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Dr. David Doukhan

Abstract

This article discusses the establishment of a new political and military alliance among Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, known as the Liptako-Gourma Treaty, signed on September 16, 2023. The alliance, formed in response to common threats from radical Islamic Jihad groups and potential military intervention from ECOWAS, aims to bolster collective defense and assistance in the Sahel region. The article delves into the geographical and strategic significance of the Liptako-Gourma area, highlighting its vulnerability to extremist groups like Katiba Macina, Ansarul Islam, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. An emphasis is placed on the challenges faced by the alliance, such as the need for improved military capabilities, funding difficulties, and the absence of a unified command structure. He also critically examines the potential role of external forces like the Wagner Group and compares this alliance with previous efforts like the G5 Sahel. The article concludes by questioning the effectiveness and future prospects of this new Sahel alliance in combating regional insecurity and terrorism.

Keywords: Islamic Jihad; Sahel Region; Extremist Groups; Sahel Alliance

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On September 16, 2023, the leaders of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso signed the 'Liptako-Gourma Treaty' (Liptako-Gourma - Alliance of Sahel States) in Bamako, the capital of Mali, thus establishing a new alliance between these three Sahel states.¹

In addition to the division of the same geographic region in the Sahel, the three countries share common borders and are all governed by a military junta. They face a common threat from radical Islamic Jihad groups that aspire to establish the Islamic Caliphate and spread towards the Gulf of Guinea countries. It seems that the decision to unite their forces stems from the common threats and challenges they face.

Obviously, the treaty was also signed in the wake of the threat of military involvement by ECOWAS countries (The Economic Community of West African States) in response

¹ Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso sign Sahel security pact Reuters (16.9.2023). Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-niger-burkina-faso-sign-sahel-security-pact-2023-09-16/> ; <https://punchng.com/mali-niger-burkina-juntas-sign-mutual-defence-pact/> ; https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/09/16/mali-burkina-faso-and-niger-sign-mutual-defense-pact_6136615_4.html ; <https://www.civildaily.com/news/liptako-gourma-character/>

to the July 26 military coup in Niger. Mali and Burkina Faso have committed to come to Niger's aid in the event of a military invasion.

At the same time, it is interesting to understand why the name Liptako-Gorma was chosen? Liptako-Gorma is a geographical area that spans across these three countries. It is an area of approximately 536,000 square kilometers, 17 million inhabitants, an agricultural area with agro-pastoral potential (agricultural and grazing landscape) and gold mines.

The focus on Liptako-Gorma is due to the presence of armed extremist Islamic groups that sow terror and violence in this land. Katiba Macina, commanded by Hamadou Kouffa, is the most well-known of them.

Then there is Ansarul Islam led by Abdoul Salam Dicko, which is mainly active in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISWAP), led by Abdulaziz Mahwaz Al-Jamal.

The Liptako-Gorma area has been suffering from total insecurity for years due to the presence and activity of the armed groups. The population is isolated, trapped, and desperate for assistance because of the escalating pressure put by radical organizations on economic and consumption resources that are becoming scarce (herds are kidnapped to feed the rebels). This situation resulted in the closing of schools, to the spread of people being kidnapped for bargaining purposes or to be recruited into the ranks of the Islamist groups.

The geographical area is suitable for these groups due to the ability to slip away and hide in one of the countries, therefore the area is also called 'the meeting of the three borders'.

What are the goals and aims of the AES Sahel Alliance?

Liptako-Gorma Convention, contains 17 articles. The main goal is to establish a collective defense and assistance architecture. The heads of the AES undertake in the treaty to fight terrorism in all its forms and organized crime in the common space of the alliance. I have already mentioned the possibility of involvement in Niger if it is attacked by the ECOWAS forces. By the way, the signatories of the alliance believe that the military alliance is justified due to the failure of the G5 Sahel. The G5 Sahel, it must be remembered, is a joint and integrated military force that was supposed to fight the problem of insecurity prevailing in the region because of the activities of the radical Islamic organizations, a task which, according to them, it failed in.

What is the immediate challenge of the AES?

The jihadist danger prevails in full force mainly in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. However, it threatens to expand towards countries in West Africa. Benin, for example, suffered

several attacks in the north of the country. The progress of the groups indicates their intention to expand also to the coastal countries in the Gulf of Guinea. The AES charter does not rule out the potential of new enterprises joining from countries with similar realities.

One of the challenges of the AES in its fight against the threat of the spread of radical Islamic terrorism and organized crime is the means and the improvement of military capabilities. The alliance needs to strengthen its military capabilities to deal with the hybrid threats facing the countries and the entire region. The new alliance must significantly strengthen the intelligence capabilities and the use of air power. This raises the question of funding. The member states of the new treaty are poor and are often supported by grants from the West. The military coups that took place there cut them off from that financial support and worsened their economic situation. The assumption that Russia or China would fill the gap turned out to be a mistake. They are ready to sell military equipment in exchange for mining valuable minerals.

The question of funding was also one of the obstacles of the G5 Sahel, an organization created in 2014 by Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. Without a UN mandate, and thus receiving no financial support from the UN, the G5 Sahel joint forces set up to fight against jihadists in the region has struggled to raise resources to achieve its goals. The AES will probably have to do the same.

In my opinion, there is another point of weakness in the new force - command and direction. Until now, in the joint forces operating on the African continent (G5 Sahel, Barkhane, Task Force Takuba, Serval), France served as commander-in-chief and professional guide. France, along with the United States and several other European countries, also provided guidance, dedicated training, intelligence and shoulder-to-shoulder combat while taking advantage of their technological advantages. In this alliance, there is no commander-in-chief and central leader, so it is difficult to see the combined forces of these three countries acting in a coordinated manner, synergistic, synchronized and efficient.

It remains to be seen how things evolve inside this new fighting, as well as the weight of the 'Wagner force' in it on behalf of Russia.