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Diplomacy over military

The past years' coups and the spread of terrorism are posing a major threat to stability in the Sahel region. Europe can and must counteract this

Since the recent military coup in Niger, a belt of military-led states now stretches through the Sahel from Guinea in the west to Sudan on the Red Sea. At the same time, the coup governments are working more closely together: Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso founded an 'Alliance of Sahel States' (ASS) on 16 September. The new defence community aims to fight terrorism but is more of a threat against interventions or further sanctions from the West African regional organisation ECOWAS.

Despite the rhetoric of the putschists and the hopes of all those who were dissatisfied with the civilian-led governments of the Sahel region, the military governments of all three countries are not effective in the fight against terrorism — on the contrary. This is not a claim; it is empirical fact. Mali and Burkina Faso have each recorded a threefold increase in terror victims since the military took office. In Niger, there has also been an increase in the two months after the coup.

Europe's role in the Sahel

Shortly after the military governments in Burkina Faso and Mali gained strength, the German federal government agreed to redefine and adapt its engagement in the Sahel. At the same time, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has prepared for an increased commitment in the region with the Sahel Plus Initiative. After the events in Niger, further development in the cooperation with the countries of West Africa is becoming even more urgent.

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This includes paying closer attention to the coastal states bordering the Sahel region, because the West African states want our support. The spread of terrorist groups is already posing a major threat to stability in countries like Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana,

Nigeria and Senegal. The effects of the frustration of large parts of the population are already being felt, due to the frequent lack of social and political participation, inadequate security and an allegedly neo-colonial West. This is compounded by a lack of future prospects for the young population and additional disinformation campaigns that fuel anti-French and anti-Western sentiments. The situation is being used by actors like Russia to establish themselves as alternative partners. Europe can and must counteract this. Here, too, it is important to coordinate directly with African partner countries — in Côte d'Ivoire, for example, the International Academy for the Fight Against Terrorism is specifically working against disinformation.

We must also ask ourselves self-critically to what extent combatting the causes – and thus an orientation towards democracy and development – were in a balanced relationship with military engagement in the region. There is much to suggest that the focus on military training and counter-terrorism is too narrow. Instead, new EU missions must be embedded into our broader commitment to peace and development policy.

Supporting civilian-led governments

Thus, it is all the more important that the Sahel Alliance's approach, pursued under the presidency of German Development Minister Svenja Schulze, more closely addresses the causes of the region's complex security crisis. Surveys by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Mali show that most people want security and social participation above all, but do not currently believe that civilian governments can guarantee this.

Thus, if coups and the spread of terrorist groups in other countries in the region are to be prevented, civilian-led governments must be supported in organising public services and security that are visible to everyone and superior to military governments. It is also evident that sustainable career and future prospects for the growing young population are needed, since they would otherwise turn to other options in disappointment. Development and foreign policy that is committed to precisely this objective then becomes stability policy. This also makes for shrewd geopolitics in a region that will become increasingly important for Europe — not just in terms of foreign and development policy, but also concerning migration, climate and security.

It is critical to communicate European interests more transparently than before and to develop a pan-European Sahel policy that places even greater emphasis on civilian components. This is the only way to regain trust for all of Europe in the current climate of opinion in the region. At the same time, the policies in Germany regarding foreign affairs, development, and defence must be closely linked to African initiatives. In this context, the diplomatic route must always have priority over military action.

In order to sustainably counter instability and the influx of terrorist groups and to prevent crises, it is more important than ever that our commitment address the wishes and expectations of the civilian population itself.

This goes hand in hand with strengthening regional diplomacy, including through the African Union (AU), in order to expand the necessary scope for political dialogue and humanitarian access. President Mohamed Bazoum, for example, has had success in Niger because he was willing to set up exit programmes for and dialogue with armed actors.

Another example of acute need is in northern Mali, where we are currently witnessing that the question of who can take over the important tasks of the MINUSMA peace mission, once it has withdrawn, has been left unanswered. At the moment, fighting between Malian security forces and armed groups over bases left behind by the mission is taking place. The fragile Algiers peace agreement, which was held together by MINUSMA and brought together important actors in northern Mali, is collapsing as a result. It is already foreseeable that the Malian army, with the help of the Russian private military company Wagner, will not be able to sufficiently stabilise the country. It is therefore all the more urgent to enter into a discussion with the AU about who can take on additional responsibility if Germany and others withdraw.

In order to sustainably counter instability and the influx of terrorist groups and to prevent crises, it is more important than ever that our commitment address the wishes and expectations of the civilian population itself, beyond simply supporting the AU and regional organisations. Coup governments can hardly fulfil the desire for improved security, economic prospects and building peace. We should therefore support those areas where we have an advantage: away from governments in the coup countries and closer to the governments in the democracies on the West African coast.



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