

## **African Military Politics in the Sahel. Regional Organizations and International Politics**

by **Katharina P. W. Döring**

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This book is a much-needed contribution to the often umbilical literature on security in the Sahel. By focusing on the key role played by African states in *making room for war* during the 2012 Mali crisis, the book provides a detailed account of the political negotiations that took place in advance of military deployment. The chronicle, analysis and exploration of these negotiations return the real sense of African states' agency at a time in which this is represented as passive or is blatantly denied. This makes the book a valuable pedagogic resource for teaching and a significant contribution to the field of 'African International Relations' (Tieku 2014). Manifold understandings, interests and strategies have resulted in multiple definitions of the 'Sahel', as already problematised by studies in African history and in IR, especially with regards to the role of France's intervention in Mali. Döring's contribution to such debate is crucial for anyone interested in either African politics or IR in general as she explores the political dimension of African interveners in the Sahel taking into account domestic policy issues as well as geopolitical ambitions.

The main question Döring asks concerns the inner workings of African-led military deployments in Mali since 2012. Employing the notion of spatial semantics, such deployment is captured in the multiplicity of discussions and negotiations that constitute the processual stage turning intangible security and foreign policy concerns into concrete military action. Spatial notions like distance, proximity, locality, regionality and globality, drawn from critical geography (p. 21) and critical geopolitics (p. 183), constitute the cognitive lines on whose contours multiple political events are discussed, many of which are eminently prosaic, first and foremost the notion of *war*. The African-led military intervention in Mali's war is thus retraced through the meaning-making attempts pursued by each actor, showing how spatial semantics shaped not only the actual location of military intervention but also the actors' most suitable political frame (p. 19). This analytical perspective is particularly important to explain the recent return of militarism in the Sahel – a phenomenon incubated by the Malian crisis – and the increased reliance of African states on military responses to address social and political crises, especially through *ad hoc* forces.

Excluding Introduction (Chapter 1) and Conclusion (Chapter 6), the analysis is organised along five dense, carefully problematised chapters. Chapter 2

addresses the early joint ECOWAS-AU mission. The mission was designed as an 'African solution for an African problem', envisioned under the principle of subsidiarity, and rooted in classical UN peacekeeping. Döring explains that the mission is an early example of how spatial semantics was already at play for the definition of the area of intervention between non-ECOWAS Sahelian States (Algeria, Mauritania) and ECOWAS' powerhouse (Nigeria). Similarly, Chapter 3 discusses South African foreign policy ambitions to form a US-inspired 'coalition of the willing'. Zuma's South Africa used the crisis to project its military force, also with the support of Algeria, which was unhappy with French forces in its 'backyard'. Chapter 4 interrogates the role of Algeria in influencing African security and counter-terrorism paradigms through the Nouakchott Process, an Algerian attempt to keep the upper hand in regional security. Lastly, Chapter 5 investigates the emergence of the G5 Sahel, championed by Chad – but also in line with French interests – as the product of competition with Algeria's Nouakchott Process.

In sum, adopting lenses borrowed from the field of Global Studies, employing the concept of spatial semantics and mobilising an empirical material constituted of several semi-structured interviews with staff, representatives, diplomats and bureaucrats, this book is of great service to the community of scholars interested in the Sahel, in IR as well as on African political systems or regional and continental organisations. As an added value, Döring's book eludes the traps of methodological nationalism, and bypasses positivist approaches, often mobilised in political science, in favour of a genuinely transdisciplinary Global Studies perspective that is able to capture the cosmopolitan nature of the African decision-making elite. In such a way, the work provides an urgently needed comprehensive overview over the overlapping crises of the Sahel, showing the complexity and relational dimension of African International Relations.

## Reference

- Tieku, T. 2014. 'Theoretical approaches to Africa's international relations', in T. Murithi, ed. *Handbook of Africa's International Relations*. London: Routledge, 11–20.

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