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# What future for Europe in the 2040 Sahel?

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# Introduction

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The Sahel has become a geopolitical crossroad where instability and power struggles are reshaping the landscape. As the region faces escalating security challenges and significant political shifts, European actors have been compelled to reassess their strategies. This is exemplified by France's phased military withdrawal<sup>1</sup> and strategic pivot towards the Gulf of Guinea and English-speaking African countries; Germany's military withdrawal from Niger; and the termination of MINUSMA<sup>2</sup> and Task Force Takuba<sup>3</sup>.

Looking ahead to 2040, the Sahel will continue to grapple with security threats, which are likely to be exacerbated by rapid population growth and climate vulnerabilities. As global competition intensifies, the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom must move beyond fragmented responses toward a coordinated, long-term strategy that addresses the root causes of instability. Europe must draw lessons from past interventions that underscore the need for proactive engagement and deeper collaboration with local and regional actors. Europe's role in the region remains vital, but it must shift from a reactive stance to a forward-thinking approach that balances immediate security concerns with long-term development and governance objectives. The EU has made significant efforts, but its approach needs to be scaled up, more flexible, and better aligned with African-led solutions to enhance credibility.

This paper builds on insights from the "Cross-Perspectives from France, Germany and Europe: What Future for the Sahel?" webinar series<sup>4</sup>, organized by the Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS). The webinars explored three key themes: the potential for a Franco-German strategy in the Sahel, with experts Denis Tull (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik) and Jonathan Guiffard (Institut Montaigne); the growing influence of new foreign actors in the region and its implications for Europe, with Nina Wilén (Egmont Institute) and Ulf Laessing (KAS); and Europe's evolving role in the Sahel, with Anna Schmauder (Global Public Policy Institute), and independent researchers Beatriz de León Cobo and Anne Savey. Final reflections include the need for a unified European approach, better integration of local aspirations, stronger regional partnerships, a renewed communication strategy, more flexible cooperation mechanisms, and innovative strategies to address security, governance, and economic challenges.

## 1. Lessons learned

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Envisioning the future of Europe's engagement in the Sahel requires a critical reflection on its past actions. In April 2021, the European Council adopted a new integrated EU strategy for the Sahel, aimed at strengthening "*the political dimension of the partnership, based on the principle of mutual accountability*" with the five G5 Sahel countries<sup>5</sup>. However, the succession of coups in Mali (May 2021), Burkina Faso (January and September 2022) and

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<sup>1</sup> France began a gradual military disengagement from the Sahel following tensions with Sahelian transitional governments. This process included the withdrawal of Operation Barkhane forces from Mali in 2022 and from Niger in 2023.

<sup>2</sup> The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established in 2013 to support political stabilization, protect civilians, and assist in restoring state authority. Following growing tensions between the Malian transitional authorities and the UN, the mission's mandate was terminated, and withdrawal was completed by the end of 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Launched in 2020 as a European-led initiative under French leadership, Task Force Takuba was composed of special forces from several EU countries and meant to assist and train Malian forces in counterterrorism operations. It ceased operations in 2022 after Mali's military government strengthened ties with Russia and asked for the withdrawal of foreign forces. See: France 24 with AFP, "EU's Takuba force quits junta-controlled Mali", [France 24](#), July 1, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> For a replay of all webinars, check [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> "EU Strategy in the Sahel", [European Parliament](#), February 2024.

Niger (August 2023) quickly undermined this approach. In her 2023 State of the Union address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a revision of the EU's strategic approach in the region<sup>6</sup>, and over the past year, the European External Action Service has been exploring options for revising the Sahel strategy. As both the EU as an organization and some EU member states like France plus the United Kingdom are reassessing their strategies for the Sahel and Africa, it is essential to evaluate what Europe should terminate, initiate, and maintain based on its historical involvement in the region.

## 1.1 Missed opportunities

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France has often been at the heart of discussions on European engagement in the Sahel. As the former colonial power, it had long been perceived in the region as the primary political and security partner. Extensive analyses have pointed to the failures of France's strategy, including overreliance on military tools, flawed identification of interests, and the mismatch between the declared strategies and the allocated resources.

While many European actors participated, either bilaterally or through EU missions, France traditionally led strategic initiatives due to its historical ties and vested interests in the Sahel. This central role led to a conflation of French and EU involvement, with other European states often relying on France's regional expertise, particularly in what was considered its "pré carré"<sup>7</sup>. As Denis Tull highlights<sup>8</sup>, the initial engagement of countries like Germany was largely driven by factors unrelated to Mali itself:

- a sense of solidarity with France, which led them to align with Paris-defined objectives without significantly influencing the overarching strategy;
- a desire to strengthen the UN and enhance their global standing.

France's own motivations were shaped by both alliance politics – given that Mali's government requested Paris's intervention – and power interests, with military engagements in the Sahel serving as a key element of France's foreign policy and regional influence, as well as a reminder of its former great power status. Meanwhile, in many European countries, counterterrorism and irregular migration prevention dominated the narrative justifying European engagement, despite the fact that MINUSMA had limited capacity to address these issues. As a result, the lack of clearly defined, Mali- or Sahel-focused strategic objectives led to inefficient resource allocation and a lack of strategic coherence. Moreover, amid rising anti-French sentiment, this dynamic reinforced the perception that the EU functioned merely as an extension of French interests. However, while France has become an easy scapegoat, it is crucial that other EU countries acknowledge their role in the failure to establish a cohesive Sahel strategy that truly reflects the diverse interests of all member states.

Beyond strategic missteps, European actors also overlooked key opportunities to engage regional partners in early conflict prevention. While the EU achieved some operational and peacekeeping successes – such as France's Operation Serval, the signing of peace agreements (2013 Ouagadougou Accords<sup>9</sup>, 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali<sup>10</sup>) and civilian protection efforts in certain rural areas<sup>11</sup>, it frequently fell short in proactive conflict prevention due to insufficient engagement with local institutions and limited early diplomacy. A lack of dialogue – not only with a broad range of African

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<sup>6</sup> 2023 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen, [European Commission](#), September 13, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Christophe Châtelot, "Comment la France est devenue indésirable dans le Sahel", [Le Monde](#), September 3, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Denis Tull, "Lessons to be learned: Germany's crisis management in Mali (2013-2023)", [SWP Research Paper](#), n° 18/2024, December 10, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Roger, "Mali : accord de Ouagadougou, retour sur un an de blocages", [Jeune Afrique](#), July 11, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations, Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali Resulting from the Algiers Process, [United Nations](#), 2015.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

stakeholders but also between EU policy experts and African studies scholars – exacerbated misunderstandings about how EU-funded programs were perceived and implemented on the ground.

In Niger, for example, the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has faced both instrumentalization by local elites and internal EU challenges, as highlighted by Léonard Colomba-Petteng<sup>12</sup>. He explains that Nigerien elites, reliant on international funding, have often treated EUCAP Sahel<sup>13</sup> as an economic resource rather than a strategic partner. The mission's material support (budgetary aid, *per diems*, infrastructure, and equipment) fueled rent-seeking behaviors and dependency, sustaining local demand for external intervention, much like past development aid. Meanwhile, opposition groups critical of both government policies and French-linked cooperation have undermined the EU's narrative. Additionally, EU officials on the ground in Niamey and Agadez have operated with considerable autonomy, adapting priorities to local dynamics – further weakening the coherence of the EU's engagement in Niger<sup>14</sup>. In Agadez, EUCAP Sahel officials prioritized security-driven migration control-training police and equipping border patrols despite the EU's official focus on a comprehensive approach, including economic alternatives. This gap fueled local distrust, as communities saw Europe prioritizing migration containment over Niger's broader stability and development needs.

As Anne Savey highlights<sup>15</sup>, European actors missed the chance to build long-term relationships by focusing too narrowly on security and short-term concerns, a failure that also reflects weak strategic branding. As Beatriz de León Cobo points out, the EU was wrongly reduced to its CSDP missions, especially the European Union's non-combat military training mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) and its two civilian capacity building missions: EUCAP Sahel Mali (for the police and gendarmerie forces of Mali) and EUCAP Sahel Niger (for the internal security forces of Niger and other G5 Sahel states). Meanwhile, external powers like China and Russia recognized the importance of strategic branding and leveraged Europe's hesitations to expand their own influence.

Honest feedback is essential to avoid repeating mistakes. Many of the missteps in Mali and the Sahel mirror those in Afghanistan, where secondary partners' limited military contributions curtailed their political influence, leaving the overall strategy largely dictated by the coalition leader – the United States in Afghanistan, and France in Mali and the Sahel<sup>16</sup>. Europe must learn from other international missions and regional frameworks, adopting models that strengthen conflict prevention and foster a more localized, sustainable approach to peace and stability.

## 1.2 Addressing colonial legacies

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Acknowledging the colonial past is essential for rebuilding Euro-African cooperation. Europe must support initiatives that prioritize cultural respect, empower local ownership of solutions, and shift from top-down approaches to genuine partnership. A transparent and accountable reckoning with the region's colonial history could enhance the legitimacy of European (and particularly French) engagement and help restore trust with local populations.

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<sup>12</sup> Léonard Colomba-Petteng, *Décentrer l'analyse de la politique de sécurité et de défense commune de l'Union européenne : ethnographie de la mission EUCAP Sahel Niger*, PhD Thesis, IEP de Paris, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> European Union Capacity Building Mission: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eucap-sahel-mali\\_fr?s=331](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eucap-sahel-mali_fr?s=331)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> "What role for Europe in the 2040 Sahel", *Cross Perspectives from France, Germany and Europe: What future for the Sahel?*, FRS-KAS Webinar Series, January 27, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Denis Tull, *op. cit.*

In the Sahelian context, France remains particularly concerned, due to its historical role as a colonial power in the region and the growing anti-French sentiment, which accuses France of maintaining neocolonial influence through economic, political, and military engagements. Some recent steps have pointed in the right direction such as France's restitution of looted artefacts to Benin and Senegal, offering a model for more responsible engagement. However, past failures in addressing colonial legacies have fueled deep-seated tensions, making the Franco-Sahelian relationship especially fraught. This dynamic has broader implications for the EU, as some African voices continue to view the organization as a tool for advancing French interests. Moving forward, it is crucial to avoid official rhetoric that comes across as condescending or prescriptive, as such attitudes have only reinforced distrust<sup>17</sup>.

### 1.3 Successful initiatives to be preserved

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Renewing an approach does not mean discarding past efforts. The EU has made strategic adjustments over the years and achieved significant progress in economic and development cooperation that should be preserved. For example, the 2021 EU Strategy rightly identified governance as a core issue in the region<sup>18</sup>, while initiatives like the Global Gateway<sup>19</sup>, the EU-Africa Strategy, and Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) have laid a foundation for future collaboration. The EU has committed €150 billion under the Global Gateway to fund infrastructure in Africa, including renewable energy, transport corridors, and digital connectivity. Additionally, among the traditional areas of cooperation which should be preserved, agricultural cooperation remains especially vital, as the sector dominates Sahelian economies and intersects with key challenges: climate change, food security, intercommunity conflicts (notably between herders and farmers), and radicalization, as marginalized rural communities remain prime targets for extremist groups. Increased investment in agriculture could thus yield multifaceted benefits while fostering economic collaboration in a field where Europe holds expertise.

While the EU has made notable strides in supporting economic diversification, infrastructure development, and governance in the Sahel, the scale, impact, and flexibility of its approach need improvement. This approach is often bureaucratic, leading to delays in project implementation. Challenges remain in promoting local industrialization, accelerating infrastructure projects, and creating more flexible, innovative financing mechanisms. The EU's funding mechanisms can be rigid, with more conditions than Chinese loans, making them less attractive. Many Sahelian countries perceive the EU's governance agenda as too prescriptive, leading to backlash (as seen with recent tensions with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso). Some adjustments could enhance the EU's effectiveness in addressing Sahel's pressing challenges.

## 2. Defining priorities and objectives

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The recent tensions between Europe and Sahel countries have raised several key questions. What should Europe's overarching vision and top priorities for its engagement in the Sahel be by 2040? How can Europe balance its strategic interests with the aspirations and needs of Sahelian societies, particularly regarding governance,

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<sup>17</sup> R.D. with AFP, "Propos d'Emmanuel Macron sur l'Afrique : le Burkina Faso s'indigne à son tour", *L'Express*, January 14, 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Delina Gocho, "Unpacking the EU's new Sahel strategy", *Egmont Institute*, April 22, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> *Global Gateway*, European Commission: [www.international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway\\_en](https://www.international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway_en)

development, and security? How can Europe ensure that its strategy accounts for long-term global challenges, such as climate change, demographic shifts, and the energy transition?

## 2.1 The need for a coherent vision

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Past engagements have exposed the EU's lack of a coherent vision for the Sahel, largely due to diverging national priorities. France had long prioritized a military approach, Germany focused on diplomacy and development, while Italy shaped its strategy around migration control. Despite these differences, European states share key interests in the region: the safety of their nationals and businesses, the presence of actors threatening EU interests, and the ripple effects of global challenges like climate change and demographic shifts. The stability and prosperity of the Sahel are – at least indirectly – tied to Europe, underscoring the need for greater strategic alignment between EU member states.

An effective EU strategy must be built on a unified vision, essential to address the region's fragmented security landscape and the spread of jihadist threats. This requires a joint analysis of regional dynamics, threats, and European interests, making enhanced intelligence sharing and coordinated diplomatic efforts critical. Political tensions, such as those between Mali's government and the Tuaregs, and the deepening ties of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso with Russia, demand both realistic assessments and a unified European response. As these states pivot toward Moscow, the EU must urgently clarify its own strategic priorities to build more effective partnerships.

Looking ahead to 2040, Europe must engage with the Sahel as a partner in shared stability and prosperity, aligning its goals with African-led strategies. This requires moving beyond the simplistic view of "local actors" as a single, uniform group and acknowledging the diversity of perspectives and agendas on the ground. Strengthening dialogue with African research centers, think tanks and regional institutions will be key to fostering a more nuanced and responsive approach. Given ECOWAS' declining legitimacy and perception as a European-aligned actor, the EU has even more incentives to diversify its engagement. This would enhance effectiveness while supporting ECOWAS in regaining credibility.

Defining objectives and priorities in line with Sahelian realities requires listening closely to partners' needs rather than imposing external views from the outset. In any case, justifying continued engagement solely by mentioning the need to contain Russian influence would reinforce the Sahelians' perception that "it was never about us", as Anna Schmauder aptly points out<sup>20</sup>.

## 2.2 Idealism vs pragmatism

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In the past, European actors have largely shaped their approach to the Sahel based on their own ideal vision for the region, often at the expense of its complex realities. As Beatriz de León Cobo<sup>21</sup> has noticed, they frequently attempted to reconcile idealistic and pragmatic perspectives, even when these were, in many cases, fundamentally incompatible. For Europe to develop a more effective strategy in the Sahel, it must move away from a normative approach that prioritizes value imposition and instead embrace a pragmatic vision rooted in realism and adaptability.

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<sup>20</sup> "What role for Europe in the 2040 Sahel", *Cross Perspectives from France, Germany and Europe: What future for the Sahel?*, [FRS-KAS Webinar Series](#), January 27, 2025.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

The conditionality of aid – linking financial or technical support to governance reforms – has often backfired, fostering resentment rather than cooperation. This also necessitates abandoning rigid ideological frames, such as the emphasis on *laïcité*, the French principle of secularism, which often fails to resonate in local contexts. Instead, Europe should prioritize inclusive dialogue, regardless of the regime in place. The double standards applied in the Sahel – for example, Europe’s condemning the 2023 military coup in Niger while tacitly accepting the institutional coup by Idriss Déby’s son in Chad in 2021<sup>22</sup> – have further undermined credibility, especially given the EU’s ongoing cooperation with authoritarian regimes in other regions of the world, such as the Middle East. Addressing these inconsistencies will be crucial in rebuilding trust and credibility in the Sahel.

Recognizing its own limitations and accepting that Europe will not be the dominant player in the Sahel for the foreseeable future is also essential. As Jonathan Guiffard<sup>23</sup> and other experts have noted, strategic patience may be necessary in the coming years, not as a call for inaction, but as an acknowledgment of the need for lower visibility and reliance on tools like strategic anticipation. The EU has to accept to lose at some point, as mentioned by Anna Schmauder. Past engagements have also shown that Europeans failed to adjust their actions even when it became clear that their tools – Barkhane, MINUSMA, Task Force Takuba – were ill-suited to the evolving political landscape. Adaptability must therefore be central to future engagements, ensuring that resources, both human and material, align with strategic objectives, or conversely, that objectives are adjusted to reflect available resources.

A clear and realistic strategy must be defined, with all relevant European countries’ ministries and political actors aligned on a coherent political vision for large-scale engagements. This should be accompanied by a consistent strategic narrative that articulates the rationale behind European involvement and fosters transparency with both local and international stakeholders. The lack of transparency and strategic coherence has fueled rumors that France was supporting and arming terrorist groups<sup>24</sup>, a narrative that was actively instrumentalized by both Bamako and Russian disinformation actors.

## 2.3 Balancing security, development, governance and long-term global challenges

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Armed conflict remains the most pressing threat in the Sahel, making security investment a priority. However, assessments of initiatives like the G5 Sahel have highlighted an overemphasis on the security pillar at the expense of development and governance, which has, in turn, contributed to rising instability. Threats such as terrorism are deeply rooted in governance failures, demonstrating why military tools alone cannot resolve the crisis. For Europe, harmonizing security interests with the Sahel’s development and governance needs is crucial. Ideally, this requires not only addressing immediate security challenges but also actively supporting democratic reforms and strengthening governance structures. However, in a context of growing so-called “neo-sovereignist”<sup>25</sup> claims, Europe must rethink how it engages in governance and development cooperation. This

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<sup>22</sup> TV5Monde with AFP, “Tchad: un ‘coup d’État institutionnel’ dénoncé par les principaux partis d’opposition”, *TV5Monde*, April 21, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> “Is a Franco-German strategy in the Sahel possible?”, *Cross Perspectives from France, Germany and Europe: What future for the Sahel?*, *FRS-KAS Webinar Series*, November 19, 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Christophe Châtelot, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Neo-sovereignism is a political ideology centered on reinforcing national sovereignty and resisting global governance as it is perceived as

undermining state control. It prioritizes national interests, autonomy, and security over multilateralism, often using populist rhetoric to critique foreign influence, including economic or military interventions. Often compared to Pan-Africanism, neo-sovereignism differs in that it tends to reject principles like democracy, human rights, and universal justice, as noted by Achille Mbembe (Achille Mbembe, “Achille Mbembe, philosophe : ‘Les putschs en Afrique de l’Ouest annoncent la fin d’un cycle qui aura duré près d’un siècle’”, *Le Monde*, August 4, 2023).



will require acknowledging that some partners may be unwilling to cooperate with Europe on these issues and being open to engaging in dialogue with military-led regimes, even if their governance is seen as controversial. Addressing this while maintaining core European values will require a more flexible and context-sensitive approach. In line with the need to move away from normativity, any engagement must be built on genuine partnership with the Sahelians, ensuring that local ownership and priorities drive the process. *“Whatever we do, we need to do it with them. Whatever we do has to be sustainable”* (B. de León Cobo).

At the same time, Europe must continue to integrate long-term global challenges – climate change, demographic pressures, and energy transition – into its strategy. These factors will have a direct impact on the Sahel, with likely ripple effects beyond the region. Addressing them in a way that fosters both regional stability and sustainable solutions will be essential to Europe’s broader engagement. However, European actors must be aware of some adverse effects: as Emmanuel Martin points out, *“many see the imposition of a green agenda on African development as a serious obstacle to industrialization-based growth for the continent”*<sup>26</sup>. European actors must resist the temptation to dictate their own priorities and timelines, as this can be perceived as paternalistic and self-serving, especially when local populations face more immediate concerns<sup>27</sup>. If not adjusted, Europe’s green approach could create tensions, especially since the Sahel is highly vulnerable to climate change but contributes little to carbon emissions<sup>28</sup>, which could lead to further criticism within neo-sovereignist and anticolonial discourses.

### 3. Potential roles and actions

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There have been several national and regional Sahel strategies over the years, yet none has managed to significantly improve the situation in the region. This raises important questions about the concrete actions necessary to implement Europe’s vision for the Sahel. While previous strategies have successfully identified key areas of focus that should be maintained, implementation has often been hindered by factors such as lack of political will and rigid mechanisms. The main challenge for the new approach will be to prioritize co-creation over conditionality and, crucially, to follow through on commitments.

#### 3.1 Security, governance and trust-building

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Beyond traditional military cooperation and previous initiatives – training, intelligence-sharing, and equipment provision –, European engagement should expand to include counterterrorism efforts focused on preventing radicalization and rehabilitating former fighters to break cycles of violence. Successful examples of terrorism containment, such as Algeria’s and Mauritania’s national reconciliation policies, have demonstrated the importance of reintegration measures. Likewise, continuing to reinforce support for DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration) processes<sup>29</sup> and promoting educational advancement will be key to mitigating terrorist recruitment. But while DDR and education initiatives have been part of MINUSMA’s efforts, the current context presents new dynamics, such as shifting power structures in the region, the increased

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<sup>26</sup> Emmanuel Martin, “The paradoxes of the EU’s Africa policy”, *GIS Reports Online*, June 28, 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Burkinabe political source, February 2025.

<sup>28</sup> According to the *Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative index*, Chad is the most vulnerable country to climate change effects and the 191st most

ready country to face such effects. According to the *World Bank*, the combined emissions of the ex-G5 Sahel countries do not exceed 1 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

territorial entrenchment of terrorist groups and the changing role of local communities in these processes. A focus on grassroots-level strategies and collaboration with non-state actors can improve the adaptability and effectiveness of these programs. Though many European actors have opposed it, they will have to be more open to supporting dialogue initiatives with identified local armed groups. More emphasis should be put on localized security partnerships (rather than top-down military assistance), and on shifting from state-centric military aid toward economic resilience strategies that integrate job creation and local governance capacity-building (example: job creation programs for at-risk youth to counter extremist recruitment).

While the EU has made significant contributions to peacekeeping and security capacity-building, Europe's engagement in the Sahel has often been criticized for its "zero-risk" approach, as noted by Ulf Laessing<sup>30</sup>. Despite substantial financial and operational contributions, European forces have been reluctant to accept risks, which has weakened their credibility among Sahelian partners. Strict risk mitigation measures, including restrictive rules of engagement, limited operational exposure, stringent security protocols, and an unwillingness to provide weapons, have at times reduced the effectiveness of European missions and strained relationships with local military forces<sup>31</sup>. For instance, the deployment of 300 highly trained British troops to Mali in December 2020, intended to bolster a more agile UN peacekeeping mission, focused on Mali's far north, while most attacks against civilians occurred in the center of the country<sup>32</sup>. This mismatch between strategy and realities on the ground has fueled frustrations.

Europe could prioritize governance reforms by promoting transparency, human rights, and the empowerment of local institutions to ensure accountability. This includes countering external actors, such as China and Russia, whose engagement often undermines democratic governance and the rule of law. A key area of convergence among European states is the need to curb Russian influence in the Sahel. As proposed by Jonathan Guiffard, this could involve a coordinated effort to document crimes committed by Russian paramilitary groups, increasing support for NGOs dedicated to this mission, and strengthening European dialogue with local democratic forces. Providing platforms in Europe for Africa's pro-democracy political actors would be a meaningful step in fostering their organizational capacity and amplifying their voices<sup>33</sup>.

To enhance its credibility and influence, Europe must reconnect with Sahelian populations, for example through long-term investment in linguistic<sup>34</sup>, political, and cultural training of deployed personnel, ensuring they understand the local context and dynamics. This includes learning key Sahelian languages (such as Hausa, Fulani, Bambara, Soninke, Tamasheq) and expanding Euro-Sahelian cultural institutes (e.g., Franco-Fulani, Germano-Bambara, Spano-Soninke) within African universities and community hubs. A more effective communication strategy is also essential: one that engages Sahelian audiences in their own languages rather than relying solely on French or English, an approach that actors like Russia have already understood and leveraged to their advantage<sup>35</sup>. An effective European communication strategy should focus on highlighting Europe's comparative advantages and positive initiatives, rather than reacting defensively to Russian disinformation.

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<sup>30</sup> Ulf Laessing, "The West fast losing influence in the Sahel", *IEMed Yearbook 2024*, European Institute of the Mediterranean.

<sup>31</sup> Denis Tull, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> Will Brown, "Aligned in the sand: how Europeans can help stabilize the Sahel", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 15, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> "Is a Franco-German strategy in the Sahel possible?", *Cross Perspectives from France, Germany and Europe: What future for the Sahel?*, *FRS-KAS Webinar Series*, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

<sup>34</sup> *A mission within a mission – The contribution of the Netherlands to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) 2014-2019*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB), September 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Will Brown, *op. cit.*

## 3.2 Socioeconomic development and other strategic partnerships

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The UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has identified economy (high debt, inflation, trade imbalances) and connectivity as the two main domains of vulnerability in Africa, particularly Sahelian countries<sup>36</sup>. Europe's investments should target these vulnerabilities while aligning with its comparative advantages and mutual interests with the Sahel, particularly in renewable energy, agriculture, micro-credit, and infrastructure (some of which are already major areas of focus). Strengthening or expanding these sectors would not only support long-term stability but also address critical development needs more effectively. More targeted support for local industries, tech startups, and agro-processing could make EU efforts more impactful. China dominates large-scale infrastructure, but there is demand for sustainable, high-standard investments, which the EU could provide.

The EU's appeal lies in its trade market and innovation capacity, which continue to attract young African entrepreneurs. This should incentivize Europe to develop win-win commercial partnerships and leverage the economic potential of African diasporas, whose remittances and business ambitions on the continent play a crucial economic role. Opportunities for economic complementarity are abundant: Africa faces a demographic boom with an expanding workforce, while Europe's aging population threatens labor shortages and slower growth. As Charles Kenny and George Yang (Center for Global Development) highlight, Europe will have 95 million fewer working-age people in 2050 than in 2015<sup>37</sup>. However, increasingly restrictive European immigration policies, including drastic visa reductions, directly contradict some of Europe's economic and strategic interests in Africa, and hinder the potential for mutually beneficial partnerships with Africa, particularly in light of demographic trends. Bridging these contradictions – between domestic political agendas and foreign policy objectives, between Interior Ministries and Foreign Affairs priorities – will be essential for a coherent and effective European strategy in the Sahel.

Beyond workforce dynamics, the EU has yet to fully engage in industrialization efforts that would allow the Sahel to shift from raw material exports to local value creation. The African continental free trade area (AfCFTA) provides a major opportunity, yet European investments remain largely disconnected from intra-African trade expansion. The EU could therefore co-finance regional trade infrastructure (logistics hubs, transport corridors) and support industrialization in key sectors like agro-processing, pharmaceuticals, and textiles, particularly in UEMOA countries.

Investment in digital transformation can also play a major role in governance and development as it can have positive effects on urbanization, deployment and growth, but this requires first addressing the region's fundamental infrastructure gaps. A major challenge to digital expansion in the Sahel is the lack of reliable electricity and internet connectivity, particularly in rural areas. Instead of isolated digital initiatives, Europe could first invest in foundational infrastructure – particularly off-grid renewable energy solutions and fiber-optic networks – to create the conditions for sustainable digital growth. Once these barriers are addressed, technological partnerships between Europe and the Sahel can help enhance digital governance and develop e-learning platforms for example. The EU could also support regional digital corridors, linking major cities and trade hubs with affordable

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<sup>36</sup> *Economic Development in Africa Report 2024*, UNCTAD, 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Kenny, George Yang, "Can Africa help Europe avoid its looming aging crisis?", *Working Paper*, Center for Global Development, n° 584, June 2021.

and accessible internet. This approach can ensure that digital transformation is not just an ambitious vision, but a feasible and impactful strategy.

In parallel, the EU has yet to align its economic strategy with debt sustainability in the region. Sahelian countries face growing public debt, limiting their capacity to invest in development. Rather than relying on traditional grants and concessional loans, the EU could support initiatives that focus on sustainable financial mechanisms, such as helping UEMOA build regional financial markets. This would reduce dependency on external creditors while fostering local ownership and resilience in financing. Debt solutions should be designed collaboratively. As innovative debt-for-climate swaps may be perceived as paternalistic, they should be approached with caution, ensuring mutual benefit and alignment with local development strategies.

Finally, research shows that foreign aid has often fostered dependency rather than progress, as some governments prioritize maintaining power over enacting governance reforms, sometimes diverting aid through corruption or clientelism. To address this, Europe must rethink its aid mechanisms to promote self-sufficiency, ensure more effective resource allocation and expand blended finance models that leverage both public and private investments. The suspension of U.S. aid could benefit European agencies, such as Agence française de développement and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, as African states could look for alternative donors. However, it could also, para-doxically, encourage African leaders to lessen their reliance on external assistance, as illustrated by the neo-sovereignist rhetoric of the Malian government, criticizing Western public aid as a tool of destabilization<sup>38</sup>. This evolving political context could present an opportunity for Europe to develop more sustainable and accountable approaches to development and governance reform<sup>39</sup>.

### 3.3 Collaboration and inclusivity

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Europe's future strategy in the Sahel must prioritize inclusivity and collaboration, ensuring that all Sahelian stakeholders – regional actors, grassroots organizations, youth, and women – have a voice in shaping policy. Stronger coordination with key partners such as the African Union, the UN, and the African Development Bank, as well as regional powers like Algeria, Mauritania, Nigeria, and Togo, will be essential for sustainable solutions. Addressing the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco is also crucial, given its destabilizing impact on regional cooperation. While the specific nature of such EU involvement remains debated, particularly given internal divergences within the Union, the EU could contribute to de-escalating tensions between Algeria and Morocco over Western Sahara<sup>40</sup>. To do so, it should aim for a more balanced relationship with Morocco that does not alienate Algeria while also reinforcing its engagement with Algiers<sup>41</sup>. A more cohesive European approach, including France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland, alongside engagement with external allies like the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan and India, would enhance policy coherence and promote shared interests in democracy advancement, peacebuilding, and counterterrorism. However, for this strategy to be truly effective, Europe must first overcome internal divisions and forge a unified vision that aligns its values, standards, and long-term interests with its engagement in the Sahel.

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<sup>38</sup> Damien Glez, "Une subvention américaine destinée au Mali détournée avant d'être annulée ?", *Jeune Afrique*, February 25, 2025.

<sup>39</sup> Célestin Monga, "Whining about aid is not a development strategy for Africa", Interview with *Le Monde*, February 14, 2025.

<sup>40</sup> Djallil Lounnas, Nizar Messari, "Algeria-Morocco Relations and Their Impact on the Maghrebi Regional System", *Working Paper*, Barcelona Centre

for International Affairs, November 23, 2018; D. Ghanem (ed.), *The EU and North Africa – Lost in recalibration*, *Chaillot Paper*, n° 179, European Union Institute for Security Studies, October 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Anthony Dworkin, "North African standoff: How the Western Sahara conflict is fuelling new tensions between Morocco and Algeria", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, April 8, 2022.

## Conclusion

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Europe's engagement in the Sahel is critical for regional stability and long-term prosperity. However, its approach, narratives, frameworks, and analytical perspectives need significant transformation. By adopting a strategy that clearly identifies priorities and genuinely balances security, governance, and economic development, while centering Sahelian needs, Europe can play a pivotal role in shaping the region's future. While immediate action may be challenging, especially in the Alliance of the Sahel States countries, maintaining dialogue is crucial for preserving influence and rebuilding trust. Renewing Europe's strategic framework is key to overcoming future challenges and reinforcing its position as a committed partner in the sustainable development of Sahel.