

Crafting an EU Strategy for Coups

The African continent has witnessed a significant rise in coups, with nine occurring in the past three years, while other places, such as Myanmar and Peru, have also experienced political instability. As the frequency of coups has increased, there is a pressing need for the European Union (EU) and its member states to adopt a systematic approach in preventing and responding to these political upheavals. Yet, the EU's response to coups remains fragmented, lacking a cohesive strategy. The article calls for a more robust strategy against the increasing threat posed by military takeovers.

Introduction

The number of coups d'état around the world has increased in the last several years, and they have become especially prevalent in Africa. For the last decade, the policy and analytical attention has been more on gradual processes of autocratisation than on sudden power grabs, and it seemed to many that the era of classical military coups was over. As coups reappear, the European Union (EU) and European governments need a more systematic approach to preventing and responding to them.

Military coups were a frequent occurrence in Africa and other regions in the decades after postcolonial independence. They then [decreased in number](#) in the early 2000s but are now re-emerging as a major political phenomenon. Some coups are led by militaries outside the government and some by military officers who form part of the incumbent regime, while others are non-military self-coups led by governments themselves against democratic institutions. Africa has experienced nine coups in the past three years, while the military has reasserted control in Myanmar and leaders in places such as Peru and Tunisia have undertaken putsches against their own democratic processes. The dramatic coups in Gabon and Niger in 2023 have, in particular, intensified concerns that these takeovers are becoming a more general trend. Many other coups have been attempted but have not succeeded. Deeper thinking is needed on what this trend means for cooperation and democracy support strategies in Africa and how the EU should respond.

The European Commission president has identified Africa as a top policy priority, but in the wake of successive coups, the EU's policy towards the region stands severely compromised. The EU and some member states, particularly France, have worked with and funded several of the militaries involved in undertaking recent coups. This raises the uncomfortable prospect that the EU has unwittingly contributed to the new wave of overthrows. The African Union (AU) and other regional bodies in Africa have taken rather clearer and stronger stances than many European governments.

There is so far no common EU response to coups. The union is willing to cut relations with some of the regimes that take power, but there is no systematically laid out set of principles for coup responses. In several cases, the EU has tried to continue security or military cooperation even as it commits to overturning coups – meaning it can send mixed messages to local actors.

Given the rising salience of military coups and their threat to democracy, we invited experts to reflect on EU policies related to these events. How has the EU responded to recent coups, and what do these responses reveal about the union's policy priorities? How should the EU design better strategies for preventing and responding to takeovers in the future? This short collection examines how the EU has dealt with coups in recent years and how it can craft a more robust and effective coup response strategy that places democracy at the forefront of this endeavour.

Strategic Patience and EU Responses to Coups

The EU has reacted in different ways and at different speeds to recent coups. It has not had a consistent way of responding to these events but rather reacted to its assessment of the dynamics on the ground in each case.

Africa's latest coup took place in Gabon in August 2023, when General Brice Nguema ousted President Ali Bongo after a disputed election. The EU did not impose critical measures in response, as the bloc had questions over the country's democratising path. This ouster was known as a "[palace coup](#)", and some have suggested that the French government may have been aware it was about to happen. The EU rejected the [military power grab](#) but also pointed to election irregularities by the government that was pushed out. While the AU and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) suspended Gabon, the EU seems set to continue its cooperation, for instance on a [forest partnership](#). The new Gabonese government has adopted a [transition](#) plan for the country.

Similarly, the EU was restrained in its response to the September 2021 coup in Guinea when the country's armed forces ousted President Alpha Condé. Although the bloc condemned the takeover, the EU and France had been uneasy about Condé's bid for a third term in office, which suggests concerns over the country's trajectory. His re-election triggered discontent and may have [contributed to the putsch](#). The AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) suspended Guinea.

In April 2021, the son of the late Chadian President Idriss Déby led a military transition, and neither the EU nor France was strongly critical of the flouting of democratic norms; the AU and ECCAS adopted relatively soft stances, too. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell stressed support for Chad's "[territorial integrity and stability](#)" despite acknowledging its lack of democratisation, lack of good governance, and lack of full respect for human rights. The EU seems to have assessed Chad's lack of democracy before the coup, and thus the bloc's response was limited. The EU welcomed a peace agreement aimed at fostering dialogue, but deadly protests soon broke out. Borrell censured the regime's "repression" of the demonstrations and called for a "[return](#) to constitutional order and a time-limited transition". In 2023, the German ambassador in N'Djamena was asked to leave after alleged comments about delays to promised elections. The EU halted but then [restarted](#) military aid. The bloc continues its humanitarian assistance.

When a military junta took power in Burkina Faso in January 2022, ending the country's path to [democratic consolidation](#), the EU's reaction was initially mild but became more critical after what European Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen called the "[coup in the coup](#)" in September of that year. The EU suspended budgetary aid and was concerned at the junta's potential cooperation with the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company. Tensions between the junta and the French government have deepened.

In Mali, the EU condemned the August 2020 coup, which ousted an [elected president](#) amid EU concerns about the country's [domestic situation](#). The bloc backed mediation by ECOWAS and then promised to support an agreed transition to democracy and restarted its two Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in the country. However, after what observers called a "[coup within a coup](#)" in May 2021, the EU imposed sanctions, stopped some of its [military training](#), and suspended budget support – although other aid outside the regime continued. The junta forced the French ambassador in Bamako to leave; the EU showed some solidarity with France. The EU downgraded its CSDP training mission to a limited scope and moved it to another location because of concerns over Wagner mercenary forces.

The EU strongly criticised the 2021 military coup in Sudan, as it seemed to end the country's fragile democratic transition, which [the bloc had supported](#), and Borrell hinted at "[serious consequences](#)" for the EU's engagement with Sudan. However, a more assertive response was triggered after conflict broke out in 2023, when the EU adopted a sanctions framework targeting major players in the war. Yet, the bloc still agreed to provide €190 million in [development and humanitarian support](#).

The EU's clearest and firmest response was to Niger's July 2023 coup. Before the takeover, the union had become a leading security and aid partner of what Borrell called former Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum's "[democratically elected](#)" government. After the coup, the EU introduced a sanctions framework and stopped its development aid and security support. EU member states rejected backing a potential ECOWAS military intervention, although France has been equivocal on this, supporting it initially but then holding back, and

Borrell did not exclude funding a [regional force](#). EU member states showed solidarity with France after the junta expelled the country's ambassador in Niamey.

Some patterns are evident from these varied responses. Borrell has admitted that they show the EU is at times [overly security centred](#) and that EU democracy support has lost traction in the Sahel. None of the African coups has elicited as complete a range of punitive EU measures as those the union imposed on Myanmar after its 2021 coup. Borrell stressed that the EU adopted an approach of “[strategic patience](#)” to the Sahelian juntas, and this may have been the case, as the EU seems to have waited to see where the [transitions](#) would take the countries concerned, even if promises rarely held. Domestic and regional stability was important to Brussels.

Crucially for debates on democracy support, the EU responses have varied in part because of differences in the political context of each coup. Countries had differing levels of democracy and reform pathways before the coups took place – even if all ousters presaged more authoritarian rule. Where the EU saw a more robust democratising process before a coup, the bloc tended to respond more clearly. The EU reacted more assertively to second coups that upended promised moves towards democratic elections.

The union has also tended to follow regional bodies: ECOWAS and the AU were more [authoritative](#) towards the coup in Mali than towards those in Guinea and Burkina Faso; the EU followed suit. The EU's position has been tougher when regimes have bred tensions with France. The union has also been more likely to impose measures when coups deepened regimes' relations with the Wagner Group. Finally, the bloc has been more assertive in its actions when there was an escalation of conflict.

Coups and the Limits to Europe's Normative Power

The recent coups in the Sahel were driven first and foremost by local and regional factors. Although not the drivers of this unrest, international actors like the EU interact with these dynamics. For example, global counterterrorism operations, the EU's security engagement in the region, and the union's attempts to curtail migration have contributed to the militarisation of politics and reinforced the power and centrality of militaries.

The EU's inconsistent responses to the recent coups call into question the union's credibility as a normative actor. Such questions are not new. In recent years, the union has been explicit about its ambitions to become a [geopolitical actor](#) and pursue interest-driven external action in light of the global geopolitical context. While the EU aims to combine its interest-driven orientation with its traditional soft power, it has struggled to balance its interests with its norms. Chad, where the EU took a rather lukewarm and conciliatory approach to the April 2021 military takeover, is one – but not the only – manifestation of this dilemma. The EU's interests in [migration management](#) and security in the Sahel and the wider region continuously test the union's commitment to norms.

As the security situation in the Sahel deteriorates, the EU might be forced to [negotiate its relationships](#) with military juntas with which it has cut development cooperation and military partnerships. Similarly, the growing influence of other actors in the Sahel – notably, the EU's strategic adversary, Russia – may reinforce the need for [rapprochement](#).

In light of these trends, the EU and its member states are grappling with how to manage their diplomatic, development, and security partnerships with countries that have experienced coups. Efforts in Brussels and national capitals to pause and reflect on the EU's coup responses are a departure from the predominant approach of offering solutions to poorly understood problems and, as such, are positive. However, to be a useful starting point for doing things differently, the current soul-searching should be genuine and driven by a critical analysis of the EU's engagement in the Sahel, including the union's role in promoting norms.

The recent coups and the EU's track record in norms promotion raise the question of whether the union has been willing to accept so-called performative democracy – that is, a system that includes democratic rituals such as regular elections but not other fundamental aspects of democracy, such as civic participation, accountability, and genuine representation – in place of genuine democracy. For example, despite being described by political

scientist Danielle Resnick as the “[last bastion of democracy](#)” in the Sahel, Niger was [lacking fundamental elements](#) of democratic governance beyond elections.

Another point of critical reflection should be France’s role in EU foreign and security policy vis-à-vis the Sahel. France has played a considerable part in shaping the EU’s engagement in the region for historical and strategic reasons as well as because of the country’s superior military capability and more substantial security presence. However, given the strong popular and political resistance to French influence, EU member states should work out a way of representing the EU as distinct from France. This must be done in terms of both narratives and tangible strategies, including security support.

The latter is particularly important given the EU’s new security partnership tool, the European Peace Facility, which enables the transfer of lethal weapons to partner countries. Combined with an impetus to curtail the expansion of terrorist groups, the facility might incentivise more hard-security support. While this is inevitable in the short to medium term, it should not distract from the need to invest in holistic responses that encompass accountable governance and socio-economic improvement.

Values and Interests in Response to Coups

Despite the EU’s aim to stabilise the Sahel, the political and security situation in the region has deteriorated amid the current wave of coups. Research on coups has singled out the [centrality of militaries](#) combined with weakened anti-coup norms as the major force behind military interventions. This suggests that while training security forces may be necessary to combat armed non-state actors in the region, these efforts need to be balanced by more investment in strengthening other state institutions and governance standards more broadly to produce a stable civil-military balance.

Of the EU’s 40 past and ongoing [CSDP missions](#), 23 have taken place in Africa. With 12 of these missions currently under way on the continent, the recent wave of coups is something the EU needs to deal with. As coups are by definition [attacks on democracy](#) and threats to the rule of law, two values that the EU [as a normative power](#) endorses, the tension between the union’s interests and its norms becomes palpable when coups occur. So far, the EU has inconsistently promoted its norms while in practice favouring its interests.

In July 2023, after the fifth military coup in Niger since the country gained independence in 1960, Borrell declared that the EU did “[not recognise](#) and will not recognise the authorities resulting from the putsch”. Borrell has had several occasions to give this type of speech in recent times. Three years earlier, after the August 2020 coup in Mali, he reassured journalists that EU interventions “don’t train armies to be [putschists](#)” and asked for the restoration of constitutional order in the country. In the period between these two coups, there were no fewer than four other overthrows in the Sahel in addition to two in neighbouring Sudan and Guinea and another in Gabon. The UN secretary-general has called this wave an “[epidemic of coups d’état](#)”.

In 2020, after the first coup in Mali, the EU temporarily suspended the two CSDP missions in the country until the Malian junta appointed a civilian-led transitional government. Less than nine months later, after the coup in Chad, Borrell initially made no official statement. Only when the transitional military council violently repressed protests after delayed elections did he issue a statement condemning the violence.

In May 2021, the EU took a week to issue an official [condemnation](#) of the second coup in Mali, despite having only recently adopted its [new Sahel strategy](#), which underlined commitments to democratic norms. The EU asked for a civilian prime minister to be reinstalled and the transitional timeline upheld but did not suspend its CSDP missions. Instead, the authorities in Mali informally decreased collaboration with the EU Training Mission (EUTM) in the country, while personnel of the EU Capacity-Building Mission (EUCAP Sahel Mali) kept a low profile and continued work as usual.

In February 2022, after the Malian junta extended the transition period to elections and unofficially collaborated with Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group, the EU imposed sanctions on the Malian prime minister and four other officials. Two months later, the EU formally suspended part of EUTM’s training of Mali’s armed

forces out of fear of Wagner mercenaries interfering in the mission's work, mirroring a decision the EU had taken for its military training mission in the [Central African Republic](#) five months earlier.

The EU's divergent responses to the coups in Africa over the past three years have taken place in a world deeply affected by great-power competition. As the EU has attempted to confirm its role as an [international security actor](#) in the Sahel, the internal tensions between the union's norms-based identity and its interests have created ad hoc responses, which have also been influenced by EU member states' divergent interests. For the future, the EU needs to decide more clearly and strategically under what conditions it wants to maintain partnerships and with whom it is willing to collaborate while looking beyond a lens of great-power competition. The EU needs thorough reflection about [weighing up presence against principles](#) while being mindful that presence does not equal influence, but absence almost certainly excludes it.

The EU's Post-coup Sanctions Dilemmas

Since the Cold War ended, the EU has often employed sanctions to react to coups. This practice, which peaked in the early 1990s, has generally remained under the radar as many targets have been low-profile countries in the developing world. The recent wave of coups in the Sahel has revived criticism of the EU's selective use of sanctions.

The lack of consistency in the EU's reactions to coups has two distinct aspects. The first is the question of selectivity: Brussels reacts to some coups with sanctions, while it merely condemns others. To articulate identical responses to similar cases, the EU could develop a set of criteria stipulating the situations that would trigger the application of sanctions and enshrine these criteria in an explicit strategy. Such an approach would enhance transparency, head off allegations of bias, and deter aspiring putschists.

However, as desirable as this sounds, establishing such criteria is unlikely to ensure consistency in practice. The US experience is illustrative. The Foreign Assistance Act prohibits funding for military regimes, yet the US executive often [avoids referring to coups](#) as such so as not to have to impose sanctions. Committing to agreed criteria means little when executives find ways around calling coups by their name.

The second issue relates to the EU's unique agreement with African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) states. This agreement entails a [conditionality](#) clause that opens political consultations in the case of a serious breach of democratic principles. Thus, when a coup occurs in a member of this group, the EU call consultations with the putschist government at fault before deciding to suspend aid, rather than resort to standard sanctions under its Common Foreign and Security Policy. The highly structured aid suspension process under the ACP agreement prescribes a dialogue typically with the aim of agreeing on a road map to restore democratic rule. Even if the EU suspends aid, this aid can be [easily reinstated](#) – and, indeed, often is.

A common argument is that the EU needs to be more consistent in its use of sanctions, but this may not be the crucial factor in response to coups. More uniform procedures would certainly not bring back the golden age of democracy sanctions seen in the 1990s. The EU is now operating in a more crowded field than it used to, particularly in Africa. Even though aid sanctions do show some impact, EU measures must coexist now with other actors: first, African intergovernmental organisations like the AU and ECOWAS, which have developed robust roles in managing regional security thanks to their [agile deployment](#) of mediation and sanctions; and, second, Russia and China, with their military presence and economic influence, respectively. With African organisations increasingly running the show, and Russia and China obstructing the pro-democracy agenda, the EU has lost importance. The prospects for supporting democracy now depend mainly on the EU's ability to coordinate with organisations in the region.

EU Militarisation and Recent Coups

While developments in Africa are the result of unique dynamics on the continent, the EU's increased militarisation there has contributed to the current wave of military coups. As these takeovers directly challenge

EU investments in democracy, peace, and security and disrupt economic and financial cooperation, they are not only normatively bad but also contravene the EU's own interests.

Across Africa, the EU has developed models of security engagement enmeshed in increased militarisation. This is seen in military training missions, capacity-building programmes, and other support measures in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa as well as in individual countries such as the Central African Republic, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, and Somalia. Increased militarisation has been pushed onto regions and countries as a response to a range of insecurities. Yet, history demonstrates that martial politics has never worked to Africans' benefit.

The EU's new geopolitical trajectory has pushed it towards a more traditional security orientation, which underpins the union's engagement in Africa. As evidenced by the development of the European Peace Facility, it has become more acceptable to respond to insecurity with military means. This approach to security undercuts the aspirations of African citizens. It also means that the EU has not attached top priority to defending democratic norms in response to recent coups. The EU's weak responses to putsches must be understood as part of the general shift in its security and geopolitical identity.

The fundamental challenge, then, is not whether the EU has a coherent response to coups but whether the union can be a true partner for African aspirations of peace. While the EU has supported institutions like the AU and other regional organisations that deal with peace and security concerns, the EU has a tendency to bypass the interests of these actors when they are seen as conflicting with the desires of the union and its member states, thus undermining African agency. Increased investments in militarisation, which have coincided with the EU's framing of migration as a threat, have strengthened militaries and undermined African peace and security, to the detriment of democracy.

If the EU is to deal more effectively with coups, it must address these deep-seated tensions in its current strategic approach to Africa. A convincing strategy against military coups would require the union to revisit the underlying assumptions of what it means to be a security actor in a turbulent world as well as the EU's overall relationships with African countries.

Addressing the Underlying Causes of Coups

The recent wave of coups in Africa has raised many questions not only on the continent but also, and perhaps even more so, outside it, particularly in Europe. Despite the diplomatic and sometimes military presence of European countries in the states affected by coups, these brutal political changes have taken many by surprise.

Commentators have spoken of an "[epidemic of coups](#)", a term used by French President Emmanuel Macron among others. Each successful military coup, which results in the overthrow of the incumbent power in favour of another, is an incentive for military officers in other countries who were thinking of carrying out a coup to do so. Another incentive is the greater possibility than a few years ago that the powers who emerge from the coup will be able to benefit from international support amid a war for influence among great and medium-sized powers, in particular between Western countries, especially France in West and Central Africa, and Russia.

However, the metaphor of an evil that spreads from one country to another has its limits. This depiction carries the risk of a partial analysis of these illegal changes of power in countries with different political, security, economic, and social contexts. It should be remembered that African countries, like all nations of the world, have their own histories and political trajectories; in Africa's case, they have existed as independent states within their current borders for only a few decades. In the former French colonies in West and Central Africa, most states have existed in their current form for 63 years. This is still a short period of time in which to establish, stabilise, and consolidate endogenous political institutions that can protect the states from upheavals, crises, and painful and uncertain transitions.

In the Sahelian countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, security crises and terrorism, which are always conducive to an increase in the political influence of defence and security forces, were clearly important and probably decisive factors in explaining the recent coups. But in contexts such as Gabon and Guinea, the main

driver was the unpopularity of those in power at a particularly vulnerable moment – after the incumbents had held fraudulent elections or attempted tricks to remain in power.

The messages from polls conducted by the [Afrobarometer Institute](#) in 20 African countries in 2021 and 2022 are clear: 66% of Africans prefer democracy to any other form of government. Large majorities reject one-man rule (80%), one-party rule (78%), and military rule (67%). But only 38% of respondents said they were satisfied with the way democracy is working in their country. While 42% believed that the army should never intervene in politics, 53% were prepared to support military intervention if elected leaders abuse their power. Support for the military to overthrow an elected government was expressed by 56% of respondents aged 18 to 35, which illustrates the extent of [youth frustration](#).

The coups that have occurred and those that may occur in other African countries are not just the result of recent security and political conditions and are not primarily about a preference for the principles and values of democracy or a rejection of them. The coups reveal structural fragilities that are themselves the result of African countries' political and economic trajectories. Rapid technological, economic, and geopolitical changes in the world in the last few years have increased the vulnerabilities of countries that were still in the challenging process of building their economic, political, and security institutions.

Most countries in the Sahel are now paying a very high price for the limited economic and social progress they have made in recent decades against a background of strong demographic growth. These states are faced with majorities of young people and children whose daily living conditions are precarious and who have spent too few years, or none at all, in school or training. These young people are ready to applaud any event that gives them hope of a radical change in the way their country is run. And this message is being heard by many, especially the military, which has the means of threatening or using force and is attracted by the privileges of political power.

The EU, along with African organisations such as ECOWAS and the AU, is right to condemn unconstitutional changes of government. But normative frameworks and strong sanctions adopted after coups are no substitute for the complex, difficult, and time-consuming work of creating and strengthening institutions and economic structures that are perceived as useful enough by the people to be defended by them.

There are no immediate external responses that can compensate for decades of insufficient economic progress, strengthen states' capacities to provide public goods and services, or connect with individuals and diverse groups across national territories. European partners can contribute to these goals, but they should have realistic and modest ambitions. Assertions of the desire for sovereignty – for what many in the region call a second and real independence – express the will of the young generations in Africa. European partners should also stop isolating dialogues on democracy and the rule of law in Africa, on the one hand, from those on the economy, trade, natural resources, and all other strategic issues, on the other; the latter are equally important for the future of Africa and Europe's relationship with it.

Four Ways the EU Can Respond to Coups More Effectively

Even when the EU and its member states suspend aid after coups, they tend to normalise relations with the new government more quickly than regional actors such as ECOWAS do, so long as some semblance of civilian rule has been established. By doing so, the EU risks undermining regional efforts to defend democracy and uphold higher democratic standards. Normalising relations with military regimes in power is also problematic because these regimes are more likely than democratic governments to undermine human rights while performing poorly on corruption and failing to provide stability or security.

Against this background, there are four ways in which the EU can better respond to, and reduce the risk of, coups.

First, the EU should not wait until a coup has happened before defending democracy. In countries such as Gabon and Mali, electoral manipulation had undermined the credibility of the government and the wider political

system, making a putsch more likely. The EU should adopt a much clearer and stronger set of responses to the subversion of democracy by civilian governments.

Second, the EU should set up stronger guidelines for standard responses to election rigging and coups and act consistently. To defend democracy effectively, the union needs to be able to act more quickly and with a strong set of expectations. Most notably, EU states should ask to see more from military juntas before restoring relations, including genuine evidence of a transition of power to civilian hands, the removal of military officials from key positions, and a feasible but demanding transition timetable.

Third, the EU must do a better job of coordinating the responses of its member states to send a credible pro-democracy signal. The European Commission should play a more forceful role in ensuring that member states respond in ways that are coherent and do not undermine one another. When European approaches diverge – as with France’s apparently aberrant approach to the April 2021 coup in Chad – this both undermines the EU’s effectiveness and generates damaging tensions with organisations such as ECCAS and the AU.

Finally, the EU should strengthen and expand its strategic partnership with the AU. The EU could do a better job of supporting African institutions to defend democracy by leveraging this partnership to support African-led initiatives and supplement the stronger stance taken by regional bodies such as ECOWAS. The AU urges cooperation from actors outside Africa to pressure coup-born regimes, with the implicit understanding that the confluence of pressure from multiple sources can compel juntas to relinquish power and restore civilian rule. European actors should therefore seek to establish new modalities for enhanced coordination when the AU calls for diplomatic and economic action against unconstitutional changes of government.

None of these activities will be effective, however, if the EU does not also ensure that it acts more consistently to avoid accusations of hypocrisy – for example, for failing to call out the numerous human rights violations of the government of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni – and demonstrate that it pays to be a democracy. One way to do this is to provide greater support for countries that maintain high standards but are currently struggling economically against high food and fuel prices that in many cases were not of their making. The best way to deal with coups is to work to ensure they do not happen in the first place.

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