

Policy Paper

Analysing EU's Sahel strategies: A civilian approach in the era of pragmatism

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Contents

Adjusting strategies to realities	1
The context of a ‘pragmatist turn’	2
The dangers of dealing with security forces	3
Recommendation: Mechanisms assuring conditionality	4
Conclusion.....	5

Summary

In the past few months, developments in the vast African Sahel region are once again becoming a concern for the European policymakers. Attacks in Burkina Faso, a violent death of the Chadian president or a second coup d’état in Mali in a year followed by a recent French announcement of suspension of Operation Barkhane¹, all of these events prove significant for the EU in the light of its extensive engagement in the region, embodied, among other things, with two civilian (EUCAP Sahel Mali and Niger) and one military mission (EUTM Mali) under the CSDP umbrella. This April, the EU has unveiled and adopted a brand-new long-term 2021 Sahel strategy, which should reflect the turbulent development and better coordinate the multiple policies and instruments the EU pursues in the region. Does it signal a notable change in EU’s course of action in Sahel? How does it relate to the ‘pragmatist turn’ in the EU’s foreign policy? And what particular issues do the three CSDP missions face? This paper aims to address these questions by analysing past and present EU Sahel strategies and practices, positions them into the wider EU foreign policy context, and presents a recommendation to a specific aspect that remains challenging.

¹ SALAÜN, Tangi a John IRISH, 2021. France ends West African Barkhane military operation. *Reuters* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/france-announce-troop-reduction-sahel-operations-sources-2021-06-10/>



August
2021

Adjusting strategies to realities

The Sahel region, in this paper used interchangeably with the G5 Sahel institutional framework formed by Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Niger, and Burkina Faso, has traditionally faced a number of pressing challenges. Climate change, interlinked food and water shortages, rapid population growth, and also weak state institutions inducing the spread of violent extremism. These issues and the fragility of the region as a whole have formed a thriving ground for illegal migration, trafficking and the spread of terrorism, issues that are of a particular concern for the EU. For these reasons, the Union, led by the current ‘geopolitical commission’, continues to view the stability of the Sahel as a priority and its extensive engagement in the region is likely to continue in the near future. As HR/VP Josep Borrell emphasized “*a part of the future of Europe is being played in Africa*”.²

When the instability and violence peaked to its highest levels in early 2010s, the EU, in order to respond to the associated threats, launched in 2011 a first comprehensive integrated strategy to the Sahel.

² BORRELL, Josep, 2020. The Sahel has to be a priority. Part of the future of Europe is being played in Africa. (Interview with Josep Borrell). *Bruxelles2* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: <http://www.bruxelles2.eu/2020/01/the-sahel-has-to-be-a-priority-part-of-the-future-of-europe-is-being-played-in-africa-interview-with-josep-borrell/?lang=en>

³ *The European Union’s Integrated Strategy in the Sahel - Council Conclusions* [online], 2021. Brussels [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at:

This document, adopted for 10 years, aimed to ensure that the EU’s efforts to promote and stimulate development converge with its security-related activities in the region, and that those two endeavours complement each other towards common objectives.³ In other words, the strategy has been focused on the well-known concept of security-development nexus and saw the security and development as mutually reinforcing and necessary in order to establish peace and prosperity. Specifically, the 2011 strategy consisted of four pillars – fight against terrorism, strengthening the security and defence forces, development, and promoting good governance and empowering the state administrations.⁴ These four domains had been positioned to an equal position in terms of priority. However, the revolution in Libya in 2011, the rise of ISIS, and migrant crisis peaking in 2015-16 changed this equal structure and the concerns of its own security prompted the EU to act more in favour of the first two pillars by investing more in the military solutions. So doing, the EU adopted the so-called 2015 Regional Action Plan (RAP) which further enhanced “*security in the region through the fight against terrorism*”.⁵

<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7723-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

⁴ Unpacking EU’s Integrated Sahel Strategy, 2021. *Finabel* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: <https://finabel.org/unpacking-eus-integrated-sahel-strategy/>

⁵ *Council conclusions on the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015-2020* [online], 2015. Brussels [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: http://eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_16331_en.htm



The new 2021 strategy, although preserving the four-pillar structure, does bring a considerable change in tone and aims to reflect the challenges that have emerged over the past decade.⁶ Firstly and most generally, it is a ‘comeback’ of a civilian and political approach which had been more or less sidelined by dominating security-focused policies such as fighting terrorists and training soldiers. Good governance, civil society and human rights are, arguably once again, seen as fundamental elements in achieving long-term peace and stability, and lie at the heart of the strategy. Political engagement and direct funding of Sahelian partners is of key importance in this regard. That means not only state administrations in capitals but also, and perhaps more importantly, the local actors, such as civil society organisations operating in rural areas, whose numbers have gradually decreased in the recent years due to the growing insecurity.⁷

Secondly, it brings improvements in terms of accountability and fighting impunity.⁸ The EU, as Borrell pointed out, “*signed too many blank cheques*” in the Sahel, especially by funding security forces that are often implicated in abuses and violence.⁹ The creation of internal accountability mechanisms

that can guarantee that perpetrators of the violence will be held responsible are viewed as a prerequisite for restoring the trust in the state institutions and the EU as well. Moreover, the emphasis on accountability should not stay limited only to the crimes of the security forces. Corruption and the misuses of the resources provided by the EU also need to be tackled by such systems. It is important to note that any accountability mechanism or reform in judicial sector must be locally owned, otherwise it will lack the legitimacy in the eyes of local population and will not lead to a proper state consolidation.¹⁰

The context of a ‘pragmatist turn’

The evolution of the strategy, however, must be viewed in the larger context of the EU’s ‘pragmatist turn’ in its foreign policy that has been, arguably, in motion since 2010s and clearly articulated later on in the EU’s Global Strategy from 2016. According to the document, “*a rapidly changing environment*” and “*existential threats*” require action guided by principles that not only aspire to advance the better world, but also realistically assess the strategic

⁶ *The European Union’s Integrated Strategy in the Sahel - Council Conclusions* [online], 2021. Brussels [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7723-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

⁷ IDRISSE, Ali, 2021. Webinar: EU Sahel Strategy: A Patchwork Policy? *Oxfam*. [cit. 2021-7-26].

⁸ *The European Union’s Integrated Strategy in the Sahel - Council Conclusions* [online], 2021. Brussels [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at:

<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7723-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

⁹ The Sahel: Time for the EU to show tough love, 2021. *The Africa Report* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: <https://www.theafricareport.com/89169/the-sahel-time-for-the-eu-to-show-tough-love/>

¹⁰ GOXHO, Delina, 2021. Unpacking the EU’s New Sahel Strategy. *PeaceLab* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: <https://peacelab.blog/2021/04/unpacking-the-eus-new-sahel-strategy>



situation.¹¹ In the context of EU's foreign policy towards developing countries, and particularly Sahel, such 'pragmatic' approach encompasses also the important concept of 'resilience' or, in other words, "*the development of self-organization and internal capacities and capabilities to deal with crises rather than the external provision of aid, resources or policy solutions*".¹² This implicates that promoting local ownership and capacity-building in a 'value-free' manner are cornerstones of this approach.

It could be argued that the Sahel strategy, as originally drafted in 2011, was a more pragmatist-focused strategy that did not primarily aim to promote EU's values or democratise the Sahel.¹³ The emphasis on the stability of the region has been pivotal, and the adoption of RAP in 2015 further strengthened this security-focused approach. In this light, the civilian-focused 2021 strategy might come as a 'reversal' of this pragmatist trend. Whereas the global EU's foreign policy, and especially in the context of an increasingly apparent geopolitical competition, is at least rhetorically heading towards a pragmatist approach, the development in Sahel is showing a different picture of the contemporary

EU's foreign policy. It reveals that the focus on stability and security without properly addressing political issues such as corruption and authoritarianism does not bring tangible results and solutions to the issues central for the EU such as migration and terrorism. This more complex civilian approach embodied in the new strategy inherently entails some promotion of EU's values, and therefore counters the 'value-free' approach of resilience.

The dangers of dealing with security forces

To properly understand the reasons for this new civilian approach, it is important to look in detail at the weaknesses of the security-focused policies of the EU in the Sahel embodied by the CSDP missions in place. All of them are capacity-building endeavours – EUCAP Sahel Mali and Niger are focused on civilian and law enforcement training, and the EUTM Mali deals with the training of the military. Apart from the EU's efforts, French Operation Barkhane and UN's mission MINUSMA also encompass capacity-building objectives.¹⁴

¹¹ *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe: A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy* [online]. 2016 [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

¹² JUNCOS, Anna E., 2017. Resilience as the new EU foreign policy paradigm: a pragmatist turn? *European Security*. **26**(1), 1-18. Retrieved at: doi:10.1080/09662839.2016.1247809

¹³ COAKLEY, Amanda, 2021. EU's moral dilemma in the Sahel. *POLITICO* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-sahel-africa-moral-dilemma/>

¹⁴ MINUSMA Fact Sheet, 2021. *United Nations Peacekeeping* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma>



The underlying logic of any capacity-building efforts is the assumption that the state is a partner that can be trusted and therefore empowered. This way, training soldiers or police officers might bring the desired stability and essentially even peace in the long term as they not only fight the terrorist threat, but also contribute to proper functioning of the state. In the context of Sahel, however, the state authorities are not that straightforward partners for the EU. National armies are not always the protectors of the civilians, often they present rather a threat to their safety. In Mali and Burkina Faso during 2020, for example, the security forces were identified as the main perpetrators of the violence, surpassing even the arguably brutal Islamist militias.¹⁵ Moreover, the issue is not only their direct involvement. The security forces frequently turn a blind eye to an ethnic violence committed by militias friendly to the state, or they directly arm them.¹⁶ In so doing, their actions or inactions, fuel rather than mediate the conflict.

Apart from that, the security forces might present a threat also to the stability of a state. Traditionally in African countries, the army holds a prominent position in the state structure and coups or non-democratic overthrows of ‘disobedient’ governments are relatively common phenomena. Training and funding security forces means putting

them into a better position not only in their fight against terrorism but also vis-à-vis the civilian government. Therefore, the risk of a coup, which always bears the possibility of instability and violence, significantly increases when there are no effective mechanisms to keep the powerful military under control. August 2020 and May 2021 coups in Mali perfectly illustrate the logic as the EU in both cases could only watch and condemn the destabilizing actions of a Malian army that it originally helped to train and arm. Unlike France, which in response to the May coup announced the end of Operation Barkhane, the EU had only temporarily suspended and then resumed the police and military training missions after the August coup last year.¹⁷ Such mild or virtually non-existent reaction from the EU, arguably, created further incentives for the Malian army to act recklessly and undermine the stability of the country.

Recommendation: Mechanisms assuring conditionality

In light of this uneasy engagement with local state authorities, the newly established aspects of the 2021 strategy, namely the focus on civil society and the accountability, can bring some improvements to the

¹⁵ PYE, Katherine, 2021. THE SAHEL: EUROPE'S FOREVER WAR? *Centre for European Reform* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2021/sahel-europes-forever-war>

¹⁶ JEZEQUEL, Jean-Herve, 2019. Central Mali: Putting a Stop to Ethnic Cleansing. *International Crisis Group* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at:

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/centre-du-mali-enrayer-le-nettoyage-ethnique>

¹⁷ EMMOTT, Robin a Temoko DIALLO, 2020. EU freezes Mali training missions after military coup, denies responsibility. *Reuters* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-idUSKBN25M1AX>



functioning of the CSDP missions and generally contribute to better development of the Sahel countries. Yet, there is still a number of aspects that should be further incorporated into the strategy. Among other things, it should be an aspect of conditionality. The EU must provide its aid, training and funds only to those actors who are not corrupt, do not commit abuses, and do not engage in subversive activities towards the state.

So far, the EU does not act proactively and successfully in this regard, as an illustrating point might serve the fact that freezing of the EUTM mission in August 2020 did not prevent another military takeover this May. Thus, a robust mechanism that would monitor and identify such problematic actors is lacking and urgently needed. This tool should clearly link funding decisions of the EU with the corruption and human rights abuses records of the recipient governments and armies. Moreover, it should also encompass the evaluation of security forces' inclinations to threaten the government or particular ethnic groups in a given state. Well-defined set of indicators should be used to measure those aspects and clearly indicate

whether the recipient is eligible to obtain the funding. The EU could, for example, draw from its experience in Western Balkans, namely Kosovo, where this conditional approach with set of indicators measuring progress was used to enhance reforms and fight corruption.¹⁸ Intelligence coming from EU resources, as well as from local groups and civil society actors, should be used effectively in this context.

The introduction of the European Peace Facility earlier this year did shed some light on these aspects of providing lethal weaponry to problematic actors and triggered a debate on such conditional approach by the EU.¹⁹ However, important steps in this regard, such as recent diverting funds from authorities to ad-hoc projects²⁰, are so far the exception rather than the rule.

Conclusion

The decade of an engagement of the EU in Sahel, especially in terms of unprecedented military commitments, did not weed out extremism nor extensively stabilize the situation in the G5 Sahel countries.²¹ Violence keeps spreading across Sahel

¹⁸ Improving governance in Kosovo: Evaluating the Impact of EU Conditionality through Policy and Financial Assistance, 2016. *European Research Centre for Anti-Corruption and State-Building* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: https://www.againstcorruption.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/D8.2.5ControlofCorruptionEuFunds_Kosovo.pdf

¹⁹ How to Spend It: New EU Funding for African Peace and Security, 2021. *International Crisis Group* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/african-union-regional-bodies/297-how-spend-it-new-eu-funding-african-peace-and-security>

²⁰ GOXHO, Delina, 2021. Pivoting Stabilisation in the Sahel: competing visions and implementation checkpoints. *Security Praxis* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Dostupné z: <https://securitypraxis.eu/pivoting-stabilisation-in-the-sahel-competing-visions-and-implementation-checkpoints/>

²¹ MUSTASILTA, Katariina a Giovanni FALEG, 2021. Salafi-Jihadism in Africa: A Winning Strategy. *EUISS* [online]. [cit. 2021-7-26]. Retrieved at: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/salafi-jihadism-africa#introduction>



August
2021

and series of events, crowned with the events in Mali this May, significantly damaged fragile partnerships and discouraged the EU, and France particularly, from relying extensively on the close cooperation with unpredictable state and military authorities in the Sahel. The new strategy, placing emphasis on the civil society, acknowledges the limits of solely security-based resilient approaches and attempts to partly re-establish value-based long-term approach with focus on governance reforms and accountability. This change of tone in EU's Sahel policy clearly diverges from the general pragmatist rhetoric that has been present in EU's discourse in the last years. Yet, if it is a sign of another change in the general direction of the global EU's foreign policy, remains an open question.



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