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A new quality of engagement Germany's extended military operation in northern Mali

by *Michael Hanisch*

Ursula von der Leyen, the German Minister of Defence, announced in October that Germany was planning to expand its military operation in Mali to the north of the country. From the beginning of 2016 on, German service personnel, as part of the United Nations mission in the West African country, is to relieve the Dutch forces that have been deployed in the north for over a year. An analysis of the size and scope of this extended operation is possible even before the final political decisions are made. With a substantial, robust expansion of the operation to northern Mali the Federal Republic of Germany would first and foremost fulfil its self-imposed obligation to assume more responsibility internationally.

Mali has been a focus of international attention – and of German security policy in Africa – since 2012. Islamist terrorists who gained strength, among other things, through the crisis in Libya, Tuareg rebels seeking autonomy in the northern parts of the country, and a military coup d'état in the capital of Bamako plunged the country into chaos within only a few months. When the Islamists threatened to expand their area of influence towards the south, France intervened in this conflict with military force in early 2013. During “Operation Serval”, the French recaptured the large cities in the north with the support of several African countries within a few weeks – but without being able to defeat the insurgents completely.

The international and the European community – with German participation – have been involved in efforts to stabilise and develop the country since 2013, with varying success. Even though the integrity of the Malian territory was re-established in large parts of the country, the security situation in northern Mali remains fragile. Despite a peace agreement between the Malian government and representatives of armed groups which was mediated by Algeria in June 2015, and the presence of Malian and international forces in the region, violent conflicts between rebels and pro-government groups as well as fatal attacks on both Malian and UN troops have increased.

The German government is planning a substantial expansion of its operation in northern Mali at the request of the Netherlands, which has peacekeeping troops deployed under a UN mandate around the city of Gao since April 2014. According to Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen, German service personnel are to replace their Dutch comrades from spring 2016 on, mainly in terms of reconnaissance in this expansive region. This raises the following questions: How is the expansion of the German operation to be rated? Which purpose does it serve? How exactly can it be implemented? Answering these questions will enable us to understand the challenges of this operation as well as its limitations, and to draw conclusions for this operation and for German policy.

International security and defence efforts in Mali

When it comes to international security and defence efforts in Mali, a distinction must be made between four missions or operations: first, the military EU mission EUTM Mali; second, the civilian EU mission EUCAP Sahel Mali; third, the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA and fourth, the French operation “Barkhane”. The aim of the EU Training Mission in Mali is to advise the Malian forces in their process of reorganisation and to train them in a way to enable them to maintain security in Mali themselves and thus contribute to the stabilisation of the country in the long term. In this mission, which is limited to southern Mali and aims to have established eight fully trained Malian battle groups with a total of 5,600 troops by its planned end in May 2016, Germany and 23 other European countries have been participating since its beginning in February 2013. Since then, Germany has been extending its contribution from approximately 100 to currently about 200 troops. In August 2015, it even assumed command of the EU mission with its total of 590 troops. Compared to the enormous task of stabilising security in Mali and even compared to the reduced contingents in Afghanistan and Kosovo, however, German military involvement in Mali, as in Africa in general, remains very moderate.

In January 2015, the EU implemented the civilian CSDP mission EUCAP (EU Capacity Building) Sahel Mali in order to contribute to the reform and strengthening of the Malian internal security sector as well. Currently, there are 13 EU member states participating in the provision of training and advice to police forces, National Guard and gendarmerie. Germany leads this mission and provides up to ten police officers and civilian experts.

In contrast to the EU missions, the UN mission MINUSMA (Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali), which is being implemented since June 2013, is also active in the troubled north of the country. It is armed with a robust mandate that allows the use of military force. In addition to the stabilisation and protection of major population centres and to supporting the re-establishment of the territorial integrity of and government authority in Mali, MINUSMA is to contribute particularly to the monitoring and stabilisation of the peace treaty between the Malian government and all armed groups. For this purpose, there are currently about 9,200 troops and approximately 1,000 police officers from 49 nations deployed in the West African country. With about 500 troops and police officers as well as Apache attack helicopters and Chinook cargo helicopters, the Netherlands provides the major part of reconnaissance and support services for the mission. Germany, on the other hand, which provided approximately 100 troops to airlift capabilities of the UN mission until June 2014, currently only participates with a total of ten troops and eight police officers; even though the Bundestag mandate covers 150 troops.

In contrast to the missions of the EU and the UN, which are exclusively focused on Mali, the French, regionally oriented “Operation Barkhane” emerged from “Operation Serval” in August 2014. Owing to national interests in the Sahel region, France has deployed about 3,000 anti-terrorism troops in five countries, referred to as the “G5 Sahel”: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The aim of the operation is to regionalise efforts to fight against terrorism, to support the G5 Sahel countries in their fight against cross-border terror networks and thus to prevent terrorists from establishing safe hideouts.

The rationale behind an extended German military involvement in Mali

Considering the current German involvement in Mali, a number of interlinked factors suggest to underlie the intention to employ Bundeswehr troops under a UN mandate to the north of the country. Firstly, the German government is pursuing regional security interests. In the past years, Berlin has repeatedly underlined that terrorism, violence, instability, crime, and impoverishment in the Sahel region may affect Europe severely in the medium term. The impacts have hit Europe and Germany faster and harder than expected, however, as evidenced by the current refugee crisis.

Owing to the continuous instability in the northern parts of the country and difficult socio-economic circumstances, Mali plays a key role in this context, both as a source of conflict and as a hub of refugee routes to Europe. Germany therefore is (and needs to be) highly interested in preventing Mali from falling apart. The planned operation within the framework of MINUSMA is thus to primarily support the stabilisation of Mali, to implement the peace process, and to facilitate the access of humanitarian actors – which also means to fight one of the causes of the flows of refugees.

Strategic considerations also seem to play a role. With a significant expansion of the Bundeswehr operation as part of MINUSMA, Germany would assume more responsibility in the world and make a more substantial and uncompromising contribution, thus practicing what it announced in early 2014. The political will not to shy away from the risks presented by participating in the UN mission in Mali emphasises the importance of the current initiative. Additionally, an operation of that kind would firmly underline the approach of Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen, which is to make Africa, with special attention to Mali, the future focal point of German military involvement upon completion of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. The question remains whether this concentration of effort on Bundeswehr missions in Africa entails a strategic calculation by the German government to exclusively intervene politically and economically, but not in military terms in other crisis regions in the future, even though the use of military force might be indicated.

At the same time, the planned mission can be seen as a clear message by the German government to deliver on its promise to increase its support of and take a firmer stand within the UN. If Germany is willing to participate in this UN mission, which is considered to be among the most dangerous, this will lend considerable weight to its claim of wanting to play a more dominant role within the UN.

Finally, the close bilateral relationship between Germany and the Netherlands is of particular relevance. The Netherlands is currently planning a general cooperation with partners from the EU in order to reduce the workload of its troops, which have been employed in Gao since April 2014. Owing to the close German-Dutch cooperation in the defence sector, however, for example in the training of armoured forces, the Netherlands has already expressed increased interest in cooperating with Germany and has therefore submitted a specific request for support to Germany. It thus seems reasonable to assume that the initiative for the discussion and consideration of a German military contribution in northern Mali is based to no small degree on the willingness to show reliability toward the close partner.

The possible specifics of a German military involvement in northern Mali

A final decision about what an expanded German military involvement in northern Mali would look like has not yet been made. General conditions, intelligence from reconnaissance reports as well as public statements made so far about the tasks and deployment area of the Bundeswehr contingent enable us, however, to make estimates about possible material and personnel requirements.

According to Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen, there is an urgent need in northern Mali for operational forces that are capable of gathering information about movements and activities of terrorist groups, militias, and criminals as well as about government troops and the local population. In her opinion, the Bundeswehr has the necessary reconnaissance capabilities to replace the Dutch forces. More specifically, this concerns the reconnaissance forces of the army, above all armoured patrols, camera-equipped “Luna” UAVs for close-range air reconnaissance, as well as special forces for covert reconnaissance. According to a

newspaper report, the employment of the high-performance “Heron 1” UAV has been rejected by the Ministry of Defence.¹ Should the deployment area be expanded, this may be reconsidered.

Yet, reconnaissance forces alone will not be enough. Given the remote location of deployment, the threat situation, which is predominantly rated as “considerable or high”, and military-tactical considerations, additional support and security components will be necessary. In the currently favoured decentralised organisation of the operation from “Camp Castor”, close to Gao, a German contingent would necessarily have to comprise command and liaison elements, logistics, medical personnel, as well as infantry for self-protection. In this context, the German rule that requires wounded personnel to be transported to an appropriate medical facility within an hour can be seen as particularly critical. Due to the enormous distances in northern Mali, this would be feasible only by using helicopters. The constant threat posed by improvised explosive devices (IED) placed by Islamist groups such as Ansar Dine and repeated attacks on UN troops in the Gao region will also require the availability of counter-IED capabilities and make mobile and rapidly deployable robust troops indispensable.

If all those capabilities were required, a German contingent would easily consist of 700 troops or more. In such a configuration, it would also be capable of conducting the operation in a largely autonomous and robust manner – in other words, it would be capable of combat.

As a result, two important consequences arise for German policy. Firstly, to ensure mission accomplishment and an appropriate protection of the troops, an operation of the Bundeswehr in northern Mali would require comprehensive capabilities and a robust mandate. Secondly, almost all reasonable configurations of the contingent would exceed the mandate ceiling of 150 troops. As a consequence, parliamentary participation will be inevitable in order to extend the mandate.

Challenges, limitations and implications

Taking into consideration the understandable intentions of the German government, a German military involvement in northern Mali presents major challenges and has clear limitations – which allows us to draw conclusions about the specific structure of the operation and about Germany’s future approach to security policy in Mali and the Sahel region.

Firstly, even if the Bundeswehr is provided with sufficient assets, its operational and especially the reconnaissance options are limited simply by geographical conditions. For one thing, northern Mali has a size comparable to that of Germany; for another, only few passable roads lead through this predominantly desert like region. For military-tactical and operational reasons, the mission as well as the deployment area of German soldiers should therefore be within realistic limits.

Secondly, it must be taken into consideration in ongoing planning that the UN mission is not fully accepted by parts of the population in northern Mali. There have been protests and riots against MINUSMA in the past. In determining the contingent, the mandate and the rules of engagement, the German government is required to find a balance between the necessities of the mission, the requirements for the protection of personnel and local conditions.

Thirdly, an expansion of the military involvement as part of MINUSMA must not simultaneously lead to a decreased involvement in EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Mali. Due to the required contingent rotation and the dimensions of northern Mali, the eight trained battle groups that will be established by May 2016 will

¹ Marco Seliger: “Deutschlands Freiheit wird bald auch in der Sahara verteidigt” (“Germany’s freedom soon to be defended in the Sahara, as well”). Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 28 October 2015.

not be sufficient to stabilise the region permanently and on their own. Even though EUTM Mali is currently creating the basis for Mali to autonomously train and build up its forces in the future, a European and thus German involvement beyond May 2016 appears to be essential even from today's point of view given the multiple issues in the Malian forces. Also, continuing its strategy of capacity building would be in accordance with the traditions of German foreign and security policy in Africa. An involvement of this kind can and must exceed mere consultancy and should also go hand in hand with an increased participation in terms of personnel in EUCAP Sahel Mali.

Fourthly, an implementation of the peace process in Mali by military means has its limits. International military involvement in the West African country, the planned expanded German contribution included, can create a stabilising framework – but cannot solve the problems in the long term without additional measures. Due to the complexity of the causes of conflict, the positions of the negotiating parties, and the socio-economic situation especially in the north of Mali, sustainable solutions and domestic reconciliation require in particular measures regarding policy, economics, and development policy as part of a complementary and comprehensive approach. The overarching political process that Germany has focused on since the beginning of the crisis remains the key to overcoming conflict, violence, fragility, and poverty in Mali. In coordination with partners and organisations active in Mali, Germany should intensify its bilateral cooperation with and its civil and police involvement in Mali.

Fifthly, the approaches of Germany, Europe and the UN, which are mainly oriented toward Mali, are confronted with a variety of regional problems. Terrorist groups and people smuggling networks are operating across the fluid borders in the Sahel region, which are difficult to control. As a result, causes of flight and refugee routes do not only exist in Mali but in almost all of its neighbouring countries. It would thus make sense if the German government was to orient its future foreign and security policy efforts even more toward regional approaches such as the EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel or the G5 Sahel format, and support such approaches with appropriate measures.

Conclusion

The Bundeswehr is facing an expansion of its mission in Mali. In Berlin, the way is currently being paved for that. Compared to current training and observation operations with a potentially lower risk, the planned deployment of German troops under a robust UN mandate to the fragile north of the country stands for a new quality of – if not for a complete change in – Germany's military involvement in Africa. This, above all, is an expression of the increased sense of responsibility in German foreign and security policy and its new focus on the African continent.

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