The security situation of Sahel countries: A test of African military politics

Book Review: African Military Politics in the Sahel. Regional Organizations and International Politics by Katharina P. W. Döring.[1][2]

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As a researcher on African conflicts and peace operations, my attention was recently drawn to the recent book by Katharina P. W. Döring, researcher at Södertörn University, titled *African Military Politics in the Sahel: Regional Organizations and International Politics*. The author is no stranger to the field of African peacekeeping, having published several authoritative papers on African armies, security politics, and conflicts in previous years.[4] Therefore, as a former peacekeeper who has been actively involved in several peace operations in Africa, I read with enormous interest her latest book, which is based to a large extent on her previous doctoral and post-doctoral research.

In her book, the author seeks to answer how and what common solutions African leaders are seeking to counter the increasingly active terrorist and armed groups in the Sahel countries, particularly Mali, which threaten the security of their countries and the region. One of the most visible elements of this is military intervention (pp. 62–63). The author also points out that since the African Union (AU) and other regional African organisations have been in existence, there have been ongoing discussions and negotiations on who and how to intervene in an African country in the event of conflict or civil war. Regional action, involving several regions, possibly 'all-African' or even international action, is needed to solve the problems. There is still no established procedure for this, and interventions are often the result of ad hoc agreements between certain interests.

The 2004 conflict in Darfur exemplified this, with Sudan initially rejecting the AU's

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intervention but ultimately accepting it to avert international intervention. The establishment of AMIS (African Union Mission in Sudan, AMIS) prevented this, but the AU couldn't manage the peace operation independently due to a lack of funding, equipment, and logistics. As a result, other actors such as the UN, US, EU, and NATO had to participate in conflict management, leading to the establishment of a joint UN-AU hybrid mission. Nevertheless, throughout the intervention, leading African politicians and soldiers have constantly stressed the principle of 'African solutions for African problems', which they have not been able to implement in this mission. I personally 'experienced this first-hand as a logistical advisor seconded by the EU to AMIS staff' (Besenyő, 2021: 147–169).

The book also reflects these ongoing discussions and negotiations in relation to Mali, indicating that African politicians and military leaders often consider several possible solutions in accordance with their interests and often arrive at a single, 'common' solution after several rounds of negotiations (p. 87). Similar to the conflict in Darfur, the failed government in Mali in 2012 prompted the regional political and economic union, ECOWAS, to initiate a regional peace operation (MICEMA/Mission de la CEDEAO au Mali). However, due to the UNSC's lack of endorsement, the AU-led operation AFISMA (African-led International Support Mission in Mali) was given the mandate to resolve the conflict (pp. 70–77). However, the AU was unable to resolve the issue on its own, leading to the deployment of international actors such as the UN (MINUSMA), the EU (EUTM MALI), and the former colonial power in the region, France (Operation Serval, Operation Barkhane) in Mali. The reader can easily follow the discussions, negotiations, and games between ECOWAS, the AU, and the UN that eventually prepared the ground for the military intervention in Mali. They also illustrate one of the author's salient points: 'African military politics are essentially spatial' (p. 34).

In the operation, AFISMA faced similar problems with the AU as in Darfur: the lack of financial and logistical support, the different training of African troops, and the fact that a significant number of African troops and officers did not speak French, which made them unable to interact with the Malian government, the army, and the local population. Consequently, the UN-led MINUSMA operation assimilated the African-led mission here (pp. 75–86). As a reviewer of the book, I cannot help but wonder how the experiences of the AU operations were processed and incorporated into the preparation and training and applied to the new operations. It emerges from Döring's book that success in this area is still to come. However, it's evident that the international actors' operations, while more successful than the AFISMA operation, failed to yield the anticipated outcomes and ultimately ended with another military coup on May 24, 2021 (Amadou & Okur, 2023; El-Ghassim, 2024; Fortin, 2024: 53; Marangio, 2024; Sanaren, 2024).

Although the author does not say so directly, she indicates that, not only in Mali, but in other cases as well, possible African military intervention would have been not only regional but 'all-African', much smoother, more organised, and probably more successful if the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC) had been

implemented as originally planned (p. 107). However, several regional organisations and African states—notably Nigeria, which aspires to replace South Africa as the continent's leading power—hindered the establishment and effective functioning of the ACIRC, either perceiving it as a purely South African project or fearing its potential to empower South Africans. The African Standby Force (ASF) merged with the ACIRC in 2019 after years of blocking it, never using it (pp. 87 and 112). Observations in this and other book chapters reveal that some African states view military intervention as a tool to advance their political agendas.

However, upon reading the book, it becomes clear that not only has the 'all-African' solution failed in Mali, but regional cooperation has also failed to yield tangible results. One of the reasons is that Mali is a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the regional organisation has been trying to find solutions for the terrorist groups that threaten Mali's security and the region. However, it quickly became clear that non-ECOWAS countries like Algeria, Mauritania, Libya, and Chad should also engage in cooperation with Mali. However, despite some positive developments, cooperation has not been particularly successful due to different and often conflicting interests. This can be seen from the decision to set up the Nouakchott Process Intervention Force within the Nouakchott Process, which 'never made it past the planning stage' and was never actually deployed (pp. 137–143).

The author also criticizes the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad established and operated. Despite strong international support, primarily from the EU, the US, and France, the force has not achieved any breakthrough success against terrorist groups in the region. In fact, following the coup in Mali, the country withdrew from the organization and expelled French troops from its territory (pp. 143–144, 159–161). The three countries formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in the place of the G5 Sahel, whose objectives were largely identical to those of the G5 Sahel. Chad and Mauritania then decided to dissolve the G5 Sahel (Doukhan, 2024).

In the final chapter, Döring concludes and examines African military politics, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. According to the author, the question of how African political and military leaders will be able to assert their interests and succeed on the continent will clearly be a crucial one in the future (pp. 188–189).

The book's strength is that the author not only drew on a large body of relevant literature but also spent a lot of time in Sahel countries, where she interviewed 143 people who were involved in the creation and operation of African Military Politics and those who implemented it on the ground. As part of the oral history, these interviews provide a considerable amount of additional information, especially in cases where relatively little relevant archival data is available on a given topic (due to confidentiality or other reasons), thus making the research more robust.

Reading this very topical and comprehensive book, we can learn a great deal about the military background and policies of regional organizations and countries on the African continent, as well as their links to each other and international politics. It can

significantly contribute to our understanding of African political processes and provides a basis for security, international, and other analyses of the Sahel countries. All those interested in the continent and region from any angle should read this book.

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