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# Strategic misalignment: European security and P/CVE engagement in the Sahel

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## ABSTRACT

A key security partner of the region for more than a decade, the European Union today faces growing challenges and the potential failure of its policy towards the Sahel. While the cycle of violence does not appear to be receding, rivals such as Russia – but also Western allies such as Turkey or the Gulf states – are building new partnerships in the region. Contesting the idea that exogenous factors alone explain strategic shortcomings, we explore instead how the evolution of EU initiatives aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has contributed to strategic misalignments with Sahelian partners. The choice of new international partners by Sahelian states does not primarily follow from ideological reasons, but rather displays tactical ductility and sensitivity to political costs and strategic opportunity. The EU assistance to the emergence of a regional security model, based increasingly on securitization and militarization through ambiguous, at times incoherent and self-referential policies, should be examined to better understand the weakening of political influence in the Sahel.

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**KEYWORDS** Counterterrorism; European Union; Sahel; Extraversion; Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism

## Introduction

On 16 September 2023, the military heads of the states of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger met in Bamako to sign the founding Charter of the 'Alliance of the States of the Sahel', a new regional scheme for defence cooperation and mutual military assistance between the three countries. Realized less than two months after that a military coup d'état removed Niger's civilian president Bazoum from power, this move represents a further step in the process of authoritarian transformation and redefinition of alliances, which is

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profoundly affecting political settlements and geopolitical equilibria within and around the Sahel. While the long-term perspectives of this developing authoritarian axis remain to be seen, recent developments shed light on the crisis of the system of security intervention and political allegiances that was built by the international community under the leadership of the European Union (EU) and its member states.

Until recently, the EU was the most important international partner in a region that was traditionally considered marginal, but has been a growing security issue: a perimeter of instability where the EU's own international actorhood and capacity in the security/military domain is tested. For more than a decade the EU and its member states developed a multidimensional system of intervention, aimed chiefly at stabilization. This paid specific attention to challenges that European policy-makers identify as threats – i.e., terrorism and migration. Nonetheless, during the past two years this arrangement has been questioned: amidst a progressive deterioration of security,<sup>1</sup> the new military juntas of Mali, Burkina Faso and more recently Niger have challenged traditional security arrangements and political partnerships, mainly at the expense of France and the EU. The Sahel has thus become a space of acute geopolitical competition among aspiring powers, Russia included. Local regimes have either broken or weakened military and diplomatic ties with European partners, turning their attention towards alternative security providers and political alliances such as Russia, but also Western allies such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Following these developments, the research community has explored how Europeans 'have failed the Sahel'. Several scholars stress the role the EU played in furthering the Sahel crisis: working in a securitization mode with local regimes alienated civil society, and reinforcing dysfunctional governance and political repression, which are usually identified as key drivers of radicalization and *embrigadement* for jihadist insurgents (Baldaro, 2021; Raineri & Strazzari, 2019). Less has been said about how EU engagement itself may be linked with the rise of competitors in the region. A widespread narrative in Brussels and Paris tends to portray the EU's shortcomings in the security field and the rise of geopolitical rivals as separated phenomena, or even to present the EU's difficulties as the consequence of Russian involvement (Lindskov Jacobsen & Larsen, 2023). Contesting this view, we claim it is necessary to reconsider how the EU lost its grip on its partners in the first place, showing how it has (unintentionally) offered them incentives and opportunities to develop alternative 'strategies of extraversion' (Bayart & Ellis, 2000).

By focusing on the evolution of initiatives aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) – a policy priority and an activity field that, after some mainstreaming, today crosses (and affects) all sectors of EU intervention in the Sahel<sup>2</sup> – we emphasize the need to identify the points of tension generated by the politics of European counterterrorism and interventionism. We suggest that the EU's estrangement vis-à-vis local partners

and the unprecedented level of international competition in the Sahel are not to be understood as exogenously induced phenomena: on the contrary, they are directly linked to problems in understanding the nature and (re)production of local political order.<sup>3</sup> This lack of clarity is reflected in problematic P/CVE policies, which sometimes ignited and more often fed a process of *strategic misalignment*. By strategic alignment we mean the convergence of the different actors involved in a system of security intervention towards a common interpretation of 1) the nature of the threat, 2) the objective to be pursued, and 3) the solutions and instruments to be adopted to reach it; all elements that create mutual expectations and reinforce political partnership (D'Amato, 2021; Wilkins, 2012). Accordingly, we affirm that a mixture of incoherent and self-referential policy design – hampered by a partial misdiagnosis of the threat – and intra-organizational struggles that were translated in terms of contradictory forms of ownership and unfulfilled expectations, eventually created fissures in the relation with local partners. These fissures, by expanding, have produced disruption. In addition to our own direct observation in the field, the present contribution is based on semi-structured interviews carried out with a wide range of European and Sahelian actors over the past 12 years.

### An EU militarized approach?

Besides establishing a direct link between European internal security and Sahelian stability, the 2011 EU Strategy for the Sahel maintained the need to guarantee the development of the region (EEAS – European Union External Action Service, 2011). Development was considered an essential component of every crisis-management initiative implemented by the EU. In this sense, the Strategy stood out as a concrete illustration of how the European civilian power could address the ‘security-development nexus’.

The EU is *de facto* a reluctant actor in the P/CVE domain. Traditionally, it prefers the implementation of preventive policies, in line with its experience in peacebuilding and crisis-management. Until the period of terror attacks on European soil – which had no operational roots in the Sahel – Brussels usually understood violent extremism as an issue connected to development: this framing allowed the EU to retag and adapt existing conflict-sensitive development and peacebuilding programmes. Here, a division of labour between the United States and France was normally expected.<sup>4</sup> However, in the case of the Sahel the security/military side of the security-development nexus soon prevailed. While the rapid worsening of the security situation partly explains this development, it is also due to the way the EU framed the Sahel from the beginning. Seeing the Sahel as a conglomerate of fragile states prone to political unrest and open to the penetration of foreign jihadist groups, the EU considered reinforcement of local partners’ security capacities the main

objective to be pursued to contain the threats coming from a supposed 'ungoverned space' (Baldaro, 2021).

The most evident signal of the EU's securitizing approach was the deployment, between 2011 and 2014, of three CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy) missions, two in Mali and one in Niger.<sup>5</sup> Until recently, these missions' budgets and mandates expanded over time, including, in addition to structural programmes aimed at reforming the security and defence sectors of local counterparts, the building of capacity by training security forces in the military and counterterrorism domains. Something similar characterized the management of the European budget directed towards the Sahelian states: formerly handled through development actors (e.g., DG DEVCO, today INTPA), most of the resources under the European Development Fund (EDF) were eventually redirected towards widely-intended security and P/CVE activities.

The Regional Action Plan published in 2015 (Council of the EU, 2015) represented a further escalation towards a militarized approach. The fight against terrorist groups and the containment of migratory flows crossing the region became the declared top priorities of the EU. Two elements, aside from the so-called migratory crisis of 2015, should be seen as explaining this move. On the one hand, political initiative from Paris appeared decisive in defining the EU's positioning: already the most influential member state in the drafting of the 2011 EU strategy,<sup>6</sup> in 2014 France launched its counterterrorism operation, *Barkhane*, deploying around 5,000 soldiers in the five Sahelian states. In parallel, that same year Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad founded the G5 Sahel, a regional organization tasked with coordinating action in the security and development domains. Its most important initiative soon became the Joint Force, a series of multinational battalions combatting jihadist groups in border areas. As demonstrated by the enthusiastic support offered by the EU to the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the European standpoint vis-à-vis the Sahel crisis was mainly filtered through military lenses.

In terms of P/CVE activities *stricto sensu*, the EU approach evolved by giving increasing prominence to security-focused initiatives, at the expense of programmes focusing on social cohesion or rule of law.<sup>7</sup> However, when the implications of this approach became visible in terms of repressive behaviours, the struggle to define the EU's priorities began again. Approved in April 2021, the European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel (Council of the EU, 2021) placed stronger emphasis on governance, including upholding human rights, fighting corruption and fostering social inclusion. This approach implicitly recognized that a strategic engagement centred on security is inadequate to meet the region's increasingly complex challenges and threats. Furthermore, the July coup d'état in Niger interrupted the deployment of the EU Military Partnership Mission (EUMPM), a new CSDP mission with an unprecedented focus on counterterrorism and military

assistance. Similarly, to prevent the jihadist threat from spreading to other West African countries, the EU is expected to deploy a military mission in Ghana, Benin, Togo, and Ivory Coast aimed at assisting the redeployment of state services and security forces in those countries' northern districts.

### **Ambiguity, competition, and dysfunctionalities of EU security practices**

The first Sahel strategy provided guidelines to inspire and shape EU action in security, crisis management, and P/CVE. Simultaneously, the need to experiment with a new policy field, enacting new policy rules, hierarchies and objectives through practice, negotiation and adaptation, paved the way for different actors willing to influence and shape the EU approach to the Sahel, without necessarily seeking consensus or even a coherent line of action.

Firstly, the EU's numerous Sahel policy initiatives are affected by persistent intraorganizational struggle in Brussels. Acting mostly as a 'broker' between different policy communities and/or member states to define and implement widely-intended P/CVE initiatives, the EU has struggled to resolve its own internal tensions (D'Amato, 2021). Within an institutional setting under construction, the Sahel strategy eventually gave the EEAS a leading role in defining initiatives to be deployed in the region. True, after a decade, the West Africa division of the EEAS remains the one actor responsible for coordinating EU action in the Sahel; nevertheless, other actors, starting from the development sector, have always tried to keep a degree of autonomy, by exploiting their access to relatively rich lines of budget – as was the case of the EDF until 2021. Various interviewees recognize that the different actors involved in the security-relevant and P/CVE initiatives in the Sahel do not really coordinate their action, but rather tend to reiterate their own practices and methods, following a logic that other officials perceive as 'partisan' (as opposed to 'integrated') and self-serving.<sup>8</sup> Over time, the EU has tried to create institutional profiles to overview the whole policy process and coordinate the action of the different organs. This is the case with the EU Special Representative for the Sahel or, in the P/CVE sector, with the EU Counter-terrorism coordinator, while on the ground a Regional Advisory Coordination Cell (RACC) was established in Bamako.<sup>9</sup> These figures lack the necessary formal powers or institutional position to shape convergence among the various actors they work with. This situation results in a degree of policy randomness and – ultimately – incoherence. Moreover, this affects the logic of implementation and the clarity of objectives to be pursued: most of the projects approved in Brussels tend to develop in line with the idea that every actor will do what falls within its own field of expertise, and thus risk being self-referential. This situation underlies programmes that are sometimes characterized as box-ticking exercises vis-à-vis

EU's fuzzy strategic principles, and often produces security initiatives that do not really consider realities and necessities on the ground. Until some years ago, the very notion of conflict sensitivity, often aired in Brussels, found little or no path once programmes hit the ground through implementation phases. Likewise, our interviews show how the gender-sensitive training offered under the P/CVE umbrella, rather than being adapted and tailored to local practices and perceptions, often followed cut-and-paste templates.<sup>10</sup>

A second point concerns the tensions between decision-making in Brussels and EU delegations. While responsible for coordinating and giving coherence to the EU action implementation on the ground, the latter can be seen as a multilevel site of negotiation and struggle within the EU policy process. Delegation employees tend to criticize two principal aspects. First, rather than standing out in the process as strategic actors, they usually proceed reactively, to some extent echoing the lengthy process of adaptation that characterizes decision-making in Brussels. Second, contrasting framings of the main issues at stake have often emerged over time. A case in point is the question of the approach to be followed in Mali, which was raised in 2018–19, when Mali's government considered dialogue and negotiations with jihadist leaders in control of portions of the country. The delegation considered the crisis mainly as an expression of local grievances and saw jihadist groups as insurgents – rather than terrorists: they stressed the need for Malian authorities to support such a move. However, mainly influenced by the French rejection of talks with terrorists, decision-makers in Brussels opposed this choice, and in the end halted the initiative.<sup>11</sup>

### Strategic misalignments

The root causes of the Sahel crisis lie in the nature and behaviour of clientelist regimes, which exploited a favourable international contingency to reinforce their neopatrimonial system of rule, and brutally repress internal dissent. While distinctions should be made between the different Sahelian countries when discussing the causes of their respective putsches, the wave of military coups d'état in the region can still be interpreted using similar analytical lenses: the worsening of the security crisis, and growing popular dissatisfaction with civilian regimes, gave local security forces the opportunity to (re-) seize political power. Moreover, both civilian and military regimes in the Sahel defined specific agendas and implemented strategies of extraversion vis-à-vis their international partners to reinforce their domestic grip on power. Attracting and controlling development and security rents is key in safeguarding clientelist systems of power.

Consequently, EU initiatives in the Sahel cannot be considered alien to the emergence of the conditions that today present a strategic misalignment with Sahelian states, and a differentiation of international partnership and

sponsorship patterns. A quasi-militarized approach to the regional crisis, coupled with an ambiguous, sometimes incoherent and often self-referential policy design and implementation in the P/CVE sector, are key elements in understanding how the EU saw its action in the Sahel at least partially compromised.

Firstly, the EU did not cause the unfolding of securitization and militarization in the Sahel, but rather seconded it by judging a regional order's crisis an issue to be managed first by improving military means. From 2017–18, the relative *montée en puissance* of national armies took centre stage in the strategies pursued by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to crush jihadist insurgents. Though the problematic implications of this trend, measured in terms of abuses committed against civilians by security forces, soon become evident, it is a fact that the EU and other international partners gave their full support. This has been linked to the European will to see the military component of P/CVE succeeding, while simultaneously avoiding putting more boots on the ground.<sup>12</sup> On their side, Sahelian partners emphasized the need to include military supplies – weapons included – and greater military presence as part of the European efforts in the region, a red line that Brussels had long refused to cross. Paradigmatically, when in 2021 the EU created the European Peace Facility – a budgetary instrument enabling the EU to deliver lethal weapons to selected allies, among other things – the Sahel seemed the most obvious place in which to first implement this tool<sup>13</sup>: two years later, only Niger has received an assistance measure worth €40 million,<sup>14</sup> in spite of problems with the transparency of its military budget and procurement. As a response to these unfulfilled expectations, since 2021 Mali, and to a lesser extent Burkina Faso and Niger, have strengthened their relations with alternative international partners, including Turkey (armed drones), and Russia. Present in the region since 2014, Russian military and material assistance has become crucial for the implementation of the brutal counterinsurgency strategies planned in Bamako or Ouagadougou. Distancing from the EU thus appears to be the rational outcome of a process that has been underway for a decade. The new juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have manifested their sovereigntist views in a climate of growing hostility to France, and even announced the aim of political unification, sending a strong signal across the West Africa region.

Similarly contradictory understandings of local ownership are observed in other domains of EU P/CVE in the Sahel. Leaving aside the military component, the three main sectors of intervention identified in Brussels are democratic governance, rule of law and social cohesion. Concerning the last, the EU does not appear to have paid sufficient attention to local partners' requests. For example, the EU emphasized deradicalization projects and initiatives that apply policy models taken from the peacebuilding and conflict-prevention fields. This often implied



the diffusion of positive messages and non-violent practices of conflict-prevention in partnership with pre-selected associations representing local civil society – usually entities already socialized to the language and the practices of the international community.<sup>15</sup> Simultaneously, however, in various Sahelian countries such as Niger, Mauritania, but also Nigeria, a different understanding and framing of (de)radicalization emerged, which tended to favour programmes based on a more ideological approach. More specifically, in the struggle between different strands of Islam, EU regional partners manifested a preference for projects engaging religious leaders and other traditional authorities, seen as fundamental elements guaranteeing social stability and cohesion.<sup>16</sup> With few exceptions, the EU avoided engaging these actors in its programmes: this choice offered plenty of room for manoeuvre to various Arab countries – from Morocco to Saudi Arabia – which in contrast invested significantly along such lines, often in ways that were perceived as ambiguous by European observers.

These elements point to an erratic attitude characterizing the EU's adoption and implementation of initiatives in the P/CVE domain, something that was eventually shaped and exploited by local partners. In Mali, where until 2020 the government granted full political access to the EU in order to preserve international rents, European actors were quite free to test and develop 'schizophrenic' P/CVE initiatives on their own (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020). In contrast, the more vocal and proactive attitude adopted by Niger's government pushed the EU to be more willing to follow the local partner's indications.<sup>17</sup> In both cases, the EU lacked the capacity to autonomously assess and understand local political dynamics and transformations, and was consequently unable to react when military coups d'état changed the regional landscape and the conditions for (re-)building international partnerships.

## Conclusion

The EU has deployed a complex and articulated set of initiatives to prevent and counter violent extremism in the Sahel. While jihadist insurgencies continue to propagate, in a violent historical trajectory linking the shores of the Mediterranean to those of the Gulf of Guinea, the EU has lost part of its political influence vis-à-vis Sahelian partners because of strategic misalignment. Sahelian regimes are looking for alternative international partnerships, including that offered by Moscow. The remedial initiatives implemented by the EU cannot be completely disassociated from the trajectory of the Sahel regional crisis. If a highly securitized approach to P/CVE and conflict-management, under French influence, has favoured militarization, the implementation of self-referential and incoherent initiatives in the security and

counterterrorism domains has exacerbated political tensions with local partners, generating contradictory ownership and unfulfilled expectations.

While testing itself as a security provider in the region, the EU lacked a clear understanding of the nature of political order, and therefore a theory of change defining root causes, key drivers and causal mechanisms. The persistence of tensions between different policy communities and sectors within the EU itself bear witness to ongoing problems in taking a clear and coherent stance and implementing policies. While we observe an attempt at decoupling the EU's image and action from those of France, it remains to be seen how far EU officials will be able to translate broad strategic orientations into more actionable policies and projects.

The 2021 Strategy and a large part of EU practitioners today insist on the need to improve a more civilian- and civil society-oriented approach to P/CVE in the Sahel. Nonetheless, in a speech delivered in March 2023 at the Schuman Security and Defence Forum, High Representative Joseph Borrell identified the insufficient military backing offered by the EU to its partners as one of the lessons learnt in Mali.<sup>18</sup> These contrasting narratives will probably determine the way the EU tries to deal with the ongoing geopolitical competition in the area. Insisting on a more governance- and civilian-oriented approach will present the EU as an alternative model to Russia, even at the risk of not intercepting pressing demands for military assistance by local partners. An approach centred on security and the military, by contrast, engages in a logic of competition with Moscow, and continues down a path of which the consequences and implications, in terms of failure vis-à-vis the jihadist insurgency, the past decade offers no lack of evidence.

## Notes

1. Since 2015/16 Al Qaida and Daesh-affiliated groups have never stopped gaining ground in the Sahel, and are now expanding towards West African coastal states.
2. Interview with an employee of the EU Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, Brussels, May 2023.
3. On understanding political order in the Sahel, see for example Lombard (2020).
4. Key stakeholder dialogue between this article's authors and EU officers, March 2021.
5. One mission is military (EUTM Mali); the other two are civilian (EUCAP Sahel Mali and Niger).
6. Interviews with two then-employees of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, June and November 2015.
7. A caveat is necessary: part of the P/CVE initiatives is not explicitly earmarked as such, given the sensitivity of this terrain for recipient states, but is often discussed under some other policy heading, such as development assistance or education. We base this argument on the insights of the PREVEX research project, whose main findings are resumed in Raineri et al. (2020).

8. Interviews with EU Council functionaries, Brussels, June 2023.
9. The RACC was moved to Nouakchott in 2019.
10. Interview with a DG INTPA employee, Brussels, May 2023.
11. Former member of the EU delegation in Mali, Brussels, June 2023.
12. Interview with an employee of the CSDP planning staff of the EEAS, Brussels, February 2019.
13. Interview with an EEAS employee, Brussels, April 2022.
14. See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/03/07/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-an-assistance-measure-to-support-the-nigerien-armed-forces-in-conjunction-with-the-eu-military-partnership-mission-in-niger/>, retrieved 23/09/2023.
15. Interview with a DG INTPA employee, Brussels, May 2023.
16. Interviews with EU Council employees, Brussels, June 2023.
17. Former member of the EU delegation in Mali, Brussels, June 2023; interviews with EU Council employees, Brussels, June 2023.
18. For a transcription of the full speech, visit [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/schuman-security-and-defence-forum-keynote-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/schuman-security-and-defence-forum-keynote-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep_en), retrieved 28/06/2023.

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