

Mali: The uncertain prospects of intervention

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Mali currently hosts the German Bundeswehr's largest foreign deployment. Some 1,400 soldiers are involved in the United Nations Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) and the European Training Mission (EUTM Mali). Many other member states of the European Union (EU) as well as the United Kingdom (UK) are also heavily involved in Mali militarily, but also politically and in terms of development policy. Regarding a possible extension of both missions, doubts not only hang over their effectiveness, but also their political licence and framework. Mali's military government, in power since 2020, has adopted a confrontational course towards Western and regional partners, thus putting cooperation to a severe test.

The political, security, and humanitarian situation in Mali has been steadily deteriorating at least since 2017 – despite the international intervention. The number of internally displaced persons has recently risen to 400,000, almost quadrupling in the last two years.¹ This sobering outcome is not only due to the extraordinary complexity of the conflict situation in Mali – the international approach is simply not working. It is based on four strategic cornerstones:

1. Counter-terrorism through the French Operation Barkhane to keep the security and threat situation manageable;
2. Revamping the Malian army to provide security on its own with the help of numerous bilateral and multilateral partners, including EUTM Mali;
3. The implementation of the 2015 peace agreement between Bamako and the Tuareg rebellion, which is to serve as a political framework for the stabilisation process and is supported by MINUSMA;
4. Stabilisation and socio-economic measures within the framework of development cooperation and formats such as the Sahel Alliance.

No substantial progress has been achieved in any of the four fields of action, much less have these strategic cornerstones reinforced each other.² Instead, violence and insecurity have spread rapidly towards the centre and south of the country, interweaving into a

¹ Humanitarian Data Exchange. 2021. "Mali Displacement – [IDPs, Returnees] – Baseline Assessment [IOM DTM]."

² Tull, Denis M. 2020. "German and International Crisis Management in the Sahel." SWP-Comment 27/2020. Berlin. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik.

complex mix of jihadism, civil war, and inter-ethnic conflict.³ Counter-terrorism has had no stabilising effects, although numerous leaders of jihadist movements have been killed in the course of Operation Barkhane. Security force assistance has only marginally improved the effectiveness of Mali's armed forces, as institutional reforms in the security sector have not progressed and been partially blocked. The Algiers peace agreement is also still largely awaiting implementation. The missions EUTM Mali and MINUSMA, in which the Bundeswehr is involved, have at best slowed down the crisis spiral (see Infoboxes, page 3 and 5).

Another deficit of the international intervention is its lack of strategic learning and adaptability. International actors have reacted to the overall negative trend, which has been evident since at least 2017, and the changing nature of the conflict with selective adjustments, but not with strategic changes. The tendency has instead been to intensify and expand engagement along existing approaches and instruments.

The long shadow of Afghanistan

The disillusionment with the balance sheet of the 20-year engagement in Afghanistan, which ended with the fiasco of the Taliban takeover, has drastically changed the discussion in Germany about the Mali mission(s). On the positive side, there is now a greater willingness to take a critical look at the engagement in Mali. Whereas the debate on the mandate in May 2021 was dominated by goodwill or, at best, friendly scepticism in the Bundestag, all signs now point to a problem-oriented view. However, it often falls back on analogies with Afghanistan. There are at least as many differences as parallels between the two settings.

The conflict constellation in Mali may be more complex than in Afghanistan. But in Mali there is no national armed movement comparable to the Taliban with a political-ideological core capable of winning over a majority. The hallmark of political violence in Mali is the mobilisation of socially and regionally marginalised groups.⁴

The interventions themselves differ in that the one in Mali took place at the request and invitation of the government, whereas in Afghanistan it was a foreign invasion with the aim of regime change. The motives and logics of the international partners are also partly different. The broad alliance in Afghanistan was mainly due to political loyalty to the United States. In the Sahel, support for France undoubtedly plays a significant role, but so does geography: Mali is in the European neighbourhood. The immediate security risks for Europe are probably lower than is often suggested by the term "Sahelistan". But the rapid spread of instability in the sub-region creates a need for medium- and long-term responses. Mali is not an isolated trouble spot, and the risks it poses to neighbouring West African countries are unpredictable.

³ Sangaré, Bokar, Gilles Holder, and Julien Antouly. 2021. "Le djihad dans le centre du Mali: lutte de classes, révolte sociale ou révolution du monde peul?" *The Conversation*, 11 September 2021.

⁴ Pellerin, Mathieu. 2019. "Les violences armées au Sahara: Du djihadisme aux insurrections?" *Études de l'Ifri*. Paris. Institut français des relations internationales.

The shortcomings and challenges of the two interventions have some parallels. Perhaps the most important one touches on the political narrative of the intervention with its focus on security-related objectives and the fight against terrorism as a leitmotif. This narrative structures the debate in Europe, but reduces policy options and creates false expectations regarding strategic goals and instruments. Thus, it is no coincidence that the German engagement in Afghanistan as well as in Mali is associated with the deployment of the Bundeswehr, indeed largely equated with it. This assimilation suggests the existence of a security problem that can be solved or at least contained with the help of military means, within a limited period of time. The almost exclusive focus on the military as an instrument narrows and undermines debates about strategy, prevents learning and adaptation processes, and almost inevitably leads to the conclusion of “failure”.

In Mali, however, it is all too clear that operational successes against jihadists do not automatically bring about stability if, as is the case, the political causes of the crisis remain salient.⁷ The centre of gravity of the crisis is not insurgent groups, but the political elites that control the central state and government. Without their cooperation, stabilisation

MINUSMA: Supporting the peace process

MINUSMA's record is mixed. Its successes in supporting the peace process are modest. Due to numerous attacks, the mission has to spend a large part of its capacities on its own protection. The freedom of movement of all its components is extremely limited. The mandate of the mission and the resources at its disposal have been insufficiently adapted to the changing context by the UN Security Council. While the mission has been given the stabilisation of the centre of Mali as a second strategic priority as of 2019, it has not received any additional resources to accomplish this task. In fact, its focus remains on the north of the country. Although 60 per cent of human rights violations are taking place in the centre, only 17 per cent of the blue helmets are deployed in this region. The Mobile Task Force, one of the mission's few robust instruments, is also deployed in the north but not in the centre. With regard to the protection of the civilian population, an adaptation of the mandate therefore seems advisable and obvious. However, it is more than questionable whether this would meet with Bamako's approval. Political support for the peace process does not require a strong military presence in the north. Supporting the transition process up to elections could be a practical political priority for the mission.

The withdrawal of Barkhane from Mali will further increase the jihadist groups' room for manoeuvre and action and consequently increase the risks for the personnel of the international missions. Since 2013, 154 blue helmets have died in Mali as a result of attacks.⁵ More than 95 per cent of them come from African countries, which in turn account for 67 per cent of the mission's military force. They often have insufficient equipment and accept high risks.⁶ Among the European contingents, only the Mobile Task Force, in which Germany is also involved (along with Sweden and the UK), has a temporary presence in the field. The Bundeswehr has suffered two fatalities since the beginning of its Mali engagement. They died in a helicopter crash without enemy interference.

cannot succeed. The regime under President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (2013–2020) simulated a partnership with external supporters that, on closer examination, was not based on common goals and interests.⁸ It is possible that military rule offers an opportunity to develop a more productive form of cooperation based on local ownership.

The transition as the bone of contention

The international intervention is not only being questioned because of its results. The government in Bamako has been hugely critical of Mali's Western partners for some time. It has even taken a hard line of confrontation with France and Europe, which has sealed the premature end of both the French Operation Barkhane and the European Task Force Takuba.

However, the escalation is not about the effectiveness of Operation Barkhane, which, despite all Malian criticism, has been a considerable military relief for Bamako. The dispute has a political core and is the preliminary culmination of a long series of controversies in the tense post-colonial relationship between Paris and Bamako. The escalation has been triggered by France's vocal advocacy for an end to transition and for elections to remove the "illegitimate" military from government.⁹

Bamako argues that the security situation does not allow for democratic elections, but above all that elections in a dysfunctional political system without prior political and institutional reforms do not show a way out of the crisis. These arguments are not far-fetched and currently enjoy considerable support in Mali. The established political class that has guided the country's destiny since democratisation in 1991 has been discredited. It has proven incapable and shown little determination to slow down the crisis since 2012, let alone overcome it.¹⁰ The prosecution of former government members for corruption and embezzlement initiated by the coup plotters has boosted their popularity.

Conversely, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and France are regarded by large parts of the public in Mali and West Africa as dishonest advocates of democratic values. ECOWAS, one argument goes, regularly turns a blind eye to the abuse of power by incumbent presidents who, as recently seen in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, have secured themselves further terms in office through constitutional amendments or dubious political manoeuvres. From Mali's point of view, the credibility of France, which actively supported a dynastic and unconstitutional takeover in Chad in 2021, is even worse. In Mali, however, Paris insists on sanctions under the pretext of democracy.

Bamako's room for manoeuvre

In its confrontational dealings with European partners, the Malian government is using the existing room for manoeuvre. Its most important resource is the domestic support it currently enjoys among large sections of the public. The removal of the Keïta regime, the fight against corruption, and the rhetoric of national resurgence have already brought the

⁵ United Nations Peacekeeping. 2022. "Fatalities by Mission and Incident Type up to 31 Jan 2022."

⁶ United Nations Peacekeeping. 2022. "Fatalities." Dataset. Accessed 14 February 2022.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Shurkin, Michael. 2022. "Thoughts on France's Failure in Mali." Washington, D.C. Shurbros Global Strategies LLC.

⁹ Le Parisien with AFP. 2022. "Mali: Le Drian accuse la 'junte illégitime' au pouvoir de prendre des 'mesures irresponsables'." Le Parisien, 27 January 2022.

¹⁰ Poudiougou, Ibrahima. 2017. "Mali: vers la fin de la gérontocratie?" Sahelien.com, 15 July 2017.

EUTM Mali: Capacity-building of the Malian army

Through its training component, EUTM Mali has promoted low-level capacity-building of the Malian army.¹¹ However, the exact impact and sustainability of this training are speculative. The mission has neither the resources nor the requisite access to be able to observe and systematically record the impact and effects of its own training measures. Overall, the level of acceptance of the mission on the part of the Malian army leadership is low. This is mainly due to the fact that EUTM training is not complemented by the delivery of equipment. Steps towards decentralised and more practical training were taken only hesitantly and met with bureaucratic obstacles as well as national caveats of the troop-contributing countries, including Germany. The advisory component of EUTM Mali was hardly able to implement any of its ambitious plans. Attempts to reform key areas of the defence sector, such as logistics and human resource management, were met with national sovereignty reservations and fierce resistance from vested interests within the Malian defence sector.

new government a certain popularity. Its confrontational course towards ECOWAS, and France in particular, has subsequently multiplied its domestic political capital many times over. The virulent rhetoric of sovereignty and patriotism, mainly embodied by Prime Minister Choguel Maïga, is hailed in Bamako as an emancipatory act of liberation.

The government derives further leeway vis-à-vis its Western partners from the fact that they have assigned Mali the status of a security problem. Instability and terrorist risks inevitably bind the partners to the country. The pressure to remain engaged simultaneously undermines diplomatic pressure in the form of sanctions or withdrawal threats that ECOWAS and the EU want to apply. The destabilising consequences emanating from Mali for neighbouring countries, and potentially also for Europe, are a political currency that the government is putting on the line. External actors are faced with a conflict of objectives: On the one hand, they are issuing threats as a possible lever; on the other hand, they actually have to avoid a rupture in order to preserve their ability to influence events in Mali.

This dilemma has been exacerbated by contradictory French and European policies. In November 2021, at French insistence, the EU announced sanctions against the Malian government, which were taken in early February 2022.¹² Nevertheless, this has not prevented the EU from continuing EUTM Mali's cooperation with the Malian army. The same applies to France with regard to Barkhane and Task Force Takuba. There is an irresolvable contradiction between military cooperation with Bamako on the one hand, and sanctions on the other. This has not escaped the attention of the Malian government, nor has the fact that the Malian crossing of "red lines" defined by France in particular has not had any negative consequences. This concerns both the cooperation with the Russian Wagner Group and the intention to seek a political dialogue with jihadist groups. The Malian government called France's bluff here. What could have initially appeared as a gamble and a foreign policy risk in the case of the Wagner Group, it turned into an advantage.

Nevertheless, the military government is under considerable pressure. It has no interest in being permanently isolated from the states in the West African neighbourhood or in

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of EUTM Mali, see Tull, Denis M. 2020. "The European Union Training Mission and the Struggle for a New Model Army in Mali." Research Paper 89. Paris. Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire.

¹² Council of the EU. 2022. "Mali: EU Adopts Targeted Sanctions Against Five Individuals." News release. 4 February 2022. Brussels. European Union.

causing a break with the EU, which could possibly also call development cooperation into question. Russia is not an alternative, but a useful complement. Its interests in Mali may be limited. Its activities are more likely to serve to negotiate issues with the Europeans that have little to do with Mali itself. Moscow would hardly be willing to compensate for a comprehensive European disengagement.¹³ At the same time, the government in Bamako knows that in the long run it cannot legitimise itself among its own population with the rhetoric of national sovereignty alone. International isolation and the loss of European support would impose severe constraints.

Conclusions

Despite its strident rhetoric, Bamako follows a sober cost-benefit calculation in its foreign policy course. How far the confrontation will go ultimately depends on the domestic political goals of the military government. It is an open question whether it seeks power for power's sake or to implement changes that will put Mali on a more stable political course. The two are not mutually exclusive.

The situation is muddled, and the Europeans have contributed to this with their largely uncritical "business as usual" policy of recent years. Nevertheless, the current rupture can be an opportunity for Germany and its international partners to create a new basis for cooperation with Bamako. One of the indisputable findings of almost 10 years of intervention in Mali and 20 in Afghanistan is that external actors tend to draw up numerous plans without sufficient local ownership. In Mali, both sides are responsible for this deficit.¹⁴ The new Malian government is an uncomfortable interlocutor, deviating from European preferences on relevant issues, but at least articulating its own preferences instead of adopting external positions without much conviction. Bamako's insistence on self-determination and sovereignty can therefore also be seen as an opportunity. Without local ownership, Mali will not find its way to stability and peace.

Germany and Europe gain nothing by opting now for a general military withdrawal in France's wake, let alone a cascading break across policies and sectors.¹⁵ Solidarity with France is appropriate. But it is also important to establish coherence in dealing with the problem of Mali. A sober view of the situation suggests that the consequences of a general withdrawal would be worse than trying to influence the situation with continued engagement, especially since a withdrawal of the Bundeswehr without sufficient advance coordination with international partners would be counterproductive. In any case, Berlin can and must use means other than military and security policy to influence the situation, and it has the necessary political and developmental capital to do so, especially in Mali. Germany has little to lose by putting Bamako's willingness to cooperate and reform to the test for a yet to be determined period. Close coordination with regional and international partners (EU, African Union (AU), ECOWAS) is essential.

German and European strategic patience is likely to be in the interests of Mali's West African neighbours, who are seeking compromises with Bamako. And finally, the international situation is also in favour of staying in Mali for the time being. The French withdrawal is a strategic victory for the jihadist movements. In the current international

¹³ Lebovich, Andrew. 2022. "Russia, Wagner Group, And Mali: How European Fears Weaken European Policy." Commentary. Berlin. European Council on Foreign Relations.

¹⁴ Asche, Helmut and Christiane Kayser. 2022. "Sahelzone: Westliche Realitätsverweigerung." Die Zeit, 6 February 2022.

¹⁵ Christian Klatt argues similarly. 2022. "Am Scheideweg." IPG, 11 February 2022.

context, a German and ultimately European withdrawal going beyond this would be a fatal sign of European weakness vis-à-vis strategic competitors such as Russia, China, and Turkey, which are assessing Europe's foreign and security policy capacity to act in Mali and the Sahel as well.

The top priority is a fresh transition roadmap with concrete milestones. ECOWAS and the AU will have to negotiate this with Bamako. It is obvious that short-term elections would not solve any problem in the current context. The representatives of ECOWAS and the AU also know this. They show a certain willingness to compromise in order to find a face-saving and adequate solution for all sides. Most recently, the AU has put forward a new transition timetable of 16 months.

From this follow at least partial answers to the question about the future of MINUSMA and German participation. Political accompaniment of the transition would be a sensible political priority for the mission. MINUSMA, the AU, and ECOWAS could form a troika to support the implementation of the transition. Also with a view to the Algiers peace process and the protection of the civilian population, there is ultimately more to be said for staying than for withdrawing. This then also applies to German participation. The use of reconnaissance drones, which the Bundeswehr operates for MINUSMA, will become even more important in the post-Barkhane phase, in which risks to the mission will increase. Another contribution to supporting the mission could be to replace the French hospital in Gao, which is essential for emergency medical care not only for the European contingents.

The case of EUTM Mali is different. The mission has even fewer successes to show. The already relatively low Malian demand for its support is likely to decrease even further in view of Russian-Malian cooperation. Both aspects justify a withdrawal from Mali, especially since a continued presence does not promise any political leverage. And last but not least, the high probability that Malian troops trained by EUTM will find themselves in military operations under the leadership or participation of the Wagner Group suggests a withdrawal. This is without prejudice to the regionalisation of the mission and its transformation into an "EUTM Sahel". Whether it is worth pursuing this option should ultimately depend on the demand from the Sahel states.

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