



Metis

Study

Stability in Africa

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Institute for
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Summary

Political stability in Africa affects the security of Europe and Germany. The African continent is undergoing political, economic, and social transformation processes and continues to be affected by instabilities as a result. Endogenous and exogenous

factors lead to ethnic and transnational conflicts and foster the re-emergence of international terrorism. Africa will increasingly become an arena of hegemonic competition between the West, Russia and China.

State stability on the African continent

The concept of stability is closely tied to the concept of state. In a traditional sense, states are characterised by the elements of state population, state territory and state power. The provision of public goods and services by state institutions to citizens of a state is considered an indicator of functioning regulatory and administrative structures. If one or more elements are lacking, we speak of fragile statehood. According to the OECD definition, fragility is already present when one of the core aspects of modern statehood is considerably weakened. The designations of disintegrating and fragile states are thus closely guided by a concept of state that assumes the existence of functioning states as a guiding principle. This guiding principle follows a *Western bias*, which postulates the European canon of values and justice as well as *good governance* as benchmarks of functioning statehood.¹ In this interpretation, twenty African nations are among the world's thirty most unstable states according to the 2022 *Fragile States Index*, with Somalia, South Sudan and the Central African Republic coming in second, fourth and fifth place, respectively. Of these twenty states, all but Libya are Sub-Saharan countries (see Fig. 1). An analysis of conflict intensities at sub-state levels emphasises that more stable states must also contend with local instabilities (see Fig. 2).

This study focuses primarily on Sub-Saharan Africa and discusses the general, endogenous and exogenous

causes of instability, the role of external state actors such as Russia and China as well as initial successes of development policy. Security implications are then discussed before the study concludes with recommendations for potential courses of action for Germany and the EU.

General causes of instability in Africa

The decolonisation process since the 1960s has caused numerous new African states to emerge. Most of these states are artificially created, their borders often a relic of European colonial rule. Because of this genesis, they typically lack ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious homogeneity as well as a historical origin myth. Peace and conflict research has found that such young states are prone to more armed conflict, revolutions and civil wars. At present, state disintegration processes are playing out in Mali, Niger, Nigeria, the Central African Republic, Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, and Somalia. Many more states are affected too, albeit to a lesser degree. The causes of state instability can be analysed at a number of levels. Endogenous factors include poverty, nepotism, corruption, kleptocracy and a weak civil society. What is more, African states have been facing enormous debt since 2009, investments have petered out, and state institutions are often dysfunctional. The economic weakness this creates comes at the expense of public education and social benefits. Such sclerotic states provide a breeding ground for organised violence below the threshold of war. The state power exercises control mostly through a strong security apparatus, although this is often also a haven for anti-democratic or anti-regime forces.

¹ See "Fragile, failed and quasi states – who are we dealing with?", Metis Study No. 5 (May 2018).

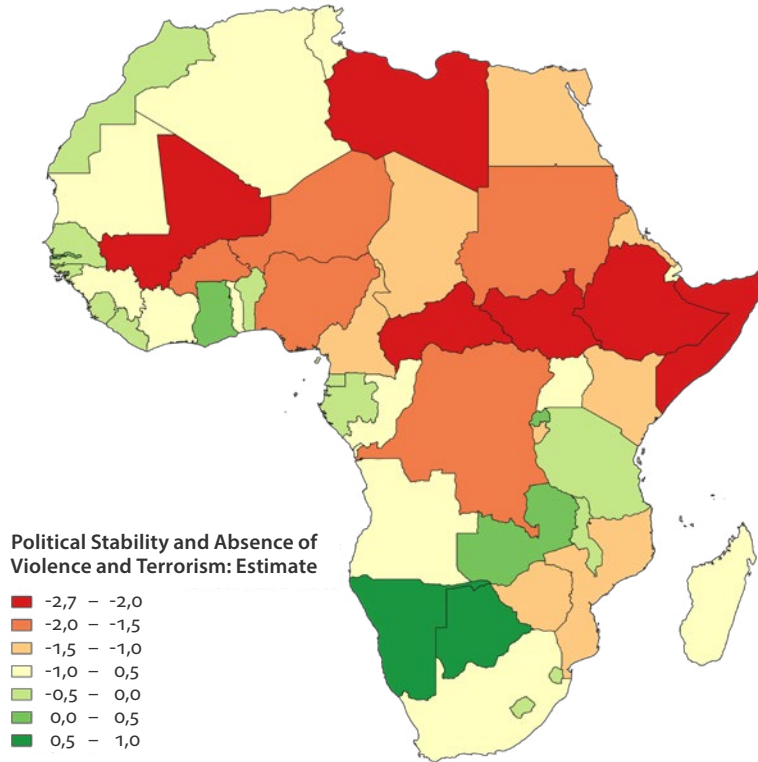


Fig. 1 Political instability at state level in Africa, May 2023
Source: author's own work based on the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*

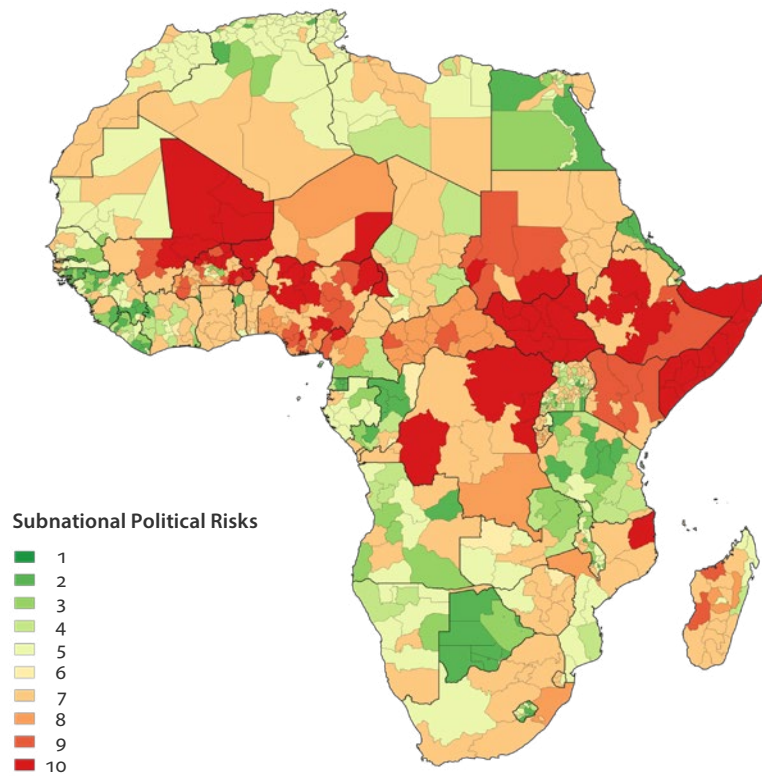


Fig. 2 Political instability at sub-state levels in Africa, May 2023
Source: author's own work based on the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*



There is a new negative trend in this regard. While 25 military coups occurred between 1990 and 2018, between 2019 and 2023 there were 17. On the positive side, the recent coups have turned out to be less bloody. Nevertheless, these conflicts undermine social capital and the public's trust in the government and they impede economic prosperity and legal security, which in turn thwarts reforms. State and social structures fall back on religious, tribal, linguistic or community patterns of identification and identity, which fosters ethnic conflict. Extremist groups exploit the state's weakness to spark secessionist conflicts, while parts of the population may become radicalised as a result of resentment and exclusion.² This often results in war economies, in which resources are distributed and appropriated by force. It becomes exceedingly difficult to break such negative cycles.

Exogenous factors that affect weak state structures on the African continent still include the lack of food security, global economic trends and negative effects of climate change. According to estimates, the continent will lose 5 to 15 per cent of its gross domestic product in the coming years as a result of climate change. A fifth of the African population (278 million people) are already malnourished, while 55 million children are experiencing health complications due to severe malnutrition. Since most of Africa's economic output is located in the primary (agriculture) and secondary (raw materials industry) sectors and diversification of the economy is poor, the degree of state resilience in the face of fluctuations in world market prices, turbulences on the financial markets and crop failures is low. The tertiary service sector is still in the build-up phase in Africa and its ability to absorb external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic or climate change is limited. What is more, the state fragility of neighbouring states has a transnational negative impact on more stable states. The result is that, due to inherent weakness, even long-term economic or political stabilisation efforts are sometimes rendered futile by external factors. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, only eight countries in Africa experienced a slight increase in terms of their *Human Development Index* (HDI) between 2019 and 2021, while 40 countries suffered a decrease. Structural and geographic factors are additional causes of instability on the continent. Of the 54 African states, 16 are landlocked without direct maritime access to the world market. They are precisely the states that rank among the lowest on the HDI. Such landlocked states are faced with high transit costs owing to the distance to transshipment ports and the lack of infrastructure. Geographical factors are accompanied by climatic conditions such as limited arable land, water

scarcity and desertification. They, too, pose almost insurmountable challenges to weak states.³

African successes

However, there are also tentative successes. Despite disruptive endogenous and exogenous factors, the economic development of some African states has included high growth rates. A middle class is developing for the first time in many countries. According to the World Bank, the economy on the continent is growing by 3.6 per cent despite external shocks, while individual states such as Kenya or the Ivory Coast are proving to be particularly resilient and adaptable. The International Labour Organization (ILO) recently published 38 success stories documenting the transition from informal to formal work in many African countries. Some success has also been achieved in the areas of youth unemployment and the establishment of civil society structures. This, in turn, supports democratisation efforts in individual states. Six out of 55 African states are currently considered young, consolidating democracies. Another factor is the increasing digital and technological transformation of Africa, including in regions that are dominated by poverty. In 18 states where more than 75 per cent of the population do not have secure access to electricity, for example, 40 to 50 per cent of people already use mobile phones. Regions of relative stability are being established, too, with hardly any internal violent conflicts. Angola, Botswana, Ghana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia, Zambia and Senegal are particular examples of political stability. The West would thus do well to sustainably support these countries in order to keep their democratic and economic transformation processes going.

External interference

Since the African continent is a focal point of the strategic competition between the US-led West, Russia and China, the exertion of influence by external actors is another destabilising factor. Interference by Western states is based on international law, is subject to review and control by the democratic institutions and civil societies of these states, and usually aims to use *good governance* to improve living conditions and economic prosperity. In rare cases, however, this interference may lead to instability if, for example, liberal transformation processes are rejected by sections of the local public for cultural or religious reasons. Resulting dependencies on investment or development aid as well as imposed concepts of law and justice may also negatively affect stability. For Russia and China, however, the focus is primarily on economic exploitation and profitability (China and Russia) as well

² See "Delegitimising the IS narrative: What are the strategies of our partners?", Metis Study No. 4 (May 2018).

³ See "Africa – a continent on the rise?", Metis Study No. 10 (May 2019).



as on military influence and expanding spheres of interest (Russia) without direct benefit for local populations or governments. Both states exploit the economic weakness of African governments in order to use loans to influence political and economic decision-making. This tactic is called debt diplomacy.

China can be assumed to use investments to expand its sphere of influence in Africa. In recent years, Beijing has become the largest bilateral lender and currently holds more than 83 billion US dollars (USD), or 12 to 13 per cent, in all African debt. Chinese investments in Africa peaked at 28.4 billion USD in 2016. Since then, loans have dropped significantly, to 1.9 billion USD in 2020, but this can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, changed Chinese priorities and struggles of African countries to repay loans. Despite this decline, the idea that China could strategically use debt to expand its influence in Africa and secure access to resources cannot be dismissed. Since African states will have to pay record sums for repayment in 2024, debt restructuring will likely lead to an increase in Chinese influence. China has also become increasingly active in military matters, although it has so far only been present in Djibouti to protect the strategically important sea route to Europe. China has also expanded its network of defence attachés in Africa, and sales of its defence equipment on the continent have increased. Despite rumours circulating about plans for new bases in Equatorial Guinea and Cape Verde, it is still unclear whether China plans to establish further bases on the African continent. China may seek mooring rights for the Chinese Navy in these countries in order to establish a presence in the Gulf of Guinea. It is thus likely that China will increase its military commitments.

In recent years, Russia has expanded its influence in Africa more than any other external actor, from deepening ties in North Africa and expanding its reach in the Central African Republic and the Sahel to rekindling Cold War ties in southern Africa. Russia's approach is distinctive among external actors in that Moscow typically relies on irregular means and *proxies* to expand its influence. The deployment of mercenaries, disinformation, election interference, support for coups, and arms-for-resources deals have all increased considerably. Russia's strategy is aimed at winning over anti-democratic forces in Africa by means of disruptive action, strategic corruption and the creation of security-political dependencies. In the case of Russia, in contrast to China, military and non-military means and assets are hard to differentiate. Mercenaries of the Wagner Group, for example, not only train soldiers of the various partner regimes and support combat operations on behalf of Moscow, they also use political and diplomatic means to operate beyond the military sphere. This combined approach allows Moscow to gain influence by bribing local militia leaders, providing political advice, establishing radio stations and newspapers, aligning

Internet search engines with Russian media and providing personal protection. Russia's interventions in Africa thus already have far-reaching implications for standards of *good governance* and security on the continent. Such an approach promotes the multipolar world order that Moscow is striving for, since it reduces the chances of success of democratic political systems in Africa. It also undermines Western stabilisation and development efforts of the past decades, the functionality of regional international organisations such as ECOWAS (West African Economic Community) and existing cooperation between African and European states.

Security implications of African instability

Political instability in Africa poses numerous challenges for Germany and Europe. Since 1990, Western efforts within the framework of the United Nations, the EU or bilateral cooperation on the neighbouring continent have only stabilised states here and there. Progress that had been achieved over years in terms of stabilisation and development was often set back or even undone by renewed conflicts. Although global projects such as the *Millennium Development Goals* have been successful, their effects on political stability are generally sobering. An analysis of the development of political stability over the past decades shows a long-term negative trend (see Fig. 3).

Any intensification of the hegemonic system conflict with Russia and China will likely continue to affect Africa. This is not only because of the interference of external actors but also owed to the unwillingness or inability of Western states to increase their political and economic commitment, either financially or in terms of personnel. The US are focusing on challenges in the Pacific while Europe is preoccupied with the conflict with Russia in Ukraine. The gradual withdrawal of Western states from stabilisation missions in Africa and the current focus on Russia have long-term security political implications. The focus on high-intensity conflicts will likely lead to tasks related to counterinsurgency, peacekeeping and anti-terror operations being neglected. Terrorism and renewed radicalisation are thus foreseeable risks to Europe resulting from state fragility in Africa. Due to the weakness of states there, the Sahel zone in particular serves as a space for extremist groups to organise, retreat and train. Terrorism experts have long referred to the region from Mauritania to Somalia as a possible future *sanctuary*. Furthermore, Western states do not currently seem to have any effective means to curb Russia's subversive influence in Africa. The more instability Russia can generate, the more influence it can be predicted to exert. The anticipated inability of the Security Council to come to a resolution and the readiness of African states to cooperate with Moscow – including in current UN or EU missions – will reinforce this trend. In the Central African Republic and Mali, it has already become apparent how relatively

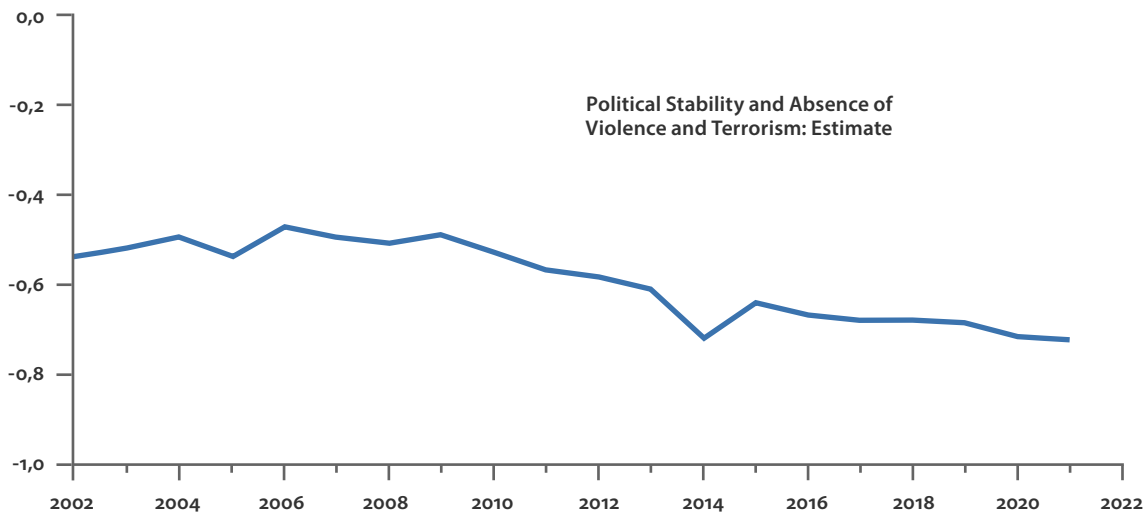


Fig. 3 Development of political stability in Africa from 1996 to 2021 | Source: author's own work based on *Worldwide Governance Indicators*

easy it is for Russian influence to bring about a premature end to stabilisation and peace missions with unfortunate results. These examples may serve as a blueprint for Russia to gradually bring other existing EU training or bilateral missions to a standstill. Wagner Group's stated intention to become more involved in Africa already suggests that Russia wants to take action in other countries.

In the economic sector, too, the European market and investment shares are declining. This trend is in direct contrast to Europe's quest to become more independent of Russia and China when it comes to resource imports, rare earths and energy production. Within 15 years, China has established itself as the most important investor and lender and, unlike European states, has refrained from making lending subject to conditions such as the protection of human rights or democratic reforms. The pragmatic approach of Russia and China is thus becoming a plausible alternative to the liberal Western model for an increasing number of hybrid regimes and authoritarian states in Africa. In future, this will likely lead to an increase in authoritarian forms of government in Africa, a rise in intergovernmental, transnational and ethnic conflicts, more war-economic resource conflicts and a gradual exclusion of Europe from the African market.

Recommendations for a pragmatic approach to instability in Africa

The EU states are already involved in security and development policy commitments in Africa. Germany's focus in this regard is on a joint, networked and coordinated approach. Activities mainly focus on regional integration, the fight against poverty, hunger and corruption as well as the fostering of constitutional structures. Incentives for economic growth and trade, scientific cooperation, cultural cooperation and environmental protection are also

created. The contribution of the Bundeswehr is mainly focused on strengthening peace and security architectures in Africa. This translates to specific tasks for the Bundeswehr, such as equipment assistance, advice and training as well as enabling and enhancing measures for security forces in partner states. The aim is to improve the crisis management capabilities of these African states. Training assistance to improve African capacities for rapid operations, to promote maritime capabilities and to combat arms proliferation and terrorism are examples of successful projects. In terms of security policy, Germany should focus its future efforts on young consolidated democracies (including Senegal, Ghana, Namibia, Botswana and South Africa). Increased support for these states can promote their democratic development and prevent external influence by authoritarian states. From these islands of stability, neighbouring countries can then be integrated in terms of security policy, thus supporting the civilising process of the armed forces, police and judiciary. Efforts must also be directed at the major armed forces of the continent, since they play a key role in peacekeeping missions of African international organisations. These include Angola, Ethiopia, Burundi, Nigeria, Cameroon and Tanzania. In order to safeguard Europe's democratic and economic influence in Africa, it is worth considering a European-African intervention force for Africa to support national and international actors in crisis situations, confront subversive measures by Russia and stabilise the security of states affected by hybrid influence. In this context, European bases could be established in key African states to serve as anchors of stability. Already successful cooperation with national partners and regional organisations should be intensified further in order to gradually enable African states to independently meet future challenges in specific policy areas, such as maritime security.



From an economic policy perspective, it is also time to consider, together with Africa, a European counterproject to the Chinese Silk Road. Although there are already initiatives at European level and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development has recently adopted a new ministerial strategy on Africa, projects and funds across Europe are limited in their ability to address the problems and potential of the continent. Together with regional international organisations and key African partners, the EU would have to set up a funding programme of EUR 300 to 500 billion for the period until 2050. The aim should be to invest in areas such as energy, transport, agriculture, industry, the IT and services sectors, education and climate protection to further foster the development of an African middle class. Yet, such investments should not establish new dependencies but primarily ensure the EU's continued involvement as a stakeholder in the sustainable economic development of Africa. Sustainable economic prosperity can then serve as a basis for social, legal and organisational support services to encourage the transformation of African societies toward democracy and *good governance*. Previous and current programmes involve high approval hurdles and implied normative requirements that are met with resistance in large parts of Africa. On a continent with predominantly hybrid or highly authoritarian government systems, current approaches will thus see little more than minor successes. In the future, the following measures could thus be considered:

Bundeswehr initiatives

- close partnership and sponsorship relations with individual key African states
- coordination with other EU countries in order to create an extensive and coordinated security cooperation network
- support for African anti-terror operations with training missions, equipment transfers and joint operations

EU-African Deal 2050+

- establishment of a EUR 300 to 500 billion EU investment framework programme for Africa for the period until 2050
- roadmap for cooperative investments in energy, transport, agriculture, industry, resources, IT, services, *supply chains*, infrastructure, the labour market, education and climate protection
- focus on economic prosperity instead of normative requirements and guidelines
- economic growth as a basis for the support of civil society transformation and democratisation processes, enforcement of human rights and protection of minorities

International initiatives between the EU and African organisations

- creation of a permanent EU response force for Africa, which should consist of equal contingents of the EU and African Union states
- establishment of identical contingents with the regional organisations ECOWAS, the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) for regionally specific operations
- creation of a mechanism covering the entire spectrum of crisis management (humanitarian emergencies, pandemics, natural disasters and peacekeeping) instead of a purely military undertaking

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