Cameroon and Boko Haram

Time to Think beyond Terrorism and Security
Denis M. Tull

The terrorist organisation Boko Haram will determine Cameroon's medium-term domestic and security agenda. Together with an underestimated structural propensity to crisis and political conflict, this presents the country with a double challenge. The ability of Cameroonian state and society to master both is far lower than talk about this "regional anchor of stability" would have it. Europe should start developing ideas on crisis prevention.

Since 2013 the Nigeria-based Boko Haram militia has successively expanded its terror attacks and bombings into Cameroon. Until then Cameroon had been a safe haven where the authorities tolerated the group in the context of an unspoken mutual non-aggression pact.

In the Sights of Boko Haram

The escalation occurred in two stages, triggered by a formal declaration of war on Boko Haram issued by President Paul Biya after the regional summit on the insurgency in Paris in May 2014. This led to surge of military confrontations in northern Cameroon's regions bordering Nigeria, with many casualties on both sides and the deployment of two thousand reinforcements by government forces. Boko Haram demonstrated its growing confidence in spectacular fashion in July 2014, when it attacked a residence of the Cameroonian

deputy prime minister in the north of the country and captured his wife. French and Chinese citizens have also been kidnapped, with large ransom payments suggesting that the group enjoys a solid financial base.

The conflict entered a new stage of escalation in the run-up to the Nigerian presidential elections of March 2015. Increasingly aggressive action by the Nigerian army and the neighbouring states (above all Chad) forced Boko Haram onto the defensive. Since then the group has shifted its strategy from direct confrontation to guerrilla tactics and terrorist attacks, and the number of attacks and suicide bombings has shot up in both Nigeria and Cameroon. Since mid-July Boko Haram has conducted at least three suicide attacks in the Extrême-Nord region, with a total of forty deaths. And the regional capital Maroua, about one hundred kilometres from the Nigerian border, was affected for the first time. That attack in the heart of national territory

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rang alarm bells, as incidents had hitherto been restricted to targets close to the border.

Boko Haram's growing base in Cameroon is equally unsettling. It is now relatively certain that the group is recruiting members in Cameroon, and by no means only through coercion. Religious/ideological preferences, social affinities among the Kanuri (who live on all sides of the Nigeria–Cameroon–Chad border triangle), and not least financial and social incentives make the group attractive to some. In a densely populated region with above-average poverty, membership of Boko Haram offers young men opportunities that are otherwise unattainable: income and employment, marriage, social status, etc. At the same time, economic problems are worsening. Given that 80 percent of all consumer goods in northern Cameroon are imported from Nigeria, border closures and other restrictions have negative repercussions on trade and livelihoods.

The government in Yaoundé has responded to each stage of escalation by deploying more troops to the north. Yet the helpfulness of militarising northern Cameroon may justifiably be questioned. Firstly, the effectiveness of regular military units is limited in the face of asymmetric threats. Secondly, Cameroon and Nigeria have yet to agree on effective cooperation. It remains to be seen whether Nigerian President Buhari's visit to Yaoundé in July has brought about any change on that front. Thirdly, the growing number of Nigerian refugees in northern Cameroon is a bone of contention. The Cameroonian authorities, fearing infiltration by Boko Haram fighters, have moved against the refugees. In early August 3,500 were deported, with another 12,000 to follow. Finally, there is still no regional strategy against Boko Haram. The operationalisation of the 8,700-strong Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), made up of troops from Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger (plus Benin), is proceeding only slowly.

Terror Meets Fragility

Boko Haram has without doubt become the central challenge for the Cameroonian government and the dominant domestic political issue. From a political and security perspective, Cameroon is in fact experiencing an undeclared state of emergency, where the external shock of Boko Haram encounters a politically and socially fragile system that less than casual observers regard as susceptible to crisis and violent escalation.

A glance at common indicators of vulnerability to crisis shows Cameroon occupying high and in some cases rising places. Despite its great wealth of natural resources, the country has been stagnating economically and socially for years. In some regions, including the north, poverty is increasing (the national poverty rate is 40 percent). In view of rapid population growth, mass unemployment and underemployment (69 percent) are socially explosive, especially in the cities. The state's legitimacy is poor, as is the effectiveness of its institutions. Corruption and a glaring lack of the rule of law characterise almost the entire public sector. This contrasts with the enduring resilience of a regime that stays in power by repressing, intimidating and coopting its opponents, but manages to preserve an appearance of political stability. But violent protests across the country in 2008, triggered by a cut in fuel subsidies and a constitutional amendment lifting the restrictions on President Biya's term of office, highlighted the vulnerability of the leadership in Yaoundé. More than one hundred people were killed by the forces of law and order and the elite Bataillon d'Intervention rapide (BIR).

Structural factors aside, the current political constellation increases the potential for crisis. It is absolutely unclear who will succeed President Biya (age eighty-two), who has ruled the country since 1982, and will leave the political stage sooner or later. Although the constitution theoretically offers a route for succession, it is far from certain if this institutional mechanism will be respected. With Biya showing no signs of

resigning and public discussion of the question a political taboo, the air of uncertainty can trigger conflicts at any time – whether between rival wings within the regime fighting over Biya's succession or from the opposition and civil society, which regard the president's departure as an opportunity for change.

"Known Unknowns"

Boko Haram thus impacts upon an already fragile context in Cameroon, where it could have direct and indirect negative effects.

A key question is what the consequences of the conflict with Boko Haram will be for the cohesion of Cameroon's heterogeneous society, which has for years tended to be more drifting apart than coming together. To be sure, a wave of patriotism in response to the threat of Boko Haram can currently be observed gripping parts of the population. One symbol of this atmosphere is a grassroots fundraising campaign for the troops. These and other actions such as solidarity marches represent an attempt to present a nation united against the enemy. But they also betray justified fears of fractures in society that could deepen along regional or religious lines. Instrumentalisation of social identities is a common tool of political and social conflict in Cameroon. For example, local politicians of the ruling party from the central region have accused their colleagues from the north of supporting Boko Haram and seeking to destabilise the government. Even if that discussion has faded for the moment, growing stigmatisation of the politically and demographically important north can by no means be excluded if the threat worsens. And that could unsettle a regime built on ethno-regional architecture.

A second risk emanates from conceivable developments within the security forces. The relationship between the coexisting apparatuses (the regular army and two separate elite units, BIR and the Presidential Guard) is not free of tensions. The pressure placed on the troops by Boko Haram could exacer-bate existing problems. Among the security forces there are also indications of unrest over corruption and the lack of opportunities for promotion, and frustration at the ineffectiveness of the strategy against Boko Haram. Since 2014 the government has fast-tracked recruitment and training for more than six thousand new soldiers. In an army that values its professionalism, this approach has met with criticism. As a result of the above, a question mark must be placed over the cohesion of the armed forces – all the more so in the event that the government were to lose its grip and the threat from Boko Haram grow still larger. Open conflicts within the security apparatus, or even a military coup, would no longer be inconceivable.

The internal consequences of counter-terrorism present a third potential problem. An eye must be kept on the application of the anti-terrorism law, which passed parliament with only the votes of the governing party in December 2014. Human rights groups, opposition parties and civil society actors have denounced the law as a tool for curtailing civil and political rights. They criticise the broad definitions of terrorist acts ("disrupt the normal functioning of public services, the delivery of essential services to the public or create a crisis situation among the public"), which could be used to silence opponents of the regime. In view of the already limited freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and the repressive practices of the administrative and security apparatus, these are fears to take seriously.

It is predictable that the reform-resistant government will use the terrorist threat to distract – at home and abroad – from the country's structural problems and continue to postpone decisions on fundamental reforms that are long overdue.

Conclusion

Great as the Boko Haram threat to Cameroon is, equally large is the danger of a sole focus on terrorism obscuring the struc-

tural and political problems facing the country. As outlined above, the two challenges should not be considered in isolation from one another, because Boko Haram has the potential to drive an escalation of existing internal conflicts.

A proactive European foreign policy should firstly aim to prevent or minimise the outlined potential negative consequences of both Boko Haram itself and of the fight against it. Secondly, a strategic approach should be developed to ensure a peaceful and orderly short- and medium-term post-Biya transition that – in the ideal case – would open up opportunities for institutional political reform. It is likely that such a negotiated transition would amount to a pact between regime insiders. Contacts to the relatively unknown Cameroonian power elites would have to be intensified, in order to identify relevant actors. A second objective should be to break the taboo on the question of Biya's succession. That would mean creating transparency in the sense of public discussions not only about the transition, but also about the challenges and institutional reforms Cameroon will face after Biya. A peaceful transition would be a success, a transition entirely without institutional reforms a tragic missed opportunity.

Even if EU member states were able to agree on a joint approach, Europe's influence must be regarded realistically. France probably carries the greatest weight with Cameroonian officials, but Paris also finds itself confronted with considerable resentments, inside and outside of the regime. For that reason, an active and visible French role is actually excluded. Not so with the United Kingdom and Germany, which are not met with the same mistrust – or in the case of Germany enjoy a high standing. The fact that Cameroon is not the focus of international rivalry is a positive factor for European engagement – which would naturally have to rely on other like-minded partners among the international community.

The diversity of problems demands a coherent multi-dimensional approach, ideally orientated on a medium-term (for example five-year) strategy to be developed by the EU member states and delegations. A regular review of implementation by the Africa Working Group (COAFR) would be necessary, in order for policies and programmes to work towards shared targets and not just more of the same.