

Castles in the Sand: Mali and the demise of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy

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For those who believed that the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was still in good shape after Libya and looked with hope at the new missions launched last summer in the Horn of Africa, South Sudan and Niger,¹ the unfortunate news is that the tide of events has twice washed over the CSDP in the last 12 months and barely left it standing.

France's solitary intervention in Mali and the EU's absence there – in an area no less strategic than the Maghreb – raises two questions of prime importance for the future of the EU's supposedly 'Common' Security and Defence Policy. The first has to do with the crisis itself, its nature and the threat posed by the terrorist groups and militias that are being countered by French armed forces. The second concerns the causes and implications of yet another example of the EU's inability to take responsibility for security matters in its neighbourhood and beyond. How did this happen and can things get any worse?

To begin with, the crisis can be analysed at the country, regional and inter-regional levels. Since the coup d'état in Mali in March 2012, the situation there has been critical. Divided between a complex process of political transition in the south and occupied territory in the north, a constellation of separatist groups including Tuaregs, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other fragmented factions have consolidated their operational base there. This could push Mali down the road to being a failed state, with obvious consequences for its population. Second, through a domino effect, there is a risk of state fragility spreading throughout the region, across the Sahel, in turn exerting dangerous pressure on the Maghreb and Europe. Fragility leaves the whole region prone to the further emergence of weapons, drugs and cross-border trafficking, providing income for jihadists and other criminal organisations.

¹ EUCAP Nestor in the Horn of Africa, EUAVSEC (European Union Aviation Security Mission) in South Sudan and EUCAP in the Sahel-Niger. See G. Faleg and S. Blockmans, "The EU's re-engagement as a security actor: Fresh start or still sleepwalking?", CEPS Commentary, July 2012 (<http://www.ceps.eu/book/eu%E2%80%99s-re-engagement-security-actor-fresh-start-or-still-sleepwalking>).

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The Arab upheaval in neighbouring North Africa – Libya in particular – has worsened the instability and created a veritable powder keg in the region. This destabilisation has affected Europe’s neighbourhood: terrorist networks and cells pose an immediate threat to EU security, since they could use the region as a base from which to launch attacks on European soil or threaten EU nationals in the Sahel and North Africa, potentially also harming energy and trade interests.

The type of threat posed by the crisis in Mali is thus direct, multidimensional and without regard to geographical proximity or historical and colonial heritage. Regrettably, this perception is not shared by all member states. Furthermore, as a multidimensional threat, achieving a successful restoration of stability will by no means coincide with the scale of the – still necessary – military operation now underway. A comprehensive post-conflict peace-building strategy will need to address interconnected problems of governance, justice, social inclusion and prevent the emergence of religious and ethnic violence that could make the country even more vulnerable to the rise of fundamentalist parties.

If Mali poses a direct threat to the EU and the nature of that threat is one the EU could have dealt with comprehensively (since it has been preparing for it for years, notably with the ‘Battlegroup’ concept and the Sahel Strategy),² why then did the EU fail to muster the political will for a ‘common’ approach when it was needed?

Arguments raised in explanation include the need for rapid action, since, as reported by a French official, the pace of the crisis did not allow military intervention to be delayed by a complex decision-making process involving 27 members. Add to this the reluctance of other EU member states to send troops into a remote desert theatre where no immediate strategic interest is at stake. The ‘Weimar’ Battlegroup, made up of France, Germany and Poland, remained grounded rather than send German and Polish troops to fight for what was perceived as an essentially French interest. As a consequence, the absence of decisive leadership from the High Representative, compounded by a lack of member state political will to send troops to fight alongside the French have further dented the CSDP. Instead, the 26 other member states have offered political and logistical support, mostly in the form of bases, transport planes and drones for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

What are the implications of this crisis, especially in view of the debate about a new security strategy to be drawn up by the end of this year? Can we expect the CSDP to reach a lower ebb than this?

First, we should be clear about what we mean by “lower” because this implies that there might be a “higher” vision for the CSDP. As a peace-builder and a manager of civilian crises, the track record of the EU over the past ten years has not in fact been that bad at all. Mali, and to a lesser extent Libya, remind us that ‘disappointment’ over the conduct of the EU’s security affairs very much depends on the perspective we take on the ultimate aim and the meaning of the CSDP. If one defines CSDP as one among a number of multilateral instruments (alongside those of NATO and the UN) to address a specific set of security concerns, acting as a multilateral provider of humanitarian or ‘soft’ security, for example, it is hardly surprising that a high-intensity, hard-security operation such as Libya and Mali did not see EU troops on the ground. However, if one defines CSDP as the security branch of EU integration, as a means to maintain Europe’s influence on the regional and global stage or

² European External Action Service, “Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel”, 2011 (http://www.eeas.europa.eu/africa/docs/sahel_strategy_en.pdf). On the EU Battlegroups, see G. Lindstrom, “Enter the EU Battlegroups”, Chaillot Paper No. 97, EU Institute for Security Studies (EU ISS), 2007 (<http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/cp097.pdf>).

even as just the enabler of its role as stabiliser in its neighbourhood, one would find the adoption of a soft policy approach and military inaction in the Sahel questionable, at best.

Let us assume that the second logic applies. If Libya was a wake-up call to reinforce CSDP operations, Mali is a set-back. A crisis at some point had been expected in Mali (in Libya it was not) and planning for a military training mission (EUTM) had been undertaken since spring 2011. There was also broad consensus on and support for military action that backed French intervention, which again, was not the case in Libya. Most important, however, NATO's role was not taken into consideration, as opposed to the almost immediate reliance on the Atlantic Alliance leading to 'Operation Unified Protector'. The non-deployment of the Weimar Battlegroup is also a concern because it shows that 'structured' co-operation is futile if there is no political appetite for making capabilities available for action. How many more wake-up calls does the EU need to give sense to the *raison-d'être* of the CSDP? A military CSDP will not work without the will of member states to make it work.

What lessons can be drawn from this episode? Whereas Libya essentially pointed to the need to revamp capacity-building through pooling and sharing, Mali is teaching Europeans an important lesson about the much-favoured comprehensive approach. The lesson is straightforward: you cannot turn a comprehensive strategy (such as the one for the Sahel) into comprehensive action if you neglect or deny the use of military power. In the field of security, the integrated and holistic approach that EU official documents constantly refer to has reached the point where established (though not perfect) civilian assets and operational capacity can neither be sustainable nor credible if not backed up by force projection, military expertise and truly deployable capabilities. Unlike ten years ago, acting comprehensively is not about boosting civilian capabilities, but rather reconsidering how an effective use of military means can help the EU assume its regional responsibilities. Furthermore, how can we expect the EU to act as enabler from behind, or encourage local ownership and responsibility in the planning and conduct of peace operations (c.f. the African Peace Facility) if the EU itself does not engage in hard security matters?

As its southern neighbourhood becomes more insecure and transformations in global security proceed at a swift pace, the EU must choose between being a responsible actor and living up to its rhetoric, or accepting the demise of its Common Security and Defence Policy. There may well be a third chance after Mali, but it should not be taken for granted that the CSDP will still be standing.