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What role for NATO in the Sahel?

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Since the collapse of the Libyan regime in 2011, the Sahel region has gradually gained significance within the NATO environment. The chaos in Libya has accelerated the interconnection of North African and Sahelian dynamics, creating a complex environment with serious implications for both the stability of North Africa and the Mediterranean Basin.

The Sahel region suffers from a paradoxical situation. In view of the multiple national (Sahel armed forces), regional (African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)) and international actors (United Nations, European Union, and also non-African states) present on the ground, the situation is often dubbed a “security traffic jam”. Some NATO Allies who have traditionally wielded influence in this region, have also invested in regional stabilization and development efforts for a long time.

For the first time at the June 2021 NATO Summit, Allies have explicitly voiced their concerns over the “deteriorating situation in the Sahel region”.¹ As the “newest addition” in this already “crowded” environment, and at a time of review of its Strategic Concept, the Alliance must demonstrate its added value; identify “niche” areas where it can complement and strengthen existing efforts; while considering the Sahelian countries’ aspirations and specific needs.

Root causes of the Sahel’s instability

A vast semi-desertic region of 5 million km² that stretches from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea and delineates the North Saharan desert from the southern tropical region, the Sahel is also one of the world’s most impoverished regions. Despite the multiplication of security and

development initiatives over the last ten years, Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs)² have expanded their footprint from the North of Mali to the Central Sahel region (Liptako-Gourma region), the Lake Chad Basin (Chad, Niger, Cameroon) and the Horn of Africa. Since 2018, Sahelian jihadist groups have also started to move southward to the Gulf of Guinea (Benin, Ivory Coast), through Burkina Faso.

VEOs like *Jama’at Nasr al Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM) and the *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara* (ISGS) in the central Sahel, as well as the *Islamic State West Africa Province* (ISWAP) and *Boko Haram* in the Lake Chad Basin, have exploited inter-community tensions and long-standing grievances to deepen their presence in the region. Persistent marginalization of specific ethnic groups and the absence of governmental institutions in rural areas have constituted fertile ground for armed groups’ recruitment of combatants among communities that feel abandoned by state authorities. The Tuareg insurgency in Mali – that led to the outbreak of the conflict in 2012 – illustrated the extent to which grievances inherited from the 1960s can grow into armed militancy. The absence of institutional/administrative order in these areas fueled trafficking activities, providing funds to insurgents and exacerbating tensions within and amongst local communities.³ By exploiting local tensions and grievances, VEOs have reinforced their legitimacy and ideological influence over local communities

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1 See Brussels Summit Communiqué, Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council, 14 June 2021, paragraph 75.

2 On the security challenges in the Sahel, see Y. H. Zoubir, “Security challenges, migration, instability and violent extremism in the Sahel”, *Mediterranean Yearbook 2017*, IEMed, pp.134-140.

3 See “Narcotrafic, violence et politique au Nord du Mali”, *Report 267/Africa*, International Crisis Group, 13 December 2018.

through alliances with tribal leaders, and by ensuring basic services, protection and arbitration for disputes linked to resources.

These dynamics are significant in the central Sahel region, where conflicts oppose the semi-nomadic Fulani herders to the sedentary farming communities in Mali (Dogon) and Burkina Faso (Mossi). In this context, the effects of climate change on water resources and arable lands are additional stress factors for local populations,⁴ making rivalries for resources even worse amid a context of fast demographic growth.⁵

Pressures on infrastructure and socio-economic resources of neighbouring countries hosting refugees⁶ have increased, especially in Burkina Faso. The large number of internally-displaced persons (IDPs) (around 1,6 million)⁷ has also given rise to challenges in terms of protection of civilians and border control management. Vast desert areas and tribal groups spread across borders, rendering territory surveillance and border control difficult for Sahelian armed forces with scarce Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance and mobility capabilities. For instance, the seven battalions of the G5 Sahel Joint Force (G5SJF) are positioned along three corridors 100 km wide along the thousands of kms of shared borders (3,300 km West-East; 1,600 km from North to South). Their mandate⁸ is to fight terrorism, drug and human trafficking; facilitate the return of refugees and IDPs; support the development of the humanitarian assistance; and ease the restoration of state institutions.

Despite significant progress since gaining independence, Sahelian countries continue to suffer from structural governance issues, inherited partially from the post-colonial period. In rural areas,⁹ where 57 percent of Malian population reside, and more than 80 percent for the population of Niger, the supply of basic services is limited or non-existent. Poverty affects around 50 percent of the population in Mauritania, and up to 90 per-

cent in Niger. Sahelian countries remain highly dependent on foreign aid and financial assistance. GDPs per capita as well as governmental revenues remain very low, while military expenditures represent between 7 and 12.5 percent of public spending.¹⁰ Scarcely resourced local education systems, underemployment and limited participation in official labour markets account for heightened migration and enrolment in trafficking activities and militias. Corruption remains a major issue and fuels resentment against political elites amongst the Sahelian populations, as demonstrated by the recent coups in Mali and Chad. Moreover, the repression of popular protests and reported violations of human rights by Sahelian security and armed forces¹¹ have deepened people's distrust towards central authorities, reflecting negatively on Western foreign forces present in the region. Memories of the colonial period and residual identity discontent inherited from the quests for independence remain vivid, and are often exploited by VEOs and competing foreign powers. Fearing disengagement from their traditional Western allies, and in a bid to overcome post-COVID-19 repercussions, Sahelian governments are considering new partnership opportunities.

The Sahelian security “patchwork”

The hardening of the situation and the regionalization of violent dynamics have made manifest the limitations of foreign counter-terrorism operations (Serval/Barkhane). International measures – like the UN operation MINUSMA and the EU-led training and capacity-building missions – have also had limited success in stabilizing Mali and in containing the spread of the VEOs to the rest of the region. In 2014, Sahelian countries began formulating collective responses to address regional instability of their own volition and on their own terms (Multinational Joint Task Force in 2015; the G5 Sahel Force in 2017).¹² However, these initiatives' results remain difficult to assess. Sahelian armies lack combat experience – with the noticeable exception of the Chadian armed forces – and face disparities amongst their services, marred further by political interference. Interoperability among G5 Sahel forces remains limited due to command-and-control weaknesses and uneven operational maintenance of equipment. Finally, combat performance is hampered by scarce and heterogeneous resources (personnel, equipment, adequate trainings).¹³

4 See “The Central Sahel: scene of new climate wars?”, *Briefing 154/Africa*, International Crisis Group, 24 April 2020.

5 The total population of the G5 Sahel countries is expected to increase from 83.7 million inhabitants in 2019 to 196 million in 2050, including about 50 percent under 15 years of age. See A. Piveteau, “The Sahel is a demographic bomb”, *Défis Humanitaires*, 2 August 2020.

6 On the humanitarian situation in the Sahel, see Central Sahel Crisis Appeal 2020, IOM, June-December 2020.

7 *Idem*.

8 See Communiqué, 679e réunion, Conseil de Paix et de Sécurité, Union Africaine, 13 April 2017.

9 See B. Z. Sakor, “A demographic threat? Youth, peace and security challenges in the Sahel”, UNFPA/PRIO, 13 November 2020.

10 See Sub-Saharan Africa, World Bank Data at data.worldbank.org

11 See “Sahel: end abuses in counterterrorism operations”, Human Rights Watch, 13 February 2021.

12 Counting about 10,000 troops from Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, the MNJTF conducted CT operations in the Lake Chad Basin. See Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram, The Africa-EU Partnership website.

13 In addition to training provided through bilateral cooperation programs (France, Spain, Belgium, United States, Great-Britain), the EU has conducted 3 CSDP missions in the Sahel (EUCAP Mali, EUCAP Niger, EUTM) aiming at reinforcing capabilities of local security forces. See “The European Union's partnership with the G5 Sahel countries”, ReliefWeb, July 2019.

At a time of review of its Strategic Concept, the Alliance must demonstrate its added value, while considering the Sahelian countries' aspirations and specific needs

This prevents forces from extending their sovereignty throughout their territory; combating terrorism on their own; as well as fulfilling their regional troop commitments (MINUSMA, G5SJF, MNJTF).

Complementary to other international and regional initiatives in the security and development domains (Coalition Sahel, EU missions, ECOWAS development projects and regional political dialogue, etc.), Sahelian efforts remain financially and logistically dependent on foreign aid and priorities. Outsiders' interests and rivalries tend to prevail over local aspirations and concerns for governance efficiency, fairness of social redistribution, human rights, and improvement of daily living conditions. Focused primarily on infrastructure development and humanitarian aid, foreign initiatives partially fail to address the root causes of the Sahelian crises. The recurrent political instability in Mali, Chad as well as Burkina Faso, have revealed the profound crisis of legitimacy and credibility affecting local governments. The disconnect between local realities and foreign strategic plans fuels grievances towards the West (or the North), putting at risk foreign forces and personnel operating in the region.

These factors are all the more worrisome given that China and Russia have reinforced their economic and military influence in the region that they construe as a springboard for strengthening their presence in the rest of the continent. Driven by the arms deals opportunities and access to natural resources, the Kremlin has developed military-security cooperation with 20 African countries, as well as trade and economic relations on the continent. However, for the moment, Russia's presence remains rather limited in the Sahel (Mali, Gulf of Guinea), focusing primarily on Central Africa.

At the same time, the need for direct investments in infrastructure and services, and the growing demand for consumer goods have facilitated the penetration of Sahelian markets by Chinese companies who covet natural resources (hydrocarbons, minerals, fish, etc.) and communication networks. The Sahel has also been marginally affected by the race between Turkey and some Middle-Eastern actors to expand their influence in the Gulf of Guinea and in the Horn of Africa.

In this context, the sustainability of Western "imported security solutions" is at risk. The gradual downscaling of the Barkhane operation in favour of the European Takuba Task Force¹⁴ has raised concerns among Sahelian leaders, despite reassurances concerning the maintenance of critical capabilities (air mobility, health, task force) to support regional forces. However, one should not lose sight of the critical ratio between the light military footprint of forces and the size of areas to be controlled.

What role for the Alliance?

If the Alliance is to play a meaningful role in the region,¹⁵ it needs to reflect on realistic ways to enhance regional stability while mitigating the risks of spill over to North Africa and the Mediterranean Basin. NATO must correctly assess the destabilizing effects for Allied countries and its partners, and the strengths and vulnerabilities of the local actors. Through its various engagements with Sahelian and Sub-Saharan actors, the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub – with the support of relevant academic institutions – could help NATO better understand socio-economic and political aspects, which have been overlooked by Allies' analysis. It is critical for the Alliance to question the capacity and political will of local authorities to address territorial development disparities and socio-political grievances at stake in regional crises.

This analytical process, combined with a broad variety of "1.5 track" engagements with regional actors, would help NATO identify realistic objectives and reliable partners so that it can then develop a tailored approach to the region, for instance by leveraging its existing assets and complementing Allies' initiatives. The Alliance might consider the Sahel within the larger framework of its policy for the South, and expand the Mediterranean Dialogue partnership to integrate Libya and all the G5 Sahel countries. A Grand-Maghreb-Sahel framework could provide a platform for regional security dialogue, allowing NATO Allies and regional partners to discuss crises that have a regional dimension, like Libya or Mali. To ensure the comprehensiveness and inclusiveness of this strategic dialogue, relevant partners like the UN, the EU, the African Union, ECOWAS or the G5 Sahel Secretariat, should be included. Taking advantage of the multiple contributions of NATO Allies, NATO could support the EU and the UN by acting as a clearing house for the Sahel's security "patchwork"; improving the coordination of initiatives; and identifying gaps in resources and operational procedures.

Fostering Sahelian interoperability and capabilities

On the practical side, the Alliance has a primary interest in strengthening the capabilities and interoperability of Sahelian countries, so that they can address their own security issues. As an example, NATO could support the (re-)building of functional civil-military relations in Libya, as well as the reform of Sahelian security architectures. NATO's expertise in the standardization domain could help reduce heterogeneity within and among Sahelian armed forces and promote regional standards that would foster interoperability within the G5SJF. NATO might also provide specific assistance, in coordination with Allies and the EU, to develop regional exercises and training programmes (special forces, IEDs, counter-ter-

14 See J. Deveau, "Mali: la force européenne Takuba se déploie lentement", *Franceinfo/Afrique*, 23 September 2021.

15 See Brussels Summit Communiqué, *op.cit.*, paragraph 75.

rorism, border control, civilian preparedness), and could open its professional military education opportunities to all G5 Sahel countries. Lastly, NATO could support Allies' counter-terrorism initiatives in the region with surveillance capacities (AWACS and drones).

Defence capacity-building programmes could also be planned in coordination with initiatives led by the MINUSMA, EU missions, Coalition for Sahel and AU measures. Capitalizing on Allies' relations with local actors could facilitate the delivery of comprehensive assistance packages. Early consultations in the planning process amongst EU and NATO Allies would allow for better forces allocation, while preserving the cohesion of both organizations. Interest-driven and project-based, such an approach would maximize complementarities among local actors, governmental institutions (national civilian agencies, armed forces, security services) and regional and international organizations, covering the full operational spectrum. After the completion of specific Operational Capabilities Concept programs (OCC), and upon request, partners envisaging a leading role in the development of regional security mechanisms, like Mauritania, could be offered a specific Defence Capacity Building "Framework Nation" package. Encouraging the exchange of best practices among southern partners (combat in desertic environment, counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, IEDs, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, etc.) could also lead to the establishment of "south to south" cooperation. The G5 Sahel Defence College could also become a joint NATO-EU-AU Centre of Excellence for lessons learned from stabilization initiatives in the Sahel. Prioritizing the efforts of the most "loyal" and active partners would reinforce the Alliance's visibility and legitimacy in the region, and instil a genuine sense of ownership among partner recipients. Finally, given the domestic situation in every Sahelian country, NATO should judiciously communicate its policy in the region, and be wary of any disinformation campaign that targets the Alliance.

As suggested in the June 2021 NATO Summit *communiqué*, the Sahel region may very well rise in prominence on the Alliance's Agenda for the South in the months ahead. Uncertainties around the future of the French-led Barkhane Operation, as well as persistent difficulties

to fund the G5 Sahel Joint Force, offer opportunities for NATO to develop a more ambitious approach towards the Sahel. The recent political developments in Libya, the growing Russian presence in the region, and the migration-related issues show that all crises are intertwined and cannot be addressed separately. For that reason, a reinforcement of the Naval standing groups, (NSG 1 and 2) together with an enhanced operational and political coordination with EU efforts to address migratory challenges (IRINI operation, FRONTEX), ought to be considered. North African partners with robust navies (Morocco for instance) could also be invited to join NATO maritime policing missions. However, deterring migration flows to reach the Mediterranean is likely to increase pressures on transit countries in North Africa. These countries, already fragilized by their own political difficulties, could be tempted to call on Russian or Chinese help to meet post-COVID 19 socio-economic demands and overcome popular discontent. Political instability and rising tensions with France have already paved new margins of manoeuvre for Russia in Mali, and might open new opportunities for the Kremlin in the Gulf of Guinea or the Horn of Africa.

A unique moment to reinvent crisis management

The Sahel region is a complex and crowded security environment, in which any vacuum left by Western forces can be filled by NATO's competitors.

It is unlikely that Allies will agree on a major military engagement in the Sahel following the end of Barkhane. Measures to support the Takuba Task Force and a wider cooperative security policy for the Sahel, accompanied by tailored DCB packages, could be more realistic. In this context, the 2022 NATO Summit must define new orientations for the Sahel. In cooperation with the wide range of stakeholders already operating there, the Alliance must elaborate a strategic vision and identify ways to make a difference. The Alliance's withdrawal from Afghanistan offers a unique moment for such a process, when NATO needs to reinvent crisis management and to assess the role it intends to play in the South.



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