



STRONGER RESILIENCE THROUGH COOPERATION IN THE SAHEL

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A COORDINATED EU FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY IN A MULTI-POLAR LANDSCAPE

ABSTRACT

In 2023, the Sahel crisis entered its twelfth year assuming a new, worrying dimension. Terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and successive military coups continue to spread instability across the whole region. Emerging competition between major powers such as Russia and France have further complicated regional dynamics, particularly following the arrival of Wagner Group and the withdrawal of French military forces from Mali.

While the European Union adopted an integrated Strategy for the region in 2021, in a series of analyses I have argued that Brussels is still insufficiently prepared to respond to this new dimension of the crisis. Yet, the Sahel region continues to be of strategic importance for the EU – both for internal dynamics, and for its external-action capabilities in the African continent – as expressed in the policy study “The Sahel Region: A Litmus Test for EU–Africa Relations in a Changing Global Order”. The consequences of the energy crises provoked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine have exacerbated Europe’s need to strengthen its partnership with African countries. But at the same time, Russia’s war in Ukraine has been an opportunity for the “Global South” to reinvigorate its foreign policy autonomy and non-alignment as tensions between the West and Russia increase.



AUTHOR

FRANCESCA CARUSO
Researcher,
Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

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**THE FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)**

European Political Foundation - N° 4 BE 896.230.213
Avenue des Arts 46 1000 Brussels (Belgium)
www.feps-europe.eu
@FEPS_Europe



ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI (IAI)

Via dei Montecatini 17 - 00186 Rome (Italy)
www.iai.it
@IAIonline



FONDATION JEAN-JAURÈS

12 Cité Malesherbes - 75009 Paris (France)
www.jean-jaures.org
@j-jaures



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Recommendations for a coordinated EU foreign and security policy in a multi-polar landscape

In 2023, the Sahel crisis entered its twelfth year assuming a new, worrying dimension. Terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and successive military coups continue to spread instability across the whole region. Emerging competition between major powers such as Russia and France have further complicated regional dynamics, particularly following the arrival of Wagner Group¹ and the withdrawal of French military forces from Mali.²

While the European Union adopted an integrated Strategy for the region in 2021,³ in a series of analyses⁴ I have argued that Brussels is still insufficiently prepared to respond to this new dimension of the crisis. Yet, the Sahel region continues to be of strategic importance for the EU – both for internal dynamics, and for its external-action capabilities in the African continent – as expressed in the policy study “The Sahel Region: A Litmus Test for EU–Africa Relations in a Changing Global Order”.⁵ The consequences of the energy crises provoked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine have exacerbated Europe’s need to strengthen its partnership with African countries. But at the same time, Russia’s war in Ukraine has been an opportunity for the “Global South” to reinvigorate its foreign policy autonomy and non-alignment as tensions between the West and Russia increase.

From a humanitarian perspective, as explained in my second policy study “Beyond Humanitarian Aid: The EU’s Approach to Alleviating Food Crisis in the Sahel at a Time of Global Insecurity”, the European Union has always devoted strong attention to humanitarian issues in the Sahel, especially as regards the food crisis. Since 2010, the EU has helped more than 100 million people

lacking access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food, making it one of the world’s major donors in this area. However, since 2021 its capacity to act in the region has been reduced both due to the deterioration of the security situation and the souring of relations between the EU and local governments occasioned by a series of military coups. This has happened in a context in which Sahelian countries’ economies had been deeply weakened by both the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine which exacerbated food crisis in Africa.

Peace, security and humanitarian situation are likely to continue creating substantial challenges, hence the EU should consider the Sahel region as a litmus test for its capacity to act as a global actor for peace and democracy in a multipolar world. In this context, and according to the findings in the research project, the EU should:

At the European Union level, it is essential for both the EU and its member states to prioritise the development of foreign intelligence capabilities. Before the EU establishes its independent intelligence capacity, member states should persist in enhancing their respective national intelligence capabilities, with a particular emphasis on improving the coordination and exchange of information. The Sahel crisis has shown how information is necessary to act consistently and effectively. Without its own intelligence, it might be difficult for the EU to act impartially and objectively. This is especially true in conflict-affected areas where people’s judgement might be influenced by emotion.

Four months after the adoption of the EU Integrated Strategy in 2021, the EU was unable to implement its strategy. Military coups and multipolar competition, combined with the fragility of the regional architecture on which part of the European strategy relied, have reduced

the EU's ability to foster greater democracy and security, and to guarantee human rights in the region. Furthermore, the above-mentioned dynamics demonstrated that the Strategy was conceived with an optimism about the region's development that has proved to be detached from reality. In a fragmented context like the Sahel, the EU needs to strengthen its capacity to understand the realities on the ground. Confronted with different dynamics, the EU has experienced difficulties implementing its foreign policy not only in the Sahel but also in other fragmented regions of the African continent, such as the Horn of Africa during the Tigray crisis. Apart from foreign intelligence, the EU should also invest more to strengthen its partnership with local think tanks, research centres and nongovernmental organisations.

Establish a foreign and security strategy that embodies a synthesis of the diverse viewpoints of its member states, rather than being driven primarily by the interests of a single nation. –

Despite the Sahel is considered a “strategic area of interests” for the European Union, in the last years we have seen that most of the EU foreign and security policy in the region has been led by France's position. This has happened in a moment where Paris – as a former colonial power – had to face growing tensions and frustrations before its presence within the local governments (Mali, Burkina Faso and now Niger) and populations of the region. In this context, the EU should develop a foreign and security approach which represent more a synthesis of the different positions of its member states. From a technical perspective, this can be done by putting the Sahel – as a strategic region for the EU stability and prosperity – at the centre of the Council's preparatory committees (COAFR and COPS) on a more regular basis. This would also guarantee a greater coordination within the European institutions.

As demonstrated in the policy study “The Sahel Region: A Litmus Test for EU–Africa Relations in a Changing Global Order”, countries like Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are at the forefront of a new era of African politics. In the changing context, former colonial powers – especially France – are criticised in an attempt to “reclaim” national sovereignty. That said, the Sahelian countries do not want to cut their ties with Europe. Against this backdrop, EU member states with interests and presence in the region – such as Germany and Italy – should play a greater role in European foreign policy in the region. Until the coup in Niger, the EU structured its actions according to French foreign policy. Niger could represent a turning point in EU foreign policy in the region: governments such as Italy's have opted for a diplomatic solution rather than a military one – thus not following the approach of Paris.

Assist in strengthening of the regional organisations. –

The latest military coups have demonstrated the incapacity of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to deter potential putsches – despite its commitment to support good governance, the rule of law and sustainable development for peace and conflict prevention. Furthermore, ECOWAS' reaction to military coups highlighted two characteristics that have undermined its legitimacy toward local governments and the population: incoherence and susceptibility of being influenced both by its member states and external actors. One of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of ECOWAS lies precisely in its structure, which includes officials who are currently serving in national-government positions. This element makes the organisation more susceptible to national interests than to the principles stated in its protocols – as demonstrated with Burkina Faso.⁷

ECOWAS imposed heavy diplomatic, political and economic sanctions on Mali and Niger while it did not react in the same way with Burkina Faso which was only suspended from the organisation. This incoherent reaction created frustrations within the organisation and culminated with a potential fragmentation after the coup in Niger in August 2023. In September 2023, the three countries signed the Liptako-Gourma agreement to establish an architecture of collective defence and mutual assistance.⁸ The charter marks the emergence of a collective defence alliance of three countries that now perceive the ECOWAS collective security mechanism as a strategic threat and may, therefore, enact the split of the regional organisation.

In this context, the EU should work to reduce fragmentation between the regional organisation by: a) emphasising the importance of and adhering to consistent actions; b) pushing to remove economic sanctions on Niger that are straining the population, not the military junta; c) supporting the basic prerogatives of ECOWAS, which are not only about peace and security but about developing regional economic integration.

Act consistently and without a double standard.

– Similar to ECOWAS, the EU's reaction to military coups and unconstitutional changes in the region has varied according to the country. Contrary to Mali and Niger, the EU condemned Burkina Faso two coups but adopted a more restrained approach and kept the channels of communication open with Traoré's government despite his harsh criticism of France and the West in general. The EU's reaction to Burkina Faso's military coup is most probably the result of Mali's growing isolation, but also an awareness that multipolar competition is the main constraint on its foreign and security policy in Africa. In Chad, when Mahamat Déby took the reins in Chad following his father's

death, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell and President Emmanuel Macron of France attended the elder Déby's funeral and pledged support to new President Mahamat. Alongside allegations of a "white coup", the EU also gave the impression of using a double standard approach regarding its own interests. Chad is perceived by Europeans as a key country in guaranteeing stability of the Sahel thanks to its functioning army and its ability to prevent the terrorist threat from penetrating too deeply, and thus expanding. At the time, together with Niger, Chad hosts a permanent French military base – the second largest in Africa. In light of the above, the EU should act consistently while being committed to its Integrated Strategy, which aims to promote democratic systems, greater security and human rights.

Keep the channel of communication open and support stronger social cohesion.

– In 2022, despite a rise in the terrorist threat across the whole region, the EU halved its financial support to local armies and supported only the Nigerien armed forces, with 25 million euro. By contrast, in the same year the EU sent assistance measures to support the Ukrainian armed forces to the tune of over 3 billion euro. This difference in approach provoked strong criticism in the Sahel, which at the same time was facing one of the most difficult security crises in recent years. Moreover, provision of lethal weapons to Ukraine further exacerbated the local perception of double standards, which leads to further frustration with the EU. Sahelian countries are against foreign military presence in their countries and instead ask for lethal-arms support to defeat the jihadist threat. However, this does not discount the fact that sending weapons is also a major problem in the region – for example, arms delivery to Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso has shown to be a challenging decision, because they might be diverted or

misused by armed groups and local armies.

In this context, the EU should re-open (in the case of Mali) its dialogue with local government and keep the channel of communication open with Burkina Faso and Niger. This could be useful for two dimensions: consider to re-open its European Union Training Mission (EUTM) and continue to engage in the country with local civil-society organisations by recognising also the multitude of actors involved. Lasting stability and peace cannot only be the result of military operations but must also involve a restructuring of social cohesion between institutions and non-state actors. With this in mind, the EU could make a contribution to mediation, and dedicate funds to help representatives of civil society, political parties and religious platforms with capacity building activities.

From a humanitarian perspective, depoliticising the nexus between peace-security and development. – The European Union has always devoted strong attention to humanitarian issues in the Sahel, especially as regards the food crisis. Since 2010, the EU has helped more than 100 million people lacking access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food, making it one of the world's major donors in this area. However, since 2021 its capacity to act in the region has been reduced both due to the deterioration of the security situation and the souring of relations between the EU and local governments occasioned by a series of military coups. The 2021 EU Strategy was built around two principles. One of them was the so-called humanitarian, development and peace (HDP) triple nexus. The EU recognises the linkages between sustainable development, humanitarian action, conflict prevention and peacebuilding, as well as the importance of diplomatic and political solutions to support peace and security, in line with the EU Global Strategy and the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable

Development. Furthermore, the EU stresses the importance of investing in prevention and addressing the underlying root causes of vulnerability, fragility and conflict while simultaneously meeting humanitarian needs and strengthening resilience, thus reducing risks. Yet, with the waves of military coups in 2021, the EU found itself unable to cooperate with local governments and, therefore, to implement its policies related not only to security but also to its humanitarian and development actions. The first consequence of this is that the EU has continued to provide emergency humanitarian assistance while leaving long-term action to one side. This has consequently undermined the principle HDP which rather than being considered an analytical tool to understand how to act in crisis contexts seems to have become a political instrument to condition aid and development.

Support debt restructuring. – Debt is the outcome of a structural imbalance between African countries and the more-industrialised economies. The region is facing a combination of food, socio-economic, climatic, environmental, security and governance vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are based on structural factors, including the demographic shift. The region's population is set to increase by 250 million over the next 20 years for a total of 700 million people, most of them young. In the 1950s, 10 agricultural producers had to satisfy 1 urban consumer, but by 2030 1 producer will have to meet the food demand of 2 consumers. These irreversible changes are putting the region's food systems in crisis. In addition to these needs, young people suffer from a high unemployment rate and are unsatisfied with the social contract with the state structures, which are becoming increasingly fragile. Security crises and violence, as well as climate change, are exacerbating the humanitarian crisis by straining state budgets and jeopardising the development gains of recent

decades. In 2022, markets were well supplied but the rise in food prices was continuing and accelerating, particularly in the Sahel. These price surges were fuelled by economic inflation in some Gulf of Guinea countries, production cuts for the 2021–22 season, the security crisis, Covid-19 and soaring world prices for agricultural products, as well as persistent obstacles to regional trade. Yet, faced with the challenge of security, Sahelian states are giving budgetary priority to their armed forces, reducing their capacity to address food crisis by, for instance, stockpiling cereals. Furthermore, the economies of the Sahel face an additional problem: the public debt crisis, which, with the recent rise in interest rates is jeopardising the growth prospects of some 20 countries on the African continent.⁹ And although recently some measures were announced, no structural reforms were addressed. In 2022, some 40 governments met in the French capital to try to tackle the problems of excessive debt and climate change, but they failed to bridge the gap between the countries of the North and South. On this occasion, some measures were announced – such as the issuance of 100 billion US dollars in Special Drawing Rights, of which 5 per cent will go to African countries. However, even this seems to be a palliative rather than a structural reform, since debt is the outcome of a structural imbalance between African countries and the more-industrialised economies.

Support regional cooperation and economic integration. – The EU should work to reduce tensions within the ECOWAS in order to enhance the region’s cooperation and economic integration. As explained in the above-mentioned paragraph, one of the causes of economic inflation in the Sahel is the persistence of regional obstacles to regional trade. The instrument that can be used to address this issue is ECOWAS which was created in the 1970s to create a single, large trading bloc through

economic cooperation. Furthermore, the EU should continue to support the region’s efforts to set up a food crisis prevention network and to equip itself with the tools needed to prevent and manage crises effectively. Furthermore, it should help the region strengthen its resilience and sustainability of food systems by adopting appropriate measures that may help the States to fill their financial gaps.

Endnotes and references

¹ The Wagner Group is an organisation that has been used in Russian military operations in many countries such as the Central African Republic (CAR), Mozambique, Sudan, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and Mali. See Ehl, David (2023) "Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: More than Mercenaries", *Deutsche Welle*, 17 April, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-64822234>; Boswell, Alan and Julia Steers (2023), "Russia's Wagner in Africa", *The Horn* (podcast series), 23 March 2023, <https://www.crisis-group.org/node/20538>.

² France ended its military operation Barkhane in the Sahel in 2022. The operation started in January 2013 in Mali with the launch of Operation Serval, quickly renamed Barkhane in August 2014. The end of Barkhane also marked the end of a painful process of withdrawal from Mali, the country where most French soldiers were deployed. See also: Vincent, Elise (2022) "After Ten Years, France to End Military Operation Barkhane in Sahel", *Le Monde*, 9 November, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/11/09/after-ten-years-france-to-end-military-operation-barkhane-in-sahel_6003575_4.html.

³ Council of the European Union (2021) *Council Conclusions on the European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel*, 16 April, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7723-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

⁴ This policy paper is part of the "Ten Years of Crisis in the Sahel Region. Perspectives for an EU Contribution to Peace and Security" research project. The aim of the project is to identify potential solutions to foster peace and security, as well as democracy and development in the Sahel region.

⁵ Caruso, Francesca and Francesca Lenzi (2023) "The Sahel Region: A Litmus Test for EU–Africa Relations in a Changing Global Order", *FEPS Policy Studies*, June, <https://feps-europe.eu/?p=64048>.

⁶ Caruso, Francesca (2023) "Beyond Humanitarian Aid: The EU's Approach to Alleviating Food Crisis in the Sahel at a Time of Global Insecurity", *FEPS Policy Studies*, September, <https://feps-europe.eu/?p=67258>.

⁷ With Burkina Faso, ECOWAS limited itself to political sanctions. This decision may have been the result of Côte d'Ivoire needing to cooperate with Ouagadougou to pursue the fight against terrorism on the border between the two countries. See also: Chacha, Mwita and Jonathan Powell (2023), "The Credibility Crisis of African Regional Organizations in the Face of Coups", *Democracy in Africa*, 8 September, <https://democracyinafrica.org/?p=24356>.

⁸ Article 6 of the charter – which is equivalent to Article 5 of NATO – now provides a legal basis for mutual assistance between allied states in the event of aggression or armed attack, such as if ECOWAS were to consider military intervention: in the event of a rebellion under Article 6 of the charter, in theory, soldiers from Niger and Burkina Faso could now support Malian forces in the face of armed groups in northern Mali already at war with Bamako. Article 6 clearly states, "Any attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of one or more Contracting Parties shall be considered as an aggression against the other Parties and shall give rise to a duty of assistance and relief by all the Parties, individually or collectively, including the use of armed force, to restore and ensure security within the area covered by the Alliance." Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (2023), *Charter of Liptako-Gourma Establishing the Alliance of Sahel States*, Bamako, 16 September, <https://maliembassy.us/?p=2346>.

⁹ de Vergès, Marie (2023) "L'Afrique retombe dans le piège de la dette", *Le Monde*, 18 June, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/06/18/l-afrique-retombe-dans-le-piege-de-la-dette_6178186_3212.html.

About the author



FRANCESCA CARUSO

Francesca Caruso is a Researcher in the Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali, where she specialises in EU–Africa relations with a focus on the Horn and the Sahel region. Francesca also works as a consultant for the International Relations Bureau of the Community of Sant’Egidio, focusing on Central Africa.

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European Political Foundation - N° 4 BE 896.230.213 | Avenue des Arts 46 1000 Brussels (Belgium)

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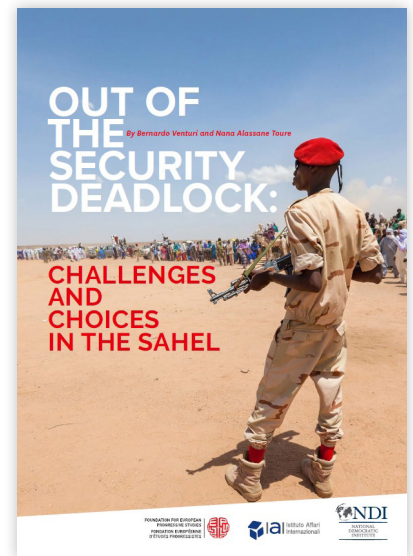
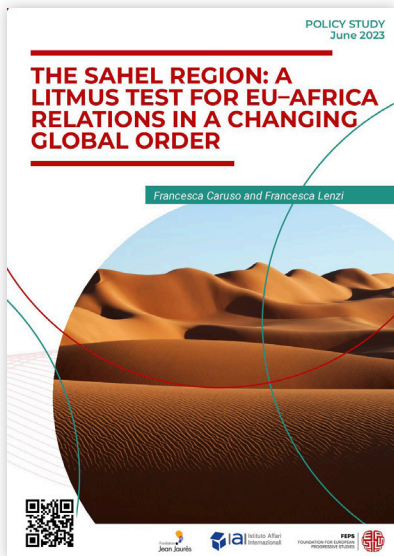
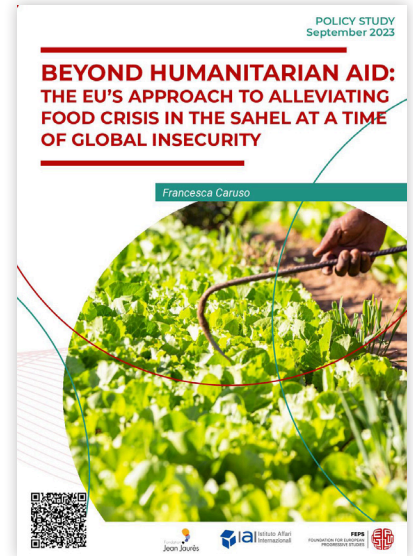
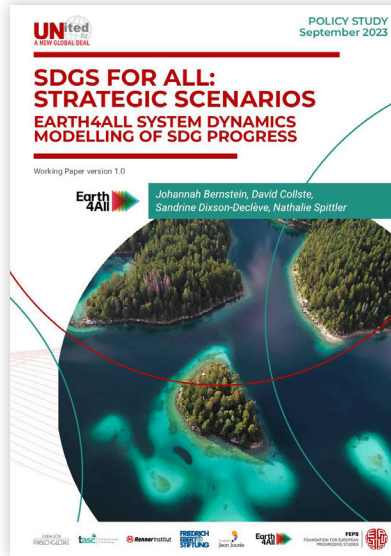
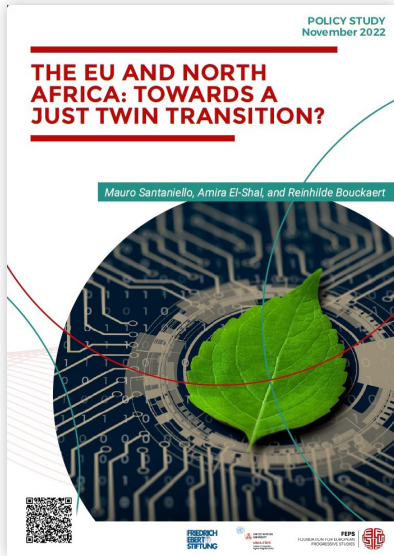
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ON SIMILAR TOPICS



Stronger resilience through cooperation in the Sahel