Prospects for EU-Côte d'Ivoire defence partnership: Local agency and views on security cooperation

Olivier Milland

In 2023, the European Union launched a new security and defence initiative with four littoral West African countries: Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo. The new partnership highlights changing European priorities against the backdrop of policy failures in the Sahel, where junta-led governments have suspended their security cooperation with European and Western actors. While the EU's new initiative seeks to build on lessons from the Sahel, it is less clear what local actors are anticipating from it. This briefing discusses the prospects for this new partnership with Côte d'Ivoire. It contends that although the prospects are encouraging for various reasons, there are risks that may undermine its effectiveness.

Western security support in flux

West Africa's political and security environment has changed dramatically over the past decade, a trend that has accelerated in the past four years. Among the driving forces are the ever-expanding threat from Sahel-based Islamist non-state armed groups, a proliferation of military coups, the emergence of intraregional blocs, and escalating geopolitical competition between external powers.

These changes have forced Western actors, including the European Union, to reformulate their security engagement in West Africa. Western efforts now largely concentrate on the four littoral states of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo.[1] Furthermore, security support to these states is, at the time of writing, ostensibly lighter and more cautious than previous operations in the Sahel. Seeking to build on lessons learned from the Sahelian operations, which were deemed too security-focused, most initiatives now take a more holistic approach, combining security and civilian aspects, such as intelligence-gathering, rule of law, and governance. In addition, most Western actors now emphasise a "partnership approach" on various levels.[2]

The EU has been engaged in this region for several years, and its security support is currently expanding. In 2023, the EU launched a new two-year civilian-military Security and Defence Initiative for the Gulf of Guinea, focussing on the four above-mentioned countries.[3] Under this initiative, six civilian and military advisors will be deployed in EU delegations to provide short-term training and expertise to support these host states' efforts to contain and respond to the threat of non-state armed groups in their northern regions.[4] This includes various capacity-building programmes, predeployment operational training, and the promotion of the rule of law and good governance.

Complementing the initiative are the European Peace Facility (EPF) assistance measures, which seek to enhance local capabilities through the delivery of materiel, including the potential to provide lethal equipment. Table 1 below outlines EPF assistance measures given to the four coastal West African states. In addition, the EU has two instruments focussing on the Gulf of Guinea in the maritime space: the EU Gulf of Guinea Strategy and Action Plans and the Coordinated Maritime Presence.

Although there are reasons to be optimistic about the EU's partnership with Côte d'Ivoire, it is important to highlight and understand its risks. Beyond the country's recent political history, there is a need to understand Ivorian perceptions of threats, what role Côte d'Ivoire wants and is able to play, and their views on security cooperation. As the EU's experiences in Mali and Niger have shown, there are significant costs to failing to identify and act on emerging threats and changing political outlooks. Nevertheless, given the transnational character of the Sahelian crisis, international partnerships will likely remain critical for the foreseeable future.

As such, this briefing, which follows the contours of a similar analysis about Ghana, discusses the prospects

for the EU's security and defence partnership with Côte d'Ivoire.[5] The report is structured in three main parts. Following this introduction, it describes the country's security and stability threat environment. Second, it outlines how the authorities are responding to those issues. Thirdly, it highlights Côte d'Ivoire's experience with security cooperation in general and towards EU security support in particular. A concluding section outlines potential implications of the current partnership.

The empirical material for this briefing derives from a combination of text-based sources and 11 in-country interviews, conducted in Abidjan in October 2023. The interviewees include local politicians, foreign diplomats, security and conflict researchers in academia and think tanks, journalists, and representatives of international aid organisations. Their answers do not reflect the perceptions of the Ivorian authorities. Rather, they highlight the views of some of the in-country practitioners and security experts, who are presumed to possess in-depth knowledge of the issues at hand, including government policies. Ultimately, they serve to complement the text-based resources by confirming or nuancing some of the data. The text-based sources include both primary and secondary material, such as press releases, government policy documents, news reports, academic journals, and articles from think tanks and international organisations.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE'S SECURITY AND STABILITY THREAT ENVIRONMENT

Projections place Côte d'Ivoire among the 20 fastest-growing economies in the world in 2024.[6] This is no small feat for a country that was coming out of nearly two decades of instability and armed conflict only 15 years ago (see Box). Nevertheless, the former French colony's security and stability threat environment remains challenging, characterised by a multiplicity of overlapping domestic and transnational factors.

There is consensus, both within the literature and among our interviewees, that the most urgent threat facing Côte d'Ivoire today is that of Islamist non-state armed groups. The fear is that these groups will expand their area of operations from their main bases in Burkina Faso and Mali into northern Côte d'Ivoire.

Côte d'Ivoire has already experienced several attacks on its territory. The first attack, in March 2016, was claimed by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and left 19 people dead in the southern beach resort of Grand Bassam.[7] Authorities allegedly foiled another coordinated attack targeting capitals and large urban centres, including Abidjan, in 2018.[8]

Between 2020 and 2021, there was a spike in militant activity mainly in and around the north-eastern towns of Kafolo and Téhini, Bounkani region, which borders Burkina Faso. No group claimed responsibility for these attacks, but there are credible indications that a faction of the al Qaeda-affiliated coalition Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin was responsible.[9]

Our interviews and several reports confirm that Islamist militants have been active in this area of the country since at least 2017, primarily using it as a rear base.[10] However, according to a case study by security expert Lassina Diarra, some radicalisation has occurred inside Bounkani, with youths leaving for Mali in 2017 and returning two years later to establish local cells for intelligence-gathering and reconnaissance.[11] Jihadists have also established bases in the Comoé National Park, which straddles the border between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire.[12]

Table 1. EPF assistance measures to Gulf of Guinea countries since July 2023

Country	Benin	Ghana	Ghana & Cameroon	Côte d'Ivoire
Value	EUR 11.75 million	EUR 25 million over 36 months	EUR 21 million	EUR 15 million
Description	Focus on supporting Operation Mirador, including the delivery of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft and unmanned air systems, as well as spare parts and maintenance training.	Delivery of non-lethal equipment in the following fields: medical, military engineering, defence intelligence, electronic-warfare systems, explosive-ordnance disposal. Provision of training in the field of military logistics.	Support the Yaoundé Architecture and strengthen the capacities of military and naval actors in Cameroon and Ghana. Support includes ISR services and non-lethal equipment, such as rigid-hull inflatable boats, marine generators for ships and scuba-diving equipment.	Upgrade ISR capabilities through acquisition of communication and data transmission equipment and unmanned aerial systems. Provision of military patrol vehicles.

Source: Council of the European Union, European Peace Facility, "Timeline — European Peace Facility." Available via www.consilium.europa.eu.

THE 1999–2011 POLITICAL CRISES. . .

In September 2002, rebel forces attacked three cities in a bid to topple the government of then president Laurent Gbagbo. While the dissident soldiers managed to seize control of Bouaké and Korhogo, the government retained control of Abidjan.

The incident followed years of government instability (a first coup d'état occurred in 1999), civil unrest, and intercommunal tensions, particularly between the north and the south of the country. The growing tensions were due to attempts by the Gbagbo administration and the previous government led by Henri Konan Bédié to limit the political rights of migrants from other African countries, a move that disproportionately affected northern parts of the country.

The 2002 rebellion set off five years of armed conflict in which the country was broadly divided into a government-held south against a rebel-controlled north and west. Gbagbo and the formal armed forces retained control of the south, while Guillaume Soro led the rebel coalition, Forces Nouvelles (New Forces), in the rebel-held areas. Foreign actors, such as France (Operation Licorne), ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States; ECOMICI, the ECOWAS Mission in Côte di'Ivoire), and the UN (UNOCI, United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire) also became involved in the conflict through various peace-support operations.

Several peace agreements were signed and broken in the years leading up to the 2007 Ouagadougou accords, which established a ceasefire and a compromise government, with Gbagbo as president and Soro as prime minister. Nevertheless, armed clashes erupted again in 2011, after Gbagbo refused to concede electoral defeat in the presidential polls held in 2010.

Alassane Ouattara, a northerner, is widely recognised as having won those elections. With the support of rebels and French forces, his supporters were ultimately able to push back Gbagbo loyalists who attacked Abidjan and arrest Gbagbo. Major civil unrest and intercommunal fighting left more than 3000 people dead across the country, particularly in Gbagbo strongholds.

. . . and their aftermath

The crises continue to affect Ivorian politics today. In 2020, Ouattara won a highly controversial third term in office after passing a new constitution four years previously. Opposition candidates Bédié and Pascal Affi N'Guessan boycotted the election, while Gbagbo and Soro were barred from running. The boycott allowed Ouattara to win by an overwhelming majority. His hold on power was cemented four months later when his party, Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix (RHDP), received an absolute majority in the National Assembly.

The strong backing of Outtara by France and other Western countries since 2010 is a key argument used to support claims of "double standards" by France and ECOWAS regarding unconstitutional changes of government in West Africa. Within the region, there is a notable strand of thought that believes that Ouattara's third term is tantamount to the coups seen elsewhere in West Africa during the past few years.

The outcome of the next presidential election, scheduled for October 2025, is highly uncertain. What is highly likely, however, is that should Ouattara present another presidential bid, this will spark widespread civil unrest that may have broader implications on the country's security outlook.

Since April 2022, there has been a lull in attacks in Côte d'Ivoire.[13] Nevertheless, most of our interviewees noted an uneasy calm in the north, and multiple sources suggest the country remains a credible target of jihadist groups. This is partly due to its close relations with France, whose interests jihadist groups have threatened in statements and attacks, but also due to the broader issues affecting the north of the country, discussed in the section below.[14]

Internal security dimensions

Instability in the Sahel is having a disproportionate impact on Côte d'Ivoire's northern regions. Akin to other coastal West African states, such as Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire's north is generally less developed and therefore more vulnerable than the south.[15] Several of these factors are also closely linked to the periods of armed conflict between 2002 and 2011 (see Box above).

In addition to the post-conflict environment and instability in the Sahel, our interviewees advanced four internal and interlinked factors that jihadist groups may exploit. The first relates to organised crime and banditry and their potential use by Islamist militants for financing, recruitment, and smuggling. Locals see these activities as key drivers of insecurity.[16] Organised criminal groups engage in various activities, such as racketeering, informal gold mining, and cattle rustling, to finance their operations.[17] Informal gold mining is widespread across the country, but jihadist groups have infiltrated and, at times, taken over these activities in the north, specifically within Comoé National Park.[18] Cattle rustling is directly affecting livestock herders but has broader economic implications for the region. Livestock breeding is a key economic activity in northern Côte d'Ivoire, which means that cattle theft can severely damage herder livelihoods. There are also signs that other illicit activities, such as the smuggling of contraband medicines, narcotics, and motorcycles, as well as kidnapping for ransom, are beginning to take root and be exploited by jihadist groups.[19]

The second factor raised by interviewees is the increased influx of asylum seekers. Since January 2023, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has registered more than 51,000 asylum seekers, the vast majority of whom are from Burkina Faso and housed in the northern Ivorian regions of Bounkani and Tchologo.[20] The already poor social services of these regions have come under heightened strain as just over a quarter of arrivals are housed in formal refugee camps.

The sustained influx of persons fleeing conflict has led to growing hostility towards non-resident communities, particularly against Fulani migrants arriving from Burkina Faso.[21] Given that Fulanis predominantly engage in livestock herding, their increased influx in northern Côte d'Ivoire has increased tensions with local sedentary farmers and led to incidents of violence.[22] Furthermore, Fulanis are regularly accused of being members of or cooperating with jihadist militant groups, a practice that is seen in other Gulf of Guinea countries, such as Ghana.[23] Although the stigmatisation of the Fulani in Côte d'Ivoire appears less systematic and widespread than in Ghana, incidents in the country point to underlying hostility towards the community.

The third factor raised in our interviews were abuses and criminal behaviour by the security forces, some of whom engage in such activities as racketeering or soliciting bribes from local communities under the guise of counterterrorism efforts.[24] In the same vein, Diarra alleges that soldiers deployed to the region as part of the government's counterterrorism measures have been demanding bribes at temporary checkpoints, whose number tended to increase on market days.[25] Despite this, a 2022 survey by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago and US nongovernmental organisation Equal Access International indicated that a majority in the northern regions hold favourable views of the security forces. At the same time, the survey points to marked differences between localities. The abuses highlighted above have even prompted some local communities to call for the army to leave, pointing to a decline in trust towards the security and defence forces.[26] Such a decline in trust may undermine the authorities' ability to win hearts and minds, which is critical for building a resilient counterterrorism response.[27] Furthermore, Islamist militants across the Sahel have previously exploited similar grievances towards the security forces in their recruitment attempts.[28]

A fourth factor raised by local interviewees is the electoral cycle.[29] These cycles have triggered deadly violence prior to and after elections over the past 15 years, although the extent of the violence has declined. It is unclear, however, to what degree the cycles of electoral violence interact with the threat of jihadist extremism. However, periods of intense electoral violence are likely to hamper state-security capabilities.

Map 1. Visualisation of Côte d'Ivoire's northern threats
Created by: Per Wikström
Source: Adaptation from researcher's open-source collection of information

In addition to these factors, Côte d'Ivoire faces the threat of maritime crime and piracy off its coasts. Such threats nevertheless remain concentrated in the maritime space and do not pose a threat to social stability to the same extent. Another problem involves the proliferation of junta-led governments and the chilling of relations between the AES and ECOWAS states. This is hampering cooperation between Côte d'Ivoire and its northern neighbours, in parallel with a deteriorating security environment in both Burkina Faso and Mali.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE'S RESPONSE TO NATIONAL SECURITY THREATS

The government's anti-jihadist response rests on two pillars: one military and security-driven and the other targeting civilian and social spending.

The military-security response

The military-security response is multifaceted and has been enhanced over the past six years. However, it follows a broader security-sector reform (SSR) initiated in the aftermath of the 2002–11 crisis period (see Box). Therefore, while some measures were already being implemented before 2016, they play a non-negligible role against the backdrop of a post-conflict Côte d'Ivoire that needs to strengthen its security governance and capabilities more generally.

A critical part of this reform programme has been the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants since 2011. Although the DDR programme has encountered some setbacks, particularly mutinies in 2014 and 2017, several observers agree that the programme has sped up since 2016.[30] One objective that appears to be progressing well is the rebalancing of the highly inflated middle ranks of the armed forces and the reduction of spending on personnel. The middle ranks were increased during the reconciliation process when some rebel commanders were promoted to officer positions within the new armed forces. In a bid to rebalance the organisation, some officers have been offered early retirement, while the recruitment of new soldiers is boosting the rank and file.[31] In 2021, the ministry of defence announced plans to recruit 10,000 new personnel by 2024; about two-thirds had apparently been recruited by October 2023.[32]

This comes amid an increased northern deployment to counter the southward expansion of jihadist groups. In 2019, the government launched Operation Airtight Border (*Frontière étanche* in French), which saw 300 soldiers deployed to Korhogo to support police and border guards with transport controls to prevent smuggling and jihadist infiltration.[33] One month after the June 2020 attack on Kafolo, the government established the so-called [Military] Operational Zone of the North (*Zone opérationnelle du nord*, or ZON, in French) and deployed additional troops in order to move from a posture of surveillance to defence.[34] Within the ZON, which covers the 630-km-long border with Burkina Faso and Mali, all security institutions were placed under one single command. Its joint staff is located in Korhogo, while two additional sector bases were established in Kong (sector east) and Boundiali (sector west).[35] Forward-operating bases have also been set up, including in Kafolo.[36] The exact number of soldiers deployed is unclear, but most estimates range between 2,000 to 2,500.[37]

In addition, the government is looking to improve mobility through the acquisition of new materiel, such as armoured transport vehicles, and the expansion of healthcare infrastructure in the north.[38] Nevertheless, sources point to continued capability gaps in air support and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets.[39] The government has already received or ordered some air surveillance equipment, such as light aircraft, helicopters, and surveillance drones from various countries, but more equipment is needed.[40]

Other efforts include increasing police recruitment or establishing mixed police and military units, such as the new anti-terrorism intelligence operational centre (*Centre de Renseignement Antiterroriste*, CROAT).[41] Strengthening training is also a priority. For instance, several of the interviewees highlighted the International counterterrorism academy (*Académie International de Lutte Contre le Terrorisme*, AILCT) as a successful training facility. The AILCT formally opened in 2021 as a joint Ivorian and French initiative and has provided training to individuals from 19 African countries. It has three pillars of action: the first provides training to officers; the second trains special and intervention forces; and the third pillar is a strategic research centre (*Institut de Recherce Stratégique*).[42]

Furthermore, the government is seeking to improve relations with civil society by reinvigorating civilian-military committees across the northern regions. These committees were first established to improve civilian-military relations following the 2011 crisis, but they are being bolstered to strengthen communication between security forces, municipal leaders, traditional chiefs, community leaders, and other civil-society representatives. These civilian-military committees meet about once a month, and their number is roughly the same as the number of regions.[43]

Authorities have also created an educational kit (*malette pédagogique*) on how to identify signs of radicalisation and how to report it. The kit has been distributed to security forces, local police, civil servants, and religious leaders such as imams. Authorities also rely on informal cooperation from such actors as private-security companies, Dozo hunters, and ex-rebels.[44]

The military response has been accompanied by a marked increase in security spending. The 2024 budget for the ministry of defence was xof 399 billion (eur 606 million), of which about two-thirds will be attributed to various programmes of the armed forces and the gendarmerie.[45] While this represents a doubling of the defence budget over six years, the increase is much slower than that of the overall national budget.[46]

The social response

The second pillar of the government's response aims to increase social resilience in the north. The Social Programme (*Programme Social du Gouvernement*), now in its second iteration, aims to improve resilience through five strategic axes. These range from mitigating fragility in border areas, improving education and living conditions of households, professional insertion focussing on youth, and improving access to public services to vulnerable communities.[47] In addition, the government has launched a three-year youth programme (*Programme Jeunesse du Gouvernement*) that focusses on training and entrepreneurship. Although this programme, which runs from 2023 to 2025, is targeted at young Ivorians in the country as well as abroad, it may also benefit the north, where youth unemployment is high.

Most of our interviewees contend that Ouattara, a northerner, has prioritised the development needs in the north since he took office. While some improvements, such as better road infrastructure connecting southern parts of the country to the north, are already visible, there is still much that remains to be done.[48] Although gdp growth has indeed kept a steady pace of more than 5 percent since 2015, inequality remains rampant, particularly when comparing the north to the south of the country.[49]

CÔTE D'IVOIRE'S APPROACH TO SECURITY COOPERATION

The interviewees believed that the Ivorian government views security cooperation favourably. Most of them saw Côte d'Ivoire as a natural leader in the region, particularly among Francophone countries.[50] The city of Abidjan is a commercial centre in West Africa, hosting the region's largest commercial port and the seat of the African Development Bank. Moreover, several of our interlocutors saw the abovementioned ailct and other Ivorian military schools as testaments of Côte d'Ivoire's leadership.[51]

Furthermore, Côte d'Ivoire has long been an active member in various multilateral institutions. It is a founding member of ecowas, waemu (West African Economic and Monetary Union), the Accra Initiative, and the so-called Yaoundé Architecture for maritime security. More than 800 Ivorian personnel deployed to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (minusma, 2013–2023). However, in comparison to neighbouring Ghana, which has contributed to un missions since the 1960s, Côte d'Ivoire is a relatively new troop-contributing country. Ivorian troops participated in multilateral missions for the first time in 1998, but their participation has increased since 2016.[52] The country has also carried out a joint operation, Koudanlgou ii, with Burkina Faso and Ghana within the Accra Initiative framework.[53]

In addition, Côte d'Ivoire has carried out ad hoc bilateral operations with Mali and Burkina Faso, such as Operation Comoé in 2020 that led to the destruction of a jihadist base in southern Burkina Faso.[54] However, since the Malian and Burkinabe juntas took power and Western actors were forced to leave, relations with its northern neighbours have hit a nadir. Despite the poor state of relations, several interviewees stressed the need for continued cooperation and dialogue with Côte d'Ivoire's northern neighbours.

Beyond the immediate sub-region, Côte d'Ivoire is pursuing a close partnership with France and, increasingly, with the us.[55] France maintains a military base in Port-Bouët, where troop numbers are expected to decrease from 900 to about 100, as part of a broader drawdown in Sub-Saharan Africa.[56] Nevertheless, France remains an important partner for Côte d'Ivoire's security apparatus, contributing to training, conducting joint exercises, and cofinancing the ailct.[57]

Relations between the Ouattara government, in office since 2011, and successive French governments have been strong. This follows a political tradition established by the first independent Ivorian president, Houphoët-Boigny, from which Ouattara's rhdp hails. Paris also supported Ouattara's campaign to regain power from Gbagbo after he refused to concede defeat in the 2010 elections and his loyalist forces targeted un and French forces during the 2011 crisis. In 2023, Côte d'Ivoire was France's second-largest trade partner in Sub-Saharan Africa, and France was the largest bilateral investor in the country.[58] Furthermore, more than

1,000 French companies are present there, including some 300 French subsidiaries, underscoring the two countries' close relations.

In contrast to some other countries in West- and Central Africa, such as Burkina Faso and Niger, where France's presence and policies are increasingly scrutinised and rejected, Côte d'Ivoire has not seen comparable levels of mobilisation against France. However, there are pockets of society that hold views that are critical of France's Africa policies and military presence in the country, including among university students and some opposition parties, particularly those associated with former president Gbagbo.[59] Such sentiment has been present since the 1999—2011 crises. Disinformation campaigns spreading anti-French narratives in the country have repeatedly been reported.[60]

In recent years, the US has significantly expanded its diplomatic presence in the country, according to one interviewee.[61] Furthermore, the US State Department has outlined a new regional strategy to prevent conflict and improve stability in coastal West Africa that would expand partnerships with countries such as Côte d'Ivoire.[62] On the military front, US Africa Command (Africom) has conducted several training exercises with Ivorian forces, including Africa Nemo and Flintlock, the latter of which has been co-hosted by Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana for the past three years.[63] Africom is reportedly also lobbying for the establishment of a military base in the country.[64]

Local perceptions of EU security support

Understanding how various Ivorian actors perceive EU security support is important for understanding the prospects of the new partnership. This section mainly builds on in-country interviews. These interviews do not reflect the government's stance but highlight how actors from academia and civil society view security cooperation. The Ouattara government is pursuing a close relationship with the EU, but is also cooperating with other Western powers such as the US and France in the domain of defence and security. Our interviewees generally shared a willingness to cooperate with various partners given the limited but growing capabilities of the Ivorian armed forces.[65] However, all our interlocutors were opposed to an increased foreign military presence for several reasons. Firstly, they did not perceive the threat to be serious enough, instead emphasising the need for capacity-building. Secondly, they believed that Côte d'Ivoire should lead the response while partners provided support, emphasising local ownership and agency.

Thirdly, the UN mission in Côte d'Ivoire (ONUCI, 2004-2017), which was deployed to monitor a 2004 peace treaty between the then government and rebel groups, was afflicted by resentment and hostility from several sides involved in the 2002–11 crisis. Some saw ONUCI as too passive and failing to prevent human rights abuses.[66] Others, such as the Gbagbo government, saw the mission as interfering in national politics. This experience resembles other UN missions in Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where local communities have perceived the forces as passive and ineffective in the face of mounting insecurity.[67]

Fourthly, the interlocutors questioned the need for support in the form of aid. Instead, they stressed the need to build partnerships. One respondent suggested that these partnerships should be established through a process similar to an open-bidding process, wherein Côte d'Ivoire specifies a need for potential foreign partners to propose solutions.[68] The choice of partner should be based on their offer's competitiveness and suitability. Another idea was to outline common objectives that partners should attain within a given timeframe.[69] Such framing would also assist local partners in assessing the effectiveness of their partnerships.

Some of the respondents also advocated for more diversification of partners. This did not mean, as one interviewee put it, "changing masters" to countries like Russia.[70] Rather, some of the Ivorian interlocutors welcomed partnerships with new European security actors, such as Sweden, and sought to reduce Côte d'Ivoire's reliance on France.

Conclusion

As this briefing shows, the European security support provided to West Africa is undergoing important changes. New partnerships with littoral West African states are now being forged, but are substantially lighter than previous operations in the Sahel. This soft-footprint approach means that "partner states" are expected to lead the security and political response, while European actors provide support. At least initially. What is unclear, however, is the form these partnerships will take in each individual state, an issue that is likely to evolve over time as the new partners build trust and shared experiences.

There are at least three points indicating favourable prospects for building a strong and sustainable partnership between Côte d'Ivoire and the EU. Firstly, Côte d'Ivoire's security situation is stable compared to its northern neighbours. This means that, currently, capacity-building is likely the most adequate form of

partnership. It also means that cooperation can be readjusted and ramped up as requirements evolve.

Secondly, Côte d'Ivoire has a track-record of cooperation in various fora, ranging from the multilateral to the bilateral. Local actors also seem to welcome the partnership approach. Furthermore, the interests and strategies of Côte d'Ivoire's current partners (France, the US, and the EU) appear to align, which means they may be mutually reinforcing each other.

Third, Côte d'Ivoire appears willing to lead its own counterterrorism response. Part of this is through the security-sector reform and the professionalisation of the armed forces. Furthermore, the two-pronged approach, mixing military and social components, ostensibly takes note of the immediate security threat while also addressing the underlying drivers of jihadist expansion in Africa. Time and again, Islamist non-state armed groups in the Sahel have demonstrated an apt use of a combination of recruitment tactics and coercion to expand their zone of operations and control. These recruitment tactics include tapping into underlying intercommunal grievances, the lack of livelihood opportunities, especially for the youth, and the absence of and mistrust towards the state in remote areas. However, as these efforts are still in their infancy, further monitoring and evaluation are needed to assess their effectiveness over time.

Despite the positive prospects, at least five risks are worth highlighting that could undermine the sustainability and effectiveness of the partnership in the coming years. Firstly, the continued deterioration of the security situation in the Sahel generally, and in Burkina Faso in particular, means that asylum-seeker inflows are likely to remain high and add strain to already vulnerable northern communities.

Relatedly, the apparent lack of cooperation between Côte d'Ivoire and its northern neighbours will limit the effectiveness of security partnerships with the West. By the same token, the antagonism between Sahelian states and Western actors may present a barrier to such cooperation. However, the porosity of borders and the transnational nature of the threat mean that such cooperation or exchange, however small, remains important for counterterrorism operations. As several of our interviewees indicated, it is important that the channels of communication remain open.

Thirdly, a substantially reduced EU presence compared to the Sahel means that the ability to monitor and assess political and security dynamics within Côte d'Ivoire will be limited.

In a similar vein, Côte d'Ivoire's main partners remain France and the United States. Given the fate of these two actors in the Sahel, this may become problematic should the political mood in Côte d'Ivoire change. The political outlook for the 2025 presidential election is highly uncertain. Ouattara has not yet confirmed whether he will run. If he does, this is almost certain to seriously anger such opposition leaders as Gbagbo. The implications of this may be reinflamed tensions and potential new clashes. Therefore, the polls will likely be an important flashpoint to monitor over the coming year.

Fourthly, the partnership approach requires sustainable funding, long-term engagement, and clear objectives. However, political changes in Western partner states, due to changes of government or a morphing geopolitical climate, may lead to a reduction in financial means. In turn, such limitations may undermine the effectiveness of the partnership and force littoral states to seek alternatives. Beyond the security response, stable funding for humanitarian operations is also central, particularly as migrant inflows are anticipated to continue.

Lastly, as more partners engage with Côte d'Ivoire, the number of initiatives and projects will increase, and with that, the need for coordination. Failing to coordinate such operations may create inefficiencies and wasteful funding over the coming years. The case of Mali may be a useful example of where different foreign security and military missions have been able to cooperate and coordinate to some extent through "functional synergies".[71]

Given that the EU's security partnership with littoral West African states is in its infancy, more monitoring and analysis is needed to assess its implications over the medium- to long term. Regular surveys studying how locals perceive large geopolitical actors may provide insight into how public opinion is shifting within the changing geopolitical climate. There is also a distinct need for more studies into Sahel-based militant activities in littoral West Africa to assess the evolution of the threat. Furthermore, scenario analysis and forecasting of Côte d'Ivoire's political dynamics may provide policymakers with a better understanding of the country's trajectory over the next five to ten years, considering factors such as terrorist activity, economic growth and distribution, and climatic changes in the sub-region. ∎

Olivier Milland, MA in International Relations, is an analyst at FOI's Programme for Studies in African Security.

Endnotes

1 The US strategy also includes Guinea.

2 In the security domain, the partnership approach broadly entails providing such support as capacity-building, training, supply of equipment, and advice.

3 Council of the European Union, "Gulf of Guinea: Council launches an EU Security and Defence Initiative," 11 December 2023, available via *www.consilium.europa.eu*; Official Journal of the European Union, "Council Decisions (CFSP) 2023/2066," 25 September 2023, available via *www.eur-lex.eu*.

4 Council of the European Union, "Gulf of Guinea: Council launches an EU Security and Defence Initiative"; European Union External Action Service, "About the European Union Security and Defence Initiative in the Gulf of Guinea," 14 December 2023, available via *www.eeas.europa.eu*.

5 Milland, Olivier, "Prospects for EU-Ghana defence partnership: Local agency and views on security cooperation," 2024, FOI Memo 8445, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, available via *www.foi.se*.

6 African Development Bank, "Africa dominates list of the world's 20 fastest-growing economies in 2024—African Development Bank says in macroeconomic report," 16 February 2024, available via *www.afdb.org*

7 Some reports indicate that Al Mourabitoun was responsible for the attack. Both groups are constituent members of the al Qaeda coalition, JNIM, so it is possible that they cooperated.

8 Tisseron, Antonin, "La coopération sécuritaire et judiciaire en Afrique de l'Ouest: Face au défi de la lutte contre les groupes armés jihadistes," 2021, Étude 81, IRSEM, available at *www.irsem.fr;* Diarra, Lassina, "Radicalisation et perception de la menace terroriste dans l'extrême nord de la Côte d'Ivoire: Le cas de Bounkani," Timbuktu Institute, 2021, available via *www.timbuktu.institute.org*;

9 Pellerin, Mathieu, "Les pays côtiers d'Afrique de l'Ouest: Nouvelle terre d'expansion des groupes djihadistes?" *Notes de l'IFRI*, French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), February 2022, available via *www.ifri.org*

10 Diarra, Lassina, "Radicalisation et perception de la menace terroriste dans l'extrême nord de la Côte d'Ivoire: Le cas de Bounkani"; interview with political party, 6 October 2023.

11 Diarra, Lassina, "Radicalisation et perception de la menace terroriste dans l'extrême nord de la Côte d'Ivoire: Le cas de Bounkani".

12 " Diarra, Lassina, "Radicalisation et perception de la menace terroriste dans l'extrême nord de la Côte d'Ivoire: Le cas de Bounkani"; Berger, Flore and Zran, Anicet, "Nord-est de la Côte d'Ivoire: Entre économie illicite et extrémisme violent."

13 Berger, Flore and Zran, Anicet, "Nord-est de la Côte d'Ivoire: Entre économie illicite et extrémisme violent"; International Crisis Group, "Keeping Jihadists Out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire," Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°192, 11 August 2023, available via *www.crisisgroup.org*

14 International Crisis Group, "Keeping Jihadists Out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire."

15 International Organization of Migration, "Northern Côte d'Ivoire Crisis Response Plan 2024," April 2024. Available via *https://crisisresponse.iom.int*.

16 International Organization of Migration, "Étude de perceptions des communautés sur la sécurité et la gestion des frontières dans le nord-est de la Côte d'Ivoire," January 2022. Available via *https://dtm.iom.int*.

17 Interview with researcher from think tank, October 2023; interview with international nongovernmental organisation, October 2023.

18 *Assanvo, William, "Liens entre extrémisme violent et activité illicites en Côte d'Ivoire";* Berger, Flore and Zran, Anicet, "Nord-est de la Côte d'Ivoire: Entre économie illicite et extrémisme violent," September 2023, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, available via *https://globalinitiative.net*.

19 *Assanvo, William, "Liens entre extrémisme violent et activité illicites en Côte d'Ivoire."*

20 UNHCR Côte d'Ivoire Dashboard: Situation des demandeurs d'asile au Nord, 26 July 2024, available via *https://data.unhcr.org/*

21 The Fulani (Peul in French) community is a pastoralist community residing throughout the Sahel region, including in Côte d'Ivoire. However, the majority of the population in Bounkani is composed of Lobi, Kulango and Malinké; National Opinion Research Center and Equal Access International, "Security and Resilience: Perceptions and Experiences," Resilience for Peace (R4P): Understanding the Border Area in Northern Côte d'Ivoire Research Series, February 2022, available via *https://equalaccess.org*

22 National Opinion Research Center and Equal Access International, "Security and Resilience: Perceptions and Experiences"; International Organization of Migration, "Northern Côte d'Ivoire Crisis Response Plan 2024."

23 National Opinion Research Center and Equal Access International, "Security and Resilience: Perceptions and Experiences," p. 23; Milland, Olivier, "Prospects for EU. Ghana defence partnership: Local agency and views on security cooperation," FOI Memo 8445, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2024, available via *www.foi.se*.

24 Interview with university lecturer, October 2023; International Crisis Group, "Keeping Jihadists Out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire," p. 13.

25 Diarra, Lassina, "Radicalisation et perception de la menace terroriste dans l'extrême nord de la Côte d'Ivoire: Le cas de Bounkani."

26 Ibid.

27 Ricard, Maxime, "Sous pression: Les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire," pp. 7–13.

28 Ricard, Maxime, "Sous pression: Les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire," p. 17.

29 Interview with political party; interview with think-tank researcher; interview with conflict researcher.

30 Ricard, Maxime (Dr.), "Sous pression: Les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire"; interview with foreign diplomat 1, October 2023; International Crisis Group, "Keeping Jihadists Out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire," p. 11.

31 International Crisis Group, "Keeping Jihadists Out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire," p. 12; Ricard, Maxime (Dr.), "Sous pression: Les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire," p.7.

32 Interview with foreign diplomat 1, October 2023; "Côte d'Ivoire: 10 000 nouveaux soldats au total incorporés d'ici 2024," 24 November 2021, *Africa24*, available via *www.africa24tv.com*

33 Gourlay, Youenn, "Opération 'Frontière étanche': Comment la Côte d'Ivoire se protège de la contagion terroriste," 12 November 2019, *Le Monde*, available via *www.lemonde.fr*.

34 Government of Côte d'Ivoire, "Sécurité: Une zone opérationnelle créée aux frontières Côte d'Ivoire-Mali-Burkina Faso," 13 July 2020, available via *www.gouv.ci*; interview with university lecturer, October 2023.

35 Ricard, Maxime (Dr.), "Sous pression: Les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire"; interview with conflict researcher.

36 Interview with foreign diplomat 1, October 2023.

37 Interview with foreign diplomat 1; interview with diplomat 2, October 2023; interview with university lecturer; interview with think tank-researcher; interview with conflict researcher; International Crisis Group, "Keeping Jihadists Out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire," p. 12.

38 International Crisis Group, "Keeping Jihadists Out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire," p. 17.

39 Interview with university lecturer; interview with foreign diplomat 1.

40 Ekene Lionel, "Ivory Coast to monitor northern borders with Delair DT-26 surveillance drones," 22 December 2021, *Military Africa*, available via *www.military.africa*; "Lutte antiterroriste en Côte d'Ivoire: Alassane Ouattara se tourne vers la Chine," *Jeune Afrique*, 24 June 2024, available via *www.jeuneafrique.com*.

41 Ricard, Maxime (Dr.), "Sous pression: Les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire," p. 11.

42 AILCT Home Page, available via *www.ailct.org*; Gunnarson, Carina, "Frankrike vid ny skiljeväg i Afrika."

43 International Crisis Group, "Keeping Jihadists Out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire," p. 13.

44 The Dozo are traditional hunters mostly drawn from Mandé-speaking communities who live across West Africa, including in Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. In recent times, some of them have taken up roles as informal self-defence militia who provide security services for local communities, often farmers, by taxing herders or preventing them from moving between pastures; Ricard, Maxime (Dr.), "Sous pression: Les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire," p. 17.

45 Ministry of Defence, Government of Côte d'Ivoire, "Assemblée Nationale: Le projet de budget 2024 du Ministère d'État, Ministère de la Défense adopté à la quasi-unanimité en commission," 8 November 2023, available via *https://defense.gouv.ci*

46 Ministry of Budget and Accounts, Government of Côte d'Ivoire, "Document de programmation budgétaire et économique pluri-annuelle 2024-2026 (DPBEP)," available via *https://budget.gouv.ci*; Ministry of Budget and Accounts, Government of Côte d'Ivoire, "Rapport de présentation du projet de loi portant règlement du budget de l'État pour l'année 2018," available via *https://budget.gouv.ci*; Ministry of defence, Government of Côte d'Ivoire, "Assemblée Nationale: Le projet de budget 2024 du Ministère d'État, Ministère de la Défense adopté à la quasi-unanimité en commission"; Ricard, Maxime (Dr.), "Sous pression: Les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire," p. 11.

47 PSGouv2.

48 Interview with diplomat 1.

49 Interview with international NGO.

50 Banga, Arthur, "La Côte d'Ivoire et la sécurité collective en Afrique de l'Ouest," *Annuaire français de relations internationales*, 2021, pp. 277–288, Paris : Éditions Panthéon-Assas, available via *www.cairn.info*

51 Interview with diplomat 1; interview with diplomat 2; interview with university lecturer; ,nterview with human-rights activist and journalist, October 2023.

52 Padonou, Oswald, "La Côte d'Ivoire et les opérations de paix: profil d'une néo-contributeur," 2019, Observatoire Boutros-Ghali du maintien de la paix, available via *www.observatoire-boutros-ghali.org*.

53 European Council of Foreign Relations, "Mapping African Regional Cooperation: Accra Initiative," available via *https://ecfr.eu*; Ricard, Maxime (Dr.), "Sous pression: Les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire," p. 19.

54 Ricard, Maxime (Dr.), "Sous pression: Les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire," p. 19.

55 Ricard, Maxime (Dr.), "Sous pression: Les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire," p. 20.

56 "En Afrique, décrue historique en vue pour l'armée française" ; Gunnarson, Carina, "Frankrike vid ny skiljeväg i Afrika," FOI Memo 8304, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2024, available via *www.foi.se*.

57 Ricard, Maxime (Dr.), "Sous pression: Les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire," p. 20; "Coup d'État français en Côte d'Ivoire ? Plutôt des exercises militaires détournés," France 24 (YouTube), 16 November 2022, available via *www.youtube.com*; Kouame, Koye Remi, "AIP/ Un exercice militaire conjoint entre Forces armées de Côte d'Ivoire et France démarre début septembre dans le Gbèkè," *Agence Ivoirienne de Presse*, 29 August 2024, available via *www.aip.ci*.

58 France Ministry of Finance and Economy's General-Directorate of Treasury, "Côte d'Ivoire: Relations bilatérales", available via *www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr*.

59 Interview with security consultant; interview with journalist and human rights activist; interview with think-tank researcher; interview with conflict researcher; interview with university lecturer.

60 "Coup d'État français en Côte d'Ivoire? Plutôt des exercises militaires détournés"; Olivier, Mathieu and Roger, Benjamin, "Le Niger et la Côte d'Ivoire dans le viseur de Wagner," 9 March 2023,

61 Interview with diplomat 2.

62 US Department of State, "The U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability 10-Year Plan for Coastal West Africa," available via *www.state.gov*.

63 "Flintlock 2022 Shows Coastal Nations Joining the Fight Against Sahel Extremism," 8 March 2022, *Africa Defence Forum*, available via *https://adf-magazine.com*; United States Africa Command, "African special operations forces, U.S. SOC-Africa announce Flintlock 2023," 13 January 2023, available via *www.africom.mil*; "Multinational Security Collaboration Highlights Flintlock 2024," 4 June 2024, *Africa Defence Forum*, available via *https://adf-magazine.com*

64 "How the US is lobbying for new military bases in Côte d'Ivoire and Benin," 17 June 2024, The Africa Report, available via *www.theafricareport.com*.

65 Interview with human-rights activist and journalist;

66 Amnesty International, "Ils ont regardé sa carte d'identité et l'ont abattu," 2011, available via *www.amnesty.org*.

67 "Mali: Au moins trois morts dans une manifestation anti-Minusma à Gao," 27 January 2015, *Jeune Afrique*, available via *www.jeuneafrique.com*; "RDC: Les manifestations anti-Monusco enflent dans l'Est," 27 July 2022, *Jeune Afrique*, available via *www.jeuneafrique.com*.

68 Interview with local politician.

69 Interview with international development organisation.

70 Interview with local politician.

71 Hellquist, Elin and Sandman, Tua, "Synergies Between Military Missions in Mali," March 2020, FOI-R--4915--SE, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), available via *www.foi.se*.