

GOVERNING BORDERS IN THE LAKE CHAD BASIN: REFLECTIONS ON THE GOVERNANCE OF SECURITY ISSUES ALONG THE CAMEROON-CHAD BORDER

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the governance of security issues in the Cameroon-Chad border region. In a bilateral and regional context marked by multifaceted cross-border security threats such as terrorism (Boko Haram), intercommunal conflicts, highway robbery, kidnapping for ransom, and conflictual transhumance, Cameroon and Chad cooperate within a bilateral and multilateral framework by pooling their efforts, while simultaneously taking individual initiatives to contain these cross-border threats. Using a qualitative approach based on document analysis, this article highlights the border dynamics, limitations, and effects of a shared management of security threats in the border region between Cameroon and Chad. The study shows that despite a shared pre-colonial and colonial heritage (socio-cultural and economic continuity), the Chad-Cameroon border region suffers from new forms of cross-border insecurity that necessitate a synergistic approach to combating them. Reflecting on this issue contributes to renewing studies on collective security in Central Africa in general, and specifically between Cameroon and Chad. It highlights the contributions and limitations of a repressive strategy as a response to insecurity on both sides of the Cameroon-Chad border. In doing so, it opens a debate on the relevance of exclusively repressive approaches, but also on an approach that makes local development initiatives and dialogue with communities' key drivers of security and a genuine social contract that can contribute to building lasting peace.

Keywords: Security, management, border conflicts, Chad, Cameroon

I. INTRODUCTION

The Lake Chad region, and the border areas between Cameroon and Chad in particular, constitute a complex and unstable geopolitical space from a security perspective. Cameroon and Chad in this area face common challenges, including the Boko Haram terrorist threat, intercommunal conflicts, highway robbery, kidnapping for ransom, and conflictual transhumance.¹ and other cross-border crimes, Cameroon and Chad are caught in the same vice-like grip, generating insecurity on both sides of their border. Due to the porous nature of the borders, this insecurity becomes a cross-border phenomenon. These two countries must therefore manage major security threats that transcend their borders, within a sub-regional context marked by the effects of climate change, humanitarian crises, and competition for natural resources. Thus, the Cameroon-Chad border, over 1000 km long,² is an area of almost chronic security turbulence³ It is also an area marked by social, cultural, and economic continuity between communities that colonial borders never truly separated. This reality, however, contrasts sharply with the contemporary security challenges developing there.⁴

¹This concerns pastoral movements and conflicts between farmers and herders.

²MUGAH (S.M), « Mener une politique d'influence dans la défense de la zone frontalière Tchad-Cameroun », Policy Brief : ISS Africa, 25 Novembre 2025. <https://issafrica.org/fr/recherches>

³SAIBOU(I.) ; Ethnicité, frontière et stabilité aux confins du Cameroun, du Nigeria et du Tchad ; Paris, L'Harmattan, 2012 p 87

⁴One would have expected the area to be less affected by security turmoil due to the social, cultural, and economic continuity that colonial partitioning failed to disrupt.

The security turmoil observed in the Cameroon-Chad border region has direct consequences on essential economic activities such as fishing, agriculture, trade, and tourism, and triggers humanitarian crises, with millions of people displaced. The limited presence of the states concerned in these border areas contributes to perpetuating infrastructural poverty and a sense of abandonment among the population. In this context, how can we analyze the insecurity in the Cameroon-Chad border region and the cooperative response being provided by these two countries?

It is worth noting that security threats in the Cameroon-Chad border region are less related to a classic bilateral border conflict than to the exploitation of porous borders and weak security governance by both states. A purely military and state-centric approach to security, without the involvement of border communities in planning and implementation, proves insufficient and can even be counterproductive. Sustainable cross-border security management between Chad and Cameroon necessarily involves strengthening bilateral and regional cooperation, integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions to address the root causes of insecurity. That said, border and cross-border security threats between Cameroon and Chad are deeply rooted in the vulnerability of the border environment of these two countries (I), and elicit a response that is both cooperative and individual, but ultimately limited in scope (II).

I- THE VULNERABILITY OF THE CAMEROON-CHAD BORDER ENVIRONMENT TO SECURITY THREATS: A FEATURE OF INSECURITY

Cameroon and Chad share a common border over 1,000 km long, a complex product of the colonial legacy, rife with conflict, and whose porous nature exposes them to chronic cross-border insecurity. It is a porous zone, difficult to control, and therefore highly vulnerable to insecurity. Governance of security issues along this border has thus become a priority for both Cameroon and Chad. Asymmetric conflicts and various forms of insecurity have found fertile ground there. This situation stems from a multitude of vulnerability factors in the Cameroon-Chadian border environment (A), which generate diverse forms of insecurity (B).

A- THE ARRAY OF VULNERABILITY FACTORS IN THE CAMEROON-CHAD BORDER ENVIRONMENT ARE SOURCES OF LINGERING INSECURITY.

Three categories of factors simultaneously contribute to the vulnerability of the Chad-Cameroon border region, thus exposing it to chronic insecurity. The first relates to the nature of the border and the border governance of the states. The second is linked to the psychology and sociology of the populations on both sides of the Cameroon-Chad border. The third, finally, is economic in nature.

1- The nature of the border and border governance of neighboring countries

These two factors are linked in that the geophysical features of the Cameroon-Chad demarcation line compromise the chances of effective border governance by both Cameroon and Chad, let alone by both jointly.⁵ Taken together in their inherent complementarity, these two factors result in the structural porosity of this 1,100 km line, inherited from the colonial era, which largely escapes the control of the two states. From a physical or geographical perspective, the Cameroon-Chad border crosses challenging environments: Lake Chad with its 3,000 shifting islands, the floodplains of the Logon-Chari area, and the foothills of the Mandara Mountains. This configuration makes continuous linear surveillance of the Cameroon-Chad border physically impossible. Geraud Magrin and Christine Raimond emphasize this point, stating that "the porosity of the border, while facilitating trade, constitutes a major vulnerability to the spread of insecurity."⁶ This physical reality is exacerbated by the low density of the state apparatus. Customs, gendarmerie, and police posts are several dozen kilometers apart and suffer from chronic under-equipment in vehicles, fuel, and means of communication.⁷ The state is therefore structurally absent from large portions of the border territory. This absence creates what security jargon calls "grey zones".⁸ conducive to the establishment of violent non-state actors.

2- Historical and socio-ethnological factors

They draw their origins from the historical balkanization of Africa by the colonizer. In this particular case, it is important to note that colonization drew a border that never succeeded in severing pre-colonial social, cultural, and economic continuities. The Kotoko, Arab Choa, Musgoum, and Fulani peoples live on both sides of the Cameroon-Chad border and share languages, marriage alliances, and trade networks. However, contrary

⁵Joint management poses the inherently complex problem of coordination.

⁶MAGRIN (G). & RAIMOND (C) ; « la région du lac Tchad face à la crise Boko Haram : interdépendances et vulnérabilités d'une charnière sahélienne », Bulletin de l'association de géographes français, vol. 95, n°2, 2018, p210

⁷MUSILA (C) ; « L'insécurité transfrontalière au Cameroun et dans le bassin du lac Tchad, Paris, Ifri, 2011, 2 p.

⁸In the Lake Chad Basin, a grey zone designates territories beyond the control of states (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria). Neglected administratively and economically, these territories become no man's lands where terrorists operate with ferocity.

to the hypothesis that this long-standing integration would constitute a factor of resilience in the face of the security crisis, the opposite has occurred: Boko Haram has exploited these networks of trust and kinship to move around, resupply, and recruit.⁹We are thus witnessing a political paradox: the border is porous not only because the state is weak, but also because local societies disregard it in their daily practices. Colonial partition failed to demarcate societies, but it created two sovereignties that hinder each other in the prosecution of criminals.

3- Psycho-sociological and economic factors

Analyzing the environmental vulnerability of the Cameroon-Chad border solely through a geographical, political, and ethnological lens would be reductive. As G. Magrin and C. Raimond argue, the porous nature of the border is not just a military problem: it also shapes local economic dynamics. The weakness of the state not only allows armed groups to pass through, but also fosters a subsistence and smuggling economy that, in turn, becomes a source of insecurity.¹⁰

While porous borders create a political vacuum, this vacuum is immediately filled by predatory economic forces. The vulnerability of the Chad-Cameroon border region is therefore inextricably linked to the collapse of traditional livelihoods and the emergence of a war economy. The most significant economic factor is the ongoing disappearance of Lake Chad, which has lost 90% of its surface area since 1960. This ecological disaster has destroyed the economic foundation of 30 million people. According to Amadou Mahamat, "Lake Chad is no longer just an environmental issue, but an economic time bomb."¹¹The border regions between Cameroon and Chad have the lowest human development indicators in both countries. According to the AFD report, more than 70% of the population of Cameroon's Far North region lives below the poverty line.¹²This poverty is exacerbated by massive youth unemployment, with young people out of school and lacking prospects. However, as Thibaud Lesueur demonstrates, "Boko Haram's economic offering is rational in a context of collapse: salary, motorcycle, marriage, social status."¹³For an unemployed young person, joining an armed group becomes an economic strategy. The Lake Chad Basin Commission estimates that 60% of rank-and-file fighters joined Boko Haram for economic, not ideological, reasons.¹⁴The absence of the state has allowed the emergence of a criminal economy that finances insecurity. Historically, the area was traversed by "highway robbers" or Zarguina, described by Saïbou Issa as "a form of parallel economy," inherited from pre-colonial raids.¹⁵An economy which, according to MUSILA, is fueled by groups that "extort money from traders on the Maroua-Kousséri axis, a vital artery for supplying Chad."¹⁶

Today, this criminal economy has become more sophisticated. Boko Haram and ISWAP tax livestock, dried poison, and contraband fuel, and impose Zakat on border populations. According to the International Crisis Group, "ISWAP has established a tax administration on the lake that is more efficient than that of the states."¹⁷The political porosity of borders thus produces a war economy that finances violence. In this logic, insecurity has destroyed legal economic circuits. As Dieudonné Vaïdjiké argues, "the difficulties of mobility are real and undermine socio-economic exchanges."¹⁸Roads are cut off, border markets like the one in Fotokol are closed, and traders prefer smuggling to avoid taxes and risks. This situation is aggravated by what Janet Roitman¹⁹This is called "the productivity of disorder": economic actors, including some state agents, profit from insecurity through illegal roadblocks and corruption. The legal economy collapses, while the economy of violence thrives.

Thus, economic insecurity and the collapse of livelihoods are not merely a consequence of insecurity; they are an active driver. By depriving young people of a future and leaving populations vulnerable to the

⁹MAGRIN (G) & RAIMOND (C); Op. cit. p 205

¹⁰Ibid p210

¹¹MAHAMAT (A) ; Le lac Tchad : Enjeux géopolitiques d'une catastrophe annoncée, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2020, p214

¹²MAGRIN (G.) & al ; crise et développement : La région du lac Tchad à l'épreuve de Boko Haram » ; Paris, AFD, 2018, p295

¹³THIBAUD (L) ; « Tchad, la longue marche vers Boko Haram, Paris, 2020, p180

¹⁴CBLT: Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy, CBLT, 2020, p17

¹⁵SAIBOU (I.) ; Les coupeurs de route : Histoire du banditisme rural et transfrontalier dans le bassin du lac Tchad, Paris, Karthala, 2010, p270

¹⁶MUSI (A, C); Op.cit. p35

¹⁷ International Crisis Group ; « se battre pour la stabilité : ISWAP dans le lac Tchad », in Rapport Afrique n° 291, 2021 ;

¹⁸VAIDJIKE (D.) ; « Autour de quelques malaises dans la mobilité transfrontalière tchado-camerounaise », in Revue Djiboul, Juillet 2022, pp344-355

¹⁹ROITMAN (J.); Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa, Princeton University Press, 2005, p248

criminal economy, the economic crisis fractures the social fabric and destroys trust in the state. This economic rupture then transforms into a psycho-sociological crisis, where feelings of abandonment and identity conflicts further render the border region vulnerable. This means that, beyond political and economic shortcomings, the vulnerability of the Cameroon-Chad border region is rooted in deep-rooted psycho-sociological dynamics. The main factor is the erosion of the social contract between border populations and the central state, which translates into a feeling of abandonment exploited by armed groups. The Cameroon-Chad border area has always been a neglected periphery for states. From the colonial period onwards, and then after independence, Yaoundé and N'Djamena concentrated investments in the capital cities, and the Lake Chad region has the highest poverty rates of the two countries, exceeding 70% according to World Bank data.²⁰ This marginalization is reflected in the lack of basic infrastructure. As Vaïdjiké Dieudonné notes: "The difficulties with mobility are real and hinder socioeconomic exchanges."²¹ No paved roads, no well-equipped hospitals, no functioning secondary schools. For the population, the state is a distant abstraction, manifesting itself only through the repressive presence of the military or the harassment of customs officials. This feeling of abandonment is all the more exacerbated because, as Charline Rangé notes, the Boko Haram crisis has discredited the traditional authorities' sultans, Lamibé, and canton chiefs who historically provided mediation.²² Killed, displaced, or accused of collusion, these leaders can no longer arbitrate disputes. "This power vacuum opens the door to Boko Haram's summary justice, which offers an alternative order to the population."²³ This vacuum is all the more exploitable because the central state is perceived as predatory. Janet Roitman, in her anthropology of the Chad-Cameroon border, analyzes the "productivity of disorder": for the local population, the state manifests itself only through the harassment of customs officials and the violence of the military, fostering a profound sense of abandonment.²⁴ REMADJI Hoimathy confirms this perverse effect of military operations: arbitrary arrests and forced displacements give communities "the feeling of being caught in the crossfire," sometimes pushing them to choose the side that brutalizes them the least.²⁵ This feeling of abandonment creates fertile ground for recruitment. Alessio Locchi, based on interviews with former fighters, establishes that 60% of young people joined Boko Haram for socioeconomic reasons – salary, motorcycle, marriage – and not ideological ones.²⁶ The armed group thus offers social status and recognition to a youth that feels marginalized and neglected by the central state.

Thus, vulnerability is not a static state but a dynamic process fueled by a plurality of factors. Political weakness paves the way for armed groups; economic poverty provides their recruits; and a sense of sociological abandonment offers them a social base. These three aspects are, analyzed by Magrin and Raimond as "interdependence and vulnerability of a Sahelian hinge,"²⁷ This logically leads to multi-layered insecurity. This manifests itself both from the top down through the offensives of Boko Haram and ISWAP against the defense forces and from the bottom up – via the resurgence of banditry, kidnappings for ransom, and conflicts over land use around the lake. These are all forms or manifestations of insecurity.

B- THE NUMEROUS FORMS OF BORDER INSECURITY GENERATED BY THE VULNERABILITY OF THE CAMEROON-CHAD BORDER

The insecurity affecting the Cameroon-Chad border region manifests itself in four interconnected forms: terrorism, cross-border banditry, intercommunal conflicts, and the criminal economy. These forms of insecurity feed off one another and reveal the fragility of the state in the Sahel-Saharan margins.

1- Terrorism

The most visible and deadly manifestation of border insecurity between Cameroon and Chad remains the terrorist activity of the jihadist group Boko Haram. Far from being spontaneous violence, its establishment relies directly on the political, economic, and sociological vulnerabilities analyzed previously. The military strategy of Boko Haram, and later ISWAP, is based on the mobility and porous nature of the borders. Magrin

²⁰BANSEK (A, H) ; « Promouvoir la sécurité de l'eau pour sortir du piège des conflits », in Voices, Banque mondiale, 2022, World Bank Blogs, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/fr>

²¹VAIDJIKE (D), Op.cit. pp. 344-355

²²RANGE, (C.) « Les chefs traditionnels face à Boko Haram » ; in Magrin, (G.), & al., crise et développement, AFD, 2018, pp 145-168

²³RANGE (C.), Op cit. p158

²⁴ROITMAN (J); Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa; Princeton University Press. 2025

²⁵HOINATHY (R) ; « Les communautés du lac Tchad entre répression et abandon », in Bulletin du CODESRIA, n° 1 & 2, 2019.

²⁶LOCCHI (A.), "Youth, Uncertainty and Boko Haram in the lake Chad Basin", in Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol. 58, n°3, 2020, pp 421-442

²⁷MAGRIN (G.) & RAIMOND (C.), Op. Cit. p 22

and Raimond believe that "armed groups use the same networks as traders and herders" to move between Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad.²⁸ This cross-border "hit and run" tactic aims to overwhelm national armies that cannot coordinate their pursuits in real time. The attack on Fotokol in February 2015 illustrates this mechanism. The assailants struck in Cameroon before retreating within minutes to Nigeria, the El Beid River acting as a natural barrier impassable without a bilateral agreement. As Magrin and Raimond point out, the political weakness of the state thus directly produces military vulnerability: the lack of territorial control transforms the border into an operational corridor for armed groups.²⁹

From 2016 onward, the split between Boko Haram, loyal to Abubakar Shekau, and ISWAP, affiliated with the Islamic State, marked a strategic shift. ISWAP abandoned indiscriminate suicide attacks in favor of a strategy of territorial establishment and governance. According to the International Crisis Group, ISWAP has established on Lake Chad "a tax administration more efficient and predictable than that of the state." The group taxes dried fish, livestock, and canoes, and imposes Zakat on the local population. In exchange, it offers protection against highway robbers and resolves certain local conflicts. This "counter-state" offering explains ISWAP's resilience despite successive military offensives. As REMADJI notes, a security response alone is insufficient because it does not compete with the armed group's service offerings.³⁰ It must be said that this crisis caused more than 2.5 million internally displaced persons and refugees in the Lake Chad Basin between 2014 and 2018, 90% of whom are concentrated in the Far North region of Cameroon. The displacement camps of Minawao in Cameroon and Baga Sola in Chad concentrate populations in overcrowded areas, where access to water and food increases the pressure on resources and reinforces the risk of radicalization. According to Remadji, ISWAP is becoming an alternative "governance actor,"³¹ more stable than the state in certain areas. This local presence explains why the crisis persists despite military operations. The jihadist insurgency transforms the border into a mobile front line, where the state loses its monopoly on violence and economic regulation.

2- Border crime

As a symbol of insecurity, cross-border banditry is embodied by highway robbers, or Zarguina. This phenomenon predates Boko Haram, but it has been reshaped by the crisis. SAIBOU Issa³² This shows that highway robbers are the heirs of pre-colonial raids and predatory networks that already structured the margins of the Lake Chad Basin. In these areas of weak state presence, cattle rustling and ransoms operated as a parallel economy. Musila Cyril notes that the saturation of security forces by the fight against Boko Haram has left spaces open to armed gangs. Worse, some criminal groups are forging opportunistic deals with jihadists: supplying weapons and information in exchange for safe passage. The Maroua-Kousséri-N'Djamena axis remains one of the most affected, with repeated ransom demands and kidnappings. Banditry increases the cost of trade, discourages the legitimate economy, and fuels agro-pastoral tensions through large-scale cattle rustling.

3- The conflictual transhumance

Demographic pressure in the area remains a factor accelerating tensions. The region hosts more than 450,000 displaced persons and refugees fleeing Boko Haram since 2014.³³ These populations add to the already vulnerable host communities and the transhumant herders who converge on the lake during the dry season. Competition for access to water and land then becomes fierce. Hycinth Banseka describes the mechanism as follows: "Rising temperatures and overexploitation have reduced the amount of water available. Fishermen have begun diverting waterways to create ponds, trapping the herders' livestock."³⁴ Following this same logic, Christian Seignobos meticulously mapped the conflicts between Musgum fishermen, Arab Choa herders, and Massa farmers around Lake Chad, demonstrating that "the drying up of the lake transforms every body of water into a battleground."³⁵ This has led to a rise in clashes between communities, particularly between herders and farmers. The drying up of Lake Chad, which has concentrated fishermen, herders, and farmers in small areas, is the driving force. Christian Seignobos shows how the conflict³⁶ The conflict between Musgum and Arab Choa along the Logon canals degenerates into ethnic clashes. The August 2021 incident in Logon and Chari, which resulted in 12 deaths and 30,000 displaced persons, illustrates this water-related violence. According to Charline Rangé, these conflicts, which generate insecurity, are further exacerbated by Boko Haram and the weakening of

²⁸ MAGRIN (G) & RAIMOND (C.), Op cit. P210

²⁹ Ibid; p207

³⁰ HOINATHY (R) Op. Cit. p 70

³¹ HOINATHY (R.); Op. Cit. p 72

³² SAIBOU (I.) ; Op. Cit. p 120

³³ UNDP; Improving Lake Chad management by strengthening resilience to climate change, 2021

³⁴ BANSEKA, (H), Op.cit. p 19

³⁵ SEIGNOBOS (C.) ; Atlas de la province de l'Extrême-Nord du Cameroun, Edition de l'Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), Marseille, 2014, p87

³⁶ SEIGNOBOS (C.); Op. cit. p90

the state, which have destroyed the traditional authorities that managed these tensions. In the absence of these mediators, cattle rustling or the destruction of a field becomes an intercommunal confrontation. The UNHCR/LWF study on the North and Adamawa regions confirms that the lack of dispute resolution institutions is the primary factor in this escalation.³⁷ The collective work edited by Chauvin, Langlois, Seignobos and Baroin shows that these conflicts weaken³⁸ social cohesion and create a favorable environment for Boko Haram activities.

4- The criminal economy

The criminal economy encompasses all illicit income-generating activities and the infiltration of this capital into the legal system. While this economy, as defined above, is not in itself a form of insecurity, it maintains an inextricable link with it in the Cameroonian-Chadian border context, making it appear as a form of insecurity. Indeed, the cross-border criminal economy finances and sustains border threats. In this respect, it constitutes a form of insecurity. Janet Roitman describes the Chad-Cameroon border as a space where informal trade and violence are mutually reinforcing.³⁹ The trafficking of fuel, cigarettes, medicines, and weapons bypasses official customs and generates profits exceeding those of the legal economy. In this regard, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos argues that smuggling networks corrupt officials and provide resources to armed groups. The money from this trafficking is used to purchase weapons, pay fighters, and perpetuate local corruption.⁴⁰ The illegal economy makes the state less attractive than criminal networks. It locks down the border in a cycle where violence protects trafficking, and trafficking finances violence.

In light of the above, it can be said that the facets of border insecurity between Chad and Cameroon form an integrated system. Jihadist insecurity exploits the porous border, banditry thrives in the absence of the state, intercommunal conflicts reveal the environmental and institutional crisis, and illicit trafficking finances the whole system. This interconnectedness makes the phenomenon of border insecurity between Cameroon and Chad complex and helps explain the relative failure of traditional military responses. It therefore becomes crucial to consider a governance approach to insecurity that focuses on solutions that take into account the local dynamics on both sides of the border.

II- A COOPERATIVE AND NATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE CHADO-CAMEROONIAN BORDER INSECURITY, WITH A LIMITED SCOPE

The rise of Boko Haram from 2013 onwards transformed the Chad-Cameroon border into an active conflict zone. Faced with this threat, both states mobilized their respective security forces while relying on strengthened bilateral cooperation. The response was organized around the deployment of national armed forces, bilateral operational coordination, and the implementation of mechanisms to control populations and border flows. This response details the mechanisms of cooperation and their limitations. Security cooperation between Chad and Cameroon, embodied by the Multinational Joint Task Force and bilateral defense agreements, has made it possible to contain Boko Haram's territorial expansion and reduce large-scale attacks on the border. However, this response remains primarily military, constrained by sovereignty limitations, a lack of civil-military coordination, and persistent political mistrust. These constraints prevent tactical gains from being translated into lasting stabilization of the border area. The aim here is therefore to analyze the cooperative mechanisms put in place (A), and the structural limits of cooperation (B).

A- COOPERATIVE AND NATIONAL MECHANISMS FOR RESPONDING TO BORDER INSECURITY BETWEEN CAMEROON AND CHAD

Border insecurity between Chad and Cameroon can no longer be treated as a strictly national problem since the expansion of Boko Haram's operations in 2014. Faced with the porous border and the mobility of armed groups, Chad and Cameroon have structured their response around joint mechanisms. The Multinational Joint Task Force, bilateral defense agreements, and joint civilian-military committees form the backbone of this cooperation. These mechanisms aim to pool military resources, coordinate actions on the ground, and limit the safe havens used by armed groups. They complement the mechanisms specific to each of these two states.

³⁷UNHCR/LWF, « Etude sur les conflits agro-pastoraux dans les régions camerounaises du Nord, Adamaoua et de l'Est, 2016

³⁸CHAUVIN, (E.) et al. (dir), « Conflits et violences dans le bassin du lac Tchad », Marseille, IRD Editions, Collection Etudes africaines, 2020, p384

³⁹ROITMAN (J.) ; « The garrison-entrepôt », in Magrin, G. et al. ; Crise et développement : La région du lac Tchad à l'épreuve de Boko Haram, AFD, 2018

⁴⁰PEROUSE DE MONTCLOS (M-A.) ; Boko Haram et le terrorisme islamiste au Nigeria, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2015

1- Cooperative mechanisms

These measures translate into the creation of a multinational joint task force and bilateral cooperation agreements. The first component of these cooperative mechanisms is multilateral: the multinational joint task force, established in 2015 under the auspices of the Lake Chad Basin Commission. This force symbolizes a cooperative, multilateral response to pool military efforts. It is a regional military coalition created to combat Boko Haram and other terrorist groups operating in the Lake Chad Basin. According to Usman Tar and Mala Mustapha, the MNJTF⁴¹ which includes Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria, Niger and Benin, constitutes the first regional security architecture in the Lake Chad Basin⁴² They analyze the MNJTF as a "regional security complex" under construction, hampered by historical contradictions, linguistic differences, and national political maneuvering. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos⁴³ This shows that this force marks the first attempt at a coordinated regional response to Boko Haram. It emphasizes that Chad and Cameroon focused the bulk of the military effort on the primary sector, covering the Logon and Chari region and Lake Chad. Operations Boma's Wrath and Talah Al Arz succeeded in destroying island bases and reducing large-scale attacks on N'Djamena and Kousseri. Remadji Hoinathy stresses Chad's specific role in this dynamic.⁴⁴ In his report for the ISS Africa, he shows that the offensive commitment of the Chadian army was decisive in preventing the collapse of the southern shore of the lake in 2015-2016. According to him, the MNJTF has achieved real tactical successes, but remains dependent on the political will of the contributing states.

The second aspect of the cooperative mechanisms is rather bilateral. The bilateral agreements between Cameroon and Chad and the joint civilian-military committees act as a shield against the insecurity plaguing the border areas between these two countries. Cameroon and Chad concluded a bilateral defense agreement in 1976. Musila Cyril, in his study for Ifri, points out that these two states, in their synergistic fight against terrorism, rely on this agreement, which was reactivated after 2014. This agreement authorizes joint patrols and a right of pursuit limited to 10 km on either side of the border. The author analyzes the joint civilian-military committees in Kousséri and N'Djamena as a tool for the daily management of border incidents. He also notes that these mechanisms contributed to a decrease in kidnappings along the Maroua-N'Djamena axis between 2017 and 2019. Finally, he concludes that these local mechanisms are effective on a small scale but lack coordination with regional strategy. The collective work⁴⁵ Led by Emmanuel Chauvin, Olivier Langlois, Christian Seignobos, and Catherine Baroin, the report shows that security cooperation is only tentatively integrating the civilian dimension through cross-border water management and inter-community mediation projects. The Lake Chad rehabilitation program, funded by the European Union and the World Bank, brings together Chadian and Cameroonian authorities to reduce agro-pastoral tensions.

2- National mechanisms

With this in mind, Cameroon created the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) in 2001 to address cross-border threats. Starting in 2014, the BIR was massively redeployed to the Far North region. Today, it comprises nearly 5,000 troops specializing in counter-insurgency and warfare in challenging environments. It operates according to a "spreading" strategy: securing cities and roads, then extending control to rural areas. Its units are equipped with night-vision equipment, drones, and light armored vehicles, giving it a tactical advantage over Boko Haram in the Mandara Massif and around Lake Chad. Cyril Musila emphasizes that the BIR helped stabilize the Maroua-Mora-Kousseri axis between 2015 and 2018.⁴⁶

Chad, for its part, adopted a more offensive posture. Under Idriss Déby, the Chadian army conducted several incursions into Nigeria and Niger to destroy Boko Haram's rear bases. The example of "Operation Boko Haram" in February 2015 mobilized more than 2,500 Chadian soldiers and enabled the recapture of the Nigerian towns of Gamburu and Dikwa. Remadji Hoinathy asserts that this posture can be explained by three factors: Chad's tradition of offensive military tactics, the desire to protect N'Djamena, and the political capital that Idriss Déby derived from his image as an "anti-terrorist bulwark."⁴⁷

In a nutshell, the national and cooperative security response of Chad and Cameroon to insecurity in their shared border areas relies on the mobilization of armed forces, the reactivation of the defense agreement, and the establishment of local control mechanisms. It is producing undeniable tactical results. However, its

⁴¹ Multinational Joint Task Force

⁴² TAR (U.A) & MUSTAPHA (M.); "The Emerging Architecture of a Regional Security Complex in the Lake Chad Basin: A Critical Analysis", in *Africa Development/Afrique et développement*, vol. 42, n°3, 2017, pp 25-48

⁴³ PEROUSE DE MONTCLOS, (MA); Op.cit. p 292

⁴⁴ HOINATHY (R); Op.cit. p 74

⁴⁵ CHAUVIN (E) et al. (dir) ; « Conflits et violences dans le bassin du lac Tchad », IRD Editions, 2020

⁴⁶ MUSILA (C); Op. Cit. p35

⁴⁷ Hoinathy (R.); "Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin", in *ISS Africa, West Africa Report*, n°20, September 2016

essentially reactive and military nature limits its capacity to generate lasting security. The border remains porous, armed groups are adapting, and civilian populations remain caught between the demands of counterinsurgency and the abuses perpetrated by armed groups.

B- THE STRUCTURAL LIMITS OF COOPERATION AGAINST BORDER INSECURITY BETWEEN CHAD AND CAMEROON

While Chad-Cameroon cooperation has halted Boko Haram's advance and brought relative stability to the front line, it has not resulted in the definitive and lasting security of the border area. Joint operations and bilateral agreements have yielded undeniable tactical results, but their scope remains limited by a number of constraints. The aim here is to understand why the Chad-Cameroon border remains a space for retreat and regeneration for armed groups, despite the intensity of the security response. To address this concern, doctrine identifies three disruptive elements: legal constraints, political and financial dependence, and the breakdown of civil-military relations.

1- The limitations inherent in the cooperative legal framework

The main legal obstacle remains the right of pursuit, limited to 10 km on either side of the border, as stipulated by the 1976 defense agreement. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos refers to this as an “operational stopping line,” which benefits armed groups. Boko Haram and ISWAP exploit the islands and marshes of Lake Chad as sanctuaries. These areas, partially outside state control, allow them to retreat, reorganize, and launch new attacks. The imprecise demarcation of the lake's border exacerbates this situation. Joint operations stop at the territorial boundary, leaving unsecured areas where state authority is not exercised.

2- The drawbacks linked to political and financial considerations

Politically, regional cooperation has long relied on the personal role of Idriss Déby. Chukwuma Rowland Okoli et al. demonstrate how Déby embodied the driving force behind Chad's commitment to the MNJTF and the guarantee of military responsiveness to Boko Haram.⁴⁸ His death in April 2021 weakened this momentum. Chad has since been going through a phase of political transition marked by internal instability and a reconfiguration of its security priorities. This weakening has a direct impact on bilateral cooperation. Without a strong Chadian commitment, Sector 1 of the Multinational Joint Task Force loses its effectiveness. Chad-Cameroon cooperation therefore remains vulnerable to internal political developments in each state.

Furthermore, the MNJTF and security stabilization projects in the area depend on EU, Germany, and US funding for more than 80% of their needs. Usman Tar and Mala Mustapha emphasize that this dependence makes cooperation vulnerable to disbursement delays and changes in donor priorities.

3- The lack of civil-military coordination in the fight against insecurity

The lack of coordination between military operations and civilian stabilization efforts also remains a factor contributing to instability. Philippe Attuquayefio et al. evaluate the AU/LCBC regional stabilization strategy and conclude that coordination between the MNJTF and civilian projects remains weak. Specifically, areas liberated by military force do not see a rapid return of administration, schools, healthcare, and justice services.⁴⁹ ISS Africa notes that by 2024, 60% of the areas “liberated” in 2022 were experiencing a resurgence of attacks. The lack of civil registration creates a vacuum that ISWAP exploits to re-establish itself and recruit. Christian Seignobos and Charline Rangé add that this situation is exacerbated by the collapse of traditional mechanisms for regulating access to water, grazing land, and fishing.⁵⁰ As long as cooperation does not restore these local management methods, it only treats the symptoms of insecurity, not its structural causes.

Furthermore, as noted by ISS Africa, the 2025 agreement between Chad and Cameroon does not adequately provide for the participation of local communities from the planning phase onward. The approach remains primarily “hard power” and “top-down,” whereas community trust is a crucial lever for intelligence gathering and recruitment prevention.

CONCLUSION

The study of border insecurity between Chad and Cameroon initially reveals a vulnerability of the border area to factors that have allowed a multifaceted security threat to take root. In response to this dynamic, the study then highlights the development of a cooperative and national-level response at the national level in each state. Chad and Cameroon have thus mobilized three levers: the Multinational Joint Task Force as a regional framework, the bilateral defense agreement as the legal basis for joint action, and local joint vigilance

⁴⁸OKOLI (CR); “Security in the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel region after Idriss Déby: implication for Regional Stability”; in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 34, n°4, 2023, pp 789-812

⁴⁹ATTUQUAYEFIO, (PK) & al. “Implementing the stabilization strategy in the Lake Chad Basin: key lessons and challenges”; in ISS Africa, Policy Brief, n°184, June 2024

⁵⁰SEIGNOBOS (C.) & RANGE (C.) : « Boko Haram, révélateur des sécuritaires foncières au lac Tchad », In CHAUVIN (E) & al. (dir), « Conflits et violences dans le bassin du lac Tchad ; Marseille, IRD Editions, 2020, pp145-172

committees as a civil-military interface. While these mechanisms made it possible to halt Boko Haram's territorial expansion and temporarily stabilize the front line between 2015 and 2022, an analysis of structural limitations shows that this cooperation is struggling to produce lasting security. The legal constraints of the right of pursuit leave sanctuaries intact, the dependence on Idriss Déby's personal role has weakened Chad's commitment, and the disconnect between military action and the restoration of civilian authority means that liberated areas quickly fall back under the influence of armed groups. Cooperation therefore remains reactive, dependent on external funding, and focused on the military aspect, to the detriment of political and social stabilization of the border. It thus appears that the security of the Chad-Cameroon border area does not depend solely on the capacity to conduct joint operations. Moreover, one might wonder whether, beyond shared and/or individualized military mechanisms, the solution to the security problems of the Cameroon-Chad border area might not lie in the capacity of these two states to transform the border into a governed and integrated space in which traditional regulation can regain its place as a mechanism of border governance.

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