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Security in the Sahel—What Role for the European Union?

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In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, which led to major political changes in some North African states, the security situation in certain countries of Central and Sub-Saharan Africa, such as Mali, Somalia, Niger and Sudan necessitates closer international attention. Escalating local problems threaten regional and international security, and the EU should contemplate whether the situation requires its military presence in the region.

Sub-Saharan Africa has traditionally been plagued by an undeveloped political culture, nepotism and corruption. More recently these were compounded by economic, political and social instability which resulted in, amongst other things, coups d'état (Mali and Guinea-Bissau), social protest reminiscent of the Arab Spring (Sudan), regional military conflicts (Sudan versus the newly established South Sudan), famine threatening the whole region and the increasing threat of international terrorism (Mali, Nigeria, Somalia). Further instability in Sub-Saharan Africa could lead to a widespread proliferation of international terrorism, maritime piracy, and organised crime, which could have direct consequences for Europe.

The Situation in Mali. From the beginning of 2012 the West African Republic of Mali has been in a deep crisis, the result of a civil war between the Tuareg separatists from the north and the government in Bamako, and a military coup d'état in March. The army formally handed power back to the National Assembly in April, and the new interim government is preparing new elections and readying Mali to recapture the North of the country by military or diplomatic means.¹ The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is lobbying for a military solution, and is seeking authorization from the UN Security Council for intervention in the north of the country. However, in the light of the threat of famine and the need to stop a humanitarian disaster engulfing Mali (the civil war produced more than 370,000 refugees), continuation of the war should not have to figure prominently in the plans of the Malian authorities. Nonetheless, the crisis in Mali remains at the centre of the interest of authorities and security services of West and North African states, and also of the U.S. and the EU. This is mostly due to the fact that al-Qaeda affiliated and allied armed organisations maintain their presence in the territories seemingly under Tuareg control.

The Situation in Sudan. The Republic of the Sudan has recently lost, as a result of the secession of the largely black Christian Republic of South Sudan, approximately 25% of its territory and up to 75% of the proceeds connected with oil production. Both states remain at odds over the oil-rich borderlands and continue to support guerrilla organisations operating in and targeting the other Sudan. In January, South Sudan ceased producing oil which was to be transported only through existing pipelines via its northern neighbour – an agreement which necessitated the payment of high transit fees to Sudan. The loss of this revenue precipitated a budget crisis in Sudan and forced its government to introduce harsh austerity measures, such as mass redundancies in the public sector and the abolition of subsidies. Such decisions, accompanied by social discontent with the dictatorial rule of President Omar al-Bashir, who is sought by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes and crimes against humanity directed at Sudanese ethnic minorities, have strengthened the Sudanese opposition which has recently begun street demonstrations inspired by the success

¹ K. Rękawek, "Mali's Political Crisis and Its International Implications", *PISM Bulletin*, No. 53 (286), 22 May 2012.

of the Arab Spring. The opposition's success will be determined mostly by the reaction of the authorities and their policies in the coming months, as the government is said to be running out of the currency reserves which are essential if the state is to function in a budgetary crisis.

The Situation in Somalia. Somalia, in East Africa, is commonly viewed as a failed state. Its reconstitution and legitimisation is the main priority of the international community which supports the Transitional Federal Government. Its mandate expires in August, which necessitates the creation of a broad-based, coalition government, including representatives of different Somali regions, in the late summer or early autumn this year. The successes of the government's forces supported by AMISOM (The African Union in Somalia) and Ethiopian troops, which battle the Islamist and al-Qaeda affiliated rebels of al-Shabbab (AS, "Youth"), are to help reach a political compromise in Somalia. AS controls wide areas of central and southern Somalia, and its main base is the port of Kismayo, against which the Somali and AMISOM troops are expected to launch an assault in the near future. Kenya and the Transitional Federal Government have already called on the international community, including a direct request to the EU, for logistical and financial support of its anti-AS offensive.

The Role of the EU. The ongoing euro crisis and the problems of states such as Greece and Spain divert the EU leaders' attention away from the Sahel, despite the fact that the situation in the region could have serious consequences for Europe. Apart from the threat of increased pressure from migration from the region, which could reignite the debate around the cohesiveness and the shape of the Schengen area, the most important challenge will be to limit the danger of terrorist safe havens being established in areas temporarily or permanently outside government control in the Sahel. Thus, the necessity of limited EU military intervention due to the region's destabilisation should not be ruled out.

At the moment, the EU has a military presence in Africa, through its security sector reform (SSR) missions and the anti-piracy military operation EUNAVFOR Atalanta. July saw the inauguration of two further SSR operations in the framework of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy - EUCAP Nestor and EUCAP Sahel. The first is meant to support the Horn of Africa states (Djibouti, Kenya, the Seychelles and potentially also Tanzania) in making anti-piracy efforts effective, and includes training packages for the judiciary and coast guards, and legal, police and maritime security advice. EUCAP Sahel is, via the presence of up to 50 EU advisors, to support the security authorities of Niger and potentially also Mali and Mauritania, in combating terrorism and organised crime successfully.

Such initiatives are definitely necessary – they promote good governance practices and enable the states to reform their security sector institutions etc. However, SSR missions have quite major deficiencies, as past experience shows that EU advisers usually play a very limited role in the real political decision-making process of any given state with which they are supposed to work. Moreover, they rarely possess a wide implementation plan for reforms, and lack the financial resources to see such a plan through to completion. Because of such difficulties, the EU should contemplate strengthening its efforts in the region with a wider military presence. This is of utmost urgency, especially in the case of Mali, which has lost control of the northern part of its territory. It might be politically difficult to enforce such a decision on the EU level, but it is still possible to launch a military operation within a CSDP framework and deploy one of the EU's Battlegroups there. From the beginning of 2013 the EU Weimar Battlegroup will be on standby (with Poland as the framework nation) and it seems that all three states comprising the group (which also includes France and Germany), and indeed the whole of the EU, should take an interest in potentially deploying the Battlegroup in a situation of deteriorating security in the region. In such a situation, Poland would gain an argument for its continuous support of the strengthening of the Common Security and Defence Policy. France maintains obvious interests in this part of Africa, and Germany, despite its reluctance towards military involvement, has recently signalled its willingness to increase its interest in EU security matters. Even the EU as a whole could benefit from military involvement in Africa, and strengthen its position vis-à-vis China and India which are growing more involved, also militarily in the case of India, in relations with different African states. Such an engagement would also show that the EU is able, if necessary, to take effective measures to stabilise its neighbourhood. The very use of Battlegroups, the first in the history of the EU, would also confirm that the EU initiatives in the sphere of building military capabilities do not exist only on paper.