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By George T. Whittle

On 4 October of last year, local militants friendly to the Islamic State ambushed a small American military unit outside a remote West African village. The incident left four Americans and five others dead and sparked a public debate on the merits of deploying U.S. forces to remote corners of the world to conduct obscure missions that the public rarely hears of and where the strategic importance may not be as clear to the general public as conducting counterterrorism operations in the deserts of Syria or Libya. Though the incident was not tied directly to Boko Haram and the Lake Chad Basin, the debate has had far reaching consequences for military activities all across sub-Saharan Africa, where public officials have suggested restricting ground commanders' authorities, eliminating potentially high-risk patrols or even pulling out of the region all together. The debate is correctly centered on what constitutes acceptable risk to American forces; but that debate cannot be fully informed without discussing where U.S. strategic interests lie and where it may be necessary to incur risk to achieve broader strategic aims due to the geostrategic importance such an area. A failure to incorporate these aspects of the debate will result in missed opportunities and a short-sighted view of U.S. counterterrorism efforts. While these interests can be found throughout far reaches of the world, this article will specifically focus on the geopolitical interests in the Lake Chad Basin and the concerns over Boko Haram.

In November 2013 the United States Department of State designated Boko Haram as a Foreign Terrorist Organization for "conducting a brutal campaign against Nigerian military, government, and civilian targets."¹ Since then, Boko Haram has grown considerably from a local Salafist insurgency to a

¹ The Department of State announced the designation of Boko Haram as a Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, and as Specially Designated Global Terrorists under section 1(b) of Executive Order 13224. See Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism

transnational terrorist organization, expanding their violent terror campaign from Nigeria into the other countries of the Lake Chad Basin, namely Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. Boko Haram is responsible for the death of more than 20,000 people and the displacement of almost 2.5 million others, becoming the deadliest terrorist organization in the world.² In early 2015 Boko Haram amplified their position and pledged their allegiance to the Islamic State, becoming their West African affiliate.³ Despite experiencing setbacks in the last year, including the splintering of their organization and significant loss of territory, Boko Haram remains more dangerous than ever.⁴

While it appears the United States has accurately evaluated the threat that Boko Haram presents regarding the low likelihood of orchestrating an attack on the American homeland, this article will argue that the U.S. has undervalued the geographic and strategic importance of the Lake Chad Basin. The lack of human security and underdevelopment in the region is both a cause and effect of strengthening ongoing radicalization. Furthermore, the slow response by both the Lake Chad Basin nations, as well as the United States, has allowed the insurgency to fester and prevents government and non-government organizations from reaching those suffering most, making it more likely that even greater destabilization will occur in the Lake Chad Basin and across the Sahel. This article will conclude with the position that it is in the United States' national interest to provide more aggressive security

"Terrorist Designations of Boko Haram and Ansaru," *U.S. Department of State*, November 13, 2013, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/266565.htm>.

² Antony J. Blinken, "National Statement at Lake Chad Basin Regional Security Summit," *Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc.*, May 16, 2016, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1789087951?accountid=322>

³ Sarah Almukhtar, "How Boko Haram Courted and Joined the Islamic State," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/11/world/africa/boko-haram-isis-propaganda-video-nigeria.html>

⁴ Boko Haram has re-invented itself many times and has had several name changes since the mid-2000s. "Boko Haram" loosely translates to "Western education is religiously forbidden" in Hausa and will be used throughout this article to identify the Salafist Terrorist Organization in the Lake Chad Basin regardless of faction or allegiance unless specifically noted. Other names used have been the "Nigerian Taliban," or the "Islamic State – West Africa Province," abbreviated many ways by scholars to include "ISWA" "IS-WAP" "ISIL-WA" or even "ISIS-WA." Boko Haram rejects this name and refers to themselves as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* (The Organization Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad). For more information on the origins of Boko Haram see, Jacob Zenn, *Northern Nigeria's Boko Haram: The Prize in al-Qaeda's Africa Strategy*, (Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2012).

assistance to the countries of Lake Chad to defeat the Boko Haram threat immediately. This is not to say that military action alone can defeat Boko Haram or prevent a return of a jihadist movement in the Lake Chad Basin; on the contrary, it will certainly take a broader humanitarian effort focused on socio-economic development, anti-corruption, and building of democratic institutions to provide basic services as well as address local grievances. However, the longer the insurgency festers and prevents government and non-government organizations from reaching those in need, the more likely even greater destabilization will occur in the Lake Chad Basin and have far-reaching impacts across the Sahel, the Middle East and Europe. This will greatly compound the difficulty and complexity of current and future U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the region.

The Lake Chad Basin is important because of its strategic location. The Lake Chad Basin lies within the heart of sub-Saharan Africa and is the connective tissue for a phenomenon called a “Shatterbelt.” The geopolitical theorist, Saul Cohen, defines a Shatterbelt as “...strategically oriented regions that are both deeply divided internally and caught up in the competition between Great Powers of the geostrategic realms.”⁵ Though Cohen’s theories are often applied to regions where today’s Great Power competition between the United States and China causes great rifts, the dynamics within the sub-Saharan are just as relevant. Cohen specifically explains that the sub-Saharan is one region whose deep fragmentation is a “global destabilizer.”⁶ It can be argued that Mali, Niger, Chad and northern parts of Cameroon, Nigeria and Burkina Faso make up a Sahel-Lake Chad Basin Shatterbelt where internal fissures, conflicts and external pressures from transnational criminal and jihadist organizations and interests between global powers lie between the important geopolitical areas of Europe and the West, the Middle East and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

⁵ Saul Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009) 45

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44

Within the Sahel-Lake Chad Basin Shatterbelt are the countries of Nigeria and Cameroon, which sit in the heart of West and Central Africa and are home to millions of diverse people and rich in natural resources.⁷ These two strategically significant states are what national security affairs expert, Nikolas Gvosdev, defines as “Keystone States.” Dr. Gvosdev explains that such states “promote regional integration and collective security among its neighbors” and “gives coherence to a regional order—or, if it is itself destabilized, contributes to the insecurity of its neighbors.”⁸ These two states are Keystones within the Shatterbelt as well as within West and Central Africa. They interact with each other; as each goes, so does the Shatterbelt and the rest of West and Central Africa. But they also need each other; Nigeria and Cameroon help promote both security and economic opportunity for each other and for the region. Dr. Gvosdev goes on to say: “Such countries are important because they are located at the seams of the global system and serve as critical mediators between different major powers, acting as gateways between different blocs of states, regional associations, and civilizational groupings.”⁹ As the lynchpin within the region, this only furthers the potency of each state’s stability or instability. If Cameroon and Nigeria remain stable, they will thrive and spread prosperity to the rest of the Lake Chad Basin. However, if their stability unravels, it will bring chaos and despair to the whole Shatterbelt.

Nigeria, with over 190 million people, is the most populous country in Africa and has the largest economy.¹⁰ In 2016, it was the 9th largest crude oil exporter in the world.¹¹ Nigeria is a financial and human capital powerhouse, yet its abysmal corruption ranking demonstrates its dichotomy within and

⁷ “Lake Chad Basin: Desk Review,” *World Food Program*, (April 2016), 6.

⁸ “Keystone States - A New Category of Power,” *Horizons*, Autumn No. 5 (2015): <http://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-autumn-2015--issue-no5/keystone-states---a-new-category-of-power>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “The World Fact Book: Nigeria,” *Central Intelligence Agency*, last modified September 27, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>.

¹¹ Nigeria is the 9th largest crude oil exporter in the world as calculated by the industry accepted number of barrels per day – averaging 1.738M b/d. This represents a 17.8% decrease from 2015 numbers. Nigeria exports over 50% of its crude oil to North America. Hasan Hafidh, Alvino-Mario Fantini, Mathew Quinn, “OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin,” *Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries*, no. 52, (2017): 59-60.

its extreme vulnerability to destabilizing factors such as Boko Haram.¹² As the distinguished author and executive of the Royal Africa Society in London, Richard Dowden, explains in *Africa: Altered States*,

Ordinary Miracles:

A successful Nigeria could transform the continent in the twenty-first century... The leader who manages to harness and direct all that energy – physical and human – will create a formidable country that will change Africa and the world. Were it to implode like its neighbors, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire, the human catastrophe would be unconscionable and it would take much of West Africa with it.¹³

The other Keystone State, Cameroon, is one of the most ethnically pluralistic yet balanced societies in Africa. There are over 250 ethnic groups, most of which flow across international boundaries. Cameroon has historically been able to absorb large numbers of refugees from surrounding conflicts while managing to remain relatively stable.¹⁴ They have this ability not only because they share common ethnic roots with many of their neighbors, but because they have relatively strong government institutions, including their military, and have demonstrated stability over the last few decades. As such, Cameroon is one of the least aid dependent countries in Africa.¹⁵

The geopolitical and strategic importance of the Lake Chad Basin cannot be overstated. A destabilized Lake Chad Basin has wider global implications as the region is already an incubator for illicit trafficking and terror financing. Chad and Niger sit on centuries-old smuggling routes which have provided illegally traded arms, people, and drugs through the Sahel and have become increasingly important for contact with other jihadist networks.¹⁶ These smuggling routes only make it easier for

¹² In 2016, Transparency International ranked Nigeria 136 out of 176 countries in their Corruption Perceptions Survey. See, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2016," Transparency International, last modified January 25, 2017, https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016.

¹³ Richard Dowden, *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 441.

¹⁴ Jean-Germain Gros, *Cameroon: Politics and Society in Critical Perspective* (Maryland: University Press of America, 2003), xv.

¹⁵ "The World Bank in Cameroon," *The World Bank*, last modified May 25, 2017, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cameroon/overview#4>.

¹⁶ Sella Onoko, "Sahel trade Routes: Arms, People, and Drugs," Deutsche Welle, January 13, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/sahel-trade-routes-arms-people-and-drugs/a-37125072>.

organizations such as Boko Haram to fund their operations and trade goods and ideas with other malign actors.

The existing potential for these countries is immense. Although currently underperforming, the Lake Chad Basin is an economic driver on the continent, has a history of political development, and contains twenty percent of the continent's population. The region is critical for stability across the Sahel and finds itself at the center of many illicit trafficking networks. If the countries of Lake Chad can improve their currently underdeveloped positions, they will transform the continent. But, if the region continues to decline, the global community can quickly run out of viable options for turning this crisis around.

To this point, Boko Haram currently represents the greatest existential threat to the region. The Nigerian born insurgency is attempting to destroy the current state structure and forcibly reestablish a Caliphate..¹⁷ Some may argue that the threat posed by Boko Haram is not as ominous because it does not possess the military capability to forcibly take over any of the Lake Chad Basin countries. Though this is likely true, it is not Boko Haram's military capabilities per se that should concern the U.S. and its West African allies. Since 2010, Boko Haram has sparked a massive humanitarian and economic crisis, killing over 20,000 people, while kidnapping and enslaving thousands more..¹⁸ Experts estimate almost 2.5 million people have been displaced from their homes..¹⁹ It is Boko Haram's ability to undermine the legitimacy of the government and the potential destruction of the Lake Chad Basin economies that pose the biggest threat to the region. Boko Haram has cut off markets, reduced regional exports, displaced thousands of families and caused large swaths of otherwise productive land to go uncultivated. The

¹⁷ Zenn, ii

¹⁸ Steven E. Hendrix, "Combating Terrorism and Violent Extremism in Nigeria: Defining a New Approach to Winning Modern Jihadist Conflict," *The International Lawyer; Chicago* 49, no. 3 (2016): 427-450. Estimates on casualty figures are a wide range and varying. I have used conservative estimates for this paper, for 20,000 people dead and almost 2.5 million displaced, but have come across figures as high as 50,000 people dead and 4.7 million displaced.

¹⁹ Blinken, "National Statement at Lake Chad"

expansive destruction has upended the local economies of the Lake Chad Basin and threatens to spread further..²⁰

Combatting Boko Haram not only puts a significant drag on the Lake Chad Basin economies, but puts significant stress on their security forces as well. Preoccupied with Boko Haram, it is even more challenging for the Keystone States to contribute to broader regional security concerns. This weakens themselves internally in terms of expenditures, political legitimacy and prevents the Keystone States from addressing other regional concerns that also have the ability to further unravel the Lake Chad Basin countries such as Anglo-Francophone tensions in Cameroon; Muslim herder and Christian farmer conflicts in central Nigeria; or other terrorist and piracy issues in the Niger Delta and Gulf of Guinea.

Compounding the problem, after Boko Haram splintered in 2016, a faction led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi sought even closer ties with the Islamic State. Al-Barnawi is a leader who seems to have greater ambitions than his predecessor and is attempting to integrate his “franchise” into a larger jihadist network. While many would view the fracturing of Boko Haram as an example of its weakened position, this would be a mistake. The crisis within the organization caused by the split is exactly the environment that “better organized” and “more capable” leaders like al-Barnawi can exploit to promote his ideology and strengthen Boko Haram’s overall position..²¹ Unlike the previous leadership under Abubakar Shekau,

²⁰ The Economic Crisis. In Cameroon, the Extreme Far North “now accounts for only 5 per cent of Cameroon’s GDP, compared with 7.3 per cent before the conflict. The shortfall at the national level – the indirect economic cost – amounts to around \$740 million a year, and thus \$2.2 billion from 2014 – 2016.” See “Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram” *International Crisis Group; Africa Report*, no. 241 (2016): 19-20.

In Chad, 60% of export revenues derive from oil, while “cotton, cattle, livestock, and gum arabic provide the bulk of Chad’s non-oil export earnings. The services sector contributes about one-third of GDP.” Approximately, 80% of Chad’s labor force works in agriculture and largely dependent on exports of livestock. See, “The World Fact Book: Chad,” *Central Intelligence Agency*, last modified October 5, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cd.html>. Chad risks losing 41% of the GDP associated with the trade of animals, largely due to Boko Haram. See, *World Food Program*, 19.

Both Chad and Niger are heavily dependent “on their ability to export cattle to Nigerian slaughterhouses” and “reach global markets...[via] the Cameroon/Chadian oil pipeline...” of which Boko Haram threatens to block. See, “Chad: External Affairs,” *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment - North Africa*, last modified September 27, 2017, <http://janes.ihs.com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/NorthAfrica/Display/1303652>.

²¹ Independent Online (South Africa), “Boko Haram Wing Tied to Islamic State Marks Resurgence in Nigeria,” *Mercury (South Africa)*, (Durban, South Africa) August 04, 2017.

who had difficult relations with the Islamic State (made obvious by the internal fissures and leadership split), al-Barnawi can benefit from closer ties with the Islamic State by exploiting the porous international borders and existing smuggling routes of the Sahel. Boko Haram can benefit greatly through not remaining isolated in West Africa, but by receiving jihadist fighters and equipment from other battlefields. If al-Barnawi can maintain his dominance in the fight for primacy within Boko Haram, his closer ties to the Islamic State will prove particularly menacing for regional security forces as the Islamic State loses control over other fronts in Iraq, Syria, or Libya. The Lake Chad Basin security forces are currently struggling without the influx of Middle Eastern and Libyan Jihadists. If this happens, the pressures on the Sahel-Lake Chad Basin Shatterbelt will only increase and it will have serious implications for the rest of Africa.

For their part, the countries of Lake Chad have made progress fighting the insurgency, albeit slowly. The 2014 expansion of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to stop arms trafficking and cross border raids from Boko Haram fighters was a huge step forward. The subsequent expansion in 2015, establishing mechanisms for command and control and coordination of regional military operations across international boundaries, allowed Lake Chad countries the ability to pursue Boko Haram fighters, and demonstrated great progress with the organization.²² With the expansion of the MNJTF, the countries of the region were able to overcome long established mistrust of Nigeria's ability to intervene on their behalf and had initial operational success, reducing the frequency of attacks into Cameroon and surrounding countries.²³ This benefitted regional solidarity and established an opportunity to provide comprehensive regional security cooperation, receiving technical support from

²² Moki Edwin Kindzeka, "Lake Chad Countries Agree on Military Task Force Amid Insecurity," *Voice of America*, March 18, 2014.

"Experts Meeting On The Elaboration Of Operational Documents For The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) Of The Member States Of The Lake Chad Basin Commission And Benin Against The Boko Haram Terrorist Group," (Final Communique, Yaoundé, Cameroon, February 5-7, 2015).

²³ *International Crisis Group*, ii.

France, Britain, and the United States..²⁴ However, international observers assess the MNJTF suffers from crucial funding and logistical resource deficits as well as a lack of cooperation with the Nigerian Army..²⁵

Nigerian President Buhari's administration has requested additional security assistance to fight Boko Haram. Buhari has attended numerous conferences and peace summits, and personally appealed to his neighbors and the international community for support..²⁶ In large part he was successful; however, security assistance has largely focused around money and support that just Nigeria directly controls. This could easily undermine recent support for Nigeria given their track record, especially if the MNJTF participants perceive Buhari's incremental attempts to rein in rampant corruption as too slow or disingenuous.

As the conflict rages on and the subsequent humanitarian crisis grows, so too does regional instability and Boko Haram's opportunity to recruit disenfranchised youth by ideology, socio-economic incentives, or coercion means..²⁷ "Taking their cue from the Islamic State... Boko Haram [has] exploited changing social dynamics and new technologies, exerting an influence that is vastly disproportionate to the group's true size and strength.." ²⁸ Still, Lake Chad Basin countries have been slow to react. Nigeria is still not investing in its people or able to dislodge the enemy from its safe havens. According to an Institute for Securities Studies publication, the people of northeast Nigeria are as scared of the Nigerian Security Forces as they are of Boko Haram..²⁹ This undermines hard fought gains in the short term. There are additional troubling signs coming from the other Lake Chad Basin countries. Chad is teetering on the

²⁴ Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria all contribute troops to the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF). France, Britain, and the United States have all provided technical support for the MNJTF. Hendrix, 427-450.

²⁵ *International Crisis Group*, ii. and "Nigeria: Security," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - West Africa*, last modified August 11, 2017, <http://janes.ihs.com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/wafra032-wafr>.

²⁶ "Roundtable Discussion with Nigerian Army Delegation," *Atlantic Council*, Last modified February 17, 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/events/past-events/roundtable-discussion-with-nigerian-army-delegation>.

²⁷ *International Crisis Group*, i.

²⁸ Jakki Cilliers, "Violent Islamic Extremism and Terror in Africa," *Institute for Securities Studies*, ISS Paper 286 (2015): 19

²⁹ *Ibid*.

edge of economic collapse.³⁰ Niger's military, despite its relative capability, is having trouble controlling its expansive border.³¹ And there are indications that even Cameroon is not taking the threat seriously enough, seemingly content as long as their border remains secure.

Currently, Boko Haram remains the U.S. Africa Command's third priority, according to 2017 Congressional testimony by its commander, General Waldhauser.³² This prioritization is appropriate enough if viewed through the lens of an immediate and direct threat to the U.S. homeland; but when considering the geopolitical impact to the Lake Chad Basin, the geostrategic importance of the region, and the implications continued destabilization will have on future U.S. counterterrorism efforts, the threat is significantly overlooked. This is a situation where a small policy and resources shift would yield important returns. However, if this shift does not happen soon, the opportunity may be lost. There are certainly risks associated with the kinds of strategic decisions that call for deeper involvement; however, they must be weighed against the risks of inaction in a geostrategically important region.

The relative stagnation of the MNJTF's progress in combatting Boko Haram creates a crossroads for the United States. The countries of the Lake Chad Basin have demonstrated an inability to solve the crisis either on their own or with limited regional security cooperation. The U.S. has an opportunity to engage with limited resources and minimal effort to make a large impact. Thus far, U.S. Africa Command has approached the Boko Haram threat through a lens of "strategic patience" and "strong partnerships,"

³⁰ "The 2014 drop in oil price and the deterioration of the security situation led to a deeper recession in 2016, with poverty expected to rise to 39.8% by 2019. These changes reflect fiscal austerity and consequent cuts in public services, and loss of income caused by the disruption of cross-border trade in livestock... A recent increase in domestic debt has led to risks in debt sustainability. Hard currency rationing and substantial fiscal consolidation have reduced the external current account deficit. However, Chad's international reserves continue to fall, representing barely a month's worth of imports." "The World Bank in Chad," *The World Bank*, last modified April 20, 2017, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/chad/overview>.

³¹ "Niger: Army," *Jane's World Armies*, last modified February 28, 2017, <http://janes.ihs.com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/jwara212-jwar>.

³² Thomas D. Waldhauser, "AFRICOM 2017 Posture Statement," *United States Africa Command*, March 9, 2017, <https://www.africom.mil/media-room/document/28720/africom-2017-posture-satement>.

focusing most of its efforts on non-combat, long-term, security cooperation..³³ However, this author argues the U.S. and its regional allies have underestimated the Boko Haram threat and the timetable in which to act. Despite the largely monetary security assistance the U.S. and allies have provided, and despite some recent operational success in the Sambisa Forest, al-Barnawi's faction "is expanding its capacity and capabilities and has a clear intent not only to target security forces, but also to derail ... associated humanitarian efforts."³⁴ National security affairs expert, Dr. Derek Reveron, warns that by working by, with, and through partners, the U.S. has a "...tendency to over rely on partners and to think [its partners] can accomplish U.S. objectives when they lack either the political motivation or the skills to do so."³⁵ This is exactly what is happening in Africa. By the U.S. not taking a decisive offensive position earlier in the campaign, al-Barnawi threatens to undermine human security and create an even larger crisis across the Sahel.

The MNJTF, by its existence, offers the U.S. an opportunity to bolster regional solidarity and democratic institutions while funding deficient African resources and firmly pursuing U.S. strategic objectives. There are significant advantages in increasing cooperation within the MNJTF; it counters a transnational problem with a transnational organization and provides legitimacy. This is a collective action problem, where all parties want an end to the terrorist organization, but no one is willing to pay the cost to fix it. Here, the U.S. has an opportunity to play the honest broker. Strong partnerships are vitally important; however, strategic patience will not work. At the current level of effort, the problem will not get better with time. This is not an instance in which the long-term outlook is positive and inaction will achieve victory. Dragging the fight out longer only strengthens Boko Haram's position.

³³ The US is not engaged in direct military operations, but is providing advisors, intelligence, training and equipment. The priority being placed on the longer-term goal of enabling operations and building institutional capacity. Security force assistance is the "decisive effort" for AFRICOM in combatting violent extremist organizations. See, Waldhauser, "AFRICOM 2017 Posture Statement."

³⁴ Jane's, "Nigeria: Security."

³⁵ Derek Reveron, *Exporting Security: International Engagement, Security Cooperation, and the Changing Face of the US Military* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 10.