 2024.

<sup>22</sup> “Rwanda, Benin Talk Military Cooperation over Border Security”, *Africanews*, 16 April 2023, accessed 27 November 2023.

programme for assistance from France in the fight against the GSIM as part of the military Operation Mirador along the border with Burkina Faso. France's military services company Défense Conseil International is to supply reconnaissance drones and an intelligence aircraft to Benin's armed forces under the European Peace Facility (EPF) for a cost of EUR 11.7 million. The support contract includes the purchase of a second-hand aircraft and training for piloting, image analysis as well as keeping the aircraft in operational condition.<sup>23</sup>

Another country that has been increasing its security arrangements with new and traditional partners is Togo. Faced with increasingly frequent attacks from armed groups from the Sahel,<sup>24</sup> Lomé is seeking to accelerate the acquisition of military equipment. President Faure Gnassingbé has notably turned towards Moscow through several intermediaries, but also towards Washington and London. Russia has redeveloped certain infrastructure at the Niamtougou military site and airbase in northeastern Togo, and it is responsible for the maintenance of the new military equipment, which sits alongside Turkish Bayraktar TB2 attack drones. A contingent of Russian experts has also arrived in the country to assist the troops.<sup>25</sup>

Before turning to Moscow, Lomé favoured French industrialists for the modernisation of its air capacities. However, problems have accumulated, particularly regarding export licences granted by Paris. Of an order placed in 2016 for five helicopters from French army surplus, only three were delivered. Moreover, the French EOS Technology observation drones had not been delivered yet to the Togolese army by 2023. Lomé was not satisfied with this. The pause in Togo's military cooperation with France also has an impact on European security cooperation. The DEFEND (Defence Forces Enabling Development) programme set up by the European Union (EU) was supposed to equip the Togolese army with drones, but by 2022 this had still not happened due to the lack of signing a memorandum of understanding between Paris and Lomé. France provides leadership for this project via the Directorate of Security and Defence Cooperation.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, Togo is also seeking to strengthen its defence cooperation with the United States. In Lomé, the United States – via Africom, the American military command for Africa – is to start an assistance plan to equip the Togolese army. This would include the establishment of an Excess Defense Articles programme, namely donations of materials from US Army stocks, under the supervision of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. This may be linked to current US efforts to strengthen security cooperation with coastal West African states more widely. It is currently limited to the occasional presence of trainers from special forces that are dedicated to operations in Africa (Socafrika). However, recent reports suggest that the United States is engaged in preliminary talks to allow American unarmed reconnaissance drones to use airfields in Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Benin.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> "France's DCI to Supply Benin Armed Forces with Drones", *Africa Intelligence*, 4 October 2023, accessed 27 November 2023.

<sup>24</sup> "31 morts et 3 disparus", Republic of Togo (official information portal), 28 November 2023, (accessed 11 January 2024); "Togo face au Terrorisme: Bilan de l'année 2023 révélé par le gouvernement", *Ici Lome*, 28 November 2023, accessed 11 January 2024.

<sup>25</sup> "Army overseeing construction of new secret northern base", *Africa Intelligence*, 19 February 2024, accessed 29 February 2024.

<sup>26</sup> "Paris Boosts Accra and Lomé Military with Drones and Observation Aircraft Using EU Funds", *Africa Intelligence*, 3 January 2022.

<sup>27</sup> "U.S. Seeks Drone Bases in Coastal West Africa to Stem Islamist Advance", *Wall Street Journal*, 3 January 2024, accessed 11 January 2024.

## What is the impact on cross-border cooperation and external partnership agreements?

With the increase of regional security cooperation in West Africa, where initiatives such as the G5 Sahel have proven ineffective, coastal countries are seeking to reinforce bilateral and regional security relations. Ghana's upper east regional security council is working with counterparts in Burkina Faso on intelligence sharing. In Benin, the government and the army are also seeking to reinforce bilateral partnerships with neighbouring countries and signed a bilateral cooperation agreement with Niger in 2022. Yet, the coup d'état that took place in Niger on 26 July 2023 and the prospects of regional military intervention by ECOWAS have led the military junta in Niamey to retreat from the agreement initially concluded with Benin.<sup>28</sup>

A more ambitious regional security arrangement is the Accra Initiative, which Ghana's government has promoted to enhance regional coordination and the sharing of intelligence. Nigeria joined the Accra Initiative as an observer during the 8th session of Ministers in April 2022 with the initial objective of linking the area of operation of the G5 Sahel joint force and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). Yet, not all members are keen to centralise the Accra Initiative as the regions' key security mechanism. Nigeria is very keen on keeping ECOWAS as the centrepiece of regional security. It is a major influence, as it is a key financier of the organisation and also holds its Secretariat in Abuja. Other countries, such as the Gambia and Senegal, are also very keen on maintaining ECOWAS as the centrepiece of the region's peace and security architecture. The recent coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso and the rising levels of insecurity across their respective and cross-border territories have led these regimes to re-dispatch their troops and engage less in the military activities of cross-border cooperation agreements with coastal countries. These three countries grouped in the newly established Alliance of Sahelian States have also announced their decision to withdraw from ECOWAS citing amongst others the failure by the organisation in combatting the spread of jihadism in their countries.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless they remain involved in intelligence sharing, one of the key pillars of the Accra Initiative framework. For instance, the regional security council of Ghana's Upper East region is working with its counterpart in Burkina Faso on intelligence sharing.<sup>30</sup>

In order to maintain a certain level of agency at the regional level and to avoid external dependencies, the principle of self-funding is included within the Agreement Establishing the Accra Initiative via direct contributions from its member states. In practice, though, it seems that each country is responsible for paying its representatives and for the activities it organises and participates in. Ghana, which is strongly invested in the establishment of the Secretariat, has provided the premises to host the Secretariat and appointed staff members. Yet, the question of budget and financing and how to bring external partners to the table without them meddling in the decision-making process will turn out to be key, since the members of the Accra Initiative want to set up a dedicated intervention force.

<sup>28</sup> "Niger: fin de l'accord de coopération militaire avec le Bénin", *Les Echos du Niger*, 14 September 2023, accessed 11 January 2024; "Le Niger dénonce un accord de coopération militaire avec le Bénin", *Le Monde Afrique*, 13 September 2023, accessed 11 January 2024.

<sup>29</sup> "Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger quit ECOWAS", *Deutsche Welle*, 28 Janvier 2024, accessed 31 January 2024.

<sup>30</sup> "Ghana Collaborates with Burkina Faso to Combat Terrorism", *Citi Newsroom*, 22 February 2023, accessed 19 January 2024.

## What role for external partners in regional security arrangements?

The member states of the Accra Initiative hold different positions on the role of external engagement – this can be categorised as differences between the hard-liners and the defenders of a moderate line. Despite their reduced participation in the operational activities of the Accra Initiative, the hardliners – composed mostly of Sahelian countries such as Burkina Faso and Mali – consider external engagements and partnerships to equate to infiltration and meddling by Western partners, and they voice their concern about this. Their position is also based on their own domestic experiences and failed security cooperation with France.

A more moderate line is defended by coastal states, including Ghana and Benin. They welcome external support as long as it respects and supports homegrown initiatives. Given that many member states also lack financial resources, reaching out to external partners is considered as a necessity. From their perspective, if the international community wants to help, it should supply the critical logistics and equipment, but with no political strings attached. They insist that their own soldiers should do the fighting with no intervention or assistance from foreign troops. In this regard, the European Commission has donated 105 armoured vehicles to Ghana in October 2023 worth EUR 20 million, financed through the EPF.<sup>31</sup>

Another sticking point is the ever-present offer of military training. Some countries, such as Ghana, do not consider military training to be a priority, as they have already received much of it in the past and they consider training to be ideologically motivated. Negotiations are thus underway on adopting a common line and also on figuring out how to “structure” the partnership and negotiate it well, despite the asymmetrical nature of the relationship. Although the objective of maintaining autonomy of decision and agency are key, external contributions are being considered. Some have already been pledged or donated by countries such as Germany in the form of equipment,<sup>32</sup> and Japan in the form of financial support.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, external partners are also adopting positions that express both similarities and differences. The EU supports the Accra Initiative, which is seen as an institutional configuration that is more flexible as well as less rigid and bureaucratic than ECOWAS. Ghana’s leadership is overall perceived to offer a reliable and assertive partnership. According to some European diplomats, the EU saw the Accra Initiative as a potential counterweight to the influence of ECOWAS and Nigeria. This support is also manifested by the attendance of top-ranking EU officials to its meetings: Charles Michel attended the last summit, which is a sign of EU support, or at least the European Council’s support.<sup>34</sup> According to a European diplomat, this raised eyebrows because the EU had never attended a peace and security meeting at ECOWAS at a similarly high level.

The role of France in this regional setting is much more discreet, as it keeps a very low profile. According to a European diplomat, Paris does not want to repeat past mistakes in the Sahel. Before the coup in Niger, it preferred to keep stronger bilateral relations with

<sup>31</sup> “European Union Donates 105 Militarised Vehicles to Ghana”, Ghana Armed Forces, 31 October 2023.

<sup>32</sup> “Germany’s Participation in Accra Initiative Summit Reinforces Strategic Partnership with Ghana”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration, Republic of Ghana, 30 November 2022.

<sup>33</sup> “Japan Announces \$500 Million to Support Fight Against Terrorism, Violent Extremism in West Africa”, *Ghana Today*, 12 April 2023, accessed 12 January 2024.

<sup>34</sup> “EU and PEC Michel Reaffirm Support to Regional Security at First International Conference on the Accra Initiative”, Press and Information Team of the Delegation to Ghana, 28 November 2022, accessed 12 January 2024.



countries such as Niger and was keen to assist in some ways with bilateral initiatives, such as Benin-Niger military operations on the border.

Some common lines do exist among partners: All are keen to avoid the same mistakes committed with the now extinct G5 Sahel, in which France was too visible, too involved and had involved the EU as well. The members of the Accra Initiative hold the view that partners from outside the region should not push too much. Technical and financial support should be provided, but political and strategic leadership should stay in the region. Yet, partners such as the EU and the United Kingdom are also expecting the Accra Initiative member states to appropriately communicate foreign partners' involvement and are encouraging these member states to clarify their positions before unlocking any significant financial support.<sup>35</sup> In this regard, a memorandum of understanding titled "Friends of Accra Initiative" has been discussed as a means to establish a framework for coordination among member countries on how best to provide support to the initiative.

## Policy implications

An internal report that was leaked to the press in 2022 had warned that if the EU were to drastically reduce its engagement in West Africa, the resulting void would be filled by competitors such as Russia and other EU's competitors.<sup>36</sup> The coexistence of old and new partners in the region has contributed to the emergence of multiple security arrangements, which points to the risk of a traffic jam among security partners.<sup>37</sup> It also raises questions about the coordination and compatibility of the various security assistance offers and the competing agendas of external security partners.<sup>38</sup>

Power rivalries between external actors in the security sector potentially present both benefits and risks for coastal West African states. It can yield benefits if West African countries tactically exploit outside competition for their own benefit. Rather than adopting a "take-it-all" approach,<sup>39</sup> they may be better served to strategically choose what type of partnerships are needed, as in the case of Ghana, whose officials have more of a preference for equipment than training. If not crafted meticulously, there might be risks of a potential misalignment of security interests between partner African countries and external security partners. In the case of France in the Sahel, security assistance was considered to serve French interests more than those of the host countries.<sup>40</sup> France's military behaviour was often considered by the military in Burkina Faso and Mali to be too present and at the heart of the countries' military strategies, hence constraining the exercising of their own agency in the fight against terrorism.<sup>41</sup>

The EU launched its security and defence initiative in 2023 in support of West African countries of the Gulf of Guinea for an initial duration of two years. This initiative will

<sup>35</sup> "Brussels and London Face Accra Initiative Headache", *Africa Intelligence*, 4 July 2023, accessed on 12 January 2024.

<sup>36</sup> *Holistic Strategic Review of EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Mali 2022* (Brussels: European External Action Service, May 2022), accessed 12 January 2024.

<sup>37</sup> S. M. Cold-Ravnkilde and K. Lindskov Jacobsen, "Disentangling the Security Traffic Jam in the Sahel: Constitutive Effects of Contemporary Interventionism", *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): 855–74; International Crisis Group, "Open Letter to the UN Security Council on Peacekeeping in Mali", 24 April 2017.

<sup>38</sup> "EU's top diplomat says Russian influence causing dilemma in Sahel", Reuters, 31 January 2024, accessed 31 January 2024.

<sup>39</sup> "Africa Can Use Great Power Rivalry to Its Benefit: Here Is How", *The Conversation*, 6 January 2022, accessed 19 January 2024.

<sup>40</sup> Folashade Soule, "Rivalités de puissances au Sahel: repenser les stratégies de diversification des partenaires sécuritaires", *CODESRIA Bulletin*, no. 1 (2024).

contribute towards supporting Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin in tackling instability and insecurity challenges, and also reinforcing the capabilities of the security and defence forces of the four West African countries. It aims to help them contain and respond to the pressures exerted by terrorist armed groups in their northern regions.<sup>42</sup> The light footprint initiative reflects that Europeans are learning from past mistakes. However, while offering additional coordinated options to maximise security assistance, it reflects a reactive approach rather than an anticipatory one. It will only be efficient if it is truly built jointly with coastal states and does not result in yet another classical training and support mission, which the EU has already provided in the past.

Another crucial factor is African public opinion, which should be taken into consideration as much as possible. African publics as well as policy-makers tend to have strong reservations about the physical presence of external forces and military bases, as evidenced by a 2016 African Union Peace and Security Council decision warning countries to be “circumspect” about permitting more foreign military bases.<sup>43</sup> Communication about the role and duration of the presence of external partner forces should be a priority and be ruled by transparency.<sup>44</sup> If these partnerships are not well negotiated both by external powers and coastal West African state partners, there will likely be risks of diverging interests, instrumentalization and increasing defiance by African populations.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> “Gulf of Guinea: Council Launches an EU Security and Defence Initiative”, EU Council press release, 11 December 2023, accessed 12 December 2023.

<sup>43</sup> African Union, “The 601th meeting of the AU Peace and Security Council on Early Warning and Horizon Scanning”, 8 June 2016.

<sup>44</sup> *Questions over Foreign Military Presence in Africa*, Peace and Security Council report (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, August 2019).

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