Multinational Joint Task Force: Lessons for Comprehensive Regional Approaches to Cross-Border Conflict in Africa

Chika Charles Aniekwe | ORCID: 0000-0003-2628-7794
Senior Advisor and Head of Lake Chad Basin Stabilisation Programme for UNDP, Ndjamena, Chad
Corresponding author
chikacharles.aniekwe@undp.org

Katharine Brooks | ORCID: 0009-0005-9453-4437
First Secretary Political, British High Commission Abuja, Abuja, Nigeria
Katharine.Brooks@fcdo.gov.uk

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Abstract

The recent proliferation of cross-border conflicts in Africa has led to the establishment of multiple Ad Hoc Security Initiatives (AHSIs) on the continent. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives has varied considerably. As such, there is now increased academic and policy interest in the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which has seen substantial operational success over the course of its mandate. This paper seeks to contribute to the debate on the strengths and weaknesses of the MNJTF model and the effectiveness of the Force in the Lake Chad region through an exploration of the MNJTF from an internal perspective. The authors of this paper have both worked closely with the MNJTF in recent years and the paper is based upon interviews with current and former MNJTF personnel, staff of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (which oversees the MNJTF) as well as donor and UN partners. In exploring this internal perspective, the article undertakes an in-depth examination of the MNJTF, including the relationship between the headquarters and the sectors, and assesses the impact the MNJTF has had upon the Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs). It identifies areas where the MNJTF has become a regional hub of best practice, challenges that have
compromised its effectiveness, and the impact of military diplomacy on the security of the region. Finally, it concludes by drawing lessons from this experience for other conflicts requiring a comprehensive regional and international response.

Keywords


1 Introduction

The changing nature of conflict on the African continent from one that is primarily state focused to one that is transnational in nature has led to changes in how actors respond to insecurity. Part of this change has been the development of Ad-hoc Security Initiatives (ASI) which support regional responses to conflict.¹ The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) is one of the oldest and, as will be argued, one of the most successful examples of ASIs on the African continent. It was originally created in 1994 as a Nigerian force tasked with combatting cross-border crime within the Lake Chad region. In 1998, it was expanded to include units from Chad and Niger.² In 2012, its mandate was expanded to cover counter-terrorism operations in response to the emerging threat from ‘Boko Haram’ in North-East Nigeria.³ In January 2015, the MNJTF Headquarters in Baga, Nigeria, was overrun by Boko Haram. The African Union (AU) then authorised the MNJTF as a regional security arrangement of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and developed a new Concept of Operations (CONOPS) for the Force. As defined by the AU mandate, the MNJTF now operates under the direct political leadership of the Executive Secretary of the Lake Chad Basin Commission who also acts as the Head of Mission for the MNJTF. The military command rest under the Force Commander, who is appointed by Nigeria.

The new MNJTF CONOPS established a regional headquarters for the Force in N’Djamena and four national sectors: Sector One comprises Cameroonian

troops covering Northern Cameroon with headquarters at Mora; Sector Two comprises Chadian troops operating in Western Chad with headquarters at Baga Sola; Sector Three comprises Nigerian troops covering the North Eastern corner of Nigeria with headquarters at Monguno; Sector Four comprises Nigerien troops operating in South Eastern Niger with headquarters at Diffa.

Under the 2015 AU Framework, the MNJTF was given three core mandated tasks. These are a) to create a safe and secure environment in the areas affected by the activities of Boko Haram and other terrorist groups in order to significantly reduce violence against civilians and other abuses, including sexual and gender-based violence, in full compliance with international law, including international humanitarian law and the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy; b) to facilitate the implementation of overall stabilisation programmes by the LCBC member states and Benin in the affected areas, including the complete restoration of state authority and the return of IDPs and refugees and c) to facilitate, within the limit of its capabilities, humanitarian operations, and the delivery of assistance to the affected populations.

Onuoha, Tchie and Zabala (2023) recently evaluated the success of the MNJTF in delivering on these mandates.4 They found that the MNJTF had made significant progress in delivering on the first of its mandates as it had succeeded in degrading the capability of terrorist organisations within the region and had ‘created a conducive environment for refugees and IDPs to return to their communities’.5 They also found that the MNJTF was ‘meeting expectations’ on the second of its mandates through facilitating the return of IDPs, delivering quick impact projects and providing assistance to stabilisation actors. However, concerns were raised about the failure of non-military actors (e.g. police) to hold areas cleared of Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) by the MNJTF and the authors noted that initiatives or activities carried out with support from the MNJTF are not always consistently implemented. Finally, their research found that the MNJTF was ‘doing well despite its limited capacity and capabilities to interact with local communities frequently and support humanitarian actors delivering assistance’, noting that challenges in coordination and interpretation of mandates remain.6

While Onuoha, Tchie and Zabala’s assessment is one of the most recent evaluations of the MNJTF, it interacts with a large body of literature such as

5 Ibid, 17.
6 Ibid, 25.
Assanvo, Abatan and Sawadogo, as well as Brubacher, Damman and Day, who examined the Force shortly after its creation and found that the MNJTF was surviving on pragmatism, with its structures and framework yet to be operational. Other, such as Dieng and International Crisis Group, who examined it a few years later, found an operational force that still struggled to exercise joint command and control, was limited in its ability to secure and hold territory, and suffered from challenges of human rights compliance and lack of coordination with civilian authorities. Onuoha, Tchie and Zabala’s assessment reflects the continued development of the Force and an increased capacity to deliver on its mandates.

This article builds on this existing work and seeks to add to this debate through an exploration of the internal perspective of the MNJTF, based upon the experiences of those who worked inside and with the Force. This approach is necessarily a subjective one and findings must be balanced against the wider literature. Nonetheless, this is an important perspective that is currently missing from the academic debate and adds to our wider understanding. The paper adopts an empirically driven research or ‘grounded’ method to understanding international institutions advocated by scholars such as Peter Wilson and Tonny Brems Knudsen within the English School of International Relations. In this approach, institutions are examined from empirical observation of practice and are then analysed and understood from a ‘participant standpoint’, involving ‘interpretation of the meanings that social actors themselves give to their actions’. This approach advocates that in order to understand actions,

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practices and institutions, it is first essential to ‘grasp the relevant meanings, beliefs and preferences of the people involved’.13

In line with this approach, the primary research method for this paper was key stakeholder interviews. Twelve interviews were conducted between 10 May 2023 and 8 June 2023. The actors interviewed for the paper are grouped into three categories. The first category were security personnel, specifically current and former leading military officers of the MNJTF (including former Force Commanders) and military and security officers of key donor partners. Five of the interviewees were within this category. The second category of actors interviewed were current and former staff of international institutions that work with the MNJTF, such as African Union, the United Kingdom’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and United Nations entities. Four interviewees were in this category. The third category of actors interviewed were staff of the LCBC. Three interviewees were in this category. The selection of interview subjects was guided by the above described ‘grounded’ approach to understanding international institutions – selecting individuals who worked either within or closely with the MNJTF over a prolonged period of time. Complementing this approach, this paper also draws from recent reports, briefing papers and datasets produced by the Secretariat of the Lake Chad Basin Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, and the MNJTF.

The following sections detail key themes which emerged from the interviews and the desk review, including; the self-perception of the MNJTF as a regional hub of best practice for non-kinetic approaches (a view shared by many who worked closely with the Force); the comparatively greater focus on International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) by the MNJTF compared with the standalone forces of the TCCs; the MNJTF’s structural and cultural evolution over time in order to respond to a changing security context; and the impact of military diplomacy through the MNJTF on regional security dynamics.

2 MNJTF as a Hub of Best Practice for Non-kinetic Approaches

In 2019, Dieng argued that the MNJTF itself and Western support to it tended to favour kinetic strategies at the expense of non-kinetic approaches.14 This

analysis is shared by some other scholars such as Brubacher, Damman and Day.\textsuperscript{15} However, in our interviews with former and current senior figures in the MNJTF, it was clear that, rather than focusing solely on kinetic methods, they saw themselves as pioneers of non-kinetic approaches in the region. This was clear both from the language used in the interviews, which stressed a ‘hearts and minds’ approach and the importance of community relationships,\textsuperscript{16} as well as the focus given to non-kinetic activities by the interviewees when asked to talk about the operations of the MNJTF. Security personnel interviewed were able to cite examples such as establishment of a Civil-Military Cooperation Cell, initiation and roll-out of community dialogue processes, delivery of quick impact projects (QIPs) and development of a communication and counter messaging programme as examples of non-kinetic approaches pioneered first by the MNJTF Headquarters, rolled out to the MNJTF sectors, and later taken up by the national militaries of the TCCs as evidence of its role in developing non-kinetic approaches to the conflict and disseminating these to the TCCs. These initiatives are examined in detail below:

The Lake Chad Basin Regional Strategy for Stabilisation, Recovery and Resilience (RS-SRR),\textsuperscript{17} launched in 2018, envisaged that civilian oversight of the MNJTF should be implemented through the establishment of an LCBC – MNJTF Civil-Military Cooperation Cell (CIMIC Cell). The Cell would facilitate cooperation between the security forces, civilian and humanitarian agencies, and local communities. Following the establishment of the RS-SRR Secretariat in 2019, the LCBC – MNJTF CIMIC Cell was created in December 2020.\textsuperscript{18} MNJTF personnel interviewed for this research stated that, in their view, the establishment of the CIMIC Cell was one of the major triggers for the tactical shift towards non-kinetic approaches by the MNJTF.\textsuperscript{19} Both security and non-security personnel interviewed said that through regular dialogue and consultation between the military component (led by the J9 of the MNJTF), the LCBC advisers, the CCL contingent, the African Union Mission Support

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{16} Interviews 2 and 3.
\bibitem{19} Interviews 2, 3, 5 and 10.
\end{thebibliography}
Team (MST) and the CIMIC Advisor of the RS-SRR Secretariat, the CIMIC-Cell gradually informed and shaped the approach of the MNJTF on non-kinetic operations.\textsuperscript{20}

Interviewees reported that since 2020, cooperation via the Cell has led to the revision of the MNJTF CIMIC SOPs and the development of a Communications Strategy for the MNJTF.\textsuperscript{21} The Cell has also managed the deployment of community dialogues and the rollout of several training initiatives for the MNJTF on the protection of civilians, gender-based violence, as well as International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL).\textsuperscript{22} Humanitarian and donor partners interviewed corroborated the views of security personnel, arguing that the creation of the CIMIC Cell incubated and fostered information sharing between the MNJTF and the other sectors, allowing effective roll out of non-kinetic initiatives across all areas of operation.\textsuperscript{23} An interview with a key humanitarian stakeholder confirmed that cooperation and coordination with the sectors had significantly improved since 2021 and that it was generally recognised as far easier to coordinate with troops operating under the MNJTF than troops operating outside of the Force in the region.\textsuperscript{24} These findings are shared by Salami and Aniekwe (2023), who found that the establishment of the CIMIC Cell had shifted practice of the MNJTF on CIMIC and led to the localisation of CIMIC structures within the sectors.\textsuperscript{25}

One of the primary focuses of the Cell in recent years has been to coordinate community engagement for the MNJTF. Much of the existing literature on the MNJTF identifies a lack of effective community engagement as an area of weakness for the MNJTF.\textsuperscript{26} Indeed, previous work undertaken on vigilantism

\textsuperscript{20} Interview 10.
\textsuperscript{21} Interview 11.
\textsuperscript{23} Interviews 4 and 6.
\textsuperscript{24} Interview 6.
in the Lake Chad Basin by one of the authors of this paper identified the lack of trust between the military and local communities as a key driving factor in the mobilisation of vigilante groups. 27 However, more recent assessments found that MNJTF has made considerable progress in this area and that ‘civilians preferred to work with the MNJTF than national forces’. 28 The findings of Onuoha, Tchie and Zabala in this regard were corroborated by stakeholders interviewed for this paper who confirmed that, although community relations had previously been strained, this had improved significantly in recent years as a result in the shift in approach on the part of the MNJTF. 29 They also said that they believed community perceptions of the MNJTF were much more positive than perceptions of the standalone forces of TCCS. 30

When asked what led to this shift in approach, a number of those interviewed said that the community dialogues which began in 2021 were a key turning point for the MNJTF. According to one interviewee, ‘the community dialogue was an eye opener for the soldiers, it was an opportunity to hear and feel the communities and to understand what they could do to rebuild the relationship with the communities’. 31 The community dialogues were initiated by the MNJTF at headquarter level and were later rolled out to all four sectors following the success of the pilot. In 2021, four community dialogues took place in Mora (Sector 1) on 13 July, Diffa (Sector 3) on 26 July, Monguno (Sector 4) on 20 August, and Baga Sola (Sector 2) on 24 August. 32 Representatives of partner organisations interviewed reported that these community dialogues helped the MNJTF better understand its responsibility to protect affected communities and that the subsequent strengthening of trust between the MNJTF and local communities was directly attributable to these community dialogues. 33 Similarly, an RS-SRR Secretariat Perception Survey conducted in


29 Interviews 4 and 6.

30 Interviews 4 and 6.

31 Interview 4.


33 Interviews 5 and 6.
2022 across the eight affected territories indicated that communities feel safer and better able to rely on security forces compared to years before 2019.\textsuperscript{34}

Following the success of the medical outreach and community dialogue programmes, the MNJTF launched a programme of community-based quick impact projects (QIPs). These were intended to support the community dialogue approach.\textsuperscript{35} QIPs deployed included delivering essential food items, the provision of educational kits/aids to schools, drilling of boreholes, provision of medical and veterinary supplies, and building schools and hospitals in areas that were inaccessible to humanitarian agencies.\textsuperscript{36} According to both military and civilian stakeholders interviewed, the provision of essential medical supplies and treatment to communities in areas of VEO control created an opening for the military to rebuild trust with communities and an entry point for a direct and honest conversation.\textsuperscript{37} The participation of selected military officers from the sectors for the pilot phase of the medical outreach and accompany community dialogue served as a platform for cross fertilisation and learning between the HQ-led forces and the sectors.\textsuperscript{38} These initiatives soon became a regular practice across the sectors. Over the past two years, the MNJTF has deployed 129 QIPs.\textsuperscript{39}

Information about these community outreach programmes was dispersed through Radio Ndarason International (RNI), a radio based in N’Djamena which broadcasts in local languages across the region.\textsuperscript{40} This allowed the MNJTF to effectively communicate information about its activities through a medium accessible to local communities.\textsuperscript{41} Interviews with two former Force Commanders indicated that they believed the community dialogues and QIPs were instrumental to the kinetic successes that were achieved in Operation


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{37} Interviews 3, 4 and 6.

\textsuperscript{38} Interviews 4 and 11.

\textsuperscript{39} In 2021, Sector One deployed 15 QIPs, Sector Two 23, Sector Three 9, and Sector Four 19. Overall, in 2021, the four sectors deployed a total of 63 QIPs. Similarly, in 2022, there was a total of 66 QIPs deployed by the Sectors as follows – Sector one 18, Sector two 23, Sector three 9, Sector four 16. Lake Chad Basin Commission, RSS Annual Report 2022.


\textsuperscript{41} Interview 2.
Lake Sanity in 2022 because of the enhanced intelligence that the MNJTF received from local communities about the operations of insurgent groups.\textsuperscript{42}

In addition to their outreach to communities, the MNJTF has also reached out to VEOS to encourage defections and counter violent extremist narratives. In November 2020, the MNJTF organised its first strategic communication workshop in N’Djamena, Chad, which recommended that partner forces work to address issues which were lending credibility to violent extremist narratives in the Lake Chad region including the grievances of local populations against the security forces and civilian governments.\textsuperscript{43} Based on the findings of these community engagement initiatives, in 2021 the MNJTF began working in collaboration with RNI to develop radio content which challenged violent extremist narratives and sought to shift the view of communities towards the MNJTF and other security agencies. At the time of initiation, strategic communications of this kind were almost entirely absent from the military doctrines of all four TCCs. In 2022, the MNJTF initiated a weekly talk show with RNI to allow them to speak directly with local communities. The talk show helped to inform local communities about the activities of the MNJTF, including QIPS, and ensured that the correct information was disseminated to vulnerable communities.\textsuperscript{44} The perceived success of these initiatives encouraged the sectors to take a similar approach. Since 2022, the Theatre Command in Maiduguri, Nigeria has adopted a similar programme to community engagement and communication outreach to VEOS.\textsuperscript{45}

Both security and non-security stakeholders interviewed said they believed that by adopting communications outreach as a tool for counterinsurgency, the MNJTF played a key role in encouraging the mass defections that have happened across the region since August 2021.\textsuperscript{46} Between August 2021 and to date, over 100,000 individuals who were either associates or combatants of JAS/ISWA or who lived in areas of VEO control have surrendered themselves to security forces across the four countries – the majority in Borno State, Nigeria. A recent report from United Nations University (UNU) and United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) indicates that these individuals left VEOS for diverse reasons, including fear of violence and death, missing one’s family, hardship and poor living conditions, lost belief in the cause, lost trust in the group leadership and desire for a different kind of

\textsuperscript{42} Interviews 2 and 3.
\textsuperscript{43} The LCBC, RS-SRR Secretariat Workshop Report, November 2020.
\textsuperscript{44} Interview 4.
\textsuperscript{45} Interviews 2 and 3.
\textsuperscript{46} Interviews 2, 4 and 8.
life.47 However, a key factor in the decision was the belief that they would not be killed by security forces, a concern which previously prevented most from defecting.48

3 Compliance with IHL and IHRL

The IHL and IHRL compliance of the MNJTF has historically been a point of criticism for international institutions: In 2016, the Under-Secretary-General to the United Nations, Jeffrey Feltman, noted that human rights violations and lack of accountability for these violations were among the main issues facing the MNJTF.49 Recognising this, much of the existing literature argues that the MNJTF has insufficient prevention and accountability mechanisms for violations of IHL.50 These criticisms of the MNJTF mirror criticisms of the TCC’s standalone forces, particularly Nigeria.51 However, the findings of key informant interviews indicate that the leadership of the MNJTF and their international partners believe that there has been substantial improvements in compliance with IHL and IHRL by the MNJTF since 2020 and that these improvements go beyond the improvements made by the standalone forces of the TCCs.52 This

48 Ibid, pp. 85–86.
52 Interviews 2, 3, 7, 8 and 10.
assessment was concurred to by both UN and CSO partners interviewed for this paper. No interviewee was able to cite an instance of a human rights violation by troops operating under the auspices of the MNJTF since 2021.

Several reasons were proffered by interviewees to explain why the MNJTF’s compliance with IHL and IHRL had improved more than forces of the TCCs operating outside of its mandate. The first was that the MNJTF gives more comprehensive IHL training to troops operating under its mandate: Former senior personnel of the MNJTF noted that whilst all four TCC countries have training curricula that include IHL/IHRL components, the training offered at the country level is at a lower level than that offered by the MNJTF. They also said they believed that the trainings offered by the MNJTF were more nuanced and context-specific to situations faced by troops operating in the Lake Chad Basin. Interviews with former Force Commanders indicated they placed a high value on the conduct of troops operating under the MNJTF banner and recognised the importance of specialised training in this area. Anecdotal evidence gained from the interviews suggests that these efforts have had a knock-on effect on contributing nations, through the gradual dissemination of better practices in the region. One Western military official interviewed noted that ‘it is difficult to quantify the impact of the MNJTF on partner nations but it is clear that over time there has been a significant shift in practice, led by changes in N’Djamena [the MNJTF Headquarters].

Second, partner organisations and UN staff interviewed said that the very fact that operations were conducted under the auspices of the MNJTF lent an extra level of scrutiny to the sectors. In their view, operations conducted under the auspices of the MNJTF tended to factor IHL compliance into operational planning to a greater extent than operations conducted outside of the MNJTF structure. Similarly, former and current MNJTF personnel noted that, although troops remained solely under the criminal responsibility of their home country, the additional layer of scrutiny and accountability of the MNJTF disincentivised tolerance of IHL violations by sector commanders.

Third, it was indicated by some of those interviewed that the MNJTF’s partnerships with the African Union, EU, UK, France, and US reinforced compliance with IHL because of the conditionalities attached the some of the

53 Interviews 6 and 11.
54 This does not mean that no instances have occurred. It may be that instances occurred but were not reported.
55 Interview 6.
56 Interviews 3 and 4.
57 Interviews 2 and 3.
58 Interview 10.
59 Interviews 6 and 5.
60 Interviews 2 and 3.
funding.\textsuperscript{61} One former MNJTF Force Commander interviewed noted that ‘our partnerships come with human right conditions that remind us of our already known responsibilities to civilian communities’.\textsuperscript{62}

4 MNJTF as an Evolving Response to Cross-Border Threats in the LCB Region

As has been persuasively argued by Ismail and Ababu, conflicts that occur on the margins of two or more Regional Economic Communities, such as in the Lake Chad Basin conflict, which sits between the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), are neglected by the existing African peace and security architecture.\textsuperscript{63} It is precisely this gap in the current institutional arrangement that led to the development of ASIS such as the MNJTF. It is therefore worth understanding how the MNJTF, the LCBC, and their international partners assess the ability of the MNJTF to meet this challenge of cross-border and cross-regional conflict.

Like the Regional Task Force set up to tackle the Lord’s Resistance Army, the model of the MNJTF is that contributing forces are domiciled in their respective countries with the remit to undertake cross-border operations under the command of the MNJTF, within defined parameters. As noted by Brubacher, Damman and Day, this arrangement is one that is more comfortable for governments keen to protect the sovereignty of their territory and control over their own armed forces.\textsuperscript{64} However, this structure presents operational challenges to any Force Commander as it denies them full effective command and control during joint operations. Onuoha, Tchie and Zabala argue that this structure impedes effective military cooperation between the four sectors.\textsuperscript{65}

To a large extent, those interviewed for this paper concurred with this assessment. Interviewees reported that the operational effectiveness of the MNJTF was often undermined by national interests and differences between

\textsuperscript{61} Interview 2.
\textsuperscript{62} Interview 3.
\textsuperscript{65} Onuoha, Tchie and Zabala, ‘A quest to win the hearts and minds: Assessing the Effectiveness of the Multinational Joint Task Force’, p. 36.
the military strategies of participating countries whenever the stakes were high.\footnote{Ifeanyichukwu Micheal Abada, Charles Akale, Kingsley Chigozie Udegbunam and Olihe A. Ononogbu, ‘National Interests and Regional Security in the Lake Chad: Assessing the Multinational Joint Task Force’, \textit{The Journal of Social Sciences Research}, vol. 6, no. 1, 2020, pp. 40–41.} Former \textit{MNJTF} Force Commanders spoke at length on this challenge, with one former Force Commander noting that ‘except for Cameroon (Sector 1), the \textit{MNJTF} forces are still primarily forces of their respective countries and are still under the command and control chain of their national armies. Forces will not commit to collective offensive and engagement if there are other competing national priorities’.\footnote{Interview 2.} This phenomenon was apparent in the latest major operation undertaken by the \textit{MNJTF} – Operation Lake Sanity – where Chadian forces only participated for a short period due to the decision of the Chadian government to prioritise other pressing internal security challenges.\footnote{Interview 2 and 3.}

However, interviews with former and current \textit{MNJTF} personnel, external partners and UN agencies all concurred that, despite these challenges, the \textit{MNJTF} had gradually evolved into a relatively successful model for addressing cross-border conflicts.\footnote{Interviews 2 and 3.} The former Force Commanders interviewed argued that, despite the operational constraints placed upon them, the forces of the \textit{TCCs} had found ways to strengthen collaboration through the available structures.\footnote{Interview 3.} They explained that, in their view, the undertaking of effective operations in recent years was only possible because of the strong interpersonal relationships that had developed over time between the leadership of the Headquarters and the four sectors. As one former Force Commander noted, ‘most of our success was largely due to the understanding and support of the respective sector commanders and not due to the directive from the Military Headquarters in the capitals’.\footnote{Interview 7.} These observations were concurred to by Western partners, who noted that operational planning had become more integrated and more joint over time, largely as a result of the personal leadership of successive Force Commanders, who had made the best of a flawed architecture.\footnote{Interview 7.}

The former Force Commanders interviewed were able to give specific examples of how they developed inter-military relationships at the strategic level within the \textit{MNJTF} that allowed them to effectively plan and coordinate joint operations, manage budgetary challenges, and support activity across the

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\item[\textsuperscript{72} Interview 7.]
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four sectors. This included developing the capabilities to conduct amphibious warfare from all four sectors. Before Operation Lake Sanity in 2022, most sectors lacked the capability to deploy amphibious operations. However, the five-month preparation stage for the operation involved upskilling all sectors in amphibious capabilities, including procuring appropriate equipment and training troops. This allowed the MNJTF to launch limited amphibious operations on the Lake for the first time, diminishing the strategic advantage of the VEOS, who had hitherto sought safe haven on the islands of the Lake. This deep cooperation between TCCS involved sharing of assets, capabilities and intelligence, beyond the level which would have been possible in 2019 or earlier.

When asked about linguistic, structural or cultural differences creating barriers to cooperation, all former and serving MNJTF personnel reported that while these issues were present at the beginning, the MNJTF had either found effective ways to mitigate them (e.g., through standing translation services) or they had gradually diminished over time. For example, two Former Force commanders noted that, rather than relying on French-English translation, the Force Commander and Sector Commanders often communicated in Fulani and Hausa language at inter-personal level. It was also noted that at the lower level, rank and file have found ways to learn parts of each other’s languages including Hausa, Fulani, pidgin English and broken French where necessary for day-to-day engagement.

On the basis of the interviews conducted for this paper, it would therefore appear that, while the structure of the MNJTF is imperfect and does not match any kind of command-and-control structure understood by Western observers (such as NATO Command States), the militaries of the TCCS have gradually developed a community of cooperation practice that they feel allows them to navigate these structures relatively effectively.

5 Impact of Military Diplomacy within the MNJTF on Regional Security

One of the most interesting themes that emerged from this research is that this evolution of cooperative practices via the MNJTF has had wider implications for regional security and the relationships between the militaries of the TCCS. In 2017, Isaac Olawale Albert argued that one of the most critical problems

73 Interview 2.
facing the MNJTF was the mistrust between the TCCs on border issues. However, the finding of this research is that this mistrust has diminished over time. Those interviewed for the paper attributed this progressive evolution to some of the factors discussed already, such as the leadership and coordination capacities of individual Force Commanders. However, those closest to the MNJTF, including former Force Commanders, argued that the very experience of fighting together had built trust between the militaries of the TCCs. In the view of these former and current military personnel, the impact of military diplomacy had gone beyond the MNJTF. One former Force Commander explained, ‘as a result of sustained cooperation and engagement through the MNJTF, cooperation between the four militaries now happens organically and systematically’. Former Force Commander Maj Gen I. M. Yusuf also noted in a public lecture in 2022 that ‘the level of cooperation has risen to a point where the countries now freely share strategic and operational intelligence [and] have agreements for joint funding of military operations’. The benefits of these inter-military relationships between the TCCs do not appear to have been limited in scope to the Lake Chad Basin. Importantly, interviewees also reported that it is now much easier for the TCCs to come to agreements on joint security operations in other cross-border areas outside of the Lake Chad Basin as a result of the practices established within the MNJTF. Examples cited included joint operations across the Nigeria-Niger border at Maradi. In the view of the interviewee who raised this example, the success of cooperation at Maradi was due to the positive cooperation practices that had developed between Niger and Nigeria in the Lake Chad Basin.

These observations have implications for the geopolitics of the region: one senior military figure interviewed commented that ‘shortly before the establishment of MNJTF, Nigeria and Cameroon were on the brink of war. However, due to the strong relationships built with Cameroon through the MNJTF, war with our neighbour (Cameroon) now seems unthinkable’. This has implications for the current crisis in Niger. On 26 July, after the research period for this article had concluded, the government of Niger was overthrown.

75 Interviews 2 and 3.
76 Interview 2.
77 Maj Gen I. M. Yusuf. *Convocation Lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan*, 15 November 2022.
78 Interview 3.
79 Interview 2.
in a military coup. President Tinubu of Nigeria, also President of ECOWAS, initially stated to coup leaders that ECOWAS would restore democracy by force if they did not relinquish power, although both Nigeria and ECOWAS appear now to be favouring dialogue to resolve the crisis. These events have had significant implications for the functioning of the MNJTF. On 22 August, the African Union suspended Niger from the MNJTF and cooperation at an operational and strategic level has broken down. While this development is not the subject of this research, subsequent follow-up conversations with key serving military personnel confirm the arguments above – that cooperation between Niger and Nigeria via the MNJTF led many individual Nigerian and Nigerien officers to be deeply uncomfortable about the prospect of waging war against their former allies in the MNJTF.

6 Political and Financial Challenges

Our research found that stakeholders within and working with the MNJTF identified two primary ongoing serious challenges to the successful delivery of its mandates: sustainable funding and the limited capacity for civilian oversight of the MNJTF. The most pressing challenge cited by all interviewees was the lack of sufficient financial resources to successfully execute operations. As noted by Onuoha, Tchie and Zabala ‘it has been challenging to maintain predictable funding [although] in the face of funding constraints, the MNJTF has been able to plan, execute and sustain large-scale joint offensive operations with a limited financial budget’.80 Prior to 2022 the majority of funding came from Nigeria. However, on 29 November 2022, the 16th Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Lake Chad Basin Commission agreed that all four TCCs would contribute to operational costs. While this decision was made with the aim of ensuring a broader resource base for the MNJTF, no operation has been conducted since that time, due to lack of availability of required funds.

Our research revealed greater complexity to this funding challenge than simple lack of available resources. In particular, it was alleged by a number of stakeholders that disputes between the military and civilian leadership over control and use of funds had led to delays in disbursements of funds to TCCs and interruptions to operations. This was one of several areas of concern highlighted by interviewees regarding the relationship between military and

civilian stakeholders of the MNJTF. One senior military figure noted that, while it was in principle a good thing that the civilian-led LCBC provided strategic direction and guidance to the Force, the architecture for the civilian-military leadership of the MNJTF was insufficient for the needs of the Force. The interviewee explained that the centralisation of political decisional power in the Head of Mission, without the corresponding capacities (in terms of institutional structures and human resources) necessary for a Head of Mission to perform optimally for the benefit of the Force, had implications on the civilian-military leadership relationship.81

Interviews with Former Force Commanders and the staff of the LCBC suggest divergent views on what constitutes adequate capacity for the Office of the Executive Secretary to perform its functions adequately and comprehensively. As ASIs are a new and evolving model of regional security operations, there are no clear guidelines on how the relationship between the military and civilian leadership should be structured or what resources or power should be availed to each. These challenges have emerged periodically throughout the history of the MNJTF and are a lesson for future ASIs to carefully consider structures of decision making and the balance of accountability between military and civilian architectures, ensuring expectations of all parties are aligned.

7 Conclusions

This paper has sought to contribute to the existing literature on the MNJTF through the development of a ‘grounded’ understanding of the Force, based upon the experiences of those who work inside and with it. Particular attention was paid in interviews to understanding the meaning that key stakeholders gave to their work with the MNJTF and their own perceptions of the Force’s strengths and weaknesses. Several interesting findings resulted from this research.

First, far from focusing on kinetic activity alone, past and present leadership of the MNJTF see themselves as pioneers of non-kinetic approaches in the region. Interviewees were able to cite many specific examples of activity that was initiated in the MNJTF and subsequently taken up by the standalone forces of the TCCs. When examining the evolution of non-kinetic practices, it is clear that their initiation was intrinsically related to the wider RS-SRR structure, which mandated the creation of the CIMIC cell and created a conducive

81 Interview 2.
environment for the MNJTF to partner with donors, UN agencies and local
organisations to undertake non-kinetic operations.

Second, our research identified that compliance with IHL and IHRL is
generally believed to be better for forces operating under the MNJTF banner
than those operating outside of it. Better training and increased scrutiny
were the primary reasons cited for this. These assertions would need to be
triangulated by future research since it is beyond the scope of this project to
verify assertions made in this regard. However, the findings of this research
pose an interesting question as to whether ASIS can foster positive cultures of
IHL and IHRL compliance as a result of factors cited by those interviewed for
this paper.

Third, those interviewed concurred that the MNJTF has become more
successful at addressing cross-border conflict over time through the gradual
development of cooperative practices between the TCCS via the MNJTF.
Successive MNJTF Force Commanders described how they have evolved ways
of working that allowed them to maximise the efficacy of the MNJTF despite its
structural limitations – developing practices of cooperation and coordination
that enabled them to successfully deliver the MNJTF’s mandates. Fourth, and
related, our research found that the experience of collaboration through
the MNJTF has built load-bearing relationships between regional militaries,
building a strong foundation for enduring regional security. These benefits are
believed by those interviewed to be felt beyond the boundaries of the Lake
Chad region.

These findings hold lessons for potential future ASIS and, more generally,
for future conflict situations which require a comprehensive regional and
international response. Based upon the stakeholder perspective presented
here, the MNJTF case demonstrates the potential positive benefits of linking
the mandate of ASIS to wider political strategies to resolve conflict which
reinforce civil-military coordination and create a conducive atmosphere for
partnerships between military and civilian agencies. It also demonstrates the
potential for an ASI to become a regional security innovator or hub of best
practice through effective leadership and the development of a culture that
values innovation, community engagement and respect for IHL and IHRL.
Lastly, the MNJTF case shows the wider political effects that can result from
the creation of ASIS: The existence of structures which foster relationships of
cooperation between neighbouring militaries can result in an expansion of the
role of military diplomacy in maintaining regional peace and security.
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Declaration of Interest Statement

We wish to confirm and recognise our roles and work with the Lake Chad Basin Commission and our positionality as actors with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office here in the Lake Chad Basin region. There are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication, and there has been no financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

Biographical Notes

Dr Chika Charles Aniekwe is a Senior Advisor and Head of the Lake Chad Basin Stabilisation Programme for UNDP-Africa. His research interests include electoral democracy, political dialogue and mediation, conflict transformation, peacebuilding, the African Union, the Lake Chad Basin, vigilantism, and Stabilisation. He tweets at @chikacharles.

Dr Katharine Brooks is the First Secretary (Political), British High Commission Abuja. Her research interests include International Institutions (UN and League of Nations), International Relations Theory, the Middle East, Africa, the Lake Chad region, Counter-Terrorism and Security and Defence Partnerships.