



Quick Fix or Quicksand? Implementing the EU Sahel Strategy

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Introduction

»» The implementation of the EU *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel*¹ has coincided with dramatic changes in the region. Shifts in the Sahel's geopolitical configuration – especially after the Libya conflict – have pushed the EU to recalibrate its implementation plans better to fit the transforming context. However, changes in the strategy's geographical orientation and policy approach have been neither consistent nor flexible enough. The concerns that underpinned the design of an EU strategy for the region included threats from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and transnational criminal activities in the region's ungoverned spaces. The establishment in early 2012 of a *de facto* theocracy in Mali by a coalition of radical Islamist groups linked to AQIM has greatly exacerbated those initial concerns.

Far from being a remote outpost abutting the EU's outer neighbourhood, a reconfigured Sahel is now a functional part of the reshaped post-Arab spring North Africa. With many Sahelian states faced with worsening insecurity and a declining regional capacity to address the potential negative spill-over effects, the need for effective EU re-engagement cannot be over-emphasised. EU interests in the region include the security of key energy suppliers,² trans-Saharan gas pipelines³ and associated commercial interests,⁴ as well as curtailing clandestine migration and tackling latent threats to contiguous EU territories⁵ and Europe's mainland. However, by initially focusing the Sahel Strategy on the weakest regional states like Mali, Niger and Mauritania – to the neglect of Nigeria and Algeria, the region's two pivotal players – the EU incurred a serious geostrategic error. Recent developments have highlighted the limits of European action without a coherent engagement of regional powers.

This paper analyses four interlinked sets of challenges facing the implementation of the Sahel Strategy. The first part looks at the EU's shifting approach to the region, aimed at reconciling policy inconsistencies and geographical imbalances. The second section analyses the crisis in Mali following the Western intervention in Libya and its dampening effects on cooperation among Sahelian states. Third, the paper examines how the limited role originally envisaged for Nigeria and Algeria became a critical missing piece that constrained the strategy's impact. Lastly, this paper offers some thoughts on how the EU can recalibrate its engagement better to reflect the region's new geopolitical realities.

1. Henceforth, the 'Sahel Strategy', the EU *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel* region was published in September 2011. Available at: http://eeas.europa.eu/africa/docs/sahel_strategy_en.pdf

2. Algeria, the home country of AQIM's core leadership, is a strategic energy supplier to the EU.

3. For example, Nigeria's Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) supplied through trans-Saharan pipelines is projected to grow in importance as the EU seeks to diversify energy sources.

4. These include DESERTEC, the €400 billion solar energy project based largely in the Sahara desert with an estimated capacity to provide 17 per cent of Europe's power by 2050. See *The Africa Report*, September 2012, p.18.

5. The Spanish enclaves (Ceuta and Melilla, both bordering Morocco), Spain's Canary Islands, and several Mediterranean islands belonging to EU member states are all within close proximity to territories directly impacted by conflict and instability in the Sahel.

I. The EU approach: integrating development and security

»» The Sahel Strategy argues that allied terrorist and criminal groups in the Sahel represent immediate and longer-term risks to European interests because of their growing ability to take advantage of weak state presence and other prevailing conditions in the region, including ‘extreme poverty... frequent food crises, rapid population growth, fragile governance, corruption [and] unresolved internal tensions’.⁶ To address these challenges, it advocates policy interventions that better integrate the development and security dimensions of EU policies. In March 2011, the EU Foreign Affairs Council adopted the Sahel Strategy and welcomed the identification of three ‘core’ countries – Mali, Mauritania and Niger – as its primary focus.⁷ AQIM’s recent consolidation in northern Mali is pushing the EU to pay closer attention to this evolving security threat alongside the longer-standing governance and development challenges in the Sahel, and engage through its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

One year into the implementation of the Sahel Strategy and amidst a deteriorating security and humanitarian outlook in the Sahel, the Foreign Affairs Council meeting of 23 March 2012 restated the Council’s commitment to helping address the challenges facing the region. From the outset, the strategy relied on a poorly defined geographic framing that barely reflects the complex interactions among interlinked conflict systems spanning the Sahel. As one commentator notes, ‘the EU tends to consider the Sahel as an issue with a vertical orientation from North to South. Indeed, one can stretch the region from Northern Niger to Nigeria [through] Chad’.⁸ In addition, development instruments have been disproportionately emphasised in the EU’s implementation efforts to the detriment of more security-based responses adapted to the mounting insecurity in the region.

The drivers of recent changes in the Sahel are manifold. Libya’s regional role has been transformed post-Muammar Gaddafi; Nigeria’s Boko Haram (BH) is now a major player in Sahelian insecurity, whilst Algeria is staunchly opposed to EU security involvement in the area. Europe’s regional engagement has also been selective: regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) have only been gradually drawn into implementation efforts. At the same time, Mali’s destabilisation and the establishment of Islamist rule in its northern territories undercut the EU’s hope that democratic stability will undergird partnership with fragile Sahelian states. The increasingly fluid regional environment, in which both state authority and regional cooperation have been weakened, challenges

6. Sahel Strategy, op. cit., p.2.

7. Council Conclusions on an EU *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel*, 21 March 2011, para. 3.

8. Béangère Rouppert, ‘The European Strategy for Development and Security in the Sahel: Rupture or Continuity?’, Switzerland: GRIP, 16 January 2012, p.12.

key assumptions underlying the Sahel Strategy. As the EU contemplates with regional partners and other stakeholders steps to re-establish the rule of law and rebuild the foundations of *de facto* statehood in the weakest Sahelian states, it is vital that lessons are learnt from the latest developments.

As part of recent EU efforts to adapt to the new realities on the ground, a Task Force Sahel charged with evaluating the performance of the strategy was set up by the European External Action Service (EEAS). It recommends ways in which the strategy could be improved to deliver concrete results on the ground. Among its members are the EU counter-terrorism coordinator, relevant geographic desks, the military planning staff and representatives of the Instrument for Stability (IfS). The group meets informally about two or three times each month. The recently created position of Regional Coordinator for the Sahel also plays a key role in this process.

During the Swedish (2009) and Spanish (2010) presidencies of the EU, a series of fact-finding missions were dispatched to Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Algeria. A second round of visits was organised to Nigeria, the AU and ECOWAS. In conceiving the strategy, however, neither ECOWAS nor other regional organisations had direct policy inputs as such.⁹ Whilst the EU itself stresses regional ‘ownership’, the fact-finding missions did not fully compensate for the lack of a genuine EU dialogue with regional states on the strategy as a way of taking on board their specific concerns. Recent efforts to more closely involve regional organisations reflect the EU’s growing appreciation of interconnected regional dynamics, the cost of uncoordinated efforts, and the dampening effect these are having on the EU’s modest development cooperation gains. Reflecting the renewed instability in the Sahel after the Libya conflict, the strategy’s geographical focus has also been expanding, albeit reactively.

In September 2011, the EU began prioritising governments’ commitment to efforts to tackle terrorism in the Sahel as a determining criterion for funding allocations. Mauritania and Niger have been closely courted as a result. The amount committed has also increased, including through the European Development Fund (EDF), which granted an additional sum of €150 million to the end of 2013.¹⁰ This increase was partly aimed at fostering the operational involvement of local stakeholders. The Red Cross for example has undertaken implementation contracts on behalf of the EU in northern Niger.

Last year, the EU estimated that approximately €650 million of its existing or pipeline aid allocations were directly contributing to the objectives of the Sahel Strategy.¹¹ Yet, direct investment in security sector reform (SSR) in the region was not prioritised until recently. In parts of the Sahel Strategy, rule of law and law enforcement challenges were conflated with SSR challenges.¹² The unclear EU perspective on security constrained European field activities. Major difficulties emerged in terms of recruiting experienced personnel to dangerous frontline roles without adequate security.¹³ Progressive adaptations are however allowing the EU gradually to address these gaps.

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9. This especially sits at odds with the strategy’s declared aim of strengthening African responsibility and ownership. See Sahel Strategy, op. cit., p. 4.

10. Ibid., p.8.

11. Ibid., p.8.

12. Ibid., section 2 on ‘Challenges’, p.3.

13. Interview at the EU Delegation to Niger, 11 November 2011.

In this sense, SSR efforts have emerged as a policy priority to bridge the security shortfalls in the strategy's initial approach. A civilian CSDP mission was deployed to Niger in the summer of 2012. EUCAP SAHEL Niger is expected to last two years with an estimated budget of around €8.7 million in its first year. The mission is mandated to strengthen the capacity of Niger's security forces to counter the threats of terrorism and organised crime via training, mentoring and advising. AQIM's repeated attacks on European citizens and interests in Niger have long demonstrated the government's weak capacity vis-à-vis the Islamist threat.¹⁴ Following the Niger deployment, the Foreign Affairs Council of 15 October requested that the planning of a military CSDP operation be pursued, with a view to deploying 150 senior military trainers to help reorganise the Malian army.

These country-based deployments are modelled on the well-tested SSR format, rather than an armed counter-terrorism or stabilisation mission.¹⁵ However, there are concerns that the missions are too small to be effective. EUCAP SAHEL Niger will comprise fifty international staff at full operational capacity, most of them civilian judicial and police experts embedded within the EU delegation. Because of their limited scale and piecemeal approach, it is also not clear exactly how the Niger mission and the envisaged operation in Mali will link up with enforcement actions currently being contemplated by sub-regional actors within ECOWAS.

Despite the Task Force Sahel's efforts, serious blind spots continue to limit the impact of the strategy. One major challenge has been the difficulty for the EEAS to fulfil its expected coordination role of the overall European presence and action in the region. In particular, France and to a lesser extent a number of other EU member states with important interests in the region often operate in parallel to the Union. In France's case, the country has been trying to 'Europeanise' its efforts by pushing for CSDP missions in Niger and Mali. Nevertheless, France's role in the Sahel has also been one of the greatest obstacles to securing comprehensive regional backing for the EU strategy. For example, Algeria distrusts France and oftentimes equates French positions to those of the EU. Beyond Algeria, France's hyperactive diplomatic role in the Sahel, its ubiquitous and often complex ties to various regional actors and its role as virtual spokesperson for the EU in the high politics of Malian crisis diplomacy at the UN Security Council (UNSC) have entrenched this impression.

It is also questionable whether the EU's broad objectives in terms of weakening extremist forces and helping to rebuild regional states' capacities have been helped by specific actions of individual EU member states. This is illustrated for example by the controversial Spanish-Italian decision to pay ransom to Islamist insurgent groups in northern Mali in July 2012 to secure the release of aid workers kidnapped by Al-Qaeda affiliated groups. Both the EEAS and the Commission remained silent amidst criticisms of the ransom payment. It would appear that regardless of the concerted efforts going into the strategy implementation, the long-running search for a coherent EU approach to the Sahel continues.¹⁶

14. 'EUCAP SAHEL Niger', EU Common Defence and Security Policy (CSDP), 16 Jul 2012. Available at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/eeas/security-defence/eu-operations/eucap-sahel-niger?lang=en>

15. The EUNAVFOR deployment to tackle piracy off the Somali coast and the Indian Ocean is distinct in that it is a sea-based, enforcement operation to complement other multinational forces present in the Indian Ocean.

16. Thomas Renard, *Terrorism and other Transnational Threats in the Sahel: What Role for the EU?*, Brussels: Centre on Global Terrorism Cooperation, 2010, p.5.

The fallout from the conflict in Libya also remains a key challenge to the strategy's functional coherence on the ground. The AU has been proven right in warning against the security implications of the campaign in Libya on the Sahel region. A related but largely unanticipated side-effect of the Libya campaign is the dampening effect that growing instability has had on regional cooperation. The latter has plummeted to a new low since the outbreak of the Malian impasse and the regional division created in its wake.

II. The 'core countries' of the Sahel

»» The Sahel Strategy confronts major challenges in terms of the complexity of the region, the divergent approaches of key players to Mali's crisis, and the EU's slow pace of adjustment to the new realities on the ground. Whilst the Sahel Strategy hinges on improved regional cooperation to make a real difference, it has papered over the widening regional cracks, particularly since the Libya conflict. Meaningful cooperation among local and international actors in the Sahel is now arguably at the lowest it has been in recent decades. This situation is not helped by the EU's failure to link the strategy to existing regional initiatives or explicitly complement them. Fragmented regional responses to challenges in the Sahel are therefore compounded by European as well as regional actors' actions.

In truth, divisions in the Sahel have deeper roots connected to the region's realities. First, assessments of the security threats facing the region have long been dominated by the concern over AQIM. However, understandings of the threat and needed responses often diverge.¹⁷ Second, Algerian reticence undoubtedly remains a problem for the EU but Algiers' single-mindedness on crisis management in Mali is only one of the many challenges. General distrust among regional actors is compounded by the lack of capacity and vision among the weakest states.

2.1. Mali's crisis: new crucible of instability

Mali is at the epicentre of the reshaped Sahel in the wake of the Libya conflict. Strategic calculations and actor configurations are being redefined. Arms and militant flows have exacerbated existing insecurities in states like Niger and Mauritania, but the most devastating effects have been visible in Mali.¹⁸ The EU's significant investment there has not been rewarded. Mali received substantial aid allocations under both the EDF and the IfS. This stood at €244 million at the end of 2011, by far the largest of all the three 'core' countries in the Sahel Strategy. Throughout 2011, the EU

17. Some analysts argue that besides posing a negligible extra-regional threat, AQIM's strength is overestimated by Western intelligence agencies. Some experts estimate AQIM's southern battalion at just about 300 fighters before the 2012 rebellion in northern Mali. See <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/07/20127119230807934.html>

18. The EU Council meeting of 22-23 March 2012 underlined its determination to support Sahelian countries in addressing the spill-over effects of the crisis in Libya.

complained about Bamako's lax attitude towards terrorism in the Sahel, but all the while expressing readiness to help restore the rule of law and extend central authority to contested zones in its north. Instead of the hoped for improvement, a January 2012 rebellion saw northern Mali fall to the control of a Taliban-like coalition of jihadists and nationalists. This development carries serious implications for the country, the region and the EU.

First, the scale and capacity of the rebel offensive led by the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA)¹⁹ is certainly unprecedented. Bolstered by sophisticated arms from Libya, the rebellion quickly overwhelmed Mali's under-equipped and demoralised army. The scale of the crisis also dwarfs the limited regional capacity for a military response. Most crucially, the Malian government's handling of challenges old and new has been incompetent. Whilst moderate Tuaregs have reached out to the central government in Bamako, the Malian military has maintained an uncompromising stance even though it lacks the capacity to impose a military solution in the north. This continues a long established pattern: in 2010, the government rejected offers from Tuareg rebel leaders to fight and expel AQIM from the north of the country. Bamako's lukewarm reception had undoubtedly been influenced by the long-standing distrust between the two sides.

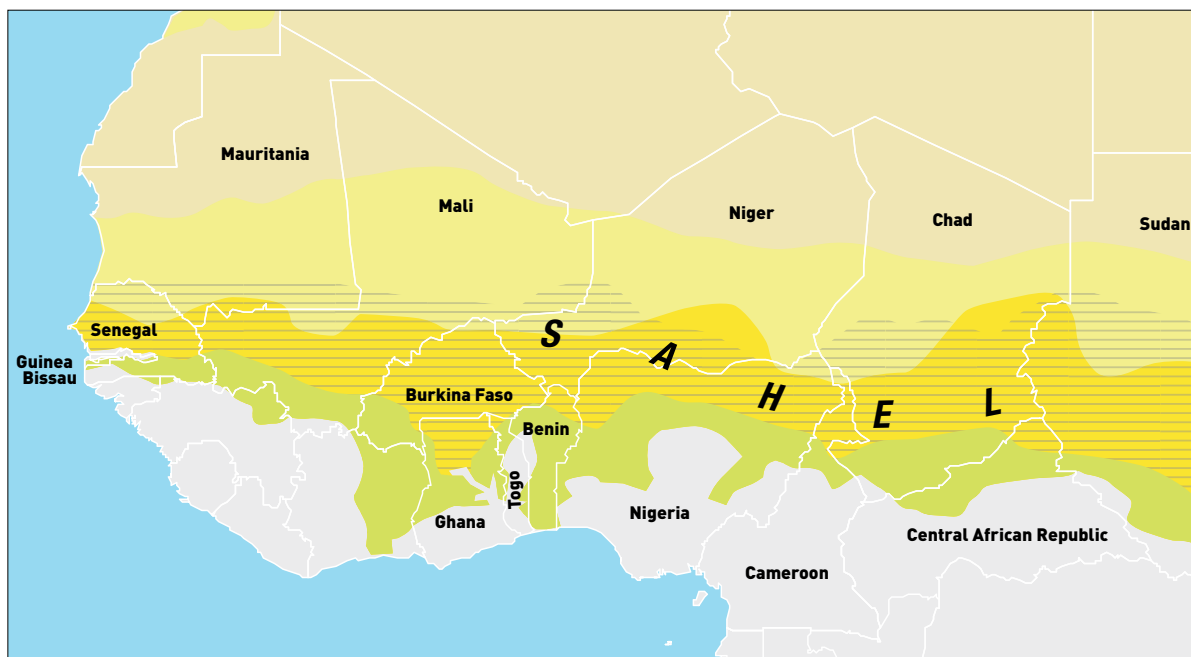
Second, with terror groups and separatist movements in the Sahel now resurgent and strengthened, the generalised insecurity is undermining needed cooperation among regional states. In particular, AQIM-allied groups have opportunistically ousted the Tuareg separatists to consolidate Islamist control over northern Mali.²⁰ AQIM is also proving increasingly adept at projecting influence across the region, from Libya's unstable south, through Mauritania and Niger to Nigeria's volatile northern fringes. Previously marginal or little known groups such as the Ansar Deen and Nigeria's Boko Haram have therefore gained strength on the back of the Malian upheaval. These developments have further complicated the EU's ability to master the terrain.

Third, regional and international responses to Mali's territorial disintegration are inchoate and potentially worsening insecurity levels. As AQIM evolves from a local group to the *de facto* government, ruling an enclave the size of France in northern Mali, huge implications are emerging for the Sahel Strategy's implementation. Mali's state institutions have been strained by the multi-level political and military crisis, challenging the strategy's focus on working with and strengthening state actors in the region. Whilst EU non-humanitarian aid to the country was suspended in the aftermath of a 21 March military coup in the capital, the gradual resumption of development cooperation is essential to shore up social service delivery and the fragile new transitional administration.

Regional diplomatic efforts have meanwhile failed to make a breakthrough. AQIM-affiliated groups such as the Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansar Deen have been able to use *de facto* control of territory in Mali's north as leverage in ECOWAS led diplomatic negotiations with insurgents. Fragmentation

19. The group's name in French is the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA).

20. The Al-Qaeda allied MUJAO and Ansar Deen aim to extend the *sharia* throughout Mali as a whole, as opposed to the MNLA's secularist objective of founding an Azawad home-state in Mali's north.



Note that the Cape Verde Islands, although not included in the map, are also defined as Sahel

among the insurgent groups in the north is also diminishing the prospects for a negotiated political settlement as the violent uprooting of MNLA nationalists by their erstwhile Islamist allies shows. The circumstances appear inauspicious for meaningful diplomatic progress. ECOWAS has therefore hedged its diplomatic efforts with parallel military preparations. The central plinth in ECOWAS's efforts is the deployment of a 3,300-strong regional intervention force to protect Mali's wobbly transitional government and to guarantee stability during the transition period. This potentially antagonises Algeria and its strong opposition to external military deployment in Mali. Promoting Malian SSR towards re-establishing a professional military force capable of leading the onslaught against Islamist rebels in the north has also emerged as an element of ECOWAS crisis management. On 12 October, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2071, which requested from ECOWAS a clear outline of the means and modalities for its Mali intervention.

2.2. The EU's shifting approach to Mali's crisis

The outbreak of crisis in northern Mali has exposed the weakness of EU efforts to integrate development and security policies towards the Sahel. The EU's piecemeal approach to crisis diplomacy in Mali contradicts the oft-repeated EU determination to play a more robust role in the region. The Malian crisis has significantly set back plans for the economic regeneration and political reintegration of northern Mali.

The Sahel Strategy envisaged increased funding for the EU's short-term crisis response through the IfS, alongside interventions geared to more long-term goals. The Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development in the North²¹ (to which the EU

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21. Officially known as the *Programme spécial pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement dans le nord du Mali* (PSPSDN), the 32 billion CFA franc (US\$ 69 million) programme has components including governance, security, development, communication and management.

contributes through the IfS) was launched in 2010 with a view to strengthening state functions. Initiatives under the programme, including plans to construct roads, have now been suspended.²² Its aim of providing alternative opportunities to northern youth most prone to recruitment by AQIM remains as valid as ever. Future efforts to re-launch the programme must tap into emerging insights on the diverse positions of different actors in the north. More targeted initiatives beyond state-led interventions are needed to strengthen groups such as youth leaders who have spoken out against violent Islamist extremism. Also, as shown by the divided reaction following the Tuareg led declaration of a Republic of Azawad in April 2012, opportunities do exist to identify secularists, moderates and Malian nationalists more amenable to the EU's vision of progress and development.

One of the EU's ongoing actions includes support for a recently created Northern Mali Network for Peace and Security. This brings together individuals from different communities, factions and professions. The network currently serves as the main point of contact for Malian authorities and international partners. The latter include the Swiss Embassy in Bamako, the EU and the United Nations Development Programme.

The intervention in Libya proved to be a serious humanitarian blind-spot for the EU. By January 2012, the more than 200,000 Malian Tuaregs who fled chaos in Libya arrived in food-vulnerable areas of the Sahel. This exacerbated humanitarian conditions and fuelled existing communal tensions in northern Mali. The EU has joined international efforts to address the serious food crisis in the Sahel by improving the area's long-term resilience. This presents a major opportunity for the EU to implement programmes with a clear development-security linkage.

In this respect, on 18 July the EU scaled up its assistance through the launch of the Alliance for Resilience in the Sahel initiative.²³ Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Nigeria are among several international and local partners and organisations involved.²⁴ EU funding was also increased by €40 million to bring the total response to the Sahel food crisis to €337 million. Whilst obviously still in need of traction, a rejuvenated Sahel Strategy could have significant value-added in the humanitarian field where the EU has unparalleled resources and expertise.

The Malian crisis now challenges the EU to move beyond its own self-image as a 'soft power' in the region. This might require the integration of a more robust military dimension into the EU policy mix, not least in support of a possible ECOWAS deployment. For the time being, as noted above, the planning of a CSDP military operation tasked with reorganising and training the Malian security forces is ongoing.

2.3. Niger and Mauritania: the fragile 'core'

In Niger, a national counter-terrorism strategy to tackle domestic insecurity and respond to crisis in the Sahel was finally implemented in October 2011. The strategy focuses on social and economic development in six of the country's eight northern

22. Interview with senior EU official, 8 March 2012.

23. This is also known in French as the *Alliance Globale pour l'Initiative Résilience* (AGIR).

24. 'Sahel food crisis – Commission scales up assistance and launches a Partnership for Resilience in Sahel', see <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/12/613&type=HTML>

regions.²⁵ Its five main areas of intervention are the strengthening of security of goods and persons, the creation of economic opportunities for the population, the improvement of the access to basic services (water, education, and health), the enforcement of local governance, and the integration of returnees from Libya, Nigeria, and Ivory Coast.²⁶

Nigerien President Mahamadou Issoufou has been at the forefront of efforts to drum up Western support for ECOWAS military action in Mali, stating poignantly on his tour of European capitals in June that Mali could become the next Afghanistan.²⁷ While his country welcomed the deployment of the civilian CSDP mission EU SAHEL Niger, the Nigerien president also argued that more should be done by the EU and others to help contain Mali's jihadist threat. Niger's disquiet is understandable for many reasons. Due to the proximity of conflict-affected areas, Niger has received a large influx of refugees. The discontent among its own Tuareg population is not dissimilar to the one that triggered the Mali conflict. Historically, Tuareg uprisings in both countries have tended to follow similar patterns. Moreover, Niger feels hemmed in by violent Islamist groups in both Nigeria and Mali and opposes Algerian rejection of ECOWAS intervention plans.²⁸

Since the ascension of Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz to the Mauritanian presidency in July 2009 and despite subsequent improvement in relations with Morocco, Algeria has been concerned about being outflanked or even encircled by its long-standing rival Morocco. For example, Mauritania's counter-terrorism crackdown of July 2010-February 2011 was met with Algerian ambivalence. Similarly, Algeria showed hostility towards the French-Nigerien joint operation in relation to the kidnapping of two young French citizens in 2011. To head off the risk of destabilisation from the Libya conflict, Mauritania has been committing resources to a Programme for the Prevention of Conflicts and the Consolidation of Social Cohesion (led by black Mauritanian returnees from Libya). This provides a vital opportunity for the EU to work with the government on several areas of internal policy that are key to greater domestic stability and wider security in the Sahel. Even then, Mauritania's regional position has often ranged from cooperation with Niger, through bristling tensions with Mali, to support for Algeria's obstruction of ECOWAS.

2.4. Burkina Faso

The EU's vision of Burkina Faso's role in its strategy implementation remains unclear. Not one of the original 'core' countries, it was nevertheless one of the four Sahelian states whose foreign ministers attended talks with the EEAS in December 2011. Burkina Faso's expanding role in Malian crisis diplomacy has pushed the country to the forefront of ECOWAS diplomatic initiatives. Its president, Blaise Compaore, was appointed by ECOWAS to be its chief mediator very early in the Mali crisis. The

25. Rouppert, op. cit, p.8.

26. Ibid., p.8.

27. 'Mali: Dangers of dealing with 'Afghanistan of West Africa', *BBC website*, published 13 June 2012. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18427541>

28. 'Mali an international terrorist base', *North Africa United*. Available at: http://www.northafricaunited.com/Northern-Mail-an-international-terrorist-base_a1691.html [Accessed on 27 August 2012].

Burkinabe foreign minister, Jibril Bassole, has also played a key role in the negotiations with insurgents in Mali.

Burkina Faso's bilateral cooperation with the EU and its member states has revolved mainly around development issues such as energy and electricity generation. Unlike the 'core' states, the EU acknowledged only that the strategy 'affects' Burkina Faso and Chad. At the same time, the EU Sahel Strategy recognises Burkina Faso's frontline role in combating terrorism in the region. A strip of Burkina Faso's northern territory is geographically within the Sahel zone, with a sizeable population of ethnic Tuaregs. Given the EU's recent refocus on rewarding Niger and Mauritania for 'best practices' on security, Burkina Faso has receded further into the background of EU aid priorities. Yet, some estimates now put the number of Malian refugees in Burkina Faso at around 62,000.

In addition, EU aid distributed to refugee camps in Burkina Faso has created tensions between refugees and locals – who also suffer from food shortages but receive no aid as they do not qualify as victims of a crisis. Meanwhile, outsiders have voiced concerns regarding Ouagadougou's expansive interpretation of its negotiating mandate. Some find it suspicious that Foreign Minister Bassole's dialogue with insurgents in Mali has excluded some groups, including MUJAO. He has instead pursued extensive discussions with Iyad Ag Ghali, leader of the Ansar Deen group. Arms supplies to MUJAO have also allegedly passed through Burkina Faso.²⁹ The French Ambassador has meanwhile voiced disquiet about the country's role in negotiating ransom payments. Such payments have risen in importance since the Islamist takeover in northern Mali.

The Spanish and Italian governments allegedly paid €15 million to militants in Mali for the release of three European hostages on 18 July 2012.³⁰ Critics doubt whether the Burkinabe foreign minister prioritises ECOWAS's or his country's views in these negotiations.³¹ Reasserting the strong historical ties between both countries, France has recently reaffirmed its role as 'facilitator' of Burkina Faso's lead role in regional crisis diplomacy. On 9 August, the UN secretary-general's special representative for West Africa, Said Djinnit, also endorsed Burkina Faso's role whilst cautioning that the country and its ECOWAS neighbours should embark on military intervention only at the request of Mali's government. To stimulate regional cooperation and partner effectively with the UN and regional organisations working to stabilise Mali, the EU must better engage with Ouagadougou.

29. 'Qui livre des armes au MUJAO?', *Jeune Afrique* 2695, 2-8 September 2012, p.7. Other sources pinpoint Qatar as the provenance of these arms. See *Africa Confidential* 53/18, 7 September 2012.

30. 'Three European hostages freed in Mali, FOR \$15m'. See <http://au.news.yahoo.com/world/a/-/world/14276733/three-european-hostages-freed-in-mali-islamists-say-ransom-paid/>

31. Justifying such suspicions, Burkina Faso pushed for a greater diplomatic role for Qatar in the Mali crisis, a position swiftly rebuffed by France. See *Africa Confidential* 53/18, op.cit.

III. Algeria and Nigeria: pivotal ‘outliers’ still missing

»» The limitations of a ‘core Sahel’ approach have become evident as Mali descends into chaos and the EU strategy has proved inadequate to nudge regional actors towards more coherent and effective cooperation. Success in the Sahel Strategy implementation requires that engagements with states, regional organisations and assorted grassroots stakeholders are complementary rather than exclusive. Dynamics in the ‘core’ Sahel cannot be easily separated from those in neighbouring states viewed as ‘outliers’. For too long, the EU’s distinction has rendered implementation of some aspects of the strategy difficult, particularly those requiring economic, security, humanitarian and governance cooperation within coherent regional frameworks. Without integrating meaningfully the pivotal ‘outliers’ as central players in the Sahel Strategy, European cooperation with regional actors including ECOWAS is likely to remain diluted and ineffectual.

3.1. Algeria: northern pivot

A reluctant interlocutor, Algeria remains one of the weakest links in the EU’s envisioning of regional coordination and collaboration in the Sahel. Despite the recent improvement in relations, EU-Algeria dialogue on the Sahel has yet to bear tangible fruit. Even after attending a presentation by Algeria on its Fusion and Liaison Unit (FLU), which coordinates security with neighbours, EU officials admit they remain unclear about the functioning of the unit.³² Given AQIM’s central role in promoting terrorism and radicalisation in the Sahel, the EU requires more than stinting cooperation from Algiers to make significant headway. AQIM has its roots in Algeria, which is also the country of origin of the organisation’s senior leadership.

The group has been a useful tool for Algerian geopolitics. For example, Algeria instrumentalises jihadist activities to extract military assistance and support from the US, especially since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. Algeria also uses AQIM to boost its regional prestige by posturing as a bulwark against terrorism in the Sahel. In reality, the country suffers very little from the direct effects of AQIM’s violence and criminality. Kabylie on the Mediterranean coast is the only part of Algeria in which the group maintains a latent operational presence.

Algeria’s insistence that dialogue and regional coordination exclude external powers like the EU is probably intended to create space for Algerian hegemonic projections and the consolidation of a sphere of influence over weaker states in the Sahel.³³ The country’s commitment to counter-terrorism has been repeatedly called into question. In northern Mali, for example, Algeria is seen as having played a double-game through its tolerance of

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32. See Rouppert, op.cit, p. 9. Algeria ostensibly runs the Fusion and Liaison Unit (FLU) on behalf of other Sahel states.

33. Laurence Aida Ammour, ‘The Sahara and Sahel after Gaddhafi’, *CIDOB Briefing* 44, January 2012.

low-intensity instability. This was ostensibly to prevent the oil exploration that adequate security conditions would permit. Algiers worries that the discovery of oil in Malian wells could deplete oil reserves on its own southern frontiers.³⁴

European suspicions of Algeria have also grown given the country's inconsistent policy towards the Islamist insurgents controlling northern Mali since early 2012. Iyad Ag Ghali, head of the Ansar Deen group affiliated to AQIM, is known to maintain communication lines with Algeria's intelligence service. Algiers supported only equivocally initial regional and international efforts to craft a regional military response towards restoring government control in Mali's north. For example, whilst Algeria officially deplors Islamist control over Malian cities such as Gao, where seven Algerian diplomats were kidnapped in April, Algiers has maintained its vehement opposition to ECOWAS's deployment of a stabilisation force there.

The sources of Algerian non-cooperation with the EU are as deep-seated as they are varied. In April 2010, Algeria established a Joint Military Command with Mali, Niger and Mauritania. This move, ostensibly to chart a common approach through the pooling of joint monitoring forces totalling about 75,000, was part of Algiers' attempt to curtail European security involvement. By the outbreak of the Malian crisis in 2012, participating states had yet to commit the needed troops. On 2 June 2011, Algeria led regional preparations for the fallout from the Libya conflict with a tri-border drill involving Mauritania and Mali, followed a week later by a joint Mauritanian-Malian attack against AQIM's supply camp in a forest near Segou, Mali.

In December 2011, Algerian instructors were sent to northern Mali even though Algeria had repeatedly voiced strong opposition to Mali's role in facilitating ransom payments to terrorists. Meanwhile, Mali and other regional states point to certain controversial Algerian policies. First, it was the Algerian intelligence service that drove Algerian jihadists into Mali's north. The same service has allegedly supported various Tuareg rebellions to counter Muammar Gaddafi's influence. In December 2010, Mali's President Toure, fearing a coup, removed Malian officers who were regarded as close to Algeria's intelligence service.

As noted above, Algeria seems keen to maintain perceptions of an ongoing threat of terrorism to further its own self-interests. Algeria's attitude towards AQIM units operating deep in the Sahel away from its capital could be seen as a midway strategy between Mali's evasive tactic and Mauritania's blunt confrontation. Even as the Sahel faces widening destabilisation, a meeting of the Arab Maghreb Union scheduled for October 2012 in Tunisia was postponed.³⁵ Lingering differences between Morocco and Algeria have held up plans for a Maghreb summit since leaders from across the region last met in 1994.

Algerian suspicion of EU intentions is further connected to historical animosities with France as a leading European state. As one analyst observed: 'Algeria boasts reserves estimated at \$230 billion. If France wants to play a role in the Arab world, it... knows full well that reconciliation with Algeria is an essential prerequisite. A more outward looking

34. Annette Lohmann, 'Who Owns the Sahara? Old Conflicts, New Menaces: Mali and the Central Sahara between the Tuareg, Al Qaida and organised crime', *Peace and Security Series* 5, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2011.

35. 'Maghreb summit risks another delay', *Al Magharebia*, 13 August 2012. Available at: http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2012/08/13/feature-01

and confident Algeria would have a very positive impact on the future of the North West African and broader West Mediterranean region. A key piece on the region's chessboard, at the age of 50, Algeria can master its future. Yet, the question remains open: would Algeria dare?³⁶ Indeed, Algeria's inconsistent positions on the Mali conflict have confounded many observers especially as the country's broader interests are better served by a stable Sahel.

As ECOWAS was working to secure the UNSC's authorisation for the use of force against Islamist groups in northern Mali, the Joint Military Staff Committee of the Sahel Region met in Mauritania on 11-12 July under Algerian leadership. The meeting gathered military chiefs from Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The declared aim of the meeting was to find a common solution to shared security problems in Mali and beyond, but it left out ECOWAS and other important diplomatic players like Senegal, Burkina Faso and Nigeria. Algeria also insists on the inclusion of all parties in diplomatic negotiations, including the Ansar Deen radicals led by Iyad Ag Ghali.³⁷ Yet, it is notable that under US pressure, Algeria appears to have been softening its stance as preparations for international military action in Mali shift into top gear.

3.2. Nigeria: southern pivot

The expansion of Boko Haram and the growing sophistication of its attacks have helped to crystallise the threats it poses not just to Nigeria itself but also to broader regional stability. Initially regarded as a wholly Nigerian phenomenon with little external connections, the group's involvement in combat operations in Mali has drawn Nigeria further into efforts to stabilise Mali and the broader Sahel.³⁸ Until early 2012, EU officials insisted Abuja was not a Sahel power.³⁹ Evidence of BH's growing involvement in Mali and Nigeria's direct exposure to negative security spill-overs is gradually changing that outlook. For Nigeria, Boko Haram's involvement in the conquest of Gao in northern Mali by Islamist groups represented a serious escalation.

Unlike Algeria, which has long pursued a successful strategy of confining AQIM to its southern fringes and northern Mali, BH's new found strategic depth in Mali and alliance with Al-Qaeda affiliated groups there exposes much of northern Nigeria to an existential terrorist threat. The country's perceived lack of counter-terrorism experience was evident in the disagreement with the US over proposals to classify BH as an international terror group.⁴⁰ To the extent possible, Nigeria seemingly prefers to keep responses to BH local, which in part explains its slowness to mobilise ECOWAS for military action in Mali. As the regional anchor state on the southern Sahel fringes, the case for a more proactive EU engagement with Nigeria on the Sahel Strategy could not be clearer. As Nigeria's multiple conflicts gradually become overlaid by the Islamist insurgency in the north, prudence dictates that Abuja must become more centrally involved in EU efforts to contain trans-border instabilities and contagions from Mali.



36. Francis Ghilès, 'Algeria 1962-2012: more questions than answers', *Opinión CIDOB* 154, 3 July 2012. Available at: http://www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/opinion/mediterraneo_y_oriental_medio/algeria_1962_2012_more_questions_than_answers

37. *Al Magharebia*, 16 July 2012.

38. Before Mali, the only sign of Boko Haram's possible international ambitions was the massive car bomb attack on UN headquarters in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, in 2011.

39. Interview with senior EU official, 24 February 2012.

40. 'Boko Haram: Jonathan under fresh US pressure', *The Guardian* (Nigeria) [Accessed on 29 July 2012].

The BH insurgency is rooted in local political dysfunction and economic grievances. Yet, evidence points to the emergence of logistical, ideological and operational outreach between Boko Haram and international jihadist groups. Recent Western intelligence assessments have further reinforced Nigerian concerns. In June 2012, the commander of the US military's Africa Command highlighted evidence pointing to operational cooperation between Boko Haram and Al Shabab militants in Somalia.⁴¹ In response, the EU has recently intensified its security engagement with Nigeria.

The EU has been conducting high-level dialogues with Abuja, including a meeting between the EU counter-terrorism coordinator and Nigeria's National Security Adviser in early March 2012. In addition, in February a Nigeria-EU dialogue was held in Abuja. However, the EU's narrow approach of using development aid to improve governance in Nigeria may need scaling up to address inequality and economic grievances in the north where BH has attracted sympathisers. Plans for a strategic partnership between Nigeria and the EU have also long been in the pipeline. Reactivating these plans for a structured and comprehensive strategic engagement is vital for both partners and for security in the Sahel. In spite of this, the needed urgency has not been demonstrated to date. The 2009 EU-Nigeria Joint Way Forward document merely restates broad joint undertakings such as the Joint Africa-EU Strategy. A more focused approach, which prioritises Nigerian issues as a basis for launching broader dialogues on Nigerian contributions to shared regional objectives including security, is needed.

Moreover, significant opportunities for scaling up current development engagements have not been fully explored. When Nigeria's absolute size and needs are considered, more generous economic exchanges with the EU are needed to reduce poverty substantially. As home to roughly one-sixth of Africans, focusing on challenges such as job creation, social welfare and effective public governance in Nigeria can go a long way to contributing to overall EU development cooperation success in Africa.

The Nigerian reaction to the Mali crisis and regional responses to Nigeria's Boko Haram threat are still evolving. In November 2011, Nigeria joined the Algerian-led FLU. Closer EU cooperation with Abuja and Algiers, accompanied by more robust support to ECOWAS, would give a strong boost to the Sahel Strategy and significantly improve regional cooperation. For example, Nigeria's Boko Haram militants were allegedly recruited by an Algerian, Khaled Bernaoui, for training in southern Algeria as early as 2006. Further, suspicion of BH presence in Lagdo (Cameroon) led to the closure of Cameroon, Chad and Niger's borders with Nigeria in January 2012. Chadian President Déby also visited Cameroon on 29 December 2011 to discuss cooperation against the Islamist threat. Shortly after, both countries implemented a common defence programme run by joint border security commissions.⁴² Highlighting the lack of a clear division of labour between the AU and sub-regional organisations, the government of Chad proposed sending its poorly equipped troops to Mali, sparking outcry from the country's opposition.⁴³

Because the long-mooted idea of African regional brigades remains a paper tiger,⁴⁴ an ad-hoc ECOWAS force drawn mainly from Nigeria will likely lead regional intervention in

41. 'Africa militant groups training fighters together and sharing funds, explosives', *Reuters* [Accessed on 26 June 2012].

42. Ammour, op. cit.

43. *Radio France International* (RFI) report, 20 August 2012.

44. 'Standing by to Standby: the African peacekeeping force with more problems than solutions', *The Daily Maverick* (South Africa), 14 August 2012.

Mali. If the Sahel Strategy is to have transformative effects, it must invest more directly and systematically in internal issues vital to Nigerian stability to strengthen the West African giant's hand better to fulfil a regional stabilising role.

IV. Resetting EU engagement

»» The inadequacy of the EU's focus on the 'core' states and the need to tackle challenges in the Sahel within a broader framework embracing both West Africa and the Maghreb have become evident. Uncertainties about how to bring Algeria and Nigeria fully on board therefore remain critical weaknesses in the strategy's implementation. Although the strategy's architects now acknowledge this is essential, suggestions along these lines were for long dismissed as distracting from the 'core' countries. Whilst closer engagement with Nigeria and Algeria has long been discussed at EU level,⁴⁵ it has not been effectively pursued or prioritised. Some studies have underlined the need to overcome mutual suspicion between the EU and Algeria as part of efforts to develop a meaningful engagement with the region's 'indispensable partners'.⁴⁶

Both Algeria and Nigeria are hegemons within the respective Maghreb and West African sub-systems bordering the Sahel. Increasingly, they both have direct interests in addressing security challenges there. Algeria feels that it possesses enough clout to unilaterally shape the Sahel's cooperative architectures.⁴⁷ Furthermore, EU prioritisation of the 'core' states unhelpfully closed avenues for a region mobiliser like Nigeria to lead ECOWAS into crisis management in the increasingly unstable Sahelian backyard.

ECOWAS's dense institutional links to affected states – the original 'core' of Mali, Mauritania and Niger, plus Burkina Faso, Senegal and Nigeria – would have justified involving the sub-regional body in the Sahel Strategy's design from the outset. Yet, notwithstanding the EU's goal to 'support the Sahel countries and their initiatives and not to substitute them',⁴⁸ substantive engagement with ECOWAS did not begin until well after the strategy had been drafted.

ECOWAS is regarded as one of the EU's privileged regional partners in Africa. Increasingly, it is benefiting from the EU's counter-terrorism assistance including on intelligence gathering and general capacity building. Qualifying projects have so far included the ECOWAS Peace and Security Project and the ECOWAS Drug and Crime Action plan, which together will receive €60 million in EU funding from 2012-2017. »»

45. EEAS presentation, Transatlantic Symposium on Dismantling Transnational Illicit Networks, Lisbon, 18 May 2011, p.6.

46. See Luis Simon, A. Mattelaer and A. Hadfield, 'A Coherent EU Sahel Strategy', Study for the European Parliament, DG External Policy, 2012, p.32.

47. Such region-organising ambitions are evident in Algerian-led frameworks like the Joint Military Command based in Tamanrasset and set up in 2009 to coordinate counter-terrorism cooperation between Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger.

48. EEAS presentation, op. cit., p.13.

Also, the EU has been supporting multilateral initiatives amongst regional actors including the Sahel Security College and the West Africa Police information system. In spite of these programmes the terrorist threat in the region has grown, leading to calls for a more robust EU presence. Specific proposals include an EU contribution to surveillance and air mobile assets to strengthen regional capacities.⁴⁹

Following the EU's decision to start planning for a CSDP mission to Mali, ECOWAS has stepped up requests for additional European military support. After high-level meetings on the sidelines of the General Assembly in September 2012, the UNSC moved towards authorising an ECOWAS intervention, arguably increasing the pressure for more muscular EU engagement either directly or through support for ECOWAS forces. Earlier in the crisis, the EU in a statement issued by the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy on 23 July had declared its support in principle for ECOWAS's military action.⁵⁰ The October Foreign Affairs Council invited the High Representative and the Commission to explore options for additional support, including in the field of planning, and the European Council on 19 October endorsed the principle of EU support to an international military force in the region. The EU should urgently move towards supporting ECOWAS's plans as part of a more coordinated, forward-looking engagement jointly to contain the Mali crisis. This can prove decisive, as ECOWAS itself has considerable experience in regional peace enforcement.

For ECOWAS, the insurgency in northern Mali has reached a critical unprecedented threshold for intervening militarily. ECOWAS's conditions for intervention include the existence of a conflict between its member states. Internal conflict occasioning a humanitarian disaster, a threat to peace or even mass atrocities such as large scale abuse of human rights could also be triggering factors. The Malian conflict though represents a watershed for ECOWAS which, unlike in its previous interventions, is seeking broad based international support including a UNSC authorisation to take action.⁵¹ Eventual Security Council approval would also create greater scope for ECOWAS collaboration with non-member states like Algeria, Morocco, Libya and Chad.⁵² It will also present opportunities to put to the test ECOWAS's nuanced and expansive interpretation of the principle of responsibility to protect (R2P). The regional body has tried to segment measures related to R2P into three distinct elements, including the responsibility to prevent, react and rebuild.

The Mali crisis and its potential regional ramifications strengthen the case for an ECOWAS led intervention with close EU backing. For example, one of the biggest threats to regional security and EU interests is a full scale alliance between state-backed narco-trafficking networks. This is already evident in the alleged collaboration between criminal organisations operating in West African states like Guinea Bissau

49. See for example, Simon, Mattelaer and Hadfield, *op.cit.*, p. 29.

50. 'EU ready to back African stabilisation force in Mali', *EUbusiness*, 23 July 2012. Available at: <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/mali-politics.hu8/>

51. Reflecting this effort, the African Union provided early endorsement for all of ECOWAS's decisions on Mali. See <http://news.ecowas.int/presseshow.php?nb=198&lang=en&annee=2012>

52. The UNSC resolution 2056 of 5 July 2012 expressed willingness to review ECOWAS's mandate request, but emphasised the need for sanctions to restore peace.

and jihadist groups in Mali.⁵³ Moreover, well calibrated EU incentives and pressures can encourage Algeria to engage more regionally, potentially kick-starting a barely existent ECOWAS-Algeria dialogue on regional security.⁵⁴

Over time, recalibrating the EU's engagement with ECOWAS could complement Algeria's influence in the Sahel. This is vital since Algeria's dominance of existing security arrangements with the smaller 'core' states has proved problematic. Suspicions of Algerian intent run deep among its contiguous neighbours. Left unaddressed, this risks stifling cooperation when decisive collaboration is needed. Part of the evidence lies in the Algerian insistence that the planned regional joint counter-terrorist force of about 75,000 men explicitly excludes the possibility of extra-regional involvement. More skilful EU engagement with regional powers such as Algeria and Nigeria and regional bodies like ECOWAS would provide voice and reassurance to smaller states whilst blunting the adverse effects of Algeria's asymmetrical power advantages and Nigeria's internal crises and distractions.

Conclusion

»» The EU Sahel Strategy has been slowly adapting to the rapidly changing dynamics of a very complex region. In spite of its shortcomings, it is gradually evolving into a project that could help mobilise fragmented regional actors around shared security objectives. A major challenge though remains for the EU in terms of how it can successfully engage all the important regional actors – ECOWAS, Nigeria and Algeria included – that are indispensable for a viable regional approach. The negative feedback loops connecting conflict systems at the 'core' and peripheral areas of the Sahel mean that more holistic EU approaches beyond narrow bilateral engagements are needed. The EU therefore needs proactively to harness the regional potential of key states like Nigeria and Algeria.

Inadequate geographical scope, unclear operational connection with wider regional frameworks and initial reluctance to consider a more serious and direct security commitment have all limited the strategy's impact. Unforeseen developments include the destabilising shockwaves from regime change in Libya and Mali's implosion. These have not been prevented by EU actions and have affected the smooth implementation of the strategy. The Sahel Strategy requires greater operational flexibility in order to respond to the evolving outlook, but adaptation is complicated by long standing coordination problems in the region.

53. See Ammour, *op.cit.*

54. Melanie Cathelin, 'EU's Africa policy after Lisbon', conference report, 18 October 2011, p.3. Available at: http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Conference_Report_EU_Africa_Foreign_Policy_FINAL.pdf

On the humanitarian front, the region will be better able to cope with its worsening humanitarian crisis if international assistance focuses on promoting meaningful resilience. The Libya conflict triggered massive displacements whilst diffusing arms and militants throughout the region. In early 2012, these displacements have in turn exacerbated long standing ecological vulnerabilities like food insecurity to create one of the worst humanitarian emergencies seen in the region in decades. Incipient international efforts to strengthen regional and local coping mechanisms, including through the EU-led Partnership for Resilience in the Sahel, must be more targeted. Such efforts have mostly failed to leverage the region's natural resilience capacities. Up-scaling investments in initiatives such as the Great Green Wall Initiative for the Sahara and the Sahel could help generate positive spinoffs to underpin community self-sustenance.

Actions by the FAO, the UN and others also risk failing the long term sustainability test unless experience and insights from the grassroots levels are more systematically taken on board. There is a need more clearly to synthesise the ground level perspectives from NGOs, communities, campaigners and experts to better inform external involvement in the management of the environment, agriculture, food security and climate change issues as key conflict drivers in the Sahel.

If the EU is to ultimately have a sustained impact in redressing interlinked challenges in this vast region bordering Europe's southern neighbourhood, it must vigorously pursue steps towards providing unprecedented levels of military support to ECOWAS and the region. At a minimum, this should involve committing serious military and logistical support to a regional force with a clear UNSC enforcement mandate. More immediately, EU funding to Mali suspended after the coup should be restored. Without it the country has no chance of breaking its deepening political impasse and it will not be able to halt the widening deterioration on both the political and security fronts. The October Foreign Affairs Council has conditioned resumption of aid on a political roadmap and tangible progress in the Malian transition. Yet, EU assistance to expedite the deployment of an international force to Mali offers one of the best hopes of overcoming the stalemate in Mali's ruling triumvirate of junta leader Amadou Sanogo, transitional President Dioncounda Traore and Prime Minister Cheik Modibo Diarra.

To be sure, Mali's crisis is of a different kind – and potentially of a far greater dimension – than West Africa has experienced so far. As such, containing its potential regional contagion should now rank as a top EU priority. As global jihadist involvement emboldens regional insurgent groups like BH, swathes of the region risk serious destabilisation from Senegal through Niger to Chad. At the same time, national and regional security response capacities appear grossly insufficient. Moreover, the potential danger of a geopolitical power rivalry between regional players like Algeria and ECOWAS, precisely when closer regional cooperation is needed, must encourage the EU more closely to bind both actors to the Sahel Strategy implementation efforts. The EU should therefore better target its political dialogue and financial leverage to push major regional stakeholders towards harmonising their often fragmented political, diplomatic and military initiatives.

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