

## 18 Military Challenges and Threats in West Africa

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### 18.1 Introduction

Much of the violent and protracted conflicts characteristic of sub-Saharan Africa in the post-Cold War years occurred in West Africa,<sup>1</sup> particularly in countries of the *Mano River Union* (MRU).<sup>2</sup> Apart from the fourteen years of intermittent conflict in Liberia, the West African sub-region also witnessed civil war in Sierra Leone; instabilities in Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and protracted rebellions in the Southern Cassamance Province of Senegal; resource-related conflicts in Nigeria, ethnic conflicts among the Numbamba and Konkomba in northern Ghana; and political instability in Togo.

Owing to these instabilities, innumerable human lives have been lost, massive property and natural resources destroyed, millions displaced, national economies shattered and untold human rights abuses have been meted out to non-combatants particularly women and children. In addition, the region has witnessed phenomenal spill-over of violence across boundaries. These happenings made West Africa globally famous in the 1990s for violent intra-state conflicts which provided the basis for some analysts to perceive the sub-region as representing the 'coming anarchy' and to describe it as a 'real strategic danger' requiring a re-colonization by former colonial masters in order to stabilize it (Cohen 1995: 95; Pfaff 1995: 4–6; Kaplan 1994: 44–76).

Insecurity in the individual states of the sub-region became closely linked together sufficiently so that the national security of individual states could hardly be considered independent of each other. The inter-relatedness of threats, which became known as the West African security complex, fundamentally highlighted the commonality of vulnerabilities and threats among states in the sub-region and the need for a sub-regional response to prevailing challenges.

Consequently, the *Economic Community of West African States* (ECOWAS), an organization of 15 West African states, metamorphosed from its initial focus on economic development, cooperation and integration to embrace security as an indispensable part of its remit. The Organization subsequently created structures and frameworks with which it has attempted to deal with the security challenges of the region. In addition to individual state efforts and the support of regional and global organizations particularly the *African Union* (AU) and the *United Nations* (UN), ECOWAS has been able to restore relative peace to the sub-region. In this regard notable hot-spots such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea have in recent times witnessed peace and stability.

Despite the achievement of relative peace and security, however, the sub-region has been far from eliminating threats to its peace and security. It is still bedevilled with myriads of security threats many of which are direct or indirect fallouts of previous security challenges or threats emerging from transnational challenges. These include intra-state armed conflicts; proliferation of small arms and light weapons; child soldierism; mercenarism; cross-border criminality; refugees and internally displaced persons; spread of deadly diseases especially HIV/AIDS; and exacerbating forms of poverty.

Within this panoply of threats in West Africa, this chapter examines existing military challenges and threats and their associated sub-regional responses. It thus provides responses to important questions such as: What are the military challenges, threats and vul-

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1 West Africa (figure 18.1) is made up of Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Cape Verde, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. Apart from Mauritania, all West African countries are members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

2 The Mano River Union (MRU) comprises Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The Union was formed to promote sub-regional economic integration and the implementation of development projects among the three member states.

**Figure 18.1:** Map of West Africa. **Source:** The UN Department of Peacekeeping Operation (UNDPKO), Cartographic Section, Map No. 4242, February 2005, at: <<http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/westafrica.pdf>>.



nerabilities in West Africa? What are the military implications of the identified security threats in West Africa? And what is the sub-regional response to the military challenges? The chapter first reviews military threats and challenges in West Africa together with empirical cases of individual country responses. It then identifies prevailing vulnerabilities upon which the threats thrive and then analyses the sub-regional response before concluding on the way forward.

## 18.2 Conceptual Clarifications

Certain terms used in social theory are essentially contested concepts. Nevertheless, it does not imply that it is difficult to agree on a definition of a concept, but that there are some concepts whose meanings are inherently a matter of dispute because no neutral definition is possible. This is classically true of the key concepts involved in this chapter. As a result, this section clarifies the concepts of military challenge, threats and vulnerability in the context of usage in the West African sub-region and particularly below.

### 18.2.1 Security

Security is herein perceived as the preservation of a state from external aggression, protecting its territorial integrity and internal cohesion (Giacomo 1989: 151). In the context of the international system, security is perceived as the ability of states and societies to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity whilst pursuing freedom from threats. International security is determined basically by the internal and external security of the component individual states (Bellany 98r: 102).

### 18.2.2 Threat

According to a United Nations study, a *threat* is any event or process that leads to large-scale death or lessening of life chances and undermines states as the basic unit of the international system. These are listed to include economic and social threats such as poverty, infectious disease and environmental degradation; inter-state conflict; internal conflict; nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons; terrorism, and transnational organized crime (UN 2004: 2).

Threats are generally relative and evolve in nature. For example, if the immediate threat to global peace and security was nuclear war and its accompanying