



The Nexus between Security and Development in the Sahel: West African Perspectives on EU Interventions

ETTG Policy Brief 3/2025

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KEY MESSAGES

1. Sahelian countries continue to experience deep levels of internal and external fragmentation which makes them breeding grounds for multiple centres of violence and power contestation. These forms of fragmentation make it increasingly difficult to develop effective and coherent responses to complex development and security challenges.
2. While the European Union (EU) and Sahel countries have developed instruments and policy tools to address the security-development nexus, approaches and processes are often beset by many challenges which tend to limit response effectiveness and impact of intended interventions.
3. In the context of heightened geopolitical competition, Sahelian states perceive the EU's approach to development and security as inconsistent and driven by domestic priorities – such as energy security, migration, the fight against violent extremism (VE) or international power dynamics – rather than by the pursuit of shared values and Africa's interests. A paradigm shift is needed to recalibrate and strengthen EU-Sahel cooperation in these critical areas, with greater transparency in communication to rebuild trust.



KEY MESSAGES (CONTINUED)

4. Poverty, social exclusion, the exploitation of historical intercommunal conflicts, and weak state capacities are fundamental drivers of VE and insecurity in the Sahel. This underscores the need to address the complex challenges that the Sahel region is faced with through the lens of the security-development nexus.
5. In spite of the strained relationship between the members of the Alliance of Sahel States, the EU should consider resuming dialogue and staying engaged. Additionally, diversifying partnerships in the region, notably towards the countries of the Gulf of Guinea, would be beneficial in terms of prevention and countering of violent extremism.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sahel region has emerged as a focal area for a range of security and development actors, including EU member states, due to its intricate blend of security challenges, governance deficits and developmental needs. The Global Gateway is the EU's latest ambitious global infrastructure investment initiative, seeking to mobilise \$300 billion in investments globally, including in Africa, between 2021 and 2027 (European Commission, 2021). However, the Sahel's multifaceted developmental and security needs, compounded by protracted violent conflicts, create webs of polycrisis that transcend conventional classifications. These dynamics challenge traditional crisis management frameworks and heighten the risks associated with investments in the region (Çonkar, 2020; Dieng, 2021). For example, a wave of military coups in what is now referred to as the 'Coup Belt' of Africa² saw the EU suspend development cooperation and financial assistance with Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. EU financial withdrawal has had huge implications for vulnerable populations who rely on EU support in critical sectors like education, health and sanitation, and agriculture. In addition, government failure to guarantee security of the population has seen an escalation in violent attacks and a spike in terrorist networks in the region, with the Sahel experiencing a tenfold increase in terrorist-related deaths since 2007 (IEP, 2024). While global terrorist activities have declined significantly since 2015, in sub-Saharan Africa terrorist attacks and activities have more than doubled (IISS, 2023). In 2021, sub-Saharan Africa accounted for nearly half of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide with four countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Somalia) accounting for over a third of all terrorism-related deaths in the region (IISS, 2023). Growing fragility in the region has led experts to predict that up to two-thirds of the world's poor, a majority of whom reside in sub-Saharan Africa, will live in fragile and conflict-prone areas by 2030 (Corral et al., 2020).



The Sahel region has emerged as a focal area for a range of security and development actors, including EU member states, due to its intricate blend of security challenges, governance deficits and developmental needs.



Governance deficits and development challenges coupled with limited state presence contribute significantly to the region's peace and security challenges (UN, 2021). Widespread poverty, inadequate infrastructure and limited access to public goods and services, for instance, create conditions where conflict and instability can thrive. In marginalised and neglected regions specifically, governance deficits and unmet development needs undermine public trust in government institutions, further exacerbating inequalities, and fuelling localised grievances born out of perceptions of state neglect and marginalisation (UN, 2021). In Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Niger, extremist armed groups and other non-state actors present themselves as proto states and in recent years have taken over government functions in specific swathes of territory, including provision of public goods and services from education and taxation to health and sanitation.

In addition, internal fragmentation among terrorist groups and other non-state armed actors makes the region a breeding ground for multiple centres of violence and power contestation. In parts of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, extremist armed groups and militia gangs continue to exploit pre-existing rivalries between farmers and herdsmen over access to land, water and grazing

1. *Polycrisis* is a conceptual term that describes types of complexity where multiple crises converge and intertwine, presenting formidable challenges to peace, security and development efforts (see Janzwood & Homer-Dixon, 2022).

2. The Coup Belt of Africa is a geopolitical concept and media phrase that has increasingly gained prominence in the last decade or so to describe regions of West Africa, Central Africa and the Sahel that have a high prevalence of military coups d'état. Between 2021 and 2023, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali each experienced putsches in quick succession. In Mali, democratically elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was overthrown by elements of the military and a few months later, a caretaker government led by President Ndaw and his Prime Minister was deposed and replaced by Col. Assimi Goita, the current military leader.

pastures. Fragile governance systems, characterised by underfunded and fragmented civil society structures, create an environment conducive to democratic backsliding. This erosion of democratic norms fosters political uncertainty and instability, manifested in contested electoral processes, unconstitutional changes of government and the proliferation of non-state armed actors. These actors exploit governance vacuums, further challenging and undermining state authority across the Sahel. Collectively these challenges are creating a perfect storm for instability and insecurity in the Sahel. Countries experiencing elevated risks of fragility also score poorly on the Human Development Index, suggesting a bi-directional link between insecurity and human development.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The authors employed a mixed-methods approach to gather comprehensive data on the security-development nexus in the Sahel. The approach included extensive desk research, analysing existing academic and grey literature, complemented by a participatory workshop held in Gorée, Senegal from 4–6 November 2024. The workshop brought together regional experts and stakeholders to provide nuanced insights and validate findings.

DRIVERS OF INSECURITY, INSTABILITY AND VE IN THE SAHEL: SHIFTS FROM GLOBAL JIHADISM TO LOCAL INSURGENCY

The Sahel, traditionally seen as a peripheral theatre, has become the epicentre of international terrorism. Terrorism-related deaths in the region reached 43% of the total in 2022, compared to just 1% in 2007 (IEP, 2023). The intensity of violence has not only escalated but also expanded geographically, both within individual countries and across regions. Initially concentrated in Mali, terrorist activity has, since 2016, increasingly spread to Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, resulting in a marked rise in the frequency of violent incidents across the Sahel (ACLEDA, 2024b). This evolution has had dire humanitarian consequences, including an increase in the number of internally displaced persons and refugee flows. The threat posed by violent extremist groups

is transnational in nature (Gueye, 2018) with potential spillover effects for neighbouring states including Benin, Togo, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Guinea (IISS, 2023).

This report, based on a systematic literature review and insights gathered from the workshop, categorises the main drivers of VE into three broad themes: (1) poverty and exclusion, (2) weak presence of the state, poor delivery of services by the state or misconduct by state agents, and (3) previous conflicts or community tensions. Climate variability and change serves as a 'threat multiplier', helping to amplify existing tensions.

(1) Poverty and exclusion

In the Sahel region, limited economic development outcomes and threatened livelihoods create widespread precarity and hardship. This is particularly true in rural areas, given the centralised nature of Sahelian states. The inability to meet basic needs, such as securing employment and sustaining a family, generates significant frustration among the population, fuelling grievances against the government, perceived as unwilling or unable to improve their situation.

VE groups exploit these vulnerabilities by offering economic incentives to potential recruits. A UNDP study explored the gendered drivers of VE and found search for economic opportunities and employment as the primary reason males in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria voluntarily join VE groups (UNDP, 2023). Poverty, conflict and under-development create a vicious cycle: low economic growth correlates with conflict and, in turn, conflict hinders the implementation of policies for sustainable development.

(2) The exploitation of previous conflicts or community tensions

VE groups increasingly exploit local conflicts to gain supporters and legitimacy, using intercommunal tensions to establish or consolidate their power (IISS, 2023). In the Sahel, the management of natural resources, namely the pastoralist-agriculturalist divide, is an important source of long-lasting tensions and grievances. In their rhetoric, jihadi groups build on tensions stemming from competition for resources, appealing to Fulani herders who feel their traditional land rights are not respected. This strategy has granted some jihadi groups a reputation as protectors of the Fulani population and their plight,



including in Mali and the areas bordering Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo (IISS, 2023). For example, the Katiba Macina, in Mali's Mopti region, often includes references in its narratives to the predatory behaviour of political, economic and judiciary elites, as well as to the Macina Empire, the golden age of Fulani power in the 19th century (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2024).

The escalation of intercommunal tensions in a climate of perceived chaos, insecurity and lawlessness has led to the creation of different self-defence militias, in some cases with the approval of central governments, be it against the jihadi threat, or against other parties in a pre-existing conflict. This has further contributed to the proliferation of armed groups and violence in the Sahel (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022). Again, in Mali's Mopti region, self-defence militias of Dogon and Bambara origin, initially conceived to protect civilians from the jihadi threat in face of the state's inability to provide security, increasingly perpetrated violence against Fulani communities, fostering a dynamic of tit-for-tat violence (IISS, 2023). This has had devastating consequences: in Mopti, jihadi groups are believed to have caused less victims than community-based militias between 2012 and 2019 (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022).

(3) Weak presence of the state, poor delivery of services by the state or misconduct by state agents

The relationship between citizens and the state has multiple facets which influence levels of trust in institutions. Firstly, the perception that democracy is well-functioning, and that citizens can meaningfully participate in public affairs, is crucial. This is because the belief that political change can be achieved through institutional (peaceful) channels reduces the likelihood of resorting to VE and violence. Conversely, political exclusion and feelings of powerlessness serve as structural push factors towards VE (UNDP, 2023). Additionally, the ability of governments to provide essential services such as water, electricity, healthcare, education, justice and security is key, as negligence in service delivery, or perceptions of corruption, mismanagement or even abuse, create a vacuum for other groups to fill.

In the Sahel region, VE groups have positioned themselves as alternative service providers and competitors to the state, gaining legitimacy and support, whether active or passive, from the wider community (UNDP, 2023). For instance, in the Macina region in central Mali, insurgent groups have established their authority by successfully mediating conflicts between farmers and herders, establishing natural resource management mechanisms, and ensuring everyday security, which the state had previously failed to do (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022). Lastly, perceptions of corruption and abusive law enforcement bodies deepen distrust and alienation from the state, which VE narratives readily exploit. This type of group grievance, which on occasions can be traumatic due to the illegitimate use of force against civilians by the state, has been proved to facilitate and accelerate recruitment (UNDP, 2023). Again, drawing on the case of Mali's Mopti region, the Katiba Macina has adapted its rhetoric to capitalise on Fulani grievances since 2018, coinciding with the intensification of law enforcement attacks on Fulani communities (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2024).

(4) Climate variability and change as a 'threat multiplier'

The notion that climate change is a cause of conflict is increasingly gaining scholarly and policy attention.³ Specifically, violent escalations and VE are seen as an effect of intensified competition over declining resources due to climate change. However, one should be cautious when identifying climate change as a central driver of conflict and VE in the Sahel. The climate-conflict nexus is indirect and complex: conflicts related to access to natural resources and land are not due to climate change; they are due to a blend of historical, economic and socio-political factors (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022). Climate change only intensifies these pre-existing issues, which are then instrumentalised by insurgent groups for recruitment purposes. To avoid the oversimplification of complex contexts, climate change should be conceptualised as a 'threat multiplier' (UNDP, 2020) – and not a cause of conflict – since it aggravates and amplifies existing drivers, such as poor socioeconomic development, weak state capabilities and inter-communal tensions (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022).

3. See, for instance, Jalani (2023), BBC (2020) and Tesfaye (2022).



INTERPLAY BETWEEN (IN)SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON EU-SAHEL RELATIONS

Despite increased military spending through initiatives like the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and others like the EU's Task Force Takouba and the EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger (EUMPM), limited results have been achieved in curbing growing insecurity in the Sahel (European Commission, 2020). This is shown by the growth and expansion of jihadist violence beyond Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso (Gaye, 2018; European Parliament Research Service, 2021). This, combined with accusations of neo-colonialism, fuelled frustration among the population in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, and ultimately led to the outright rejection of French and US (and, more generally, European) military presence. Additionally, persistent poor development outcomes, growing unemployment and poor service delivery resulted in growing dissatisfaction among the population.

In Mali, this frustration manifested in widespread waves of protests in 2019 and 2020 against the democratically elected ex-president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. His government was accused of being unable to address the country's multiple crises: the jihadist insurgency in the north, the inter-communal violence plaguing the centre, and the general economic hardships (France 24, 2020). A military junta led by Colonel Assimi Goïta took advantage of President Keita's unpopularity to overthrow the government in 2020. In Burkina Faso and in Niger, although there were no such organised protest movements, comparable grievances were leveraged by military juntas who staged coups d'état of immense popularity in 2022 and 2023, respectively (ETTg, 2024).

The public rhetoric of the new military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger shares a common theme: the strategic exploitation of long-standing historical grievances against


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France and the West. These juntas capitalise on popular discontent stemming from the perceived failure of French and US military forces to protect the population from jihadist insurgencies, as well as the inability of previous governments to address deteriorating security conditions, improve governance and bolster economic performance. This narrative has been instrumental in garnering domestic support and consolidating their authority. However, the military juntas have equally failed to provide protection against jihadist groups, with reports indicating an escalation in violence and spread of jihadist networks across the Sahel (Aubyn et al., 2022).

Proliferation of coups in the region has normalised unconstitutional changes of government in the eyes of public opinion, particularly given the crisis of confidence in state institutions. Additionally, disinformation campaigns, some sponsored by Russia, have amplified pre-existing polarisation, anti-Western sentiment and distrust in state institutions (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022). Consequently, undemocratic governments have enjoyed mass popular support across Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso despite heavy criticism by ECOWAS, the UN, African Union and the EU. However, the important degeneration of political and civic rights brought by the military juntas of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)⁴ is likely negatively affecting their public support.⁵

4. The Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des Etats du Sahel) is a newly formed regional bloc comprising Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, established in response to their collective withdrawal from ECOWAS in 2023. The member states have committed to mutual support across political, economic and military domains. However, as of now, the Alliance has not been officially recognised by the African Union or by ECOWAS, raising questions about its legitimacy and potential impact on regional stability and cooperation.

5. This assertion is based on expert comments made during the Policy Dialogue Event 'The Nexus between Security and Development in the Sahel: West African Perspectives', held in Dakar (Senegal) on 5–6 November 2024. Exact figures on public support for the juntas are not available.



With relations with the West in jeopardy, the juntas have turned to other international powers, namely Russia and the Wagner Group, for support to fight the jihadist insurgency. The deterioration of relations with European partners emboldened juntas to enter into security agreements with non-Western allies such as Russia, Turkey or the Gulf states whose engagement in security-related issues in the region has increasingly become crucial (Baldaro & Strazzari, 2023). Particularly, security and defence cooperation with Russia has notably increased, encompassing the purchase of weapons, military training or the deployment of the Wagner Group – rebranded as the 'Africa Corps' (Milosevich-Juaristi, 2023; Reuters, 2024; France 24, 2024b; Lechner & Eledinov, 2024).

Political ties have also tightened between the AES members and the Kremlin, in line with Russia's shifting foreign policy. For instance, while the African continent was minimally mentioned in Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, the 2023 version referred to Africa as a 'distinctive and influential center of world development' (IISS, 2024). President Putin held talks with Burkina Faso's leader, Ibrahim Traoré, at the Russia-Africa summit in July 2023; while Russia's Deputy Defence Minister, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, visited Niger in December 2023, before continuing to Mali; and foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has made multiple visits to the region in the past years (IISS, 2024). The most recent manifestation of the region's pivot towards Moscow is Mali and Niger's severance of diplomatic relations with Ukraine following its alleged involvement in the Russian defeat in the Tinjaouatène battle in Mali (RFI, 2024).

Meanwhile, while the EU remains 'minimally engaged' in the Sahel, and since 2021, the bloc's strategy for the Sahel has shifted to a focus on state governance and development, signalling a pivot from a purely security-military approach (European Parliament Research Service, 2021). Critics, however, note that this re-engagement strategy is detached from reality. For example, the EU's broad and overambitious objective of fostering democracy, security and human rights in the region faces significant challenges, given the wave of unconstitutional changes of power and subsequent cooling of relations between EU and Sahelian states, the fragility of institutional architecture, as well as the current trend of multipolar geopolitical competition. In last year's EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the Sahel appears as a region of concern and as

a window of opportunity to strengthen political dialogue and operational engagement with regional blocs such as ECOWAS and the AU (Council of the European Union, 2022). Even though the traditional framework of collaboration no longer exists, this narrative underscores the EU's desire to stay engaged with Sahelian countries.

A renewed EU strategy for the Sahel is challenged by the lack of unity among EU member states regarding how and to what extent to engage with military juntas in a complex context of multipolar competition (Desmidt, 2024). Since ECOWAS lifted sanctions on Niger in early 2024, conversations and cooperation have resumed between the junta and important donors such as the World Bank and the IMF. The EU, however, has not followed suit, with the planned \$603 million (500 million euros) investment for the 2021–2024 period remaining frozen (Brouck, 2024). France and the US, whose military missions were invited to leave the country, have also not changed their position.



LEVERAGING EU DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AND ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIPS TO ADDRESS THE NEXUS

While development and security are inherently linked, influencing each other in multifaceted ways, the EU's economic partnerships in fragile contexts have historically been grounded in the notion of 'security and stability before development' (Haastруп, 2013). This approach often neglects the critical reality that lack of development directly undermines security and stability. In recent years, there has been a shift toward a more integrated approach that balances development and security efforts. However, this shift has been largely driven by increasing geopolitical competition in the region, particularly in response to the rise of Chinese investments and Russia's growing influence in the region. A new global race⁶ for Africa's critical raw minerals, which are needed to accelerate transitions from fossil fuels to clean energy, has seen European countries aiming to become dominant players in the renewable energy value-chain create economic and security partnerships with Sahelian and non-Sahelian countries

6. See for example: The Economist (2023).



With \$150 billion destined for Africa, investments are streamlined towards five key areas: quickening the green transition; boosting the digital transition; accelerating sustainable growth and improving working conditions; enhancing health and pharmaceutical systems; and improving education and training.



– for example Italy's Mattei Plan for Africa (Fattibene & Manservigi, 2024). In 2021, the EU launched its Global Gateway, an ambitious global infrastructure investment initiative, aimed at mobilising \$300 billion in investments worldwide between 2021 and 2027. With \$150 billion destined for Africa, investments are streamlined towards five key areas: quickening the green transition; boosting the digital transition; accelerating sustainable growth and improving working conditions; enhancing health and pharmaceutical systems; and improving education and training. Critics, however, note that investment instruments under the Global Gateway constitute a repackaging of existing funding initiatives without substantial commitment to fresh capital injection.

Despite current challenges facing EU-Africa relations (see Shiferaw-Tadesse & Di Ciommo, 2023), the EU-Africa Summit has evolved into a crucial platform for enhancing collaboration between the EU and African countries. Convened every three years, the Summit has facilitated the expansion of European trade, investments and financial support to African countries through grants and concessional loans for infrastructure development, job creation and economic growth. In strengthening economic and diplomatic ties with Africa, Europe has introduced several strategic initiatives, such as the Global Gateway and bilateral agreements between EU member states and their African counterparts. A notable example is the EU's Critical Raw Materials Act, which aims to achieve 'net zero' carbon emissions by 2050 (European Commission, 2021). While this initiative is positioned as a key pillar of Europe's green transition,

critics argue that in addition to exporting emissions to African countries, it could have severe economic consequences for Africa, potentially leading to significant job losses that undermine the continent's already fragile industrial base (ISIP, 2021; University of Groningen, 2024). These concerns highlight the need for more inclusive and equitable strategies that balance environmental goals with Africa's economic development priorities. EU countries like Germany and Italy, for example, have entered into partnerships with African countries to secure critical raw materials. Seeing opportunities to grow their own economies and boost domestic manufacturing, some African countries have banned the export of critical raw minerals, insisting that these resources be refined domestically as part of value-addition and local beneficiation (Reuters, 2022). For those countries that succeed, this could set the stage for greater collaboration between European private firms and African governments. However, much of it will depend on the reliability of power and transport infrastructure.

The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, published the 'Political Guidelines' – a critical document that outlines her vision for her second term from 2024 to 2029 (von der Leyen, 2024). The document reaffirms Africa as Europe's 'sister continent', highlighting the deep historical, cultural and economic ties between the two regions. Yet, the document dedicates only minimal attention to Africa, with the most substantial references focusing on migration control and the exploitation of critical mineral resources. Critics argue that sparse detail and patchy reference to Africa in the blueprint reflects a lack of attention to ties with Africa while reference to Africa still mirrors old colonial practices tied to extractivism. The current bifurcation of African development leaves the EU with the challenge of taking approaches to development that are context-specific and sensitive to Africa's development challenges. To address this, EU financial support for continent-wide development initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) must be undergirded by a strong commitment to develop regional and cross-border infrastructure like seaports, roads, electricity and water to support development. In fragile contexts like the Sahel, cross-border regional infrastructure can enhance and deepen regional integration, enabling new forms of economic and political integration to emerge, thereby contributing to peace and stability in a region characterised by growing fragility.



RETHINKING RELATIONS BETWEEN AFRICA AND THE EU/WEST: LESSONS FROM THE SAHEL

The current structure of the European Union's external relations, particularly within the European External Action Service, limits effective coordination and synergies between EU member states, EU institutions and key external actors such as the US, UN, ECOWAS and the African Union. This often results in fragmented and inconsistent approaches to development cooperation, conflict prevention, management and resolution (Gebhard, 2017). The EU has, at times, been criticised for employing a 'reverse engineering' approach, where frameworks are developed retroactively to provide coherence to disparate and dissimilar contexts (see Pirozzi, 2014). Furthermore, the EU's limited contextual understanding of local conflict dynamics and actors constrains its ability to navigate sensitive situations effectively. In the Sahel, proliferation of armed non-state actors underscores the need for a critical reassessment of EU-Sahel security relations.



SECURITY-DRIVEN, MILITARISED APPROACHES ARE INSUFFICIENT TO TACKLE VE AND CAN BE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE

Overly securitised, militarised and gender-insensitive approaches to security sector reform (SSR) can inadvertently contribute to the proliferation of armed groups and exacerbate efforts to counter VE (ACLEDA, 2024b). In certain cases, these strategies may displace violent extremist groups, unintentionally broadening their geographic reach. This risk is especially pronounced in contexts where state institutions are weak and accountability mechanisms are absent. Security-focused interventions often consolidate the power of government and security forces, which, in the eyes of some citizens, may be perceived as corrupt, unaccountable or oppressive. Such perceptions can further alienate communities and enhance the appeal

of VE groups, fuelling recruitment and deepening instability (UNDP, 2023). Decades-long counterterrorism efforts by France, the US and the EU have overlooked the importance of addressing the key drivers of VE and insecurity like poverty and exclusion, weak state presence, poor delivery of services by the state or misconduct by security forces.



MULTILATERAL COUNTERTERRORISM AND PREVENTION/COUNTERING OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM SHOULD HAVE CLEARLY DEFINED OBJECTIVES, OUTCOMES AND AN EXIT STRATEGY

European and multilateral counterterrorism and prevention/countering of violent extremism efforts must be anchored by concrete, clearly articulated objectives, measurable outcomes and a well-defined exit strategy. France's Serval operation in Mali serves as a prime example of this approach. It had specific military goals within a well-defined geographic scope: to halt the advance of terrorist groups, secure Bamako to protect French nationals and preserve Mali's territorial integrity (Gnanguênon, 2014). The operation included a clear withdrawal plan, transitioning responsibility to the UN's MINUSMA mission. In coordination with the Malian army, France successfully contained the jihadist insurgency, safeguarded Bamako and central Mali, and pushed back jihadist strongholds in the north. As a result, Operation Serval was widely regarded as a political and military success (Nasr & Parens, 2023).

In contrast, the subsequent Operation Barkhane lacked clear and concrete objectives beyond the broad aim of 'fighting terrorism'. Its scope expanded to the wider Sahel region and involved numerous European and African partners, but without a coherent strategy or effective cooperation mechanisms. Territorial gains were not followed by the restoration of civil governance, services or local authority structures, allowing insurgent groups to reoccupy areas and continue recruitment (Nasr & Parens, 2023). Moreover, the absence of robust accountability and oversight mechanisms further eroded the operation's effectiveness, negatively

impacting the local population's perception of law enforcement efforts. This underscores the importance of clear goals, coordinated execution and post-conflict reconstruction in any successful mission to counter terrorism and violent extremism.

IMPROVED ENGAGEMENT AND DIALOGUE WITH NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS FOR EFFECTIVE COOPERATION

Engaging with local communities – and even groups involved in illicit economies or violent extremism – is critical to understanding their grievances and negotiating solutions that can improve lives within legal frameworks. A rigid, one-sided stance adopted in Mali, particularly towards extremist and insurgent groups, raises concerns, especially when compared to the successful dialogue-based strategies employed in Niger and Mauritania (IISS, 2023). For instance, in 2020, France opposed efforts by former Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita to engage with senior AQIM leaders, citing the principle of 'non-negotiation with terrorists'. This imposition not only infringed on Mali's sovereignty but further damaged the credibility of France's military operations in the country (Laplace & Diallo, 2021; Bensimon, 2020).

Evidence shows that negotiated resolutions tend to be more sustainable than purely military solutions (Batault et al., 2024). Dialogue is essential for identifying key stakeholders, clarifying grievances and building trust. However, strategic negotiations with violent extremist groups present significant challenges, such as the risk of legitimising these groups, the lack of clear interlocutors and the absence of enforcement mechanisms. Nevertheless, negotiations can be pursued alongside kinetic counterterrorism operations, which degrade a group's military capacity and pressure them into talks. In addition, successful conflict resolution requires robust strategies for the disengagement and reintegration of combatants, ensuring long-term peace and stability (Batault et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

The security-development nexus underscores the urgent need for a paradigm shift in EU-Sahel relations. The region's persistent fragility and complex challenges require more nuanced and integrated approaches that go beyond traditional security and development cooperation. As highlighted in this analysis, while the EU's strategies are ambitious, they often fall short due to a lack of contextual understanding and coherence among member states and institutions. To promote sustainable development that strengthens regional security, the EU must prioritise local engagement and address the root causes of insecurity, such as poverty, exclusion and governance deficits. This involves not only enhancing state capacity to improve public service delivery but also building trust and legitimacy by engaging with non-state actors and local communities. Additionally, the EU's economic partnerships should be recalibrated to ensure they contribute to both development and security, avoiding the shortcomings of a purely securitised approach, which has struggled to deliver meaningful development outcomes. The evolving geopolitical landscape further complicates the EU's role in the region. A strategic, unified and context-sensitive engagement is therefore essential. This includes supporting regional initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area, de-risking private investments to attract investors, and prioritising cross-border and regional infrastructure projects that have the potential to foster both economic and political integration.



The region's persistent fragility and complex challenges require more nuanced and integrated approaches that go beyond traditional security and development cooperation.



Recommendations

SECURITY SECTOR REFORM THROUGH INCREASED TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

To enhance transparency of SSR processes it is critical to increase transparency in the allocation and use of military funds, which in some instances have been exploited as instruments of corruption and sources of internal conflict between armed factions – thereby fuelling instability and corruption of political systems. There is an important distinction to be made between military and police roles. In countries like Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, there have been credible reports of EU funds being misused and mishandled by host governments. For example, the military usurping public policing duties, often using methods ill-suited for maintaining public order. This continues to weaken the trust between the EU, host states and local communities, particularly in fragile contexts.

Gender mainstreaming is one crucial element to ensure transparency and accountability in SSR processes. Recognising the unique roles played by women and girls, as well as the gendered impacts of conflict and insecurity on both women and men, will ensure more inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

THE ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR THROUGH JOB CREATION, YOUTH ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEMS, AND CROSS-BORDER INFRASTRUCTURE

To foster sustainable development in the Sahel and Africa more broadly, economic partnerships with the private sector must be prioritised and reimagined. For instance, the EU's existing Economic Partnership Agreements should be restructured to serve as instruments for transforming Africa's Regional Economic Communities into dynamic 'zones of developmental regionalism'. This approach would complement and strengthen initiatives such as the AfCFTA.

A strategic transition is required to move away from reliance on primary commodity exports toward an economy driven by small and medium-sized enterprises. This shift would provide opportunities for local capital, expertise and workforce skills to generate significant and inclusive economic impact. By 2050, African countries will add about 800 million people to their workforce while Europe's working age population will decline by 156 million in the same period. Supporting African countries to take advantage of their demographic dividend is essential for long-term stability and should underline EU-Africa engagement going into the future.

Additionally, the establishment of a robust industrial sector focused on technological innovation and skills transfer between African and European private firms and companies is critical. This will lead to the creation of resilient African entrepreneurial ecosystems capable of driving sustainable growth, promoting competition and modernising local and medium-sized enterprises.

TARGETED SUPPORT FOR CSOS

The EU should enhance the ability of local civil society organisations (CSOs) to access its grants by implementing more flexible and tailored accountability mechanisms that are feasible for smaller CSOs to manage. Currently, the complexity and resource-intensive nature of monitoring, evaluation and follow-up requirements place significant strain on these organisations, demanding resources that they often lack. Simplifying these processes would allow CSOs to participate more effectively and equitably.

Targeted support for CSOs – restoring trust between regional bodies, particularly between ECOWAS and AES – is critical for regional peace and stability. Targeted EU support for regional CSOs will enable them to play a more proactive role as a bridge between the EU, governments and the populace. However, European domestic politics and a shifting geopolitical context characterised by new configurations of the European Commission will have implications in Europe's engagement in the Sahel and Africa more broadly. The EU-Africa Summit in 2025 could be an opportunity to address areas of divergence and contention while advancing policy proposals to drive a new impetus in partnerships with Sahelian (African) countries.

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This Policy Brief was produced with the support of the Open Society Foundation and in collaboration with the Gorée Institute in Dakar



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ISSN 2984-0457

