

AN APPRAISAL OF THE ROLE OF THE AFRICAN UNION IN MULTINATIONAL JOINT TASK FORCE OPERATIONS IN THE LAKE CHAD BASIN

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Abstract

On 29 January 2015, the African Union Peace and Security Council authorised the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) counterinsurgency operation to tackle the menace of Boko Haram and other terrorist groups in the Lake Chad Basin. Accordingly, the authorisation validated the Mission despite not being an AU-mandated mission. Beyond the validation, the AU plays other significant roles in the Mission, such as logistics assistance and operational coordination, towards strengthening the MNJTF in realising its mandate. The study evaluates the role of the AU using a descriptive research method, which involves in-depth interviews and documentary sources. The study found that the AU has played a significant role in improving the performance of the MNJTF in the region, such as endorsement and legitimisation of the Force, strategic guidance, capacity building, logistics support, and coordination of the Troops Contributing Countries (TCCs). Despite these efforts, the conflict has remained intractable, while the MNJTF faces challenges of poor funding, gaps in logistics, and operational equipment, including poor coordination of the troops for operations. The study recommended among others that the AU should explore an alternative means of funding, and closer cooperation with international partners among others to improve its role in the Mission as well as the performance of the Force towards realising its mandate in the Lake Chad Basin.

Keywords: *African Union, Peace and Security, Multinational Joint Task Force, Military Operations, and Counterinsurgency.*

Introduction

The need to address the menace of the Boko Haram insurgency and other terrorist groups in the Lake Chad Basin region led to the reactivation and subsequent authorisation of the Multinational Joint Task Force by the Lake Chad Basin Commission and African Union Peace and Security Council (AU-PSC) in October 2014 and January 2015, respectively. Following the authorisation, the MNJTF became a counterinsurgency force against the Boko Haram and allied terrorist organisations operating in the region. The aim was primarily to contain the spread of Boko Haram and its allied terrorist groups, create a secure and safe environment and restore peace and stability in the region (AU-PSC, 2015).

Accordingly, the MNJTF regional headquarters was established in N'Djamena, Chad with four Operational Sectors in the four affected countries of the Lake Chad Basin, which include Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. These countries formed the commanding structures of the Force including troop contribution. By June 30th 2015, the MNJTF commenced operation, with the deployment of troops by the TCCs as a counterinsurgency force against Boko Haram and its allied terrorist groups in the Lake Chad Basin (Saleh & Ukaeje, 2024). Notably, the MNJTF already existed as a moribund cross-border security force comprised of Nigeria, Niger and Chad before its reactivation into a counterinsurgency force. However, Cameroon and Benin were not part of the arrangement.

The MNJTF, since its deployment as a counterinsurgency force has achieved some level of success in its operational mandate. For instance, reports of several international security monitors such as the United Nations Development Programme Conflict Assessment in the Lake Chad Basin (2023), Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) (2023), and International Crisis Group (2023), as well as other scholarly reports, have shown that Boko Haram and its allied terrorist groups have been degraded and downgraded and majority of the seized territories in the affected areas recovered. In all this, the African Union played an active role in these achievements, ranging from strategic guidance to the MNJTF through the African Union Peace and Security Council; capacity-building support by providing training and equipment to enhance the mission's operational effectiveness; provision of logistics support to the MNJTF including transportation, communication, and medical assistance; and coordinating the international partners, such as the United Nations, the European Union, and bilateral donors to mobilise resources and support for the MNJTF. However, despite these roles, the MNJTF has been associated with several operational challenges. Thus, making it difficult for the Force to achieve an end state in the mission.

Against this backdrop, the study attempts to appraise the role of the African Union in the MNJTF Operations in the Lake Chad Basin. The aim is to unravel the impact of the AU towards the effectiveness of MNJTF operation in the Lake Chad Basin.

Methodology

The study draws on a broad array of primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources comprised existing literature on the African Union and MNJTF in the Lake Chad Basin, as well as documented evidence such as reports from conflict monitors in the Lake Chad Basin such as the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database (ACLED), African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), International Crisis Group (ICG) as well as

official reports from the MNJTF desk and websites. The field survey involved opinions from other stakeholders in the MNJTF such as the personnel of the Force, CSOs and members of the Lake Chad Basin on the effectiveness of the AU in the MNJTF which was garnered through in-depth interviews. The results were qualitatively analysed.

Theoretical Underpinning

The theoretical orientation of this study is hinged on the Systems Theory. The Systems theory is a transdisciplinary theory with proponents cut across different disciplines. One of the major proponents of the theory is Von Bertalanffy, who developed the general systems theory in 1937, which became popular after publication in 1946. The doctrinal kernel of the systems theory lies in its emphasis on understanding a continent as a whole system with several sub-systems of interconnected and interdependent parts, none of which can be effective in isolation towards achieving a common goal. The goal of systems theory was captured by Beven (2006) who posits that the systems theory aims to model a system's dynamics, constraints, conditions, and relations; and to elucidate principles (such as purpose, measure, methods, and tools) that can be discerned and applied to other systems at every level of nesting, and in a wide range of fields for achieving optimized results. This implies that the involvement of the AU as a central continental body is to provide the needed measures, methods and tools required to support the subsystems (sub-regions and their institutions) to prevent them from failing in their objectives. This is exemplified in the AU authorisation of the MNJTF CONOP as a counterinsurgency force to address the menace of Boko Haram and the allied terrorist groups in the Lake Chad Basin. The Systems theory provides valuable insights into the role of the African Union in the complex web of MNJTF counterinsurgency operations in the Lake Chad Basin. It draws attention to the efforts of the AU PSC in ensuring the effectiveness of the Force towards attaining its mandate in the region such as the political, economic, financial and coordination as well as the impact of such roles on the security and stability of the region

Overview of the African Union's Role in the MNJTF in the Lake Chad Basin

The involvement of the African Union in the MNJTF in the Lake Chad Basin could be traced to the spread of the *Jamaat'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* commonly known as Boko Haram insurgency from northeast Nigeria to other neighbouring Lake Chad Basin states; Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (Casola, 2020). Notably, Boko Haram had risen to become one of the world's deadliest terrorist groups (Global Terrorism Index, 2015). Thus, its subsequent spread into the Lake Chad Basin generated serious international and regional concerns and made it expedient for the establishment of a counterinsurgency force to contain the group and its allied terrorist groups in the region.

In response to the rising threat of Boko Haram in the region, Nigeria and other neighbouring Lake Chad Basin Countries of Niger, Cameroon and Chad including Benin under the aegis of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) moved for the reactivation and operationalisation of the already existing and moribund MNJSF. The aim was to ensure an explicitly focused Joint Force that would fight against the Boko Haram and other allied terrorist groups in the Lake Chad Basin. This initiative led to the involvement of the AU, a regional continental leader because without the endorsement of the AU, the Force would not be recognised and accepted by the international community, particularly the United Nations Security Council (UN Charter reviewed mandate, 1998; the African Union Constitutive Act, 2001).

By 2012, the operationalisation of the MNJTF to a counterinsurgency force was addressed at the 14th African Union Summit of Heads of States and Governments held in Chad. The outcome of the meeting was to expand the mandate of the MNJSF to include counterinsurgency as a response to the spread of Boko Haram from northeast Nigeria to the Lake Chad Basin. It was supported by the African Union Peace and Security Council and it also marked the beginning of the transformation of the MNJSF to a counterinsurgency force, which was later known as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in Lake Chad (AU-PSC, 2017). In addition, it provided the LCBC with the opportunities to further their actions and make more consultations.

Subsequently, several meetings and summits were held with the LCB countries, the African Union, international partners and bilateral donors. Some of these meetings include the Paris Summit of 17 May 2014, which brought together the Heads of States of Benin, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria, France, and representatives of the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), and the European Union (EU) to deliberate on the issue (Saleh & Ukaeje, 2024); and the ministerial meetings that took place in London and Washington on 12 June and 5 August 2014 respectively. The London meeting reaffirmed member-states commitments at the Paris Summit and welcomed the progress accomplished from subsequent meetings, particularly the signing of the Yaoundé Memorandum of Understanding on the Regional Intelligence Fusion Unit (RIFU) on 9 June 2014 (AU, 2015).

Significantly, the outcome of the meetings was the decision to enhance regional cooperation in the fight against Boko Haram by employing coordinated patrols and border surveillance, pooling intelligence, adopting political and financial sanctions against Boko Haram, Ansaru, and their leaders, and exchanging relevant information on the group's activities (Zamfir, 2015; Tar & Adejo, 2017). This decision led to the activation of the moribund MNJTF by the LCBC as a platform for coordinating the operations of the fight against the group and the subsequent agreement to contribute troops for operations by the affected countries. However, the operations were restricted within the national boundaries of these states (Tar & Adejo, 2017)

By October 2014, Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon including Benin had contributed troops to the MNJTF, resulting in the emergence of a Force of 10,000 troops. The MNJTF maintained its headquarters in Baga, Borno State, Nigeria (Nextier SPD Policy Weekly, 2020). However, in January 2015, the headquarters of the MNJTF and the residents of

Baga were attacked by Boko Haram. The attack resulted in the death of many soldiers and the sacking of the towns of Baga and Doron Baga by the group (Fessy, 2015). The attack on the MNJTF Headquarters in Baga and the environs reawakened the commitment of member-states of the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the concern of the AU for an effective counterinsurgency operation against the group in the region. Accordingly, the LCBC was authorised by the African Union to develop a new Concept of Operations (CONOP) for the Force, which came into force on 29 January 2015. The CONOP re-established the MNJTF as a counterinsurgency force for combating insurgency and acts of terrorism in the Lake Chad Basin.

Assessing the African Union's Role in the Multinational Joint Task Force Operations in the Lake Chad Basin

The role of the African Union in the MNJTF operations in Lake Chad is derived from the authority of the PSC Protocol as established by the African Union Constitutive Act, of 2001. The PSC Protocol confers on the AU-PSC the powers to authorize the mounting and deployment of peace support missions and the general rules for the conduct of such missions including thereof, and undertake periodic reviews of these guidelines. It is on this ground that the AU PSC authorised the activation of the Multinational Joint Task Force as a counterinsurgency force against Boko Haram and other terrorist groups in the Lake Chad Basin to restore peace, security and stability.

The MNJTF operation in the Lake Chad Basin is an AU-authorized mission, not an AU-mandated one. It differs from the conventional AU-Mandated Peace Support Operations because of the status of the Mission. The AU PSC only authorised the operationalisation of a new Concept of Operations (CONOPs) for the MNJTF, meaning that the AU does not deploy it therefore it does not operate under its command-and-control structures. The MNJTF is mandated by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), which is the political leadership of the MNJTF and its command and control is directly under the MNJTF Force Commander (EPON, 2023; Zabala, 2023). Nevertheless, the partnership between the AU and the MNJTF is vital, not only for the validity it gives the mission but for the political support, funding, logistics support and other bilateral and operational supports that the AU can advocate for on behalf of the MNJTF. This is carried out through the AU Mission Support Team, a platform through which the AU conducts its activities in the MNJTF.

The AU Mission Support Team (AU MST) in the MNJTF consists of 14-man staff at the MNJTF's Headquarters. The MST supports the planning, and prioritising of tasks and coordinates the support from partners. This allows for the AU to be in constant communication with the mission where it can be able to assess the most critical needs of the mission, to be able to advocate for further support for the mission. Through the AU, the MNJTF gets operational and office materials for the Headquarters, vehicles and other support from partners. Despite the efforts of the African Union through its Peace and Security Council in ensuring the effectiveness of the MNJTF towards restoring peace and stability in the Lake Chad Basin, the MNJTF still faces challenges in its operational environment particularly in such areas of support as funding, coordination of member-states and logistics and equipment supports where the AU is deemed to play a major role.

The Challenges

Inadequate Funding for MNJTF operations

Funding is one area AU plays a significant role in its partnership with the MNJTF. Apart from its strategic position as a pre-financing body, the AU coordinates other partners that provide financial support for the Mission. It also disburses such funds on behalf of the donors to the MNJTF and the four operational sectors. The AU also monitors the spending of all MNJTF's funds to ensure efficient utilisation and accountability. For instance, through the AU, the MNJTF gets approximately USD500,000 per year (USD120,000 per sector), and this is disbursed by the AU on behalf of the MNJTF (Onuoha, et al 2023, Zabala, 2023). Incidentally, funding the mission's operations has remained one of the challenges impeding the effectiveness of the MNJTF since its deployment due to delays, insufficiency or inconsistency in its funding. This was confirmed by the MNJTF Force Commander, Major General Ibrahim Sallau Ali who stated that inconsistency and insufficient funding have been a major challenge hampering the effectiveness of the mission in operations (Personal Interview, 19 May 2024). This is evident in the delays experienced by the mission in the activation, planning, execution and sustaining of large-scale joint offensive operations that will decimate the terrorists. For instance, it took the mission almost two years to launch Operation Lake Sanity II after the end of Operation Lake Sanity I in March 2022. Such action implies that the successes might be revised by the terrorists or create an opportunity for the terrorists to rebuild and come back to attack as has been witnessed severally in the region.

Capacity Gaps in Logistics and Operational Equipment

As a regional partner to the MNJTF, one of the roles of the Africa Union is to provide logistics support including transportation, communication, and medical assistance to the mission. The AU has been doing this through its Peace and Security Council. For instance, through the AU-PSC, the MNJTF has benefitted from the European Union through the provision of funds to assist the MNJTF Headquarters and the operational sectors across the affected states in funding their logistics for operations (Onuoha, et al.2023). Similarly, through the AU PSC, the MNJTF has received support from international partners such as France, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (USA) in the areas of operational equipment such as surveillance drones, operational helicopters, anti-Improvised Explosive Devices and communication gadgets (Personal Interview with Former MNJTF Force Commander, Maj Gen. Abdul Khalifa Ibrahim, 22 May 2024). Despite this, the problems of logistics and operational equipment have remained major challenges to the force

Extant reports have shown that the MNJTF requires at least 70 per cent or ideally 90 per cent of the operational equipment to effectively combat Boko Haram and other terrorist groups in the Lake Chad Basin. But it hardly has access to 65 per cent of its requirements (Onuoha et al 2023). As noted by I.S. Ali (Personal Interview, 19 May 2024), the Force currently needs modern operational equipment such as Counter Improvised Explosive Devices (Counter- IEDs) like Husky Mounted Mine Detectors, Water-borne IEDs and IEDs resistant vehicles such as MRAP-Mine- Resistant Ambush Protected and appropriate drone equipment such as the vertical take-off and landing drones for the ongoing clearance operations going in the affected areas. He noted that what the MNJTF has in terms of counter-IEDs equipment and drones is inappropriate for the nature of the operations in the region. While the counter-IEDs are handheld equipment, which makes them insufficient for effective counter-IEDs, the drones are the sleek type that takes off like an aeroplane, provided by KOGENTA, an EU-contracted logistics company through the AU. These drones have a short-life service and cannot go beyond 30 minutes of operation, unlike modern drones that can go over an hour of operational service. Even the Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) that is provided by a company contracted by the P-3 Countries (France, the USA and the UK) to provide ISR does not do the actual 'targeting' information concerning the terrorists such as their movement, hideouts, logistics bases etc., which in many instances made military operations difficult and, in few cases, resulted in operational failure or collateral damages (Personal Interview with MNJTF Personnel 17 May 2024). This implies that the AU despite being embedded in the MNJTF Headquarters through the AU-MST, has not been effective enough to close the gaps in logistics and equipment that have been a major challenge to MNJTF operations since inception.

Poor Coordination Among Member States

As stipulated in the African Union Peace and Security Protocol 2002, and the AU partnership with the MNJTF, the AU through its PSC is mandated to coordinate the multilateral agencies such as the LCBC, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), including the affected states to ensure understanding among them. However, this has been lacking among the troops contributing countries, particularly in ensuring that the operational sectors support the headquarters during operations. Instances are bound where a member-state withdrew or refused to participate in a joint operation without any tangible excuse to justify her withdrawal. Chadian government had on different occasions withdrawn its troops before and during operations citing internal security challenges and lack of funds to mobilise its forces in operation (Interview with Former Force Commander, Maj. Gen. A.K. Ibrahim, 22 May 2023). According to Major General A.K. Ibrahim, at the beginning of Operation Lake Sanity, the MNJTF had planned a joint offensive comprising troops from the four sectors to clear the Lake Chad Island and settlements known as "Tumbuns of Terrorists" but the Chadian troops refused to join the operation knowing fully well that other countries troops were relying on their vast experience and knowledge of the terrain which falls within its area of responsibility (AOR). Unfortunately, the AU could not reconcile the issues, to make the Chadian troops join the operation. Such an action should not be allowed in multinational joint operations as it can undermine the entire operation.

Another instance of poor coordination by the AU is its inability to draw the support of the two regional blocks (ECOWAS & ECCAS) whose countries are involved in the MNJTF. The ECOWAS and ECCAS have not shown serious concern for the MNJTF operations. Apart from the political endorsement and the initial financial support of USD 1 million contributions from ECOWAS in 2015, the Force has not received any support in finance and operational equipment from ECOWAS and ECCAS. According to Senior Personnel of the MNJTF, the impact of ECOWAS and ECCAS has been visibly missing in the mission noting that it was not clear how the AU plays a coordinating role in this aspect (Interview with a Senior MNJTF Personnel, 15 May 2024). Additionally, the problem of poor intelligence cooperation among the member-states of the MNJTF, which has continued to generate concern among the Nigerian troops and the headquarters of the MNJTF has still not been resolved. This is one area the AU is expected to have worked on, to bridge the existing gap in intelligence management among the sectors and the headquarters. Unfortunately, nothing has been done as it remains a major challenge in the operation. As noted by one of the personnel of the MNJTF interviewed "The problem of intelligence management in the MNJTF is still visible because the AU and the LCBC have not considered its importance to operational effectiveness, if they do, resources will be voted for intelligence gathering and intelligence cooperation among the sectors will improve" (Personal Interview with a Senior MNJTF Personnel, 17 May 2024). This implies that despite the AU coordinating role in the mission, particularly in maintaining interoperability, gaps still exist that have a significant effect that if not addressed would affect the effectiveness of the Force or lead to its collapse.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Obviously, beyond the authorisation and validation of the MNJTF counterinsurgency operation against Boko Haram and other terrorist groups in the Lake Chad Basin, the African Union through its Peace and Security Council plays significant roles towards the realisation of the MNJTF mandate in the region ranging from political support, logistics assistance and operational coordination of other partners to the Mission such as ECOWAS, ECCAS, UN, EU, USA, the UK, and France. Accordingly, it has achieved some level of success in these areas as regards the validation of the mission by the international community and the support from international multilateral agencies such as the UN, EU and the P-3 Countries of France, USA, and the UK including coordinating provision of logistics supports and equipment for the Mission. These efforts contributed to the successes recorded by the MNJTF in the Lake Chad Basin such as the degrading of Boko Haram and its allied terrorist groups, the recovery of the seized territories, the massive

surrendering of members of Boko Haram and fighters, and mass return of the internally displaced persons and refugees. However, despite this modest success, the MNJTF is still challenged in the areas in which the AU is meant to play significant roles towards the realisation of the end state of the mission in the Lake Chad Basin. The study therefore proffers recommendations to strengthen the AU towards effective support to the MNJTF, which if considered and implemented by the AU PSC. This includes the following:

1. Explore Alternative Means of Complementary Funding: The AU as the pre-financial powerhouse of the MNJTF should explore alternative sources of funds to redeem its position beyond validation in the mission. Particularly, now that the EU Partners through the European Peace Facility (EPF) have whittled the influence of the AU over the management of the mission's fund. Such an alternative would help solve the issue of logistics and equipment that have remained a recurring problem in the Mission, revamp AU's influence and improve the performance of the MNJTF in realising its mandate in the Lake Chad Basin.
2. Strengthen the African Union's Coordinating Role: AU should ensure that its coordinating role in the mission is strengthened. This can be done by providing technical assistance and capacity-building programmes for national authorities and MNJTF personnel through the AU Peace Support Operations Department. This will go a long way in strengthening its impacts on the MNJTF and TCCs as well as improving its impact on the Mission.
3. Foster Closer Cooperation with International Partners: Fostering closer cooperation with international partners and getting new partnerships to assist the MNJTF is another avenue for the AU to improve its role in the mission. Such closer partnerships with reputable international donor agencies will help attract more funds and the required operational equipment and materials to support the mission.

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