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The regionalisation of counter-terrorism strategies in the Sahel: the G5 as a challenge for transatlantic relations

Brice Didier

Executive Summary

- > Established in 2014 to foster concrete responses to transnational security challenges in the Sahel-Saharan strip, the G5 Sahel – composed of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger – has progressively asserted itself as both a regional forum and interlocutor on development and security cooperation in the region.
- > While only a second-rate concern for the United States, security in the Sahel has become a priority of the European Union's global security agenda, and allowed the EU to assume a leadership role, with France playing a crucial part.
- > Even though the French and EU-sponsored project of a G5 Sahel Joint Force has been endorsed by the international community in 2017, difficulties to reach an agreement on its mandate and operationalisation have caused a transatlantic rift.
- > Despite the gradual implementation of a comprehensive response to terrorism through the G5, the persistence of the security crisis should incite further empowerment of national and local authorities while increasingly integrating the Joint Force with two other missions, Barkhane and the MINUSMA.
- > Witnessing a North-South instability continuum, Europeans and Americans should change their strategic approach and envision North Africa and the Sahel-Saharan strip as one dynamic area, enlarging the geographical scope of their anti-terror activities to a 'G5+' including Libya and Algeria.

The Sahel has long been characterised by political violence, border permeability, territorial disputes, traffics of all kinds, and ethnic-sectarian violence. Since 2011 and particularly following the French military intervention in Mali in 2013, instability and insecurity have also been catalysed by the resurgence of Islamic terrorist groups. Mixing with traffickers networks, separatist movements and other conflicts, they have transformed the Sahel into a crisis hub. This has attracted attention from Europeans and their American allies, as terrorism and related mobility issues directly affect them. However, such a complex social and territorial environment complicates traditional security responses that would contain the threat by compartmentalising it. Instead, it requires a comprehensive framework of effective solutions, adapted to the geography of the region and the fluidity of terrorist and other illegal activities. This has to be supported by a coherent sponsorship at the international level and implemented by well-coordinated regional, national and local actors at the regional level.

One year after the inception of a G5 Joint Force, the High-Level Conference on the Sahel in February 2018 in Brussels highlighted the international community's growing awareness of the importance of the Sahel for the stability of Africa and Europe. It constituted a breakthrough in unlocking international support to the operationalisation of the Joint Force. It also confirmed long-established European commitment to supporting Sahel authorities. This European political sponsorship contrasts with the Trump administration's difficulty to engage with the Sahel countries and, more broadly, Africa.

Nonetheless, in the context of an upsurge of terrorist activities in the Sahel, armed attacks against the French and United Nations (MINUSMA) missions in Ouagadougou and Timbuktu, reminded the international community of the persistence of security threats in the region and the need for a more adequate response.

First addressing the origins of the current security crisis in the Sahel and the security continuum with North Africa, this policy brief focuses on the central role played by France and the European Union (EU) and argues that the G5 Sahel was from the start conceived with military ambitions. It then assesses the growing transatlantic rift between European and American sponsors regarding their respective security-focused approaches to the region. It concludes that, to be adequate, a counter-terrorism strategy in the Sahel needs to reinforce domestic social cohesion and police missions, while being more comprehensive through an expansion of its geographical scope.

Terrorism in the Sahel: a geographically diffuse problem

Algeria and Libya: the North Africa – Sahel continuum

Africa's continental crossroad, the Sahel was a propitious ground for a security crisis under the pressure of jihadi groups and unbridled weapon flows originating from North Africa.

It is first necessary to consider the important role that Libya has played as a strategic hub for terrorist groups operating in the Sahel. The rapid fall of the Qaddafi regime, following the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) operation in 2011, catalysed the development of terrorism and the collapse of already weak state structures in neighbouring Sahel countries. In the absence of a post-intervention strategy, the Libyan territory was left without state control. Initially in the hands of both pro- and anti-Qaddafi groups, small arms and weapons began to circulate to fragile bordering states of the Sahel, where terrorist organisations could easily access them to exploit existing ethnic and sectarian tensions.

More importantly, the influence of groups originating from bordering North African states played a central role in the eruption of terrorist groups in the Sahel. Al-Qaida in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), in particular, was created in Algeria in 2003, as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat. Experiencing difficulties to establish itself in Algeria, since 2009 it has focused particularly on Northern Mali, taking advantage of the weak control of the Malian government over the territory and Tuareg populations' separatist aspirations. Joining the Tuareg tribes of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) in their rebellion against Bamako in 2012, AQIM, together with Ansar al-Dine and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, rapidly marginalised the MNLA and became the main concern for state authorities.

A response complicated by the reconfiguration of the jihadi landscape and the absence of regional leadership

In the last two decades, the Sahel has witnessed the emergence of a patchwork of parallel groups often competing with each other. However, a milestone was

reached in March 2017 with the merger of four groups – namely AQIM's Saharan branch, Ansar Din, Al-Murabitun and the Macina Liberation Front – under the banner of the Group in Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM). By joining forces, these terrorist groups have gained in coherence and effectiveness. In spite of their allegiance to the broader al-Qaeda jihadism, this merger also confirms the local rooting of terrorism in the Sahel, which is proven by the choice of Tuareg leader Iyad Ag Ghaly – founder of Ansar Dine – as the GSIM leader. Although this group is still ideologically rivalled by the ISIS-affiliated Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, a strategic convergence between both cannot be totally excluded. The risk is also that jihadist movements continue their territorial expansion in both West Africa and Libya, and that they grow with the return of fighters from the Middle East.

Faced with this lifting of barriers between terrorist factions, the response remains challenging. Moreover, regional actors such as Algeria have proven reluctant when it comes to a regionalized military response. Even though, Algeria has played a leading role in the Mali Peace Process, particularly through the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement on Northern Mali, and is ready to contribute to the stabilization of the wider region, Algerian cooperation with the G5 remains limited. Algiers maintains its suspicions regarding the setup of a joint force, insisting on not intervening outside its borders “due to constitutional, historical and doctrinal reasons” (Lounnas 2018: 5). Such a limited commitment to the regionalisation of counter-terrorism contrasts with the progressive assertion of the G5 as a key actor, illustrated by the French and broader European support to its setup.

Backing the G5 Sahel: Europeanising France's efforts

French parentage, military focus

Created in February 2014 with a light institutional architecture, the G5 Sahel was initially designed as a framework for coordinating and monitoring existing regional cooperation and international initiatives – including the European Union and the African Union (AU) – while coupling and bolstering security and development initiatives. Although it was not established as a security organisation, the G5 Sahel had from the start a strong military focus. Even before it was officially created, a meeting of the heads of military staff of the five Sahel countries in July 2013 marked the starting point of enhanced cooperation on border management in order to bolster stability in the region.

The origins of the G5 are also to be found in the progressive reconfiguration of the French strategy, towards greater geographical comprehensiveness in the Sahel. France launched operation Serval following UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2085 in December 2012, in response to

Bamako's request for military assistance. Serval was designed as an operation limited in time and resources. It ultimately stopped the offensive and liberated Northern Mali in 2013. However, as of 2014, violence resurged locally, leading to considerable numbers of internally displaced people. After the Malian Army was defeated at Kidal in Northern Mali, the withdrawal of Serval was suspended in May 2014. Witnessing a multiplication of fronts, France ended Serval in Mali and Epervier in Chad (an operation that had lasted since 1986) in August 2014 and launched operation Barkhane, tasked with eradicating terrorist groups in Chad, Mali and Niger.

Barkhane was a first response to the fluid geopolitical setting of the region. However, with the fight having been geographically extended to a territory as large as Europe, France had to look for extra capacity and found a relay to its action in the G5.

Operationalising a regionalised strategy

Even though the project of a Joint Force gained support from the international community, an agreement on its funding, and hence operationalisation, was more difficult to reach. Facing a deteriorating situation in central Mali, bordering Burkina Faso and Niger, the G5 Sahel took an important step forward in February 2017, when the heads of state of its member countries decided to reactivate the project of a G5 Joint Force. Officially launched together with French President Macron in Bamako in July 2017, the joint force aims to support Barkhane and the MINUSMA by leading cross-border operations against terrorists but also organised crime and human traffickers. Although backed by the AU and the EU, subsequent debates at the UNSC were marked by US reluctance vis-à-vis the project, which led to a minimal political agreement without further agreeing on the funding of the force (MEAE 2018).

The High-Level Conference in Brussels in February 2018 constituted a watershed for the operationalisation of the Joint Force and the perennation of the G5 as such – announcing €414 million of financial assistance, including €176 million from the EU and its member states, among which €100 million from the African Peace Facility (European Commission 2018b). Nevertheless, it merely represents a continuation of France's efforts, after the first military operations launched late October 2017, UNSC Resolution 2391 which authorised the MINUSMA's logistical support to the force, and the Conference at La Celle Saint-Cloud in December 2017. The latter indeed succeeded in confirming national financial commitment by G5 members, and in unlocking support from the EU and its member states, but also from the US (\$60 million of bilateral assistance for the States of the Joint Force), Saudi Arabia (\$100 million) and the United Arab Emirates (\$30 million).

By bringing the question of political and operational support to the Joint Force at both the EU and UN levels, and making multilateralism and support to the MINUSMA a priority, the G5 has arguably led France towards a progressive Europeanisation of its Sahel policy.

Today, the Sahel Alliance – launched by France, Germany and the EU together in July 2017 – serves as a 'coordination hub' to accompany the G5 and embodies the 'international development assistance' aspect of the 'security-development nexus' of counter-terrorism policies. Bringing together France and Germany, the EU, the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the UN Development Programme, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, the Alliance remains open to other contributors (MEAE 2018). The absence of the US adds to the notion of a growing transatlantic rift reinforced by Washington's skepticism regarding the Joint Force displayed in the UNSC.

The transatlantic rift: American disinterest vs European transformative regionalism

A growing transatlantic rift

Contrasting with the EU sponsorship of the G5 and despite a \$60 million American pledge in support of the Force, the US is the 'great absentee' in the Sahel. Yet, certain past initiatives, established in the 'Global War on Terror' context, had focused on the region under the successive Clinton, Bush Jr. and Obama administrations. However, a project such as the Pan-Sahel Initiative was crippled by a lack of consistency among US departments and agencies, and by a "securitisation of Washington's Africa policy" which led to a "militarization of the continent" (Oyebade 2018: 795-796; Adebajo 2018: 28). Later incorporated in the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, it ultimately vanished in the US military's Africa Command (AFRICOM).

Arguably, the US reaction to the French proposal at the UNSC was for a large part due to the fact that the debate erupted at a lynchpin moment in the US over its presence in the region after four US Army soldiers had been killed in a terrorist ambush in Niger. Considering that the region is not critically important economically, and that it is rather improbable that terrorist groups and traffic emanating from the Sahel would attain US territory, the Sahel will not come on top of the Trump administration's agenda any time soon. Nevertheless, the fact that US Ambassadors to Sahel countries are all career diplomats and not political appointees highlights to what extent bilateral relationships are considered significant and challenging, and the difficulty not to lose ground in a region where the weakness of institutions makes personal relationships crucial factors of diplomatic success.

More generally, the Trump administration's African policy has remained blurred by the President's ambiguous rhetoric and the Department of State's lack of a clear vision, thus widening the transatlantic rift. Besides the US President's use of the term "shithole countries" to qualify African nations, the current administration lacks a proper African policy: the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs was nominated only in May 2018, a year and a half after Trump's inauguration; at this point, the US still has no ambassador in major African countries such as South Africa; Africa is mentioned last in the latest National Security Strategy; and where US Secretary of State Tillerson's tour in Africa could have advanced US-African relations, it ended up being a one-way journey – as Tillerson was fired the minute he came back to Washington.

This lack of interest of the US in the Sahel and more generally Africa has allowed Europeans to assume more of a leadership position within the US-EU-West Africa triangle.

A French-driven European leadership favoured by US disinterest

To a large extent, "transatlantic cooperation in Africa is basically about collaboration between the United States and France, and not between the US and the European Union" (Olsen 2018: 1-2). Hence, the fact that the US thanked France but no other partner when reaching an agreement at the UNSC (US Department of State 2017) represents a straight continuation of the mutually beneficial cost- and task-sharing between Washington and Paris: the US backs France's 'gendarme' role politically and logistically – as for the intervention in Mali in 2013 –, whereas the presence of French military forces allows the US for maintaining 'American boots on the ground' at a minimum. Nonetheless, the current US administration's disavowal of multilateralism, its will to make budget cuts in development aid and UN peacekeeping missions, its posture on migration and poor consideration of Africa present the risk of jeopardizing US allies' efforts.

Although the Middle East remains the main site of geopolitical tensions at the EU's doorstep, contrary to the US, the EU's ambitions to be an actor in world politics start with a leading role in Africa. This is particularly true in the Sahel where the EU has asserted itself as the first partner in peace and security, through prevention, mediation and peacekeeping, but also by contributing to multilateral initiatives and building partnerships. This tends to be confirmed by the centrality of CSDP missions in the security architecture of countries like Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali, EUTM Mali) and Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger) and the active political and financial support to the Mali peace process. The creation of the G5 Sahel coincided with the extension of the EU Sahel Strategy to Burkina Faso and Chad (Council of the EU 2014)

and allowed the EU to reinforce its actorness in the region by political, developmental, and humanitarian means (see European Commission 2018a).

The building of a comprehensive approach to the Sahel and a strong EU-G5 bond followed a two-step process which has highlighted differences with the US. Confronted with the reality of terrorism within and outside Europe and the inter-connectedness between the two, the EU progressively developed a unitary approach to countering terrorism both domestically and abroad. Following the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, which allowed for the combination of CSDP elements with development and humanitarian instruments, the EU started to draw up the blueprint of a comprehensive approach. Hence, in its 2011 Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel – designed and published before the start of the current crisis –, the European External Action Service underlined the necessity of a "regional, integrated and holistic strategy" (EEAS 2011: 2). Today, with the G5 Sahel playing the role of a regional forum but also of a single interlocutor for external actors, the EU disposes of the means to actually implement what was defined as a transformative partnership-based approach.

Conclusion

Most of the past European and American approaches to instability in the Sahel lacked a comprehensive understanding of terrorism and its roots, and notably the inter-linkage between development issues, bad governance and corruption. Terrorism in the Sahel-Saharan strip is less the violent expression of religious extremism than that of social, economic and political frustration. Catalysed by public authorities' corruption and an increase in confessionalisation mixed with long-established ethnic tensions, this frustration transforms the path towards radicalisation into a form of social movement. At the same time, international presence and sponsorship to state military initiatives in the Sahel contribute to reinforcing terrorists' legitimacy.

Against this backdrop, it is extremely difficult to pursue a "comprehensive" approach or "integrated" response to terrorism in the Sahel given that this has to pass by a reassertion of nation-states, while considering the social, ethnic and religious heterogeneity of the region, the plurality of threats and the permeability of territories that require cross-border synergies.

Past approaches to the Sahel also suffered from a low level of coordination in the making and implementation of response strategies. If the set-up of a joint force could be interpreted as premature or a hasty exit strategy for Barkhane, the G5 Sahel still has considerable potential for building resilience at the national level, and synergies and political dialogue at the

broader regional level. However, it cannot function without international support in the medium term.

The analysis leads to a set of operational and strategic recommendations. At the operational level, it becomes necessary to empower the G5 towards more autonomy. However, the sole Joint Force neither has the capacities nor the mandate to operate further than border areas and target the very core of terrorist networks.

- Considering the geographical presence of the threat, G5 member states' domestic security should be reinforced through an increased external support for and cooperation – notably regarding training – with domestic police missions as a complement to cross-border military cooperation.
- Considering the hybrid nature and cross-border structure of the threat, the Joint Force's flexibility should also be increased through further integration with Barkhane and the MINUSMA.
- Considering the need for political autonomy and legitimacy in the eyes of populations, the Joint Force should be granted a mandate under Chapter VII of the UN Charter by the UNSC – which has been considered in the

Communiqué by the Co-Chairs of the High-Level Conference (European Commission 2018b), while national and local authorities must take steps to offer an alternative by strengthening social cohesion, notably through an increased dialogue with local and civil society actors, including religious ones.

At the strategic level, the reality of the North-South axis requires the response to instability to be more geographically comprehensive.

- Considering the Sahara as a natural barrier, North Africa has long been envisioned in Europe and the US as part of the 'Middle-East and North Africa' or confused with the 'Arab-Islamic World', without including countries of the Sahel-Saharan strip. Beyond this compartmentalised approach, sub-regions such as the Sahel or the Horn of Africa should be perceived as part of greater North African dynamics. Europe and the US might need to review the way they envision the Sahel and the whole Northern half of the African continent.
- As a forum, the G5 Sahel should be scaled-up to a 'G5+' and further integrate key neighbouring countries, above all Algeria and Libya.

Further Reading

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