Intelligence and National Security Management in Ghana: Evolution, frameworks, challenges and policy imperatives

Johnny Kwadjo

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African Security Sector Network (ASSN)

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For more information, please contact the **ASSN** team by email: **info@africansecuritynetwork.org**

or visit the **ASSN** website:
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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

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INTRODUCTION

An appreciation of the **history, structure / framework and contemporary dynamics** of intelligence and national security management in Ghana provides a most important analytical lens for understanding the country's *overall security architecture and modes of security governance.*

Each element of this broad outline should provide a useful layer of insight that, when taken together, should explain how Ghana's security system is organised, why it functions the way it does and how it adapts to changing threats.

It is, therefore, within this context that it is noted, firstly, that Ghana's Intelligence and national security system has, historically, evolved from a colonial-era political policing institution to the more legal and regulated, intelligence- led architecture that is seen, today, carrying out activities that may include complex threats, such as terrorism and violent extremism, cyber and other white color crimes, and transnational organised crime.

Secondly, Its contemporary framework is anchored on the Country's 1992 Constitution; the Security and Intelligence Agencies Act, 2020 (Act 1030), and the 2020 National Security Strategy, which, together, define the institutions, mandates, coordination mechanisms and oversight arrangements required.

The Historical evolution

Colonial intelligence in the Gold Coast revolved around a Special Branch-type political surveillance unit embedded in the colonial police force and focused on monitoring nationalist activism rather than providing any kind of neutral national security assessments.

In the late 1950s, when the Kwame Nkrumah government, soon after Independence, turned to India to help build Ghana's early external and internal intelligence services, they created the Foreign Service Research Bureau and retained the colonial Special Branch as tools of regime protection in a hostile and turbulent political environment that eventually ended in the military coup of February 1966.

It was not surprising, therefore, that subsequent military and civilian regimes multiplied security and intelligence entities, often overlapping, but which now focused on coup prevention.

Nevertheless, this focus on coup prevention, failed to prevent repeated seizures of power by the military and their accompanying human rights abuses by the security services in general.

But after the coup in 1981, which saw an almost total collapse of the existing security apparatus at the time, reforms gradually began, aimed at building a real Intelligence capability, leading to the establishment of the Bureau of National Investigations (BNI) as a dedicated civilian intelligence body separate from the police and the military, as a means of embedding intelligence structures under constitutional control in 1992.

We may, therefore, note that Ghana's intelligence reforms before 1992 were ad hoc, regime- protective and weakly regulated, whereas reforms after the 1992 Constitution became more legal- based, institutionally integrated and oriented toward democratic oversight and national (not just regime) security.

This shift marks a move from the politicised and opaque security practices to a more professional, intelligence- led architecture embedded in constitutional and statutory frameworks.

The Constitutional and legal framework

As previously indicated, following the 1981 coup, the intelligence apparatus effectively collapsed, and intelligence work became fragmented across military, police and parallel units without a coherent legal framework or clear division of responsibilities.

Oversight was minimal, with no constitutional provisions setting out mandates, structures or accountability mechanisms, leaving the agencies largely anonymous and unregulated in law.

It was, therefore, Ghana's 1992 Constitution that explicitly provided structures for the country's security sector. The Constitution introduced detailed provisions for managing security structures and explicitly included the directors of External, Internal and Military Intelligence in the National Security Council, bringing intelligence agencies under constitutional authority and the rule of law. This stripped the agencies of their former anonymity and required that their activities be conducted within a defined legal and institutional framework instead of doing so by informal executive directives.

The Constitution also created the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), mandating it to scrutinise abuses by security and intelligence officials.

This gave citizens a formal avenue to question misconduct by intelligence officials, and, by so doing, helped to integrate intelligence reform within a broader project of democratic transition and security sector governance, linking a functioning, lawful security system to Ghana's political stability and peaceful transfers of power.

To operationalise these constitutional provisions, Ghana enacted the Security and Intelligence Agencies Act, 1996 (Act 526) and its replacement, the Security and Intelligence Agencies Act, 2020 (Act 1030), to provide statutory mandates for intelligence and security agencies, defining membership and functions of security councils(District, Regional and National) while providing for intelligence agency accountability at Parliament through budgetary control and reporting obligations. An accountable civilian agency, the Bureau of National Investigations (now National Intelligence Bureau), was consolidated as the main internal intelligence body separate from the police and the military, while the National Security Council Secretariat became the central collating and analysis hub for Internal, External and Military Intelligence agencies.

The post-1992 reforms also emphasised improved training, technology and more rigorous recruitment criteria, gradually professionalising the services and enabling them to better support policy and crisis situations.

Act 1030 also updated the framework to reflect emerging threats while formally establishing Regional and District security councils as committees of the National Security Council, as well as, tasking them to provide early-warning alerts and measures, as well as undertake peacebuilding engagements and law and order functions at sub-national level.

Ghana's core intelligence community, therefore, comprises Internal, External and Military intelligence agencies, coordinated through the National Security Council and its Secretariat.

The former BNI, renamed the National Intelligence Bureau (NIB) in 2020, functions as the principal domestic civilian intelligence agency with a mandate to deal with organised crime, financial crime, espionage, sabotage, terrorism, piracy and related threats, operating through regional offices across all 16 regions of Ghana.

The National Security Council, chaired by the President, serves as the central decision-making body for security policy, integrating inputs from the Ghana Armed Forces, Ghana Police Service, NIB and other specialised agencies.

The National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) acts as the collating and coordinating hub, responsible for crisis management, inter-agency intelligence fusion and contingency planning, making it the operational nerve centre of the intelligence-led security architecture.

Policy frameworks and strategy

The National Security Strategy of Ghana (A Secure and Prosperous Ghana, with Regional, Continental and Global Reach and Influence) document, adopted in 2020, pursuant to section 24 of Act 1030, consolidates various sectoral policies into a single framework that identifies key threats and sets out the strategic national security objectives of Ghana, focused on sovereignty, territorial integrity, human security and socio-economic stability.

It emphasises an integrated and coordinated use of national power and resources while prioritising prevention and seeking to align security policy with broader development and governance agendas.

Complementing this, Ghana has adopted the National Framework for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism (NAFPCVET), which provides for a four-pillar counterterrorism strategy – Prevent, Pre-empt, Protect and Respond (3PR) – with the Ghanaian intelligence community placed at the centre of implementation.

These frameworks recognise terrorism, cyber threats, maritime insecurity and organised crime as key risks, and explicitly require enhanced intelligence sharing and community engagement to achieve these goals.

The Contemporary Threat Environment

Ghana operates in a region affected by instability, especially in the Sahel, where insurgent and terrorist groups have expanded operations and created “terrorist enclaves”, which increase the risk of spillover into coastal states.

Although Ghana has not yet suffered a successful large-scale terrorist attack, its security assessments treat jihadist violence, radicalisation and cross-border infiltration as prominent threats in the national security matrix.

Beyond terrorism, Ghana faces challenges from transnational organised crime, including drug trafficking, illicit financial flows and maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, all of which require sophisticated intelligence collection and inter-agency coordination.

Cybercrime and broader cyber threats are also rising concerns, which require the intelligence system to be oriented and equipped, under Act 2030, to confront and cope with.

Operational dynamics and coordination

Ghana’s current model is described as “intelligence-led”, meaning security operations, especially in counterterrorism and complex crime, are designed around timely collection, analysis and dissemination of intelligence rather than a reactive force deployment after the fact.

Thus, NSCS's role as an all-source fusion centre, especially the role of its Secretarial in integrating military, police, border, financial and external intelligence to produce strategic and operational assessments for decision-makers at all levels, is central to this effort.

At the same time, Regional and District security councils, established under Act 1030, are expected to feed localised information upward, providing early-warning on communal conflicts, chieftaincy disputes and other internal tensions that can escalate into broader security crises.

This multi-layered structure aims to bridge the gap between national-level strategy and community-level realities, although challenges of capacity, resources and information-sharing practices still affect performance.

Key challenges

Persistent fragmentation among agencies, with parallel reporting lines and institutional rivalries, continues to hinder the development of a fully-integrated intelligence operations and persistently slows down governmental responses to fast-moving threats.

Thus, ensuring effective, routine intelligence sharing — while protecting sources and methods — remains a core management challenge for the NSC and its subordinate bodies.

Another challenge concerns the effort at determining an appropriate balance between security imperatives and civil liberties, particularly regarding surveillance, arrests and the treatment of political opponents or activists, given the lingering historical legacy of regime-protection intelligence inherited.

Strengthening parliamentary oversight, enhancing transparency where possible and deepening professional norms are, therefore, necessary steps for consolidating a democratic, citizen-centered intelligence culture.

But, above all, endemic and egregious corruption and fraudulent practices by some senior officials of the intelligence services threaten to destroy the very fabric of public trust in the services.

This has proved particularly dastardly because the fraud is blatantly carried out behind the pretext of the wall of secrecy provided by operational requirements.

Recent investigations indicate that corruption, involving the blatant theft of large sums of funds earmarked for security procurements, was enabled, principally, by the belief by these corrupt officials that the secrecy provided by "National security considerations", also provided a perfect cover for their activities.

Basically, a very senior intelligence Director-General was arrested on allegations of siphoning millions in state funds into his private accounts and using part of the money to acquire property, with the transactions frequently booked generically as "security" expenditure rather than any clearly itemised spending.

Indeed, the apparent ease with which such massive embezzlement took place in procurement fraud seemed to have shocked the Ghanaian public into an appreciation of how emblematic an opaque national-security budgeting and expenditure system can mask personal enrichment, and undermine public trust in the security services.

Consequently, one of the most urgent tasks of Intelligence sector reform in Ghana today is how to devise effective measures to curb corruption in the agency.

In this regard, the first issue that arises is how to provide greater transparency without sacrificing operational imperatives.

In general, it has been observed that the misuse of classified funds can be reduced by combining limited public transparency with very strong internal and parliamentary visibility.

The goal is for a small group of trusted actors to see everything, while the public sees enough to deter abuse without exposing operations.

Other measures may include:

Clear rules and traceability

- Define in law what "classified" or "special" funds may be used for, and explicitly prohibit non-security uses (e.g., campaigning, personal benefits) in order to make misuse legally unambiguous.
- Require every transaction from classified accounts to have a written justification, approvals and documentation kept in a secure but auditable trail, so investigators can reconstruct the full money path.

Strong internal controls and audits

- Separate duties (request, approve, pay, reconcile) so that no single officer controls the full process, and impose strict limits on cash advances with rapid reconciliation requirements.
- Mandate periodic audits of classified funds by an internal inspector-general unit plus an external supreme audit institution team with security clearance, with public release of sanitised summaries highlighting control weaknesses and corrective actions.

Targeted disclosure and parliamentary oversight

Give a small, cleared parliamentary or independent oversight committee full access to detailed classified fund records, and require confidential briefings on major uses, overruns and irregularities.

Integrity, risk management and whistleblowing

- Use risk-based monitoring to focus extra scrutiny on high-risk areas (cash, sole-source contracts, foreign intermediaries), continuously updating risk maps and mitigation plans.
- Enforce conflict of interest and asset declaration rules for officials controlling classified funds, and provide secure, anonymous whistleblowing channels plus protection for those who report suspected misuse.
- Together, these practices narrow the discretion around classified money, ensure that at least some independent actors can "see everything", and raise the likelihood that inappropriate spending is detected and sanctioned, which strongly deters misuse.

Prospects for Ghana's Intelligence and National Security Management

Ghana's relative stability in a turbulent region appears to suggest that its intelligence-led national security architecture has made some meaningful contributions to preventing major crises and managing internal tensions.

The continued implementation of the National Security Strategy and NAFPCVET, coupled with investments in human capital, technology and regional cooperation, will be essential for sustaining this stability amid evolving threats.

Future reforms should focus on deepening inter-agency integration, enhancing cyber and financial intelligence capabilities and expanding community-based early-warning systems to guard against violent extremism and localised conflict.

Within this context, continuing along these trajectories should aim at achieving an Intelligence system that reconciles effectiveness with accountability in contributing to a viable National Security Management system in a vibrant and contested democracy.