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Harm van de Plassche, *Boundaries of power: the EU in Mali*  
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# **Boundaries of power : The EU in Mali**

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## **Introduction:**

'It feels a bit schizophrenic. We used to buy rice for the poor people, now we are buying them arms.' (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020, p. 935) This striking statement was made by an anonymous EU officer working for one of the two Common Security Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in Mali. The two missions were established after 2012, when a major rebellion broke out in the north of the country amongst the Tuareg people, who threatened to take over the capital of the country, Bamako. A French intervention prevented this, but Tuareg control of the north persists, and the region has also seen an intensification of Islamic terrorist activities, especially from Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), an Al-Qaeda affiliate. Since then the international community has proven ready to assist the Malian government with military aid and has also put boots on the ground. EUTM Mali and EUCAP Mali, the two CSDP missions, are just two of the many international missions which are stationed on Malian soil right now (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020).

As the initial quote indicates however, there exists some ambiguity about the effectiveness and the consistency of the international approach to Mali. This impression was exacerbated when in the summer of 2021 French president Emmanuel Macron announced that mission Barkhane, the biggest military operation in the country, would be wrapped up by the beginning of 2022. The mission had received a lot of criticism from international human rights groups for an airstrike which had targeted a wedding party, leading to the death of 19 civilians (Munshi, 2021). The mission had also not been able to give the Malian Armed Forces (MAF) the upper hand over the Tuareg rebels of the north. For his part Macron motivated the withdrawal by pointing to the absence of political coherence and stability on the Malian side, which had undergone two coup d'états in as many years, one in 2020 and one in 2021 (Charbonneau, 2021).

The French retreat left a power vacuum which was filled with the most problematic of European foes. The Wagner Group, a Russian mercenary organisation, has been active in Mali since December of 2021 under the patronage of the Malian government. The Group is tightly linked to the Russian Ministry of Defence and Federal Security Service (FSB) (Thompson, Doxsee & Bermudez, 2022). This is not the first time Russia has attempted to decisively influence Sub-Saharan Africa; after the fall of dictator Omar Al-Bashir in Sudan it actively delegitimised the civilian opposition and supported the military (Faleg & Palleschi, 2020). Whilst this was a worrying development in and of itself in 2021 due to European interests in the region, after February 2022, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine cemented Russia's status as Europe's most significant opponent, it became an even bigger problem. The Sahel has been a region of European interest since 2012, as indicated by the CSDP missions, but

took on new importance in 2015 after the refugee crisis prompted European governments to try to control the main arteries of migration to the continent (EEAS, 2011). There are also major humanitarian concerns regarding the presence of the Wagner Group in the region. The Group has been linked to a massacre in the city of Moura, where between 350 and 380 men were killed in the space of four days (Burke & Akinwotu, 2022).

The question thus poses itself: how can the EU ensure that its CSDP missions create a stable and safe Mali in collaboration and with the confidence of the Malian government and people? To answer this question we will first conduct an analysis of the issue at hand: what are the current CSDP missions in Mali doing and what is the context in which they operate? Next we will look at the decision making process behind the CSDP missions, how this functioned in the case of EUTM and which players can influence it. Next, the major problems the CSDP missions are encountering will be considered. To conclude, a few possible solutions to these issues will be sketched out, as well as their consequences on the ground.

## **Analysis of the issue:**

In this section we will analyse how a crisis developed in Mali and the previous interactions of the EU with this country and the region at large. We will see that Mali does not face one crisis, but two interlocking ones. Simultaneously we will explore how the EU intervention was not only prompted by autonomous developments within Mali itself, but also by a broader realignment in EU policy. The main perspective of our analysis will be that of the CSDP missions, meaning that we will focus on the aspects that impact their operations most.

Out of all European countries, Mali, and West-Africa in general, has had the closest relations with France. The reason is the country's colonial past and the large military infrastructure the country has maintained in the region (Faleg & Palleschi, 2020). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that France was the first to intervene when a military crisis broke out in Mali in 2012. The Malian crisis was triggered by the NATO intervention in Libya. Ghadafi, the aged dictator of the country, had maintained peace in the Sahel region by giving jobs to Tuareg rebels who had fought the post-colonial states since the 90's. However, with his fall, they returned home and started an insurgency in the North of Mali. They were joined by a large Salafist faction which had migrated into Northern Mali from Algeria after the civil war in that country had been decided in their disfavour. In 2012 they conquered large swathes of the north of the country and made it known that it was their intention to establish a theocracy. In 2013 they penetrated into the centre of the country. At this point France intervened with Operation Serval, beating the insurgents back. However this operation did not defeat them; since then many have joined ISGS and JNIM and crossed into bordering countries (Idrissa, 2021). Mali thus faces a conventional military opponent in the north of the country and an unconventional terrorist threat.

In the midst of this, two CSDP missions were deployed to the country. Their main initial objective was to reform the national army so that it would be more effective in countering its enemies. EUTM had to train around 550 men from the MAF whilst EUCAP was primarily engaged in training the Malian security forces which report to the Ministry of the Interior (Rouppert, 2015). This means that EU forces did not, and still do not, participate in active military operations (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020). Besides these joint European efforts, some member states have also supported or initiated military measures in the region, such as France with Operation Barkhane. Other non-EU initiatives include the Takuba Task Force, which was established in 2020 by some western countries to assist the MAF in the field as well as in training (European Council, 2021).

This new Task Force is part of a broader realignment in European policy. EU security interactions with Mali have been critically intertwined with the region we know as the 'Sahel'.

Everyone interested in EU foreign policy has heard of this region, approximately knows what it means but cannot define it precisely. That is because the concept has floating borders, which are shaped by developments within the region. Previously, European policy towards Sahelian countries was embedded within a West African strategy which centred around the principal supranational agency of the region, ECOWAS. However, since the adoption of the 'Sahel Strategy' by the EU in 2011 this has changed. In the document the Sahel was defined as Mauritania, Niger, Mali, and Algeria. In 2014 Burkina Faso and Chad were added to the list and Algeria removed. In some EU documents the borders of the Sahel are pushed to Nigeria and Senegal. This is because the definition of the region is based on common issues (Lopez-Lucia, 2020).

Recently the Sahel has increasingly been defined in terms of governance and security (Goxho, 2021). This can also be seen in how the EU has interacted with the region. ECOWAS has lost its preeminence in European relations with the region. It still receives a large amount of funding, but it is not the sole recipient anymore. The EU has instead sponsored more scattered initiatives of which the G5 Sahel, which includes Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania, is the most important. This organisation is primarily focused on security matters and also has a task force for battling terrorists (European Council, 2022). What has undergirded this more muscular policy is the EU's own crises. The two most important developments were those of the refugee crisis and the political reaction it produced within Europe itself (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020), and the terrorist attacks of which France was the prime victim (McDonagh, 2015). It is not only on the level of EU policy that this development is apparent; more and more member states define West-Africa as a priority region in their foreign policies because of concerns regarding migration and terrorism (Faleg & Palleschi, 2020).

The EU has thus tried to prevent the Malian state from being defeated by the multiple threats it faces through two CSDP missions. Its efforts have centred around training, not combat, unlike missions by some individual member states. However, the missions are part of the broader trend of increasing muscularity in the foreign policy of member states and the EU, focusing on the Sahel as a region of concern with regards to the issues of migration and terrorism.

## **EU decision making:**

From the preceding section it has become clear that the EU has been deeply involved with Mali and the Sahel region at large. Recently most of this involvement has come within the context of the CSDP and its two missions in Mali, EUTM Mali and EUCAP Mali. In this section we will examine the process of decision making within the EU in this domain by using the case of EUTM Mali, which was crafted and decided upon in 2012-2013. Besides looking at the formal procedure within EU institutions we will also examine other actors on different levels who have an impact on EU involvement in Mali.

The body that first proposed the creation of EUTM was the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), which contains all the foreign affairs ministers of the member states. After a request from the Malian authorities for European action they commissioned a crisis management concept (CMC) (Rouppert, 2015). On this occasion the FAC made use of the new possibilities offered by the reforms which the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), under which the CSDP falls, has undergone since the 1990's. These gave the EU more scope for joint external actions. At the core of these external actions lie the Petersberg tasks, which permit the EU to engage in humanitarian, peacekeeping and crisis management tasks. The FAC was made the principal decision maker in the CFSP arena and was given a president in the form of the Higher Representative (HR), whose position was created by the Treaty of Amsterdam. The FAC votes by unanimity, due to the highly sensitive nature of the questions involved. However, with the Treaty of Lisbon, the capabilities of the HR were augmented and the European External Action Service (EEAS) was established, thus concentrating more power in Brussels (Juncos & Friis, 2019).

It was a directorate within this last institution, the Crisis Management and Planning Directorate (CMPD), which took up the task of drafting the CMC for the EUTM (Rouppert, 2015). The EEAS has been crucial in establishing the EU stance towards the Sahel and Africa in general. This did not go without some bureaucratic infighting. It battled for control of the EU's Africa policy with the Directorate for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) of the European Commission. Due to their organisational nature, the EEAS being more like a diplomatic corps and DG DEVCO focusing on economic development, they were inclined to disagree on the extent of EU involvement in African policy and the focus that it should have. With the support of the French government, which had been the main proponent of a more active EU policy in Africa, the EEAS has prevailed over DG DEVCO (Lopez-Lucia, 2020).

However it would be wrong to give the impression that the EEAS and the HR are all-powerful. In the case of the EUMT mission, and all CSDP missions more generally, it had to take into account the feedback and expectations of the Political and Security Committee (PSC) and its various



subcommittees. The PSC consists of national representatives at the ambassadorial level and can rely on a vast amount of working groups, which in the case of the EUMT ensured that the CMC conformed to the expectations of the member states. Ultimately the member states, in their capacity of European Council, are the ones who decide by unanimity on this sensitive issue. It is thus clear that the EU institutions have a large say in the shaping of the plan, but already at quite an early stage have to deal with national interests (Juncos & Friis, 2013).

In the case of European relations with Mali and the Sahel these national interests play a crucial role. The predominant national player is France. As already indicated, it was the one who directly intervened militarily when the Malian insurgents were quickly making progress in the country in 2012. It did not only do this because it could, thanks to its superior military capabilities, but also because of its long standing connections and interests in the region. It has intervened on average once every fifteen months in the Sahel and its engagement in Mali has been particularly massive under operation Barkhane. At its peak, the French force was 5,000 strong, had 200 armoured vehicles as well as fighter jets and transport aircraft (Idrissa, 2021). It was also French Minister of Defence Jean-Yves Le Drian who pushed for the creation of EUTM Mali. This means that French national politics also have an important impact on the region and EU policy towards it. Besides national there are also supranational players involved. The UN is key in this aspect. It has a 12,000 strong peacekeeping mission in the region, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). It is also the critical forum where major problems are discussed, such as human rights violations by Malian forces (Raineri & Strazzari, 2019).

## **Major issues:**

In Mali the developments sketched above have produced problems in three different spheres: on the geopolitical level, the organisational level and the 'popularity' level. These all, in different ways, have reduced the effectiveness of the CSDP mission and have produced a more problematic context of operations. In the following section we will examine these problems, going from the macro to the micro. These will form the background against which possible solutions will be formulated.

The first issue is the geopolitical one. As previously indicated, EU policy regarding the region we now know as the Sahel was embedded within the EU's West Africa policy. Crucial in this respect was The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), an organic product of the region's internal dynamics. This organisation is one of the most advanced supranational institutions in the whole of Africa, focusing on political and security cooperation. Its most striking feature is that ECOWAS has the right to intervene militarily in a member state 'in cases of a threat to democracy, a humanitarian disaster, serious violations of human rights, and threats to regional peace and security' (Lopez-Lucia, 2020, p. 4). The organisation has backed up its noble principles with firm action. If we take the case of Mali, we can see it has had a crucial impact on this country's modern political development. When a coup d'état was executed in 2012, ECOWAS closed its borders and threatened military intervention. This proved sufficient to lead to a swift democratic transition which ECOWAS helped implement (International Crisis Group, 2016). However, as indicated, recently ECOWAS has been confined to the background in EU policy. The alternative the EU has devised is supporting weak institutions which are more easily malleable. Sometimes these structures are even created under its pressure (Lopez-Lucia, 2020).

The second problem is organisational. By late 2017 EUTM Mali had contributed to training half of overall MAF personnel, whilst 3,500 internal security agents had received similar assistance from EUCAP Mali. Since then the activities of both missions were expanded. EUCAP had to help the Malian state guard its borders, whilst EUTM got the task of supporting the G5 Sahel Joint Force. However, whilst its activities expanded, EUTM trained Malian forces have been repeatedly accused of human rights abuses. Other EU trained staffers and units have been identified as being involved in criminal activities, even on an international scale. These have been tolerated because EU officials believe these units to be better than no defence. They consider that these Malian forces are the ones who can get the 'job done' (Raineri & Strazzari, 2019). However it has led to a situation where populations turn to insurgent groups for safety and stability (Charbonneau, 2021).

Two factors complicate the monitoring of the Malian troops. Firstly, the militaries of the member states have been heavily shaped by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, in which many of them participated. The main result of this has been that there is a definitive aversion amongst high military officials and politicians for involving men in situations where they might be at risk of losing their lives. This has led to some resentment on the side of the MAF but on the organisational level has also reduced the amount of control the CSDP missions can exert on the men they train. Due to the fact that EU member states want to reduce casualties, CSDP officers are constrained to highly securitised compounds to fulfil their work. This means that they have a restricted vision of what the men they train have learned and how they apply it in practice (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020).

Finally there is the 'popularity' problem. The CSDP missions, which are often confused with those of the French by the local population, are not popular. First of all there are the effects of the restricted nature of the CSDP missions as described above. European officers divide the Malian territory into 'safe zones', in which they live and work, and 'unsafe zones' where the Malian population lives. This gives the impression that the Europeans are not willing to carry any of the risk themselves, whilst still wanting to have some control over operations. Coupled with this are differences of perception. European officers in Mali tend to regard the Malian security system as corrupt and as principally sustaining patron client relationships. Meanwhile, Malian officials see their security forces through the lense of sovereignty, with which the Europeans are partly interfering (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020). Secondly, there is the element of history. The definitive recent historical experience of Mali was French colonialism. France has been the main driving force behind the CSDP, and also had the largest unilateral mission stationed in Mali. France is perceived as being engaged in a form of neocolonialism, which irks the Malian government and its population, sparking protests across the country (Lorgerie, 2022). It does not help that the chief of staff of the French armed forces has explicitly stated that their approach to crisis management in the Sahel is based on France's colonial adventure and that an informal division of labour has emerged wherein French troops are responsible for the use of force, and the EU and other partners do 'politics' or development work (Charbonneau, 2021).

## **Policies & implications:**

In this section we will try to sketch out possible 'solutions' to the problems outlined above. Just as our analysis of the problems, these solutions will be divided into three connected levels: geopolitical, organisational and 'popular'. It is important to clarify that these proposals are situated within a specific moment in time. The boundary of what has been termed 'realistic' and 'unrealistic' when it comes to EU foreign and defence policy shifted radically with the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February. These recommendations will therefore situate themselves within the framework that Europe must not 'suffer' events but 'shape' them, as High Representative Joseph Borrell stated in an article penned a month after the start of the invasion (Borell 2022).

On the geopolitical level the EU must re-embed its policy towards Mali within a broader West-African framework. ECOWAS, the most important international player in the region, has been sidelined. This might have been justified if EU policies had proven more effective in eradicating terrorism and achieving regional stability. Instead, what has happened is that an unfriendly regime has entered the corridors of power in Mali and has welcomed the EU's most determined competitor. The initiatives Europe has launched have been too malleable to its influence. What is needed are regional partners who have better knowledge of what is happening on the ground and can navigate the political, cultural and economic situation.

Before ECOWAS was sidelined by the EU in its policy, the cooperation between both organisations was intense. The EU was the main donor to the organisation. This did not mean that it was a passive bystander. Rather, the EU had a seat at the table when fashioning the principles and ambitions of the organisation. In the case of ECOWAS this is a crucial element to have a say in, because it is on the basis of violations of these principles or values that it can intervene. Furthermore, ECOWAS promoted a more holistic approach to regional integration, being a political as well as a military alliance of states. Now the EU funds two different training centres for the Sahel region in matters of security which are in direct competition with three similar ECOWAS centres. The EU should fund these last centres, which train a greater variety of nationalities, thus fostering cooperation and common views on West-African problems, rather than a purely 'Sahelian' one (Lopez-Lucia, 2020). However the danger is that a withdrawal of funding from the more malleable organisations the EU has recently funded will weaken them. In the case of the G5 Task Force, this could mean a withdrawal of military force from some critical hotspots, thus creating a power vacuum. It is not clear who would fill this gap.

Policies focusing on the organisational side of the equation could possibly ensure that it is filled by the right people. The current problem is that malpractices are perpetrated by the people the

EU trains because it cannot exert control over what they do. Now the EU is muddling through: it does not want to fully support the Malian military by engaging in direct combat, which would enable it to monitor its conduct, but it does not want to leave the Malian military hapless either by not providing it with any training. In the current political climate the EU could decide to fully engage its forces stationed in Mali. This would mean expanding the mandate of the EUTM, the military mission, to accompany and monitor the Malian forces in combat. Besides reducing possible malpractices on the Malian side it would also reduce the influence of the Wagner Group. European forces would now form the additional highly trained and technologically superior forces the Malian government hoped to find in the Russian mercenaries. It would mean that more Europeans become casualties in a conflict that is not 'theirs', just as in Iraq and Afghanistan. However this is what 'talking the language of power', as Borrel indicates, means; taking more responsibilities and risks (Borell, 2022). Besides that there is also a way in which this could be seen as a 'European conflict': a global fight against the influence of Russia. Finally, the restrictiveness of the mandates of CSDP missions has been recognised as a significant problem for a longer time; this could be the perfect time to attempt to solve it (Churruca, 2015).

Besides the effects that this full commitment of European forces would have on the effectiveness of the Malian military in the field, it would also improve the 'popularity' of the European mission. They would not be seen anymore as putting the risk of the conflict on the shoulders of normal Malians. There remains the problem of anti-French and anti-colonial attitudes. A possible solution would be that French forces currently still operating in Mali are incorporated into the EUTM mission. This could be politically unpalatable to the French as it does concern military affairs, but since Macron is the main proponent of a 'European Army' the political will seems to be there (BBC, 2018). The fact that the French would be the driving force in the mission would not be a problem as they have been that all along, and from research it seems that a leading nation in a CSDP mission is an asset rather than a problem (Rouppert, 2015). Furthermore, during a previous CSDP mission, EUFOR Chad/CAR, the EU already dealt with anti-French sentiments in the same manner. France contributed more than 55% of all personnel, but the mission proved a humanitarian success with no major anti-French outbursts (Churruca, 2015).

## Conclusion

Mali currently faces a problematic situation. Since 2012 it has been engaged in a military conflict on multiple sides: in the North with insurgents and in the rest of the country with terrorists. It also faces an unstable political situation, with two coups having shaken the state in the last two years. The EU has tried to maintain the Malian state since 2012 with two CSDP missions intended to strengthen the Malian security forces and its military. It seems clear that this has not been an outright success. The EU has adopted a broader policy within the region which has weakened a previously effective and 'homegrown' organisation, ECOWAS, and supported the creation of institutions whose success has been limited. This has led to the enlargement of the responsibilities of the CSDP missions although they already faced other problems, namely the malpractices taking place within the MAF despite training by EU officers. This is due to the fact that the EU cannot monitor the forces in the field because the mandate of the missions is restricted and because they are confined to securitised compounds. Finally, the CSDP missions and interventions by other EU states, mainly the French, are highly unpopular within Mali, leading to protests and the hiring of Russian mercenaries.

The main question of this essay was how these obstacles could be surmounted so that the CSDP missions may produce a safer and more stable Mali. Three solutions have been proposed. They have explicitly placed themselves within the particular and historical moment we are living in right now when it comes to EU foreign and defence policy. The first solution tackles the geopolitical issue and is quite straightforward: make ECOWAS the primary partner in the region again. ECOWAS has more local knowledge and is a bigger, more multilateral and holistically minded organisation than the ones the EU is focusing its funding on now. Putting it at the centre of the EU's strategy would create a bigger coalition for helping Mali and the Sahel. The second solution centres on the organisational problems and is more ambitious: give EU forces stationed in Mali the authority to engage in combat. This would lead to better monitoring of Malian troops and an increased effectiveness in the field. It would also help with solving the popularity issue, as the EU would be perceived as taking some of the risk which only Malian soldiers and security forces are taking now. The third proposal seeks to further help alleviate this last issue through the integration of the French mission into EUTM Mali. Political will seems to be there on the side of the French and it would remove some of the impression that the French are acting as a neocolonial power.

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