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Europe of defence — What challenges for 2011 ?

After the fall of Gaddafi

The Sahel-Saharan belt between logics of power and the logic of terror

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On 26th August, a double attack claimed by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) hit Algeria's Cherchell Military Academy, killing 18 people. Terrorism, however, is just one of the issues confronting the Sahel-Saharan belt.

Against a fragile and unstable background, the upheavals underway provide opportunities for geopolitical reconfiguration in a fragmented region dominated by power games and logics of terror. A region faced with the risk of seeing new divisions arise, or the worsening of existing divisions.

While the civil war in Libya seems to have reached an end, the region appears to be considerably weakened. The former dictator Gaddafi is still free, destabilisation threats persist, and there are many doubts concerning the ability of the rebels to create peace. The transition is risky, and not only because of the expectations of the resident populations or the regional weaknesses exacerbated by the revolts and revolutions in the Arab world.

Beyond the questions concerning the future of North Africa, the dynamics at work evoke the importance of power games and logics of terror in a region that is both strategic and fragmented.

Libyan doubts

Contrary to pessimistic views on the deadlocked and bogged down conflict, the victory of the rebels in Tripoli took many observers by surprise. Operation *Mermaid*, organising the arrival by sea of rebel fighters who had fled the capital and trained for 6 months, reaching the Green Square in under 48 hours, was surprising. From a jumble of miscellaneous fighters, mostly inexperienced, at the beginning of the conflict, the insurgents had become a military force, with the help of planes from Otan, able to get the upper hand on loyalist troops.

The conquest of Tripoli, however, does not resolve any questions concerning the country's future. As Mouammar Gaddafi has not been captured and has networks – and even real popularity – in several regions of the African continent, members of the NTC must still prove their will and ability to bring peace to the country and implement the proposed roadmap (1). In the resulting struggle for power and influence, two groups of actors must be closely monitored. The first are the armed Islamists of the LIFG (Libyan Islamic Fighting Group) who, until now, have agreed to obey the NTC and fight on its side by occupying important military positions; Abdelhakim Belhaj, one of the rebel military leaders, is today the military governor of Tripoli. Will they agree to lay down their arms once the fighting has ended? Will they recognise the government formed from the anticipated process? How will they integrate into the new state? The second group of actors are the tribes. In fact, all NTC members were selected based on their affiliations with different regions of Libya and their tribal affiliations. Even after the 1969 revolution, Libya's fragile cohesion depended on the balance between different tribal structures (2).

The attitude of Libya's future leaders towards Gaddafi's "thwarted power" policy constitutes another uncertainty (3). After the failure of his attempts to unite the Arab world under his authority, annex Chad and fight against the United States and Israel, the former Libyan leader has not stopped threatening political influence over the African continent. The Community of Sahel-Saharan States, a regional economic and cultural association created in 1998 that includes over twenty countries around Libya (from Somalia to Senegal), has served for several years as "a Libyan branch to channel the Libyan *jamahiriya's* [popular republic] financial flows, capital and development assistance." (4)

The priority of anti-terrorism

Though Libya's future and the regional policy of the new power (once it becomes established in Tripoli) may remain unresolved, the regional weaknesses induced by the conflict are already visible, with implications for the relationships between states of the Sahel-Saharan belt.

The increase in the number of weapons strengthens the potential for action and damage among the region's terrorist and criminal groups. As evidence of these movements, on Sunday 12 June 2011 in Niger, 80 km north of Arlit, after a clash with a group of "bandits", the national guard recovered two 4x4 vehicles, one of which contained 640 kilos of semtex explosives, 435 detonators and 90,000 American dollars (5). Similarly, the Libyan conflict supported the logic of mobilisation throughout the region. Gaddafi's mercenaries have acquired weapons and, returning to their original country, pose a large risk of becoming a source of destabilisation for the powers that already struggle in imposing their authority over all of the territories under their administration. This is particularly true for Niger and Mali, which are engaged – in a very different manner – in recovery policies in their northern regions and reintegration of populations.

Faced with these increasing threats, during the spring and summer of 2011 several declarations and meetings of representatives from Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Algeria took place. The four countries, which meet every six months and in April 2010 set up a common training centre in Algiers as well as a joint military-staff committee, CEMOC (Joint Operational Military Staff Committee), in Tamanrasset, have reaffirmed their desire to work together, faced with the repercussions of the Libyan civil war. While relations between Algiers and Bamako were at a stalemate two years ago, there has been a distinct thawing of relations under the new Malian

Minister of Foreign Affairs Soumeilou Maïga, appointed on 6th May 2011 and supporter of an active fight against terrorism and criminality in the region.

Concerns over terrorism and regional cooperation initiatives predate the Libyan crisis, as demonstrated by the date CEMOC was founded. Anxiety over the repercussions of the civil war have actually strengthened connections and cooperation between the three Sahel states and Algeria and, from this point of view, Libya has acted as a catalyst, at least for Mali and Niger; under President Aziz, Mauritania made the fight against terrorism a priority in 2009. Beyond the media impact, these views must be carefully considered. In a region where cooperation has proven to be difficult and weak, where states lack resources and are subjected to centrifugal forces which limit their ability to take action, where views differ on the involvement of foreign powers in the region, one can only judge by actions. All the more so when the fight against terrorism is a tool in the power games played in the Sahelo-Saharan belt.

Underlying power games

Algeria's position on the Libyan civil war and foreign support of the insurgents reflect its geopolitical plans, as Algeria aims to become a regional power in the fight against terrorism. Its Moroccan, Tunisian and Libyan neighbours are first and foremost rivals, whose influence ought to be limited, when they do not represent a potential threat. For the Algerian leaders who lived through the repeal of the first round of the 1991 legislative elections and the resulting civil war, the NTC thus evokes the Islamist danger. It echoes back to Algeria's recent past and, through a game of mirrors, appears as a threat to the region.

If regional actors have geopolitical ambitions, global powers also participate in these struggles for influence and take positions. Following the attacks of 11 September 2011 and under the "war against terrorism", the United States established a presence in the Maghreb and Sahel. The security argument was central among the reasons that brought the US to the region, as evidenced by the 2007 establishment of an African regional military command (AFRICOM). It works to prevent terrorist organisations from recruiting and training new members, and to prevent the creation of an area that might serve as a refuge for regional or international terrorists (6).

Under these dynamics, security and the fight against terrorism are not the only reasons. The Franco-Libyan agreement of summer 2007 was thus largely motivated, for Paris, by the desire to access the country's hydrocarbons and uranium and to open a large market to French businesses (7). For the Chinese government, its businesses and its migrants, Africa was also deemed a land of conquest, in the economic sphere as well as for its supplies of strategic resources (8). Despite the NTC's denunciation of the negotiations between Chinese weapons companies and the Gaddafi regime in July, Beijing will do anything it can to be present during the reconstruction of Libya, to ensure that the contracts signed with the old regime are honoured. Fears are as large as the wealth in the Saharan subsoil and the countries bordering the desert. After all, following the American intervention in Iraq, the redistribution of contracts – at least initially – favoured companies from countries that got involved alongside the United States to take down Saddam Hussein's regime. In the negotiations beginning in Libya, the countries that participated in the military operation alongside the rebels, starting with France and the UK, will have some advantages. However, the other countries will not allow themselves to be left behind, and it is in the NTC's interest to encourage competition.

Chaos *containment*

From this perspective, Europe and the Europeans face a large challenge in containing disorder, reducing threats and risks and thus contributing to the security of North Africa.

The first priority is managing the consequences of the insurrection in Libya within the country and the region. Libyan actors need support in seeking consensus and re-establishing peace, processes

that run a high risk of not proceeding smoothly. The definition of new interior balances, struggles to redistribute oil wealth, the explosion of weapons, are some of the issues at hand that require firm principles and an understanding of regional cultural dynamics. Generally speaking, on the regional scale, the relationships between power and populations are at the heart of the issues, and not only because of the revolts and revolutions in the Arab world. In Libya, the situation of the Tuareg could thus considerably deteriorate after the victory of the rebels. The representative of the Tuareg Coordination of Libya called upon Algeria to open its borders and allow Libyan Tuareg to take refuge in southern Algeria. Niger faces the return of over 200,000 migrants, who previously worked on the other side of the Libyan border, and the end of money transfers coming from Libya.

The European Union and state members possess assets that carry weight in the region. The introduction of a European diplomatic department and a *Mediterranean Task Force* can help make European policy more consistent. Most importantly, Brussels announced over the span of a few months a strategy for Sahel, focused on security and development (9) and a new approach to local relationships, putting political reform in the foreground (10).

Nature abhors a vacuum: doing nothing runs the risk of allowing the logics of terror to prevail in the region, with an increase of divisions within societies as well as on the regional scale. Faced with these uncertainties and threats, Europeans don't have much of a choice other than to get involved in the Sahel-Saharan belt, to actively defend their vision for the region and its future with regional and international actors, and to remain firm on principles.

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(1) In 37 articles, the "roadmap" lists the major steps of the transition that the NTC, "the only legitimate representative of the Libyan people", intends to implement in post-Gaddafi Libya. The NTC especially undertakes to leave Benghazi and establish its headquarters in Tripoli and to appoint, within thirty days of its establishment in the capital, a "temporary executive office" to administrate the country and to organise, within eight months, the election of a "National conference". As the National Transition Assembly includes 200 members, the "National Conference" should appoint a Prime Minister within thirty days, for whom the newly formed government must provide a vote of confidence. It should also establish the committee to draft the new Constitution, subject to a referendum, and to call general elections within six months, after creating an electoral law.

(2) Hasni Abidi (Director of the Centre for Study and Research on the Mediterranean and Arab World), "Les tribus, un élément central dans la construction de la nouvelle Libye" [Tribes, a central element in building a new Libya], *Le Monde*, 25 August 2011.

(3) Patrice Gourdin, *Géopolitiques. Manuel pratique [Geopolitics. A Practical Manual]*, Paris, Choiseul Éditions, 2010, pp. 503-504.

(4) "L'ombre de Gaddafi sur les États sahélo-sahariens" [Gaddafi's shadow over the Sahel-Saharan states], *Le Pays*, cited by Patrice Gourdin, p. 504.

(5) According to the local Nigerian press, the group was preparing to deliver weapons to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in exchange for four French hostages, who had been kidnapped last September in Arlit. These hostages would have later been "sold" to the Libyan regime, which wanted to have bargaining power vis-à-vis Paris. (http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20110628-niger-enqu%C3%AAte%20avance-sur-materiel-explosif-provenance-libye).

(6) These arguments were put forth by the State Department during discussions on the 2010 federal budget (Anthony H. Cordesman and Arma Nerguizian, *The North African Military Balance. Force Developments & Regional Challenges*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, edition of 7 December 2010, p. 115).

(7) Jean-Michel Bezat, "En Libye, Areva souhaite construire un réacteur mais aussi chercher des gisements d'uranium" [In Libya, Areva wants to build a reactor and also find uranium deposits], *Le Monde*, 29 July 2007.

(8) For China in Africa, read Serge Michel and Michel Beuret, *La Chinafrique. Pékin à la conquête du continent noir [Chinafrica: Beijing's drive to conquer the black continent]*, Paris, Grasset, 2008

(9) Presented by Catherine Ashton during an address on 19 January, the EU-Sahel strategy is structured around four major themes: involvement in favour of development, conflict resolution and good governance; closer regional cooperation; strengthening states' abilities in the field of security (especially Mali, Mauritania and Niger); a fight against extremism and radicalisation. This strategy will be addressed in a future memo.

(10) This approach, defined in the two communications of March and May 2011, particularly stresses the principles of "conditionality" and "differentiation" for granting aid, while reaffirming the importance of regional cooperation.

Research Programme

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