

# Mission Creep Mali

EU Europe's failed backyard policy

GUE/NGL

**THE LEFT**

IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

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# Introduction

Just as this Study is about to be published, another coup d'Etat took place in Burkina Faso on September 30th 2022. While the proclaimed reason for this next military seizure of power is the devastating security situation, the main concern in western media seem to be some Russian flags waved by supporters of the coup. After the presence of European Military and Police in the region was primarily justified for nearly a decade by altruistic motives (resembling the classic “White Man’s Burden”), its continuation is now suddenly advocated with the trivial geopolitical aim “not to let” other powers – now Russia – “take the field”.

Indeed, European interests were constitutive in the shaping of a European foreign policy towards the region from the very beginning. On a global level the aim of European policymakers was to define the place of the EU in the world order, on a European level the individual states and institutions – somehow similarly – tried to sharpen their role within the evolving foreign and military policy of the EU. While in detail the interests of the member states varied, they reached a consent in the interdiction and surveillance of “unlawful” trade and migration, while enabling “lawful” trade and European investments and somehow fight terrorism. This broad set of at best loosely defined motives was paired with a willingness and imagined capability to rebuild the affected states from the scratch – not only according to western interests but also to European ideas of effective statehood and governance. The specific blend of European interests, institutional arrangements and mindsets resulted into an extensive militarization of the region, involving several international actors with very little oversight and accountability for the actual developments in the region: a deteriorating political, social and security situation.

Those dynamics and interdependencies between European politics and the Situation in Mali and its neighboring countries are the subject of this Text. The Study does not claim to give an introduction into the complex social and political fabric of the “Sahel” – a first and foremost geographical term for an area across the whole African continent defined by climate, flora and fauna. Its aim is not to identify local or regional shortcomings, sources of conflict or “African solutions for African problems” but a critical assessment of the European thinking, foreign policy institutions and involvements in a region that was geopolitically redefined as G5 Sahel with a focus on the military deployments in Mali.

# I. General Background

## I.1 A brief history of the EU's common foreign policy

As early as 1992, the explicit idea was formed to add a military component to the European Union with the creation of joint intervention forces. The European Headline Goal of 1999 envisaged an EU intervention force of 50.000 to 60.000 members that would be able to fulfil the Petersberg tasks already defined in 1992 (“humanitarian and rescue tasks; conflict prevention and peace-keeping tasks; tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking”).<sup>1</sup> The position of High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy was likewise created in 1999 to implement these goals. Its first holder, the former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, referred very early on to a process at “the speed of light”. Nevertheless, the envisaged intervention force still only exists on paper and, although some small headway has been made in recent years, the more distant goal of a European army is still far from reach.

This is hardly surprising given that the recruitment of military forces and the decision on their deployment touches the very core of national sovereignty. Added to this is the fact that within the European Union, which is still in the process of enlargement, completely different strategic cultures exist side by side, not to mention competing defence industries and procurement systems specifically adapted to each of them. As is the case in all other policy fields, the individual member states pursue different, often enough mutually opposed interests in foreign policy, at least with regard to the details, and the formulation of a common position is marked by compromises and power struggles. This is what makes the truly joint deployment of armed forces particularly precarious. Moreover, the lack of a “demos” of the European Union, i.e. a deeply rooted and widespread identity as EU citizens comparable to that of the nation states, comes into play, especially when there is a high likelihood that the EU will suffer its own losses: What parents would be willing to sacrifice their offspring for the interests and identity of the EU?<sup>2</sup>

**...the individual member states pursue different, often enough mutually opposed interests in foreign policy, at least with regard to the details, and the formulation of a common position is marked by compromises and power struggles.**

Nevertheless, the goal of a common foreign policy and a common defence policy was continuously and vigorously pursued. A first, early step was the publication of a common European Security Strategy (ESS) in 2003 under the title “A secure Europe in a better world which, however, largely ignored the major strategic differences between the member states. Contrary to what one would expect, namely the defence against clearly defined military threats, its focus lay on humanitarian interventions in so-called failing states, through which the EU was to underline its global claim to leadership and appear as a shaper of globalisation. In 2004, the European Defence

Agency (EDA) was created with the primary aim of harmonising the armament projects of the member states. Although a first Capability Development Plan (CDP) was drawn up and published in 2008, defining common objectives and requirements, the EDA initially led a rather unremarkable existence and launched relatively few joint armament projects. This changed fundamentally in the wake of the Ukraine conflict in 2014 and the Brexit referendum in 2016. The catalyst was also the EU Global Strategy (Global Strategy for European Foreign and Security Policy) published in 2016, which superseded the ESS of 2003, placing greater emphasis this time on defence against a militarily equivalent opponent. “Strategic autonomy”, the proclaimed goal of this strategy, can only be achieved if the EU is willing and able to conduct major war operations independently of the

USA and NATO, involving the combined deployment of air, land and naval forces, supplemented by its own capabilities in space and cyberspace. The significantly larger and more coordinated armament projects necessary for this were subsequently launched within the framework of various strategically coordinated programmes and led, among other things, to the establishment of the European Defence Fund (EDF), the first-ever joint EU armament budget of sorts, and in 2017 the so-called “Permanent Structured Cooperation”



★ Capital	🚒 G5 Sahel Joint Force Focus Area
● Urban Area	🇺🇳 MINUSMA Deployment
▲ G5 Sahel Permanent Secretariat	🇫🇷 Operation Barhane (France)
▲ G5 Sahel Joint Force Headquarters	🇪🇺 European Union Training Mission (EUTM) and European Union Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP)
🟡 G5 Countries	
🟠 Sahel region	

(PESCO), within the framework of which major joint armament projects are now being implemented.

In addition to the harmonisation of armament, however, the political-administrative framework conditions for a common defence policy had to be painstakingly created and pushed through. While the scenario of a large-scale war paved the way for armament, at the political-administrative level it was above all the smaller EU missions, especially on the African continent, that contributed to a certain routine and optimisation of the decision-making processes. For example, the question of financing joint military missions and operations arose early on, as these could not be financed from the common EU budget under the current treaties. In 2004, shortly after the start of the first EU missions in Macedonia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Athena Mechanism was adopted for this purpose, a kind of pay-as-you-go system in which all EU member states (except Denmark) pay for the costs jointly incurred by the participating states. For operational planning and decision-making, the Political and Security Committee (PSC) was established as early as 2000 and the European Union Military Committee (EUMC) the following year. They were supported in long-term planning and monitoring of conflicts by the EU Military Staff (EUMS) and a growing number of Council working groups. Analogous and partly overlapping institutions exist for civilian or hybrid missions. At the political level, the decision on missions, scope, mandate and duration lies with the Council of the European Union, i.e. the respective ministers of the member states, which, however, are essentially prepared by the PSC. The PSC, the EUMC and the thematically or regionally differentiated working groups of the Council are also composed of representatives of the member states and essentially represent their perspectives and interests. It is therefore understandable that complicated negotiation processes take place not only within but also between the respective bodies, and these processes also had to be field-tested.

While the institutional structure was essentially in a state of ongoing restructuring and expansion, the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in December 2010 was a decisive step forward in this regard, integrating most of the above-mentioned bodies into a common structure with further foreign policy instruments (intelligence and satellite reconnaissance, visa policy and diplomatic corps, financial instruments and humanitarian aid). Nevertheless, it is very

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much still a hybrid entity caught between the intergovernmentalism shaped by the member states in military matters and the genuinely supranational institutions of foreign policy under the aegis of the Commission. The creation of an independent diplomatic corps of the EU associated with the establishment of the EEAS made it possible, in addition to independent information gathering and contact networks, to create thematic and regional departments composed not only of representatives of the member states, but of individuals who are at least theoretically committed to common interests. It is nevertheless questionable whether and when the thus constituted EU foreign policy apparatus will be able to develop comparable stocks of knowledge and relationships and an independent culture, at least with respect to individual regions, as, for example, France has been able to do in the Sahel.

## I.2 Africa and the Sahel as testing grounds

The early missions and operations within the framework of the CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy)<sup>3</sup> were instrumental in establishing and streamlining both the military and the political-administrative processes. In addition to the ones already mentioned in the DRC and Macedonia (2003), these included EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2004), a second one in the DRC (2006) as well as a cross-border mission in Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2008. With less than 2,500 forces in each case, almost all of which were ground troops, these were relatively small missions with little potential for escalation and often of very short duration. These EUFOR missions largely matched the concept of the EU Battlegroups, which envisaged that from 2007 onwards two, typically multinational formations of about 1,500 forces each would be available for missions at short notice and that the member states would take turns in participating. Although somewhat less ambitious in scope than the envisaged EU intervention force, the battlegroups in their planned form have never been deployed to date; instead, the forces of the



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various missions carried out since then have been assembled on an ad hoc basis according to the respective requirements, readiness and interests of the member states. As with the intergovernmental negotiation and decision-making processes, albeit on a smaller scale, the provision, declaration of readiness, etc. alone have arguably advanced cooperation at the process level significantly.

The last EUFOR operation to date was decided in January 2014 for the Central African Republic and terminated again less than a year after the arrival of the first associated troops in the area of operations. Most of the missions decided in the years after 2008 were of a different nature, including EUNAVFOR Somalia (2008), EUNAVFOR Med (2015) and EUNAVFOR IRINI (2020), the first three naval deployments, all of which took place / are taking place off African coasts. A first EU training mission (EUTM) to reform, advise and train local armed forces was decided in 2010 in Somalia and later for Mali (2013), in 2016 again for the Central African Republic and most recently in 2021 for Mozambique. Also in Somalia (or the East African coastal states), a capacity-building mission for “civilian security forces” (EUCAP) was established for the first time in 2012. While the focus here was on coast guards and the (including judicial) fight against piracy, the subsequent EUCAP missions in Niger (2012) and Mali (2014) were primarily concerned with the establishment of gendarmerie and border protection forces as well as the legal prosecution of illegalised migration and terrorism. As such, they can be seen as a further development of the EUPOL missions, as they were first decided in 2003 for Macedonia, in 2005 and 2007 for the DR Congo, in 2006 for the Palestinian Territories and in 2008 for Afghanistan. In each case, the focus was on the training of special police units.

For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that numerous other “civilian” CSDP missions have also taken place or are taking place in other countries and regions, including a justice reform mission in Iraq, monitoring missions in Aceh/Indonesias, Georgia and Ukraine, as well as joint border monitoring missions (EUBAM) on the border between Moldova and Ukraine and at the border crossings between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. However, more robust military operations have so far only taken place in the Balkans and on the African continent or off its coasts. In the case of the Balkans, these have taken place in close cooperation with NATO and supported by previous or parallel NATO operations. That way, their logistics could be used or entire field camps could be taken over, and sometimes the personnel already under NATO were simply placed under a new command. In contrast, the EU operations on the African continent, at least on the face of it, present higher challenges in terms of autonomy and planning. This includes, among other things, having their own advance parties that reconnoitre local requirements and possibilities, set up field camps, commission local service providers and hire local personnel. This involves negotiating military overflight rights and stationing agreements, contracting shipping companies and obtaining permits to unload military goods via certain ports, for example.

Notwithstanding the considerable logistical effort, the deployment mandates were often relatively short. The first EU mission without recourse to NATO structures, in the DR Congo in 2003, lasted only three months. Most of the soldiers were provided by France and the deployment and protection were reliant on bases that France already maintained on the African continent. The deployment phase of the second operation in the DR Congo in 2006 lasted four months. On this occasion,

“for the first time in European history ... a European headquarters was operated in accordance with EU guidelines - the EU OHQ (European Union Operation Headquarters) in Potsdam”, as the then commander, Lieutenant General Karlheinz Viereck (Germany), stated in an almost gushing review of the logistical achievements, also highlighting the experiences from past EU operations such as CONCORDIA (Macedonia), ARTEMIS (DR Congo 2003) and ALTHEA (Bosnia and Herzegovina): “We only had six weeks to deploy the forces as well as to establish operational readiness. Both the FHQ [Force Headquarter] in Kinshasa and a complete field camp including infrastructure had to be established practically from scratch. A similar effort was made in Gabon, where most of the intervention forces were stationed. On 29 July, the Force Commander, French General Christian Damay, reported full operational readiness to me in line with schedule, underlining once again the professionalism, spirit and conviction with which the European force was able to master its task”.<sup>4</sup> The 2008/2009 EUFOR operation in Chad and the Central African Republic, on the other hand, lasted almost a year and went much less smoothly. Despite the fact that the EU was able to draw on existing French locations and deployment agreements in the very area of operations, they were met with considerable logistical problems in moving and supplying troops to the vast landlocked states. Both government and rebel groups expressed hostility to the operation and French personnel were involved in deadly firefights during border incidents with units from neighbouring Sudan.

Apart from the obvious training character of these operations, each of them naturally also pursued an official purpose, which, at least in the case of the three mentioned, was also laid down in UN Security Council mandates. In the DR Congo, for example, the aim was to stabilise the provincial capital Bunia in the short term in 2003 and to secure (obviously unfree) elections in the capital Kinshasa in 2006. The 2008/2009 mission was related to the Darfur conflict and was intended to ensure the protection of refugees. In the DRC, the missions were short-term supplements to a long-term and large UN mission (MONUC) with well over 10.000 troops, in Chad and CAR they were a stop-gap solution that was ultimately replaced by a UN mission. As far as the official goals are concerned, it is rather unclear what the added value of implementing the operation under EU rather than UN command should consist of. To what extent the EU operations contributed to the achievement of these goals is unclear and was hardly discussed afterwards. Their success in raising the EU's visibility as an international actor and serving as test runs for further deployments is undisputed.

### I.3 Ideology: Failing States and Networked Security

As already indicated, the concept of “failed statehood” occupies a central role in the European Security Strategy of 2003. This was very much in line with the trend of the time. Although the term had already been coined in the previous decade and used primarily to describe a development policy problem, it was the Bush administration that made it the subject of security policy in the wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001. The 2002 US National Security Strategy contains

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Military staff from Europe in Africa. They could be Martians, they are so alien.

the pivotal and striking sentence: “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones”. In his personal letter introducing the NSS, then US President Bush stated “that weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states. Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murderers. Yet, poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.”<sup>5</sup> The following year, the ESS argued very similarly: “[C]orruption, abuse of power, weak institutions and lack of accountability – and civil conflict corrode States from within.” A multitude of threats could develop here, the consequences

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of which could also be dramatic for the EU. The paper cites, among other things, terrorism and organised crime, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and migration. Therefore, “[w]ith the new threats, the first line of defence will often be abroad.”. Furthermore, “[o]ur task is to promote a ring of well governed countries to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean with whom we can enjoy close and cooperative relations.” At the same time, it is stated that “[i]n contrast to the massive visible threat in the Cold War, none of the new threats is purely military” and “nor can any be tackled by purely military means” – “Each requires a mixture of instruments”.<sup>6</sup>

This narrative of failed statehood, pushed by a hardline neo-conservative US government and supported by government funding and research funds, dominated the transatlantic



debate on security policy and international relations in the following years, although it was occasionally pointed out that its empirical basis remained thin, and the terminology used mostly vague. Implicitly, it placed the European model of statehood on a pedestal and declared diverging forms of state rule as potentially threatening and the ultimate root cause of (including military) interventions. Only on rare occasions did anyone dare raise the question as to whether this was in fact a (new) process with a clear tendency (as suggested by the security strategies) or whether the European-style Westphalian state did not represent more of an exceptional case globally and historically. An exception that now laid claim to being a global norm, that is. Essentially, the 'failed statehood' narrative could be described as colonialism in a new guise, whereby the (former) metropolises, define in particular the former colonies as deficient, derive an authorisation or even a call for action to transform them towards "responsible" governance, as explicitly envisaged by the ESS "to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean".

This was closely interwoven with the strategy of the comprehensive approach that served as a guideline for dealing with failing states. In its various definitions and manifestations, it describes the joint and coordinated use of civil and military, foreign and often also domestic policy instruments vis-à-vis third states. After all, interventions in failing states are not about militarily overpowering an opposing army, but about permanently and fundamentally transforming the institutional ruling apparatuses. The focus is therefore on reforms of the armed forces, the police and the judiciary (so-called "security sector reforms", SSR). In order to make the fight against terrorism, migration, smuggling, drug trafficking, etc. more effective, the armed forces are to be better trained, more modernly equipped, more mobile and more present throughout the country, which, in addition to high acquisition, infrastructure and operating costs, almost always requires a massive increase in personnel. In the process, the sovereignty of the states concerned is formally respected, but at least some of the objectives pursued run counter to the interests of the population in gen-

eral (combating migration) or at least those of certain economic and political elites. The security sector reforms therefore harbour a considerable potential for social division and alienation between the population and the government, which acts as a representative of foreign interests when, for example, it enacts laws against cross-border trade (smuggling) and builds EU-funded prisons for those who continue to rely on such subsistence models. The same applies to the establishment of special prosecutor's offices and police authorities with special powers to fight terrorism, which often, at least in appearance, specifically target individual population groups.

It should be borne in mind that such interventions or SSR take place almost by definition in states with a small domestic product and a weak tax revenue base. Although the massively increasing costs for the security apparatus may be partly borne by the intervening states or alliances in the short to medium term, they usually have a negative impact on other state budgets right from the early phase of their implementation. In the long run, however, it not only harms the legitimacy of local governments if their army and police forces are financed (trained, equipped and advised) by third countries, but it is also difficult to justify in the donor states. In theory, the belief that "[S]ecurity is a precondition of development", as professed in the ESS, offers a solution to this, from which the SSR's maxim of action, to "develop security", is derived. According to this, after the internationally supported establishment of security (through the expansion of the security apparatus), an economic upswing can be expected that will enable the state to finance and maintain these apparatuses itself in the medium term. In reality, it is much more likely that the bloated and underfinanced security agencies will end up as a burden or even a lia-

### Presidents of Mali

Period	Name	Type of power transfer
1960-1968	Modibo Keita	Declaration of Independence
1968-1991	Moussa Traoré	Coup
1991-1992	Amadou Toumani Touré	Interim president after coup
1992-2002	Alpha Oumar Konaré	Election and (disputed) re-election
2002-2012	Amadou Toumani Touré	Election and (disputed) re-election
2012-2013	Dioncounda Traoré	Interim president after coup
2013-2020	Ibrahim Boubacar Keita	Election after coup and intervention
2020-2021	Bah N'Daw / Assimi Goïta	Coup
		Bah N'Daw: Formal interim presidency
		Assimi Goïta: Leader of the coup
2021-?	Assimi Goïta	coup

bility as soon as international donors lose interest and move on to “develop security” elsewhere. At the very least, however, the rather theoretical notions of future prosperity give an idea of the development and investment opportunities that the intervening states see (certainly also for their domestic industries) if the third countries were reformed accordingly and transformed into “good governance”.

As for the states in the Sahel region in particular, however, the geography and various indicators such as population size, GDP, infrastructure, arable land, etc. alone should suffice to cast serious doubt on the prospect of ever realising enough per capita income and state revenue to guarantee a nationwide presence of state security forces according to the model and ideas of European states. Historically, especially in post-colonial states with large, sparsely developed and sparsely populated provinces, intermediary forms of governance with decentralised security arrangements have emerged instead of a centralised state. In this case, certain problems in the Sahel region and elsewhere could be explained conceptually by the incompatibility of European ideas of the state with postcolonial state practices.

#### **1.4 Interests I: Combating smuggling, migration and terrorism**

Throughout the 1990s, European states exhibited at best rudimentarily formulated and implemented regional or even transnational strategies vis-à-vis African states (with the exception of France and the United Kingdom). There merely existed long-standing links with individual African states in terms of military training, humanitarian aid, technology transfer, “development aid” and resource extraction, which, however, showed only little in the way of coordination nor did they pursue longer-term transformation goals. When European governments addressed the African continent, they often did so on the basis of indices of democratisation or economic development, by which the states were compared with each other and individual model pupils were identified and put forward for special promotion. In West Africa, not only Ghana but also Senegal and Mali were frequently credited with positive development.

The new surge of international interest in the Sahel region that followed on the heels of the 9/11 attacks resulted from the USA's Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) in November 2002, which intensified intelligence cooperation and training of local special forces in Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad. After the disaster in Somalia in 1993, which had led to a very far-reaching military withdrawal of the USA from the African continent, this represented a trend reversal, which at the same time had a formative effect by redefining an entire sub-region within West Africa via a cross-border phenomenon that could potentially pose a threat to US national security. In line with the national security strategy, the focus was on the fear that terrorist-Islamist networks could spread and take root in the weak states on the ground. Previously, Islamist terrorism - apart from Algeria - had played virtually no role on the African continent and in Western strategy papers. Even the subsequently emerging European strategy papers and policies towards the African

continent addressed this area of phenomena only later and initially with restraint.

In the mid-2000s, the first terrorist groups could be identified in the Sahel region, which primarily US authorities insistently tried to bring into connection with drug trafficking.

### **Negotiating "readmission agreements" and compensation payments for the "reception" of refugees became a central pillar of the foreign policy of the EU and its member states.**

The issue of drug trafficking to Europe via West Africa was quickly taken up by European think tanks and strategy papers and translated into foreign policy practices. An example of this is the hybrid EU mission EUSSR in Guinea-Bissau (not mentioned so far), which in 2008 was an attempt to reform the military and police apparatus of the southwestern coastal state with a very small contingent of forces (21 people) and to gear it towards combating drug trafficking. The mission was largely driven by the concern that Guinea-Bissau, due to the prevailing corruption, could develop into a central transshipment point for cocaine heading to Europe via South America, thus generating huge profits in the West African transit states and fostering the spread of corruption and organised crime. The mission was terminated prematurely in 2010,<sup>7</sup> after facing a series of political assassinations at the highest level (President and Chief of General Staff), mutinies and coup attempts on the ground within a few months.

By this period, the issue of migration had all but eclipsed drug trafficking in the European perception of the Sahel region. With the unification of visa policy and the creation of “an area of freedom, security and justice” as the third pillar of the EU (Treaty of Amsterdam, 1997), many routes of entry into the EU were criminalised and illegalised migration was initially perceived as a problem that mainly concerned the southern external borders. In the following years, this perception shifted more and more to the transit countries. The establishment of the EU border management agency Frontex in 2004 was instrumental in this process. In addition to coordinating the EU member states in the direct “protection of the external borders”, Frontex relied from the outset on cooperation with the countries of origin and transit countries in accordance with its concept of “Integrated Border Management” (IBM). Negotiating “readmission agreements” and compensation payments for the “reception” of refugees became a central pillar of the foreign policy of the EU and its member states. They supplied equipment for police and border protection to neighbouring and transit states, which in return undertook to prevent migrants from leaving towards the EU and to allow deportations of their own citizens and third-country nationals. As this runs counter to the interests of the respective populations, it is safe to assume that this policy is somewhat at odds with the proclaimed goals of democratisation and may instead have aggravated authoritarian tendencies in the North African states.

In addition to the technical and personnel reinforcement of the external borders and the transit states, the “management of migration flows” became an explicit and central goal of the EU’s foreign and domestic policy. To this end, the European Parliament and the Council launched the “programme for financial and technical assistance to third countries in the areas of migration and asylum” (AENEAS) in 2004 and allocated it 250 million euros for the period until the end of 2008. In addition to specific measures to assist third countries to “manage more effectively all aspects of migratory flows”, it also provided for “feasibility studies” and “general studies”. Objectives included the “introduction of systems for data collection; observation and analysis of migratory phenomena; identification of the root causes of migratory movements and the definition of measures aimed at tackling them”.<sup>8</sup> Thus, a body of knowledge was produced that problematised – up to that point mostly legal – migration of people to third countries as preparation for illegal entry and created pressure on the transit states to act. In the European public sphere, ideas of flight and migration as a clandestine, individual (and occasionally, for instance in 2006 in Ceuta, a collective “invasion” with deadly repercussions) act of crossing a demarcated external border were superimposed by a thinking in terms of flows that had to be interrupted far beyond EU territory. Frontex and others have frequently published corresponding maps representing different “migration routes” through the northern part of the African continent, marked with lines of varying thickness, which have also found their way into various academic disciplines. The list of projects funded by AENEAS is also divided into five “routes”, whereby the “African and Mediterranean migratory routes” represent a clear focus with 50 out of 117 funded projects. Remarkably, the term “Sahel” did not even appear in the report - today this would certainly be different - instead, the discussion centred on the term West Africa. However, the central states, which today are usually subsumed under this region (Mauritania, Mali and Niger), played a central role, as did the

adjacent coastal states in the north (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya).<sup>9</sup>

Through such programmes and the activities of Frontex, working relationships were formed between members of European institutions and agencies, authorities of the member states and authorities of third countries, in particular those concerned with matters of “Internal security”. A good insight is provided, for example, by the report of a “technical mission on illegal immigration” in Libya in late 2004, which is classified but was published by the NGO Statewatch, including a group photo, list of participants and timetable. Under the leadership of the EU Commission, 14 representatives from member states, accompanied by Libyan officials, visited various authorities and border sections over a period of eight days and were informed by high-ranking politicians and representatives of the authorities on site about the routes and composition of the migrants, the views, plans and deficits of the local authorities as well as potential means of support.<sup>10</sup> Similar delegation trips were organised in the following years by Frontex and the EU Commission in other states of the region, although it can be assumed that their composition shifted in favour of the growing apparatus of EU institutions.

In 2009 and 2010 – parallel to the establishment of the new European External Action Service (see I.1.) – so-called joint fact finding missions took place in Mauritania, Mali and Niger, the results of which were incorporated into the first regional strategy of the newly founded EEAS, the “Sahel Strategy”, at the beginning of 2011.<sup>11</sup> This strategy also focuses on the “insufficient operational and strategic capacities in the

**... the fight against terrorism has not yet assumed a central position in the EU's approaches, but rather still takes a back seat to the fight against illegalised migration.**

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broader security, law enforcement and judicial sectors (military, police, justice, border management, customs)” in its analysis of the problem and states already in the introduction that “helping these countries achieve security is integral to enabling their economies to grow and poverty to be reduced”. In this regard, the strategy is quite optimistic in that it assumes that within five to ten years security, stability, good governance etc. could be strengthened on the ground to a sufficient degree “so that the Sahel region can prosper and no longer be a potential safe haven for AQIM [Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb] and criminal networks”.

It is made abundantly clear elsewhere in the paper that this would also be in Europe's very own interest, with the interruption of undesired flows / the securing of desired trade being of central importance: The “[reduction and containment of] drug and other criminal trafficking destined for Europe “is mentioned as a priority, as well as to secure lawful trade and communication links (roads, pipelines) across the Sahel, North-South and East-West, and to protect existing economic interests and create the basis for trade and EU investment”.

Terrorism still plays an ambivalent role in the Sahel Strategy of 2011. In the introductory summary of the “challenges” on the ground, in addition to extreme poverty, climate change, famine and corruption, there is only a passing mention of “terrorist-linked security threats”. However, AQIM is mentioned at various points as the only relevant terrorist group on the ground at the time, particularly in relation to its potential ability to “carry out attacks on EU territory” and its tendency to focus on attacking “Western targets” on the ground, thus discouraging “investment in the region”. In fact, AQIM had not carried out any attacks before, but rather held Western nationals for ransom and later also killed members of Western companies on several occasions. Nevertheless, the fight against terrorism does not occupy a central place in the EU's Sahel Strategy of 2011, especially when compared to the security strategies of the USA at that time. Rather, it is perceived as one of many symptoms of failed statehood, which could tend to resolve itself with the necessary reforms of the security sector and the subsequent hoped-for economic upswing. This has changed in part with the massive increase in the diversity, activities and level of violence of terrorist groups, although as of mid-2022, the fight against terrorism has not yet assumed a central position in the EU's approaches, but rather still takes a back seat to the fight against illegalised migration.

## **I.5. Interests II: Energy and resources (for the energy transition)**

The Sahel region is rich in a variety of raw materials, including uranium, which France has been mining in northern Niger since the early 1970s. The largest mine in the region is located near the remote town of Arlit, built in the late 1960s virtually in the middle of the desert to enable uranium mining and since then developing in lockstep with the commodity's cyclical fluctuations. Several military and gendarmerie bases are located in the immediate vicinity of the town and the mine, and French

armed forces are periodically stationed on the premises of the French mining company itself. The USA has also built a base with a small airport in the vicinity of the mine since at least 2015. Both French and US troops are likewise present in the provincial capital of Agadez, from where the most important road to Arlit runs, the latter also with a drone base. By and large, this is a heavily monitored and militarised region from which little information leaks to the outside world. The question of whether it is de facto France, the USA or the Nigerien authorities who are “calling the shots” is difficult to answer. What is certain, however, is that uranium mining and the associated presence of French forces is one if not the core issue in France's relationship with its former colony, and that for decades members of the Tuareg population have perceived the uranium mines as a violation of their autonomy. The consequences of uranium mining for the environment and health, as well as the difficulties of even assessing these on site, are described in a 2010 study by Greenpeace entitled “Left in the Dust”.<sup>12</sup> The most recent major attack on the mine was carried out in May 2013 by the then quite young group MUJAO, which simultaneously attacked the mine in Arlit and the French base in Agadez.

## **Niger's uranium potential is often cited as France's central motivation for maintaining its military presence.**

Niger's uranium potential is often cited, generally by critical voices (not without exceptions)<sup>13</sup>, as France's central motivation for maintaining its military presence. A common objection is that its production is on a downward slope and that France relies on long-term supply contracts with Kazakhstan and others for its uranium. This argument, however, does not take into consideration the highly strategic nature of France's dependence on this raw material, not only for its electricity supply, about 70% of which relies on nuclear power (approx. 9,700 t uranium/year)<sup>14</sup>, but also for its status as a nuclear power. While it may be the case that France could currently rely on Kazakhstan (a traditional ally of Russia) and Canada for supplies and would not necessarily be dependent on uranium from Niger, this does not change its strategic interest in securing direct, long-term access to what they consider their own “piece of the cake”. The 2022 war in Ukraine and the resulting supply chain disruptions of all kinds of goods should support this point. Uranium is also believed to exist in Mali, but has not so far been exploited.

In the late 2000s, especially German companies and corporations began to emphasise the region's potential for renewable energy production and, under the umbrella of “Desertec”, promoted civil society initiatives while also founding their own consortium to promote and raise political and financial support for the construction of wind power and solar thermal plants between the West Coast of Africa and the East Coast of the Arabian Peninsula. With Deutsche Bank, Münchner Rück (formerly: Allianz), Siemens, RWE and E.ON, Germany's top political power players were involved. The idea propagated by capital and German research institutes such as the DLR (German Aerospace Centre) was to interconnect the power plants in the region but also with the Eurasian continent in order to generate up to 25% of Europe's future electricity demand from

“desert power”. The complex political situation and the security situation in the countries and regions involved were given virtually no consideration in the publications of these actors. While the large-scale interconnection of the various locations and a supply to Europe via cable soon turned out to be pie in the sky, the companies involved were certainly able to use the political support to unlock new export markets for power plants, power plant elements and electricity grids for smaller-scale supply in the region.

It did not take long, however, for the supply of Europe with desert power to resurface on the politically extensively promoted agenda, only this time under the slogan “green hydrogen”. Again, it was above all Germany that relied on this energy carrier for its energy transition and decarbonisation plans. As part of the German hydrogen strategy, extensive funding programmes were launched to finance the transition of energy-intensive industries such as steel and chemicals first to natural gas and eventually to hydrogen. Meanwhile, the German government commissioned research institutes to develop plans to produce hydrogen from renewable energies on the African continent. One such project was the H2 Atlas-Africa by the Forschungszentrum Jülich, with a map of the greater region showing the supposed costs per kilogram of hydrogen for all the states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), including Senegal, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.<sup>15</sup>

Mali's most important export commodity so far has been gold, which finances about one-fifth of the state's revenues and

is said to account for the incomes of about 2 million people - about 10% of the population. Furthermore, large quantities of lithium have been discovered, and preparations for large-scale mining have been in the making for years. Thus, in August 2021, regardless of all the political turmoil, Australian mining company Firefinch, which already extracts gold in Mali, and Chinese lithium producer Ganfeng concluded a contract to launch the Goulamina Lithium Project. Approximately 120 km south of the capital Bamako, a huge lithium mine is to be built on an area of 100 km<sup>2</sup>. The water supply for the mine will be drawn from nearby Lake Sélingué, an artificial reservoir on (Niger tributary) Sankarani River, which currently supplies much of the country with water. The lithium has to be transported by lorry across Côte d'Ivoire to the port city of Abidjan, some 800 km (linear distance) to the south, from where it will be shipped for further processing (presumably in China). Gangfeng counts Tesla, Samsung, Panasonic, VW and BMW among its most important customers. Lithium is a critical raw material needed in vast quantities for the transition to electric mobility and whose demand has been growing significantly for years. In addition to lithium and gold, larger quantities of manganese and bauxite are also assumed in Mali, and consumption of these is expected to grow as digitisation and electromobility progress. Bluntly put, the “energy transition” in Europe, as it is currently conceived, namely as a growth generator, can hardly be realised without green hydrogen and raw materials from the Sahel region.



# II. The comprehensive approach in Mali

## II.1. 2011-2012: Libyan war and the collapse of Mali

While plans for the DESERTEC project (see I.5.) were being propagated in Germany in early 2011 and the newly established European External Action Service (see I.1.) was putting the final strokes to its first regional strategy, the Sahel Strategy, a series of uprisings unfolded from North Africa across large parts of the Arabic-speaking world that were to go down in history as the “Arab Spring” (despite the fact that these protest movements also found imitation in numerous African states that were not predominantly Arab). France, Great Britain and the USA in particular used the uprising in Libya, which early on was military and Islamist in character, for a military intervention that was soon placed under NATO leadership to overthrow the local regime under “revolutionary leader” Gaddafi.

Libya was the most prosperous African country at the time and a regional power in North Africa and the Sahel. Gaddafi was an anti-imperialist, a supporter of pan-Arabism and pan-Africanism. For years, he had repeatedly signalled his willingness to restrict the departure of migrants towards Europe, but he had set conditions for this and had spoken out in favour of open borders, at least between African states and especially in the Sahara. In addition, he maintained an extensive network between governments, armed and politically influential groups, at least in the northern half of Africa, and repeatedly intervened in conflicts in a mediating capacity - also with the aim of pushing back Western influence. It was foreseeable that the dismantling of his system would fundamentally challenge the balance of power in the region and lead to destabilisation in the long term.

France, under its President Nicolas Sarkozy, was the driving force behind the air strikes against Libya. The formal basis was UN Resolution 1973 of 17 March 2011, which designated the African Union as facilitator and called for an immediate ceasefire, but at the same time - at French and US insistence - allowed for the establishment of a no-fly zone and

authorised member states to take all necessary measures to protect the civilian population. The latter was immediately and publicly interpreted by NATO countries and some members of the Gulf Cooperation Council as legitimisation to crush the country's incumbent regime and regular army and to provide military support to the insurgents. While numerous high-ranking heads of state and government, especially of NATO and its allies, but also high-ranking UN representatives, were at a summit on the situation in Libya in Paris at Sarkozy's invitation on 19 March 2011, Sarkozy announced that his air force had begun attacks on the Libyan army. The air strikes launched from France were supported that very day by cruise missiles launched by the US from ships in the Mediterranean against Libyan air defences. On the same day, several NATO countries pledged their participation in the attack. On 25 March, NATO officially assumed supreme command of the intervention, now called Operation Unified Protector - one could also speak of a war of aggression.

**Libya was the most prosperous African country at the time and a regional power in North Africa and the Sahel.**

By the time the intervention officially ended on 31 October 2011, NATO said it had conducted over 20.000 air sorties and carried out more than 7.500 airstrikes. This enabled the insurgents to make rapid gains on the ground after a few weeks.

Confirmed reports of casualties among the civilian population, the Libyan army and the insurgents were given little coverage in the Western media. To this day, no reliable figures are available.

Since the attacks were mainly flown from NATO bases in southern Europe and the Mediterranean as well as from naval units stationed there, the logistical effort was limited. In mid-April, however, the USA reported that the European allies would soon run out of ammunition without additional supplies from the USA. The use of ground troops had been explicitly excluded in UN Resolution 1973 and only took place on a small scale in the form of special forces, mainly from the UK, to support the insurgents. On 20 August 2011, a convoy of vehicles carrying the incumbent head of state was attacked by NATO air forces, resulting in Gaddafi falling into the hands of the insurgents, being brutalised and killed on the spot.

**Left: A building struck by a NATO airstrike in the village of Majer.**

**Right: Photos of those killed at the site of a NATO airstrike.**

Attia al-Juwaili, flickr.com, (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)



**By the time the intervention officially ended on 31 October 2011, NATO said it had conducted over 20.000 air sorties and carried out more than 7.500 airstrikes.**

With the civil war and the NATO intervention in Libya, large quantities of weapons ended up circulating in the region. Some of these were issued from Libyan depots to create a civilian home guard, some were captured by the insurgents. Simultaneously, NATO and Gulf states - officially concerned with protecting the civilian population - delivered large quantities of small arms and ammunition by aircraft, ships or even parachuted them into the country.<sup>16</sup> To this day, various militias in Libya are fighting each other with these weapons and continue to receive supplies from European states, various Gulf states, Turkey and Russia. However, a considerable share of the weapons has also reached other African countries over land, including Niger and Mali. Many Tuareg with roots in these countries had served in the Libyan military before and during the war (while some also joined the insurgents) and then returned or fled back to Niger and Mali with their weapons and equipment. In Mali, this happened at a particularly critical time, as the government under Amadou Toumani Touré, which was in power in the south at the time, had begun to expand its presence in the north again in 2010 - which was seen by some Tuareg living there as an encroachment on their autonomy or even a violation of various agreements following the revolts of the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> Such government efforts were also supported by the EU and were therefore suspected of restricting the freedom of movement and business models of the population in the north. Once the Gaddafi regime, which had been a guarantor of this extensive freedom of movement and a protective power for various Tuareg factions, had fallen, they came under pressure.

In this context, the “National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad” (Mouvement national de libération de l’Azawad, MNLA) was founded in late 2011 and started a rebellion in January 2012 to enforce independence for the north. To this end, they repeatedly attacked sites of the Malian army and largely drove them out of the north. The rapid successes are

partly explained by the fact that the MNLA entered temporary alliances with jihadist forces - which thus gained considerable strength and soon outstripped the MNLA in controlling public life. While armed Islamists took over the leadership in the north, a mutiny in the garrison town of Kati developed into an outright coup in the south from 21 March 2012, during which the presidential palace in Bamako was surrounded, several ministers arrested and the incumbent president Amadou Toumani Touré forced to flee only one month before the planned elections. The reason for the mutiny was what the soldiers saw as the government’s too indecisive reaction to the uprising in the north, where many Malian soldiers had fallen and for which they were also not sufficiently equipped to fight.

The coup severely and rapidly exacerbated the crisis. With the state having lost all control in the north, it was also no longer clear in the south who was and who should be in charge. The incumbent president had fled and officially resigned after three weeks, but certain factions within the military remained hostile to the putschists. The latter did agree to appoint the speaker of parliament as Mali’s interim president, but he was allegedly beaten up by supporters of the coup inside the compound of the presidential palace in May 2012 and then flown out to France for treatment.

Following the coup in the south, those forces had gained the upper hand who advocated decisive military action in the north and hoped for quick successes with the help of international military support. However, despite France, the EU and others being fundamentally well-disposed towards the idea, the hoped-for international support proved difficult, es-

pecially in view of the murky situation in Bamako. The hopes for a quick military solution to the problems in the north were in any case, at least in parts of the population, characterised more by national frenzy than by realism.

The MNLA took advantage of the turmoil in the south to officially proclaim the independence of Azawad but continued to lose ground vis-à-vis the Islamists. In Bamako, the internationally supported transitional president Dioncounda Traoré was able to increasingly gain a foothold, but the essential decisions were made abroad. In December 2012, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution prepared by France, the USA and others, which mandated a military mission under the leadership of the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Then, on 11 January 2013, France launched a large-scale military intervention at the request of the Malian transitional president, which also saw the deployment of ECOWAS troops in the country with Western logistical support. It was against this background that elections were organised and held, which were won - unsurprisingly - by Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, a representative of the old political elite with established ties to France.

## II.2. 2013: The French intervention Operation Serval

The French intervention in early 2013, known by the operation name “Serval”, can be considered one of the most efficient military operations of Western forces in recent decades, at least with respect to its short-term successes. So much so that in 2014, the U.S. military-affiliated RAND Corporation conducted an evaluation of the intervention to be able to draw lessons for future offensive deployments [expeditionary operations] of land forces.<sup>18</sup> According to them, an essential factor for military success was the fast-paced, determined and also risky advance of the French ground troops, which did not allow the enemy to reorganise, mount effective defenses or scatter among the civilian population. The sole goal was vic-

tory and not stabilisation, which was seen as a welcome change by high-ranking military officers.

Two further preconditions for the rapid advance of the French troops were their good “area-specific expertise” along with the international support, specifically in terms of logistics. At that time, France had for decades been operating bases in the neighbouring states of Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, as well as in Chad to the east. Almost as soon as the French president announced the intervention on 11 January, French combat helicopters and special forces from Burkina Faso attacked the Islamists in the centre of Mali, and the following day a convoy of airborne troops and light infantry in Côte d'Ivoire set off in the direction of Mali. Further reinforcements arrived from Senegal or were brought to Bamako from France via Senegal (by ship) and Côte d'Ivoire (by air). The ground troops were supported by fighter planes already stationed in Chad and further fighter planes that were transferred from France to Dakar at short notice.

Additional troops were then flown in very quickly from the allied states in the region. The UN resolution of the previous December was used as legitimisation for this (which was hardly questioned) – even though it was obvious that these forces were initially deployed mainly under French command. The logistics for this were mainly handled by allies of France in the EU and NATO, in a highly coordinated manner and with remarkable speed. According to RAND, within the first three weeks, allies provided 75% of the airborne logistics for Operation Serval and 30% of aerial refueling capability. Germany, for example, quickly set up an air hub in Dakar, which was also used by other EU and NATO countries. In a matter of weeks, 4.000 French and 6.400 allied African forces were brought to Mali, facilitated by the extensive freedom of movement that France had imposed for its military in its former colonies even after their independence. The USA, which had already built up the required infrastructure - including several drone bases - in the region in the years before, contributed with



a considerable amount of reconnaissance capabilities (see I.4.). The Malian army also succeeded in reorganising itself, at least in part. In the wake of the French advance, they carried out massacres of the civilian population - especially of minorities suspected of collaborating with the Islamists - which have still not been investigated.

The prevailing narrative to justify the French intervention is that after the capture of the town of Konna in central Mali, the Islamists were on the verge of conquering the capital Bamako and that France decided to intervene at short notice, quasi as “help in need”, at the request of the Malian (transitional) president. The RAND Corporation also follows this narrative. Nevertheless, the operation was clearly well prepared, as RAND also acknowledges that “a French military publication states that planning for a contingency in the region had taken place in 2009-2010, and related training exercises took place in 2011 and 2012”. Other sources close to the military let on that such a deployment had already been prepared and expected within the French contingents in the neighbouring states for months and that the political decision-makers ultimately caved in to pressure from the military leadership.

There is a dearth of reliable statistics on the casualties of the French intervention. French sources usually speak of nine French soldiers killed. The number of “Islamists” killed is thought to range from several hundred to over a thousand. Among the Malian armed forces and the allied African armies, the number of casualties is probably in the triple digits. Civilian casualties were hardly recorded and almost completely disregarded in the reporting – which by and large dwelled on the successes of France and its local allies.

The rapid successes were followed by difficulties on the plains. The major northern cities of Gao and Timbuktu were conquered with the use of air power, but many of the insurgents managed to go into hiding or reorganise in the north. Operation Serval officially ended after six months on 15 July 2013 and was replaced by Operation Barkhane, in which the existing contingents in Chad and Burkina Faso were merged with the remaining French units in Mali, and Niger and Mauritania were added to the joint area of operations. Barkhane, in contrast to previous deployments, was more concerned with the war on terror - while the long-term stabilisation of Mali was now left up to the UN mission MINUSMA, to which many of the army personnel previously brought to Mali from other African countries were assigned.

### **II.3. 2013ff: Barkhane, MINUSMA, EUTM, EUCAP**

#### **UN: MINUSMA**

The largest proportion of foreign soldiers has been present under the mandate of MINUSMA since mid-2013.<sup>19</sup> The mandate of the UN mission has been steadily expanded ever since and its size has grown from about 6.000 forces in 2013 to almost 15.000 from 2019. More than half of the associated

troops are provided by African forces, sometimes closely allied with France. The European states initially contributed with logistics and soon also with command and reconnaissance capabilities and, especially from 2016 onwards, took on central tasks to a larger extent under German leadership. In the same year, Germany also took over Camp Castor from the Netherlands. Located directly next to Gao airport and another large MINUSMA field camp, it became subsequently the largest and most important location of the European contingents of MINUSMA.

MINUSMA, while highly visible in various parts of Mali due to its extensive military logistics, does not engage in offensive operations and has tended to conduct its patrols and exercises in semi-secure areas. Nevertheless, the mission is

**... an essential factor for military success was the fast-paced, determined and also risky advance of the French ground troops, which did not allow the enemy to reorganise, mount effective defenses or scatter among the civilian population.**

considered the most dangerous UN mission in the world, with over 250 casualties by mid-2022. Especially in the first years, the UN mission enjoyed a good reputation among the population, mainly because of its civilian and diplomatic activities, and did not seem to be a preferred target of jihadist groups. However, after the general security situation deteriorated drastically and continuously from 2016 onwards, MINUSMA came under increasing criticism on the ground, precisely due to its visibility and military passivity, that it was more concerned with self-occupation and self-protection than contributing to the protection of the population.

#### **France: Barkhane**

Instead, the French armed forces took over offensive operations within the framework of Operation Barkhane, which emerged from the French intervention Serval in August 2013. While continuing to be a counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operation carried out mainly by special forces, it integrated the French forces already stationed in the region in Burkina Faso and Chad and expanded its area of operations to the so-called G5 Sahel (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad). As a result, France has geographically refocused its post-colonial military presence in West Africa on the western Sahel region and redirected it towards the fight against terrorism. Ultimately, with the G5 Sahel, France has defined a cross-border area in order to wage its own “war on terror”, comparable to the USA in other parts of the world.

In addition to technical reconnaissance and intelligence operations, about which of course little reliable information is available, Barkhane consisted of training activities with local

armed forces and armed groups, ground operations together with the Malian and Chadian armed forces, drone operations and air strikes. In the course of larger operations, which lasted several weeks in individual areas, the French Ministry of Defence served success stories on an almost daily basis, stating that “about twenty” or “about thirty” members of armed terrorist groups (groupés armés terroristes, GAT) had been “neutralised” in battles or air strikes.<sup>20</sup> Often, similarly rough information was given about destroyed vehicles, especially motorbikes, and other equipment and infrastructure used by the terrorists. No information was given about civilian casualties, however, and at least in Europe, but also in national media, this was hardly ever reported.

One exception was an airstrike near Bounti, a remote location in the north-central part of the country, on 3 January 2021. Shortly before, France had announced that two more members of Operation Barkhane had been killed, including for the first time a woman, bringing the total to 50. Immediately after the attack, local elites and organisations reported that the air strikes had hit a wedding party, and international NGOs also issued statements suggesting that civilians had been killed. France and various allies, however, maintained their version that only GAT members had been killed. An investigation by MINUSMA, however, came to a different conclusion and published a report less than three months later, according to which at least nineteen unarmed civilians were among those killed, and only three suspected members of a terrorist group.<sup>21</sup> Presumably, there were also civilian casualties in many other battles and airstrikes under Barkhane, as often claimed on the ground but rarely clarified. Whether the attacks were retaliatory and civilian casualties were at least accepted in order to isolate the (alleged) GAT members from the rest of the population and their families remains speculation. It was a war crime in any case.

To the outside world, MINUSMA seemed to suggest that there was a strict separation between the UN stabilisation mission and the French counter-terrorism operation Barkhane, although cooperation was vaguely implied in MINUSMA's later mandates. However, the European MINUSMA contingents in particular undermined the formal separation in practice. Germany, for example, built a joint air hub with Barkhane in neighbouring Niger as part of the MINUSMA mandate to supply Camp Castor increasingly via Niamey instead of Bamako from 2017 onwards. Within the framework of Barkhane, France took over the security of the airport in Gao used by various MINUSMA contingents, and the large German and other European contingents also relied on or shared French capabilities for the transport and care of wounded. In this respect, Barkhane also contributed to an already existing stratification/division within MINUSMA: The European contingents within the UN mission, which were in any case better protected and better equipped, had better reconnaissance results, supplies and logistics at their disposal through their connections to Barkhane, and could hope for faster evacuation, better medical care and more robust military support in an emergency. This became particularly visible after France left the country in 2022 under pressure from the Malian junta and Ger-

many, as the largest troop contributor to MINUSMA, conditioned its further participation on a “sufficient supply and protection level for German soldiers”, in particular “the continued availability of close air support after the withdrawal of the French combat helicopters”,<sup>22</sup> stationed additional and more robust forces in Gao and nevertheless largely suspended its activities outside Camp Castor for the time being. In this respect, it can certainly be concluded that the offensive operations of Barkhane described above created the “safe environment” in which MINUSMA operated, at least from the

## **Conceptually, however, the first phase was to train four “combat battalions” of several hundred forces each in eleven weeks before they were to be deployed alongside the French special forces in the north.**

German perspective. However, not everyone in MINUSMA shares the view that the UN operation would be over without Barkhane and the German contribution. There was also the view that without the substantial European contribution, which was also developing a life of its own and pursuing its own interests, a more neutral approach and better cooperation with local forces might be possible.

### **EUTM Mali**

As already mentioned, the EU's foreign policy apparatus had been planning and preparing for a strengthening of military and police forces in the Sahel region since at least 2007; this was also a central element of the 2011 Sahel strategy of the newly established European External Action Service. However, the NATO intervention in Libya and the subsequent turmoil in Mali created entirely new framework conditions. The country was de facto divided, with an unelected transitional government in the south and a robust French military intervention fighting insurgents in the north.

In the face of this situation, the Council of the European Union decided as early as 17 January 2013, i.e. in the early phase of the French military intervention, to create EUTM Mali for the purpose of (re)building and training the Malian army - with the latter facing accusations of having committed serious human rights violations, including arbitrary executions, during the reconquest of the north.<sup>23</sup> Around three weeks later, the first European forces for this mission arrived in Bamako. The portrayal of many analyses and policy papers, according to which EUTM was a rapid European reaction to the need for stabilisation following the French intervention, is misleading, if not false. The fact is that operational planning for the deployment had already begun in mid-October 2012, well before the latest escalations and the French intervention. According to the Council of the EU, Mali's interim president, Dioncounda Traoré, had already submitted a first general request for support in stabilising Mali in writing on 18 September 2012. On 24 December - and thus still before the supposedly sponta-



Kidal, 27 July 2013 - A Malian soldier patrols the perimeter of the building where the military delegation from Bamako is meeting with the Governor in Kidal, North of Mali.

neous French intervention - Traoré specified this request with a written invitation to conduct an “EU military training mission” in Mali, which certainly did not happen independently of European planning. This provided the mission with a certain basis in international law, although it was issued by a government that had emerged from a coup and obviously did not exercise comprehensive control over the territory.

The mandate defined by the EU was to “to provide, in the South of Mali, military and training advice to the Malian Armed Forces (MAF) operating under the control of legitimate civilian authorities, in order to contribute to the restoration of their military capacity with a view to enabling them to conduct military operations aiming at restoring Malian territorial integrity and reducing the threat posed by terrorist groups”.<sup>24</sup> The “control of legitimate civilian authorities” should be understood here more as a target definition than as a description of the initial state and was obviously missed in view of the subsequent military takeovers leading to the currently ruling military junta. In addition to this supposed democratisation goal, however, the “military operations aiming at restoring Malian territorial integrity and reducing the threat posed by terrorist group” defined the reconquest of the north and counterinsurgency as goals, at least indirectly. In this respect, the military training of the EUTM in Mali can certainly be seen as massive foreign participation in what is referred to under international law as a non-international armed conflict, in other words, a civil war. Germany, but also the mandate of the Council of the European Union, emphasised training aspects such as “command and

control”, “logistical chain” and “human resources” as well as training on “International Humanitarian Law, protection of civilians and human rights”. Conceptually, however, the first phase was to train four “combat battalions” of several hundred forces each in eleven weeks before they were to be deployed alongside the French special forces in the north. There is no reliable information on how much time was actually left for complex topics such as international law and human rights (in asymmetric warfare) in addition to the “basics of fighting”,<sup>25</sup> infantry and artillery training and tactical training in the so-called sandbox.

**After the military coup of 19 August 2020, the mission was temporarily formally suspended and was formally resumed just two months later. However, it had already been operating on a very limited basis ...**

Despite the at least indirectly offensive orientation and the unforeseeably complicated framework conditions at the time of planning, the start and subsequent build-up of the mission initially proceeded relatively quickly and smoothly. As early as April 2013, the training of the first Malian battalion began as planned in the existing training camp near Koulikoro, about 60 km north of the capital Bamako (whose commander was able to welcome the German contingent in their native language, which he had learned during a general staff training in

Germany). Germany, whose military training assistance to Mali goes back to 1969, had mandated a 180-strong participation in February 2013 and has since repeatedly taken the lead role of EUTM. By the end of 2013, it comprised a total of about 500 forces and has grown slowly but rather steadily since then. In addition to the actual training in Koulikoro (where the Germans were allowed two beers a day) the mission included a headquarters in Bamako, which was housed in a hotel and is said to have initially offered the deployed European forces all kinds of amenities. There too, however, the security situation soon deteriorated, first with an attack on a luxury hotel in the capital popular with diplomats in November 2015, then with an attack on the EUTM headquarters in March 2016, and in June 2017 with an attack on another hotel near Bamako used by EUTM, in which a Portuguese soldier died and other EUTM and MINUSMA personnel were injured.<sup>26</sup> In response to the attacks, different combinations of Malian security forces, French and US forces as well as members of MINUSMA and EUTM were deployed.

Although at the beginning of the mission, the German government in particular promised to ensure that participants in the 2012 coup or suspected Islamists would be excluded from EUTM, the selection of trainees was not very transparent and apparently careless or even erratic. Thus, at least the national governments and presumably also the EU authorities still have no information on how many members of the Malian army have been trained so far, how many of them are still part of the armed forces or whether they participated in the coups of 2020 and 2021. However, the latter is almost certainly the case, given the statement by the EU's foreign affairs representative that 90% of the Malian army has been trained by the EUTM<sup>27</sup>. At the same time, according to press reports, the EU missions on the ground in 2021 have found that over 6,500 people are on the payroll of the approximately 15,-20.000-strong military who are either nonexistent or not on duty, and whose salaries are presumably being collected by superiors.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond the success stories of the EUTM, mainly spread via social media, there have been repeated (confidential) reports of tensions between the Malian army leadership and the EUTM. Topics of contention included, among other things, the lack of equipment for the trainees (without shoes and with wooden rifle dummies), their sometimes derogatory treatment and the specific training content, which was oriented more towards European ideas and availability than towards local needs. In any case, it is understandable that in view of the difficult logistics, lack of personnel and precarious security situation, it was quite a challenge for the Malian army leadership to withdraw in each case precisely those units from the mission and assign them to the EUTM that suited the courses offered - and that the associated transfers provided further occasions for attacks, desertions and defections. However, the fact that the Malian military is and has been involved in human rights violations even after being trained by EUTM did only really come to the attention of the European public in the wake of the military junta's rapprochement with Russia and joint operations with Russian forces. For the involvement of EUTM-

trained units in an alleged massacre in spring 2022 near Moura in central Mali, the EU and the German government denied any responsibility and stated: "The deployment and employment of the trained assets are decided by the Malian authorities without coordination with EUTM Mali".<sup>29</sup>

After the military coup of 19 August 2020, the mission was temporarily formally suspended and was formally resumed just two months later. However, it had already been operating on a very limited basis, first due to growing tensions with the military leadership and then due to the Corona pandemic, and this was also true for the entire period until its extensive relocation to Niger from 2022 onwards. The

## **Since 2015, the gathering of information on illegal migration has been officially included in the mandate of EUCAP Sahel Niger. In July 2022, the mission signed a non-public working document on cooperation with Frontex.**

preconditions for this relocation had already been created in the EU Council decision of March 2020, which for the first time also vaguely included "activities outside Mali.... in support of the G5 Sahel group".<sup>30</sup>

### **EUCAP Sahel Mali**

EU capacity-building missions represent the latest and most flexible forms of operations under the EU's Common Foreign, Security and Defence Policy. Formally, these types of civilian missions touch the very (selective) core of what is often understood as "security sector reforms" (SSR): Police and Justice. As far as can be extrapolated from the few missions that have taken place so far, they pursue specifically European interests and are hardly noticed by the national publics in the countries of operation as well as within the EU. The first EUCAP mission took (formally) place from 2012 under the name EUCAP Nestor in the East African coastal states of Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and the Seychelles with the objective of training and equipping coastguards and facilitating the legal prosecution of alleged pirates on the ground.<sup>31</sup> In addition to the EU naval mission Atalanta, it was also based on the first EU military training mission EUTM Somalia, which was established in 2010. Since European interference in the legal system not only met with little support but also with fierce resistance in the other states concerned, especially in the absence of any substantial military counterpart, this mission was transferred to EUCAP Somalia in 2012, where the local government had to rely on international support (such as EUTM Somalia and EUNAVFOR Atalanta) to at least maintain its ground in the capital.

Preparations for one or more EUCAP missions in the Sahel region were already underway before the destabilisation resulting from the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 and were presumably set back by it. In the less affected Republic of Niger, a mission was launched in 2012 to reform and train

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen meets leaders of the National Transitional Council forces in Tripoli.



NATO, flickr.com, (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

the Nigerien police, national guard and gendarmerie, but also to intervene in the associated legislative processes. Since then, its staff has grown to about 120 “international experts” and 50 “local” employees, with the former consisting mainly of the police authorities of the participating European states alongside a few administrative staff and academics. EUCAP Sahel Niger is headquartered in the capital Niamey, and since 2016 it has also maintained a field office in Agadez in the north, which at least until then had been a central hub for migration routes to the Mediterranean.<sup>32</sup> Other important milestones since 2017 have been the establishment of two (of the planned four) “mobile border control companies” (Compagnie Mobile de Contrôle des Frontières, CMCF), each consisting of around 250 forces. Divided into five sections with three platoons each, they are expected to be able to monitor about 200km of border each, often accompanied by European police forces. In addition to fighting illegal migration, their mission is also to combat drug and arms smuggling and terrorism, which may explain their rather robust appearance. Another task of EUCAP members is to identify equipment needs (e.g. IT, vehicles, radios) and mobilise appropriate assistance from the EU and its member states, as well as to coordinate cooperation with the authorities of neighbouring states and the joint military intervention force FC-G5S (see II.5.). The latter has assigned liaison officers to various Nigerien ministries, agencies and units to optimise their cooperation and information exchange. Since 2015, the gathering of information on illegal migration has been officially included in the mandate of EUCAP Sahel Niger. In July 2022, the mission signed a non-public working document on cooperation with Frontex, which is in part intended to improve the risk analyses of the EU border management agency.<sup>33</sup>

EUCAP Sahel Mali, a similar mission with comparable objectives and structure, was launched in Mali in spring 2015. At the time of its implementation, the Malian government was hoping to support the return of national security forces to the embattled north. However, since the security situation there did not allow sufficient freedom of movement even for Mali's armed forces and its international partners in the following seven years, and since there is still no prospect of improvement, EUCAP Sahel Mali has so far failed to demonstrate any comparable “successes” in border security as its Nigerian counterpart with the CMCF. In a distinctly more unstable environment, EUCAP Sahel Mali relies more heavily on the armed forces, especially EUTM Mali. The information policy is extremely restrictive; apart from the objectives and tasks stated in the respective EU mandates, as well as the approximate personnel expenditure, there is hardly any publicly visible information available. A notable exception are the regular reports (tables) on contract awards exceeding a volume of 15.000 euros. The corresponding report for the first quarter of 2022 corroborates the impression of a stronger military orientation. The by far highest individual contract, worth 17.7 million euros, pertains to the support of the mission by helicopters from a private Irish supplier, followed by 2 million for the equipment of vehicles with jammers from a French manufacturer, as they are used for the defence against improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Unlike EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali has not yet established a field office, however it did set up a mobile unit (MU) in late 2019 in Mopti, capital of the province of the same name in the centre of the country, where the security situation has dramatically deteriorated since 2016. The MU consists of 20 people, most of them members of the French gendarmerie, more than half of whom are entrusted with security tasks. Having initially operated from a well-secured hotel, the MU has now rented and extensively secured its own property, which is also guarded by Malian police forces. The plan was to use this setting to substantially increase cooperation between international actors (MINUSMA, EUTM, NGOs), local politicians and dignitaries and the security forces working on the ground. Scattered across the province, a dozen or so locations of national police or gendarmerie were to be established, serving on the one hand as secur-

**Since at least 2018, Germany has almost continuously maintained a Bundeswehr advisory group in Mali to provide technical support to the Malian armed forces.**

ity hubs for development and governance, and at the same time as focal points for the MU to meet with local elites and/or security forces. Initially, it was due to the poor safety environment that many of these security hubs could only be visited by the MU from a helicopter or that visits could only take place within very tight time windows and only as long as the EUTM

could ensure medical evacuation. Although EUCAP's activities in the centre were based on a stabilisation plan drawn up by the Malian government with European assistance, there were also reservations and fears in the capital that the international actors would gradually undermine the state in the administration on the ground. With the military takeover of the country in 2020/2021, the Gendarmerie and the National Guard were also placed under military command. It can be assumed that concrete training courses have since largely come to a standstill and that the consultations with the ministries have also been limited. And yet, as of early 2022, despite the withdrawal of the French Operation Barkhane, which has sometimes been deemed an ejection, and the looming transfer of the EUTM to Niger, there were still major investments being made by the EUCAP mission in Niger. Although the security situation and the conflicts with the coup government make a continuation of the presence of European trainers and advisors seem barely justifiable, as of mid-2022 there had been no noticeable public discussion about whether to terminate or continue EUCAP Sahel Mali – among other things, because there is hardly any awareness within the EU of this mission, whose goal is a far-reaching restructuring of the Malian state in keeping with European interests.

## II.4 Special Forces, Counter-Terrorism and Enable & Enhance

Already prior to the escalation from 2016, a number of other international actors that were not part of the officially mandated missions named so far had been active in and around Mali, both militarily and in the security sector reform. It has already been mentioned that after the 2015 attack on a hotel in Bamako, US special forces were also said to have been involved in the subsequent securing of the site.<sup>34</sup> Although nothing is known about a permanent presence of US forces in Mali itself, it is assumed that about 800 (mainly) special forces of the USA are stationed in neighbouring Niger, where they operate several drone bases, from which they also conduct reconnaissance operations in Mali. As early as 2002, the USA began intensifying their intelligence cooperation with states in the region, including Mali, training special forces and conducting regular joint manoeuvres.<sup>35</sup> Also involved in this were special forces from other EU and NATO states, including Germany, which were thus verifiably present in Mali, at least for a short period of time, and have been permanently active in Niger, both openly and covertly, at least since 2018. It can be assumed that this also applies to the special forces of other NATO states.

In addition, Chad, as a close ally of France, has an extensive number of troops stationed in Mali. While this deployment often takes place within the framework of MINUSMA, Chadian units often conducted joint “exercises” or operations against suspected terrorists with the French Operation Barkhane and Malian forces outside of the MINUSMA mandate.

Other civilian and military actors are on the ground to organise and coordinate support for Malian military and police forces even beyond the EUTM and EUCAP missions. Since at least 2008, Germany has almost continuously maintained a

Bundeswehr advisory group in Mali to provide technical support to the Malian armed forces. Since 2016, this group has also been coordinating the development of military infrastructure (including ammunition depots, maintenance workshops) and the delivery of military equipment (including protected vehicles) as part of the so-called “Enable & Enhance Initiative” the specific content of which, however, is subject to secrecy. Similar measures to support “civilian security forces” (including personnel, radio equipment, vehicles) are coordinated by Germany via the Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (giz) and financed from the budget of the Development Ministry and the Foreign Office.<sup>36</sup> At the European level, corresponding measures are coordinated by the staff of the EUTM and EUCAP missions as well as other advisors and liaison officers and are mainly implemented and financed by the so-called Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, the European Development Fund and the European Union Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF), often with the support of private companies.

For years now, there has also been speculation about comparable activities by Turkey and some Gulf states. Beyond Saudi Arabia's extensive pledge of 100 million euros to support the joint intervention force of the G5 Sahel states, such reports are perhaps credible, but not very reliable.

## II.5. 2016ff: G5 Sahel - Escalation, Dissolution and Mission Creep

As already mentioned before, the security situation in Mali took a dramatic and permanent turn for the worse from 2016 onwards, while the focus of the conflict shifted from the north of the country to its centre and the neighbouring states to the east. Due to the extent and complexity of the escalation, only part of it can be satisfactorily explained by the interaction of

**Even more important may have been the reestablishment and rise of further armed Islamist groups, recruited mainly from the local population, especially in the centre of the country and the neighbouring states.**

the below factors. Other, longer-term problems such as population growth, climate change and the decline of agricultural land have certainly also contributed.

### **The architecture of the peace agreement:**

The peace agreement signed in June 2015 (Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali Resulting from the Algiers Process) consisted essentially of a ceasefire between the government in Bamako and some armed groups in the north with the perspective of disarming them or integrating them into the army. This created an incentive to found or join corresponding armed groups. Other groups, especially religiously motivated ones, were excluded from this agreement and the envisaged

reconciliation process, hereby declared enemies or terrorists to be fought jointly by the signatory parties. This laid the foundation for a situation in which different armed groups were to fight (presumed) terrorists on behalf of the state and in the process were also able to negotiate the balance of power among themselves and vis-à-vis the state. This was exacerbated by the regionalisation provided for in the agreement and the accompanying creation and replacement of political and administrative posts. There are indications, that this unsurprisingly led to (at least) short-term, informal alliances or agreements between groups that were officially supposed to fight each other, i.e. those who signed the agreement and those who did not. The peace agreement focused on the north and (not only there) left out civil society, women and youth and did not enjoy popularity among the population, while creating incentives to take up arms and encouraging militancy.

#### **The reorganisation of the Islamist groups:**

Although the members of the French operations Serval and Barkhane and their allies initially made a quick advance towards the north in 2013, they ultimately failed to defeat the jihadist groups - and at the same time excluded or largely blocked any negotiated solutions. Many Malians insinuate that France and allied neighbouring states had a vested interest in permeating a persistent threat situation to justify their presence, which is not implausible. At the same time, the early successes of the Islamic State in the Syrian civil war around 2014 spurred jihadist movements worldwide and made Mali - also due to the Western troop presence - a new theatre of conflict after the tide turned in Syria and Iraq. Even more important may have been the reestablishment and rise of further armed Islamist groups, recruited mainly from the local population, especially in the centre of the country and the neighbouring states. They skilfully exploited existing discontent and lack of prospects (especially among the youth) and existing tensions among various population groups, which led to ethnically motivated attacks, reprisals and the formation of local self-defence militias. In the face of the state and the international troop presence, the jihadist groups switched to guerrilla tactics and carried out isolated but spectacular attacks and assaults against them. These were already enough to force both international and Malian troops to not only increase their own security but also to provoke more offensive action by the Malian army, France and its allies outside MINUSMA, which came at the cost of the civilian population. Both those factors together contributed to alienation between the population on the one hand and the Malian state and international troops on the other and expanded the recruitment base.

#### **Full-scale militarisation:**

The early successes of Operation Serval had already been accompanied by reports of attacks by the Malian army on the civilian population, particularly in the centre of the country. In that period, the army was often perceived as liberators and MINUSMA as a protective force. This mood persisted for as long as the security situation continued to improve in large parts of the country and people were hoping for an early victory followed by an economic upswing. Yet the growing discrepancy between social stagnation and the expansion of international

and military infrastructure led to increasing discontent, especially once the security situation began to deteriorate again - and it became clear that many foreign actors were in for the long haul. The solutions proposed by the international partners focussed on police and military approaches and corresponding instruments were used. The international armament, training and support of the Malian security sector, although formally based on a networked approach (Comprehensive Approach), occurred largely in a chaotic manner. Both EUTM and EUCAP Sahel Mali, for example, failed to define useful success criteria for their work or mechanisms by which to monitor how many of their trainees deserted or defected or participated in military takeovers. Even the actual size of the Malian armed and security forces is unknown and subject to rough estimates. Vast amounts of international money trickled into the security apparatus, in part due to the priorities imposed on the Malian government. Access to wealth and political participation went through the respective programmes, which privileged men of the old Malian elites, dubious service providers and European advisors, and increasingly restricted the population. While the former benefited from the extensive military logistics and the

### **Access to wealth and political participation went through the respective programmes, which privileged men of the old Malian elites, dubious service providers and European advisors, and increasingly restricted the population.**

militarily secured cross-border mobility, the latter found their freedom of movement increasingly curtailed.<sup>37</sup> Thus, a milieu emerged whose ideas about the direction of the country were sometimes diametrically opposed, but which profited together from the insecure status quo and thus also had an interest in its continuation.

However, the international community, especially the European states, reacted by expanding and intensifying the ultimately failed efforts described above. This phenomenon is often referred to in military literature as “mission creep” and describes the tendency for the declared goals, the mandate and often also the deployment of forces of a mission to expand or multiply precisely at the time of the obvious failure or as a reaction to it. This can be observed in the case of various UN missions that have become permanent fixtures in the landscape. They often started out as stabilisation missions and later, despite their lack of success, defined themselves continuously new tasks and goals, and established departments and staffs. This may possibly be an attempt to retroactively cast legitimacy on the entire mission, at least through (supposed) progress in specific areas (e.g. human rights monitoring, raising awareness of gender-based violence). From a military perspective, it is often linked to the unfounded expectation that a short-term, more robust and dangerous approach with more



troops could turn the tide after all. Basically, this tendency seems to be more related to the specific discourses in the intervening states than to the situation on the ground.

Such mission creep can be seen in Mali for the UN mission MINUSMA, whose mandate has been continuously expanded both in terms of civilian/political objectives and militarily, as well as in terms of cooperation with and support to other missions such as EUTM and Barkhane. The mandate of June 2016 called for MINUSMA to have a stronger presence in the centre and at the same time strengthened self-protection in the face of frequent attacks. The following year it was mandated for “robust and active steps” to counter asymmetric threats. At the same time, the ceiling or target size for the participation of uniformed personnel (military and police) was only slightly raised from 12,640 to 15,209, making it a foregone conclusion that it would not be able to cope with the new tasks. In December 2017, MINUSMA's tasks were again considerably expanded with the “operational and logistical support” of the new joint G5 task force. This was later supplemented (for good reasons), again at the political level, by the observation of human rights violations by this force. Discussions on the addition of an explicitly offensive unit within MINUSMA have been running through the negotiations in the Security Council since 2013, but were not implemented due to the resistance of certain states.<sup>38</sup> In part, this role was transferred to the Barkhane as of 2018 by explicitly authorising the “French forces” (for the first time) “to intervene in support of elements of MINUSMA when under imminent and serious threat” in their areas of operation and using all necessary means until the expiry of the mandate of MINUSMA approved in this resolution.<sup>39</sup>

This trend is even more evident in the case of the EUTM Mali mission, whose staffing was reportedly increased from 500 to 700 between December 2013 and December 2021.<sup>40</sup> Even if other sources estimate the number to be closer to 1.000 forces by the end of 2021, this purported doubling is in no way sufficient to deal with the fundamental expansion of tasks in the same period. While the mission was initially strictly limited to the secure south - the region around the capital - the mandate area was expanded in 2016 to include the (increasingly insecure) centre and the north and now also provided for the training of former rebel groups that were to be integrated into the army. From 2018, there was a further expansion to include training for units from the G5 states, which were to be subordinated to the joint intervention force. In 2020, (non-executive) mission-related support “down to the tactical level”

## At no point does anyone ever pause to ask what difference 5.000 armed forces can make in an area the size of Western Europe with numerous, overlapping (armed) conflicts.

was also mandated - but never actually implemented. As is common for a mission creep, this expansion took place at a time when the EUTM's freedom of movement and relations with the Malian military leadership had already reached their lowest point. Subsequently, the mission was expanded to neighbouring states, including through the (previously covert or non-mandated) integration of the training of Nigerian special forces by the Bundeswehr, thus further delimiting the mission, before it was finally redirected primarily towards Niger.

In the case of the French operation Barkhane, a similar pattern can be discerned, despite a lack of valid or reliable troop figures. At the beginning of Barkhane in August 2014,

the number of 3.000 was below that of the predecessor mission Serval, but at the same time it covered all G5 Sahel states and a much larger area of operation. Despite repeated announcements by the Macron administration to reduce the troop presence, its official size grew to 5.100 forces before Macron announced in July 2021 a withdrawal from Mali and the end of Barkhane for the following year, without, however, wanting to give up its presence in the region.<sup>41</sup> Previously, the force had been reinforced by troops from other EU and NATO countries. The UK had already announced support for Barkhane in 2016 and deployed three heavy transport helicopters and 60 forces to Mali in July 2018. Shortly before that, Estonia had also pledged to send up to 50 forces and five armoured transport vehicles to Mali, which have been stationed in Gao since August 2016 and whose numbers had temporarily risen to almost a hundred. In 2020, the Estonian contingent was transferred to the newly established Task Force Takuba, a European anti-terrorist operation consisting mainly of special forces, which declared its initial operational capability (IOC) under French command in July 2020. After adding further units, mainly from Italy, the Czech Republic, Sweden and Denmark, it grew to 600-800 forces. Takuba could be considered an international supplement to the French Barkhane on Malian territory. While usually described as “European”, it takes place outside the CSDP framework. Takuba took a very offensive approach, yet its concrete mandate and legal legitimacy remained ambiguous but were hardly openly questioned. This seems all the more remarkable when considering the fact that Takuba is the most robust and first “European” mission to date that is explicitly oriented towards offensive counter-terrorism.

In parallel to this general, but in terms of the number of forces moderate expansion of international, and especially European deployments, the establishment of a joint G5 intervention force, the Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel (FC-G5S), was pursued from 2017 onwards. The G5 Sahel is often described as a regional organisation that was founded at the initiative of the governments involved. While this may be formally correct, it is still striking that the states involved (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad) are precisely those close allies of France at the time, in which Barkhane was stationed and active. These are the same states that had already been bundled together by the EU in the 2000s when planning transnational security sector reforms and had also been named in the Sahel Strategy of 2011 as priority countries for future engagement. It was a foregone conclusion that funding would come mainly from the EU and that they were bound to closely cooperate with the EU and Barkhane at the security policy level. Accordingly, the G5 can likewise be regarded as the result of European ideas and planning, to which the governments of the participating states have submitted - often with very dubious legitimacy - or at least offered themselves in the hope of receiving financial support, notably for their security apparatuses.

Although the G5 Sahel group also pursues development policy goals, at least according to its claim, its concrete actions

focus on security policy and hence the FC-G5S intervention force. The latter was created in February 2017 at a summit in Bamako via the only published resolution of the G5 states to date (No. 00-01/2017) and began its work shortly thereafter.

It is aimed at “combating terrorism, drug trafficking and illegal immigration” and is mandated to “combat terrorism and transnational organised crime”.<sup>42</sup> The military and financial needs for the force were subsequently defined together with representatives of the five Sahel states concerned at a conference in the German Ministry of Defence.<sup>43</sup> At a “donor conference” jointly initiated by France and Germany, a total of 414 million euros was then pledged in Brussels in February 2018, including 100 million from the EU itself, 76 million from individual member states, 60 million from the USA, 100 million from Saudi Arabia and 30 million from the UAE.<sup>44</sup> The size of the force was set at 5.000 forces, which, however, were not to be additionally deployed, but integrated from the existing forces into joint formations. As such, this was primarily a huge financial injection for the military apparatuses of the states concerned, most of which had a dire human rights record and weak political control over their forces.

In Europe, the establishment of the FC-G5S was trumpeted as a great success, which, among other things, should serve the goal of fighting the causes of flight or interrupting migration flows. Indeed, the focal points of the FC-G5S were and are located along national borders, also with a view to maximising the added value of cross-border cooperation, including in the fight against terrorism. However, it was also clearly recognisable that the establishment of the FC-G5S within the EU was understood as a core element of a (not very realistic) exit strategy in the sense of creating “African solutions for African problems” (sic) and thus a perspective of reducing one's own troop deployment and continuing to exert influence through financial dependencies, smaller training and advisory missions, among other things. However, in view of the lack of political control of the armed forces involved and their participation in past coups and attempted coups, scepticism about this strategy was also expressed by government and military think tanks in Europe. At the same time, it was pointed out that it would correspond to a tendency of the respective governments to delegate core tasks of statehood to the “international community” and that this externalisation

could further undermine their legitimacy.<sup>45</sup> At no point does anyone ever pause to ask what difference 5.000 armed forces can make in an area the size of Western Europe with numerous, overlapping (armed) conflicts - even if they were to rely on support from the respective armed forces, MINUSMA, Barkhane and EUTM. Suffice it to look at tiny Kosovo, where NATO had deployed 60.000 additional forces over many years to secure precarious stabilisation and contested statehood - and still failed to get a sustainable grip on fundamental problems such as organised crime and corruption.

## **The idea that “defence and security forces” fought militia and Islamist groups to protect the civilian population does not even begin to describe the situation in Mali.**

In view of the fact that “Enable & Enhance” and security sector reforms are at least avowedly also concerned with and intended to promote aspects of the rule of law, there has also been very little discussion of the effects of giving soldiers cross-border powers under very vague mandates that fall within the police sphere of law enforcement and very directly affect the civilian population, their freedom of movement and chances of survival. The already blatant difference between the freedom of movement and rights of the civilian population and those of the military has thus been further exacerbated.

## II.6. 2020f: Coup and loss of control

As the military buildup in the region continued, the security situation went from bad to worse. In his quarterly report on the situation in Mali of March 2018, the UN Secretary-General not only reports on a first deployment of the FC-G5S on the Mali-Burkina Faso border, which “reportedly resulted in neutralising several terrorist elements”, but goes on to provide a striking summary of key developments regarding the security environment: “The security situation worsened during the reporting period, and attacks against MINUSMA and the Malian defence and security forces intensified.” Of the 133 cases of human rights violations and abuses MINUSMA documented during this period, a quarter (33) were attributed to Malian defence and security forces, 55 to peace agreement signatory groups and 37 to “violent extremist groups”.<sup>46</sup> The following report from June 2018 cites allegations of 44 summary executions by the Malian armed forces and a retaliatory operation under the command of the FC-G5S in which 12 civilians were killed. The report accuses a Tuareg group close to the government in Bamako of serious attacks against the population in the Niger border area, resulting in at least 143 civilian deaths, the burning of houses and the forcible displacement of 695 people. Of the 344 cases of human rights violations and abuses documented by MINUSMA during the reporting period, 138 were attributed to Islamist groups.<sup>47</sup> This is an exemplary summary of some of the events reflected in the respective reports, which are themselves incomplete. It is merely intended to illustrate that human rights violations, attacks, executions were commonplace in Mali - and increasingly so in neighbouring countries - and that such violations occurred in different ways and were attributable to “defence and security forces”, militias and jihadist groups alike. Although there was enough open fighting between these three groups, the brunt of the conflict, also in terms of deaths and injuries, was borne by the civilian population. The idea that “defence and security forces” fought militia and Islamist groups to protect the civilian population does not even begin to describe the situation in Mali.

The same can be said of the neighbouring states of Burkina Faso and Niger, where social conflicts were also skilfully escalated by jihadist actors after the French intervention in Mali, provoking a violent state reaction that frequently targeted individual ethnic groups, thus radicalising further parts of the population.<sup>48</sup> In all three countries, this created a level of insecurity, especially in the bordering provinces, far away removed from the capital, which made it increasingly hard to grow food and engage in other forms of subsistence and in-

come generation, and thus not only drove people from their homes but also prepared the ground for the recruitment efforts of armed groups. Although the capitals (and other densely populated centres of power) were only on few occasions the target of assassinations, such incidents, in addition to flight movements and reports of murder and mayhem in the provinces also heightened the sense of insecurity among the urban population. At the same time, the social gap grew between members of the old elites who benefited from the enhanced international cooperation (centred on security sector reform) and those who were at least indirectly affected by the violence in the provinces (as traders, drivers or through family ties). As a result, the urban centres also saw growing discontent with the respective governments and their international backers. The prospects for a military pacification were generally overestimated here too (similarly to European discourses). As the latter failed to materialise, especially the intentions of the third countries involved were increasingly called into question. In the end, both the Islamist movements in the provinces and the emerging social movements in the centres (which, incidentally, often called for more decisive action against the former) were also fuelled by an anti-colonial stance, anti-Western rhetoric and perfectly valid criticism regarding the stabilisation of the old elites through European interventions and funds.

In early summer of 2020, Mali saw the emergence of the protest movement M5-RFP (Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques, Rally of Patriotic Forces), mainly based in the capital area. An alliance that, to quote the analytically acute

## **The new Malian government also appeared more assertive in dealing with Germany, other European actors and MINUSMA. By reclaiming long-lost sovereignty rights such as control of airspace, it severely impaired their logistics and freedom of movement.**

publicist Charlotte Wiedemann, brought together “left-wing secular and religious forces, youth movements and established politicians who had broken away from the president”, criticised government corruption and called for the resignation of the president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. Although centred on the preacher Mahmoud Dicko and his followers, it was also supported by socialist and trade union organisations. “For his citizens, Keïta in both function and lifestyle became the symbol of a typical post-colonial relationship, with a French second passport and assets outside the country. There was a video circulating of his son Karim, elevated to central posts, showing him on a Mediterranean yacht surrounded by scantily dressed women while the population suffered under the Covid-19-induced lockdown. In those weeks, the US ambassador in the capital Bamako issued the absurd accusation that the opposi-



Former German Defense Minister, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission since Dec. 1, 2019 to attend a change of command ceremony in Mali on 28 July 2015.

tion's demand for the head of state's resignation violated the Malian constitution."<sup>49</sup> In July, mass protests spiralled out of control and special police units opened fire on demonstrators, killing at least eleven people. These were reportedly FORSAT units, considered a successful project of Western-sponsored security sector reforms, previously trained by special forces of the French police, EUCAP and - only three months before their deployment against the protesters in Bamako - by the EUTM to conduct "anti-terrorist operations in urban environments".<sup>50</sup>

In this context, elements of the military arrested the president and leading members of the government on 18 August 2020. As in 2012, the starting point of the military takeover was the large military camp near the garrison town of Kati at the gates of the capital. Even abroad, where the coup was largely condemned, the media hardly, if at all, reported criticism or counterdemonstrations, showing instead pictures of cheering crowds. Given the seemingly planned and largely smooth course of events, it seems rather doubtful that the largely bloodless coup was in fact the result of a spontaneous mutiny in Kati, as has occasionally been suggested in sympathetic left-wing contributions. At around midnight, the president, who had been detained in Kati, declared his resignation and parliament and government dissolved. The following day around noon, a five-member group of military officers appeared in front of the cameras, referred to themselves as the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (Comité national pour le salut du peuple, CNDP) and laid out fairly concrete plans for the transition. They explicitly stated that they would continue to work with MINUSMA, EUTM and Barkhane and declared their intention to hold elections after a transition period. While France and the USA strongly con-

demned the coup, the German government and the EU were more restrained in their response. Obviously, the coup was condemned in the usual manner and a return to constitutional order was called for, but no concrete sanctions were threatened. The EUTM and EUCAP missions, already in low gear due to the pandemic and being restructured, were officially suspended, but were expected to be resumed in the near future. The return to constitutional order was not an express condition in this regard.<sup>51</sup> The West African Economic Community imposed sanctions, but they were soon lifted once the leader of the coup, Assimi Goïta, now vice-president, was joined by the former defence minister Bah N'Daw as president of a transitional government, providing it with a "civilian" veneer - despite the fact that N'Daw himself had been an active military man until 2012 and had subsequently played a major role in the internationally imposed restructuring of the armed forces.

Nevertheless, the latter, the acting defence minister and the prime minister of the transitional government were again arrested and forced to resign in May 2021 in a kind of "coup within a coup" by military forces led by Goïta. On this occasion, the reactions of both the West and ECOWAS, echoing France's strong condemnation, were much more severe. ECOWAS imposed particularly harsh sanctions, which were quickly felt by the civilian population. Although the initially good relationship between transitional government and protest movement had cooled down in the meantime, people again took to the streets of Bamako in a show of public support for the military takeover, despite or even because of the sanctions imposed by the EU and ECOWAS, which is in any case readily regarded as a proxy for French interests and policies. This probably also had a part in strengthening the henceforth even



A Danish pilot for the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) makes his way through a Cambodian company of explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) experts trained by the UN Mine Actions Service (UNMAS) who are being transported from Bamako to Gao, in northern Mali, for service.

more blatantly military-dominated junta in its nationalist, sovereignist stance, couched in anti-colonial rhetoric. Relations with France deteriorated rapidly as a result. Macron had already announced in June 2021 that he would end Barkhane, although it may have been primarily intended as a threat at the time. Encouraged by offers of support from Russia, the Malian junta nevertheless stayed the course and skilfully used the entire arsenal of diplomatic means and levers, even going as far as to expulse the French ambassador in January 2022 and to terminate the military agreement with France, which had provided the basis for the stationing of Barkhane, in May 2022. By this time, the first Russian forces had already moved into bases that France had left behind following its withdrawal. There was no more denying at this point that Barkhane along with the European support mission Takuba in Mali no longer had a future. On 15 August, the French General Staff announced that the last French soldiers had left the country. The following day, Russian forces were also reportedly seen at Gao airport, which had previously been secured by the French and serves as a central logistical base for the MINUSMA mission, especially the participating European forces.

The new Malian government also appeared more assertive in dealing with Germany, other European actors and MINUSMA. By reclaiming long-lost sovereignty rights such as control of airspace, it severely impaired their logistics and freedom of movement. Mali suddenly insisted on the authorisation of troop transports, reconnaissance flights of the German Heron-1 drone and did not even refrain from temporarily restricting overflight rights for strategic air medical evacuation, which de facto prevented certain contingents - such the one from Germany based in Gao - from leaving their base altogether. In addition, private companies that provided air transport, storage facilities and other logistics for foreign contingents were subjected to stricter controls and restrictions. Already back in January 2022, a Danish contingent destined to join the European mission Takuba was ordered to leave upon arrival due to a lack of a stationing agreement. In mid-August 2022, 49 Ivorian soldiers were arrested upon arrival with a private airline and made to face criminal proceedings for alleged mercenarism. As a so-called "National Support Element" of MINUSMA, outside the regular contingents, they were supposed to secure the premises of a German logistics service provider at Bamako airport, which provided air transport and an informal small field camp at the airport for the Bundeswehr and other MINUSMA contingents. Russian influence and interests are often suspected behind such incidents, to conceal their own actions and to undermine relations with previous partners, which cannot be dismissed out of hand. It could also be interpreted as an attempt by the Malian bureaucracy to regain their grip on the complex network of military logistics and troop movements in the country. Presumably both are correct, since Russia evidently benefitted from the result, while both Takuba and Barkhane left completely and EUTM largely left the country, with an increasing number of states discontinuing or questioning their participation in MINUSMA.

The situation in the summer of 2022 posed a major dilemma for the German troops in Gao. Their freedom of action and movement was largely restricted not only by the Malian bureaucracy but also by the withdrawal of the robust units from Barkhane and Takuba, while smaller European contingents had already announced to leave Mali. Withdrawal did not seem like a far-fetched idea, especially given the mood among the troops. On the other hand, Germany, as the largest troop contributor with high-value capabilities, had a pivotal role in MINUSMA and was both symbol and guarantor of the European role within MINUSMA and in Mali in general.

The scenario, oft-invoked by German commentators, in which MINUSMA would find itself on the brink of collapse following a (partial) German withdrawal, seems possible, but not all that likely. Rather, we are bound to witness a trans-

formation in which Europe loses influence within MINUSMA and the Malian government, while in turn Russia and possibly Egypt will take on a stronger role. How this will affect the security situation of the population remains to be seen. There are reports of negotiations with Islamist groups that have failed in the past because of France. Expectations on the streets of Bamako are high and, especially regarding Russia's military support, probably just as excessive as they were vis-à-vis France and the EU back in 2012. Since then,

## **Expectations on the streets of Bamako are high and, especially regarding Russia's military support, probably just as excessive as they were vis-à-vis France and the EU back in 2012.**

Western media have increasingly reported on human rights violations and alleged massacres by the Malian army and its new – from now on Russian - partners. In the information war taking place in Mali itself, however, the pro-Russian perspective seems to predominate, also with regard to the Ukraine conflict.

# III. Hypotheses on the causes of failure

## III.1. Interventions without conflict awareness

For many of the previous (military) interventions on the African continent, it bears repeating that “inner-European integration agendas [shaped] European external actions to a greater extent than local conflict constellations and the publicly proclaimed goals of pacification and democratisation” and that “interests that were only indirectly related to Africa” played a central role.<sup>52</sup> The specific short-term goals were oftentimes very humble and, as with the use of funds, utterly disconnected from the proclaimed, long-term goals such as peace and democratisation. An assessment and discussion of the outcomes of the missions as they relate to these goals did not take place to the extent necessary and would most likely be predominantly negative. Nevertheless, on the face of it, they proved to be of avail in advancing the nascent common Foreign, Security and Defence policy of the European Union.

The Sahel Strategy of 2011, on the other hand, outlined short- and medium-term goals with the aim of reshaping a region, based on a coordinated use of various instruments of EU external action. The problem analysis, however, which is at best rudimentary, remained entrenched in a narrow, Eurocentric understanding of “failed statehood”, while the solutions sought were entirely oriented towards European interests: Protecting Europe from terrorism, combating illegalised migration and facilitating or protecting European investments. As a result, the insufficient training and equipment of local “security forces” was identified as a problem, along with further institutional and legislative prerequisites that needed to be met in order to achieve the various objectives identified out of Europe. In accordance with the already existing strategic paradigm of “comprehensive approach” and the institutions and instruments based thereupon, a coordinated approach including the enhancement of military and police capabilities and consultation on reforms towards “good” governance was posited as a solution, whereby corresponding measures at EU level, by member states and other international and non-governmental organisations should interlock with a common goal.

In this conflict analysis, if it deserves to be called that, the concrete causes and dynamics of the conflicts on the ground,

the perceptions and needs of different population groups or the complex interdependencies that exist played only a subordinate role at best. A striking example of such an omission is the fact that the dismantling of Libya as a regional power, driven by NATO and some EU member states, was not even taken into consideration in the Sahel Strategy published at the same time (and implemented from 2013 onwards). This is despite the obvious fact that it fundamentally shook up the balance of power in the entire region and vastly facilitated the spread of weapons. Conflicting interests and ideas within the respective societies as to what is to be understood by “good” governance and what they expect from which form of state-

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hood were largely ignored, and the corresponding escalation potential of a reformatting of the state system was completely disregarded. Conflict analysis was closely attuned to European ideas and interests, and the instruments long before created on this ideological basis came into operation.

## III.2 Negation of conflicting goals

The disconnect between the European perception of conflict and the realities in the Western Sahel region also allowed for the extensive negation of conflicting goals. To reiterate an example already mentioned, with the EU's illegalisation of certain forms of cross-border trade and (transit) migration, which were previously perfectly legal or tolerated business models, entire populations have been turned into what should be explicitly combated: organised crime. This at least created incentives for what was anticipated as a particular threat in European strategy papers, namely convergences of interests,



The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) held a memorial ceremony for the Burkinabè peacekeepers of the Mission who were killed during an ambush on the Goundam-Timbuktu axis, in the Timbuktu region, on 2 July 2015.

implicit and explicit strategic alliances between terrorist and criminal actors.

At the same time, the “fight against corruption”, a central element of “good” governance, is not only in tension with the illegalisation of established business models on the ground, but also with large sums of foreign and international funds being channeled into the country via development projects and “Enable & Enhance” that must be disbursed on time. The thus inflated “security sector”, whether in the Sahel region or in Europe, offers numerous incentives and opportunities for corruption. Beyond actual criminal practices, the amounts spent by EU missions and development policy organisations on local and international service providers for security tasks, hotel accommodation, vehicle maintenance, etc. should at least convey an idea of the private profits that go hand in hand with the decision for this or that hotel, to take an example. Irrespective of whether the at first glance absurdly high amounts may even be justified in view of the poor infrastructure and security situation, the visible increase in income disparities at least reinforces the subjective perception of corruption and injustice - undoubtedly one of the contributing factors to the surge in social protests against the elected government and its perception as agents of foreign interests.

By the same token, there is an apparent but rarely articulated contradiction between the fight against terrorism and the simultaneously proclaimed goals of strengthening the rule of law, ending impunity (in the security sector) and protecting human rights. Even for the instruments provided under the rule of law, such as special prosecutor's offices, police units with

special powers and the expansion of the secret services, there is - even in Western societies - at least a tension a tension between fundamental rights and the fight against terrorism. This contradiction becomes glaringly obvious, however, when foreign forces, say from France and Chad, use massive force and air strikes against insurgents or terrorists, most likely harming civilians in the process, yet at the same time enjoy immunity

from prosecution in the country of deployment by virtue of a stationing agreement (as do many civilian members of EU missions and MINUSMA). It is only in rare individual cases, such as the air strikes near Bounti in January 2021, that an investigation was subsequently conducted by MINUSMA, resulting in diametrically opposed assessments of the situation. Overall, it seems highly questionable whether the “fight against terrorism”, which relies to such an important extent on foreign armed forces, can be compatible with the

protection of human rights and the strengthening of the rule of law. Another conflict of goals, which applies to most large UN missions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, has recently been highlighted under the current junta of Assimi Goïta by the quarrels over the military logistics of MINUSMA and others. Formally, i.e. according to the mandate, most of these missions have the objective of strengthening the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the countries of operation. A fundamental element of this sovereignty is to control the

**Even when soldiers are wounded or killed, this is usually only noticed in the country of origin, despite the much-vaunted solidarity.**

movements of armed groups across external borders as well as their domestic activities, control of airspace being another related element. It comes with the (emerging grey) territory of having large, multinational, armed missions consisting of a multitude of fluctuating contingents, hosts of private service providers (security, logistics, ...), "National Support Elements" and other contingents pursue their business within the borders, that preserving these elements of sovereignty becomes increasingly difficult. Especially since the states in question are, almost by definition, countries whose legal systems and bureaucracies are undergoing profound crises and transformations and tend to be overburdened even without having to supervise extensive UN military logistics. This becomes even more of a problem when, in addition to the UN, other contingents of the EU, individual states (Barkhane and Takuba), regional task forces such as the FCG5S and even covertly operating special forces are involved.

### III.3. Unclear prioritisation of ever-proliferating goals

In the Sahel Strategy and other publications, the economic goals behind the EU's security engagement in the region are dealt with in very general terms, disregarding the fact that they may well differ between the participating states. France, for example, is primarily interested in securing uranium deposits in Niger, while Germany wants to unlock new export markets for renewable energies and the production of "green" hydrogen. The specific mandates of the EU missions do not spell out these implicit goals, listing instead numerous others ("restoring territorial integrity", "rule of law", "reducing the threat posed by terrorist groups"), which are not operationalised in any detail and partly contradict each other. MINUSMA's mandates define further tasks. In public communication and parliamentary debates, the discussion often revolves around further goals, in the case of Germany, examples include (in the beginning) "solidarity with France", strengthening the EU's ability to act or also strengthening the UN. Again, however, no one deems it necessary to specify what, say, "strengthening the UN" entails. At the same time, humanitarian and altruistic motives are frequently mentioned, i. e. wanting to help the people in the region and give them a perspective. Depending on the political orientation and the current situation, "fighting migration" or, differently coded, "fighting the causes of flight" is equally named as a goal and task. The multitude of insufficiently operationalised objectives makes it difficult to conduct an honest evaluation and encourages mission creep, the continuation and expansion of missions without a clear definition of achievable goals, termination criteria and exit strategies. It ultimately enables a multitude of actors in the web of comprehensive approach to pursue (economic) special interests.

### III.4. Lack of democratic control and failure of European civil society(s)

Outside France, public interest in the specific activities of European armed forces, police forces and advisors in the Sahel region is very limited. Even when soldiers are wounded or

killed, this is usually only noticed in their country of origin, despite the much-vaunted solidarity. The overall high deployment of forces from Europe, which is distributed across different mandates and often small national contingents, continues to be discussed - if at all - in national publics under specific conditions and underestimated in terms of scope, complexity and material and immaterial costs. This translates into a general lack of interest in the overall situation and its development. With the exception of France, again, the dramatic and continuous deterioration of the security situation from 2016 onwards was hardly noticed by the European publics and existing mandates (if they were subject to a parliamentary prerogative at all, that is) were often extended without taking the development of the situation into account.

## Whether it is due to the dynamic evolution of the EU's foreign policy apparatus or the complexity of the networked approach, its flurry of combined activities largely escapes democratic control, including at the European level.

Whether it is due to the dynamic evolution of the EU's foreign policy apparatus or the complexity of the networked approach, its flurry of combined activities largely escapes democratic control, including at the European level. Operations such as EUCAP and Takuba are only known to a narrow circle of specialists in Europe. Even the quality press often fails to distinguish between the UN mission MINUSMA and the EUTM mission. There was hardly any discussion or debate about the fact that Takuba was the first European counter-terrorism mission to be launched outside the EU legal framework. Other reasons explaining the lack of European interest and awareness may be that in the comprehensive approach, different bodies at both EU and national level exercise control powers, the large-scale involvement of special forces and private service providers, and that even beyond that, e.g. with regard to the concrete measures of the German "Enable & Enhance Initiative" or the reports of the EUCAP Sahel Mali, the veil of secrecy remains firmly in place. Overall, there is a lack of mechanisms and public arenas at both national and European level that are capable of perceiving and discussing the European Union's networked approach in its full scope and thus also of responding to changes in the situation and the associated priority objectives in individual cases. However, the lack of public debate cannot be attributed to the structure of the European approach alone, but also to deficits in reporting. For example, the French air strikes near Bounti, which according to MINUSMA's investigation report hit a wedding party, were hardly reported beyond France. Other war crimes or human rights violations by allies of the European armed forces are also documented in UN public documents and elsewhere, without being discussed in the European media. For example, even prior to the start of the EUTM and throughout its presence in Mali, NGOs have reported on human rights violations



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by the Malian army and yet this has not been given any significant attention by the EU in the context of training and equipping the army. Unsurprisingly, this started to change with the presence of Russian advisors and military instructors. Now hardly any report in the quality press seems to go without mentioning the alleged human rights violations of the Malian army and its Russian partners. It is always automatically assumed that those killed were civilians, while the media either uncritically parroted the French Ministry of Defence's success stories about “neutralised” members of armed terrorist groups or did not report them at all. This may be a symptom of too much proximity between the journalistic and the political elites within the EU, with the former too readily espousing the interpretations and flexible target definitions of the latter instead of critically reflecting on them. This is also indicated by the fact that the failure and the disastrous developments in the region are most often attributed to the local governments and the EU's external action is criticised for not having exerted enough pressure on them. The present study took a different approach.

# VI Outlook: Mali caught in the maelstrom of Geopolitics?

## VI.1 The German Dilemma

Initially, the dominant narrative used to explain the German troop presence in Mali was that of “solidarity with France”. In the meantime, the argument of “fighting the causes of flight” or “combating illegal migration” was also central to legitimising the deployments. After the withdrawal of the French, it is now primarily emphasised in Germany that “the field should not be left to the Russians”, accompanied, however, by more moralising justifications to the effect that the UN should not be “abandoned” and Mali should not be left “alone”. The variety of justifications for all things considered, similar mandates and missions testifies to the one-size-fits-all approach of German and European foreign policy, which has developed an ideologically founded civil-military approach to crisis management that is deployed regardless of the specific situation and the proclaimed goals. One is inclined to suspect that the overall point is simply to secure and exert influence. In this regard, the justification of “not leaving the field to the Russians” after almost ten years of “engagement” in the region might well cut to the core of its original purpose, at least retrospectively. This can be an opportunity, but it also harbours enormous dangers.

In autumn 2022, German foreign policy finds itself in a delicate position. After the withdrawal of the French, other European states have announced their withdrawal or reductions, uncoordinated and each on account of their specific interests (these withdrawals are also ultimately a consequence of the flexibilities of the comprehensive approach). The relocation of large parts of the EUTM mission to the neighbouring country of Niger is already underway. The Malian government is increasingly restricting the freedom of movement of the German MINUSMA contingent, while Russian units are occupying an increasing number of bases - most recently, there were even reports of Russian forces at Gao airport, on which German logistics are based. Close air support after the loss of the French combat helicopters - an ex-

PLICIT requirement for the continuation of the mission as stated in the German mandate - is precarious and at the expense of other MINUSMA contingents in Timbuktu. At the same time, the Islamists seem to be expanding their influence in the area around Gao. The situation is getting dicey for the German contingent, which is also Europe’s only remaining lever to exert military and thus also structural influence, at least through MINUSMA. This would be an opportunity to pursue a goal and demand of German foreign policy that has been voiced time and again for years, namely to take on “more responsibility” militarily on the African continent.<sup>53</sup> However, there are rumblings within the troops, which also find their way into parliament. The Ministry of Defence prefers withdrawal, the Foreign Ministry wants to continue the mission. The latter would possibly even require a further expansion or a more robust mandate - because currently the German forces can hardly deploy and are more of a burden for MINUSMA.

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The war in Ukraine adds to the complexity of the situation. It may well offer the German government an opportunity to take a face-saving departure from its self-imposed claim to “assume more responsibility” in Africa (and through other foreign missions) and to refocus on national and alliance defence. On the other hand, it sets a particularly difficult context in which to actually “leave the field to Russia” in a region that the Federal Foreign Office has described as the “geostrategic forefield of Europe”.<sup>54</sup> In view of the unfortunately quite plausible further

escalation of the confrontation between NATO and Russia, the latter could well use its presence in Mali to further push back European influence in North and West Africa and, at least from the European perspective, further destabilise the region. However, it would also be conceivable for European governments to withdraw almost completely from Mali and for at least in-

dividual actors to attempt to destabilise the situation in Mali from the outside. After a further escalation and perhaps another coup, this could set the stage for a glorious return of the EU and possibly even NATO (after request from the African Union or ECOWAS, for example). Presumably, however, this would come at the cost of thousands more lives lost.

## IV.2 A non-aligned Mali?

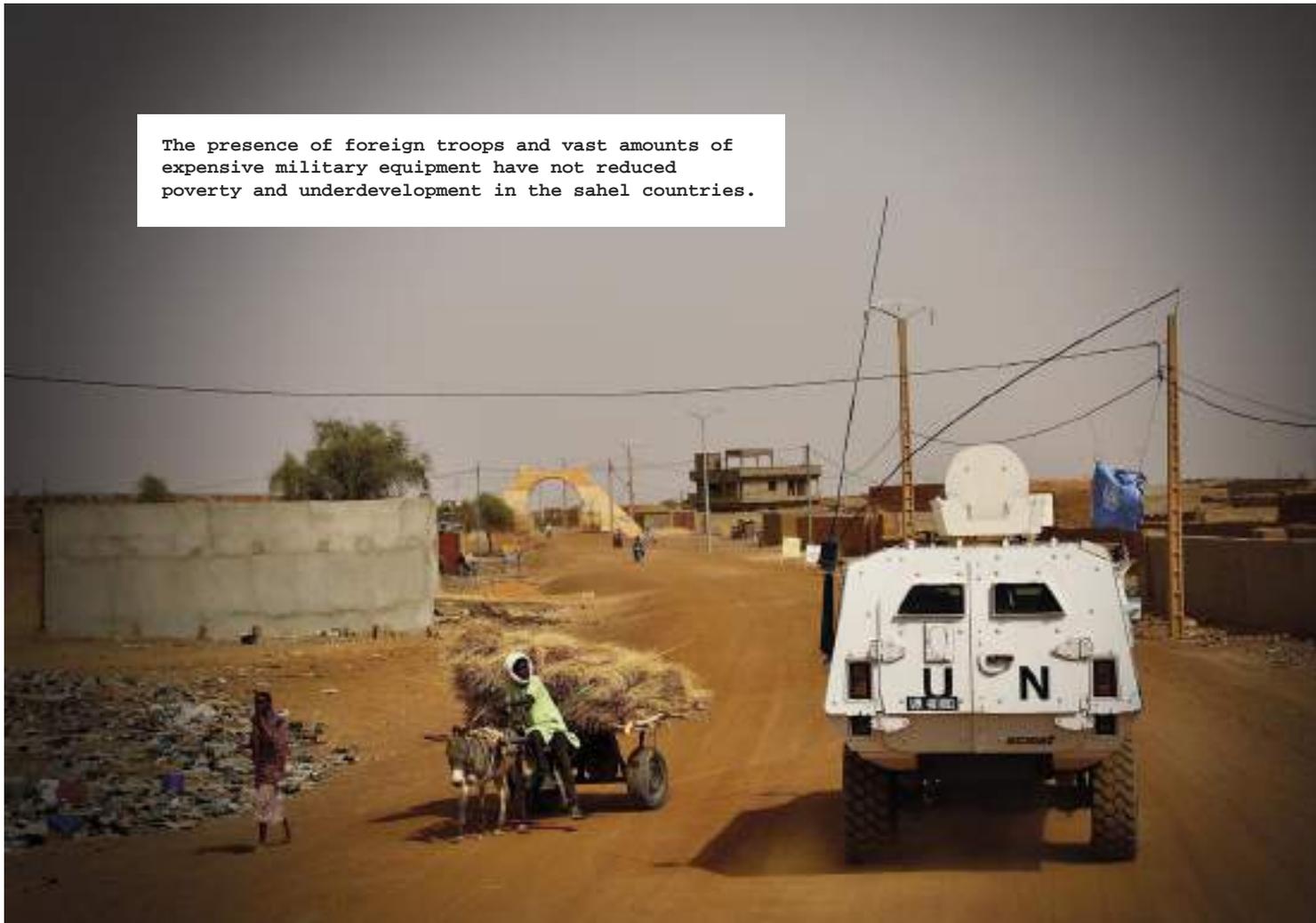
Russia holds a strategic advantage in Mali in that it does not pursue direct interests in the region to the same extent as at least certain European states. In the event of a further escalation, Russia would be in a position to withdraw. Its reputation, which is currently very good on the ground, would undoubtedly suffer, but Russia would be far less affected by the consequences of further destabilisation than Europe and consequently NATO.

This near lack of direct interests gives Russia another advantage, which the current junta in Mali seems to be taking advantage of. Russia is not tied to the old ruling elites and networks that have fallen out of favour with the population. It can stabilise the government without having to impose its own agenda like fighting migration - which ultimately has a destabilising effect. Russia could create a framework under which MINUSMA could be oriented less towards European interests and more towards those of the Malian government, and thus actually strengthen Malian sovereignty. With a more honest and realistic approach to foreign policy, the EU could also continue to try to exert influence without wanting to reform the entire region and every single state according to its ideas. Then

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both the EU, Russia and other actors could make offers instead of imposing demands. Provided that the Malian junta actually manages to reconcile the interests and ideas of the different population groups, this could also provide a great opportunity for the country, the region and the continent. In fact, if Russia, the EU and others were to return to such a foreign policy with regard to Mali, based less on military and coercion and more on diplomacy, it would be a good prospect for the world at large. However, different though they might be, both Russian and European imperialism, one currently at display in Ukraine, the other as seen in the Sahel, should give reason for serious doubt.

The presence of foreign troops and vast amounts of expensive military equipment have not reduced poverty and underdevelopment in the sahel countries.



## Footnotes

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- 15 See: <https://africa.h2atlas.de/ecowas>.
- 16 Final report of the Panel of Experts in accordance with paragraph 24 (d) of resolution 1973 (2011) (S/2012/163), documented inter alia here: [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/163](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/163).
- 17 This is reflected in the Malian government's action plans "Programme d'Intervention d'urgence pour la Réduction de l'Insécurité au Nord Mali" (PIRIN) and the "Programme spécial pour la paix, la sécurité et la Paix et le développement au Nord-Mali" (PSPSDN), which are assessed very differently in the literature. They were motivated by the fight against terrorism and aimed at a stronger presence of the Malian state in the north. See, among others, Amadou Keita, Stéphanie Lima and Céline Thiriot: Etat, décentralisation et environnement - inventaire critique d'une crise multiforme, in: Brunet-Jailly et al: *Le Mali Contemporain*, URL: <https://books.openedition.org/irdeditions/21095?lang=en>. According to various accounts, the PSPSDN in particular aimed to improve the living conditions of the population in the north, while others describe an extensive militarisation of the region through military manoeuvres, new gendarmerie and military bases and prisons. In any case, the leaders of the PSPSDN primarily pursue repressive approaches to fight organised crime, drug trafficking and terrorism, cf: Malijet.com: Au cœur du dispositif antiterroriste d'ATT : le Pspdn et ses hommes, URL: [https://malijet.com/a\\_la\\_une\\_du\\_mali/26705-au\\_coeur\\_du\\_dispositif.html](https://malijet.com/a_la_une_du_mali/26705-au_coeur_du_dispositif.html).
- 18 Michael Shurkin: France's War in Mali - Lessons for an Expeditionary Army, Rand Corporation (2014), URL: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR770.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR770.html)
- 19 For a more detailed account by the author on "MINUSMA and military operations in the Sahel. see: <https://migration-control.info/en/wiki/minusma-military-operations-sahel>
- 20 The corresponding press releases of the French Ministry of Defence are no longer available there, but are archived under the following URLs:

- <https://web.archive.org/web/20220126203804/https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/points-de-situation/point-de-situation-des-operations-du-1er-au-7-janvier-2021> (including the original press release on the air strikes on Bounti) and:  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20220126210807/https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/points-de-situation/point-de-situation-des-operations-du-16-au-21-janvier>.
- 21 MINUSMA (Division des Droits de l'Homme et de la Protection): Rapport de l'incident de Bounty du 3 janvier 2021, URL: [https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport\\_final\\_bounty\\_bounty9.pdf](https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport_final_bounty_bounty9.pdf).
- 22 Bundestag Printed Paper 20/1761, URL: <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/017/2001761.pdf>.
- 23 FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights): Avoiding revenge in order to win peace (30.1.2013), URL: <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/mali/Avoiding-revenge-in-order-to-win-12810>.
- 24 Council Decision 2013/34/CFSP of 17 January 2013 on a European Union military mission to contribute to the training of the Malian Armed Forces (EUTM Mali).
- 25 Ralf Beste: Auf ein Bier an der Malaria-Bar, Spiegel.de (19.4.2013), URL: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/trittin-in-mali-besuch-der-bundeswehr-in-koulikoro-a-895470.html>
- 26 Reports and information on losses in the context of the EUTM and the concrete circumstances of the attacks and military reactions are very reserved. For a critical appraisal of the information policy surrounding the latter attack, see: Nicolas Gros Verheyde: North Korean communication - A lack of tact and strategy, *buxelles2.eu* (21.6.2017), URL: <https://www.bruxelles2.eu/en/2017/06/des-europeens-timides-et-peu-strategiques/>.
- 27 EEAS [EEAS]: Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the press conference (26.08.2020), URL: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/informal-meeting-eu-defence-ministers-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-0\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/informal-meeting-eu-defence-ministers-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-0_en).
- 28 Bamada.net: 6.541 militaires fictifs décelés par l'union européenne au sein de l'armée malienne (16.5.2020), URL: <http://bamada.net/6-541-militaires-fictifs-deceles-par-lunion-europeenne-au-sein-de-larmee-malienne>. The process was also confirmed by the Federal Government, see: Bundestag-Drucksache 20/2215, URL: <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/022/2002215.pdf>.
- 29 Juliet Ferguson: EU-trained soldiers responsible for deaths of civilians in Mali, *www.opendemocracy.net* (10.05.2022), URL: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/mali-eu-mission-soldiers-human-rights-abuses/>.
- 30 Council Decision (CFSP) 2020/434 of 23 March 2020 amending Decision 2013/34/CFSP on a European Union military mission to contribute to the training of the Malian armed forces (EUTM Mali).
- 31 A legally difficult undertaking, since the actual crime often took place in international waters or is merely assumed to have been committed with intent (by witnesses on ships residing in other parts of the world). In the end, the personnel of the international naval missions repeatedly brought suspected pirates to the coastal states for detention, but they could not really be tried there, at least not according to the rule of law, which, however, resulted in overburdening the already strained judicial apparatus, according to the author's observations in Kenya, above all for the benefit of organised crime, whose members were able to delay trials and bribe their way out of the overcrowded prisons.
- 32 Council of the European Union: EUCAP Sahel Niger to help prevent irregular migration (13.05.2015), URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/05/13/eucap-sahel-niger/>.
- 33 Frontex: Frontex signs Working Arrangement with EUCAP Sahel Niger (15.07.2022), URL: <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-signs-working-arrangement-with-eucap-sahel-niger-R8bj2Z>.
- 34 BBC: Mali attack: Special forces storm hotel to free hostages (20.11.2015), URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34877069>.
- 35 These were initially carried out within the framework of the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) of the US State Department, which was transformed into the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCI) in 2005.
- 36 See, for example, giz's "African Police Program", URL: <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/15637.html>.
- 37 This does not only apply to the local and western elites. The Research Centre for Flight and Migration (FFM) in Berlin stresses the fact that it is hardly possible for young men and women from the region to escape their family circumstances and "see the world", for example as migrant workers, but that the only other option is (for the men) to join an armed group.
- 38 An overview of the evolution of the MINUSMA mandate is provided by Jaïr van der Lijn et al: Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (2019), URL: <https://effectivepeaceops.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/EPON-MINUSMA-Report.pdf>
- 39 UNSC Resolution 2423 (2018), URL: [https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/n1820250\\_0.pdf](https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/n1820250_0.pdf).

- 40 Virginie Baudais, Souleymane Maïga: The European Training Mission in Mali - An Assessment (SIPRI Background Paper (April 2022), URL: [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/bp\\_2204\\_eutm\\_mali.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/bp_2204_eutm_mali.pdf)). The mandate at EU level does not provide concrete figures, which could only be found in fact sheets that are published irregularly and are often imprecise. The EUTM fact sheet of March 2020 describes the size of the mission as 745. Both figures seem low, also in view of the fact that Germany alone had mandated 600 forces for this mission at that time.
- 41 France24.com: Macron announces France's Sahel military force will end in early 2022 (14.07.2021), URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210713-macron-announces-france-s-sahel-military-force-will-end-in-early-2022>.
- 42 G5 Sahel (Secretariat Permanent): Resolution N°00-01/2017 Relative à la Création d'une Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel, URL: [https://www.g5sahel.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/images\\_Docs\\_Resolutions\\_force\\_conjointe\\_\\_05\\_02\\_20171.pdf](https://www.g5sahel.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/images_Docs_Resolutions_force_conjointe__05_02_20171.pdf).
- 43 BMVg: Security in the Sahel region - Europe supports G5 task force (20.09.2017), URL: <https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/europa-unterstuetzt-g5-eingreiftruppe-18316>.
- 44 Deutsche Welle: EU doubles funds for G5 Sahel military anti-terror security force (23.02.2018), URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-doubles-funds-for-g5-sahel-military-anti-terror-security-force/a-42711948>.
- 45 Carefully formulated, both arguments can be found, among others, at the pro-government and pro-military German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), see: [Denis M. Tull: Mali, the G5 and Security Sector Assistance, SWP Comment 2017/C 52, URL: [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2017C52\\_tll.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2017C52_tll.pdf)]
- 46 UNSC: Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali (29.3.2018), S/2018/273, URL: [https://minisma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/report\\_of\\_the\\_secretary-general\\_on\\_the\\_situation\\_in\\_mali\\_-\\_29\\_march\\_.pdf](https://minisma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/report_of_the_secretary-general_on_the_situation_in_mali_-_29_march_.pdf).
- 47 UNSC: Situation in Mali - Report of the Secretary-General (06.06.2018), S/2018/541, URL: [https://minisma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/180606\\_sg\\_report\\_on\\_mali\\_english\\_.pdf](https://minisma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/180606_sg_report_on_mali_english_.pdf).
- 48 For example, in October 2017, the International Crisis Group described the violence in northern Burkina Faso - despite increasingly jihadist tendencies - as a "social revolt" rooted in an "ossified and unequal social order", see: ICG: The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North, Africa Report N°254 (12.10.2017), URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/254-social-roots-jihadist-violence-burkina-faso-north>. The spiral of escalation and violence, as it unfolded in the following years, is vividly portrayed by Tim Cocks, among others, see: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-africa-islamists-preacher-insight-idUSKBN1XM1K8>.
- 49 Charlotte Wiedemann: Mali - Putschisten als Hoffnungsträger?, Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik (October 2020), URL: <https://www.blaetter.de/ausgabe/2020/oktober/mali-putschisten-als-hoffnungstraeger>.
- 50 It does not seem to have been conclusively clarified whether, or in how many cases, it was the same personnel who fired the shots and were trained by EUCAP or EUTM. For a compilation of relevant sources see: <https://ffm-online.org/mali-eu-gedrillte-antiterroreinheit-schlaegt-zivilen-protest-in-bamako-nieder/>.
- 51 EEAS [EEAS]: Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the press conference (26.08.2020), URL: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/informal-meeting-eu-defence-ministers-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-0\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/informal-meeting-eu-defence-ministers-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-0_en).
- 52 Stefan Brüne: Noch das alte oder schon das neue Europa?, in: Heinz-Gerhard Justenhoven, Hans-Georg Ehrhart (eds.): Intervention im Kongo - Eine kritische Analyse der Befriedungspolitik von UN und EU, Kohlhammer Verlag 2008.
- 53 See e.g. Max Hofmann: "Von der Leyen: ,We want to take on more responsibility'", dw.com (20.06.2014), URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/von-der-leyen-we-want-to-take-on-more-responsibility/a-17725750>; critically: Abou Jeng: An African Perspective - Pointers for Germany's Foreign Policy Direction in Africa, d.i.e The Current Column (February 2014), URL: [https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/German\\_Development\\_Institute\\_Jeng\\_26.02.2014\\_01.pdf](https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/German_Development_Institute_Jeng_26.02.2014_01.pdf).
- 54 Federal Foreign Office: Strategic orientation of the Sahel engagement, April 2021.

# International missions

<b>Mission</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>Political leadership/ responsibility</b>	<b>Scope</b>	<b>Primary legitimacy under international law</b>	<b>Tasks</b>
MINUSMA	2013-	UN (DPKO)	> 15,000 armed and uniformed personnel	UN Security Council Resolutions	Stabilization, peace agreement implementation, civilian protection, ...
Force Conjointe G5-Sahel	2017-	National defense ministries (G5 countries) and permanent secretariat of the G5 in Mauritania	5.000 soldiers from G5 countries	Resolution No. 01/2017 of the G5 Sahel States	Cross-border cooperation in the fight against organized crime and terrorism
Barkhane	2013-2022	France (Ministère des Armées)	< 5.100, mainly special forces	Deployment agreement (until 2022)	Counterterrorism (in all G5 Sahel states)
Takuba	2020-2022	National defense ministries (European countries)	< 800, mainly special forces	--	Counterterrorism (mali)
EUTM Mali	2013-	Council of the EU - Political and Security Policy Committee (PSC) - Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) in the EU Military Staff (EUMS)	< 1.000	Invitation of the Malian government in 2012, stationing agreement	Training of the Malian Army (now also G5 with focus on Niger)
EUCAP Sahel Mali	2015-	Council of the EU - Political and Security Committee (PSC) - Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC) in EEAS	approx. 150 non-executive, mostly uniformed, partly armed forces	Invitation or toleration by Malian government	Training of "civilian security forces" (gendarmerie, national guard, national police), reforms of the judiciary
Special forces from Germany, USA, other	Partly already before 2013	National defense ministries	partly operating covertly	-	? (in the German case, among others, hostage rescue)
Advisory groups	Partly already before 2013	National defense ministries	In the German case: approx. 8	Invitation / acquiescence of the Malian government	Military training and equipment aid, "upgrading"

