



Current Developments in West Africa's Regional Integration – Challenges for the Future Design of Foreign and Development Policy

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Summary

On 16 September 2023, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – all three states led by military regimes – decided to establish a new regional organisation, the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des Etats du Sahel – AES). This move was prompted by the worsening of the crisis within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2023, a crisis that reached its peak to date with the announcement by the three AES members on 28 January 2024 of their withdrawal from ECOWAS, a regional organisation set up back in 1975.

In a socio-political context in which the role and functions of the state, the extent of state powers and the way in which they are exercised are increasingly being called into question, new forms of political and social organisation are developing. These are also influenced by the current geopolitical developments in the changing world order. At the same time, states and societies and the ongoing regional integration processes are facing major new challenges. Within ECOWAS, conventional ideas of state and society, values and structures are coming up against growing tendencies towards a new understanding of statehood and sovereignty. In the West Africa/Sahel region, new processes of nation-building and state-building are under way, underpinned by efforts to renew social cohesion and to integrate the 'vital forces of the nation' – a concept cited increasingly frequently in these countries – as comprehensively as possible.

These developments call for a realignment of German and European foreign and development policy. The political and social conditions and expectations of the

partners in the West Africa/Sahel region are currently undergoing profound transformation. They need to be aligned with the content and interests of the value-based foreign policy advocated by Germany – in line with the principle of a 'partnership between equals'.

Any appraisal of the future developments and integration of the dynamics that determine them must take account of the various integration processes, which are particularly diversified and run in parallel in this region. Adopting a comparative perspective, this paper provides an overview of the various regional organisations in the West Africa/Sahel region. It analyses the potential of each of them in terms of their development prospects and sustainability. In addition to the critical relationship between ECOWAS and the AES, it also examines the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), the Integrated Development Authority of the Liptako-Gourma Region (Autorité de Liptako-Gourma – ALG) and the G5 Sahel, which is currently being dissolved.

If the partnership between Germany and Europe on the one hand and the West African and Sahel states on the other is to be continued, it will be vital to adopt a pragmatic approach and maintain a political dialogue with all the partners. The states in this region are extremely important to Europe's future development. Moreover, it is only through communication based on mutual respect underpinning cooperation in the economic and development sectors that the growing influence of political powers such as Russia and Iran – whose ideas, interests and values are not in line with the Western Atlantic model of democracy governed by the rule of law – can be curbed effectively.

West Africa/Sahel, a region in flux

Many African countries have been undergoing radical processes of change for several years now. The future course and outcome of these processes will play a key role in determining the future partnership arrangements between Europe and Africa. Africa is currently experiencing a historic period marked by the end of the modern post-colonial state, leading to processes of nation-building and state-building and to a new definition of the concept of statehood. Changes are being initiated in the form that state powers and public services take, the way they are exercised and the balance between them. Insofar as the role and functions of the state, the scope of state powers and the way in which they are exercised are increasingly being called into question, the development of new forms of political and social organisation is becoming more important.

Recent experience in West Africa shows that states and societies are not always able to cope with these challenges. Social conflicts at national or regional level and an ineffective public sector have led to an implosion of political systems in many cases, resulting in coups. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are examples from the past three years. The capacity of these systems was no longer adequate to meet the requirements and expectations of their citizens. Elected holders of political office in particular are often unable to perform their official mandate to translate the population's needs into concrete measures.

In several cases, large sections of the population have been seen to support unconstitutional changes of government. This is a clear indicator of a lack of basic social consensus, the material expression of which is the constitution. As a result, citizens increasingly less frequently identify with the principles and values that determine the modern state. The gap between two principles that normally ought to complement one another – legality and legitimacy – is thus becoming wider.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the states in the region are aware of the growing economic and

political importance of their continent. They are thus demonstrating a new understanding of sovereignty and a new self-confidence on the international stage. Two events serve as examples to illustrate this trend: the speech given by Professor Robert Dussey, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Togo, on 21 September 2023 at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York (Dussey, 2023a) and the constitutional amendment adopted by Burkina Faso's transitional parliament on 30 December 2023. Among other things, this amendment elevates the national languages spoken in Burkina Faso to the status of official languages. French has been retained as a 'working language' and English has been introduced as an additional working language (Art. 35, para. 3). Burkina Faso has thus followed the example of the new constitution adopted by the Republic of Mali on 22 July 2023.

The aforementioned developments are particularly complex, because they are not limited to the national level but also have an impact on the form that intergovernmental relations and cooperation take. They are causing far-reaching changes in the various continental and regional integration processes – a system dating from a time when most of the African states were gaining political independence. This continuing development of the political and social order and systems in recent years has also given rise to dynamics in connection with regional integration, the extent and impact of which should by no means be underestimated in the ongoing design of German and European foreign and security policy.

A new regional actor: the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

On 16 September 2023, the transitional presidents of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter establishing the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) (Burkina Faso, Republic of Mali & Republic of Niger, 2023). The backdrop to this decision was an exacerbation of the crisis within the Economic Community of West African

States (ECOWAS) as a result of the coup in the Republic of Niger on 26 July 2023. All three signatories to this charter came to power through coups. Despite the instalment of civilian-led governments in which civilian actors play a key role, the fact that state authority in these three countries is exercised by a military leadership creates a particular connection between them. These state leaders have become even more aware of the potential resulting from this situation since the coup took place in Niger, if not before. They are taking targeted steps to leverage this potential in order to enforce shared political interests and orientations.

Prior to that, at their Extraordinary Summits on 30 July and 10 August 2023, the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government issued a warning that, if necessary, ECOWAS would restore constitutional order in the Republic of Niger by military means. So far, no action has been taken to implement the decision to deploy a regional ECOWAS force. Nevertheless, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – all of them neighbouring Sahel states and now also linked by the fact that all three are under military rule – took the opportunity to launch an initiative of their own in the face of this threat: on 16 September 2023, they decided to set up the AES as a defence alliance. The governments of Burkina Faso and Mali had already published a joint communiqué on 31 July 2023, announcing that a military intervention to reinstate Niger's President Mohamed Bazoum would be tantamount to a declaration of war against them both.

Article 6 of the AES Charter adopted six weeks later addresses this point. Under this article, any attack against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of one or more of the contracting parties will be considered as an act of aggression against the other contracting parties. In order to restore and guarantee security in the area covered by the alliance, all the contracting parties are obliged – individually or jointly – to provide mutual assistance. This includes the use of armed force. The clause also covers the potential deployment of an ECOWAS force on Niger's territory.

The ECOWAS membership of the three AES founding members was suspended as a result of the seizure of power by the military. Extensive economic and financial sanctions were adopted against them. The economic and financial sanctions against Mali and Burkina Faso have since been lifted, but the political rights and powers that membership entails continue to be suspended and the sanctions adopted against individuals remain in place. For several months, Niger remained subject to ongoing sanctions, a decision reaffirmed by the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government during its summit on 10 December 2023. However, these sanctions were eventually lifted on 24 and 25 February 2024.

On 25 November 2023, the economic affairs and finance ministers of the three AES member states met in Bamako to discuss economic development and continuing integration in the Liptako-Gourma region (AES, 2023a). The final communiqué of this meeting identifies policy areas in which the three member states aim to step up their cooperation:

- trade, free movement of persons and goods within the AES;
- food security;
- energy security;
- industrial transformation, potential and outlook;
- financing, economic integration, legal framework and necessary reforms.

In this context, the communiqué also refers to the goal of creating a 'true economic and monetary union for the AES', thus calling into question the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), which was set up 1960 when these countries gained political independence and to which they all belong. This wording reflects the position taken by the AES member states in this context: the CFA franc, which was introduced by the former colonial power France as a domestic currency, is not subject to their exclusive sovereignty and is pegged to the euro and it therefore does not form the basis of a monetary

union in the true sense. Finally, at their meeting, the finance and economic affairs ministers recommended setting up an AES stabilisation fund and an investment bank.

On 30 November and on 1 December 2023, the foreign ministers of the three AES founding members met in Bamako to decide on measures concerning the specific details of the alliance and mechanisms for greater coordination of their political and diplomatic actions. The meetings were also designed to stipulate modalities to strengthen the integration of these three states. The policy areas for which the AES is responsible are to be extended to include diplomacy and economic development. In addition, they advocated creating a confederation of the three countries.

These recent developments raise the question of the relationship between the AES and another regional organisation, namely the Integrated Development Authority of the Liptako-Gourma Region (ALG), which the same countries founded more than four decades previously.

The Integrated Development Authority of the Liptako-Gourma Region (ALG)

The ALG is also a regional organisation of the neighbouring countries Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. However, its origins date back to 1970 and it is based on a joint initiative by two UN bodies, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). On 3 December 1970, the three countries signed an agreement to set up the ALG, the headquarters of which have been in Ouagadougou ever since. The ALG's initial objective was to promote a regional framework to enhance and develop mining, energy, hydraulic, agricultural, pastoral and fisheries resources in the Liptako-Gourma area.

As an organisation devoted to cooperation and development, the ALG is currently undergoing significant change as a result of the decisions

taken by the heads of state and government of the three member states. The territory for which it is responsible was initially limited to a cross-border area covering 370,000 km², which accounted for 19.29% of the surface area of all three member states. In November 2011, the heads of state and government first decided to extend the geographical remit of the ALG to cover the entire territory of all three countries. On 24 January 2017, they agreed on the next step, which involved adding the topic of security and development to the policy areas covered by the organisation. At the same time, they signed another revised version of the ALG Treaty. After the ratification processes had been completed in all three member states, the revised treaty came into force on 12 February 2018 (ALG, 2017).

In the preamble to this new ALG Treaty, the parties already emphasised their commitment to the principles of ECOWAS and WAEMU. The establishment and development of ECOWAS in 1975 introduced a new dynamism into regional integration in West Africa. Along with the community's rapidly growing political clout since then, this may have contributed to the fact that, compared with the two large organisations ECOWAS and WAEMU, the ALG has ultimately no longer played a significant role in the process of integrating the political and economic areas in this region.

According to Article 10 of the ALG Treaty, the ALG can enter into cooperation agreements with international and regional organisations within the scope of its objectives. Article 3, para. 2 of the ALG Treaty also outlines the status of associated states in connection with programmes or projects to be jointly implemented, while Article 3, para. 3 of the ALG Treaty creates an 'observer state' status, albeit without specifying in any more detail the rights or obligations associated with this status.

The relationship between the AES and the ALG – the outlook for further developments

It is striking that the three member states of the ALG have so far not made reference to its legal and institutional framework in connection with setting up the AES, even though they cover the same area. There are certainly key differences in the original design and focus of the two organisations: the ALG was founded on the basis of a programmatic approach with a view to promoting development in their common border areas by integrating their economic areas in key sectors, while the AES was initially created as a defence pact. By extending the areas that fall within their remit, however, the two organisations have become more aligned in terms of the subjects they address, although this happened much more rapidly with the AES than with the ALG. Since its reform in 2017, the ALG has aimed to enhance security cooperation between its member states, to prevent radicalisation and to address conflicts within and outside the community. Soon after its founding act was adopted, however, the AES began to increasingly prioritise the core topics of economic integration. One major difference is that the ALG never attempted to evolve into a confederation or even a federation involving the transfer of extensive competences and powers, the sovereign exercise of which is a matter for the member states. By contrast, the heads of state and government of the AES parties have declared this to be their explicit goal.

The dynamic nature of these developments and the fact that the areas of policy and action of the two organisations are becoming increasingly aligned raises the question of whether they are still complementary organisations or in fact are – or will soon be – competing ones. Will the AES – which due to the current geopolitical change processes appears to be backed by stronger political will at present – soon overtake the ALG in its development and perhaps even make it obsolete? Looking ahead, it is also conceivable that they may continue to exist as parallel

organisations or even that the ALG might become part of the AES. There has already been a similar case, when WAEMU became the successor of the West African Economic Community (Communauté Economique de l'Afrique de l'Ouest – CEAO) and the West African Monetary Union (Union Monétaire Ouest-Africaine – UMOA) after it was officially founded on 10 January 1994. The UMOA has been part of WAEMU ever since, while the CEAO ceased to exist in March 1994. The AES still lacks an institutional base. As far as the AES is concerned, however, even merely from a legal and economic point of view, steps could be considered to transfer the basic tried-and-tested legal and organisational aspects and institutions of the ALG to the AES as a starting point. If nothing else, coordination of the sectoral policies of the two organisations would at least be conceivable. This could subsequently lead to increasingly closer cooperation and ultimately to a merger. Whether or to what extent the AES member states will draw on the achievements and possibilities of the ALG to develop their new organisation remains to be seen. So far, considerations of this kind have not been addressed in current political discussions.

Given the current trend towards increasing fragility among the states in the West Africa/Sahel region, it is also unclear at present whether the initial dynamism of the AES will or can continue on a permanent basis. Particularly in view of the fact that financial resources are tending to become scarcer, the question of how to secure sustainable funding for this organisation is still open.

Implications for the system of regional institutions

In addition to the aspects already mentioned above relating to institutional economics, the question also arises from a political viewpoint as to where and how the AES will position itself in relation to the other intergovernmental organisations and integration processes in the West Africa/Sahel region.

On the one hand, the economic integration of the countries of West Africa within the ECOWAS framework, which has already been under way for some time, does not in principle prevent more extensive cooperation between individual member states (such as in the ALG). On the other hand, it should be considered that the initiative to found the AES was prompted by the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS on the three AES states and by the specific threat of joint military intervention in the Republic of Niger by the remaining ECOWAS members. If this threat had actually been carried out, it might have meant the demise of this economic community set up back in 1975. Right from the outset, the 11 remaining ECOWAS members with voting rights failed to reach a consensus about a military intervention of this kind. The economically strongest and most populous state in the region, Nigeria, is divided on this matter itself. On 6 August 2023, the Nigerian Senate rejected the military intervention explicitly advocated by President Bola Tinubu.

On 11 August 2023, the President of Cape Verde, José Maria Neves, spoke out against the use of armed force and in favour of a diplomatic solution, while the President of Guinea-Bissau, Umaro Sissoco Embaló, emphasised in an interview with the French news channel France 24 on 15 September 2023 that a military intervention by ECOWAS was still an option. In contrast to the situation in The Gambia at the beginning of 2017, when ECOWAS last adopted a measure of this kind successfully, there appears to be general agreement that a similar undertaking in the form of a rapid intervention and immediate withdrawal is not realistic here (see, for example, Sow, 2023). Togo has since proposed a conciliatory course of action that deviates from the official position adopted by ECOWAS. The first public appearance outside the AES countries by Niger's new military leadership took place when Brigadier General Mohamed Toumba was invited to attend the Lomé Peace and Security Forum (LPSF) organised by Togo's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 20–22 October 2023. Toumba is the Minister of the Interior, Public Security and Territorial Administration installed by

Niger's military leadership. Two days before the 64th Ordinary Session of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government in Abuja (Nigeria), the head of Niger's military leadership, General Abdourahmane Tiani, was in Lomé for a working visit on 8 December 2023. The purpose of his visit was to ask Togo for support and mediation in the conflict with the West African community of states. The different standpoints of the ECOWAS member states are also reflected in the fairly conciliatory position that the community adopted on the matter at its summit on 10 December 2023. Although the sanctions adopted in July 2023 were upheld, the conference set up a committee made up of the heads of state of Togo, Sierra Leone and Benin to enter into dialogue with Niger's military leadership and other partners in the country. To facilitate the return to constitutional order as quickly as possible, the aim was to thus agree on a roadmap for a transition phase that was to be as short as possible. Government bodies were to be put in place for the duration of this phase and a mechanism was to be created to monitor and evaluate the process. Depending on the results of this dialogue, the sanctions imposed following the coup were to be gradually reduced or removed. If this process did not produce any results, ECOWAS intended to uphold the sanctions. It would then call on the African Union (AU) and its partners to enforce targeted sanctions against the members of Niger's military leadership and their allies. A scenario in which ECOWAS would launch a military intervention against Niger's new leadership appeared to be averted for the time being. It was not mentioned any further in this communiqué. This at least appeared to open up new scope for negotiations. In a communiqué issued on 14 December 2023, the ECOWAS Commission officially recognised the ousting of Niger's elected President Mohamed Bazoum as a fact. In doing so, it relinquished the ambivalent position it had adopted up to that point that the Republic of Niger was still legally represented at the meetings of the ECOWAS bodies by its former government members, who had been in exile abroad since the coup of 26 July 2023.

The differences of opinion among the West African states regarding the crisis in Niger highlight the weakness of ECOWAS as a community based on democratic values and principles and the rule of law, something that has become more evident in recent years. It is important to note that those suffering under the sanctions are not those responsible for this crisis. Instead, the sanctions affect the poor population of the Republic of Niger and the people living in the border regions of its neighbouring states, because the economic activities of these people are also severely restricted due to the border closures and the resulting interruptions to the flow of goods (Cadre de Coopération Transfrontalier Dendi-Ganda, 2023).

With their declared objective of creating a 'true economic and monetary union for the AES' and their ambition to increase the integration of their economic areas under new political conditions, the long-term aim of the initiators of the AES is clearly to replace WAEMU, of which they are all currently still members. In contrast, a stable cooperation arrangement has been developing between WAEMU and ECOWAS for some time now (Byiers & Dièye, 2021). The two organisations already signed a cooperation and partnership agreement on 15 May 2004 and set up a Joint Technical Secretariat; they also coordinate their sector policies on a regular basis. Ever since they were founded in 1975 (ECOWAS) and 1994 (WAEMU), the two organisations have acquired a high degree of legitimacy: ECOWAS has done so because it is based on the division of the African continent into regional economic communities (RECs), a move initiated by the UN and recognised by the AU. WAEMU has acquired its legitimacy on the basis of the high degree of economic integration of its member states compared with other regional organisations, which is based on their monetary union.

However, this development is currently at risk of undergoing a watershed moment. ECOWAS has increasingly been subjected to criticism by its member states in recent years. The criticism has

concerned the political influence exerted by external partners such as the EU and in particular France, as a result of which the critics saw their continental identity and independent existence jeopardised. This development reached its peak, at least for now, when the three AES member states issued a joint communiqué on 28 January 2024 announcing that they were withdrawing from ECOWAS 'with immediate effect' (Burkina Faso, Republic of Mali & Republic of Niger, 2024). Article 91 of the ECOWAS Treaty does not permit members to leave the community with immediate effect merely by issuing a communiqué to that effect. Instead, the Executive Secretary of the organisation must be notified in writing and the withdrawal does not take effect until one year after such notification. From today's perspective, however, it would appear very likely that this situation will occur. One of the reasons that Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger gave for this step was that ECOWAS had allegedly moved away from the ideals of its founders over the 49 years of its existence, claiming that, under the influence of foreign powers, it was violating the principles associated with its founding. This announcement by the AES states generated a flood of reactions from the international community expressing dismay and regret. One prominent example was the communiqué by the President of the AU Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, who called for the 'irreplaceable unity of ECOWAS' to be preserved and declared that the AU was willing to promote 'the logic of brotherly dialogue far from any external interference from any quarter'. Although ECOWAS has since made a political U-turn with its decisions of 24 and 25 February 2024 to lift the sanctions against Niger, Mali and Guinea 'with immediate effect', it is doubtful whether this will be sufficient to overcome the deep crisis. If the AES states do not abandon their intention to withdraw from ECOWAS, this would mean the collapse of a long-standing order. It would give rise to a large number of problems. First and foremost is the free movement of persons and goods and the associated financial transactions and customs systems, which are key to the further

economic development of the region and of the entire continent. The current agreements would need to be replaced by a series of bilateral agreements. There is some doubt regarding the implementation of this project, as none of the states involved has the intention of actually giving up the achievements made over the past few decades in the field of economic integration. So far, the AES countries themselves have not specifically called into question their membership of the monetary union established by WAEMU, which compared with ECOWAS is even more closely associated with the colonial past. At present, they are merely issuing general declarations of their intention to create a new common currency.

There is another recent example of the emphasis by the countries in the West Africa/Sahel region on their own state sovereignty and their fundamental rejection of all foreign influence, namely the rise and fall of the G5 Sahel framework. The alliance was founded in February 2014 as an institutional framework for intergovernmental cooperation in the security and development sectors. The EU was a key partner. The Permanent Secretariat of the organisation has its headquarters in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania. Its initial members were Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. As a result of the military coups in three of its member states and because Chad has also been governed by an interim government led by the armed forces since mid-2020, the organisation is currently undergoing a process of dissolution. The Republic of Mali withdrew from this alliance of states in May 2022, followed by Burkina Faso and Niger at the end of November 2023 – and hence from the military cooperation established by the G5 Sahel too (Burkina Faso & Republic of Niger, 2023). On 6 December 2023, the heads of state of the last two remaining countries in the alliance, Mauritania and Chad, decided to dissolve the G5 Sahel group (Islamic Republic of Mauritania & Republic of Chad, 2023).

With the dissolution of the G5 Sahel, the EU has lost its most important partner in the fight against terrorism and its efforts to reduce illegal migration in the Sahel region. Back in July 2017, Germany, France and the EU launched the Sahel Alliance to provide joint support to the G5 countries. More states and organisations soon joined them. Furthermore, the Coalition for the Sahel was launched as a broader initiative in Pau (France) on 13 January 2020 at the summit between the G5 Sahel countries and France. It was designed to facilitate the synchronisation, coordination and interaction between the various areas of international measures to support the G5 states. The goal was to create a coherent initiative at regional level that includes all levers and actors in the Sahel, regardless of whether they address security, policy or development issues. This coalition also formed the foundation or the starting point for the Sahel Plus Initiative launched by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

Notwithstanding these political and institutional changes, the problems have essentially remained the same. They continue to hinder the economic and social development of the citizens of the West Africa/Sahel region and their neighbouring coastal states. The German Federal Government and its bilateral and multilateral partners thus face the difficult challenge of continuing relevant cooperation, where possible, with their African partner countries in this region and adapting it to the new political conditions in some of these states. In this context, the situation is exacerbated by the fact that the military-led AES states have taken the initiative of turning to new partners with a view to 'diversifying' their cooperation. The objectives and values of these new partners are not always compatible with those of Germany and the EU: a current example of this is a senior government delegation from Niger that embarked on a trip led by the Prime Minister on 15 January 2024 to Moscow, Ankara and Tehran. It is questionable what resources these new partners will actually be able or willing to contribute to any such cooperation, however. It is also not clear to

what extent the African countries concerned might thus be subjecting themselves to new political influences and dependencies, despite giving their rejection of external influence as the reason for partly turning away from their western partners.

The security situation in the West Africa/Sahel region has also changed, because on 25 January 2024 the Government of the Republic of Mali terminated the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation resulting from the Algiers Process. Accusations were made against the government of the country that brokered the agreement, Algeria, among others (Republic of Mali, 2024). The future of the Accra Initiative set up in September 2017, which also involves the West African coastal states Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and (since 2019) Nigeria, is also at stake here.

In the context of the increased reference to the national and diverse cultural identities of the African continent, endogenous approaches and concepts are increasingly being adopted to solve regional problems and to boost cooperation between the African states. One example of these new dynamics is the African Political Alliance (APA), the initiator and driving political force behind which is Togo's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Professor Robert Dussey. The APA sees itself as an informal platform for consultation, political dialogue, 'multidimensional cooperation and collective action'. The first conference of the foreign ministers within this format took place on 3 May 2023. A further APA event was the Lomé Peace and Security Forum organised by Togo's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 20–22 October 2023 (Dussey, 2023b).

Outlook

In the future, too, Europe and Africa will continue to share a common destiny. Africa will continue to feel the impact of political decisions taken in Europe. And events in the Sahel region are felt relatively clearly and quickly in Europe. A specific example of this was an order signed by Niger's military leadership on 25 November 2023 to

repeal the law relating to the illegal trafficking of migrants of 26 May 2015. This decision was taken two days after the European Parliament had once again condemned the coup and the arrest of President Mohamed Bazoum, who was ousted from power on 26 July 2023. In recent weeks, the AES member states have distanced themselves even further from the EU and France as partners by terminating several key cooperation agreements. On 4 December 2023, Niger's military leadership notified the EU that it was terminating the partnership agreement on the civilian EU Capacity Building Mission in Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger) and the EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger (EUMPM Niger), a mission led by the EU to help enhance the capacity of Niger's armed forces (ActuNiger, 2023). The following day, Mali and Niger terminated the double taxation agreements signed with France many years previously (Republic of Mali & Republic of Niger, 2023), a step that Burkina Faso had already taken on 7 August 2023.

The developments in the Sahel region described above create huge challenges for Germany, Europe and the entire western world. The transformation processes initiated in several countries in the region will result in the redefinition of the state, its tasks and its performance profile.

Current partnerships can only be maintained if their form and content take account of these new conditions and if measures are taken to breathe new life into them. Germany and its western allies can now (still) take the initiative and provide constructive support to their partners in Africa in shaping their new state and regional order. If they fail to do so, they will leave the field wide open to powers such as Russia, whose ideas and interests differ from the Western Atlantic model of democracy based on the rule of law – powers that have been able to expand their political and economic influence in Africa in recent years.

A key requirement for maintaining these partnerships is that Germany and the EU continue the political dialogue and cooperation with all the state governments in the region as 'partnerships of

equals', to cite an apt term used in Germany's foreign and development policy in this context. Mutual acknowledgement, respect and understanding are necessary as a basic cross-cultural consensus for this dialogue to succeed. These partnerships should not be maintained or renewed at all costs and certainly not if it would mean abandoning internationally recognised values and principles, but steps must be taken to explore how and in which policy areas cooperation can be continued under the new political and institutional conditions. This must obviously be done in close consultation with the AU and the regional organisations. If these consultations are to be successful, they will require a pragmatic approach. Crucially, potential areas of tension must be identified in advance and assessed realistically, thus enabling an independent position and strategies to be developed. Any differences that arise can be overcome by taking steps to come

together and seek compromise. Breaking off the dialogue would be counterproductive for both sides.

In view of these complex problems, Germany faces the challenge of refining and implementing a foreign and development policy that is aligned both with its own values and objectives and with the expectations of its African partners – regardless of whether or not, in the case of the West Africa/Sahel region, it is in line with the foreign policy of France, which has plainly failed, but without jeopardising the friendly relations and partnership between Germany and France. Among close European partners too, mutual acceptance of approaches that differ in some respects is one of the added benefits of solid and stable friendly relations.

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