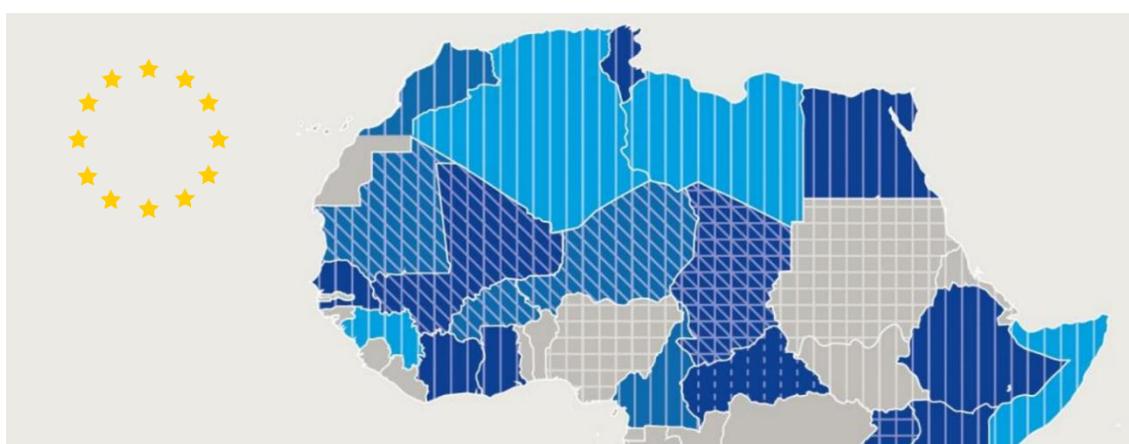


The Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum

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Conclusions of the Forum: European Strategy for the Sahel ¹

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A European Strategy for the Sahel

Dr. Ignacio Cosidó

The International Security Centre's ambition is to become a European reference centre on the Sahel. The organisation of the 1st Sahel Europe Dialogue Forum last March was a first step in this direction. One of the main fruits of this dialogue has been the creation of a Network of Experts made up of European and African academics who will continue studies and debates on our common challenges and interests.

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.

In the near future we will organise a new Forum, hopefully with the physical presence of some of the participants, which will serve as a new meeting point on the road we want to travel together.

We have the dual conviction that the Sahel has become Africa's strategic centre of gravity and that this continent is key to Europe's future. Faced with Europe's demographic decline and ageing, the African continent will double its population in the next decade with a majority of young people. Africa also has a wealth of natural resources and immense potential for growth. China's growing presence on the continent is a good illustration of the strategic interest Africa should have for Europe.

Europeans have traditionally seen the Sahel as a potential risk in terms of terrorism and irregular migration. These risks are true, but the underlying problem is the Sahel's capacity to destabilise the whole of Africa. The strategy of Sahelian terrorist groups is to expand their terrorist action southwards, targeting Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Togo and Ghana. There is also a growing connection between pirates operating in the Gulf of Guinea and terrorist organisations. Alongside the terrorist threat, there is also the expansion of organised crime, which is beginning to open up routes for cocaine or cannabis from the Atlantic to the Eastern Mediterranean via the Sahel. The Maghreb has so far shown great resilience in the face of instability on the other side of the Sahara, but the porosity of its immense borders may create growing security problems for countries such as Morocco and Algeria. Ultimately, it is the stability of the whole of Africa and the security of Europe that is at stake in the Sahel today, not to mention the opportunity cost to the EU of not cooperating with a continent in chaos.

The Sahel has historically been the nexus between Africa and the Mediterranean. Trade routes, migratory movements and the exchange of ideas and beliefs between Africa and Europe have had the Sahel as their main passageway. Today, terrorism, irregular immigration, organised crime and the illicit trafficking of all kinds of goods, including drugs and human trafficking, also have the Sahel as one of their main bases of operations.

Yet the Sahel remains largely unknown to Europe. European public opinion perceives it as something distant and alien to its interests, the media only cover one-off events, a terrorist attack or a coup d'état, and even its ruling classes have not been fully aware of the strategic interest that this area has for our countries. A better knowledge of the Sahel, a better analysis of the common challenges we face and a fruitful dialogue between the two will undoubtedly contribute to making Africa the great opportunity for Europe's future rather than the main source of threats.

European cooperation with the Sahel has so far had a dual dimension. On the one hand, economic and humanitarian cooperation. On the other, security cooperation, especially in the fight against terrorism. In total, the European Union alone has invested 8.5 billion euros in this cooperation between 2014 and 2020.

Despite the scale of this cooperation, its impact has been limited. The political, economic and social situation in the Sahel, far from improving, has deteriorated in recent years. Demographic dynamics and climate change do not bode well for the long term. The strong population growth and its concentration in urban areas with a severe lack of infrastructure are likely to generate additional tensions. Climate change may have very negative effects on an economy still dominated by the primary sector and dependent on fragile livelihood balances. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further aggravated the economic and social crisis in the Sahel by restricting movement and reducing trade.

In terms of security, the Serval operation launched by France in 2013 was a great success, preventing the jihadists from taking control of Mali and liberating the main cities from terrorist occupation. This operation was followed by Operation Barkhane, in which more than 5,000 mainly French troops were involved in containing the terrorist threat in the area. However, the growing disaffection of the local population with the presence of foreign troops, the high cost of maintaining the deployment and a certain political fatigue in France due to the sustained effort have led President Macron to announce the end of the operation and its replacement by an as yet undefined operation.

Despite the success of Operation Serval and the partial achievements of Operation Barkhane, it is clear that we need a change in our security strategy in the Sahel. First, there is a need for greater coordination of efforts on the ground. Alongside Operation Barkhane, there is the ongoing EUTM in Mali, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the Lake Chad Multinational Force, the UN's MINUSMA, the EU's GAR/SI Sahel, EUCAP Sahel, the ECOWAS counter-terrorism plan, and the Joint Regional Operational Command set up by Algeria. For its part, the US maintains a presence of 1,500 troops on the ground on the basis of bilateral agreements, and Morocco has also initiated some bilateral cooperation with the Sahel countries. In my opinion, it would be necessary to integrate all this force presence on the ground into a single NATO-led operation with a UN mandate to guarantee security in the area and confront the threat of terrorism. I understand the enormous practical difficulty of this proposal, especially French and American reluctance for competing reasons, but I believe that only NATO has the credibility and capabilities to successfully coordinate an operation in which Europeans and Americans must work together.

A second issue is how to engage local communities in this operation. Central to this would be the involvement of Sahelian forces. In the last year, 18,000 local troops have been trained in the framework of G5 Sahel, but in a territory of ten million square kilometres, this force is still insufficient. The GAR SI Sahel project is a model for addressing this process.

On the other hand, the presence of military forces on the ground should be accompanied by powerful humanitarian action and effective development cooperation

that has a real impact on the well-being of communities. Finally, the surgical nature of counter-terrorism actions is essential to avoid a counterproductive effect on the population and to instil respect for human rights as a basic premise for the actions of the indigenous armed and security forces. In recent years, more civilians appear to have been killed by military operations (national and international) than by terrorist attacks. This goes a long way towards explaining the growing disaffection with the presence of foreign troops on their territory.

Third, it is essential to ensure good governance in these countries. Such governance requires, firstly, an effective state presence throughout the territory. Secondly, developing effective corruption prevention mechanisms. Historical experience shows that the automatic imposition of our democratic systems on countries with very different political cultures and social contexts has in most cases resulted in failure, but the international community can accompany and positively influence processes that, based on its own experience, at the appropriate pace and generated from its leadership, allow for more transparent, more participatory and more efficient regimes at the service of their citizens. To this end, it is essential to properly reconcile the principles of authority, respect for the rule of law and individual freedoms.

Fourth, we need a regional solution that also involves the Maghreb countries. The rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, exacerbated by the Western Sahara issue, makes it difficult not only to articulate any Maghreb cooperation framework but also to articulate a joint strategy in the Sahel. Nevertheless, the influence of these countries in the region is decisive and it would be important to involve them in the solution, for example, through their possible participation in the NATO mission that we suggest for the Sahel.

Finally, we need a broad vision and a comprehensive strategy to address the challenges we face together in the Sahel. It is sometimes more effective in the fight against terrorism to discourage the recruitment of young people by the various armed groups than to eliminate a cell. In my opinion, the fundamental tool for ensuring development in Africa is education, especially for girls, even if its effects are medium-term. On the other hand, investing in local initiatives such as the Great Green Wall of the Sahel, which aims to combat desertification, limit the impact of climate change in the region and generate new resources, are examples of initiatives that we should consider.

Terrorists have a great capacity to use pre-existing conflicts to their advantage and to develop narratives that are favourable to their interests. We therefore need a policy that aims to resolve existing conflicts, for example between pastoralist nomadic communities and farming communities, and to develop appealing discourses that are matched by facts. The fight against jihadist radicalisation must start by preventing the root causes of radicalisation.

The task ahead in the Sahel is enormous. That is why it is essential that we join forces, that we listen more to the voices of those who face these challenges on the ground and that we are willing to make the effort and the commitment to act. We need to

thoroughly review our strategy because the reality is that the situation has deteriorated dangerously in recent years despite our actions. Simply sticking to the current line or disengaging from the problem may come at a very high cost, for Africa, but also for Europe. The International Security Centre of the Francisco de Vitoria University will do its utmost to contribute to this new strategy.



A renewed European strategy in the Sahel

General Francisco José Dacoba

The holding of this Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum was a fortunate initiative of the International Security Centre (IPI-UFV). And it has been so in its entirety, starting with the title itself, which directly alludes to Dialogue as an essential tool for finding, together on both shores of the Mediterranean, possible solutions that will ultimately allow for the vigorous, sustainable and inclusive development of Sahelian societies. Dialogue is the best way to address relations between two neighbouring regions that need each other.

Europe's presence, based on the principles and values proclaimed by the Union, is positive and necessary in the Sahel. The prosperity, stability and strength of these states are essential for Europe. Although to uninformed ears it may seem otherwise, we share the same objectives: economic and social development, institutional strengthening, the fight against Islamist radicalisation and organised crime networks... This is why "a renewed EU strategy for the Sahel" is so necessary.

The Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies logically stresses that for this process of growth and well-being in the Sahel to be consolidated, it is essential, along with many other circumstances, to establish a sufficiently stable security environment.

The importance of this region for Spain, and also for the European Union, is based on proximity: in a globalised world, geographical distances are no longer insurmountable and borders are no longer hermetic, especially between neighbours. They never were and must not be in the future. Political and social stability, good governance, well-being and peace are in the mutual interest of Europeans and Sahelians.

Not for any other reason does Spain's 2017 National Security Strategy recognise the Sahel as one of its priority areas of interest. In the same vein, the 2016 European Global Security Strategy mentions the Sahel, and Africa in general, on numerous occasions. However, Spain's and Europe's presence in the region does not correspond to the strong interdependence between the two Mediterranean shores. The Spanish Third Africa Plan rightly states that Spain is the country with the most at stake in Africa, but there is still a long way to go. The Union's plans are also along the same lines of increasing Europe's presence on the African continent.

The shared challenges facing the Sahel countries are numerous and have been analysed in detail and brilliantly during the successive sessions of the Forum. As a simple reminder: demographics (in 2050, a quarter of humanity will live in Africa, and more than a billion will live in the Sahel); the ravages of global warming on economies heavily reliant on agriculture and pastoralism; the persistence of transnational criminal networks dedicated to the illicit trafficking of arms, drugs, hydrocarbons and, unfortunately, people; the institutional weakness of States and, in an alarmingly growing manner, jihadist terrorism. In relation to this last point, the situation in a country as important as Nigeria is well known, with obvious repercussions in the Sahel, and we are very concerned about the situation in the so-called "triple border" (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso), in the Lake Chad basin, and its extension to neighbouring countries, until recently relatively untouched by terrorist activity, such as Benin, Togo, Ghana... Or Senegal.

Faced with such a complex scenario, there are no simple solutions, let alone a single solution. Cooperation between Europe and the Sahel is the essential framework. The approach must be African; the traditional model of aid designed in Europe by Europeans and implemented in the Sahel also by Europeans, with European criteria and almost outside of the recipient societies, is no longer valid. Collaboration without paternalism: institutional, economic, educational, diplomatic, police and military. Military intervention alone is no guarantee of success, but neither can the necessary security be achieved and maintained without it.

Transforming challenges into opportunities is the vision contained in the European Union's new strategy with Africa, not for Africa, as well as in the Spanish government's aforementioned Third Africa Plan. The aim is to share a "partnership" project with the Sahel countries, which is very different from the penetration of the African continent by other global actors, such as China, Russia, Turkey or some Gulf monarchies, with interests very different from those of Europe in the region and with procedures and criteria that are incompatible with the EU's principles.

The success of the Dialogue that this Forum has sought to announce and promote, from the title of the initiative to each and every one of the magnificent presentations that we have had the opportunity to enjoy, will benefit both Europeans and Africans.

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