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The Accra Initiative: An Old Wine in a New Bottle?

Emma Birikorang
Mustapha Abdallah

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Introduction

Faced with rising threats of terrorism and violent extremism in West Africa, regional initiatives have increased to mitigate the effects of these threats and prevent new attacks. Key among them include the Multinational Joint TaskForce (MNJTF), the Group of Five for the Sahel (G-5 Sahel) and the Accra Initiative (AI). The MNJTF¹ was established by the Lake Chad Basin countries (Cameroun, Niger, Nigeria and Chad) in 2015 to contain the spread of Boko Haram; while five Sahelian states, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania founded the G-5 Sahel in 2014 to counter the brutality of Boko Haram, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its unholy alliance with al-Qaeda, especially in the Sahel.² Mimicking these arrangements, and following the 2016 attacks on Burkina Faso and potential spillover to coastal states, the AI was established in September 2017 in Ghana's capital city, Accra. Similar to the MNJTF and the G-5 Sahel, the AI represents a regional cooperative security mechanism aimed at preventing the spread of violent extremism and terrorism from the Sahel and addressing transnational organised crime in border areas of the participating countries.³ After six years of its existence, the AI continues to generate discussion among regional policy actors and practitioners similar to the euphoria that greeted the G-5 Sahel initially.

The policy discussion has become even more intense following the withdrawal of Mali from the G-5 in May 2022, and the coup d'état in Niger, in July 2023, spelling its almost certain demise. While this has increased the quest of external partners to associate with, and fund the AI, it raises fundamental questions around sustainability of the Initiative. Will it be like the G-5 Sahel— an old wine in a new bottle? Can the Initiative succeed if it adopts a heavy military approach to respond to fighting Violent Extremism and Terrorism (VET)? What alternative approaches should be adopted to make it more effective? We

argue that although the Initiative may be laudable, its success depends on the right use of nomenclature – “prevention” that is soft and comprehensive rather than “countering” that is hard and military-focused. Indeed, adopting preventive approaches that recognize the role of key actors – youth groups, women groups, Civil Society Groups (CSOs) and ministries such as Agriculture, Gender, National Security, Interior and Defence can contribute to its success. Within the discussions surrounding AI, there has been the use of nomenclature such as kinetic and non-kinetic. We argue that the use of such terms suggests the militaristic orientation of the AI. Of course, the success of the Initiative will also hinge on the countries taking ownership in terms of financial contribution while at the same time coordinating external partner's strategic support. This policy paper first conducts an analysis of some of the operations conducted by AI. Subsequent sections discuss future prospects; highlighting the issues of prevention, ownership and funding as well as coordination with strategic partners. The final section provides concluding thoughts and some suggestions for improving how the AI could avoid becoming another G-5 Sahel.

Operations and Contradictions of the AI

Established in September 2017, the Accra Initiative started with five members namely: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo. In 2018, Mali and Niger were first admitted as observers due to their closeness to the coastal states and owing to demonstrable experience in combating violent extremism in the Sahel.⁴ Subsequently in 2019, they were recognised as full fledged members.⁵ During the last concerned Heads of State and Governments Summit on Accra Initiative held in the Ghanaian capital on 22 November 2022, Nigeria participated as an observer as it had not yet become a member.

Three pillars underpin the operations of the Initiative:

¹The MNJTF countries now include Cameroun, Chad, Niger, Niger and Benin

²See Noussi, M. and Tametong, S. (2022) 'The Accra Initiative and the Fight Against Terrorism In West Africa'; available <<https://on-policy.org/the-accra-initiative-and-the-fight-against-terrorism-in-west-africa/> (accessed 24/07/2023)

³Kwakye, S. (2019) 'Can the Accra Initiative prevent terrorism in West African coastal states?

<https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-the-accra-initiative-prevent-terrorism-in-west-african-coastal-states> (accessed 24/07/2023)

⁴The jihadist threat in northern Ghana and Togo: Stocktaking and prospects for containing the expansion' *Regional Programme Political Dialogue in West Africa*, Konrad Adenauer- Stiftung

<https://www.kas.de/en/web/westafrika/publikationen/einzeltitel/-/content/the-jihadist-threat-in-northern-ghana-and-togo-2> (accessed July 25/2023)

⁵Kwakye, 2019, Op Cit.

(1) information and intelligence sharing; (2) training of security and intelligence personnel; and (3) conducting joint cross-border military operations to strengthen border security. Beyond the meetings held at the levels of heads of security and intelligence services and government ministers in charge of security, four operations have been undertaken – Koudanlgou I, II, III and IV.⁶ In particular, Koudanlgou I, which was conducted in May 2018 jointly by Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Togo, led to the arrest of 52 individuals in Burkina Faso, 42 in Benin, 95 in Togo and 13 in Ghana. Similarly, Koudanlgou II, which comprised Burkina Faso, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire supposedly “neutralised” 16 elements of Islamic State for the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and arrested 8 others in November 2018.⁷ Koudanlgou III and the simultaneous operations in the Koundagou IV in six countries led to some arrests and seizures of weapons.⁸ According to Ghana’s National Security Advisor, Brigadier-General Emmanuel Okyere (rtd), materials including weapons, narcotic drugs, mining implements, contraband goods and vehicles were impounded during the swoop in addition to the arrest of 386 people, including 107 foreigners in the five northern regions of Ghana.⁹

Although it is unclear whether all those arrested were part of terrorist networks, the military incursions and the arrests undoubtedly have controversial consequences. First, the claim of neutralising terrorist cells is not easily verifiable as these groups continue to move and operate freely along the borders of member states. While they may be latent, they certainly exist and await opportunities to strike. Secondly, it is difficult to determine whether all those arrested were indeed terrorists. Such military swoops are often exploratory and a fishing expedition to hopefully arrest some criminals. Innocent civilians are caught in such operations. The AI operations arrested several innocent people who were later released. Thirdly, there has been no evidence of prosecution or imposition of sentences. The pronouncements on these operations, therefore, need to be carefully scrutinised.

Attributable partly to the pooling of efforts and resources, such occasional collaborative patrols

and operations have the potential to improve the security situation in the region if properly managed. However, the question is, how sustainable will this measure be in dealing with the threat? Do the countries have the necessary resources to continue to fund the operations? Beyond the fact that most of the participating countries (e.g., Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) remain at the lowest level of Human Development Index (HDI) reports, there also exist suspicions between countries relating to intelligence sharing and cross-border movements, in spite of a memorandum of understanding that was signed in Bamako in 2020 among the participating countries.¹⁰

A key emerging challenge of the Accra initiative relates to the political situation in a number of its member states, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Mali’s questionable exit from the G5 Sahel has left it in a quandary. Burkina Faso and Niger are under military dictatorships with cantankerous relations with ECOWAS and AU. How do they relate with the other members of the ECOWAS who are AI member states? While the Accra Initiative is security cooperation, strained relations between these military regimes and ECOWAS risk jeopardising the relations with the other AI members.

Another key challenge arising out of interviews with a cross-section of actors in Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Niger suggests that the ad-hoc nature of the operations, protection of sovereignty and mistrust between countries can undermine intelligence-sharing efforts.¹¹ Moreover, a lack of command and control in the Initiative can weaken its operations relating to the respect for the rule of law and adherence to human rights principles.¹² Additionally, the vulnerabilities at the borders including corruption arising from collusion between security actors and criminal groups, and ethnic and resource conflicts (farmer-herder) present veritable challenges for the success of the Initiative.¹³

Future Prospects

Despite the challenges highlighted above, prospects exist for the AI to succeed in achieving its mandate.

⁶Noussi and Tametong, Op Cit, 2022.

⁷The jihadist threat in northern Ghana and Togo: Stocktaking and prospects for containing the expansion’ Regional Programme Political Dialogue in West Africa, Konrad Adenauer- Stiftung <https://www.kas.de/en/web/westafrika/publikationen/einzeltitel/-/content/the-jihadist-threat-in-northern-ghana-and-togo-2> (accessed July 25/2023).

⁸Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali and Niger

⁹<https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/operation-koudanlgou-makes-massive-swoop.html>

¹⁰Noussi and Tametong, Op Cit, 2022.

¹¹Interview, Lecturer, University of Abidjan, July, 2023

¹²Interview, International Development Partner, Abidjan, July, 2023

¹³Ibid.

This requires a three-pronged approach namely: comprehensive preventive approach, ownership of the financial burden and strategic cooperation with external partners.

Preventive Approach

Although military offensives (what has been termed kinetic approach) may be necessary from time to time to scuttle existing extremist cells, in many instances, such approaches have detrimental effects and create discontent in vulnerable communities. As such, we argue that, for the AI to succeed, more emphasis should be placed on prevention, which recognises the role of key actors such as the youth and women groups. In many of the participating countries, extremists have exploited the vulnerabilities of youth and women to carry out attacks. These groups have become more vulnerable to the consequences of the socio-economic crisis in the region. Therefore, between the border of Niger and Mali, ISGS continues to recruit mainly among the youth, and marginalised pastoral communities; while along the borders of Ghana and Burkina Faso/Togo, young people are mobilised to conduct attacks against civilian targets. These threats arise from deep-rooted grievances against the state, violations by security forces, and competition for resources within farming communities.¹⁴ Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) on the other hand, has exploited a lack of access to schools, limited economic prospects, food shortages, and an absence of local authorities in its recruitment in Tillerberi close to Niger-Burkina Faso border.¹⁵ Interviews in Niger with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) confirm that JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) employ women to conceal their weapons and to serve as cooks in their cells. From the interview responses, women support the terrorist groups ostensibly for their security and protection as their breadwinners

may have been killed through previous attacks by the terrorists and state security forces.¹⁶ As such, involving this category of actors in the preventive efforts will be a significant step forward.

Already laws and policy initiatives exist in various countries in this regard. For example, while the National Framework for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism (NFPCVET) in Ghana focuses on the 'Prevent' pillar with specific programmes to address the concerns of the youth, Niger, before the coup, had moved from hard military-centric to soft interventions that recognise community participation as a critical component for addressing the threat of VET. For example, at the community level, Niger has established local peace committees to strengthen local conflict monitoring, prevention, and management,¹⁷ which according to one respondent has reduced localised tensions in village communities in the northern part of Niger.¹⁸

Key ministries including Gender, Agriculture, Defence, Interior and national security will play critical roles in framing the right policies to guide the preventive efforts. While the ministries of gender in the various countries will coordinate gender and women-specific interventions, ministries of Agriculture can focus attention on preventing and managing the recurring farmer-herder conflicts across borders. Additionally, they could use their power of mobilisation to support women and youth initiatives in farming and other crop/animal production initiatives. Already ministries of defense, interior and national security are playing diverse roles in terms of framing policies and coordinating joint security responses. While these efforts are worthwhile, there is the need to involve key CSOs working in the local communities to contribute to sharing intelligence information that can inform the design of preventive interventions.

¹³Ibid.
¹⁴Ibid, see also Interview, CSO, Niger, June 2023
¹⁵Ibid.
¹⁶Interview, CSO, Niger, June 2023
¹⁷Ostaeyen, P. V. and Aning, K. (2023). 'Status of ISWAP and ISGS in West Africa and Sahel', at CEP-KAS_Paper 2_Status of ISWAP and ISGS in West Africa and Sahel._June 2023.pdf (counterextremism.com)
¹⁸Interview, CSO, Niger, June 2023.

Ownership and Funding

Another critical issue of concern for the participating countries is the ownership and the burden-sharing of financing the Initiative. The experience of the G-5 Sahel Initiative, which depended heavily on external partners, should be minimised as much as possible.¹⁹ The key question, however, is, do the participating countries have the financial wherewithal to continue to sustain the operations? Already, the operations suffer from adhocism due largely to financial difficulties. Ghana is facing financial difficulties and is currently under an International Monetary Fund(IMF) programme. The three Sahelian states of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger featured among the last 10 countries in the 2022 Human Development Index report,²⁰ suggesting their levels of poverty, which certainly will have implications on their commitment and contribution to a regional initiative. These countries are military regimes and undergoing various financial and political sanctions by regional and international organisations. It is the recognition of this financial challenge that has increased the interest of external partners to support, and as one interviewee indicates, “to throw funds around”²¹. For example, Germany, Japan, the US, and the EU have expressed varied interest in supporting the Initiative. During the Heads of State Summit organised on 23 November 2022 in Accra, the German Government, through its representative expressed its commitment to the Initiative. She indicated that the German Government has already supported the Ghana Armed Forces (GAF) by providing it with relevant equipment and the construction of required facilities in the most vulnerable areas of its operations.²² The President of the European Council also expressed similar commitment and added, “We don’t have any hidden agenda. Our agenda is well-known: providing lasting results”²³ While this statement can be subjected to further interrogation, the key concern, we argue is, how member countries coordinate the expected

financial support to its priority areas of prevention. The fear is that since prevention may not be as attractive as joint operations and offensive mechanisms, partners may be more inclined to support the latter. Additionally, for the external partners, it is critical that when supporting such initiatives, they tie in stringent accountability mechanisms, while also ensuring that “do no harm’ principles are adhered to.

Coordination of Strategic Partnership

While member countries have expressed commitments and are, being urged to take the lead in funding the activities of the Initiative, the reality of countries’ economic circumstances, we argue, can hardly support its activities. Consequently, member countries have the primary responsibility to forge strategic partnerships, and as Charles Michel, the President of the European Council rightly intimated “based on trust, mutual respect and friendship”.²⁴ The partnership, however, will benefit the Initiative when priorities are clearly defined and commitment to apply the resources to address the challenges that drive people into VET. For the moment, the government of Ghana seems to be driving the AI agenda, supporting it with infrastructure and some funds. The operations headquarters of the Initiative is being based in the Northern region of Ghana and will be unimaginatively called the Multinational Joint Task Force, indicating that the MNJTF-Boko Harm model is the preferred framework on which the AI is being modelled. Yet member states of the AI need to take ownership of the process, dictating its pace, direction and operation. The partnership between these countries needs to be strong, based on trust, strong principles, norms and operating procedures. Outside of this, the AI risks becoming a tool through which external actors fight their proxy wars, exert and increase their spheres of influence in an already volatile region.

¹⁹The European Union, France, United States (US), Germany have been funders of the G-5 Initiative. After the December 2018, Summit by the G5 held in Mauritania, EU and France were able to ramp up their funding for the G5 Sahel anti-terror alliance to € 1.3bn. see El Khou, B.D (2019) ‘The G5 Sahel: An Insufficient Organization for a Failed Region?’ https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/gpis_etds/122/

²⁰<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/hdi-by-country>

²¹Interview, CSO, Abidjan, July, 2023.

²²<https://mfa.gov.gh/index.php/germanys-participation-in-accra-initiative-summit-reinforces-strategic-partnership-with-ghana/>

²³<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/11/22/speech-by-president-charles-michel-to-the-international-conference-on-the-accra-initiative-in-accra-ghana/>

²⁴Ibid.

Conclusion

The Accra Initiative is laudable and has the potential to change the dynamics of peace and security in the littoral West African states. The nature of interaction among member states and partners suggests that it has significant goodwill and interest. This, however, needs to be channeled appropriately. The experience with previous initiatives focusing on counter-terrorism indicates that a strong emphasis on countering terrorism is heavy-handed and counterproductive. The collateral damage from such operations produces new converts to extremism, leading to a never-ending flow and cycle of extremists. The paper, therefore, while shedding light on the Accra Initiative, has highlighted some of the potential pitfalls and opportunities inherent in the initiative. It has emphasised a three-pronged approach: prevention, ownership and funding, and coordination of external partnerships.

Key Recommendations

1. More emphasis should be placed on prevention. To do this, other ministries outside of the Defence, Interior and National Security, such as Gender and Youth, Social Protection and Agriculture should be

brought on board;

2. Civil Society actors are key partners in prevention. At the moment, they are on the sidelines of the AI, and there is no clear strategy for how they can be brought on board. To bring them on board, the various nomenclature of the initiative should be reconsidered;

3. Additionally, there should be a clear strategy to increase the civilian component of the staff, beyond the police, military and national security operatives;

4. The host nation, Ghana, needs to be mindful of not upsetting its internal security coordination structures, in which existing national counter-terrorism infrastructures are pitted against the regional counter-terrorism mechanism. Clear standard operation procedures need to be established and stringently followed;

5. The core members of the AI should demonstrate financial commitment to the initiative beyond the secondment of officials. Reducing dependency on external actors will ensure its longevity and effectiveness;

6. Governance and security are inextricably linked. Poor governance in member states will result in insecurity. Therefore, members of the AI should have an avenue for addressing governance deficits in member states.

About the Authors

Emma Birikorang is the Deputy Director of the Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research (FAAR), KAIPTC. She holds a PhD in Politics and International Studies from the Oriental and Africa Studies (SOAS),

Mustapha Abdallah is a Senior Researcher and Acting Programme Head, Peace Support Operations (PSOP), Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research, KAIPTC. He is currently a PhD candidate at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon.

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KOFI ANNAN INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING TRAINING CENTRE
PMB CT 210, CANTONMENTS, ACCRA-GHANA | T: 233(0)302718200 | F: 233 (0)302718201

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