The EU's Military Engagement in Africa: Reality and the Way Forward

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Policy Recommendations

➢ **Decide on the role of military missions and operations**
➢ **Understand the country with which the EU is engaged**
➢ **Adopt a long-term approach, and avoid isolated actions and opposing effects**
➢ **Deal with the lack of political will**
➢ **Reach accommodations with regional countries**
➢ **Think about sanctions and sequenced programmes**

For the past 20 years, the European Union (EU) has aspired to be an important advocate of global peace and security, and the European Commission and the European Council have developed a multitude of approaches and instruments towards this goal. The EU has mobilised both its civilian and military resources to manage crises. This help includes humanitarian assistance, development aid, democracy and human rights support, as well as military and civilian missions and operations. Ten of the 19 missions and operations established and completed by the EU took place in Africa, and currently eleven of the 20 ongoing missions and operations are also taking place there. In terms of the EU's military engagement specifically, only one of the seven ongoing missions and operations, EUFOR Althea, is neither deployed nor related to Africa.

EU troops have been sent to stabilize the security situation and support electoral processes across the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Chad, and the Central African Republic (CAR). The EU involves itself in security sector reform by providing advice, assistance, and/or training in the DRC, the CAR, Guinea-Bissau, Somalia, Mozambique, and the Sahel region. These missions and operations constitute the military pillar of the EU's strategy within the framework of an integrated approach to African countries.[1] Existing EU policies clearly intend to support sustainable security provisions, such as the Strategic Framework to Support Security Sector Reform[2] and the EU Stabilisation Concept.[3] These documents emphasise, among other topics, human security, inclusive settlements, the accountability of security institutions and governments, the strengthening of civil society, national ownership, the coordination of EU and international actors and instruments, and the balance between long-term systemic change and immediate security needs

However, in general, the total number of missions deployed has remained stable and the level of EU activity has never increased. Despite the initial impetus and certain developments over the years, the EU seems to be more concerned with issues of migration and terrorism. Its focus has shifted from military deployments to non-executive missions centred around training and advice, which involve a smaller number of personnel.[4] However, focusing on

boosting state forces' capacity to fight short-term threats undermines the effectiveness of addressing the root causes of conflict and insecurity in the countries concerned. In fact, it might even be said that EU practices have contradicted their own objectives. Furthermore, over the past few years, there has been a rise in the number of unconstitutional military takeovers across the African continent, including countries in which the EU has carried out military missions. In August 2020 and in May 2021, two successful coup d'états occurred in Mali; in March 2021, an unsuccessful coup attempt took place in Niger; and in September and October 2021, respectively, both the Guinean and Sudanese governments were dissolved and replaced by military juntas. Over the last decade, the list of countries to carry out coups has included Niger, Mali, Guinea Bissau, the CAR, and Burkina Faso.[5]

The phenomenon of recurring coups in Africa points to the real effect of the efforts made by the international community, which to date have been unable to lessen the appetite for military seizures of power. The structures, motivations, and conditions that incite coups in Africa have not changed, thus making the progress of several state-building programmes implemented on the continent questionable. For example, in February 2008, the Council of the EU established a mission in support of security sector reform in Guinea Bissau (EU SSR Guinea-Bissau). This took place from June 2008 to September 2010, and included assistance in capacity-building, training and equipment, as well as in facilitating subsequent donors' engagement.[6] However, in April 2010 there was a military uprising, followed by a failed military coup in December 2011 and a successful military coup in April 2012. These coups undermined the efforts that aim to promote democracy and establish stable civilian rule in some African countries. They also emphasise the need to rethink engagement in war-torn nations. In this context, this policy brief presents the following recommendations regarding EU policy commitments and practices within the security sector in Africa.

> "...focusing on boosting state forces' capacity to fight short-term threats undermines the effectiveness of addressing the root causes of conflict and insecurity in the countries concerned."

- **Decide On the Role of Military Missions and Operations**

Two decades of EU military engagement in conflict management have encompassed short-term rapid response and stabilisation operations, bridging operations, and advice and training missions. In general, engagements have been limited in both geographical scope and duration, and have lacked alignment with broader aims. Restricted and short-term mandates limit the impact of the operations and missions on the ground. Consequently, the EU has not been able to reverse existing governance conditions and practices, and has not changed the structural character of the politico-administrative system in the countries concerned. Even worse, EU engagement seems to have supported the consolidation of a neo-patrimonial system ruled by elites, in which military leaders driven by personal interests play a role. There are comprehensive policies guiding the design and implementation of EU security involvement. Thus, the EU should put them into practice by reflecting on what it wants to achieve and what role it is willing, and able, to play in each context in African countries.

- **Understand the Country with which the EU is Engaged**

Outside actors should always understand the on-the-ground reality of the given country of activity. The contexts in Africa are generally complex and fluid, and the EU should at least partially recognise and adjust to these contexts, as well as bringing new approaches, otherwise resistance and potential instability could arise. The prioritisation of state-building has had limited outcomes so far. The EU needs to carry out critical and comprehensive assessments of the conditions and realities in the countries prior to, and during, engagements, in order to efficiently identify whether their actions are producing, or could produce, unintended negative effects. Context analysis should include the drivers of conflict, key actors, governance practices (local and informal), the political and socioeconomic environment, and existent or potential political/social

interactions, all of which may undermine the EU's reform efforts. Evaluations should also include the identification of existing state structures and how they can be changed in order to produce positive effects on the behaviour and performance of local regimes.

- **Do Not Expect the Country to Suddenly Transform into What the EU Thinks It Should Be.**

Deeper changes can only be achieved through longer-term reform goals. The EU's engagement with Africa must generate productive and viable medium to long-term benefits rather than short-term returns. The fulfilment of benchmarks is important in any programme, but should be part of broader objectives. From a security sector reform perspective, this means assessing policies and strategies in terms of the impact they have on the security in the long-term. Capacity building within police and military institutions should not be treated as end goals but as a means to achieve political stabilisation and security for citizens. The EU should strengthen its ability to end, shift, and adapt programmes based on regular monitoring and evaluation.

- **Avoid Opposing Effects of Engagement**

EU policies in Africa have strongly prioritised the reform of the security forces (police and army), border control, and the rehabilitation of related sectors. Although this is an important precondition for the restoration of state authority across the country and therefore for the promotion of peace and democracy, the effects of such reforms have mostly been localised. The decision to focus on a technical, capacity-building approach, including the provision of arms and equipment, limits the EU's ability to produce change, largely due to political, institutional, structural and socio-cultural constraints. Although EU engagement in security sector reform has struggled to improve state institutions, it also risks having an opposing effect. In general, EU programmes in this area have not reversed the extractive character of security services and patronage links of police and armies. Moreover, the improvement of state security services in some countries has constituted a risk in itself, rather than providing protection and security to citizens. Consequently, the EU should find ways at this level of increasing its ability to produce

transformation which effectively contributes to change in the countries concerned. Particularly in the security sector, programmes need to increase the capacity of security and defence structures to address threats whilst simultaneously reducing the risk of consolidating certain power configurations, provoking abusive behaviours, and creating dynamics of resistance and/or misappropriation of efforts. The risk matrix developed by the EU to monitor risks can be an effective tool to ensure that its security assistance will not be misused.

- **Deal with the Lack of Political Will**

A lack of political will on the part of host country authorities is a common occurrence, resulting in less engagement with donors to promote genuine security reform. Both the resistance of local actors to external efforts, and the misappropriation by domestic elites to reinforce their own positions and sustain predatory systems, constitute important impediments for wider and sustainable change. Thus, beyond providing resources and expertise, the EU should find ways to encourage local authorities to become involved more meaningfully in reform procedures. This includes seeking strategic partnerships with local communities in order to gain insight into security needs, as well as involving local actors into the oversight of programmes.

- **Avoid Isolated Actions**

Operations and missions should be integrated with a broad engagement, existing not only on paper, but also in practice. Political involvement is needed to avoid violent practices and atrocities between opposing groups (including the national army, armed groups, ethnic groups, etc.), which often aggravate grievances, fuel resistance, and perpetuate cycles of violence. The EU should work with local authorities to allow all actors to be involved in the process within which military missions/operations are embedded. It should equally avoid dissipating political capital and eroding government strength, as this leads to various leaders and groups jockeying over positions, power, and access to resources.

- **Reach Accommodations with Regional Countries**

In African countries, instability often forms part of a regional conflict system in which there is ample scope

for neighbouring countries and other powers to intervene in various ways to protect their perceived self-interests. Thus, the EU should be fully aware of the need to reach workable accommodations with neighbouring countries in order to discourage them from generating or supporting instability.

• **Plan Sanctions**

Engagement in Africa is normally focused on bolstering the governments and state institutions. However, the EU should be cautious when acting in predatory and/or clientelistic states, or where a significant level of corruption is present. The EU needs to effectively manage its programmes through stringent safeguards, whistleblowing mechanisms, robust frameworks for follow-up, and mechanisms of accountability on the part of the government as to how it channels the financing it receives. Moreover, the EU should take into account the possibility of using its power to sanction abusive behaviours, the misappropriation of external resources, and even the unconstitutional seizure of power.

• **Think about Sequenced Programmes**

With the exception of specific interventions that may be necessary to stabilize situations involving a high degree of violence, EU engagement in African security can take place through sequenced programmes. Through cycles of planning, design, implementation, and evaluation, as well as by using the risk matrix, each phase would only start after the outcomes of previous phases had been evaluated. The evaluation including levels of accountability, political will, governance impacts, dynamics of corruption, diversion and misuse, and civilian harm, among others.

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