

Prospects for EU-Ghana defence partnership: Local agency and views on security cooperation

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The volatile security situation in the Sahel is having a seriously destabilising effect that goes beyond the borders of the countries immediately affected. National efforts and Western-led security support have largely failed to contain the threat in the past decade, leading to a schism between Sahelian states and various European actors. As Sahelian militant groups are now at the doorstep of littoral West Africa, European actors are scrambling to redefine their security support by placing greater emphasis on building new partnerships in the region. Ghana is one of two countries with whom the EU is looking to expand its cooperation. However, in a bid to avoid making miscalculations akin to those made in other Sahelian states, there is an urgency of gaining an improved understanding of local agency and views on security cooperation in a bid to design more effective and durable security responses.

INTRODUCTION

The political and security situation in the Sahel region is dire. What began as a Tuareg secessionist insurgency in northern Mali in 2012 has transformed into a regional multidimensional crisis, including an extensive presence of various Islamist non-state armed groups and ethnic militias, in a situation of intercommunal hostility and military takeovers across the Sahel. Furthermore, low-intensity attacks have been reported in northern parts of Benin (2019), Côte d'Ivoire (2020), and Togo (2022) during the past four years.

In tandem with this, political animosity and geopolitical competition have increased, not only among countries in the region but also towards and between extra-regional actors. The presence of Western military actors, in particular France, has become a critical friction point, with local public opinion and leadership becoming increasingly hostile to the French military presence. Since February 2022, the French military has withdrawn from three Sahelian states at the request of their junta-led governments.⁽¹⁾ Bamako also demanded that the UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, leave by the end of 2023.⁽²⁾ MINUSMA handed over control of its last major camps in the northern town of Timbuktu a few days before the end of the deadline.⁽³⁾

The presence of other Western security actors, including the European Union and the United States, is also being challenged because of their normative focus

on the promotion of democracy and human rights. The EU's Training Mission in Mali has drastically reduced the number of its personnel, while the Nigerien junta in December 2023 announced the cancellation within six months of two security and defence cooperation agreements with the European bloc.⁽⁴⁾ The first was the EU's civilian capacity-building mission, EUCAP Sahel Niger, which had been in place since 2012. The second was the EU Military Partnership Mission to Niger, which deployed in February 2023.⁽⁵⁾ On the same day, Niger signed a defence cooperation with Russia.⁽⁶⁾

The extent and speed at which Sahelian states severed their relations with France, downgraded their relationships with other European states, and took a more positive stance towards Russian support appeared to take many in Europe by surprise. What is more, some African countries' refusal to side with European positions in UN General Assembly votes condemning Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine caused some consternation in European diplomatic circles.⁽⁷⁾ Importantly, it highlighted diverging interpretations between Western and African actors. While some in Europe were quick to blame this development on Russian disinformation campaigns, others have sought to question the effectiveness of the European response.⁽⁸⁾

Against this backdrop, Western actors, including the EU, France and the US, are attempting to reframe existing relations or build new partnerships with African

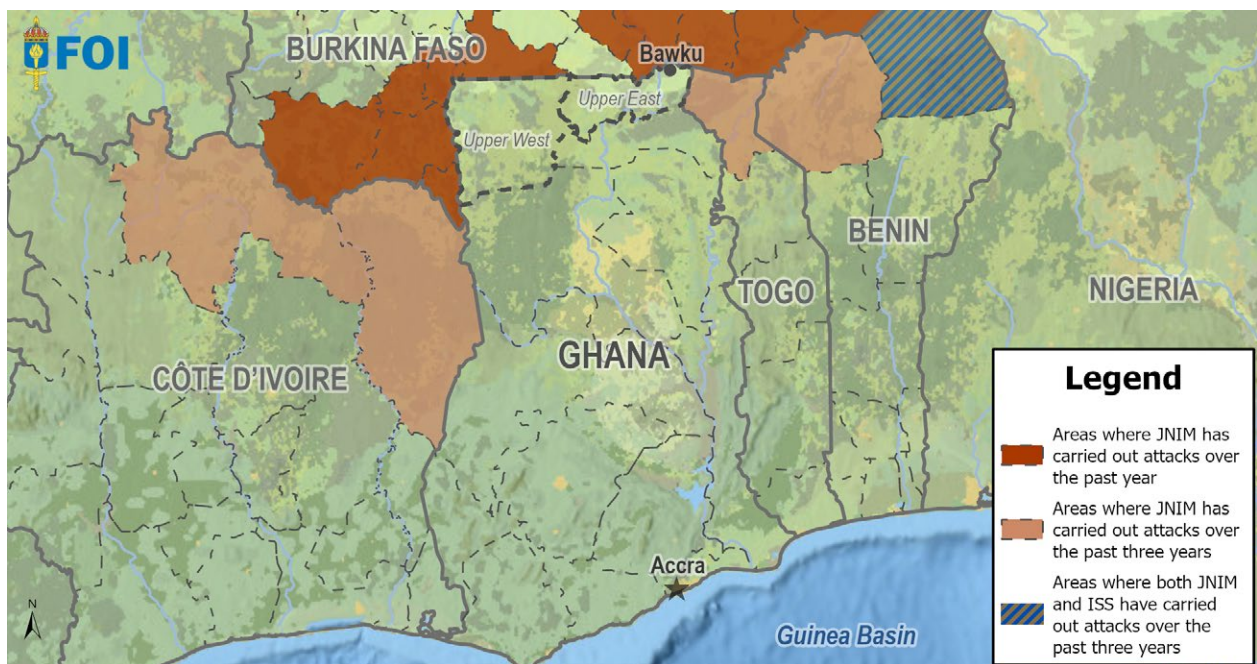
actors. France announced in February 2023 that it would reframe its engagement in Africa on a model of partnerships with local actors, including by reducing its military presence.⁽⁹⁾ By the same token, the Council of the EU announced a new initiative, in August 2023, that established a new civilian-military mission in countries along the Gulf of Guinea that will last for two years. So far, only Benin and Ghana have invited the EU to deploy, but the mission may be extended to other countries as well. Again, the mission emphasises “an integrated approach for a security and defence partnership.”⁽¹⁰⁾ The decision promises to deploy military advisors to EU delegations as well as provide training and capacity-building for local security forces.

What is less clear from these moves is what support local actors want or what role they want to play. Part of the challenges that emerged in the Sahel in recent years was the inability of external actors to adequately respond to their host communities’ security needs.⁽¹¹⁾ Other assessments have posited that Western security assistance has been too supply-driven, failing to account for the needs or conditions on the demand-side, and resulting in ineffective and sometimes counterproductive policies.⁽¹²⁾

As such, this brief assesses, in four parts, the prospects for European actors to build an effective and durable partnership with Ghana. It draws the conclusion

that there are good prospects for this for three reasons. Firstly, the security situation in Ghana is problematic but nowhere near as critical as the situation among its northern neighbours. Secondly, Ghana sees itself as a natural leader in Africa generally and has a long tradition of partaking in various security cooperation arrangements. Thirdly, Ghanaian actors are broadly positive towards the EU’s willingness to support but wants to maintain ownership and emphasise the need for effectiveness. They are also wary of France’s historical leadership in the region or potential hidden EU agendas.

The empirical material for this study consists of government documents, such as annual reports and speeches, as well as other open-source material, including media reports, data on political violence, and reports by civil-society organisations and security-sector specialists. Furthermore, the local perceptions expressed in this brief derive from 13 semi-structured interviews with in-country persons within government, civil service, academia, media, diplomatic corps, and civil society. These interviews were conducted in Accra in September 2023. The perceptions and views expressed in the interviews by no means represent an exhaustive account of how Ghanaians see cooperation with the EU, but they do express some sentiment that guides the broader Ghanaian narrative.



Map 1. Violent events attributed to JNIM and ISS-affiliated groups in border areas between Burkina Faso and littoral West African states, 2020-2023

Remarks: Created by Marianna Serveta

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Actor-specific activity: “JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslim” in Burkina Faso, Benin, Côte d’Ivoire and Togo 2019-2023, Accessed 11 January 2024, adapted by the author. Available at acleddata.com

GHANA'S SECURITY AND STABILITY THREAT ENVIRONMENT

Ghana's security situation stands out in the region as no jihadist attack has occurred in the country at the time of writing. However, attacks have occurred very close to the Ghanaian border and there is consensus among the interviewees that the situation in Burkina Faso is highly threatening also for Ghana. There are various reasons for this. In sum, it threatens to exacerbate Ghana's own security woes. The porosity of borders is a complicating factor making Ghana's already limited capacity to monitor and control the national territory very challenging. For example, there are 44 official points of entry into Ghana, but the number of informal crossings is estimated at 189.⁽¹³⁾

Transnational dimensions of instability

Local actors perceive the spillover effects of Islamist violence in the Sahel on Ghana as the primary threat. Although the interviewees considered Ghana peaceful and stable, there was a concern that broader instability within the country may provide fertile ground for extremist groups as well as exacerbate underlying drivers of instability.⁽¹⁴⁾ Some of the interviewees suspected that Islamist militants may already be present in the border areas with Burkina Faso. While militant groups have not yet conducted any attacks in-country, there are indications they may be using Ghana as a rear base or a recruitment zone.⁽¹⁵⁾ Furthermore, recent reports have indicated that Islamic State in the Sahel (ISS) attempted to establish a minor cell in the country's Eastern Region as early as 2019.⁽¹⁶⁾ Presumed Ghanaian fighters have also been present at training camps in the Gourma region of northern Mali. Nevertheless, precise estimates are unclear about the number of Ghanaian nationals who have joined the ranks of non-state armed groups such as ISS and al-Qaeda's affiliate, *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM). EU officials, meanwhile, have complained that the authorities communicate very little about the threat, making it difficult to form an adequate understanding of it. However, none of the interviewees believed that Ghana would be overrun in the same way as Mali and Burkina Faso, where JNIM is estimated to control 40 percent of the territory.⁽¹⁷⁾ Rather, they believed that should jihadist activities spread to Ghana they would remain localised in the near to medium term. Some of the interviewees said that this is because of peaceful coexistence between Muslim and Christian communities, that Islam is a minority religion and there is little support for extremist groups in Ghana.⁽¹⁸⁾ Nevertheless, it is worth noting that perceptions of

peaceful coexistence between Muslim and Christian communities in Burkina Faso were widespread only a few years ago, and yet jihadist violence has reached unprecedented levels.⁽¹⁹⁾ This by no means suggests that there is a breakdown in Christian-Muslim relations in Burkina Faso, but it does point to a realistic possibility of violent groups expanding their zone of operations despite this coexistence, as the drivers of jihadism in the Sahel are complex and not strictly tied to religious fundamentalism.

Relatedly, government officials emphasised the problem of increasing refugee inflows, primarily from Burkina Faso. Although there was a decrease in the number of arrivals from Burkina Faso at the beginning of 2023 there are expectations it will increase as the situation continues to deteriorate.⁽²⁰⁾ Most of the asylum seekers are concentrated in the Upper East and Upper West regions.⁽²¹⁾ The perceived threat in relation to this is twofold. On the one hand, government officials warned that militants may be hiding among the large numbers of refugees who make their way to Ghana.⁽²²⁾ On the other, the influx of refugees entails a higher pressure on health and housing infrastructure in the north, which is less developed than the south.

In line with a broader trend seen across the Sahel, the Fulani ethnic group, which is widely dispersed across the region is becoming increasingly stigmatised also in Ghana. This is due to underlying hostility and, in part, to negative stereotyping and "othering" in local media.⁽²³⁾ This is driven both by inter-communal tensions, as many "people [erroneously] see [Fulanis] as non-Ghanaians," and land disputes, as the movement of cattle damages cropland, a classic case driven at least in part by conflict between pastoral transhumance and sedentary farming livelihoods.⁽²⁴⁾ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees expressed concern in July about the forced returns of several hundred refugees, most of whom were Fulanis.⁽²⁵⁾ Relatedly, the number of Fulani herders moving their cattle to Ghana during the transhumance season has increased due to the insecurity across the northern border. In turn, this influx exacerbates competition over land, both between herders and local farming communities in the north. The growing competition over land in tandem with the ostensible targeting of Fulanis, raises legitimate concerns about jihadist expansion. Indeed, Hamadou Kouffa, the leader of the JNIM-affiliated Katiba Macina, has sought to exploit the grievances of Fulanis across the Sahel to increase recruitment from the group.⁽²⁶⁾ Furthermore, in a video from 2021, a presumed Ghanaian suicide bomber in Mali called on Fulanis in Ghana to take

up arms.⁽²⁷⁾ Albeit isolated incidents, they point to the potential for polarisation between farming communities and the predominantly pastoralist Fulani community in northern Ghana.

There are additional concerns about the threat from organised crime groups who are active in trafficking across the border region. The smuggled goods include small arms and light weaponry, explosives, fuel, drugs, and other commodities and goods, which may be used to finance the militants' operations.⁽²⁸⁾

Finally, maritime crime and piracy have also been a security concern in Ghana and the wider Gulf of Guinea region during the past decade. Nevertheless, the number of reported incidents has fallen significantly since its peak in 2020, which has led to a deprioritisation of the threat. Furthermore, some of our interlocutors suggested that piracy is not seen as a threat against Ghana but rather to Western actors who use Ghanaian waters for shipping.⁽²⁹⁾

Internal dimensions of instability

In terms of the domestic factors that may increase instability, government officials, academics and policy analysts have highlighted the deteriorating security situation in the north and long-standing land disputes as particular concerns. Several of the interviewees raised the conflict between the Mamprusi and Kusasi ethnic groups in the Bawku area of the Upper East Region as an example.⁽³⁰⁾ The area borders Burkina Faso's Centre-East region, where JNIM has conducted attacks for several years.⁽³¹⁾ Essentially, the fear is that the instability in parts of Burkina Faso may spill over and further inflame the Bawku conflict. The area has also become a hotspot for the trafficking of arms and drugs between the Sahel and coastal areas.⁽³²⁾ Despite the deteriorating trend in Bawku, no link has yet been established to the Islamist militant groups present in Burkina Faso.

Another driver of insecurity in Ghana is the presence of illegal gold-mining operations, locally referred to as *galamsey*. These exist throughout the country, but many of them are concentrated along the north-western border with Côte d'Ivoire.⁽³³⁾ Individuals from across West Africa allegedly run some of these mining operations, where criminality and human-rights abuses are regularly reported. These include armed robberies and the use of firearms, as well as, given the nature of the activities, explosives.⁽³⁴⁾ In response to the issue of illegal gold mining, the government has deployed the military to disrupt some of these operations. Some of our interlocutors indicated that animosity towards the armed forces has been fuelled by their heavy-handed approach against some of the miners, many of whom

live hand to mouth. Some miners are even ready to use violent tactics against the soldiers. Furthermore, several studies indicate that groups affiliated to ISS or JNIM are exploiting these clandestine sites, including by collecting Islamic taxes (*zakat*) and recruiting members, to finance their operations.⁽³⁵⁾ Such activities are consistent with a broader trend seen across the Sahel in recent years.⁽³⁶⁾

Thirdly, there was consensus among our Ghanaian interlocutors that youth unemployment presents a serious risk of instability in the longer term. Nationally, the unemployment rate in 2021 was estimated at almost 33%, but reaching nearly 39% in the Upper East.⁽³⁷⁾ Given Ghana's serious macroeconomic woes, there is concern that the issue will worsen and fuel growing levels of civil unrest. Experience from other Sahelian states, such as Burkina Faso, suggests that a lack of employment opportunities and livelihoods for local youths has been widespread among fighters recruited by non-state armed groups.⁽³⁸⁾

Finally, several interviewees noted that general elections planned for 2024 may become a flashpoint for politically motivated violence in the country. Although elections in Ghana have been comparatively peaceful since the return of democracy in the 1990s, recent election cycles have seen an increase in politically affiliated youth vigilante groups who use violent tactics. Ghanaian politicians have increasingly used these vigilante groups to monitor polling stations and intimidate voters.⁽³⁹⁾ Despite the ban on these groups in 2019, reports of violent acts continue.⁽⁴⁰⁾ As such, conflicts such as the one in Bawku may become further inflamed and infiltrated by external actors looking to sow division.

GHANA'S RESPONSE TO NATIONAL SECURITY THREATS

Ghana has taken a multi-pronged approach to its perceived security threats, including increased security deployment, strengthening intelligence-gathering, capacity-building, public-sensitisation campaigns, and social programmes. Firstly, the government has sought to strengthen the security presence in the north. Following the death of an immigration officer in Bawku in April 2023, the government announced the deployment of about 1,000 security operatives, including US- and UK-trained special forces, to the Upper East.⁽⁴¹⁾ In addition, authorities are currently establishing four forward-operating bases, two of which are due to be located in the Upper East and the remaining two in the Upper West, according to one well-placed interviewee.⁽⁴²⁾

This follows a series of security operations in recent years that focused on different aspects of the perceived

security threat, including land disputes, violent crime, illegal gold mining, and trafficking. The deployments include Operation Conquest Fist, which saw the deployment of 600–800 counterterrorism forces, including soldiers and police, to secure the country's borders. Operation Cow Leg, which has been activated in various iterations since 1988, has seen joint military and police forces deployed to deal with long-running disputes between sedentary farmers and cattle herders over grazing and land rights. These operations are regularly activated in various areas of the country in response to herder-farmer hostilities. Operation Calm Life is deployed across the country to deal with armed robberies, while Operation Vanguard seeks to combat illegal gold mining.⁽⁴³⁾

Furthermore, the government has sought to increase its capabilities, for instance, by acquiring new technology for reconnaissance and surveillance. However, it is unclear what type of technology it acquired. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the inauguration, in July, of a new Signals Training School at the Burma military camp, in Accra.⁽⁴⁴⁾ In addition, in October 2023, the EU delivered 105 armoured vehicles that will be used to patrol the border.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The EU materiel is part of a broader support package worth some EUR 615 million and delivered through the European Peace Facility (EPF). These vehicles may add some patrol capabilities, but one foreign military official described patrolling Ghana's 475 km-long border as highly challenging from a military perspective.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Besides the military response, the government has increased its cooperation with local chiefs, who play an important role in intelligence-gathering and conflict resolution.⁽⁴⁷⁾ One security analyst claimed that Ghana's response stands out in comparison to its neighbours in that it has preferred to monitor suspected militants' movements rather than disrupt their activities by making arrests.⁽⁴⁸⁾ In addition, the government has sought to increase sensitisation among the population through a campaign called "See something, say something," which mirrors the New York Metropolitan Transport Authority's, established in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.⁽⁴⁹⁾ In the same vein, the Ghanaian campaign encourages citizens to report suspicious activities to the authorities via a designated telephone number. The authorities have also carried out an awareness campaign through meetings in local communities.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Finally, the government is implementing a job-creation policy, including temporary employment for youths.⁽⁵¹⁾ The aim is to ensure that people have acceptable livelihoods, which in turn

may limit the attraction of fast money offered by the various jihadist groups.

As of yet, it is difficult to assess the impact of these measures. What is clear, however, is that macroeconomic factors are challenging the effectiveness of the response. Ghana is going through one of its most severe economic crises in decades. The crisis is characterised by inflation that is over 50%, a debt-to-GDP ratio in 2023 of 84.9%, and the downgrading by several credit-rating agencies of the country's investment grade, hampering its ability to access financing on capital markets. Consequently, this has forced the government to seek a three-year USD 3 billion Extended Credit Facility from the IMF in 2022, which was finally approved in May 2023. A World Bank report in July 2023 estimates that GDP growth will not recover its potential before 2025, indicating that austerity measures will likely continue to hamper the government's ability to finance its security response in the coming years.⁽⁵²⁾ Indeed, the public deficit has already slowed the effective implementation of policies and likely exacerbated pre-existing capacity gaps. In its annual report for 2022, the Ministry of National Security confirmed that underfunding has led to inefficiencies and delays in many of its activities. Such deficiencies are particularly evident when it comes to the staffing targets of its various agencies, including the National Intelligence Bureau (NIB), the Research Department, and the National Signals Bureau (NSB). In 2022, the NIB and the NSB were only able to meet less than half of their staffing targets.⁽⁵³⁾ The same report also describes other lacunae, such as ageing equipment, deficits in the number of vehicles, and inadequate office or warehousing space. In turn, this means that in the coming years, the government will continue to remain reliant on external support to fund its counterterrorism response.

GHANA'S APPROACH TO SECURITY COOPERATION

The regional dimension of the Sahelian security crisis and the porosity of the borders in the region mean that cooperation on security is critical for an effective response. Indeed, several regional organisations and initiatives are active in seeking to combat various aspects of the regional threat. Chief among these is the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which is both a common market and political bloc. Since the late 1990s, ECOWAS has also mounted several peace-support operations (PSOs) by deploying soldiers and police to countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia. The organisation also plays an active

role in early warning and conflict prevention, as well as counterterrorism.

Although ECOWAS is considered one of the most established and integrated Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Sub-Saharan Africa, the bloc has struggled to respond to the various security crises in West Africa and the Sahel during the past decade. Partly, this is due to the fact that some of the countries affected by the transnational crises are not ECOWAS members. As such, different ad hoc coalitions of the willing have been formed to combat transnational insurgencies, such as in the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel.⁽⁵⁴⁾ In the same vein, in 2017, Ghana's President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo announced the Accra Initiative (AI). The initiative seeks to formalise counterterrorism cooperation and intelligence-sharing between its five member states,⁽⁵⁵⁾ Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo, in a bid to stem the southward expansion of jihadist groups from the Sahel. The idea was to hold regular meetings on at least two levels: the first, between the heads of state, and the other, between ministers of defence and security. The organisation's executive secretariat is based in Accra, and its operational headquarters are being built in the northern city of Tamale.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Furthermore, the organisation is intended to be lean and flexible, able to allow member states to mount bilateral security arrangements and temporary operations.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Nonetheless, there has been concern about how the Accra Initiative and ECOWAS's respective mandates overlap, including in matters of early warning and intelligence-gathering as part of its counterterrorism strategy.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Ghana's pledge in 2022 to establish a multinational joint task force also created some confusion in ECOWAS circles as it was perceived to conflict with the ECOWAS standby force. However, according to the respondent who was a senior government official, the government has now clarified its statement and emphasised that the Accra Initiative is only there to support the wider security architecture.

In addition, Ghana cooperates bilaterally with extra-regional actors such as Austria, Denmark, Germany, the UK, and the US; all provide training in various forms, including of the special forces and the Navy. Similarly, the EU is supporting Ghana with materiel, specifically through the EPF, and there are ongoing efforts to expand the partnership as part of the European bloc's new strategy for the Gulf of Guinea region.

All Ghanaian actors we spoke to described their country as a leader in the region. Although the country does not enjoy the same military and economic power as its main West African partner, Nigeria, Ghanaian actors

perceive their country to be a leader on the diplomatic front. This perception dates back to the time when it sought its independence. In 1957, Ghana, which had just become the first African country to gain independence after colonial rule, has always been known, along with its first president, Kwame Nkrumah, as favouring Pan-Africanism and seeing that its natural responsibility is to support other African countries' struggles. Since independence, Ghana has played an active role in various PSOs, including both UN- and African-led. Furthermore, participating in such operations now constitutes an important revenue stream for the armed forces; the interviewees expected that Ghana will continue to play an active part in similar missions well into the future. Ghana also hosts the reputable Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Centre, which provides training, policy analysis and research in the field of peacekeeping. The interviewees also suggested that because of Ghana's leadership role, external actors such as the US have long tried to partner with it, including through an effort to establish a US base there.⁽⁵⁹⁾

Generally, the interviewees perceived Ghanaian soldiers as being professional and better equipped than their regional counterparts. For instance, they noted that "one will not find Ghanaian soldiers wearing flip-flops", but at the same time they still lack other basic equipment, such as sleeping bags and backpacks.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Despite the country's leadership ambitions, however, one EU official stressed that Ghana does not have the ambition to become a regional hegemon. A director at the ministry of foreign affairs said Ghana is "assertive [but] not aggressive."⁽⁶¹⁾

Against this backdrop, Ghanaian actors among the interviewees emphasised the country's leadership role not only within ECOWAS but also through the Accra Initiative. None believed that the UN was the relevant organisation to deal with the situation in the northern border areas. Several local actors were also critical of the UN system, calling for it to be reformed. For instance, they considered the UN Security Council's veto system out of sync with modern times. They also called for more interventions under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, which would enable more African-led PSOs through the RECs, but retaining access to UN-assessed contributions.⁽⁶²⁾ The African Union Peace and Security Council, as well as the three African members of the UN Security Council, also advance this notion; discussions on this topic are gaining momentum.⁽⁶³⁾

The interviewees perceived Ghana to be one of the "drivers" within the ECOWAS system, along with Nigeria.⁽⁶⁴⁾ But their perceptions diverged with regard

to Francophone countries, especially Côte d'Ivoire. While some put the country into the group of leaders within the ECOWAS bloc that also includes Senegal, others deemed that the Ivorian president, Alassane Ouattara, lacked legitimacy and credibility. This is due to his changing the constitution and seeking a third presidential term in 2020, which they described as a constitutional coup d'état.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Some also view the close relationship of Francophone countries with France as problematic, saying that this sometimes hampers collective ECOWAS action.⁽⁶⁶⁾

Such divisions also led to different perceptions about the effectiveness of ECOWAS. Despite deploying multiple PSOs, the West African bloc has not been able to operationalise its standby force, which is one of the pillars of the African Peace and Security Architecture.⁽⁶⁷⁾ Further doubts were raised about the effectiveness of the organisation following the coup d'état in Niger, after which ECOWAS threatened to deploy its standby force to reinstate the deposed president, Mohammed Bazoum. Some of our interlocutors also challenged the credibility and legitimacy of ECOWAS, due to its inability to prevent what they called constitutional coups in Côte d'Ivoire as well as Guinea. The participation of Côte d'Ivoire in ECOWAS operations, they contended, undermines the organisation's credibility in the region.⁽⁶⁸⁾

While interviewees elevated the Accra Initiative as a relevant project for fighting jihadism, there was consensus that it is facing serious challenges. The EU officials interviewed raised questions about the operationalisation of the initiative's force headquarters.⁽⁶⁹⁾ Ghanaian public officials also admitted there had been a slowdown during the past year, but stressed that Ghana remains committed to the initiative.⁽⁷⁰⁾ For instance, there have been no high-level meetings between the member states during 2023; the last one occurred in November 2022.

The effectiveness of the Accra Initiative was also questioned by the interviewees. A key reason for this was that Burkina Faso, which is such a critical part of the problem due to its centrality in the Sahel crisis, had decided to leave.⁽⁷¹⁾ Apparently, the member states had been unable to assist Ouagadougou when it had solicited support from the organisation.⁽⁷²⁾ Another weakness raised was that the Accra Initiative had taken a very militaristic approach, and failed to target other aspects of the threat, such as the human-security angle.⁽⁷³⁾

Given the challenges that both ECOWAS and the Accra Initiative are facing, both local and foreign actors among the interviewees suggested that security cooperation is now becoming more bilateral. Although the

UK allegedly continues to support and advocate for the Accra Initiative, EU support appears to be moving in the direction of bilateral support. "We thought a few years ago that we could support [the Accra Initiative] but there is nothing to support, so we are supporting Ghana instead," said one EU official.⁽⁷⁴⁾ This appears to be confirmed by the growing number of support mechanisms channelled through the EPF and provided on a bilateral basis. Out of the 14 assistance measures allocated to security actors in Sub-Saharan Africa since 2021, only six have been directed towards multilateral operations. None have been given to the Accra Initiative.⁽⁷⁵⁾

Ghanaian perceptions of EU security cooperation

During our in-country visit, Ghanaian actors were broadly positive towards the EU's willingness to help, but most of them had reservations about its motivations. Furthermore, most of the interviewees were opposed to a foreign military presence. For instance, one interviewee expressed circumspection towards the 2018 US-Ghana defence cooperation agreement, which grants US forces exclusive use of facilities adjacent to Kotoka International Airport, in Accra.⁽⁷⁶⁾ Although no such agreement exists between the EU and Ghana, there is a realistic possibility that local perceptions towards an EU military presence may be similar.

The interviewees criticised the EU's conditionality on aid and questioned what they perceive as the EU and Europe's "hidden agendas."⁽⁷⁷⁾ Furthermore, government officials and civil servants expressed frustration over what they considered to be the EU's refusal or inability to listen to their needs. One civil servant described talks between Ghana and the EU as a "dialogue of the deaf."⁽⁷⁸⁾ The highly placed government official said: "We are getting frustrated! There are a lot of promises. A few months will pass and then they come again asking us the same questions."⁽⁷⁹⁾ Adding to the frustration is the perception that the EU applies a double standard by limiting the supply of lethal equipment to African countries but not to Ukraine.⁽⁸⁰⁾ Conversely, EU officials complained that Ghanaian demands were either not clear, unrealistic, or too extensive.⁽⁸¹⁾

The apparent dissonance between stakeholders may appear somewhat at odds with the willingness both sides expressed to cooperate. Nevertheless, such differences of opinion are common and likely shaped by the political agendas of the respective actors as well as the very nature of their relationship: one is supply-driven while the other is demand-driven. While negotiations may help the stakeholders reach a compromise that is acceptable to both parties, the question then arises whether

the final compromise will actually serve the intended purpose and effectively combat the threat.

Indeed, several Ghanaian actors questioned the need for European support if it was not having its intended effect. One concern, which stems from previous experiences in the country, is that security cooperation and materiel support either do not deliver the desired capability or that support programmes are limited in time. For instance, if the equipment delivered is not compatible with Ghanaian capabilities, this increases the need for training.⁽⁸²⁾ Failing to focus on a specific capability, therefore, may elevate costs in the longer term. Instead, capability-driven support may allow it to be incrementally developed over time and adjusted accordingly.

CONCLUSION

The recent developments in the Sahel have been trying for European security support and forced Western actors to reassess their presence and approach in the region. The “partnership approach” has now emerged as a new paradigm, which increases the need to understand and build strong relations with local partners. Based on the perceptions collected for this brief, three reasons support the conclusion that there are good prospects for building security partnerships with Ghana.

Firstly, although of concern, Ghana’s security situation is nowhere near as poor as in the Sahel. Furthermore, Ghanaian security forces are perceived to be better equipped than their Sahelian counterparts.⁽⁸³⁾ In the same vein, Ghanaian security forces have experience working within other multilateral missions through their active participation in PSOs, which may indicate a

preparedness and culture of working with external partners. When building effective partnerships with the EU, this is an advantage, as it allows for the gradual rollout of attempts to enhance capabilities without the same degree of urgency as in Mali and Niger, for instance.

Secondly, Ghana stands out for its leadership ambitions. Rather than being a dominant player, Ghana wants to foster intraregional security cooperation, as shown by its active role in PSOs, as well as its willingness to drive regional organisations forward. Its leadership ambitions are also apparent at the global level, including Ghana’s push to reform the UN system and its hosting of the UN Peacekeeping Ministerial Meeting in Accra in early December 2023.⁽⁸⁴⁾ This should be seen as an asset and an opportunity, as it demonstrates local agency and the ability to work with various partners, which is critical for a partnership-focussed policy approach.

Thirdly, our interlocutors were broadly appreciative of EU support. However, they want to maintain a high level of ownership and avoid any “boots on the ground.” Some interviewees also raised concern about France and saw its role in its former colonies as problematic, demanding instead that other European countries play a greater role. Indeed, such underlying sentiment indicates that the EU may have an important role to play, not only through individual member states, but also at the multilateral level.

Moving forward, the EU needs to carefully manage its relations with local partners to ensure that its support is effective and delivers the desired capabilities. In an increasingly uncertain geopolitical climate, building trust will be critical over time. ■

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Endnotes

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