



Mali: Another European Intervention without the EU?

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As French forces are engaged in combat operations in Mali, even belated EU involvement remains crucial, to ensure that the intervention fits in with the political end-state that the EU rightly pursues.

Since 11 January, French land and air forces, with military logistic support from other EU Member States (including Belgium, Denmark and the UK) have been engaged in another combat operation in Europe's "broader neighbourhood", in Mali. Other EU capitals, notably Berlin, have expressed clear political support. The coalition is for the moment less grand than that which engaged in Libya, where several Member States took part in the air campaign, though the challenges are at least as great, and the chances of eventual success, understood as lasting peace, as doubtful.

Yet the French intervention was inevitable. Numerous factors are at play: the rapid advance of a coalition of local jihadist militias, together with an Algerian jihadist group, threatening the fall of the State; Mali's neighbours' fear of spill-over of the eventual implosion of the Malian

State; French uranium interests in neighbouring Niger; and, what should be the most important of all, the very real fear of the people of Mali for the advancing militias. The French emergency operation was necessary in order not to jeopardize the deployment of the envisaged multinational African force, acting under UNSC Resolution 2085, which is to bring peace and stability to this poverty-stricken and conflict-prone region. Will it work?

COMPREHENSIVE CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

One cannot say that the French intervention is not in line with the broad European consensus on conditions for the use of force. A UN Resolution and a unanimous Security Council provide the necessary legal framework. There is a collective European political framework too, in the shape of the comprehensive Sahel Strategy adopted by the EU, including an ambitious security dimension. The main responsibility for stabilizing Mali lies with an African force, which fits in with the EU policy of promoting African ownership.

But that in itself does not guarantee success. Decision-makers would do well to heed some of the key lessons from past operations.

(1) Every operation needs a clearly defined political objective, which can realistically be achieved through the envisaged military action. The military objectives on the ground that lead towards this political end-state must be as detailed and concrete as possible. Vague objectives and lofty goals (“restoring democracy”) lead to mission creep – elements of which might already be in place – and the risk of unknowingly getting bogged down in a protracted Malian guerrilla – as did happen before in Afghanistan (and Vietnam).

(2) Foreign interventions cannot succeed unless their objectives fit in with local dynamics. Nobody but local actors can in the end tip the balance – foreign military, even from the region, cannot. In other words, Mali stands or falls with a credible government in Bamako – which today does not exist. The current regime came into power after a military coup in March 2012, which brought down a democratically elected government, however inept. It was precisely that coup that created the political chaos of which today’s conflict is a direct consequence. Jihadist militias made use of the political vacuum in the capital and of the collapse of the Malian armed forces first to gain control of the north of the country and then to start marching south. The international community did force the military junta to step aside, but the coup leader, Captain Amadou Sanogo, remained the strong man in Mali and continues to pull many of the strings. As long as there is no legitimate government in Bamako, supported by law-abiding and credible armed forces, outside military intervention will have at best a limited and temporary impact.

(3) A government is not legitimate unless it is perceived as such by all parts of the

population. In Mali, this means perspectives should be offered to the Tuareg in the north of the country. Their marginalization has been a source of conflict in the region for decades and is at the heart of the conflict today. Extending a serious political and economic offer to the Tuareg is all the more urgent as one of the Tuareg groupings, the MNLA, has announced its willingness to support the military intervention by engaging the jihadist militias. Taking into account the wide cultural and political gap between the south and the north of the country, it is far from certain though that Bamako (or the neighbouring countries, where there are important Tuareg populations too) will accept to address Tuareg demands and even less to reaffirm Tuareg self-government, agreed upon in 1991. If they would indeed be unwilling to do so, than the current conflict will only be the precursor of the next armed struggle.

COMPREHENSIVE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE EU

The comprehensive approach that is thus called for is exactly what the EU Strategy for the Sahel envisages. It is encouraging to note that a strong sense that peace and stability in the Sahel (and in the Horn of Africa) are directly in the interest of the EU, and are therefore a European responsibility, is increasingly developing in Brussels and the capitals of the Member States alike. Which makes it all the more surprising that the current crisis management operation is a unilateral French, and not an EU initiative.

The EU had been preparing a training mission (or EUTM). Its deployment has now been accelerated in reaction to the current crisis, the Foreign Affairs Council meeting in an extraordinary session on 17 January for that purpose. In line with the objective of African ownership and the justified reluctance to get directly engaged in combat, the objective of

EUTM has always been to train the Malian armed forces rather than to participate in operations – it is not an executive mission. If as far as the military dimension of the comprehensive approach is concerned a challenge can be met by deploying an EUTM only, which is of course the ideal scenario. This scenario seems to be becoming reality in Somalia – finally, for one should not forget that Somalia has been in a state of anarchy and civil war for two decades now.

“For the EU and all of its Members States, it is time to live up to the strategies to which they so kindly signed up.”

One should not nurture the illusion that each and every problem can be solved by offering training though. The rightful desire to keep as light a footprint as possible carries the risk that chances to control a problem before it escalates are missed. The logistic circumstances are very difficult, but in the Sahel, in the absence of heavy capabilities (especially air support) among the local parties, deploying even limited assets (notably fighter aircraft and helicopters) can make a big difference. That is exactly what France is now doing in the current crisis situation, its hand forced by the jihadist militias, in the full knowledge from the negotiations about EUTM that there was no appetite for a combat operation under the flag of the EU itself. The French intervention was immediately welcomed by London and Berlin among other EU capitals. The High Representative, Catherine Ashton, kept strangely quiet, not mentioning the operation in any of her statements on Mali until finally in a debate in the European Parliament on 15

January she paid “tribute to those member states, particularly France, as well as the countries of West Africa, who have come to Mali’s aid”.

Two conclusions can already be drawn from this state of affairs.

(1) For now, in Mali, EU involvement remains vital. EUTM was conceived from the outset as one part of a comprehensive approach, linked notably to establishing a legitimate government in Bamako and inter-Malian reconciliation, code word for a comprehensive (and probably regional) political dialogue with the Tuareg. Only the EU can take charge of the various political, economic and humanitarian dimensions. By also fully supporting the French military intervention politically, the EU will strengthen its impact – and should make sure that it subscribes to the same political objectives as EUTM.

(2) For the future, EU Member States must realize that adopting strategies goes hand in hand with assuming responsibility. The Sahel strategy is a good example of a comprehensive approach, without which no military intervention can achieve anything. But the opposite holds true as well: had the jihadist militias been allowed to march on Bamako, the whole strategy would have become meaningless. All those who subscribed to the Sahel Strategy ought thus to feel responsible for acting in the current crisis situation. But even if more Member States would go beyond a paper commitment to the Sahel strategy, today the EU institutions are simply not equipped to launch a rapid response operation of this type – there is no better illustration of the need for more permanent planning and conduct structures as well as intelligence assets within the EEAS. Then a High Representative could

initiate crisis response, rather than having to react to it (or waiting to do so).

CONCLUSION

A final modest suggestion by way of conclusion, to decision-makers, academia and the media alike. Let us this time forget the hyperboles about “international terrorism” and a mythical al-Qaeda, which no longer exists. They only strengthen local extremists in their conviction that they are part of a mighty international movement against the West – and that the Malian militias definitely are not. Mali is part of Europe’s “broader neighbourhood”, where peace and stability, or the absence thereof, has an impact on our vital interests, but the militias are no vital threat to western civilization. They are a very real threat to the average Malian citizen though, and that should be sufficient reason for us to care. For the EU and all of its Members States, time to live up to the strategies to which they so kindly signed up.

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