

Coups in the Sahel Expose Europe's Mistakes

Article by Raluca Besliu

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EU leaders have been quick to cast recent coups in the Sahel as unpredictable. But the EU cannot so easily absolve itself of responsibility without shifting its foreign policy from militarisation to grassroots human development. France's forced withdrawal from the region gives the EU an opportunity to make this shift.

On 26 July 2023, members of the Nigerien military seized power in a coup, which saw President Mohamed Bazoum detained and commander general Abdourahamane Tchiani proclaiming himself the country's leader. This adds to a recent string of military coups in Sahel countries, including in Burkina Faso (2022) and Mali (2021).

The Niger coup represents a major roadblock for the European Union (EU)'s collaboration with Sahel countries to counter extremist movements, a key focus of its 2021 revised Sahel policy.

As the second military coup in a country where the EU has invested in military training, following Mali, it also calls for a re-evaluation of the EU's security strategy. The EU's military approach has not worked. In fact, it may have harmed the effectiveness of its diplomacy and development support, raising questions about the EU's credibility in civilian efforts. The backlash against France, a key regional actor promoting a military-centric security approach, adds urgency to addressing this matter.

Rather than bolstering the Sahel countries' military, the EU must truly commit to improving people's lives through tangible actions. Shifting to diplomatic engagement and investing in local grassroots peace and development efforts could reshape its vision for the Sahel's long-term security.

This change in approach could foster prosperity and sustainability in one of the world's poorest regions, disproportionately affected by climate change. It could also prevent the EU from adopting knee-jerk reactions to events like military coups, such as completely withdrawing support from Niger, which could have a negative impact on its perception in the Sahel.

In late 2022, the EU established the Niger military partnership mission (EUMPM) at the Nigerien authorities' request. The mission aimed to bolster the Armed Forces' ability to contain terrorism and protect the population.

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when a military coup occurs is problematic.*

Planned for three years at a cost of 27.3 million euros, the mission faced a challenge during the July coup when the military, which the EU was willing to support with finances and equipment, sided with the coup leaders. In response, the EU halted not only EUMPM, but also 36 million euros in humanitarian aid and 66 million euros in development assistance for education and youth alone.

Training the military and then punishing the population when a military coup occurs is problematic. As Niger is of the world's poorest countries, where over 40 per cent live in extreme poverty, this approach seems not just punitive, but borderline cruel. It also risks generating lasting resentment among the population, who may feel unfairly held responsible for their leaders' actions.

When questioned about the EU supporting a military that challenged the democratic process, Josep Borrell defended the mission in Niger by saying: "when countries are fighting terrorism and their armed forces ask you to support them, to train their soldiers, and you do that, it is impossible to prevent what is going to happen the day after tomorrow. [...] So, nobody can give you the guarantee of what is going to happen in the future."

In a region known as "the coup belt", where power changes hands quickly, often to military juntas, coups reoccurring seems rather predictable, especially when the underlying issues generating instability and popular discontent, like poverty and climate change, remain unaddressed.

Niger's July coup marks its third since 2010, while Mali had three and Burkina Faso two during the same period. Considering that several of these coups were initiated or backed by the military, investing in military training appears risky and unlikely to pay off.

The EU's other Sahel military training mission in Mali, initiated in 2013 to bolster the self-sufficiency of the Malian Armed Forces in countering terrorist groups, has also not been particularly successful. Despite the EU's efforts, Mali's security continuously worsened, culminating in the 2021 coup that led to the capture of President Bah Ndaw by the Malian army. Since then, Colonel Assimi Goita, a Malian military officer, has served as interim president.

In April 2022, the EU suspended EUTM Mali's training due to the coup, citing concerns about a compromised political transition and the safety of EU personnel. This decision followed France's announcement of withdrawing its 2,400 troops from Mali in protest of the military takeover.

These suspensions left a security vacuum, strengthening paramilitary groups like Russia's Wagner and emboldening Malian rebel forces. With Wagner now scrambling to readjust after the recent loss its leader, the security vacuum is only likely to deepen. The EU had allocated 133 million euros for EUTM Mali between 2020 and 2024, funds that could have supported numerous grassroots peace and development initiatives instead.

France's forced withdrawal from the Sahel also provides the EU a chance to rethink its security strategy. France's longstanding entrenchment in the Sahel, rooted in its historical ties to its former colonies, and its distinct approach to security and development may have undermined the EU's regional influence.

France's foreign policy in the region has prioritised using military intervention to maintain ties with former colonies, safeguard economic interests, and protect expatriate citizens. Development played only a minor role; it could only come after security was ensured and was ideally funded by the countries themselves, not by France's financial contributions.

Allowing France to take a dominant role in the Sahel made the EU appear as "merely France's support actor", tacitly endorsing its member state's military-centric, self-invested approach.

France's days in the Sahel are now numbered: it is an increasingly unpopular and contested actor in the region, with growing anti-French sentiments sweeping the Sahel countries.

For a growing number of people, the French military presence on their territory is a symbol of France's neo-colonial aspirations to politically control its former colonies, while taking advantage of their critical resources, like uranium in Niger. Demanding the French army to depart is an assertion of national sovereignty, with security a matter of national concern.

In August 2023, Niger revoked several bilateral military cooperation agreements with France. The latter contested the decisions, claiming those deals were signed with Niger's legitimate leaders. In response, tens of thousands of protesters gathered outside a military base in September 2023, demanding that French soldiers leave Niger.

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Mali had similarly withdrawn the defence accords with France in April 2022, claiming violations of its national sovereignty by French troops, including breaches of Malian airspace.

The demise of France in the Sahel and its security model could offer the EU valuable lessons to build a new security vision. Over a decade of military missions have not rendered the region more stable. On the contrary, it is currently much more unstable.

Rather than investing in military training, the EU could focus on addressing the root causes of insecurity, including by supporting grassroots peace and development initiatives, distributed through its development mechanisms.

The Sahel region is experiencing some of the harshest impacts of climate change in the world, with temperatures rising 1.5 times faster than the global average, resulting in unpredictable rainfall and shorter wet seasons. This has led to reduced crop yields and the loss of grazing land, pushing many people into dire circumstances. Some migrate, while others are driven to extremist groups for survival.

By addressing climate change and helping people sustain their livelihoods, especially through development assistance, the EU can also contribute to countering violent extremism and enhance regional security.

The EU first needs to shift its development assistance approach. Rather than supporting top-down projects developed through government consultation but without input from local communities, which often do not achieve long-term success, the EU should focus on investing in grassroots initiatives that harness local commitment and expertise.

Numerous local projects, such as reforestation campaigns, sustainable agriculture projects, and renewable energy initiatives, would welcome the EU's support in tackling the pressing issues facing the Sahel.



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