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Ivory Coast: one country, three armies?

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As the international community commits to contribute to the prosperity and democracy in Cote d'Ivoire, it should avoid just empowering President Ouattara's regime instead of the state. The country has gone from a functioning –if authoritarian—state under Houphouet (in power from independence in 1960 until his death in 1993) to an ever-degrading state weakness and failure according to the World Bank, Foreign Policy and Brookings indices. After more than a decade of failed multipartism, coups, territorial division, armed confrontation, xenophobic ideologies and power manipulation by Laurent Gbagbo, Cote d'Ivoire clearly needed a new regime, and the international support to consolidate Alassane Ouattara in power since April (after he won the elections in November) is more than welcome. However, Cote d'Ivoire needs not just a new regime but also stronger institutions, and amongst them a unified national military, to provide stabilization and security.



Ouattara has pledged to create one new national army, the *Republican Forces of Ivory Coast* (RFCI), and is currently exploring military organization, training, arming and financing options in cooperation with France, the European Union, the United States, and the United Nations Operation in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI). But the international support for Security Sector Reform could be misused to build yet one more military faction that protects those who have just attained power. The RFCI could become a de facto third army, adding to the former national military *Armed Forces* that defended Laurent Gbagbo, and to the former "rebel" faction *New Forces*. These two groups confronted one another in the past few years, with the *New Forces* finally supporting Ouattara and helping to install him in power by defeating Gbagbo's *Armed Forces.* The *New Forces* were led by Guillaume Soro, who has secured his position as Prime Minister and Defence Minister in Ouattara's first government.



Most of these military units are out of the President's control and abuse the population throughout the country, although the situation is now calmer in Abidjan. They are "deployed" along borders (dealing with customs), in major towns (providing their own administration and police), and on countless checkpoints that ransack those undertaking trade or simple travel throughout the territory. In the recent crisis, prisons were emptied, foreign mercenaries imported and arms distributed widely. So banditry, traffic and random crime are also a major concern. With around one million internally displaced persons and about half a million refugees (mainly in Liberia), lawless Cote d'Ivoire will prove hard to manage.

In order to avoid building a third army, the RFCI needs to include the former *New Forces* yet dilute Soro's power, and bring on as many as possible of "converted" *Armed Forces*.



Some of its generals have already sworn allegiance to the President, but they clearly expect privileged treatment in exchange. More specifically, Ouattara may have to make concessions regarding impunity, which would weaken his regime and most importantly the state. Many individuals from those groups, responsible for violence against thousands of victims, should be brought to justice to restore public trust in the security forces and build up the rule of law. But, this would weaken the reconciliation, halt the reform, and if responsibility were traced all the way up in the hierarchy of military command, Gbagbo, Soro, and even Ouattara himself, could be concerned. So transitional justice and condemnation for human rights violations are additional crucial elements, but have political and institutional implications for state-building. In the broader picture, the main security challenge is the demobilization of a large part of all former *forces* and their reintegration in alternative economic scenarios. Ideally, the UNOCI could coordinate the international policies in this regard, but this will only work hand in hand with



wider development policies and massive investment. In view of the economic links and transborder conflict in the region, the effort would also need to address the whole of West Africa and not just Cote d'Ivoire. The international community's engagement needs to take these complexities into consideration, and specially be aware that a third army and yet another strongman regime - even Ouattara's--would not redress but aggravate state fragility.

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