



West Africa as an arena of geopolitical conflict - Destabilisation, propaganda narratives and comprehensive countermeasures

Conference Report

Florentine Miehlke, Project Lighthouse Africa e.V., 04.07.2023

On June 13, 2023, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, together with 1 German-Netherlands Corps, the German Africa Foundation and Project Lighthouse Africa e.V. under the umbrella of the Common Effort Community held an international conference at the AUDIF Auditorium in Berlin on the topic of "West Africa as an Arena of Geopolitical Conflict – Destabilization, Propaganda Narratives and Comprehensive Counter Measures". The purpose of the conference was to discuss the key issues of the role of foreign actors in the geopolitical environment of West Africa, the comprehensive approach to security and development, possible conflict resolution and the role of the EU in the region from the different perspectives of the military, politics, academia, business and civil society. Special attention was given to the role of communication, narratives and perspectives.

The event took place under the guidelines of the "Chatham House Rule": Accordingly, participants are allowed free use of the information received only on the condition that they will not reveal the identity or affiliation of speakers or other participants. The thanks to the participants for the committed discussion must therefore remain abstract at this point - as must the request that any vagueness in the summary be met with forbearance. The following remarks are an unavoidably subjective attempt to reconstruct a very diverse and rich discussion.



The following pages summarize the results of the discussion. This summary is intended to serve as an impulse and reminder for all participants as well as the wider circle of those who were invited to the event.

The discussion was structured along six themes:

- Geopolitical challenges and their impact on the European and West African security landscape
- Politics and propaganda in (West) Africa in the focus of foreign political actors
- West Africa: Decline of democracy and rule of law, corrupt elites and instability
- Development, democracy and security in (West) Africa
- Narrative Management for peace through dialogue for sustainable conflict resolution
- (West) Africa as Europe's new strategic focus

Panels and Speakers:

Opening Remarks

- Brigadier General Schrödl, German Federal Ministry of Defence

Panel 1 – Politics and propaganda – Making new allies

- Amb. Mamadou Haidara, Special Advisor to President Alassane Ouattara, Côte d'Ivoire
- Charline Burton, Executive Director Search for Common Ground
- Lukasz Kondraziuk, International Republican Institute
- Linda Maokomatanda, Kiel Institute for the World Economy
- Moderator: Sabine Odhiambo, German Africa Foundation

Keynote Speech

- Cellou Dalein Diallo, Former Prime Minister of the Republic of Guinea and main opposition leader (in exile)



Panels and Speakers:

Panel 2 – A comprehensive approach to development and security in West Africa

- Cellou Dalein Diallo, Former Prime Minister of the Republic of Guinea and main opposition leader (in exile)
- LtGen Nico Tak, 1 German-Netherlands Corps
- Dr. Christoph Hoffmann MP, Chairman Committee on Economic Cooperation and Development, Board Member German Africa Foundation
- Dr. Karamba Diaby MP, Member Committee on Foreign Affairs and Chairman of the parliamentary group on West Africa, Board Member German Africa Foundation
- Moderator: Denis Tull, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)

Panel 3 – Foreign interventions in regional conflicts: the narrative management for peace through dialogue approach (NAMA4PD) for a sustainable conflict resolution

- Prof. Dr. Martin Emmer, Freie Universität Berlin and NAMA4PD working group
- Amacodou Diouf, Action Humaine pour le Développement, Intégré au Sénégal
- Ndeye Marie Diédhiou Thiam, Plateforme des Femmes pour la Paix en Casamance
- Moderator: Markus Bickel, Security Table Berlin

Panel 4 – Africa – Europe's new strategic focus in a multipolar world?

- Gudrun Masloch, Head of Division for West and Central Africa, German Federal Foreign Office
- Rob Sijstermans, Policy Coordinator for West Africa, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Moderator: Thomas Wiegold, AugenGeradeaus Berlin

Closing remarks

- LtGen Nico Tak, 1 German-Netherlands Corps



Geopolitical challenges and their impact on the European and West African security landscape

The geopolitical security landscape is massively threatened by the Russian war of aggression, which has initiated a turning point in European security policy, making the issue a high priority for the German Ministry of Defence. The effects are also being experienced in Africa. Factors such as high youth unemployment and increasing scarcity of resources are triggers for conflicts that lead to humanitarian problems. The spread of Islamist-oriented terrorist organisations is also increasingly threatening stability in North and West Africa. Besides Europe, other actors such as Russia and China also play an influential role in Africa.

In order to ensure sustainable stability in African countries, a networked partnership approach at eye level is needed, in which Africa remains in charge and is supported by the other actors. The basis for this is a listening and regional needs assessment approach.

Politics and propaganda in West Africa in the focus of foreign political actors

The geopolitical dynamics of West Africa continue to be shaped by the same actors. Foreign authoritarian systems such as Russia and China are playing an increasingly decisive role. Russia pursues the political strategy of intervening in democratically unstable regions and using them as gateways for the assertion of its own political, but also economic interests, such as in Mali. China shows a strong presence in many regions of Africa using "soft power" to achieve strategic goals. China achieves this, among other things, through regular and continuous visits and the strengthening of relationships based on conveying appreciation and respect. China also has a competitive advantage through substantial and rapid financial investment.



Participants discussed that society and access to information in the country are changing, so a continuous presence is crucial for the position of influence of foreign actors.

Europe's role is still shaped by the Western legacy of colonisation, which is predominantly perceived negatively by local communities. In order to learn from the mistakes of the past, local thinking and action as well as the involvement of the local population should be encouraged. Europe has the opportunity to build healthy and respectful relationships through a continuous presence in the regions, taking into account country-specific circumstances.

The Sahel is experiencing a security crisis, which is compounded by the rise of terrorism. Populations, especially in rural areas, with little knowledge and access to valid information are more vulnerable to join terrorist groups.

In the context of peacebuilding – and in addition to factors like access to education and truthful information – intra-community conflict resolution and trust in the state and security forces play an important role. Attendees pointed out that these factors can only be strengthened in a sustainable way through the involvement of local communities and the exemplary behaviour of those in power. Through social cohesion and European support, local communities can become more resilient to conflict.

West Africa: Decline of democracy and rule of law, corrupt elites and instability

The situation in West Africa is characterised by a crisis of trust between the population, those in power and Western representatives, which opens up opportunities for foreign actors to gain more influence. As participants discussed, the crisis of trust is fuelled by several factors. One factor is the violation of African integrity and national legitimacy by the historical past of European colonisation of Africa. Another factor is the great discrepancy between the objectives of Europeans, such as the establishment of democratic



principles and the promotion of the rule of law, and those of Africans, like fast economic development and economic partnership at eye level. The example of Guinea shows a violation of democratic rules at the electoral level, with the executive controlling the entire state apparatus and using it for its own interests. It is reported that the lack of rule of law leads to rural migration and terrorism among the youth population. There is talk of a new cold war driven by propaganda, disinformation and corrupt plots.

In the discussions, participants highlighted that Africa's future, marked by climate change, food insecurity and a new cold war, requires a partnership between Africa and Europe based on shared values and geopolitical interests. This crisis of trust, the speakers concluded, can be overcome through regular and continuous dialogue and exchange at eye level, which is also what today's conference represents.

Development, democracy and security in West Africa

In order to promote democracy and security in West Africa, a comprehensive approach, confidence-building and the visualisation or evaluation of existing projects are important elements of cooperation between Europe and Africa. The bundling of existing projects and results can form the basis for further developments and improvements.

Another element is access to education for the female and male African population and thus the creation of future prospects, explicitly for the young population.

Security crises, triggered by, among other things, abuse of power in the country and inadequate military leadership, have led to military coups. In the discussion, it was emphasised that "foreign militaries must be modest in the African context and can only support, but never be the solution" to conflicts. Moreover, a deeper understanding of the situation in the region can help to take the right measures for greater impact.



Narrative management for peace through dialogue for sustainable conflict resolution

In times of crises and disinformation, approaches such as Narrative Management for Peace through Dialogue (NAMA4PD) can make a crucial contribution to sustainable conflict resolution by talking with Africa rather than about Africa. In doing so, it combines measures of conflict resolution, such as the strategic focus on security and the fight against disinformation, with an emphasis on networking between key stakeholders like the military and representatives of the local population. Communication not only has the function of conveying facts, but also of strengthening identity and relationships. The aim is to enable people in the regions to manage information properly and to understand the interests behind it. In addition to religious leaders, youth and women are also seen as important actors. The problems prevailing among the population are a decisive factor in the fight against disinformation. The speakers summarised that it is necessary to bring all actors together in a democratic sphere of discourse and to jointly develop solutions on how best to organise a communication programme to stabilise the security situation in the region, involving relevant media such as community radios.

Anchors of stability such as Senegal are of great importance for the entire region of West Africa. In the context of disinformation, it is important to be as preventive as possible to enable people to deal with information properly before disinformation and destabilisation arise, the speakers concluded.

Casamance, a region in southern Senegal, was used as an example of experience with conflict resolution for peace in the panel discussion. In the early 1980s, an independence movement emerged in the region. The women of the region also supported their men in this movement. As a result of this independence movement, major grievances arose in Casamance that had an explicit negative impact on women. However, women never had a voice within the movement. As a result, a broad women's network has emerged that works together for peace and now also promotes the training of women as leaders.



(West) Africa as Europe's new strategic focus

Africa is not only geographically close to Europe, but is also historically, politically and economically closely linked to Europe and therefore represents a strategic focus. In perspective, Africa's demographic context is characterised by rapid population growth, which makes vocational training and language skills enhancement an important tool for intensive and mutually beneficial interaction with European countries. Mutual interests and appreciation should be the driving forces for a lasting and resilient relationship between the countries for generations to come. Africa's interest lies, among other things, in its desire for support in the field of education. Compared to other foreign players such as China, Europe does not engage enough and does not show the necessary presence. In the discussion about what Europe can and should offer, it is strongly recommended to analyse the needs on the ground in detail before making decisions and turning the big screws. In doing so, Europe can and will work more closely with local actors and adopt an open and pragmatic attitude, the speakers agreed. Africa no longer wants a relationship based on the principle of "customer - supplier", but on the principle of "equal partner".

In a multipolar world, sustainable partnerships and deepened relationships will become key.

Concluding remarks

The Common Effort initiative is an important approach to bringing together civilian actors and military experts and building a network. A network that promotes comprehensive dialogue and brings to the fore issues that are neglected in the public debate. In the cooperation between (West) Africa and Europe, it is of great importance to leave leadership and responsibility to African countries and to promote an approach of equality among partners. This requires European countries to show a stronger presence in (West) Africa and to cooperate with local actors. Trust is the basis for all efforts to strengthen the security situation in these countries. The networked approach and the fight



against disinformation in the democratic discourse field, as exemplified in the NAMA4PD concept, represent a first step towards a more resilient population.

The conference concluded with the signing and welcoming of a new member to the Common Effort Community.

The next Common Effort event will take place in Hamburg at the end of November 2023 and will focus on hybrid threats and resilience in the context of collective defence.

Cross-cutting questions

Across the six thematic areas, some fundamental questions in the field of geopolitical cooperation emerged during the discussion:

- What went well in the engagement at the local level and what are the learning effects?
- What lessons can be drawn from Chinese engagement for our own European engagement?
- How do we define democracy and who should serve as a role model?
- How can companies react to crises in time?
- Are military coups a symptom or a cause?
- How to ensure accountability in projects?
- Do the paradigms of cooperation between Europe and Africa need to be disrupted and realigned?
- What does a practical application of narrative management using media look like?
- Is there a strategy at European level to increase competitiveness and presence on the African continent?

Conference film available: <https://youtu.be/GKvd9tJ4Wkc>