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The Perseverance of the Crisis in Mali

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After yet another Tuareg rebellion, followed by a virtual takeover of the northern parts of the country by various terrorist organisations and a highly destabilising coup d'état, Mali finds itself engulfed in a protracted political, security and humanitarian crisis. The worrying series of events in Mali has brought the country to the attention of international actors, including the European Union (EU), which is concerned about the lack of stability and security in the Sahel, an area adjacent to the immediate EU neighbourhood. Unfortunately, the majority of the foreign ideas on how to address Mali's crisis lack an enduring commitment to improve the situation on the ground. Unless the international proposals are in line with the UN Secretary General's recommendations from 29 November 2012 and veer towards long-term solutions, Mali is likely to remain destabilised for the foreseeable future.

Mali, a landlocked, sparsely populated and poor country in West Africa, has hardly ever featured prominently in the international spotlight. Nonetheless, from the early 1990s onwards it was hailed as an almost exemplary democracy to its fellow African states, with its peaceful transitions of power looking like a viable alternative to the autocratic governance models of neighbouring countries. Its democratic reforms and credentials helped the country secure up to €560 million from the European Development Fund for the 2008–2013 period.¹ However, the two decades of democratic government have hardly coincided with economic reform, for example, about 45% of the population was below the poverty line in 2006.² Unfortunately for Mali, its relative obscurity and one claim to fame was abruptly terminated by this year's events as it became engulfed in a protracted three-pronged political, humanitarian and security crisis.

Crisis in Mali

2012 was meant to be a presidential election year in Mali, with president Amadou Toumani Touré stepping down after two terms in power. Unfortunately, as polling day neared yet another rebellion by the Tuareg—a nomadic minority (10%) in Mali that mostly inhabit the country's northern areas—erupted.³ The rebels, organised into the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and allegedly benefiting from the inflow of arms and volunteers from the decaying Libyan military, were able to push the Malian troops deep into the south of the country and then declared the independence of Azawad, an area carved out of northern Mali. As no country has recognised Azawad, it has become clear that the MNLA clearly overplayed its hand, finding relatively little support for an independent Tuareg state in a place where the nomadic people do not even constitute a majority.

¹ See: "Mali," http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/acp/country-cooperation/mali/mali_en.htm.

² See: "Mali," <http://data.worldbank.org/country/mali>.

³ The Tuareg have a long history of anti-state violence in Mali. See: K. Rękawek, "Mali's Political Crisis and Its International Implications," *Bulletin PISM*, no. 53 (386), 22 May 2012.

At the same time, the MNLA-led rebellion had grave consequences for the entire Malian state as the disgruntled and under-resourced Malian military mutinied against the central government, accusing it of ineffective management of the Malian war effort and neglect of the needs of Malian troops. The military junta ousted the outgoing president but relatively quickly, under internal and international pressure, handed power back to civilian leaders through the Government of National Unity formed in August 2012.

Unfortunately, this step fell short of reconciling the proponents and opponents of the military putsch as the Malian political class seems to be increasingly consumed by endless arguments over the legality of the coup, its fallout, mechanisms for restoring the country's territorial integrity, and the timetable of a political process that should see Mali elect a new president in 2013. Meanwhile, the virtual abandonment of the northern regions of Mali by the state has worsened the security situation there and a drought has led to a dramatic humanitarian crisis, together creating about 400,000 refugees.⁴ All of this was happening against the backdrop of activities by terrorist organisations operating in Northern Africa, such as Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its splinter group, Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), which began to cooperate with Ansar Dine ("Defenders of Faith"), the less nationalist and more Islamist-oriented faction of the Tuareg rebels who are attempting to turn the whole of Mali into a sharia-based entity. Their combined strength and the dwindling potential of the MNLA after it failed to generate support for its ill-timed independence bid have allowed the Islamists to openly establish a presence in northern Mali and transform a seemingly nationalist rebellion into what now looks like a jihadist struggle against yet another "insufficiently Islamic" Muslim state.

The International Community's Concerns

As the Malian political and humanitarian crises erupted almost simultaneously, the international community and the neighbouring countries have had very little time to shape insightful strategies to address all of the country's problems. Moreover, one has to remember that the worry about the fallout of the Malian political deadlock and the widespread alarm over the humanitarian situation were relatively quickly overshadowed by the security concerns about the takeover of the three, mostly desert northern regions of the country by the terrorist organisations.⁵

The Neighbouring African Countries, mostly members of the Economic Community of West African States (**ECOWAS**), are fearful of the political leanings of their local Tuareg populations (**Niger**), which might be inspired by the activities of their Malian brethren, and worry about the potential of Islamist insurgencies in their countries (**Nigeria**) as well as the *coup d'état* in Mali potentially influencing some of their own military commanders (**Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso**). As a result of these concerns, ECOWAS has shown determination to assist Mali in restoring its territorial integrity and has pledged to send troops to assist the Malian army in its looming fight with the Islamists and the Tuareg nationalists.

Two non-ECOWAS regional military powers, **Mauritania**, which has a track record of using its forces to pursue Islamist terrorists deep into Malian territory, and especially **Algeria**, with its history of ties to the northern Mali Tuareg community and acting as an "honest broker" in Malian-Tuareg conflicts, see the current security crisis in northern Mali as a validation of their worries about the shape of the Malian state and its previous inability or unwillingness to seriously challenge the lawlessness prevailing in its northern regions. Both are highly sceptical of the Malian capacity to address their security issues and would probably opt for a negotiated solution to the conflict without a visible European or American military presence in the Sahara.

France, as the former colonial power in Mali, is by far the most present and active European Union member and perceives the crisis as an attempt on behalf of terrorist and criminal networks to carve out a lawless territory in immediate proximity to EU shores and the borders of its southern neighbours. Such a territory could then be used to launch terrorist attacks on European, but mostly French, interests in the region or on mainland Europe itself. This thinking is very much inspired by the events of the 1990s when the predecessor of the Mali AQIM, the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria

⁴ See: "Mali situation," <http://www.unhcr.org/50a9f82316.html>.

⁵ The regions of Tombouctou, Gao and Kidal constitute an area larger than France but are only inhabited by about 1.2 million people.

(GIA), successfully targeted France in a wave of terrorist attacks. France actively lobbies for robust **European Union** involvement in the Malian crisis, and its efforts seemed to have paid dividends as defence and foreign ministers of the EU G6 minus the UK (France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain) have recently embraced the idea of sending an EU Common Security and Defence Policy training mission to Mali.⁶ At the same time, and in order to show support for the political attempts at resolving the crisis, the EU “wishes to see a civilian transition leading to elections as rapidly as possible.”⁷

The U.S., which is militarily present in Africa through its U.S. Africa Command and which allegedly has expanded its covert presence on the continent,⁸ shares some of France’s security concerns and wants to see the West African nations work together in joint counter-terrorism efforts. It had devoted resources to the training of the Malian army in counter-terrorism, but this approach, as the pre- and post-coup military developments clearly demonstrate, has spectacularly failed. Perhaps as a result of that failure the U.S., though it is touted as a supporter of the Malian or Malian-ECOWAS military effort into northern Mali, seems relatively unenthusiastic about the idea of more direct involvement in the Malian crisis and has so far stayed clear of headline-making counter-terrorism activities in Mali, such as drone attacks on the AQIM bases or personnel. The U.S. is also adamantly in favour of legitimising the new Malian political order through quick elections, which would arm the new authorities with the clout necessary to either wage war on the Tuareg or to conduct a comprehensive political agreement with them.

Reconciling all of these motivations and concerns into a coherent stance on behalf of the international community in relation to Mali is bound to be extremely difficult and will most probably take a lot of time. Therefore, in order to gather the support of as many outside actors as possible, the attempts to resolve the Malian crisis have been multi-pronged in nature, with the Malian transitional authorities involved in a robust lobbying process aimed at ensuring foreign (ECOWAS- and UN-authorized) “assistance to re-organise the Armed Forces of Mali and restore the territorial integrity of Mali.” In response to that, U.N. Security Council Resolution 2071 (2012) of 12 October 2012 effectively sanctioned a dual-track approach to the crisis. The government, “the Malian rebel groups and (the) legitimate representatives of the local population in the north of Mali” were urged to attempt to find a political resolution to the problem. Simultaneously, however, it gave the UN Secretary General 45 days to provide the Security Council “detailed and actionable recommendations” on the deployment of an “international military force” in Mali.⁹

Likely Scenario of Events

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon unveiled his recommendations on 29 November and steered clear of endorsing a rapid military deployment. In his opinion, “fundamental questions” on how the proposed international force, recently called the African-led International Support Mission for Mali, or AFISMA, would be “led, sustained, trained, equipped and financed, remain unanswered.”¹⁰ Thus, the Secretary General recommended a rejuvenated military planning effort and a strong focus on finding an inclusive political solution to the crises in Mali. This is bound to take time and upset parties who wished to see a UN Security resolution authorising an AFISMA deployment by the end of the year.

However, the delay will not upset the more enthusiastic ECOWAS members, who will continue to insist on a rapid external military deployment to Mali. At the same time, the Europeans, and especially the French, with their most in-depth understanding of the region, seem to be more realistic and appreciative than their African peers of the logistical difficulties that might easily engulf any deployed force in Mali.

Thus, more of concrete promises will likely emerge in the next several weeks of troop deployments from African countries other than Nigeria, Niger, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Chad

⁶ “Meeting of the Foreign Affairs Ministers and Ministers of Defence of France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain, Paris, 15 November 2012,” http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/121114_Outcome_proposal_Final_cle821c1b.pdf.

⁷ “EU Relations with Mali,” http://www.eeas.europa.eu/mali/index_en.htm.

⁸ C. Whitlock, “U.S. expands secret intelligence operations in Africa,” *The Washington Post*, 14 June 2012.

⁹ See: U.N. Security Council resolution 2071 (2012), <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sc10789.doc.htm>.

¹⁰ S. Tisdall, “UN Urges Caution over Military Intervention in Mali,” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/nov/29/un-caution-military-intervention-mali>.

(a non-ECOWAS member) as these have already committed their militaries to the resolution of the Malian crisis. Some of the contingents might eventually rush into Mali, but will deploy only to the southern part of the country. There they will at best concentrate on helping the Malian security forces stabilise the situation there, and at worst will remain idle on their bases. Moreover, only after the arrival of the European training mission and EU or American “enablers” (troops specialising in non-combat duties), which may appear as late as autumn 2013, will there likely be any further implementation of a military solution to the Malian crisis or a serious push to reshape the Malian military.

However, the Malians will insist on the primacy of their army in the expected fight, and this will only lead to further delays as their armed forces have never recovered from their early 2012 collapse. Their units and commanders remain divided as not all of them whole-heartedly endorsed the March coup. In addition to this, some members of the military and the Malian political class have misused foreign financial resources invested in the army, such as funds from the U.S.-coordinated Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, which was meant to strengthen the country’s counter-terrorism capabilities. Consequently, the questionable track record of the Malian army in fighting terrorism in the Sahara forced neighbouring countries to withhold transfers of armaments that had arrived at their ports and which were destined for landlocked Mali.

Under such conditions, one should not expect the rapid re-organisation and redeployment of the Malian army to the north as both AFISMA and the non-African trainers will face an uphill task to reconstruct the military, practically from scratch. This bodes ill for any attempt at a typical security-sector-reform mission (SSR), which would be the low-key option for the EU to take, as many Malian military units would have to first be disbanded before any attempt at training them back up could seriously be considered. It is possible that the EU planners could attempt a more ambitious training project, and establish a new Common Security and Foreign Policy military mission along the lines of EUTM Somalia, which is responsible for training Somali troops in Uganda.¹¹ Launching such a mission could signal a long-term commitment on behalf of the EU and other international partners, but it could take years before a reconstructed Malian military could take on the Tuareg and the Islamists. In the meantime, the feeble and reluctant African contingents will not be able to actively tilt the military balance to Bamako’s favour, and the Europeans (and Americans) will remain adamant that the crisis is primarily an African affair that must be solved by Africans.

The unfolding chain of events related to solving the Malian crisis via a military option will not prevent the insurgents from cementing their hold on parts of northern Mali, but could lead to an intensification of the ongoing internal rivalry between their more nationalistic and Islamist factions. Apart from preparing a military intervention, ECOWAS will continue its diplomatic efforts to foster divisions between the jihadist AQMI and MUJAO and the Islamist but also Tuareg Ansar Dine. The threat of foreign intervention will play a major role in this process as West African mediators, most notably those from Burkina Faso, will attempt to convince some of the Tuareg rebels that the establishment of an independent Azawad (the MNLA’s professed goal) or turning the whole of Mali into a sharia-based entity (Ansar Dine’s objective) are not realistic policy positions.

Conclusions

In the coming months, the international community’s multi-pronged efforts to solve the Malian crisis are likely to result in the deployment of an African-led military detachment that will receive substantial French and U.S. logistical backing. This might be followed by the establishment of a more permanent European military presence in the country aimed at fostering the reconstitution of the Malian army. Diplomatic attempts, nurtured by ECOWAS and perhaps Algeria, to push the Tuareg rebels away from their erstwhile Islamist and terrorist allies could proceed simultaneously with the military build-up, though they are likely to end with yet another allegedly milestone political agreement between the Malian government in Bamako and the more amenable rebel factions.

This does not mean, however, that the Malian authorities would be ready for whole-hearted political, economic and social engagement with the Tuareg living in Mali. The state’s corrupt, self-

¹¹ For more on EUTM and its activities see: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/eeas/security-defence/eu-operations/eu-somalia-training-mission?lang=en>.

serving and nepotistic political class is derived mostly from Malians from the south, who are loath to divert Mali's scarce resources towards the north. In the long run, it could also opt for mobilising the non-Tuareg inhabitants of Mali into government-sponsored militias to ensure the acquiescence of the northern regions. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that some Malians benefit from the lawlessness of the northern part of the country, which before the 2012 rebellion and coup was rife with illicit activities such as drug and tobacco smuggling across northern Africa and to Europe. Consequently, some would be willing to endorse heavy-handed and ill-thought-through solutions aimed at restoring the pre-2012 status quo in the north amounting to Bamako's lack of interest in all affairs Tuareg. Under such conditions, AQIM, MUJAO and to a lesser extent Ansar Dine, which have been present in the region for about two decades, would likely remain deeply entrenched in their desert fiefdom and refrain from abandoning an area that provides them lucrative business opportunities.

In such conditions, one should not be surprised with the European and American reluctance to militarily rush into Mali. The EU and U.S. will most probably insist on a cure for Mali's accountability and transparency deficits with new elections (to be held sometime in 2013). These alone, however, cannot be treated as a viable panacea to Mali's political deadlock. What is more, the elections could only be held in the country's south as the north is in Islamist and Tuareg hands, and would only replicate the current political order in Bamako. Thus, it would be more than useful to see a different type of Western involvement in resolving the Malian crisis in which the EU, and potentially the U.S., force, cajole, facilitate, assist and push for a process of a grand political compromise that would precede another round of elections in Mali. Such a process would need to include all of Mali's political actors whose presence is essential to strengthening the legitimacy of a political solution. Producing such an outcome would be the first step on the road to fixing the security and humanitarian situations in the country.

The international community cannot dictate the terms of the country's political roundtable but should be ready to provide the necessary assistance while utilising the best EU and EU Member State practices on political compromise. Simultaneously, it should also threaten the interested parties with negative economic consequences and the withdrawal of EDF funding if the political crisis is prolonged. Such an approach, which would be less directly concerned with countering terrorism and more oriented towards ensuring that Malian political problems do not worsen the country's security situation, is likely to be more successful in the long term. The alternative and seemingly ECOWAS-preferred military solutions are only likely to deepen and extend the crisis.