

What's Brewing in Benin? Security Collaboration in the Gulf of Guinea

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This policy brief aims to explore Benin's security situation and international partnerships in the security domain, while identifying current and future challenges to such collaborations. The conclusion argues that Western and multilateral actors should maintain discrete collaboration but be cautious not to overburden Benin with their presence as absorption of new capabilities and capacities take time, and as a too heavy presence of Western security actors can become a burden rather than an advantage for the government. External actors should also continue to support recent efforts by the authorities to open up the political landscape to maintain its long-standing democratic tradition.

INTRODUCTION

The Gulf of Guinea has drawn attention from Western states in recent years due both to increasing spillover of violent extremism from the Sahel and because of Sahelian military juntas' [shift of security partners from Western countries to Russian](#) actors. Indeed, as three Sahelian states experienced five coups during the past years and gradually ousted their former security partners, starting with France, followed by the [UN \(in Mali\) and the EU and the US \(in Niger\)](#), the Gulf of Guinea countries' relative stability and geopolitical positions have attracted new attention from external actors. Benin, neighboring both Burkina Faso and Niger, saw attacks by jihadist groups crossing the borders in the North of the country already in 2019. Although expanding relatively slowly, between 2021 and 2024, the number of attacks grew, forcing the

government to invest more resources in counter terrorism efforts and reflect on more immediate ways to counter the expansion. Out of the Gulf of Guinea countries, Benin has so far been the hardest hit, and recorded a [doubling in the number of recorded fatalities \(to 173 deaths\)](#) over the past year. A figure which remains small in comparison to neighboring Sahel states, but which still indicates an increase.

In spite of these attacks and the adoption in 2019 of a [new electoral code limiting political opposition](#) parties, Benin has remained relatively democratic and stable. Such stability has attracted old and new security partners to increase collaboration, both to counter terrorism and because of the expulsion from the Sahel countries. The US, France and Belgium have all intensified security collaboration with Benin over the past few years, while the EU has launched a new, regional CSDP initiative in the Gulf of Guinea. African states have also showed interest for Benin, with Rwanda offering to send troops bilaterally for counter terrorism purposes, similar to its operations in Mozambique.

A SLOW SPILL-OVER RISKING STABILITY IN BENIN

Benin, which up until 2019 was considered one of Africa's most stable democracies, saw reforms which [curtailed opposition parties' and voters' space](#), prompting the country to go from ["Free" to "Partly Free" in the 2020 Freedom House ranking](#), a position it has maintained since then. Yet, the latest parliamentary elections saw less violence and [opposition wins](#) for the first time in four years, showing encouraging signs of a return to a democratic trajectory. President Talon has also [pledged](#)

to step down after his second term in 2026, which would cement such development. However, while hailed as a stable beacon of democracy on the African continent for the past three decades, Benin is no stranger to authoritarian governments: with six successful coups and eight coup attempts since independence, Benin has seen its share of civil-military imbalance and military authorities. Nevertheless, the country made successful efforts to reverse the imbalance with a professionalization of the armed forces after the latest successful coup in 1972. The averted coup attempt in September 2024 so far also appears to be an isolated political event and not reflective of a broader discontent within the armed forces. However, it came in a context of increased instability in the North of the country with a deadly jihadist attack close to the borders with Niger and Burkina Faso in July this year, killing 7 security forces and 5 rangers.

The spill-over of violent extremism and organized criminality from the Sahel region towards the Gulf of Guinea was highlighted as a risk long before it became a reality. Yet, already in 2014-2015, Malian fighters reportedly conducted a reconnaissance operation in the W-Arly-Pendjari park complex, three natural parks bordering Burkina Faso, Benin and Niger and representing the largest and most important continuum of ecosystems in West Africa. Since 2018, the forests of the park complex have increasingly served as logistic fallback bases for jihadist groups from the bordering countries. A mediatized kidnapping of French tourists in Benin 2019, resulting in the death of two French soldiers during the rescue mission, was seen as the first sign of (non-claimed) jihadist activity in the country. Yet, it was not until the end of 2021 that Benin was officially attacked – again not claimed - by JNIM over the borders from Burkina Faso. Before then, both jihadists and Beninese security forces avoided confrontation, although according to local researchers, small scale attacks were already taking place before then.¹

In response to the increased instability in the North and the risk of jihadist instrumentalization of disenfranchised

populations, the Beninese authorities took different measures. Benin participated in the creation of the Accra Initiative in 2017 to exchange intelligence, conduct operations and train security forces on a regional level between the seven member states. Yet, the initiative has remained relatively inert, especially following the Sahelian coups which have hampered regional collaboration. On a national level, two government policy initiatives intended to reduce land conflicts were taken in 2019 to subsequently decrease possibilities for jihadist recruitment. However, the initiatives were seen by external observers as unintentionally being counterproductive, risking increased support and recruitment possibilities for jihadist groups.

The deployment of more security forces to the North in different counter terrorism operations has been the most visible response to the increased instability. Taking a different route from neighboring states, Benin outsourced protection of the Pendjari park to a South African NGO, "African Parks", in 2017. The park rangers are considered as knowledgeable about conservation of natural reserves and effective in securing their areas by both national authorities and external observers.² This led to a new private-public partnership for parts of the park W in 2020, yet so far it has not been considered as successful given that attacks have multiplied over the past few years. Yet, park W is twice the size of Pendjari and thus more difficult to secure, which might be part of the reason for this. National security forces are also deployed on a six-month rotation schedule to several small bases in the park. However, many bases are only accessible by air, with helicopters resupplying the bases on a weekly basis.

At the start of 2022, the Beninese authorities launched Operation Mirador, an up to 5,000 troops strong military operation with the aim of combatting non-state armed actors and bringing stability to the North of the country (an area the size of Belgium). As a result of the insecurity and the subsequent security operations, the parks have been closed for tourists since 2022, and the northern communes have been categorized as "military zones".

1 Interview with Beninese researcher, Parakou, Benin, April 2024.

2 Interviews with foreign military personnel, Parakou and Ouassa, Benin April 2024.

To boost the effectiveness and capacity of Operation Mirador, the authorities announced the [recruitment of an additional 5,000 troops in 2023](#), 2000 of which were deployed to the theaters at the beginning of 2024. In addition to recruiting more manpower, the Beninese authorities have also decided to create new security corps, including a National Guard and a Special Forces Unit, which has implied the need for more training and equipment, aspects which old and new security partners have picked up on.

NEW AND OLD SECURITY PARTNERS

Reflecting the increased instability in the North of the country, Benin has intensified collaboration with some of its security partners over the past few years, including France, the US, Belgium, and Rwanda.

France – Old Partnership, New Initiatives

As the former colonial power, France is the oldest security partner to Benin. Its first military collaboration accord dating from [1961 and revised in 1975, is still the basis](#) for the current cooperation. French 'coopérants', military officers integrated into national institutions, are present in the Beninese defense and internal security structures, as well as two in each of the National Schools with a Regional Vocation (ENVR). [Of the 17 ENVR in Africa, Benin is hosting two](#), one focused on demining and depollution and the other on logistics and maintenance. In 2024, there were ongoing plans for setting up a third ENVR in Benin, focused on borders. The ENVR was originally destined for Niger, but given the rupture of relations between France and Niger, Benin was chosen to host the new ENVR.³

France has been conducting train and equip projects for decades in the country as well as hosted Beninese officers in France for training. It has also contributed with maritime capacity building to enhance the capabilities of the Beninese navy. [Operation Corymbe](#), deployed almost permanently in the Gulf of Guinea since 1990 and encompassing one to two French ships, has for example

conducted [several different types of training](#) to contribute to maritime security in the region. [African Nemo](#), an operational cooperation exercise for the Gulf of Guinea's maritime security capabilities is also coordinated by the French navy. Punctual, yet recurrent capacity-building initiatives on different specialties, such as [urban combat](#) or [diving](#) take place on a regular basis, at times with the French Elements in Senegal (EFS), other times in [Chad with the French Forces in the Sahel](#) (FFS) (previously part of Operation Barkhane).

As France was gradually pushed out from its Sahelian partners during the past two years, security collaboration with its partners in the Gulf of Guinea has received intensified attention. France gave 15 Armored Personnel Carrier (APC) to the Beninese forces last year with an [additional 15 to be delivered this year](#), as well as several Super Puma helicopters. In December 2023, the French Chief of the Armed Forces, General Burkhard conducted an official visit to meet with his homologue, General Ghaguidi, emphasizing the importance of the military collaboration, yet [denouncing rumors of the construction of a new French military](#) base or operation in Benin. However, training and equipping of the Beninese forces are set to continue, including the Beninese Special Forces, and with possibilities of increased collaboration due to the new ENVR.

The US – Stepping Up Collaboration

The US is a long-term security partner to Benin, with a [SOFA \(status of force agreement\), from 1998](#) in relation to the African Crisis Response Initiative. It has also provided security assistance to Benin through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and the Defense Department's Global train and equip program for several years. [Since 2014, North Dakota National Guard has a State Partnership Program with Benin](#), which includes joint exercises, capacity building and providing equipment to its Beninese counterparts. Yet, it is especially during the past years that the US has intensified security cooperation and multiplied high-level visits, correlating with US's withdrawal from Niger and [the US-sponsored UN-backed security mission to fight gangs in Haiti](#), where Benin has pledged to contribute troops.

³ Discussion with military officer, Cotonou, Benin, April 2024.

Different security collaboration projects have been initiated by the US in Benin over the past five years. Since 2019, the Special Operations Command Africa forces have partnered with the Beninese special operations units during [Joint Combined Exchange Training \(JCET\)](#) for counterterrorism exercises, while also providing equipment like radios and first aid kits. In November 2023, the US donated \$2,1 million worth of individual equipment, such as boots, gloves, ballistic glasses and binoculars in the framework of the [three-year Border Security Program \(BORSEC\)](#), which trains Beninese soldiers on border security tactics. US is also providing three helicopters and a plane to the Beninese forces for medevac and supply purposes.⁴

In addition to this, a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) regarding a Foundational Skills and Leadership Development Program was signed in 2023, with the aim to intensify the collaboration and expand it to areas [including intelligence gathering, capacity building and equipping the Beninese Armed Forces](#) in the North of the country at the Bembèrèkè Military Training Center. Due to the break down of security cooperation between the US and Niger, Benin has also received equipment initially destined for Niger. This was the case for a ship filled with material stationed outside of the Cotonou port for over two months, where finally 3 million worth of equipment and air tankers were given to the Beninese security forces in April 2024.⁵ In September this was repeated, when Benin and Côte d'Ivoire authorities [accepted a donation from the US of 38 armoured vehicles](#) originally intended for Niger, thus again demonstrating how Benin is not only getting the spillover of instability from the Sahel countries but also unexpected donations due to the rupture of relations between Western and Sahelian states.

More recently, the US has increased the number of official visits, with [the Commanding General of the US Army's Southern European Task Force visiting Benin](#) in January 2024 to strengthen relationship between the Benin Armed Forces and the U.S Army. Perhaps more notable and related to US expulsion from Niger in March,

⁴ Discussion with military officers, Parakou, Benin, April 2024.

⁵ Discussion with military officer, Cotonou, Benin, April 2024.

[AFRICOM's Commanding General Langely visited Benin](#) during three days for the first time since he took office, in May 2024. At the time of his visit, discussions revolved around continued training of the Beninese Special Forces in the North of the country, instruction regarding intelligence gathering, but also about the possibility of establishing a military base in the country, given the US' forced withdrawal from the drone base in Agadez in Niger. So far, no agreement on the construction of a new military base has been concluded, yet US counter terrorism forces continue to train Beninese soldiers in different areas of the country, including Parakou and further north.

Rwanda – Talking but not Walking so far

It is not only Western partners that have increased their security cooperation with Benin over the past few years but also African states, like Rwanda. In 2022, talks began between Rwanda, described by observers as the [new continental gendarme](#) after its intervention in Central African Republic and Mozambique. In July 2022, [the Beninese Chief of Army Staff visited the Rwandan Chief of Defense staff for bilateral talks](#). Less than a year later, during a visit by the Rwandan President in Benin, the two countries signed new agreement on military cooperation, with President [Kagame promising military assistance to Benin](#) to combat the spillover of violent extremism from the Sahel countries. Figures around the [deployment of 350 Rwandan troops](#) have been circulating, yet so far there has been no sign of troops on the ground. In the meantime, Rwanda has secured [another round of EU funds to finance](#) its operation in northern Mozambique. Such EU support is likely to encourage Rwanda to continue to play a bilateral counter terrorism role on the continent, while the EU itself has also increased its presence in Gulf of Guinea.

EU – New Regional Security Initiative and EPF Funds

In December 2023, the [Council of the EU adopted the decision](#) launching the EU Security and Defense Initiative in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) for a period of two years. The Initiative was initially set to reinforce the capabilities of the security and defense forces of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana,

Togo and Benin to tackle instability and insecurity, yet as Togo has decided not to formally accept the EU offer, focus is now on the three remaining countries. The Initiative was thus launched only a few weeks after the two EU CSDP operations were expelled from Niger and a few months before the EU decided to end its decade-long EUTM mission in Mali. However, consultations and negotiations for the Initiative preceded these events, which has a new flexible and modular set up with a small presence of military, civilian and defense expertise together with European Peace Facility (EPF) Assistance Measures. In October 2024, GoG in Benin still had a very small presence with only two advisors, which periodically will be enhanced with visiting experts.

Benin has also been selected for support from the European Peace Facility for approximately [€35 million between 2023-2024, which represents 27% of Benin's defense budget](#), hence an important sum. The support covers equipment to the armed forces, such as multipurpose military aircraft and medical capacities, while it will also initiate the creation of a national military academy for the training of pilots and aircraft mechanics. However, while the figures for the EPF support are impressive, so far, the speed of the actual delivery of the support has been less impressive, due to EU's bureaucracy. [French Défense Conseil International, managing over €11 million of the EPF funds](#) has selected the French drone manufacturer Delair as one of the main EU operators for the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities aspect of the support. Delair is set to supply six observation drones to support Operation Mirador in the north. Part of the EPF support was initially thought for Togo, but as the country has not confirmed its participation in the initiative, Benin became the prime beneficiary, again showing how Benin becomes the stand-in partner for external security actors when neighboring states turn the back on its partners.

Belgium – Intensifying Cooperation

Belgium and Benin's military collaboration celebrated 25 years during the summer of 2024. The 25-year period has seen both bouts of intensified collaboration, such as between 2001 and 2009 when Belgium trained pilots

after having donated helicopters to Benin, and years without any active cooperation between 2014 and 2018. Since 2022, however, when Benin decided to set up a new National Guard, the collaboration has intensified, as Belgium answered a demand for training of the new corps. Starting in the spring of 2023, Belgian defense has deployed teams of 10-15 trainers twice a year for a period of approximately 6-8 weeks, training Beninese instructors in subjects such as small unit tactics, medics, explosives and sniper capacities. The Beninese soldiers are all drawn from the paracommando unit and will most likely be deployed to the North of the country in Operation Mirador. Some of the soldiers trained also hoped to be deployed to the US-financed mission in Haiti, although that mission is yet to be approved.⁶

The Belgian training of the Beninese National Guard is only one of three elements of the military collaboration. The other two main tenets are the recent cooperation regarding the annual Flintlock Exercise and the long-term maritime collaboration. In September 2023, Benin created its first Special Operations Forces (SOF) unit, which participated in the Flintlock Exercise in April 2024. [Flintlock is the US-initiated](#) annual SOF regional exercise which gathers troops from over 30 countries, conducting counter terrorism training for a period of two weeks. Following the coup in Niger in 2023 Belgium suspended its bilateral military [operation: Operation New Nero](#) in the country, including the training of the Nigerien companies designated to participate in Flintlock. Shifting focus, Belgian military instructors instead engaged in a collaboration with the Beninese military, training the Beninese SOF units for their first Flintlock Exercise in April for ten days. While this collaboration is the most recent of the Belgo-Beninese military partnerships, the maritime cooperation dates several decades back.

For several years, the Belgian navy ship Godetia (which entered service in 1965), was deployed to African waters, stopping in harbors along the coastline for different cooperative activities with African partners to enhance maritime security. Benin was a privileged partner to

⁶ Discussion with Beninese soldiers, Ouassa April 2024.



Belgium for much of the last two decades, [with Godetia taking ship riders for short periods to participate in shipboard firefighting, navigation](#) and maritime operations amongst others. [In 2021, the ship was taken out of service](#). Since then, there are small Belgian defense teams deployed twice a year for 2-3 weeks, training with their Beninese counterparts at the Maritime Operational Security Training Centers, with a liaison coach deployed to the center for the annual maritime exercises with France and the US.

A 3-D (Defense, Development and Diplomacy), project spearheaded by the Belgian development agency ENABEL, also focuses on protecting the Beninese coastline and enhancing the capabilities of the security forces to do so. [The PASPort project is underway since 2019](#) and is set to continue to 2028. It covers training, equipment and construction aspects for the Beninese navy. One part of that project is linked to the prospective construction of a new navy base in Sémé, 20 kilometers south of Cotonou,⁷ yet so far, the main navy base is situated in the port of Cotonou, which has a special link to Belgium.

In a unique cooperation between the two countries, the port of Antwerp manages the port of Cotonou for a period of [9 years, between 2018 and 2027](#). Four Belgian recruits were selected by the Port of Antwerp and hired by the Port of Cotonou for the indicated period to manage, upgrade, and strengthen the capacities of the local team as well as to computerize the data system. Since 2018, together with the national staff, the four personnel have transformed the port and increased its revenues from €1 billion per year in 2016, to €61 billion in 2023. It is also the first port in Africa that is certified as an Eco-port.⁸

The Belgian Defense already rents a small terrain in Cotonou for equipment and material of rotating teams, and plans to expand and develop this to serve as a new logistical hub in Africa for its military operations on the continent. The investments made by Belgium implies that Benin is envisioned to maintain its role as a long-term security partner on the continent, with

⁷ Discussion with the different parties in Cotonou, April 2024.

⁸ Discussion with Port personnel.

further increased collaboration in the future. Yet, while Benin currently is relatively stable, the country is also facing several different challenges including the difficult relations with neighboring Sahel countries and the risk of external security cooperation destabilizing rather than strengthening the state. The next section explores these challenges.

CURRENT & FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR BENIN

Benin's experience with extremist violence remains so far – although increasing - relatively limited. The government's multifaceted attempts to prevent jihadism from expanding is part of the reason for this, just as [inter-jihadist dynamics has prevented IS Sahel](#) from establishing itself in the country. Yet, challenges to the current relative stability remain, including the continuous border dispute with Niger, the risks associated with hosting too many external security partners, and the upcoming elections in 2026. Below each of these factors is analyzed.

Border Dispute with Niger

The [coup in Niger in 2023 divided the West African region](#) and the continent more broadly. As ECOWAS imposed sanctions and closed borders between its members and Niger, focus was on Niger. Yet, neighboring countries, like Benin, also suffered from the border closure. Before the coup, the [Benin corridor handled 80% of Niger's freight](#) through the port of Cotonou and in the early months after the coups, hundreds of trucks were stuck behind the Beninese northern border to Niger, resulting in wasted cargo and drivers going broke after weeks without moving. For the Cotonou port, the blockage caused a decreased flow of goods which resulted in lower revenues. On the Niger side, the closed borders ensued in spiked food prices as more than [7,300 tons of food aid were stuck in transit](#), while informal routes along the river were exploited to transport fuel and other goods to inflated prices. However, seven months after the coup, when ECOWAS lifted the sanctions against Niger and opened borders again, Niger authorities [refused to reopen the borders with Benin](#), citing security concerns. In a move demonstrating the Niger regime's deep disdain for the

French authorities, the Nigerien interim Prime Minister referred to [French bases in Benin “training terrorists”](#) destined to destabilize Niger.

The border dispute took a new turn in May earlier this year as Benin decided to respond to Niger’s closure by [suspending its authorization to load oil from Niger at the Beninese port of Sèmè](#). That decision ran counter to the 2019 agreement between the two states and the Chinese company that manages the pipeline from the oil fields in Niger to Benin and forced Niger to turn off the pipeline momentarily. Pressure, undoubtedly from China, on Benin, forced the latter to let through the first barrels of oil later in May. Over [90,000 barrels of crude oil are supposed to be shipped to China per day](#), enabling an economic lifeline for the military junta in Niger. While the oil export has continued, the Nigerien border has remained closed, preventing commercial flows to start again and build up economies on both sides. Negotiations continued in early fall 2024, yet at the time of writing, no deal had been reached. This not only affects economic relations negatively but also security cooperation along the border to prevent jihadist expansion on both sides.

Walking a Tight Rope between External Support and Sovereignty Narratives

Benin is not Niger and Niger is not Benin. But that does not prevent Benin from drawing lessons from its neighbour regarding the hosting of foreign troops. Benin has already received spill-over material and increased cooperation with external partners due to the Niger coup and the subsequent fall-out between the new regime and partners. From one perspective that is beneficial for Benin’s security forces which need more and specialized equipment to fight jihadism in an efficient manner. So far, the increased training and equipping by Western partners over the past two years have also been relatively low-key. This has avoided to draw attention from internal and external actors who are reluctant to Western presence and influence in the country and evoke misguided sovereignty narratives.

Yet, this was also the case in Niger during a long time, which up until the coup in July last year was seen as a relative stable partner, willing to host foreign troops on its territory. Except that over time, and in relation to Mali’s expulsion of Barkhane and Taskforce Takuba, more did not become merrier, but rather too much, resulting [in divisions between the political and military leadership](#). In the current climate of anti-Western sentiments on the African continent, and in particular in West Africa, overburdening a state with Western military presence may weaken the government and result in both a political and military backlash if security forces and/or opposition actors do not align with the government’s policy. To avoid putting the government in an internally difficult position, Western partners should therefore maintain a discreet presence and avoid increasing cooperation too swift and limit actual troop presence to the necessary.

A Stable Democracy is only a Stable Democracy until it is not

Benin, just as Niger, was up until last year viewed as a relatively stable democracy in an unstable region. That comparison only goes so far as there are enormous differences between Benin and Niger in terms of development, economy, social environment and political institutions. Benin has built comparatively stable and professional security forces after the latest coup in 1972 and has thereby consolidated a certain civil-military balance, and importantly, trust between the civilian population and the armed forces. Yet, the [US Department of State report on Human Rights](#) from last year highlight human rights issues, including arbitrary arrest or detention and substantial restrictions on freedom of expression. Indeed, Amnesty reported that [arrestations of journalists and opposition leaders](#) and restrictions on strikes remained issues undermining Benin’s democratic stability.

As Presidential elections loom in 2026, [the steps toward re-opening the political landscape](#) for opposition parties in 2023 are encouraging and suggest that there is a will to return the country to a stable democratic path. However, to ensure that national accountability and oversight

mechanisms remain relevant and efficient, external actors should make sure to match their security support with backing of civil society and development actors. This does not imply going against the sitting government, rather it suggests contributing to strengthening local agency, institutions and capabilities to maintain a democratic order and avoid tilting the civil-military balance too much to the benefit of the security forces.

CONCLUSION

Benin is the center of attention as the Gulf of Guinea has faced increasing spill-over of jihadist violence from neighboring Sahel countries and as the latter have exchanged Western security partners for Russia. To prevent further expansion of extremism and to maintain stability and democracy, Beninese authorities would benefit from continuing a multifaceted approach with an emphasis on matching civilian responses with military to avoid falling into a trap of civil-military imbalance. Maintaining trust between the civilian population and the security forces is crucial to tackle jihadist recruitment and growth with transparency and accountability as key values guiding the relations. Western partners can support such trust building, not only through relevant courses for security forces, but also by facilitating encounters and dialogues between representatives from civil society and the security sector.

Democracy is not a panacea against extremist violence and as recent examples have shown in the broader region, holding elections do not equal democracy. Yet, if the elections are free and fair, they do constitute part and parcel of a democracy, and a democracy stands a stronger chance to fight extremism with the backing of the population. Beninese authorities benefit thus from building stronger democratic institutions and swinging the pendulum back toward the democratic track they had paved out for themselves over the past decades. Western actors can show support for this development while holding back national ambitions of deploying forces and countering competitors' potential influence by practicing patience and discretion.

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