

WAIT AND SEE?

THE DYNAMICS OF EUROPE'S EVOLVING APPROACH TO THE SAHEL

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Abstract

Having faced a series of *coup d'états* in recent years, the Sahel region is marked by instability and it raises fundamental security questions for Europe. In a context where European governments are responding to Russia's war on Ukraine, and where crisis management is viewed with less salience, the Sahel remains a dynamic region that requires continued European strategic and political attention. Not only does the Sahel region continue to produce political dynamics and effects that directly implicate European security interests, but it is a region that is increasingly entangled with global strategic competition. This In-Depth Paper outlines some of the core security dynamics at play in the Sahel and how they impact Europe. It provides four brief scenarios, followed by policy recommendations, to assist with thinking about possible courses of action in the Sahel in the coming years.

Introduction

‘Those who rejoice, in Europe or elsewhere, at the difficulties encountered by Europeans in the Sahel do not appreciate correctly what is at stake.’¹

The Sahel. A region in Africa that has long been a focus of European security. The core Sahelian countries of Burkina Faso, Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger face a range of security challenges including jihadism, extremism, terrorism, political instability, socio-economic underdevelopment, rapid demographic growth, illicit trafficking, corruption, food insecurity and the effects of climate change. Owing to its central geographical position in Africa, the Sahel also interlinks with other regions such as the African West Coast, North Africa, the Great Lakes region and Europe. In recent times, the Sahel has increasingly become entangled with global geopolitical dynamics with countries such as Russia, China and even Turkey trying to exert influence on the region. The number of *coup d'états* in recent years has only exacerbated insecurity and further invited strategic competitors to enter the scene.

Europeans have been aware of the security risks in the Sahel for some time. In 2013, following an official call from the Malian government and a United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution, France launched *Operation Serval* to halt the advance of jihadist groups on the capital Bamako. In 2014, this military operation was replaced by *Operation Barkhane* which had a more regional focus based on cooperation with Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger (the “G5 Sahel”) to combat jihadist groups in the Sahel region. Integrated under the command of *Operation Barkhane*, in 2020 a decision was taken to militarily support the Malian Armed Forces and G5 Sahel through *Task Force Takuba*. This task force saw several European nations contribute military support to the Sahel region to combat the growth of jihadist forces.

In addition to French-led military support to the region, there was an international dimension including the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and a number of European Union (EU) initiatives. Not only did the EU dedicate €8 billion through humanitarian aid, development cooperation and security assistance to the region from 2014 to 2024², but it engaged in the Sahel through civilian and military missions under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). These deployments included military training missions to Mali and the Central African Republic (RCA) (EUTM Mali and EUTM RCA), capacity building missions to Mali and Niger and a military partnership mission to Niger (EUMPM Niger). Additionally, the EU appointed a Special Representative for the Sahel and it created a Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell (RACC) to coordinate its “integrated approach” to the region.

However, following the *coup d'états* in Mali (2021), Chad (2021), Burkino Faso (2022) and Niger (2023) there has been a need to rethink the European strategy towards the Sahel region³. In the wake of these coups, *Operation Barkhane* was ended in November 2022, MINUSMA wound-down in December 2023⁴ and the majority of EU missions were cancelled too. The coups have also led to a breakdown in regional security mechanisms, as shown by the G5 Sahel and the Economic Community of West African States

1 Borrell, J. “Democracy Must Prevail in the Sahel”, 8 September 2023. See: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/democracy-must-prevail-sahel_en (accessed 8 June 2024).

2 European External Action Service, “Sahel Region”, 27 August 2021. See: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/sahel-region_en (accessed 25 November 2024).

3 Nissen, C. “Europe’s Role in the Sahel”, DIIS Policy Brief, 27 May 2024. See: <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/europes-role-in-the-sahel> (accessed 25 November 2024).

4 United Nations, “MINUSMA Fact Sheet”, June 2024. See: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma> (accessed 10 June 2024).

(ECOWAS) losing Mali, Burkino Faso and Niger as members⁵. With European and international withdrawal from direct military engagement, questions emerge about the most suitable manner through which to engage the Sahel region. Even though conditions on the ground do not presently permit European military engagement, it is equally true that Europe maintains an interest in curbing terrorism and eventually working with Sahelian countries on political, military and development objectives.⁶

In fact, while there is no direct European military engagement in the Sahel, steps have been taken to ensure a diplomatic and political presence, where possible. France has started to rethink its approach to the Sahel region and even the EU has begun to adjust its approach. For example, new CSDP initiatives such as the EU Security and Defence Initiative in the Gulf of Guinea (EU SDI GoG) have moved the Union's security assistance to Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin⁷. Of course, the European and international withdrawal from direct military engagement in the Sahel has invited critical questions, not least in terms of the overall strategic approach towards the region and the perceived lack of a clear end-state for engagement.⁸ The situation in the Sahel has also given France a reason to reflect on its overall approach to the region.⁹ Despite the clear need for lessons learned from past actions in the Sahel region, a focus is required on the nature of future involvement in the region.

Today, it appears unrealistic to consider bilateral approaches with Sahelian countries, especially with interlocutors that have publicly underlined their hostility towards Europe. Nevertheless, the post-coup situations in Mali, Chad, Burkino Faso and Niger remain dynamic and it cannot be excluded that Europeans will be called upon in future to directly support these countries in the future. How this European support may evolve in the future is a core objective of this In-Depth Paper. To this end, the paper expands on two main assumptions that are arguably at the heart of any European approach to the Sahel. First, that coups and instability in the Sahel mark a continuum of security factors rather than any lasting political revolution, although the spectre of how the Sahel is increasingly bound-up with strategic competition (e.g. Russia and China) cannot be overlooked. Second, that how European countries and the EU engage with the Sahel in the future will tell us a lot about Europe's ongoing evolution in security and defence. In the following sections we address each of the two assumptions, and, before concluding, the paper offers four very short scenarios to consider for the Sahel and associated policy recommendations.

5 "Group of Five for the Sahel Joint Force", *Security Council Report*, 30 April 2024. See: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2024-05/group-of-five-for-the-sahel-joint-force-9.php> (accessed 1 June 2024) and Pichon, E. "Sahelxit' in West Africa: Implications for ECOWAS and the EU", *European Parliamentary Research Service*, April 2024. See: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762295/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)762295_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762295/EPRS_BRI(2024)762295_EN.pdf) (accessed 2 June 2024).

6 Ministère de l'Europe et des affaires étrangères, "Security in Sahel". See: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/africa/security-and-the-fight-against-terrorism/security-in-sahel/> (accessed 19 June 2024).

7 European External Action Service, "EU Security and Defence Initiative in support of West African countries of the Gulf of Guinea". See: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/2023-12-EU%20SDI%20GoG_02.pdf (accessed 4 June 2024).

8 See, for example, Tull, D.M. "Security Force Assistance under Geopolitical Stress: The EU's 'Strategic Review' of its CSDP Missions in Mali", *SWP Berlin*, 20 June 2022. See: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/mta-spotlight-09-the-eus-strategic-review-of-csdp-missions-in-mali> (accessed 4 June 2024) and Erforth, B. and Tull, D.M. "The Failure of French Sahel Policy: An Opportunity for European Cooperation?", *SWP Berlin*, 5 September 2022. See: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/mta-spotlight-13-the-failure-of-french-sahel-policy> (accessed 4 June 2024).

9 See, for example, Op. Cit., Antil, A. and Vircuoulon, T.; Guichaoua, Y. "The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel", *International Affairs*, 96(4) (2020), 895-911; Robert, A-C. "La France en Afrique: un canard sans tête", *Revue Internationale et Stratégique*, 133(1) (2024), 105-112.

Continuity and change in the Sahel

There is a temptation to view the *coup d'états* and the resulting instability that has spread through the Sahel in recent years as evidence of a fundamental shift in African security. The reality is that the Sahel has experienced a great deal of continuity during its relatively recent phases of instability. The region has for many years been home to terrorism, violent conflict, climate change and instability and this has resulted in long-standing security and development challenges such as displacement, food scarcity, conflict, corruption and more. The presence of juntas in Mali, Burkino Faso and Niger have done little to address these long-standing issues, but these acute humanitarian and development challenges existed before the coups – and these challenges will outlast the military juntas too. And even when it comes to *coup d'états*, these are not new phenomena, even though each coup embodies its own political dynamics and intricacies¹⁰ – for example, since 1960 Mali and Niger have experienced ten coups combined¹¹.

The security situation in the Sahel remains a volatile one. While acknowledging the limitations of large-scale data sets¹², there have been 911 reported cases of political violence in Mali, 726 cases in Burkino Faso and 367 in Niger in 2024 (as at 28 June 2024) alone. These acts of violence against civilians and battles have occurred at the hands of and/or directly involved junta forces, Islamic State, Wagner Group, *Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin* (JNIM) and more¹³. So, there can be no doubt that violence is a mainstay of the situation in the Sahel, even if there is evidence that the coup wave in the Sahel since 2020 has substantially increased the potential for jihadist groups to expand and intensify their violence¹⁴. There is also little hope of any meaningful or lasting socio-economic development in the Sahel region while military juntas remain in power.

The implications of this security situation for Europe are uncomfortable. Indeed, many of the regimes in the Sahel region have openly engaged in “anti-colonial” and/or “anti-Western” rhetoric towards Europe. While it is true that the rest of Africa has not followed Mali, Burkina Faso or Niger in their hostile approach to France or Europe¹⁵, the anti-European sentiment in the Sahel makes it more difficult for Europeans to engage. This is true of counter-terrorism actions but also for the delivery of assistance to local populations, combatting poverty and investing in education and employment. In any case, the stability needed to ensure secure and effective development assistance has been sorely undermined, and there may grow a more long-lasting aversion to European military and civilian assistance in the region. This, in turn, implies that even if future governments and regimes in the region do call on European assistance, it may not be easy for European governments or institutions

10 Wilén, N. and Guichaoua, Y. “Un coup d’État singulier? Trois raisons pour lesquelles le coup d’État au Niger se démarque des précédents coups d’État au Sahel (et pourquoi il est très grave)”, *Le Rubicon*, 6 September 2023. See: <https://lerubicon.org/un-coup-detat-singulier-trois-raisons-pour-lesquelles-le-coup-detat-au-niger-se-demarque-des-precedents-coups-detat-au-sahel-et-pourquoi-il-est-tres-grave/> (accessed 6 June 2024).

11 Camara, K. and Stigant, S. “Countering Coups: How to Reverse Military Rule Across the Sahel”, *United States Institute of Peace*, 3 August 2023. See: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/countering-coups-how-reverse-military-rule-across-sahel> (accessed 4 June 2024).

12 Eck, K. “In Data We Trust? A Comparison of UCDP GED and ACLED Conflict Events Datasets”, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 47(1) (2012): 124-141.

13 All date here collated from ACLED. See: <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/sahel/#map> (accessed 19 June 2024).

14 Thurston, A. “Military Coups, Jihadism and Insecurity in the Central Sahel”, *OECD West African Papers*, 43 (April 2024), p. 24. See: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/522f69f1-en.pdf?expires=1719305386&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=F79E72C849F9D606254B65AD5D7B526F> (accessed 6 June 2024).

15 Antil, A. and Vircuoulon, T. “Après l’échec sahélien, repenser le logiciel de la politique française en Afrique”, *Briefings de l’IFRI*, 10 avril 2024. See: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifri_antil_vircoulon_politique_francaise_afrique_2024.pdf (accessed 14 June 2024).

to simply revert to past strategies and approaches built on military deployments, military training and security reform.¹⁶

Additionally, the situation in the Sahel has opened the door for greater influence in the region by Russia, China and Turkey. While Russia offers no development path to Sahelian countries, relying instead on opportunistic military offers via paramilitary and mercenary groups (e.g. *Afrika Corps*), players such as China and Turkey are different. Although China has long-been seen as a challenger to Western approaches to Africa¹⁷, Beijing increasingly sees regions such as the Sahel as fertile ground for its own development approach. Stressing the importance of a “Community of Common Destiny”¹⁸ with African countries is seen as a way to ensure Chinese access to resources and economic opportunities on the continent, while also fanning “anti-colonial” sentiment among African populations¹⁹. For its part, Turkey is also trying to expand its influence in Africa through trade and security assistance, although Ankara has adopted a more cautious approach to the Sahel when compared to other regions in Africa, most notably North Africa²⁰.

The reality is that Europe could become part of a “bidding war” between external actors in the Sahel, especially as the regimes in coup-hit countries seek to play one external actor off against the other to extract the perceived best offer. Thus, anti-European rhetoric may be mobilised to gain favour with China and/or Russia, but over time this message could be modulated as the coup regimes – if they survive – recognise the limits to Beijing’s and Moscow’s offers. With the United States (US) losing ground in the Sahel region and Africa more broadly²¹, Europe will have to return to the drawing board to design a more effective approach to Africa.

Returning to the “drawing board” in the Sahel

Even if a short-term re-engagement with the Sahel appears unrealistic, there is still a need to weigh-up the costs of not having a significant presence in the region. First, future re-engagement with the region will likely see the Sahel characterised by an even worse level socio-economic development, deteriorating democracy and political instability. Thus, even if Europe does re-engage with the Sahel based on its past principles and approaches it will need to redouble financial efforts, while considering the optimal form of military engagement. Second, the Sahel will be far more dangerous from a security perspective due to a proliferation of arms and violent actors. There is already evidence of a concerted effort by the juntas to requisition military equipment left behind by European forces²². Furthermore, we already

16 International Crisis Group, “Reorienting Europe’s Approach in the Sahel”, *ICG Commentary*, 30 January 2024. See: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/reorienting-europes-approach-in-the-sahel> (accessed 8 June 2024).

17 Seddon, D. “China: Africa’s New Business Partner”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 33(110) (September, 2006), 747-749.

18 Yu, L. “China’s Expanding Security Involvement in Africa: A Pillar for ‘China-Africa Community of Common Destiny’”, *Global Policy*, 9(4) (2018), 489-500.

19 Coraglia, B. “Russie/Chine en Afrique”, *Diplomatie*, 123 (Septembre-Octobre, 2023), 21-25. See: <https://www.aren24.news/2023/12/04/russie-chine-en-afrique-partenaires-ou-rivaux/> (accessed 8 June 2024).

20 Lebovich, A. and van Heukelingen, N. “Unravelling Turkish Involvement on the Sahel”, *Clingendael Institute Policy Brief*, 28 July 2023. See: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/unravelling-turkish-involvement-sahel> (accessed 11 June 2024).

21 Ray, C. A. “Is the United States Losing the Sahel?”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 7 May 2024. See: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/05/is-the-united-states-losing-the-sahel/> (accessed 2 June 2024).

22 Wilén, N. “Procurement by Proxy: How Sahelian Juntas Acquire Equipment from Ousted Security Partners”, *Africa Policy Briefs*, Egmont Institute, 26 March 2024. See: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/procurement-by-proxy-how-sahelian-juntas-acquire-equipment-from-ousted-security-partners/> (accessed 11 June 2024).

know that Russia has emerged as the biggest arms exporter to the Sub-Saharan region²³ and there is also intelligence to suggest that Moscow has used countries such as Mali to procure weapons for re-shipment to Russia in order to evade international embargoes²⁴.

Therefore, re-engagement with the Sahelian countries in the future will likely be more dangerous for Europe. *If* and *when* Europe militarily re-engages with the Sahel, it will be in large part dependent on France's overall approach to the region. France has borne the brunt of "anti-European" sentiment in the region, but it is often overlooked that France made a huge sacrifice in the region, including with the loss of life of its soldiers and personnel. There cannot be a general European approach to the Sahel without France. Accordingly, the major question facing France and Europe today is how best to engage with the Sahel over the short-, medium- and longer-terms. Creating new pathways will be critical, even if there is no immediate political willingness to directly re-engage with the Sahel. In the short-term, the major objective appears to be to ensure that the crisis in the Sahel does not spill-over into the broader West African region. Beyond the short-term, however, it is worth considering what policy options may emerge for Europe based on various scenarios.

Scenarios for the Sahel to 2030

So far this paper has looked at the present challenges facing Europe in the Sahel, but the use of scenarios can help us test our assumptions and analyse *how* and *if* Europe would respond in the coming years (up to 2030) to various security situations. Accordingly, the rest of this section will develop four short scenarios designed to reflect on possible policy options.

Scenario 1 - the *status quo*

Out to 2030, the situation for the juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger solidifies and through a process of farcical "democratic" processes they attain the "popular consent" of the people. In Mali, President Assimi Goïta has launched a number of police crackdowns against protest groups and state surveillance capacities have been improved. In Niger, President Abdourahamane Tchiani follows a similar path and in 2025 he calls national elections, which all observers call a sham. Captain Ibrahim Traoré has anointed himself "President for Life" in Burkina Faso, and state repression in the country is rife. Together, Mali, Niger and Burkino Faso strengthen the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), which attains weapons and support from Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. The AES begin to organise annual summits, which lead to a recurring declaration on "anti-colonialism" and "anti-Westernism". The AES also proclaims its intention to replace ECOWAS as the main regional security force in the Sahel. Development and peace in the region suffer, with growing poverty and widespread human rights abuses.

²³ African Defence Forum, "Russia Emerges as Top Weapons Supplier to Sub-Saharan Africa", 21 April 2023. See: <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/04/russia-emerges-as-top-weapons-supplier-to-sub-saharan-africa/> (accessed 11 June 2024).

²⁴ Le Cam, M. "US says Russia's Wagner tried to use Mali to arm itself in Ukraine", *Le Monde*, 27 May 2023. See: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/united-states/article/2023/05/27/us-says-russia-s-wagner-tried-to-use-mali-to-arm-itself-in-ukraine_6028203_133.html (accessed 11 June 2024).

The maintenance of the *status quo* poses a continuing challenge for Europe. Clearly, the solidification of the juntas' power means that European countries should consider intensifying diplomacy with neighbouring states in the region, especially with West African states. The major security objective will be to avoid any crisis spill-over into neighbouring regions, and European institutional actors such as the EU could be mobilised to ramp-up security assistance and support to partner countries in the wider West African region. From a military perspective, an emphasis on the gathering of intelligence appears to be likely with the objective of monitoring the actions of the juntas and malicious jihadist and paramilitary groups. This *status quo* scenario may also call for the readiness of specific military capabilities (e.g. special forces) in case core European interests are put at risk.

Scenario 2 - a new wave of coups

Throughout 2025 and 2026 a new wave of coups emerges in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso as rival factions in the military and society in the three countries protest against the juntas' control. In Mali, there is a hope that the main opposition politicians that have returned to the country will form a transitional citizen assembly, and the leaders call for support from European states, the EU, UN and the US. However, control in Mali is far from assured and violence spirals out of control. In Niger, a rival military faction within the ruling junta emerges and assassinates the military leadership, leading to a military munity. There is a risk of major civil war in the country, with a chance that there might be a crisis spill-over into neighbouring countries. In Burkina Faso, the situation is relatively better in that there is not open conflict in the streets, although there is no clarity as to whether junta military leaders have been taken hostage by Islamic State-backed jihadists or not. Again, this new wave of coups does nothing for the plight of people, who still suffer from under-development, malnourishment and insecurity.

This scenario would lead to a precarious and dynamic security context. As the juntas are removed from power, there is a risk that external paramilitary groups (*Afrika Corps*) are called upon to support ousted leaders. Equally, there may be moves by regional actors such as ECOWAS to consider military support to stabilise the situation. For Europe, a range of diplomatic steps at the UN level could be considered, but there is a risk of deadlock in the Security Council. Discussions between France and other relevant European partners could be initiated, not least in case limited and smaller scale military missions (i.e. the use of special forces or drones) could be required. This is particularly relevant in the case of growing threats from jihadist groups. In most instances, however, European countries will need a complete intelligence picture of the political situation.

Scenario 3 - the rise of the revisionists

In 2027, despite repeated calls to end Europe's "historical colonisation" of the Sahelian countries, President Assimi Goïta is under pressure from rival factions and groups. He asks for international support to maintain his regime. Calls for China to directly intervene with a peacekeeping force are rejected by Beijing, but a compromise is found whereby Russia will significantly enhance the presence of *Afrika Corps* in the country. China maintains significant economic interests in the country and has agreed with Russia that China will make increased, indirect, payments to Moscow for its war efforts in Ukraine. With Russia enforcing Goïta's rule via arms deliveries, China makes an interest free loan offer to the Malian junta, but in return administrators from Beijing will take over the fundamental management of Mali. Although Burkina Faso and Niger are concerned about following Mali's direction, China and Russia use a mixture of economic levers and the promise of security assistance to increase their control over governance and security in the region.

Any significant military presence provided by revisionist powers would serve to curtail Europe's margin for manoeuvre in the region. This does not necessarily mean that Europeans should respond with their own military (re)deployments. However, what would effectively materialise is competition over the relevance of different development models in the region. As the Russian offer would be mainly paramilitary in character, Moscow would have a largely one-dimensional presence. China's potential offer in this scenario would be more comprehensive and include economic means. The success of a Chinese approach in the region may be mixed, but Beijing's offer may require a European response. In this respect, European states could mobilise the EU to provide more intensive economic and security assistance to states neighbouring the Sahel. A substantial ramping up of assistance to West African states, based on a revised European approach to Africa, could contribute to avoiding security spillovers and underlining the unique features of a European developmental offer in Africa.

Scenario 4 - the caliphate returns

In 2026, instability in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has worsened due to a concerted effort by jihadist groups to oust the military juntas. Their aim is to proclaim a new caliphate in the Sahel. The new caliphate emerges in the *Liptako-Gourma* tri-state border area and is centralised in Gao, Mali, but pockets of Islamic State territory emerges in northern Benin and north-western Nigeria. The financing of Islamic State comes for local economies with a system of extortion, smuggling, ransoms, natural resources and foreign revenues. In particular, the new caliphate in the Sahel is able to attain financial income from illicit transfers from the Middle East and money laundering sources. The new caliphate has also requisitioned arms stocks previously held by the military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and it relies on weapons and ammunition stocks from Islamic State affiliates in Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan and the Philippines. The entrenchment of the new caliphate has, however, had the effect of somewhat unifying the concerns of Europeans, the US, Russia and China, which all voice concerns about the rise of the group. Even so, Russia and China are not compelled to directly intervene in the region.

In this extreme scenario, Europe's core interests would certainly be at stake and a comprehensive approach combining political, economic and military tools should be considered. Not only would it seem plausible and advisable to consider direct military engagement (e.g. air strikes), but efforts would be required to disrupt the illicit flows of money and weapons sustaining the caliphate. European countries would need to be cautious about how they communicate with countries such as Russia and China. It should not be excluded that Europeans are left to largely lead on any response. A diplomatic offensive towards African and Arab states would be advisable, given the need to create an international coalition against the caliphate. Such a coalition, including UN, EU and regional involvement, would need to consider all military options as well as to draw up a political strategy for the post-caliphate era.

Conclusion

This In-Depth Paper has revealed that, while the various coups in recent times have up-ended Europe's presence in the region, many of the structural factors that led to the coups are long-standing issues for the region. As this paper has discussed, this includes widespread poverty, food insecurity, climate change, corruption, the flouting of human rights, jihadism and more. With Europe having a smaller footprint in the region today, these structural factors will continue to animate potential future scenarios. The paper has also highlighted how this continuum of political, economic and social challenges in the Sahel means that Europeans will have to continuously ask themselves the questions of how, when, why and with what means they may or may not want to engage with the Sahel. True, much of the political attention today is focused on the response to the war in Ukraine, but this does not imply that regional crisis zones such as the Sahel become irrelevant.

Indeed, the Sahel will remain a region where several European security concerns emerge including the trafficking of people and arms, jihadism and violent extremism. Nevertheless, this paper has indicated that these risks should be seen in light of growing strategic competition with Russia and China. The presence of Russia, China and others in the Sahel may provide Europeans with a different rationale for engagement in the Sahel. Indeed, one of the dominant strategic narratives today is "great power competition", but this paper has indicated that such competition is starting to be played out in the Sahel. This places an additional burden on Europeans designing a coherent strategy for engagement in the Sahel. If there is little appetite among European nations for larger military deployments to the Sahel, as was the case in the recent years, then new approaches will be required. This paper has indicated that more attention is required to enhance security assistance to countries around the Sahel. It has also argued that more specialised military approaches in the Sahel could be considered, including the greater use of military intelligence, special forces and air power. Europe's recent resurgence in defence investment may help to develop capabilities that can be used in multiple strategic theatres.

At present, an overall European strategic approach to the Sahel is missing. Russia's war on Ukraine is understandably shifting the focus, and there are European governments that will be reluctant to re-engage with the Sahel. Political attention and military resources are largely dedicated to Europe's eastern flank today, and Europe's reputation in the coup countries is low. "Anti-colonialist" narratives, fanned by both Russia and China, will dampen Europe's appetite for a renewed approach to the Sahel – especially if Europeans let these narratives succeed. Yet, as this paper has argued, the Sahel will continue to effect European security interests and policy options for various scenarios should be considered sooner rather than later. While Europeans may still presently be in a "wait and see" mode towards the Sahel, the security dynamics unfolding in the region may wait for no one.



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The Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the key contemporary security and diplomatic challenges of the 21st century – and their impact on Europe – while reaching out to the policy community that will ultimately need to handle such challenges. Our expertise in security studies will seek to establish comprehensive theoretical and policy coverage of strategic competition and its impact on Europe, whilst paying particular attention to the Transatlantic relationship and the wider Indo-Pacific region. Diplomacy as a field of study will be treated broadly and comparatively to encompass traditional statecraft and foreign policy analysis, as well as public, economic and cultural diplomacy.

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