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Burkina Faso: Between strategic autonomy and the imperative of regional cooperation

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2015, Burkina Faso has been faced with a security crisis that has claimed numerous civilian and military victims while destroying civilian property and administrative infrastructure. The socio-political crisis of 2014, which led to the overthrow of the Compaoré regime by a popular uprising, may have laid the foundation for the emergence of the current security crisis. The rift within Burkina Faso's already divided army was accentuated by General Diendéré's coup attempt in September 2015 and the resistance deployed to counter it. The country's involvement in the resolution of internal armed conflicts, through the connections between the Compaoré regime and armed groups in Mali in particular, helped foster a sense of security in Burkina Faso regarding such threats. While President Kaboré's election in November 2015 was quickly accepted by his opponents, his re-election in 2020 was contested by a segment of the political class, although the overwhelming majority of political players would eventually rally behind him. However, the Kaboré regime's inability to curb the security crisis, combined

with economic governance issues regularly denounced in the press, facilitated the coup of January 24, 2022, and the seizure of power by the Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (*Mouvement patriotique pour la sauvegarde et la restauration* - MPSR), then led by Lieutenant Colonel Damiba. Eight months later, dissension within the MPSR led to the coup of September 30, 2022, led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré. These repeated military power grabs have had a negative impact on the Burkinabe army. It has therefore become vital to reorganize the army and heal its internal divisions.

The security crisis has spawned a humanitarian crisis and exacerbated community conflicts. The humanitarian crisis is reflected in the high number of internally displaced persons (IDPs): over two million or ten percent of Burkina Faso's total population according to the National Council for Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation (*Conseil National de Secours d'Urgence et de Réhabilitation* - CONASUR), an exceptionally high figure. The security crisis has also



undermined relations between communities within the country. The community dimension of the security crisis is beginning to take on worrying proportions. Once known as a country of exemplary social cohesion, thanks to the melding of its different ethnic and religious communities, today Burkina Faso is experiencing a weakening of its social fabric. Against this backdrop, this Policy Paper seeks to evaluate Burkina Faso's new counter-terrorism strategy since the advent of the MPSR II. More specifically, it will assess Burkina Faso's socio-political and security context and the transitional authorities' commitment to strategic autonomy. The paper will examine the impact of this quest for strategic autonomy on the efforts to fight insecurity in the Sahel and analyze whether it could have consequences for regional counter-terrorism efforts. At the outcome of this analysis, socio-political recommendations will be made to Burkina Faso's transitional authorities as well as its regional and international partners.

I. THE TRANSITIONAL AUTHORITIES' QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

On the political front, after a relatively successful political transition in 2015, the two successive coups d'état taking place within the space of eight months in 2022 have to some extent reconfigured the political landscape. The coup of September 30, 2022, was partly due to differences within the MPSR over the strategy to be used to defeat terrorism. The MPSR I, under President Damiba, had opted to combine a military approach with dialogue with terrorists, and tacitly seemed to favor aligning itself with the West. As was already the case under President Roch Kaboré's government, the MPSR I was reluctant to grant full operational autonomy to the Barkhane force on Burkinabe territory. Task Force SABRE operations were not primarily carried out on Burkinabe territory, as French intervention on Burkinabe soil always required the consent of the Burkinabe side. Indeed, the Burkinabe population is traditionally reticent towards interventions by foreign forces on their national territory, as demonstrated by the dismantling of French military bases in Burkina Faso under the First Republic in 1961, and the quasi-clandestine arrival of the SABRE force in 2009. In this sense, the desire for strategic autonomy expressed by the MPSR II, although it represented a break with the past, was built on pre-existing foundations.

On the domestic front, the drive for strategic autonomy is at least openly reflected in the focus on an "all-military" strategy, aimed at forcing members of terrorist groups to lay down their arms and contact the National Call Center to join a reintegration program, the details of which are defined by the State. This strategy implies expanding the armed forces through massive recruitment of Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDPs) and increasing the strength of defense and security forces (army, gendarmerie, police, water and forestry agents, etc.), as well as significant investments in military equipment and aerial delivery systems. On the diplomatic front, the MPSR II expresses its will for strategic autonomy in the fight against terrorism, and subsequently, in its commitment to national ownership of that effort. It rejects Western military presence and intervention on Burkinabe territory, as well as that of private military security firms such as Wagner, to cite the most widely criticized example. The leaders of the MPSR II have clearly stated that they intend to define for themselves the areas in which international partners can support Burkina Faso in its fight against terrorism, as external support must not run counter to Burkina Faso's pre-defined strategy. This commitment to a purely Burkinabe solution to insecurity distinguishes Burkina Faso from Mali (and its partnership with the Wagner military security company) and Niger (which has strengthened its partnership with the Barkhane force and other military forces from Western countries). Although the foundations for a uniquely Burkinabe solution were already in place under President Roch Kaboré's regime, notably in its very sparing, ad hoc reliance on the Barkhane force and adoption of the VDP law, Captain Ibrahim Traoré's regime truly distinguishes itself from its predecessors in its commitment to strategic autonomy.

The rapprochement with Russia can be explained by a number of factors, including the traditional use of Soviet military equipment by Burkina Faso's defense and security forces, as it is easier to handle and less costly. Several reasons have been put forward by Burkina Faso's traditional partners for not supporting the new regime militarily. Firstly, the country's will for strategic autonomy is not easily accepted or understood (France). Secondly, the large-scale recruitment of VDPs, who are often accused of massive human rights violations, was also cited (Canada). However, the new strategy for dealing with VDPs is to place them under the direct authority



of the army, thereby strengthening control over them. While the Burkinabe authorities are quick to point out that VDPs now receive human rights training prior to their deployment, the impact of such training in the field has yet to be assessed. Last but not least, the nature of the regime, as an emergency government following a coup d'état, has also been cited as a reason for refusing military support (USA). This refusal to provide support, combined with the need to procure military equipment to achieve strategic autonomy, has led to a self-interested rapprochement with Russia, which has been facilitated by Mali, as President Traoré's regime enjoys excellent relations with the latter. There has also been a marked rapprochement with Turkey (for the purchase of drones) and Iran. These developments are directly linked to the need to purchase military equipment to combat terrorism.

On the regional front, the drive for strategic autonomy clashes with the diplomatic choices and strategies of neighboring states. ECOWAS has never been able to take the operational lead in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel, despite the cross-border nature of the threat. It has been supplanted by the G5 Sahel, which has however been weakened by the official withdrawal of Mali, whose presence is essential to the organization's actions. The effectiveness of the G5 Sahel as a regional counter-terrorism framework is therefore questionable. It is now being challenged by the Accra Initiative, which encompasses both Central Sahel and coastal countries. The Accra Initiative aims to set up a 2,000-strong joint force and strengthen intelligence cooperation. Although Burkina Faso was initially approached to take on a thousand members of the joint force, it quickly ruled out the possibility, probably due to its commitment to strategic autonomy. However, it has yet to express any intention of withdrawing from the G5 Sahel. The proliferation of regional institutional frameworks for the fight against terrorism is detrimental to the intelligibility of the strategies implemented and can have a negative impact on the expected outcomes. However, to curb insecurity, the Burkinabe transitional authorities' drive for strategic autonomy needs to be reconciled with regional counter-terrorism efforts.

II. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF ISOLATIONISM IN THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL

Burkina Faso cannot afford to rely on an exclusively national solution in the fight against insecurity. The transnational nature of the threat and the structural causes of terrorism would make that approach ineffective. Accordingly, Burkina Faso's transitional authorities are developing a policy of appeasement with neighboring states, both in word and in deed. The measured response to the accusations made by the President of Ghana regarding Wagner's alleged presence in Burkina Faso, as well as to the discourteous remarks made by Nigerian General Abou Tarka condemning Burkina Faso's drive for strategic autonomy, demonstrate that the MPSR II is aware of the need for sub-regional collaboration in the fight against terrorism. Successive visits by the heads of state of Benin and Ghana to Ouagadougou, which focused on security matters, have further confirmed the need for the countries concerned to join forces in the fight against terrorism. The visit of Burkina Faso's Minister of Foreign Affairs to Côte d'Ivoire, despite the sanctions imposed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) banning high-ranking Burkina Faso officials from flying into ECOWAS airspace, and the delivery of military equipment to Burkina Faso by Côte d'Ivoire, with a view to conducting joint military operations, also confirm a willingness to expand cooperation with neighboring states. Regional police, customs, and military cooperation is vital. Our analysis shows that bilateral cooperation in the fight against terrorism seems to be emerging. This may prove the most viable approach, given the lack of trust between Burkina Faso's transitional authorities and sub-regional organizations. Military cooperation with Mali is already a reality, and it is also vital with the other neighboring countries. However, bilateral military operations alone will not be enough to curb terrorism in certain border areas. For example, a joint military operation by Burkina Faso and Niger in the tri-border area would be futile without Mali's involvement. Similarly, joint military operations between Burkina Faso and Benin in the Parc W area would be pointless without the involvement of Niger, Togo, and even Ghana. Finally, a joint military operation between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire would only have limited impact if Mali were not involved. Due to the porous nature of the borders and the ability of terrorists to take refuge in areas untouched by military



operations, any planned military operations should be not bilateral but trilateral and, in certain areas such as Parc W, they would need to involve at least four states. Burkina Faso and its neighbors must therefore transcend their divergent military and diplomatic strategies to achieve effective military and security cooperation in the fight against terrorism. As for the transitional government's counter-terrorism strategy in Burkina Faso, it seems to focus mainly on military and security actions.

III. AN APPARENT "ALL-MILITARY" STRATEGY

The MPSR II has been developing actions to combat terrorism since September 30, 2022. These primarily consist of military-security and humanitarian actions. On the military-security front, the large-scale recruitment of VDPs and defence and security forces (DSFs) bears witness to this new approach. In addition, the country's military capabilities are being strengthened, including through the use of aerial delivery systems. On the humanitarian front, supply operations are regularly conducted in disaster-stricken areas. In some disaster-stricken or reconquered areas, the DSFs are building boreholes and asphalted roads. It also appears that a number of laws and regulations drafted under previous regimes have been adopted at the same time. On December 1, 2022, the new authorities issued a Decree of the Council of Ministers adopting a 2022-2026 national counter-terrorism strategy (SNCT), followed on April 11, 2023, by the adoption of an implementing decree for the strategy through the creation of a national counter-terrorism coordination body (CNCT) placed under the authority of the Prime Minister. The CNCT is therefore the body responsible for implementing the SNCT. The overall aim of the SNCT is to "vanquish the terrorist peril and its related scourges through a vigorous, holistic, national response that mobilizes the entire nation and develops effective cooperation with neighboring states and the international community, whilst consolidating social cohesion, peace, and development". To achieve this, the SNCT stands on four (4) pillars, which are further broken down into strategic priorities, strategic objectives, and operational objectives. The four pillars are:

- measures to combat the conditions that promote the development of terrorism,

- measures to prevent and counter terrorism,
- measures to build states' capacity to prevent and respond to terrorism, and
- measures to ensure respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the foundation for the fight against terrorism.

In this respect, the SNCT represents a holistic approach that encompasses the military-security approach without being limited to it.

On May 9, 2023, the transitional legislative assembly adopted a law on national security policy (PNS). With its focus on the link between security and development, the PNS "is founded on the assertion that sound and balanced governance of all sectors of national life, combined with discerning and consistent strategic options, are the foundations of a strong, peaceful, stable, prosperous, and resilient nation". Accordingly, the PNS has been designed to guarantee national security based on the following threefold requirement:

- a stable government that fully discharges its sovereign obligations,
- a satisfactory level of human security for present and future generations, and
- optimal protection of the fundamental interests of the nation.

The PNS is founded on a holistic approach to security, of which the SNCT is the most visible expression. The process of drawing up the national security policy and subsequently the national counter-terrorism strategy began under President Roch Kaboré. The national security policy and the national counter-terrorism strategy are the fruit of a truly endogenous process, which involved the security and defense forces, researchers from a number of disciplines, and the various constituents and driving forces of the nation. Their adoption by the MPSR II is a clear sign of government continuity despite the political turmoil the country has experienced. At the same time, the validation of the national strategy for the prevention of radicalization and the fight against violent extremism (SNPREV) on May 10, 2021, and the adoption of its 2021-2023 action plan should be noted. The SNPREV was drawn up in line with the G5 Sahel reference framework, with support from USAID. The aim of the SNPREV is to "reduce vulnerability to radicalization and violent



extremism and strengthen social cohesion and peaceful coexistence with neighboring countries in the subregion". In July 2021, the 2021-2025 national strategy for social cohesion in Burkina Faso (SNCS) was adopted with UNDP support. The SNCS aims to strengthen social cohesion by improving conflict prevention and management, mitigating drivers of radicalization and violent extremism, reinforcing social dialogue, and combating exclusion. It is also common knowledge that a 2022-2026 national reconciliation strategy (SNR) was drawn up under President Kaboré and validated under President Damiba. A draft social pact (Pacte du Vivre-Ensemble) was drawn up in the wake of the SNR.

The definitive adoption of the PNS and the SNCT under President Traoré, with the CNCT as the implementing body, suggests that the claim that the transitional authorities have opted for an "all-military" strategy should be qualified. However, it is still too early to draw any definite conclusions at this stage. The rapid and effective adoption of the PNS and the SNCT by all branches of government could help to allay claims of an "all-military" approach. Otherwise, we would have to conclude that President Traoré's regime has indeed opted for an "all-security" strategy, understood as an exclusively military-security approach to the fight against terrorism, despite its obvious limitations.

The abundance of instruments adopted since 2021 works counter to the consistency and intelligibility of counter-terrorism efforts. The reasons for this include the lack of collaboration between the various ministerial departments; the wide range of technical and financial partners, each with their own roadmaps that they are keen to implement; and, finally, the successive changes of government. It is therefore important to establish the PNS as a core document, from which proceed the various sectoral or specific strategies and their action plans. The sectoral strategies of the PNS (national defense strategy, national environmental protection strategy, etc.) have still not been adopted thus far. However, specific strategies such as the SNCT, SNPREV, SNCS and SNR need to be implemented consistently.

Concrete results have been achieved in the field through military action, including the liberation of communes such as Solenzo, Falangouloutou, Pissila and Dassa, and people have been able to return home. However, the

offensive strategy implemented by the MPSR II has led to an increase in violence by terrorist groups, resulting in forced displacements of civilians, both in villages with and without VDPs. To date, the number of IDPs continues to grow, and the number of villages subjected to forced displacement is rising in certain regions, particularly in the Boucle du Mouhoun, the East, the North and the Center-North. Under those circumstances, if the transitional authorities manage to achieve rapid and significant successes, such as reducing attacks on civilians and DSFs and securing numerous communes, they will emerge strengthened. Failing that, a variety of scenarios are possible.

IV. POSSIBLE SHORT- AND MEDIUM-TERM SCENARIOS FOR THE TRANSITION IN BURKINA FASO

Four scenarios are conceivable in the short-to-medium term for the future of the transition in Burkina Faso.

Firstly, the prospect of another coup cannot be totally ruled out. The outcome of the trial in connection with the call to set fire to the palace of the Mogho Naba on July 10, 2023, clearly shows that Burkinabe civil society leaders may have harbored thoughts of a putsch. As Burkina Faso's political history reminds us, there has never been a military coup without a civilian wing made up of politicians and/or members of civil society. While the current regime enjoys unprecedented popular support compared to its predecessors, it is not immune to being toppled by military or political factions. Indeed, in his March 23, 2023, speech in Kaya, President Traoré himself confirmed the existence of plots to overthrow him. The arrest of Lieutenant Colonel Zoungrana in late December 2022 on suspicion of acts of destabilization shows that this scenario cannot be ruled out. Another coup would undeniably have a devastating effect on the fight against terrorism and would further exacerbate political instability and rifts within the army. To minimize these risks, the transitional president must work relentlessly to improve security and combat misgovernance, including by effectively following up on institutional audits, including of the army. He must also work to heal the rifts within the army, by establishing equity and justice and by respecting the specific features and functions of each military corps, even though the urgency of the situation requires them



all to take part in anti-terrorist operations. In February 2023, the transitional legislative assembly passed a bill to make the role of provost marshals operational in the theater of operations in the context of the fight against terrorism. The provost function is the original function of the gendarmerie, which is to prevent and punish human rights violations within the armed forces. Effectively supporting the establishment of provost marshals will help to reassure every element of the nation and prevent community conflicts.

Secondly, President Traoré's regime could organize national elections to hand over power to elected authorities. The transition charter sets July 2024 as the end of the transition. From a practical standpoint, however, this deadline is unlikely to be met, as the planned revision of the electoral roll has yet to be carried out. What is more, the preparatory steps, such as registering voters on the electoral roll, have not yet begun. The question of appointing members to the various sections of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) has also been raised, particularly in its regional and communal branches. The July 2024 deadline also falls in the middle of the rainy season. Traditionally, elections are not held in Burkina Faso during the rainy season, to allow the rural population to go about their farming activities. Furthermore, the transition agenda includes political, administrative, and institutional reforms designed to rebuild the Burkinabe state. Their adoption and implementation are crucial to breaking the cycle of coups d'état and political crises. It is well known that the conditions of access to and exercise of power are the Gordian knot of crises in the Sahel. Corruption and the predominant role of money in the race for power have significantly undermined the legitimacy of elected leaders. The absence of accountability mechanisms for elected authorities has encouraged citizens to embrace coups as a means of sanctioning corrupt elected officials. It is therefore important to implement the reforms required to rebuild the state before organizing an election to prevent another cycle of coups d'état. However, the extension of Burkina Faso's transition must necessarily be the focus of discussions between national players on the one hand, and between the country's transitional authorities and ECOWAS on the other. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that a transition is by its very nature temporary and not meant to endure. It is therefore vital for the authorities, in con-

sultation with the CENI, to revise the electoral roll with a view to organizing the election.

Thirdly, we cannot rule out the possibility that the Traoré regime will remain in power. This could result from an indefinite extension of the transition. In that case, the regime would inevitably be confronted with power fatigue over the medium term. In the case of the current transition, this could be accentuated by economic and financial difficulties caused by the security crisis. A lack of immediate and lasting results could lead to impatience on the part of the population and—ultimately—to disaffection with the transitional authorities. Disaffection could turn into rejection if President Traoré's regime fails to demonstrate exemplary economic governance. Indeed, the legacy of President Thomas Sankara in the minds of the Burkinabe people has made sound economic and financial governance the primary criterion for judging a regime. On the other hand, it cannot be ruled out that President Traoré himself may run in elections organized over the medium term. This would inevitably give rise to socio-political tensions, since, in French-speaking Africa, with the exception of Senegal, an incumbent running in a presidential election virtually always ends up winning. This scenario would be more easily accepted by the population if he delivered convincing results on the security and humanitarian fronts, and if the MPSR II distinguished itself by its exemplary management of public resources and economic governance.

Finally, even if this scenario is clearly undesirable, we cannot rule out a deepening of the security crisis, which would directly threaten social cohesion in Burkina Faso, both between ethnic and religious communities, leading to a "Somalization" of the country that would be detrimental to the entire region. While the stereotype of an ethnic conflict between the Mossi and Fulani should be avoided, as it is too simplistic and fails to reflect the complexity of the situation in Burkina Faso, it is undeniable that conflicts between farmers and herders over the control of natural resources have served as a ferment for the development of the crisis. Moreover, the initial overrepresentation of the Fulani ethnic group in the Ansarul Islam terrorist group has heightened ethnic tensions and created a climate of mistrust between communities, recalling the nineteenth-century raids and wars in the Sudano-Sahelian band. Terrorist attacks against other religious communities (notably Christians and Shiites),



but also against Muslim leaders who do not share their conception of Islam, is a threat to the long-harmonious religious cohabitation in Burkina Faso. In light of this, it is vital for customary and traditional chiefs and religious communities to play a key role in the fight against terrorism.

CONCLUSION

The advent of the MPSR II on September 30, 2022, was triggered by the growing security and humanitarian crisis in Burkina Faso, as well as by differences within the army over the appropriate strategy for defeating terrorism. The MPSR II has opted for strategic autonomy in the fight against terrorism, increasing the strength of its fighting forces and making massive purchases of military equipment. Their refusal to negotiate with terrorists may reinforce the impression that they have chosen an all-military strategy. Despite the differing strategies adopted by the three Central Sahel states, they can only defeat terrorism through close collaboration with each other and with the coastal states. The transitional government has officially adopted a law on national security policy and a national counter-terrorism strategy, both of which were drawn up inclusively under previous regimes, taking a holistic approach to the fight against terrorism. If these instruments are fully implemented by the transitional authorities, then the current assumption of an “all-military” strategy would be called into question. To overcome terrorism, it is imperative for Burkina Faso to implement its national security policy and national counter-terrorism strategy consistently, effectively, and inclusively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of these analyses, we submit the following recommendations:

To the current transitional authorities of Burkina Faso:

- Implement the national security policy and the national counter-terrorism strategy in an effective, inclusive, and coherent manner,
- Consistently integrate the national strategy for the prevention of radicalization and the fight against

violent extremism as well as the national strategy for social cohesion into the national counter-terrorism strategy,

- Take steps to ensure effective audits within the army and vigorously combat economic and financial misgovernance within the state apparatus,
- In consultation with the CENI, implement the reforms required for the organization of free, honest, and transparent elections,
- Implement the political, institutional, and administrative reforms set out in the transition agenda, and
- Include customary, traditional, and religious authorities in the fight against insecurity.

To African sub-regional and continental organizations:

- Encourage and facilitate bilateral and plurilateral initiatives to combat terrorism in the Sahel,
- Support Burkina Faso’s transitional authorities in organizing a credible, honest, and transparent electoral process within a reasonable timeframe, taking into account the real factors that could compromise the pre-established timetable, and
- Take into account Burkina Faso’s national security policy and national counter-terrorism strategy within the framework of the G5 Sahel and the Accra Initiative.

To Burkina Faso’s international partners:

- Provide financial support for the Burkina Faso Transition Government’s stabilization and development plan,
- Support the implementation of Burkina Faso’s national security policy and anti-terrorism strategy,
- Support the operationalization of provost marshals in military theaters of operation, as a means of preventing and punishing violations of human rights and international humanitarian law,
- Support the transitional authorities in organizing an honest, free, and transparent election,
- Step up support for actions aimed at curbing the humanitarian crisis, particularly measures to resettle IDPs, strengthen food supply measures and support Burkina Faso in lifting blockades, and
- Work to ensure that humanitarian assistance does not increase the economic dependence of IDPs.



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