



POLICY BRIEF


EU Strategy in the Sahel: What Future for the Security-Development Nexus?

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Background

The Sahel region is made up of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, making up the G5 Sahel, an organisation for the coordination and regional development of member countries.¹ The region represents an area of fundamental importance for African and Western countries due to its strategic geopolitical position and the amount of natural resources in the territory. The Sahel countries are characterised also by conflicts and attacks of armed groups affiliated with religious extremism.²

This region is important for EU foreign policy because of its geopolitical position between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa – especially Libya. Its geographical location has consequences on migration flows and counter-terrorism strategy, involving militias and extremist armed groups acting across national borders.

Moreover, the region is important for EU Member States for economic reasons. Sahel countries are rich in natural resources such as uranium, gold and oil. For instance, over the last 15 years, France has invested in Uranium deposits in Niger, for its nuclear projects.³ Furthermore, militias and armed groups have attacked gold mines and deposits to gain control over minerals and natural resources. The overall situation in the Sahel causes tensions between national armies and extremist groups seeking territorial control.⁴

Another interesting aspect of this geographical area is the competition between Western powers to exercise not only advantage over natural resources, but also political and diplomatic supremacy. China, the United States, European countries and the EU are the players that are investing the most.⁵ Several European Member States have pursued political and investment agendas independent of the Union. France has always invested heavily in the region, for historical reasons, linked to colonialism, and for purely economic motives. For France, the stability of the Sahel is fundamental, so that France has conducted two military operations: Operation Serval, in 2013 and concluded, and Operation Barkhane in 2014, which is still ongoing.

Germany has also identified its own interests in the Sahel, so that in 2017 it founded, together with France, the Sahel Alliance; an international organisation that aims to support Sahel countries and their populations in the face of current challenges.⁶

The Sahel context and long-term stability in the region are of extreme importance not only for the interests and economic objectives of Western actors, but also because the region has been affected by deep contradictions and unresolved problems for years. Although the African countries involved are among the richest in natural resources, they are also the poorest and most politically unstable. Instability and inequality are exacerbated by lack of transparency and good governance.

The problems within the region have deteriorated with a crisis in Northern Mali in 2012, followed by the Tuareg Rebellion and a coup d'état in the capital city. Tensions and clashes have rapidly crossed

¹ <https://www.g5sahel.org/le-g5-sahel-2/>

² Eric Pichon, “Understanding the EU Strategy for the Sahel”, European Parliamentary Research Service, September 2020, p. 4

³ Rachel Cooper, “Natural Resources Management Strategies in the Sahel”, K4D, 2018, p. 8 – 13

⁴ Luca Raineri, “Gold Mining in the Sahara-Sahel: The Political Geography of State-making and Unmaking”, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2020

⁵ [Keith Somerville](#), “Why it’s not all about security as West beefs up military in Africa’s Sahel”, The Conversation, 2016

⁶ Virginie Baudais et al, “The peacekeeping, peacebuilding and security architecture in the Sahel”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2021

national borders and the most violent groups have made the region even more fragile, exacerbating long-standing problems.⁷

For the reasons previously mentioned and to demonstrate its value as international actor, in 2011 the EU Commission and Council decided to present the first European Regional Strategy: The Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel.⁸ It aims to improve access to basic services to the population, provide economic and educational opportunities, but also limiting criminal networks and improve security.

As a result of the deteriorating situation in the Sahel and awareness of its importance, in 2015 the European institutions decided to adopt and implement the second regional programme for the Sahel: The Sahel Regional Action Plan.⁹ This strategy aims to continue the engagement in the region, to support and strengthening the rule of law. As final step, in 2021 EU Council and Commission have implemented a third plan: the Integrated Strategy in the Sahel.¹⁰

The role of local, national, and international levels of government has been implemented in order to better respond to specific needs. Moreover, the implementation of the Integrated Strategy in the Sahel will focus on human rights violations, as well health crisis and food security, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic. To underline the strategic and economic importance of the Sahel, it is relevant to mention the three missions deployed by the EU, complementary to the regional strategies.

Under the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU Capacity Building Mission in Niger, the EU Training Mission in Mali and the EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali was launched in 2012, 2013 and 2014 respectively.

These operations have specific mandates and aims, such as training national forces, providing humanitarian aid and implementing the security reform.¹¹ The entire European strategy is based on the security-development nexus, an approach according to which regional security leads to economic development. Regional security has been set as a prerequisite for poverty reduction, yet initial results have not been satisfactory, as the data presented below illustrates.¹²

The interconnection between security and development can be also analysed through the human security approach, according to which human security leads to human development¹³. After the partial failure of the first European Strategy, a more human-oriented approach has been pursued by EU policy-makers.

⁷ Eric Pichon, “Understanding the EU Strategy for the Sahel”, European Parliamentary Research Service, September 2020, p. 4

⁸ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/3947/Strategy%20for%20Security%20and%20Development%20in%20the%20Sahel
https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/africa/docs/sahel_strategy_en.pdf

⁹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/04/20/council-conclusions-sahel-regional-plan/>

¹⁰ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/sahel-council-approves-conclusions-on-the-eu-s-integrated-strategy-in-the-region/>
<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7723-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

¹¹ Virginie Baudais et al, “The peacekeeping, peacebuilding and security architecture in the Sahel”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2021

¹² <https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=BF-NE-ML-MR-TD>

¹³ John-Andrew McNeish and Jon Harald Sande Lie, “Security and Development”. Published by Berghahn Books (2010)

Bjorn Hettne, “Development and security: Origins and future” in Security dialogue. Vol 41, No 1 (February 2010), pp. 31-52

Therefore, this paper aims to analyse the weaknesses and strengths of each strategy. This initial analysis then allows to develop a detailed analysis of whether the security-development approach is the most suitable for achieving the predefined objectives and what we can expect from the 2021 European Strategy.

Current Debates

The first regional strategy for the Sahel has allowed the EU to have a relevant role in the security sector at international level, and not only in international trade. Four fields of action have been identified in the Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel and have not been replaced in subsequent strategies: development, good governance and internal conflict resolution; politics and diplomacy; security and the rule of law; the fight against extremist violence and radicalisation.

Although one of the main objectives of the strategy was to increase economic and educational opportunities and sustain social cohesion, in practice the participation and involvement of civilian populations was minimised, while promoting the development of military security¹⁴.

For this reason, one of the main critiques concerns the lack of centrality of citizens and population. The involvement of the population is essential for the whole mission and should be the core of the security-development nexus.

Another critical issue that emerged from the first strategy and has never been resolved is the chaos and confusion created by the many projects and programmes promoted, such as the EU Trust Fund for Africa and the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Furthermore, the European regional strategies are in addition to specific UN action plans, the organisation of the Sahel Alliance and the role of the African Union.

Coherent synergies and coordination among the actors involved has failed to cooperate to achieve what should be the main common goal: the sustainable development of the region, political stability and security within states and across borders.

The crisis that erupted in Mali in 2012 further worsened the overall situation in the region and the transnational nature of the fighting made the challenges even more complex.

In the 2011 Strategy, great attention has been given to the improvement of military security and national armies through missions. According to the proponents of the strategy, the amelioration of this sector should have led to economic development, but this interdependence did not occur. Crises and unresolved conflicts have shown limited success in security and development reform.

In the first strategy, the security-development nexus was implemented through a state-centric approach, in which national security would foster economic development; rather than a human-centric approach.

What was missing was the human aspect of the nexus, hence human security should have been put at the centre in favour of human development. In the Human Development Report in 1990, the concept of human development was conceptualized for the first time as: “a process of enlarging people's choices. The most critical ones are to lead a long and healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living. Additional choices include political freedom, guaranteed human rights and self-respect”¹⁵. A human oriented approach should have been at the centre of the project since the first

¹⁴ Toward an Effective EU Funding Model for African Peace and Security. Published by International Crisis Group (2021)

¹⁵ Human Development Report 1990. Published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), p 10

strategy, as well as addressing the needs and concerns of local communities should have been a priority.

What is important to highlight is the awareness of the European Institutions, and the willingness to learn from the previous mistakes. In fact, the European Parliament declared the willingness to introduce changes in the second strategy and policy makers pointed out the importance of this region and plans to support it.

Regarding the second Plan (2015-2020), the focus has been on the cooperation between different levels of governance, from the local to the international level. This strategy represents an implementation of the previous one. Human rights and rule of law remain a critical component of this regional action plan as a response to the multidimensional crisis in Sahel.

The Sahel Regional Action Plan has been adopted with few changes compared to the first, without changing the general framework set up previously. The theoretical basis of the security-development nexus has not changed and the approach used to implement the projects remains.

Nevertheless, an evaluation of the work carried out has been made so that a more effective strategy can be proposed. One of the improvements concerns the collaboration between the actors active on the territory, thus seeking more effective cooperation.

Furthermore, a monitoring mechanism has been put in place in order to make visible the activities carried out by European member states to implement the strategy¹⁶. The European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel was adopted recently, thus, it is necessary to see how it will be concretely implemented in the next few years. Nevertheless, it is possible to note a specific focus on national, local and international level of cooperation and the role of governance.

The role of several actors emerges, especially the focus on non-state actors and civil society increases, "the EU will also make sure to draw on decentralised authorities and civil society in all its diversity"¹⁷. The Integrated Strategy in the Sahel, approved in 2021, represents an opportunity for the EU and its member countries. They can demonstrate the capacity to implement an effective regional strategy and help African countries to achieve sustainable development and stable human security.

One common issue emerged in all the strategies has been the number of plans and types of founding, it seems difficult to identify processes and decision making behind. What emerges from a deep analysis is lack of coordination, overlapping of responsibilities, goals and chaos.

Since 2012, many countries and organisations have approved and implemented plans in support of the Sahel. However, this has not resulted in more efficient services. Instead, it has created a lot of overlapping in roles and tasks to be carried out. One example are the two military missions deployed autonomously by France, which overlap with the EU missions.

The Sahel countries have been plagued by serious and numerous problems for years, so the engagement of the EU and its member states could not have led to an immediate and deep improvement, neither in terms of security nor in terms of development.

Nevertheless, during the first decade of engagement in the Sahel the situation did not get better and data from the World Bank and UNDP illustrate that improvements in the region have not been satisfactory, both economically and politically.

¹⁶ Council conclusions on the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015-2020, p 24

¹⁷ Council conclusions on the European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel, p 9

According to the UNDP, the Sahel countries have a low Human Development Index value, all measuring between 0.4 and 0.39 except for Mauritania which has an index of 0.55.¹⁸ An important fact is the value of GDP, according to the WB global ranking, the Sahel countries are at the bottom of the list. They do not show constant growth like other African countries, their GDP has decreased in the last two years.¹⁹

Furthermore, the economic situation did not lead any positive results; in fact, according to the World Bank, many other indicators show no improvements and poverty among the population is getting worse.²⁰ These data show that the European commitment has not brought the desired results in many respects.

This should lead to a reflection on the actual effectiveness of the European project and the benefits that the security-development nexus approach has brought to local populations, which is analysed in the next section.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The security-development nexus is not completely new in the security studies field, Bjorn Hettne proposes a historical analysis of this concept from an economic theory point of view²¹. He also argues that there are multiple possible connections between security and development, based also on the current global context and the most prominent theories at the time; despite this, only in the 1990s the nexus took an explicit shape.

This interconnection can be analysed through different approaches, focusing on the human security aspect or through a more state-centric theory that sees state security as a prerogative for the economic and social development of a country.²²

What seems interesting is the change in the approach to security-development nexus by the European Institutions and policy makers. This means that the first Strategy emphasized the role of economic development and national and military security. The second Plan is a development and a confirmation of the previous one. The Council and the Commission have declared the importance of the region, thus have decided to confirm the strategy, along with other plans for the African continent.

Despite this, discussions and disagreements have emerged between supranational and intergovernmental European Institutions. The Council has asked for a greater involvement by the Commission and the EEAS²³. The European Parliament has asked for more coordination between the High Representative and the Council²⁴. In the third Strategy good governance and civil society organisations gain a major role, the EU gives “its support by placing greater emphasis on the political

¹⁸ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking>

¹⁹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>

²⁰ https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.POV.NAHC?locations=BF-TD-ML-MR-NE&name_desc=true

²¹ Bjorn Hettne, “Development and security: Origins and future” in Security dialogue. Vol 41, No 1 (February 2010), pp. 31-52

²² John-Andrew McNeish and Jon Harald Sande Lie, “Security and Development”. Published by Berghahn Books (2010)

²³ Council conclusions on the European Union’s Integrated Strategy in the Sahel

²⁴ Eric Pichon, “Understanding the EU Strategy for the Sahel”, European Parliamentary Research Service, September 2020, p 9

European Parliament resolution of 16 September 2020 on EU-African security cooperation in the Sahel region, West Africa and the Horn of Africa (2020/2002(INI))

dimension, with governance at the heart of its action”²⁵. The European regional Plan had to deal with COVID19 Pandemic, which has delayed the work in the field.

It provides a major interest in long-term objectives and awareness of the whole region and current situation. Moreover, this new Strategy aims to tailor the plan’s pillars to each context and country.

The security-development nexus certainly enables policy makers to develop security and development projects in parallel. On the other hand, however, taking the link between the two for granted could underestimate the importance of other aspects of international cooperation such as the enhancement of national culture and rural communities.

The security-development nexus is a type of approach that has several advantages because it makes possible the enhancement of the political stability of a country without detracting from the economic and social development needed by its citizens. In practice, however, the balance between the two components is not obvious, as has been seen from the results obtained by European strategies.

Finding an alternative to the nexus is not easy, and many answers are possible. Understanding the limitations of the security development nexus is important in order to acquire a critical approach and achieve positive results.

It will be interesting to see how the last adopted strategy will be implemented and what will be the role of G5 and its countries. A brief analysis on the possible future of the plan and its actors is presented in the next section.

Future Prospects

The European effort in the Sahel is without doubt, articulated and complex, however, it cannot be an excuse to lower the standards or support only the militarization of the region. International cooperation and humanitarian aid cannot work perfectly, allocation of resources and planning are difficult to manage, moreover, each country and organisation has its own agenda and interests.

After the decade of European involvement in Sahel, differing opinions emerged among the players involved. Despite the fact that European leaders have expressed confidence and positive views of European engagement in the Sahel, analysts and experts consider the three strategies as a set of failures. This view stems from the various crises the region has faced, including the 2012 rebellion in Mali, the 2020 coup d’état in Mali and the influence of extremist groups in all Sahel countries.

A risk is to divert attention from the region and leave unstable and fragile countries unable to tackle their problems. To avoid this possibility, it seems crucial to focus the attention on long-term objectives, furthermore, these goals should be based on the needs and culture of local areas.

When looking to the future, the role of the G5 Sahel countries and the AU cannot be ignored, the countries concerned must remain at the centre of operations. Several criticisms have emerged regarding the reduced capacities of the states receiving the funds, compared to the international powers that have imposed strict rules for funding.

The security-development nexus, as a theoretical basis for the development of the European regional strategy, has proven to be effective on some aspects; however, it has also presented shortcomings on other issues.

²⁵ Council conclusions on the European Union’s Integrated Strategy in the Sahel

In conclusion, it is difficult to say what will happen in a region as unstable as the Sahel and what the impact of the new European strategy will be. One can certainly hope that the new projects will focus on protecting civilians and providing assistance and opportunities to young people and the most vulnerable members of society.

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