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France's Africa Policy under President Macron

Good Intentions, Partial Reform and the Fiasco in the Sahel

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Since his election in 2017, President Emmanuel Macron has tried to distance himself from established and widely criticised patterns of France's Africa policy. He diversified relations with Africa in regional and substantive terms, integrated non-state actors and cultivated a comparatively open approach to France's problematic past on the continent. However, Macron's efforts to craft a narrative of change was overshadowed by path dependencies, above all the continuation of the military engagement in the Sahel and incoherent relations with autocratic governments. The involuntary military withdrawal first from Mali (2022), from Burkina Faso (2023) and finally from Niger (announced for late 2023) marks a historic turning point in Franco-African relations. The question is no longer whether relations between France and its former colonies will change; the real question is whether Paris will be able to shape this change or if it will be a mere bystander to a transformation that is largely driven by African actors.

When he became president, Emmanuel Macron was undoubtedly aware of France's reputation problem in Africa. His response was to make a clearly recognisable effort in crafting a new narrative to demonstrate his political will for changing relations with France's former colonies in Africa. The target audience of Macron's message of change and renewal are the African publics and civil society actors who, in the eyes of the president, stand for Africa's positive dynamics: entrepreneurs, intellectuals, youths, artists, but also members of the diaspora. Macron wants to use these actors as bridge-builders to establish new partnerships and leave the undesirable aspects of

France's reputation in Africa behind. Emblematic of this method was the new format of the traditional Africa-France Summit, held in Montpellier in October 2021. Contrary to diplomatic traditions, no African government representatives were invited, but only non-state and civil society actors. It remains questionable, however, to what extent this carefully selected circle of civil society figures represents broader societal currents in Africa, or whether it is able to exert political influence at home.

In addition to his public diplomacy activities, Macron has also engaged a number of substantive political and economic issues.



Economic and monetary policy

A reform initiative of potential significance was the announced abolition of the West African franc CFA currency. The importance of the move lies primarily in the political sphere. In West Africa, the currency is primarily seen as a colonial relic, a constant reminder that the CFA states still have no monetary sovereignty almost 60 years after independence. This makes the CFA franc a highly visible symbol of continued post-colonial French influence and paternalism. In recent years, the currency has become a focal point of resentment and social protest. Macron therefore links the reform above all to the goal of defusing the increasingly virulent criticism of France in the region.

France and eight states of the West African Economic and Monetary Community (Union économique et monétaire ouest-africaine, UEMOA) agreed at the end of 2019 in a first step to reorganise the currency system of the CFA franc, which is to be replaced eventually by a common West African currency (Eco). The West African Central Bank (BCEAO) was relieved of the obligation to deposit 50 per cent of its currency reserves with the French central bank. In addition, France is no longer represented in the supervisory bodies of the UEMOA. However, the currency remains pegged to the euro and France continues to guarantee a fixed exchange rate. Critics see the changes as a pseudo reform, especially since the measures were not agreed upon within the framework of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which would include the region's Anglophone states. The introduction of a common currency (also called Eco) is the continued goal of ECOWAS; according to optimistic projections, it is to be introduced by 2027.

Another high-profile initiative of Macron concerns financing Africa's development. With the "Financing African Economies" summit in Paris (18 May 2021), the government distinguished itself as an advocate for African countries in order to cushion the

dramatic social consequences of the Covid pandemic. While falling short of its ambitions, the summit called on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to allocate Special Drawing Rights of \$650 billion in support of African members. Sudan received pledges for far-reaching debt relief. A follow-up summit ("Summit for a New Global Financing Pact") in June 2023, which was attended by representatives from more than 100 countries, did not bring about a fundamental breakthrough on how sustainable development and climate investments in developing countries should be financed. Nevertheless, it made some headway on finance, as it was decided that the IMF would provide \$100 billion in Special Drawing Rights for countries at risk of climate change. Among other things, Senegal and Western partners announced a Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), combining climate and development objectives, while a deal was reached to restructure Zambia's \$6.3 billion debt.

If the summitry sent the signal that France's Africa policy extends beyond its former colonies, Macron's frequent travels to countries outside of the French *pré carré* (e.g. Angola, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa) reinforced the point. In fact, it confirmed that France's economic and political interests have diversified further in the course of the last decade, shifting in particular towards dynamic high-growth countries. Of France's exports to sub-Saharan Africa, only a third now go to the UEMOA countries. The UEMOA's share of imports is only 14 per cent (2021).

Reforming aid

The Macron administration has also initiated a modernisation of its development cooperation. Among other things, official development assistance (ODA) is to be increased and used more effectively. After almost a decade of stagnating or declining spending on aid, the multi-year development policy financial planning of August 2021 provided for an initial gradual in-

crease in ODA to 0.55 per cent of GDP and to 0.7 per cent by 2025. The government also plans to change its priorities. After years of increasing the share of ODA received by emerging economies, the least developed countries are to obtain greater support starting in 2024. In 2021, the latter group was given 16.3 per cent of France's gross bilateral ODA, much lower than the average of 22.9 per cent that other members of the OECD provide.

The share of grants in bilateral aid is to be increased to 70 per cent by 2025. The main recipients are to be a group of priority countries and low-income countries, mostly in Africa. Discrepancies persist, however. Officially, 18 African countries (plus Haiti) make up the list of France's priority countries, but none is among France's top 10 ODA recipients.

At the same time, France's ODA focus on Africa is somewhat relative. In 2021, 36.8 per cent of its aid went to Africa (\$4.7 bn). But roughly 40 per cent of this was obtained by just five countries: Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire, South Africa, Tunisia and Egypt. However, in August 2023, the government announced the suppression of its priority list of partner countries, and it remains unclear whether a new list based on revised criteria will be drafted.

Paris is also striving for stronger political steering of development cooperation at the strategic level. An inter-ministerial "National Council for Development and International Solidarity" (CNDSI) is to set out the broad political guidelines. On the ground, French ambassadors are to take on this role in partner countries. These centralisation measures are accompanied by an increase in the bilateral aid share from 57 per cent (2015) to an average of 65 per cent. In addition, as of 1 January 2022, France's technical cooperation agency (Expertise France) was integrated into the Agence française de développement (AFD) in order to bundle competences in the implementation of aid projects and create more coherence.

Overall, the changes seem to point in the right direction. French aid has a reputation for being politically arbitrary and lacking

effectiveness. Over the last decade, the discrepancy had been growing between declared political priorities and the allocation of aid. Africa's share of ODA, for example, had declined from 52 per cent (2010) to 41 per cent (2016). Sub-Saharan Africa received only 29 per cent of French ODA in 2016. Of this, only 10 per cent went to the five states of the Sahel, although the region had been a foreign policy priority of the French government since 2013.

The new politics of memory

In addition to the CFA franc, Macron has not shied away from entering another contentious field in African-French relations and has embraced the politics of memory.

Two issues are at the forefront. First, there is little doubt that Macron has advanced the debate on restitution for African cultural art and artefacts, in France and beyond. An expert report he commissioned from the academics Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy recommended a comprehensive restitution for African cultural property and has given the discussion considerable political and social traction. By the end of 2023, the government intends to submit framework legislation to parliament to facilitate the return of goods from national collections. Initial proposals for a doctrine providing the restitution and return criteria have already been made. A not insignificant effect of Macron's restitution initiative has been its impact beyond France. It has acted as a catalyst for debates in other European countries, not least in Germany.

A second component of Macron's politics of memory concerns initiatives on coming to terms with the history and responsibility of French colonialism in Algeria and Cameroon as well as France's role in the genocide in Rwanda. Here, too, Macron resorted to commissioned expert work (the Stora report on Algeria; the Duclert Commission on Rwanda and a bi-national commission of experts on Cameroon) in order to obtain a quasi-official assessment of France's responsibilities and crimes. By tackling these

issues, Macron followed up on statements made during his 2017 election campaign, when he described the colonisation of Algeria as a crime against humanity.

Macron's embrace of the politics of memory was not only guided by normative-moral considerations. The president's political ambition is to put relations with African states on a new footing, thereby improving France's tattered reputation on the continent as a whole.

However, addressing the past in order to be able to move forward is unlikely to do justice to the political and social significance and sensitivity of the issues at stake. Macron has a flawed reading of the past and present. Thus, he frequently emphasises generational change in Africa as a springboard for his appeals to young Africans to not be "blocked" by the colonial past as a frame of reference for French-African relations – "representations of yesterday", as he revealingly called them in his 2017 Ouagadougou speech.

However, dealing with the past – or how this past may be represented in the present – cannot simply be decreed, certainly not by the former colonial power. Macron underestimates the continued salience of colonial legacies and the rising tide of anti-colonial narratives in African societies. In doing so, he runs the risk of undermining the credibility of his initiatives, which could easily be dismissed as strategic communication.

Continuity in the Sahel and the turning point Mali

In the Sahel, Macron did not appear as a reformer, but merely as the administrator of an inherited and ultimately failed military intervention, which was the largest foreign deployment since the Algerian War. From a West African perspective, he simply continued France's traditional policy of intervention in the former colonies, thus undermining the public policy narrative of change. Since at least 2019, Macron had toyed with the idea of refashioning or

reducing the scale of France's military involvement in the Sahel. But ultimately, no decision was taken to that effect. In the end, it was the military juntas of Mali Burkina Faso and Niger that forced his hand.

Macron's (in)famous dictum "There is no longer a French Africa policy!", which he coined in Burkina Faso of all places (Ouagadougou, 28 November 2017) and wanted to be understood as an obituary for the murky "*Françafrique*", not only missed its mark. His claim seemed absurd, given that 4,500 French troops were stationed in the Sahel at that moment. As a matter of fact, Macron's statement, which he has repeated since, seriously backfired. In the Sahel, it was perceived as further evidence of the insincerity of France's policy, which constantly claimed change but never turned words into deeds. Perhaps unfairly, the lack of success of Operation Barkhane – visible in the steady spread of insecurity and violence – further discredited France's presence in the region.

Macron's adherence to a Sahel policy so obviously doomed to failure is to a large extent explained by structural conditions. To begin with, many regional and international partners have traditionally expected Paris to lead security policy in West Africa, while others accepted it more or less grudgingly. Inadvertently or not, this attitude of partners has reinforced France's self-perception as a natural leader in the region. Related to the foregoing is the fact that Africa remains an important projection of French power and grandeur. Historically, the military has played an important role in this regard thanks to its operational expertise, its bases in the region (Gabon, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Senegal and Chad) and dozens of interventions since 1960. Going against the diminishing French appetite for military interference since the late 1990s, the decade-long military interventions in Mali and the Sahel have greatly reinvigorated the influence of the military and the Ministry of Defence on the Elysée's foreign policy decisions, to the detriment of the foreign ministry, despite the substantive knowledge and skills of its staff. This partly explains the

lack of political-strategic anchoring of the military interventions, as well as a rather large number of political misjudgements, such as contradictory positioning vis-à-vis the military regimes in Mali and Chad, the failure to grasp political dynamics in Mali and – for a long time – the rampant anti-French sentiment in the region. In retrospect, the decision to gamble everything on the cooperation with Niger after the Mali fiasco must also be seen as a mistake – albeit one in which France was not alone.

Endogenous political-institutional factors also explain the apparent difficulties in changing the course of action in the Sahel. The verticality of France’s political system gives the president almost unlimited decision-making power in foreign and security policy. This is the case even for large and indefinite deployments abroad (Opérations extérieures, OPEX), such as Barkhane. Since the constitutional reform of 2008, the government has had the duty to “inform” parliament in the event of a military operation abroad (ex post). If the intervention lasts more than four months, parliament has to vote to authorise an extension. As a matter of fact, the National Assembly exercises no control over the government in foreign and defence policy. On 22 April 2013, it approved an extension of Operation Serval without a dissenting vote – this authorisation was considered valid also for Serval’s successor, Operation Barkhane, until its end in November 2022. Since 2013, parliament has discussed the Sahel intervention just twice in plenary sessions. Moreover, when it comes to operations abroad, there is almost a domestic political consensus across party lines. A critical discourse on the goals, course and impact of OPEX is practically non-existent in the political as well as the public sphere. Thus, politically and institutionally, there are few channels to question or correct exceedingly centralised decision-making. Ultimately, this means that any changes in France’s course in the Sahel and West Africa essentially depend on the varying depths of insight provided by Macron and his small circle of advisors in the Elysée.

Prospects after the Mali debacle

It is hardly surprising that an assessment of Macron’s Africa policy so far is mixed and contradictory. On the plus side, there are some initiatives that are beginning to breathe life into the narrative of political change (the politics of memory, aid reform, a less military-centric approach). On the other hand, he extended the doomed Sahel intervention, which, under his watch, resulted in a fiasco. It is paradoxical that the reformer Macron did not know how to break through path dependencies, although there is much to suggest that he had recognised the need for a change of policy.

It remains questionable how adaptive Paris will be in view of the disaster. Since the withdrawal from Mali, the situation for France has deteriorated further, with severe setbacks occurring in Burkina Faso and Niger. The announced “new approach” in the Sahel and the region remains vague. The most concrete announcement has been the withdrawal of several hundred troops from bases in Africa, while the transformation of extant military bases into some form of joint training academies remains ill defined.

Certainly, some mistakes have been recognised and a number of conclusions drawn. These include the pledge to take the needs of African partners more seriously, rather than trying to define them on their behalf. There is also the intention to act more discreetly, and thus to be politically less vulnerable. But this very intention was discarded at the first opportunity. The vociferous reactions from Paris to the coup in Niger were not an innovation in style and content, but “more of the same”. They were also counterproductive, as they diverted attention from the coup plotters and instead contributed to closing domestic political ranks in Niger against France, the “common enemy”. Other steps, such as the suspension of visas for artists and students from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (“for security reasons”) are politically self-defeating.

Also unhelpful is Macron’s tendency to underestimate the historical depth of the

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animosity to France's policy in West Africa, construing it as the result of political and communicative manipulations by strategic competitors (Russia, China, Turkey) or local demagogues. Although there is a more differentiated analysis in the administration, the message that goes out from this – and thus received in Africa – is that the French government is incapable of or unwilling to genuinely question its current and past policies, which is not a good position for countering anti-French sentiment.

Mali will go down in the history of Franco-African relations as a political turning point. The crisis has exposed the weaknesses of France's Africa policy, such as the contradictory treatment of authoritarian rulers, ineffective military approaches and, too often, unrelenting paternalism. In Mali and elsewhere in the region, it has brought to the surface deep-seated political and social frustrations over the "stalled decolonisation" that has persisted since 1960. France's political crisis in Africa therefore does not stop in Mali, and probably not at the edges of the Sahel.

Macron likes to portray the demographic change in Africa as an opportunity for a new political beginning. In reality, this change is accelerating a political rupture to which Paris is only reacting. The political and social networks between France and Africa have been eroding for some time, not least because of restrictive migration policies. For Africa's young generations, France (and Europe) are destinations with diminishing appeal and soft power. Fewer and fewer young Africans associate them with the promise of upward social mobility. For members of urban protest movements, France represents the focal point of their critiques and emancipatory discourse. These groups are changing the domestic political balance of power and putting pressure on African governments that are caricatured by populist spokespersons as France's accomplices. In Africa, France has long since become the object of domestic

political contestation and mobilisation efforts. There is hardly any other point on which political and civil society actors in the region are more likely to agree than a critical stance towards France. There is no other postulate from which political capital can be made more quickly than the one that France must be put in its place. Paris will suffer a significant loss of influence in the region, no matter what measures the government takes in the short or medium term.

Paris could be dealing with a permanently shaken self-understanding of its own role in Africa for years to come and faces the historic challenge of defining a new course towards Africa. For Germany and other European governments, this could provide an opportunity for entering into a policy dialogue with France that is not determined a priori by the superiority of political insights in Paris and the primacy of French interests in Africa. There is no lack of challenges. The manifold consequences of the Ukraine war as well as climate, energy and migration policy are among them, in addition to dealing with Europe's colonial past in Africa.

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