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A new mission for Mali

Mali is criticising Western involvement in UN peace operations. But there is no medium-term exit strategy that doesn't exacerbate current issues

Temporarily suspended overflight rights for MINUSMA in Mali, street protests against MONUSCO in eastern Congo together with the diminishing political will in the participation of foreign missions in Europe after Russia's war against Ukraine has put the Blue Helmet missions in the Global South under pressure. Especially since Russian mercenaries know how to unsettle Western troop-contributors in a targeted manner and with little effort. While the deployment in the Malian desert is tying up additional resources due to the heightened security situation this year, military 'high value capabilities' are now also expected on NATO's eastern flank. Government officials in Mali or the Central African Republic – whose countries actually benefit from stabilising missions – are criticising Western involvement in a populist way and are strengthening their cooperation with Russia hoping to increase both their disputed domestic legitimacy and foreign policy options simultaneously. The images of the chaotic withdrawal from Kabul are also still fresh in the minds of many political decision-makers in Europe. The Blue Helmets were never in Afghanistan, nevertheless it was evident that many of the ambitious goals of international engagement there were not achieved.

Yet the global track record of United Nations (UN)-mandated peacekeeping missions is much better than commonly known: Blue Helmets protect lives and create a political space that is important for the preservation of often fragile peace. They protect civilians in South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Congo and Mali; their protection enables humanitarian aid and their peace operations support the implementation of peace agreements. Wherever the Blue Helmets are active, they are supported by the local population. The majority of the population in central Mali appreciates MINUSMA for example for its humanitarian mission, which is clearly illustrated by survey data from the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation's 'Mali-Mètre'. Even if the humanitarian situation and the security status in the areas of operation are currently not improving, it would probably be even worse without the presence of the Blue

Helmets.

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Despite these overall positive outcomes, UN-mandated peace operations must adapt to the new reality of a multipolar world order. The political will in troop-contributing countries of the Global North and the available military and personnel capacities for large stabilisation missions in the Global South are likely to diminish in the foreseeable future. Although regrettable, it would be negligent towards all regions whose humanitarian security depends on peacekeeping missions to simply hope that this development might change quickly. This is why it is important to start to think early enough about how peace missions can receive better support in the medium and long term, even without sending troops. It is already probable that in a multipolar world, more responsibility will fall on regional organisations such as the African Union (AU). However, stronger regional responsibility requires multilateral solidarity, including financial support for peace missions, especially if the UN itself will no longer want to be on the ground with its own troops in the near future.

When Western troops are not welcome

Mali is a good example of the need for this discussion. Critical inquiries about Germany's largest foreign deployment are increasing, inter alia, because the Malian government keeps sending signals that the German troops are actually not welcome. Other Western contributors have already withdrawn their troops or plan to do so soon. Meanwhile, the civilian security and humanitarian situation is deteriorating due to territorial gains by armed groups.

The involvement of European countries such as Germany in MINUSMA creates conditions that enable the delivery of humanitarian aid, support a political transition and protect civilians. At the same time, they fundamentally contribute to strengthening the UN and assumes international responsibility in a region that is geopolitically important for Europe. However, all this is often lost in the debate. What has been missing from this discussion so far is a perspective on how things could proceed in Mali instead. There is no medium-term exit strategy that does

not simply accept a deteriorating humanitarian and security situation.

As long as there are functioning work relationships with the Malian military government and a clear political transition plan, German participation in MINUSMA should continue but it needs to be supplemented with a political target agreement that is more realistic. Therefore, it is necessary to develop political milestones that are clearly communicated to the host, the Malian government, and allow for continued German involvement – or require an orderly withdrawal in case they are not being fulfilled. Those milestones that are aiming to peacefully replace the junta could include domestic reforms such as a new constitution, offering inclusive dialogue processes (also to armed actors who are willing to engage in dialogue) and the opening of political space for civic actors. The elections planned for 2024 can also be part of it but are not sufficient on their own. Also, unhindered troop rotations, an accessible airport in Gao that is not controlled by Russian forces and reliable overflight rights – elements that guarantee the protection of MINUSMA – would be necessary but not sufficient preconditions for a continuation of German involvement in MINUSMA. Simultaneously, Berlin and Brussels need to develop a medium-term support perspective for a peace mission in Mali to ensure that large parts of the country are not simply abandoned to armed groups – even if German and other European soldiers are not participating.

The alternative of an AU-led mission

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recently proposed the creation of an AU-led successor mission for Mali, given the increasing uncertainty about the future of MINUSMA. This may also be a reaction towards the Malian government that has repeatedly been portraying the mission as ‘neocolonial’, despite the fact that two-thirds of MINUSMA's troop contributors are African countries. The narrative of Western dominance in MINUSMA costs the mission important credibility among the Malian population, despite the fact that it is simply not true. Guterres, however, did not elaborate on his proposal for Mali.

Two examples of AU-led missions are the hybrid mission UNAMID, which was deployed in Sudan's Darfur region until 2020, and the AU-led AMISOM (now ATMIS) mission in Somalia since 2007. If you talk to people who have been involved with both missions, you will hear is a lot of frustration and need for reform. Especially the uncoordinated involvement of neighbouring states that have their own strong interests in AMISOM is considered to be problematic. Other problems were (and still are) the inadequately secured financing of AMISOM and the amount of bureaucracy between the AU and the UN in the UNAMID-

mission. Despite all those problems, it is clear that missions with leaner mandates and greater regional participation are likely to gain more importance in the future if the political will for stabilising large-scale missions with broad mandates will decline.

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AU (co-)coordinated missions can only be successful if they are integrated into processes of regional diplomacy and if they are part of political confidence-building between the government, armed groups that are willing to engage in dialogue and the civilian population in the country of operation. Moreover, their success depends on the extent to which peace missions support basic government services for the affected population and, last but not least, have a predictable funding perspective.

Until now it is unclear whether the AU is willing or even able to engage militarily in Mali. This would probably only be the case if there was long term and extensive financial support from the Global North. Further conditions would be a transparent coordination with the Malian government and a clear division of roles between the national army and the AU mission. On top of that, the AU cannot rely solely on troops from neighbouring states that are currently having tense relations with the junta but should include troop contributors from all over Africa. If Europe supports such a mission, the establishment of human rights protection in the mandate and the inclusion of civil society voices must be a prerequisite.

Assuming these conditions are met, it is conceivable that AU missions could receive the task to secure the Malian capital and regional centres, as well as to work with the Malian army against jihadist groups in central Mali that are unwilling to engage in dialogue and terrorise civilians. This robust component would also lower the Malian government's incentive to cooperate with Russia, which has threatened rather than protected civilians. At the same time, this new mission would have to continue to facilitate humanitarian assistance and create space for confidence-building which makes political solutions to Mali's complex local and national conflicts more likely. Additionally, the confidence-building would need to be completed by diplomacy coordination across the region since violent actors are crossing borders in the Sahel region. Previous counterterrorism missions in the Sahel have lacked political embedding in the AU, instead, they hoped to facilitate peace simply by killing terrorist leaders – which turned out to be a miscalculation.

The engagement in the Sahel region makes sense from a development and foreign policy perspective, especially since Russian actors are now also becoming more active there.

A new AU mission could start operating in Mali in parallel with MINUSMA, which continues to play an important role in the political transition and is securing the Algiers peace agreement with armed actors in northern Mali. Such a mission could gradually take over responsibilities from MINUSMA if it is provided accordingly with the logistical capabilities. The financial and logistical support of such an AU mission would be more cost-effective for the EU than an engagement with their own troops, so that released funds can be invested in the support of regional diplomacy, integrated development cooperation, crisis prevention, humanitarian aid and strengthening the AU.

In any case, a follow-up mission in African hands would require further active political engagement by European governments in Mali. The engagement in the Sahel region makes sense from a development and foreign policy perspective, especially since Russian actors are now also becoming more active there. The Sahel region remains geo-strategically important because of the threat of a state vacuum in the immediate vicinity of Europe that is more and more controlled by violent actors, whose activities are spreading to the West African coastal states. Above all, Europe bears humanitarian responsibility for a region extremely threatened by the global warming, and where a humanitarian crisis is exacerbated by a deteriorating security situation.



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