

Vanishing partners: the implications of the Sahel coups for the EU's security policy

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The EU's security policy towards the Sahel has reached an impasse following a series of coups in the region. The EU sees it as an area of its extended southern neighbourhood and focuses primarily on its partnership with the group of five countries that make up the G5 Sahel platform. France has shown particular interest in this region: since 2013, it has been involved in the fight against jihadist groups that threaten the territorial integrity of the Sahel countries. The assistance from the EU and its members, coupled with the failure of local elites to address the economic and social problems of their populations, has strengthened the role of the armed forces in the G5 countries. Subsequent coups in Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have triggered a deep crisis in their relations with the EU's member states, especially France, and resulted in the activation of Russia's Wagner Group private military company in the region. The controversial results and limited capacity to conduct missions and operations under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in the EU's southern neighbourhood have raised questions about the future of EU crisis management. The EU's reduced involvement in the Sahel may create opportunities to increase the Union's activity in its eastern neighbourhood and to make greater progress in projects that are key to strengthening NATO's collective defence.

The EU's strategy on the Sahel countries: political cooperation

The development of the EU's relations with the Sahel has been championed by France, which colonised this region in the past and which since the 1960s has pursued an active policy of cooperation with the newly established states there. The 'Europeanisation' of France's approach to this region is aimed at reducing the costs of this policy as well as neutralising the persistent accusations that France remains in the paradigm of a neo-colonial approach. France's case that the EU should take an active role in efforts to stabilise the Sahel out of concern for the consequences for its own security has been echoed by countries such as Italy, Spain and Germany. The main threats emanating from the Sahel include the rise of jihadist groups, including the possible spillover of their activity onto European territory, and uncontrolled migration, as the Sahel ranks among the regions with the highest demographic growth in the world.



The European Union Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel was published in 2011.¹ It envisaged an integrated approach to this region as it recognised that the issues of its security and economic and social development were closely intertwined.² The EU's actions were supposed to be based on four pillars:

- 1) development, good governance and internal conflict resolution,
- 2) politics and diplomacy,
- 3) security and the rule of law,
- 4) fight against and prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation.

The continued deterioration of the situation in the Sahel, particularly the civil war in Mali and the French military intervention that began in January 2013, prompted the EU to prioritise security over development and humanitarian issues. This approach was reflected in the EU's Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015–2020,³ which focused on:

- 1) preventing and countering radicalisation,
- 2) the creation of the appropriate conditions for youth,
- 3) migration, mobility and border management,
- 4) the fight against trafficking and organised crime.

In addition to the tense security situation in the Sahel, this choice of priorities was influenced by the ongoing migrant crisis in Europe and the accompanying series of terrorist attacks in France and Belgium.

Scant success in stabilising the region and its population's growing dissatisfaction with cooperation with Western countries, as well as military coups in several Sahel countries starting in 2020, led to heightened criticism of the policy pursued by France in particular, but also by the EU as a whole. Critics pointed out that Western aid, which was aimed at strengthening the region's militaries and security forces, had made them the only functioning component of the state apparatus in these countries. On the one hand, this state of affairs allowed them to enjoy the support of the population, while encouraging officers to abandon political neutrality and overthrow legitimate governments. The EU hoped to change the situation by decentralising its support and making it conditional on progress in the introduction of reforms, transparency of action and respect for human rights. These reflections led to the conclusions that the EU Council adopted in April 2021.⁴

Internal instability in the Sahel countries and conflicts with their governments prompted the EU to engage in cooperation with regional organisations and the African Union. The G5 Sahel group, comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, was established in 2014 to build unity around the counter-terrorism strategy. This expanded the EU's activity, which had previously been limited to Mali and Niger, to include also Burkina Faso and Chad.⁵ Coups in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023) have led to the marginalisation of the G5. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) gained importance for the EU's diplomatic efforts after its most important members, notably Nigeria, reacted negatively to the successive takeovers by military juntas in the Sahel states.

¹ 'Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel', European Union External Action Service, eeas.europa.eu.

² B. Przybylska-Maszner, 'Strategia Unii Europejskiej na rzecz bezpieczeństwa i rozwoju w regionie Sahelu. Między polityczną wolą oddziaływania a realnym wpływem na sytuację w regionie', *Forum Polityczne*, t. 17, 2014, pp. 123–140, [per: cejsz.icm.edu.pl](https://cejsz.icm.edu.pl).

³ 'Council conclusions on the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015–2020', Council of the EU, 20 April 2015, consilium.europa.eu.

⁴ 'Council conclusions on the European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel', Council of the EU, 16 April 2021, consilium.europa.eu.

⁵ E. Pichon, M. Betant-Rasmussen, 'New EU strategic priorities for the Sahel. Addressing regional challenges through better governance', European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2021, europarl.europa.eu.

European presence in the region

In recent years, French military operations have been the core component of the EU countries' military engagement in the Sahel. Operation Serval was conducted from January 2013 to July 2014 with the aim of neutralising a coalition of Islamist groups that operated in the north of Mali and threatened the rest of the country's territory, including the capital Bamako. Mali's government requested military assistance from France, which led a joint operation with its allies (including Belgium, Chad, Mali, Germany, Spain, the US and the UK) that involved approximately 4,000 troops supported by the air force and navy. As a result, the government regained control of all the major cities.⁶

As it was necessary to prevent the resurgence of Islamist forces, Serval was replaced by the counter-terrorism Operation Barkhane,

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which continued from August 2014 to November 2022. Its area of operation encompassed the borderlands of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, where jihadist groups, both those originating from al-Qaeda and linked to the Islamic State, were particularly active. While Operation Serval is unequivocally considered a success, the assessment of Barkhane, which went on for eight years, is more complex.⁷ The mission succeeded in neutralising dozens of key jihadist figures, but as the French forces and their allies scored tactical successes, the states in the region failed to grow stronger. Their armies and governments were also increasingly at odds with the European countries.⁸

In parallel with France and its partners, the EU itself became involved in the expansion of the armed forces of Mali and Niger. It launched two military missions to this end: the EUTM Mali training mission, which has been ongoing since February 2013, and the EUMPM Niger military partnership mission, which was established as recently as December 2022. Since 2020, the former has theoretically covered not only the territory of Mali, but also the area of all the G5 Sahel countries; in 2021–2022, it also included Germany's Military Assistance Task Force Gazelle (MATF Gazelle) which operated in Niger. Meanwhile, the latter mission failed to start operations as Niger suspended its cooperation with the EU following a military coup in the summer of 2023. EUTM Mali managed to train around 18,000 troops by 2022. Although its mandate, which was extended in 2020, is due to expire in May 2024, the coup in Mali has significantly complicated the context in which it operates.

The EU has also sought to influence the situation in the Sahel through its civilian operations: the capacity-building missions in Mali (EUCAP MALI), which was established in 2013, and Niger (EUCAP Niger), which has been operational since 2012. These are CSDP missions designed to support reforms of the security sector, strengthen police forces and aid the reconstruction of the civilian administration and the judiciary. Their other objective is to advance the EU's security interests, for example by combating smuggling and human trafficking. The two missions' activities are supported by the EU Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell (EU RACC), a network of security and defence experts whose job is to train local structures for specific tasks such as counter-terrorism and forensics.

Another important element in enhancing the capabilities of the Sahel partners is the European Peace Facility (EPF),⁹ which has been operational since 2021 and is partly designed to cover the costs of

⁶ P. Chapleau, G. Fernandez, *SERVAL: Libérer Gao, Kidal et Tombouctou*, ECPAD, Paris 2022.

⁷ M.-A. Pérouse de Montclos, 'Opération Barkhane au Sahel, à quand un vrai bilan?', *Jeune Afrique*, 3 September 2023, jeuneafrique.com.

⁸ J. Guiffard, 'Barkhane: échec, réussite ou bilan nuancé', *Institut Montaigne*, 17 March 2023, institutmontaigne.org.

⁹ Ł. Maślanka, 'An EU War Chest: the success and uncertain future of the European Peace Facility', *OSW Commentary*, no. 523, 10 July 2023, osw.waw.pl.

the EU's joint military missions. EUTM Mali received approximately 40% of the funds earmarked for this purpose from the EPF in 2021–22 (€46.4 million and €58.6 million respectively).¹⁰ In addition to this, the EPF also provided €24 million for the training of the Malian army in December 2021. It was also expected to fund the EUMPM Niger mission and purchase equipment, including weapons, for Niger's armed forces. A total of €65 million in aid for Niger was approved from July 2022 to March 2023, but its disbursement was halted following the coup in July 2023. Since 2013, the EU has spent a total of around €600 million on its civilian and military missions in this part of Africa and trained 30,000 soldiers.¹¹

However, among the populations of the Sahel states the image of France, and to a lesser extent that

» Both Barkhane and Takuba have reached an impasse following the second military coup in Mali.

of other European countries, has deteriorated sharply since 2014. France has been looking for a way to reduce the visibility of its presence in the region while retaining control over the military operations on its territory. The main project that went in this direction was the multinational mission Takuba,¹² which was launched in 2020 with the participation of a number of EU countries. It operated in the borderlands of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso alongside Mali's armed forces, the G5 Sahel force, Barkhane and other actors. The Sahel was also expected to be one of the theatres of operations for the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), which was created upon France's request in 2018 and brought together European countries interested in strengthening their crisis management capabilities outside the EU and NATO. Both Barkhane and Takuba reached an impasse following the second military coup in Mali in 2021, which resulted in the withdrawal of European forces from the country. After an initial relocation to Niger, the Takuba mission came to an end in late July 2022.

The forces of the EU member states have also been playing an important role in the UN Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which has been in place since 2013. For example, up to 1,300 troops from Germany have been participating in this mission; the Bundestag has extended their mandate until 2024. In November 2022, the UK announced that it would withdraw its 300 servicemen from MINUSMA. In June 2023, the Malian junta called on the UN to disband the mission and told foreign troops to leave the country immediately.

Anti-Western turn in the Sahel and consequences for the EU's involvement

Assistance from the EU and its members has failed to comprehensively strengthen the structures of the Sahel states, but it has significantly improved their military capabilities, leading to armies having a greater role in local politics. This process has been accompanied by the waning popularity of the ruling elites, which have been accused of being overly dependent on Europe, especially France, the former coloniser. In August 2020, the Malian military revolted against their country's government.¹³ A junta led by Colonel Assimi Goïta took power and then appointed a civilian president and prime minister in September 2020. Although the UN, the African Union, ECOWAS, the EU and the French government all condemned the coup, it appeared that military cooperation would continue. The situation changed dramatically in May 2021 when another coup overthrew the junta-dependent civilian government and Goïta's group seized direct control. Just a month later, France announced that it would suspend joint operations with the Malian army and reduce the size of its military contingent

¹⁰ N. Gros-Verheyde, '[Fiche-Mémo] Quels sont les coûts communs des missions et opérations militaires de la PSDC en 2021–2022 (v2)', B2 Le Quotidien de l'Europe géopolitique, 23 June 2022, club.bruxelles2.eu.

¹¹ 'Borrell: "The EU has failed to strengthen democracy in the Sahel"', Africa News, 13 September 2023, africanews.com.

¹² N. Gros-Verheyde, 'La task-force Takuba en quelques mots', B2 Le Quotidien de l'Europe géopolitique, 7 April 2021, bruxelles2.eu.

¹³ J. Czerep, 'Mali after the Coup', *PISM Bulletin*, no. 217 (1647), 29 October 2020, pism.pl.

in the country. The junta took advantage of this to step up its anti-French and anti-Western rhetoric and to start negotiations with the Wagner Group to bring Russian mercenaries into the country.¹⁴ Relations between Mali and France continued to deteriorate: Mali expelled the French ambassador in January 2022, which was followed by President Emmanuel Macron's decisions to withdraw French forces from Mali and declare the end of Operation Barkhane in November 2022.¹⁵ The crisis in Mali also resulted in the decomposition of Takuba, as individual EU members did not see any possibility of continuing this operation. Despite the deteriorating conditions in Mali, the EU has not yet to abort its missions, either military or civilian, although in April 2022, the EU's top diplomat Josep Borrell announced that some training activities would be discontinued due to the lack of security guarantees from the Malian government and the possibility of interference from Wagner forces.

The situation was further complicated by the January 2022 coup in Burkina Faso, which overthrew President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and installed a junta led

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by Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba.¹⁶ The latter remained in power for only eight months: another coup followed in September 2022 and Captain Ibrahim Traoré took over. As in Mali, the second coup brought officers with a clearly anti-Western attitude to power, which resulted in the removal of French forces from Burkina Faso and its rapprochement with Russia and Turkey. The EU's response was limited to a condemnation of the coup.

The change in the political situation in Mali and Burkina Faso raised questions about the wisdom of pressing on with the EU's military involvement in the Sahel. Another issue was where the European forces could be stationed if their operations were to continue. Supporters of the EU's presence in the region pointed to Niger.¹⁷ Its president, Mohamed Bazoum, was democratically elected and intended to carry out reforms to strengthen the state and the rule of law. This led to decisions to relocate some troops from the Takuba and Barkhane missions to Niger and to launch another EU mission, EUMPM Niger. The coup that took place in July 2023 thwarted these plans, as a military junta led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani took power and placed Bazoum under house arrest.¹⁸ It suspended the constitution and from the outset used hostile rhetoric towards the West, especially France. Both the EU countries and Niger's ECOWAS neighbours introduced sanctions against the country and began to seriously consider a military intervention, which was reportedly encouraged by France, Nigeria and Senegal. In the end, this has not happened, partly due to the sceptical attitude of the US, which has around 1,100 troops on the ground in Niger, as well as Germany and Italy, as some 300 Italian military personnel have been stationed in Niger under bilateral arrangements. In addition, the coup leaders from Mali and Burkina Faso have threatened to side with the Nigerien junta, which has generated the danger of a regional war.

On 24 September 2023, France announced that it would withdraw its military units (around 1,000–1,500 troops) and its ambassador from Niger. The coup also prompted the EU to suspend its mission and to halt all disbursements of EU funds. The forced downsizing of the presence of the EU's member states and the EU itself in the Sahel has also been accompanied by the growing activity of

¹⁴ Ł. Maślanka, 'No Exit: France on Its Discord with Mali and the Situation in the Sahel', *PISM Bulletin*, no. 86 (2003), 30 May 2022, pism.pl.

¹⁵ M. Mainguet, 'Tensions entre la France et le Mali: la crise diplomatique résumée en six actes', *Ouest France*, 1 February 2022, ouest-france.fr.

¹⁶ J. Czerep, 'Military Coup in Burkina Faso', *PISM Spotlight*, no. 5/2022, 28 January 2022, pism.pl.

¹⁷ 'Le Niger, « laboratoire » du nouveau dispositif militaire français en Afrique', *Le Point*, 24 May 2023, lepoint.fr.

¹⁸ M. Le Cam, E. Barthet, A. Sylvestre-Treiner, 'Au Niger, autopsie d'un coup d'Etat', *Le Monde*, 23 August 2023, lemonde.fr.

the Wagner Group and Russia in stoking anti-Western sentiment among the general public and the military elites in the Sahel countries.¹⁹ The prevailing view in EU discussions is that Russian involvement is opportunistic: the Kremlin chooses its partners from among countries that are weak, mired in internal turmoil and ready to offer attractive conditions for the exploitation of their natural resources in exchange for the protection of regimes that lack democratic legitimacy. The memory of the former Soviet Union's anti-colonial policy towards Africa during the Cold War also plays an important role in this cooperation.²⁰ The Wagner Group's presence in the Central African Republic can be seen as a classic example of this model of collaboration. Although this country is not geographically part of the Sahel, it is also a former French colony and resentment towards the former ruler has provided an ideological underpinning to the cooperation between the country's government and the Wagner forces.²¹ This scenario has played out again in Mali: the arrival of Russian mercenaries became the reason for the withdrawal of EU forces there.

Anti-Western rhetoric has been a constant feature in the local media, while Wagner-linked companies have been helping to manipulate these sentiments through

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social networks. The most recent coup in Niger was also accompanied by anti-Western and pro-Russian undertones, but so far Niger has not established any new forms of cooperation with Russia or the Wagner Group. This may have stemmed from the latter's limited effectiveness in the fight against jihadist groups, as demonstrated by a spike in terrorist acts in Mali following the withdrawal of European troops from that country. At this point, there is also no evidence that Russia or its mercenaries have been involved in the other anti-Western coups. However, Russia has sought to capitalise on their consequences by trying to link the Sahel's tide of disillusionment with Europe with its own policy towards the West. The presence of the Wagner forces in this part of Africa is one of the factors that favour the departure of EU forces from this region as it raises the risk of false flag operations.

Forecast

The debate on the EU's engagement in the Sahel has been ongoing for several years. The emphasis on security issues and the need to stabilise the region militarily, which stemmed from the 2015 migration crisis and the wave of terrorist attacks in Europe, came under increasing criticism in subsequent years as selective and insufficient. Resistance to an excessively 'securitised' approach to the Sahel intensified after the coup in Mali. Critics then pointed out that the increased importance and effectiveness of local armed forces, as a result of the missions and operations of individual EU members and the EU itself, had not necessarily had a positive impact in terms of stronger state structures and the rule of law in the region. The current discussions are focusing on the need to pay more attention to human rights and socio-economic development. However, this does not answer the question of what should be done in a situation where the existing partners, the legitimately elected and internationally recognised civilian governments of the G5 Sahel countries, have been vanishing as a result of successive coups and being replaced by anti-Western military juntas. It seems that the priority should be to ensure that EU taxpayers' money, especially military equipment, does not end up in the hands of the enemies of the EU and the West. Therefore, the EU's civilian and military missions in the region may become a thing of the past or become merely symbolic.

¹⁹ L. Rajaoarinelina, 'Poutine l'Africain', Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, 6 January 2023, frstrategie.org.

²⁰ M. Bartosiewicz, 'Controlled chaos: Russia's Africa policy', *OSW Commentary*, no. 534, 23 August 2023, osw.waw.pl.

²¹ Ł. Maślanka, 'France and the Russian Presence in Africa', *PISM Bulletin*, no. 47 (1477), 17 March 2020, pism.pl.

The deteriorating conditions for the EU's presence in the Sahel, combined with the rising influence of authoritarian powers such as China, Russia and Turkey in this part of Africa, should not lead to the EU's overreach, which would carry the risk of committing excessive resources to a region which is peripheral in terms of its economic and political interests. Instead, its diplomatic activity should focus on involving large countries bordering the Sahel, particularly Algeria, Morocco and Nigeria, in an effort to stabilise the situation. It is also important to strengthen the EU's strategic communication in the countries of this region, including in cooperation with the local media. Meanwhile, the concerns about uncontrolled migration may encourage the governments of some EU member states to establish semi-official contacts with the juntas and urge the EU to do so as well.


The EU countries' diminishing military presence in the Sahel, even if it was forced, may trigger a discussion on revising the CSDP's priorities. It would be desirable to reflect on how to balance the EU's interest in its southern and eastern neighbourhoods. For years, the EU's Central and Eastern European member states have lived with the conviction that the bloc's activities as part of the CSDP have insufficiently served their security interests. The outcome of the war in Ukraine and Russia's desire to subjugate the other post-Soviet states using various instruments are of key importance to the EU. In view of this and the threat that the Russian Federation poses to the EU, its activities towards its eastern neighbourhood under the CSDP, which have been expanded since 24 February 2022, should be stepped up even further. The resources that have been freed up by reduced activity in the Sahel could be redirected towards greater civilian and military security engagement as regards Georgia, Armenia and Moldova as well as a further increase in support for Ukraine.


We should also expect the EPF's success to encourage the EU's member states to continue funding this initiative, which allows them to provide *ad hoc* support. However, the granting EPF funds and the establishment of future civilian and military missions and operations in the Sahel should take greater account of the risk that EU money may end up bolstering anti-Western military juntas, as the recent spate of coups has demonstrated.

It is also worth reflecting on the advisability of developing crisis management capabilities. For years, the EU has been developing its battlegroups for deployment in these scenarios but they have never actually been used in this context. Strategic Compass provides for the reorganisation of the battlegroup concept into the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) by 2025, which will be accompanied by an expansion of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC). RDC will number up to 5,000 troops and participate in regular and costly live exercises; first one of these took place from 16 to 22 October in southern Spain. Reduced European engagement in Africa raises questions about committing extensive resources to crisis management in this region, especially if these efforts are to compete with the implementation of NATO's defence planning, which should be the priority from the perspective of the European Union as a whole.

Map. EU, UN and French missions and operations in the Sahel region in 2013–2023





 G5 Sahel coalition members
Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger

 Anti-Western coups:
• Burkina Faso (January 2022, September 2022)
• Mali (August 2020, May 2021)
• Niger (July 2023)


 countries with confirmed Wagner Group presence:
Mali (since December 2021)


EU military missions:

 EUTM Mali (since February 2013) –
EU military training mission based in Bamako


 EUMPM Niger (since February 2023,
suspended due to coup) –
EU military partnership mission based in Niamey

EU civilian missions:

 EUCAP Mali (since January 2015) –
civilian capacity-building mission based in Bamako


 EUCAP Niger (since July 2012) –
civilian capacity-building mission based in Niamey

UN operations:


 MINUSMA
UN Multidimensional Stabilisation Mission in Mali
(since June 2013, in the process of withdrawing)

Completed French-led multinational operations:

 crisis management Operation Serval
(from January 2013 to July 2014) – Mali

 anti-terrorist Operation Barkhane
(from January 2014 to November 2022) –
Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger

 multinational mission Takuba (2020–22) –
Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger

 Chad – logistical support for Operations Serval, Barkhane and the Takuba mission,
as well as the location of troop deployment following coups in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger

Sources: OPEX – Opérations extérieures, Ministère des Armées, defense.gouv.fr; EUTM Mali, eutmmali.eu; EUMPM Niger, eeas.europa.eu; EUCAP Mali, eeas.europa.eu; EUCAP Niger, eucap-sahel.eu; MINUSMA, UN Information Centre Warsaw, unic.un.org.pl.