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The Chad Crisis and Operation EUFOR Chad/CAR

Denis M. Tull

Recent fighting between three rebel groups and the Chadian army calls into question the deployment and purpose of Operation EUFOR Chad/CAR, which the Council of the European Union launched on 15 October 2007. The escalation of violence and open French political and military support for the authoritarian regime of President Idriss Déby have fundamentally changed the political circumstances under which the EU operation will be deployed. Therefore, the EU should re-examine EUFOR's underlying purposes. It should also consider abandoning the entire operation.

Based on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1778 of 25 September 2007, the EU decided to launch a military operation in eastern Chad and north-eastern Central African Republic (CAR). The operation, mandated for a one-year period, is intended to protect some 450,000 Sudanese refugees and Chadian displaced persons in the region bordering Sudan and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid by improving security in the area.

The EU considers the EUFOR operation as a European contribution to conflict resolution in neighbouring Darfur. But it is also an attempt to limit the destabilising impact of the Darfur crisis on Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR). France, which has pushed for the operation, will contribute 2,100 of the force's 3,700 soldiers. Other main troop-contributing countries are Ireland (350 soldiers), Poland

(350), Austria (250) and Sweden (200). Germany and Great Britain declined to participate. UNSC Resolution 1778 mentions the possibility of launching a UN mission as a follow-up after EUFOR's withdrawal and the EU has stated explicitly that this EUFOR mission is merely a bridging operation.

The launch of EUFOR has been hampered by numerous problems. Delays in generating troops and equipment, including helicopters, reflected the unease of many EU Member States towards an operation in which they did not want to participate, but which they were reluctant to refuse outright in order to avoid embarrassing the new French government under President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Overall, the process of assembling the force was a rather embarrassing exercise demonstrating the limits of the European

Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). It was resolved only in January 2008 when France significantly increased its contribution of troops and helicopters. As a result of the delays, the deployment of the operation, initially scheduled for November 2007, was deferred until February 2008.

Further delays occurred when three Chadian rebel groups launched an offensive against the government of President Idriss Déby in early 2008. The insurgents reached the capital of N'Djamena in early February but were driven back by the Chadian army—Darfurian rebels allied with Déby, most likely assisted by French troops. Since 1986 France has maintained a military presence in Chad (“Operation Epervier”), which at the moment consists of 1,400 soldiers along with six Mirage fighter jets and surveillance planes. In 2006, French fighter jets fired on rebels advancing on N'Djamena, making the French government's assertions that its soldiers were not involved in the recent fighting for N'Djamena not particularly convincing.

In its statement of 4 February, the UN Security Council strongly condemned the rebels' attempt to seize power by force and called on Member States to support the Chadian government. The statement was primarily intended to bolster the French position, and the French government wasted no time in announcing that it was prepared to intervene in favour of the Déby government.

Conflict in Chad

The current conflict in Chad has an important regional dimension, given its interconnectedness with the ongoing conflict in neighbouring Darfur, Sudan. EUFOR is primarily targeting the regional aspects of the Darfur conflict and represents the international community's failure to replace a weak African Union mission in Darfur with a more robust presence—a plan fiercely resisted by the Sudanese government. Partly as a result, the French government proposed deploying on the

Chadian side of the border. The aim of this operation—which became Operation EUFOR Chad/CAR—was to dampen the humanitarian consequences of the Darfur conflict and reverse the destabilisation of extremely fragile states in neighbouring Chad and CAR.

The Darfurian refugees who have crossed the border into Chad (and who continue to do so) are the victims of a conflict that has become a proxy war pitting the Sudanese and Chadian governments against one another. Both sides seek to destabilise each other by supporting insurgents. Chadian President Déby has supported the rebels in Darfur against the Sudanese government in Khartoum. Since at least 2005 the Sudanese government has armed Chadian rebel movements in response, including those that attacked the capital of N'Djamena in April 2006 and January 2008. Sudanese support to Chad's rebels has been significant, leading President Déby to abandon his hitherto strong resistance against the French proposal for an international military mission in Chad in July 2007.

The overthrow of the Déby government by the rebels could have serious ramifications. It would strengthen Khartoum's influence in the region, and in turn, hamper efforts to reverse the regionalisation of the conflict in Darfur through military engagement by the international community on both sides of the Sudanese-Chadian border.

In addition to its interconnectedness with the Darfur conflict, the current crisis in Chad also has an important domestic dimension. Despite the involvement of the Sudanese government in the conflict, it would be a mistake to consider the Chadian rebels merely as Sudanese stooges. The leaders of the insurgents are members of Chad's political establishment. They have held high offices in government and some of them are part of Déby's family. They are fighting in order to re-integrate themselves into a highly factionalised, clientelistic system from which they have been excluded rather than for broader societal grievances.

Indeed, President Déby himself came to office in precisely the same manner. As a former chief of staff under President Hissène Habré, he toppled Habré in 1990 with the support of the Sudanese and Libyan governments.

A compromised EU operation

The political situation in Chad has progressively deteriorated over the past three years. But the escalation of the conflict since January 2008 has changed the political parameters in EUFOR's theatre of operations. EUFOR will now have to deploy in the midst of violent conflict and the question needs to be asked whether it can confine itself to the protection of refugee camps without being drawn into an increasingly violent domestic power struggle. Given France's prominent role in both Chad and EUFOR, this is highly unlikely.

France has initiated the EUFOR operation, will lead the operation on the ground and field more than half of the troops. At the same time, it already has a military presence in Chad (Operation Epervier) and a long-standing record of supporting the Déby regime. Against this background, hardly anybody in the region doubts—least of all the rebels or their Sudanese backers—that one consequence of the EUFOR operation will be the propping up of Déby's faltering regime. Indeed, with the rebel assault on N'Djamena happening just as EUFOR was about to deploy was an explicit attempt to derail the operation before it had even deployed.

More violence is expected in the coming weeks. The rebels were repulsed but not decisively defeated, and have announced plans for a new offensive. The French government, for its part, has publicly declared that it will support Déby militarily if need be and has a UN Security Council mandate to do so.

Strangely enough, in throwing their support behind Déby, neither President Sarkozy nor French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner made any reference to

the EUFOR operation. In so doing they have blurred the already murky connections between the French Operation Epervier and the European EUFOR operation. Inadvertently or not, this compromises the humanitarian character and rationale underlying the operation. It exposes EUFOR to allegations that it is merely a Trojan horse for French interests in Chad. France now finds itself in an unenviable position. By siding with Déby, it can impede the spread of Sudanese influence in Chad at best. But this will neither solve the problematic regional dynamics underlying the Darfur conflict nor the domestic problems in Chad. On the contrary, Déby has seized the opportunity presented by the rebellion to declare a state of emergency and to arrest members of the civilian opposition and of civil society, to which the European response has been discouragingly muted.

Reconsidering EUFOR

Given its limited size and capabilities, it was doubtful from the very beginning that EUFOR Chad/CAR would be able to fulfil its ambitious mandate. EUFOR can protect a limited number of refugee camps, but it is unlikely to substantially improve the humanitarian and security situation in eastern Chad. In view of this, it is also doubtful that EUFOR would eventually be replaced by a UN mission. There is also a reasonable probability that EUFOR will come under attack by the rebels and their Sudanese backers. Time and again over the past years—most recently in attacks on African Union and United Nations forces (UNAMID) in Darfur—the Sudanese government has demonstrated that it is willing to use all means necessary, including violence, to protect its interests. All of this raises the prospect of a much more protracted and possibly bloody European operation in Chad.

The political and military circumstances in Chad have changed significantly since the EU took the decision to create the EUFOR operation in October 2007. The

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situation is unlikely to improve in the coming weeks and months. Given the openly declared French support for Déby, the humanitarian and political credibility of EUFOR has been undermined before the mission has even deployed. This has repercussions beyond Chad, not least for future European military operations in Africa. The EUFOR Chad/CAR episode is being closely watched in the region.

For these reasons, the European Union should consider delaying, or even abandoning the operation. Though such a step will damage the EU's international reputation, the costs would be less than if it continued with an operation that is fundamentally flawed.

Instead, the EU should seek to address the underlying causes of the humanitarian crisis in eastern Chad that EUFOR is meant to tackle. These are located in both Khartoum, as underlined by the Sudanese government's military offensive in Darfur over the last week, and in N'Djamena. In Sudan, the EU should support the joint African Union/United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), which is in the process of deploying, including providing UNAMID with the helicopters that are now marked for use in Chad. It would be more effective to bolster the capacities of UNAMID than merely seeking to limit the Darfur conflict's consequences in a neighbouring country.

Renouncing EUFOR need not imply abandoning Chad to its current instability. But it would require a change of international, European and French policies towards the country. The UN Security Council statement and subsequent remarks by French officials sent the wrong signals to Déby, who now finds himself in a strengthened but still tenuous position. The same is true for the rather tame response of European and French officials to the recent arrests of opposition and civil society representatives in N'Djamena.

Déby also thinks that his political value is once more on the rise because of Western fears about rebels allied with Sudan taking power in Chad. Rather than falling in this

trap and siding with Déby, the international community should try to lure the rebels out of their alliance with Khartoum. As an important donor to Chad, the EU should promote a political solution to the conflict, possibly a power-sharing arrangement during a transitional period that includes Chad's civilian opposition parties. A political dialogue under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement should then be started with the objective of formulating precise benchmarks for improving human rights, the rule of law and basic democratic standards. The success of this approach requires the close cooperation of the World Bank, which is heavily engaged in the country, and other external players such as the United States and China.

The more general lesson of EUFOR is that the EU should in the future reflect more thoroughly before it embarks on ill-conceived military operations, either to bolster its reputation as an international player, or due to the pressure of individual EU members. With regard to ESDP and EU involvement in Africa, the Europeans will also have to come to terms with French policies towards Africa. Unfortunately, at least in the case of Chad, these are more reminiscent of the darkest moments of France's well-known clientelistic policy, or "Françafrique," rather than the "rupture" from past policy that President Sarkozy promised. Paris needs to be aware that continuity with past policies undercuts France's own attempts to urge its European partners towards greater engagement in Africa—a goal that is shared, at least on the declaratory level, by all EU Member States (Africa Strategy 2005; Joint Africa-EU Strategy and Lisbon Summit 2007).