European aphasia in the Sahel: stabilising how?

Delina Goxho & Selina Daugalies

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Preface

In 2021 the European Union (EU) launched a new Sahel strategy, affirming the EU's intention to step up the partnership with the Sahel region by addressing the area's challenges. The new strategy reflects the EU's growing concern over the region's security and political instability, resource scarcity and the resulting humanitarian crisis.

Currently, the EU has several Common Security and Defence missions deployed in the Sahel. These focus on civilian capacity-building (EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali) and on military training (EUTM Mali), as well as a regional advisory coordination cell (RACC). Additionally, individual member states, including France, are militarily engaged and support joint task forces with the G5 countries. However, the current military stabilization efforts have not lead to the expected improvement of the security situation in the region. On the contrary, extremist actors continue to expand into new geographic areas. Simultaneously, Russia's and China´s growing influence in the region counter the EU´s intensions. Recent developments have led to the EU suspending its Training Mission in Mali. As a sign of the heightened tensions in the region, Germany, the biggest troop contributing country from the EU, decided in November 2022 also to pull out of the UN-led United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali. Instead, the EU and its member states have refocused their efforts on countries where they see a more positive development trajectory, including Niger.

In light of these new developments, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Multinational Development Policy Dialogue (KAS MDPD) commissioned this study, which names key challenges and suggests a change of course. This study can be seen as a complimentary effort to the work done by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung regional office in Mali, which focuses on fostering a dialogue between European and Sahelian actors and supports decision makers in their efforts to build and to enhance good governance structures.

We would like to thank the authors Delina Goxho and Selina Daugalies for writing this study and for their efforts in engaging on this topic with European and Sahelian decision makers, think tanks and practitioners.

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Abbreviations

AFD	Agence Française de Développement
APSA	African Peace and Security Architecture
AU	African Union
CIMIC	Civil-Military Co-operation
COIN	counterinsurgency
CRAZ	Regional Council of Agadez
CSO	civil society organisation
CT	counterterrorism
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EEAS	European External Action Service
EIGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
EPF	European Peace Facility
EPLO	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office
EU CSDP Missions	EU Common Security and Defence Policy Missions
EU RACC Sahel	The EU's Regional Advisory & Coordination Cell for the Sahel
EUCAP Sahel Niger	EU Capacity Building Mission in Niger
EUTF	EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa
EUTM	European Training Mission to Mali
FAN	Nigerien Armed Forces
FDS	defence and security forces
G5S-JF	G5 Sahel Joint Force
HACP	Haute Autorité pour la Consolidation de la Paix
HIPPO	Independent High-level Panel on Peace Operations
IcSP	Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace
ISWAP	Islamic State in West Africa Province
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
JNIM	The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in CAR

MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali
MNJTF	Multi-National Joint Task Force
MONUSCO	UN Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DR Congo
NDICI–Global Europe	Neighbourhood, Development & Intern. Co-operation Instrument
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
P3S	The Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel
PARSEC	Programme d'Appui au Renforcement de la Sécurité
PCCN	Community Cohesion Programme in Niger
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
SFOR	NATO-led Stabilisation Force to former Yugoslavia
SSR	Security Sector Reform
UNDP	United Nation Development Programme
VDP	Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie

Executive summary

Stabilising fragile states to ward off transnational threats has become the mantra of the last decade. However, the lack of a common agreed-upon definition of what stabilisation truly means leads to a multitude of different interpretations and implementation strategies of such approach. In West Africa's Sahel region, especially in the Central Sahel, which comprises Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, several EU countries (including and, to some extent, led by France) are prioritising what we call a **two-staged reactive stabilisation strategy** with a relevant military presence, while several other EU countries (including and, to some extent, led by Germany), follow a more **pre-emptive line of action**. Brussels is the playground where these different strategies are wound up in an **EU stabilisation approach**, which does not however resemble a strategy on the ground, and which so far showcases that the EU's current undertakings in the Central Sahel face more obstacles than achievements. It is time to reconsider and evaluate what is working and what is not in the Sahel, find a direction for the EU's stabilisation approach that is truly coordinated and that includes:

- Prioritising good governance above all, adopting primarily civilian and preventive solutions to crises and imagining an **articulation of stabilisation as *ad hoc* (or case by case) and integrated rather than sequential.**

- **Increasing its conditionality mechanisms *vis-à-vis* Niamey** following the principles of *ex ante* and *positive conditionality* (through the European Peace Facility) to ensure that most of its funding, be it humanitarian, development or security, goes where it is needed the most.

- Conducting **in-depth, transparent and comprehensive evaluations** to learn from successes and failures for future engagement, particularly in the case of a European Training Mission in Niger, as well as **adjusting the programming** of its migration policies and ensuring that this **responsibility is eventually taken up by the Nigerien state and the Agadez regional government.**

- Funding decentralisation initiatives in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, but also **diplomatically supporting mediation** amongst regional and central governments.

- **Considering local dynamics** (through independent assessments) in any EU security intervention, which means that, before choosing to set up a programme in a certain village (and for the EU to fund it), dynamics in *that particular village* must be made clear and examples of **where stabilisation programming worked** must be considered.

- Encouraging and providing **opportunities for civil society to publicly discuss their proposed solutions** with international partners by providing the necessary visibility platforms for them to speak as well as direct EU funding opportunities.

- **Increasing the clarity of its communication and pushing its civilian and military missions to be more upfront locally** to counter misinformation, appear in the news (both radio and television) and have a more intense and prolific profile on social media, especially on Facebook.

- Refraining from supporting regional organisations unless certain guarantees are in place. **Bilateral support is more effective than regional organisations**, as different countries are willing to pull very different weights.

- Defining an **exit strategy**, which implies that the EU must be ready to depart from the Sahel should its leaders choose not to respect a series of conditionality mechanisms and agreed-upon steps to both stem the violence and avoid that other areas of the region fall prey to it.

The Sahel stretches across West and Central Africa and consists of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, which form the G5 Sahel states. The collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011 and the subsequent uprising and coup in Mali in 2012 led to an escalation of violent insurgencies by both al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliated groups, which then spread to central Mali, neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso and in some cases exacerbated already-present inter-communal tensions. This has added yet another insecurity level for populations based in the border areas such as Diffa in Niger and the Liptako-Gourma region between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. In addition to institutional collapse, a worsening of the humanitarian situation, and a climate crisis, the region is also facing a steady increase in violent extremist uprisings and communal violence, triggering an ongoing security crisis that has now lasted ten years and spread to Burkina Faso and Niger as well as, progressively, southern states such as Togo and Benin.[1] In order to generate peace and long-term stability, several regional and foreign actors are intervening in the Sahel. However, the operational environment for stabilisation efforts in the region is currently being redefined due to the escalated diplomatic crisis between Bamako and Paris in February 2022, which led to a series of consequences, including the departure of Mali from the G5 Sahel regional alliance in June 2022.[2] Western allies are withdrawing from Mali, redeploying or terminating their current training and counterterrorism efforts in the country. This not only has paralysing consequences for remaining missions like the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission (MINUSMA) to Mali, which heavily relied on the tools put in place by the Western presence to carry out its mandate,[3] but it has also far-reaching implications for stabilisation efforts across the entire region. In addition, aside from competition between the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (EIGS) and the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) in the tri-border area, and links with Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the south, other forces are redefining the operational landscape: Turkish armed Bayraktar drones have recently been purchased by the Nigerien army, while Russian paramilitary group Wagner is now

1   ACLED (2021) 'Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines', ACLED. Available at: https://acleddata.com/2021/06/17/sahel-2021-communal-wars-broken-ceasefires-and-shifting-frontlines/

2   AfricaNews (2022) 'Mali's withdrawal from G5 Sahel effective from June 30', AfricaNews. Available at: https://www.africanews.com/2022/06/17/malis-withdrawal-from-g5-sahel-effective-from-june-30//

3   Laessing, U. (2022) 'Bundeswehr-Einsatz im Sahel in Zeiten von Frankreichs Abzug und Russlands Intervention', KAS Länderbericht. Available at: https://www.kas.de/de/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/bundeswehr-einsatz-im-sahel-in-zeiten-von-frankreichs-abzug-und-russlands-intervention

accompanying Malian armed forces in combat, and China is slowly building a strong commercial presence in all three central Sahel countries. This will have far-reaching consequences for the region in the long term and may lead to more significant geopolitical competition, should the EU choose to increase its presence in the Sahel.

Introduction

How best to strengthen fragile states and prevent state collapse are some of the most pressing issues of the 21st century. Due to global interconnectivity, threats arising from instability (such as terrorism or mass migration) are understood to be transnational, which is why there is a growing appetite for comprehensive and coordinated stabilisation approaches. But what is stabilisation and what do different governments mean by this term? Stabilisation is mentioned in several different contexts and associated with various buzzwords such as, for example, conflict prevention, counterinsurgency, capacity building, training and equipping local forces, security sector reform (SSR) and development support. One of the reasons for this is that the international community is still unsure of what stabilisation means, but another reason is that the conceptual ambiguity gives the "stabiliser" a multitude of options from which to pick and ultimately makes them choose the most favorable instruments for foreign intervention while tagging them under the banner of stabilisation. The danger is that this lack of clarity does not just lead to unconcerted, confused series of actions, but also that it makes both stabiliser and stabilised unaccountable for whichever strategy they choose to adopt.

In West Africa's Sahel region this definitional unclarity results in various stabilisation approaches that emphasise different *foci* and hinder efficient coordination efforts. In the eye of the current withdrawal of some Western forces from Mali, the issue of stability in the entire region becomes crucial. In this report, we first analyse how stabilisation as an intervening strategy came about through a short reconstruction of the genesis of the term. We then move on to examine the dominant European stabilisation efforts led by France and Germany, as well as EU stabilisation actions in the Sahel. The choice to use Germany and France to showcase the different approaches European member states are adopting regarding the Sahel depends both on the fact that Paris and Berlin are the most relevant European players in the region and the fact that they have conceptualised stabilisation in two different ways. By using France and Germany as examples, we wish to expose how Europeans are interpreting stabilisation and putting it into practice, also seeking to explore commonalities and differences with counterinsurgency and delve deeper into what the EU means by stabilisation. We then move on to examine stabilisation as intended by regional organisations,

seeking to analyse their challenges and choke-points. To exemplify European stabilisation work in the Sahel, we choose to analyse the Nigerien case study, as Niamey is the new main partner for the EU's stabilisation efforts in the Sahel region, which are set to be further intensified after the Western withdrawal from Mali. We look into how stabilisation is interpreted by the Nigerien government, by also showcasing how Niamey perceives external stabilisation aid. We end the report with a series of recommendations for the European Union in the region.

To assess the existing stabilisation approaches, this policy report draws on desk research and a series of semi-structured interviews covering a wide range of perspectives. Interviews were conducted between July 2019 and August 2021 with policymakers and analysts in Brussels, as well as German and French officials and experts working both with and for their respective stabilisation units. This was complemented by interviews with Sahelian policymakers, former rebel leaders, European, U.S. and Sahelian militaries (mainly armed forces, gendarmerie and garde nationale), self-defence groups in Niger, humanitarian workers and local and international NGO staff between January 2020 and June 2022 in Niamey, Agadez, Bamako and Ouagadougou. Our presence in both Brussels (for the first 6 months of work) and Niamey, Bamako and Ouagadougou (for about a year after that) allowed us to triangulate, but also to conduct interviews with the same individuals more than once, providing interviewees with the possibility for feedback. Using content analysis, we then quantified and analysed the meanings and relationships of concepts such as stabilisation and crisis prevention.

1. The genesis of stabilisation: the Sahel stabilisation manual

Within the domain of contemporary international relations, talk of stabilisation has become omnipresent: but how did this idea of stabilisation come about? What were the main tenets that underpinned its birth and how was this interpreted in the context of the Sahel?

The end of the Cold War led to a global rethinking of why and how conflicts are fought: they started being seen no longer as a product of US/Soviet competition, but as being caused by a variety of **interlinked factors** such as poverty, communal tensions and state weakness.[4] The liberal idea that all states in sub-Saharan Africa (and elsewhere) wanted to resemble the Weberian state models of Europe and North America was a certitude. And development

4   Bethany Lacina (2004) 'From side show to centre stage: civil conflict after the Cold War', Security Dialogue 35: 2, pp. 191–205.

and conflict started being seen as two sides of the same coin: if peace derives from economic wellbeing and democratisation, then an *integrated* approach is necessary to bring about stability. The security sector was not necessarily seen only as an add-on to development, but its role was arguably more marginal both in rhetoric and in practice in the years that followed.

Following the conflict in Yugoslavia, the NATO-led Stabilisation Force (SFOR) was the first security mission to champion a well-developed idea of stabilisation into its mandate. The *Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe* (1990) then devised a policy which would incorporate democratisation and human rights, economic development and co-operation, and security issues, showcasing how security on its own could not be able to deal with the fragile situation in the region. Thus, **current discourse around stabilisation in the Sahel and an integrated European agenda for the region is no novelty**. In 2015 the Allied Joint Doctrine on the Military Contribution to Stabilisation and Reconstruction was published: the document understands stabilisation and reconstruction as **civilian endeavours**, whereas the military's role would only be one of "establishing a **safe and secure environment**".[5]

After 9/11, public discourse around conflict and insecurity changed again, bringing to the fore the **jihadist transnational threat**. Since the threat was seen as developing 'across borders', the entire world was at risk and states that were fragile (or failed) could endanger everyone by providing a haven and support for terrorist groups. As reported by Albrecht and Clausen (2021), "the inability of failing states to control their own territories, and the threat to global stability that they posed as a consequence, gave **impetus to extensive state and nation-building efforts**".[6] Europe and North America became more disillusioned with states in the Global South, recognising that perhaps the issue was not so much incapacity to reform, but unwillingness to do so – hence a 'reconstitution' and **top-down reform of the security sector** of certain states started being promoted in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

As of 2005, the logic of the '**Responsibility to Protect**' (R2P)[7] began seeping into the tissue of international interventions,

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5   See p. 9:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/625763/doctrine_nato_stabilization_reconstruction_ajp_3_4_5.pdf

6   Clausen M.L. and Albrecht P. (2021) 'Interventions Since the Cold War: from state-building to stabilization', *International Affairs* 97:4, Oxford University Press, p. 1205.

7   Arbour, L. (2008) 'The Responsibility to Protect as a duty of care in international law and practice', *Review of International Studies* 34: 3, pp. 445–58; UN General Assembly (2005) World Summit Outcome Document, Resolution A/60/L.1.

exemplified in the cases of Kosovo and East Timor,[8] which resurfaced again (and then eventually died out) with Libya in 2011. What was happening in the early 2000s and driven in part by the emergence of the R2P concept, was a rethinking and reconceptualisation of conflict management following the Rwandan genocide and the humanitarian intervention in Kosovo.[9] In other words, suddenly attention was directed towards **root causes of conflict** and how to address such.[10] In the US in 2005, it was the Pentagon itself that decided to make stability operations an obligation for its military operations. A *Field Manual on Stability Operations* was drafted in 2008, which included the provision not just of military aid to fragile states, but also emergency infrastructure, humanitarian relief and essential government services.[11] It is rather surprising to see how many of the recommendations foreseen in the manual still hold true today – it is almost as if **the new Sahel Strategy and more in general EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions have copy-pasted the mantra of stabilisation** already devised at the beginning of the millennium, i.e. good governance, rule of law, economic development, nationhood and civil society, and market economies.[12] In the UK, already in 2007 there was momentum for the creation of a Stabilisation Unit, comprising the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, which saw conflict resolution as an exquisitely political endeavour.

Now, **problems in Afghanistan and Iraq** in the past decade, coupled with an increasing **unwillingness to invest** overseas through 'boots on the ground' after incurring severe losses in conflicts in the Middle East and thanks to the advent of increasingly precise technology such as armed drones, have **eroded the idea that states could be entirely reformed**, their security sectors rebuilt and their leadership be made accountable to citizens and partner forces alike.[13] While Schulte (2019) argues that these interventions should be "bounded" by incremental targeted reforms,

8   Kurth, J. (2005) 'Humanitarian Intervention After Iraq: Legal Ideals vs. Military Realities', Foreign Policy Research Institute 50: 1, pp. 87–101.

9   Bellamy, A. (2011) *Global Politics and The Responsibility to Protect: From Words to Deeds*, London and New York: Routledge.

10   This rethinking of the origin and interrelation of the threat(s) to peace and security was also reflected in the political debate at the time, particularly in the result of the world summit outcome adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2005.

11   US Department of the Army (2008) Field Manual 3-07 Stability Operations.
Available at: https://irp.fas.org/doddir/army/fm3-07.pdf.

12   Wittkowsky, A. and S. Breuer (2020) 'Twenty-Five Years of Stabilisation Discourse: Between Realpolitik and Normativity', *Center for International Peace Operations Study*.

13   Rogers, J., and D. Goxho (2022) 'Light footprint—heavy destabilising impact in Niger: why the Western understanding of remote warfare needs to be reconsidered', *International Politics*.

military successes and political settlement, this does not appear to be the case with Sahelian states: the 2020 coup in Mali (and the subsequent 2021 'coup within a coup') did indeed lead to the temporary suspension of the European Training Mission (EUTM) there. Only a few months later, however, the mission was reinstated and enlarged.[14] At the same time, political opposition to French presence in the region has pushed Paris to withdraw its counterterrorism Operation Barkhane on August 15th and call back its Ambassador to Mali.[15] The withdrawal of French-led Operation Barkhane from Mali has just meant the "transformation" of the mission: the new "Barkhane"[16] is relocating to friendlier states in the region, such as Niger and Chad.[17] Thus, it appears that in this current contemporary context, conflicts are seen as either unwinnable or too costly, and **an approach that is less ambitious is preferred, but the mantra of good governance, rule of law, economic development, nationhood and civil society still remains the banner of intervening countries.**

This new understanding of intervention is called stabilisation. The main idea behind the new "stabilisation" is one of **shifting the burden** of fighting and the burden of responsibility almost entirely onto partner forces and local elites, who are ultimately conceptualised as being responsible for the stability of their state, while at the same time supporting development, humanitarian actions and a reform of the state. However, this low-stakes approach incurs problems of its own and it ultimately ends up being more ambitious than presented.

The core principle of stabilisation in the current conflict context in the Sahel is "by, with and through".[18] *By, with, and through* is not a new concept, but its meaning has changed significantly over the three decades since its first appearance[19] in military literature. In

> **Conflicts are seen as either unwinnable or too costly, and an approach that is less ambitious is preferred, but the mantras of good governance, rule of law, economic development, nationhood, and civil society still remain the banner of intervening countries. This new understanding of intervention is called stabilization.**

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14   This was decided on 13 October 2020. See: https://eutmmali.eu/an-expected-redeployment-and-resumption-of-activities/

15   Powell, N. (2022) 'Why France Failed In Mali', War on the Rocks. Available at: https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/why-france-failed-in-mali/

16   We do not yet know the name of the new operation.

17   Barotte N. (2022) '*Au Sahel, Barkhane cherche ses marques*', Le Figaro. Available at: https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/au-sahel-barkhane-cherche-ses-marques-20220922

18   Pichon, E. and M. Betant-Rasmussen (2021) 'New EU strategic priorities for the Sahel', European Parliamentary Research Service. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696161/EPRS_BRI(2021)696161_EN.pdf

19   Department of the Army (1955) 'U.S. Army Special Forces Group', Field Manual. Available at: https://archive.org/details/FM31_20_1955/mode/2up

2009, General Ray Odierno, Commander of the Multi-national Force - Iraq, gave a televised interview[20] about Iraq wherein he cemented the phrase into popular military jargon, saying:

> *Outside the cities, U.S. forces will continue to conduct full-spectrum and stability operations by, with and through our Iraqi security force partners. Our combined efforts will establish a layer of defence as Iraqis secure the cities. Our combat forces, partnering with the Iraqi security forces, will secure the belts and borders in an attempt to eliminate safe havens and sanctuaries and to limit freedom of movement of insurgents and prevent the facilitation of foreign fighters through the borders.[21]*

The recalibration of ambitions, the redefinition of Europe and its external action, and the new global approach intends to work primarily on governance, with special attention to the role of civil society and a civilian dimension of crisis resolution. But "by, with and through" also implies a more complex set of practices, namely the support of government security forces to not just carry out defence and counterterrorism operations, but also be responsible for the protection of civilians and, more in general, good governance. In an very sobering August 2022 speech, the EU's chief of diplomacy Josep Borrell stated that:

> *The [...] problem is unclear goals and 'mission creep'. It is hard enough to succeed in this type of external interventions, but if we are unclear about what the goals are, failure is almost baked in. In Afghanistan, what started as a limited operation to end the rule of the Taliban who had sheltered Al Qaeda – i.e. a counterterrorism operation – had morphed into a much broader, more ambitious 'state building' operation, to build a broad-based, accountable Afghan government that would make a quantum leap and uphold civil liberties. On the first goal, the op-*

20   Gen. Ray Odierno (2009) 'Televised interview on the ongoing security operations in Iraq', C-Span. Available at: https://www.c-span.org/video/?287356-1/general-odierno-security-operations-iraq

21   Dalphonse, D., C. Townsend and M. Weaver (2018) 'Shifting Landscape: The Evolution of By, With, and Through`, RealClear Defense. Available at: https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/08/01/shifting_landscape_the_evolution_of_by_with_and_through_113676.html

eration succeeded, already in 2001; on the second, it did not. Indeed, outsiders bringing sophisticated equipment and their own cultural values were unable to 'short-circuit' history and deliver a government that somehow respects international norms but also fits local, cultural conditions.[22]

From a military point of view, this has meant that **remote warfare**[23] (which includes, as understood by Watson (2018) and Goxho and Rogers (2022), the use of Special Forces Operations, the provision of Security Force Assistance and the deployment of armed and surveillance drones) has been the preferred form of deployment for most international forces in contemporary conflict theatres. Most intervening forces in Niger for example dedicate themselves to train-and-equip programmes, very rarely accompany troops in combat and often focus on aerial surveillance or civilian components of stabilisation, such as police training and community cohesion programmes. From a more **governance** point of view, another relevant element of international stabilisation efforts in the region has to do with migration and border controls: projects such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)-implemented Community Cohesion Program (PCCN) in the Tillaberi, Diffa and Agadez regions in Niger aim at fostering positive intercommunal relations through dialogue and peace caravans to avoid recruitment of youths into the ranks of armed groups, but also increasing migration fluxes and trafficking patterns. This is also done from a distance, as most IOM staff struggle to reach the most problematic areas of the country, such as the border areas of all three regions mentioned above. And from a **political** point of view, even influencing these states is done from a distance, **outsourcing the responsibility of political choice** to local actors without truly disengaging should they wish to make decisions that interfere with the political ambitions of their partners. European stabilisation efforts in the Sahel are a case in point: they are part of a wider doctrine according to which Europe and Africa are now "partners" and are no longer in a vertical relationship with one another, as part of a global trend of seeking to achieve stability through a mix of **control at a distance** and **swift political manoeuvring when necessary**. And this can be seen in other

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22   Borrell, J. (2022) speech on *Foreign interventions and the future of European defence*, here: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/foreign-interventions-and-future-european-defence_en

23   Krieg and Rickli (2008) call it surrogate warfare; Mumford (2013) calls it proxy warfare; Demmers and Gould (2018) and Mutschler (2016) call it liquid warfare.

This is what the EU now calls "the triple nexus". In other words, a system of technical standardization and performance auditing is constructed, which then allows the donor to maintain overall control of the mission and equipment, justify criticism by pointing out that the role of external forces is only to support local forces, while upholding an illusion that the forces on the ground are in command of the strategy.

domains as well: stabilisation, for all its talk of integration, collaboration and mentoring of partner forces, coupled with humanitarian and development aid geared towards building community cohesion, appears to be today a **technical, bureaucratised division of labour**.[24] This is what the EU now calls "the triple nexus".[25] In other words, a system of technical standardisation and performance auditing is constructed, which then allows the donor to maintain overall control of the mission and equipment,[26] justify criticism by pointing out that the role of external forces is only to support local forces, while upholding an illusion that the forces on the ground are in command of the strategy. In the Sahel this has meant that it is local forces (or the African forces within MINUSMA) that have been suffering the most violence from armed groups both in the tri-border area and the Diffa region bordering Nigeria. All this contributes to the perception that foreign forces, despite their superior military power, have no interest in truly supporting their local partners: while Nigerien commanders (and Nigerien President Bazoum) point out that "foreign forces are only here to help us fight *our* war",[27] mid- and low-ranking officials alike, as well as a number of civil society organisations working in Niamey and Agadez, mentioned that they "don't even understand what all these people are doing here".[28] One researcher interviewed by Médiapart mentioned that:

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24   Clausen M.L and Albrecht P. (2021) 'Interventions Since the Cold War: from state-building to stabilization'.

25   As clarified in the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) 2021 evaluation document, "the objective of the triple nexus is to maximise the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of coordination between humanitarian, development and peace actions. In practical terms, for the purposes of this study and in accordance with the OECD DAC 'Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus', this means implementing joint analysis, shared strategic planning and programming, and collective outcomes among humanitarian, development and peace actors, all of which should be supported by predictable, flexible, multi-year financing and a comprehensive, adaptable and coherent donor strategy". Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/sites/default/files/exec_summary_learning_lessons_from_the_eutf_final.pdf

26   Ibid.

27   Larcher, L. (2022) 'Mohamed Bazoum: "Westerners must take more risks in the Sahel",' La Croix. Available at: https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Mohamed-Bazoum-Occidentaux-doivent-prendre-risques-Sahel-2022-05-18-1201215640; Interviews with members of the Nigerien gendarmerie, FAN and garde nationale commanders, Niamey and Agadez, between May and September 2022.

28   Interviews in Niamey, between April and June 2022.

> *"No one quite understands what EUCAP does. Some of their training is the same as that offered by Civipol, an organisation attached to the French Ministry of the Interior [...]. They have the same manuals".[29]*

One advisor within the Agadez regional government (CRAZ) asked us what EUCAP is doing in the Agadez Antenna:

> *"I mean, we are not witnessing a lowering of levels of criminality, we are not seeing less trafficking, be it human, drugs or weapons, from and to Mali, we only know Europeans are sitting in the same space as us, but only some of our police or garde meet with them".[30]*

While this appears to be a widespread perception in Niger, Europeans also have their comments to make regarding the way Nigeriens react to aid, intelligence and in general provision of support, as we will clarify below. As for foreign presence such as the two EUCAP bases in Niamey and Agadez and the communication around them, while it is unlikely to see EUCAP officials roam the streets of Agadez and Niamey, often EUCAP is not even called to comment on a particular media inquiry, which contributes to the perception that they are there without truly "being there".

Suffice to say that under the umbrella of stabilising the Sahel, European self-interest appears to be prioritised, and responsibility redirected. At the same time, Sahelian counterparts play a manipulation game, as they need to juggle between the need for support from their international partners on the one hand, and feelings of rejection of foreign presence at home on the other.

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29   Zandonini, G., T. Statius and R. Gidigoro (2021), translated from « *Personne ne comprend très bien ce que fait Eucap. Certaines de leurs formations sont exactement les mêmes que celles que proposent Civipol, un organisme rattaché au ministère de l'intérieur français qui intervient aussi au Niger. Ils ont d'ailleurs les mêmes manuels»*.

30   Interview, Agadez Regional Government representative, October 2021

2. The United Nations stabilisation doctrine – 'Empty of meaning'

To better understand European stabilisation mechanisms in the Central Sahel, we first need to look at the United Nations stabilisation doctrine. Within the UN, the debate on what stabilisation is has been unfolding for several years, to some extent leading to what MacGinty (2012) calls a definition "full of buzzwords, but empty of meaning".[31] United Nations stabilisation missions have been a reality for more than two decades now, and the 2008 Capstone Doctrine document chooses to place stabilisation at the heart of conflict management:

> *"The doctrine is built on the important principle that whilst UN peacekeeping operations are meant to support a peace process, it cannot deliver peace on its own. The Capstone doctrine thus understands and accepts that UN peacekeeping operations are part of a larger peace process. Within this larger context, it argues that the core business of UN peacekeeping is to create a secure and stable environment, including strengthening the capacity of the state to provide security, with full respect for the rule of law and for human rights".[32]*

Already in 2014, de Coning, who had been analysing UN peacekeeping missions for several years, wonders why the Security Council, the Secretariat and troops and police contributing countries to missions such as MINUSMA do not seem to understand what their mission is supposed to do: is it to implement a peace agreement to achieve peace? Or to remove a threat to achieve peace? It is ultimately the difference between a mission that is defensive and one that is offensive.[33] What does 'stabilisation' mean in a UN peacekeeping context? What is the difference between UN

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31   MacGinty, R. (2012) 'Against Stabilization', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 1: 1, p. 24.

32   De Coning, C., J. Detzel and P. Hojem (2008) 'UN Peacekeeping Operations Capstone Doctrine' NUPI Report of the TfP Oslo Doctrine Seminar 14 & 15 May, p.3.

33   De Coning, C. (2014) 'Do we need a UN stabilisation doctrine?' in Gowan, R. and A. Smith (eds.) What needs to change in UN Peace Operations? An expert briefing book prepared for the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations. New York, Center on International Cooperation, New York University and International Peace Institute, pp. 31-32.

missions, like MONUSCO, MINUSMA and MINUSCA, that have 'stabilisation' in their name and those that do not? At present neither the Security Council nor the Secretariat is able to answer this question.[34] A **domino effect develops from definitional ambiguities**, which leads to more opacity around the approach: the lack of conceptual clarity around what the UN means by stabilisation ultimately leads to doctrinal confusion, which then impacts the way operations are conducted and inevitably affects the way other organisations, such as the EU, the AU and ECOWAS, interpret stabilisation. MINUSMA is a case in point for the Sahel region, where the mismatch between doctrine and current practices in UN stabilisation efforts becomes evident, and problematic. In April 2013 the UN Security Council authorised MINUSMA in Mali in support of the transitional authorities of Mali, "to *stabilise* the key population centers, especially in the north of Mali, and, in this context, to deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas".[35] It is not new for UN missions to have mandates authorising the use of force, but these typically have no specific "enemies" and have generally been short-lived. "When the UN [...] uses peacekeeping operations to wage war, it violates the basic principles of peacekeeping".[36] Issues on the practical side of things can further complicate this: one of the biggest challenges with new equipment brought to Mali was the unwillingness to paint helicopters and planes white. The German C 130 transport aircrafts and the Apache and Chinook helicopters continued to wear their combat colors, on which a UN logo was painted.[37] This creates the image that the UN is "going green", or in other words, is turning into a combat operation.

The 2015 Report of the Independent High-Level Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) demanded a clarification of what stabilisation means at the UN level, but such clarity is yet to be attained. However, this issue does not only concern the UN level. Ultimately, since there is no agreed-upon definition, this means that stabilisation actors lack conceptual guidance and operationalisation is dealt with at the national level, which (not least out of self-interest) leads to various stabilisation approaches with different emphases. This in turn gives rise to coordination problems at the supranational and regional

> The lack of conceptual clarity around what the UN means by stabilization ultimately leads to doctrinal confusion, which then impacts the way operations are conducted and inevitably befalls on the way other organizations, such as the EU, the AU and ECOWAS also interpret stabilization.

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34   Ibid.

35   Karlsrud, J. (2015) 'The UN at war: examining the consequences of peace-enforcement mandates for the UN peacekeeping operations in the CAR, the DRC and Mali', Third World Quarterly 36:1, p 45.

36   Karlsrud, J. (2015), p. 41.

37   Karlsrud, J. (2015).

level – a thing that becomes very clear when looking at the French and German stabilisation approaches and the resulting difficulties for the EU to find a common ground. And this also trickles down to UN member states because the UN itself does not provide a clear framework, which means the EU does not either, which means member states and regional organisations can do with this type of definition whatever they see fit and is in their interests. Again, we choose the French and German approach not so much to show that one approach is effective and the other is not, but rather to showcase the similarities and differences in stabilisation practices in the region, since these two countries are the most significant European ones in the Central Sahel.

3. Reactive vs. pre-emptive stabilisation in the Sahel

3.1 The view from Paris

In February 2018 the French government adopted a new stabilisation strategy "Prevention, Resilience and Sustainable Peace",[38] through a three-pillar approach:

1. Addressing the **root causes** of fragilities before they lead to full-fledged crises (preventive)
2. Strengthening the **social contract** through capable and legitimate institutions (contractual)
3. Better coordination of French actors within **international frameworks** (comprehensive)

There is an evident push on the part of the French government to align itself with German guidelines on stabilisation, and more in general with a European integrated approach to solving crises. A long-term approach is envisaged, together with a comprehensive understanding of humanitarian, development and peace sectors. An example that illustrates this at European level is the contacts between the French crisis and support centre and the German staff in the jointly established Sahel Alliance, which however does not appear to have any acknowledged impact in the Sahel. When asked what the Sahel Alliance means for them, one Nigerien analyst working on European external aid to the region responded: "What is that? Is that one of those partnerships, initiatives, joint strategies that we are losing count of? What does this one do?"[39]

Still, French strategy in the Sahel counts on a relevant military presence, which for a time actively supported UN peacekeeping Mission MINUSMA through a harder counterterrorism (CT) approach, carrying out operations that MINUSMA was not mandated to perform. The idea was, and to some extent still is, that French CT efforts would **keep the violence below a certain threshold**,[40] while international partners and other parts of French commitment in the Sahel would take care of reinforcing the capacities of Sahelian militaries, security forces and state authorities to restore services

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38   See Strategy Report here: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/meae_strategie_fragilites_en_bat_web_cle497968-1.pdf

39   Interview with a Nigerien analyst, CNHS, August 2022.

40   Guichaoua, Y. (2020) 'The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel', *International affairs*, 96: 4, pp. 895-911.

in insecure areas. In this environment, the French Stabilisation Unit finds itself within the Crisis and Support Centre department of the French Foreign Ministry, and it is tasked with monitoring, anticipating, and managing crises that occur abroad. It is also responsible for supporting post-crisis stabilisation (this last aspect is being prioritised within the tasks of the Unit). The Support Centre, in turn, is part of what Paris calls the 3D (Diplomacy, Development, and Defence) approach to crisis zones. The French military thinking on stabilisation largely falls into three phases: a short-term phase, where counterterrorism operations seek to "neutralise" armed actors and CIMIC (civil-military co-operation) responds to the immediate needs of local populations to help garner support for ongoing military operations and regional governments; a medium-term phase, where the crisis and support centre develops projects and analyses to stabilise at-risk areas and help shore up stability in regions that they deem potential future trouble spots; and a more long-term development strategy under the leadership of the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), which focuses on long-term development projects. The recent decision by the French government to pull out funds for development aid in Mali, following diplomatic tensions with the military junta, and the November 21st 2022 declaration by Bamako that it would forbid French-financed NGOs from operating on Malian territory, severely puts into question the 'D for development' strategy in Mali.[41]

The envisaged **exit strategy** for French military authorities back in 2017 was to have the G5 Joint Force – a military alliance of five Sahelian countries created in 2017 with the support of France – take over and provide security in the most dangerous border areas. But, as we will clarify below, the Joint Force has largely been a failed endeavour. Finally, Task Force Takuba, a European Special Forces endeavour once again promoted by France, is in shambles after the French and Malian military junta fell through in the beginning of 2022. The diplomatic row between Malian and French authorities and the relatively hasty departure of Barkhane from Mali (and relocation to Niger) had significant repercussions on European allies' willingness to work in Mali: German defence minister, Christine Lambrecht, stated that it would be hard to imagine German armed forces remaining in a country whose government gives the impression

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41 Le Monde (2022) Mali : la junte interdit les activités des ONGs financés par la France'. Available at : https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/11/22/mali-la-junte-interdit-les-activites-des-ong-financees-par-la-france_6151022_3212.html

that they are not welcome,[42] much like what happened with Danish forces within Special Forces mission Takuba, who left the country soon after being deployed. Despite leaving Mali, Barkhane and other French stabilisation components will remain in the Sahel but focus more closely on a government that is willing to host them, such as Niger. Thus, the French stabilisation doctrine remains the same: as reported by Crisis Group, French military efforts focus primarily on jihadist targets, outsourcing intercommunal violence and other challenges to partners and Sahelian authorities.[43] Development and humanitarian efforts are assigned to a series of humanitarian and development agencies and funds such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the IOM and the World Bank, and are coordinated by the Sahel Alliance. This means that, for the moment being, there is no exit strategy.

3.2 The view from Berlin

Berlin focuses primarily on the (current and potential) crises and conflicts that particularly affect German and European security interests: North Africa, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan and now Ukraine, as well as crisis states in sub-Saharan Africa. Its stabilisation approach is laid out in the 2017 "Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace"[44] guidelines. Here, stabilisation is seen primarily as a means to **create structures that prevent conflicts** from flaring up. The focus is therefore on promoting social dialogue and political participation as well as strengthening state structures that serve the interests of the population (all in co-operation with partners). Overall, a holistic approach for crises is acknowledged, **aligning security, development, and governance efforts**. However, the Stabilisation Unit embedded in the Federal Foreign Office does not carry out any projects of its own. Instead, two thirds of the funds are directed by the Foreign Office to international partners such as the UN or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The Stabilisation Unit can allocate around one third to national partners (such as Welthungerhilfe, Berghof Foundation). Compared to Paris, the German approach is **more focused on**

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42   Zeit Online (2022) 'Christine Lambrecht stellt Fortsetzung des Mali-Einsatzes infrage', AFP. Available at: https://www.zeit.de/zustimmung?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.zeit.de%2Fpolitik%2Fdeutschland%2F2022-02%2Fbundeswehr-mali-christine-lambrecht-mandat-verlaengerung

43   International Crisis Group (2021) 'A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy', ICG Report N° 299/ Africa; Goxho, D., G, Soto-Mayor and A. Schmauder (2020) 'Strategic Missteps: Learning From a Failed EU Sahel Strategy', ISPI. Available at: https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/strategic-missteps-learning-failed-eu-sahel-strategy-28130

44   See Germany's stabilisation guidelines here: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/publikationen/preventing-crises-resolving-conflicts-building-peace-1524308

co-operation with partners, thus it is **less independent**, and **less centred around security**. Even in cases where German special forces are deployed, such as mission Gazelle in Niger, one component that is crucial is civil-military co-operation, i.e. military actions that have *some* effect on civilian life (one would be a current project where mission Gazelle is supporting the construction of a maternity ward in Tilia's hospital).[45] In the Sahel, Germany is 'solely' contributing to various, again, *collaborative* stabilisation efforts (EUTM-Mali, EUCAP-Mali and EUCAP-Niger), after recently deciding to pull out of peacekeeping mission MINUSMA in Mali by May 2024,[46] as well as promoting development co-operation projects through the Coalition for the Sahel and Sahel Alliance.[47] Rather than being a proactive stabilisation actor, no action is taken in the Sahel without having **an eye on Paris**. This is unsurprising given that France claims European leadership on the region, but it also implies that Germany (which considers military-dominated approaches as misleading), despite being France's closest partner, must find its own course of action: namely, so far, **pre-emptive action**.[48] And the toolbox is vast, consisting of six pillars (1. PREVIEW 2. Democratisation aid 3. Security Sector Reform 4. Promoting rule of law 5. Peace mediation 6. Evaluation).[49] The Stabilisation Unit uses the early crisis detection tool PREVIEW which analyses publicly accessible data to monitor crisis developments. Based on the conviction that democratic structures increase stability, **preventive measures include democratisation aid** such as election observation and advice on election processes as well as the promotion of political participation and related media. Moreover, in the German understanding of stabilisation equipment and training aid for the military, police and/or disaster and civil protection are understood as **supporting security sector reform**. Inevitably linked to this is the **promotion of the rule of law**: protecting citizens from state arbitrariness. Pillar five describes the support of peace mediation efforts through civil conflict resolution measures wherever possible while, finally, all stabilisation efforts undergo evaluation processes. In all of this, an interest is laid **on including civil society**: since 2005 the Advisory Board on Civilian Crisis Prevention and Peacebuilding (experts from the fields of crisis prevention, conflict management

45   Interview with a member of the German military in Niamey, Niger, August 2022.

46   Politico (2022), Germany to withdraw troops from Mali by 2024. Available at https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-military-bundeswehr-pull-out-mali-olaf-scholz/

47   See German involvement in the Sahel: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/afrika/sahel/2450778

48   Tull, D. (2020) 'German and International Crisis Management in the Sahel', *SWP Comment 27*.

49   See six pillars of German preventive crisis management here: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/themen/krisenpraevention

and peacebuilding) has been providing technical support for the work of the Foreign Office.

Although the two approaches seem relatively similar on paper and in their institutional setting, they notably diverge in the Sahel, as they emphasise different *foci*. By promoting a relevant military presence in the Sahel, French stabilisation efforts are characterised by a **reactive approach** to the current insecurity in the region. Given France's dominant role in the Sahel and Germany's long-standing reluctance to "hard" military approaches, German stabilisation efforts are rather focused on **civil crisis prevention**. While the German and French strategy papers allow for greater opportunities towards more co-operation, the question arises as to how these two interpretations of the stabilisation of the Sahel region align at EU level.
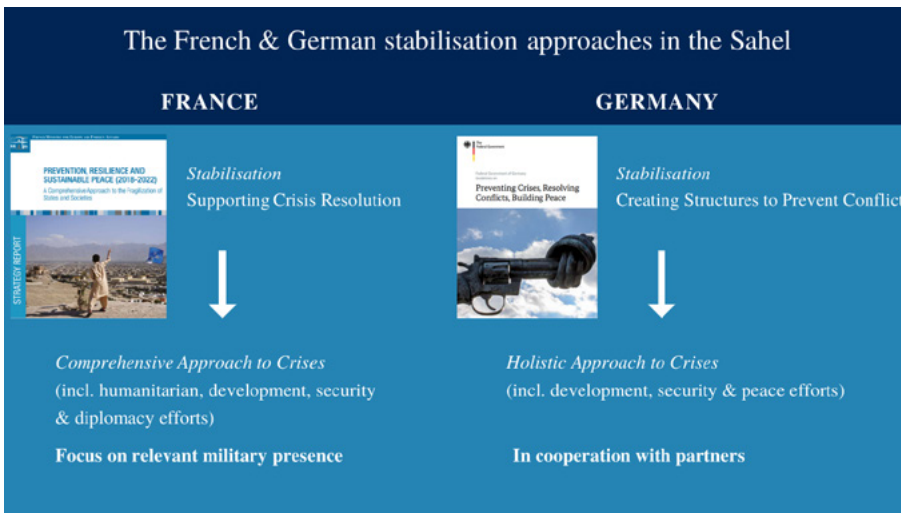
4. Looking at stabilisation from Brussels

4.1 The EU as a stabilising actor in the Central Sahel: current practices

For its part, the European Union has not been lagging behind in the Sahel: since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, a growing number of policies and tools have been earmarked for the promotion of stabilisation. However, as pointed out by Raineri and Strazzari (2019), the European Union's operational contribution to stabilisation remains to date relatively understudied, despite it being one of the most abused words in European political discourse: in the new 2021 Sahel Strategy, the word 'stabilisation' (or variants of it, such as "instability") is mentioned 20 times throughout the document. The way the European Union itself conceptualises its stabilisation work is through a combination of conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding.[50] Next to diplomatic and political endeavours to support stabilisation abroad, the CSDP missions are the key EU stabilisation tools, alongside quick-impact funding instruments (the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) and the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) precisely serve this purpose). As of 2015 the EUTF is aimed at "addressing root causes of irregular migration and promoting stability".[51] The IcSP and EUTF, which have recently been replaced by another set of funding mechanisms called NDICI–Global Europe,[52] are the financial component of this EU stabilisation strategy, while the CSDP missions, three of which are based in the Sahel, are seen as the "European stabilisation arm".[53]

In order to analyse the stabilisation policies of the EU in the Central Sahel, we choose to look at practices, as

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50   See EEAS 'What We Do: Policies and Actions': https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/conflict-prevention-peace-building-and-mediation_en

51   See Trust Fund description here: https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/index_en

52   The Neighbourhood, Development and International Co-operation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe) aims to support countries most in need of developmental challenges and has an overall allocation of 79.5 billion EUR. The budget is divided among four areas: geographic programmes, thematic programmes, the rapid response mechanism as well as a cushion of unallocated funds. See: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance_en

53   Mission descriptions here: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/missions-and-operations_en#11929

"stabilisation operations, by virtue of their own inherent 'pragmatism', are more concerned with results than with matters of principle. As a consequence, what triggers stabilisation appears to be less significant for the analysis than what stabilisation brings about in terms of actual policies and their consequences for the key actors in the targeted context".[54]

In the case of the EU in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, stabilisation practices develop along **two main parallel lines**: one focus is on **training and equipping local security forces**, and one on **controlling borders**. Equipping and training local security forces (especially the national guard, the gendarmerie and customs, who operate outside of urban areas) inherently implies strengthening border controls and managing threats such as terrorism, especially in the tri-border area in the central Sahel and in the Diffa region in Niger; controlling criminality, principally in the Agadez region of Niger; and obviously limiting irregular migration, though not just through the CSDP missions, but also through funding to organisations such as the IOM, tasked with hampering migration and trafficking. In Mali projects such as PARSEC (*Programme d'appui au renforcement de la sécurité*) essentially intend to better control border areas to limit insecurity and guarantee that once "the area is stable, development projects can be implemented".[55]

As these are security missions that work with government security forces only, they are also seen to support security forces and authorities whose reputation is not exactly spotless, especially outside the capitals. In Mali, where the EU has been training military forces for nine years now through its EUTM, security forces were responsible for the bulk of the violence in 2020.[56] Aside from **problematic relations with partner forces** and governments, European presence in the Sahel is marred with a series of other problems: a recent Médiapart article on the work of the EU Capacity Mission (EUCAP) in Niger (and the large costs endured by the mission) reports that the mission is in a "purely accounting logic

> **In the case of the EU in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, stabilization practices develop along two main parallel lines: one focus is on training and equipping local security forces, and one on controlling borders**

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54   Raineri, L. and F. Strazzari (2019) ,(B)ordering Hybrid Security? EU Stabilisation Practices in the Sahara-Sahel Region', Ethnopolitics 18: 5, p. 544f.

55   See project description here: https://expertisefrance.fr/en/fiche-projet?id=404281#:~:text=PARSEC%20is%20the%20key%20project,the%20centre%20of%20the%20country.

56   ACLED (2021) 'Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines'.

[...]. Some Nigerien agents have been trained 6 times by EUCAP, on different subjects, without any rationale".[57]

As clarified in the chapters above, Paris and Berlin have different interpretations of stabilisation and **Brussels is the playing ground** where such differences are most visible and most debated. The role of the Partnership for Security and Stability (P3S) in the Sahel in this space is clear: to smoothen out differences and lead to a European approach that considers both French and German preferences. "Other countries matter less", a European diplomat working for the European External Action Service (EEAS) mentioned, "they rarely have the expertise to have strong opinions on the Sahel dossier, so they follow whatever comes out of France and Germany". At the same time, the P3S is supposed to lobby other European capitals towards a civil-military action from the inception and planning phases and towards a "civilian leap", as declared in the April 2021 Sahel Strategy. The main objective of this political concertation led by the P3S (but also by the EU Special Representative for the Sahel, which represents the interests of all 27 member states) is to **coalesce a European vision on stabilisation** that is directed chiefly by France and Germany, as the office hosts seconded diplomats from Paris and Berlin who work on stabilisation, internal security, justice and defence. By seeking to bridge the gap between a purely security approach and a purely development approach, the P3S wishes to apply a vision that veers more towards that of the German Stabilisation Unit: security and development must not be seen in sequence, but as **two faces of the same coin**, a joint endeavour that intends to stabilise through civil-military planning and coherence with all actors on the ground, including humanitarian agencies and donors. The main outputs of the European approach are to foster trust between civilians and security forces; have Sahelian authorities in the frontlines of both the fighting and other civilian components of stabilisation, so that these processes can be *owned* by them; provide state services in both capitals and more peripheral areas through a needs-based method; and ultimately strengthen social cohesion. What is particularly interesting with this approach, aside from the evident advantage of proceeding in parallel rather than in sequence, is the fact that it is very distant from the so-called counterinsurgency strategy employed in other contexts: "We do not want to win hearts and minds in the Sahel; we want to make the state more appealing to citizens, we want

57   Gidigoro, R., T. Statius and G. Zandonini (2021) 'Au Niger, la faillite d'une mission de «stabilisation» financée par l'UE', Mediapart. Available at: https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/301121/au-niger-la-faillite-d-une-mission-de-stabilisation-financee-par-l-ue

them to choose their own state rather than terrorist groups, or criminality or migration" a German diplomat based within the EEAS clarified. "This is why we need to operate in a way that does not make us too visible; **we should not own the process, we should be on the sidelines**". This is the first difficulty European missions are facing within the region itself: a stabilising approach that prioritises local ownership is effective only if its consequences are seen on the ground. In the Sahel, especially in the tri-border areas and in the Diffa region of Niger, violence is on the rise and European stabilising efforts are producing tensions more than solutions. This is also due to a failure to communicate. A fighter of the Malian national guard defined EUCAP as a "dog with no teeth": "What are you doing here? You say you come here to help us, but it looks like you are just protecting yourself by just being in your base all the time". Negative perceptions of French forces, which were particularly visible in Burkina Faso and Niger in November 2021[58] when a large French military convoy was passing through to reach Gao in Mali (and led to a violent protest in Tera, where 2 Nigerien civilians were killed and many more injured)[59], are seeping into perceptions of European forces as well, with no distinction. The main argument of those opposing foreign presence is that it **impacts sovereignty without providing better security.**

> **"We do not want to win hearts and minds in the Sahel, we want to make the state more appealing to citizens, we want them to choose their own state rather than terrorist groups, or criminality or migration. This is why we need to operate in a way that does not make us too visible, we should not own the process, we should be on the sidelines."**

EUTM Mali aims to strengthen the capabilities of the Malian Armed Forces, with the ultimate result being self-sustaining armed forces.

EUCAP Mali is a European Union civilian crisis management mission to assist the internal security forces in reasserting the State authority across the country.

EU RACC Sahel aims to support G5 Sahel structures and countries to enhance regional co-operation and operational capabilities in the field of defence and security.

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58   AFP (2021) 'French forces face violent protests after crossing into Niger from Burkina Faso', France 24. Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20211127-french-forces-face-fresh-protests-after-crossing-into-niger-from-burkina-faso

59   Aljazeera (2021) 'Deaths in Niger as protesters confront French army convoy', Aljazeera online. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/27/three-killed-in-niger-as-protesters-confront-french-army-convoy

> **EUCAP Sahel Niger** contributes to the development of an integrated, coherent, sustainable, and human rights-based approach among the various Nigerien security agencies in the fight against terrorism and organised crime.

4.2 COIN and Stabilisation Go Hand in Hand

A significant aspect in the debate on stabilisation approaches in the Sahel concerns the use of coercive means. The European Union, for all its recent discourse on strategic autonomy and being a more relevant security player on the global stage (outlined by Commissioner von der Leyen with the words: a "geopolitical union is what Europe urgently needs"),[60] struggles to use the term 'counterinsurgency' (or COIN) to define its stabilisation missions, which have in fact significant points in common with COIN. This is due to a number of factors: first of all the EU does not have the capabilities to conduct sustained high-intensity military operations, but also counterinsurgency is seen as illegitimate, too problematic, or outside the mission framework typology that has underpinned the development of the EU's security and defence policies.[61] Bird's 2008 analysis still profoundly resonates today, and yet, the EU has found a way to **circumvent the problem** and use its external missions as 'stabilising' efforts, rather than counterinsurgency ones. To stabilise fragile states, the EU is supporting SSR as well as the capacity building of the defence sector during ongoing conflict.[62] In doing that, the EU is involved, among other things, in training and equipping local forces that are then combatting insurgents. The implication of this is COIN *via proxy*, as local security forces are "trained with the intention of them assuming responsibility for countering internal security challenges, supporting and gradually replacing external armed interventions."[63] Hence, COIN can either be:

> *"defined as a part of stabilisation, or vice versa. Both pursue similar and mutually reinforcing goals – the suppression of an armed insurgency in the*

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60   See speech by von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech_19_6408

61   Bird T. (2008) 'The European Union and Counter-insurgency: Capability, Credibility, and Political Will', Contemporary Security Policy 28: 1, pp. 182-196.

62   Skeppström, E., C. Wiklund and M. Jonsson (2015) 'European Union Training Missions: security sector reform or counter-insurgency by proxy?', European Security 24:2, pp. 353-367.

63   Ibid, p. 354.

case of COIN, the strengthening of government and a political agreement on the part of stabilisation".[64]

However, it would be short-sighted to ignore all the other aspects being pursued under the SSR agenda (such as training police forces and border guards and enhancing the rule of law) and only focus on the narrow military capacity building aspect.[65] The issue with the COIN *via proxy* dynamic, however, is inevitably linked to the possible negative side effects that can occur *after* training local armed forces. In other words, what guarantees the improvement of the security situation through such an endeavour? By way of example, the ambivalence of the EU and its member states with regard to stabilisation in the Sahel can be exemplified in the work of

64   Wittkowsky, A. and S. Breuer (2020) 'Twenty-Five Years of Stabilization Discourse: Between Realpolitik and Normativity', *Center for International Peace Operations Study*, p. 18.

65   Skeppström, E., C. Wiklund and M. Jonsson (2015) 'European Union Training Missions: security sector reform or counter-insurgency by proxy?'

EUTM wishes to support the Malian government without being entangled in their political quicksand, although this is getting harder by the day.

the EUTM. EUTM wishes to support the Malian government without being entangled in their political quicksand, although this is getting harder by the day, and the EU has been scaling back the mission (from almost 500 soldiers to 300) and is considering opening an EUTM Niger, again relocating to a friendlier state.[66] As for the European Peace Facility (EPF), in June 2022 the European High Representative Josep Borrel announced EUR 25 million to be delivered to the Nigerien army, which should finance the creation of a forward operating base for their army and the construction of a military training school in Niamey. While this is a significant development for Niger, whose government has been asking the EU for more military budget support in the wake of the crisis in Ukraine (President Bazoum has shown anxiety over the EU focusing its military aid support only on its eastern front and potentially forgetting Niger),[67] questions remain over the **absorption capacity** of the Nigerien army and previous **allegations of mismanagement of funds** on the part of the Nigerien Defence Ministry, accused in 2020 of embezzling approximately EUR 137 million over an eight-year period ending in 2019.[68] A coalition of civil society organisations led by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) in Brussels has also expressed concerns around the EPF and its effects on human security, particularly as it allows the EU to provide military equipment to third-country armed forces and regional military operations.[69]

"We remain concerned that it [the EPF] could, despite its name, cause harm to civilians, exacerbate existing tensions and fuel violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in conflict-affected settings".[70]

Now, despite relevant changes in the Sahel region which took place in the past two years only, it appears that such changes were **not**

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66   Africa Intelligence, Face à la junte, l'UE réduit drastiquement les effectifs de l'EUTM-Mali, 20 Septembre 2022, Available at https://www.africaintelligence.fr/afrique-ouest/2022/09/20/face-a-la-junte-l-ue-reduit-drastiquement-les-effectifs-de-l-eutm-mali,109811515-art

67   Larcher, L. (2022) 'Mohamed Bazoum: « Les Occidentaux doivent prendre plus de risques dans le Sahel »', La Croix. Available at: https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Mohamed-Bazoum-Occidentaux-doivent-prendre-risques-Sahel-2022-05-18-1201215640

68   Burke, J. (2020) 'Niger lost tens of millions to arms deals malpractice, leaked report alleges', The Guardian. Available at : https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/06/niger-lots-tens-of-millions-to-arms-deals-malpractice-leaked-report-alleges

69   EPLO (2021) 'The European Peace Facility: Minimising Significant Risks in Implementation', EPLO. Available at: http://eplo.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/EPLO_Statement-on-the-European-Peace-Facility.pdf

70   Ibid, p. 1.

mirrored in a relevant foreign policy response from Brussels. Mali went through two *coups d'état*, a dramatic breakup of ties with France and a newfound proximity with Russian paramilitary group Wagner; Burkina Faso is now also governed by a military junta, after a second military coup in September 2022, and is being more vocal about its rejection of France as a partner.[71] This raises questions about the continuation of France's declared budget support for Ouagadougou of EUR 15 million, the contours of which are still being worked out on the French side, and the planned military support program for the Burkinabe armed forces.[72] President Bazoum of Niger is currently at the head of the only democratically elected government in the region, which, together with its "stabilisation Ministry", the *Haute Autorité pour la Consolidation de la Paix* (*HACP*), is seen by many in Brussels as a stability bulwark to Sahelian chaos. But have European leaders truly understood the position this puts Bazoum and Nigerien elites in? What measures are they taking to ensure that the **negotiating power** suddenly in the hands of Bazoum and his entourage will not mean a complete exploitation of the relationship with the EU? The announcement to deliver EUR 25 million to Niger in the wake of the debacle between Paris and Bamako gives a clear political indication: the EU now has a closer friend, and this closer friend will be **treated with kid gloves**.

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71   We will not mention Chad since this particular report focuses on the Central Sahel, but N'Djamena is also currently governed by a non-democratically elected leader.

72   De Rohan Chabot, P. (2022) 'Appui budgétaire et aide militaire: le plan de Paris pour soutenir Ouagadougou', Africa Intelligence. Available at: https://www.africaintelligence.fr/afrique-ouest/2022/09/26/appui-budgetaire-et-aide-militaire--le-plan-de-paris-pour-soutenir-ouagadougou,109825318-art

5. Stabilisation approaches of regional organisations

Regional organisations, such as the African Union (AU), ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel Joint Force (G5S-JF), have developed a considerable body of know-how in the stabilisation domain. However, despite political talk and significant financial support, such joint initiatives, with a partial exception for MINUSMA, have not been able to deliver in practice, and this closely aligns with the way the EU is also conducting and financing stabilisation projects in the region, often supporting such regional organisations.[73]

The African Union established the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) in 2002 as a long-term structural response to the peace and security challenges on the continent.[74] Through the APSA, also envisioned as offering "African solutions to African problems", the AU has access to tools and structures which should help it to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts (this also includes the African Standby Force). However, some of the biggest challenges the APSA is facing to date are **financial ownership** and **rapidly changing security environments**. Still, the EU is financing many of these structures: as one of the AU's most significant partners, it provides considerable funds, in particular to the APSA, but shortfalls are apparent: the **capacity building element is still weak**, **funding procedures are too complex**, and the **mobilisation of African resources is still limited**.[75] Overall, this affects the allocation and implementation of EU support and results in insufficient funding and poor effectiveness. In fact, the EU is mostly financing APSA's basic operational costs with no plan for refocusing support.[76]

When it was created, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was primarily an economic organisation without a security mandate. Realising that conflict and insecurity were major obstacles to economic development, ECOWAS developed its main conflict prevention and management frameworks and tools, namely the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999) and

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73   De Coning, C., L. Gelot and J. Karlsrud (2016) *The Future of African Peace Operations: From Janjaweed to Boko Haram*, London: Zed Books.

74   European Court of Auditors (2018) 'The African Peace and Security Architecture: need to refocus EU support', Special Report N° 20.

75   Venturi, B. (2017) 'The EU and the Sahel: A Laboratory of Experimentation for the Security–Migration–Development Nexus', *IAI Working Papers 17*.

76   Ibid.

the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001). Together they formed the basis for the ECOWAS Conflict and Prevention Framework (2008). ECOWAS has repeatedly contributed to efforts to help 'stabilise' the Sahel region, mainly from a political and diplomatic point of view. For example, it took the lead in negotiations on the format for the Malian transition after the August 2020 coup. However, the **diverging views of leaders of ECOWAS' member states**, which appeared to reflect their respective national and electoral interests, have hampered the organisation's initiatives and severely undermined its credibility as a mediator.[77] In 2013, the EU launched a 72 month project (with a budget of EUR27 million) to support the ECOWAS Regional Peace, Security and Stability Mandate. The objective of the project, which provided training and capacity building activities to ECOWAS partner states, was to sustain the institutional capacity of the ECOWAS Commission and to create effective Plans of Action based on selected parts of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework.[78] Although the long-term sustainability aspect of the project has yet to be assessed, the project has achieved successes and highlighted the benefits of working in partnership between the EU and ECOWAS. [79]

As for the G5 Joint Force, the picture is more complex (and certainly less promising): the Joint Force was created to address both terrorism and transnational organised crime among the five Sahelian member states. For a force supported by three United Nations Security Council Resolutions – 2359 (2017), 2391 (2017) and 2480 (2019) – and with a force strength of nearly 5000 troops, they have only been able to conduct ten joint border operations. Operation Barkhane, but also EUTM, the two EUCAP Sahel missions and MINUSMA, have tried to enhance the operational readiness and capabilities of the G5 Sahel through mentoring, training, and funding of the joint force operations. The EU has been the G5 Sahel's main financial backer since 2018 and has disbursed over EUR 200 million to the pan-African alliance. Managed by the French operator Expertise France, this European funding has grown towards the purchase of – non-lethal – equipment for the G5.[80] But the force has progressively lost relevance in the Sahel stabilisation

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77   Baudais, V., A. Bourhrous and D. O'Driscoll (2021) 'Conflict Mediation and Peacebuilding in the Sahel', *SIPRI Policy Paper 58*.

78   See project description here: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/56207_en

79   Kenneth, C. (2021) 'ECOWAS-EU PSS Project Makes Progress`, Development Diaries. Available at: https://www.developmentdiaries.com/2021/11/ecowas-eu-pss-project-makes-progress/

80   Africa Intelligence (2022) 'How EU plans to allocate $600m military support package within the AU', Africa Intelligence online. Available at: https://www.africaintelligence.com/west-africa/2022/04/27/how-eu-plans-to-allocate-dollars600m-military-support-package-within-the-au,109780831-art

space, until eventually the Malian junta decided to opt out,[81] which forced the Sahelian organisation to a standstill. This is due to **weak intelligence gathering tools**, **limited aerial capabilities** and the **lack of rapid response**, which invariably affected their operational effectiveness.[82] However, it is important to note that most Sahelian countries did not employ their most effective human resources in the force, showing a clear **lack of political willingness to engage regionally**. In addition, despite adopting an Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)-mandated compliance framework for the Protection of Civilians in 2018, which should make Joint Forces soldiers accountable for exactions against civilians, two problems persist: full implementation of all elements of the compliance framework has never been achieved[83] and such mechanism is yet to be implemented by national armies, which commit the bulk of the violence.[84] Most recently, in his August 2022 speech, Borrell gave a rather sobering picture of the work of the G5 in general:

> *"The situation is complex, but here too we are forced to acknowledge that trend lines in the region, after more than ten years of international engagement, are poor: terrorism is rife, states are weak and civilian populations are bereft of security and basic services. And this despite all the attention and resources deployed to underpin a G5 Sahel-led process and a civilian 'surge' announced last year".[85]*

After the EU suspended all its training operations with the Malian Armed Forces in mid-April 2022, it is now intensifying its funding through the EPF to another pan-African military organisation: the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a formation headquartered in N'Djamena, comprising units from the Lake Chad basin states of Benin, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad, to fight against

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81   UN News (2022) 'Mali's withdrawal from G5 Sahel, Joint Force 'a setback' for the region', United Nations online. Available at: https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1118582

82   Edu-Afful, F., A. Tchie, F. Aubyn, O. Diallo and M. Zabala (2022) 'Shifting from External Dependency: Remodelling the G5 Sahel Joint Force for the Future', Epon Report. Available at: https://effectivepeaceops.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/EPON-SAHEL-Report.pdf

83   OHCHR (2020) 'Status Report: OHCHR Project supporting the G5 Sahel Joint Force with Implementation of the Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Compliance Framework.'

84   Goxho, D. (2022) 'Protecting Civilians From Those Who Should Protect Them', Egmont Policy Brief 274.

85   Borrell, J. (2022) speech on *Foreign interventions and the future of European defence*, here: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/foreign-interventions-and-future-european-defence_en

the Islamic militant group Boko Haram. The EU, which is already the MNJTF's largest donor, announced on 21 April 2022 that it will provide the task force with an additional EUR 10 million.[86]

Although regional organisations on the African continent such as the African Union, ECOWAS, the G5 Joint Force and the Multi-National Joint Task Force have established structures and instruments to help stabilise conflict-prone areas, these often cannot be used optimally and are marred by a variety of problems, ranging from poor coordination to lack of political will. EU funds are used to mostly cover operational costs, which in turn results in poor effectiveness of stabilisation efforts.

86   Africa Intelligence (2022).

6. EU stabilisation action in the Sahel: what we talk about when we talk about practices

We chose to analyse the case of Niger, as significant European efforts will now be based in the country. This is due to the aforementioned Western withdrawal from Mali and following escalated tensions over the presence of private military contractors from the Russian-backed Wagner Group. We expect both the European Union and its member states to **recalibrate their stabilisation efforts onto Niger** in the coming months and years, not just because the Nigerien government has shown significant interest in having European partners support them in their quest for stabilisation, but also because European partners themselves feel more comfortable supporting a democratically elected government, which communicates with its own citizens and submits *some* security decisions to the will of Parliament. Thus, we chose to focus on the Nigerien case study.

Niger: are European efforts undermining or creating stability?

In the Sahel, stabilisation is a term utilised by both local authorities and foreign donors. As previously highlighted, the bulk of international efforts in Niger focus on train-and-equip programmes. However, they **do not just focus on security forces** (Armed Forces, or FAN, *garde nationale*, *gendarmerie*, customs and police), **but also on the administrative structures that support the work of the Defence and Security Forces (FDS)**. Training programmes seek not just to aid troops perform better in combat, but they also seek to professionalise troops, make their structures more flexible and coordinate their work. One example of this is an Expertise France-implemented EU project, RENFORCES Niger, which seeks to improve relations between populations and the Nigerien Armed Forces, in order to promote the **return of basic services** in the targeted locations through:

1. the creation of spaces for dialogue
2. an amelioration of the living conditions of the Armed Forces of Niger
3. the construction of a 700-man military camp in the Tillabéri region

4. the rehabilitation of critical points on the Mangaize-Tilia road, over a length of around 70 km.

But there are cases in which international efforts contribute to undermining 'stability' in Niger. One example of this is the **constant demand to increase defence spending** on the part of partner countries, which for a country like Niger, one of the poorest in the world, is highly problematic,[87] given the amount of other structural problems the country is facing, such as shortages in health and education services. The main issues concerning the efficacy of foreign operations and stability are a lack of transparency and oversight: the sheer number of actors makes it almost impossible for citizens in the recipient country to assess the objectives of operations.[88] Moreover, there exists no clear way of measuring strategic effectiveness as progress is usually measured in 'neutralised terrorist actors', which has too many blind spots as an indicator. And blind spots also

> The main issues concerning the efficacy of foreign operations and stability are a lack of transparency and no oversight. There exists no clear way of measuring strategic effectiveness.

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87   Cole, E. and A. Grossman (2020) 'In Niger, Foreign Security Interests Undermine Stability—What Can Be Done?', United States Institute of Peace. Available at: https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/11/niger-foreign-security-interests-undermine-stability-what-can-be-done

88   Rogers, J. and D. Goxho (2022) 'Light footprint—heavy destabilising impact in Niger', International Politics.

exist geographically: Niger (and the broader Sahel area) is simply too vast for the small number of troops deployed in individual missions, thus some zones are left uncovered by intervening forces.[89] The fact that training local forces may be causing more harm than good and co-operating with governments and defence ministries which are not transparent can further undermine stabilisation efforts. But it is also the lack of context sensitivity by foreign operations that can exacerbate rather than smooth ethnic tensions.[90] And lastly, many states may be involved in stabilisation efforts without understanding how they contribute to the overall long-term objectives or how they can be achieved, as there is an inability of intervening countries to agree on what 'stabilisation' entails.[91]

On the other hand, the Nigerien government is also conducting its stabilisation operations from a safe distance, in Niamey. Nigerien President Bazoum has lamented a lack of involvement of partner forces in stabilisation efforts: in his speech at the Peace and Security Forum in Dakar in December 2021, he demanded that partner forces provide **more tailored support to their Nigerien counterparts on intelligence, air support and capacity building**. Now the presence of a European Training Mission was requested by Niger's Head of State and the project has been in the works in Brussels since the end of May.[92] But President Bazoum also lamented that the partners' big mistake is their "**weak involvement in the fight against arms trafficking from Libya**, which is the most important element sustaining terrorism in the region".[93]All in all, President Bazoum has oftentimes repeated that the bulk of the fighting must be carried out by Nigerien troops; "having anyone else fight our enemies for us would be an *insult*".[94] At the same time, in regions such as Tahoua bordering Mali, one of the most deadly areas for civilians and armed forces alike, the FAN do not intend to "make a step without foreign or indigenous aerial support and possibly through being accompanied by partner forces",[95] such as Germany, which has an Operation Gazelle training base in Tilia. During his visit to the base in May 2022, Chancellor Scholz mentioned a planned

89   Ibid.

90   Ibid.

91   Ibid.

92   Africa Intelligence (2022) 'L'UE planche sur le déploiement d'une mission de formation EUTM à Niamey', Africa Intelligence.

93   See: 'Discours du président de la République S.E.M. Mohamed Bazoum au 7ème Forum International sur la Paix et la Sécurité de Dakar'. Available at: https://www.presidence.ne/discours-du-prsident/2021/12/6/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-sem-mohamed-bazoum-au-7me-forum-international-sur-la-paix-et-la-securite-de-dakar

94   Larcher, L. (2022) 'Mohamed Bazoum: "Westerners must take more risks in the Sahel",' La Croix.

95   Interview with a member of the Nigerien garde nationale, outside Niamey, August 2022

continuation of the mission in close co-operation with his Nigerian partners, but only until December 2022, after which the base will be handed over to Niger.[96]

Another way that government-mandated "distant" stabilisation practices are at work in the Sahel is through the **integration of former self-defence militias** into the state security apparatus – this is done both to give legitimacy to these militias, who can cover those areas the state cannot reach, and to show that, unlike Burkina Faso, Niger does not have a problem with self-defence groups. Niamey has recently incorporated some of these militias under its wing,[97] and to do so it co-opts their power, making them a state-supported body. Tahoua and Tillaberi are two cases in point: most recently the Nigerien government has trained some 500 fighters, some of which were already engaged against armed groups and *coupeurs de route*. Now the Regional Council of Agadez (CRAZ), through the political support of the Haute Autorité pour la Consolidation de la Paix in Niger, intends to do the same for the Agadez region, also in order to "provide the Agadez youth with employment".[98]

Despite these efforts to "stabilise at a distance", President Bazoum is also putting in place some more promising stabilisation endeavours: he has recently been more forcefully encouraging members of his *entourage* and in general Nigerien public figures to **return to the area of the country where they are from**, so as to show people in more isolated communities that the Nigerien state supports them. In addition, Niamey is also currently seeking to set up **programmes of demobilisation and reintegration of former Boko Haram and EIGS fighters** in Diffa (Gudumaria) and Tillaberi. Such programmes, however, appear all too weak for the time being. Finally, one other interesting policy on the part of Niamey is establishing three-tiered **negotiation channels** with armed groups operating in the tri-border area, through local-level dialogue, but also on a more confidential higher level.

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96   Tagesschau interview (2022) 'Scholz besucht Bundeswehrsoldaten im Niger', Tagesschau online. Available at: https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/afrika/niger-scholz-101.html

97   As of March 2022, interview with former garde nomade representative (now garde nationale), Niamey, March 2022

98   Interview with Agadez Regional government representative, Agadez, July 2022.

Conclusions

The European stabilisation manual in the Central Sahel region is facing numerous obstacles and shortcomings, which require an evaluation and shift in approach on the part of the EU and its member states. This report seeks to clarify how stabilisation is conceived and how it is put in practice in the Central Sahel by relevant European states, flagging the inadequacies and hurdles they pose at EU level, while also analysing existing stabilisation endeavours in Niger. By doing so, we wish to identify the essential chokepoints, critical insecurity paths and potential recommendation measures to conceive sustainable stabilisation in the Sahel, subsequently outlining how the EU can contribute with several technical and political examples.

While debate over how stabilisation should be defined will arguably never cease to exist, it is essential to understand that stabilisation is a matter sensitive to its context and therefore it must be studied, but most importantly put in practice, on a case-by-case basis, following a rigorous analysis of the situation in a specific location. At a more national or regional level, in order to facilitate supranational coordination efforts and provide a clearer framework for implementation, it is important that structures and dynamics that one intends to intervene in are properly assessed and understood. Overall, despite providing significant development and humanitarian aid, European security efforts in the Sahel tend to incur many difficulties: insufficient funding for ailing structures, poorly formulated project goals and obstacles such as the lack of political will on the part of partner governments lay the foundation for this and require a change in approach. Based on the above, the following recommendations are stressed.

Policy recommendations on stabilisation for the European Union

- To envisage a European Union that is an effective and committed stabilising actor in the Sahel, it is important first for the EU to clarify that stabilisation does not just mean the *absence* of security threats such as armed group violence in the Central Sahel, but also **respect for democratic values and upholding the principles of good governance by Sahelian governments**. A coordinated EU response in this sense would need to prioritise good governance above all, adopt primarily civilian and preventive solutions to crises and imagine an **articulation of stabilisation as *ad hoc* (or case by case) and integrated rather than sequential**, as the German stabilisation doctrine indicates, while maintaining a security focus in those areas where violence threatens the lives of civilians.

- This means that the EU is faced with a dilemma: **either it chooses to "risk** and invest more", which implies a more capillary European staff presence in the region (in the security case, it would mean setting up training bases closer to the violence, much like German and Belgian bases in Tilia and Maradi),[99] **or it chooses to keep a 'remote' presence**. But if it chooses the latter, more conditionality mechanisms must be applied to Sahelian leaders and interlocutors from civil society groups must be privileged, as will be clarified below.

- It is of paramount importance for the EU to be aware that now that Burkina Faso and Mali (but also Chad) are ruled by non-democratically elected leaders, only Niger can claim a certain democratic legitimacy in the region. This means that the **negotiating power of President Bazoum** with regard to its European partners has rapidly increased, putting his government in a very strong position. To avoid falling prey to political blackmailing, the EU must **increase its conditionality mechanisms *vis-à-vis* Niamey**. This must be done in a way that will produce a wanted outcome, i.e. following principles of *ex ante* and *positive* conditionality.[100] By way of example, it is important

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99   Belgians are not in Maradi any longer, talks ongoing for Torodi.

100 Dalton, M. and T. Ross (2020) 'A Roadmap for Better Choices From Security Partners', War on the Rocks. Available at: https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/a-roadmap-for-better-choices-from-security-partners/

to note that allegations of corruption and embezzlement are commonplace in the Sahel and that the perception from departments such as Maradi or Zinder in Niger is that Niamey elites hold all international funds in their pockets, leaving only breadcrumbs to the rest of the country. The EU must ensure that most of its funding, be it humanitarian, development or security, goes where it is needed the most. The European Peace Facility must be used as a symbol of positive conditionality. The issue of embezzlement at the Ministry of Defence level must be properly investigated and those responsible be brought to justice, before the EU disburses funds that will once again be used by the Nigerien MoD.

• Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, despite going through similar predicaments with regard to insecurity in the tri-border region, deal differently with violence, inter-communal tensions and, more in general, governance challenges. One example of how the **EU must display its different relationships with the three countries** is through, notably, the provision of funds, but also political declarations: in the case of Niger, since President's Bazoum approach to conflict areas is one where he pushes for his government to be more present and spread across the territory, the EU must support travel to locations such as Tillaberi and Tahoua, where ISGS and JNIM violence is concentrated, and Diffa, where Boko Haram resides, or Maradi, where banditry is on the rise.[101] At the same time, supporting this type of initiative in a country like Mali is much more problematic, since the military government is perceived in one way in Segou in the centre (and even there with variations) and in another way in Kidal in the north, as shown in the most recent FES Mali-Metre.[102] Recent allegations of abuse in the Mopti region of Mali, perpetrated by Malian armed forces and the Russian paramilitary group Wagner, are a case in point to why the so-called "return of the state"[103] is not always a good thing.

• Should the EU choose to open a Training Mission to Niger, akin to that of Mali, it must conduct an **in-depth, transparent and comprehensive evaluation** of what the lessons learnt from the Mali experience were and seek to learn from successes

101 Koné, H. (2022) 'Organised banditry is destroying livelihoods in Niger's borderlands', Institute for Security Studies. Available at: https://issafrica.org/iss-today/organised-banditry-is-destroying-livelihoods-in-nigers-borderlands

102 FES Mali-Metre (2022) 'Enquête d'opinion: Que pensent les Malien(ne)s ?`, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Available at: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mali/10100/2022-13.pdf

103 International Crisis Group (2016), 'Central Mali: an Uprising in the Making?', ICG. Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/central-mali-uprising-making

and failures. There are a number of analyses that have already undertaken some of this work (notably Tull and Erforth (2022), Schmauder (2020) and Court of Auditors (2018)), however more research and evaluation are needed.

- In a region where the state has often been seen as absent, predatory or abusive, **decentralisation is key to ensuring institutional accountability** for those who represent citizens. But the EU must not just fund decentralisation initiatives in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, but also **diplomatically support mediation** amongst regional governments and central governments, with a **leaner role for ministries in Niamey, Bamako and Ouagadougou**.[104] This could be tied to structural aid: via positive conditionality, the EU would guarantee a package of aid to a certain Burkinabé ministry provided that they allow for more decision-making manoeuvres and funds to their counterparts in regions such as Boucle de Mouhoun and Sahel.

- Decentralisation comes with its own challenges, not just with regard to convincing state structures in Niamey to give up some of their resources and power, but also because it **risks pulling certain regions of the country further away from Niamey**. The Agadez region is a case in point: in some remote areas of the vast northern region, poles of power have historically been Chad and Libya, rather than Niamey. However, after the Tuareg rebellions, the government has been able to negotiate with northern elites and integrate and co-opt some of their leadership into state structures, offering a certain level of autonomy to the north. The same has not been done with Peuhl communities across the country, whereas now most armed groups in the tri-border area belong to this underrepresented ethnic group, which leads to stereotyping, inter-communal violence and a feeling of being abused or ignored by the state. It is important for the EU to be aware of such dynamics and support decentralisation, as long as regional leadership bodies maintain a constant tie to the capital, underrepresented groups are included in policy decisions, and elites in the capital are required to travel to more remote regions on a regular basis.

- In Agadez, the EU has overall had a problematic role: its 2015 much-wanted law did curb migration onto European shores but had dramatic consequences for Agadez itself. Criminalisation

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104 This refers to a more balanced link between central and regional administrations in terms of decision-making powers and receiving financial support. However, instances of corruption exist within smaller administrations as well.

of both drivers (*passeurs*) and migrants was at odds with the fact that transporting migrants was regarded as a licit occupation in northern Niger – and one that has contributed to keeping the region stabile through economic opportunities for the local population. Until the law was implemented in 2016, migrants were travelling in buses legally operated by companies such as Rimbo, and then, once in Agadez, on the back of pickup trucks. To avoid bandits, military escorts would then accompany the trucks all the way to destinations such as Puits Espoir (Hope's Well) or Dirkou oasis.[105] The EU promised to support other economic activities once the law was implemented, but, despite significant resources being invested in Agadez, many former *passeurs* found themselves unemployed, which, coupled with the lack of tourism, once a large income-generating activity, led to a general sense of unease and recent protests against the migrant population which now lives in the city. Why did these EU-supported projects fail to reach those who needed it the most? The EU must do an analysis of the consequences of its migration policies in Agadez and adjust programming, notably by focusing more on supporting economic development through tourism. At the same time, many lives are at stake in the Assamaka area in the north, where Algeria abandons migrants seeking to cross the border: IOM, despite its many shortcomings in Niger (namely the fact that they have become a tentacular organisation doing work ranging from biometric identification to community stabilisation through football matches), is one of the few organisations that has the capacity to save migrants in that area. **The EU must ensure that such responsibility is eventually taken up by the Nigerien state and the Agadez regional government.**

• For a true partnership with Sahelian governments to become reality and not just stay rhetorical, the EU must be ready to depart from the Sahel should its leaders choose not to respect a series of conditionality mechanisms and agreed-upon steps to both stem the violence and avoid that other areas of the region fall prey to it. An **exit strategy** is necessary. As seen in Bounti, Mali, and the recent clashes in Téra, Niger, where a French military convoy headed to Gao was attacked by civilians, a foreign military presence that does not appear to protect civilians runs the risk of being seen as a force undermining national sovereignty. Be transparent, be accountable.

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105 CRU Report (2018) 'Effects of EU policies in Niger', Clingendael. Available at: https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2018/multilateral-damage/2-effects-of-eu-policies-in-niger/

- This has been an often-repeated recommendation for EU action in the Sahel, but any security intervention must consider local dynamics. By local we mean that realities in the tri-border area and Diffa/Nigeria border area vary considerably: hence, before choosing to set up a programme in a certain village (and for the EU to fund it), dynamics in *that particular village* must be made clear. This means that those making such assessments must both be independent *and* risk going to that area, and that those carrying out projects must also take the risk going into the area, while at the same time pushing for governmental presence where governmental presence does not harm civilians. Monitoring and evaluation in this sense are fundamental, but so is **strongly localised qualitative research.** One example of this is a 2021 Benjaminsen and Ba analysis of farmer-herder conflict in the villages of Ogossagou Dogon and Ogossagou Peul in Mali. More research of this type should be encouraged and funded by the EU.[106]

- While research must be localised, examples of **where stabilisation programming worked** must be taken into account. One example of this would be the UK Stabilisation Unit document on elite bargains: the unit conducted a comprehensive review of how international interventions in conflict-affected countries have contributed to violence reduction and sustainable transitions and concluded that elite bargains play a crucial role in this context (thereby challenging some of the existing approaches to end violent conflict). According to this analysis, violent conflict stabilises only when the allocation of benefits, opportunities and resources (such as political positions and business prospects) is consistent with how power is distributed in society. The findings emphasise that in some contexts there is a short-term need to provide pragmatic support to emerging elite bargains that contribute to delivering stability and violence reduction. At the same time, long-term stability requires increasing inclusivity over time so that those constituencies that empower elites are engaged in a political process.[107]

- The EU is an important partner to civil society organisations (CSOs) in Mali and has in the past provided some funding and training. But the arrest of prominent Malian anti-corruption

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106 Benjaminsen, T. and B. Ba (2021): Fulani-Dogon Killings in Mali: Farmer-Herder Conflicts as Insurgency and Counterinsurgency, African Security 14: 1, pp. 4-26.

107 See document on elite bargains here: https://reliefweb.int/report/world/securing-and-sustaining-elite-bargains-reduce-violent-conflict

campaigner Clément Dembélé in May 2020 and of the Nigerien journalists who uncovered the military contracts scandal shows that civil society groups need more leverage to pressure governments to carry out reforms. **Opportunities for civil society to publicly discuss their proposed solutions** with international partners have been limited and ad hoc.[108] The EU must encourage Sahelian civil society organisations by providing the necessary visibility platforms for them to speak.

- Visibility is not everything; money also matters. In Niger, only two local CSOs/NGOs who work in stabilisation-related programmes receive direct EU funding, while some others only get funds when the UN or other larger agencies choose to partner with them in *consortia*, which means that they receive much less than they could, should they get **direct EU funding**. This also means that they are unable to set their own agenda.

- Given the strong potential for misinformation in the region, **funding of radio stations and other media platforms**, such as Studio Kalangou in Niger, Studio Tamani in Mali and Studio Yafa in Burkina Faso, supported by Fondation Hirondelle, can help provide excellent platforms in local languages, as well as French, working towards a more inclusive idea of security in hard-to-reach areas. Projects of this sort must be strongly supported by the EU, not just because they provide Sahelian publics with independent, reliable information, but also because European policymakers can then use them to get a better sense of what is happening in the region.

- Communication remains a fundamentally problematic aspect of the EU presence in the Sahel. Neither EUCAP Mali, nor EUCAP Niger (including the Antenne in Agadez), nor the EU Training Mission to Mali have any ties with the cities they are based in: as clarified above, they appear to be distant, expensive entities interested only in blocking migrants (through bodies such as the CMCF in Birni N'Konni), or conducting more "murky" business in both Mali and Niger, which quickly leads to a number of conspiracy theories on social media.[109] This must change: **Brussels must push its civilian and military missions to be more upfront locally**, appear in the news (both radio and television) and have a more intense and prolific profile on social media, especially on Facebook.

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108 Forthcoming Saferworld paper.

109 McCullough, A. (2022) 'Au Niger, les thèses complotistes ne viennent pas que de Moscou', Afrique XXI. Available at: https://afriquexxi.info/Au-Niger-les-theses-complotistes-ne-viennent-pas-que-de-Moscou

- The APSA has potential to become an effective framework for peace and security in Africa, but it needs to further develop its capacities, instruments and financial independence. However, given negative experiences with other regional organisations, such as the G5, which quickly became a money-sucking machine, the EU must ensure not only that financing is tied to an effective security strategy on the part of APSA, but also that the right human resources are employed by Sahelian states, which would show political will. The G5 Joint Force between Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad is expected to be suspended and donors such as the EU should review their engagement to draw constructive lessons learnt for future funding decisions. As recent developments show, this is not being done.[110] For the moment being and given the current situation in Mali and Burkina Faso, the EU should refrain from supporting regional organisations unless certain guarantees are in place. **Bilateral support is more effective than regional organisations**, as different countries are willing to pull very different weights.

- Despite this being potentially counterproductive in the short term, **EU reactions to Wagner's violence against civilians in Mali must be unflinching**: reports of abuses committed by Wagner and the FAMA are pouring in, and the decision on the part of the Malian junta to block MINUSMA's access to sites must be openly criticised by the EU. A strong and public European reaction to the Malian government wishing to "diversify its security partnership" will backfire, but the EU must keep a strong stance regarding abuses and avoid providing structural funds to the Malian Defence Ministry which then pays mercenaries to carry out a military campaign that is killing civilians.

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110 Ibid.

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