

FEATURE

The handling of the EU's military mission in the central African state of Chad holds vital lessons for the bloc's future operations in Africa, as Richard Gowan writes

A PREDICTABLE CRISIS

George Orwell defined "doublethink" as "the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them". There isn't a single word for pursuing two potentially contradictory policies towards European security. But by the end of last year France seemed at risk of doing just that.

Policy No 1 was all about grand strategy. The new government of Nicolas Sarkozy – gearing up for its EU presidency in the second half of 2008 – aimed to think big, radically big. It had initiated the drafting of a new white paper on defence, equivalent to the US National Security Strategy. This was expected to mark a major shift from the days of Jacques Chirac: those who saw early drafts reported that they were firmly pro-American.

And the white paper promised to be the prologue to a broader effort by the French to update the European Security Strategy, set to reach its fifth birthday in December 2008. Although other governments were said to be unconvinced that this was necessary, Parisian policymakers wanted a far clearer statement of principles on challenges like energy security and Russia than could be found in the original, often rather opaque, version.

By contrast, policy No 2 had a specific geographical focus: Africa. As 2007 drew to a close, France was urging other member states to sign up for an EU-flagged mission in two of its



Rebels are the cause: Africa's latest refugee crisis unfolds on the Chad-Cameroon border

Photograph: Reuters

former colonies, Chad and the Central African Republic. Both had become increasingly destabilised by internal strife and the spillover of violence from neighbouring Darfur. The French wanted 3,500 EU troops (plus 300 UN police) to protect refugees.

But if that was a good cause, Chadian rebels and some EU governments shared the suspicion that France's main goal was to prop up its long-standing clients in Chad's unstable government. The risks seemed significant, and the mission overshot its intended start date in December because no one but the French would offer essential helicopters.

So as 2008 began, there were already good reasons to question whether France could combine pushing the EU to be a more effective global actor with its efforts to get other European countries involved in its old empire.

And on the first weekend in February, two factors suddenly made that problem look even more urgent

the objectives," said French General Jean-Philippe Ganascia, field commander of the EU force, playing it cool.

By the time you read this, the EU and UN forces will hopefully be getting on with aiding the vulnerable.

But three things are already clear. One is that, for the first time, the promise of an EU military deployment has been met with a determined display of force – EU planners will count themselves lucky that this brutality came before they actually had significant forces in harm's way. The second is that the consensus underpinning EU security cooperation is being severely strained by the experience. The third is that this combination of events was all too predictable.

This doesn't just mean there were concrete warnings that Chad could turn ugly, although doubts were raised about the mission from very early on. The UN Secretariat – now responsible for over 55,000 peacekeepers in Africa, many of them in highly volatile situations – had

recent years. Of the 21 missions approved under the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), 7 have been sent to Africa. Only the western Balkans have hosted larger quantities of EU-flagged troops and police.

There are various reasons for this proliferation of African missions. One is that, unlike the Middle East, this is not a region where deploying forces causes frictions with the US. Another is that France, attempting to cut back its defence spending, has been keen to share its post-colonial burdens with its EU allies. During his 2006 election campaign Nicolas Sarkozy explicitly promised military disengagement from Africa – does that mean the ESDP must now fill the gap?

The EU has also found common ground with African governments on security issues – when the two continents' leaders met in Lisbon last December, their final statement contained an impressive list of peacekeeping initiatives. The European Commission is most proud of its African Peace Facility, which has funded African Union peacekeepers in Darfur.

Cooperation isn't always simple. In spite of the funding, the poorly equipped AU force struggled to cope in Darfur. There have been frictions over the use of the Peace Facility (the Commission being involved, there are complex accounting rules). Many African analysts also distinguish between indirect support and EU deployments involving former colonial powers – as one puts it, "no one is fighting in Chad to keep the Irish out."

And for some European leaders in Lisbon, there may have been misgivings about those deployments too. For those without historical attachments to Africa, the value of missions there is unclear. In the words of one Czech strategist soon after his country joined the EU: "we worked so hard to get into Europe and now you want us to go into Africa?"

It is unlikely that many of his countrymen will go there soon. The Czech and Slovak armies have formed a "battlegroup", one of the EU emergency response brigades that Britain and France argue should be of particular use in Africa. But Prague and Bratislava noted that their forces were not intended for African or Arctic missions – raising mind-boggling visions of EU forces at war on polar ice caps, and rather more seriously demonstrating the lack of cohesion over much more

For the first time, an EU military deployment is not only encountering significant violence, but is fuelling violence in its own right

than before: extracts from the white paper were leaked to *Le Figaro*, and all hell broke loose in Chad.

The proximate cause of the latter crisis was the EU's deployment, which had been rescheduled to begin on Friday February 1 after the French found some extra helicopters. An initial contingent of Irish elite forces was ready to fly in when it emerged that a rebel force was advancing on the Chadian capital, apparently intent on heading off the mission.

As I write, it's still hard to say exactly what happened in Chad, but it was certainly horrific. Thousands of civilians fled their homes, and over one hundred deaths were reported. France initially claimed to be neutral, but after the rebels had reached the presidential palace, it swung in to save the government.

Having initially put its mission on hold, the EU resumed deployment on February 12. "The framework of the operation has not changed; nor have

resisted getting involved in Chad as there was "no peace to keep". In private, European officials complained the mission's proposed deployment (one year) was too short and its 3,700 personnel far too few (analysts called for 10,000 troops or more).

But, whatever the specifics of this crisis, the generic threat that an operation in Africa turning bad could harm European security cooperation has been present for far longer. That is because there has never been a real consensus on the need for such operations.

Africa has often been absent from EU security debates. Indeed, the very word "Africa" cannot be found once in the original European Security Strategy, which even gets in a reference to Canada. This, the leading French commentator François Heisbourg argued while it was being drafted, was like a US strategy document ignoring Latin America.

But in spite of what may be down on paper, Africa has proved particularly fertile ground for European missions in

Man with a mission: Ganascia leads the deployment of the EU's 3,700-strong peacekeeping force in Chad

Photograph: Reuters



probable operations further south.

Larger states are not immune to qualms. Although Germany was a co-instigator of the battlegroup concept, it was discomfited when it came under French pressure to deploy troops to the Congo in 2006 to back up UN forces during potentially dangerous elections. The troops went in the end and came home safely, but German officials privately speculate that two to three deaths would have ruled out any such commitments in future.

By the time it came to putting the Chad mission together, Germany – along with most other big troop suppliers like Spain and Italy – didn't have soldiers to offer, let alone expensive assets like helicopters. It was largely left to countries with long-standing peacekeeping traditions (often forged under UN auspices during the Cold War) to offer contingents to what remained a primarily French force: Ireland, Austria and Poland.

For most European governments, the primary strategic concerns of the day remain elsewhere: Kosovo, Lebanon and Afghanistan. And as rancorous transatlantic debates have shown, EU leaders are as sensitive to

casualties in Kandahar as in Kinshasa.

But the Chad episode offers a chance to admit that something is amiss in the EU's approach to African operations, with the potential to damage security cooperation more broadly. Every clash among Europeans over helicopters corrodes their credibility a little more. So while France may want to use its presidency for large-scale reforms of the way the EU does foreign policy, it should also aim to resolve differences over Africa.

The leak of the French white paper on defence to *Le Figaro* gave some strong hints of how Paris may approach those concerns. Extracts suggest that it is keen to keep its own presence in Africa under review, in line with President Sarkozy's campaign pledges. Paris is also planning to shift troops from its major east African hub at Djibouti to a new base in the United Arab Emirates.

There are two other ways to try to cut costs. One is to push further for other EU members to take on greater responsibilities, defying all the recent evidence of their doubts about doing so. The other is to continue to invest in support programmes like the Peace

Facility, so that in future African forces can more consistently take the lead.

As the Darfur case shows, this hand-off will not be quick or easy. For the time being, the UN and EU are still needed in Africa. Yet it won't be made any easier if the EU approach continues to involve trying to co-opt unwilling member states to go to fraught ex-colonies. Those countries that feel they do still have valid interests in Africa – whether hard-headed or humanitarian – would be well-advised to form an EU-African "security group" to set some guidelines on how future operations should be mandated and manned.

But such a group could only succeed if it established both trust and formal cooperation mechanisms with African governments and the UN. The EU as a whole might then be able to get on with addressing global issues without fear of being blind-sided in another Chad.

If the French presidency can set both those processes in motion, it will not only disentangle its own policies. It will do Africa and Europe a service too.

Richard Gowan works at New York University's Center on International Cooperation