



EUFOR RCA Bangui: ‘defence matters’

by Thierry Tardy

On Monday 20 January EU Foreign Ministers approved the creation of EUFOR RCA Bangui, the ninth EU military operation within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and the seventh on the African continent. Five years after the termination of EUFOR Tchad/RCA (2008-09), the EU returns to the Central African Republic (CAR) in a stabilisation role. One month after the European Council on Defence that insisted that “defence matters”, EU member states seem to be displaying a willingness to follow up words with deeds and inject new momentum into crisis management in sub-Saharan Africa.

The operation will include approximately 600 troops and should deploy in February for a period of up to six months. It will be mandated to secure the capital city of Bangui and create the conditions needed to allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid. The option to deploy a more ambitious operation outside of the capital city was ruled out. Once again, France played a key role in the making of a CSDP military operation on the African continent, in both political and operational terms. EUFOR RCA Bangui will also free up the French troops already deployed there on Operation Sangaris, allowing these forces (1,600 troops) to move outside of the capital, as initially planned.

As three different operations will be running in parallel in the CAR – the AU-led mission (MISCA, 3,600 troops), the EUCSDP mission, and Operation Sangaris – close coordination will be required.

The Operation Headquarters (OHQ) of the EU’s mission will be located in Greece (Larissa), with Athens also holding the EU Presidency. The Greek OHQ is one of the five national headquarters available for EU operations – together with the ones in France (used for operations Artemis and EUFOR Tchad/RCA), Germany (used for EUFOR DRC in 2006), the UK (currently used for Atalanta), and Italy (designated as OHQ for EUFOR Libya in 2011, which never materialised). An Operation and a Force Commander will now need to be appointed, various planning documents drafted and approved, and a force generation conference held before a second decision of the Council formally launches the operation.

As has been the case for all EU military operations, EUFOR RCA Bangui will be created on the basis of a (forthcoming) UN Security Council Resolution as well as the new CAR president’s consent. The resolution will refer to Chapter VII of the UN Charter and allow the operation to use ‘all necessary means’ to implement its mandate and protect civilians. This grants the operation a rather robust mandate, comparable to the one given to Sangaris.

The EU operation, however, will *not* make use of the EU Battlegroup concept (Greece leads the Battlegroup on standby for the first semester of 2014). Although the size of EUFOR Bangui will be less than that of a standard Battlegroup, both the force’s mandate and the local context on the

ground would have indeed come close to matching the ideal scenario for deploying the hitherto untested rapid reaction force. These favourable conditions arguably did not exist for previous CSDP operations launched since the Battlegroups became operational (2007). Nevertheless, discussions on this option did not go very far, reopening the debate on the usability of the concept.

Limited participation

In terms of participation, France is likely to provide the bulk of the force – and to fill any remaining gaps at the end of the force generation process. Smaller contributions are expected from several other member states, including Estonia (that has confirmed its contribution), Greece (through its HQ), and Germany (with logistical support). Sweden, Poland, Finland, and Lithuania may also participate. Interestingly enough, while Germany is unlikely to contribute troops to the CAR operation, the decision to deploy elements of the Franco-German Brigade in EUTM Mali will free up more French assets for a possible redeployment to the CAR. This has been widely seen as marking a partial shift in Berlin's posture *vis-à-vis* EU engagement in African security.

Needless to say, this new mission is modest in scope, the numbers involved are limited, and so is the spectrum of EU countries involved. The environment, too, remains highly volatile, and the mission's success is, of course, not guaranteed. However, following the establishment of EUTM Mali a year ago, the creation of a new CSDP military operation in the CAR attests to the fact that sub-Saharan Africa does indeed matter to Europe, and that the EU cannot confine its role in this part of the world to humanitarian and development assistance, or delegate its responsibilities to one single country. Most notably, the way in which both the French and African Union operations have been tested in the last few weeks in Bangui indicates that the European force may end up facing a much more challenging environment than previous EU military operations, and one not comparable to its two training missions. How Europeans will handle this will provide an indication about their levels of commitment, but the robust nature of the mandate already suggests a certain acceptance of the risks involved.

What exit strategy?

Contrary to the United Nations or African actors, the EU does not envisage long-term military

commitments on the continent and insists on the necessity of having an exit strategy prior to any engagement. This is the result of both the EU's conception of its own security role and its predominantly risk-averse posture. This also explains the six-month mandate of EUFOR Bangui as well as the need for some form of military handover at the end of the mandate.

These imperatives have led to the concept of 'bridging force' whereby the EU operation is deployed to allow a longer-term mission to achieve full operational capacity. Such has been the case in Chad in 2009 and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2003. In both instances, the UN took over after EU operations had been deployed for a limited period of time. EUFOR Bangui matches this model with either the AU-led force or – most probably, given the multifaceted nature of the tasks to be accomplished – a UN peacekeeping operation taking over from the EU in the summer of 2014. The question might then be whether EU troops can be re-hatted to form part of the UN mission, which did happen to a limited extent in Chad in 2009 (with French, Irish, Polish, and Austrian troops remaining in the MINURCAT 2) but not at all in the DRC in 2003.

In the same vein, any exit strategy that sets an end-date runs the risk of withdrawing before the mandate has been entirely fulfilled. Given the nature of the conflict in the CAR, how likely is it that the situation in Bangui will be sufficiently stable in six months to allow the EU to declare the mission a success and hand over to AU forces or the UN? How immune will the European force be from 'mission creep'?

At the political level, developments in the CAR appear to be moving in the right direction with the designation of a new president and a timetable for elections in 2015. That said, a broader reconciliation process is yet to begin. Elements of an EU comprehensive approach are also in place from the development/humanitarian side, with the donors' conference – also held on 20 January – pledging €366 million for humanitarian aid in the CAR.

However, the country's entire governance structures need to be created from scratch, and EUFOR Bangui is, at best, only one piece of the puzzle. Rather than simply exiting after six months, the challenge is to make sure that the EU remains engaged in a longer-term commitment in the CAR using the various tools and policies at its disposal.

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