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An Escalating Situation

The withdrawal of French contingents from Niger marks the end of a decade-long EU military involvement in the Sahel (France24, 2023). With Niamey announcing the end of the European Union Military Partnership Mission (EUMPM) and European Union Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) in Niger, EU presence in the country has met the same fate as in Mali and Burkina Faso (Bensimon et al., 2023; Le Monde, 2023). Just as concerns are being raised regarding the future of European troops stationed in other African countries, the United Nations Security Council unanimously agreed on the gradual withdrawal of peacekeepers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Associated Press, 2024). Yet, while its prospects seem bleak, ensuring sustainable stability in Africa will likely remain a European priority in the coming years. Aside from the power struggle seemingly won by Russian influence and the fuelling of anti-French sentiment, the increasing rate of desertification and recurrence of droughts will likely continue to feed violence on a much larger scale (Sova et al., 2023). Now labelled as one of the main reasons behind the continued insurgence of violent armed groups and subsequent mass migration toward Europe, food insecurity-related violence will likely force European countries to find long-term solutions (Botha et al., 2014; Martín Ramírez, 2020). While attempting to address what is now accepted as the root cause of violence is certainly the most effective way to prevent instability, the return of EU military operations cannot be ignored as a potential tool to mitigate blowback to European countries. However, as EU representatives at the UN have recently stated, the peacekeeping of the future will likely be more complex and ambitious than it is today (Gonzato, 2023).

The theory behind the potential renewal of European involvement in Africa, specifically in the Sahel, is largely based on past attempts to target European issues at their source. French-led counterinsurgency operations such as Operation Barkhane reflected an urgency to address the terrorist threats posed by Islamist groups present in the region. Similarly, Italian involvement in Niger had as its main objective the slowing of human trafficking and mass migration to Southern Europe by overseeing the main gateway cities to crossing the Sahara (Scherer, 2018). That European countries could resume military operations in Africa in the future is thus not mere speculation. While an immediate resumption of European operations in the Sahel is highly unlikely, so is the complete abandonment of European states' security concerns in the region.

Peacekeeping Fades as Violence Soars

While eyes are set on understanding and mitigating the direct consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian War in Europe, media coverage of its effects on African security has been limited to sporadic statements.

The significant proportion of cereal production represented by both Ukraine and Russia before the war was already a major cause for concern in the early days of the invasion. The surge in prices severely impacted the largely undiversified African food market, with numerous states reliant on imported items (Yohannes-Kassahun, 2023). Moreover, African reliance on Russian and Belarussian fertilisers took a major hit with the placement of EU sanctions, which accelerated inflation (Hatab, 2022). With rampant desertification and drought fuelling new conflicts and exacerbating pre-existing ones, hopes for sustainable political stability are increasingly at risk.

Violence, not only at the hands of insurgent groups but also by governments themselves, has been gradually soaring in various African regions. In the Sahel, numerous coups have disrupted the region's ability to withstand non-state armed groups (Haidara, 2023). Concurrently, continued governmental abuses in Nigeria and the DRC have amplified the consequences of conflicts against Boko Haram and in Kivu respectively, jeopardising their overall effectiveness in attaining peace (Amnesty International, 2022; Ewang, 2022).

These signs of unrest and instability, albeit present in only a handful of African nations, exert a significant ripple effect across the entire continent and resonate on a global scale. However, conventional peacekeeping and peacebuilding endeavours are waning, yielding ground to emerging stakeholders in the region. Recent UN peacekeepers deployed to Africa have seldom been European, for instance. As of right now, nations such as Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Ghana provide the bulk of the peacekeeping personnel in African operations. Advancing the Africanisation of peacekeeping personnel has often been regarded as a pivotal milestone for pan-African solidarity, and its alignment with EU-UN interests and capacity-building missions has credibly alleviated the burden on several missions (Allen, 2023). Nevertheless, the replacement of a European presence by the encroachment of Russian private military companies threatens European security interests (Kayali & Caulcutt, 2023).

The EU Agenda Concerning Africa

The 2022-2024 new priorities for the EU-UN strategic partnership on peace operation and crisis management see the EU as a well-established and essential partner for UN Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) (General Secretariat of the Council, 2022). Out of 18 Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in 2022 [1], 13 were deployed parallel to UN missions, 9 of which concerned African countries (UNLOPS, 2022).

Through its delegation at the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34), the EU reaffirmed its commitment to UN peacekeeping efforts, highlighting its commitment to both civilian and military CSDP operations (Gonzato, 2023). The 2024 C34 report of the Secretary-General similarly accentuates the significance of the UN-EU partnerships in peacekeeping operations, further suggesting future European involvement (UN Secretary General, 2024).

EU engagement in Africa over the years has been characterised by efforts toward disarmament and capacity building, as well as direct military assistance. Ongoing EU operations such as Operation Irini in the Mediterranean and Operation Atalanta off the Horn of Africa attest to the range of European projection along Africa's coastline.

[1] Note: EUTM and EUCAP Sahel were launched after the establishment of the new EU-UN partnership priorities.

Aside from the developmental and humanitarian rationale behind European efforts and interventions in Africa, the importance of the continent to the security concerns of individual EU countries is a significant element in foreshadowing a renewed European foothold. After an arduous process of nurturing relations with African countries, Italian and German hopes of securing access to liquefied gas are being increasingly challenged by the junta takeovers and their consequences (Sassi, 2023). Similarly, the collapse of the G5 Sahel ended French plans to establish long-term counterinsurgency efforts in the region. Considering the state of affairs in Libya, the aforementioned Italian efforts to combat human trafficking and migration elsewhere crumbled with the Nigerien coup (Jones & Genovese, 2023). Yet, elements of European persistence can be seen in adjacent regions. Following the establishment of EU Security and Defence Initiatives in Ghana, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, and Togo, a larger initiative for states in the Gulf of Guinea was launched to combat the potential spillover of insecurity from the Sahel (Council of the EU, 2023). This initiative has proven especially beneficial for those states that maintain a significant troop presence in the region. Notably, France has strategically positioned most of its remaining forces in the Gulf, with contingents stationed in Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, and Gabon (Ministère des Armées, 2023).

The Future of EU Missions in Africa

In this new wave of EU initiatives, member states will have to adopt the lessons learned from their prior missions. The apparent erosion of EU relations with certain African nations is not necessarily symbolic of a failure of EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, even though it is likely connected to a broader European misunderstanding of local contexts (Van der Lijn et al., 2022). In-depth studies on the shortcomings of individual missions are rather exhaustive, and further attempts to summarise them would be mere repetition. However, in a rapidly evolving context, the operational lessons learned from EU military missions in Africa could allow for a better understanding of tomorrow's challenges. While direct military intervention by the EU or its members remains unlikely, training and capacity-building missions will arguably be the main format of future action.

The increasing partiality of local communities has been a rising problem, best exemplified by increased anti-French sentiment in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea, which has grown to symbolise a broader pushback against Western intervention (Guiffard, 2023; Rich, 2023). Paired with the increased targeting of peacekeepers and foreign personnel, a reconsideration of the European approach is due. Since operations began in 2012, French military assistance and intervention in the Sahel have been characterised by indecisive victories that somewhat shifted public perception (Aina, 2023). The absence of mechanisms ensuring the performance as well as accountability of Malian government forces trained by the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), arguably worsened the EU's ability to appropriately train local forces and address human rights abuses (Baudais & Souleymane, 2022).

Therefore, new training missions will need to put in place follow-up systems to ensure complete training, with a greater willingness to use non-military assistance components, such as aid and developmental assistance, as leverage (Van der Lijn et al., 2022).

While the European Peace Facility will ease the supply of armaments necessary to build local forces, this will need to be better balanced with peacebuilding and disarmament efforts, both of which are seemingly becoming of less concern to EU policymakers (Bergmann, 2023). A better understanding of local contexts and a continuous analysis of how trained forces are being employed is a necessary step towards effective EUTM missions in Africa. The disconnect between civilian and military CSDP missions could jeopardise training efforts, as strict military intervention does not necessarily reflect local needs (Ferrando, 2021).

Conclusion

The intertwined complexities of security challenges in Africa require a nuanced and adaptive approach from the EU and its members. The withdrawal of French contingents from Niger signals a pivotal shift, emphasising the need for the EU to reassess its role in the continent. The EU's strategic partnership with the UN on peace operations and crisis management reflects a commitment to stability, but one still tainted by the limited success of UN missions. Future missions will need adaptable strategies, that focus on long-term training, capacity building, and reaching a balance between military and non-military assistance. Balancing armament supply with peacebuilding efforts is crucial and can only be achieved through the synergy of civilian and military mandates. While African solutions for African problems should remain the continent's priority, the EU cannot compromise its security interests in the region. Therefore, if European countries choose to be involved, they must do so with a careful and effective strategy.

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