



Presidents of the G5 Sahel and France at the Press Conference of the Pau Summit

Executive summary

No promised land

France and its European partners are locked in a long-term struggle to try to stabilise the vast Sahel region, spanning from Mauritania to Chad, in which there will be no outright victory over jihadist-backed insurgents and tangible progress is hard to measure.

Often described as France's Afghanistan, the conflict risks becoming Europe's Afghanistan.

There is no promised land at the end of the wilderness. But the European Union and its member states can achieve a better outcome than the present deadly instability if they make more targeted, integrated and conditional use of

the substantial financial and military resources they are ploughing into the region.

The Sahel needs tough love from Europe - a strategy to encourage political dialogue, governance reforms, decentralisation, protecting civilians, better public services and the empowerment of women and young people, alongside security assistance, rather than an obsessive focus on counter-terrorism with a blind eye to corruption and rights abuses. It also needs international partners to deliver on the pledges they make at high-profile conferences.

Eight years after France's military intervention at the request of the Malian government to repel Islamist-dominated armed groups

advancing rapidly through central Mali and possibly towards the capital, Bamako, the security situation has deteriorated across the central Sahel region, especially in the so-called tri-border area where Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger meet.

The numbers of civilian casualties and displaced persons continues to rise, food insecurity has worsened and the footprint of jihadist groups has expanded southwards and westwards. That has spurred the growth of 'self-defence' militias, often linked to the official security forces, that have been responsible for the largest number of civilian deaths every year since 2017.

There are three reasons why the arid region with limited natural resources holds strategic importance for the European Union, and not just for France, the former colonial power:

- the proliferation of jihadist insurgents, with connections to ISIS and Al Qaeda networks in Libya and the Middle East, threatens to create a safe haven from which to destabilise fragile Sahel states and their neighbours and potentially incite radicalised young Muslims in Europe to violence;
- destabilisation in the Sahel risks spreading to key south Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) and is already threatening West African partners from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Guinea (notably Senegal, Ghana, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria) where

Europe has major economic, political and demographic interests; and

- the central position of the Sahel makes it a historic crossroads for migration and trafficking of goods, narcotics, weapons and people. Deeper instability and humanitarian crisis would be bound to trigger increased irregular migration to Europe from and through the region.

When trying to explain why the situation in the region continues to deteriorate after eight years of growing international engagement, French and EU officials repeat the same counterfactual: it would have been much worse if we hadn't intervened. States would have collapsed, populations would have been uprooted in greater numbers, and the Sahel would be a safe haven for jihadist groups extending their tentacles from Senegal to Nigeria.

Crisis of legitimacy

The Group of Five Sahel (G5S) states - Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad - are among the world's poorest countries, despite gold, uranium and oil deposits. They cover an area larger than that of the EU with a population of 84mn. Some 5mn people have been uprooted by conflict and hunger. Agriculture and pastoralism are the main economic activities but also frequent sources of tension exploited by jihadist groups.

Numerous factors have caused a deterioration of the situation - the disruptive impact of climate change, fuelling historic disputes over water and land between herders and farmers, rapid population growth, widespread poverty and unemployment, weak governance, corruption, lawlessness, human rights violations and multiple ethnic and community conflicts.

Central governments that lack broad popular legitimacy are unable to impose their authority or provide public services over large areas of their territory. State security forces and allied militias, when they are present in peripheral areas, are often feared as much or more than the insurgents due to human rights abuses, torture and extrajudicial killings.

Since 2020, the humanitarian crisis has been worsened by COVID-19, which has set back trade and economic activity, even though Sahel countries, where more than half the population is under the age of 15, have suffered fewer deaths proportionally than older Western societies.

Women and children are among the hardest hit by the conflict, which has forced the closure of some 3,000 schools and often shut traditional markets, depriving many women of the means to sell goods and feed their families, and raising pressure on extended family networks.

A peace agreement brokered by Algeria with United States and European support in 2015 with Tuareg rebel movements in Mali - though not with the main jihadist groups - has gone largely unimplemented. The political elite in Bamako showed little inclination to share power or accept regional autonomy, while the rebels were reluctant to disarm and the jihadists had no interest in cooperating.

The holding of presidential elections in Burkina Faso and Niger in late 2020 and early 2021 respectively - despite the security situation - and the installation of a more inclusive civil-military transitional authority in Mali, following the coup that ousted former elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in 2020, may have created momentum towards a long overdue revival of peace efforts and governance reforms. But it is very fragile.

Just how brittle the region's governments are was highlighted in mid-April 2021 when France's strongest ally in the Sahel, Chad President Idriss Deby, was killed fighting off an armed rebellion hours after being proclaimed winner of a deeply flawed presidential election that would have given him a sixth term after more than 30 years in power. The sudden death of the veteran autocrat removed a key military partner of the West in central Africa, whose

country hosts the headquarters of French-led Operation Barkhane, fighting jihadist insurgents across the Sahel.

Leaders of the G5S states made impressive-sounding commitments at a summit in N'Djamena, Chad in February 2021 to implement the Algiers agreement, improve security, reform the military, return basic state services to areas reclaimed from insurgents, end impunity for atrocities and crack down on corruption. European partners should hold them to those commitments.

Instability and intervention

While Mali had experienced periodic revolts by northern Tuareg separatists for decades, instability spiked after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings that toppled some authoritarian rulers in north Africa.

Algeria had driven the remnants of Islamist fighters defeated in its 1990s civil war southwards into the desert borderlands, where they formed the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) that became Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007, pledging allegiance to the jihadist franchise founded by Osama bin Laden. That movement has formed a broader coalition incorporating other Islamist groups known as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM).

Since 2015, a breakaway jihadist group declaring direct allegiance to the Islamic State movement based in Syria and Iraq - Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) - has been responsible

for a growing wave of violence in eastern Mali, western Niger and northern Burkina Faso. The two groups initially cooperated but have clashed, with ISGS seeking to impose its more absolutist, centralised and ultra-violent ideology.

The Franco-British-led NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 sparked an uncontrolled proliferation of looted Libyan weapons and the return of Tuareg fighters, who had worked as mercenaries for Muammar Gaddafi, across unguarded borders. France intervened militarily in Mali in 2013 with US support to prevent jihadist fighters allied with Tuareg insurgents from advancing towards Bamako. Paris saw a threat not only to its West African *pré carré* (backyard), but also of a terrorist safe haven from which to mount potential attacks in France and Europe.

Since 2014, the French counter-terrorism Operation Barkhane has extended to the whole region with some 5,100 soldiers now engaged in combat operations and in training and supporting the armed forces of the Sahel states and a nascent G5 Sahel Joint Force. In addition to crucial US intelligence and logistical assistance, Germany, Spain, Denmark and the United Kingdom have provided airlift and helicopter support for Barkhane. France has lost 55 soldiers in Mali since 2013.

Despite intense French pressure on EU partners to share the security burden, only Estonia contributed ground forces to Barkhane. Other European governments and parliaments have been unwilling to risk casualties in combat operations in the Sahel.

A French-led European special forces group, Task Force Takuba, became operational in 2020 to advise, support and accompany Malian armed forces in the tri-border area. Estonian special forces joined from the outset. Swedish and Czech units have since arrived, and Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal and Belgium have expressed interest in contributing.

The United States has 800 soldiers in Niger and contributes crucial intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, strategic airlift and air-to-air refuelling for Barkhane. US officers participated in the planning and conduct of French-led joint operations Bourrasque and Eclipse with troops from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in 2020 and 2021. The US has also carried out officer training for the armed forces of Sahel countries. For example, the leader of the Malian military coup, Colonel Assimi Goïta, trained with US special forces.

The Trump administration signalled in early 2020 its intention to draw down US forces in Africa but did not touch the Sahel deployment. The Biden administration has ordered a global posture review. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told a G5 Sahel summit in February 2021 that Washington would “build on existing efforts in West Africa and share lessons in the global fight against violent extremism”, but stopped short of a commitment, eagerly sought by France, to maintain its military presence.

A mostly African 12,000-soldier United Nations peacekeeping force known as MINUSMA - the largest and most dangerous UN operation worldwide - and an EU military training mission

are also deployed in Mali, as well as EU civilian capacity-building missions in Mali and Niger. MINUSMA's ability to protect the civilian population is constrained by limited equipment and training of many of its national components and the constraints of a UN mandate, which critics say make it a sitting target. The force has lost more than 230 lives since 2013, of which 135 were due to hostile action.

The conflict has caused a rising number of casualties, including at least 2,438 civilians out of a total estimated death toll of 6,257 in 2020 - the deadliest year so far. These macabre statistics, compiled by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), show more civilians were killed by security forces and allied militias than by jihadist rebels or criminal groups.

Containment, not victory

French-led intervention removed the most immediate threat to the survival of states. Yet despite tactical successes including the elimination of key insurgent leaders and hundreds of fighters of the two main jihadist groups, French commanders acknowledge that Barkhane can at most contain and degrade the insurgents. “We will never achieve a definitive victory”, the French armed forces chief-of-staff, General François Lecointre, told the public in November 2019.

French President Emmanuel Macron inherited the Sahel war in 2017 from his predecessor, François Hollande, and has prosecuted it with broad backing from the political establishment



Touareg capture Timbuktu as Mali junta restores constitution

but dwindling public support. Macron pressed G5S leaders to reaffirm publicly their request for continued French military presence, summoning them to a summit in Pau, France in 2020 to renew their vows and approve a 'military surge' to roll back jihadist gains.

A year later, after participating by video in the N'Djamena summit, he declared that the surge had "saved the Sahel for the second time" and called for a "civilian surge" to return state services to areas cleared of rebel fighters.

Macron rejected calls by Malian politicians to try to bring leaders of the Al Qaeda-linked coalition known as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) into a political dialogue. The French president said G5S leaders had agreed that veteran northern Tuareg rebel lyad

Ag Ghaly, leader of GSIM, and Amadou Koufa, his deputy who leads the Katiba Macina armed group active in central Mali, were "terrorist chiefs ... enemies and under no circumstances interlocutors". He called for "reinforced action to decapitate these organisations".

That was in marked contrast with efforts by Mali's ex-president Keïta, the transitional authorities that replaced him and Burkina Faso's re-elected president to reach out to radical movements in an attempt to reduce violence and end the conflicts through dialogue.

On the face of things, France would appear to be going all out to kill the very insurgent leaders with whom some of its African partners wish at least to explore the possibility of a political solution. The reality is more complex. French

officials said Macron needed to put a name and face on the “invisible enemy” in the Sahel to justify the military action and the casualties to voters at home. But it was up to governments in the region to decide with whom to talk.

General Lecointre was artfully ambiguous in a radio interview in late 2020, saying that selecting interlocutors was “a choice for politicians, and in the first place for Malian politicians”. While France took a principled position of not negotiating with terrorists, he said, “that does not mean that one doesn’t negotiate with an enemy”.

“Reaching an understanding with someone you have fought against requires the ability to choose the right negotiating partner - someone who is representative and legitimate. That will one day raise the question of a political agreement with people who at one stage or another were the enemies of Barkhane and the enemies of the Malian armed forces,” he added.

No proxy war, French lead

While the Sahel conflict bears similarities to the long-running Afghanistan wars, French officials are at pains to point out that it is not a proxy war. There is some evidence of Russian and Turkish (dis)information activities aimed at undermining the French presence, but geopolitical rivals are not arming or funding the jihadists. Nor are they intervening with drones or mercenaries as in Libya. Key neighbours including Algeria, Morocco, Ghana and Nigeria are actively trying to promote peace and stability.

Morocco and Gulf Arab states have invested in building mosques and training imams in Mali, and diplomats see a Saudi hand in promoting its rigorist Wahhabi brand of Islam over the historically tolerant and eclectic Maliki and Sufi strains long prevalent in the region. Some see a Saudi influence through high-profile Malian politico-religious leader Imam Mahmoud Dikho, who has acted as an intermediary between the Bamako government and jihadist groups, and who led mass protest rallies against President Keita in 2019 and 2020 before the military coup.

Russia has sold arms to Sahel governments, some of whose military commanders underwent officer training in Moscow. State-backed Russian mercenaries of the Wagner Group military company are present in Libya and the Central African Republic but not in the Sahel. China and Turkey are less present in the Sahel, where economic pickings are slim, than in other parts of Africa, where they are voraciously expanding their presence.

Some relief workers and NGOs operating in the Sahel say French-led security operations have contributed to displacement and at times hampered mediation and development efforts on the ground, undermining trust between humanitarian workers and local populations. However, the French military generally gets high marks for the targeted nature of their operations. There is greater concern about the behaviour of irregularly paid and ill-disciplined national defence and security forces, and officially sanctioned ‘self-defence’ militias.

Critics among humanitarian workers contend that French and EU policies buttress flawed governments, turning a blind eye to corruption, human rights abuses and ethnic favouritism in the name of fighting terrorism and upholding ‘stability’. Without addressing governance shortcomings through ethnic inclusion, power sharing and transparency, they argue, development and sustainable stability are impossible.

In response, French and EU officials interviewed for this report highlighted the fragility and slender human and financial resources of the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the low ratio of civil servants to the population, and the political sensitivity of European former colonial powers being seen to pressure African governments.

In practice, European governments and the European Commission tend to take their lead in the Sahel from France, whatever their private misgivings. Despite differences of approach between Berlin and Paris, Germany is politically locked into supporting French policy, not least in order to keep the low military risk exposure demanded by parliament and German public opinion.

Widening coalitions, endless coordination

In response to casualties and setbacks in the field, France has mobilised growing coalitions of European and international actors to widen the panoply of development and humanitarian action and share the military burden, while retaining operational command and control.

Successive initiatives including the Sahel Alliance established in 2017 bringing together donors and development partners, the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S) launched in 2019 to work on strengthening security forces, and the overarching Coalition for the Sahel created in 2020 have been layered on top of each other, sometimes ruffling political feathers and multiplying coordination meetings.

“Trying to coordinate their interventions has an expensive transactional cost”, said Maman Sambo Sidikou, the Executive Secretary of the G5 Sahel. “We simply can’t afford it if we want to make a difference in Sahelians’ livelihoods.”

Mali is home to the largest number of EU peace, security and development tools and is seen by some in Brussels as a test bed for the implementation of the EU’s Global Strategy for an integrated foreign, security and development policy. Since the COVID-19 pandemic struck, this has been rebranded a “Team Europe” approach, aiming to combine the resources of the Union, its member states and financial institutions.

Critics say EU effectiveness has been hampered by the mixed quality, short tours of duty and limited mandate of its security trainers and the relatively thin staffing of its diplomatic delegations in the Sahel countries. Priorities have been skewed by a short-term focus on stemming migration, although that has generated additional resources for the Sahel. And EU policy suffers from the familiar ‘too many cooks’ syndrome inherent in the Union’s complex institutional structure and in coordination between Brussels and member states.



French and Malian soldiers together in the Liptako-Gourma region

Responsibility for the Sahel is divided among three separate departments - the European External Action Service, the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (previously Development and Cooperation), and the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations - each with its own decision-making procedures. They coordinate endlessly but no one is in ultimate charge.

The EU has had a Sahel policy since 2011. Brussels has sought to combine development assistance, humanitarian aid and capacity-building in a comprehensive approach but has so far fought shy of using conditionality to insist on politically sensitive governance reforms in the host countries. It adopted a five-year Sahel action plan

in 2015, adding resources from the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa created that year. Altogether the EU and member states have spent €8.5bn on the Sahel since 2014, not including the cost of France's Operation Barkhane, estimated at close to €1bn a year in 2020.

EU policy was set to be overhauled in spring 2021 with a new strategy promising a more hard-nosed, transactional and prioritised approach. The new policy, due to be signed off by EU foreign ministers, introduces concepts such as 'shared responsibility' and 'mutual accountability' to signal that Europe is prepared to withhold budget assistance to governments that do not meet their own commitments to reform governance, fight corruption and end impunity for human rights abuses. Those

funds might be redirected through international agencies and NGOs to ensure the civilian population does not suffer.

It remains to be seen how far the Commission and the External Action Service will be willing or permitted by member states to turn the taps off. Some capitals and Commission departments have long opposed the principle of conditionality. Direct budget support to Mali was suspended temporarily after the August 2020 military coup but restored after the transitional government was installed three months later and pledged elections in March 2022.

Without political change and more inclusive governance in the region, the EU risks pouring increasing amounts of money into the sands of the Sahel to achieve little improvement while the French and their military partners are doomed to a costly and open-ended containment exercise.

Exit strategies?

Stuck in a war it cannot win but dare not lose, France has sought burden-sharing solutions through ‘Sahelisation’, ‘Europeanisation’ and ‘Africanisation’ of the security, stabilisation, financial and development challenges.

Yet despite Operation Barkhane’s declared aim of giving “partner states the capacity to ensure their own security autonomously”, it is not clear that better trained and armed G5S forces would be able to defeat the insurgents or even hold

them at bay if French forces were to withdraw. So far they have no aviation capability, vital in such a vast theatre.

Paris officials studiously avoid even vague timelines for that goal, although Macron clearly aims to reduce the French deployment before the 2022 presidential election.

Notwithstanding the creation of the G5 Sahel structures, governments and armed forces in those countries remain overwhelmingly national. Habits of cooperation will be slow to form. While the 5,100-strong G5S Joint Force, created to address cross-border security threats, has an integrated theatre command in Bamako and a joint intelligence fusion centre in Niamey, field units remain under national tactical command and soldiers are recruited and paid nationally. The Joint Force played a role in joint counter-terrorism operations with Barkhane in 2020 and 2021 but remains very much a work in progress.

Paris has pressed for the UN to provide permanent funding for the G5 Sahel Joint Force and place it under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, but the Security Council has failed to agree on such an approach so far. The United States, under the Trump administration, and Britain both opposed it. Meanwhile, the EU is providing most of the funding.

A promised African Union (AU) peacekeeping force for the region has yet to materialise. The AU appointed a special envoy for the region,

former Burundi president Pierre Buyoya, in 2012 but his small civilian AU Mission for Mali and the Sahel gained little traction and he resigned in 2020 and died after being convicted of the assassination of his predecessor.

A greater AU political and military role in stabilising the Sahel, with EU financial and technical support, would fit with the idealistic vision in Brussels and Addis Ababa of an equal Africa-Europe partnership. But it seems a distant prospect.

Efforts by Algeria to create an intelligence fusion unit for the Maghreb-Sahel region and mediate diplomatically have yielded uneven results, as the very limited implementation of the 2015 Algiers agreement illustrates. Diplomatic action by other neighbours both bilaterally in the case of Ghana and Senegal and through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has the potential to increase security, political and economic support for the central Sahel countries, driven not least by those neighbours' fears of jihadist threats seeping across their borders.

Based on more than 45 interviews with African, European, US and UN policymakers, military commanders, diplomats, aid officials, experts, civil society activists and relief workers, this study considers alternatives for European policy in the Sahel and explores potential long-term 'exit strategies'. The term is a misnomer in that the EU effort to stabilise the Sahel is and must remain open-ended, but it reflects the fact that resources and public support are not unlimited.

Among the key recommendations are:

- a more conditional approach to EU budget assistance for Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, linking payments to an agreed set of benchmarks for key governance reforms, with a credible resolve to withhold direct financial support if governments do not fulfil their own commitments; all external partners should make military equipment support conditional on much more effective measures to stem endemic corruption in national defence budgets;
- more robust mandates and organisation of the EU military and civilian missions in Mali and Niger, with longer tours of duty for seconded trainers, continued mentoring in the field for graduates of EU training, and the provision of more tailored and appropriate equipment for Sahel forces to increase their mobility and flexibility; a beefed-up EU diplomatic presence with more delegated authority to adapt EU programmes to needs on the ground;
- EU and international support for both local inter-community mediation and Sahel governments' efforts to promote an inclusive national dialogue including all those forces willing to pursue peaceful solutions and participate in decentralised institutions; this may include elements of the GSIM, which has expressed willingness to enter talks, but is unlikely to include ISGS, which shows no interest in peace or negotiations;

- a more streamlined approach to key priorities for development assistance to Sahel countries centred on education and training, especially for girls, locally managed irrigation and agriculture projects, micro-credit and small business support, particularly for women, and institution-building in justice, human rights and public services;
- a phased reduction of the French military presence over five years, refocused primarily on intelligence, reconnaissance, surveillance, training and air support for the G5 Sahel Joint Force and national armed forces; and
- in the short-term, MINUSMA should be given a more robust mandate and equipment, notably in helicopters, to improve the protection of civilians; in the long run, its role should be made redundant by a combination of the training and deployment of national security forces, the ramp-up of the G5 Sahel Joint Force in border regions, and a possible African Union peacekeeping presence.