

ARMS CIRCULATION AND CROSS-BORDER INSECURITY: THE NEED TO MEET THE CHALLENGE OF POROSITY OF BORDERS BETWEEN CAMEROON AND ITS NEIGHBORS

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Abstract: *Cameroon's borders are known for their porosity. While they are vital economic interfaces, they also crystallise political and security tensions, both in the context of inter-state conflicts (Bakassi) and internal conflicts involving rebel, secessionist, or autonomist groups (NOSO crisis). But Cameroon's borders can also be exploited as a resource to fuel these confrontations through trafficking, arms circulation, smuggling and corruption, as well as by offering the protection of a 'diplomatic sanctuary'. So, what explains this porosity of the borders? Furthermore, what are the strategies developed by the Cameroonian state in the face of this porosity, which is a source of cross-border insecurity? This reflection, based on archival documents, oral testimonies, and bibliographic documents, aims to highlight the link between security risk and border porosity. It then presents the two main types of border preservation mechanisms: on the one hand, « walls » and other strategic devices that mobilise well-known means but also new technological innovations; and, on the other hand, security forces that choose to be mobile and, to guarantee their effectiveness, must take up the challenge of national and international cooperation.*

Keywords: Circulation, Arms, Borders, Porosity, Cameroon

Cross-border porosity is a reality common to the borders of Cameroon and those of neighboring countries. Several factors are at the origin of this porosity which leads to insecurity on our borders. The probable causes behind this porosity would be political instabilities, insurrections and immigration of populations to neighboring countries. This clearly poses the problem of pooling efforts between CEMAC member states, in the phenomenon of porosity as highlighted (Saibou, 2006: 119), of border surveillance. Because despite the efforts made by the Cameroonian State, the porosity of Cameroon's borders is a historical truth of La Palisse. We therefore wonder about the remedies to stop this phenomenon which is undermining our borders. Better yet, what strategies has the Cameroonian State developed to deal with this porosity, a source of cross-border insecurity? This work aims to firstly highlight the link that exists between security risks, the porosity of borders and the circulation of arms or their trade, then, mechanisms and strategies centered on technological innovations. In addition to this, the classic mobilization of security forces to guarantee the effectiveness not only of borders, but also to meet the challenge of bilateral cooperation between neighboring countries.

1. Relationship between security risk and cross-border porosity

The link between security risk and the porosity of borders is very close, because the border presents itself as a kind of "entry and exit gate" of a country. And, the neglect of border control can, according to (Fall, 2003: 90), lead to an emergence of crime fueled by the trafficking of arms, drugs and precious stones. This situation, as Ndongo Epok points out, certainly prevails in West Africa, but is also a sad reality experienced on a daily basis for residents of the border areas in Central Africa. Cameroon shares its borders with Nigeria, Chad, Gabon, Congo, Equatorial Guinea and the Central African Republic. By domino effect, the phenomena experienced are similar. The second factor which establishes the close link between security risk and porosity is the illicit sale of weapons across the borders, thus creating notorious insecurities both in Cameroon and in its neighboring countries. This

insecurity could give rise to gangs of thieves and criminals, taking advantage of this border porosity to invigorate the war economy or the crime economy in organized gangs within each neighboring state.

Since the almost simultaneous independence of the countries of Central Africa, the porosity of the borders is one of the reasons for the political instabilities of certain countries in this sub-region. The Noso and Boko-Haram wars, where attackers armed with weapons transit through Cameroon, are palpable illustrations of this. These are rebels and militias who accentuate cross-border crime, leading to insecurity in Cameroonian territory if necessary. The porosity in our borders (Danga, 2020: 332) implies mass and illicit transfers of dangerous devices. This pernicious use of borders as a source of violence makes the historian Saibou I say that border areas are the sanctuary of rebel movements, due to the lukewarm imprint of the State on these areas far from decision-making centers and sometimes deprived. State repressive apparatuses to perpetuate trafficking, with illegality being legitimized by the actors. The border therefore becomes a place where criminals mobilize, taking advantage of this porosity to invigorate the economy of war or the economy of crime in organized gangs in the different borders linking Cameroon to its neighbors. The map below takes stock of the war economy in Bangui, and of the militia bands in Cameroon, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, and even to the borders of the South and North Sudan entities (Fall, 2003: 102). The consequences of the porosity of our borders are explicitly highlighted, with the immediate corollary of cross-border crime, the exploitation of local wealth, linked to trafficking and the non-control of significant flows of arms, munitions and drug all sorts. This situation is at the origin of several actions encouraging the abuses of the “Noso”, “Séléka” and “anti-Balaka” rebels. However, in view of the analysis made in this map, we deplore the tracing of the different zones of trafficking and illicit circulation of weapons and by extension the negligence in the control of drugs, ammunition and weapons of all calibers. Which reinforces the idea of reinforcement in the numbers of the Cameroonian defense forces? It is clear that the porosity of borders is a factor which is equated with insecurity and its consequences. It is therefore capital thought (Ango, 2001: 100) for the State, in order to preserve national sovereignty, to strengthen prevention and security mechanisms through technological innovations.

1.1. Mechanisms and technological innovations of Cameroonian border control

As a factor of insecurity, the porosity of borders is a phenomenon at the heart of debates in Cameroon. And despite the surveillance techniques developed by the Cameroonian State in our borders, insecurity is increasing, hence the establishment of new mechanisms to reduce this porosity. Before talking about the border preservation mechanism, it is important to briefly present the real border situation. Indeed, the porosity of our borders is due to the lax nature not only of the government in the choice of security personnel, but also to the methods used to restrict this growing porosity throughout Cameroon's borders. Because this insecurity, it should be noted, leads to a significant deficit in the control and regulation of products entering through the borders of Cameroon and neighboring countries. This insecurity is in fact marked by the rise of terrorism, maintained by the militias who circulate without embarrassment in the States of Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, the Central African Republic and South Sudan (Bangoura, 1996: 215). The fight against cross-border porosity (Adam, 1997: 300) becomes an absolute imperative to face the security problems to which Cameroon and neighboring states are exposed. Thus, the protection mechanisms put in place to guarantee peace, security and local development would be disarmament, demobilization, the involvement of considerable numbers of law enforcement forces in the peacekeeping process and securing our borders and disarming smugglers.

1.2. Mechanisms for preserving and securing borders

It follows in fact that cross-border porosity supported by the unhealthy behaviour of certain crooked “men in outfits” has pushed the Cameroonian government, as stated, (Danga,

2020: 298) to take “the bull by the horns”. To this end, the mechanism adopted by the Cameroonian government is the establishment of seasoned military units along the land and maritime borders, for the surveillance of material goods entering the towns near the borders and later throughout the country territory. The phenomenon of corruption, laxity in control operations along the border posts and above all the rapid desire of certain customs officers to enrich themselves require a redeployment of the strategic system of the defense forces on the borders of Cameroon because, as the officer underlines André Bertrand Mvogo: “the weak presence of the State in border control amplifies maritime and land piracy of our borders”. This alarming cross-border situation means that joint control of the army, gendarmerie and police is at the center of the fight against porous borders. Colonel Youssa will speak about preventive and repressive surveillance as an inseparable factor in tracking down terrorists, smugglers and transnational offenders “polluting” the borders and creating notorious insecurity not only in Cameroon, but also in neighboring countries (Fall, 2003: 105).

Notwithstanding the criticism addressed to them regarding their behaviour and their state of corruption on the borders, the Cameroonian police and customs play an important role in the battle against the illicit circulation of goods and especially the fight against cross-border crime. The example of the Cameroon-Nigeria maritime border near the town of Akwaya is one illustration among many others of the determination of the Cameroonian police and customs in the fight against the violation of our borders by faithless attackers nor law which plunder Cameroon's wealth and fuel terrorist networks in Cameroon and its neighborhood. Despite the persistence of border porosity, it should be noted that the control mechanisms set up by the Cameroonian government in the fight against porosity in our borders have progressed over time, space and in intensity. However, for a guarantee of lasting cross-border security, it would be wise for the Cameroonian government to introduce innovations in cross-border control to reduce the high rate of porosity of the borders.

2. Technological innovations in border control

The attempt to analyze technological innovations in securing Cameroon's borders encounters numerous difficulties. Indeed, the policy of good neighborliness as advocated by President Paul Biya somewhat weakens the establishment of real security of Cameroon's borders. However, some innovations are being implemented to solve this pressing problem of cross-border porosity.

2.1. Insufficient manpower in the Cameroonian army

Subsequently, and given the insufficient numbers in the Cameroonian army, the government will set up an Elite unit responsible for effectively combating the phenomenon of insecurity on our borders. The rapid intervention battalion (BIR) with the special mission of neutralizing rebel bands and combating insecurity has succeeded as much as possible in calming this growing insecurity in Cameroon and more precisely in the North with the harassing presence of cutters of road. In fact, this corps is the essential link put in place by the Cameroonian government to combat the insecurities plaguing the entire territory, hence the creation within this same corps of a special “Delta” unit which had to intervene effectively in the Cameroon-Nigerian problem on the Bakassi peninsula (Danga, 2020: 300). And even if this body experiences some difficulties relating to the number of its elements, it is a reassuring palliative for questions of cross-border insecurity. In the same vein, the creation of the National Borders Commission (CNF), a consultative structure on border issues, was set up for cross-border security. The policy of effective occupation of these border areas protected by traffickers from different sectors is necessary and urgent to fight against this security threat. As another innovation, the government has erected “barrier walls” which make it possible to filter objects entering the territory, and to channel flows around border points to facilitate the surveillance of objects and people. All that remains for the law enforcement forces operating in the border area is to truly fulfill their role. In the same vein, the strengthening and

alternation of elements of forces in border posts are two other elements which guarantee the reduction of porosity and by extension the phenomenon of cross-border insecurity. The measures undertaken by the Cameroonian government have certainly reduced the rate of insecurity at our borders; however, much remains to be done because acts of corruption, cronyism and above all the crisis of personnel to ensure the maintenance of order at the borders remain current. Hence the necessary cooperation of CEMAC member countries to stem the porosity that is a source of insecurity on our borders (Danga, 2020: 305).

2.2. Challenges of bilateral sub regional cooperation

Talking about cooperation between neighboring countries is essential for the preservation of peace in the different countries concerned; and the governments of these countries should get involved in order to put an end to these crises fueled by the fraudulent penetration of illicit goods and small arms (SALW) into the sub-region. To do this, the establishment of an International Joint Patrol (PAMI) is necessary to ensure not only the interests of Cameroon but also those of neighboring countries in an area which could generate “war” if nothing is done. Because, let us note, since 1966, the countries of Central Africa have been going through security crises thanks to the transfer of arms which takes place on the border with Cameroon. As such, the Cameroonian gendarmerie carries out border security missions on a daily basis jointly with elements of the Central African gendarmerie; these control forces fight against cross-border threats. Cameroonian Colonel Youssa also specifies that: “the history of the national gendarmerie is closely linked to the preventive and repressive security of the territory”.

In other words, the gendarmerie occupies a special place in the fight against porosity in our borders. It would therefore be wise to also place the latter at the center of this fight for naturally better performance. For better performance, it would also be wise for Cameroon and its neighbors to strengthen the logistics and equipment of customs officers and gendarmes (Ngwounfo, 2017: 344) to fight against smugglers. On another level and still speaking of the challenges in terms of cross-border cooperation, it is important for the governments of Central African countries to create jobs to reduce the unemployment rate by investing in sustainable projects to guarantee stable and remunerative. As most Central African states have a significant number of unemployed, on average 70%, the majority of young people find themselves confined near the borders where terrorist groups, drug traffickers, weapons of war, small caliber and conventional ammunition.

Thus, the difficulty in monitoring these borders becomes obvious. Indeed, cross-border security reform remains a requirement for the governments of Central African countries because the crises in Chad, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo and even Cameroon require a pooling of efforts to stop the trafficking of objects, illicit goods and weapons on the borders. It is also necessary to dispatch the army of each neighboring State in the policy of implementing the defense of the integrity and security of the borders of the sub-region because the porosity of the borders remains a notorious source of traffic Illicit weapons and ammunition by extension, smuggling of SALW. It is therefore urgent that African heads of state and the international community resolutely take decisions to carry out the various disarmament operations, demobilization of irregular forces, for the protection of our borders. For this, an effective occupation of these border areas confiscated by smugglers is necessary and urgent to stem or even neutralize the threat. CEMAC member states should also involve populations in this fight to denounce any abuse relating to the trafficking of illicit goods and objects entering the territory of the regions concerned (Danga, 2020: 310).

In this vein, the identification of target areas is necessary for operations of mixed defense forces. The ECCAS set up among others by the 06 member countries of the CEMAC contributed in its own way to putting an end to the threat which existed at the borders of these States. For the particular case of Cameroon, the government for these operations has set

up “falcons, Nomade, Harmattan” along certain routes, to fight against cross-border porosity on the Cameroon-Chad border. Because these winding routes traveled by the phenomenon of highway robbers are a very dangerous path for the populations of both countries. Hence this strengthening of patrols by mixed law enforcement forces. This cooperation between countries bordering Cameroon is necessary to the extent that precautions taken by States contribute to the reduction of insecurity in almost all countries bordering Cameroon. President Paul Biya, for his part, began a disarmament and demobilization campaign in 2018 aimed at destabilizing the fighters of Boko-Haram and Noso armed groups. The Gulf of Guinea Commission was entrusted, within the framework of inter-state cooperation, with the mission of securing the borders against all kinds of piracy hindering security in CEMAC member countries. This cooperation between the heads of Central African States must respect a certain ethics with regard to the strategic and sensitive nature of the border because it could, through a laxity observed on the part of the government, favor a route of destabilization for the security of states.

At the end of this exploratory reflection on the questions of porosity and cross-border security, the exploitation of the data and the analyzes carried out show that, more than a reality, cross-border porosity leading to territorial insecurity is a fact. On this note, the presence of mixed patrol forces, the strengthening of elements of the armed forces, and better equipment for customs officers are essential in the fight against smugglers present on the borders. A frank and sincere collaboration between Cameroon and its neighbors is essential for the harmonization of cross-border operations between Cameroon and its neighbors. And even if the collaboration of mixed patrol forces does not prove obvious given, for example, the diversified interests of the latter, it nonetheless remains true that the general objective must be the re-establishment of security, reduction in illicit trafficking and the tracking down of smugglers at the borders linking Cameroon with its neighbors.

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