

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of small grey dots, with several larger red dots scattered throughout, primarily around the title area.

# Stability in Lake Chad: a focus on economic development and the resilience of the people as an adjunct to military action

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2015, the countries bordering the Lake Chad Basin have been attempting to provide a military response to Boko Haram, which has taken a high human and economic toll in this territory inhabited by citizens of four different countries. The emergence of terrorism in this part of the continent is solely the consequence of the failure of the governments, which have not provided infrastructure, even less basic social services.

The threat took these governments by surprise, and they reacted with a military response that reduced the danger without eliminating it completely. Over the years, the Islamist movement has undergone a transformation, and it is important for governments to adapt their responses to the changing circumstances by promoting economic development alongside military action. Indeed, they must move beyond a single-minded focus on security alone, and, with the support of the international community, must listen to the people, hear their grievances and aspirations, and devise a coordinated response plan for this part of Africa, which is at the crossroads of several regions (West Africa, the Sahara, and Central Africa). This should be done in a concerted manner and with

the support of the international community. Otherwise, poverty and climate change, which create a breeding ground for terrorism, will have a more serious impact on the security of the region and the rest of the world.

## INTRODUCTION

Prior to the death of Field Marshal Idriss Déby Itno, who fell in battle against rebels belonging to the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) in the Chadian desert in April 2021, Chad was viewed as an “*island of stability in an ocean of insecurity*”. The country’s relative stability was due solely to the absence of insurrectionary movements within its territory, which was not spared from acts of banditry and various forms of trafficking. The fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in October 2011 and that of Omar Hassan Al-Bashir in Sudan in 2019, followed by a transition that ended in a coup d’état and civil war, along with the emergence of Boko Haram and its establishment around Lake Chad and on its islands in late 2014 further accentuated the risk of destabilisation in the region.



The countries bordering the lake (Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria, and Chad), as well as Benin, swiftly reacted, creating a Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) under the supervision of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC). Deployed around the lake, the force was able to contain the threat without, however, annihilating it. After a prolonged period of respite, Boko Haram is back in the news, although it was thought to have been significantly weakened following a major offensive by former president Idriss Deby Itno, which was dubbed the “*Wrath of Bohoma*”. The terrorist group changed its modus operandi and continued to harass defence and security forces with guerrilla operations and kidnappings in April 2022 and the months that followed. However, it seems like the socio-economic development and the appropriate access to basic social services are challenges that could undermine the apparent military results.

The aim of this policy paper is to assess the region’s management of the fight against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, focusing on its progress and limitations, and to outline the prospects for lasting stability in the region, bearing in mind that the security situation will be further complicated by the Sudanese crisis with 100.000 Sudanese refugees which already have passed the boarder according to UNHCR.

## A RELATIVE MILITARY SUCCESS, BUT THE ISSUES REMAIN

Repeated attacks by armed groups have forced more than 406,000 people to flee their home villages and settle in makeshift camps, according to UNHCR. The loss of human life and means of production, and the slowdown in economic development remain significant. Prior to 2015, the Lake Chad region was a major trading centre as well as a crossroads for a number of illegal activities, including trafficking in drugs and psychotropic substances imported from Nigeria. The area’s economy ran on the naira, even though three of the four countries bordering the lake used the CFA franc. This reflected the robustness of the Nigerian economy, which supplied most of the neighbouring countries with manufactured goods. Thanks to the oil boom in the 1970s and 80s, Nigeria became a destination for idle youth seeking their fortune. Such journeys generated the popular image of

the *Alhadji*, a wealthy trader who drove large cars and had multiple wives and children, as a model of success in the minds of young people. The recession that hit the Nigerian economy ended up partially deconstructing this image and encouraged the rise of intolerant speech. Despite the actions taken against it, trafficking continues due to the lack of a military and administrative presence on the part of the area’s states. In January 2015, when the first fugitives from the attack on Baga Kawa reached the shores of Lake Chad, the military presence there was quite weak.

It was only as the operations progressed that the army’s presence was strengthened all the way to the islands of Tchongolé and Kinasserom. It is estimated that nearly 10,000 soldiers were deployed by the four states in the fight against the terrorists. A major military base with the capacity to accommodate aircraft has even been set up in the town of Baga Sola.

On the military front, Boko Haram has virtually ceased operating on Chadian territory, apart from rare incursions against army positions and kidnappings of citizens, humanitarian workers, and even government officials. However, while military operations have stopped, the islands have been deserted by the population, who have returned to major urban centres such as Bol, Baga Sola and Liwa.

Since then, the number of attacks has fallen. Faced with military setbacks, Boko Haram opted for a strategy of withdrawal, making only rare incursions to stock up on food. It was also at this time that explosive devices began to replace frontal attacks. Finally, it was also the beginning of the ideological dissensions that led to the split in Boko Haram and the birth of ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Barnawi. While there are no figures available, the security threat has been temporarily warded off.

It can be concluded that, although Boko Haram has been militarily weakened, like the Hydra, it has not been completely wiped out and is taking advantage of the lulls in the fighting to reorganise and change its methods by recruiting new members from among the farmers who are idle due to the insecurity on the islands.



## CONSOLIDATING GAINS AND ADAPTING TO NEW CIRCUMSTANCES

It is a well-known fact that protracted military operations entail a serious risk of armies getting bogged down. This is likely to happen around Lake Chad, where armed forces have been stationed for close to a decade.

In addition to the risk of battle fatigue, there is the thorny issue of funding, which the Multinational Joint Task Force is likely to lack in the long term. As crises multiply, media and donor attention is increasingly focused on new crises such as Sudan or Ukraine. This is why it is important to adapt for obvious strategic reasons.

The first step is to adapt the engagement model to the new situation. Since the war is increasingly asymmetrical, with the enemy forming part of the population, the armed forces should “strip off their uniforms” and get closer to the people. This will put a more human face on military operations, facilitate soldiers’ socialisation and, in turn, make it easier to gather human intelligence. At this stage of the war, an army entrenched in its camp and faced with an invisible enemy is all the more vulnerable.

For instance, units should organise civil-military activities for example, with a social focus (actions in health centres, construction of public works for the local population), thus contributing to recovery efforts in the region which, it should be remembered, lacked and still lacks many basic social services.

## TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE “BUILDING, NOT REBUILDING” PLAN

Be it in Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon or Chad, the Lake Chad region has lacked political vision since independence. The great drought of the 1970s, which led to a drastic reduction in the surface area of Lake Chad, failed to draw the attention of the states to this area of fertile land, as demonstrated by the polder development experience. Even the creation of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) has done little to address the development needs imposed by the prevailing situation.

As a result, many observers believe that what Lake Chad truly needs is a comprehensive programme of “building, not rebuilding”. A political and economic strategy for the region must include the construction of infrastructure (roads, socio-educational and health facilities) as well as the creation of a new production system that considers the periods before and after Boko Haram. Indeed, before 2015, the production and trade system essentially revolved around Nigeria, but this production system has broken down as a result of the insecurity. Today, the people living on the lake are no longer producers and are largely dependent on assistance from humanitarian NGOs, whether they live in refugee or displaced persons camps or elsewhere. To achieve this, it will be necessary to consider a plan for the return of displaced populations to their villages. This will be the first step on the long road to building Lake Chad.

A new economic system must thus take into account the area’s basic trades (fishing, agriculture, livestock farming) as well as new developments introduced through contact with the outside world since the start of the crisis. The approach should be holistic, so as not to lose sight of the socio-anthropological aspects. A forgotten region by states that share this common space, Lake Chad also remains a territory marked by feudal systems, which must have been severely tested by the humanitarian crisis. The construction of schools, health centres, leisure facilities and lines of communication will promote the resumption of economic activities.

In addition to improving productivity and securing livelihoods, this approach will be decisive in deconstructing the terrorist discourse and will make recruitment increasingly difficult.

## THE SUDANESE CONFLICT, A THREAT TO CHAD AND THE LAKE

If Sudan descends into war, Chad will be further weakened, both by the influx of refugees, which will weaken its already battered economy, and by the precarious security situation created by the existence of rebel groups who have not signed the peace agreements under the current transition. These rebel movements could take advantage of the insurrectionary situation



to rearm or even launch attacks. For the record, Boko Haram managed to reach the port of Sudan, where its elements who had gone to collect logistics were arrested following coordinated action by Sudanese and Chadian police. This suggests that the exacerbation of the crisis in Sudan will be seen by ISWAP and Boko Haram as an opportunity to arm themselves and recruit new members.

Lake Chad, as mentioned above, is in fact a poor relation in terms of government presence, sovereign state powers, and development policies. The lake is of strategic importance in the fight against climate change, terrorism, and violent extremism, and should unify the four countries located on its shores around a common development objective. However, although the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) has existed for more than forty years, difficulties persist in the regional coordination of development strategies. This difficulty, which is due to latent conflicts between neighbours, is compounded by a lack of interest in, and therefore funding for, Lake Chad projects and programmes.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of this analysis, it is important to make the following recommendations:

### To the international community

- A. Mobilize urgent international aid for solving the problems in the region (insecurity, climate change, migration, underdevelopment). Increasing insecurity in the region will only reinforce the risks of destabilisation in the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea.
- B. Support and finance the design and implementation of a building plan for the Lake Chad area to prevent immigration, trafficking, and terrorism.
- C. Encourage the States bordering Lake Chad to move away from a focus on security alone and turn their defence and security forces into “*professional armies*” serving development.
- D. Support the efforts of the countries to prevent the situation in Sudan from flaring up, which would have repercussions for the entire region, given the precarious conditions that already exist.

### To the States

- A. Bring basic social services closer to the people living around Lake Chad to encourage their integration into their national communities. As the absence of government is one of the main causes of the emergence and development of violent extremism, only enhanced presence of government services can reassure the people and deter them from their joining extremist groups.
- B. Reform development policies by redesigning them from a holistic perspective. Development programmes and projects have very often been imposed on the population, leading to many failures due to a lack of buy-in.
- C. Set up a special programme to give disadvantaged groups, and particularly girls, access to education.

## CONCLUSION

The security crisis and the subsequent humanitarian crisis caused by the emergence of Boko Haram in 2015 in Lake Chad has been met with a military response that has yielded mixed results. While the terrorist threat has decreased in relative terms, it remains present with new methods. Most of the people who fled their villages without means of production are still in displaced persons camps. Poverty, which is one of the reasons why some of the population has turned to violent extremism, has not been reduced despite humanitarian action. What is needed, therefore, is a more sophisticated economic policy that takes account of the aspirations of the population.

To achieve this, the countries surrounding the lake, with support from the international community, must learn from the failures of previous development policies and place people at the heart of the new approach. This approach should promote the emergence of a diversified economy, based on a holistic design, and implemented with all strata of society in mind. This is the best way to intelligently combat terrorism when it attracts new recruits by denouncing exclusion and injustice.



### **About the author**

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