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US' bilateral approach in the Sahel questioned

On 4th October, a joint US-Nigerien patrol was ambushed near Tongo Tongo, Niger. The attackers opened fire on the patrol, killing three US Special Forces and four Nigerien soldiers. A fourth US Special force later died of his injuries. The attack occurred in the Tillabéri region, western Niger, near the border with Mali, an area considered as a terrorist hotspot. At the end of May six Nigerien soldiers were killed after an attack in Abala [Niger/Mali: une dizaine de militaires tués en 24h, TV5 Monde, 1 June 2017], while in March five gendarmes lost their lives after a deadly raid in the Wanzarbé area, close to the borders with Mali and Burkina Faso. [Niger: cinq gendarmes tués lors d'un raid terroristes dans l'ouest du pays, Jeune Afrique, 6 March 2017].

The death of US Special Forces obviously shed light on the US' military presence in Niger. In a later statement, the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) said that US forces operate in Niger to provide training and security assistance to the Nigerien Armed Forces, including support for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) efforts, in order to target violent extremist organisations in the region. The US already operates an airbase near Niamey since 2014 and is building a new drone base south of Agadez [Robyn Dixon, Killing of 3 Green Berets in Niger puts a spotlight on US counterterrorism efforts, Los Angeles Times, 05 October 2017].

Surrounded by failing States (Mali to the west, Libya to the north and Nigeria to the south) where terrorist groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb found an ideal breeding ground, Niger is in the crosshair. In July the UN Special Representative for West Africa Mohamed Ibn Chambas warned that instability in Mali was extending to Burkina Faso and Niger, in particular along the Liptako-Gourma border region, where several terrorist groups, criminal rings and smugglers have already stepped up presence. In a September interview the Interior Minister of Niger Mohamed Bazoum said that the local offshoot of ISIS in the Greater Sahara (led by the former member of the al-Mourabitoun terrorist group Abu Walid al-Sahraoui) is the main threat to the security of Niger [Morgane Le Cam, Niger: « L'Etat islamique dans le Grand Sahara est la nouvelle menace », Le Monde, 15 September 2017]

Efforts to eradicate jihadist groups from a region considered a soft underbelly of North Africa have not been successful so far. The French military mission in the Sahel region Barkhane (which includes 4,000 soldiers and replaced the Operation Serval launched in 2013 to prevent the fall of Bamako to jihadist groups) struggle to track senior terrorist leaders in the vast area, while the Mission Multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali (MINUSMA) has suffered significant casualties (80 peacekeepers killed since its establishment in 2013, the deadliest UN mission in activity so far).

In order to enhance the military capabilities of the Sahel States, a new multilateral approach was adopted this year. On 2 July member countries of the G5 Sahel regional organisation (including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) agreed to establish a joint military force to fight against terrorism in the region. The joint force (5,000 military and police personnel from the G5 member States to be later increased to 10,000), is expected to be operational by next year and could represent a further instrument in containing the advance of jihadist groups [Bilan du G5 Sahel: des annonces concrètes mais un manque de financement, RFI, 03 July 2017].

However, the serious disagreement between France and the US in June had deep consequences on the project. In June the new US administration made clear that while it supported the creation of a regional force to tackle jihadist groups in the Sahel, it preferred to continue its bilateral approach with the States of the region. The decision was in line with President Trump's policy of scaling back the US' funding for peacekeeping operations and resulted in a UN resolution only welcoming the establishment of the joint force [Colum Lynch, 'Trump weighs vetoing France's African anti-terrorism plan', Foreign Policy, 13 June 2017]. As a result, of the €423 million needed to launch the joint force, the G5 Sahel could only rely on €108 million, €50 million of them provided by the European Union.

Besides revealing the complex relation between Washington and Paris in the Sahel, the dispute is delaying the establishment of the joint force, causing irritation among member countries of the G5 Sahel. On 3 October, during the fifth meeting of the Mediterranean Dialogue Policy Advisory Group (MD PAG) of NATO in Nouakchott, the Mauritanian Minister Delegate to Foreign Affairs Khadjjetou Mbareck Fall urged the international community to increase the financial support to the joint force, stressing the need of equipment, communication systems and medical emergency units.

A donor conference is expected in December in Brussels to raise additional funds for the project. However, it remains to be seen if the attack in Niger could have changed perspectives in Washington, forcing the Trump administration to adjust its policy in the region and to adopt a multilateral approach more in line with the ambitious project of the G5 Sahel's joint counterterrorism force.

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