

Have African Coups provoked an Identity Crisis for the EU?

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As Africa experiences a new coup wave establishing military governments across the continent, the EU grapples with fundamental questions about what direction to take.

In the past three years several global crises have upset the international order: the covid pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the recent coup wave in African states where EU has invested heavily over the past decade. The EU has maintained a relatively cohesive front for the two first crises but is struggling to find an approach to deal with the third. The Covid pandemic provoked national tensions and crisis in some member states, but the EU as a collective ultimately responded effectively: agreeing to create a recovery fund for the hardest-hit member states and after an initial slow start, managed to catch up with vaccine procurement and distribution. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine provoked unprecedentedly fast, tough and unanimous sanctions from the usually slow bureaucratic machine, and while discontent over some member states' national decisions regarding military support has disturbed the overall picture, at no point has the overarching aim of supporting Ukraine against Russia been up for debate.

In contrast to the previous crises, the recent coup wave in Sahelian states where the EU has invested significant resources, deployed personnel, and more broadly attempted to affirm its role as a global security actor over more than a decade, has demonstrated cracks in cohesion. More specifically, it has provoked questions regarding France's leading role within the EU when it

comes to Africa, as well as fundamental questions about how to merge the identity of the EU as a normative power with that of a security actor in the midst of a Global Power competition. The recent decision by the Niger junta to abruptly end EU's CSDP missions in the country is adding further questions regarding EU's future in the region and as a security player more broadly.

AFRICA'S COUP 'EPIDEMIC'

Over the past three years, the African continent has experienced nine coups and 14 coup attempts. This implies a reversal of the trend observed between 2000 and 2020 which saw fewer but more effective coups. Instead, we observe an increase in both the number of coups and their success rate, leading to talks about an "epidemic of coups" or "contagious coups", with a new phenomenon of a "coup within a coup", being exemplified in no fewer than three states. Six of these coups have taken place in the Sahel region, three in Mali and Niger where the EU has deployed four CSDP missions since 2011 with the aim to reinforce the capacity of the local security forces to fight common enemies and stabilize the states. While figures regarding costs should be taken with a pinch of salt, a Saferworld report from 2022 estimated that the EUTM Mali had costed 255€ million between 2014-2022, EUCAP Sahel Mali 254€ million between 2014-2024 and EUCAP Sahel Niger 237€ million between 2012-2021. These figures should be added to the African Peace Facility financing of the G5 Joint Force of 235€ million and the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace 90€ million as well as the European Development fund 78€ million.

The recent coup wave is a break with the previous two decades, but it is not a new phenomenon. Africa is by far the continent which has seen most coups in the world, with [220 out of the 492](#) coups and coup attempts worldwide taking place in Africa between 1950 and November 2023. Out of these figures, 109 were successful. As of 2022, out of 54 states on the continent, 45 had experienced at least one coup attempt since 1950, with the average African state suffering four coup attempts since independence. Niger and Mali experienced their 5th coup respectively in 2021 and 2023, while Burkina Faso saw its 9th coup in September 2022. Niger has been under military rule for 22 years since independence, while Burkina Faso – with some margins for how you count – has been under military governance for 45 years. To say that the democratic tradition in these states is fragile is an understatement. Especially as the years with elected governments cannot be said to represent picture perfect democracies, but rather being characterised by widespread corruption, [occasional oppression of opposition members](#) and [human rights abuses](#) by the security forces.

The coup wave is not a new phenomenon, but the EU's security presence and heavy investment in the security sector of several of the states which have experienced coups is relatively new, meaning that the organization needs to react and take decisions on how to proceed. Especially so, as research has shown that states which already have [experienced coups are likely to see more](#). There is therefore a strong probability that the current coup wave is not yet over. How then, has the EU reacted to the recent coups?

EU'S AD HOC RESPONSES TO COUPS

"After the coup in Niger, the EU does not have an approach", an EU official told me. It was, as observers already noted, ["a putsch too much"](#). The coup in Niger did not just provoke national and regional chaos in the Sahel, it also provoked confusion within the EU, whose bets were firmly fixed on the last state perceived as democratic in the Sahelian belt, with a newly [approved CSDP military partnership](#) mission about to start up its activities alongside EUCAP Sahel Niger. It also triggered tensions between EU member states and

France, after the latter was rapidly [pushed out by the newly established junta](#). The Niger case was nevertheless not the first in recent years where the EU had to take a decision about how to react against coup leaders in the Sahel: it had [time to practice on five coups](#) in Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso before the coup in Niger.

The EU [condemned the coup in Mali and temporarily suspended](#) the work of the two CSDP missions after the first coup in August 2020. The suspension only lasted until the Malian junta [appointed a civilian-led transitional government](#) two months later and the EU's work resumed quickly. In April 2021, Chad experienced a 'constitutional coup', whereby the son of the deceased President, General Déby, repealed the constitution and [took power as the head of a military council](#). Contrary to the Malian case, there was no official declaration or condemnation from the EU High Representative, instead Borrell and French President Macron [attended the funeral](#) of the long-term autocrat Deby alongside the new leader, thereby sending a public message of support for the military council. A few months later however, the [EU HR was forced to issue a statement](#) condemning the violence as the transitional military council violently repressed protests following a delay of planned elections. Elections, which the [EU is set to support](#) financially in 2024, while it recently [resumed European Peace Facility funded military collaboration](#) with Chad.

In Chad, the EU thus opted to look the other way regarding the coup, strongly influenced by France, but also following the African Union which in an [unprecedented move since 2003](#), decided not to suspend the country from the institution. Yet, the EU drew the line for violence by the military against civilians, indicating that while democratic norms occasionally could be sidestepped, human rights could not.

Mali's ["coup within a coup"](#) - took place in May 2021, only weeks after the EU adopted its [new Sahel strategy](#) which underlined the importance of mutual accountability. The [EU took a week to issue an official condemnation of the second coup in Mali, asking for the reinstatement of a civilian prime minister and the upholding of the](#)

transitional time line, yet did not suspend its CSDP missions. As an EUCAP staff member mentioned: “It was not an elected government that was overthrown in the second coup, so work continued more or less as usual albeit more discreetly with less formal ceremonies”.¹

However, seven months later [the EU imposed sanctions on the Malian Prime Minister](#) following the Malian junta’s decision to extend the transition period. Military collaboration was nevertheless not [officially suspended until April 2022](#), when the EU ended EUTM’s training of Mali’s armed forces out of fear of indirectly supporting Russian mercenaries from Wagner with material and resources. In short, the EU accepted to work with the military government as long as a transition timeline was in place but drew a red line to work with the Russian mercenaries. The examples of Mali and Chad show the importance for the EU of an officially agreed transition timeline and the promise of a return to democracy. Such an agreement has nevertheless been missing in Niger.

Niger’s coup on the 26th of July 2023 drew stronger reactions from both the EU and the West African regional organization ECOWAS than preceding coups in the region. On the 29th of July, the EU High Representative, Borrell, declared that the EU [“did not recognize and will not recognise the authorities resulting from the putsch in Niger”](#). In addition to the immediate suspension of budget support, all security cooperation activities were halted with immediate effect.

ECOWAS went a step further and issued a threat of a military intervention to restore constitutional order in addition to the usual suspension and sanctions. A move which put the possibility of a regional [war on the table](#) as suspended ECOWAS members Mali and Burkina Faso declared that they would see any military intervention in Niger as a declaration of war against their own states. The threat of an intervention did however not only divide regional actors, but also international ones.

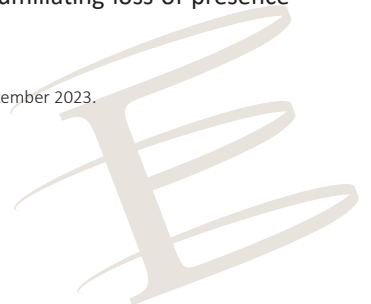
NIGER COUP PROVOKES DIVISIONS AND DEBATES

ECOWAS mediation role in Niger got backing from all major international players, including the EU, AU and the US, but while [France publicly voiced support for a possible military intervention](#), other actors carefully avoided to do so. The EU dodged the issue of an intervention with [Italian](#) and [German officials](#) openly discouraging a military intervention, while the AU Peace and Security Council, following more than a week’s discussion after a marathon meeting, issued a [communiqué where it only ‘took note’ of ECOWAS decision](#) to deploy a Standby Force. AU officials present at the meeting recalled deep divisions between ECOWAS representatives and the other members of the Peace and Security Council which necessitated days of debate to arrive at a joint position.² The US declared support for ECOWAS but emphasized [a diplomatic solution](#) over a military one, a stance which was reaffirmed by the US negotiation attempts with the junta early on. Although the actual intervention never took place, the threat allowed the Nigerien junta to mobilize and solidify domestic support against external ‘enemies’.

The Nigerien junta also took cues from neighbouring coup leaders and [suspended military collaboration with France](#) barely a week after the coup took place, fomenting further division between international partners. As the US made [unprecedented diplomatic efforts, avoided calling the coup “a coup”](#) for months (as it would entail a legally proscribed end to military collaboration), and [resumed counterterrorism missions](#) from the US-built drone base in Agadez just over a month after the coup, [France was fuming](#) at what was perceived as a betrayal by its Western partners while it reluctantly withdrew troops from Niger. Adding further insult to injury for France, disputes with Germany regarding military support surfaced during France’s stand-off with the junta in August while other EU member states officials in the country saw France’s harsh stance as an obstacle for EU to engage more pragmatically with the junta. France’s forced withdrawal from Niger came thus not only with a humiliating loss of presence

¹ Former EUCAP Mali staff, Brussels, Belgium, November 2023.

² AU Official, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 2023.



and influence in Niger, but also with broken trust and open disputes with Western partners and a dent in the EU's cohesiveness.

On the 4th of December 2023, the [Nigerien junta decided to end all security collaboration](#) with the EU, effectively announcing the end of EUCAP Sahel Niger and the nascent military partnership mission EMPM. The decision came 10 days after [the European parliament issued a resolution](#) asking for the immediate release and reinstatement of President Bazoum. The resolution followed the adoption of a [sanctions framework by the Council of the EU](#) at the end of October. The resolution did not add anything new in terms of political content, and the efficiency of the sanctions framework was doubted by observers as it [easily could be circumvented by individual junta leaders](#). Yet the two decisions did nevertheless not go down well with the transitional authorities. Two days after the parliament resolution was adopted the Nigerien regime [revoked a 2015 law enacted to curb smuggling](#) of migrants travelling through Niger towards Europe, a law which the EU had been instrumental in supporting. The move was widely seen as [retaliation against the EU](#) for its continued support of President Bazoum, yet few expected the junta to go even further and end the EU's operations in the country. Unsurprisingly, the new decision has provoked even more confusion and frustration within EU circles about where to go from here.

IN SEARCH OF A DIRECTION

The EU is now facing the challenge of dealing with France's loss of influence in the region as well as taking a clearer and more cohesive stance on how to engage with military governments in Africa. In the meantime, the juntas of the Sahel region are consolidating their power. Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali announced [a new military alliance](#) tasked with fighting external interference (such as an ECOWAS intervention), and jihadist groups in September, and in November Burkina and Niger followed Mali's lead and [left the G5 Sahel Joint Force through a joint communiqué](#). After imposed referendums, changed constitutions and extended or lacking transition timelines, there is little hope for a

democratic transition any time soon in the four states. Instead, the EU will have to figure out what approach to take in the Sahel with what is currently on the table: four military governments with ambitions to stay in power, an expanding jihadist threat and an increasingly dire humanitarian situation with record high numbers of displaced persons and food insecurity. A situation which is mirrored elsewhere on the African continent.

France losing its lead

France's forced departure from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has had significant repercussions on national, regional and international levels. [On a national level, France is grappling with internal debates between the Defense Ministry, the Elysée, and Quai d'Orsay](#), as well as with waning support from a domestic audience which has financed large scale military operations for decades in Africa. On a regional level, France's position as the EU's framework nation for missions in Africa is up for grabs, as criticism from member states against France's strategies on the continent are increasingly loud. Italy's prime minister [accused France of exploiting African states](#) years before taking office, and German and French diplomats have had open disagreements about politics in Chad after the military council took power. On an international level, France's position as the pen-holder for its former colonies in Africa on the UN Security Council is also in limbo, after the Malian [junta publicly rejected France as the pen-holder](#) for all issues concerning the country.

France's loss of a leading role in and on African issues may rejoice some EU member states who have grown tired of the French arrogance and know-it-all attitude. France's acceptance of coups in Gabon, Guinea and Chad while condemning others, has elicited rightful [accusations of double standards](#). Yet, as satisfying as it may be to see France backtrack publicly, its loss of influence may also mean a loss for the EU as a whole. A senior EU official once described it as: "If the EU is a car, France is the motor that makes the car move. Germany is the trailer, slowing the car down, but following in the end. Other member states are either the wheels

or doors, and some even think they are at the steering wheel”.³ While this was told with a tongue-in-cheek attitude, few would contest France’s ambition for the EU on certain issues.

No other European member state has up to now been willing to invest as many resources, manpower and budget for military operations on the African continent, let alone sacrifice troops. My Egmont colleague Sven Biscop often refers to France as the EU’s rapid reaction force for fault of any institutionalized alternative. The US support for French operations in the Sahel region has also implied a closer relationship and a common approach on certain counter terrorism issues. That common approach was nevertheless lost with the Niger coup, and the rifts between the former partners further confirmed last week when the US Ambassador in Niger presented a copy of the letter of credence to the military junta. If Trump wins the upcoming US elections, whatever collaboration that is left between European partners and the US in West Africa, is likely to disappear.

In sum, while the EU has suffered from France’s mistakes in the Sahel – particularly its attempts to hide behind the EU when convenient - as a security actor it has also benefitted from France’s engagement while taking a less visible back seat on certain issues. Individual European states more broadly have also often both used France’s drive to initiate their own policies while simultaneously blaming France for any failures. As France now is forced to change its attitude and strategy towards African partner states, it should do so in close dialogue with other EU member states and accept to follow, rather than decide the European approach.

A Force for Good? The Normative Power Europe

The recent coup wave has also resuscitated the debate about norms versus interests in the EU. As a self-proclaimed normative power, whose identity is based on democratic values and human rights, dealing with

military juntas who deliberately have sidestepped procedures to respect the latter have provoked questions about if and how to engage with them. It is around this dilemma that the EU’s identity crisis turns. If the EU collaborates with coup leaders without, at the very least, attempting to induce a democratic transition, it sends a political signal of tolerating non-democratic transfers of power. Such an acceptance would first draw accusations of double standards for Africa, and second, more generally undermine democratic transitions in the rest of the world – including Europe. Over more than a decade, and even during the past few years of coups, the EU has shown that it wants to remain involved in the Sahel, and in West Africa more broadly. The ‘if-question’ is thus answered, but it has been struggling with under what conditions and on which terms that the engagement should take place.

On the one hand, the EU could disengage completely from the coup leaders and discreetly support civil society actors from below, while hoping for a bottom-up democratization wave to take hold. Such an approach would allow the EU to stay true to its values while supporting populations which have not chosen their leaders and avoid accusations of hypocrisy. Yet, if the EU leaves, external authoritarian actors such as Russia or China are likely to step in and reinforce regime maintenance strategies, making a democratic movement a difficult and distant endeavour. On the other hand, the EU could take the pragmatic approach and maintain security cooperation with coup leaders after transition timelines have been fixed to continue combatting common enemies in the shape of jihadist movements. While not being able to prevent the regimes from engaging with other actors, the EU would still be present and able to step up engagement if conditions were to change. It would also offer a different option to authoritarian partners which could be a decisive difference in the long run. This is the approach that the EU has adopted in Mali, strongly influenced by southern member states concerned by migration movements.

³ Discussion EU official, November 2022, Brussels, Belgium.



However, recent developments have shown that military governments in the region are not more efficient in combatting jihadist groups than their civilian counterparts. If anything, the [security forces' human rights abuses under coup leaders drive jihadist recruitment](#) and as such feed into a vicious and violent circle. EU's engagement to increase the capacity and professionalism of the regional security forces has so far been difficult to evaluate, but it seems fair to argue that they have not been able to eradicate unprofessional behaviour, and probably should never have been expected to do so either. Overall, expectations for EU missions to bring about fundamental and sustainable changes to security sectors without significant buy-in from national and local actors and a conducive environment are likely to remain unmet. Hence, security cooperation with military governments should be entered with eyes open and without any illusions about radical transformations or successes on the battlefield.

Some of these choices of engagement are however no longer for the EU to make. As Mali chose to collaborate with Wagner over France, and EUTM, and Niger decided to expel the two EU operations, the EU is now left with EUCAP Mali and the new EU Security and Defence Initiative in the Gulf of Guinea, set to start in the coming months. While an undesirable situation, it will force the EU and its member states to reflect on principled issues that divide them and create a more coherent and cohesive strategy for the future.

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