
THE SAHEL REGION: A LITMUS TEST FOR EU–AFRICA RELATIONS IN A CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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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 has further complicated regional dynamics, particularly following the arrival of Wagner Group Russian mercenaries and the withdrawal of French military forces from Mali. While the European Union (EU) adopted an integrated strategy for the region in 2021, it 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, whereby migration concerns overlap with increasing debates within European societies on external commitments, and for its external-action capabilities in the African continent. 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.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to analyse the context in which the EU is trying to implement its 2021 Integrated Strategy in the Sahel by examining the challenges and opportunities that the new regional context offers Europe to act on behalf of security, peace and democracy in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

In 2023, conflicts and political instability in the Sahel show no sign of abating. 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 has further complicated regional dynamics, particularly after the arrival of the Wagner Group¹ in Mali as a first sign that the country's new military junta wanted to diversify external alliances.

The Sahel region continues to be of strategic importance for the European Union (EU) – both for internal dynamics, whereby migration concerns overlap with increasing debates within European societies on external commitments, and for its external-action capabilities in the African continent. The consequences of the energy crises provoked by the war in Ukraine have exacerbated Europe's need to strengthen its partnership with African countries in order to diversify its energy supply. 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 Moscow have increased. The regional context in which the EU is seeking to implement its foreign and security policy represents new challenges questioning the Union's ability to act not only in the Sahel but across the whole continent. Some of the dynamics taking place in the Sahel countries have recently occurred in other nations such as the Central African Republic (CAR) and Ethiopia.

The objective of this paper, therefore, is to analyse the challenges and opportunities that the new regional context offers Europe in supporting security, peace and democracy in Africa. This will be done by analysing the 2021 Integrated Strategy in the Sahel² in order to highlight the measures the EU has put in place in the region to respond to new local, regional and international dynamics.

Methodologically, the proposed research relies mainly on qualitative data-collection tools and analysis – namely, literature review, desk research and key-informant interviews. The literature review and desk research both aim to take stock of the assessment of European strategy in the region and analyse the regional context. In addition to this, the research has involved a dozen EU and Sahel experts, as well as civil-society representatives, through virtual meetings and bilateral interviews in order to dig deeper on policymaking and the possible future trajectories of EU action in the region.

1. THE EU STRATEGY IN THE SAHEL

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1.1 What does the Sahel mean for the EU?

Since the start of the security crisis with the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya in 2011 and the acceleration of unwanted migration flows from the sub-Saharan countries in 2015, the importance of the Sahel for the EU has turned from that of a desert land on Europe's doorstep into a priority for its foreign-policy neighbourhood influence.³ The region is considered a crucial component in outlining a secure EU system since Sahelian geographical proximity is defined as a "bridge" between North Africa and the sub-Saharan region. Furthermore, the region has been recognised as a major concern for the EU due to the presence there of multiple crises, which have hidden repercussions on the Mediterranean stability and security condition. In fact, the risks of terrorism and communal violence; injections of migration flows across European borders; illicit human and drugs trafficking; highly politically unstable national and regional institutions; severe economic deficits; and, lastly, ongoing oppressive humanitarian threats exacerbated by the impacts of climate change are among the factors that have positioned the Sahel centre stage in Europe's attempts to cushion the spill-over effect on the European security dimension.⁴

In a historical period characterised by transnational polycrises throughout the entire international community, the years 2022–23 have made the Sahel and the African continent generally even more relevant to the EU due to an additional factor: the energy crisis resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Although the Sahel has always been regarded as strategic for its extraction resources (such as oil, precious metals and minerals),⁵ with the sudden drastic reduction of gas supplies from Russia the EU was compelled to rethink partners to support the energy needs of individual member states. In this situation, Africa, which already represents 20 per cent of European gas imports, plays an even more crucial role in the overall energy

security of the EU.⁶ As a matter of fact, countries such as Nigeria, Algeria, Egypt, Cameroon, Angola, Equatorial Guinea or the Democratic Republic of the Congo are essential actors in Europe's efforts to build its diversification strategy for a secure gas supply.

In July 2022, Algeria, Nigeria and Niger signed a memorandum of understanding for the formalisation of the Trans-Sahara pipeline (TSGP), which could hold great potential for Europe's gas supply. Specifically, the pipeline is intended to transport 30 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas a year from those three nations, with Europe as its final destination.⁷ As a result, the current context could prove to be a win–win outcome for both the African and European continents. European gas diversification would be satisfied by African countries that, by attracting foreign investments, would increase production to meet both internal and external demand. However, this scenario has proved difficult to realise due to the security instability and geopolitical uncertainty that particularly afflicts the Sahel region and its neighbouring states. By its very nature, the pipeline would cross areas highly affected by the actions of the jihadist group Boko Haram and areas of Niger where the presence of other jihadist groups is growing, potentially destabilising the whole region's integrity.⁸

Therefore, the EU is constantly being urged to address two crucial dynamics: the strengthening of the securitisation of the most vulnerable regions and the containment of multipolar competition led by China, Turkey and the Gulf countries, along with Russian influence, through a central repositioning of the EU in Africa and in the Mediterranean region. In these two dynamics, the Sahel, strategically positioned at the centre of the African continent, has the ability to transversely influence the stability and security of the Mediterranean and Africa. This means that the Sahel and Europe are intrinsically

connected, and the security of the latter depends heavily on that of the former.⁹ Therefore, the EU has a well-founded interest in continuing to enhance and promote the principles of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) in the region by acting as a stabiliser against internal and external threats.¹⁰ Besides this, the Sahel is also essential to the EU's foreign-policy actions because it may prove to be a testing ground for the Union in two circumstances: firstly, in demonstrating the effectiveness of its intervention in the African continent and, secondly, in confirming to its Sahelian partners that a collaboration partnership with the EU could contribute to stability, peace and development in the region. Hence, bearing in mind the pivotal role of the Sahel to the EU, the European approach there must be reviewed and implemented in conjunction with the new challenges that have emerged – especially in the last year and a half.

1.2 The European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel

In April 2021, the Council of the European Union approved the new EU Integrated Strategy in the Sahel. The strategy was formulated at a time when most of the current, worrisome crises had not yet emerged. Indeed, in the year of its conclusion, migratory flows along the Mediterranean routes were quite controlled, Sahelian political instability was not yet fuelled by the ensuing succession of coups d'état, the presence of the Wagner Group was not yet threatening the region and the EU was not experiencing a full-scale war at its borders.

Nevertheless, the prevailing European atmosphere was strongly characterised by an eagerness to intervene in the region to bring about effective changes that would make up for the failures and unmet goals of the previous strategies outlined in 2011 and 2015. Indeed, the European presence was being increasingly fortified in various ways – from the opening of new embassies in the region to the appointment of special envoys to demonstrate continued diplomatic engagement along with the EU High Representative for the Sahel. A particularly important aspect of this atmosphere is marked by the fact that the EU was also a founding member of

the Sahel Alliance in 2017, committing to coordinate international development spending in the region. Clearly, all these attempts were a way of trying to single out European problems directly related to the African sphere by seeking to deal with the very issues that were afflicting the region.

Additionally, the strong intervention optimism of that time was also employed to counter the repeated criticism that the EU was receiving about its feeble operation: in other words, a European intervention that was being driven by well-constructed strategies on paper but vague practical action on the ground. Above all, the EU lacked a clear political strategy that would effectively engage its Sahelian partners in a more comprehensive security context.¹¹ This difficulty in putting intentions into effective practice stemmed from several factors but was driven mainly by the adversity inherent in encompassing all the interests of European countries in a single European action. For this reason, the EU's policy in the Sahel has always been described as a “laboratory” of attempts to intervene in order to satisfy different interests: firstly, to resolve the migration issue for the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea with long-term development programmes in the region; secondly, to support French military efforts in Operation Barkhane;¹² and lastly, but above all, to introduce a European dimension into the security-and-development sector of the region.¹³

Since 2011, the EU has been involved in the Sahel with the adoption of the European Union Strategy for Security and Development, which was reinforced in 2015 with the Sahel Regional Action Plan (SAR). These two strategies had a strong, militarised, security-focused approach but the expected results were not properly achieved. For this reason, following criticism of the failure of unmet targets, the EU decided to move away from a security-oriented approach to a more integrated intervention promoting good governance, and supporting human rights and economic development while addressing the root causes of insecure conditions in a framework of regional cooperation.¹⁴

The EU's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel 2021 aims to address contemporary challenges recognising the

importance of the mutual accountability between the EU and its Sahelian partners in finding long-term, sustainable solutions. A wide range of instruments was outlined to frame a more pragmatic strategy. Firstly, a deep-seated focus on political dialogue between the EU and its member states, on the one hand, and the G5 Sahel and each of its member states (Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Mali and Mauritania), on the other, forms the basis of the Integrated Strategy's intentions. This political dimension focuses on good practice in state governance by addressing human rights, the rule of law and transparent electoral processes, democracy and the fight against corruption – seeking to ensure that states respect their commitment towards the population and holding government actors accountable (Articles 40–41). Secondly, the EU, through the European Peace Facility (EPF),¹⁵ has the intention of boosting security-sector reform with a financial and training contribution to the fight against terrorism and armed groups. Support for peacebuilding and mediation efforts has been increased as well, thanks to an ambitious public-communication policy to raise awareness of hybrid threats and reconciliation activities (Articles 42, 43 and 44). Lastly, strengthening the role of the multilateral system, the EU intends to ensure constant political monitoring of the implementation of its strategy in conjunction with continuous confrontation with its Sahelian partners for the definition of priority objectives, implementing the lessons learned from past failed developments (Article 45).¹⁶ This last Article of the EU's strategy has particular value because, following the recent changing context in the Sahel due to the several coups d'état and the deterioration in relations between Sahelian governments and European institutions, the EU must be able to respond appropriately to the delicate changes and new needs of its Sahelian partners if it does not want to be deposed from its entrenched role in the region and become a less influential actor there.

Nonetheless, the EU's 2021 Integrated Strategy in the Sahel clearly reveals complexities and difficulties – especially between what is communicated in the strategy and the actuality of its implementation. As already stated, the latest European focus shifts from a purely military and security approach to a

vision that places valuable emphasis on governance satisfying the critical needs of the region. More emphasis than hitherto is placed on the desire to establish a political and civilian approach to bring the EU closer to civil organisations and local authorities in order to establish a relationship of cooperation and mutual trust. However, a problem persists in the manner in which the EU tries to bring about actions and improvements without really taking local demands into consideration. One of the most widespread complaints from civil societies is precisely the profound lack of interest on the part of European actors to allocate funding where civilians require precise support and assistance (such as in infrastructure networks, in the health and educational sectors, and in projects to ward off the humanitarian crisis).¹⁷ The same logic occurred for the military-assistance discourse – and, indeed, the result escalated into violent clashes pitting Malian and Burkinabé forces against international convoys that forced the recent withdrawal of Germany, Denmark and France from the region. This point is closely related to another objective of the European strategy – namely, to provide troops for the protection of civilians and human rights. The security dimension in the Sahel is extremely delicate, and characterised by a range of different actors operating across the region. European forces have sought to cooperate with local armies to counter the threat of jihadist groups that are constantly perpetuating violent attacks against civilian populations. However, the problem raised by the Sahelian authorities and civil organisations is the lack of adequate training and armaments provided to local soldiers in order to possess the appropriate means to defend civilians. In addition, there have been scandals whereby troops were not well fed or paid on time.¹⁸ Local Sahelian actors have repeatedly reiterated their request not to have any foreign “boots” – and especially not French ones – on their “ground”. If the EU is currently forbidden from carrying out military activities in the Sahel, even under the pretext of fighting the jihadist threat, the only margin of operation it has right now is to truly support the local armies, providing them with all necessary means to restore internal security and stability. In other words, the EU could provide the national armies with a support programme of well-constructed training and awareness sensibility

about the human-rights dimension needed to protect civilians through citizen-based rights security, which is able to recognise the needs of vulnerable groups, being gender-, ethnic- and age-sensitive – all in a dimension of inclusiveness. But in order to achieve this outcome, respect for human rights has to start first of all from local soldiers in order to forge the best conditions available and permit them to work for the welfare of the Sahel. Surely, in this context, the EU can make a significant contribution while staying faithful to the designated goals of its 2021 strategy.

2. THE REGIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXT OF THE EU'S INTEGRATED STRATEGY IN THE SAHEL

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The regional and global context in which the EU is trying to implement its integrated strategy is somewhat different to that in 2021 when the text was adopted, and this section will analyse the new challenges that the EU has to address at the local, regional and global level.

2.1 2023: a year of insecurity and humanitarian crisis

In 2023, the Sahel crisis entered its twelfth year. Despite the proliferation of international missions and contingents in the region, the Sahel has become a new epicentre of terrorism. The region continues to be plagued by violence and fragmentation, while several Sahelian governments have proved unable to provide effective security in the face of the increasing number of terrorist groups and their activities. Between 2007 and 2021, the number of terrorism-related deaths there increased tenfold, accounting for 35 per cent of the global total of such fatalities in 2021 compared with just 1 per cent in 2007.¹⁹ By 2022, the violence had expanded in intensity and geographic reach: nearly two thirds of the districts in Mali, Niger and (especially) Burkina Faso have experienced violent Islamist attacks.²⁰ The most heavily affected regional areas are the Tri-Border, North-central Burkina Faso, Central Mali and Western Niger – mostly where there is a reduced security presence and natural resources, such as gold. According to the study, violence is also potentially expanding in neighbouring countries of the Gulf of Guinea, such as Togo, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire.

The vast majority of violent extremist activities are related to the Islamic State in the greater Sahara (ICGS) and to the Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimin (JNIM) coalition. Civilians are increasingly being targeted – especially in Burkina Faso, where

violence has displaced nearly 2 million people. Against this backdrop, the region is facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Armed conflict together with chronic poverty, climate change, food insecurity and political instability has made the Sahel crisis one of the fastest growing in the world.²¹ In 2022, over 34.6 million Sahelians needed assistance and protection – about 6 million more than in 2021.

2.2 The wave of military coups and a global democratic crisis

In May 2021, Mali experienced its second military coup within nine months. On 24 May, members of the armed forces arrested Mali's transitional president, Bah Ndaw, and prime minister, Moctar Ouane, in what has been called a "coup within a coup".²² This ousting of the transitional government was initiated by Colonel Assimi Goïta, the same person who had seized power in an August 2020 coup amid nonviolent mass protests demanding the resignation of then President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.

Since then, the Sahel has been overwhelmed by a wave of successive military coups.²³ On the one hand, this political instability has contradicted the idea that coups were "going out of fashion" in Africa.²⁴ On the other hand, it has questioned the European leadership's optimism at being able to establish a mutual accountability relationship with local governments. Mali's coups were followed by two military takeovers in Burkina Faso, occurring between January and October 2022. In Chad, former President Idriss Déby's son Mahamat took power in the aftermath of his father's death by establishing a transitional government in April 2021. Only in Niger was a coup thwarted – by the country's security forces, just two days before the inauguration of Mohamed Bazoum's presidency.

As Chadian President Mahamat Déby recently stated in an interview,²⁵ in all three countries those responsible for the coups justified the seizure of power as a takeover to avoid national chaos²⁶ and promised to the international community (i.e. the United Nations, the African Union, ECOWAS [the Economic Community of West African States] and the EU) a limited transition before returning to democratic rule. In each of the three countries, the end of the transition has been postponed: at the time of writing, Mali will go to elections in June 2024, Burkina Faso in July 2023 and Chad in October 2024.

The reasons behind these coups are varied and might be explained by several internal factors. In Mali, for instance, Covid-19 had a devastating effect on all sectors of society – especially its security, economic and social dimensions.²⁷ In Burkina Faso, the two military takeovers were the results of a clean-up policy initiated by former President Kaboré (2015–22) in order to eliminate the legacy of his predecessors, thus also undermining army unity.²⁸ However, the regional coups’ domino effect²⁹ is also the outcome of several macro-trends: the failure of economic and social development; the absence of the state in parts of the territory, which has created a breeding ground for the development of trafficking in drugs, arms and humans; and ethnic and religious tensions between nomadic and transhumant pastoralist populations and sedentary farmers, between Christians and Muslims (even if the strongest conflicts remain internal to the Muslim religion), and between different social currents that strongly oppose each other.³⁰

Military takeovers are not new to Africa: out of 486 attempted or successful coups carried out in the world since 1950, Africa has seen 214 – the most of any continent.³¹ In the last three years, apart from Sahelian states military coups took place in other African countries such as Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Sudan. According to a study by Afro Barometer, only a minority of Africans believe that elections can produce representative and accountable leadership. The survey suggests that it is in the provision of democratic goods, ranging from inclusiveness to transparency, rather than in the aspirations of citizens that democracy in Africa is running out of steam.³²

Also, while most Africans believe in elections as the best way to select their leaders, popular support for elections has weakened – and only a minority think they help produce representative, accountable leadership.³³ At the global level, 2022 marked a serious setback for freedom and democracy as a result of the war in Ukraine, coups and attacks on democratic institutions.³⁴ In addition to this, the United States Capitol Hill attack on 6 January 2021, when a storm of Republican supporters disrupted a joint session of Congress convened to certify the results of the presidential elections, damaged US (and consequently European) moral authority and capacity to exert pressure on countries that are not committing to democratic values. This was particularly true because the US had hitherto been considered the proverbial “leader of the free world”, or at least a country where many of the prerogatives of democracy – such as elections – were not contested. As President Mnangagwa from Zimbabwe declared of the Capitol Hill riots the following day, “the U.S. has no moral right to punish another nation under the guise of upholding democracy”.³⁵

2.3 A fragile regional-architecture structure

In the EU’s Strategy in the Sahel, the Union called for a new approach to security-sector reform and security assistance to be jointly developed with regional organisations such as the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS. Although ECOWAS was created in 1975 as an economic regional organisation, since the 1990s it has provided military, mediation and peacebuilding support to its member states.³⁶ But the latest military coups have demonstrated the incapacity of the Economic Community to deter potential putsches – despite its commitment to support good governance, the rule of law and sustainable development for peace and conflict prevention.³⁷ The military coup by Colonel Damiba in Burkina Faso, for instance, took place two weeks after ECOWAS imposed heavy diplomatic, political and economic sanctions on Mali after the military government there proposed a five-year transition.³⁸ The sanctions comprised the freezing of Malian assets in the Central Bank of West African States,

the closing of the borders between Mali and other ECOWAS member states, and the suspension of all transactions with Bamako except those relating to medical products and basic necessities. Although the Malian government responded to ECOWAS by declaring it would continue to pursue dialogue with the organisation, it closed all its borders with its other member states (except Guinea); condemned the sanctions as “illegitimate, illegal, and inhumane”; and called on the Malian populace to protest.³⁹ This call was answered by thousands of people, who took to the streets of Bamako brandishing placards that read “Stop France’s genocide in Mali” and elicited solidarity from various regional civil-society groups. According to the Malian junta, ECOWAS had been manipulated by “extra-regional powers with undeclared goals”.⁴⁰ The sub-text of this accusation was that ECOWAS had been manipulated by France, the old colonial power, which wanted to strike at the Malian junta after it let the Wagner Group’s Russian mercenaries into the country. At the regional level, ECOWAS is perceived as an organisation defending the interests of a few heads of state rather than of the population at large.⁴¹

Another element that has reduced the legitimacy of ECOWAS is its response to the unconstitutional changes that have occurred in the past few years. Previously, the Economic Community served as a deterrent to the illegitimate seizure of power. According to Article 3 of ECOWAS’s 1999 Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security,⁴² the organisation can deploy a civilian and military force to maintain or restore peace within the sub-region, whenever the need arises. According to Article 1(c) of Protocol 2001 on Democracy and Good Governance, ECOWAS has zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means.⁴³ In 2017, when the Gambian former president Yahya Jammeh did not want to hand over power to his rival, Adama Barrow, who had been democratically elected, ECOWAS intervened not only diplomatically but also militarily – forcing Jammeh to leave the country after having ruled it for 22 years. By contrast, in recent years ECOWAS has remained silent in the face of unconstitutional changes such as those in Guinea,⁴⁴ and helpless when confronted

with incidents of repression of citizens, corruption phenomena or socio-economic defaults that put a strain on the lives of the region’s citizens.

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.⁴⁵ This was evident during the recent coups in the Sahel: while with Mali ECOWAS decided on political and economic sanctions, with Burkina Faso the organisation limited itself to political sanctions. This decision may also 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.

2.4 A multipolar competition dominated by an old lens

The context in which the EU intends to act in the Sahel is even more complex when one takes into account the growing multipolar competition between various actors. The Sahel is crowded with regional and global actors such as the Gulf countries, Turkey, China and Russia. While Europeans have dominated the security sector in the region since 2012, China’s presence is motivated by economic interests such as natural resources, mining and industry. In Mali, for instance, China has made significant economic investments in the industrial sector, while in Niger and Chad its areas of investment are energy, mining and infrastructure.⁴⁶ However, China is also increasing the security dimension as the success of the aforementioned investments is put at risk by increasing regional instability.⁴⁷ Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have extended their influence in the region through cultural diplomacy.⁴⁸ Turkey, other than diffusing a medium-term soft-power foreign policy, has recently increased its presence military – especially in Niger – by selling its drones. Diplomatically, Gulf countries such as Qatar have also tried to become key partners in the Chadian transition, organising a five-month dialogue in Doha between the Chadian government and 54 Chadian politico-armed groups

in order to reduce tensions and contribute to the successful transition of newly elected President Mahamat Déby. In the same vein, Algeria has been intermittently involved in Mali – in the mediation process between Bamako and rebel groups in the north of the country.

However, the external actor that has had the greatest impact on the EU's and its member states' presence in the Sahel has been Russia. Russia's presence in Africa is often described as only a military one, underestimating the fact that Moscow is establishing relations on the continent that go beyond the security sector. Moscow's growing presence in the African continent began earlier than 2021: the Russia–Ukraine crisis of 2014 and the first Western sanctions against Moscow pushed the Kremlin to go back to the African continent. Since then, Russian authorities have pursued an aggressive strategy of re-establishment through their two main resources: arms sales and the provision of security services. From 2016 to 2020, Moscow supplied 30 per cent of all the arms purchased by sub-Saharan African countries, becoming Africa's biggest arms supplier. Since 2017, it has signed military-cooperation agreements with 20 sub-Saharan African countries, up from only seven from 2010 to 2017; in Sudan, it may even have found a host country for a military base on the Red Sea.⁴⁹

Officially, Russia arrived in Mali in September 2021, in the form of the Wagner Group, to both provide security assistance to top government officials and to fight against the country's jihadist groups.⁵⁰ In 2022, Mali also received military equipment from Moscow such as jets, combat helicopters and mobile radar systems. Its military junta welcomed the shipment as a demonstration of a “win-win partnership with the Russian Federation”.⁵¹ After Burkina Faso's second military coup, Russia offered its support to the government in facing down the jihadist threat. At the time of writing, it is still uncertain whether the new Colonel Traoré government will accept Moscow's help, although some recent episodes raise fears of a possible rapprochement with Russia. In February 2023, Burkina Faso urged the French troops mobilised on its soil to leave the country within a month.⁵² The same month, the

United States shared information with authorities in Chad that Wagner is working with Chadian rebels to destabilise the government in N'Djamena.⁵³ This information has been denied by several rebel groups and has been described as an attempt by the West to legitimise the government's clampdown on the population.⁵⁴

However, the example of the Central African Republic (CAR) shows that although Russia's return to Africa has been viewed primarily from a security perspective (Wagner in the CAR is mainly involved in the fight against rebel groups and ensuring the president's security), Moscow's goal is to build long-term cooperation with African countries that will be also economic, humanitarian and cultural. As the Russian ambassador in the CAR explained to a local newspaper in March 2023, Russia is developing its partnership with the CAR in a variety of sectors, including education, by, for example, offering CAR students the possibility to study medicine, agriculture or defence in Russia; by offering to teach Russian and International Relations at the country's public university; and by promoting a Russian cultural centre for young people where they can watch Russian films. Furthermore, Russia is deepening its religious ties with the country: in 2022, it included the CAR in the African exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church.⁵⁵ As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with veto power, Russia is a diplomatic asset for those African countries that do not wish to align with the West. In Ethiopia, during the Tigray crisis, Russia's diplomatic support has been key for Addis Ababa. While most of the international community criticised the Ethiopian government's alleged blockade of humanitarian aid in Tigray, Russia has supported Addis by delaying UN Security Council meetings called to discuss the declaration of famine in the Ethiopian region.⁵⁶

Moscow's re-engagement in the continent paid off as Russia's war in Ukraine broke out. The United Nations emergency session on March 2022, in which the General Assembly voted on a resolution to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, demonstrated that many African countries wish to be neutral or even to side with Russia. In fact, 17 out of 54 African

countries abstained and Eritrea voted against. This year, the result was similar: during the UN General Assembly vote to demand that Russia pull its troops out of Ukraine, 15 African countries abstained and Mali joined Eritrea in its vote against the resolution alongside Syria, North Korea and Belarus.⁵⁷ Together with Sudan and the CAR, Mali and Burkina Faso are at the forefront of this new era of African politics, in which former colonial powers – especially France – are heavily criticised and national sovereignty revenged. From a global perspective, this new trend in Africa fits into a wider positioning of the so-called Global South, which includes emerging countries like India, China and Brazil. Together with the Middle East and Asia, Africa is a key battleground for those countries that do not subscribe to the narrative that countering Russia is a moral imperative if democracy, territorial integrity and a rules-based world order are to be upheld.⁵⁸

3. THE LIMITS OF EU MITIGATION STRATEGIES

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3.1 The reaction to military coups

The first aim of the 2021 EU Integrated Strategy was to promote democracy and good governance by addressing human rights, the rule of law, transparent electoral processes and the fight against corruption. According to the strategy, success for the EU would depend on mutual accountability, continuous political dialogue and a climate of trust with local governments.⁵⁹ The wave of military coups has obviously limited this goal – especially in Mali, where the relationship between the junta and Europe has been most sorely tested. With its second coup, Mali became the epicentre not only of violence in the region but also of a structural political crisis between some Sahelian countries and the EU and its member states. With this second putsch, political divisions between Mali and France reached their peak after years of tensions accumulated since the beginning of the crisis in 2012. Although France was present in Mali with its counterterrorist Operation Barkhane, disagreements with local authorities regarding the management of the security crisis in the country's north and the question of opening talks with the leaders of the al-Qaida affiliate JNIM, as decided by former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, strained relations between the two countries.⁶⁰ Mali shifted away from its traditional ally and sought military support from the Wagner Group's Russian mercenaries.

According to Bamako, the arrival of Wagner was intended to “fill the gap” that would inevitably be created with the withdrawal of Barkhane forces,⁶¹ the announcement of which was made immediately after the second coup. Although political instability certainly persuaded Paris to leave the country, this decision also resulted from the fact that Barkhane had become increasingly unpopular in France – a detail that might have swayed French voters during the presidential elections of 2022. Both in Mali and in France, the operation has been described as

a genuine fiasco: since 2013, 51 French soldiers have died while insecurity in Mali and the wider region has continued to spread.⁶² Tensions between Bamako and Paris culminated in January 2022, when Mali expelled the French ambassador after Paris questioned the legitimacy of the military junta. Moreover, from the CAR to Senegal, frictions between the local governments and/or civil societies of former colonies and Paris have been constantly increasing.

Against this backdrop, the EU reacted in concert with France, making it clear that up to this point the Union's foreign policy in the Sahel was aligned with that of Paris. After Mali's second coup, the EU condemned the military takeover and announced a plan to support ECOWAS's sanctions against Bamako in response to the junta's delay of elections until December 2025. This decision was the result of strong pressure that France brought to bear on the EU at a time when Paris was holding the rotating EU presidency.⁶³ The sanctions were strongly criticised both by the Malian government and by international non-governmental organisation (NGOs). In a letter addressed to the international community, a group of NGOs – including the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the International Rescue Committee – warned that sanctions could have a devastating impact on a country that was facing its worst food insecurity in 10 years, with over a third of its population in need of humanitarian aid.⁶⁴ However, ECOWAS lifted economic and financial sanctions in April 2022, after Mali agreed to return to civilian rule by March 2024 and published a new electoral law. Meanwhile, sanctions have indeed badly hit the country, provoking a default on over 300 million US dollars of debt.⁶⁵

The second military coup and the arrival of the Wagner Group compromised not only Paris's but also the EU's stabilisation efforts in Mali. Following France's military withdrawal, the EU suspended

its EUTM (European training of Mali forces) in the country in April 2022,⁶⁶ citing a lack of guarantees from the Malian authorities that Russian military contractors would not interfere in the work.⁶⁷ A couple of months before, 15 EU countries along with Canada had published a letter condemning Russia's presence in Mali.⁶⁸ However, from a security perspective, the EU decided to remain engaged in the region and refocused its effort on countries where it sees a more positive development trajectory – such as Niger, where the Union has deployed a new EU training mission.⁶⁹ Paris and Europe's deteriorating relations with Mali also had an impact on MINUSMA, the United Nations peacekeeping mission that was set up in 2013 to stabilise the country and to protect civilians. In July 2022, Malian authorities arrested nearly 50 soldiers from Côte d'Ivoire, who had come to Mali to work for a contracting company of the MINUSMA,⁷⁰ and in February 2023 the head of the mission's human-rights division was expelled from the country.⁷¹

As friction with France and Europe increased, at the regional level two blocs were created: the pro-West bloc with Niger and Chad, and the anti-West bloc with Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea. The latter countries have recently signed an agreement wherein they state that on issues related to infrastructure, the economy and security they will act as "as a unique bloc".⁷² In line with this fracture, Mali withdrew from the G5 Sahel in May 2022.⁷³

Contrary to the situation in Mali, the EU had a smoother reaction with the military coups in Chad and Burkina Faso. 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-standards approach regarding its own interests. Chad is perceived by Europeans as a key country in guaranteeing a certain stability in the Sahel thanks to its army and its ability to prevent the terrorist threat from penetrating too deeply, and thus expanding.

Also, together with Niger, Chad hosts a permanent French military base – the second largest in Africa.⁷⁴

However, French and EU double standards did not prevent N'Djamena from hardening its tone with European member states by adopting attitudes similar to those of the Malian junta. In April 2023, Chadian authorities expelled the German ambassador due to his "impolite attitude" towards the government and a "lack of respect for diplomatic customs".⁷⁵ Germany, in turn, expelled from Berlin the Chadian ambassador, while Brussels published a communiqué in which it defined the event as a "particularly hostile gesture given the long-standing partnership and commitment of the EU and its member states to Chad, including in the context of the ongoing transition".⁷⁶ The EU has also reiterated the importance of a rapid return to constitutional order and a time-limited transition that guarantees respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

President Déby extended his tenure in office by two years at the beginning of October 2022 using a national reconciliation forum boycotted by a large part of the opposition and major rebel groups. Furthermore, at least 50 people were killed and nearly 600 arrested as hundreds took to the streets on 20 October to demand a swifter transition to democratic rule.⁷⁷ The EU and its member states condemned the excessive use of force against demonstrators, and called on the Chadian government to find those responsible for the violence and bring them to justice.⁷⁸ Yet, contrary to the situation in Mali, neither the EU nor the African Union imposed sanctions on Chad's government. This reaction, other than highlighting a double-standards approach, emphasises an aspect of the EU's and its member states' foreign policy that puts it in greater difficulty: beyond the external alliances (i.e. Mali with Russia vs. Chad with France) on which the West is structuring much of its foreign policy in Africa, all the countries of the Sahel alike claim their own national sovereignty and reject any kind of external interference in governance. Finally, it is therefore good to reflect on Niger's positioning in the medium to long term. France has moved the entire contingent that was in Mali (2,400 troops) to Niger, but internal and regional dynamics do not guarantee that Niger will remain solely French/

European-aligned rather than seeking new allies. President Bazoum himself may be forced to “diversify” his alliances in order to respond to the internal demands of the population.

Regarding Burkina Faso, the EU condemned the country’s two coups but adopted a more balanced 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 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 Ethiopia, during the Tigray crisis (2020–22), the EU initially reacted with a highly critical approach to the way the government was handling the conflict and the humanitarian crisis in Tigray. But in parallel, Ethiopia’s government was supported by China, Russia and the Gulf countries. This multipolar competition had a major impact on EU–Ethiopia relations, which have sharply deteriorated. The same happened in the CAR, where the “ultimatum” approach of France in the face of the increasing presence of Russia in the country has achieved nothing except to degrade relations between Bangui and its traditional allies.

Against this backdrop, the EU expressed its intention to continue to be engaged in the Sahel during the last European Council meeting in January 2023, at which the EU member states confirmed that the region remains a priority. Following the decision to establish a new Military Partnership Mission in Niger, the Council agreed to develop a Crisis Management Concept in order to offer the coastal states in the Gulf of Guinea concrete engagement and targeted training and support.

3.2 The European Peace Facility and the war in Ukraine

A further aim of the 2021 Integrated Strategy was to boost security-sector reform with a financial and training contribution towards the fight against terrorism and armed groups through the European Peace Facility (EPF). Established in 2021 by Council decision to preserve peace, prevent conflicts and

strengthen international security, the EPF covers an increased range of EU military missions and operations and allows the Union to support partners on a global level, either bilaterally or through international or regional organisations. Through the EPF, the EU can provide training and equipment, including items designed to deliver lethal force for defensive purposes, as well as maintenance, repair and refit services. The total budget for the period 2021–27 is almost 8 billion euro.⁷⁹

As described in the section above, political tensions between the EU and its member states and the Sahel’s military juntas have also hampered European military efforts. France withdrew the forces behind Operation Barkhane from Mali in August 2022, while the EU has suspended its training mission and several EU member states have withdrawn their military participation in MINUSMA. However, another element that has diverted the EU’s attention from the terrorism threat in the Sahel is the war in Ukraine. In 2021, most of the EPF was dedicated to the Sahelian countries, with 24 million euro to provide military equipment to Malian forces and an EU training mission in Mali and 35 million euro to support the G5 Sahel Joint Force. But 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, sending lethal weapons to Ukraine further exacerbated the local perception of double standards and frustration, as explained by a leader of Burkina Faso civil society.⁸⁰ Sahelian countries are against foreign military presence in their countries and instead ask for lethal-arms support to defeat the jihadist threat. This, of course, shows that the local governments themselves adopt double standards, since the Wagner Group represents a foreign military force. Moreover, sending arms to Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso is even more problematic as they might be diverted

or misused by armed groups and local armies.⁸¹ That said, it is increasingly problematic for the EU to justify the large difference between the financial commitment it is devoting to Ukraine and that to other countries in crisis, which until recently were considered strategic for the stability and security of Europe.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the EU's formal engagement, the challenges to the implementation of its strategy from a political and security perspective remain high. 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. The military coups, combined with multipolar competition with Russia and the weakening of regional organisations, demonstrate that the 2021 Integrated Strategy was conceived with an optimism about the region's development that has proved to be detached from reality.

Therefore, the political and security objectives of the EU – to strengthen democracy and governance through cooperation with local governments and support for the military – have not been achieved. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has contributed to diverting European attention from the region despite an extremely difficult security and humanitarian context. However, although with different dynamics, the EU has experienced difficulties implementing its foreign policy not only in the Sahel but also in other parts of Africa, such as the CAR and Ethiopia. In addition to multipolar competition and the crisis of democracy, the EU has to face the fact that, today, Africa is part of the so-called Global South, which includes emerging countries like India, China and Brazil. Together with the Middle East and Asia, Africa is a key battleground for those countries that do not subscribe to the narrative that countering Russia is a moral imperative if democracy, territorial integrity and a rules-based world order are to be upheld.

Against this backdrop, the EU should:⁸²

- Develop a long-term approach political approach that does not solely focus on military operations. This can be done by better understanding the

context in which it operates, through an effective analysis of power dynamics and popular demands. In this perspective, the EU should invest in foreign intelligence assets in order to be able to act impartially and objectively.

- Engage more closely with local civil-society organisations and recognise 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.

Considering the multipolar competition and the willingness of local governments, but also the population generally, to develop new alliances, the EU should both act in concert with other powers – including the Gulf countries, Turkey and China – and strengthen regional organisations. This can be done by avoiding fostering a proliferation of sub-regional organisations or alliances that only create confusion and ineffectiveness, but by supporting the more established ones such as ECOWAS and the African Union – and by funding existing small organisations that have influence on the ground. In this respect, the EU should consider the Sahel region as a litmus test for its capacity to act for peace and democracy in a multipolar world.

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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 has further complicated regional dynamics, particularly following the arrival of Wagner Group Russian mercenaries and the withdrawal of French military forces from Mali. While the European Union (EU) adopted an integrated strategy for the region in 2021, it 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, whereby migration concerns overlap with increasing debates within European societies on external commitments, and for its external-action capabilities in the African continent. 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.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to analyse the context in which the EU is trying to implement its 2021 Integrated Strategy in the Sahel by examining the challenges and opportunities that the new regional context offers Europe to act on behalf of security, peace and democracy in Africa.

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