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Tull, Denis M.

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Mali, the G5 and Security Sector Assistance: Political Obstacles to Effective Cooperation

Denis M. Tull

While the security situation in Mali and its border areas continues to deteriorate, the new "Force Conjointe" (FC) of the G5 Sahel states completed its first military operation in mid-November. Its aim is to make a regional contribution to the fight against terrorism and organized crime. A summit was held in Paris on 13 December to mobilise further financial and equipment support for FC. Germany and the EU are strongly committed to this project alongside France. However, efforts to enhance regional armed forces are fraught with problems. International partners prefer a capacity-building approach geared to short-term success over security sector reform and lack a coordinated strategy. The Malian government, on the other hand, preserves the status quo and is not prepared to accept its political responsibility.

The Mali crisis began in 2012 with a separatist rebellion in the north, followed by a military coup in the capital Bamako and the occupation of northern Mali by jihadist groups. Its repercussions have since reached neighbouring countries. The resulting strong military focus of local and international actors will be reinforced by the creation of the FC of the G5 Sahel countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania, Chad). International support for the force follows the well-known maxim "African solutions to African problems". In relation to the FC this amounts to bilateral support for the armed forces in the region: training and equipment to bolster the capabilities of national and hence FC forces. This complements an array of measures already under way, such as the EU's training mission (EUTM Mali), which has been in existence since 2013.

Capacity-Building in Place of Security Sector Reform

Politically speaking, the preference for regional solutions is uncontroversial. It is less clear whether security sector assistance in the guise of train and equip projects offers an efficient path. As an essentially technical approach in core operational areas, security sector assistance covers a wide range of measures from modest tasks (such as training and equipment for mine-clearing, snipers, logistic services) to complex operations.

Dr. Denis M. Tull is currently on leave from SWP, working at the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) in Paris.

However, the results to date are inconclusive. Mali's security forces are probably in better shape today than they were at the time of the 2012 crisis, but the worsening security situation belies at best relative progress. The situation can only improve fundamentally if, among other things, external support moves beyond the current technical and tactical focus and, above all, is designed to be long-term and strategic; that is to say a structural reform of the security sector (army, police, justice). This must include aspects such as the fight against corruption (especially in procurement); professionalisation of recruitment, human resources and career management procedures; and creation of effective structures in administration, logistics and the chain of command. Improved civil-military relations should also be an essential reform objective; at stake here are the primacy of politics, effective parliamentary control, the anchoring of democratic and constitutional norms and human rights standards, etc.

Since the early 2000s, several initiatives on security sector reform (SSR) have been launched in Mali, although none progressed much beyond the discussion stage. The 2012 crisis once again highlighted the urgency of an SSR, and the government elected in 2013 made SSR a priority. The Algiers peace accord of 2015 explicitly states the necessity for a profound SSR. However, as in other fields (such as the fight against corruption), the government has restricted itself to formal technical measures, such as setting up various bodies, including the Conseil National pour la Réforme du Secteur de la Sécurité. Without political backing, however, they remain powerless. Everything suggests that the government gives clear priority to capacity-building over structural reforms. Top of the list are procurement (weapons systems, helicopters, etc.) and recruitment, in line with the 2015 Loi d'orientation et de programmation militaire (LOPM), which provides for military expenditure of about €1.9 billion by 2019.

Overall, the government has thus far shown little interest in substantive reforms aimed at professionalising the security sector. It shares this attitude to a large extent with its international partners. The precarious security situation seems to guide responses on both sides, especially moves towards rapid capacity building, but it is unlikely to solve the security sector's underlying governance problems.

International Partners: Going It Alone

External support for the Malian security sector (from UN, EU, bilateral partners) – whether deeper reform or just capacity-building – can only be effective if it is based on shared goals and strategies. Today, almost six years into the crisis, this is the case to only a very limited extent. To be sure, international partners have massively increased their aid. By the beginning of 2017, they were running no fewer than seventy different projects to assist Mali's security sector (justice, defence, internal security). However, most of these initiatives were not based on concerted action, let alone a common strategy.

There is little coordination between external actors and the Malian side. According to one Malian government official, international partners "do what they want and as they see fit" – without seeking the consent of local authorities. This perception deepens already considerable resentment against international players, and amplifies Malian complaints about international tutelage ("tutelle") and loss of national sovereignty. Some Malian observers self-critically concede that the government has so far failed to provide a framework into which the partners could fit – but they are arguably a minority in Bamako.

There is also little in the way of coordination between international partners themselves, inevitably leading to overlap and duplication. The problem is highlighted by the way some external actors proclaim "coordination" with other donors –

which should be a matter of course – as a distinct project goal.

In addition, mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating training measures are inadequate, absent or simply beyond the ability of partners. For example, EUTM Mali has no means of evaluating the performance or knowing the whereabouts of soldiers who have undergone EUTM training. Indirect insights are provided only by the French antiterrorist operation Barkhane, which accompanies Malian army units in action and can thus provide some feedback to EUTM. Most international partners lack solid evidence for the assumption that more training and equipment increases the effectiveness of Mali's armed forces. The unintended consequences of security sector assistance are also largely unknown. In light of the foreseeable acceleration in support for the G5 FC and its contingents, monitoring and evaluation tools should be strengthened.

Effective Armies: A Shared Goal?

The policy of the international partners seems to follow the assumption that Mali and the other G5 countries are interested in building an effective security sector, in particular armed forces. Such a common interest would vastly enhance the prospects of successfully strengthening and/or reforming the security sector – yet its existence is doubtful, at least in the case of Mali, the epicentre of the regional crisis, but also in Niger.

Firstly, it is questionable whether the Malian government possesses any incentive at all to strengthen and professionalise its army. Historically, it has tended to outsource core state prerogatives. Delegation to intermediary actors is evident in social services, which are to a considerable extent provided by local and international non-governmental organisations, and a similar situation can be observed in the security sector, where Bamako has repeatedly mobilized local militias to fight rebels.

On a larger scale, the French Operation Barkhane can also be regarded as an actor to which security management has been delegated. As long as this heavily armed 4,000-strong mission is present in Mali, and in the other G5 countries, governments will likely consider it an effective security guarantee against possible threats, be they insurgents, jihadists or their own military. In other words, the political and military support of international partners encourages local governments to ignore the consequences of their actions or non-actions.

Secondly, troubled civil-military relations in Mali and Niger raise doubts as to whether their governments actually favour strong, professional armies. Since independence in 1960, Mali and Niger have experienced five failed coups and seven successful ones (most recently in Niger in 2010 and in Mali in 2012).

The influence of the military in the political arena is obvious, and considerable mistrust exists between civilian political elites and military leaders. Developing a professional and relatively autonomous military, independent of political influence, is therefore probably not in the interest of governments. They tend to control the military by patronage and fragmentation wherever possible. The downside of this policy is decreasing combat effectiveness.

Denial of Political Responsibility

Given the steadily deteriorating security situation in Mali and the Sahel, it may seem appropriate to focus outside assistance on the military and security forces in general. But this has also contributed to crowding out discussions about the socio-political dimensions of the crisis. These include the lack of public goods such as rule of law and social services, but also counterproductive crisis management. This is convenient for governments, which face great difficulties in meeting citizens' expectations. By accident or design, the exclusive focus on security threats shrinks public space for the articulation of such demands by citizens; security threats, the state of emergency and

rising expenditure in the security sector serve to legitimize governments' inability to meet voters' expectations.

The Malian government follows this logic of the "evacuation" of endogenous sociopolitical factors when it portrays the crisis as an effect of a global phenomenon (terrorism) or when it attempts to reduce it to primarily exogenous problems afflicting Mali from Algeria and later Libya. The government stigmatizes all violent actors in Mali as "terrorists", "barbarians" and "animals" (President Keïta), who lack rationality and must be fought with military means. As such, the government is shirking its responsibility by ignoring the social and political aspects of the crisis. Paradoxically, the FC-G5 dynamic has a similar impact. The FC may well reflect regional ownership, but seen from Bamako, it also helps to assuage and distract from outside and local concerns about major challenges that are more national than regional: the stagnant peace process, the progressive take-over of the Mopti region by radical Islamists and governance issues in Bamako, which all could have an impact on the 2018 presidential elections.

Conclusion

Strengthening local security forces is essential in the long term to ensure that local solutions take precedence over external actors, whose legitimacy in the region is weak and diminishing. Despite the strong pressure to "do something", a nuanced and coherent approach to security sector assistance should be pursued.

While focusing on the development of military capacities for the Malian army and the G5, the (internal) political dimensions of the crisis should not be forgotten. Apart from the questionable practice of international partners focusing their attention on the military rather than police and gendarmerie, not all violent challengers of the Malian state are jihadists. And not all problems can be solved by repressive means.

In Niger, opinion polls suggest that jihadism is perceived at most as a secondary issue. And in Mali, national debates show that many citizens see political dialogue with violent actors as an option. That notwithstanding, efforts to strengthen local security forces should take the political context more seriously than has been the case so far with tactically oriented capacity-building.

Fostering a still hesitant debate on security sector reform, cooperating with drivers of a reform discourse, and patient efforts to persuade the government of the reform agenda should complement and in the medium term replace capacity-building – even if this will meet with resistance: in Mali and among international partners. Their own credibility depends on the fact that German, European and international players seek dialogue with each other and, above all, with Malian partners. Ultimately the aim should be bring the countless initiatives together in a coordinated and reform-oriented approach that seeks structural changes and promotes the legitimacy of the security forces and thus of the state. Mali is far from unique in this regard, but that does not make the challenge less urgent.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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