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Eight years of international operations in the Sahel: Rethinking the Strategy

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On 10 September, the Centre for International Security of the Francisco de Vitoria University organised the Conference on Foreign Policy in the Sahel. Throughout the day, several debate forums and colloquiums were held focusing on the stability of the Sahel and the role of the international community, particularly the European Union and Spain, in contributing to the stability and security of the two shores of the Mediterranean.

At the closing roundtable, under the title Eight Years of International Operations in the Sahel: Rethinking the Strategy, Mr. Ángel Losada, Spanish diplomat and European Union Special Representative for the Sahel until 2021; Mr. Emmanuel Dupuy, Director of the French think tank *Institut de Prospective et Sécurité en Europe*; Mr. Alfonso García-Vaquero Pradal, Brigadier General of the Spanish Army, former commander of the EUTM Mali mission; and Mr. Boubacar Ba, researcher at the *Centre d'Analyse sur la Gouvernance et la Sécurité au Sahel*, moderated by Beatriz de León Cobo, researcher and coordinator of the Expert Group Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum, analysed the impact of international operations on the ground and their evolution in order to better adapt to the current strategic scenario.

The fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban last August after 20 years of intervention was a serious blow to the international community and raises the need to reassess the strategy, modus operandi and impact of other international operations on the ground. In this sense, international operations in the Sahel are particularly the subject of interest and comparison, as the region is considered the cradle of another frozen conflict and the equivalent for France of what Afghanistan has been for the United States. Not surprisingly, despite significant contextual differences, after almost ten years of counter-terrorism operations, stabilisation and training missions, and considerable development assistance efforts, instability and insecurity remain the main challenge in the Sahel. The following paragraphs therefore aim to review the crisis context in the region, the strategies developed by European countries so far, and the lessons learned for the future.

The Sahel, a "crisis hotspot"

In order to rethink the strategy in the Sahel, it is necessary to understand the crisis it faces, or rather, the diverse and intertwined crises it suffers from, since, as Ambassador Ángel Losada mentioned, "the Sahel is a crisis hotspot" where "we find all the crises we can imagine".

On the one hand, an economic and development crisis: despite the fact that the territory that acts as a transition between the Sahara Desert and the Sudanese savannah is potentially one of the richest geographical regions –home to abundant natural, human and cultural resources¹– its countries are among the poorest on the planet. Proof of this is that most countries in the region have a GDP per capita of less than \$900 and this summer alone, some 8.7 million people were at risk of food crisis or famine². On the other, a security crisis, especially since the fall of Libya and the fourth Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali in 2012 that favoured an influx of weapons and the proliferation of armed groups - including jihadist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State that have progressively spread and entrenched themselves in the region from north to south and east to west.

As Emmanuel Dupuy pointed out, these groups are now not only present in the tri-border area, but are also beginning to be present in southern Burkina Faso and northern Côte d'Ivoire, and their shadow is increasingly falling over Togo, Benin and Senegal. Moreover, they are not only attacking national and international security forces, but are also competing among themselves and against other secular armed groups for control of the territory, increasingly imposing their will on the civilian population by means of threats, sieges and massacres³. To this must be added one or more inter- and intra-communal crises in central Mali since 2016⁴ and more recently in Burkina Faso⁵ and the Tillabéri and Tahoua

¹ UN. The Sahel: Land of opportunities. Africa Renewal, n.d.

² The World Bank. *GDP per capita (current US\$) – Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Algeria, World*. Data.worldbank.org, 2021 ; CILSS. *Cadre Harmonisé d'identification des zones à risque et des populations en insécurité alimentaire et nutritionnelle*. www.ipcinfo.org, April 2021.

³ NSAIBIA, H.; DUHAMEL, J. Sahel 2021: Communal wars, broken ceasefires, and shifting frontlines. ACLED. 2021.

⁴ BENJAMINSEN, T. A.; BA, B. *Fulani-Dogon Killings in Mali: Farmer-Herder Conflicts as Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*. African Security, 2021. p.1-23.

⁵ HUON, P. *How jihadists are fueling inter-communal conflict in Burkina Faso*. The New Humanitarian, February 2020.

region in Niger⁶, which mainly pit semi-nomadic Peul pastoralists against Bambara, Dogon or Mossi farming communities⁷. On the other hand, there are also clashes between Peul and Tuareg communities, particularly the Daoussahak tribe. Cycles of violence and revenge in these communities have led to the death of thousands of civilians in recent years, with examples such as the massacre of 160 Peuls by presumed Dan Na Ambassagou militiamen (Dogon self-defence militia) in Ogossagou (Mopti) or that of Sobane Da (Mopti) in which Peul militias attacked a Dogon village. Both took place in 2019. Although conflicts between herders and farmers over resources are "age-old", they have been partly accentuated by a climate crisis and a demographic explosion that have increased competition for space, as well as by the instrumentalisation of local grievances by the different jihadist groups seeking to recruit members and generate chaos. In addition to inter-communal tensions, there are also intra-communal grievances, especially within Peul communities where different castes, traditionally more marginalised or considered foreigners despite hundreds of years in the region, are being recruited by jihadist groups that promise them the equality of all Muslims in defiance of the traditional social order. With the same communities living on both sides of the porous and long borders, intra- and inter-community tensions have quickly spilled over into the Liptako Gourma region. All of this, of course, has generated a serious humanitarian crisis and consequent migration crisis –though the latter is more intra-regional than intercontinental⁸.

However, as the ambassador acknowledged, "the facts have shown (...) that the most serious crisis is the governance crisis" or the lack of good governance "which is also behind what has happened in Afghanistan". Emmanuel Dupuy was of the same opinion, arguing that the reality of 2021 "is not the same as that of 2013" and that focusing on the security crisis triggered by the fall of Libya has made us forget that what is happening is mainly the result of a number of political crises caused by social exclusion, the disconnection between the centre and the periphery, and the state's inability to provide basic services. The crisis of governance lies significantly behind the Tuareg revolt in 2012 and the recent inter-communal conflicts, and is evidenced by the wave of coups and coup attempts currently sweeping the region, most recently reaching Guinea. The fact that the military coup d'état in Mali in August 2020 was supported by the majority of the population, with a very significant international presence and without an anti-West driver seems to demonstrate that the problem is primarily one of poor governance. In many parts of the region, the absence of basic services, extrajudicial killings – which in 2020 surpassed the number of civilian deaths at the hands of armed groups in Mali⁹–, corruption and impunity, have led to the breakdown of the social contract and a complete lack of trust in the authorities among the majority of the population. This, Ambassador Losada pointed out, is where we need to focus our attention.

⁶ International Crisis Group. *Murder in Tillabery: Calming Niger's emerging communal crisis*. Crisis Group Africa Briefing N172, May 2021.

⁷ BENJAMINSEN, T, A; BA, B. *Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation*, The Journal of Peasant Studies, 2018. p.14.

⁸ Adam Thiam. *Central Mali: Stakes and Dangers of a Neglected Crisis*, Macina Institute, Humanitarian Dialogue, March 2017.

⁹ Freudenthal, E.; Huon, P.; Nsaibia, H.; van der Weide, Y.; Bolly, M. *No strings attached? How Europe's military support for Mali closes its eyes to abuses*. The New Humanitarian, August 2021.

Rethinking the international community's strategy to stabilise the Sahel

EU action

As early as 2011, before the Malian crisis, the EU recognised the strategic importance of the region for Europe by adopting the first EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, which by March 2014 covered the five G5 Sahel countries: Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad. The strategy was a pioneer in acknowledging the nexus between security and development, two concepts that are not understood separately today but which at the time were not seen as intertwined. Among other things, the EU has since launched EUTM Mali, a military training and advisory mission, and two civilian capacity-building missions, EUCAP-Sahel Niger and EUCAP-Sahel Mali, the three still ongoing. It has also allocated a large amount of funds to development projects in the various G5 Sahel countries over the years, including 8 billion in the 2014-2020 period. However, action by the EU and the international community as a whole has been primarily security focused, which has not prevented the spread of violence across the region, and despite all the effort and money invested, social unrest has continued to grow.

As a result, in April this year the EU Council approved a new strategy for the Sahel that places more emphasis on the issue of good governance while still maintaining the security-development element¹⁰. To this end, more emphasis is to be placed on the rule of law and democratic governance, demanding greater transparency and accountability of institutions. It also seeks to strengthen political dialogue with the countries of the region based on the principle of mutual accountability, which, as Ambassador Ángel Losada explained, seeks to be triangular, not only between the country's government and the European/EU governments, but also with and for the population, which must be more involved in the process of overcoming the crisis. On the other hand, the strategy proposes making the security and development nexus much more comprehensive, by incorporating the issue of human rights, which is fundamental, and the humanitarian issue.

For the EU, it is crucial to prevent human rights violations by the armed forces of the countries, putting an end to impunity in the security sector. In addition to training in international humanitarian law, in this fifth mandate of EUTM Mali, there is already a mechanism through which the forces will be accompanied to verify that the proper process is being followed. Ambassador Losada also understands that there is a limit to the EUTM's capacities; "a much larger mission would be needed to ensure that human rights are respected in all cases, but we are on the way and we continue to insist on this".

Finally, the EU intends to actively collaborate in three of the four pillars of the recently created Sahel Coalition: reinforcing the capacities of the armed forces of the countries in the region, promoting the

¹⁰ European Parliamentary Research Service. *New EU strategic priorities for the Sahel: Addressing regional challenges through better governance*. European Parliament, 2021.

return of the state and basic services, and providing development aid through the Sahel Alliance - leaving the pillar of the fight against terrorism, in which it cannot participate, to the states.

French action

As a former colonial country, France has a special relationship with the Sahel countries and is probably the Western country most involved in the region. French intervention began initially through Operation Serval in 2013 and has evolved, adapting to the needs of the moment until today. Operation Barkhane, a continuation of Serval, is a global counter-terrorism operation with a military component and a civilian component through the Coalition for the Sahel, which will soon be implemented. As Emmanuel Dupuy summed up in his speech, "we cannot understand French strategies in the Sahel without understanding the personality of the different French presidents who have supported different countries according to their ideological affinity". Macron has made clear that he has inherited the decisions and mistakes of former president François Hollande and takes into account domestic public opinion, which is increasingly opposed to intervention. For all these reasons, he has insisted at recent summits (Pau and Nouakchott) on the Africanisation and Europeanisation of international missions in the Sahel.

France's strategic evolutionism also responds to an operational change among the increasingly mobile terrorist groups themselves. French missions have had to adapt by having a lighter and more air-transportable force, using more drones and with the principles of lightness, mobility and adaptability for asymmetric counterinsurgency, which is necessary to respond to the regional threat. To all this, it is essential to add a geographical redeployment, closing bases where the French have considered that cooperation with MINUSMA is sufficient and redirecting troops to other areas where they are more necessary, such as in the centre, Gao, Gossi and Menaka.

Regarding the new French strategy, Dupuy noted that it is difficult to know what Barkhane's transformation will lead to, not only because there are elections in France, but also because there are elections in Germany and the French strategy planned to rely on its allies, including Germany. Moreover, President Macron will not only be campaigning for the French presidency, but will also take over the six-month rotating presidency of the EU. Macron has spoken of a redeployment, which does not mean that the French will withdraw their troops, but rather that it will be transformed into a new mission to respond to the new strategic paradigm previously mentioned (lightness, mobility and asymmetric counter-insurgency). Operation Barkhane itself was already an agglomeration of pre-existing missions in different countries, including Serval in Mali and Licorne in Côte d'Ivoire. According to Emmanuel Dupuy, troop withdrawals may be replaced by more technology, which parallels the American doctrine of the "light footprint" (fewer troops on the ground). It is likely that France will decide to deploy part of its contingent to Niger as part of this redesign, based on a pragmatic approach due to political instability in Mali and Chad.

However, this new strategy may have the opposite of its intended consequences on two fronts. First, when Barkhane's redeployment and transformation was announced, European allies in the region were not associated with it. Considering that part of the strategy depended on European forces taking

over through Task Force Takuba, this could culminate in less EU involvement in counter-terrorism missions, which could leave a vacuum in international operations. Indeed, two European countries have said they would not participate as they had not been consulted.

Secondly, if the French military is less present, there is a risk that the G5 Sahel countries will have to take over earlier than planned and increase their defence budgets, which are already much higher than they should be (22% of the budget in Chad, 20% in Mali and 17% in Niger. Further increases could lead to budget cuts in much-needed ministries such as education and health.

Spanish action

Spain is the only European country with territory on the African continent. As such, Spain's strategy in Africa particularly takes into account the concept of "advanced frontier", which is based on the idea that globalisation has diluted geographical borders and therefore national security threats can develop thousands of kilometres away¹¹. For this reason, as Brigadier General Alfonso García-Vaquero explained, Spain "collaborates closely" with African governments and armies in the region through multilateral institutions, such as the 5+5 dialogue and privileged bilateral relations. With nearly 30 per cent of Spain's armed forces on the African continent, Spain is the largest contributor to EU military missions and within NATO leads the promotion of collaboration with our southern neighbours through the Mediterranean dialogue.

In Mali, the Spanish contingent provides more than 55 per cent of the EUTM mission's personnel, currently around 600 troops. Spain also has three transport helicopters deployed, two aircraft deployed in Dakar in support of Operation Barkhane, executing more than 30% of all intra-theatre transport in the Sahel. In addition, Spain provides bilateral support to the G5 Sahel and neighbouring countries, through the design and execution of cooperation plans materialised in the implementation of various activities requested by the countries concerned, with the aim of contributing to the reinforcement of their military capabilities so that they can guarantee the protection of their societies and fight terrorism and organised crime autonomously and with their own means. Finally, it works in the field of education with the G5 Sahel Defence College in Nouakchott, teaching classes and contributing to the development of the centre, particularly in terms of its digitalisation and the development of the various curricula. In any training strategy, the cultural aspect is key when it comes to training, and it must be respected by building on the procedures and traditions of the host country, adding our experience and lessons learned.

General García-Vaquero considers that "we can be very proud of what our forces are doing in the area, quietly and selflessly with the sole purpose of helping these countries so that they can live in peace and develop properly". Spanish missions are characterised by their emphasis on "full respect for the customs and sovereignty of African countries and in accordance with international law". However, it recognises that the large size of the territory means that military action alone is not enough to ensure

¹¹ Enrique Figueredo Barcelona. *La frontera avanzada*. La Vanguardia, May 2016.

the solution, but not take its place", in reference to the governments and societies of the Sahel. In the security sphere, this means providing relevant training to national armed forces so that they can fight properly and defend their country on their own. On the other hand, Emmanuel Dupuy stressed the need to understand security forces beyond the armed forces, by increasing, training and deploying more border guards, coastal agents and police forces, among others. However, it must be stressed that Africanisation does not imply a complete withdrawal of the international community. According to Professor Boubacar Ba, "it is very easy to say that we have to be left to manage our own problems" but when a country is caught up in a series of crises as complex as those mentioned, "it is very difficult to stand up on one's own and asking the international community for help is not a weakness".

Although there is a section of the Sahelian population that calls for the withdrawal of international troops - especially French troops - according to Professor Ba, the role played by international cooperation is generally appreciated in Mali and other countries in the region. The various international operations on the ground, from MINUSMA to EUTM, have shown that there is a real effort to provide technical and logistical support to Mali - an effort, however, that will need to be reinforced in the coming years. The problem, argued Professor Ba, lies in the communication and transparency of the actions undertaken: although much has been done in the past to help, communities on the ground still ask "what have we done with the support of these countries? Where is all this aid going?". The third lesson learned and challenge to be addressed is therefore to ensure greater transparency and communication around the performance of the international community, and in particular training operations (EUTM and EUCAP) and counter-terrorism operations (Barkhane and Takuba). Ambassador Losada also recognised the need for a local understanding of the framework for action and the limits of the mandate of the different missions, so that they are not perceived as occupying forces, but neither are they expected to carry out the functions of police, border guards or community mediators. Although efforts have already been made to improve the communication of European operations through local radio broadcasts in local languages, there is still a long way to go.

Finally, the other major challenge and lesson learned in these eight years of operations is the need for coordination between international actors. As Emmanuel Dupuy stated, there are approximately seventeen strategies for the Sahel (ECOWAS, EU, AU...). Leadership and coordination are essential to address the cross-border and destabilising challenges that affect not only the Sahel but also the West African region and even other regions of the continent: porous borders, absence of a strong state, lack of social cohesion, etc. The 27 EU countries' visions must be harmonised, so that the countries less involved understand the urgency and the challenge posed by instability in the Sahel and continue to invest financial and, above all, human resources. However, it is difficult to find a coordinated response among the international community partially because of differing views on whether to negotiate with some jihadist leaders. Moreover, the volatile political context in the region makes a unified approach complex, as of all the heads of state who launched the G5 Sahel, only one is still in place. However, greater coordination is essential to address the region's challenges.

The return of the Taliban to power, as mentioned by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, has had a symbolic and psychological impact on the motivation of armed groups affected by the international forces operating in Afghanistan. Jihadist groups in the Sahel feel stronger than ever, knowing that with patience, they can take control of the region in the same way as the Taliban have taken control of

Afghanistan. The international community's patience and efforts to accompany Sahelian societies in the process of stabilising the region must therefore be commensurate. In conclusion, to take up Ambassador Losada's words, this is what the European Union will continue to do, since it has invested heavily in it and "the security of the Sahel is the security of Europe and the security of Spain".

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