The European Union's Military Operation in the Central African Republic: Successes, Shortcomings and Lessons Identified

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Introduction[1]

The Central African Republic (CAR) has a history of poor governance and underdeveloped security institutions, which can be traced back to the country's independence from France more than half a century ago. The country has never been able to produce an effective central government or provide protection for its citizens during violent conflicts in the wake of several insurgencies and military coups.[2] Despite being rich on natural resources, CAR is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world.[3] Even though the country gained its independence from France in 1960, the two countries have kept close ties, and much of the CAR's natural resources are controlled by its former colonial power.[4] Consequently, France has had a key stake in CAR and frequently intervened in conflicts throughout the country's violent history.[5]

In 2013 conflicts in CAR escalated, attracting much international attention and an increased donor presence in the country focussing on stabilising and rehabilitating the country. In response to the violent conflicts in CAR, the European Union (EU) unanimously decided to deploy a military operation, European Forces Republic of Central Africa (EUFOR RCA). The objective of the operation was to contribute to creating a safe environment and to provide humanitarian aid.[6] The deployment of EUFOR RCA added significant symbolic value to the EU's role as a global actor and was based on French interests.[7] However, despite an overall will to intervene, the EU member states were reluctant to contribute troops to the operation, which was also reflected in its planning. As a result, EUFOR RCA was given a limited mandate in terms of tasks, area of operation and time. [8] The mission was established on February 10, 2014[9], authorised by the UN Security Council (UNSC), with a mandate to protect the populations most at risk and create conditions for the provision of humanitarian aid.[10] This small-scale operation was terminated on March 15, 2015 after having fulfilled its mandate. EUFOR RCA was an unambitious operation geared towards meeting a set end date instead of significantly improving the situation on the ground in CAR.[11]

The objective of this brief is to analyse the contribution of the 2014-2015 EU CSDP operation EUFOR RCA to the overall security situation in CAR. This brief builds on the empirical data gathered and analysed by the project Improving the Effectiveness of Capabilities in EU Conflict Prevention (IECEU), which includes in-country fieldwork and interviews. The structure of this brief is as follows: First, it

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1) This brief is based on the research and findings of the IECEU project deliverables: 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6 and 3.7. To see the full deliverables, go to: http://www.ieceu-project.com/?page_id=197

2) IECEU D3.5, "Study Report of DR Congo, South Sudan, CAR and Libya" (2017), p. 183. http://www.ieceu-project.com/?page_id=7436

3) United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Accessed on January 4, 2018. http://unctad.org/en/Pages/ALDC/Least%20Developed%20Countries/UN-list-of-Least-Developed-Countries.aspx

4) IECEU D3.3, "The Central African Republic (CAR) Review" (2017), p. 1. http://www.ieceu-project.com/?page_id=3002

5) Ibid.

6) Tardy, Terry, "EUFOR RCA Bangui: 'defence matters'" (2014), European Union Institute for Security Studies. ISSUE ALERT. https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Alert_7_CSDP_and_CAR_.pdf

7) IECEU D3.5 (2017), p. 4. http://www.ieceu-project.com/?page_id=7436

8) Ibid.

9) EEAS "EUFOR RCA". Accessed on January 2, 2018. https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/csdp/missions-and-operations/eufor-rca/index_en.htm

10) IECEU D3.3 (2017), p. 3.

11) IECEU D3.7, "Africa: Conclusion Report", (2017). http://www.ieceu-project.com/?page_id=7448

provides a short outline of the history of CAR, the foundations for the current conflict in the region and the EU's involvement herein. Second, it introduces the operation's main objectives and obstacles in terms of the internal and external challenges encountered. Third, it analyses and discusses the operation's strategic and operational shortcomings and the lessons identified. Based on the objective of the operation, the following question is raised: **What were the successes and shortcomings of the EUFOR RCA operation, and could anything have been done differently to increase effectiveness?** This brief is based on the framework and findings produced by the 2015-2017 IECEU research project. It does not include all elements needed to answer this question, but highlights the IECEU's most significant findings in this case.

Mapping the Conflict

The roots of the conflict in CAR are complex and can be traced back to colonial times. However, the purpose of this brief is not to give a detailed description of the many underlying causes of the country's instability, but rather to provide a short summary of the country's last half century of conflicts and how the EU has most recently attempted to assist CAR in dealing with the recurring insecurity, violence and political instability. Understanding the basic components of the conflict provides a baseline for assessing the effectiveness of the EU's most recent operation deployed in the region.

CAR is a former French colony and its road to sovereignty began in 1946, when the country was granted its own representatives in the French parliament and simultaneously received its own assembly. Self-governance was achieved 12 years later, and the last 'shackles' to France were broken in 1960, when the country officially gained its independence.[12] The objectives during the first presidency were to raise the standard of living and end intertribal strife.[13] However, only six years after gaining independence an unproductive economy and ineffective political rule led to a military coup – the first of many over the next three decades. The country experienced internal fragmentation and feuds between opposing political and ethnic groups in addition to the military fighting rebel groups.[14] In June 2008 a cease-fire was reached between several rebel groups and the government, and a presidential election was held. However, this did not significantly improve the humanitarian situation in CAR, and clashes between various groups continued.[15] Furthermore, due to CAR's geographical location, the country was severely affected by spill-over conflicts and political instability in the neighbouring countries: Chad, Sudan and South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cameroon.[16]

In 2012 several rebel groups joined and formed alliances, and a year later they attacked the capital, which led to the dissolution of the parliament and the nomination of a new transitional leader representing the rebel movement. However, this transitional leader did not have the financial means to keep the rebel alliance together and decided to disband it, which, due to lacking support and loyalty from

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12) IECEU D3.3 (2017), p. 8.

13) Steele, M., "Central African Republic: Colonial period: Oubangui-Chari" (2005) in Encyclopedia of African History, vol. 1-3, ed. Kevin Shillington. New York; London, pp. 234-235.

14) IECEU D3.3 (2017), p. 10.

15) Ibid.

16) See IECEU D3.3 (2017) pp. 11-14 for an in-depth description of how the crisis in Darfur (Sudan) had significant negative impacts on CAR.

the military and the police, led to chaos and disaster.[17] Many fighters from the rebel alliance continued to commit atrocities and went on killing sprees, and because of the weak and insufficient security sector there were no means to stop them.[18] The situation in CAR grew worse, and the conflict soon took an ethnic turn with severe tensions between Christian and Muslim population groups. In 2013 a large wave of violence between non-Muslim and Muslim civilians generated large population displacement, and roughly 450,000 people, with a majority of Muslims, fled to the neighbouring countries.[19]

According to the IECEU project, the root causes of the crisis and key lessons identified can be summarised under five categories : (1) a history of coups and counter-coups and of weak security institutions; (2) a weak state, poor infrastructure and fractured national identity; (3) the lack of a functioning judicial system; (4) ethnicity and religious affiliation; and (5) poor economy and dependence on aid.[20]

The 2014-2015 EUFOR RCA Operation

The EU is the main donor in CAR and has been the country's key partner for many years, contributing more than EUR 500 million to assist CAR in dealing with recurring insecurity, violence and political instability.[21] Since 2008 the EU has deployed four missions and operations to CAR: (1) the 2008-2009 European Union Force in Chad and Central African Republic (EUFOR Tchad/RCA)[22]; (2) the 2014-2015 European Forces Republic of Central Africa (EUFOR RCA); (3) the 2015-2016 European Union Military Advising Mission (EUMAM RCA)[23]; and (4) the 2016-ongoing EU Military Training Mission (EUTM RCA).[24] These have all been short-term interventions with clear end dates carried out in cooperation with the UN peacekeeping engagement.[25]

The 2014-2015 EUFOR RCA operation was authorised by the UN Security Council with a mandate to protect civilians and generate conditions under which humanitarian aid could be provided.[26] The EU was promoting its own comprehensive approach as a strategy to tackle the country's security challenges and the complex development. [27] The objectives of the EUFOR RCA operation can be divided into five categories: (1) security, (2) humanitarian assistance, (3) stabilisation, (4) resilience and

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17)   Ibid., p. 11.

18)   Human Rights Watch, "'I can still smell the dead': The forgotten human rights crisis in the Central African Republic" (2013), United States of America. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/car0913_ForUploadWInsert_0.pdf

19)   IECEU D3.3 (2017), p. 19.

20)   Ibid., p. 83-85

21)   European Commission, INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT - Building partnerships for change in developing countries, "The European Union's comprehensive approach in the Central African Republic (2013-2016)" (2016). Accessed on January 4, 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/news-and-events/european-unions-comprehensive-approach-central-african-republic-2013-2016_en

22)   EUROPEAN UNION SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY, "EU Military Operation in Eastern Chad and North Eastern Central African Republic (EUFOR Tchad/RCA)". FACTSHEET, updated in March 2009. Accessed on January 5, 2018. http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/csdp/missions-and-operations/eufor-tchad-rca/pdf/01032009_factsheet_eufor-tchad-rca_en.pdf

23)   Council of the EU, "Central African Republic: EU military training mission approved for two years" (2016). Press release. Accessed on January 8, 2018. http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/04/19/fac-eu-car-military-training/

24)   Ibid.

25)   IECEU D3.3 (2017), p. 62.

26)   Ibid., p. 3.

27)   European Commission (2016).

sustainable recovery, and (5) regional impact of the crisis.[28] Prior to deploying EUFOR RCA the EU had provided EUR 50 million to an African Union-led mission in CAR (MISCA) so more troops could be deployed. This was followed by a major state-building project aimed at rebuilding the security apparatus, which at the time was non-existent, as the majority of the country's policemen and judges had all fled in fear of being killed.[29]

According to Council Decision 2014/73/CFSP, 'EUFOR RCA should deploy as rapidly as possible to Full Operating Capability (FOC) in order to contribute to the stabilisation of the situation'.[30] The aim was a handover to the African-led International Support Mission in CAR within four to six months of Full Operating Capability.[31] EUFOR RCA deployed 945 men, including 750 combat troops adding to the French and African Union troops already on the ground in CAR.[32] The operation's first objective was to provide protection at the capital city's airport, as it was used to provide shelter for thousands of internally displaced persons and served as a main access point to the rest of the world.[33] Securing the airport was important because international military, civilian personnel and citizens of CAR all needed an operational airport for the movement of humanitarian aid, military and civilian equipment and consumable goods.[34] The mission completed its short mandate period after nearly a year on March 15, 2015.

Strategic and Operational Shortcomings

The EUFOR RCA operation had a slow and reluctant start, and the union's initial intention to 'deploy as rapidly as possible' was not met, as it took the member states six force generation conferences and six months to gather enough personnel to reach Full Operational Capability (FOC). The force generation was described in the press as 'painful, and, as alluded to above, some high-ranking officials denounced the Member States' lack of support and engagement in response to a serious humanitarian crisis'.[35] This damaged the EU global security actor, and the union received widespread criticism for dragging on the negotiations for such a small operation, especially when people were dying on a daily basis in CAR. This portrayed an image of a reluctant and dithering actor without any real determination to act.[36] The EUFOR RCA operation's main strategic and operational shortcomings are tied to the narrow nature of its mandate, in terms of the amount of troops assigned, the duration of the operation and its geographical scope. On this basis many observers viewed the operation as 'insufficiently adapted to the needs of such a large country as the CAR'.[37] As a whole, the empirical material indicated that the locals would have wanted EUFOR RCA to operate in a larger geographical area.[38] To many of these

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28) European Commission, "The EU engagement with the Central African Republic" (2015). Accessed on December 28, 2017. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-5041_en.htm

29) IECEU D3.3 (2017), p. 62.

30) Council of the European Union, "Council Decision 2014/73/CFSP of 10 February 2014 on a European Union military operation in the Central African Republic (EUFOR RCA)" (2014) (7).

31) IECEU D3.3 (2017), p. 66.

32) Ibid., p. 72.

33) Ibid., p. 67.

34) Ibid.

35) Ibid., p. 78.

36) Ibid., p. 79.

37) IECEU D3.3 (2017), p. 79.

38) Ibid., p. 82.

observers, the small-scale operation demonstrated a lacking interest in the suffering in CAR among EU member states.[39] Furthermore, much of the criticism directed at the EUFOR RCA operation focussed on a significant gap between the needs on the ground and the means provided by the EU.[40] Even though military interventions were seen as an appropriate instrument for stopping the immediate violence in CAR, the EU received much criticism for not exercising its battlegroup option,[41] which was viewed by many as the most appropriate instrument to use in a conflict of this calibre and scale.[42]

Lessons Identified

There are multiple lessons to be learned from the EUFOR RCA operation, which are primarily related to the strategic level thinking and planning structures within the EU. In addition to the external challenges on the ground that resulted from a complex crisis environment, the instability in the neighbouring countries and actions by other international players, the EU had to deal with several internal challenges as CAR did not fall into any of the EU's regional strategies, which partly hampered the implementation of a comprehensive approach. [43]

Despite this criticism, once deployed, EUFOR RCA was a partial success. In the arena of internal goal attainment all operational objectives were met and the operation reached its politico-strategic objectives and fulfilled its mandate successfully.[44] As for external goal attainment, EU troops improved the security conditions and, alongside other actors, prevented violence from diffusing. Furthermore, despite a narrow mandate EUFOR RCA did more good than harm and was also relatively efficient and cost-effective.[45] Another success, suggested by the empirical material, was that EUFOR RCA was generally well perceived by the locals.[46] Furthermore, the locals feared that the termination of the EU operation would create a security vacuum when the UN was to take over, as the UN operation was perceived by them as less efficient and reliable than EUFOR RCA.[47]

Even though EUFOR RCA fulfilled its mandate and reached its politico-strategic aims and operational objectives, there were several shortcomings which compromised the operation's effectiveness: (1) There was a general lack of political will and commitment from EU member states towards the operation, and by refusing to use its battlegroup option the EU missed the mark in terms of what the situation and the citizens of CAR would have benefitted most from. (2) Timing played a main role, and because of the EU member states' unwillingness to contribute troops to the operation, EUFOR RCA's deployment was delayed by six months, which allowed time for the conflict to intensify and escalate.

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39) Ibid., p. 79.

40) Ibid., p. 3.

41) A battlegroup is the minimum militarily effective, credible and coherent, rapidly deployable force package capable of stand-alone operations or for the initial phase of larger operations. In their generic composition, but depending on the mission, battlegroups have a personnel of about 1,500. Battlegroups are based on the principle of multinationality and can be formed by a framework nation or a multinational coalition of member states. So far, the EU has never deployed a battlegroup.

42) IECEU D3.3 (2017), p. 3.

43) Ibid., p. 95.

44) IECEU D3.7 (2017).

45) Ibid.

46) IECEU D3.3 (2017), p. 80.

47) Ibid.

And (3) the limited mandate in terms of timespan, scope of operations and resources combined with an *exit date* rather than an *exit state* was an essential flaw in the EU's strategy.[48]

Lacking a long-term strategic vision and facing political constraints in combination with an insufficient funding mechanism, EUFOR RCA was realised under challenging circumstances.[49] However, despite leaving room for improvement, EUFOR RCA showed that it is possible to achieve good results in spite of ongoing conflicts and a limited scope and mandate.

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48)   IECEU D3.5 (2017), pp. 184-186; Christensen, G. et al., "Successes and Shortfalls of European Union Common Security and Defence Policy Missions in Africa: Libya, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic" (2018). The Royal Danish Defence College. file:///C:/Users/00461869/Desktop/brief_2.pdf

49)   IECEU D3.3 (2017), p. 95.