Introduction

Making Room for War

How is an African continental elite of presidents, diplomats, and bureaucrats making room for war? In the everyday sense, ‘making room for something’ usually relates to furniture, for example. To make room for the new table, the old one needs to be removed. Can the same phrase relate to politics around African-led military deployment for the Sahel? Do the actors take out others to move in? Do they replace one with another? Not quite. It seems obvious that rearranging a room relates to a problem of space, yet actors negotiating military deployment appear far removed from this paradigm. This understanding of ‘making room (for (x))’ rests on an everyday conception of a physical three-dimensional space, a contained space in which objects are situated. Yet in this book I draw on a radically different notion of space – space as relational and changing – and rethink military deployments and geopolitical narratives from this angle. Thinking space relationally remains a challenge, as our everyday thinking and experience is dominated by standard notions of space. ‘Making room for’, from a relational perspective of (social) space, thus means to reshape and alter the relations between actors in such a way that a space is (re-)created. It is not a change in space, but a change of space. This book follows actors as they ‘make room for war’, reshaping relational space in such a way as to make military deployment possible and, at the same time, repositioning themselves against others.

The use of ‘war’ here is deliberate. It too evokes tension. I came to understand ‘war’ in relation to African-led military deployment during an interview in Bamako in February 2017 about the joint mission deployment to Mali by the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). My interlocutor remembered the period of deployment as the time, ‘when ECOWAS was at war’.1 He was referring to the 2013 combat between troops

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1 Interview ECOWAS Representative, Bamako, 13 February 2017 (#667).
from ECOWAS member states and armed groups in Mali. He spoke plainly, not of ‘interventions’, ‘conflict management’, or ‘stabilization’ as is the norm in the field of African peace and security. The word ‘war’ irritated me. It seemed brutish, unnuanced, and somewhat old-fashioned.\(^2\) We were talking about a complex multilateral deployment, the first ever ECOWAS-African Union (ECOWAS-AU) mission, the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) that was guided by advanced principles for such Peace Support Operations. Yet the terminology obscures armed violence, combat, and military action.\(^3\) Moreover, the technical-managerial jargon used by professionals in the field of African peace and security camouflages the military dimension and to a greater extent the politics at its core. People draw on common-sense references to space when negotiating who is or is not an adequate intervener. This book exposes the very politics that surround African-led military deployments.

_African Military Politics in the Sahel_ presents an in-depth study of the negotiations taking place around African-led military deployments in Mali and the Sahel since 2012. This is an empirically challenging task, as the intervention landscape in the Sahel has been, and is, in constant flux, at times radically, within a matter of days. Therefore, the focus will be to analyze the more durable dynamics that give power to taken-for-granted notions of space that underpin narratives about the credibility and legitimacy of different interveners. The book analyzes the context-specific constellation of actors that form an interconnected

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\(^2\) This is symptomatic of the radical changes the idea of ‘war’ has undergone since the early twentieth century. Norms and legal frameworks for legitimizing armed combat have been continuously changed. The Kellogg–Briand Pact of 1928, for example, led to an ostracizing of war as a recognized means to settle disputes between states as described in _The Internationalists_ by Hathaway and Shapiro. Subsequently war needed to be justified with exceptional circumstances, leading to the dehumanization of adversaries on the one hand and, on the other, necessitating victimization as frequent in the so-called responsibility to protect. For detailed discussions, see for example Wheeler, _Saving Strangers_; Charbonneau, “Dreams of Empire”; Ölsson, “Interventionism as Practice.”

\(^3\) This is not meant in an accusatorial way. The specialized vocabulary on these kinds of military deployments has developed over time by – and as appropriate for – a specific ‘community of practice’; see for example Wenger, _Communities of Practice_. It is indicative of evolving practices of deployment, for example in the paradigm of peacekeeping as it developed under the United Nations. It also suggests an evolution of the knowledge of and understanding towards these different deployments. Yet further – though not solely – it is part of a specific communication strategy (or rhetoric).
network of elites that shape African military politics. These include presidents, high-level diplomats, and representatives of the commissions of the African Union, ECOWAS, the European Union, and United Nations, as well as bureaucrats and mid-level staff within these organizations. I argue that African military politics are essentially spatial by analyzing what I call spatial semantics to understand how African continental elites legitimize military deployment and (re)negotiated relations among them. The book approaches international politics from a transdisciplinary Global Studies perspective that emphasizes the importance of actors, transregional connections, entanglements, narratives, and context-specific historicity.

The Introduction is in five sections, four of which lay out the themes for this book – military deployment, politics, and space. Section I.1, ‘Le Mali est notre Afghanistan’, reveals the blatant ignorance of African-led military deployments for Mali and the Sahel considering an over-emphasis on French military deployment and interveners, such as the European Union, United Nations, or United States, and how this disregards the agency of African actors. Section I.2, Studying African Military Politics, introduces the discussions on African-led military deployments that have until now focused on technical aspects and assessments whereas I propose to approach them as part of African military politics. Section I.3, Many Interveners, Many Sahels, draws on abundant references to space that accompany interventions in the Sahel by highlighting different understandings of the area it covers that various actors use to include or exclude others. Section I.4, Rethinking Space: From Fixed Containers to Dynamic Relations, proposes perspectives from critical geography to locate the politics of African-led military deployments in the Sahel and argues for the value of analyzing what I call spatial semantics. The final section of the Introduction, Section I.5, provides a road map to the book.

I.1 ‘Le Mali est notre Afghanistan’

On the developments in Mali, an article title in Le Monde announces ‘Le Mali est notre Afghanistan’. This suggests that the French military

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4 For earlier work advocating such an approach to studying African peace and security, see Döring et al., Researching the Inner Life of the African Peace and Security Architecture.

5 Ayad, “Le Mali est notre Afghanistan.”
engagement against armed groups in Mali is of a similar ilk to that of the United States in Afghanistan. It implies a strong and singular relationship that not only objectifies the country that is intervened in but also obscures the multitude of other actors engaged in conflict responses by reinforcing the image of a white Western intervener. Whereas my aforementioned interlocutor remembered early 2013 as the time ‘when ECOWAS was at war’, another completely denied that was the case. When I requested a meeting with a French national in 2017 to talk about the 2013 ECOWAS-AU deployment, the blunt response was that there was ‘no African intervention to speak of’ and thus no need for a meeting. This ignorance of the African intervention experience in Mali is longstanding and continuous. Already, at the time of the deployment of AFISMA in January 2013, the media coverage’s focus lay with the Franco-Chadian Operation Serval. Violence had escalated in the north of Mali since 2011. A coup d’état followed by an attempted secession in spring 2012 and a subsequent advance of armed groups southwards triggered the involvement of ECOWAS, the

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7 After the Malian government asked for French military support in December 2012, Operation Serval deployed on 11 January 2013. The 4,500 troops were joined by 1,400 Chadian soldiers to support the Malian army. See Le Monde Afrique, “Qui participe à l’opération Serval au Mali?”
8 This has been linked to the unravelling of the Gaddafi regime. The violent removal of Gaddafi from power through the NATO intervention and the ensuing escalation of armed violence had greatly contributed to the destabilization of the whole region. This had an impact on the escalation of violence in the north of Mali, since armed groups absorbed fighters coming from Libya that identified as Tuareg. The NATO intervention in Libya has been part of a larger problematic tendency of so-called Western powers to engage in regime change to promote liberal values – that mostly ended in prolonged armed violence as has been vividly argued by Puri, Perilous Interventions. This is a pattern whereby self-proclaimed liberal Western democracies rely on and support authoritarian regimes if it serves their interests, while at the same time creating instability domestically that is maintained through violence and human rights violations. Under changed political conditions, these same authoritarian regimes are then demonized and destabilized.
9 I deliberately choose the broad descriptive term ‘non-state armed groups’ or simply ‘armed groups’ throughout the book to avoid as much as possible a reproduction of the labels and discourses of the responding actors, like the African Union or ECOWAS, which do not always adequately capture the heterogeneous identities and interests of these armed groups. In cases where more specificity is needed, the groups are referred to by the names used by the responding organizations at the given time. Thus, I will simply refer to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) the way it was used in the African Union context.
African Union, and eventually the United Nations and more international non-African interveners—most notably France. While the French-led intervention was covered extensively, the African troops were only mentioned in passing or at the end of news items and even then, mostly with reference to the Chadians that deployed within Serval. The image of France as the ‘intervention champion’ in Africa was once again reinforced and extensively discussed in the literature. Whether lauded as a success story of ‘hunting jihadists’ or condemned as ‘a form of neo-imperialism’, discussions over Operation Serval eclipsed the African-led military deployment. This neglect deepened after the (mainly West) African troops deployed under AFISMA were officially re-hatted under the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) on 1 July 2013. Eventually the conflict interventions in Mali were mainly narrated in terms of two successive French deployments (Operations Serval and Barkhane), the United Nations mission MINUSMA, and two European Union training missions as well as an ever-expanding landscape of further non-African development and security interventions. This stopped after successive military takeovers of power in 2021, the invitation of Russian mercenaries by the military leadership and subsequent withdrawal of French troops. The last French soldiers left Mali in August 2022 amid a resurgence of jihadist armed groups.

Those willing to see African agency in multilateral interventions for Mali and the Sahel have discussed the deployment of AFISMA and its implications for the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), the African Union’s flagship policy programme to foster stability, security, and peace on the continent. Still, AFISMA was discussed primarily in terms of its flaws. As Kasaija P. Apuuli reflects: ‘The at the time, despite the groups merging in 2017 with others to form Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).


11 See FRANCE 24, “France in Mali”; Kane, “Mali: The Forgotten War.”

12 At the heart of APSA is the Peace and Security Council (PSC), ‘the standing decision-making organ of the AU for the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts. It is a collective security and early warning arrangement intended to facilitate timely and efficient responses to conflict and crisis situations in Africa’. African Union, “Peace and Security Council.” APSA is commonly described as an architecture that rests on the PSC as the main pillar with four additional pillars there to support its work: the African Standby Force...
Malian crisis more than any other, exposed serious shortcomings in the APSA.\textsuperscript{13} This sentiment of a failed African engagement in Mali, while the French-led Operation Serval was hailed for its quick military successes, triggered strong responses in 2013 – the year that the African Union celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of an independent continental organization.\textsuperscript{14} While the cumbersome process to develop AFISMA had already created tension between ECOWAS, the African Union, and the United Nations, the aftermath of the deployment triggered a competition among African leaders over who was best suited to lead military deployment in the Sahel – and could claim leadership in maintaining security on the continent. The African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC) was introduced by the African Union Commission (AUC, or commission) chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and lobbied for by then South African president Jacob Zuma. The Nouakchott Process Intervention Force in northern Mali was proposed by the commission and representatives from eleven member states in the Sahelo-Saharan region facilitated by the Algiers-based African Union African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT/CAERT). Eventually, the presidents of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger proposed, as members of the newly established regional organization G5 Sahel, a Joint Force to be deployed against ongoing violence by armed groups in the Sahel.

Far from being a nullity or minor glitch in international relations – as the aforementioned French interlocutor implied – the ECOWAS-AU mission in 2013 is an African intervention experience with far-reaching consequences for international politics on the continent. The African Union and ECOWAS were sidelined in the quest to find lasting peace in Mali and the Sahel once the United Nations took over their mission and more non-African interveners entered the fray. Denying the history of this ECOWAS-AU mission, AFISMA, echoes white supremacist

\textsuperscript{13} Apuuli, “The African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises,” 79.

\textsuperscript{14} In 1963, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was established to free the continent from external domination and to unite the newly independent countries in the spirit of pan-African solidarity. In the late 1990s, the OAU embarked on an ambitious project to transform and revitalize the organization, leading to the formation of the African Union as the direct successor.
I.2 Studying African Military Politics

The prism of African military politics captures the multitude of negotiations by an African cosmopolitan elite before, during, and after military deployment at the level of continental African politics – with its embeddedness in the international system. The actors involved include inter alia heads of state, ministers, diplomats, and bureaucrats from regional organizations. These negotiations take place in civilian and diplomatic settings, yet their objective is military action. Moreover, the actors involved often have either some background in military training or come from a political national environment that is co-constituted by the military dimension. In most West African countries, for example, the military continues to play an immense role in shaping politics even in civilian-led countries and as the recent wave of military coup d’états in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso show, the military is still very much at the forefront of governing these societies. This impacts the tone and shaping of policies at the level of international organizations, such as the African Union. Research on militarism has studied civil–military relations at the national level, dynamics behind military coup d’états, and the phenomenon of rebel

15 Schnabel et al., “Les ’syndicats des chefs d’État’ sur le terrain.”
This book contributes to these lines of inquiry by showing how military action and reasoning is pursued in international organizations by actors in suits rather than uniforms.

Literature on African-led military deployments has focused on African Union Peace Support Operations, but recently also on ad hoc military deployments. These debates have been largely empirical and often shy away from embedding these deployments in wider continental international relations. In the following, I want to highlight two implicit biases that continue to shape debates about African-led military deployment in academic and policy circles. The first bias is an overreliance on single-case studies and methodological nationalism inherited from the analytical frames of political science and international relations. The second bias finds expression in a narrow interest in outcomes, successes or failures stemming from managerial logics in the security-development field. In contrast, I propose to approach these deployments as embedded in African military politics and to draw attention to the actors involved in their establishment, that they are part of political projects driven by national and continental elites to further their own ambitions, and that they form part of a larger process of shifting paradigms for military intervention.

Scholarly interest in African Union Peace Support Operations has grown in parallel to the number of deployments since the early 2000s. Earlier missions in the Comoros and along the Ethiopian–

16 See Souare, Civil Wars and Coups d’Etat in West Africa; Houngnikpo, Guarding the Guardians; N’Diaye, Mauritania’s Colonels Political Leadership.

17 This literature is published both through peer-reviewed academic channels, but also as so-called grey literature by think tanks, non-university research institutes, training facilities, or organizations active in the field. Yet in this context, distinguishing between academic literature and grey literature is artificial, as debates form across these different publication channels with similar content, share assumptions, assessments, and concerns. Moreover, authors move across institutions shifting positions, at times as consultants, at times as academics, based at universities or at non-university institutions. This affects the conventions for writing when, for example, publications draw on insider knowledge that it not transparently referenced. As these publications are mainly received by a limited number of (expert) readers, they are judged not according to academic standards, but rather based on the reader and author having a shared understanding of the topic.

18 In response to secessionist attempts in the Comoros, the OAU Mission in the Comoros (OMIC I) was deployed in 1998. After the organizational transformation, the AU continued deployments in the Comoros within various mission frameworks to assist with the electoral processes. In May 2007, the AU
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Eritrean border area received scant attention, while later missions have sparked significant interest. The 2003 African Union Mission in Burundi was later handed over to the United Nations which started discussions about the different roles of the two organizations as intervening actors. Also, during the intervention in Sudan, from 2004 onwards, the African Union had to align its actions with the United Nations, and also the regional organization Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The African Union Mission in

Electoral and Security Assistance Mission to the Comoros (MAES) received a mandate to secure the electoral process. However, after the leadership in Anjouan, one of the islands, threatened to secede the missions mandate changed to peace enforcement to maintain national sovereignty (Mays, Historical Dictionary of Multinational Peacekeeping, 51–52).

In 2000, the OAU had deployed the OAU Liaison Mission in Ethiopia–Eritrea (OLMEE) that became the AU Liaison Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea (AULMEE) with the organizational transformation. The mission’s mandate was to assist the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) through the provision of security in the border area and oversee the implementation of a ceasefire agreement. However, with the deterioration of relations with the Eritrean government, the UN mission was withdrawn in July 2008, rendering AULMEE obsolete (ibid., 43).

In April 2003, the AU Mission in Burundi (AMIB) was authorized to provide security and oversee the ceasefire, the Arusha Accords (that were to end the decade-long civil war) and a programme for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR); see for example Murithi, “The African Union’s Evolving Role in Peace Operations”; Boshoff, “Burundi: The African Union’s First Mission”; Francis and Tieku, “The AU and the Search for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi and Comoros”; Peen Rodt, “The African Union Mission in Burundi”; Wodrig and Grauvogel, “Talking Past Each Other”; Badmus, “The African Mission in Sudan (AMIS)”. These responsibilities were taken over by the United Nations Operation in Burundi (ONUB) that was authorized in May 2004 (Boshoff, “The United Nations Mission in Burundi (ONUB)”). Later, during the 2015 election crises that were sparked by President Pierre Nkurunziza’s contested bid for a third term, the AU PSC invoked Article 4 (h) of the AU’s Constitutional Act and threatened to deploy a peace operation to ensure the protection of civilians, against the government’s will (Wilén and Williams, “The African Union and Coercive Diplomacy”).

Somalia (AMISOM) 2007–2022 has been studied in detail in particular, regarding different intervening actors or the interests of different troop contributing countries that deployed and neighbouring countries.22 As in Mali, in the Central African Republic (CAR), the African Union had to coordinate its response with the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the responsible regional body, as well as the United Nations and French troops (here under Operation Sangaris).23 The discussions around AFISMA, the ECOWAS-AU deployment in Mali, acknowledged the months-long struggle to find a mandate and assessed the logistical problems.24 While ACIRC was addressed in heated terms,25 the other response to

the responses by neighbouring Uganda as well as IGAD have received attention – see for example Apuuli, “Explaining the (il)legality of Uganda’s Intervention”; Ylönen, “Peace or Stability?”; Apuuli, “IGAD’s Mediation in the Current South Sudan Conflict”; Back, “IGAD, Sudan, and South Sudan”; Pring, “Including or Excluding Civil Society.”

22 The African Union already deployed its Mission in Somalia in 2007 and this experience has been thoroughly discussed in, for example, Rein, “The EU and Peacekeeping in Africa”; Williams, “AMISOM under Review”; Dawit and Daniel, “AMISOM: Charting a New Course”; MacQueen, “Black Hawks Rising”; Williams, Fighting for Peace in Somalia; Williams, Joining AMISOM; Anderson, Peacekeepers Fighting a Counterinsurgency Campaign.

23 Various actors have responded to different conflicts (and conflict stages) in the Central African Republic with several missions. Some of the literature has been concerned with the different engagements by various actors, like the European Union; Bono, “The EU’s Military Operation in Chad and the Central African Republic”; Dijkstra, “The Military Operation of the EU in Chad and the Central African Republic”; Novaky, “From EUFOR to EUMAM”; the African Union; Welz and Meyer, “Empty Acronyms”; the United Nations or France; Glock, “Can the Central African Republic Carry on without France?” In other literature, the interlinkages and cooperation among them have been discussed; Carayannis and Fowlis, “Lessons from African Union–United Nations”; Plank, “The Effectiveness of Interregional Security Cooperation”; Smith, “Conflict Management in the Central African Republic”; Bachmann et al., War, Police and Assemblages of Intervention.
