

Stabilization Policies After the Sahel Coups

Comparison of the Policies of Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the United States



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The Sahel is increasingly ruled by authoritarian military regimes; co-operation with them towards goals such as stability and peace is becoming more and more difficult for Germany. Following the recent coups in Mali and Niger in particular, the question now is whether and how the previous stabilization policies can be continued. For around ten years, Germany, together with the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, has been pursuing stabilization policies that focus on strengthening fragile governments. In the future, Germany must more clearly define which partners are considered legitimate and which fundamental principles should apply, notwithstanding the high degree of context-specificity.

- **Legitimate partners:** The German stabilization strategy provides no indication of what constitutes a legitimate partner in practice. Germany should define clear criteria.
- **Local expertise:** Decisions for or against cooperation are always case-dependent. However, there is a lack of local expertise for making these context-specific decisions. Germany should therefore invest strategically in local expertise.
- **Foundations:** The German strategy needs more clarity regarding the foundations of future stabilization policies, especially with regard to the classification of security cooperations between coup governments and Russia.

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Executive Summary

Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States pursue similar strategies as part of their stabilization policies. These parallels have so far been particularly evident in the Sahel, where the partners cooperated closely until the recent military coups, especially those in **Mali** and **Niger**. However, since the coups – in Mali in 2020 and 2021, in Niger in 2023 – the stabilization actors have been faced with a dilemma: on the one hand, they do not want to cooperate with the new military governments due to a lack of democratic principles. On the other hand, they do wish to continue pursuing their interests in the region in the areas of stability and values, for instance, with regard to democratic governance and respect for human rights. Since stabilization is aimed directly at statehood and political processes, the seizure of power by putschists and the conditions in the Sahel region complicate the stabilization efforts of Germany and its partners. This raises the following questions:

- What are the basic priorities of the respective stabilization strategies?
- What are the specific priorities in the event of a coup?
- And what does this mean for future strategies?

INITIAL SITUATION

Coups Present Challenges to Cooperation on Stabilization

Stabilization as a foreign policy instrument aims to strengthen legitimate state structures and political processes in order to mitigate the effects of conflict in the short term and avoid further conflict in the long term. This is a risky undertaking, as stabilization is meant to work in fragile and high-risk conflict environments. Over the last ten years, Germany in particular has expanded the focus of its stabilization efforts in the Sahel countries. The results of these engagements are mixed: while success in Mali was rather limited even before the coups, in Niger, positive developments were observed. However, the coups of recent years have made cooperation considerably more difficult and pose a major challenge for stabilization actors, by their very nature calling

into question the legitimacy of the state structures that are to be strengthened. This leads to a dilemma: should stabilization efforts now be pursued all the more – or have they in fact been stripped of their foundations?

This study examines the stabilization strategies of Germany and some partners with similar concepts – the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States – concentrating on their approaches during the coups in Mali in 2020/21 and Niger in 2023. The aim is to analyze the priorities of various Western states in the event of a coup, both in theory and practice, and to compare these with the original goals of stabilization. Based on this, suggestions are formulated to guide future actions of policymakers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Germany and Its Partners Need Clear Goals

The strategies of the stabilization actors mentioned are intended to enable coordinated effects, but they differ greatly in key aspects. In particular, country-specific priorities and the different assessments of legitimate statehood lead to strategies that do not always allow for aligned action. Although the first coup in Mali in 2020 was publicly condemned by all of the actors examined, it hardly led to any practical consequences.

The reaction of the stabilization actors to the coup in Niger in 2023 was much harsher but still did not produce the desired return of the old regime. It took the stabilization forces months to realize that their approach had failed. Their reaction to the coups changed considerably over the period under review, while their strategy papers remained unaltered.

As a result, the reactions of Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States following the coups often did not correspond to the previously agreed stabilization goals. Above all, coups pose a major challenge to the goal of supporting legitimate statehood. The actors assess the factor of legitimacy very differently, focusing on aspects such as the form of government, the government's specific approach, or popular approval. Moreover, all these assessments are based on shaky foundations. For instance, one might ask: if popular approval can strengthen the legitimacy of a coup government, how can it be measured? No clear criteria and reliable data are available in this area.

The German Government Should Define Its Goals More Clearly and Build Up More Local Expertise

Germany and its partners rightly see themselves as like-minded stabilization actors, as they pursue comparable political approaches to shared values and interests. Another commonality, however, is that neither of them defines clear criteria as to what constitutes a legitimate government in the operational region of their stabilization measures. The countries should urgently define these criteria: individually, and ideally also in a joint declaration of intent. The Stabilization Leaders Forum, which the actors already use for mutual exchange, represents a suitable platform for this effort.

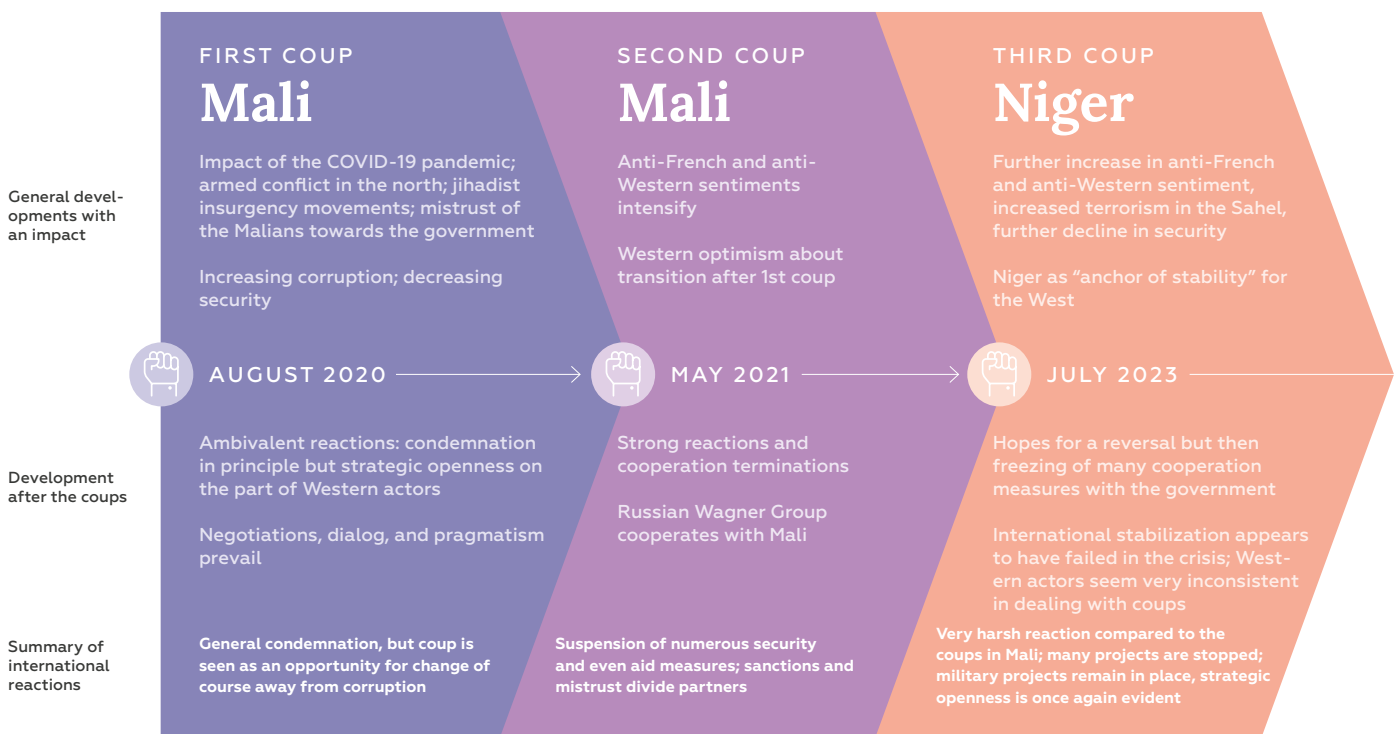
A crucial question in this context is what to prioritize after coups: security or the restoration of democratic processes? As much as the actors would like to achieve both of these goals at the same time, previous experience shows that they have to make a choice.

A better understanding of local conditions through local networks is also crucial. This not only helps assess the acceptance of a coup among the population

but also generally contributes to addressing the specific context of stabilization measures. Instability in a region should not be an excuse to lose track of the situation but rather a reason to invest heavily in local knowledge and language skills. In volatile conflict situations, it is impossible to keep a close eye on everything, but better strategic positioning can improve the assessment of motives for action and help to adapt appropriate responses.

Finally, more clarity is needed on Germany’s actual priorities in the area of stabilization. Based on an evaluation of texts and interviews, the present analysis identifies the key issues relevant for stabilization measures after coups. The decision tree designed for the study (page 35) is intended to serve as a starting point for an urgently needed debate. Assuming the primacy of security, it tries to shift very complicated issues from being merely considered to being acted upon.

The Coups in Mali and Niger and the Reactions of Stabilization Actors



Source: Own illustration

Introduction

Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States are pursuing similar stabilization strategies. This is especially evident in the Sahel, where the partners worked together closely until the coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021 and in Niger in 2023. Stabilization, that is, the attempt to strengthen fragile legitimate statehood, is generally a risky undertaking. Coups like those in the Sahel region challenge the foundations of stabilization strategies, in particular, the democratic principles on which stabilization is based. In addition, coups endanger cooperation, putting into question the legitimacy of the very state structures meant to be strengthened. A fundamental question arises: have stabilization efforts been deprived of their foundations or are they all the more urgently needed in these situations?

Despite many similarities, the stabilization approaches of the Western actors mentioned above are not entirely aligned. These differences form part of the international debate regarding the future of stabilization, which has intensified significantly. At the same

time, the growing anti-French and anti-Western resentment as well as the Russian presence in the region in the form of the Africa Corps (formerly the Wagner Group) are exacerbating the situation. Finally, the lack of consistency among international partners in dealing with coups to date contributes to this exacerbation, opening up scope for the juntas to pick new partners and to exercise power. To provide a practical perspective, we consider and compare the approaches taken by the actors during the coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021 as well as in Niger in 2023. Based on the analysis of strategy papers and press releases, we conducted 22 interviews with experts from ministries, think tanks, and academia in the four Western countries involved.

Thus, we are exploring the following fundamental questions:

- What are the general priorities pursued by the stabilization strategies of these actors?
- Which specific priorities arise in the event of a coup?
- How did the international partners react to the coups?
- What lessons can be learned for future strategies?
- What are possible future approaches?

WHAT REASONS DO THE ACTORS PROVIDE FOR THEIR STABILIZATION EFFORTS?

The stabilization actors justify their commitment in terms of both values and interests. In this context, value-based reasons include, for example, the promotion of peace and human rights, opposition to the decline in democracy and freedom worldwide, and multilateral cooperation in the UN, EU, and in ad hoc formats. The containment of migration, the fight against terrorism, and geopolitical factors are among the interest-based motivations. The actors differ in the weighting of the motivations; for further details, see chapter 4, "The Actors' Responses to Coups."

Methodology

- The study is based on document and text analysis and interviews with experts.
- The selection of stabilization actors is based on preliminary research and seeks to ensure the greatest possible comparability.
- As the focus of international stabilization, Mali and Niger are case studies particularly pertinent to our analysis and particularly relevant for the future.

The findings of the present study are based on a combination of document and text analysis with expert interviews. In order to understand the priorities and definitions of the actors with regard to their stabilization policies, we identified and analyzed relevant papers and documents in the area of stabilization for each actor (Germany, Netherlands, United States, United Kingdom). In each case, we examined press releases, newspaper articles, and other public sources as well as the official positions of the actors during the coups. Building on this, we conducted 22 expert interviews with (former) employees of ministries of the respective stabilization actors, (former) government advisors in the field of stabilization implementation as well as academics and think tank members. The selection was based on the participants' ability to provide information on the stabilization strategy of at least one relevant actor studied between 2020 and 2023. In concrete terms, this means that the interviewees were involved in or responsible for political decisions during the coups.

A female gender identity was assumed for 14 of the interviewees based on external characteristics. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. Some of the interviews involved several individuals as focus groups to enable the participants to combine their expertise. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and for reasons of availability, not all of the individuals contacted agreed to an interview.

The project framework determined the choice of Germany as one of the actors to be examined. In discussions with German government representatives, the most suitable countries for a comparison were deemed to be the United States, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, since the preliminary research produced the following results: **firstly**, the **approaches to stabilization** in Germany, the United States, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom are **the most similar**. Based on these preliminary findings, France was excluded from the comparative analysis despite its role as an important actor in the Sahel region: its stabilization approach was not similar enough. However, when analyzing the reactions to the coups, we do consider the role of France in French-speaking West Africa. In addition, we have also taken into account the special Franco-German relationship in our recommendations. **Secondly**, the efforts of the selected actors **overlap both regionally and in terms of substance**. The case studies for analyzing the reactions to coups and the resulting implications for stabilization can be thus selected with more precision. The resulting analysis is intended to capture the practical implications of the theoretical stabilization concepts in order to identify the priorities and objectives in the event of a coup.

The present study examines the coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021 and in Niger in 2023. This focus results from the long-standing stabilization commitment of external actors in the Sahel region and the resulting urgent need to gain insights after the recent coups. These two countries in particular have been chosen due to two reasons: firstly, the level of involvement there was particularly high, and the conditions for stabilization have changed fundamentally as a result of the coup in Niger. Secondly, resource constraints suggested confining the project to two illustrative examples at this stage. Furthermore, our analysis is limited to the external perspective on the events in Mali and Niger and does not consider domestic actors or the coups' background. Instead, we focus on the reactions of the stabilization actors (Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States) to the coups and the way these were addressed by their respective policies.

Stabilization Strategies

- The strategies of the countries examined are meant to interact and work in unison, but they differ in key aspects.
- Country-specific priorities and especially the assessments of legitimate statehood lead to different approaches.
- Coups bring these incongruities into particular focus and put priorities such as the primacy of security to the test.

In order to examine the implications of coups for stabilization policies, we first analyze the stabilization strategies of Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Our aim is to distill the relevant concepts and priorities of the actors. We also scrutinize the relevant documents for possible references on the handling of coups. The initial analysis considers the advantages and disadvantages of different stabilization strategies with regard to coups along four categories: strategic objectives, timeframe, priorities, and requirements.¹ Profiles of individual countries as well as a comparison can be found on pages 11–15.² Here, we will directly compare the four stabilization approaches, discussing their similarities and differences.

Overall, the strategies paint a picture of stabilization that is directly linked to the general international debate on definitions.³ Different actors and states interpret stabilization differently, although there are many areas of overlap. Thus, the actors examined can be

understood as like-minded partners who all face the same challenges due to the coups given their commitment to stabilization in the Sahel. We will use the following categories to compare the differences and similarities between their strategies: type and function of the strategies, central priorities, primacy of security, cooperation with (illegitimate) statehood, and strategy for dealing with coups.

Type and Function of the Strategies

A significant difference is evident in this first category. For example, Germany and the United Kingdom have produced strategy papers that are clearly identified as such and aimed at a specific target audience (Germany's dedicated concept "Shaping Stabilization" and the United Kingdom's "The UK Government's Approach to Stabilization: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners"). The British Guide has the distinction of being aimed at practitioners and should be seen as a set of guidelines rather than just a concept paper. In contrast, the United States and the Netherlands tend to approach their commitment to stabilization in a number of broader foreign policy strategies, emphasizing building security, preventing conflicts, and stabilizing regions. For the United States, we identify the "Stabilization Assistance Review" and the "Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability" as central documents. While these make comprehensive statements, they never achieve such specificity of concepts as the German guidelines. The Netherlands does not seem to possess any central document;⁴ instead, publications such as "Theory of Change – Security and Rule of Law"⁵ contribute to specific aspects of stabilization work. These publications are explicitly aimed only at the ministry's own employees and direct partners. In addition, individual evaluations by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department and the associated published statements by the Ministries of Development and Foreign Affairs⁶ show which strategies are being pursued. These are explicitly not aimed at a wider public, either.⁷

- 1 This method is modeled on a study by the Center for International Peace Operations: Andreas Wittkowsky and Sebastian Breuer, "25 Years of Stabilization Discourse: Between Realpolitik and Normativity" [in German], report by the Center for International Peace Operations (Berlin, March 5, 2020), <https://www.zif-berlin.org/news/25-jahre-stabilisierungsdiskurs-zwischen-realpolitik-und-normativitaet>. Last accessed July 02, 2024.
- 2 The subsequent overviews are based on detailed analyses of the respective documents. For reasons of space, we opted not to use the full versions. Should you be interested in these, please contact the authors.
- 3 See e.g. Wittkowsky and Breuer, "25 Years of Stabilization Discourse."
- 4 This was confirmed by the interviews conducted: for example, interview 11, February 13, 2024.
- 5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Theory of Change – Security and Rule of Law (English, January 2023)," (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, January 26, 2023), <https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2023/01/26/theory-of-change---security-and-rule-of-law>. Last accessed July 03, 2024.
- 6 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, "Kamerbrief reactie op evaluatie Nederlands veiligheidsbeleid in fragiele contexten," (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, August 28, 2023), <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2023/08/28/kamerbrief-inzake-beleidsreactie-op-iob-evaluatie-nederlands-beleid-stabiliteit-veiligheid-en-rechtsorde-in-enkele-van-de-meest-fragiele-contexten>. Last accessed July 11, 2024.
- 7 IOB Policy and Evaluation Department, "IOB evaluation: Inconvenient Realities – An evaluation of Dutch contributions to stability, security and rule of law in fragile and conflict-affected contexts" (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, August 28, 2023), <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2023/08/28/inconvenient-realities-stability-in-fragile-contexts-iob-evaluation>. Last accessed July 11, 2024.

Central Priorities

According to their strategy papers, the four actors have a similar understanding of stabilization policies. They see stabilization as a political undertaking supporting long-term stability, resilience, and security in initially fragile contexts using an integrated approach. The aim is to influence or facilitate political processes during and shortly after violent conflicts. In this context, stabilization is a short-term transitional instrument used at an early stage and intended to pave the way for more sustainable measures. The initial focus is on reducing violence, improving living conditions, and providing a degree of safety for the local civilian population. The four actors agree on the importance of showing alternatives to violence and preparing the ground for peaceful conflict resolution and social/political participation. Moreover, all of them recognize the role of the geopolitical environment in their stabilization efforts. But while the Netherlands and Germany are focusing on multilateral alignment (for instance, in the European context), the United States and the United Kingdom rely on exerting influence and building alliances to adjust and realize stabilization efforts. In addition, all actors examined recognize that working in stabilization contexts is inherently risky, but their strategic approaches to these risks differ – for example, focusing on the civilian population (NL) or high context specificity (UK).

The Primacy of Security

Before we come to the application of measures in the event of a coup, we would like to compare the strategies with regard to security as a priority or prerequisite for stabilization work. Crucially, not all make security the key priority. Germany and the Netherlands, for instance, do see it as an important variable, but most of their stabilization efforts (while varying from institution to institution) do not demand a robust level of security. After all, these countries regard stabilization primarily as a contribution to (rather than a prerequisite for) sustainable, positive peace. The United Kingdom and the United States, on the other hand, consider security a necessary factor for all further measures. If security cannot be established, these actors see little point in proceeding. Security is regarded as a prerequisite for stabilization. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the United Kingdom and the United States see stabilization as enabling a kind of negative peace.

Cooperation with (Illegitimate) Statehood

The legitimacy of statehood is an important frame of reference for stabilization measures. The term refers to a sovereignty established in a well-justified fashion and accepted as lawful by the population. In their stabilization strategies, the actors under consideration differ crucially regarding their stance on cooperation with not quite legitimate state powers. Although all actors acknowledge the importance of democratic and legitimate state structures in the partner country, they remain very vague about what to do if such structures do not exist (any longer). For instance, the strategy of the Netherlands emphasizes the local civil society as the addressee of the stabilization efforts: thus, Dutch stabilization policies consider it crucial that this society actually recognizes stability as a legitimate goal. With this population-centered approach, a clear distinction is made between legitimate stability and stability that is only established through repression. The latter does not create a participatory social contract. However, there is no clear position on issues such as coup governments legitimized by the population and other problematic implications that might arise should the partner government be ousted as a result of a coup.

The United Kingdom also attaches great importance to the consent of the population in its stabilization efforts. However, it is unclear how this consent could be measured. Moreover, the British approach differs from the Dutch in that stabilization efforts are only deemed acceptable in direct cooperation with the government. The rule of law is emphasized, security and law being regarded as closely intertwined. Therefore, the power to shape this area is considered central to stabilization. It remains unclear how this approach is to be realized in case of a coup.⁸ The United States follows a similar strategy, focusing its commitment on locally legitimized authorities and systems that enable peaceful conflict resolution. It only intends to support locally accepted authorities and is keen to promote inclusive political processes and good governance reforms. In addition to national security interests, the emphasis is placed on strengthening legitimate structures and institutions with regard to the rule of law, governance, the promotion of democracy, and anti-corruption work. Thus, the United States also only considers stabilization measures if they can take place in close cooperation with the government and according to the rule of law.

However, the United States explicitly states the relevance of the local form of government, stressing that stabilization measures require clear decisions on which specific legitimate political systems and actors to support. The will to institutional and political change is seen as a basic precondition for cooperative stabilization – albeit a hard-to-achieve and context-dependent precondition. Despite its awareness of the difficulties, the United States is the only actor postulating that, before and during stabilization measures, the partner government must clearly state its own contributions and obligations. If it fails to do so, and especially if it disregards human rights or fosters corruption, the stabilization actors should be prepared to change course, for instance, restricting security assistance. Germany formulates a similar caveat in softer terms, mentioning context and the question of long-term resilient values shared with the partner country. No precise criteria are listed; instead, there is only a generic admonition to realistically assess the specific situational risks.

Strategy in Dealing with Coups

Just as in regard to failed obligations on the part of the partner country, the United States is the only actor examined to explicitly threaten a reduction in stabilization support should a coup take place. However, these statements are found not in the stabilization documents but in separate laws, addressing foreign policy engagement and security cooperation in general rather than stabilization in particular. Moreover, in reality the two restrictions, Section 7008 and the Leahy Law,⁹ are usually circumvented or only implemented in a limited way.¹⁰ This is often because the situation changes so rapidly that the restrictions are hard to implement. The UK strategy, on the other hand, specifically explains that, given the inherently risky stabilization environments, it is important to recognize the possibility of rapid change and to adapt (that is, to adjust the measures) quickly. It discusses in detail the reality of potentially conflicting goals, the risks of cementing the status quo, and the crucial role of

context.¹¹ The UK strategy thus appears most reflective, flexible, realistic, context-specific, and applicable – partially, perhaps, because it explicitly positions itself as a guide. The relevant document from Germany can also be described as guide and is also quite context-sensitive and concrete. However, case-by-case flexibility can lead to accusations of double standards and be regarded critically both by the affected populations and the international community.¹² Germany explicitly defines only one red line: the financing of terrorism; however, this prohibition seems to be of limited relevance in cooperation with state actors.

Miscellaneous

Finally, the following aspects stand out as contrasts between the respective strategies.

In Germany, stabilization is viewed very differently by the ministries involved – in particular, the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Development – and the respective implementation institutions on site. Our interviews revealed considerable differences regarding many key considerations, such as the priority of security and the legitimacy of the local partners. This leads to a very different view of how and in how far one might cooperate with juntas.¹³

The Netherlands focuses on strengthening the rule of law and establishing a social contract.¹⁴ In general, it aligns itself strongly with its stabilization partners.

A notable positive aspect of the British strategy is the close attention paid to the political economy dimension of stabilization contexts; this analytical approach can do justice to the diversity of individual actors in stabilization contexts – and thus help understand the processes in the Sahel and the impact of stabilization measures.¹⁵

With regard to the United States, it is to be added that Congress plays an important role in setting regional priorities, and thus the allocation of funds depends on

9 These are legal regulations for bilateral measures implemented with a partner government in the event of an unconstitutional change of government by the military or in case of major human rights violations.

10 Sarah Harrison, "Impacts of Section 7008, the 'Coup Restriction', on U.S. Policy in Niger," *Lawfare Media* (blog), 23. August 2023, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/impacts-of-section-7008-the-coup-restriction-on-u.s.-policy-in-niger>. Last accessed July 11, 2024.

11 In Germany, on the other hand, "(...) the reference documents of the German government for the departments but remain too abstract and context-unspecific in terms of their content for planning and implementation (...)", p. 33. Last accessed July 19, 2024. "What is missing is a common understanding of what sustainable peace is and a strategy in how to achieve it, i.e. a translation into joint ministerial theories of change that define concrete goals and results to be achieved on the way to sustainable peace. The lack of such a shared understanding is visible, among other things, in tensions between different goals and impact assumptions in the area of stabilization", p.33.

12 This has already happened with regard to the African Union: Adem Kassie Abebe, "The African Union's Hypocrisy Undermines Its Credibility," *Foreign Policy* (blog), 27. August 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/27/the-african-unions-hypocrisy-undermines-its-credibility>.

13 Interview 21, March 21, 2024; Interview 9, March 19, 2024.

14 Interview 8, March 26, 2024; Interview 12, February 22, 2024.

15 Interview 17, March 18, 2024.

individuals and their political affiliations.¹⁶ In addition, the United States' strategies show a pronounced institutional path dependence: over the years, different institutions have developed a strong bias for certain instruments and measures.¹⁷

This comparison clearly demonstrates: while the actors can be described as similarly minded in terms of the stabilization measures and their implementation contexts, they differ (in some cases greatly) in terms of content – i.e., the definition of legitimacy and the focus on security vs. the rule of law. With this awareness of their theoretical priorities, their behavior in practice can now be better described and discussed using the case studies of the coups in Mali and Niger from 2020 to 2023.

EXCURSION: FRANCE

Due to its colonial past, France plays a prominent role in the Sahel. Its involvement in the region is characterized by a mixture of positive and desirable partnerships, a partly individual agenda, a post-colonial approach, and rejection by local partners and the population. Like the French security policy in general, its stabilization strategy has a strong military focus. On the one hand, this enables a division of labor between France and other countries, such as Germany, whose stabilization measures are less forceful and more civilian in nature. If this division of labor works and is also supported by the local partner government, it can enable a successful collaboration between close allies. On the other hand, such a difference in approach hinders comparisons to other, more similar, stabilization actors – especially if recommendations for future adjustments of stabilization strategies are to be made. Despite the exclusion of France from the comparative analysis, this European partnership is taken into account. Following the coups, with any Western involvement now greatly reduced, close European partners such as Germany and France are still coordinating their activities. Some sections of the following chapter will show the difference in the respective opinions and approaches. We will also try to take these aspects into consideration, at least tangentially, when making recommendations.

¹⁶ Interview 19, February 29, 2024; Interview 20, March 21, 2024.

¹⁷ Interview 11.



GERMANY

NAME(S)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guidelines of the Federal Government: Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace (2017), Shaping Stabilization (2022)
TYPE/FUNCTION OF THE STRATEGIES	<p>The documents are intended to serve as a model/general concept for the civilian approach to international crises and armed conflicts, thus operationalizing German integrated peace efforts in practice and fostering dialogue between actors. The target audience includes national and international stakeholders and interested members of the public. The documents are also meant to contribute to the national security strategy.</p>
PUBLISHED BY	Federal Government (guidelines), Foreign Office (concept)
STRATEGIC GOAL/ DEFINITION	<p>An instrument for the short-term improvement of living conditions and the facilitation of political processes in conflict regions characterized by violence. Stabilization encompasses approaches for comprehensive change processes enabling diplomatic, development, and security policy measures (including military measures) to be deployed in a coordinated, integrated manner. The measures go beyond context-blind maintenance of an ostensibly stable status quo.</p>
STABILIZATION PRIORITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Containing violence, providing a degree of safety (short-term improvement of living conditions) Demonstrating alternatives to an economy of war and violence Strengthening the legitimate political authorities and their structures
STABILIZATION TIMEFRAME	<p>Stabilization comes into play when prevention is no longer effective, and violence occurs. It acts as a short-term instrument intended to set the course for subsequent long-term development. There is no clear time frame.</p>
ASSUMPTIONS AND PREREQUISITES FOR ENGAGEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition and practical consideration of changing realities in the target country Stabilization efforts inherently risky, setbacks not uncommon Objectives might come into conflict; high degree of flexibility and pragmatism required Ability to tie in with longer-term measures (interdepartmental approach) Rule of law as the basis for peaceful coexistence Strengthening of legitimate state structures should be possible
RED LINES AND REFERENCES TO COUPS	<p>Coups are not explicitly mentioned in the strategy documents. One clearly identified red line is terrorism financing. A possible lack of a common value base with the partner country is mentioned and seen as a realistic risk; in such a case, a decision would have to be made as to whether the shared values are sufficient for longer term cooperation.</p>



NETHERLANDS

NAME(S)	• Theory of Change – Security and Rule of Law (2023)
TYPE/FUNCTION OF THE STRATEGIES	Specific instructions for government officials and ministerial staff working on security, fragility, and stability issues, as well as for international partners.
PUBLISHED BY	Strategic Policy Unit (ESA), Security Policy Department (DVB), Department for Stabilization and Humanitarian Aid (DSH)
STRATEGIC GOAL/ DEFINITION	Time-limited activities that take place immediately after an armed conflict in order to create security, stability, and justice in an integrated manner in the short term. They are intended to facilitate trust in a peace process, support it, and at the same time lay the foundations for longer-term peacebuilding and development by offering a peace dividend and attempting to strengthen legitimate political authority. Thus, stabilization is an inherently political undertaking.
STABILIZATION PRIORITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety of the civilian population • Restoring the social contract between the population and a legitimate political authority • Creating political participation for the population and alternatives to an economy of violence • Enabling a functioning state with inclusive and transparent institutions; supporting an inclusive security sector that serves the population
STABILIZATION TIMEFRAME	Stabilization measures are considered temporary, intended to help improve the situation of the population in the short term; a rough time frame ranges from four to five years.
ASSUMPTIONS AND PREREQUISITES FOR ENGAGEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership with government institutions that bear responsibility and cooperate transparently • Commitment of the partner to guarantee public order to the civilian population (social contract) • Stability only legitimate if the population accepts it • Ability to tie in with longer-term measures • Willingness to take greater risks • The measures should be incorporated into an overarching (regional) strategy • Engagement should be in line with the national interests
RED LINES AND REFERENCES TO COUPS	Coups as events are not explicitly mentioned, but possible dilemmas in cooperative dealings with governments that have come to power through a coup are highlighted. In such a case, the stabilization priorities are to be continuously weighed up in order to identify risks and room for maneuver; moreover, stronger international coordination is called for.



USA

NAME(S)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas (2018) • Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (2020)*
TYPE/FUNCTION OF THE STRATEGIES	Both documents serve to establish a stabilization concept beyond the failed reconstruction and statebuilding paradigm.
PUBLISHED BY	Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations; US government and partners
STRATEGIC GOAL/ DEFINITION	A political undertaking that aims for impact-oriented, integrated processes to create conditions under which locally legitimized institutions can peacefully manage conflicts and prevent the return of violence. Stabilization creates the conditions for building legitimate social and state institutions and civil security.
STABILIZATION PRIORITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National security interests of the United States • Promoting democracy and human rights • Promoting institutions, rule of law, and good governance • Inclusive reform of the security sector • Enabling partner countries to autonomously break cycles of violence (supporting conflict resolution and transitional justice) • Fighting terrorism and crime • Reinforcing international alliances and partnerships (with the United States in a leadership role)
STABILIZATION TIMEFRAME	Stabilization as a short-term activity (transitioning into long-term measures) designed to create immediate and focused effects in a fragile situation. Time frame: one to two or two to five years.
ASSUMPTIONS AND PREREQUISITES FOR ENGAGEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locally accepted, legitimate authorities necessary for stability • Political will, institutional progress, responsibility and cost sharing on the part of the partner country • Lack of responsive statehood is emphasized as a challenge • Stabilization requires clear decisions on which specific legitimate political systems and actors to support • Transparency about the political and financial commitments to be fulfilled by the partner government • Change of course in the event of non-compliance with obligations
RED LINES AND REFERENCES TO COUPS	Coups are not explicitly mentioned in the stabilization strategies. One red line is an increase in corruption and human rights violations, which are to be punished by freezing security cooperation. Political obligations are expected of the partner, and the engagement is to be adjusted if these are not met. With regard to illegitimate changes of government, there are legal restrictions in the United States (in particular Section 7008 and the Leahy Law) stipulating the blanket suspension of security cooperation in such cases, with the exception of democracy promotion.

* All of the United States' strategic documents on its foreign policy can be understood against the backdrop of the Global Fragility Act (GFA) of 2019, which was updated in 2022. That Act's ten-year plan, known as the Global Fragility Strategy, is considered the United States' most important high-level strategy for tackling root causes of conflict and tailoring an integrated approach to crisis zones. The strategy comprises the four topics of prevention, stabilization, partnership, and management, and is intended to take into account the failures of the approaches in Afghanistan and Iraq. The PCPS, for example, is one way of implementing the objectives of the GFA. In 2022, four pilot target countries were presented, prioritizing the coastal region of West Africa. The Sahel was not explicitly mentioned, which is why the strategy is only partially included in the present analysis.



UNITED KINGDOM

NAME(S)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The UK Government’s Approach to Stabilisation: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners (2019) (under revision in 2023/24)
TYPE/FUNCTION OF THE STRATEGIES	<p>The strategy document is intended to serve as a guide to support practitioners in making individual decisions. The target audience are decision-makers and practitioners who are actively involved in stabilization on site.</p>
PUBLISHED BY	<p>Stabilisation Unit of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office</p>
STRATEGIC GOAL/ DEFINITION	<p>Intervention mechanism with various instruments to contribute structurally to stability and strong political systems in conflict environments characterized by violence, thus promoting civil conflict resolution. Focus on eliminating security deficits and bolstering justice and the rule of law.</p>
STABILIZATION PRIORITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating some degree of security/protecting basic living conditions • Supporting the political process to reduce violence (promoting the rule of law) • Laying the foundations for long-term structural stability • Addressing eroded systems as a threat to UK security
STABILIZATION TIMEFRAME	<p>Stabilization is considered an initial, transitional policy response that is to span from a few months to a few years. Different instruments are used depending on the time factor. No clear timeframe.</p>
ASSUMPTIONS AND PREREQUISITES FOR ENGAGEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the high context-specificity and potentially contingent effectiveness of each engagement • Anticipating and addressing the local economy of violence • Recognition that conflicts are not linear, importance of flexibility • Legitimacy of political structures is emphasized • Ally logic; coordination of multilateral action • Trade-off mechanisms should always be determined in relation to national security • Awareness of possible conflicts between: targets and broader national interests; short- and long-term targets; targets and other regional activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ One such conflict, for instance, is constituted by political agreements with the elites, which help contain violence but at the same time reinforce the underlying structural inequalities
RED LINES AND REFERENCES TO COUPS	<p>Coups are not explicitly mentioned. In general, however, the guide mentions that the situation might always rapidly deteriorate. A high degree of adaptability and readjustment in terms of prioritization, sequence, and risk and damage minimization is required in response. With regard to conflicting targets, one is to accept that “not all good things come together.”</p>

COMPARISON OF THE STRATEGIES



TYPE AND FUNCTION OF THE STRATEGIES

“Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace” and “Shaping Stabilization” guideline /concept as cornerstone documents

Lack of cornerstone strategy documents, instead analysis using theories of change and evaluations

“Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners” clearly positioned as a manual for implementing staff and involved employees

Strategies with targets regarding individual stabilization aspects, no generally applicable strategy

CENTRAL PRIORITIES

Upholding values based on human rights, international standards, and German interests

Promoting stabilization, supporting like-minded partners, focus on population and rule of law

Promoting regional stability and British aims, context-specific stabilization

US (security) interests central to all activities

PRIMACY OF SECURITY

Different assessment of the priority of security depending on the actor; cooperation still possible even without robust deployment

Sustainable peace must be achieved through a robust social contract and strengthened rule of law

Security situation a priority, democratic and economic development secondary

Improving the security situation has top priority

COOPERATION WITH (ILLEGITIMATE) STATEHOOD

Cooperation with state partners only under certain (unclearly defined) conditions

Always bearing in mind the negative effects of supporting state power

Stabilization only makes sense in connection with state power

Cooperation with regimes and governments when it serves US interests

STRATEGY FOR DEALING WITH COUPS

No direct strategy for dealing with coups

No direct strategy for dealing with coups

No direct strategy for dealing with coups

No direct strategy for dealing with coups; legal restrictions in the event of a coup

MISCELLANEOUS

Strong differences between participating ministries and organizations regarding the basic attitude towards stabilization

Strengthening the social contract as a cornerstone concept

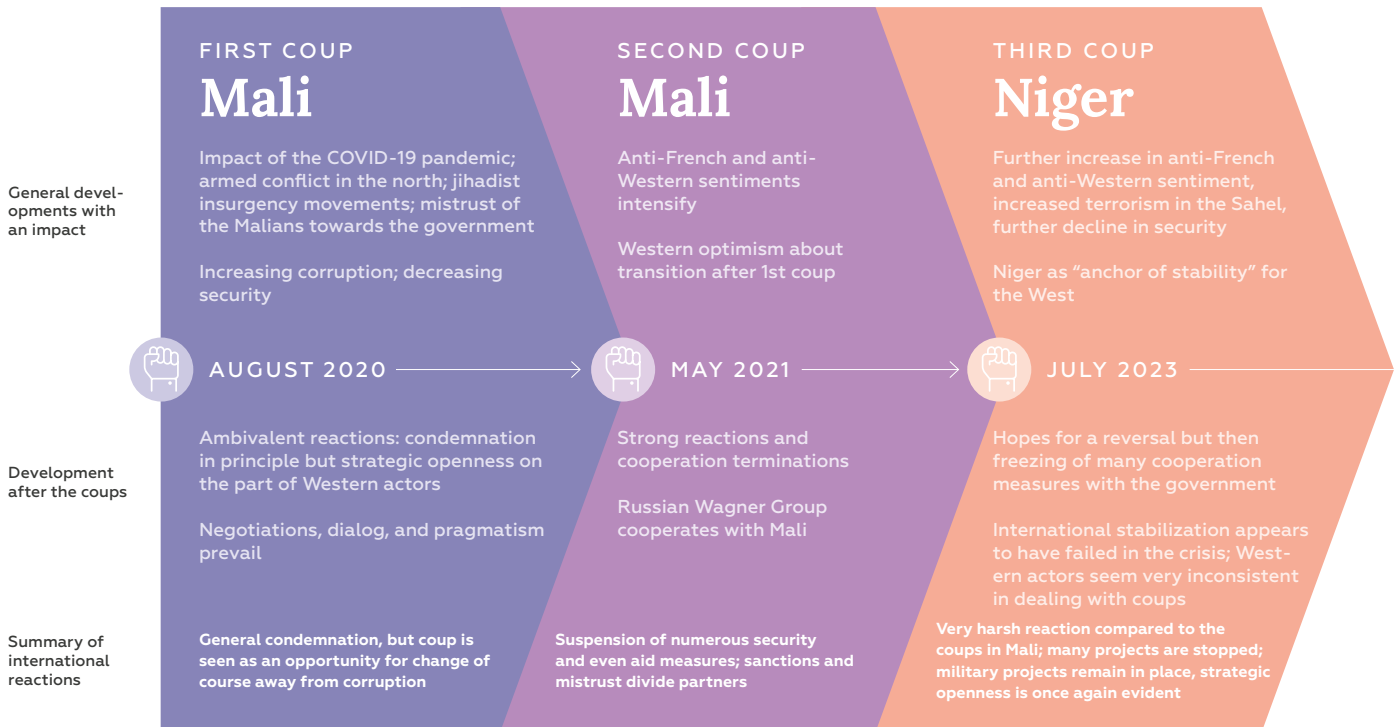
Political economy as an important element of analysis

Congress as an important actor in setting regional priorities, large number of institutions involved in the stabilization process

The Actors' Reactions in Coup Situations

- The behavior of the various actors has changed over the period under review
- The first coup in Mali was not seen as particularly negative by almost all actors
- Only further coups made it clear that these developments were spreading throughout the region and that the putschists were learning from each other ("coup script")
- The tougher reactions to the coup in Niger were not timely enough and insufficient ("too little, too late"), and the attempt to reverse events failed

The Coups in Mali and Niger and the Reactions of Stabilization Actors



Source: Own illustration

EVENTS AND INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS

We examine the behavior of the stabilization actors in the case studies Mali (in 2020 and 2021) and Niger (in 2023) on two levels:

- **Micro level:** We explore how the actors reacted to the coups on the ground and which measures had a short-term effect. As part of the study, we also contextualize these reactions with a view to further involvement in the region in the medium term.
- **Macro level:** Here, we examine the extent to which a coup affected the broader concepts of stabilization.

Coup in Mali in August 2020: “Business as Usual” – Transition as a Window of Hope and Actors Aligned

After the coup in Mali became public in August 2020, the reactions of the stabilization actors on the ground painted a uniform picture. While the coup did not seem to come as a surprise after months of protests, it was quickly condemned in official statements.¹⁸ Western actors were concerned about the Mali Peace Agreement and pushed for stopping violence and rapidly, peacefully returning to the constitutional order. In particular, the role of international organizations such as the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for a rapid transition was emphasized and supported. Existing involvement was only cautiously questioned or readjusted. The focus was primarily on the implications of the coup on operational issues, such as the continuation of the “UN

Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali” (MINUSMA) and bilateral development cooperation. The cooperations that were suspended were mainly military ones, such as training missions by the European Union (EUTM) and the United States. After a relatively speedy beginning of the transition process in October, partner countries and international organizations reactivated suspended measures, pledged new funds, and welcomed the transitional government’s reforms.¹⁹ The Local Transition Monitoring Committee was formed, involving the EU but also representatives of the UN and MINUSMA, AU, and ECOWAS as well as the United Kingdom, the United States, and France.²⁰

Overall, the reactions and statements in our interviews show that although the coup was condemned in principle because it violated the constitution, the rapid willingness of the new government to transition was even seen as a major opportunity for Mali.²¹ The international actors reacted to this with a certain optimism and a kind of pragmatic hope. After both the civilian population and France rejected the return of the deposed president shortly after the coup due to his inability to tackle the armed conflicts, corruption, and widespread discontent among the population,²² international attitudes changed as well.²³ Taken together, these rather pragmatic reactions can be described as “soft acceptance” of the coup.²⁴ Germany and its partners welcomed the junta’s willingness to cooperate and were all but relieved to ease the sanctions in order to remain involved. A reinstatement of the ousted government therefore seemed to be off the table, as it was considered incompetent by all parties, above all by France, while the transitional government presented itself as a new partner.²⁵ Only in retrospect

- 18 “Mali Military Coup: How the World Reacted,” Al Jazeera, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/19/mali-military-coup-how-the-world-reacted>; German Foreign Office, “German Federal Foreign Office on the Situation in Mali” [in German], German Foreign Office, 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/mali-freilassung-keita/2378680>; Tina Groll and dpa, “Coup Attempt: EU Condemns Coup in Mali” [in German], *Die Zeit*, 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2020-08/putschversuch-mali-militaer-heiko-maas-soldaten-praesident>; “African Union Suspends Mali’s Membership as International Community Condemns Coup,” France 24, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200819-mali-coup-leaders-face-international-condemnation-au-suspends-membership>; Secretary Pompeo [@SecPompeo], “The U.S. Strongly Condemns the August 18 Mutiny in Mali. We Join Our International Partners Including the Economic Community of West African States and the @_AfricanUnion in Denouncing These Actions.”, *Tweet*, *Twitter*, 2020, <https://x.com/SecPompeo/status/1296096823942184960>; Ambassade des Pays-Bas au Mali, Facebook Post, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/AmbassadePaysBasMali/posts/le-18-ao%C3%BBt-un-coup-d%C3%A9tat-a-eu-lieu-au-mali-au-cours-duquel-le-pr%C3%A9sident-le-premi%C3%A9r-3198162280268175/>; FCDO and James Duddridge, “Mali: UK Statement on Military Coup,” GOV.UK, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/mali-uk-statement-on-military-coup>. All sites last accessed on July 12th, 2024.
- 19 German Bundestag, “Plenary Protocol 19/225” [in German], 2021; U.S. Embassy in Mali and Morgan Ortagus, “U.S. Response to Establishment of a Transitional Government in Mali,” U.S. Embassy in Mali, 2020, <https://ml.usembassy.gov/u-s-response-to-establishment-of-a-transitional-government-in-mali/>; “Special Representative Voices ‘Cautions Hope’ for Transition in Mali, Despite Delays, Resurgence of COVID-19 | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases,” accessed February 20, 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14409.doc.htm>; International Crisis Group, “Transition au Mali : préserver l’aspiration au changement,” *Rapport Afrique*, N° 304 (2021). All sites last accessed on July 12th, 2024.
- 20 Eric Pichon, “Mali: Yet Another Coup,” *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 2021.
- 21 UNSC, “Weeks after Coup d’État in Mali, Strong Regional Leadership, New Transition Plan Show Promise for Country’s Future, Special Representative Tells Security Council,” 2020, <https://press.un.org/en/2020/sc14320.doc.htm>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.
- 22 Alex Thurston, “The International Community’s Soft Acceptance of the Coup in Mali,” *IPI Global Observatory* (blog), September 3, 2020, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2020/09/international-communitys-soft-acceptance-coup-mali/>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.
- 23 Eric Pichon, “Mali: The Coup and Its Consequences,” *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 2020.
- 24 Thurston, “The International Community’s Soft Acceptance of the Coup in Mali.” Thurston.
- 25 Thurston, “The International Community’s Soft Acceptance of the Coup in Mali.”

did some actors realize that this reaction sent ambiguous signals regarding the legitimacy and value of democracy to the civilian population and also helped to form the breeding ground for anti-French sentiment.

The Western actors differed in terms of the political level at which they expressed their views on the coup as well as the extent to which existing commitments were revised. Thus, the United States made statements that were relatively clear and sometimes threatening²⁶ but speedily continued many of its projects and circumvented its own coup restrictions as the projects were considered militarily relevant.²⁷ The Netherlands, meanwhile, had focused on the civilian population in its projects, which were revised accordingly.²⁸ Overall, a division of labor could be observed during the coup and afterwards, which successfully distributed the stabilization repertoire among the various actors. France's robust military presence in Mali enabled it to carry out counterterrorism measures that other actors were unable or unwilling to do. These missions were then supported by the civilian focus of German efforts and by the extensive drone missions of the United States, which supplied key data for the French missions. This division of labor allowed all actors to focus on and leverage their strengths.

The international community thus reacted in a largely unified and coordinated manner, attempting to apply its lessons learned from Afghanistan. There was no scrutiny of stabilization as an instrument of choice, and the coup government was at least implicitly treated as legitimate. At the same time, it is clear that this division of labor also led to a stronger rhetoric of reliability and that the close interweaving of the commitments reinforced the mutual demands of the aligned stabilization actors.²⁹

Coup in Mali in May 2021: "A Coup Within a Coup" and Russian Security Cooperation As a Warning Sign; Transfer of the Stabilization Efforts

The second coup, a "coup within a coup," took place in May 2021 and led to significantly stronger reactions from the stabilization actors on the ground.³⁰ In its public statements, Germany immediately insisted on the resumption of the transition process and called for more international pressure and consequences.³¹ Initially, only the United States suspended its bilateral military projects and economic cooperation;³² the other actors restricted themselves to rhetoric, even if it was considerably tougher than at the time of the first coup. MINUSMA was to remain in operation, but the EUTM training mission was discontinued and downgraded to an advisory status.³³

Other stabilization actors only showed equally strong reactions after Mali's cooperation with the Russian Africa Corps mercenary force (at the time as the Wagner Group) became public.³⁴ As a result, the United Kingdom discontinued its bilateral intergovernmental projects and planned to only remain active on the ground through non-governmental organizations and in line with its commitment as a Sahel Alliance partner.³⁵ It became clear that a return to the status quo ante was being sought and that the international partners disapproved of the coup not only in principle, but also in terms of strategy and substance. For this reason, projects were more likely to be discontinued than revised.

At the same time, there was an increasing division in the attitudes of the actors, with some seeking to shift their focus towards greater cooperation with the civilian population (Germany, Netherlands), while others wished to forcefully punish the junta (France).

26 Laura Smith-Spark, David McKenzie, and Brent Swails, "Why the Mali Coup Could Worry Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron," CNN, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/19/africa/mali-coup-unrest-explainer-intl/index.html>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

27 U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Mali," *United States Department of State* (blog), <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-mali>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

28 Ambassade des Pays-Bas au Mali, Facebook post.

29 "German Military Stayed Too Long in Mali | D+C - Development + Cooperation," July 23, 2023, <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/germany-has-withdraw-quickly-mali-one-reason-federal-government-failed-learn-lessons>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

30 Ena Dion and Joseph Sany, "After Two Coups, Mali Needs Regional Support to Bolster Democracy," *United States Institute of Peace*, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/12/after-two-coups-mali-needs-regional-support-bolster-democracy>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

31 MINUSMA, "Joint Statement on the Situation in Mali (May 24, 2021)," MINUSMA, 2021, <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/joint-statement-situation-mali-may-24-2021>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

32 Ned Price, "On the Situation in Mali," *United States Department of State* (blog), 2021, <https://www.state.gov/on-the-situation-in-mali/>; "U.S. Cuts off Ethiopia, Mali, Guinea from Africa Duty-free Trade Program | Reuters," Reuters, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-cuts-off-ethiopia-mali-guinea-africa-duty-free-trade-program-2022-01-01>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

33 "German Military Stayed Too Long in Mali | D+C - Development + Cooperation."

34 "German FM Urges End to Mali's Cooperation with Russia," *www.euractiv.com*, April 13, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/africa/news/german-fm-urges-end-to-malis-cooperation-with-russia/>; FCDO and James Kariuki, "Ensuring a Timely Return to Constitutional Rule and the Protection of Human Rights in Mali," GOV.UK, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/ensuring-a-timely-return-to-constitutional-rule-and-the-protection-of-human-rights-in-mali>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

35 Devex, "Countries not Receiving UK ODA Allocations in 2021-22," 2021; William Worley und Raquel Alcega // June 07, 2021, "UK Ends Bilateral Aid to More than 100 Countries, Territories," Devex, June 7, 2021, <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/uk-ends-bilateral-aid-to-more-than-100-countries-territories-100087>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

Calls for collective (for example, EU-wide) sanctions became louder but were not shared by all actors. There did, however, seem to be a consensus on the red line of Mali's security cooperation with Russia; once that line was crossed, the actors severely limited their involvement. The Africa Corps and the junta's anti-Western propaganda pushed their way into this gap left by Western actors.³⁶ Anti-French resentment also intensified during this time.

Western stabilization actors now focused on Niger as an anchor of stability and one of the few relatively democratic governments in central West Africa. They emphasized that they would like to remain involved in the region; in general, stabilization still seemed to be regarded as the appropriate instrument. The efforts were now focused on Niger, based on the argument that stabilization was only possible with a "willing" partner. Nevertheless, the very different reactions to the two coups in Mali and the way in which the seriousness of the developments was overlooked have probably opened doors to further coups in the Sahel, specifically in Burkina Faso and Niger.³⁷

Coup in Niger, July 2023: Strong (Over)Reactions and Dissent Among the Actors

The actors immediately responded to the coup in Niger with massive international condemnation; compared to the coups in Mali, the demands were much firmer. One reason for this might be that the coup came as a surprise to Germany and its partners: Niger had been regarded as a relatively stable democracy, and there was hope that a collective, tough response could still turn the tide.³⁸ The focus was on trying to undo the events, as the overthrown regime was seen as a good partner, ideally to be reinstated in accordance with the principles of the rule of law and

measures to promote democracy. Personal connections between Western actors (in particular US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and French President Emmanuel Macron) and Niger's ousted President Mohamed Bazoum also played a major role. The actors emphasized the collective support of ECOWAS and did not recognize the junta due to the criminal behavior attributed to it, which probably added to the already harsher punitive response.

The first disagreement in the reaction of international actors became apparent in the attitude towards ECOWAS' plans to intervene militarily in Niger.³⁹ Further divisions followed as some actors wanted to penalize this coup as much as possible, while others wanted to remain involved in Niger at all costs. The divide between the actors' arguments and narratives was widening, and fronts were forming. Within the European Union, the French position (harsh punishment of the junta and military intervention) was opposed by Italy and Spain in particular, who were among those who wanted to maintain relations with Niger, primarily in order to be able to control migration.⁴⁰ This contributed to an even stronger anti-French discourse in the Sahel, which the juntas were happy to promote. Germany and the Netherlands saw themselves in a mediating role between the positions, while the United Kingdom and United States were able to act more independently from the EU but seemed to have similar debates within their own decision-making processes.⁴¹ The junta was in a position to navigate and exploit the room for maneuver that arose as a result of the actors' disagreements.⁴²

Despite these differences, however, tough and quick collective operational measures were taken; cash flows were frozen or discontinued completely across

36 "Russia Is Filling the Vacuum Left by the West in the Sahel," <https://www.ft.com/content/f9fd4d44-fb63-40c1-8280-a1a685c63396>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

37 Interview 10, April 18, 2024.

38 Matthew Miller, "Secretary Blinken's Calls with Nigerien President Bazoum and Former President Issoufou," *United States Department of State* (blog), 2023, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-calls-with-nigerien-president-bazoum-and-former-president-issoufou/>; Sohaib Mahmoud and Mohamed Taifouri, "The Coups d'Etat of the Sahel Region: Domestic Causes and International Competition," Arab Center Washington DC, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-coups-detat-of-the-sahel-region-domestic-causes-and-international-competition/>; German Foreign Office, "Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock Following a Telephone Conversation with the Nigerien Foreign Minister" [in German], German Foreign Office, 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/-/2610418>; German Foreign Office, "Coups in the Niger: Political Situation and Evacuation of German Nationals," German Foreign Office, 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/coup-in-the-niger/2610802>; "Coups in Niger: Updates from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs," EIN Presswire, August 1, 2023, <https://www.einpresswire.com/article/647614807/coup-in-niger-updates-from-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs>; Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, "Nederlandse deelname aan vredesmissies; Brief over de Nederlandse veiligheidsinzet in de Sahel en West-Afrikaanse kuststaten post-2022," officiële publicatie, 2023, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-29521-AZ-n1.html>; FCDO and Andrew Mitchell, "Minister for Africa Statement on Violence in Niger: 28 July 2023," GOV.UK, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/minister-for-africa-statement-on-violence-in-niger-28-july-2023>. All sites last accessed on July 12, 2024.

39 German Foreign Office, "Foreign Minister Baerbock on the Outcomes of the ECOWAS Summit" [in German], German Foreign Office, 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/-/2612010>; U.S. Department of State and Anthony Blinken, "Extraordinary ECOWAS Summit on Niger," *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed February 26, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/extraordinary-ecowas-summit-on-niger>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

40 Interview 4, March 5, 2024; Interview 21; Tull, "What Next in Sahel Policy? Conflicting Goals and Limited Options for Action" [in German], 2024.

41 Interview 15, February 15, 2024; Interview 18, February 29, 2024.

42 "Junta in Niger stalls Pistorius" [in German], FAZ, 2023, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/junta-in-niger-haelt-den-besucher-pistorius-hin-19398234.html>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

all actors. The United States and Germany in particular promoted close contact with Bazoum and regular exchanges with the junta. After months of fruitless talks and negotiations, the West grew increasingly helpless, and Bazoum's reinstatement became less and less realistic. With the fall of this last anchor of stability, there no longer seemed to be a state partner in the region open to cooperation from the West's perspective. This raised the question of whether the existing stabilization approaches can still be applied in the Sahel. Many Western experts were now also calling for a reorientation in the Sahel region,⁴³ including, for example, a shift to neighboring countries (Mauritania, West African coastal states), a stronger focus on topics such as antiterrorism measures or purely non-military, non-governmental, and civil society projects.⁴⁴ At the time of writing, the UK strategy is being revised.

Moreover, in view of Russia's war against Ukraine and the growing presence of actors such as Russia and China in the Sahel, the handling of the coups was also increasingly influenced by external developments. Germany and its partners were strongly opposed to the security cooperation of previous African partner countries with Russia. It became apparent that these geopolitical factors had a greater impact than other domestic political developments in reducing the willingness for further engagement.⁴⁵ A similar mechanism can also be seen in Sweden's reaction to one of Mali's pro-Russian votes on a UN resolution in January 2024. Following Mali's vote against Russia's exclusion from the UN Security Council, Sweden immediately stopped its bilateral aid to Mali.⁴⁶ The escalation of the Middle East conflict and its impact on US behavior in the Sahel is another example. For two months, the United States had avoided calling the events in Niger a coup in order to circumvent the consequences of

its own coup restrictions, at least for the time being. However, it seemed to have revised its foreign policy focus immediately after Hamas's terrorist attack on Israel, and now officially described the illegitimate seizure of power as a coup. We are not aware of any alternative reasons or political developments in Niger (be it bilateral or domestic) that could have caused the sudden declaration, and the temporal proximity is striking, even if it does not necessarily establish causality. The international actors are thus considering the Sahel and its states not in isolation but in the context of the international and geopolitical environment.

ACTOR-SPECIFIC REACTIONS

In the following, we consider the stabilization actors' individual and bilateral reactions to the three coups. Rather than focusing on the specifics of particular coups, we abstract and summarize the individual reactions and measures as well as their similarities and differences by actor. The background is the identified general trend of intensified reactions. The aim is to paint a more general picture of the dominant response mechanisms and underlying motivations, thus gaining more clarity about the supposed priorities of the individual actors.



Germany

Germany's declarations regarding the coups are often dominated by narratives about values and principles such as the rule of law and taking responsibility.⁴⁷ This contrasts with the predominance of operational issues when it comes to the actual revisions of the stabilization efforts. In case of the examined coups, the reactions focus on the implications for operational issues and their continuation

- 43 Malte Lierl, "Siding with Societies: How Europe Can Reposition Itself in the Sahel," 2024, <https://documentcloud.adobe.com/spodintegration/index.html?locale=de-de>; Tull, "What Next in Sahel Policy? Conflicting Goals and Limited Options for Action"; Stefan Lange, "German Sahel Strategy Hanging in the Balance" [in German], *Augsburger Allgemeine*, 2024, <https://www.augsburger-allgemeine.de/politik/afrika-die-deutsche-sahel-strategie-steht-auf-der-kippe-id70300211.html>; Crisis Group, "Reorienting Europe's Approach in the Sahel," 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/afrika/sahel/reorienting-europes-approach-in-the-sahel>; Bipartisan Senior Study Group for the Sahel, "Senior Study Group for the Sahel: Final Report and Recommendations," United States Institute of Peace, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/01/senior-study-group-sahel-final-report-and-recommendations>; Schmauder, "Strategic Missteps: Learning From a Failed EU Sahel Strategy," *ISPI* (blog), 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/strategic-missteps-learning-failed-eu-sahel-strategy-28130>; Lierl, "Siding with Societies: How Europe Can Reposition Itself in the Sahel"; Tull, "What Next in Sahel Policy? Conflicting Goals and Limited Options for Action"; Lange, "German Sahel Strategy Hanging in the Balance"; Crisis Group, "Reorienting Europe's Approach in the Sahel"; Bipartisan Senior Study Group for the Sahel, "Senior Study Group for the Sahel"; Schmauder, "Strategic Missteps." All sites last accessed on July 12, 2024.
- 44 Fabian Scheuermann, "Germany Supplies Military Equipment to Regime Close to Russia – for 'Stabilization of the Region'" [in German], January 22, 2024, <https://www.fr.de/politik/lieferung-deutschland-burkina-faso-millionenhilfe-mit-freundlicher-hilfe-aus-berlin-militaer-ausruestung-92784819.html>. Scheuermann. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.
- 45 Thomas Wiegold, "EU Suspends Training Mission in Mali for the Time Being" [in German], 2022, <https://augengeradeaus.net/2022/04/eu-setzt-ausbildungsmission-in-mali-vorerst-aus/>; Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, "Afrika-beleid; Brief regering; Stand van zaken over de politieke ontwikkelingen in de Sahelregio," officiële publicatie, 2022, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-29237-177.html>; "German FM Urges End to Mali's Cooperation with Russia." Wiegold, "EU Suspends Training Mission in Mali for the Time Being" Staten-Generaal, "Afrika-beleid; Brief regering; Stand van zaken over de politieke ontwikkelingen in de Sahelregio." Last accessed on July 12, 2024.
- 46 Hall, "Sweden Stops Aid for Mali," *Euro Weekly News*, January 7, 2024, <https://euroweeklynnews.com/2024/01/07/sweden-stops-aid-for-mali>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.
- 47 Interview 3, February 29, 2024; German Foreign Office, "Foreign Office on the Situation in Mali" [in German]; Groll and dpa, "Coup Attempt."

as well as military interests;⁴⁸ suspensions tend to affect value-based stabilization measures rather than multilateral missions such as EUCAP Sahel or MINUS-MA, in which Germany wants to demonstrate reliability to the respective partners.⁴⁹ This also explains the different perceived severity of the Foreign, the Defense, and the Development Ministries' reactions,⁵⁰ as these are primarily concerned with their respective decision-making areas.

The German government usually argues in favor of "staying engaged at all costs" and the political relevance of maintaining a local presence. Germany's reactions also show that it prioritizes the actual behavior of a given government⁵¹ over general principles such as the form of government. On the one hand, this means that the relevant channels are kept open, and the local context is dealt with pragmatically rather than dogmatically. On the other hand, some projects and measures that might justifiably be terminated due to the changed circumstances remain running. Germany's reactions can thus appear opportunistic. This behavior also raises questions about the role of legitimacy for Germany and inconsistency in its engagement. In particular, the risk of conflicting objectives⁵² appears to inhibit consistent, legitimate, value-based responses. The conditions on the ground are not being monitored closely enough; due to this lack of an informational basis, the readjustment to the changed circumstances is postponed. As a result, Germany's commitment temporarily stalls in the status quo ante.

As a focus of stabilization measures, Germany continuously emphasizes not only geopolitically relevant and/or military cooperation but also development assistance and collaboration with civil society and

local political actors (not aligned with the government).⁵³ It thus focuses on the population and the local authorities as a target group, continuing measures such as dialog formats, assuming that their membership changes little after coups and that Germany can therefore remain consistently engaged.⁵⁴ However, this could be a misjudgment. Irrespective of the coup, elites could remain in key positions, making further engagement difficult.⁵⁵ A possible lack of knowledge about that could be due to inadequate monitoring on the ground. Some of the reactions therefore appear inconsistent in terms of substance and severity. This lack of clarity prevailed even before the coups, with support for the 2015 Mali Peace Agreement emphasized among the goals.⁵⁶ The coups further reduced the likelihood of successfully implementing the measures stipulated by the Peace Agreement.

In general, Germany appears to have intensified its reactions to both positive and negative developments with regard to the coups examined.⁵⁷ After all, such reactions serve as incentives for or against similar events. The response has been steadily growing in severity since 2020, irrespective of the severity of the developments on the ground. Germany's reaction to the 2020 coup in Mali was initially critical, then optimistic; in 2021, it was much clearer. Germany took an even tougher stance in Niger in 2023, and the Federal Foreign Office suspended all engagement less than a week after the coup.⁵⁸ However, as mentioned above, the positions of the various ministries differ. Commitments for new long-term projects can be made while other measures are stopped. Instead of an alignment on the objectives, both pragmatic and principle-based approaches can be observed.^{59 60}

48 "Pistorius in Niger - First Ministerial Meeting after Coup" [in German], Deutscher Bundeswehr Verband, 2023, <https://www.dbwv.de/ticker-zurueck-zur-startseite/pistorius-im-niger-erstes-ministergespraech-nach-putsch>. "Pistorius in Niger – First Ministerial Meeting after Coup." Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

49 Interview 1, February 26, 2024; Interview 6, March 5, 2024.

50 Interview 21.

51 Interview 3.

52 Interview 1; Interview 2, January 5, 2024.

53 Interview 3; Scheuermann, "Germany Supplies Military Equipment to Regime Close to Russia – for 'Stabilization of the Region!'" Interview 3; Scheuermann, "Germany Supplies Military Equipment to Regime Close to Russia – for 'Stabilization of the Region!'"

54 Interview 3.

55 Interview 1.

56 Interview 7, March 22, 2024.

57 Interview 4.

58 "Germany Suspends Aid to Niger, Cooperation after Coup," Al Jazeera, accessed February 22, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/31/germany-suspends-aid-to-niger-cooperation-after-coup>; German Federal Government, "Publication 20/8335: Current Development Cooperation in the Republic of Niger" [in German], 2023, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/083/2008335.pdf>; German Foreign Office, "Coup in the Niger." "Germany Suspends Aid to Niger, Cooperation after Coup"; German Federal Government, "Publication 20/8335: Current Development Cooperation in the Republic of Niger"; German Foreign Office, "Coup in the Niger." All sites last accessed on July 12, 2024.

59 German Federal Government, "Publication 20/9910: Measures to Combat Terrorism in West Africa." German Federal Government.

60 "Pistorius in Niger – First Ministerial Meeting after Coup." "Pistorius in Niger – First Ministerial Meeting after Coup."



The Netherlands

The Netherlands reacted very consistently to the coups under investigation. Overall, these reactions are notable for two main characteristics: 1) They rarely address or discuss national demands or interests; 2) statements are rarely made by high-level actors. The focus is on multilateralism (AU, ECOWAS, EU, UN) as well as on pushing for collective sanctions and pressure on the Malian and Nigerien junta.⁶¹ In the case of Niger, there were more statements at government level by the foreign and development ministers, but usually, the comments are made by local experts such as ambassadors. When reorganizing its activities, the Netherlands stresses the social contract, the benefits for the local population. Thus, even after disruptive events, it seeks to continue such measures and maintain open communication channels with the public.⁶² However, cooperation with the government is handled more cautiously. Particularly in the case of certain red lines, such as the desire for increased military cooperation following coups (Mali, for example, requested helicopters) and the start of cooperation with the Africa Corps (again, in the case of Mali), the fundamental commitment is cast into doubt and cooperation with the government is suspended, while long-term development collaboration continues.

Interviewees also mentioned the importance of partners such as Germany. To align with Germany, the Netherlands might agree to the motion of suspending certain financial or material support, no matter if it actually participates in this form of support.⁶³ Unfortunately, the efforts to bridge the gap between different approaches, such as those of Germany and France, are not very successful in practice. The objectives of the commitment tend to be defined by region

rather than by country or project.⁶⁴ Thus, decentralized government structures are often left to react to coups, being more active in the regions. The Netherlands also considers decentralized local structures to be essential partners with whom it can continue to cooperate after a coup.⁶⁵ After the coup in Niger, for example, only around a quarter of the projects were paused.⁶⁶



The United States

The United States' reactions to coups clearly focus on its own geopolitical and national interests. Although these interests also include the promotion of values such as democracy and the rule of law,⁶⁷ individual circumstances dominate, and principles come second. With its legal restrictions regarding coups, the United States is the only actor to have explicitly defined actionable response mechanisms. These were also used in the coups under consideration, and relevant security cooperation at government level was suspended. However, the United States immediately undermined its own mechanism in Mali, continuing to provide limited security assistance⁶⁸ to law enforcement partners and authorities in Mali through a "notwithstanding" authority.⁶⁹

In the case of Niger, it became clear that the so-called coup restrictions strongly influence the classification of possible coups on a rhetorical level.⁷⁰ The United States hesitated for almost two months before it declared the events in Niger a coup,⁷¹ and the relevant response mechanisms became effective. In general, the United States shows a strong focus on maintaining security and military cooperation in line with its strategic national and geopolitical interests. At the same time, external factors (which influence the United States' foreign policy actions in the geopolitical

61 Ambassade des Pays-Bas au Mali, Facebook post; "Kamervragen (Aanhangsel) 2020-2021, nr. 3494 | Overheid.nl > Officiële bekendmakingen," accessed April 30, 2024, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/ah-tk-20202021-3494.html>. Ambassade des Pays-Bas au Mali, Facebook post; "Kamervragen (Aanhangsel) 2020-2021, nr. 3494 | Overheid.nl > Officiële bekendmakingen."

62 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, "The Netherlands suspends direct cooperation with Nigerien government," nieuwsbericht (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2023), <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2023/08/04/the-netherlands-suspends-direct-cooperation-with-nigerien-government>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

63 Interview 11.

64 Interview 11.

65 Interview 11.

66 Interview 11.

67 Miller, "Secretary Blinken's Calls with Nigerien President Bazoum and Former President Issoufou"; U.S. Embassy in Mali, "On the Transition Timeline in Mali," U.S. Embassy in Mali, 2022, <https://ml.usembassy.gov/on-the-transition-timeline-in-mali>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

68 U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Mali"; Price, "On the Situation in Mali"; "What Sanctions Have Been Imposed on Niger Since the Coup?," VOA News/Reuters, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/amp/what-sanctions-have-been-imposed-on-niger-since-the-coup-/7217354.html>. U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Mali." Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

69 The United States can suspend the restrictions on the basis of an internal "notwithstanding" authorization and exemption regulation in order to be able to continue parts of its security cooperation: "Through a notwithstanding authority, limited security assistance to law enforcement partners continues."

70 "The Complexities of Calling a Coup a Coup | Crisis Group," February 23, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/complexities-calling-coup-coup>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

71 Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Declares the Military Takeover in Niger a Coup," *The New York Times*, 2023, sect. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/us/politics/niger-coup-biden-declaration.html>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

context) also impact bilateral cooperation in the Sahel. For example, the war in Ukraine and Russia's role as a geopolitical opponent of the United States and a new partner of the Sahel governments are affecting the United States' actions. As a result, stabilization measures and goals are compromised for geopolitical reasons.

Here, too, the focus is on the national security of the United States, as security cooperation with unfriendly actors in the Sahel is seen as a gateway for destabilizing the West African coastal states, which in turn could lead to a threat to transatlantic security.⁷² After a coup, civil, economic, and financial support is discontinued much more quickly than stabilization measures. In some cases, this discontinuation is threatened in advance.⁷³

The United States is showing a strategic openness to transition, that is, an orderly transfer to a constitutional order. In addition, it retains a certain flexibility, described in the interviews as "creativity," in its choice of partners and the reapproaching after coups.⁷⁴ All in all, the approach is pragmatic rather than dogmatic – be it for reasons of security, geopolitical interests or possibly a degree of humility with regard to interventionism in general. The goal is to preserve scope for cooperation and anticipate the realities on the ground (especially in Niger). Here, too, questions arise about the relevance of legitimacy. Furthermore, it is striking that government personnel play a major role in bilateral relations and coup reactions. This was particularly evident in Niger: the close Blinken-Bazoum relationship enabled a considerable willingness to engage in mediation efforts.⁷⁵ One of the

reasons why the severity of the reaction and the use of threatening postures varied greatly in Mali was the change of government: the difference illustrates the contrast between Biden and Trump.⁷⁶ In general, the range of actors making statements is very broad and includes foreign ministers, special envoys, and top diplomats.

Compared to the other stabilization actors examined, the United States tends to make fewer public commitments with regard to international alliances or multilateral approaches in coup regions (only in the case of Niger, strong links to ECOWAS as a regional alliance were highlighted, and ECOWAS was supported).⁷⁷ This underlines the national interests and security focus of the US stabilization approach and the international leadership position that the United States seeks to secure.



The United Kingdom

The United Kingdom's concept of stabilization prioritizes the rule of law, as can be seen in its reactions to coups in the target countries. A legitimate state power is seen as both a goal of and a premise for stabilization; the United Kingdom circumvents the suspension of its engagement after coups, enabling bilateral cooperation⁷⁸ in order to position itself as sustainably engaged and open, and to accompany the transition.⁷⁹ In general, reactions are characterized by caution, openness, and a desire to adapt the commitment to new realities, especially before Brexit.^{80 81} It was only after 2021, with the second coup in Mali and the coup in Niger, that these reactions became much harsher and included the restriction of bilateral cooperation and long-term

72 Interview 21.

73 Ned Price, "On the Situation in Mali"; "U.S. Cuts off Ethiopia, Mali, Guinea from Africa Duty-free Trade Program | Reuters."

74 Interview 22, March 7, 2024.

75 Interview 4.

76 Laura Smith-Spark, David McKenzie, and Brent Swails, "Why the Mali Coup Could Worry Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron," CNN, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/19/africa/mali-coup-unrest-explainer-intl/index.html> (last accessed on July 12, 2024); "U.S. cuts off Ethiopia, Mali, Guinea from Africa duty-free trade program | Reuters." Smith-Spark, McKenzie, and Swails, "Why the Mali Coup Could Worry Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron"; "U.S. cuts off Ethiopia, Mali, Guinea from Africa duty-free trade program | Reuters." Smith-Spark, McKenzie, and Swails, "Why the Mali Coup Could Worry Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron"; "U.S. cuts off Ethiopia, Mali, Guinea from Africa duty-free trade program | Reuters." Smith-Spark, McKenzie, and Swails, "Why the Mali Coup Could Worry Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron"; "U.S. cuts off Ethiopia, Mali, Guinea from Africa duty-free trade program | Reuters." Smith-Spark, McKenzie, and Swails, "Why the Mali Coup Could Worry Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron"; "U.S. cuts off Ethiopia, Mali, Guinea from Africa duty-free trade program | Reuters."

77 U.S. Embassy in Mali und Ortagus, "U.S. Response to Establishment of a Transitional Government in Mali"; Miller, Matthew, "Secretary Blinken's Meeting with West African Partners on the Situation in Niger," *United States Department of State* (blog), 2023, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-west-african-partners-on-the-situation-in-niger> (last accessed on July 12, 2024); U.S. Department of State and Blinken, "Extraordinary ECOWAS Summit on Niger."

78 Interview 13.

79 James Heappy, "Mali: UN Peacekeeping Mission – Hansard – UK Parliament," 2022, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2022-11-14/debates/0636721E-3514-4813-995D-A1D26138FA42/MaliUNPeacekeepingMission>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

80 Commons Chamber, "UN Mission in Mali: Armed Forces Deployment – Hansard – UK Parliament," 2020, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-12-09/debates/EC6E8467-4797-4FF1-BD58-8C3F4AB49711/UNMissionInMaliArmedForcesDeployment>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024. Commons Chamber.

81 Alex Vines, "Why the Mali Coup Should Matter to the UK," Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/08/why-mali-coup-should-matter-uk>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

engagement (including development cooperation), sending a clear political signal.⁸² This politicization is also accompanied by a stronger contextualization in wider international developments and geopolitical events, such as the impact of Malian cooperation with the Africa Corps. Until such developments, the United Kingdom generally aimed for continued engagement despite shocks at the government level, with stabilization being seen as a short-term measure, and thus unaffected by coups.⁸³

There is a strong general focus on supporting multilateral efforts, alliances, and their common alignment (AU, ECOWAS, Alliance for the Sahel),⁸⁴ with the United Kingdom taking a strong position as part of its partnerships and international commitments. It is always the Minister of State for Development and Africa of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) who makes statements in relation to the coups under investigation, never the Prime Minister.

Up to this point, we have examined the theory behind the four countries' stabilization approaches and the reality of dealing with coups in the context of stabilization efforts. In the following, the actual reactions will be compared with the theoretical objectives and concepts. Our aim is to find out how well the stabilization approach suits coup contexts, analyzing and highlighting the scope for action in such situations.

82 Interview 13.

83 Interview 13; Interview 15.

84 FCDO and James Kariuki, "Supporting a Sustainable, Collective Response to Challenges Facing the Sahel," GOV.UK, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/supporting-a-sustainable-collective-response-to-challenges-facing-the-sahel>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

DISCUSSION:

Comparison of Stabilization Objectives and Coup Realities

- In the context of the coups, the actors' behavior often no longer matches their original objectives
- The goal of supporting legitimate statehood is put under severe strain
- Legitimacy is a factor that stabilization actors evaluate very differently, which can lead to counterproductive decisions
- The decision-making process within stabilization efforts must be consistent and comprehensible to the population in the context of stabilization

We shall now consolidate the findings from the previous chapters and discuss them along with insights from the expert interviews. Before looking at the individual stabilization actors, we will consider some general issues.

GENERAL ISSUES

The reactions of the international actors examined have clearly become stronger from one coup to the next. Apart from this common tendency, however, these reactions differ greatly – be it in terms of the stabilization goals and interests pursued or the adjustments of the stabilization measures. Consequently, the juntas became more self-confident, exploiting the divergences. External actors such as Russia also took advantage of

the inconsistencies, positioning themselves as alternative partners and offering “regime survival packages.”⁸⁵ It is therefore questionable to what extent regimes in such contexts should continue to receive support through stabilization engagement.

The legitimacy of the government from the perspective of the population plays a major role in the stabilization approaches of the actors examined. During the first coup in Mali in 2020 in particular, the actors ascribed a high level of legitimacy to the junta, as civil society appeared to be in favor of the coup. Thus, the actors cooperated with the coup government.⁸⁶ Crucially, the actual mood of the population is usually difficult to assess and heterogeneous. There are differences along geographical and ethnic lines, as well as individual political attitudes and experiences in dealing with international partners. In addition, access to and exchange on social media play a major role, as do mis- and disinformation. The difficulty in assessing the popular opinion is a fundamental problem for stabilization policies in the Sahel states – especially if legitimacy is to serve as a *sine qua non* condition.

In general, it often remains unclear how (e.g., with which criteria or precedents) legitimacy is defined – even though it is a crucial, perhaps *the* crucial criterion for the decision on cooperation. Projects often emerge as a result of proposals from implementing organizations,⁸⁷ which relieves the burden on the limited national analytical capacities. However, this procedure also reduces domestic political control, sometimes up to outsourcing legitimacy decisions to the implementing organizations.

None of the actors anticipated the coups, not having enough insight into the general mood of the population. The population and the putschists are united in their demand for more sovereignty for their states, self-confidently demanding better conditions in bilateral and multilateral relations. The preferential treatment of Western partners is seen increasingly critically. Such developments need to be considered and addressed, and indeed the interviewees repeatedly highlighted the urgency of extensive monitoring and contact at eye level. A better understanding of a government's legitimacy, the general mood, and the developments on the ground would help anticipate possible coups and plan responses to them.

85 Mathieu Droin and Tina Dolbaia, “Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa. What’s the Limit?” Centre for Strategic and International Studies, accessed May 22, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-still-progressing-africa-whats-limit>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

86 Interview 5, March 19, 2024.

87 Interview 8.

Apart from the actors' narratives and strategies, the individuals involved and their personal relationships play an important role. In Niger, for example, Bazoum's good relations with Blinken and Macron mattered greatly; Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz, while not very interested in the issue, also had a preference for Bazoum. Although the Nigerien government under Bazoum was not considered fully democratic, it was relatively reform-oriented and regarded as the last remaining democratically minded partner in the region. In addition, the political perception of individual decision-makers can play a role in their calculations. A ministerial administration may present things to its minister in a euphemistic fashion, for example, by classifying projects as non-governmental or low-risk, so that they can continue to run in accordance with the minister's rules even if they do not actually meet them.⁸⁸ It appears that, in a crisis, decisions are made based on different motives at different levels.

Another issue is the length of the stabilization period, which is often shorter in theory than in practice: all strategies are rather vague about how long stabilization measures should last, but generally call them a short-term solution; long-term measures are supposed to follow. The immediate achievement of some degree of stability, security, and prospects for peace seems to be the priority, forming the ground for development cooperation.

The nature of stabilization as a prerequisite for long-term development efforts and stability can create a conflict of objectives regarding the claim to transformation. If stabilization was only intended to free people from violence in the short term, it could be possible to quickly achieve a negative peace even under coup governments, thus making further engagement legitimate and even successful. However, this would also highlight the issue of the government's legitimacy. Further, course-setting measures are especially questionable, as these could support and strengthen an illegitimate regime. Since the continuation or termination of certain measures was very inconsistent and situation-dependent, it can be concluded that many other factors beyond principles or pre-defined goals have an influence on these decisions. This was also the tenor of some statements in the interviews conducted.

One such factor is the role of the national and geopolitical security interests of the stabilization actors. While stabilization is a foreign policy instrument, the reactions to the coups show that it is heavily influenced by domestic political interests, geopolitical calculations, and external shocks. However, there are differences between the countries: national security plays a major role for the United States and a subordinate one for the United Kingdom. In Germany and the Netherlands, it is not to be found in the documents; in practice, it was expressed in a focus on multilateralism and collective responses to the coups. For Germany, the concept of integrated security also matters considerably: for example, civilian stabilization measures might emerge due to the Bundeswehr being on the ground and thus creating pressure for sufficient civilian projects to complement its presence.⁸⁹ Such considerations have a logic all of their own, making it difficult to assess these projects' objectives as being affected or unaffected by a coup.



GERMANY

In general, Germany continued the majority of its measures after the coups, prioritizing military and operational issues and drawing red lines in the implementing country with regard to foreign policy developments, such as security cooperation with Russia. Our interviews made clear: although the possibility of a coup was considered to be high, particularly in Niger, it was not factored sufficiently into the planning. Furthermore, continued cooperation after the coups is seen to mean the de facto acceptance of these coups. Experts mention Germany's ongoing involvement and lack of hard reactions being heavily criticized.⁹⁰

It subsequently became clear in the interviews that Germany considers the formal form of government to be only one among many indicators for assessing bilateral cooperation. The concrete behavior of the government appears to matter more.⁹¹ In the case of the Sahel, for example, the nominally democratic governments in Mali and Burkina Faso were only weakly legitimized and received little support from the population, despite having been elected. For this reason, the reaction after the coups was initially cautious and the reinstatement of these governments was demanded

⁸⁸ Interview 12.

⁸⁹ Interview 6.

⁹⁰ Interview 5.

⁹¹ Interview 3.

only hesitantly, as a matter of principle rather than with any real insistence. In Niger, on the other hand, it was generally felt that Bazoum had much stronger popular support as president and therefore led a more stable government before the coup.⁹² As a result, there were tougher reactions and louder calls for a return to the pre-coup situation. However, this raises the question of how far German engagement takes these differences into account in the conceptions of stabilization measures and legitimacy. Is the legitimacy of the government a relevant factor at all? And how much did the decision-makers really know about the mood on the ground? In general, situation reports and monitoring play a major role in the suspension or continuation of engagement after coups. Our interviews confirmed that Germany perceived the former Malian government to have always had very little acceptance among the population; nevertheless, cooperation was pursued in order to further support the Peace Agreement. In retrospect, this can be seen as inconsistent and self-contradictory.⁹³ Based on our interviews, the implementing employees did see the local dynamics but could not achieve a corresponding political reevaluation at a higher level.⁹⁴

Furthermore, non-state actors clearly play a central role in Germany's approach, allowing for stabilization measures even without a strongly legitimized government.⁹⁵ According to the German strategy, stabilization aims to find operational approaches based on political objectives, enabling collaboration with local NGOs without the direct involvement of the central government⁹⁶ – in strong contrast to the British approach, which asserts that stabilization efforts must by definition be undertaken in cooperation with the state.

Germany believes that locally legitimized actors not closely affiliated with the government will remain relevant if goals continue to be aligned with their

interests.⁹⁷ This ties in with the German approach of relying heavily on dialog formats. However, such formats are particularly difficult to implement after a coup. Questions arise about the actors: should one continue to cooperate with the previous contacts within the elite? There is a high risk that these formats could create or reinforce a distorted picture of the situation on the ground.⁹⁸

Another contradiction becomes clear when considering the potential impact of civilian stabilization efforts. Developing this potential is possible in the right contexts but was not sufficiently explored at the beginning of the engagement in the Sahel.⁹⁹ If the aim of the stabilization measures is to “create a secure environment, improve living conditions in the short term, and demonstrate alternatives to economies of war and violence,” it must be considered a failure in the Sahel.¹⁰⁰ With regard to previous revisions of the commitment and future projects in the Sahel, the plan is to provide more rewards or sanctions for positive or negative developments respectively.¹⁰¹ The first attempts at such reorientation were made in response to the coup in Niger; however, this was perceived as a disproportionate and surprising reaction. The hoped-for effects had not yet been achieved.

Furthermore, according to our interviews, local engagements often revealed the lack of a consistent approach to stabilization. The situation is described as a “hotchpotch” of different projects with their individual objectives (for example, strengthening multilateralism). Another point of criticism is that the public focus is often only on military intervention for stabilization. Instead of engaging in dialog with the Malians, especially those not involved in projects, the frequent visits of government representatives to Mali were often focused on Gao and missions such as EUTM.^{102, 103} In turn, this focus and the public interest have an impact on the selection of stabilizing measures taken.

92 Interview 6.

93 Interview 3.

94 Interview 3.

95 Interview 3.

96 German Foreign Office, “Shaping Stabilization – Foreign and Security Policy Concept for an Integrated Peace Engagement” [in German], *German Foreign Office (blog)*, December 28, 2022, 29, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2571114/5628ac0dffb0966b7c3ade051a04b9e3/integriertes-friedensengagement-data.pdf>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

97 Interview 3.

98 Interview 1.

99 Interview 3.

100 German Federal Government, “Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace” [in German], January 9, 2018, 69, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/1214246/057f794cd3593763ea556897972574fd/preventing-crisis-data.pdf>. Last accessed on July 19, 2024.

101 Interview 6.

102 Interview 1.

103 This reinforces the very one-dimensional nature of journalistic reporting in Germany. There are hardly any reports on the Malian society or the political situation. As a result, public education and opinion in Germany is limited to multilateral missions, which is not a good basis for politicians to explain or justify stabilization measures.

Another problem of the Sahel engagements seems to be that existing risk analyses have been ignored. The great public interest in foreign missions involving the Bundeswehr automatically increases the pressure to carry out various civilian projects alongside the military ones, regardless of their prospects of success, and sometimes despite unclear objectives.¹⁰⁴ This is perceived as a basic German reflex: military presence always has to be underpinned by civilian means. Insights gained from the interviews suggest that this is primarily due to the attention of the Bundestag. Trips by members of the Bundestag were highlighted in particular. According to the interviews, this means that standards and analyses for civilian projects are often disregarded. It is a direct contradiction to the strategy, which provides for a separate risk assessment for each measure and also considers risks for German foreign policy in general (such as loss of reputation or breach of international law).

The German approach, particularly in the Sahel, envisaged that local governments would be given a say in where stabilization measures were carried out in return for their active efforts to ensure security. This seems to imply that a degree of security is required for stabilization measures. Following the withdrawal of MINUSMA troops and other forces (e.g., the French troops) and a deteriorating security situation due to the resurgence of terrorist groups, the question arises as to whether the necessary minimum level of security can still be guaranteed. Our interviews showed that in the current geopolitical reality in the Sahel, the Russian Africa Corps could provide a degree security required for project work, despite the gross human rights violations it has committed itself. In theory, German activities could then move into the secured areas. However, this would make a mockery of the stabilization approach and its values. Russia's involvement does not improve the situation per se. However, our interviews and research made it clear that Germany is not prepared to make its own contribution to robust security. This reveals a fundamental dilemma of the German strategy in the Sahel as well as a gap between theory and practice: it remains unclear how local governments are supposed to establish stability without international support. The underlying question is: what is the relationship between security and stability?



THE NETHERLANDS

The Dutch stabilization strategy is even more context-dependent than that of the other actors studied, as was confirmed in various interviews. Overall, it became clear that even secondary documents such as “Theory of Change” are not fundamental to day-to-day work in stabilization contexts, and that the relevant UN definition of stabilization can be reinterpreted depending on the context. For the Netherlands, stabilization is basically whatever the responsible actors decide it to mean. Nevertheless, exchange with Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States is fundamentally important, as are multilateral formats within the EU and the UN.

In general, according to our interviews, the Netherlands appears to have less potential for shaping policy than its partners, the budgets and political influence being smaller.¹⁰⁵ Still, there are efforts to make a significant contribution through stabilization measures. Successes have been achieved in particular in supporting the rule of law and involving the civilian population. In general, the local civil society and the improvement of the living conditions are always the priority for the Netherlands. This enables the country to remain involved even in the event of coups, switching to measures further removed from the government, as was initially the case for all of the examined coups. However, in view of the deteriorating situation in the Sahel, the Netherlands was increasingly hampered in maintaining this strategy in the long term after the second coup in Mali. The political pressure following the coups was very high and led to the full or partial discontinuation of many stabilization projects, which were part of a robust and regular evaluation process.¹⁰⁶ This process is particularly impressive compared to the other cases examined. The insights of these evaluations from the Dutch engagement in Afghanistan were taken into account by the German inquiry committee on “Lessons from Afghanistan.”¹⁰⁷ This shows that such evaluations can also lead to sustainable improvements in stabilization strategies in partner countries.

Setting a long-term and high-level goal in the Sahel, especially after the coups, was a major challenge in the Netherlands for a long time due to the lengthy coalition-building process and unclear factional

¹⁰⁴ This and the following paragraph are largely based on interview 6.

¹⁰⁵ Interview 11.

¹⁰⁶ Interview 12; Interview 11.

¹⁰⁷ “25th meeting of the Inquiry Committee: Lessons from Afghanistan for Germany’s Future Networked Engagement” [in German], September 28, 2023.

politics.¹⁰⁸ Despite these obstacles, the Dutch authorities are trying to achieve the greatest possible positive impact in the Sahel with like-minded partners. The reactions to the coups are less due to the Netherlands' own initiative; rather, they were formulated in close coordination with the partners.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, we did not identify any gaps between theory and practice in the Netherlands, and the reactions to the coups were relatively consistent and principled. At the same time, the scarcity of resources and funds played a key role, which is why the focus was on a multilateral, collective approach.



THE UNITED KINGDOM

According to the British approach, stabilization is defined by the state's capacities. Accordingly, local approaches without interaction with the government do not fall under the British concept of stabilization.¹¹⁰ This contrasts with the German strategy. Similarly, the British use the concept of fragility much less than Germany and the United States. This may be indicating, whether intentionally or not, a lower awareness of the possible fragility of states. Our interviews also revealed disagreement as to whether stabilization is a desired outcome – or a process, such as inclusive mediation or compliance with international law.¹¹¹

Conceptually, stabilization is an instrument that is geared towards short-term positive change. From this, the British approach infers that possible coups do not have to be anticipated or considered. The focus should be on positive change, regardless of any developments such as coups.¹¹² According to this approach, stabilization efforts would continue even in the event of a coup.

This approach contradicts the principle of risk assessment: after all, stabilization is meant to work in volatile situations. However, it fits in with the view of several of our interview partners like those in the

United States, who reject general rules for coups. They argued that some projects could continue in the event of a coup and others should be stopped as part of important and necessary political signaling.¹¹³ They stated that this allowed for flexibility, keeping various doors and options open. In addition, it was sometimes possible to hold productive talks on stabilization with technocrats in coup governments.¹¹⁴ The experts interviewed explained that such opportunities for dialog should not be closed off outright. This approach is in line with the British focus on establishing long-term peace and stability with the consent of the population but contrasts with the assumption that this requires a representative, legitimate political system.¹¹⁵ As with the German approach, questions about the definition of legitimacy arise.

Following the British stabilization approach and its focus on the political economy of stakeholder groups in the partner country, the key part of the work takes place before and after the coup: the interests of a new regime need to be identified; it must be determined whether further cooperation is possible. In other words, reflection and recalibration are required.¹¹⁶

Most of the interviewees believed the influence of outside actors not significant enough for them to be considered (partially) responsible for a coup.¹¹⁷ This contrasts with several points of criticism, such as, the criticism of the putschists receiving training abroad. There are thus a number of contradictions between the British strategy papers and the realities on the ground revealed by our interviews.

Still, the British approach to stabilization seems to work as an instrument in coup contexts. The chain of effects of stabilization remains consistent, as statehood must be restored in order to establish security. Therefore, stabilization ultimately always aims at the restoration and strengthening of statehood and can be applied accordingly.¹¹⁸ Even if the coups themselves were almost completely free of violence,

¹⁰⁸ Interview 12.

¹⁰⁹ Interview 11.

¹¹⁰ Interview 13.

¹¹¹ Interview 15.

¹¹² Interview 13.

¹¹³ Interview 13.

¹¹⁴ Interview 13.

¹¹⁵ UK Government, "The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners" (London, March 7, 2019), 14, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uk-governments-approach-to-stabilisation-a-guide-for-policy-makers-and-practitioners>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

¹¹⁶ Interview 15.

¹¹⁷ Interview 15.

¹¹⁸ Interview 22.

our interviews suggest that donors should consider the secondary effects: should statehood be restored and strengthened if it might lead to massacres of the population?¹¹⁹

Alternative interests also emerged in the interviews: the British contingent in MINUSMA probably had the aim of demonstrating good partnership to the European countries after Brexit rather than providing bilateral support to Mali.¹²⁰ The British stabilization strategy was under revision at the time the present study was finalized. Among other things, the difficult balancing issues are to be fleshed out, and the paper is to become even more of a guideline rather than a policy. There still seems to be a division as to whether securitization of the approach is desirable or undesirable. An important aspect is that, while the military component in Mali delivered on what was asked for, the civilian approach had to contend with specifications that were far removed from needs. Ideas such as gender percentages in the budget sounded good in London but made less sense on the ground, becoming an obstacle in tailoring projects to needs. Despite its promising potential, the approach of using political economy as an analytical lens has not been successful.¹²¹



THE UNITED STATES

In the United States, the stabilization of the Sahel appears to be less of a foreign policy focus than for the other actors. For example, the West African coastal states are part of the Global Fragility Act, but the Sahel is not, even though instability was higher here at the time of its publication.¹²² This categorization of the partner states was based on the false assumption that US support was wanted by the local governments and populations in the coastal states, whereas this was not clear in the case of the Sahel.¹²³ This is founded on the strategic US guidelines that the focus should be on locally accepted, legitimate authorities and that US involvement should be politically desired

by the host. However, the experts in our interviews suggested that – after the coups and the increased relevance of the Sahel for transatlantic security due to the spillover risks of terrorism – one could and should now become a little more creative about what a democratic partner is, since the (previous) governments had not been completely democratic anyway.¹²⁴ This fits in with the first goal of stabilization according to US strategy papers: the protection of US national security (closely followed by support for democracy and human rights).

The question then is: is the Sahel relevant enough for national security to justify compromising the commitment to democracy and human rights? The US Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa, published in 2022, was an attempt to take the relevance of the Sahel into account.¹²⁵ According to this strategy, the United States wants to work with its partners to counter authoritarian coups and prevent autocratic consolidations. However, the focus of the document is not on stabilization, which is why it is not considered as a reaction to the coups.

Ideology and values seem to have been used as an excuse when the real issue was the attitude of the coup regimes towards the United States – specifically, as our interviews made clear, whether or not they were friendly to Russia and China.¹²⁶ Thus, geopolitical influence can be at stake under the veneer of stabilization and its values. This is also consistent with the weeks-long delay of an official recognition of the coup in Niger – despite the close personal ties between Blinken and Bazoum, which led to much exchange and support for his family. Some observers see a change from a “War on Terror” to a “Great Power Competition.”¹²⁷

Considering the whole region, we can also point out in this context that the junta in Burkina Faso is subject to the fewest sanctions despite its practices not conforming to human rights.¹²⁸ This ignores the US strategy papers clearly stating that engagement in fragile

119 Interview 22.

120 Interview 17.

121 Interview 17.

122 Interview 18.

123 Interview 18.

124 Interview 18.

125 “Vital Partners, Shared Priorities: The Biden Administration’s Sub-Saharan Africa Strategy,” *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed May 13, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/vital-partners-shared-priorities-the-biden-administrations-sub-saharan-africa-strategy>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

126 Lechner, John; Eledinov, Sergey, “What Washington Got Wrong about Niger and Russia | Responsible Statecraft,” <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/us-niger-russia>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

127 Lechner, John; Eledinov, Sergey, “What Washington Got Wrong about Niger and Russia | Responsible Statecraft.”

128 Interview 22.

contexts must be based on respect for human rights and democratic values. However, in 2020, the year of Mali's first recent coup, only one percent of the funds actually went towards promoting democracy, rights, and governance.¹²⁹ This supports the view that the commitment to stabilization is not necessarily affected by coups. In our interviews, some observers claimed that the focus on safety coupled with a lack of control may be a contributing factor.¹³⁰ However, research in this area is highly case-dependent, and general principles are still in need of further research. In this context, it is interesting to note that training on human rights standards in the military primarily strengthens military cohesion.¹³¹ Thus, although such training is meant to and can lead to a greater awareness of human rights, its main effect is to increase the likelihood of the military acting in unison in the event of a crisis – and thus also to support a coup if ordered to do so.¹³²

Even though the United States' coup restrictions do not directly or explicitly address stabilization engagement, they still seem relevant, being the only significant mechanism relating to coups and the termination of security cooperation. If the United States declare that a coup has taken place, there must be consequences in cooperation: this rule works as a narrative tool condemning coups. At the same time, however, this mechanism opens up a transitional period before such an official declaration is made in which one can attempt to face reality and to create a functioning working relationship with the new authorities.¹³³ This mechanism was described as theoretically positive in our interviews, as it provides direction and principles for decisions; this was said to enable more consistent action. In reality, however, this mechanism is largely undermined and circumvented because the restrictions appear too inflexible, closing diplomatic and other communication channels without considering the specific context of the case. This is regarded as highly problematic and insufficiently context-specific by diplomatic staff and practitioners, and was also said to send the wrong signals regarding cooperation and diplomacy in general.

The selective use of the mechanism makes it barely credible. This ties in with the criticism of the coup

restrictions regarding the lack of transparency and public communication of the mechanisms: if the United States' partner countries had clearer information about the restrictions and their consequences, and if the restrictions were implemented consistently, they could also act as a deterrent and better fulfill their purpose. As things stand, however, it is a failing mechanism based on a sound idea.

DECISION-MAKING IN THE EVENT OF A COUP DURING STABILIZATION

Several fundamental decision-making factors in stabilization work can be identified from the analysis of theoretical stabilization strategies and actual procedures. In the event of a coup, the legitimacy of the government is the primary issue; it is assessed differently by the stabilization actors depending on the specific circumstances. However, the basis for assessing these circumstances is usually poor, up-to-date and in-depth knowledge being hard to come by. In addition, the stabilization actors place varying degrees of priority on factors such as the security situation, national security concerns, and geopolitical circumstances. This is reflected in the extent to which stabilization measures are really being stopped or revised according to the theoretical principles, and in the level of political decision-makers who tackle the situation. In the case of Niger, personal relationships with President Bazoum played a role as well.

The decisions on issues such as the Western country's own security policy interests and viable options for stability depend on the context, but many of them also contain dogmatic elements. One fundamental question is what kind of environment stabilization measures can take place in, for instance, with regard to a necessary minimum level of security. This goes beyond the so-called duty of care for stabilization personnel; it involves the conditions needed for successful work and not just the personal security of the deployed staff. Another example is the question of legitimacy and its implications. Of course, the exact local circumstances play a major role in how the stabilization actors obtain the relevant information and assess the situation.

129 Dion and Sany, "After Two Coups, Mali Needs Regional Support to Bolster Democracy."

130 Dion, Ena; Cole, Emily, "How International Security Support Contributed to Mali's Coup," United States Institute of Peace, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/09/how-international-security-support-contributed-malis-coup>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

131 Renanah Miles Joyce, "Soldiers' Dilemma: Foreign Military Training and Liberal Norm Conflict," *International Security* 46, no. 4 (April 1, 2022): 48–90, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00432. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

132 Joyce, "Soldiers' Dilemma."

133 Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Declares the Military Takeover in Niger a Coup."

Recommendations

- In order to successfully shape stabilization policies in the future, Western actors must become more consistent in their handling of coups and urgently need to define criteria for state legitimacy.
- Greater investment in local knowledge and evaluation of activities is necessary to do justice to the specificity of contexts.
- Stabilization remains a policy area with difficult trade-offs that need to be clarified despite major differences among Western actors.

The present analysis shows many shared approaches and a good deal of coordinated behavior among the stabilization actors (who were chosen for their like-minded attitude in the first place). However, it also points to a potential for improvement in terms of coordination and the information basis used for situational decisions. Though choices to be made in the event of a coup are highly context-specific; fundamental questions about the priorities of stabilization need to be answered. The following recommendations are meant to address the course of German policy in particular.

Better coordination with the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States is crucial. The Stabilization Leaders Forum is an existing platform that lends itself to this purpose. Cooperation between Germany and France, the closest allies in Europe, is particularly challenging due to their sometimes very different strategies and priorities in the Sahel. The present study addresses this aspect, as it is always relevant for German foreign policy.

Against the background of the situation outlined above, it is recommended that the stabilization actors jointly formulate general **guidelines**. These could create coherence by prioritizing objectives and thus strengthen the common approach towards the self-confident and self-determined juntas in Mali and

Niger. As it is, the lack of consistency among international actors creates room for maneuver that is being exploited by the juntas. At the same time, the juntas are instrumentalizing close partnerships within the EU, particularly between France and Germany. The termination of multilateral agreements in favor of bilateral ones leads to a lack of transparency between donors, which works in favor of the juntas and facilitates corruption. In this context, it is crucial for Germany and France to deal with their differences in a way that utilizes the strengths of each partner for their shared interests. Effective coordination can make bilateral agreements achieve more for everyone. At the same time, Germany should not always feel the need to emphasize its close relationship with France – after all, real friendships do not have to be proven at every turn.

In addition, greater transparency among the stabilization actors should also improve communication and the expectations towards the implementing country. Information about any red lines could be provided right at the start of cooperation, in times of peace and democracy. This should not be seen as a threatening gesture but rather as a piece of information shared in a partnership of equals. It can also help to prevent inconsistent reactions, as was the case with the United States in Niger.

Such guidelines should pay particular attention to the definition of **legitimacy**. It is crucial to operationalize the criteria accordingly. **What does popular acceptance mean? How does this relate to the effectiveness of a coup government? And what role does this play in the decision-making process?** Such definitions would enable a more informed and realistic assessment of the revisions to the stabilization efforts. To answer **these questions**, a retrospective analysis of Germany's political actions during the first coup in Mali would be useful. Here, the popular acceptance of the coup and the hoped-for greater effectiveness of the new coup government seemed to be valued more highly than constitutionality. The subsequent relocation of the stabilization effort from Mali to Niger was motivated by the hope of finding a more willing and cooperative partner, indicating the key role of pragmatic reasons. At the same time, Niger had an elected president in Mohamed Bazoum, and the local democracy seemed reasonably stable. Such an examination of important cooperation criteria should provide more clarity for Germany's strategy. Reaching agreement on this with like-minded partners is certainly an ambitious goal. An exchange on this topic may be an important intermediate step that could

also help bridge the different demands and levels of the existing documents analyzed at the beginning of this study.

Furthermore, formulating guidelines should help actors **define their roles and decide in how far security is prioritized** in the context of stabilization measures. This is particularly important as stabilization measures are not intended to maintain the status quo unconditionally but rather set the course for sustainable change. A clear understanding of the importance of security can facilitate well-founded decisions in the case of security cooperation instead of suspending such cooperation outright.

An evidence-based, impact-oriented approach to the status of security would be to prioritize security sector reforms¹³⁴ instead of, for example, security sector assistance. Past experience has shown that such assistance tends to be instrumentalized, while fundamental reforms following the deconstruction of a military and security apparatus have been successful (in Sierra Leone, for example).¹³⁵ In reality, however, a reform of the security sector always needs the partner country's willingness and is not always easy to implement with the available resources. Simply insisting on a certain form of security accompanied by political reforms is thus not helpful. It is important to recognize that the actual or perceived security on the ground may differ from the external actors' perception. Thus, both the putschists in the Sahel region – as can be seen from their arguments and their focus on counter-terrorism measures – and the population at large seem to place more value on perceived security and stability than on democratic governance. An external actor's reflection on the role and definition of security can therefore contribute to clearer decision-making options both beforehand and on an ongoing basis in the event of a coup.

In general, it became apparent that assessments for many processes on the ground are based on a thin factual basis and depend on implementing organizations or individuals in embassies. More comprehensive information and **local expertise** are needed to provide a better basis for decision-making. The current phase, with engagement in the form of active security cooperation being greatly reduced, could be

used to strategically expand the knowledge base. Investment in personnel (outside of specific stabilization measures), language skills, cultural understanding, and a general willingness to travel to peripheral regions are needed. Some of the necessary knowhow already exists in implementing organizations, in academia, and in individual ministries. However, a lack of cooperation and high staff rotation mean that it can rarely be tapped into at the crucial moments. Therefore, the expertise needs to be not only further built up but also interconnected and made applicable to the decision-making process. No resource shortage can justify that people and projects are only available in acute crises. Long-term availability of experts and the integration of findings from evaluations would help take account of the strategic interests in the region and support the desired cooperation on an equal footing. The evaluation practice in the Netherlands seems to provide better structures for actually applying the lessons learned.

Instability in a region should not be an excuse to lose track of the situation but rather a reason to invest heavily in local knowledge and language skills. In volatile conflict situations, it is impossible to keep an overview of everything at all times, but it is possible to improve strategic positioning in order to evaluate motives for action and adapt one's rhetoric and stance appropriately. The resulting larger network and local expertise would also enable the international actors to assess the acceptance of a coup by the population in an independent and differentiated manner. This process of generating knowledge and establishing a presence in peripheral areas could also strengthen Germany's position as an independent actor. In this way, Germany can act in networks and within the framework of international organizations while operating independently and being perceived accordingly. This could partially solve an important problem: some regimes and sections of the population often fail to perceive the cooperation between Western actors in the Sahel with sufficient differentiation. Propaganda produced by the juntas and Russia contribute to the perception of the Western actors as monolithic. Against the background of anti-French sentiment in parts of West Africa, this represents a risk for further (bilateral) cooperation and must be considered in future engagements.

¹³⁴ "Security sector reform" refers to a reform of all actors relevant to security, such as the military, police, and judiciary, based on the principles of the rule of law, which should lead to a democratically controlled security sector that operates in accordance with human rights standards. Security sector assistance includes approaches that focus on enabling existing forces to carry out their tasks, for example, through training, equipment, or direct support from the assisting country's forces.

¹³⁵ Interview 15.

German foreign policy makers are examining many adjacent portfolios to see which other approaches can be pursued in the region and where resources can be reallocated. Assessments of whether ECOWAS can be reformed and once again become a relevant actor¹³⁶ would benefit from better local knowledge and access to information. Assessments of the actors' **political economy** are crucial for the indirect stabilization commitment. After all, we can understand decisions better if the decision-making factors are visible. Many interviewed experts emphasized this approach as promising, but there is not enough knowledge to describe and evaluate the decision factors appropriately. This begins with the question of the relevant actors, i.e., the need to identify the individuals and groups that play a role in the conflict. It is also important to find out what motivates these actors, how they maintain their position, and to what extent they can be persuaded to support non-violent political solutions. Contrary to some claims, this method also leaves room for the analysis of (supposedly) irrational behavior and interests. This would be an important basis for restarting stabilization projects if the circumstances change and promising opportunities for action are identified. Awareness of the decision-making factors enables one to consider how these can be influenced and how potentially violent actors can be persuaded to support peaceful political solutions through appropriate incentives.

In general, the sovereign partner state's acceptance of the actions is a prerequisite for stabilization measures. Such acceptance is helpful for providing humanitarian aid to the population, too, but only in the most extreme cases is such aid heavily curtailed by the local government. Usually, it remains a viable non-political way to satisfy the basic needs of the population. However, our analysis concentrates on stabilization measures; we do not consider any other options (such as humanitarian aid) for further action in Mali and Niger at this point.

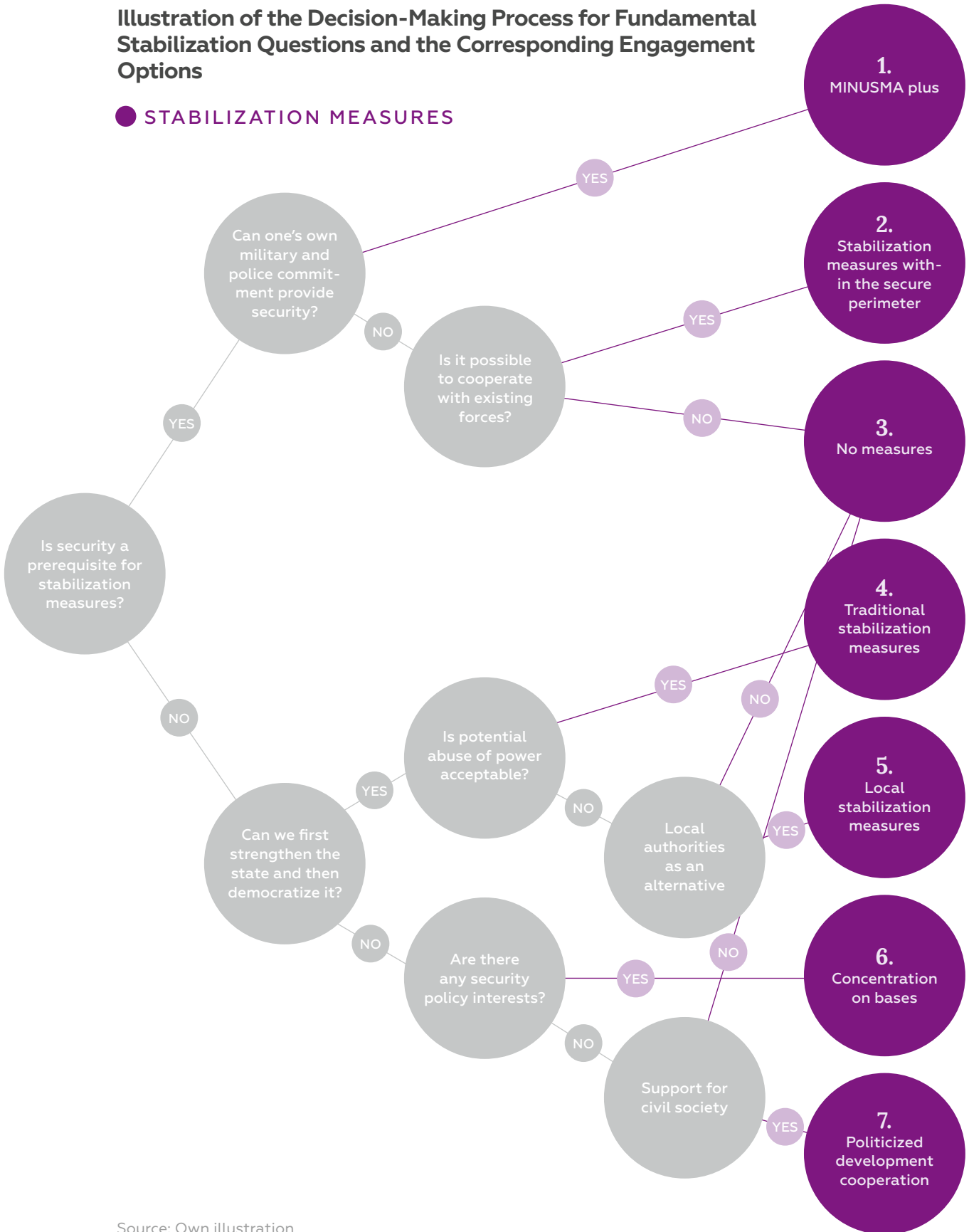
Our recommendations on common guidelines for stabilization actors presuppose two elements: willingness to cooperate and agreement on common criteria. The lack of political will and/or consensus on the content might be a challenge; moreover, coming to an agreement can be a very protracted process. This makes it all the more important for Germany to clarify key questions regarding the definition of legitimacy and the significance of security. Doing so could also

make Germany's stance more transparent vis-à-vis the stabilization partners examined here, as well as France. A decision tree derived from the discussion points in Chapter 6 ("Comparison of Stabilization Objectives and Coup Realities") serves as a guideline for discussing the significance of security and legitimacy in stabilization efforts. The goal is to translate general considerations into yes/no questions, rendering the priorities visible and bringing about the appropriate commitment (see diagram on page 35).

¹³⁶ Cascais, Antonio, "ECOWAS Is under Pressure to Reform – DW – 04/17/2024," [dw.com](https://www.dw.com/en/ecowas-is-under-pressure-to-reform/a-68836475), <https://www.dw.com/en/ecowas-is-under-pressure-to-reform/a-68836475>. Last accessed on July 12, 2024.

Illustration of the Decision-Making Process for Fundamental Stabilization Questions and the Corresponding Engagement Options

● STABILIZATION MEASURES



Source: Own illustration

We begin with the primacy of security, as it seems to us central to the conditions and instruments. However, it is also possible to start with the other questions and rearrange the tree accordingly, or to add new options. The use of the decision tree can lead to very different results among supposedly aligned actors, as it might reveal different priorities despite similar goals. Each of these decisions brings opportunities but entails risks, too. Once these opportunities and risks are revealed, a reverse test can be carried out to check whether the chosen approach seems appropriate and

whether the overall package of objectives, values, and resources works in theory and in practice. We have summarized some of the key opportunities and risks for various stabilization measures below. The decision tree and the overview of the measures are not intended to be exhaustive, nor should the tools of analysis be seen as the only possible options. Rather, we would like to contribute to solutions and provide some constructive perspectives on the political debate regarding stabilization measures and their future.

Opportunities and Risks of Different Engagement Options

STABILIZATION MEASURES	OPPORTUNITIES	RISKS
1. MINUSMA Plus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security is a prerequisite for civil projects and the core of the state contract that is to be strengthened by stabilization. • Secondary objective around counterterrorism is achievable. • Reaction to the militaristic tendencies of the juntas and to the local needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External help is perceived as a security service that relieves the state authorities of their responsibility. • The time is not being used to strengthen the country's own security forces. • A multilateral stance can appear paternalistic and homogeneous and be rejected in light of the colonial past.
2. Stabilization measures within the secure perimeter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actor remains active on the ground and could differentiate itself from the United States, France, etc. • Can be used as an incentive for more transparency and international coordination (with like-minded partners). • Actor retains a foothold and can still actively influence possible developments even if the juntas gain more power. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Might empower illegitimate actors who may not be able or willing to establish long-term stability. • Might actively contribute to unsafe conditions for the civilian population (and perhaps also mean indirect complicity in human rights violations). • Stronger cooperation between juntas and Russia or China may have to be accepted.
3. No measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saving financial and human resources in light of increased demands in other areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A deteriorating security situation to be expected. • Many years of involvement in rural contexts and the associated development of relationships and positive impressions wasted. • Signal and opportunity for Russia and China to exploit the lack of Western engagement and use it against Germany in other contexts.
4. Traditional stabilization measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging stabilization situations render failures especially visible, successes not visible enough. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One needs to deal with the mistakes made in the past. • Stabilization as a political instrument is increasingly perceived negatively, especially in affected populations.
5. Local stabilization measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The civilian population is empowered, the living conditions improved. • Cooperation with the local authorities instead of the central government is possible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong shift to development cooperation, • Stabilization engagement must always work to strengthen statehood; however, local cooperation cannot be completely decoupled from illegitimate regimes.
6. Concentration on bases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A gateway opens up for minimal local stability measures and/or network development in the civil and state environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence is drastically reduced. • Many years of involvement in rural contexts and the associated development of relationships and positive impressions are wasted.
7. Politicized development cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the elements that already work well, • Adaptation to a new geopolitical situation that no longer allows for depoliticized cooperation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The probability that the situation in the Sahel will continue to deteriorate drastically without stabilization instruments increases. • Local governments will not accept measures that undermine their legitimacy or work against their interests.

Source: Own illustration



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