

FRENCH-GERMAN COOPERATION IN THE SAHEL: CONSEQUENCES OF AND PERSPECTIVES FOR GERMANY'S "TURN TO AFRICA"

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ABSTRACT

Since about 2014, Germany has unexpectedly re-evaluated Africa's place in its foreign and defence policy, particularly in relation to the Sahel countries. While it may seem premature to conclude that Africa is now a top priority in Germany's external relations, this "African turn" nonetheless matters. Not only has it triggered a level of political and military engagement that is spectacular by German standards. It has also ushered in an unprecedented cooperation between France and Germany, unequal partners in the Sahel in terms of past involvement, political outlook and strategic culture that are now tied by converging interests.

The *research paper* describes recent changes in Germany's African policy, which constitute an essential and necessary prerequisite for Franco-German cooperation in the Sahel. This is followed by a discussion of German perceptions of France's African policy, which today are less negative than in the recent past, favouring a rapprochement in terms of security policy, the indirect and direct modalities of which, particularly in Mali, are described subsequently. Finally, the *research paper* speculates about the prospects for cooperation in light of the constraints and priorities of the German partner, who, in purely military terms, is unlikely to further up-scale her engagement in the Sahel.

CONTENT

Introduction	2
Germany's Policy towards Africa	2
Germany's Turn to Africa	4
German Perceptions of French Policy towards Africa	5
Operational Cooperation in Mali and the Sahel.....	7
Perspectives for French-German Cooperation in the Sahel	8
Conclusion	10

INTRODUCTION

Since about 2014, Germany has unexpectedly re-evaluated Africa's place in its foreign and defence policy, particularly in relation to the Sahel countries. While it may seem premature to conclude that Africa is now a priority in Germany's external relations, this "turn to Africa" nonetheless matters. Not only has it triggered a level of political and military engagement that is spectacular by German standards, but it has also ushered in an unprecedented bilateral cooperation between France and Germany, unequal partners in the Sahel in terms of past involvement, political outlook and strategic culture, that are now tied by converging interests.

This research paper explores the Franco-German cooperation in the Sahel and its prospects for the realm of defence and security. This may not only matter as far as international stabilization efforts in Mali and the Sahel are concerned. Franco-German cooperation in the Sahel could also give a decisive impetus to the EU's defence policy in a context that poses multiple challenges (Brexit, uncertainties about the future role of the United States, turbulences shaking all regions in the EU's neighbourhood, etc.).¹

The paper is organized as follows: First, it describes recent changes in Germany's African policy, which constitute an essential and necessary prerequisite for Franco-German cooperation in the Sahel. This is followed by a brief discussion of German perceptions of France's African policy, which are less negative today than in the recent past, favouring, like the convergence of interests, a rapprochement in terms of security policy, the indirect and direct modalities of which, particularly in Mali, are described subsequently. Finally, the paper speculates about the prospects for cooperation in light of the constraints and priorities of the German partner.

GERMANY'S POLICY TOWARDS AFRICA

During the decade leading up to Germany's "turn to Africa", i.e. from 2004 to 2014, the continent received mixed attention at best from Berlin.² On the one hand, Africa remained a relatively minor region, as shown for example by the fact that the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, had only undertaken two official trips during this period.³ Even so, German interest in Africa has increased slightly but incrementally, particularly through the European Union's missions and operations within the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). From this point of view, the "turn to Africa" underway is to some extent the culmination of a gradual change brought about by security issues over the past decade. However, the refugee crisis and its domestic repercussions have prompted Chancellor Merkel to reconsider her posture towards the continent.

Germany in Search of Goals

Sub-Saharan Africa has always been considered by German leaders as a marginal region for their interests. Consequently, they found it difficult to identify objectives and priorities with regard to the continent, both geographically and thematically.⁴ Apart from South Africa, considered by far the most important country in economic and political terms, and relatively dense links with former colonies (Togo, Cameroon, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, Namibia), humanitarian and development issues dominated Germany's Africa policy for decades. It seems hardly exaggerated to say that until very recently, Germany's African policy and its development aid policy were in fact one and the same thing. While this may change, the weight of development policies remains important. Tellingly, the Ministry of Economic Cooperation (BMZ) continues to claim itself as the "Africa Ministry". The traditional preponderance of development assistance was also reflected at the parliamentary level. Members of important parliamentary committees (defence, foreign affairs)

1. This research paper is based on a number of interviews with German and French officials (foreign affairs, defence) that were conducted in Berlin, Paris and Bamako in April and June 2017. In order to ensure the anonymity of the interlocutors, references to interviews are not included.
2. See also Ulf Engel, "Networked Security Between 'Restraint' and 'Responsibility'. Germany's Security Policy towards Africa", *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 17:2, 2016, p. 60-69.
3. In 2007 and 2011. The infrequent (one per year) travel of foreign and defence ministers is also somewhat illustrative in that regard.
4. In German ministries, the term "Africa" is traditionally reserved for the sub-Saharan region. The countries of the Maghreb are part of the "Near and Middle East" region (similar to MENA).

hardly distinguished themselves by an interest in African issues, which were traditionally relegated to the development or humanitarian and human rights committees.

Economically, sub-Saharan Africa was and remains a negligible partner, despite recent rhetoric - in Germany and elsewhere - that aims to highlight Africa's economic emergence and opportunities. In 2016, trade between Germany and sub-Saharan Africa amounted to 22 billion euros, or 1.24% of Germany's foreign trade. This level has been stable or even declining for many years.⁵ South Africa is easily the most important partner, accounting for about 45% of trade between Germany and sub-Saharan Africa. In West Africa, German companies have shown some interest for Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire. In recent years, economic interest has focused on East African countries, perceived as more stable and dynamic in terms of regional integration than the rest of the continent.⁶

In regard to political investment, and despite a clear lack of interest, Germany has maintained for many years one of the most extensive diplomatic networks, with 38 embassies on the continent. On the security front, Africa has never been considered as a strategic location, despite the existence of low-key bilateral cooperation projects with a number of countries. This situation has not fundamentally changed with the fast-paced growth of European Union security activities in Africa since 2003, kicked off by Operation Artemis in the DRC. Gradually, the continent became the main destination of the EU's military operations and civilian missions with a total 17 so far.⁷

The Progressive Rise of Germany's Security Policy

German participation in CSDP missions and operations has been and remains generally modest, with the exception of Operation EUFOR RD Congo in 2006, which was led by Germany and for which it provided the second-largest contingent (780 troops), just behind France. In retrospect, and contrary to what some Berlin decision-makers feared at the time, EUFOR DRC did not prove to be the watershed that led Germany to an expanding military engagement in Africa's conflict zones. The apprehensions and the sometimes-virulent controversies caused by Operation EUFOR RD Congo testified to the attitude of German political decision-makers and public opinion on Africa in general: strong doubts on whether real interests in Africa were stake, let alone the kind justifying the deployment of German soldiers. Finally, Germany's participation in EUFOR RD Congo has once again confirmed well established principles when it comes to taking decisions over military deployments: a general reluctance to send the military abroad, an insistence on minimal risks for soldiers, the prerequisite of a multilateral framework (EU, NATO or UN) and a mandate from the UN Security Council.

However, EUFOR RD Congo, and more generally the multiplication of CSDP operations and missions on the African continent, have had two consequences for German policy. On the one hand, it confirmed once more the impression, still widespread in Berlin, that when it comes to EU military involvement in Africa, Berlin is being pushed by others (notably France, sometimes Belgium), rather than determining its own agenda, which is often simply absent due to a lack of interest in Africa. On the other hand, African security issues have seeped into the political agenda in Berlin every time CSDP missions and operations were discussed in Brussels, forcing the German government and parliament to take a stand. The persistence of these topics since the 2000s has contributed to the need for further clarification of Germany's policy towards Africa, its interests and objectives.⁸ Various official documents ("The African Concept" in 2011, the "Guidelines for German African Policy" in 2014) resulted or were born from these exercises.⁹ It is true that the preparation of these documents initiated a debate on Africa. But these have not anchored the continent in the mainstream of Germany's foreign and defence policy, nor has it resulted in a genuine Africa strategy crafted on well-defined interests and priorities. Partly as a result, the various ministries were able to maintain a large degree of autonomy to pursue their own Africa agenda(s), notably the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation. Interdepartmental coherence remains a significant challenge.¹⁰

5. "[Nord-Süd-Gefälle im deutschen Handel mit Afrika](#)", *German Trade and Investment*, 21 March 2017.

6. "Deutsche Konzerne sind in Afrika noch zögerlich", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 December 2016.

7. "[Military and Civilian Missions and Operations](#)", *EEAS Europa*, 3 May 2016.

8. Tobias Koepf, *L'Allemagne à la recherche d'une stratégie de politique africaine*, Note du Cerfa, IFRI, 2015.

9. *Deutschland und Afrika. Konzept der Bundesregierung*, Berlin 2011; *Afrikapolitische Leitlinien der Bundesregierung*, Berlin 2014.

10. Tobias Koepf, *L'Allemagne à la recherche d'une stratégie*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

GERMANY'S TURN TO AFRICA

From 2014 onwards, Germany's posture towards Africa and its view of the continent changed significantly. Several factors contributed to this.

Increased International Responsibility

The first driver of change is a general alteration in German foreign policy. In 2014, the grand coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats crafted a new discourse to suggest Germany's willingness to assume more international responsibility, particularly in regard to the management of an escalating number of crises (Syria, Ukraine, Libya, the Eurozone).¹¹ An indicator of this willingness has been the reorganization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, leading in 2015 to the establishment of a vast division dedicated to "crisis prevention, stabilisation and post-conflict management", with a staff of 130 and an annual budget of \$300 million.

A second indication of the willingness to take on more responsibility is the German participation in the United Nations Integrated Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (UNMISMA) from 2013 onwards, which is the first major German participation in a United Nations peace operation in terms of personnel.¹² This commitment actually preceded France's call for solidarity from its partners following the Paris terrorist attacks at the end of 2015.¹³ In any case, it is the conjuncture of armed conflict, organised crime, terrorism, "state collapse" etc., and thus the makings of a regional and global crisis in Europe's immediate neighbourhood that have, according to German diplomats, shaped German awareness and engagement in Berlin. In reality, however, the attention of the German government has squarely focussed on migration - a subject which has at best tenuous links with African security challenges as we will explain later on, and which is perceived in Berlin as much more important than, for example, the issue of terrorism.

At the military level, however, Berlin's expanding engagement in Mali remains closely bound with certain ideas and principles: i) The deployment of German soldiers whose combat mandate is virtually excluded;¹⁴ ii) The requirement of a multilateral framework; iii) The view that the military can only be one element among others in a "comprehensive approach" to crisis management; iv) In line with this military reticence, the government's emphasis on empowering local and regional actors. This is reflected in the support for EU training missions to rebuild the security apparatus in war-affected countries (e.g. EUTM Somalia; EUPOL and EUSEC RD Congo; EUTM Mali) as well as significant financial and technical support to the African Union, sub-regional communities (i.e. the African Peace and Security Architecture, APSA) and more broadly for regional integration in Africa.

The Trigger: The Refugee Crises

The second factor that has arguably driven German involvement in the Sahel is the "refugee crisis". While the reception of some 890,000 refugees (mainly Syrian and Iraqi) in 2015 was widely supported by the majority of political parties and the German population, it also created significant political tensions. Migration has therefore become a contentious domestic policy issue. In this context, the Chancellor shifted attention to Africa, stating that African migration was a "major challenge" that required Germany to pay much more attention to the continent.¹⁵ While this shift towards Africa was unexpected and surprising, Merkel has since pursued this line of thought, leaving little doubt that

11. The starting point were the synchronised speeches by President Joachim Gauck and the Foreign Affairs (Frank-Walter Steinmeier) and Defence (Ursula von der Leyen) ministers at the security conference in Munich (31 January-1 February 2014). For a useful analysis of the evolution of German defence policy see Philippe Etienne, "L'Allemagne et la défense en 2017: une 'puissance réfléchie' au cœur du projet européen", *Revue Défense Nationale*, no. 800, May 2017, p.68-75. See also Markus Kaim and Hilmar Linnenkamp, *The New White Paper 2016 – Promoting Greater Understanding of Security Policy?*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2017.

12. The UN-mandated engagement in Kosovo and Afghanistan was carried out within the framework of NATO. A special case is the maritime mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in which Germany participated at the beginning of the year (2006) with 900 soldiers. In terms of funding, Germany is the fourth largest contributor (with 6.4%) to both the UN budget and the UN peacekeeping budget.

13. In this regard, Chancellor Merkel's remarks during her visit to Mali in October 2016 should be put into perspective as she suggested that the deployment of German soldiers to northern Mali (Gao) was also, or even more so, at the request of France.

14. See the interview with the Minister of Defence, Ursula von der Leyen, "Alleingänge mit deutschen Soldaten wird es nicht geben", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 February 2014.

15. "Merkel: 'Afrika ist das zentrale Problem'", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 June 2016.

African migration to Europe has become a concern for the government. Crafting a narrative that links poverty and migration, Merkel declared Africa's development to be "the greatest challenge of our time", calling for more effective development policies, increased private investment, job creations and so on, to tackle it.

As a result, it appears as if the German government has identified, perhaps for the first time, a strategic interest relating to Africa and even, for the time being, a foreign policy priority. Since 2016, this has generated a flurry of activities. For instance, several political parties (including the CDU and the SPD) have drafted concept notes on an African policy, albeit revealing differences in nuance rather than substance. Usually absent from the debate on Africa, even the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry for Economic Affairs have positioned themselves, stirring up the resentment of the BMZ on its preserve. For example, Africa was elevated to the rank of a prominent topic of the German G20 presidency in 2017, mobilizing a number of international institutions for a "Compact" aimed at accelerating development in Africa.¹⁶

In light of Germany's modest ties with Africa and given the fact that the country is not a major destination for African migrants (and even less for refugees from the continent), the government's sudden "turn to Africa" was unexpected. Some diplomats interpret it as the chancellor's strategy to get out of the defensive impasse that she had been forced into by the criticism of her refugee reception policy. Thus, the turn to Africa serves to change focus and perspective, communicating the government's willingness and capacity to act prospectively and strategically in order to anticipate and manage crises that could have a negative impact on Germany, e.g. mass migration from Africa. At the same time, the turn to Africa seems to have taken on too much weight to be a mere short-term element responding to domestic political concerns. At any rate, there is support for increased engagement in Africa among the political parties represented in parliament. German public opinion is also favourable. A 2016 opinion poll found that 68% of Germans supported greater involvement of their country in Africa. Most want more development aid (82%), more investment in African economies (72%) and more aid for managing refugee crises in Africa (70%).¹⁷ In addition, 41% were in favour of a military engagement against terrorists, an astonishing figure in view of German scepticism for military operations.¹⁸ Yet the White Paper on National Defence, published in 2016, makes little mention of Africa.¹⁹

GERMAN PERCEPTIONS OF FRENCH POLICY TOWARDS AFRICA

A key consequence of Germany's turn to Africa is that the French and German governments share the assessment, for the first time, that Africa - and the Sahel in particular - carries strategic weight. Even if priorities are not identical (terrorism in the case of France, migration for Germany), they nevertheless appear to be largely compatible and even congruent in the eyes of both countries' policy-makers. The bottom line is the securitization of Africa and its borders, perceived and conceived as a place of threat and risk for Europe.

A Resilient "Françafrique"

If enhanced Franco-German cooperation is on the agenda today, it may be less obvious than it seems. Traditionally, in Berlin's political and ministerial circles, the reputation of French politics in Africa is rather poor.²⁰ As such, France is perceived as pursuing relentlessly narrow economic and political interests, or having a penchant for questionable practices ("mallettes") and a tendency to prop up dictators, while not caring much about democratic values, human rights, etc. Paternalism, short-termism and an "outdated great power attitude" are said to be further hallmarks. This idea of a resilient "Françafrique" contrasts strongly with the German self-perception in Africa as benign and disinterested and a conviction - not entirely erroneous - that Germany enjoys significant popularity on the continent, including in most of its former colonies.²¹

16. For a severe critique of the "Compact" by two German economists, see Helmut Reisen and Robert Kappel, "[G20: Africa's Loss](#)", *IPS Journal*, 17 July 2017. See also Robert Kappel, *New Horizons for Germany's Africa Policy*, GIGA Working Papers, 2017.

17. *Internationale Politik*, 11/12, 2016, p. 5.

18. In February 2014, only 18% of respondents said they were in principle in favour of using the military tool as a foreign policy instrument.

19. Yet it is generally mute on regional issues. See Bundesregierung, *Weissbuch zur Sicherheitspolitik und zur Zukunft der Bundeswehr*, Berlin 2016.

20. The perceptions in this section are reported by Andreas Mehler and Christian von Soest, *La politique africaine de l'Allemagne: quelles convergences avec la France?*, Note du Cerfa, IFRI, 2012. The observations and interviews that the present author has made during the last decade in Berlin do concur largely with theirs.

21. In truth, the German imagination discards a part of reality. To give just two examples: Cameroon is a priority country for Germany's economic coopera-

Furthermore, there is a perception in Berlin that France remains locked up in an excessively military logic that fails to search for political solutions in crisis management and that neglects the consequences of its military interventions, as for example in Libya in 2011. Illustrative of this perception for example, in 2012, a German official described the French attitude as following a simple logic: "Is there a problem? We have a military solution".²²

In the same vein, recurrent French efforts to mobilize the European Union in Africa are often suspected as attempts to instrumentalize CSDP operations, that is, to mobilize allies in the pursuit of narrow French interests. According to a widespread opinion, the text book case is no doubt Operation EUFOR Tchad/RCA (2008-2009) which has further damaged French credibility, as indeed the five-year mandate of Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) in general, due, among other things, to the intervention in Libya and its aftermath.²³

This negative perception of France's African policy is still quite strong today, especially among certain parliamentarians and the German media, which regularly allude to a tainted African policy of France that Germany should be wary of.²⁴

The Hollande "Quinquennat": Poor Perceptions Receding

The presidency of François Hollande has contributed to a significant improvement of the image of France's African policy. In the Foreign Affairs and Defence ministries, Hollande is credited for his efforts to normalize relations with former colonies, even though German observers note tenacious resistance in both France and Africa. Interventions in Mali (January 2013) and the Central African Republic (December 2013) are generally not perceived as articulations of "doubtful" French interests. Operation Serval in Mali, for example, was viewed favourably and received political and, to a lesser extent, logistical support.²⁵

On a more positive note, policy-makers in Berlin unanimously recognize the vast pool of expertise and experience as well as the networks that France has at its disposal in Africa. In this regard, France "plays in another league" than Germany. The competence of the French diplomatic and military apparatus is generally recognised. Regarding the former, for example, a German diplomat approvingly noted the "tour de force" of French diplomacy in the management of the Malian crisis in 2013 and its successful mobilization of international support (UN, EU). For another diplomat, the fact that France managed to involve its European allies heavily in the Malian crisis, including Germany, is one of the major foreign policy successes of Hollande's presidency.

In German ministries today, cooperation with French counterparts is generally considered as good, both bilaterally and within the EU context. Consultations have intensified with Germany's growing commitment to Mali. On occasion, these are held at the invitation of Paris, which is appreciated in Berlin. However, some interlocutors express the idea that they are not always taken seriously by their French counterparts who consider themselves to be mechanically, or even "naturally", better able to analyse and understand "Africa". There is a perception among some government officials in Berlin that "the French do want to cooperate, but only if and as long as they define the line to take". A lack of communication and information sharing is also deplored. On the other hand, some consider France's bad reputation in Africa (including in Mali and Niger) and worry that closer cooperation with France could damage Germany's positive image in these countries.

In summary, perceptions of "Françafrique" are clearly on the decline in Germany, especially within the government bureaucracy, a fact that undoubtedly facilitates reinforced Franco-German cooperation in the Sahel. However, there is still a tangible apprehension about how to approach this cooperation, on which, however, few substantive divergences are discernible.²⁶

tion, although it does not fulfil official key prerequisites to obtain aid (respect for human rights, reform-mindedness etc.). As far as Namibia is concerned, Germany still struggles to come to terms with the genocide committed against the Herero and Nama populations (1904-1908).

22. Andreas Mehler and Christian von Soest, *La politique africaine de l'Allemagne*, op. cit., p. 16.

23. See Andreas Mehler and Christian von Soest, *La politique africaine de l'Allemagne*, op. cit., p. 18.

24. For a fairly typical example, see "[Frankreichs Afrikapolitik in der Kritik. Alte Seilschaften und neue Begehrlichkeiten](#)", *Deutschlandfunk*, 19 May 2017.

25. "Qui participe à l'Opération Serval au Mali?", *Le Monde*, 29 January 2013.

26. In that regard, one topic that several German interlocutors have raised is France's tendency to neglect human rights and democratic standards in Chad.

OPERATIONAL COOPERATION IN MALI AND THE SAHEL

Since the start of the Serval operation in 2013, Franco-German cooperation in the Sahel has made significant progress due to a convergence of interests in the area. Today it is intended to be multidimensional, covering diplomacy, development policies, and defence and security policy in the broadest sense.

Unprecedented German Engagement in Africa

At the diplomatic level, growing German involvement in the Sahel has resulted in intensified exchanges and consultations between Paris and Berlin and, at the symbolic level, two joint visits by foreign ministers to Mali and Niger (May 2016) and Mali (June 2017). In terms of development policies, one could mention the "Alliance for the Sahel" initiative, launched at the Franco-German ministerial council in Paris in June 2017, which seeks to improve the effectiveness of development aid.²⁷ In August 2017, a joint Franco-German initiative aimed to strengthen cooperation between the EU and the three Sahelian states of Libya, Chad and Niger to limit migration.

Defence and security policy is undoubtedly the area in which cooperation has made the greatest strides. German contributions to the stabilization of Mali indirectly attests to Franco-German cooperation, in particular through its contingents within MINUSMA and CSDP missions (EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel-Mali). Starting with an initial contribution of 150 troops to MINUSMA, Germany gradually expanded its contributions in terms of material and troops. This is partly explained by France's appeal to European allies following the attacks in November 2015.²⁸

As of July 2017, the German military commitment amounted to 889 troops for MINUSMA (by comparison, in June 2017 France contributed 33 police and military officers) and 139 troops for EUTM Mali, making Mali the largest German military operation today, barely exceeding the ongoing commitment in Afghanistan.²⁹ Altogether, participation in the two missions (EUTM, MINUSMA) makes Mali by far the largest German military operation ever conducted in Africa. In addition to the number of personnel deployed, the contribution in terms of helicopters (4 NH90 transport helicopters and 4 Tiger attack helicopters) and UAVs (including 1 Heron-class vehicle) since 2016 is also notable. Finally, Germany led the EUCAP Sahel-Mali mission (2014-2017) and for one year (2015) assumed command of EUTM Mali, to which the country contributed one of the largest national contingents.

From the French point of view, the German contribution is highly appreciated for two reasons. Politically, the presence and even enlargement of the German commitment is an important sign that "France is not alone". Furthermore, it seeks to go beyond the unilateral approach by mobilising European and international partners. The deployment of troops and high-end equipment (helicopters and drones) within MINUSMA are particularly valued.

However, it has to be noted that the inherent constraints of the German defence policy impose important operational limits that are likely to create frustration with the French counterpart.³⁰ To begin with, German risk aversion remains a major constraint.³¹ German soldiers in Mali are subjected to important caveats. The contingent within MINUSMA remains largely confined to its Gao camp, where their task is to collect and analyse information through electronic intelligence. Any movement outside the camp is subject to strict security conditions in order to ensure, if necessary, emergency medical evacuations in a very short time. The use of German helicopters is also subject to numerous restrictions. In the same vein, and for security reasons, Germany has long opposed a geographical expansion of EUTM Mali's activities, which limited the effectiveness of the mission by forcing it to continue its training in Koulikoro, near Bamako, for a long time.³²

27. ["Une Alliance pour le Sahel"](#), Conseil des Ministres franco-allemand, Paris, 13 July 2017.

28. For a detailed description of the decision-making process in the case of Mali (and Libya), see Michael Hanisch, *German Foreign and Security Policy. Determinants of German Military Engagement in Africa since 2011*, Naval Postgraduate School, 2015.

29. In July 2017, [3 251 German soldiers were engaged in 14 military missions](#).

30. See also Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, ["Paris to Berlin: Just Do It !"](#), *Blog PeaceLab 2016*, 25 August 2016.

31. In the French comprehension, the German approach means "zero casualties".

32. This has changed since May 2017 with the third EUTM mandate, which allows the mission to extend its area of engagement to the Niger Loop and also includes the cities of Gao and Timbuktu.

Bilateral Cooperation on the Ground

In terms of bilateral and therefore direct cooperation, Germany has provided logistical support for Operation Barkhane since April 2016. Two Transall aircrafts and a detachment of German soldiers were deployed to the French military base in Niamey. They are part of the German contribution to MINUSMA and EUTM Mali, but they also provide important logistical support for the transport of equipment and personnel to Barkhane.³³

In addition, a number of concrete bilateral projects are under preparation. These include the deployment of part of the Franco-German brigade (planned for 2018) and, above all, measures in support of the armed forces of the Sahel countries. For example, enhanced support for the G5 Sahel is closely coordinated between Germany and France.³⁴ In this context, Germany has offered material support to the G5 Sahel Defence College in Nouakchott, which will provide training for G5 military officers. It also announced its willingness to finance the training of G5 liaison officers as part of the regionalisation of EUTM Mali. Complementary support is provided for the G5 Sahel Joint Task Force in terms of mobility, equipment and advice. Options to strengthen support for Niger's armed forces are also being studied.

PERSPECTIVES FOR FRENCH-GERMAN COOPERATION IN THE SAHEL

In light of the worrying security situation in Mali and its neighbouring countries, international engagement will remain high and may even increase. As a result, closer Franco-German and European cooperation will remain on the agenda.³⁵ Could that imply that Germany will expand or intensify its military and security-related engagement in the Sahel?

The Limits of Germany's Military Involvement

While Germany's military engagement in Mali has evolved significantly since its timid beginnings in 2013, it remains circumscribed, in accordance with the country's general principles in the conduct of its defence and domestic policy. In a high-risk theatre such as Mali, a qualitative or quantitative increase in German military engagement seems rather unlikely.³⁶

Even with its relatively large size, and despite the current African "hype" and the fact that it supports the United Nations and the European Union, the German military engagement in Mali is far from unanimous in Berlin. According to a German diplomat, military engagement in Mali has at least as many opponents as adherents in Berlin, requiring the government to work hard to convince both members of parliament and public opinion that a sustained Sahel commitment is worthwhile.

If, for the time being, public opinion does not pay too much attention to it, this could quickly change if German soldiers are killed in hostile acts or if collateral damage is sustained among the Malian population.³⁷ It is also possible that the German government that will emerge from the September 2017 general election may not rely on a grand coalition and may therefore enjoy less political space as the previous one in terms of defence policy. As a result, it seems unlikely that Germany will increase its military contribution to the Sahel or to Africa in general.³⁸ This is even less so since the link between an enhanced military engagement and the priority axis identified by the government to explain its commitment in the Sahel, namely migration, is far from self-evident. On the military and security level, a compromise could be found on the idea of providing more "mentoring" to the Malian army during operations, which some officers believe would significantly strengthen the resilience and combativeness of local forces. Empowering local forces in this way would ultimately help to limit direct military engagement, for Germany or any another state. However, "mentoring" is an approach which, in the German conception, is far from trivial and situated near the upper end of the spectrum

33. "[Barkhane: La base aérienne de Niamey accueille deux avions allemands en soutien de la MINUSMA](#)", French Ministry of Defense, 24 May 2016.

34. See "Deutschland und Frankreich unterstützen gemeinsam G5 Sahel", *ministère de la Défense*, 13 April 2017.

35. "Macron sollicite ses partenaires européens au Mali", *Le Parisien*, 19 May 2017.

36. Between its creation in 2013 and June 2017, MINUSMA lost 79 blue helmets due to malicious acts.

37. During the crash of a Tiger helicopter attributed to a technical failure, two German soldiers were killed in July 2017 near Gao. They were the first German soldiers to die in external operations since 2015.

38. For the same conclusion, see Michael Hanisch, *German Foreign and Security Policy, op. cit.*, p. 206.

of military engagement. In any case, this is an idea that goes beyond the Franco-German framework, since such an approach would likely be attributed to the mandates of EUTM Mali or MINUSMA.

In reality, it seems doubtful whether Germany will be able to maintain the level of its current military engagement. The doubts that have arisen refer, in the first place, to the eight helicopters that Germany has put at the service of MINUSMA since 2017 amidst considerable hesitation and which led to an increase of 350 people in the German contingent.³⁹ Berlin's agreement with MINUSMA provides for the presence of helicopters until mid-2018. However, it seems unlikely that the United Nations will find replacements as MINUSMA already suffers from a shortage of helicopters.⁴⁰ As a result, the repatriation of helicopters will be a difficult decision for Berlin. Moreover, this decision will be compounded by other overarching considerations. Indeed, in light of Germany's candidacy for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2019-2020, for which elections are due to be held in June 2018, Berlin will certainly struggle to muster arguments for the withdrawal of its helicopters.

A More Likely Option: Capacity-Building for Local Partners

Rather than enhancing its military engagement, Germany is far more likely to step up its capacity building efforts to strengthen security forces in Mali and elsewhere in the region through training and equipment. Since 2013, the government has developed a programme to this end ("Ertüchtigungsinitiative"), the main idea of which was subsequently anchored at the EU level ("Enable and Enhance", then "Train and Equip").⁴¹ In 2017, for the second successive year, the government allocated a dedicated fund (130 million EUR) to finance such projects, jointly managed by the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Currently, African countries are among the main beneficiaries, namely Mali, Nigeria and Tunisia.⁴² A project is being prepared with France for the supply of trucks to Niger within the framework of support for the G5 Sahel.

The fact that Germany and France have taken the lead on these issues outside the framework of the European Union is no doubt a strong signal. Indeed, various legal and bureaucratic obstacles have hitherto hindered the implementation of such a tool at the EU level.⁴³

Given the legal and financial incapacity of the training projects (i.e. EUCAP Sahel Mali and Niger and EUTM Mali) to meet the needs expressed by Niger and Mali in terms of equipment, and in response to the general willingness to see the rise in strength of the Joint G5 Sahel Force, it is likely that Franco-German cooperation in this area will be strengthened. In parallel, the two countries will continue their efforts to convince other EU Member States to join them. Close coordination in this area is needed for several reasons. Firstly, the Malian and Nigerian governments tend to welcome all aid offers they receive, without necessarily taking into account their own specific needs and sustainability requirements. Secondly, the equipment of these armies, particularly the Malian forces, originates from very different sources, which does not increase their effectiveness. Thirdly, close coordination should also contribute to the sustainability of capacity-building measures, which is a perennial problem in this type of cooperation.⁴⁴

39. As a result, the German parliament had to increase the maximum number of mandated soldiers from 650 to 1 000 soldiers in January 2017.

40. As of June 2016, the Mission had fewer helicopters than a year earlier. Two helicopter units (one attack helicopter unit in Kidal and one utility helicopter unit in Timbuktu) were still missing. Of the 14 military helicopters deployed, only 11 were operational by June 2017. See Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali, New York, 6 June 2017, para 42. Interview with senior MINUSMA military officer, Bamako, June 2017.

41. Communication conjointe au Parlement Européen et au Conseil, *Renforcer les capacités pour favoriser la sécurité et le développement. Donner à nos partenaires les moyens de prévenir et de gérer les crises*, Commission de l'UE, Bruxelles, 2015. See also Thierry Tardy, *Enabling Partners to Manage Crises. From 'Train and Equip' to Capacity-Building*, European Institute for Security Studies, 2015.

42. Other beneficiaries are Jordan and Iraq.

43. The main issue is a dispute over when and under what conditions the EU will be able to finance equipment for the benefit of security forces in third countries.

44. Not to mention other risks such as violations of human rights committed by armed forces that were trained and/or equipped, or the risk of equipment falling into the hands of armed groups. For the time being, Mali remains a relevant example in both cases.

CONCLUSION

As correctly observed by former French Minister of Defence, Jean Yves Le Drian, German commitment to the Sahel, and particularly to Mali, has increased in a way "unimaginable only three years ago".⁴⁵ In the process, a new Franco-German cooperation is developing on the continent, in terms of diplomacy and above all defence, both bilaterally and multilaterally. It was primarily the perception of a strategic challenge in the Sahel and an effort to position itself on the international level that ultimately prompted Germany's interest in the region. Thus, and contrary to past practice, German involvement is no longer primarily the result of lobbying by European partners (French or others) which often caused German involvement to be both reluctant and limited. In other words, converging interests today allow for more frank and perhaps more productive bilateral cooperation between France and Germany than has been the case in the past - at least in regard to Africa. Certainly, this cooperation also has potential ramifications beyond the Sahel, such as the Franco-German desire to revive the European defence project. Nevertheless, the Sahelian challenge is taken seriously enough to put aside the often-predominant hypothesis that engagements, as the current one in the Sahel, serve above all to develop and mature a European defence policy by searching for theatres of engagement, or even "laboratories", in order to render the CSPD dynamic and visible.

Overall, the Franco-German cooperation works well, but is not quite balanced. This is especially evident in the military field. By extension, and for the time being, the cooperation is also not very ambitious, in the sense that it revolves around a complementary cooperation, based mainly on a simple division of roles according to French and German comparative skills. This tends to associate France with hard military action (counter-terrorism) and Germany with "development", capacity building, etc. Today, it is recognised by everyone that stabilising Mali and the Sahel is not primarily a matter of military action, but rather an effective combination of different policies and instruments that are adapted to local circumstances. While this discourse is increasingly accepted, there is still a long way to go before a rebalancing will be achieved. This does not necessarily require doing more, but entails more efficiency. The idea of a change in methods lying at the heart of the "Alliance for the Sahel" is interesting in this respect and could be expanded to other areas, in that it emphasises stronger mutual accountability between international partners and Sahelian actors.

Greater international efficiency could also require a greater sharing of responsibilities between France and its partners, whether German, European or international. The objective should be to go beyond a configuration which makes France - rightly or wrongly - the leader of Franco-German, European or international efforts in the Sahel allowing it to define the international course of action. This will help to increase the involvement of Germany and other partners who do not always feel that they are taken seriously by their French counterparts. It is also important and in France's interest to diminish the feeling of French domination, which is pervasive among many actors in Mali and probably Niger. Public opinion in these countries has a strong tendency to see any external action as emanating from Paris. This is problematic precisely because the local image of France is ambivalent to say the least.⁴⁶

Moreover, the presence of Germany and other partners does not suffice to imprint the idea in Mali that France "is no longer alone" and now acting in concert with the international community. This political message is weakened and diluted by the presence of Operation Barkhane, because it is perceived locally as the most powerful instrument that a single external actor, in this case France, has brought to bear on Mali and the Sahel. Consequently, as long as Operation Barkhane exists, French military and political preponderance will be taken, in Mali and elsewhere, as fact.

Finally, Germany's intensified involvement may also be an opportunity to go beyond the question of the Sahel. France would benefit from a situation in which Germany's interest in Africa would extend beyond the current situation (migration, Sahel, G20 presidency). This cannot be taken as a given, especially considering the competitive international environment characterized by multiple international crises, in which Berlin might consider other hotspots and regions as more important. Hence it is in France's interest to anchor the continent as a strategic theme in Franco-German relations and within the EU, thus going beyond security concerns narrowly defined in the Sahel. This requires developing more ambitious forms of interregional cooperation on subjects that are no less strategic for the future of Africa than Europe (trade, environment, climate change). To do so, the upcoming EU-Africa summit in November 2017 in Abidjan should provide for a good opportunity.

45. Jean-Yves Le Drian quoted in "Défense: Paris et Berlin créent une base aérienne commune à Evreux", *Les Echos*, 10 April 2017.

46. The many theories circulating in Bamako about France's interests speak for themselves. See also, on Niger, Antonin Tisseron, *Quand la France ne fait plus rêver. L'exemple du Niger*, Institut Thomas More, June 2016.

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