

The Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum

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The Sahel as Africa's Strategic Heartland: Security Challenges¹

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Introduction: Security Challenges in the Sahel

Ambassador José Hornero

Following the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum on 15 March, the speaker Pedro Sánchez Herráez, a colonel in the Spanish Armed Forces, and the invited expert Emmanuel Dupuy, advisor and consultant, have written down some of the important ideas discussed at the forum.

¹ This analysis is part of an ongoing line of research by the International Security Centre on the Sahel. Following the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum organised in March 2021, speakers belonging to the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum Expert Group have deepened the themes of their conferences, analysing the shared challenges, and the opportunities for cooperation on our common challenges. The political crises in Mali and Chad link the security crisis to governance challenges in these states, where the presence of self-defence militias and jihadist groups hinder economic and social development. In such a changing environment, with the Sahel being Europe's advanced frontier, it is now more important than ever to promote a space for dialogue in which both regions can share, cooperate and propose innovative solutions. This series of publications, as well as the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum, have received a grant from the General Secretariat for Defence Policy of the Ministry of Defence.

The authors emphasise the idea of linkages and interdependence on several overlapping levels (security, economic, climatic, social) as well as the cross-cutting nature of the approaches adopted by the international community. These ideas of interdependence and transversality are consistent with a Sahel that has been, and has been since time immemorial, the long corridor connecting North and South, Europe with and the Gulf of Guinea, the Nilotic East with the Bantu and Berber West, and even with Latin America. A miniature Silk Road, with porous borders and overlapping ethnicities. Along this route, warriors, sages, ideas and goods have circulated, tensions have spread and affections have been woven.

A disturbance within this geopolitical corridor very easily produces shock waves that end up spilling over at both ends, affecting neighbouring regions sooner or later. One need only reread the history of Spain to remember this. The disturbance today is terrorism on the southern side of the corridor, which is slowly but inexorably heading towards the sea; and on the northern side, irregular migration and various forms of trafficking, the former in a tumultuous and the latter in an orderly fashion.

The scarce presence of the state in large areas is one of the causes of the difficulties in overcoming the current crisis. This weak presence of state institutions, often tenuous and sometimes non-existent, in certain areas of the Sahel has been exploited to the full by terrorist groups, bandits disguised as Islamic warriors, paramilitaries or leaders of all kinds to extend their influence.

In this context, both authors stress the importance of good governance as a key part of the solution. This implies the effective application of the widely shared principle of Sahelian ownership. An essential step in this ownership is the effective return of basic state services to areas that have lost contact with them, whether through terrorist imposition or for other reasons. To feel the institutions is to make them real. In every village where people touch their fingers and see basic services with their eyes, a giant step towards stabilisation has been taken. The ultimate goal is to avoid military victories with civilian vacuums because they are immediately exploited by the enemies of the state.

Moreover, as Dupuy points out, Barkhane lives in the paradox of undeniable French military victories on the one hand, and the local population's resistance to positively valuing this military presence on the other, with a series of actions that have sparked controversy in part of local public opinion and which France has vehemently denied were not justified militarily. Not to mention, Dupuy continues, the growing domestic pressure in France and Mali over the real effectiveness and legitimacy of French engagement in the region; the "stuttering" Task Force Takuba; and the US approach that prefers the bilateral to the multilateral when it comes to the Sahel. As Colonel Sánchez points out, all of this points to the imperative need for deeper Sahelian ownership. In this context, the restructuring of the French military presence in the Sahel (announced

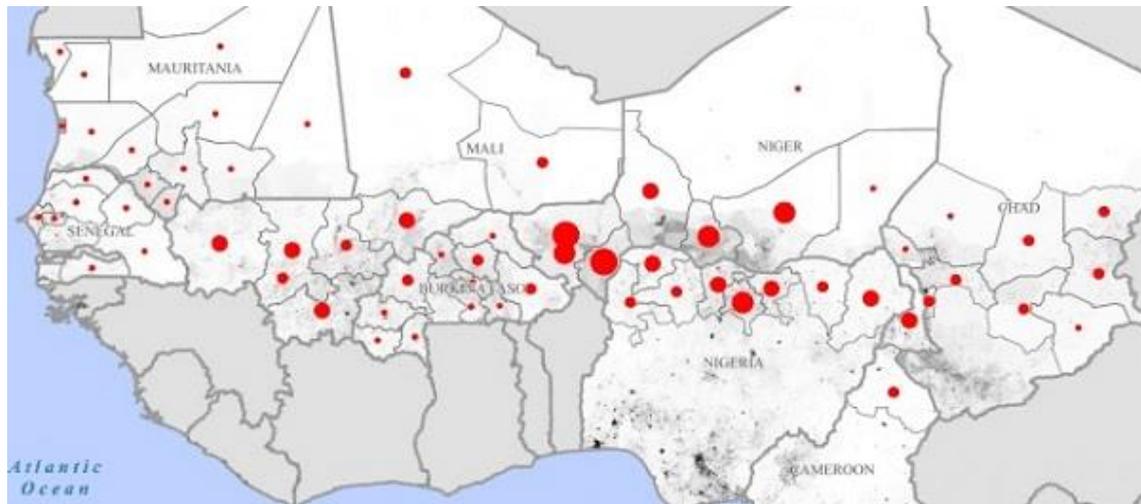
at the G-7 conference in June, i.e. after the forum) will entail a number of changes that could substantially influence the nature and architecture of the Sahelian national forces. Restructuring is an open-ended process that the main foreign ministries, starting with the French, are seeking to make cooperative in order to avoid an undesirable effect for all.

The structural fault lines that run through the Sahel, and how they are amplified by the violent forces, act as a major disintegrating factor, according to the authors. In addition to the usual cleavages (ethnic, pastoralism/farmer duality, or religious), vertical tensions are becoming increasingly relevant, used as a battering ram by terrorists in their quest to tear Sahelian societies apart by exploiting their internal contradictions. It is an opportunistic strategy that rubs salt into open wounds, numbed in the recent past by decades of secular and unitary republicanism, but which are becoming increasingly virulent. One of these vertical tensions is that which separates large landowners from humble shepherds, or clans that have historically considered themselves to be protagonists of their history versus others who tend to identify themselves as sharers in it.

These horizontal and vertical tensions are eroding a traditional status quo that used to accommodate one or the other with varying degrees of success. It is therefore important to avoid reducing existing conflicts to an exclusive struggle between ethnicities and religions or between ways of life, and to view these geopolitical realities as complex phenomena that resist being viewed from a monolithic point of view. In the end, as Colonel Sánchez warns, the violent always seek to prevent an "us" and replace it with an "us and others". Ethnicities and religions, horizontal identity markers, are not enough to achieve this destruction of the social fabric, so they have found another way, digging underneath to exploit underlying age-old quarrels.

This terrorist flexibility is yet another example of a strategy that is being insidious, tenacious and pragmatic. To mention just one, fitna, warfare between insurgent Muslims or not so common in other regions of the world, is avoided as much as possible. The most dramatic case of Sahelian fitna is between DAESH and JNIM, but this is due more to specific geostrategic interests than to theological differences. Without underestimating the religious factor, it is the desire for an improvement in personal expectations and living conditions that drives the radicalised youth to join armed groups. According to this view, terrorist ranks are better and more easily decimated by changing expectations than by launching offensive after offensive.

Another theme of the paper is the effects of climate change in the Sahel and its impact on the current worsening security crisis. On this point, there is a deep divergence of opinion among experts, with the main difference centring on the relative weight given to climate in relation to other underlying factors (economic, social, political, demographic, etc.).



The Sahel and (in)security: a focus of growing instability

Pedro Sánchez Herráez

The Sahel: a space of transition and mobility

The term 'Sahel', which derives from a word meaning shore, refers to the southern edge of the great desert, the Sahara. And in the same way that the Mediterranean is a "sea of water", and that for those who know how to cross it, it constitutes a space of communication between the two shores (Europe and Africa), the Sahara, this "sea of sand", materialises a space that allows movement between its two shores, between the Mediterranean coast of Africa to the north and the southern shore, the Sahel.

For this reason, this apparently remote southern shore has been interconnected for centuries with the Mediterranean coast and with Europe; and also, through the basins of the Senegal River or the Niger River, depending on the dominant Sahelian empire in past eras, the goods that flowed along the millenary routes that cross Africa and the Sahara also reached the Gulf of Guinea and sub-Saharan Africa. The Sahel was and is a transitional space.

On the other hand, the very dynamics of Sahelian life, governed by natural cycles and the use of the land in the compass of rains and droughts², induced - and induces -

² This is why the Sahel is sometimes defined as a bioclimatic zone, the space south of the Sahara in which rainfall ranges from 150 to 600 millimetres (or litres per square metre) of annual rainfall (or 200 to 800, according to other sources). And given that the Sahara has grown by 10 per cent in the last hundred years,

movements³ in the compass of these natural rhythms: in certain seasons, lands full of grass and undergrowth are used by shepherds, who move their herds to the compass of the existence of pastures, in a complementary cohabitation with the farmers who cultivate these lands when the climatic conditions are right. But this cohabitation is feasible when the rainfall cycle has been as expected and when the number of people (and livestock) who must live off these lands does not exceed a maximum set by the productive capacity of the land. And if this delicate balance is disrupted by climate change - which has an extraordinary impact on the Sahel - and exponential population growth - there is talk of a "human tsunami" due to rapid population growth in the region - the imbalance generates disputes and strife and provides fertile ground for insecurity and instability.

The Sahelian space is included in the borders of between 10 and 12 countries (depending on the different sources and due to the mobility of this space), although the term institutional Sahel or G5 Sahel (formed by Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad) is normally used, both because this is the area where the great Sahelian empires of antiquity developed and because French colonisation left administrative structures and common elements that have facilitated their integration into a supranational organisation. And these nations are going through a delicate moment, a major security crisis.

Security, a key factor in a stable society

Sahelian countries have low incomes, so their security apparatuses are not very extensive. For example, the G5 Sahel countries, with 10 times the surface area of Spain and borders without natural obstacles and very permeable, and with slightly less than twice the population of Spain, have, added together, approximately one third of Spain's armed forces and less than one fifth of its police forces. The starting point for the state to provide security is very complex. Even the state's own presence in many territories is weak.

A stable society needs, in the first instance, security, which requires specific tools. But since security is the primary element, there must also be a good system of governance (a fair government that is accepted by the inhabitants, an efficient administration, a

and that this growth is essentially southwards from the continent, the Sahelian space is moving southwards at the same pace and direction, adding another mobility factor.

³ WALTHER, Olivier J. y RETAILLÉ, Denise, Le modèle sahélien de la circulation, de la mobilité et de la incertitude spatiale, *Revista Autrepart*, 2008/3, n 47, p. 109-124. Available in <https://www.cairn.info/revue-autrepart-2008-3-page-109.htm>

good judicial system, etc.), which in turn allows progress from an economic and social point of view (increase in wealth, greater social cohesion, etc.).

Therefore, the trinomial security, governance and economic and social development is referred to as the "stabilisation cycle", reflecting the process followed, in many cases for centuries, in nation-building processes. This cycle functions as a virtuous circle, as the higher the intensity and quality of security, governance, and economic and social development, the more each of these pillar's feeds into and enhances the other. Indeed, international aid⁴ is generally oriented towards trying to help the cycle turn in the right direction.

But it can also become a vicious circle: a decrease in the level of security, a questioning of the system of governance, or a worsening of living conditions and social cohesion, all cause the cycle to turn in the opposite direction, feeding back at full speed and generating a destabilised society. And the lack of security is often the trigger for this destabilisation.

The pillars of the stabilisation cycle are always attacked, and in an orchestrated manner, by those who seek to destabilise a country or a region; its security forces and bodies are attacked, trying to show their ineffectiveness, the government is accused of corruption, civil servants and institutions representing the state are attacked, schools and medical clinics are attacked to create disorder and unrest, an ethnic or religious group is attacked as a priority to force social de-cohesion.... And all this while systematically spreading narratives about the government's inability to care for its population and blowing on the embers of real or mythical differences between different sectors or groups of the population. The cycle, but this time of instability, turns at increasing speed, and in this environment of disorder and chaos, the social contract between citizen and state breaks down, society disintegrates along ethnic, tribal, religious, etc. fault lines, and warlords or jihadist terrorists, as in the Sahel - who have contributed to this disorder in a planned way - emerge as an organised force that takes control of the territory.

But the solution is not simply to reinforce the security pillar from outside. Far from it.

Security and its endogenous component

Security, like development, has a powerful endogenous component. It is feasible to contribute to increasing the level of security and development of a people, but it is absolutely impossible to do so without not only their acquiescence, but also their firm will to make progress in improving those levels. If the state is perceived by the dominant

⁴ MINISTERIO DE DEFENSA, Operaciones de estabilización, Ejército de Tierra, Mando de Adiestramiento y Doctrina, PD2-001 (vol. 3), 2013, p. 10.

elites as a structure that they can appropriate for their own ends⁵, or if ethnic, religious, tribal, etc. divisions take precedence over any consideration of shared citizenship, it is impossible to create political and human spaces of security and common coexistence.

There are always embers of the past; and in peoples with a long history, such as the Sahelians, moments of cooperation as well as competition can be found. And the generation of a narrative of hatred and victimisation leads to a dialectic of "the ones and the others", to the impossibility of the "us". And this identity of "victim of the past" - rightly or wrongly - properly instrumentalised provides a sense of impunity that serves as a self-justification for crimes and atrocities.⁶ Thus, age-old inter-ethnic disputes and references to colonisation and the grievances generated by it are embers to blow on in times of crisis and insecurity, as it is tremendously profitable, for those who blow.

A united and cohesive society is very difficult to break; but if the concept of "citizen" is replaced by ethnic, tribal, religious, etc. group affiliation, it is much easier to destabilise that population. And terrorists know this, and use it at local, national, regional and global levels.

Growing influence of the Sahel on regional and international (in)security.

To the structural complexities of the Sahel, already cited above, have been added those arising from the COVID-19 pandemic: if mobility is inherent to Sahelian life dynamics, how to obtain daily sustenance in the face of confinement and restrictions on movement? And if in rich countries, social unrest and demands for aid from the population towards states have strained administrations and populations, what has not happened in the Sahel?⁷

Instability in the region is growing and expanding, along the same routes and roads along which goods, people and ideas have flowed for centuries, and at full speed. The European Union - and Spain is a leading nation in this regard - is fully aware that in the absence of stability in the region, jihadist groups are gaining strength, expanding throughout the area⁸, and increasing their activism on a global scale, which is why the

⁵ The sequence of coups d'état in Mali can be seen as a paradigm of this situation. JEZEQUEL, Jean-Hervé, Mali, un coup dans le coup, International Crisis Group, Q&A/Africa, 27 May 2021. Available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/sahel/mali/mali-un-coup-dans-le-coup>

⁶ MAALOUF, Amin, Identidades asesinas. Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2012, p. 43.

⁷ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, El Sahel en tiempos de pandemia: ¿aún peor?, Documento de Análisis 24/2020, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 15/07/2020. Available in http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA24_2020PEDSAN_pandemiaSahel.pdf

⁸ IOANNIDES, Isabelle, Evaluating the EU approach to tackling the Sahel conflicts, European Parliament, EPRS PE 654.173, 09/2020. Available in [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/654173/EPRS_STU\(2020\)654173_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/654173/EPRS_STU(2020)654173_EN.pdf)

Union continues with its commitment, and to an increasing degree, to peace and stability in the region.

And given that insecurity and the main actors that generate it -mainly jihadist terrorist groups- act on a regional scale, the responses must be in the same direction, an issue that was already evident years ago⁹, but that the current reality does not fail to highlight almost daily. In fact, the Gulf of Guinea has become the area of the planet with the highest rate of piracy; and while these countries have been used by terrorists as safe zones to establish their bases, they are beginning not only to suffer attacks, but suspicions are growing of closer links between terrorists and the armed groups that carry out piracy.¹⁰

As in the past, the Sahel is proving to be an area of transition, of interconnection, although in this case, given the circumstances, it is a space for the development and expansion of a growing insecurity. Is there a solution?

Final thoughts

Given that the Sahel is a truly transnational space, responses must be provided throughout this space. And such support must be multidisciplinary, at all levels and across the whole spectrum of the stabilisation cycle: contributing to increased security, improved governance, and economic and social development.

Threats and risks know no borders or limits; and in a highly complex and unstable environment such as the Sahel, jihadist groups find the perfect breeding ground for their activities. Not only do they establish a foothold and control the territory, but they also tend, through their own narrative of global jihad, to extend and expand their radius of action, reaching, like a perfect storm that grows and feeds on itself, the countries of the Maghreb, the Gulf of Guinea, the rest of Africa, Europe...

Therefore, the Sahel is Africa's strategic centre of gravity. And just as a fire must be fought by first acting against its source, so it must be fought by concentrating this transnational and multidisciplinary aid in this region.

But it should also be remembered and understood that security and development have a strong endogenous component. One can "contribute" to increasing security,

⁹ WALTHER, Olivier J. y LEUPRECHT, Christian, Mapping and deterring violent extremist networks in north-west Africa, Department of border region studies, Working paper 2/2015, University of Southern Denmark, 2015.

¹⁰ ARREDONDAS, Margarita, Alarming expansión of jihadism in Sahel, 01/04/2021. Available in <https://atalayar.com/en/content/alarming-expansion-jihadism-sahel>

improving governance and development, but one cannot "create" security, good governance and development without the strong commitment and overcoming of divergences among the region's own population.

If this is not the case, and to use a nautical simile, efforts from the outside will only serve to "bail water" and, for a time, prevent the ship from sinking. But since the storm is perfect, if everything and everyone is not properly aligned - both domestic and foreign - the ship will eventually sink. And when a strategic point, such as the Sahel, breaks down, the impact is global and brutal.

Let us hope, for all our sakes, that this does not happen. It would be a real catastrophe for everyone.



Stabilisation and peacekeeping in the Sahel: achieving peace and not just victory against armed terrorist groups.

Emmanuel Dupuy

Barkhane's men and women may have taken over from Operation Serval (11 January 2013-August 2014), which aimed to prevent armed groups from pouncing on Bamako and destroying the chances of survival of the Malian state, weakened by a coup a few months earlier, but they are now acting over a vast area of 5 million km².

From a military point of view, the Serval operation was a great success in terms of "anti-terrorism", liberating northern Mali in just twenty days. The city of Gao was liberated on 25 January, Timbuktu on 27 January and Kidal on 30 January. But this was 2013!

However, as early as 2014, Jean-Christophe Notin's book, "France's war in Mali" seemed, from the outset, to question the official "narrative" aimed at justifying the launch of François Hollande's operation because of the risk of disintegration of the Malian state.

Since then, 56 French soldiers have been killed in the Sahel, 50 of them in operations, mainly in Mali. More than 3,000 Malian soldiers and 230 peacekeepers have also died in this relentless fight against terrorist organisations, most of which operate in the so-called "three borders" zone between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The UN recently recalled that 4,250 Burkinabe, Malians, and Nigeriens, including many women and children, were victims of terrorism in 2020. The paradox of counterinsurgency is that 2020 will undoubtedly be a year of military successes.

The military operation Barkhane, which has been 'tracking' some 2,000-armed terrorist group (ATSG) fighters since January 2013, eliminated about 1,000 of them in 2020 in the

Sahel-Saharan strip. The year 2020 will thus be crowned with symbolic successes. Following the example of the elimination of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leader Abdelmalek Droukdel in June 2020, and more recently, on 30 October, of Bag ag Moussa, head of military operations of the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (GSIM).

The 'Executive Committee' dedicated to counterterrorism, held at 123 Orleans-Bricy airbase on 1 February, puzzled many experts in the region. The Director of External Security (DGSE), Bernard Emié, released a video confirming that the main leaders of the TAG, including Iyad Ag Ghali, Tuareg leader of the GSIM, and Hamadou Koufa, Fulani leader of the Macina Katiba or Macina Liberation Front, now intend to conduct their operations in the direction of the countries bordering the Gulf of Guinea (Benin, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Togo, and Ghana). While this "migration" of the TAG has been known for some time, its disclosure seems to be part of a vast communication operation aimed at legitimising the validity of the French military presence.

With 128 combat actions, i.e., an average of one operational sortie every three days, the results are truly significant: 500 small arms and light weapons (SALW) seized or destroyed, 40 heavy weapons, such as machine guns, destroyed or seized, 15 rocket launchers seized and destroyed, and 25 pick-up trucks immobilised.

The French military is thus acting more in synergy with its local partners. This is what was promised at the Pau Summit. Operation Eclipse (2 January - 3 February), covering 400 km in front and 200 km in depth, in the "three borders" region between the towns of Hombori, Boukessi and Douentza, involved 1,500 French soldiers, 900 Burkinabe, 850 Malian and 150 Nigerian soldiers. Not surprisingly, the operation received a great deal of media coverage.

18,000 soldiers from the armed forces that make up the G5-Sahel Joint Force have been trained since 2014. 6,000 in 2020 alone, three times more than the previous year. However, this may not be enough to convince populations of the advantages of the French presence.

Most recently, Operation Eclipse, in which the French military and Malian armed forces jointly participated, is at the centre of a controversy - following attacks on two villages in central Mali - regarding an information war waged by the TAG.

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However, pressure on the significance of our engagement in the Sahel is growing in France, Mali and several other Sahel-Saharan countries. This legitimate questioning of the effectiveness and legitimacy of our military engagement in the fight against armed terrorist groups has recently been expressed in the IFOP-Le Point poll, which indicates, on 12 January, that 51% of French people now doubt France's commitment in the Sahel.

This is a far cry from the 73 per cent of French people who approved of Operation Serval in January 2013.

The financial dimension will also be important, as France's presidential elections approach in May 2022. With a planned budget of €911 million in 2020, Operation Barkhane is expected to 'swell' further with the arrival of the 364 Serval troops. There is talk of a record €1.2 billion by 2021.

Defence Minister Florence Parly's constant reminder of the still-in-the-making force generation of Task Force Takuba, which will bring together - between now and next summer - eleven European special forces and a target of 600 soldiers, will no doubt have been one of the markers of the N'Djamena Summit on 16 February.

The most optimistic will no doubt also advocate European involvement, by insisting on the nearly 800 troops - currently and more than 1,000 by the summer of 2021 - that make up the European missions (European Union Training Mission - EUTM-Mali and European Union Border Assistance Mission - EUCAP-Mali and EUCAP Sahel - Niger).

This would be forgetting that, although the Germans are massively present in the framework of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) with 930 troops among the 14,000 blue helmets present in Mali since April 2013, they are rarely in an operational situation.

We can only count on our British partners, who have 300 soldiers in MINUSMA, while providing invaluable support within Operation Barkhane, thanks to the 100 or so soldiers embedded in Barkhane as part of Operation Newcombe. The new US administration's pledge to maintain the 1,500 troops deployed in the region does not seem to guarantee a paradigm shift by Washington, which continues to favour its bilateral security partnerships to the detriment of its support for the G5-Sahel, MINUSMA and, to a lesser extent, Barkhane.

It is perhaps the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, General François Lecointre, who best sums up the operational dilemma in which Barkhane now finds himself, indicating that France had "turned the dial" in the Sahel.

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