Regional Security Complex in The Sahel Region and The Roles of International Actors.

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore the state of insecurity in the Sahel region with a special focus on terrorism and violent extremism. Regional Security Complex Theory is employed as the theoretical framework of this article to better illustrate the shared nature of armed conflicts and insecurity in terms of causes and impacts in the Sahel - in essence, how the peace and security of Sahelian countries are systematically linked. It delves into the origins and current trends of terrorism, violent extremism, and insecurity in the region, and on the solutions implemented by international agencies (from within and outside Africa) as well as state actors especially France, the United States of America, China, and Russia. It discusses how the spaces for networking and uniting citizen initiatives are lacking at local and transnational levels beyond the inter-governmental structures. In the end, the article unveils why jihadist organizations still plan and conduct deadly coordinated operations in the Sahel, despite the presence of international military forces under the banner of the United Nations' Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) local troops and initiatives by international actors including French forces. Recommendations are made on the significance of policy makers placing local communities at the heart of their interventions, by shifting their attention to local institutions and acknowledging, formalizing, and reinforcing their authority while working to make them more inclusive.

Keywords: Sahel Region, Security Complex, Terrorism, Violent Extremism

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Introduction

War on terror is slightly more than twenty years old with its battle ground appears to be shifting to the Sahel region. This specific region is one of the most desolate places on earth, but today it is the hotbed of insurgent groups which more are making alliances with global terrorist syndicates. The impacts of terrorism to the Sahel region is an ignored reality that affects millions of people (Brito, 2021). In the Liptako Gourma region, which straddles Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the security situation and humanitarian crisis have significantly deteriorated in recent months. The front lines are constantly changing, meaning that people are always on the move in search of security and safety. Conflict is not the only danger they face; the vagaries of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are also affecting the lives of millions.

To understand the phenomenon of violent extremism in the Sahel, it is imperative to consider the geographical features of the region and its impact on the Sahel countries. Paul Collier (2007) defines four causes that prevent countries from prospering: the conflict trap, the natural resource trap, being landlocked with bad neighbours, and bad governance. The Sahel states fall into almost all of these traps. Additionally, endogenous factors like climate change and rapidly shifting demographics that drive internal conflicts (Traore, 2018).Sahel is a semiarid region of western and north-central Africa extending from Senegal, eastward to Sudan. It forms a transitional zone between the arid Sahara (desert) to the north and the belt of humid savannas to the south. The region stretches from the Atlantic Ocean eastward through northern Senegal, southern Mauritania, the great bend of the Niger River in Mali, Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta), southern Niger, north-eastern Nigeria, south-central Chad, and into Sudan (McKenna, 2020). At least eight months of the year are dry and rain, confined to a short season, averages 4–8 inches (100–200 mm), mostly in June, July and August (McKenna, 2020). In the second half of the 20th century, the Sahel was increasingly afflicted by soil erosion and desertification resulting from the growing population pressure on the environment that, ultimately, made more demands upon the land than previously. Due to farming activities and firewood fetching, trees have been felled indiscriminately and, as a result, rainfall runoff and the wind carried off the fertile topsoil, leaving arid and barren wastelands. The fragile nature of agriculture and pastoralism in the Sahel was strikingly demonstrated in the early 1970s, when a long period of drought, beginning in 1968, led to the virtual crop failure and the loss of 50 to 70 percent of the cattle.

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As a result of rain failure in 1972, the loss of human life by starvation and disease stood at 100,000estimated in in the year that followed (1973). Severe drought and famine again struck the Sahel in 1983–85 (Ibid). Culturally and historically, the Sahel is a shoreline between the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. This means it is the site of interaction between Arabic, Islamic and nomadic cultures from the north, and indigenous and traditional cultures from the south. Ethnic groups in the Sahel are often spread across conventional borders and, at times, they are more loyal to their own ethnic communities than they are to their home countries (Sidatt, 2020). Rapid population growth in the Sahel has also been a contributing factor to the instability in the region and is expected to increasingly affect human security as well. The population in the Sahel is expected to double to more than 150 million by 2040 (George, 2012). The pressures resulting from this can upset fragile internal balances and inter-state tensions (UNDP, 2011) as the Western Sahel is already home to a large number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from conflicts dating back to the 1990s.

Fig. 1. Sahel Region   **Source:** *Brito (2021)*

Sahel is traversed by major ancient trading routes, the trans-Saharan routes that enabled the propagation of ideas, the free movement of people, and goods for centuries (Traore, 2018). In recent years, the Sahel has been in the global spotlight due to famines, religious terrorism, anti-state rebellions, and arms, drugs and human trafficking. These developments are the product of both local and global dynamics (Suleiman, 2017).

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In the Sahel, armed violence, food shortages, the weak presence or complete absence of public authorities and the economic crisis have led to more than a million people being displaced, while others have decided to join armed groups (Amadou & Wells, 2020).

Security Complex in The Sahel

Conflict and insecurity are not new phenomena in the Sahel. Historically, competition over resources and land between farmers, nomadic herders and semi-nomadic groups has always existed in the Sahel. Resolution of these conflicts was often provided through the peaceful mediation of traditional leaders. With the influx of islamist groups and worsening pressures on resources and land due to a changing climate, the situation has significantly changed. Today, clashes between herder-farmers, farmer-gold miners, and hunter-wildlife rangers intersect with jihadi armed conflict which has ultimately contributed to the emergence of new complex forms of violence (Ammour, 2020). Terrorists and other criminal groups have attempted to exploit such weaknesses by destabilizing countries and rally behind ethnic violence to further erode social cohesion (Sidatt, 2020). As a result, an inextricable tangle of inter-communal rivalries, jihadi attacks, banditry, and criminal activities now plagues the region.

A study conducted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2017) finds that two distinct security complexes are visible in the Sahel. In one, regional patterns are evident in the interaction between states, based on security inter-dependence, which gives priority to military-related activities. In the other, groups of individuals are connected below the level of the State by (non-military) human security concerns, which generate significant regional (transnational) formations. While this is not necessarily exclusive to the Sahel, the region reveals a clear pattern in which it is not only states, but also communities outside the frame of the state, which emerge in regional clusters. The latter is distinctive. It is a solid and durable people-based transnational cluster (UNECA, 2017). The Sahelian security complex could therefore be observed as a collection of states as well as communities whose regional and transnational interaction is not dependent on the formation of a cluster of regional states. The fact that security complexes are clearly observable at the two levels of analysis (state and people) is a distinctive feature of security in the Sahel.

Conflict and large-scale insecurities in the Sahel and their development consequences must, thus, be understood within these two divergent forces, that is a state-based regional security and a people-based transnational security complex. The two are compelled by different sets of logic. On the one hand, the state-based complex is underpinned by concerns about immediate threats to states – including, armed violence and organized crime – to which predominantly military responses are sought. On the other hand, the people-based security complex is driven by deep-seated human existential concerns, which connect both human security and human development needs of the populations. Arguably, the development and security outcomes in the Sahel will depend on which of these two forces ultimately gains ascendancy.

Table 1: Two divergent security complexes in the Sahel

Issues or dimension	State-based regional/ transactional	People-based transnational/ regional security complex [and human development complex]	Conflict causing and sustaining factors
1. Dominant issues	Political issues	Humanitarian and human development issues	Survival and human development of people and communities in Sahel and border areas are interconnected or inter-dependent and this must be made a priority issue on the
2. Security threats and challenges	Terrorism and related organized crime	Local grievances; protests against the State over neglect and exclusion	The pursuit of negative coping mechanisms in dealing with State exclusion and existential threats has led some groups to collaborate with declared terrorist groups and criminal networks.
3. Constituency or key actor/	State/regime-centred	People/community-centred	Limited points of intersection
4. Borders and territories	Evidence of State sovereignty and inviolable	Borders are immaterial; porous borders are a source of resilience and coping mechanism for Sahelian peoples.	A key area of tension: Sahelian peoples have crisscrossed the region as part of their coping mechanisms for centuries. Raises issues for Africa's regional integration agenda.
5. Mobility and migration	Cross-border movement is a source and form of security	Cross-border movement/ migration is a source of livelihood, resilience and	Regional approaches to integration might either aggravate or reduce this tension.
6. Key resource	International law, protocols and African Union processes	Social capital: trust, confidence and solidarity	Without integrating State and people-based security concerns, these resources might be deployed at cross- purposes.
7. Impact on policy and practice	Strong /dominant impact on policy at State, regional and international levels: • Huge funding available	Limited variable impact on policy and practice: • Limited funding (relatively) • Limited political attention	Human development of Sahelian peoples not achievable with current State-focused approaches.

| 8. Actors | • States/Regimes
• Regional Economic Communities and the African Union
• Armed Forces and security agencies
• Bilateral security | • Humanitarian agencies
• Civil society organizations/ non-governmental organizations and international non-governmental organizations
• Community groups and citizens | Treating the Sahel as a regional or transnational security and human development complex alongside current military approaches. |

Source: UNECA, 2017.

The table above expounds the difference between the two-security complex logic. Having mentioned this, this discussion will primarily focus on State-based regional security complex in the Sahel region.

Terrorism, Violent Extremism, and Insecurity in The Sahel

According to 2020's Global Terrorism Index, there has been a global decline in the number of deaths from terrorism by 15% for fifth consecutive year to 13,800. Although this is good news, things are not as promising in Sub-Saharan Africa. There has been a shift of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL's) centre of gravity from the Middle East and Northern Africa towards Sub-Saharan Africa, which is now a home to 7 out of 10 countries with the largest increase in terrorism. Mali and Burkina Faso (both from the Sahel) are actually going against the trend of a decreased terrorism impact (where it is declining elsewhere, it is increasing in these two countries and deaths in Burkina Faso increased six-fold in 2019).
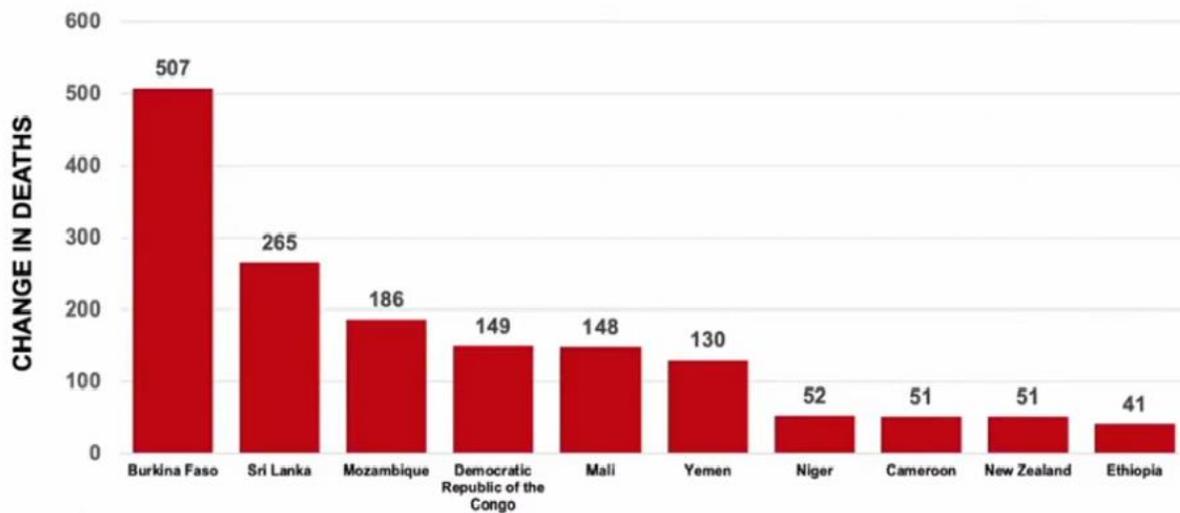
Fig1. *Increases in Deaths from Terrorism in 2019*   **Source:** *IEP, 2020.*

With the exception of Mauritania, which was not particularly affected by Islamist terrorism in the last five years, all the other countries in the region have been shaken by a significantly high number of attacks. Nigeria and Mali rank fifth and tenth, respectively, among the countries with the deadliest violent Islamist activity globally (Ilardo, 2020). In 2017, as a result of extremist violence and related counter measures, 3399 individuals were reported dead in Nigeria and 493 in Mali (Blair, 2017). At the same time, extremist organizations harbouring in Nigeria and Mali used these two countries as bases to launch attacks across the region's porous borders claiming several other lives in Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso, with the spill-over of terrorist activity causing respectively 148, 62, and 53 victims in the three countries (Global Terrorism Database, 2018). The most active terrorist group in the region is Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) with reportedly tens of thousands of jihadists moving from North Africa southward into the Sahel, followed by Boko Haram, based in Northern Nigeria and in the Chad Lake basin. Other groups are notably Ansar ul Islam, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), responsible for recent attacks in Niger, the Movement for the Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), a militant Islamist coalition especially active in Mali and Burkina Faso that was formed in March 2017 following the merger of AQIM fighters, the Fulani Macina Liberation Front, Ansar al-Dine and Al-Mubrabitoun. In response to intensifying terrorist activity, regional and international forces have also intensified their engagement in the Sahel (Ilardo, 2020). Terrorism in the Sahel started in the

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1990s in Algeria when President Chadli Bendjedid was ousted from power by the military (Traore, 2018). The Algerian Army took over the state's institutions to annul the results of the first legislative elections won by an Islamic party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). The FIS, a newly formed Islamic party, promised change, equity, and transparency to the disgruntled population, while presenting itself as the only viable alternative to the historic and army-backed National Liberation Front (Ibid). Following the cancelation of the election in December 1991 and in response to army repression on hundreds of Islamic leaders, the FIS morphed into an insurgent group resorting to terror tactics against government structures, innocent civilians, and foreigners. In 2002, the Salafist Group for Predication and Combat, an Algerian violent extremist group, re-established itself in the Sahel pledging allegiance to Al Qaeda thus becoming AQIM (Traore, 2018). The 2011 Libyan crisis had a destabilizing effect on the Sahel countries (George, 2012; UN Security Council, 2012; Lounnas, 2018; Ospina, et.al, 2020). Following the collapse/deposition of the Gadhafi regime, thousands of heavily armed Tuaregs deserted the Libyan army and flocked to Mali in 2012 (George, 2012). Simultaneously, AQIM took advantage of the war in Libya to steal the Libyan Army's weapon stocks and armaments provided by foreign governments. AQIM also began to recruit combatants and form dormant cells. Profiting from the ongoing instability due to the absence of state control in Libya, AQIM embroiled itself in illicit activities like human trafficking, the illegal sale of crude oil, and weapons smuggling (Traore, 2018). Large quantities of weapons and ammunition have been smuggled out of Libya. Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, and Niger are the countries that are mostly affected by this outflow (George, 2012). The movement of these weapons (which include anti-aircraft artillery, rocket-propelled grenades, ammunition and surface-to-air missiles) across state borders by former fighters who, either, were members of the Libyan army or mercenaries participating in the Libyan conflict, has led to the proliferation of arms, to the benefit of arms traffickers and terrorist and other armed groups operating in Sahel region (Ibid).

In 2003, AQIM successfully established sanctuaries, training camps, bases, and hostages' hideouts in northern Mali due to the incapacity of the government to adequately deal with famines, pandemics, unemployment, and poverty. The immensity of the lands and the insufficiency of state capacities make it impossible for the Sahel countries to effectively control their territories or adequately provide basic services to their population (Traore, 2018).

Also, AQIM exploited the cyclical Tuareg rebellions against the Malian government as well as tribal and occupational competitions between herders and farmers, nomad and sedentary ethnic groups. For instance, in Mali, AQIM leaders used marriages with local tribes, the procurement of commodities, medical care to the disenfranchised population, and bribery of state officials to embed itself in the Sahara Desert (Ibid). In Northern Mali, while preaching Salafi-Jihadism, AQIM sought to seduce locals with a captivating rhetoric of social justice, equity, and welfare and then proceeded to ransom money from kidnapped Westerners (Traore, 2018). As of now, Mali remains a breeding ground of terrorist groups in the Sahel. Not only has the threat not been contained but it has expanded to neighbouring countries like Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast (Ibid).

The Roles of International Actors

In 2014, as a collective answer to the growing security threat, the Heads of States of five Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) created the G5 Sahel, an intergovernmental cooperation framework seeking to coordinate the security and development policies of its member states in response to growing regional instability due to the proliferation of armed groups, notably jihadists, in areas left outside central government control (European Parliament, 2020; Pichon & Fardel, 2020; OHCHR, 2021).

The creation of the G5 Sahel follows the launch of international and foreign missions and operations[1] (Pichon & Fardel, 2020). In 2017, the G5 Sahel Joint Force was launched with the aim of fighting terrorism and organised crime in the region (European Parliament, 2020). The force was authorized by the African Union Peace and Security Council in April 2017 and was strengthened by the adoption of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2359 in June the same year (Cooke, 2017). The G5 Sahel Joint Force initially consisted of approximately 5,000 military and civil personnel but this has increased to 6,200 (Sandes, 2021). The joint force relies on external actors for military training, resources, and assistance to conduct military operations.

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[1] United Nations' mission MINUSMA 2013, European Union Common Security and Defence Policy 2012 and 2013, France's operations Serval, 2013, then Barkhane, 2014.

Multinational military efforts are being carried out in the region alongside G5 Sahel forces involving the French led mission and the EU, United Nations (UN), United States, and other countries like Russia and China are getting more involved in the Sahel. Also, by 2018, Turkey pledged €4.1m ($5m) making a total of €418m being promised by donors including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and others towards, the G5 force in Sahel (Africa Research Bulletin, 2018). Similarly, Rwanda pledged $1m, while Norway pledged to contribute around 40 officers and soldiers of special forces as well as a Hercules plane for the purpose of training local security forces in Niger (Ibid).

Canada has also been supportive to the region for example, by 2020 it had $20.6 million for humanitarian assistance in the Central Sahel region provided humanitarian assistance totalling $281.1 million in 2018 to 2019, and in June 2020 it announced that it would join The International Coalition for the Sahel[2] (Dumas, 2020). France other European states and the EU remain the dominant security and development player in the Sahel (Lebovich, 2021). In January 2013, at the request of Mali's Government, France launched Operation Serval to push back the terrorist groups in North Mali, supporting troops from Mali and other African States (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2020). The operation ended on 15 July 2014, and was replaced by Operation Barkhane[3], launched on 1 August 2014 to fight Islamist fighters in the Sahel (Barluet, 2014). Operation Barkhane aimed to become the French pillar of counterterrorism in the Sahel region (Larivé, 2014). It was made clear by former French Defence Minister (now a Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs), Jean-Yves Le Drian, that the main objective of Operation Barkhane is counterterrorism (BBC, 2014). French military intervention also directly supports the G5 Sahel forces through training and the introduction of new technologies and resources.

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[2] A group that aims to facilitate coordination and interaction between the various dimensions of international action to support the G5 Sahel countries.

[3] The operation is named after a crescent-shaped dune in the Sahara Desert.

On June 2021, France announced that it will reduce its military presence arguing that it's no longer adapted to the needs in the area (Charlton & Petesch, 2021). France has begun withdrawing its troops from northern Mali (Kanté, 2021) and Macron announced that France would reduce its force to 2,500 to 3,000 troops from over 5000 troops (Charlton & Petesch, 2021).EU is cooperating with the G5 Sahel countries in three main tracks: Political partnership, security and stability support, and development cooperation. With regards to the second track, EU has provided a contribution of €147 million to help the setup of the G5 Sahel Joint Force (European Union, 2019). The EU also has three Common Security and Defence Policy missions in the region; European Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali, EU training mission (EUTM) in Mali. The EU has deployed the Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell (RACC) in where the G5 Sahel Permanent Secretariat is based, Nouakchott (Ibid). The EU also provides other programmes to improve support stability and security in the region.

During the 13 January 2020 Pau Summit, a Coalition for the Sahel was announced by the Heads of State of France, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, in the presence of the United Nations Secretary-General, the President of the European Council, the European Union High Representative, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission and the Secretary General of La Francophonie (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2020). The Coalition aims to bring together, alongside the G5 Sahel, all countries, international organizations and institutions supporting security, development and stability in the Sahel (French Embassy in Canada, 2021) and it promotes a comprehensive approach at regional level including all levers and actors involved in the Sahel, whether they be military, security, political or development actors (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2020).

Coalition for the Sahel is based on four complementary pillars:

- Pillar 1: Fight against terrorism

    This pillar is jointly led by the G5 Sahel states and France. It aims at fighting against armed terrorist groups by coordinating all of the efforts led by Sahel armed forces and the G5 Sahel Joint Force with the partners – Barkhane, MINUSMA, Takuba Task Force[4] – with priority given to the Three-Borders region (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2020).

- Pillar 2: Building the capacities of the armed forces in the region

    The European Union leads this pillar working in close connection with the G5 Sahel. The pillar works within the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S)[5], initiated by France and Germany. The second pillar works within this partnership to coordinate all the defence capacity building actions for G5 Sahel countries, such as training and equipment for national armed forces and the G5 Sahel Joint Force (French Embassy in Canada, 2021).

- Pillar 3: Supporting the return of the State and administrations in the territory, ensuring access to basic social services

    The European Union leads this pillar working in close connection with the G5 Sahel. The aim of this pillar is to support and coordinate the redeployment actions of the State and strengthen internal security and justice capabilities (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2020).

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[4] It is the is a European military task force led by Sweden. The name originated from the takuba sword that is used across the western Sahel. The task force was established at the request of the Nigerien and Malian governments. The governments of Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Mali, Niger, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the UK supported the creation of a task force.

[5] It aims at identifying security needs and increasing efforts in the fields of defence and internal security, under EU coordination.

-   Pillar 4: Speeding up official development assistance

    This pillar is jointly led by the G5 Sahel and the Sahel Alliance[6]. aims to respond to challenges regarding employment, poverty, education, healthcare and infrastructure in G5 Sahel countries (French Embassy in Canada, 2021).

The United States also has wide array of policy mechanisms to combat terrorism in the Sahel. AQIM is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the State Department (Kennedy-Boudali, 2009). Additionally, the FBI's legal attachés support initiatives that promote regional counterterrorism cooperation, and traditional bilateral military relationships facilitate counterterrorism training and operations. One of the main avenues for regional engagement on counterterrorism has been the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). The goal of the TSCTP is to build partner capacity for counterterrorism and facilitate efforts to counter extremist thought (Ibid). Begun in 2005 as the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI), TSCTP program has grown to include nine countries - Morocco, Algeria, Mali, Niger, Tunisia, and Mauritania, Senegal, Nigeria, as well as Chad and in 2008 it was incorporated into the United States Africa Command in 2008[7] (Fox News, 2008).

The United States is the largest single humanitarian donor to the Sahel (Laff, 2021) and it provides logistical support to France for its 5,000 troops stationed in the Sahel as part of the Barkhane operation to help fight terrorism in the region (RFI, 2021). According to a joint statement following a call between US President Joe Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron, the US is committed to increasing its support for European counterterrorism operations

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[6] An international cooperation platform to enhance the stability and development of the Sahel region. It was launched in July 2017 by France, Germany and the EU, along with the AfDB, the World Bank and UNDP. Since its launch, Italy, Spain, the UK, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Denmark, The European Investment Bank and Norway have joined the initiative as full members. The Sahel Alliance has also 11 observer members including the USA, Canada, Japan, Belgium, Switzerland, Finland, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, Ireland and others. It is financing and coordinating over 1000 projects with the G5 Sahel countries. More information can be found on their website: https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/.

[7] On October 1, 2008, responsibility was transferred from the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and the United States European Command (EUCOM) to the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) as it assumed authority over the African theater of operations

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in the Sahel (Élysée, 2021). U.S has also donated more than $8 million in military equipment[8] to Niger which will aid the West African nation and its G5 Sahel Joint Force partners in the fight against terrorism in the region (AFRICOM, 2020). Since 2013, the U.S. has partnered with the Niger Air Force, matching millions of dollars, to revitalize its C-130[9] program (AFRICOM, 2021). The U.S. is also providing enduring program support through infrastructure development, maintenance training, advisors, aviation parts, and other supporting equipment (Ibid).

Being the second largest to UN peacekeeping budget (covering 15% of its cost behind USA which covers 28%), China is expected to take a bigger role in the peace and stability of the Sahel region of West Africa after pledging to boost funding and troop numbers for United Nations missions (Nyabiage, 2020). China has emerged as an important economic, political but also security actor in Africa as a result of its 'Going out' policy[10] officially launched in 2001, and the massive roll-out of its signature connectivity strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)[11], since 2013 (Grieger, 2019). China has recently worked to establish itself as a serious security provider from its participation in non-combatant peace operations in 1998, to combat-ready peacekeepers in 2012 and lastly with the implementation of a formal defence collaboration through the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)[12] (Leigh, 2021). In June 2017, as other permanent members of the UN Security Council, China supported, including financially, the deployment of G5 Sahel anti-terrorist joint force (Ibid). Since 2016, France has also asked China to directly contribute financially to the G5 Sahel joint force, a request that was later

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[8] Such equipment includes 15 Osprea MK7 MAMBA armored personnel carriers, four Osprea MK7 MAMBA armored command vehicles, three Osprea MK7 MAMBA armored ambulances, two Toyota land cruiser ambulances, and four armored vehicle mechanic tool sets. Recently, it has also donated two C-130 to Niger to support Sahel Operations.

[9] Canadian Armed Forces / Royal Canadian Air Force Hercules aircraft.

[10] China's strategy to encourage its enterprises to pursue overseas investments and extend manufacturing outside China in order to gain access to natural resources and to open up new export markets for Chinese finished goods.

[11] Formerly known as One Belt One Road (OBOR) it is an ambitious economic development and commercial project that focuses on improving connectivity and cooperation among multiple countries spread across the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe. The strategy was adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 with the purpose of restoring the ancient Silk Route that connected the three continents.

[12] Started in 2000, the event promotes bilateral dialogue between China and Africa with the aim of furthering cooperation between China and its African counterparts.

reiterated by French President Macron during his China's visit in January 2018 (Cabestan, 2018). China's deputy permanent representative to the UN, Dai Bing, noted that "China will continue to provide financial and equipment support to the Joint Force through bilateral channels" (Xinhua, 2021).

Russia is a major supplier of arms to Africa. Africa accounted for 18% of all Russian arms exports between 2016 and 2020 (Clifford, 2021). Defense relationships between Russia and Africa are also growing. Regional security became one of the key topics discussed before and during the Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum, held in Sochi on October 23–24, 2019 (Sukhankin, 2019). Specifically, the Permanent Secretary of the G5 Sahel, Maman Sambo Sidikou, expressed his hope that at a certain point Russia would be involved, since "the region is unable to deal with this [terrorism] on its own" (Sukhankin, 2020). By the end of 2018, Russia signed at least 19 military-technical cooperation agreements with several countries in sub-Saharan Africa. There were also new developments in 2019 pertaining to the G5 Sahel. Specifically, Russia strengthened its cooperation with Mali where ministers of defense of both countries signed an agreement on strengthening cooperation in the realm of military affairs and security.

There have been concerns that Russia is taking advantage by filling the void by the withdrawal of Western forces. In this case the concern is whether French military drawdown in Mali, once Operation Barkhane ends, will create another vacuum filled by Russian paramilitary units that have been extending their influence all over the African continent? (Lasserre, 2021). According to several reports, Russia has agreed to push the Wagner mercenaries[13] into the entire Sahara-Sahel, including the G5 Sahel group (Klomegah, 2021). The Russian foreign ministry, Sergey Lavrov, confirmed reports that Mali plans to hire contractors with the Wagner Group to fight extremism in the Sahel, but insisted that the private company is not operating under Moscow's control (Africa Times, 2021).

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[13] Also known as PMC Wagner, is a Russian paramilitary organization also described as a private military company/contracting agency whose contractors have reportedly taken part in various conflicts including Syrian civil war and has established itself in most African countries including Angola, CAR, Congo, Guinea, Mozambique, South Africa and Sudan.

Criticisms and Shortcomings of International Interventions

Since its creation in 2017, G5 Sahel Joint Force – with the help of international actors – has conducted numerous operations against terrorist organizations. Its military activities in the Barkhane in the Liptako-Gourma, the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, held back the terrorist groups (Dieng, 2021). But these are not significant accomplishments given the magnitude of the challenge. The G5 Sahel Joint Force has been criticized of being slow partly because cooperation between Sahelian countries has long been difficult due to inter-state tensions and the fragile relations of distrust that comes with this. For example, Mauritania often accuses Mali of not being harsh with terrorist groups. Lack of financial resources remains one of the main obstacles to force's capacity to operate fully. Four of the task force members (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger) are among the ten poorest countries in the world (Ibid). This has made the Joint Force reliant on external actors for resources, military training and assistance to conduct military operations. This dependence appears to diminish the joint force's autonomy and self-sufficiency, which suggests external support will be needed for the joint force for an indefinite period (Sandes, 2021).

Despite the urgency of this threat, it has been challenging for states to find appropriate answers. Moreover, past and current responses of states in the region as well as their international partners (often holding competing geopolitical, economic and military interests in the region) have also so far proven largely uncoordinated (Boutellis & Mahmoud, 2017). With the deployment of UN peacekeepers, a United States-backed counterterrorism operation, two ongoing missions of the French special forces and the formation of the G5 Sahel Force, the region is going through a new wave of militarization in a constant escalation during the last seven years that has resulted in an increasing number of victims, law-enforcement (sometimes in controversial extra-judicial processes) and border enforcement with patrolling and checkpoints (Maïga & Adam, 2018).

Over the past decade, efforts to address the problem of violent extremism have mainly involved a series of security measures largely inspired by the fight against terrorism. But experience has shown that such strategies are inadequate and at times fuel further extremism (Ibid). This experience motivated the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism issued by the

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UN Secretary-General on 24 December 2015. During the presentation of this plan, former Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon emphasized that 'many years of experience have proven that short-sighted policies, failed leadership, heavy-handed approaches, a single-minded focus only on security measures and an utter disregard for human rights have often made things worse' (UN Secretary-General 2016).

Repressive security measures are indeed often counterproductive and expands defence and security budgets to the detriment of education and social sectors, while reducing the space available in society to engage in necessary dialogue. The lack of a robust post-military strategy including plans for defectors, for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), and for reconstruction has also proven to be a significant challenge as the vacuum is often filled by violent extremist organizations and criminal networks. In addition, civilian 'vigilantes' have formed and often led the fight against violent extremist groups. For instance, the Civilian Joint Task Force (C-JTF) in North-East Nigeria has been a key element in the fight against Boko Haram. However, many fear that these vigilante groups could easily become the next Boko Haram if significant efforts are not made to change their conditions (International Crisis Group, 2017). Given colonial history, Sahelians are suspicious of France's military engagement in the region.

There have been accusations and complaints over France's arrogance and hidden agendas. However, there are also current reasons to question the relevance and effectiveness of the model of military cooperation. Many Sahelians, especially Malians, don't understand why Barkhane's mandate focuses on counterterrorism and not the protection of civilians (Moderan & Hoinathy, 2021). Moreover, Samuel Ramani (2020) argues that France's unilateralism and the United States' wavering are destabilizing the Sahel and creating an opening for Russia and China in the region. Despite the ongoing intense debates concerning growing violence in the Sahel region, one vital contributor to insecurity in the Sahel is often ignored: the crisis of international governance. Instead of taking constructive steps to address the array of challenges facing the Sahel, great powers and regional institutions are exacerbating the region's problems (Ramani, 2020).

Due to their intense focus on geostrategic competition and willingness to equate authoritarianism with stability, great powers such as France, the United States, China, and Russia, have actually perpetuated conditions, such as corruption and fragile state institutions, that contribute to rising political violence in the Sahel (Ibid). Despite these military successes, France's approach to counterterrorism in the Sahel has also exacerbated the region's security crisis. Although French military operations rely on U.S. intelligence and logistical support from some 800 U.S. personnel deployed in Niger, France's preference for unilateralism in West Africa has restricted its ability to work with the U.S. on developing a regional security strategy. In 2017, France initiated a U.N. motion calling for a 5,000-man African security force to be deployed to the Sahel but rankled U.S. officials by apparently not consulting with them on its plans (Ramani, 2020). On the other hand, the wavering commitment of the United States to stabilizing the Sahel has exacerbated France's overextension and reduced the international community's ability to combat extremism in West Africa. In spite of bipartisan opposition and objections from French Defense Minister Florence Parly, U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper hinted strongly of a reduction of U.S. counterterrorism forces in the Sahel region (Ibid).Although France's unilateralism and the United States' disengagement have been the most significant contributors to the crisis of security governance in the Sahel, Russia and China's approaches to regional security have also worsened this problem.

Russia's permissive approach to arms contracts in West Africa reinforces France's efforts to make autocracy the antidote to extremism (Ramani, 2020). Russia's military cooperation agreements with Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger and Mali pay no heed to the human rights situation there. In June 2019, Russia's military cooperation agreement with Mali might have resulted in the training of Malian militants that orchestrated a coup in Mali in 2018 (Ibid). There are also reports that the U.S. government trained the coup plotters in Mali (Gramer & Hadavas, 2020; Paquette, 2020; Seymour & Theodore, 2020). As for Beijing, in spite of its desire to extend the Belt and Road Initiative into the Sahel, China has only offered ambiguous rhetorical solidarity with the G-5 bloc's counterterrorism goals.

The unstable Sahel region is a strategic point for Beijing's trade ambitions in Africa. Chinese investments in the region are vast – spanning Senegal, Niger, Chad, Nigeria and Sudan, with recent advances in Burkina Faso after it switched diplomatic allegiance from Taipei to

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Beijing (Nyabiage, 2020). Although China has significant peacekeeping deployments in Africa, Richard Gowan, UN director for the International Crisis Group, said: "Beijing appears cautious about putting its military personnel in too much danger after some of its peacekeepers were killed in Mali and South Sudan in 2016." Gowan said that while France and the G5 countries carried out counterterrorism operations in the Sahel, China limited itself to the lower-risk "blue helmet" peacekeeping missions (Ibid). Benabdallah (2020) argues that the US foreign policy had been oriented towards countering China in Africa, and elsewhere, so there was anxiety in Washington over Beijing's military and security engagement. "[But] African governments, AU officials and regional institutions all seem to take a pragmatic approach to China's involvement," Benabdallah said. "They see that the resources provided by China are critical and they welcome them for the most part.

Isabelle Lasserre (2021) is very critical of Russia's engagement in the Sahel. Eager to regain the influence the former USSR had in Africa, she argues, Russia has signed partnerships with around twenty African countries. She went further arguing that Russian paramilitary, sometimes hiding behind front companies linked to Wagner, provide training for local armies, protection for high level officials, security for precious mines like gold, silver or uranium, and even carry out combat missions. In exchange, they get contracts allowing them to exploit natural resources (Lasserre, 2021). It does so with the intetion of filling the void left by the West and it does so in tandem with Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey (Ibid). Experts and researchers have, thus, concluded that Russia has set out to battle against neo-colonial tendencies of France and stepping also to join "the scramble for resources" in Africa. It is argued that the arrival of Russian mercenaries would jeopardize other external commitment to fighting terrorism, and limit development assistance from international organizations (Klomegah, 2021). Research Professor Irina Filatova, for example, noted that Russia's influence in the Sahel has been growing just as French assistance and influence has been dwindling, especially in the military sphere. She thus advices Africa that when choosing friends, it would be better to deal directly with the government, than with (Russian mercenaries) Wagner group, whose connection with the government was hardly recognized (Ibid).

Way Forward

Traore (2019) asked questions like "why the African strategy has failed to overcome the jihadists in the Sahel? and Why do jihadist organizations still plan and conduct deadly coordinated operations in the Sahel, despite the presence of international military forces under the banner of the United Nations' Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA), local troops and French forces?"

In giving answers/solutions to these questions he proposed a strategic response to the problem which is an African-led effort, backed by the international community. As highlighted, the application of military force in coercive actions alone will not produce long-lasting effects. To achieve progress against Violent Extremism Organizations, African countries, with the support of the international community, must consider projecting military force to support and span across the realms of the information and economic instruments of power.

In the Sahel, with very few exceptions, regional and international responses to armed jihadism have largely been state-centric and security-driven that have not gone deep enough in acknowledging and tackling those social, governance, and economic deficits underlying the region's problem. The presence of conflicts, coupled with an endemic poor governance, further delegitimizes the authority of states in the eyes of the most affected communities that are in turn increasingly turning to religious and local leaders.

Against this backdrop, policy makers and practitioners should place local communities at the heart of their intervention by shifting their attention to local institutions and acknowledging, formalizing, and reinforcing their authority while working to make them more inclusive. Inequalities, tensions, and grievances should therefore be addressed to cut off the lifeblood of radical ideologies while at the same time repairing the eroded social fabric to restore what is perhaps the most efficient prevention mechanism against violent extremism (Ilardo, 2020).

The United Nations Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism called for the development of multi-sector and multidisciplinary regional and national plans to address the root causes of this phenomenon.

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In the Sahel-Sahara, many existing regional organizations are already addressing this issue (including G5 Sahel, the LCBC, ECOWAS, and the AU) in addition to several other international organizations and partners (Ilardo, 2020). It is therefore vital to ensure consistency in the efforts of these different regional frameworks and to ensure that they are mutually reinforcing.

But most importantly, the development of national, sub-regional or regional plans of action to prevent violent extremism (rather than simply top-down, state-centric approaches) can provide opportunities to build inclusive responses, based on shared action involving institutions, citizens, and communities. This will help to bring about alternatives that in turn can provide innovative and positive responses. The different levels of action included in these plans must also be adapted to the specific local contexts and perceptions but should not ignore the regional and global context (Traore, 2018).

Beyond the state itself, consultative structures including senior citizens, religious leaders, traditional authorities, women, youth, political parties, and the private sector can also play an important role together. Where they exist, they could be strengthened, and elsewhere they could be created to inform national, regional, and international policies on the prevention of violent extremism. Such initiatives should contribute to promoting a culture of dialogue and a dialogue of cultures. Most states are already involved in sub-regional and regional coordination structures[14], allowing them to work together to strengthen policies generally aimed at both countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism (African Union, 2018). But beyond the inter-governmental structures, spaces for networking and uniting citizen initiatives are lacking at the local and transnational levels. Support is needed to help citizens develop such structures and have a role in dialogue with states as well as regional and international authorities and organisations.

Moreover, research and analysis on the phenomenon of violent extremism and its underlying drivers remain dominated by Western narratives espoused by certain states. It is

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[14] For example, the G5 Sahel, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU), and the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) revived by the creation of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to fight Boko Haram.

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therefore essential to capitalise on, build on, and support local scientific research on the phenomenon of violent extremism and to help ensure its results are disseminated and taken into account in the development of national and regional policies. Such local research should also play a role in sharing best practices and lessons learned at the national, regional, and international levels, including for instance through regional centres of analysis.

Participants in the regional conversations nonetheless acknowledged the role and central responsibility of states in prevention, including through soundly managing public affairs and focusing on the management of diversity. This can be done by creating inclusive institutions, establishing a better balance between preventive approaches and security-oriented responses, and respecting the rule of law and human rights. This also applies to policies states are required to develop when faced with returnees. The challenge is to strike a balance between holding perpetrators accountable and repairing the damage done to some of them, their families and communities from which they hail, while recognizing that much of this social malignancy is largely the result of failed or misguided public policies and the abuse of power by state actors. It is therefore necessary to get states to reconcile the legacies of these policies and address the trust deficits that they have spawned.

Changing current approaches indeed also implies taking stock of the limitations and failures of policies at various levels i.e., international, regional, and national. The process of developing such plans can be an opportunity to contribute to relations between the governing and the governed, supporting inclusive dialogue at all levels.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite regional and multinational military efforts carried alongside the G5, terrorism remains rampant in the Sahel. Additionally, security forces in the region have been accused of human rights abuses and their efforts have so far failed to stop the proliferation of terror groups and killings in the region. Since 2017 there have been a seven-fold increase (700%) in violent incidents with a 44% rise in attacks in 2020 which resulted to the loss of lives of nearly 7000 people many of them were civilians (ABC News, 2021).

Close to 10 years after the French military intervention pushed al-Qaida affiliated fighters out of northern Mali, the Sahel region continues to make headlines with the world's fastest growing Islamist insurgency and one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises. Across the region, insecurity and socio-political instability continue to reach new heights. Yet, unrelenting setbacks in the fight against terrorism are undermining political support for international actors within a region where, in words of Kamissa Camara (2021), a donor "traffic jam" is currently at play. For these reasons, a change in international policy toward the Sahel is not only necessary, but it has become inevitable.

Given the scale and nature of the terrorism problem in the Sahel, special forces will achieve very little if their activities are not part of a broad, comprehensive strategy. Unfortunately, such a strategy is lacking (Shurkin & Bernard, 2021). No short-term technical approach can overcome or compensate for the need for good governance and inclusiveness to support the development of common preventive responses. However, these responses may be in jeopardy if care is not taken to guard against a further securitization of responses as the ongoing military campaigns to eradicate the Islamic State and related groups rage on, altering the pressing need to address the local and global peace, governance, and development deficits at the root of their emergence.

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