

SPECIAL INTEREST TOPIC REPORT

THE 'SUPER CAMP' STRATEGY AND
IMPACT SCENARIOS FOR THE IP
COMMUNITY

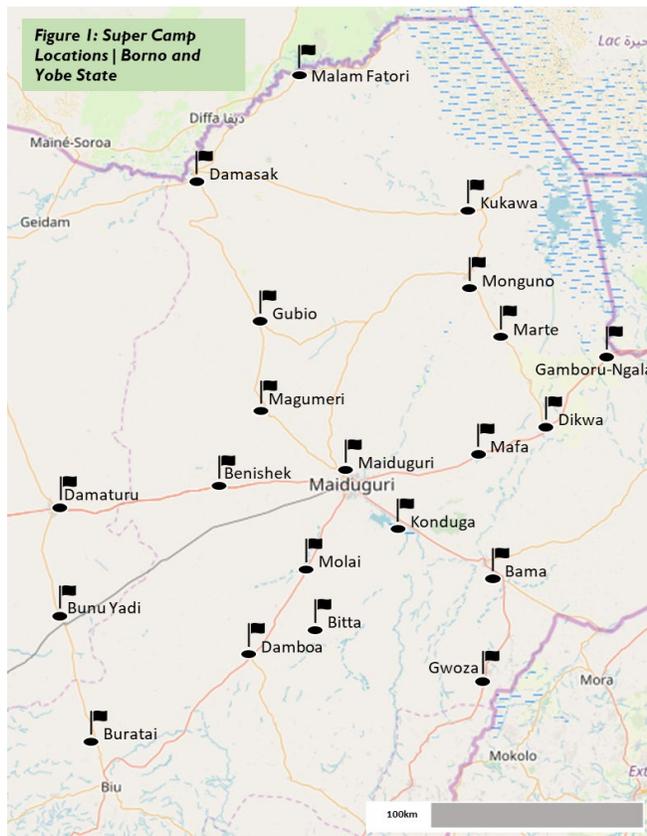


THE ‘SUPER CAMP’ STRATEGY AND IMPACT SCENARIOS FOR THE IP COMMUNITY | SPECIAL INTEREST TOPIC REPORT

31st October 2019

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

In June 2019, the Government Security Forces (GSF – the Nigerian Army and other troop contributing nations comprising the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF)) started closing Forward Operating Bases (FOBs)¹ along key roads in northern Borno State.



This could be said to have been the start of the implementation of the *Super Camp* Strategy. In July 2019, the Army closed a further 3 FOBs along the Maiduguri-Damaturu axis and, in August 2019, the Nigerian Army (NA) formally announced that it was adopting a new strategy based on the concept of withdrawing from small FOBs in Borno and Yobe States into “Super Camps”. The Super Camp strategy was implemented with the immediate creation of 19 Super Camps, later expanded to 21, located in Bama, Benishek, Bitta, Bunu-Yadi, Buratai, Damasak, Damaturu, Damboa, Dikwa, Gamboru-Ngala, Gubio, Gwoza, Konduga, Kukawa, Mafa, Magumeri, Maiduguri, Malam-Fatori, Marte, Molai, and Monguno. The Super Camps in Gubio and Magumeri were established after repeated incursions by Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs)², including the widely reported attacks on 21st August that occurred close on the heels of the withdrawal of troops from these areas and served to reinforce the beliefs held by some that the new strategy would create a security vacuum that the

¹ FOBs – while some of the locations were not FOBs in an accurate military doctrine sense, this term is used in this Special Interest Topic Report to denote the small, outstation type locations occupied by typically small numbers (on average, 15 soldiers) of lightly armed GSF.

² AOGs – In the northeast Nigeria context, AOGs, other than where specifically stated, refer to the Boko Haram (BH) factions: BH pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2015 becoming known as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) but, by 2016, its leader, Abubakar Shekau had been disavowed by ISIS’ central leadership, and Abu Musab al-Barnawi, son of BH’s founding leader, had been installed as BH’s head, precipitating a split, with Shekau’s faction – Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal Jihad (JAS, and frequently still referred to as BH) who were then pitted against al-Barnawi’s faction (who retained the name ISWAP) in factional fighting that adds a further layer of complexity to the security risk environment in northeast Nigeria. Although fluid, the dividing line of the territory of the two groups is typically regarded as the Damaturu-Maiduguri-Ngala road. ISWAP operates north of the line and into Niger and the Lake Chad basin. BH / JAS operates south of the line and mostly in the areas around Sambisa forest, Bitta, Gwoza, Banki, Ngala and in the areas around Konduga.

AOGs would rapidly fill, exploiting their new found freedom of movement.

The NA stated that the aim of the Super Camp strategy was to maintain key and highly reinforced formations, to concentrate resources, and to thwart the seizure of military hardware by AOGs. The NA further stated that the Super Camp strategy, “Ensures fast mobilising, quick reaction and longer reach at tactical level, combined with the striking power of the Air Taskforce.” The new Super Camp strategy was not welcomed by all, including the humanitarian aid and wider development sector community, who are left with the perception that the roads are no longer protected by GSF, creating heightened risk exposure to their people and operations.

And the international and some national press, as well as Babagana Zulum, the Borno State Governor, suggested the consequences would be that AOGs would fill the vacuum, with much comment also that this was as much an attempt by the military to minimize losses of men and materiel in the face of repeated attacks and declining morale, as it was a doctrinal shift to better combat the insurgents. There’s truth in both these statements...

Prior to the establishment of the Super Camps, the military approach was ‘drifting’ – and the military recognized this. Gains made against the insurgents in 2016 in re-taking ground lost to BH were being held-lost-re-taken, but with little evidence that the repeatedly stated [by military commanders and Buhari’s Government] elimination of the insurgent threat had been achieved. There was no culminating battle; no denouement. The military was mired in the kind of post-conflict, attritional counter-insurgency operation so commonly seen elsewhere.

Conversations with commanders of troops in the area confirmed that morale was low – in part, of course, because troops were operating from isolated positions, under continuous threat of attack – conventional and asymmetric, resupply and reinforcement were exceptionally challenging in the face of ambushes and IED attacks, but also because there was no sense that the ‘mission’ was moving forward. Holding ground has a purpose when parallel strategies with unity of purpose are being successfully implemented – de-radicalization / re-integration of AOG foot soldiers, the successful return of displaced persons, the disruption of funding and recruiting networks, local and sub-national social and political dialogue. But in the complex risk environment of Nigeria’s northeast, substantive progress on an integrated approach to addressing the insurgency and the conditions that enable it to continue has not been made.

Faced with a stalling mission, strategic military thinking *demand*ed a doctrinal shift. Whether the Super Camp strategy will, ultimately, deliver the military objectives is yet to be seen. But there are, even now, some scenarios and dimensions to the strategy that should be reflected upon by IPs in the northeast and dimensions to the changed risk picture presented by the establishment of the Super Camps.

NO PHYSICAL PRESENCE = FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND ACTION FOR THE INSURGENTS, RIGHT?

Probably, yes. The Super Camps mark a return in some ways to the Fortress Strategy. At a simplistic level it is easy to say GSF will more likely remain in the camps than deploy to conduct mobile, proactive patrolling or disruption operations. But that probably will not be the case, because:

- This is not the GSF running scared; it is a purposeful strategic shift. Yes, the short-term effect will be to minimize losses to the types of quasi-conventional assaults mounted by AOGs on the isolated FOBs.

- But, at an operational, and particularly tactical level, ground commanders know that they cannot ‘bunker down’ and allow AOGs to move freely in the northeast as the Super Camps need to be resupplied and operations conducted from them. If no proactive operations (patrolling, route / area clearances, intelligence-led disruption operations, searches, strike operations, etc) are conducted along access routes and in the Areas of Operational Responsibility (AORs) assigned to camps, resupply and other more deliberate movements to and from camps will be subject to ambush and other attacks, with tactical advantage ceded to the AOGs, that would arguably rapidly render the Super Camps ineffective as a physical location from which counter-insurgency operations can be mounted.

Whether or not the forces concentrated in the Super Camps and those assigned, at a strategic level (air ground attack, support helicopters, surveillance and intelligence gathering, artillery), to the counter-insurgency is another question, and the likelihood is that the GSF will evolve the scale and nature of forces and resources assigned to the mission as the Super Camp strategy embeds. In particular, the modest air, support helicopter and artillery assets available will be stretched or inadequate if AOGs are able to coordinate attacks against GSF (simultaneous ambushes / IED attacks, and [feint or committed] assaults against in the more remote Super Camps in the north where mutual support from other Super Camps will not be achievable).

So the likelihood is that AOGs will not have ‘free rein’ to move and act and there will be no security vacuum (that implies the GSF are wholly absent), albeit, and certainly in the short term, they will be able to do so more than was previously the case. The most likely scenario is that in the short term, a new normal will emerge, where the targeting focus of the AOGs necessarily shifts, as is already being seen, to ambushes of movements and their presence in areas where Super Camps are not becomes more frequent.

THE TOWNS WHERE THE SUPER CAMPS ARE WILL AT LEAST BE SAFER...

In some respects, the Super Camps will provide greater security for concentrations of population and IDP camps in proximity. But the reality is the Super Camps will also present a high value target and particularly for ISWAP whose targeting is almost always of the GSF, police and political actors and agencies.

Not all Super Camps are the same. Some of the smaller, more isolated camps will, in the local context, be more vulnerable to attack, less defensible where troops are deployed on a planned operation or drawn out by diversionary attack by an AOG, leaving smaller numbers behind, unable to rely on mutual support from other Super Camps in close proximity and more difficult to reinforce, where overland transits would be subject to significant ambush risk / risk of IED attack. The almost certain likelihood is that, even now, Super Camps are subject to concerted targeting activity by AOGs, such as:

- Infiltration, where AOGs will seek to place their people inside camps as part of any contract civilian workforces – or coerce or intimidate these people – to gain low-level intelligence and act as ‘enablers’ where a complex attack against a camp was mounted.
- Surveillance, systematically building a picture of activity at and around Super Camps to probe for weaknesses and identify patterns of movement (how, when and where movements are conducted) that may reveal a vulnerability.

The camps will, therefore, represent focal points of risk by proximity for civilians including IPs, as will the routes providing access to and from the camps.

ALL AOGs ARE NOT EQUAL, BUT THEIR NEEDS ARE THE SAME

An added dimension that creates additional complexity when assessing the short- and medium-term trajectory of risk in the northeast is created by the fact that the objectives and methods of ISWAP and JAS are not wholly the same.

ISWAP currently hold more territory, influence and number more fighters than JAS, but already there are signs of a resurgence in AOG activity in the JAS-dominated areas (with a spike in violence around Banki/Bama/Konduga). Significantly weakened and largely inactive before the withdrawal of FOBs, an emboldened JAS have claimed several attacks in the last 2 months; and this trend is likely to continue in the short term with ambushes of GSF movements and hit and run attacks against settlements beyond the reach of Super Camps to protect or mount a counter attack before JAS fighters have left the area.

Both will perceive that the establishment of Super Camps will, certainly in the short term, provide them greater opportunity to operate in areas where, previously, they would have automatically been in direct contact with GSF. They need money (taxing local communities and stealing cash-in-transit), food, medical supplies and equipment, fuel, vehicles, weapons and ammunition. The removal of FOBs that they were able to overrun and reduction of smaller scale troop movements highly vulnerable to ambush, will mean they cannot get hold of weapons and ammunition so easily, and this will translate to additional need (beyond, for ISWAP, their declared strategic intent in any case) to target the Super Camps and movements along supply and operational axis routes.

But everything else they will feel they are able to acquire more easily. ISWAP's approach is likely to continue to be more sophisticated, co-opting rather than coercing local populations. JAS are likely to continue to be indiscriminately violent, and plunder communities where they still hold sway, south of the Damaturu-Maiduguri-Ngala line.

With greater local freedom of movement, there is considerably greater likelihood that the episodic factional fighting between ISWAP and JAS will increase in frequency as their fighters come into contact with each other on the ground competing for the same resources and both seeking influence over local communities, depleting their resources and distracting their focus.

SUPER CAMPS AND THE IP COMMUNITY

This is an evolving context, and one that the PLSO team will continue to track and, as the spatial and thematic pattern of incidents builds, report to the IP community with analysis to support risk-based planning and decision making. As things stand, there are factors that already warrant reflection by the IP community:

- GSF will seek to control civilian movement through mechanisms such as Operation Positive Identification. IPs will need to comply fully with constraints and conditions placed on movement or risk government / military intervention to suspend or stop their operations.
- The risk environment in northeast Nigeria is exceptionally complex and the military will continuously seek to 'clear the battlespace' so they can focus effort on the AOGs. In many respects, the military regard the IP community as, at best an unwanted complication. At worst, the GSF can view the IP community as an enabler of the AOGs. This could be through IP activity inadvertently providing AOGs with resources (cash, vehicles, fuel, etc) where stolen, looted during

attacks on communities, or where a failure / inability to control distribution to final beneficiaries occurs. It could also be through [perceived] willful support, where access or some other benefit is believed to have been 'traded'. And, it is worth noting, this is perception, not fact, and there are no substantive cases of such action on the part of IPs. Where cases that are akin to this have occurred, as in the cases recently involving Mercy Corps and Action Against Hunger, punitive actions against the IPs have relatively quickly been rescinded as the facts have been established.

- There is already evidence that the recent contraction of IDP numbers is reversing, as people flee areas where the AOGs are now more visible because of the removal of the FOBs. The humanitarian need in the short term is arguably increasing, and certainly the spatial pattern of need is changing.
- There is also already evidence that the AOGs are mounting Illegal Vehicle Checkpoints (IVCPs) along routes that were previously secured by FOBs and which are also transit routes used by the IP community, bringing IPs into more frequent contact with AOGs. When GSF then respond to these IVCPs, the roads are closed and this is likely to happen relatively frequently, clearly with no warning, and disrupt IP movement / humanitarian aid delivery operations.

All of this creates an immediate need, where this is not currently happening, for IPs to develop positive, proactive communication and relationships with local GSF in the areas they operate in, to ensure, as a minimum, compliance with movement controls, early notification of routes placed out of / back in bounds. IPs will recognize that creating these relationships in a way that does not 'attach' them to the military and, by extension, the government, will be challenging but necessary if they are also to access communities where there may be hostility to these actors. This a subject that, with the IP community's participation, the PLSO team will return to over the coming months.

SUMMARY REMARKS

In the medium term, it is unlikely that the AOGs will remain content with control only of Borno's hinterlands, where a population displaced by continued chronic insecurity will continue to shrink, and the attendant loss of tax revenues. AOG may be forced to conduct conventional attacks against the Super Camps. In this scenario, the GSF will have distinct advantages, not least the use of air power on the large concentrations of vehicles and AOG forces that would be required to defeat Super Camp defences. It is also unlikely that, politically, the government will accept the perception that it has conceded territory to the insurgents. The GSF may then be compelled to engage wherever and whenever AOG are sighted. In the short term, there will continue to be AOG ambushes of GSF convoys and raids on communities that cannot be easily protected by the Super Camps. In the longer term, either side may find the situation unacceptable and seek to act decisively. This may be in the form of a major conventional attack on a Super Camp by AOGs, and, for the GSF, provide the political-strategic rationale for a major offensive, as it did in 2015/16, to reclaim territory.

The establishment of the Super Camps then is a major development that will fundamentally shape the risk environment in northeast Nigeria where the IP community operate. Navigating this dynamic period of change will require deliberate action on the part of IPs and an open recognition that the GSF are a vitally important stakeholder with whom engagement and continued liaison will be essential and, without which, access will be difficult to achieve.