

The German Government's Africa Policy (July 29, 2014)

Abstract

The growing importance of Africa in foreign and security policy is undisputed, but Germany's involvement on the continent so far has largely been focused on development aid and economic cooperation. The author, Kenyan-based Ronald Bera, calls on Germany to move beyond lip service to strategic action.

Source

We need more Germany in Africa

In spite of major announcements, the German government's Africa policy remains inadequate. On the continent, Europe's leading force is a different one.

For a long time now, the international community has expected more commitment from Germany, and it is something one also hears from Africa: only donor country and development partner – that is not enough.

That is why attention was considerable not only in the German media when Federal President Joachim Gauck called for Germany to play a decisive role in resolving international crises in the future. And when the government announced at the same time that it would be formulating a new Africa strategy. Minister of Defense Ursula von der Leyen even raised expectations that Germany would become more involved also militarily in peacekeeping missions on the continent.

But by now it's clear: Everything remains as it was.

Germany is Europe's driving economic power, but it is still – and time and again – France which is taking the leading role in Africa. Germany is caught between hard interests and soft values when it comes to its relationship to Africa. That has consequences: one is that Germany is losing its influence and is running the risk of being perceived as a toothless tiger. The other: it is losing contact with a continent of great potential.

Africa's policeman

Africa has seen significant conflicts in recent years: in Ivory Coast, where a president was unwilling to give up power; in Libya, where the country rose up against a long-time dictator; in Mali, where militant Islamists were engaged in rebellion; and in the Central African Republic, where so many died in the sectarian conflict that aid organizations had to constantly revise their estimates.

In all four of these conflicts, France intervened – under two presidents and various political camps – and in so doing underscored its image as Africa's policeman. In Ivory Coast, the French took direct action and helped to secure the peace and restore the rightful president to power. France was significantly involved in the intervention in Libya that stopped Muammar al-Gaddafi's dictatorship, Germany was not.

Last year, France sent 5,000 soldiers to Mali, a former colony, in order to stop the advance of the Islamists. They had taken advantage of the uprising of the separatist Touareg movement and had occupied large areas in the north of the country before French troops pushed them back.

France is ready to act out of its own interests

France sent its military, a total of 1,600 soldiers, into the Central African Republic, to at least ensure some stability for the country. After Muslim rebels overthrew the president in March, religious tensions have continuously turned into violence.

Recently, France also announced that it would leave troops in Mali and the surrounding countries for a large, border-spanning anti-terror operation in the region.

And where is Germany? If it does anything, it contributes to training missions or takes over medical supply or transport flights, provides military observers or liaison officers.

When the conflicts erupted in Mali and the Central African Republic, it became evident once again: France is ready to act, also out of its own interests, but it does not want to always be the first and often the only one to react to emergency situations in Africa. Germany, by contrast, waits to be asked.

Good reasons for a stronger engagement

It is really sufficient to always contribute just enough so Paris won't be upset? Surely not, and there are good reasons for a stronger engagement in Africa on one's own accord. Through geographic location, alone, Africa and Europe are linked. Every conflict in Africa affects Germany and the entire continent: it is Europe's coasts that African refugees are trying to reach. When pirates make Africa's shores unsafe, it is Europe's trading routes that are affected. And the spread of extremist terror networks from Mali to Somalia poses dangers that likewise do not stop at borders.

The safety of soldiers is often an argument against a more substantive participation by the Bundeswehr in the missions to date. But that is hardly understandable given that a few months ago, 20 German military trainers exchanged their location in Uganda's quiet capital of Kampala for Mogadishu in Somalia, where militias close to al-Qaeda have been fighting for more than five years, among others against forces of the African Union. Another way to look at it is that Germany lacks the military capabilities to do more. At least that is plausible enough to fend off some criticism.

Of course, Germany is making contributions other than military, above all in development cooperation. The millions of euros that Germany is giving to the Central African Republic in aid for development work and to fight malnourishment certainly deserve credit. But we really know that it is not hunger which is plaguing that country. The causes are violence and the security situation.

The German government's most recent Africa strategy lists guidelines for 18 areas: from the promotion of peace and security to environmental protection and the prevent of human rights abuses. No prioritization is evident. That could be intentional. Too bad, really.

Source: Ronald Bera, "Wir brauchen mehr Deutschland in Afrika," *Die Zeit* Online, July 29, 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/2014-07/afrika-militaereinsatz-entwicklungshilfe>

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: The German Government's Africa Policy (July 29, 2014), published in:
German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-5337>> [July 14,
2025].