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Lessons to be learned: Germany's crisis management in Mali (2013-2023)

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SWP Research Paper

Denis M. Tull

Lessons to Be Learned: Germany's Crisis Management in Mali (2013 – 2023)

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

SWP Research Paper 18
December 2024, Berlin

- Germany was heavily involved in international crisis management in Mali for ten years, from 2013 to 2023. Important lessons can be drawn for effective and adaptive foreign and security policy, in particular concerning Germany's internal structures and processes.
- Germany's engagement in Mali was shaped by its commitments to allies and the United Nations. This was a legitimate interest, but left Berlin without strategic goals of its own in Mali.
- The lack of strategic and political orientation has resulted in less than optimal use of the very substantial resources invested. Interministerial cooperation failed to meet expectations, despite a number of new instruments (including in security force assistance) and institutional innovations (the Sahel Task Force, CIVAD).
- Although Germany's participation in MINUSMA was operationally successful, it was inadequately anchored politically and strategically. MINUSMA as a whole failed to achieve its political goals.
- In the field of crisis management, Germany's organisational learning processes occur mainly from one deployment to the next, less so during a given operation. Despite the duration of the Mali engagement, learning and adjustment processes occurred only at the operational-tactical level. Fundamental course corrections were not made, despite the obvious need to do so. Interministerial cooperation was insufficient to facilitate effective strategy-building. The learning culture within and between government departments proved inadequate.

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Lessons to Be Learned: Germany's Crisis Management in Mali (2013–2023)

Mali was a key focus of German foreign and security policy over the past decade. The engagement began in 2013 and was initially limited in size. But between 2017 and 2023 it became the largest foreign deployment of the German armed forces, with over 1,100 soldiers serving in UN and EU missions. Like Afghanistan, Mali represents a test case for Germany's capacity to engage in crisis management with an integrated approach involving multiple government departments.

This review of the ten-year engagement finds that the German and international responses to the crisis were unsatisfactory overall. It identifies strengths, weaknesses and potential improvements, and outlines the central parameters — strategic capability, integrated approaches and interministerial coordination in the multinational context — that are relevant for future crisis management and for the effective organisation of national and collective defence.

Rather than seeking to analyse the impact of German policy in Mali, the study focuses on the functioning of the German crisis management apparatus, examining selected areas and topics. The conclusions have broader implications for German foreign and security policy. The analysis traces connections from overarching strategic issues to concepts, instruments, and learning processes, thereby generating political and operational lessons.

First of all, it is encouraging that the progress made in German crisis management over recent years was also reflected in Mali. This involved novel concepts such as the integrated approach and a diverse range of instruments, including security force assistance and stabilisation. Furthermore, the three relevant ministries — the Federal Foreign Office (AA), the Federal Ministry of Defence (BMVg) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) — demonstrated remarkable perseverance and committed considerable funding. Total expenditure exceeded €5 billion.

However, more does not always mean better. The ministries struggled to develop operationalisable targets and to provide an appropriate strategic framework to match Germany's substantial financial com-

mitment. Strategic shortcomings limited effectiveness and impact. The extensive measures adopted were often only vaguely related to the proclaimed objective of stability and peace. Apart from the Bundeswehr's mandate in MINUSMA, the German engagement was not clearly defined. Only after 2020, towards the end of the intervention, did Berlin attempt to formulate a strategic framework. But by that point — seven years after the initial deployment — the intervention had become mired in path dependencies.

Despite the introduction of certain helpful institutional innovations, such as the Sahel interministerial task force and the SFA initiative, which has become a flagship of interministerial crisis response, operationalisation of the integrated approach did not progress as hoped. This is rather surprising given that the integrated approach is firmly established in the German discourse and within the ministries.

Participation in MINUSMA was a sound decision from a foreign policy perspective, and Germany's engagement was undoubtedly successful from an operational standpoint, even if the UN intervention as a whole failed to achieve its political objectives. What was missing was a strategic foundation in the form of a clear, compelling narrative on the objectives and limitations of Germany's involvement in MINUSMA. Germany was a prominent international actor in both bilateral and multilateral contexts, but its influence on the strategic direction of the intervention was limited. In the initial stages, this was largely due to Berlin's alliance rationale of the intervention, which appeared to render the development of a national strategic framework unnecessary.

Although a decade of involvement in Mali should have provided sufficient time for learning and adaptation processes, these largely failed to materialise even as the situation deteriorated from 2017 onwards. Apart from making a few operational adjustments, Germany's response was largely to stay the course and double down on its commitment and contribution. But frequent assertions that Germany was "doing a lot" evaded the hard question of why outcomes were inadequate and learning and adaptation insufficient. Government officials themselves point to the discrepancy between the magnitude of the German crisis response and its results. From an institutional perspective, the German apparatus is not yet adequately structured to facilitate effective intra- and interministerial learning and adaptation processes. There are almost no established procedures or structures for collective learning. Staff exchanges between ministries are rare, while frequent rotations within ministries erode institutional memory. Evaluations are still uncommon, particularly in the Foreign Office and the Defence Ministry. Furthermore, as civil servants confirm, an organisational culture that encourages learning from mistakes has yet to be established.

Recommendations:

- The Bundestag should task the relevant ministries to conduct a joint evaluation of their engagement in Mali, in order to identify shortcomings and lessons for future decision-making. Comparing these with the extensive findings of the Enquête Commission on Afghanistan would enhance their robustness.
- The Bundestag should demand greater accountability from the ministries. To encourage strategic orientation and a fully integrated approach, it would be appropriate to revisit the concept of interministerial mandates. This should address the current imbalanced focus on the Bundeswehr and strengthen the accountability of the Foreign Office and the Development Ministry, as well as supporting parliamentary engagement with the integrated approach.
- Interministerial crisis management should be revamped using positive and negative incentives. The establishment of country-specific interministerial task forces is useful, provided that they are endowed with the political leverage to oversee strategic processes. It would be worthwhile to consider joint and more flexible budgeting for priority countries. This approach needs to build on realistic, comprehensible and operationalisable country strategies. At the very latest when a crisis becomes a political priority in Berlin, a country strategy should be developed, subject to regular review and adjustments. At the same time, the ministries concerned should collectively implement specific measures to reinforce their learning culture and infrastructure.

Goals and Strategic Capability

Any assessment of Germany's crisis engagement in Mali must begin with an understanding of the goals that the German government set itself. Goals are obviously instrumental in shaping and implementing a strategy. It is essential that the link between actions and objectives is clearly understood. In Mali the evident shortcomings in both objectives and strategy arguably diminished the impact of Germany's significant commitment. A strategic approach was eventually developed to address the discrepancy between declared and actual motives and objectives — roughly seven years after the start of the intervention.

The real motives: Supporting allies and the UN

Although the German government justified its involvement in Mali in terms that emphasised the importance of the country and the region (Sahel, West Africa), the initial engagement was primarily guided by objectives that had little to do with Mali.[1] This at least is the view of multiple German government officials, who point out that Berlin was driven by two basic motives. Firstly, it was a matter of alliance politics and solidarity with France, which sought a strong commitment from its partners — both bilaterally and within EU and UN frameworks — for the French military intervention that began in January 2013 (Operation Serval). Germany's second motivation was to strengthen the UN and the multilateral order, hand in hand with German ambitions to play a more active role in international politics (the discourse on "international responsibility"). Germany's participation in EUTM Mali, which operated under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), was complementary to both motives: Berlin supported France, contributed to implementing the EU's foreign and security policy, and — in the case of MINUSMA — demonstrated its multilateralism.

The significance of these motives was heightened around 2015/16. The German government's decision in early 2016 to run for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) for 2019/20 led to an increase in German contributions to MINUSMA.[2] The size of the German contingent in MINUSMA increased from ten in January 2016 to 559 in December 2016 and finally to almost 1,000 in 2017. Secondly, following the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, the French government invoked the EU's mutual assistance clause (Article 42 (7) of the Treaty on the European Union) and requested support to fight the so-called Islamic State in Iraq/Syria and elsewhere. While Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen linked continuing German involvement in the anti-IS coalition in northern Iraq and a potential expansion of German activities in Mali to the French request for assistance,[3] such unequivocal positioning by the German government remained the exception.[4] In light of the role of UN and alliance considerations, one could argue that the presence itself was the objective.[5]

1 On the basis of statements made by ministers and state secretaries from the foreign and defence ministries during the annual Bundestag debate on the EUTM and MINUSMA mandates (2013—2023).

2 Deutsche Gesellschaft für die Vereinten Nationen (DGVN), "Deutschland strebt erneute Kandidatur für den UN-Sicherheitsrat an", 24 March 2016, https://dgvn.de/meldung/deutschland-strebt-erneute-kandidatur-fuer-den-un-sicherheitsrat-an (all websites listed in the footnotes were last accessed on 13 September 2024).

3 Nina Werkhäuser, "German Army Support for France", *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, 17 November 2015, https://www.dw.com/en/german-military-could-support-france-in-anti-terror-efforts/a-18856741.

4 Members of the Bundestag, on the other hand, have put forward this argument several times.

5 This confirms earlier findings. Christian Patz, "Peacekeeping Labor Mali: Deutschland und der MINUSMA Einsatz", *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen* 3, no. 4 (2019): 339—61; Wolfram Lacher, *Unser schwieriger Partner: Deutschlands und Frankreichs erfolgloses Engagement in Libyen und Mali*, SWP-Studie 3/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2021); Markus Kaim, *Die deutsche Politik im VN-Peacekeeping:*

Throughout the decade the official German narrative revolved around the crisis within the country and the broader Sahel, emphasising the risks to Europe's security (illegal migration, instability, terrorism).

Countries often participate in multilateral missions for reasons that have little to do with the target country (for example alliance politics). Afghanistan is a case in point. Similar instances are found in the Sahel, with the participation of eastern and northern European states in the French-led Operation Barkhane and Task Force Takuba.[6] Moreover, the Belgian, Dutch and Swedish contributions to MINUSMA were themselves linked to bids for a seat on the UN Security Council.[7] It is not unusual for a single mission to pursue multiple, more or less compatible objectives. This is exemplified by the Dutch MINUSMA participation.[8]

Germany's alliance politics and the UN's objectives in Mali were both justifiable and legitimate. And it can be argued that Berlin achieved its primary foreign policy goals during the first few years of the intervention — even if it is fair to say that it achieved relatively little in terms of stabilisation on the ground. The bid for a Security Council seat was successful, and the UN and in particular its peacekeeping were reinforced by German (and European) participation. Berlin fulfilled its obligations to France[9] without any major military contribution, which Paris had not seriously expected anyway.[10]

This leads to two interim conclusions. First, Germany's engagement in Mali cannot be assessed solely in terms of stabilisation, at least not in the early stages of the intervention. The goals and criteria required to do so were simply lacking. In principle, alliance politics and UN goals are compatible with stabilisation efforts in Mali. In this particular case, however, there is good reason to suspect that their predominance hampered Germany's willingness to strategically orient its own actions. The lack of clearly identified interests in Mali itself contributed to the very late and ultimately inadequate development of an overarching narrative. The lack of appropriately defined strategic objectives and their operationalisation probably meant that the extensive resources that Germany invested in Mali were used ineffectively and inefficiently.

A German strategy for Mali?

From 2016/17 objectives directly relating to Mali itself gradually assumed greater importance in the discourse and practice of German policymakers. Chancellor Angela Merkel firmly pursued this stance, identifying migration from Africa as the most significant challenge for the EU in light of the refugee situation in Germany at the time. She focused on Mali and the Sahel region.[11] So migration and refugee movements formed the central argument for German engagement, alongside terrorism. Yet Mali was not an important country of origin or transit for migration, and there is still no reliable evidence of terrorist links to Europe. Thus a narrative was crafted that was largely "decoupled" from realities in Mali, and was never subjected to rigorous scrutiny, not even within the government.[12]

Did Germany have a clear understanding of its own priorities? And did it have a suitable strategy in and

Eine Dienerin vieler Herren, SWP-Studie 7/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2021).

6 Denis M. Tull, "France and the Rest: Testing Alliances in Europe by Providing Security in the Sahel", in *Sahel: 10 Years of Instability – Local, Regional and International Dynamics*, ed. Giovanni Carbone and Camillo Casola (Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies [ISPI], 2022), 101–16, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/sahel-10-years-instability-local-regional-and-international-dynamics-36174.

7 Arthur Boutellis and Michael Beary, *Sharing the Burden: Lessons from the European Return to Multidimensional Peacekeeping* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2020), 2, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/European-Canadian_Final.pdf.

8 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, *A Mission within a Mission: The Contribution of the Netherlands to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) 2014–2019* (The Hague: Policy and Operations Evaluation Department [IOB], September 2022), 12, https://www.iob-evaluatie.nl/binaries/iob-evaluatie/documenten/rapporten/2022/09/30/evaluatie-nederlandse-bijdrage-minusma/ENG+Summary+%E2%80%93+A+mission+within+a+mission.pdf.

9 As acknowledged by Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian; see for example Anne Bauer, "Défense: Paris et Berlin créent une base aérienne commune à Evreux", *Les Echos*, 10 April 2017; Patz, "Peacekeeping Labor" (see note 5), 357.

10 For a different take, see Kaim, *Die deutsche Politik im VN-Peacekeeping* (see note 5), 27.

11 "Merkel: 'Afrika ist das zentrale Problem'", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 June 2016; Stephan Detjen, "Merkel in Afrika: 'Wohl Afrikas liegt im deutschen Interesse'", *Deutschlandfunk*, 9 October 2016.

12 Interview with Bundestag deputy, 24 January 2024 (quote); interview with government official, 11 January 2024.

for Mali, with defined and operationalised goals? Given the involvement of multiple ministries in Mali, particularly the Foreign Office, the Development Ministry and the Defence Ministry, a joint concept would have been required to shape a unified understanding of the problem at hand and — following an integrated approach — to define strategic priorities for Germany's engagement. A stronger strategic focus would also have been necessary for reasons of effectiveness and efficiency. Between 2013 and 2023, the three German ministries spent at least €5.1 billion on Mali, an average of around €463 million per year.[13] This was an impressive budget, although significantly lower than for Afghanistan, where €865 million was spent annually from 2001 to 2021.[14]

The justification for Germany's involvement in Mali was constructed ex post.

The German government only began preparing a series of strategy papers on Mali and the Sahel in 2020. The delay suggests that Mali policy had until then been driven largely by bureaucratic processes, and therefore lacked political guidance. Even then, the impetus for strategising seemed to come primarily from the Bundestag, which was increasingly alarmed by the situation in the country.[15] This was not unrelated to parallel developments in Afghanistan, where the Bundeswehr's other major foreign deployment ended in failure in summer 2021.[16] Finally, the foreseeable reduction of the French military presence in Mali also played a role, as it raised security and safety questions for the German MINUSMA contingent in Gao in northern Mali (where Barkhane also had its main base). Against this backdrop, parliament was central in pushing the ministries to come up with a strategic concept for Mali and the Sahel. Seven years after it began, Germany's crisis response in Mali found its Mali-centred rationale only in retrospect, or at least rather late in the day. From then on, it was much more oriented towards goals in the country itself.

The government's discussions on Germany's role in Mali and the Sahel resulted in three strategy papers between March 2020 and May 2023. The first was a detailed report to parliament that outlined the government's perspective for the first time.[17] While the report was sanguine about the situation on the ground, it expressed optimism about Bamako's commitment to various reforms including demobilisation and reintegration of combatants (DDR), security sector reform (SSR), constitutional reform and decentralisation. The report also noted that President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's authority had been "essentially consolidated".[18] Mass protests against the Malian government began just a few weeks later, ultimately leading to Keita's overthrow by the military in August 2020. Like Paris, Berlin was caught off guard by the coup.

The 2020 report to parliament also provided a comprehensive account of Germany's multifaceted and "integrated" engagement, largely in terms of the output dimension, to demonstrate German activism in Mali. The document did not present a strategic approach in the strict sense of the term, nor did it elucidate what resources and measures were required to achieve which goals, nor did it indicate which means and actions could produce the desired outcomes. Its thinking was predicated on the assumption that the solution was to strengthen the Malian state. The mounting tensions between Malian and external partners were not mentioned. The paper emphasised Malian ownership but failed to address the implications of its consistent absence. Furthermore, the paper failed to consider whether the very extensive international presence in the country, comprising military, development and diplomatic actors, was possibly impeding the very ownership it sought to promote.

13 Deutscher Bundestag, *Das deutsche Engagement in Mali*, Drucksache 20/867 (Berlin, 27 February 2022), 4, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/008/2000867.pdf, updated using figures from Deutscher Bundestag, *Schriftliche Fragen*, Drucksache 20/9004 (Berlin, 27 October 2023), 63, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/090/2009004.pdf.

14 "Afghanistan-Einsatz kostete mehr als 17,3 Milliarden Euro", *Zeit Online*, 5 October 2021.

15 Interview with government official, 12 December 2023.

16 Several parliamentary groups in the Bundestag presented Mali and Sahel papers in quick succession: CDU/CSU in May 2020, Alliance 90/The Greens in November 2020, the SPD in February 2021 and the FDP in March 2021.

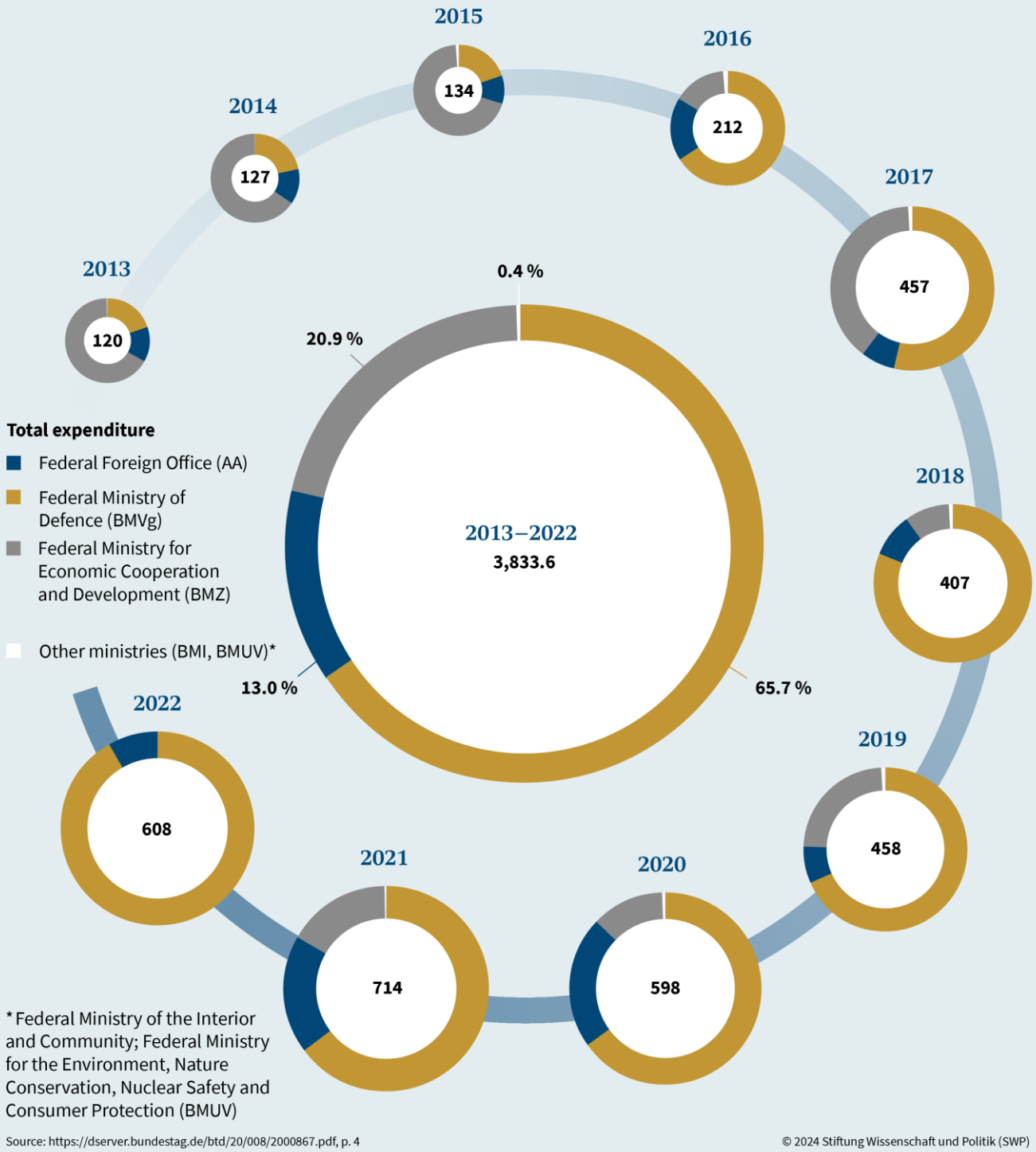
17 Deutscher Bundestag, *Bericht der Bundesregierung zur Lage und zum deutschen Engagement in Mali/Sahel: Aktuelle Lage, Ziele und Handlungsfelder des deutschen Engagements*, Drucksache 19/18080 (Berlin, 25 March 2020), https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/19/180/1918080.pdf.

18 Ibid., 6f. (quote 6); Christian Klatt, "Eruption der Gewalt in Mali", *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*, 6 July 2020, https://www.ipg-journal.de/regionen/afrika/artikel/eruption-der-gewalt-in-mali-4511/.

Figure 1

German government engagement in Mali by ministry (2013–2022)

Figures in millions of euros, by year



Source: https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/008/2000867.pdf, p. 4

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Above all, however, Berlin did not say what a German or international course correction in the Sahel might look like, which would have been an obvious step in view of the steadily worsening situation since 2017. Last but not least, the effects and limits of Germany's own approach, including the UN and EU mis-

sions and Germany's participation in them, were largely ignored. The two subsequent German government strategy papers of February 2021 and May 2023 only partially addressed these deficits. Although they were more goal- and result-oriented (with talk of "benchmarks", "overall objectives" and "sub-targets"), they did not constitute actual strategies — as noted by several government officials.[19] National interests were described only in very broad terms, and the goals to be pursued in Mali remained relatively general.[20] Nor was there any plausible explanation of how German actions were supposed to contribute to achieving goals that were simultaneously vague and ambitious.[21] The document did not offer a forward looking perspective. Instead, it was focussed on the status quo and the ways and means of German involvement.

Overall, the strategy papers appeared to be geared towards national audiences, the Bundestag in particular, rather than providing strategic and operational guidance.

All in all, the lack of a strategic framework meant that Germany deployed its wide range of instruments and projects relatively arbitrarily and with little coherence. It is possible and indeed likely that individual measures may have had positive effects. But without an integrated approach capable of achieving synergies they are likely to have remained too isolated and localised to further the overarching goals of peace and stability.

A lack of strategy capability

Although many government officials interviewed for this study agreed that Germany lacked an adequate strategic framework in Mali, the apparatus was unable to overcome this challenge. What factors account for this seeming paradox?

To begin with, initial international successes in 2013 to 2015 contributed to overoptimism and an assumption that Germany's engagement could be reduced relatively quickly.[22] As a result, Berlin's objectives for stabilisation and peacebuilding were vague — in contrast to the quite specific motives that policy-makers invoked to justify German involvement, such as countering migration and combatting terrorism. There was no plausible connection between the stated motives and German action on the ground, neither bilaterally nor within the framework of EUTM Mali and MINUSMA.[23] This demonstrated the cognitive dissonance within the German discourse justifying involvement.

A second factor that hampered strategic thinking was the aforementioned prevalence of motives that had little to do with the Mali crisis, at least during the initial phase of the intervention. Objectives and requirements were not derived from the situation in Mali. Instead, mere participation in international stabilisation efforts was deemed sufficient proof of solidarity with partners and international burden-sharing. Consequently, for a long time Berlin did not see the need to define operational goals in Mali itself.[24] This raises the question of whether the ever-growing engagement in Mali was commensurate with the relatively limited objectives and whether solidarity with allies and support for the UN could not have been achieved with lesser means.

A third factor was the international embedding of Germany's crisis response. The failure to shape, and if necessary correct, the French-dominated international approach has also been acknowledged by government officials.[25] This echoes the experience in Afghanistan. The limited military contributions of Germany and other junior partners restricted their political influence on the overarching international strategy, which was formulated by the coalition leader, in this case France.[26] In any case, debates in Berlin revolved

19 *Strategische Ausrichtung des Sahel-Engagements* (Berlin, 2021); *Neubestimmung und Anpassung des Sahel-Engagements der Bundesregierung* (Berlin, 2023). Both papers are unpublished. See Deutscher Bundestag, "Bundesregierung will Engagement in Mali fortsetzen", press release, 13 September 2023, https://www.bundestag.de/presse/hib/kurzmeldungen-967116.

20 *Neubestimmung und Anpassung des Sahel-Engagements* (see note 19), 2.

21 Ibid.

22 Notable early achievements included the rapid successes of the French Operation Serval, the political rapprochement between the civil war parties with the Treaty of Ouagadougou, the holding of elections (all in 2013) and finally the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement.

23 The German contribution to the European civilian mission EUCAP Sahel Mali was small (2022: 10 police). Deutscher Bundestag, *Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Sevim Dağdelen, Ali Al-Dailami, Żaklin Nastić und der Fraktion Die Linke*, Drucksache 20/4957 (Berlin, 13 December 2022), 1, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/049/2004957.pdf.

24 Lacher, *Unser schwieriger Partner* (see note 5).

25 Interview with government official, 1 November 2023.

26 See Philipp Rotmann, "Schluss mit dem Autopiloten! Gute Krisenpolitik fährt nicht von allein", *49security*, 2 March

around the idea that solidarity and burden-sharing with France were a major driving force behind German actions in Mali.[27] Those who viewed this as a pivotal factor were compelled to conclude that Germany's rather passive posture was intentional and consistent with its foreign policy objectives. This, in conjunction with the presumed superiority of French knowledge and expertise, resulted in a self-imposed restraint vis-à-vis Paris.[28] The German embassy in Bamako continued to advocate for a more independent stance on Mali and the Sahel. This position gradually gained traction within the ministries in Berlin, but remained a point of internal contention due to the overarching importance of Franco-German relations.[29] The Sahel was a priority for Paris, but not for Berlin.

There was little appetite for laborious interministerial discussions.

Even once the idea that a strategic concept for Mali and the Sahel was necessary and desirable had become accepted, work to develop an ambitious strategy still encountered resistance. The ministries were reluctant to engage in time-consuming interministerial discussions.[30] Diplomats in the Foreign Office were concerned that such a strategy might include goals that would be difficult to meet. The more specific, targeted and impact-oriented such a strategy was, the more the ministries would be held accountable for results and failures. Others argued that a detailed framework was not desirable in light of the fluid situation in Mali, contending that a concrete strategy might place constraints on political flexibility. Avoiding conflicts between ministries may also have played a role. Consider the debate about how to engage with the Sahel's military juntas. Should Berlin join Paris in isolating the new rulers internationally? Or should it consider offering cooperation at the risk of conflict with Paris? There was little consensus within the German government on this issue, nor even within individual ministries. Given that background, it is perhaps no surprise that building a Sahel strategy was not a priority for senior policymakers. The Federal Chancellery intervened in Mali policy on an ad hoc basis, but generally left it to "the interplay between government departments".[31]

In conclusion, the evidence presented here reveals a contradictory picture of Germany's strategic capability. While the proponents of an ambitious strategic orientation undoubtedly existed within the ministries, a lack of political guidance meant that inertia prevailed and Mali policy remained in the grip of the "bureaucratic autopilot". This was due to the undeniable advantages that bureaucratic routine offers: maximum flexibility in the face of significant uncertainties and limited prospects of success. It also helped to avoid conflicts in interministerial cooperation. Finally, strategic vagueness meant that the Bundestag, the media and the public were unable to actually assess the actions of government departments in terms of specific objectives and results.

2023, https://fourninesecurity.de/2023/03/02/schluss-mit-dem-autopiloten-gute-krisenpolitik-faehrt-nicht-von-allein.

27 Lacher, *Unser schwieriger Partner* (see note 5).

28 Interview with Bundestag deputy, 24 January 2024; interview with government official, 2 October 2023.

29 It was only from around 2020 that independent positions and ideas were articulated and expressed. This was due to doubts about the course being expressed by many partners and France encountering difficulties in its relations with the Sahel states.

30 Interview with government official, 26 September 2023.

31 Interview with government official, 17 December 2021, 22 August 2023.

The Integrated Approach: Chasing Utopia?

Officials regularly mentioned the need for an approach that effectively integrates civilian and military instruments.[32] But many also conceded significant limitations in practice. At the bureaucratic working level, strong interministerial information exchange, consultation and coordination still runs up against the logics and priorities of the individual ministries. Add to this a relative lack of political guidance in defining strategic priorities for the government as a whole and it becomes clear why German policy in Mali remained largely reactive. As one interviewee put it, "we never managed to ride the wave, let alone get ahead of it".[33] The persistent discrepancy between ambition and practice seems difficult to resolve. And there were frequent calls to "force" interministerial collaboration by using positive or negative incentives to promote joint institutions (formats, procedures, instruments).

Country strategies represent one obvious instrument to achieve this.[34] But that would necessitate a strategy process that is more than a mere bureaucratic routine ending with the lowest common denominator. *Real* strategies could provide a useful framework for promoting a shared interministerial understanding concerning assumptions, objectives and planned action for regions that are expected to become foreign and security policy priorities. In this respect Mali represents a step backwards compared to Afghanistan. A concept for Afghanistan — albeit not a country strategy — was developed relatively early in 2003, two years after the start of the intervention.[35] The Bundestag should request country strategies and detailed situation and progress reports, similar to those for Afghanistan between 2010 and 2014.

Yet some diplomats think that written country strategies have "only limited impact on political practice anyway" or even dismiss them as an academic exercise.[36] One thing is clear: strategies will not be an effective guide in the absence of institutions and procedures to operationalise their implementation. One ambitious step could be joint, multi-year country budgets, which would have to finance large parts of Germany's involvement in a specific crisis. As well as a financing mechanism, a country budget would create an institutional framework to force the ministries into joint strategic planning. The cooperation between the Foreign Office and the Defence Ministry on security force assistance ("Ertüchtigung") could serve as a model. At the same time, Mali has shown that jointly managed instruments do not automatically lead to joint action. Likewise, the impact of the Joint Analysis and Coordinated Planning instrument (Gemeinsame Analyse und abgestimmte Planung, GAAP) introduced in 2020 remains limited, especially as it has to date only been applied in two ministries, namely the Foreign Office and Development Ministry.[37] At least in the 2021—2023 period no GAAP was carried out for Mali.

In Mali, diverging assessments from different ministries exposed the need for more ambitious integra-

32 See also Simone Schnabel and Antonia Witt, *Friedenspolitische Kohärenz im deutschen Regierungshandeln: Lehren aus Mali und Niger*, Studie 5 (Beirat der Bundesregierung Zivile Krisenprävention und Friedensförderung, 2022), 11.

33 Interview with a development actor, 2 February 2024.

34 Schnabel and Witt, *Friedenspolitische Kohärenz* (see note 32), 12; Julian Bergmann, "Kohärenz stärken: wie ein integrierter Ansatz in der deutschen Afrikapolitik gelingen kann", *Joint Futures Blog*, 13 December 2023, https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/publikation/mta-joint-futures-34-ein-integrierter-ansatz-fuer-die-deutsche-afrikapolitik.

35 Winfried Nachtwei, "Lehren aus deutschen Krisenengagements gibt es reichlich — aber auch Lernfortschritte?" *Sirius* 3, no. 4 (2019): 362—77 (369).

36 Interviews with government officials, 11 January 2024, 22 August 2023.

37 Bundesrechnungshof, *Bericht an den Haushaltsausschuss des Deutschen Bundestages nach § 88 Abs. 2 BHO über die Humanitäre Hilfe und Übergangshilfe einschließlich der Schnittstellen Krisenprävention, Krisenreaktion, Stabilisierung und Entwicklungszusammenarbeit* (Potsdam, 2020), 14.

tion efforts. The Defence Ministry complained repeatedly that the diplomats were being overoptimistic, euphemistic or unrealistic.[38] The disparities reflected the different timeframes and aims of the ministries.[39] On account of its security focus and detailed mission mandates, the Defence Ministry works to shorter timeframes than the Foreign Office and the Development Ministry, whose horizons are medium-term and long-term respectively. The GAAP therefore needs to be extended to the Defence Ministry and possibly other ministries. At the same time, an expanded GAAP will not solve the problem of a lack of political objectives. Only when these have been defined at the top can the working levels begin to work on the concept of a common operationalisation for all ministries.

It is undeniable that the ministries put a great deal of effort into coordination and co-signing processes in Mali. In-country coordination and planning in Bamako were practised within the framework of an institutionalised format ("Nord-Runde"). And a Foreign Office-funded civilian advisor in Gao (CIVAD), who advised the Bundeswehr contingent and the German embassy, served as an interface. Most officials praised this as an innovative and useful instrument for operationalising the integrated approach. On the ground, the CIVAD was able to contribute to a joint assessment of the situation and assist with management of civilian instruments.

At the same time, however, this innovation also revealed the limits of integration. Some German development cooperation actors feared a loss of autonomy and excessive proximity to the military contingent.[40] Additionally, there is an obvious discrepancy between the usefulness of the CIVAD as a nodal point of the integrated approach, as acknowledged by all sides, and the fact that the German government only deployed a single CIVAD to Gao. The United Kingdom, the Netherlands and even France had more personnel with similar profiles. At times, London had three CIVADs on the ground. In crisis countries where Germany is heavily involved, there is a strong case to be made for sending more staff from the respective ministerial headquarters and giving them more decision-making authority. The issue of inadequate staffing at key hubs also emerged in connection with Germany's security force assistance tool ("Ertüchtigung").

There was also constant interministerial coordination in Berlin. At the decision-making level, Mali was temporarily addressed by the State Secretaries' Round Table, which was originally dedicated only to Afghanistan. After the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, this group was soon dissolved. That reflects Mali's lower priority compared to Afghanistan, despite its major Bundeswehr deployment.

The most prominent format for interministerial cooperation and institutional innovation was the Sahel Task Force (AS Sahel), composed of representatives from the Foreign Office, the Defence Ministry and the Development Ministry.[41] But it was only established in 2019, relatively late in the process. This mirrors the delay in producing interministerial strategy papers (from 2020). The AS Sahel only partly fulfilled expectations. While it did manage coordination processes at the working level, almost all interviewees noted that the AS Sahel was unable to serve a strategic political function — which would have meant operationalising Mali policy across ministries, implementing it and providing strategic direction where necessary.[42]

The reason for this was that the AS lacked the necessary authority and responsibility. From the point of view of Development Ministry and Defence Ministry representatives, it was not an interministerial institution, but a "unit" of the Foreign Office. Within the Foreign Office, in turn, the task force was only one voice among many, not "primus inter pares". The AS Sahel lacked the political weight to formulate strategic guidance vis-à-vis other desks and divisions that also had a stake in Mali policy (UN, EU & CSDP, Stabilisation). Even after its establishment, Mali policy lacked political direction, according to many officials in Berlin and Bamako.[43]

This clearly suggests that the challenges regarding strategy and coherence should not be reduced to the *cross-ministerial* dimension. Coherence *within* the individual ministries cannot be taken for granted either.

38 Interviews with government officials, 26 September 2023, 12 October 2023.

39 Gerrit Kurtz, "Mehr als eine bürokratische Pflichtübung: Ressortgemeinsamkeit in der zivilen Konfliktbearbeitung", *PeaceLab*, 28 April 2021, https://peacelab.blog/2021/04/mehr-als-eine-buerokratische-pflichtuebung-ressortgemeinsamkeit-in-der-zivilen-konfliktbearbeitung.

40 Interview with government official, 3 April 2024.

41 The "Afghanistan/Pakistan" and "Ebola" (West Africa) working groups were precedents.

42 As noted by Schnabel and Witt, *Friedenspolitische Kohärenz* (see note 32).

43 Interview with government official, 12 December 2023; interview with government official, 23 August 2023.

Bureaucratic specialisation and differentiation means that multiple units of one and the same ministry have a seat at the table. For example, within the Foreign Office the Sahel task force had to coordinate internally with the Africa Division, the UN and CSDP desks, and several units of the Stabilisation Division, which have more political weight in the internal hierarchy (UN, EU) or more resources (Stabilisation Division). The degree of complexity within the Defence Ministry is comparable (country division, stabilisation, strategy and deployment, mandating, CSDP).[44] The different responsibilities, logics and resources of the various units within the institutions make it difficult to develop and operationalise strategy. The AS Sahel, for example, was supposed to steer Sahel policy, but like other country units it had no resources of its own with which to back up the policy. This illustrates the price of increasing differentiation of institutions and instruments, namely the increasing complexity of ensuring the harmonisation, coordination and steering that are necessary to bring the vision of integration to life. The more entities, departments and ministries are involved, the more coordination effort is required, without necessarily producing strategic guidelines. In many cases the lowest common denominator is likely to be the result.

A task force such as the AS Sahel is a meaningful innovation if it represents more than just another player in the concert of coordination. In other words, if it is granted clear responsibility to guide interministerial policy. Since the creation of such a unit identifies a region or country as a priority, at least temporarily, this should also be accompanied by sufficient staffing and the appointment of a high-ranking official at the top. This is indispensable to provide the AS with the necessary weight to enforce guidance within the Foreign Office and between the ministries. Such a working group should integrate country expertise from different ministries, but also knowledge from the specialised sections responsible for the use of instruments and funds.

Another problem that became apparent in Mali is the danger of overblown expectations. In the German discourse, the effectiveness attributed to the integrated approach is exaggerated in almost every respect. It is an ideal. Even if it were possible to implement it comprehensively, it could never be applied effectively everywhere, at least not in a large country like Mali.

While the German activities concentrated around the Bundeswehr base in Gao were at least partially interlinked, this does not appear to have been the result of a strategic discussion about whether and for what purpose the German government should prioritise Gao and the surrounding area. In terms of the effectiveness of the integrated approach, it makes sense to define spatial priorities — and thus also boundaries. These need to be communicated to national and international partners to create realistic expectations. Overall, Germany still has a long way to go on the road to an integrated, internally coherent approach.

44 This refers to the situation until 2023. An organisational reform was carried out in the Defence Ministry in spring 2024.

Security Force Assistance: Room for Improvement

The field of security force assistance ("Ertüchtigung", EIBReg) reveals the strengths and weaknesses of Germany's crisis management. Significant funding, diverse instruments and a strong focus on the needs of partner countries contrast with inadequate strategic orientation. What Germany wanted to achieve with its assistance in Mali, how this was linked to the overarching German involvement and how individual EIBReg projects fitted into the overall picture all remained fairly vague. EIBReg projects were also insufficiently linked with broader bilateral security measures and CSDP missions. On a positive note, this link was partially implemented — albeit only from 2021 and therefore at a late stage.

Measures to strengthen military and security forces are a growing field nationally and internationally. Assistance to foster capacity-building and local ownership are the buzzwords. Almost all of the EU's CSDP missions since 2006 have focused on training, including two in Mali (EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali).[45] In 2016 Germany created its own instrument, the EIBReg, to "sustainably support the security sector of partner countries and thus make Germany and Europe more secure".[46] As well as the traditional security assistance measures — advice, training, non-lethal equipment and infrastructure — EIBReg also allows arms to be supplied. Focussing on both security and defence, Germany's EIBReg explicitly follows the guiding principle of integrated security, under which actors, means and instruments should synergise. This is reflected institutionally, with the Foreign Office and the Defence Ministry sharing responsibility for identifying and funding EIBReg projects.

In Mali, Germany carried out far more than just EIBReg projects in the narrow sense of the term. Apart from its participation in EUTM and — to a much lesser extent — EUCAP Sahel Mali, Berlin implemented further security and defence measures in addition to the actual EIBReg projects. The Bundeswehr Advisory Group, which has been engaged in efforts to enhance Malian capacities in the domain of logistics since the 1970s through the German Equipment Assistance Programme (AHP), represents the longest-standing initiative.[47] Five members of the Bundeswehr were in Mali from 2013 to 2023 under this programme. There was also a comprehensive training and education programme for the Malian army. In 2021 it included more than thirty slots for Malian officers to participate in officer training courses, specialist training and study programmes in Germany (short and multi-month to multi-year). In addition, a German officer was sent as an advisor to the regional École de Maintien de la Paix (EMP) in Bamako in 2016, and later assigned to the Malian Ministry of Defence.[48]

There is no publicly available overview of the volume and scope of EIBReg projects. Since 2016, the commitment has created a broad spectrum of predominantly military projects (approximately 80 per cent of expenditure), including biological security (as part of the G5 Sahel regional organisation), border management and security, personal equipment for soldiers (boots, helmets, body armour), support for military justice, construction of ammunition bunkers, and stockpile security and management in the area of

45 For detailed information on the problems of EUTM Mali: Denis M. Tull, *The European Union Training Mission and the Struggle for a New Model Army in Mali*, Research Paper no. 89 (Paris: Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire [IRSEM], February 2020), https://www.irsem.fr/data/files/irsem/documents/document/file/3233/RP_IRSEM_89.pdf.

46 BMVg, *Fragen und Antworten zur Ertüchtigung*, https://www.bmvg.de/de/themen/dossiers/engagement-in-afrika/das-engagement/ertuechtigung-in-afrika/faq-ertuechtigung.

47 This includes the supply of equipment and specialised training on the equipment, primarily in the areas of pioneer service, medical services, logistics and maintenance.

48 The post of defence attaché was established at the German embassy in Bamako in 2016/17.

small arms and ammunition control.[49] The largest financial contribution was the provision of at least forty armoured Casspir and Puma troop carriers manufactured in South Africa, which were handed over to the Malian army.[50] The unit price for these vehicles was roughly €500,000 apiece.

The lack of transparency on the part of the German government makes it difficult to discern the effectiveness and success of individual projects. So far, Germany's involvement has only been evaluated selectively and results are not publicly accessible.[51] Discussions with officials suggest a mixed picture regarding project outcomes. What is clear is that Germany made a significant investment. There was certainly no shortage of German assistance. The EIBReg volume for Mali reached around €30 million per year in 2021 and 2022.[52] This represented 13 per cent of the German security force assistance budget (which was €225 million, excluding Ukraine).[53] Germany has probably been by far Mali's most important partner in the field of security force assistance in recent years.

Security force assistance bears similarities to other fields of German involvement such as stabilisation. A comprehensive and diverse commitment can be a strength; coherence and strategic orientation remain challenges. Individual projects can be very successful, but do not necessarily contribute to overarching strategic goals (and may not even be coherent with the overall approach). For example, it cannot be ruled out that training in ammunition management has helped the Malian armed forces. But it is certainly not obvious whether and how it made a "significant contribution to the peace process and the stabilisation of the country".[54] In order to assess this, the objectives, assumptions and results of the project would have to be accessible.

This highlights a problem that has characterised Germany's overall approach in Mali, namely the gap between exceedingly broad objectives (stability, peace) on the one hand and specific measures on the other. For example, it can be argued that German security force assistance has certainly contributed to strengthening the Malian security forces. However, the range of individual measures does not necessarily add up to an impact-orientated and above all strategic approach. What is missing is a theory of change that establishes a plausible causality of assumptions, measures and resources and aligns them with the objectives to be achieved.

Some ministerial officials concede that there is room for improvement as regards strategic orientation. They also recognise that all too often bureaucratic processes mean that project cycles (start, implementation, completion) and related considerations (project feasibility, funding) take centre stage to the detriment of strategic objectives and effectiveness. Making the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry of Defence jointly responsible for EIBReg was actually meant to avoid these problems. However, its impact fell short of expectations. In Mali at least the EIBReg was less an interministerial instrument than a funding mechanism that, in the words of one official, "can be tapped from two directions".[55]

Administrative coordination can certainly prevent project duplication, but ultimately both the Foreign Office and the Defence Ministry seem to view "their" projects primarily as independent endeavours running in parallel. This is evident in the annual planning process. Instead of a structured review that examines the contribution of specific projects to strategic goals, there is reportedly only a loosely defined list of projects. In Mali, the lack of coordination and joint strategic planning meant that potentially similar or complementary projects "had nothing to do with each other" and — worse still — in at least one case knew nothing of each other.[56] The idea of an inte-

49 BMVg, "Ausbildung zur Munitionskontrolle in Mali", 8 January 2019, https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/ausbildung-zur-munitionskontrolle-in-mali-29990.

50 Gerhard Heiming, "Deutschland unterstützt Mali mit geschützten Fahrzeugen", *Europäische Sicherheit und Technik*, 24 July 2019, https://esut.de/2019/07/meldungen/international/14096/deutschland-unterstuetzt-mali-mit-geschuetzten-fahrzeugen; "Germany Gives Malian Army New OTT Technologies Armoured Vehicles", *Africa Intelligence*, 10 May 2021.

51 See also Philipp Rotmann, "Von Deutschland lernen?", *Welt-Sichten*, 9 August 2020, https://gppi.net/2020/08/09/von-deutschland-lernen.

52 Interviews with BMVg representatives, 25 November 2021, 17 November 2022, 11 October 2023.

53 Bundesrechnungshof, *Bericht nach § 88 Absatz 2 BHO an den Haushaltsausschuss des Deutschen Bundestages – Information über die Entwicklung des Einzelplans 60 (Allgemeine Finanzverwaltung) für die Beratungen zum Bundeshaushalt 2022* (Bonn, 12 May 2022), 10, https://www.bundesrechnungshof.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Berichte/2022/entwicklung-einzelplan-60-bundeshaushalt-2022-ergaenzung-volltext.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=1.

54 BMVg, "Ausbildung zur Munitionskontrolle in Mali" (see note 47).

55 Interview with government official, 2 October 2023.

56 Interview with government official, 11 October 2023.

grated, cross-ministerial approach thus fell short of the political aspirations. This did not go unnoticed by Malian partners, who noted a lack of transparency and contradictory objectives and agreements on the German side, damaging its political credibility.[57]

The need to strategically link different EIBReg projects should be given further consideration, because security force assistance is not limited to EIBReg. Multiple instruments (EIBReg, equipment assistance, participation in CSDP missions) and considerable German funding are only an asset if measures are planned more strategically. If this is not done "from below", top-down political guidance is needed to break through project logics and path dependencies. Criteria for selecting projects could for example consider interlinkages and complementarities with CSDP missions. Tentative steps in this direction were taken in Mali, albeit at a late stage For example the training for driving the EIBReg-financed troop carriers was partly carried out by EUTM.

Greater integration and coherency are important for the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of German programmes, and also necessary in order to promote local ownership. Considering the multitude of instruments deployed in the realm of security force assistance (including by Germany itself), it is not surprising that the Malian government was quickly overwhelmed by the task of coordinating and managing its numerous international supporters. For instance, in 2017 external partners implemented no fewer than seventy projects to support the security sector (justice, defence and internal security). It is not without irony that a study had to be commissioned specifically to establish an overview of which donors were active in which areas.[58] The EU alone deployed two separate missions (EUCAP Sahel Mali, EUTM Mali) and ran several large projects (including PARSEC, GAR-SI Sahel) and numerous smaller ones, suggesting that strategic coherence was uncertain at best.[59] Instead, the integrated approach became to some extent an end in itself — and Mali became its "laboratory".[60] The jungle of German and other international partners and their activities — by no means only in the security sector — was detrimental to effectiveness and efficiency, and also politically problematic. In the eyes of Malian officials they created the impression of paternalism and concerns over "loss of control."[61]

Another insight is the necessity to clarify the relationship between the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of security force assistance (capacity-building) and security sector reform (SSR). The prevailing understanding is that security sector support should do more than simply strengthen the partner's capacities.[62] Yet in practice all international partners — including Germany — seem to focus on operational capacity-building while the dimension of security sector governance plays only a subordinate role. Thus, even if it had been possible to establish a perfect military apparatus in Mali, this would not have solved the fundamental medium-term difficulties of the security sector, which cannot be isolated from the rest of the political system. One problem was that the governance dimension met with little or no interest among key Malian actors — not among government elites, because the goal of maintaining power stood in the way of actual SSR, and not among military officers, because they prioritised operational capabilities and capacities. International actors' advocacy for security sector reform thus fell on deaf ears. With very few exceptions (one being military justice), the conclusion of German actors seemed to be that their reform ambitions were largely futile, leading them to focus instead on capacity-building that either covered a concrete need (such as Casspir vehicles) or was at least politically uncontroversial (such as small arms control and ammunition management).

Findings from Mali and other countries show, however, that capacity-building without governance re-

57 Ibid.

58 International Security Sector Advisory Team (ISSAT) and Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), *Cartographie du soutien de la communauté internationale en matière de sécurité et de justice au Mali: Rapport final* (Geneva, February 2017).

59 Katherine Pye, *A Means to an End or an End in Itself? The EU Integrated Approach to Conflict in Mali*, EU Diplomacy Paper 05/2019 (Bruges: College of Europe, 2019), https://www.coleurope.eu/sites/default/files/research-paper/edp-5-2019_pye_0.pdf; Andrew Lebovich, *Halting Ambition: EU Migration and Security Policy in the Sahel*, ECFR Policy Brief (London: European Council on Foreign Relations [ECFR], 25 September 2018).

60 Interview with EU official, Bamako, 10 June 2017.

61 Interview with government official, 22 August 2023 (quote); see also Denis M. Tull, "Rebuilding Mali's Army: The Dissonant Relationship between Mali and Its International Partners", *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2019): 405—22.

62 Auswärtiges Amt, *Ressortgemeinsame Strategie zur Unterstützung der Sicherheitssektorreform (SSR)* (Berlin, July 2019), https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2247420/222c695ee476e6ec1eaa350989c08f41/190917-sicherheitssektorreform-data.pdf.

forms is neither effective nor sustainable.[63] Simply declaring that civil society should be more involved in future security sector assistance is not a solution.[64] If it is to achieve a sustainable impact the EIBReg will have to address the uncomfortable and undoubtedly difficult questions concerning the relationship between military capacity-building and political reform. At the same time, reform initiatives will suffer if German government officials increasingly conceive security force assistance as a political door-opener and call for "pragmatism" in a wider international context that is characterised by increasing strategic competition.

Four lessons can be learnt from Mali. Firstly, there is room for improvement in the interministerial management of EIBReg, where there is a need to move from mere coordination to ambitious joint strategic planning. The EIBReg is no longer a niche instrument (see Ukraine) and also deserves more attention from the Bundestag in order to realise the ambition of effective interministerial action. Strategic goals, a plausible theory of change and more transparency are needed. This does not guarantee success, but would at least create the conditions for "projects to become solutions".[65]

A second challenge is to overcome path dependencies and project logics. These are salient where ample budgets are available and allocated annually, but personnel capacities (especially on site) are scarce. The pressure to spend existing funds may set in motion a spiral of activities that are ill adapted to the sensitivity of security sector assistance, the complexity of the context and the limited capacities of both the partners and the German actors on the ground. The problematic result is often that short-term project logics are prioritised over impact.

Thirdly, strong financial engagement in a politically sensitive and complex realm such as security sector assistance requires commensurate capacities in terms of personnel on the ground. In Mali, a large proportion of the military EIBReg projects rested on the shoulders of a single military advisor, even when funding was in the tens of millions. The disjoint was unacceptable, especially in light of the demanding tasks that had to be accomplished. These included the identification of local needs, negotiation processes with partners and Berlin headquarters, and management of project processes. In addition, essential tasks — namely close monitoring of project outcomes, consequences and impacts — fell by the wayside. The political risks of security force assistance and impact monitoring demand adequate personnel on site to perform management and analysis and fulfil reporting and due diligence obligations.

Fourthly, the sensitivity of this field of intervention demands much closer observation of local dynamics and — building on this — political planning to anticipate conceivable disruptions (such as coups) and prepare adequate responses. Berlin (like Paris) was caught off guard by the coup in August 2020 and the implications for Germany's military cooperation with Mali remained unclear for too long. Of course, political planning anticipating possible adverse developments should be required for Germany's crisis response as a whole.[66]

63 Rotmann, "Learning from Germany?" (see note 51).

64 Auswärtiges Amt, *Ressortgemeinsame Strategie* (see note 62), 24.

65 Interview with government official, 1 November 2023.

66 Markus Kaim, "Afghanistan, Mali, Niger: Warum deutsche Außenpolitik so oft an der Wirklichkeit scheitert", *Der Spiegel*, 8 August 2023.

The MINUSMA Experience: Partial Success amidst Overall Failure

MINUSMA was Germany's first significant participation in a UN peacekeeping mission since Somalia (1993/94) and Bosnia (1995).[67] It was also — for better or worse — the most visible aspect of the German involvement in Mali. The Bundeswehr deployment completely overshadowed the rest of Germany's involvement in the Mali crisis.[68]

It is futile to draw lessons from Germany's MINUSMA participation without examining the mission itself. Like comparable UN stabilisation missions, MINUSMA faced major challenges. These included: ongoing armed conflict and the absence of a viable peace agreement; the changing nature of conflict, which mitigates against traditional forms of resolution; an environment in which peacekeepers themselves were targeted; and finally, disputes between the members of the UN Security Council, which fatally weakened the authority and legitimacy of the mission in the host country and among the conflict parties. There are good reasons to doubt whether traditional UN missions can achieve much in a context like Mali. The problems were exacerbated by the Security Council's unwillingness or inability to adapt MINUSMA to the difficult conditions.

Measured against the main objectives laid out in its mandate, MINUSMA failed politically. It proved unable to make a decisive contribution to conflict resolution by helping to implement the Malian peace agreement of 2015. However — and this is often overlooked — it did at least keep the agreement alive. The peace accord only collapsed *after* the mission had left the country.

There were other partial successes, too.[69] MINUSMA indirectly contributed to preventing the violence in rural areas from reaching the larger urban centres. It facilitated the delivery of humanitarian aid and helped to protect civilians (albeit only in a small part of the country). It was hampered by governmental obstruction in Bamako, a lack of capacity and mobility, and a hostile environment. The mission had to invest 60 to 70 per cent of its resources in self-protection — securing camps and convoys — in order to minimise its own casualty figures and preserve the support of troop-contributing countries. Conversely, Malian support for the mission was weak from the outset. Both the government and the population expected a military partner prepared to fight the armed groups, and this "misunderstanding" was never resolved. The government even fuelled rumours that the mission was supporting the "terrorists".[70] MINUSMA could only rely on local support in the small part of Mali where its presence — as in Gao — improved local security and provided economic opportunities.

What lessons can Germany learn from its participation in the mission? Berlin arguably achieved its foreign policy goals, earning credit with France and at the United Nations. The duration of Germany's involvement, with its high-end capacities, was a selling point that generated foreign policy prestige. Contributing to MINUSMA was also relevant with respect to Africa policy, as it meant sharing the burden with the African states that bore the main burden of the

67 This excludes the participation of the German Navy in the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

68 Torsten Konopka, "Mali: Rückzug oder mehr Risiko?" *Vereinte Nationen*, no. 1 (2022): 9—14.

69 Henrik Maihack, "Eine neue Mission für Mali", *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*, 22 September 2022.

70 Fabien Offner, "A Dozen Shades of Khaki: Counter-Insurgency Operations in the Sahel", *The New Humanitarian*, 11 January 2018.

Mali crisis and the risks involved in the mission, both as affected neighbours and the largest MINUSMA troop contributors (with a share of around two thirds).[71]

Politically and strategically, Germany's participation in MINUSMA — unsurprisingly — reflected the strengths and weaknesses of its overall approach. Germany's actual motivation was not clearly related to objectives in the country itself. Although a Mali-centred crisis narrative was increasingly underpinned by action, this shift was inadequately justified and operationalised. Abstract platitudes aside, there was no overarching strategic narrative to coherently justify German participation. This can be conceived as a lack of political embedding, in the sense of explaining how MINUSMA contributed to stability and what part the Bundeswehr played in the overall constellation. For example, many members of the German MINUSMA contingent were uncertain about the aim and purpose of their deployment, even though their tasks were precisely outlined.

The fact that German government politicians consistently attributed the mission's political significance to objectives outside its mandate contributed significantly to the uncertainty. Preventing irregular migration and countering terrorism were explicitly *not* covered by the MINUSMA mandate.[72] Anyway, at the tactical level the Bundeswehr was strictly limited by its rules of engagement. Robust action was permitted in self-defence, but not to actively pursue or capture suspected members of jihadist groups. Such inconsistencies between proclaimed goals and actual tasks should be avoided in future missions. A credible narrative is necessary to ensure that all involved — including the armed forces and members of parliament — know exactly why Germany is participating in a mission and what its objectives are — and that they can be achieved.[73]

Another lesson concerns the exit strategy. When Germany joined MINUSMA in 2013 it was not foreseeable that Mali would become the Bundeswehr's largest current foreign deployment, as it was from 2017.[74] Nor was its duration foreseeable, as Berlin shied away from setting a timeframe. While the need for credible exit strategies is widely acknowledged, practically speaking they are unlikely to be implemented in multinational missions. For one thing, Berlin has little influence on factors such as conflict trajectories or the decisions of international partners. For another, multinational deployments also generate dependencies. It was politically crucial for Germany that other European states also became involved in MINUSMA. Conversely, it was Germany's participation that motivated smaller European states to provide troops. For the latter, Germany served as a "linchpin" ("Anlehnnation"). Forces from countries including Belgium, Estonia, Ireland and the Netherlands were integrated into the German contingent and benefited from camp security, logistics and medical services. This created German responsibilities vis-à-vis partners. Interdependencies also arose from the nature of Germany's high-value capabilities, for which the UN could not easily find adequate substitutes in other member states. In view of its international responsibility and dependability, the German government had to factor its partners into any (even partial) withdrawal plans.

Join missions with a finite multi-year commitment.

Domestic politics also stood in the way of a well thought-out exit strategy. This applied especially to the negotiating processes between the parties of the governing coalition and between the foreign and defence ministries. This became particularly apparent after the second coup d'état in Mali in May 2021, when the merits and downsides of opting out of MINUSMA were debated extensively within and between the foreign and defence ministries. In the end, the Federal Chancellery's compromise in 2023 was to extend the mission one last time while announcing its withdrawal for the following year.[75] This was a sensible response that enabled a planned and predictable

71 Maihack, "Eine neue Mission für Mali" (see note 69).

72 For example the then Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer: "Everything we do in that region, every terrorist attack we prevent … justifies our involvement, because it improves the lives of those who live there, weakens terrorism and thus also makes our own region more secure." Deutscher Bundestag, Stenografischer Bericht, 159. Sitzung, Berlin, 13 May 2020, 19754, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19159.pdf#page=70.

73 Similarly, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, *A Mission within a Mission* (see note 8), 5.

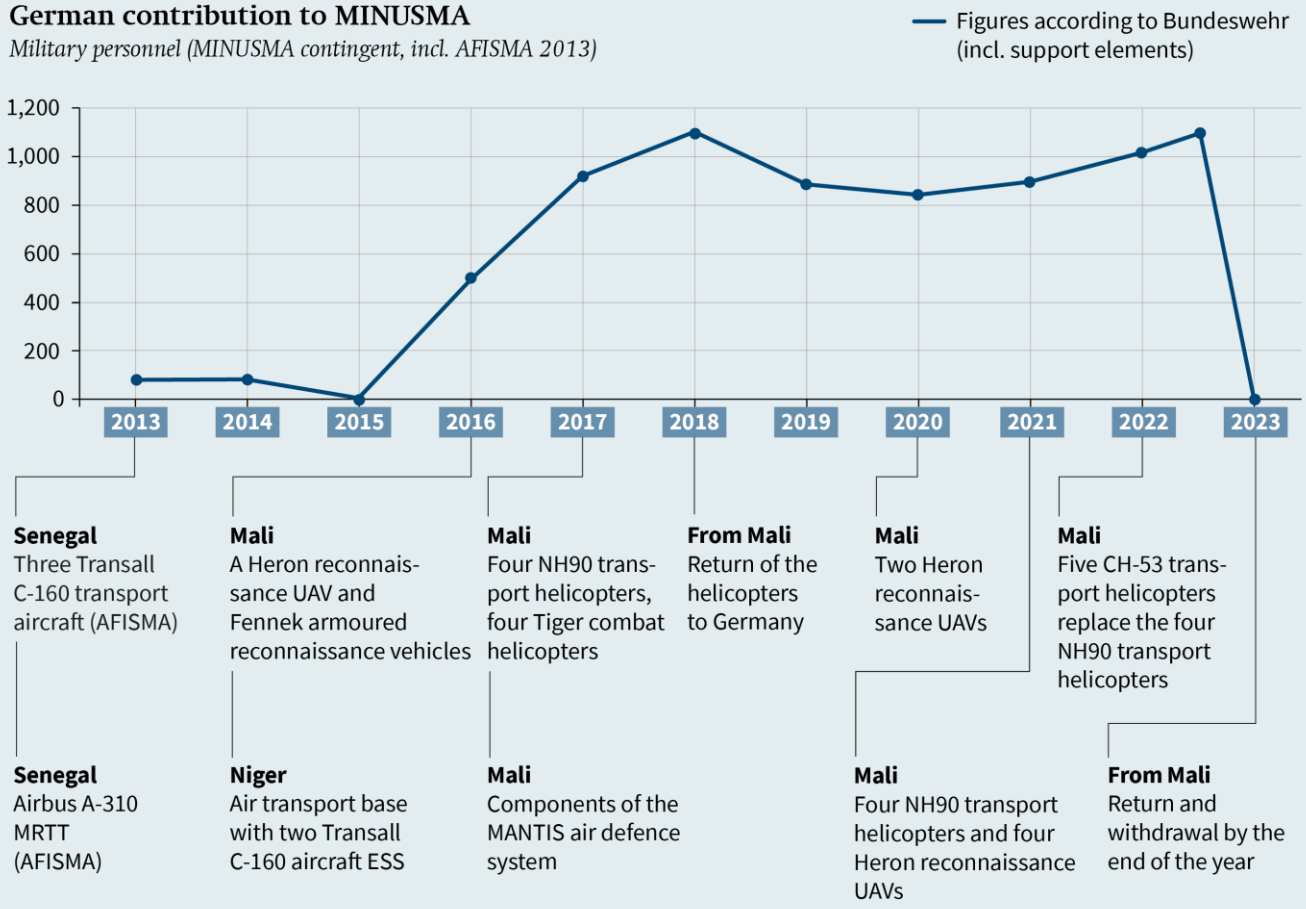
74 Konopka, "Mali: Rückzug oder mehr Risiko?" (see note 68), 10.

75 Deutscher Bundestag, "Mali-Einsatz der Bundeswehr letztmalig verlängert", May 2023, https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2023/kw21-de-bundeswehr-minusma-947962.

Figure 2

German contribution to MINUSMA

Military personnel (MINUSMA contingent, incl. AFISMA 2013)



Source: Bundeswehr and Zentrum für Internationale Friedenseinsätze (ZIF)

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withdrawal under difficult conditions. Compared to Afghanistan, this orderly exit was undoubtedly a step forward.

Ideally, Germany's withdrawal from a mission should be part of an overarching exit strategy. From this perspective, the trajectory of Germany's MINUSMA participation cannot be described as coherent or forward-looking. At best, this was the case during the second half of the intervention, and even then only partially. However, there were also signs of "mission creep", of incremental expansion of the Bundeswehr's role. This was perceptible from the growing financial cost, the increasing use of capabilities and the expansion of infrastructure at the Gao and Niamey sites.

For the most part, Germany's MINUSMA participation was largely reactive and tentative.[76] It made a brief quantum leap in the period from 2016 to 2018, when a Heron 1 reconnaissance drone, a mixed reconnaissance company, four NH90 transport helicopters and four Tiger combat helicopters were deployed to Mali, and an airbase was established in Niamey. The deployment of the NH90 helicopters from 2017 was certainly not planned in advance.[77] At the same time, there was apparently already a plan to withdraw at the end of 2018, although this was never implemented. Only the helicopters were withdrawn that year — but only temporarily and without adequate replacement from other UN member states. The drones remained and more were added (there were two from

76 See Konopka, "Mali: Rückzug oder mehr Risiko?" (see note 68), 12.

77 Thomas Wiegold, "Hubschraubermangel in Mali: Deutsche Helikopter 'nicht auszuschließen'", *Augen geradeaus!* (blog), 11 July 2016, https://augengeradeaus.net/2016/07/hubschraubermangel-in-mali-deutsche-helikopter-nicht-auszuschliessen/.

2020, four from 2021), and troop numbers remained at a relatively high level (approx. 850 soldiers on the ground, 2019—2021). Finally, five CH-53 transport helicopters were added in 2022.

It is fair to say that decision-making processes in foreign and security policy could be improved. With a view to its own defence planning, it would be desirable if the German government held out the prospect of a multi-year but time-limited commitment (for example three years) when entering into a mission. This would help the UN to plan, especially where high-value capabilities are at stake. Transaction costs would be lower for the UN and Germany. From a German perspective, a period of several years would enhance predictability in the domestic and foreign policy arenas. Thinking and acting in longer timeframes would also strengthen the strategic orientation when planning and evaluating a mission. It would also help to counter the political-bureaucratic automatisms that can lead to a succession of mechanical annual mandate extensions that is not conducive to making cuts and adjustments.[78]

Last but not least, committing to defined multi-year participation would strengthen Germany's negotiating position vis-à-vis the UN. Once a mission has begun path dependencies quickly set in, for example if the UN is not in a position to replace capabilities. Multi-year contributions can to some extent counteract that phenomenon. They make it clear that — and when — the UN will have to find replacements for Germany's contributions. This would give Germany greater flexibility should it consider withdrawing from the mission. Such an approach would not impinge on the Bundestag's annual decision regarding the mandate. The parliamentary prerogative means that the German government can only make a political declaration of intent to partners and the UN. However, reliable and strategically orientated foreign and security policy cannot and should not be run on a year-to-year basis. Given Germany's record of consistency, this has not been an issue with is foreign missions — so there is no good reason not to make its policy more predictable. That would be in its own interests and those of its multilateral partners.

From an operational perspective, the following lessons can be learnt from Germany's participation in MINUSMA:

78 Thorsten Gromes, *Ausstieg verpasst? Der Bundestag und die UN-Mission in Mali*, PRIF-Report 2/2024 (Frankfurt: Peace Research Institute Frankfurt [PRIF], 2024).

A mission within a mission: For Germany, participating in a UN stabilisation mission was uncharted operational territory. Berlin contributed high-value capabilities, while insisting that German forces were to be exposed to minimal risks. Germany provided transport and combat helicopters, drones and reconnaissance equipment that met the needs of the UN. In return, the UN accepted German conditions predicated on Berlin's view that certain UN standards were inadequate (security, health facilities, supplies etc.). Berlin insisted on a model that guaranteed extensive German autonomy in terms of camp security, medical care and evacuation, as well as national caveats. The Bundeswehr thus formed a "mission within a mission". It was located in a separate camp with its own security regime — Camp Castor — and was therefore also physically separated from the rest of MINUSMA.

Political strictures and deployment restrictions meant that the German contingent was unable to fulfil its potential.

Other notable features included a massive expansion of the camp to German standards and the construction of a separate airbase in Niamey (cost approximately €130 million). At the same time, the Bundeswehr operated a complex rotation system that, at its high point, required up to two hundred flights per year (!), involving considerable organisational effort for the MINUSMA bureaucracy and great financial cost to Germany.[79] National support was also a significant factor: German units that worked alongside the German MINUSMA contingent in Mali but were not officially part of the mission. In 2023, the latter comprised up to 40 per cent of the total German contingent.[80]

The political and operational consequences of this two-tier system within MINUSMA merit closer scrutiny. It undoubtedly limited the integration of the German contingent into the mission. In fact, Bundeswehr soldiers often saw themselves as standing outside the mission. Exchange of information with other

79 Interview with MINUSMA employee, 10 May 2024.

80 In 2023, 1,100 members of the German armed forces were deployed as part of the MINUSMA mission in Mali and Niger. Of these, only 664 were officially registered with MINUSMA (as of 23 May 2023). See Conseil de sécurité, *Situation au Mali: Rapport du Secrétaire général*, 1 June 2023, https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/230601_mandate_renewal_report_fr.pdf.

MINUSMA members was hindered by the physical separation of the camps. Overall, German capabilities such as helicopters and drones were largely integrated into the mission and its command structures. They protected convoys, patrols and sites, and were seen as valuable support by MINUSMA leadership and the other contingents. Nevertheless, the availability of German assets was sometimes limited by national prerogatives — such as restrictions, secrecy, diverging assessments of the security situation or prioritisation of the German contingent.[81]

The political guidelines from Berlin and the deployment restrictions meant that the German contingent was unable to realise its full potential. Its focus was on reconnaissance and self-protection and it made no other contributions to MINUSMA, not even indirectly. The political purpose of the mission was sometimes lost sight of. German reconnaissance was primarily geared towards military needs, keeping track of hostile jihadists. It would have been desirable, at least from the perspective of the MINUSMA mandate, for reconnaissance work to have paid greater attention to protecting the civilian population and providing a broader picture of the situation.

Operational experience: Over a period of ten years, a total of 27,000 German soldiers served in MINUSMA.[82] This generated considerable operational experience and training, which are especially valuable in light of the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the growing need for national and collective defence in the face of new conflicts. This applies in particular to the reconnaissance components and helicopter squadrons. The multinational context enabled cooperation with European and NATO partners and fostered interoperability (on a small scale), especially as Germany worked together with European contingents in Gao.

Given its NATO culture, German participation in the UN context was not always smooth, and often sobering (in terms of standards, procedures and objectives). Still, Mali has generated insights that should be processed and preserved with an eye to possible future missions. Comparable UN-led stabilisation missions are unlikely, but peace missions with more traditional tasks such as monitoring ceasefire agreements and peace treaties can be expected.[83]

Deployment risks: For domestic political reasons, the risks to which German soldiers may be exposed is the central variable in every German foreign deployment. From this perspective, the mission in Mali was a success. The Bundeswehr suffered a number of serious injuries, but no combat fatalities. This outcome was ensured by strong risk mitigation, restrictive rules of engagement, and adequate equipment, rescue systems and camp security. The price of risk aversion was that the operational benefit of the German contingent for MINUSMA was sometimes limited. One exception was the Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance Task Force (ISR TF). It sometimes operated far away from the Gao field camp, although the German government failed to communicate these operations. While this was likely done to minimise the perceived risks of the mission,[84] such an approach prevents the army and the government from mobilising domestic support.

81 Boutellis and Beary, *Sharing the Burden* (see note 7), 20f.

82 By 4 April 2023 6,599 soldiers had served with EUTM Mali and 25,308 soldiers and 90 police with MINUSMA (data on police participation only available since 2016). To date three police have served with EUCAP Sahel Mali. See Deutscher Bundestag, *Schriftliche Fragen*, Drucksache 20/6495 (Berlin, 21 April 2023), https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/064/2006495.pdf; Peter Carstens, "Letzte deutsche Soldaten kehren zurück", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (online), 15 December 2023, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/letzte-soldaten-von-mali-einsatz-zurueckgekehrt-19388055.html.

83 Katharina P. Coleman and Paul D. Williams, "Peace Operations Are What States Make of Them: Why Future Evolution Is More Likely Than Extinction," *Contemporary Security Policy* 42, no. 2 (2021): 241—55.

84 By contrast, the British army's communication during its MINUSMA mission was exemplary.

Learning from Mali?

Learning and adaptation processes should improve the effectiveness and efficiency of crisis management, as well as reducing avoidable costs. Germany has made progress in this respect in recent years by developing new concepts (integrated approach, guidelines for crisis prevention, stabilisation, etc.), institutions (such as the Stabilisation Division at the Federal Foreign Office) and instruments (including EIBReg). Some of this learning was applied in Mali, although implementation was patchy at best and the results rather sobering. The findings from Mali also confirm some of the interim findings of the Enquête Commission on Afghanistan.[85]

The ten-year intervention in Mali should have provided sufficient time for learning and adaptation, leading to political, strategic and/or operational adjustments.

However, German policy in Mali was characterised above all by continuity, although a few institutional innovations such as the Sahel Task Force and CIVAD do indicate learning processes. In light of the gradual deterioration of the political and security situation from 2018 and the lack of discernible responses, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that learning and adaptation were inadequate.[86]

The few changes that were made essentially affected the tactical-operational level. They were not linked to attempts to overhaul strategy and therefore had little effect on the overall picture. For example, Germany's contribution to MINUSMA became somewhat more robust over time — through patrols and the use of combat helicopters. EUTM Mali also witnessed moves towards a more practical and decentralised approach, despite much reluctance and risk aversion in Berlin. In some cases, new instruments were deployed (EIBReg) and the external partners invested more in international coordination (for example through the Sahel Alliance and the Coalition for the Sahel). Yet these measures did not add up to a strategic shift to tackle an increasingly confused situation. One partial exception on the German side came towards the end of the intervention, when Berlin made discernible efforts to emancipate itself to some extent from the French-led course of action.

Overall, however, Germany favoured continuity. There was little willingness to question the basic assumptions of the international — and therefore also German — approach in Mali.[87] Counter-terrorism was declared a priority in Berlin, as elsewhere, even though it had no strategic impact and the German government was not prepared to participate in military counter-terrorism operations anyway. Berlin also took the view that negotiations with jihadist groups were unacceptable.[88] Berlin continued to regard the Algiers Peace Accord of 2015 as a viable political solution, even as it became increasingly untenable. Diplomats were anxiously looking for signs of progress, no matter how small or irrelevant. Germany did not use its membership of the UN Security Council in 2019/20 to further debate on the international strategy. It supported questionable decisions, such as expanding MINUSMA's mandate to central Mali without increasing its personnel and supporting the hopeless "Joint Force" of the G5 Sahel states. The Joint Force, to which all partners provided financial and political support, is a stark example of wishful thinking in foreign and security policy. The German government became involved in the G5 in 2017, viewing

85 Deutscher Bundestag, Enquete-Kommission "Lehren aus Afghanistan für das künftige vernetzte Engagement Deutschlands", https://www.bundestag.de/ausschuesse/weitere_gremien/enquete_afghanistan.

86 Cyril Bensimon and Jean-Pierre Stroobants, "L'UE inquiète face à la forte dégradation sécuritaire au Sahel", *Le Monde*, 15 May 2019.

87 As also occurred in the case of Afghanistan. See Christoph Zürcher, *Stellungnahme – Öffentliche Anhörung zum Thema "Internationale Evaluierungen des Afghanistan-Einsatzes: Ergebnisse, Lehren und erfolgte Maßnahmen"*, Deutscher Bundestag, Kommissionsdrucksache 20(28)34, 18 September 2023, https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/966018/600d811fe06722e530fa656e92530195/KOM-Drs-20-28-34_Stellungnahme-Zuercher.pdf.

88 "Merkel will trotz Putsch an Bundeswehreinsatz in Mali festhalten", *Der Spiegel*, 31 May 2021.

it as a potential solution to the crisis in Mali. However, there was no concrete evidence to suggest that this political construct was viable, other than through the financial support it received from Western donors.

A large number of projects does not guarantee impact.

Instead of changing course, Berlin and other partners resorted to counterfactual justifications.[89] It was regularly claimed that the situation in Mali would be even worse without international involvement. This was plausible, but not necessarily convincing. If external crisis management merely slowed the country's decline, rather than halting it, then failure was ultimately unavoidable and therefore foreseeable. The inability of Germany and its partners to learn was underlined by another aspect: the more difficult the situation became, the more they expanded their commitment — without necessarily arguing that a lack of means was the fundamental problem.

There is no doubt that fresh ideas for a course correction were lacking, not only in the ministerial bureaucracy and parliament, but also on the part of think tanks and civil society, where "political solutions" were postulated without any concrete and feasible proposals.[90] Ideas such as increasing civilian involvement came to nothing in view of the security situation on the ground. At the same time, there was obviously great pressure to stay the course — despite growing doubts, also in Berlin. Prioritisation of Mali and the associated allocation of resources created a momentum of its own that placed the focus on output and projects and exacerbated path dependencies. This was particularly true on the civilian side (Foreign Office, Development Ministry). The considerable financial latitude enjoyed by Germany's crisis response created new opportunities and obligations for German actors in Berlin and Bamako, fuelling a relentless search for new activities and projects.[91] Pressure to achieve results translated into pressure to increase expenditure and disburse funding. The talk of active crisis management needed to be backed up with activities and expenditure, particularly on the civilian side (for example through stabilisation).

Nonetheless, generous funding and a large number of projects are still no guarantee of impact: "Money alone does not solve problems, and more money does not mean better solutions."[92] Yet the imperative to "do something" can lead to neglect of strategic considerations and impact. The pressure from Berlin to implement activities and disburse funds meant that the German embassy was not always in a position to properly monitor and assess — and if necessary veto — the wide array of activities. It would have needed greater decision-making and coordinating powers to effectively and coherently channel German activities in line with local needs. In other words, German crisis policy should be more decentralised and localised, which would require the transfer of personnel from Berlin to the countries in question.[93]

The inadequacies of learning and adaptation in Mali indicate that the internal prerequisites for an adaptive German crisis policy are insufficient. This begins with the question of interministerial planning, which remained as inadequate in Mali as was in Afghanistan.[94] Permanent and undoubtedly time-consuming information exchange, coordination and co-signing processes have obviously not led to progress on questions of strategy. Most officials are committed to working across ministries. Yet, they often concede that the quality of cooperation is extremely dependent on individuals — making it idiosyncratic and not institutionalised. One explanation may be that officials have little incentive for personal commitment to interministerial cooperation. Some complain that doing so is not necessarily reflected in personnel evaluations because cooperation across ministries tends not to produce directly visible results.[95] In addition, knowledge of other ministries is limited (this applies less to regional desks than to specialised thematic sections). Exchange of personnel between ministries is apparently decreasing, partly because it is not perceived as enhancing career prospects.[96]

89 Winfried Nachtwei notes that the efficacy discourse was neglected in Afghanistan and speaks of a counterfactual "justification discourse". See Nachtwei, "Lehren aus deutschen Krisenengagements" (see note 35), 370.

90 Denis M. Tull, *German and International Crisis Management in the Sahel: Why Discussions about Sahel Policy Are Going around in Circles*, SWP Comment 27/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2020), doi: 10.18449/2020C27.

91 Interview with government official, 22 August 2023.

92 Interview with government official, 26 January 2024.

93 Interview with government official, 8 February 2024.

94 Deutscher Bundestag, *Zwischenbericht der Enquete-Kommission Lehren aus Afghanistan für das künftige vernetzte Engagement Deutschlands*, Drucksache 20/10400 (Berlin, 19 February 2024), https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/104/2010400.pdf.

95 Interview with government official, 1 November 2023.

96 Interview with government official, 12 October 2023.

Beyond these obstacles, some officials (particularly from the Foreign Office and the Defence Ministry) argue that their own organisation is poorly positioned for learning. Frequent staff changes make it difficult to develop in-depth expertise, build institutional memory and utilise experience.

In Mali, a lack of human resources also impaired the ability of the apparatus to learn and adapt. There was a significant discrepancy between personnel capacities in Berlin and on the ground. For example, the German embassy in Bamako was inadequately staffed for much of the past decade. If government representatives rightly regard new instruments and innovations such as EIBReg and CIVAD as evidence of learning, then it is difficult to explain why these interfaces and key positions (only one person in each case) were not backed up with more personnel capacity. Adjustments to the personnel and staffing plan occur, if at all, with long delays. Ministries need greater flexibility in order to be able to deploy staff commensurate to the priority accorded to a given country (here Mali). German engagement in a crisis cannot be effective without strengthening personnel capacities on the ground.[97]

A further impediment to learning in Mali (as in Afghanistan) was the paucity of impact analyses and independent evaluations conducted during the intervention period. These could have served as interim findings to facilitate a review of approaches and programmes. In Mali, a number of projects were evaluated, but not entire portfolios or the overarching strategy. Therefore, evidence-based policy was hardly possible. No-one could really say whether and how projects led to (political) solutions. Yet, this by no means slowed down the drive to implement projects and spend funds, as some government representatives have self-critically noted.

Despite an awareness of the importance of institutional learning at an individual level, the culture and infrastructure within the apparatus are clearly not yet adequate.[98] The establishment of an evaluation unit at the Federal Foreign Office is to be welcomed. Nevertheless, in order to enhance its impact and efficacy, it would be desirable to establish this unit as an autonomous organisational entity outside the Stabilisation Division.[99] It would be even better if, as in the Netherlands, an independent evaluation department were responsible for all externally-oriented programmes and projects, including security and defence policy. So far, the German government has failed to carry out its promised interministerial evaluations.[100] The fact that Mali, of all places, has seen virtually no evaluations (let alone cross-ministerial ones) is surprising given the deep footprint that Germany has left there over the past decade.

A culture of "learning from failure" is needed.

In particular, the foreign and security policy learning culture is still in its infancy.[101] Of the few evaluations carried out for projects in the areas of stabilisation and SFA in Mali, none is publicly available.[102] Even in the field of development cooperation, with its much stronger evaluation culture, there are very few relevant reports on Mali. The Development Ministry's evaluation institute, DEval, has been commissioned to produce just one since 2013.[103] To this author's knowledge, that is also the only evaluation of German government involvement in Mali that is publicly available for the period 2013—2023.

What is more, there is no guarantee that individual sections will share their reports with other sections within their own ministry, let alone with other minis-

97 Gerrit Kurtz, "Diplomaten an die Front! Krisenprävention braucht das richtige Personal", *PeaceLab* (blog), 8 September 2016, https://peacelab.blog/2016/09/diplomaten-an-die-front-krisenpraevention-braucht-das-richtige-personal.

98 Deutscher Bundestag, *Zwischenbericht der Enquete-Kommission* (see note 94), 23.

99 Interview with government official, 12 December 2023.

100 Auswärtiges Amt, *Praxisleitfaden Ressortgemeinsamer Ansatz zur Krisenprävention, Konfliktbewältigung und Friedensförderung* (Berlin, 2019), 22f., https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2285522/968495447acfa63ee9b50e829e9f326e/191206-praxisleitfaden-data.pdf.

101 To their credit, the Foreign Office and the Development Ministry did jointly evaluate the German engagement in Iraq (with positive findings). Auswärtiges Amt, "Externe Gutachter bescheinigen AA und BMZ erfolgreiches Irak-Engagement" (Berlin, 31 March 2022), https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/service/laender/irak-node/evaluierung-irak-aa-bmz/2520178.

102 It is unclear how many evaluations were conducted in these areas.

103 Ariel Ben Yishay et al, *Does Irrigation Strengthen Climate Resilience? A Geospatial Impact Evaluation of Interventions in Mali*, DEval Discussion Paper 1/2023 (Bonn: German Institute for Development Evaluation [DEval], May 2013), https://www.deval.org/fileadmin/Redaktion/PDF/05-Publikationen/Discussion_Paper/2023_Klima/2023_DEval_Discussion_Paper_1_Irrigation_Climate_Mali.pdf.

tries. If results and recommendations are only accessible to a small circle, the effects will inevitably be limited: evaluations are by definition the beginning of a learning process, not the end. They have to be absorbed, and that requires human capital and institutional infrastructure. It is also necessary to establish a "culture of failure" to strengthen the willingness to learn from setbacks as well as successes.[104] In this context, officials often reported that the organisational cultures within ministries employ information filters that make precisely this more difficult.[105] Warnings and bad news are generally unwelcome.[106]

Parliament also has a duty to demand greater accountability.[107] It should push for regular evaluations at the level of individual ministries, across all ministries and beyond the level of individual projects. One central problem is that parliamentarians' attention has been focused almost exclusively on engagement involving the armed forces, while civilian involvement has received little attention. This marginalises other actors (Foreign Office, Development Ministry) and their instruments — and inadvertently relieves them of their responsibility, seriously undermining the integrated approach and hampering progress on a strategic culture. In this context, it is regrettable that the coalition government decided to evaluate the Bundeswehr's foreign deployments in 2021 without taking Germany's overall engagement into account.[108] The Bundestag therefore has a key role to play in both the integrated approach and interministerial learning. This could be remedied by the often-floated idea of extending parliament's crisis management mandates to include civilian as well as military measures.[109] Crisis management, as in Mali, would then no longer be tied solely to Bundeswehr deployments.

104 Sarah Brockmeier, "'Review 2024'? Für eine Zeitenwende im Auswärtigen Amt", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 17, no. 73 (2023): 40—45.

105 Interviews with ministerial officials, 12 December 2023, 1 November 2023, 20 September 2023.

106 Kaim, "Afghanistan, Mali, Niger" (see note 66).

107 Deutscher Bundestag, *Zwischenbericht der Enquete-Kommission* (see note 94), 22.

108 Even though this was supposed to include "ongoing" deployments through 2023, Mali (MINUSMA, EUTM) was excluded. BMVg/Auswärtiges Amt, *Bericht der Bundesregierung zu einer Evaluierung der laufenden, mandatierten Auslandseinsätze der Bundeswehr (Zusammenfassung)* (Berlin, 2024), https://www.bmvg.de/resource/blob/5809072/be282977d1daae9f27ec9a70058a158a/evaluierungsbericht-auslands einsaetze-data.pdf.

109 Ekkehard Brose, "Vernetzte Sicherheit, vernetztes Regieren, vernetzte Mandate", *angeBAKS*t*, no. 1 (17 June 2021), https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/angebakst_21-1.pdf; Nachtwei, "Lehren aus deutschen Krisenengagements" (see note 35), p. 370; more dismissive, German Bundestag, *Briefing by the Commission to Review and Safeguard Parliamentary Rights in the Mandating of Foreign Deployments of the Bundeswehr*, printed matter 18/5000 (Berlin, 16 June 2015), 7, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/18/050/1805000.pdf.

Debating Foreign and Security Policy: More Honesty!

Decision-making processes in foreign and security policy are structured by highly ritualised discussions and procedures. Its protagonists are ministers and senior officials, the working levels of the ministerial bureaucracy and the members of parliament. Particularly in the context of a foreign deployment of the Bundeswehr, interactions between these groups are characterised by routinised roles and patterns, while strategic and substantive issues are often avoided.

In the case of Mali, such patterns were evident in the successive governments' justifications of Germany's engagement. For a long time, there was a discrepancy between the dominant motives of UN and alliance politics and the declared official goal of stabilising Mali and the Sahel. The objectives were not incompatible and the true motives (solidarity with France, UN politics) were not concealed — though they were rarely voiced by the German government.

What explains these largely parallel discourses? What political effects did they have on Germany's involvement in Mali? While Germany's foreign policy vocabulary places great emphasis on solidarity with allies, multilateralism and international responsibility, these aspects are apparently insufficient to legitimise participation in international crisis management, at least in the domestic political context. This is certainly the case when the German armed forces are to be deployed (always a controversial issue), and all the more so when the deployment is to a country that is not traditionally one of Germany's priorities (Mali). Afghanistan was no exception. The 9/11 attacks on the United States should have been sufficient to trigger political and military solidarity. Apparently that was not the case, otherwise there would have been no need for the controversial dictum of "protecting Germany's security in the Hindu Kush". In the German discourse, justifications for a Bundeswehr deployment may appear normatively incomplete if as the purpose is "merely" alliance solidarity.[110] The issue with the parallel discourse is not the existence of multiple objectives; rather, it is the lack of transparency regarding these objectives. This may explain why cabinet members put forward straightforward motives (viz. the stabilisation of Mali) to preclude criticism from the Bundestag, the media and the public that deploying German forces to show solidarity with France or the UN is insufficient, arbitrary and altogether unconvincing.

However, one can question whether it is really inadmissible to disclose the full story. The foreign and defence specialists in parliament are well aware of the complexity of foreign policy decision-making processes. Indeed, with respect to Mali, their arguments were more nuanced than those put to parliament by ministers. In any case, ministers expose themselves to accusations of insincerity and opacity. This, in turn, gives rise to another issue: emphasising stabilisation over other motives ultimately forced the government to assess its performance against criteria that do not entirely match its actual motives.

Communication at cabinet level had consequences at the working level of the ministerial bureaucracies. The latter had to achieve the best possible results in line with official stated goals — despite the vast majority of mid-level officials and desk officers clearly believing that the proclaimed goal of stabilising Mali was not Germany's actual, overriding priority. These unspoken discrepancies are likely to have discouraged strategic thinking and action in the ministerial bureaucracies. This also eroded the willingness to take risks, which is so important for crisis response.[111]

These contradictions, which were ultimately driven by domestic politics, shaped the government's communication about its Mali policy. German objectives

110 Nachtwei lays out a similar argument in "Lehren aus deutschen Krisenengagements" (see note 35), 369.

111 Rotmann, "Schluss mit dem Autopiloten!" (see note 26).

Lack of transparency in German crisis response

Publicly accessible information on the concrete actions of German crisis policy in Mali is scarce. Even basic fact sheets about the relevant ministries' activities are not freely accessible. And information flows within the government apparatus are also limited, as there is no digital information system to collate data about German programmes and projects in third countries.

While public pressure ensures that development cooperation is relatively transparent, this is much less true of other ministries and policy fields. It is particularly striking that stabilisation and security force assistance — the supposed flagships of German crisis response — are largely opaque. The Stabilisation Division of the Federal Foreign Office has published numerous concept papers since it was founded in 2015, but information on how these concepts are to be translated into action, plans and projects and what effects they will have is rare. At best output data is published that says little about outcomes.[a] Databases can be used to identify Foreign Office–funded projects, but are lacking essential data points.[b] There is no publicly accessible information on security force assistance, not even a list of implemented projects. At best, PR-type information can be found, which is published by implementing organisations and the Bundeswehr.[c]

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that information on the impact and consequences of programmes and projects — for example in the form of progress reports or evaluations — is extremely rare. There are only three publicly accessible evaluation reports on Mali for the 2013–2023 period, two of which are from the field of development cooperation.[d] There is no doubt that more evaluations are carried out than are published, especially in the field of development cooperation. For key areas of crisis management (stabilisation, security force assistance), however, there is every indication that very few impact analyses have been carried out to date. This is regrettable because transparent governance is a prominent German policy goal, which should also be honoured in the case of its own actions — especially as the government's "Guidelines for Civilian Crisis Prevention" commit it to improving communication in the area of crisis management.[e] The lack of transparency is particularly striking in light of the considerable resources invested in the military and civilian areas of German crisis management.

a See, for example, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *The UNDP Regional Stabilization Facility for the Lake Chad Basin and Liptako-Gourma Regions*, https://www.undp.org/africa/waca/undp-regional-stabilization-facility-lake-chad-basin-and-liptako-gourma-regions.

b See, for example, d-portal.org, https://d-portal.org/ctrack.html#view=search.

c Bundeswehr, "Ertüchtigung zum Umgang mit Munition bei EUTM Mali", 6 December 2019, https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/einsaetze-bundeswehr/abgeschlossene-einsaetze-der-bundeswehr/mali-europaeische-trainingsmission-/eutm-bundeswehr-eu-einsatz-mali/ertuechtigung-zum-umgang-mit-munition-bei-eutm-mali-161938.

d United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), *Independent Evaluation of the Sustaining Peace in Mali and the Sahel Region through Strengthening Peacekeeping Training Capacities Project (Phase II)* (Geneva, 2019); KfW Entwicklungsbank, *Ex Post Evaluation Small-Scale Irrigation – Mali* (Frankfurt, 2020); Ben Yishay et al., *Does Irrigation Strengthen Climate Resilience?* (see note 103).

e Bundesregierung, *Krisen verhindern, Konflikte bewältigen, Frieden fördern: Leitlinien der Bundesregierung* (Berlin, 2017), https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/1213498/d98437ca3ba49c0ec6a461570f56211f/krisen-verhindern-data.pdf.

remained vague, while problems and challenges were underplayed, especially in reports to parliament — which were kept at least moderately optimistic to avoid jeopardising parliamentary support for the intervention. The strong emphasis on Germany's output ("We are doing a lot!") also served this function. Questions regarding effects and impact were given short shrift, if they were addressed at all.

Some ministry officials are quite self-critical of the routines and mechanisms of foreign policy processes and their own role in them. But they also point out that members of parliament often fail to demand more critical reporting or strategic thinking.[112] In Mali it took a dramatic deterioration of the situation on the ground, coupled with the implications of France's announced withdrawal for the Bundeswehr, to prompt members of parliament to insist on more credible assessments from the ministries.[113]

112 See Werner Distler and Miriam Tekath, *Robust Mandates, Robust Knowledge? Mali-Mandate im Bundestag (2013–2021)*, CCS Policy Paper no. 6 (Marburg: Center for Conflict Studies [CCS], Philipps-Universität Marburg, 2021), https://www.uni-marburg.de/de/konfliktforschung/dateien/publikationen/policy-paper_finale-version_test.pdf.

113 Most German media reporting was produced outside Mali and did not provide critical perspectives. See Lutz

At the same time, members of parliament need to see a prospect of success in order to justify continued support for German engagement to their voters.[114] If the government presented modest goals with uncertain prospects, this would raise understandable doubts among parliamentarians as to the point of the mission and its mandate.

Parliament should be told what it needs to know and not just what it wants to hear.

The vaguer the goals and strategies, the less government departments are exposed to critique by the Bundestag, the media and the public.

At the same time, the parliamentary groups that make up the current coalition have little interest in scrutinising their own government's course too critically. These political logics cannot be avoided, but they do tend to stunt strategic debate. It would undoubtedly be beneficial if all parties and actors involved in decision-making processes were more honest and transparent about the objectives of foreign engagements and the probability of success or failure.

Even in cases where the prospects of success are moderate or uncertain, there may be compelling reasons for Germany to engage in a crisis country and accept the risk of failure. Examples include solidarity with allies or the consequences of inaction. However, in the case of Mali, these reasons — and this is the heart of the matter — were often not presented convincingly (or at all). The ministries did not communicate what they considered achievable, but instead proclaimed vague overall objectives and ideal end states in order to persuade parliament to vote in favour.

The level of strategic debate can only be raised if the Bundestag is told what it needs to know — and not what it wants to hear.[115] Greater transparency about problems, dilemmas and conflicts of goals could lead the Bundestag to formulate more realistic expectations in a field where success is not the norm.

There is no silver bullet to address this problem. Joint meetings of the relevant Bundestag committees[116] or the creation of a dedicated committee (for integrated crisis management) would be conceivable, instead of the foreign affairs, defence and development cooperation committees deliberating separately, as is presently the case. Concentrating expertise in such a joint committee could raise the level of strategic discussion. Given that government departments are required to cooperate and coordinate, it is incomprehensible that that perspective is not reflected in the Bundestag and its committees. That would also relativise the Bundeswehr-centred nature of the crisis management discussion. Above all, however, the greater and broader expertise of an integrated joint committee would put parliament in a better position to demand strategic action from the government.

Mükke, *Mediale Routinen und Ignoranz? Die Sahel-Einsätze der Bundeswehr im öffentlichen Diskurs* (Frankfurt: Otto-Brenner-Stiftung, 2023).

114 Interview with government official, 6 February 2024.

115 Paraphrasing Lakhdar Brahimi. See United Nations, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations* (Brahimi Report), A/55/305 — S/2000/809 (New York, 21 August 2000), X.

116 This primarily concerns the Committees on Foreign Affairs, Defence, Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid, and Economic Cooperation and Development. Others could be added as required and relevant (for example Home Affairs).

Conclusions

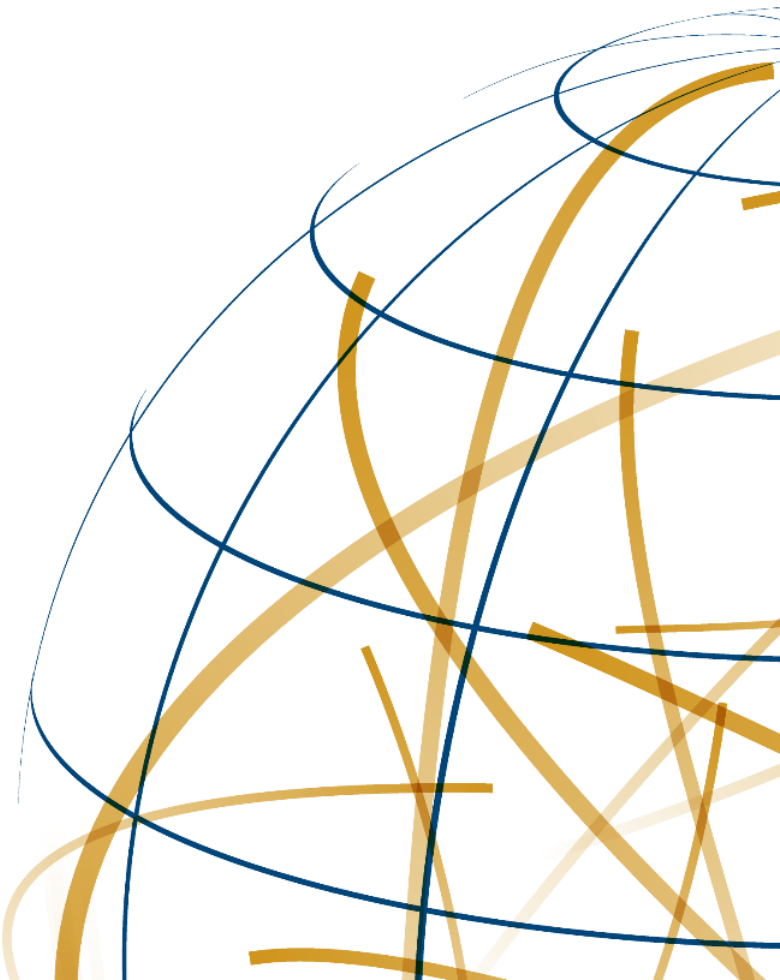
There is considerable scope for improving Germany's capability to act strategically in crisis management. What is needed is a more precise conceptualisation of what Germany's own interests and objectives are in any given case, and decisions on the means to be used to achieve them. If, as in the early years of the Mali engagement, the primary objectives are not directly related to the crisis but nevertheless justifiable (such as UN policy or solidarity with allies), the government should have the courage to say so clearly and define the mission and its objectives accordingly. This is important for the mission's domestic legitimacy and for the criteria used to assess expected and achieved results.

It is also necessary to establish the appropriate level of political guidance for a strategy once it has been defined by the government. Without continuous review of interministerial goal-orientation, effectiveness and coherence, even the best concept is at risk of failing. The lack of appropriate strategic objectives and operationalisation also makes it highly likely that the considerable resources that Germany mobilised in Mali were employed less effectively and efficiently than would have been possible.

These insights into strategic and management deficits are not particularly controversial, and are shared by many civil servants within the apparatus. Where disagreement remains, however, is over the necessary consequences and improvements. The experience in Mali suggests that making many small adjustments did not have sufficient qualitative effects, especially concerning cooperation across ministries and agencies. Existing committees, formats and interfaces (such as regular meetings of state secretaries, the AS Sahel, weekly jours fixes, etc.) are clearly not enough to ensure progress in shaping, adjusting and implementing a coherent and realistic strategy. This is largely attributable to the institutional autonomy of the ministries, but there are other factors at play. Internally, multi-tiered structure and differentiation can serve specialisation and professionalisation. But the proliferation of specialised sections and desks also poses a challenge when formulating binding overarching goals within a ministry, to which all sections then contribute, for example through country strategies that define the strategic framework.

If the status quo does not allow a sufficient degree of strategic debate and decisions, then the obvious question is whether a National Security Council — the creation of which has been much discussed — would be suitable for solving the problem. There are numerous good proposals on the table, but there are also understandable concerns that point to powerful government principles and coalition logics.[117] Whether a new institution would solve old problems or merely shift them is open to debate. However, if unclear competences and responsibilities in strategy development and political guidance are one of the main problems of German crisis management, such a body would certainly not represent a quantum leap, but it would possibly represent progress.

117 See the numerous articles on this topic in *Internationale Politik*, https://internationalepolitik.de, as well as on the following blog *49security*, https://fourninesecurity.de.

Abbreviations

AA	Federal Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt)
AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission in Mali
AS Sahel	Sahel Task Force (Arbeitsstab Sahel)
BMVg	Federal Ministry of Defence (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung)
BMZ	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung)
CIVAD	Civil advisor
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
EIBReg	Security force assistance initiative (Ertüchtigungsinitiative der Bundesregierung)
EUCAP Sahel Mali	EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali
EUTM Mali	European Union Training Mission Mali
GAAP	(Joint Analysis and Coordinated Planning) Gemeinsame Analyse und abgestimmte Planung
GAR-SI	Groupes d'Action Rapide — Surveillance et Intervention au Sahel
MANTIS	Modular, Automatic and Network capable Targeting and Interception System
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali
PARSEC	Programme d'Appui au Renforcement de la Sécurité dans la Région de Mopti et à la Gestion des Zones Frontalières
SFA	Security force assistance
SSR	Security sector reform
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNITAR	United Nations Institute for Training and Research
UNSC	United Nations Security Council