

France's Africa Policy at a Turning Point

Denis M. Tull

In view of the political fiasco of its military intervention in the Ivory Coast (Operation Licorne), France has announced a restructuring of its security policy in sub-Saharan Africa. Following the stalled reforms in French Africa policy introduced in the 1990s this is probably the most important break in the special relationship between Paris and its African "backyard" (Pré Carré). France is scaling back its involvement in Africa, giving up on unilateral interventions and striving for a gradual multilateralization of its Africa policy. It is to be expected that Paris will take the initiative in promoting a European policy towards Africa that will provide its own policy broader legitimation.

A key element of the reform includes France's intention of reducing the number of its military bases in Africa from five to three, with the closure of bases in the Ivory Coast and Chad, which each has 1,000 soldiers. It remains unclear if the restructuring also means a reduction of the overall number of troops stationed in Africa. The remaining military bases in Senegal (1,000 soldiers), Gabon (800) and Djibouti (2,800) are to become partners of the respective subregional African organizations ECOWAS (West Africa), CEELAC (Central Africa) and IGAD (East Africa), which represent the pillars of the new African security architecture. Responsibility for southern Africa (SADC) will fall to the base on the French island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean. According to Paris, the goal of the restructuring is to establish security policy cooperation with Africa that is multilaterally orientated and in which the French bases

will support the African standby brigades, which are in the process of being set up, in the areas of training, logistics and equipment. In addition to this "Africanization," Paris is also striving for a "Europeanization" of its security policy in Africa. To this end, the French military structures in Africa are to be opened up to European partners. Among other things, this could involve sending officers from EU member states to French military bases. This cooperation could then be expanded as an instrument of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.

French Africa policy: Plus ça change...?

The momentousness of the proposed realignment of French military policy in Africa can hardly be overestimated for two reasons. Firstly, Africa is traditionally

accorded high priority in French foreign policy. Since the establishment of the Fifth Republic, francophone Africa is no less important to France's national self-perception and its position in international politics than the possession of nuclear weapons. Secondly, the planned change in security policy, which is a pillar of French-African relations, appears to be symptomatic of the gradual transition in French policy towards Africa underway since the beginning of the nineties. This largely involuntary process was set in motion and has sped up as the result of four factors: first, the end of the East-West conflict; second, the emergence of a new generation of leading French politicians who, given the high cost, increasingly had doubts about the advantages of the historically determined special relationship with the France's African "backyard;" third, a series of debacles in the country's policy toward Africa, including France's infamous role in Rwanda before and after the genocide (1990–1996) and in the former Zaire (1994–1996), where Paris supported the dictator Mobutu up to the very end, thereby isolating itself internationally; four, public scandals (Elf, Angolagate) in which high-ranking French politicians were involved.

The discrediting of France's Africa policy and the resulting pressure to reform have led to considerable efforts to adapt. The goal of such efforts has been to pave the way for a more pragmatic and more "rational" policy towards Africa, in order to bring the costs down to a more reasonable level. This has included a clear reduction in French development aid for Africa, a 50 percent devaluation of the CFA franc, which was then tied to the French franc (1994), the drastic reduction of civil and military experts in Africa, and the incorporation of the Ministry for Development Cooperation into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1998, a measure Premier Lionel Jospin (1997–2002) was able to push through against considerable resistance from President Chirac. Jospin's public comments about the new Africa policy ("Don't do less, rather do it better", "Neither intervention, nor indiffer-

ence") could not hide the fact that these measures signaled a lowering of the strategic importance of Africa and consequently a reduction of French involvement on the continent.

The reforms of the Jospin era did not, however, lead to a strategic realignment of France's policy toward Africa. There was considerable resistance from an influential clique of French and African elites. In addition, the numerous political centers of power that deal with Africa (Office of the President and Cellule Africaine, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, etc.) did not exactly clear the way for the new orientation that was being sought. Thus, for example, the harmonization of policy towards Africa within the framework of the EU which was agreed to with Great Britain barely made it beyond the stage of being announced. In the areas of promoting democracy and human rights, Paris fell far behind its official commitments and the efforts of other states. The result was an Africa policy that lacked consistency and was in part without direction, oscillating between necessary reforms and established policy patterns. The former was personified by Jospin, the latter by Chirac, who has long been an adherent of the traditional Gaullist Africa policy.

Intervention and Its Consequences

The importance of Africa to the French government increased again with the end of the cohabitation between the Gaullists and socialists in 2002. Chirac and his new Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin clearly distanced themselves from the multilateral course promoted by Jospin. The proportion of bilateral development aid was promptly raised from 66 to 72 percent. Not only did France break with the EU's critical stance toward the autocratic regime in Togo, thereby returning to its traditional position, the country also invited Zimbabwe's President Mugabe to a French-African summit meeting in Paris in February 2003, despite massive objections. While these and other measures did not reverse the reforms

that had been introduced, they did qualify the impact of such reforms. The goal of this course correction was to strengthen once again France's capacity to act, which had been weakened by Jospin's reforms, in a region of central importance to the country's national self-perception and its international status. The crises in the Ivory Coast and in Ituri in the Democratic Republic of Congo provided the opportunity.

Operation Artemis, the EU's military intervention in Ituri in 2003 which was primarily initiated and conducted by Paris, was intended to prove France's claims to leadership and ability to shape events in its African "backyard" while at the same time sharing the burden of the policy among its European partners. Within the context of the controversy surrounding the Iraq War that was going on at the same time, it was also supposed to counter US accusation that the EU was neither willing nor able to take on international responsibilities. Paris celebrated Artemis as a success of a common European defense policy to which the French army had made an outstanding contribution.

Operation Licorne in the Ivory Coast, which began in 2002, represented, on the other hand, the typical pattern of French unilateral action in Africa, even though the mission later received legitimation from the UN Security Council and France positioned itself as a "neutral" intervening power in the Ivorian civil war. Paris refused to side with the government of Laurent Gbagbo which had come under pressure from rebel forces, a policy for which France would pay a very high price. The resulting anti-French witch hunt unleashed by Gbagbo, the bombing of French positions by the Ivorian air force and the emergency evacuation of 10,000 French citizens meant no less than the irreversible loss of the former "French" role model of Paris' Africa policy. It was a loss that could also weaken France's influence in other African states. Awareness of this fact is reflected in the decision now to close the French military base in the Ivory Coast.

The disintegration of its former West African jewel, which in France was long considered unthinkable, and above all the traumatic experience of the violent anti-French agitation in the Ivory Coast, gives the proponents of a new French policy towards Africa new impetus. Beyond the financial burden, Operation Licorne has above all shed light on the political costs of an Africa policy, the necessary reformation of which was halted halfway through the process. The symbolic impact of having maneuvered itself into a dead-end in the most important of its four African core countries (Ivory Coast, Senegal, Cameroon, and Gabon) and being forced in the end to relinquish its mediation role in the Ivory Coast to South Africa can hardly be overestimated.

Looking forward

Given the context outlined here, what is the importance of the restructuring of French military policy in Africa and what insight does it provide in terms of shaping France's policy toward Africa in the future? France will further reduce its involvement in Africa, without, of course, withdrawing from the continent completely. Particularly in francophone Africa, the country will remain an influential player for the foreseeable future. The existing bilateral relations, including the partially secret defense agreements, remain unaffected by the planned restructuring of the armed forces stationed in Africa—a contradiction that aptly expresses the ambivalent stance of the French government.

In light of the debacle in the Ivory Coast and the renunciation of unilateral undertakings, which is now recognized as being unavoidable, the restructuring of the military policy in Africa is an indication of France's future policy towards Africa. This will entail two multilateral factors. The first involves the support of African regional organizations, which has already been going on since 1997 within the framework of the RECAMP program (Renforcement des

© Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2005
All rights reserved

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

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

ISSN 1861-1761

Capacités de Maintien de la Paix). The declared intensification of these efforts is not only the result of France's inability to handle the Ivorian crisis either politically or militarily on its own; above all, participation in the construction of regional organizations affords France greater voice in the future shape of Africa's security architecture, which Chirac sees as threatened by the increased military involvement of the US in Africa. The second and more important component is the participation in multilateral operations of the UN and EU. No doubt, Paris will see the EU's Operation Artemis in the Congo, which has been widely declared a "success," as representing the ideal type for its future Africa policy. France will take up the cause of multilateralism in order to demonstrate its capacity to act in Africa and to protect its interests, while at the same time spreading the political and financial burden among the EU member states. This suggests that France intends to change its strategies and instruments in its Africa policy while maintaining for the time being the same goals as before, or at least not subjecting them to fundamental revision. In other words, the French government, at least under President Chirac, will pursue a multilateral course that enables it to take the leadership role within the EU in relations with Africa.

In view of this instrumental approach, it is to be expected that France will in the near future propose initiatives regarding the formulation of a common European policy towards Africa. The prerequisite for the development of such a policy, however, is that France first of all abandons its decades-long practice of "geo-clientelism" in Africa, which Germany (and others) has long accepted. Secondly, a political dialogue between equals needs to take place not just between Paris and Berlin, but between Paris and the EU as a whole. It's questionable whether such a process of dialogue is realistic under Chirac's presidency. Nevertheless, the restructuring of French security policy in Africa suggests that the reform-orientated forces within

the French administration are on the rise. The question is therefore not whether, but rather when Paris will initiate an open discussion about policy towards Africa. The German federal government should take the opportunity to position itself as an equal partner in promoting its Africa policy objectives. At the same time, Berlin should clearly reject French attempts to use multilateral operations for its own instrumental ends.