



A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy

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Principal Findings

What's new? Key international backers of French-led Sahel stabilisation efforts, including some French officials, are disappointed with the results of the military-heavy approach developed primarily by Paris and are looking for alternatives. COVID-19 has hobbled international efforts to accelerate and expand stabilisation operations in the Sahel.

Why does it matter? The current approach has not stemmed the Sahel's security crisis, which continues to expand into new areas. Meanwhile, popular frustration with Sahelian governments is growing, as exemplified by the unrest that led to the August coup in Mali.

What should be done? France and its allies should prioritise addressing the region's governance crisis: encouraging Sahelian states to engage in dialogue with not only rural dwellers but potentially also militants; provide social services; and adopt fiscal reforms. Military operations are important but should be at the service of such an approach.

Executive Summary

The Sahel stabilisation strategy, led by France, is foundering amid a rise in communal killings and jihadist militancy as well as eroding public confidence in the region's governments. The strategy is intended to calm the region with wide-ranging investment in security, development and governance, but for the most part, it has fallen short on such promises. Instead, it increasingly centres on French operations aimed at jihadists' military defeat. COVID-19 has aggravated this tendency, crimping UN peacekeepers' operations in Mali, the EU's training of Sahelian security forces and development activities. Some of France's allies express disquiet, especially after Mali's August 2020 coup. Paris and its partners should reorient their approach to one rooted in efforts to prioritise governance, notably by soothing the escalating tensions among communities and between communities and the state in rural areas, which jihadists exploit, and by improving governments' delivery of basic services to citizens. Outside actors should also create incentives for Sahelian governments to reform, notably by tightening public finances.

Seven years after French forces deployed to the Sahel to battle jihadists in Mali, the region faces a profound crisis. France's early operations in 2013 played a critical role, halting the jihadist advance toward the country's centre that had captured much of northern Mali and driving fighters out of northern towns. Since then, however, militants have swept from the north into the centre and across borders into southwestern Niger and northern and eastern Burkina Faso. The al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State's local branch have profited from frictions within and among rural communities in these areas, recruiting angry locals to expand operations. Jihadist attacks have increased fivefold since 2016 and inter-ethnic violence has ballooned. The January 2021 killings of more than 100 civilians in Niger's northern Tillabery show the devastating consequences for rural dwellers. Despite a strong push by France, its partners and Sahelian states to hold battlegrounds and recover lost territory, militants continue to entrench in several rural hotspots as they seek to expand southward.

The COVID-19 pandemic and Mali's coup have brought further challenges. Despite the pandemic, military campaigns led by France's anti-jihadist Operation Barkhane have continued apace. But the UN's mission in Mali has had to curb its activities while EU support missions for Malian and Nigerien security forces have put theirs on hold. The pandemic has also affected development budgets, which have been partly repackaged around COVID-19 aid for 2020-2021. International efforts have accordingly become even more heavily weighted toward military operations. Meanwhile, the coup in Mali was a stark illustration of the eroding popular trust in governments across the region. The mass protests that triggered the coup were sparked by indignation at voting irregularities but were sustained by exasperation simmering on Bamako's streets with corruption and the state's failure to check rampant insecurity. Similar discontent is evident in Burkina Faso and Niger.

Thus far, these events have prompted little change in the international approach. Military operations by Barkhane, often together with Sahelian security forces and in some past cases local militias, have aimed to keep jihadists at bay, recapturing and

holding areas they seize. In principle, such campaigns should create space for the return of state authority and officials to rural areas. The UN's stabilisation mission also supports the state's return and aims to protect civilians, among other things. The EU's missions and operations build the capacity of the Sahel's security forces to eventually take over. Development projects aim to help governments win over residents of insurgency-affected areas. In January 2020, at the Pau summit, France and Sahelian states largely doubled down on the approach and have since stepped up military operations.

Yet spiralling violence in rural areas and mounting public anger at the region's governments cast an ever-longer shadow over this strategy. Military operations clearly must be part of the picture. Recently, they have achieved some tactical gains, notably killing jihadist leaders. Yet Sahelian security forces and local militias appear to be committing more abuses against civilians, driving more recruits into jihadists' arms. Heavier military operations, particularly those relying on local militias, can also fuel the communal violence from which the militants profit. Reinforcing state authority has primarily taken the form of capacity building and infrastructure projects. The strategy neglects what are arguably more important efforts to calm local disputes and convince rural dwellers of the state's good-will. Supposedly "quick-impact" development projects too often prove ineffective in areas where insecurity reigns or citizens distrust the state. Officials in Brussels and other European capitals increasingly voice doubts about the present approach.

Shifting tack requires changing the narrative underpinning the international strategy from one highlighting insecurity to one centred on a crisis of governance. The governance crisis that lies at the root of the Sahel's problems is prompting growing hostility toward governments, whether expressed in rural insurgency or urban protest. A new approach, flowing from that new narrative, would not entail throwing out the current multidimensional strategy but reordering priorities. It would emphasise, first, local dialogue as a means of presaging the state's return to rural areas, and, secondly, wider governance reform. Outside actors should encourage states to step up efforts to broker truces between warring local factions and calm disputes among and within communities and between them and state actors. They should also give greater priority to government service provision, notably health care and education, including in areas where security forces are not yet deployed. They should encourage Sahelian states to improve public-sector financial management, potentially by conditioning some funds on reform.

Military operations, while still key, should be at the service of this strategy. In some places, Sahelian states and their external partners might use military pressure to confront jihadists or keep them from capturing new areas. Elsewhere, they might press the pause button to allow civil authorities to initiate local peacemaking efforts, potentially even with insurgent leaders. For their part, Sahelian states must prevent abuses by security forces and their non-state allies. They could also assume responsibility for activities of benefit to the locals, such as recovering stolen livestock. These would complement efforts to win over rural populations in insurgency-affected areas, who often perceive the state as more devoted to repression and helping Westerners get rid of jihadists than to providing basic services.

A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy

I. Introduction

Since 2013, when France sent troops to stop a jihadist advance on Mali's capital Bamako and kick militants out of the country's north, outside powers have been working to stabilise the Sahel. Paris has led the strategy, which is multifaceted but heavy on military operations. For this mission, it has enlisted the aid of Germany and other European countries, as well as the United States, UN and European Union (EU), and the Sahelian states themselves.

Seven years on, however, there is no convincing success story in the Sahel, but rather a steady deepening and expansion of its conflicts. Many of France's partners, and even some within the French system itself, are increasingly sceptical about a stabilisation strategy that has burned through vast resources with meagre results. The coronavirus pandemic may compel Western states to reassess their budgetary priorities, possibly putting Sahel stabilisation programs on the chopping block.

Building on Crisis Group's 2017 report *Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force*, and on recent pieces on the conflict's roots in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, this report analyses the French-led multilateral stabilisation project in the central Sahel in the shadow of COVID-19.¹ It is based on interviews with dozens of African, French, other European and U.S. military officials and other policymakers involved in security and development initiatives in the region. It examines how the stabilisation strategy has floundered and suggests ways for France and its partners to rethink their approach.

¹ See Crisis Group Africa Reports N°s 293, *Enrayer la communautarisation de la violence au centre du Mali*, 5 November 2020; 289, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, 3 June 2020; 287, *Burkina Faso: sortir de la spirale des violences*, 24 February 2020; and 258, *Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force*, 12 December 2017.

II. The Stabilisation Strategy under Pressure

A. Defining the Approach

Mali's 2012 collapse, brought on by a Tuareg-led rebellion and a coup, which opened the way for groups with links to al-Qaeda to seize the north, was a seismic shock to European officials who had considered the country a model African democracy.² Fearing contagion from Libya in the wake of Muammar Qaddafi's ouster, and intervening at the Malian government's request, French troops under the banner of Operation Serval deployed in 2013 to fight jihadists who by that point had pushed the rebels aside and appeared to be marching on Mopti-Sévaré, central Mali's capital.³ The intervention, which was widely popular among Malians, arguably saved the country from being overrun by militants. Determined to keep the jihadists at bay, Paris replaced Serval with Operation Barkhane, envisaged by Jean-Yves Le Drian, then France's defence minister and today its foreign minister, as a way to bolster Sahelian security forces and, in his words, prevent the spread of "jihadist groups between Libya and the Atlantic".⁴

France's intervention was also critical to building an international coalition to support stabilisation efforts in Mali.⁵ In April 2013, Paris pushed the UN Security Council to mandate a UN stabilisation mission in Mali (MINUSMA), tasked with protecting key population centres, acting as a buffer against the return of armed groups, re-establishing a state presence, especially in the north, and helping the Malian security forces rebuild.⁶ In 2015, taking advantage of the UN deployment and the jihadists' retreat, an Algerian-led international mediation effort, backed by the UN and France among others, forged a peace deal involving the government and various armed groups in the north. Signatories did not include the jihadist groups that had held the north, although many of their foot soldiers and some mid-level commanders had defected to other militias as the political winds changed. This

² "Mali's Precarious Democracy and the Causes of Conflict", U.S. Institute of Peace, May 2013.

³ Following NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya and the fall of Muammar Qaddafi, weapons flowed out of the country into the rest of the Sahel, including northern Mali. While the Libyan state's collapse accelerated regional instability, the Sahel had already seen governments toppled in Mauritania (2005, 2008) and Niger (2010), a trend that would continue with Mali's coup (2012) and the uprising that ousted President Blaise Compaoré in Burkina Faso (2014).

⁴ In August 2014, Operation Barkhane succeeded Operation Serval, with some 4,500 soldiers deployed with a counter-terrorism mandate over an area spanning Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania. Barkhane's focus would spread from northern Mali to the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area over the next five years. "French military to extend Mali 'counter-terrorism' operations into Sahel", France 24, 13 July 2014. Over the period 2018-2020, Barkhane's annual cost was estimated at roughly \$1 billion. See "Projet de loi de finances pour 2020 : Défense : Préparation et emploi des forces", French Senate, 10 November 2020; and "Commission de la Défense : Projet de loi de finances pour 2021, audition du Général François Lecointre, Chef d'état-major des Armées", video, French National Assembly, 15 October 2020.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, French and EU diplomats, August 2020.

⁶ See UN Security Council Resolution 2100, S/RES/2100 (2013), 25 April 2013.

“Algiers accord” has proven fragile: it provides a roadmap for redeploying state officials and institutions to northern Mali, but the peace it secured is uneasy at best.⁷

Paris sees its Sahel strategy as multidimensional. The military presence, of which Barkhane is a crucial component with key logistical support from MINUSMA, seeks to stop jihadists from again overrunning towns and holding territory. This containment creates space for efforts to improve security, development and governance and restore state authority in rural areas.⁸ UN peacekeepers can help in areas where they operate, but French counter-terrorism operations provide a necessary hard edge for dealing with agile militants. Foreign partners can then assist national and regional security institutions with financing and training, allowing them to take primary responsibility for securing areas they had previously neglected or left to fall prey to jihadists and other armed groups. In parallel, to reinforce state authority over contested areas, donors can scale up development efforts to re-establish state services.⁹

Paris has taken other steps aimed at building the region’s capacity to police borders and territory. It has leveraged its influence within the EU, which has deployed training missions in Niger and Mali (EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali), focused on law enforcement, and in Mali (EUTM), dedicated to the national army.¹⁰ France has also been the lead external advocate for drumming up aid and logistical support for the G5, a grouping of five Sahelian countries created in 2014, and the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the military alliance that Paris envisages will eventually take on primary responsibility for regional security coordination and joint operations across common borders.¹¹ In June 2020, European armies committed to standing up a new European force, Takuba, to relieve the pressure on French troops and support the Malian army in its fight with jihadists.¹²

⁷ Five years after the Algiers accord, the parties have yet to carry out the political and institutional reforms outlined in its second section. What measures they have taken have made little impact on the ground. See Jean-Hervé Jezequel, “Mali’s peace deal represents a welcome development, but will it work this time?”, *The Guardian*, 1 July 2015; and Matthieu Pellerin, “Mali’s Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years On: An Uneasy Calm”, Crisis Group Commentary, 24 June 2020.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, French and EU diplomats, August 2020. For more, see Michael Shurkin, “France’s War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine”, *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Winter 2020/2021).

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, French diplomats, defence officials, development officials, August and October 2020.

¹⁰ Since 2011, the EU has deployed, under the common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), various missions whose main objective was to provide long-term security sector reform: a civilian capacity-building mission in Niger in 2012 (EUCAP Sahel Niger), the military training operation in Mali in 2013 (EUTM Mali) and a civilian capacity-building mission in Mali in 2014 (EUCAP Sahel Mali). The EUTM and EUCAP Sahel have a non-executive mandate and a non-combat role, meaning that they act in an advisory role only, aiming to strengthen the armed forces’ capacity by training personnel and offering guidance on security sector reform.

¹¹ The G5 Sahel Joint Force was launched in 2017 to fight terrorism, cross-border organised crime and human trafficking in the G5 Sahel countries. See “Un ‘G5 du Sahel’ pour le développement et la sécurité”, *Le Monde*, 16 February 2014.

¹² Takuba is expected to carry out counter-terrorism operations from three Malian army bases in Gao, Ansongo and Menaka against the Islamic State, allowing Barkhane to focus on other parts of Liptako-Gourma. The force also aims to get trainers closer to the field than the EUTM can, for example, while conducting mobile, targeted operations that would complement conventional army

In addition, France rallied a number of external partners to commit to extending development financing to the region. In 2017, France, Germany and the EU launched the Sahel Alliance, in collaboration with the UN Development Programme, African Development Bank and World Bank, to coordinate and improve development assistance to the G5 countries.¹³ The alliance has wielded a basket of more than €11 billion and aims to support investments in education and employment, rural development and food security, decentralisation, and the provision of basic services and internal security.¹⁴ In 2019, France and Germany then announced a Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S), which committed to mobilising international support to strengthen justice systems and improve domestic security through capacity and training programs for local forces.¹⁵

B. *An Evolving Challenge*

Interventions by France and its partners have struggled to keep up with dramatic changes to the nature and geographic scope of the Sahel crisis. Violence has spread from Mali's north into rural stretches of central Mali, south-western Niger and northern Burkina Faso. Groups under the banner of the al-Qaeda-linked Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State (ISIS)'s local branch have recruited disgruntled youths, picked up the pace of their attacks on national security forces and tightened their territorial grip.

The last few years have seen a striking rise in rural insurgency in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.¹⁶ Both the JNIM and the Islamic State exploit spiralling rural discontent to recruit from disaffected ethnic groups, in particular but by no means exclusively the nomadic and cattle-rearing Peul. Militants step in to offer protection and firepower to help in local disputes, while providing arbitration and regulating access to resources. In the Macina delta of central Mali, ethnic-based violence between Peul and Dogon has driven angry locals into the ranks of both militants and self-

missions. See also Laurent Lagneau, "Vers une réduction du format de la force Barkhane à partir de février 2021 ?", Opex 360, 6 November 2020.

¹³ The Alliance now also includes Italy, Spain, the UK, Luxembourg, Denmark and the Netherlands. The EU and its member states have mobilised \$8 billion since 2014 to help stabilise the Sahel. "L'UE renforce son soutien aux pays du Sahel central, en Afrique", press release, European Commission, 20 October 2020. In 2014, the G5 Sahel drew up a Priority Investment Programme to coordinate development projects. The initiative involves 40 development projects across the region at a cost of €2.4 billion. See "La force conjointe G5 Sahel et l'Alliance Sahel", France Diplomatie, May 2020.

¹⁴ See "Qu'est-ce que le Programme de Développement d'Urgence", Sahel Alliance, January 2020.

¹⁵ See "Biarritz G7 Summit: Strengthening Commitments in the Sahel", press release, Sahel Alliance, 10 September 2019.

¹⁶ Escalating tensions pitting communities against both one another and the state relate not only to the recent tumult but also to longstanding disputes in these countries. Rural dwellers in each of the three central Sahel states have struggled for decades with rising competition over access to natural resources, including land and water, and a crisis of pastoralism. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°154, *The Central Sahel: Scene of New Climate Wars?*, 24 April 2020. These underlying circumstances facilitated the spread of violence as more weapons circulated and more young men came to live by the gun. See also Crisis Group Africa Report N°261, *The Mali-Niger Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, 12 June 2018.

defence groups.¹⁷ In Burkina Faso's Soum and Centre North provinces, the jihadists have similarly exploited intercommunal tensions between Peul and Mossi.¹⁸ In Tillabery, in south west Niger, where on 2 January 2021 militants killed more than 100 people in attacks on two villages, and across the border in Mali's Ménaka region, the Islamic State's local branch has taken advantage of unregulated competition for natural resources and local power between (and among) Peul, Djerma, Tuareg and Daosahak to entrench itself as an insurgent force.¹⁹

Sahelian states' scaled-up military operations against jihadists in these rural areas have been part of the problem, helping trigger a disastrous cycle of violence against civilians. State security forces frequently ally with local militias, who often use the counter-terrorism fight as pretext to pursue their own local agendas.²⁰ Security forces, themselves often unable to distinguish civilians from militants, and local proxies have on occasion targeted communities wholesale, particularly the Peul. For their part, militants have also attacked individuals, families and even entire villages they suspected had collaborated with state authorities. Such abuses have led to others, with more self-defence militias emerging and often taking indiscriminate revenge.²¹ As long as such violence grips the rural Sahel, jihadists will find opportunities.

Despite the evolution in the nature of violence, Barkhane has continued to focus on military operations against jihadists. French officials portray the proliferation of violence in rural areas as either a diversionary tactic by jihadists or an expression of "ethnic violence", which they argue is outside Barkhane's mandate to tackle.²² During 2019 and 2020, for example, Barkhane intensified its operations in the tri-border Liptako-Gourma area – especially around Gossi in the southern part of Mali's Timbuktu region, a main jihadist stronghold – while 200km south, intercommunal killings in the Mopti region ballooned, accounting for more violent deaths than anywhere else in the country. Barkhane officials say they did not intervene because Malian authorities did not request support and because the French force's mandate is

¹⁷ See Crisis Group Report, *Enrayer la communautarisation de la violence au centre du Mali*, op. cit.; as well as Crisis Group Africa Reports N°s 254, *The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North*, 12 October 2017; and 238, *Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making*, 6 July 2016.

¹⁸ Crisis Group Reports, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence* and *The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North*, both op. cit.

¹⁹ Crisis Group Report, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, op. cit.

²⁰ In Niger's northern Tillabery, counter-terrorism operations involving alliances between Nigerien and French security forces and Tuareg and Daosahak ethnic militias from across the border in Mali led to communal campaigns of violence against civilians – again, largely Peul – in 2018. The Nigerien state suspended these operations, but a late 2019 redeployment of security forces to the Malian border sparked the killing of hundreds of Peul, Tuareg and Daosahak civilians by jihadists, militias and security forces. In Burkina Faso's Soum and Centre North regions, self-defence groups have fuelled community-based violence, while counter-terrorism operations led to security forces abusing civilians, mainly Peul. Extrajudicial killings of suspected militants also proliferated in all three countries. Crisis Group Reports, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, *Enrayer la communautarisation de la violence au centre du Mali* and *Burkina Faso : Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, all op. cit.

²¹ See Jean-Hervé Jezequel, "Central Mali: Putting a Stop to Ethnic Cleansing", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 March 2019.

²² Crisis Group interview, French military intelligence officer, Dakar, June 2019.

counter-terrorism, not dealing with intercommunal violence.²³ The French position is understandable, given the counter-terrorism focus. But many locals question the presence of foreign forces fighting one category of violent actor but leaving others free to mount attacks upon civilians nearby.

Barkhane's counter-terrorism emphasis has other drawbacks. It means that gains tend to be short-lived: often militants return or simply move elsewhere. It has also sometimes put pressure on MINUSMA's attempts to adjust its own operations to a changing environment.²⁴ In the past, French diplomats resisted efforts to redeploy additional UN blue helmets to protect civilians in central Mali while Barkhane's command was concerned that sending more peacekeepers to the centre might dilute MINUSMA's ability in the north to continue providing logistical support to France's counter-terrorism operations.²⁵

C. *Mounting Popular Anger*

Mounting insecurity has coincided with a gradual erosion of popular confidence in Sahelian governments.

Mali's August coup is the starkest illustration. The military overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was preceded by weeks of protests fuelled by popular anger at a worsening security situation and a government viewed by the public as corrupt and self-serving.²⁶ Much like the 2012 coup that set the current crisis in motion, Keïta's ouster illustrated how quickly governance failings can undercut stabilisation efforts, especially if they prompt people to take to the streets and soldiers to mutiny.²⁷ It was sobering for foreign partners who were pumping hundreds of millions of dollars into the Malian security forces.²⁸ The German defence minister

²³ Crisis Group interview, Operation Barkhane member, Dakar, November 2019.

²⁴ MINUSMA, a force 15,000 strong, has the UN's deadliest mission, with 209 of its largely African peacekeepers killed in the past seven years. Originally, it was tasked with assisting the redeployment of state authority in the north, but it has itself been on the back foot for years as it continually comes into the crosshairs of jihadists and other armed actors. In response, in 2019, the UN Security Council mandated MINUSMA to help the Malian authorities protect civilians and reduce violence in the north.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Barkhane member, February 2019.

²⁶ In April 2020, low turnout, violence and vote rigging allegations marred the first legislative elections held in seven years, prompting a wave of mass protests. Opposition parties established the 5 June Movement and marched with the popular imam Mahmoud Dicko against President Keïta, with many protesters railing against poor governance and the government's failure to stem the security crisis. Security forces killed at least fourteen people during three days of protests in the capital in July. The use of excessive force helped set the stage for 18 August, when military officers staged a coup and dissolved parliament. Insecurity had also rocked the government in 2019, when the reported killing of 160 Peul civilians in Ogossagou by the Dana Ambassagou Dogon militia, which has links to the government, prompted the prime minister and his cabinet to resign.

²⁷ In March 2012, soldiers upset with the state's handling of the Tuareg rebellion in the north mutinied and seized power.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, EU official in the central Sahel, August 2020. The budget for the EUTM's fifth mandate running from 2020-2024 is €133,700,000, an increase compared to spending patterns from 2013 to 2019. See "EUTM Mali Fact Sheet", 7 May 2020.

pointed out that some junta leaders had been trained in Germany and France.²⁹ Following the coup, the EU suspended its security and defence missions in Mali.

The erosion of public confidence in the authorities had become intertwined with widespread resentment of Western intervention in the Sahel.³⁰ Protesters who took to the streets in the build-up to Mali's coup voiced particular anger at French operations. Several Malian cultural, religious and political celebrities derided the government as a puppet of neo-colonial France.³¹ Such antipathy for France was an understandable source of frustration for French officials, given the resources Paris has invested in the region.³²

Similar popular resentment has risen in Niger, where protests have been directed at both the government and its international allies. In March 2020, demonstrators took to the streets to rail against government corruption in the wake of a defence sector audit that revealed some \$137 million had been lost to overcharging, embezzlement and kickbacks over the course of President Mahamadou Issoufou's two terms.³³ This affair, along with the authorities' subsequent choice to crack down on protesters – resulting in the death of three protesters and the arrest of five leaders – rather than the perpetrators of the fraud, have tarnished the reputations of Issoufou, whose alleged close political and military allies were implicated, and the ruling party as the country enters its presidential election cycle.³⁴ In early 2020, authorities prohibited planned anti-French protests after jihadists attacked Nigerien military outposts in Tillabery, leading to clashes between security forces and civil society activists, who denounced the heavy losses Nigerien security forces were suffering and demanded the departure of French and U.S. forces.

In Burkina Faso, popular protests have accelerated since 2018 over everything from living conditions to mass displacement and insecurity, as citizens excoriate a government that, in turn, is increasingly resorting to repression and the use of vigi-

²⁹ "EU freezes Mali training missions after military coup, denies responsibility", Reuters, 27 August 2020.

³⁰ Indeed, prior to the coup, analysts had warned of the risks inherent in France propping up governments with authoritarian tendencies that could turn on the citizenry. See Nathaniel Powell, "The flawed logic behind French military interventions in Africa", *The Conversation*, 12 May 2020. "Ongoing French and international efforts in support of Sahelian states against jihadist and other armed groups risk strengthening precisely those leaders, regime elites and security forces whose actions helped generate the very crises France seeks to resolve".

³¹ These figures notably include Salif Keïta, one of Mali's most popular singers, who accused former President Keïta of knowingly letting France occupy the country in a video that has garnered more than a million views since its release. Salif Keïta, "C'est la France qui assassine les Maliens", video, YouTube, 16 November 2019.

³² Crisis Group interviews, French diplomats and military officials, August and October 2020.

³³ At least three protesters were killed. Authorities were able to shut down anti-government protests by locking up the leaders on the pretext of stopping the spread of COVID-19. Niger spent \$229.6 million on the military in 2018, up from an average of less than \$50 million in the period 1975-2018, while decreasing spending on education in 2016 and 2017. See World Bank data, "Niger Military Expenditure 1975-2019" and "Government Expenditure on Education – Niger, 1971-2018". Similarly, protests erupted in Tillabery over the government's handling of economic and movement restrictions in the wake of violent outbreaks there in October 2019.

³⁴ "How a Notorious Arms Dealer Hijacked Niger's Budget and Bought Weapons from Russia", Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 6 August 2020.

lantes.³⁵ The risk of anti-French protests – some such protests took place when President Emmanuel Macron visited Ouagadougou in 2017 – could return if the Burkinabé associate greater military French intervention in their country with further instability. Such an association appears possible, given that Barkhane increasingly operates in Burkina Faso and the Burkinabé government now looks to rely on armed civilian volunteers to participate in counter-terrorist operations, a recipe for further inter-communal conflict.³⁶

D. COVID-19

COVID-19 has dealt a further blow to the Sahel strategy. The pandemic's arrival has complicated external interventions in the Sahel, which were forced to adapt, hibernate or freeze at a time when they sought to expand or get started.³⁷ Barkhane commanders have insisted that COVID-19 will not hinder their operations, though whether that will remain the case is unclear. The virus has nonetheless disrupted the UN mission, the EU missions and the Takuba force. It has slowed development initiatives by introducing new restrictions on meetings and travel; staff had to work remotely or saw their focus and some funding redirected toward virus-related relief and mitigating the pandemic's socio-economic impact.³⁸ Donors have suspended some projects for the time being.³⁹

Thus far, Barkhane operations appear unaffected but that may change. Commander General Pascal Facon said the virus was merely an “additional operational constraint” that would have “no impact” on anti-Islamic State operations in the tri-border area.⁴⁰ Still, the effects of COVID-19 on France's national finances mean that

³⁵ According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED)'s data, there were 85 protests in 2018 in Burkina Faso compared to 68 in 2017. The number grew to 136 in 2019, and, since 1 January 2020, 75 protests have been recorded in the country. The ranks of Koglweogo vigilante groups have swollen since the organisation was formed in 2015. There are now as many as 4,500 self-defence militias counting between 20,000 and 45,000 members. See Rémi Carayol, “Les milices prolifèrent au Burkina Faso”, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 2020.

³⁶ Rural self-defence militias have already committed abuses, including two mass killings that shocked the Burkinabé public in 2019 and 2020. The first took place near the town of Yirgou (Centre North), where self-defence groups murdered 49 Fulani on 1 January 2019 in retaliation for a jihadist attack occurring the night before in a neighbouring village. The second happened on 8 March 2020 in the towns of Barga and Dinguila (north west), when a militia opened fire on local inhabitants and burned down their houses, killing at least 43. Carayol, “Les milices prolifèrent au Burkina Faso”, op. cit. See also Crisis Group Report, *Burkina Faso : sortir de la spirale des violences*, op. cit.

³⁷ ISIS issued a statement on COVID-19 portraying the virus as a chance for militants to advance their projects as Western countries battled a pandemic that would restrict their military adventurism abroad. “The Crusaders' worst nightmare”, *Al-Naba*, 19 March 2020. Al-Qaeda's Sahel affiliate, the JNIM, declared that the pandemic “has struck [the Satanic alliance] at home, destroying their economy and preoccupying them” and mocked the “weakness and paralysis of colonial France in the face of a microscopic germ visited by God on it”. See “New statement from Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin: ‘About the Bamba raid in north Mali’”, *Jihadology*, 11 April 2020. Analysts and multilateral organisations tended to take seriously the risk of an escalation in jihadist violence. See “Report of the Secretary-General on the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel”, UNSC S/2020/373, 8 May 2020.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, EU official and World bank official, November 2020.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, development professional working in the Sahel, November 2020.

⁴⁰ “Le Covid-19 ‘n’a pas d’impact sur les opérations de Barkhane’”, AFP, 5 May 2020.

the military budget may come under the knife. With France projecting an 11-14 per cent GDP drop in 2020, parliament was already questioning the defence minister and *chef d'état major* in April about military spending, seeding doubt that it would survive the pandemic unscathed when other budget lines, such as development and aid, are being slashed to reallocate money to fight the virus.⁴¹ Defence Minister Florence Parly claimed that the amended financial law for 2021 did not alter her ministry's budget, but the French military fears that its budget will likely face cuts, even as the cost of its engagement in the Sahel rose by 10 per cent in 2020 compared to 2019.⁴²

MINUSMA has already suffered.⁴³ In March, as the virus spread through its camps, the mission took preventive measures both for staff safety and to ensure that camps did not become vectors of infection for Malians. It suspended regular UN flights in and out of regional bases and in-country transport of personnel. It also ordered many staff to work remotely.⁴⁴ Camps with confirmed cases – including those in Mopti and Gao – were subject to total confinement to limit contagion.⁴⁵ Despite these steps, by June there were 70 confirmed COVID-19 cases within the UN force, including at least two deaths.⁴⁶ In some cases, UN programs diverted resources earmarked for reducing community violence toward improving hygiene in rural areas.⁴⁷

The pandemic created similar roadblocks for European operations. The virus forced the EUTM to hunker down and suspend operations even as it sought to expand to central Mali. On 3 April 2020, the EUTM and the two EUCAP Sahel missions went into “hibernation”, suspending most training activities, reducing deployed staff by half and adapting to new virus-related restrictions.⁴⁸ COVID-19 also erected new

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, senior French military official, September 2020. Jean-Dominique Merchet, “Défense : le budget des armées survivra-t-il au coronavirus ?”, *L'Opinion*, 27 April 2020. The GDP drop could well translate into a significant decrease in funding for the French armed forces. Leila Aboud and David Pilling, “France to reallocate Africa aid money to fight against coronavirus”, *Financial Times*, 9 April 2020.

⁴² “Au Sahel, Paris sur le point de réduire sa présence militaire”, TV5 Monde, 6 November 2020. The Military Planning Law for 2019-2025 aimed for a budget amounting to 2 per cent of GDP; it contains a revision clause, however, according to which parliament is to reassess its viability in 2021. The government could use this opportunity to cut defence spending. See Merchet, “Mali : contre qui se bat l'armée française ?”, *L'Opinion*, 25 October 2020. Some deputies in the parliamentary majority are already stressing that future budgets should allocate more resources to strategic domains, like cyber-warfare and hypersonic missiles, and less to endless foreign interventions. Nicolas Barotte, “Après le coronavirus, les armées s'inquiètent de payer le prix de la crise”, *Le Figaro*, 24 April 2020.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, senior MINUSMA official, May 2020.

⁴⁴ After a 2010 cholera outbreak that killed close to 10,000 people in Haiti was traced to a UN peacekeeping camp, the UN is under pressure to avoid being a source of disease elsewhere. Crisis Group interview, UN official, May 2020. Nevertheless, photographs from peacekeeping camps in Mali in May showed that not all of them were enforcing COVID-19 regulations. See Clair Macdougall, “In Mali, the first death of a UN peacekeeper from Covid-19 keeps his family guessing”, *PassBlue*, 27 July 2020.

⁴⁵ See “UN: 70 COVID-19 cases within peacekeeping force in Mali”, *Anadolu Agency*, 29 May 2020.

⁴⁶ Macdougall, “In Mali, the first death of a UN peacekeeper from Covid-19 keeps his family guessing”, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ See “From fighting with guns to fighting the pandemic”, *UN News*, 30 May 2020. In others, MINUSMA led initiatives with civil society such as Mobilisation Citoyenne pour Zéro Coronavirus au Mali to raise awareness about virus prevention and treatment.

⁴⁸ See “An expected redeployment”, *EUTM Newspaper*, 15 June-15 August 2020.

hurdles for Operation Takuba. In November 2019, officials projected that the force would reach full capacity in the autumn of 2020, but they now expect to achieve this goal in early 2021 or perhaps even later.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, development projects faced similar new restrictions and roadblocks. National rules banning foreign arrivals and meetings that went into effect from April to July appear to have held up planned projects.⁵⁰ For good reasons, part of the EU development funding, especially that designated for health and education budgets, was repackaged to encompass projects aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19, such as outfitting airplanes with medical kits and supplying hospitals with breathing machines.⁵¹ The EU also accelerated the transfer of funds to the Malian government so that it could finance its plan of action for combating the pandemic. In a few cases, donors reoriented development funding to support the anti-coronavirus fight. For instance, France reallocated €1.5 million first intended to help rebuild the health system in the Mopti region to fund the Malian health ministry's COVID-19 action plan.⁵²

For now, the virus appears likely to skew the international strategy in the Sahel even further toward Barkhane's military operations, given its relative impact on that strategy's other components.

⁴⁹ See "La force militaire Takouba, dernière invention française pour le Mali", *L'Opinion*, 18 November 2019. French Defence Minister Parly pronounced the force "ready to act starting 15 July". But only France and Estonia were ready to deploy at that point. Difficulties related to the deployment of soldiers from different countries, all with their own procedures and expectations, combined with the coronavirus, have slowed down the deployment of the entire force, now scheduled for the summer of 2021. In August, Italy announced that it would contribute 200 soldiers to the Takuba force, authorised to act in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. See "Autorizzazione e proroga missioni internazionali 2020", Senato della Repubblica, 10 June 2020. Following approval by their respective parliaments, Sweden and the Czech Republic also began dispatching troops to the Sahel in December 2020.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, EU official, November 2020.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, EU official, November 2020.

⁵² "Team Europe Response to COVID 19-Mali", update n°8, 22 June 2020.

III. Limitations of the Current Approach

External actors, including France and its European partners, rightly argue that stabilising the Sahel requires a multidimensional approach, comprising military operations, security provision, development and better governance. Yet they have struggled to get the balance among the different components right.

A. *Security and Development Nexus*

The security-development nexus, a central tenet of the French-led Sahel stabilisation strategy, is based on the idea that security and development can mutually reinforce each other. Military operations clear the way for development efforts and the state's redeployment, which in turn bring stability. In practice, however, efforts have come up short. While military surges against jihadists in target zones like Liptako-Gourma have made real gains in recapturing territory, the next step – following up with development projects and redeployment of state services and authorities – often barely begins before jihadists return and new violence breaks out. Compared to military offensives, development projects need longer timeframes and a stable environment to succeed, but such conditions tend not to exist. In addition, because of the low level of consideration for tensions between communities, development work can also aggravate conflict.⁵³

The experience of trying to follow up military operations with development efforts in Mali's Ménaka region is one example. After Barkhane partnered with local militias in a 2018 campaign that eliminated over 100 militants, the Agence française de développement, other partners and state authorities developed plans to redeploy services, especially local administration personnel (*préfets* and *sous-préfets*) and functioning courts and schools, to the area.⁵⁴ But security conditions were still fragile and staff were unable to operate beyond Ménaka city without a military escort. Militants rebounded at a grander scale. The incapacity of Malian forces to patrol outside big camps while militias, bandits and jihadists proliferated created such high levels of insecurity that it was almost impossible for development workers to function outside Ménaka town.⁵⁵ Even under soldiers' protection, in areas like Ménaka, the approach simply has not worked.⁵⁶

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Paris, December 2019.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Paris, August 2020. See also "Rapport d'information de la commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées en conclusion des travaux d'une mission d'information sur le continuum entre sécurité et développement", French National Assembly, 19 February 2020. According to ACLED data, Barkhane soldiers working with local armed groups managed to kill 108 militants in the Ménaka region between 1 January and 31 December 2018.

⁵⁵ Taking Ménaka as an example of renewed efforts to better articulate development and security in the central Sahel, a French National Assembly report on the security-development nexus recognised that the main achievements were limited to rebuilding Ménaka's police station and repairing its water supply. Although the report stresses the difficulties development staff face in circulating outside Ménaka town, it still deems the investments to be "promising". "Rapport d'information de la commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées en conclusion des travaux d'une mission d'information sur le continuum entre sécurité et développement", op. cit.

⁵⁶ In November 2019, ISIS militants killed 53 soldiers in an attack on the Indelimane military post in the Ménaka region. See the MINUSMA note on trends of human rights violations and abuses

Moreover, the notion of a security-development nexus is often underpinned by the erroneous assumption that the population in an area recaptured by military operations will welcome the return of state institutions. In reality, some communities are ambivalent and others, particularly those that state security forces portray as allied to jihadists, view all state actors warily. In parts of the rural Sahel plagued by competition over natural resources, militants themselves have learned to manage such contestation better than states.⁵⁷ In Mali's Macina region, in particular, nomadic herders now rely on jihadists to guard their cattle and regulate access to pasture, while also showing satisfaction with the militants' mediation of their disputes with farmers.⁵⁸ In contrast, those herders fear state intervention, which they associate with previous agricultural policies that have favoured farmers to their detriment.⁵⁹

B. *Governance: Reform Trails Capacity Building*

While Western officials commonly express frustration that Sahelian governments' poor track record contributes to instability, they despair of being able to bring about change.⁶⁰ That, inevitably, depends on Sahelian elites themselves, popular demand and negotiations between citizens and state. As far back as 2014, a top EU official lamented the failure of European attempts to get Sahelian states to reform.⁶¹ Such sentiment remains prevalent today.

One issue is prioritisation. Strengthening governance is a pillar of the stabilisation strategy but both donors and Sahelian states accord it lesser importance than meeting security benchmarks, to the extent that some European officials say that in practice, reform efforts at times amount to little more than lip service.⁶² Western partners understandably view reform as difficult and complicated, a longer-term objective than short-term security deployments. They also fear that it may stir tension between them and Sahelian governments that have diverging agendas.⁶³ For Western partners who hold the purse strings, curbing terrorism and containing migration tend to be the priorities, whereas Sahelian elites often perceive such stabilisation initiatives as primarily useful in bringing new resources that can reinforce their own power. Some Western officials are reluctant to rock the boat, out of fear that their Sahelian partners will become less cooperative.⁶⁴

between 1 January and 31 March 2020. "Note sur les tendances des violations et abus de droits de l'homme", MINUSMA, April 2020.

⁵⁷ See Crisis Group Briefing, *The Central Sahel: Scene of New Climate Wars?*, op. cit.

⁵⁸ Célian Macé, "Au Mali, les jihadistes se font parrains de la paix", *Libération*, 21 September 2020. See also Crisis Group Report, *Enrayer la communautarisation de la violence au centre du Mali*, op. cit.

⁵⁹ See Crisis Group Briefing, *The Central Sahel: Scene of New Climate Wars?*, op. cit.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, French diplomats and military officials, EU officials in the Sahel, August and October 2020.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, EU official in the Sahel, July 2014.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, UN diplomat in the Sahel, October 2020.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats and UN officials, August and October 2020.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, August and October 2020.

Western partners also tend to depoliticise the issue of governance.⁶⁵ For instance, donors often reduce political challenges like returning the state to rural areas and improving its relations with locals to an infrastructure or capacity-building problem. This leads them to focus, for example, on training state security forces or building new gendarmerie posts and courthouses in the countryside, while at the same time neglecting policies aimed at making the state's presence more useful to rural dwellers.⁶⁶ Efforts to boost institutional capacity tend to gloss over political factors that may undermine efficacy, such as the recurrent abuse of residents at troops' hands or the partiality of the justice system to ruling elites.

Even among policymakers, many recognise the shortcomings.⁶⁷ As one European diplomat with over a decade of experience in the Sahel pointed out: "People are more comfortable with a technical approach to facilitating the return of the state and holding elections. But the problem lies at the political level, in the relationship between states and their citizens".⁶⁸

Some Western-backed programs address political challenges head on, showing particular promise in tackling the crisis of rural governance. These tend to focus less on institutional capacity and more on local dialogue, for instance, forums in which residents and security forces may air grievances and build trust, talks between warring communities that may lead to local ceasefires or initiatives connecting herders and farmers to help them resolve disputes.⁶⁹

On the whole, however, initiatives such as the Coalition for the Sahel and P3S reproduce flaws of previous approaches in that they make little attempt to build Sahelian state institutions' accountability and performance or ensure that they can deliver basic public goods in a relatively fair and inclusive manner.⁷⁰ For example, while the Sahel Alliance is on track to have funded and coordinated 730 projects in the G5 countries by 2022, many of those projects focus on building infrastructure, sidestepping core issues over how these are used and who benefits.⁷¹ Few get at the core issue of poor government performance.

⁶⁵ For more on the technocratic nature of French and European interventions in the Sahel, see Yvan Guichaoua, "The Bitter Harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel", *International Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 4 (2020); and Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Christine Nissen, "Schizophrenic Agendas in the EU's External Actions in Mali", *International Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 4 (2020).

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, EU diplomats and development officials, August and October 2020. Crisis Group interview, former EU official in the Sahel, September 2020.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats and UN officials, August and October 2020.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, EU official in the Sahel, November 2020.

⁶⁹ Examples include agropastoral mediation launched by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in the tri-border area and processes to support intercommunal dialogue leading to a ceasefire in Niger's northern Tillabery.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, UN and EU officials, August 2020; EU officials, October 2020.

⁷¹ Andrew Lebovich, "Disorder from Chaos: Why Europeans Fail to Promote Stability in the Sahel", European Council on Foreign Relations, August 2020, p. 24. Of the 730 projects, 464 are intended for Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso (informally labelled the G3). As of early November 2020, 64 per cent of these projects were completed or in progress. Crisis Group telephone interview, development expert, November 2020.

C. *The Pau Summit and its Aftermath*

The death of thirteen French soldiers in a helicopter accident in Ménaka on 25 November 2019 prompted President Macron to call an emergency meeting on the Sahel.⁷² First scheduled for December, amid rising anti-French demonstrations in Sahelian capitals, the summit was postponed after a devastating ISIS attack on a Nigerien military outpost in the Tillabery region on 10 December led to a period of national mourning.⁷³ In January 2020, Macron finally hosted the heads of the G5 Sahel states along with senior representatives of the EU, African Union (AU) and UN. The summit took place in Pau, France, the home base of seven of the dead soldiers, in what Macron hoped would be a moment when the Sahel recommitted itself to curbing the regionwide rise of militancy. The president hinted beforehand that he was prepared to withdraw French forces if he detected lack of support for French military intervention in Sahelian government circles.⁷⁴

The approach that emerged from Pau did not, however, mark a major departure from the existing strategy.⁷⁵ France committed hundreds of new troops to the effort and the signatories launched what is formally known as the International Coalition for the Sahel, resting on four pillars: maintaining counter-terrorism operations, especially against ISIS; stepping up capacity building for Sahelian armed forces; supporting the return of the state; and assisting development initiatives.⁷⁶ President Macron himself described the summit as a “turning point in our military strategy”.⁷⁷ Still, even some French policymakers admit that the approach remains rooted in the same security-development nexus, with capacity building once again defined as the path to improving government performance. Indeed, a French diplomat said it reflected France’s decision to give a strategy in which it has invested resources and energy for years a “last chance”.⁷⁸

Since Pau, Barkhane’s command has played up the success of a number of joint military operations with Sahelian governments.⁷⁹ The French Joint Staff billed the

⁷² In a newsletter released on 28 November 2019, ISIS said the two helicopters collided under fire from fighters of its local Sahel affiliate. Iris Peron, “Mort de 13 militaires au Mali : quel est le groupe djihadiste qui revendique l’attaque ?”, *Le Parisien*, 29 November 2019. The French military promptly denied the claim. “Soldats français tués au Mali : le general Lecointre dément la revendication de l’EI”, RFI, 29 November 2019.

⁷³ Hannah Armstrong, “Behind the Jihadist Attack in Niger’s Inates”, Crisis Group Commentary, 13 December 2019.

⁷⁴ Ruth Maclean, “France summons African leaders, threatening troop pullout”, *The New York Times*, 12 January 2020.

⁷⁵ Macron announced that France would beef up Barkhane’s counter-terrorism work by deploying additional soldiers (first 220, then 600) to its 4,500-strong force. He also publicly thanked EU member states that had agreed to participate in Takuba. Statement by the Heads of State at the G5 Sahel Pau Summit, 13 January 2020.

⁷⁶ See “The International Coalition for the Sahel”, press release, France Diplomatie, 14 January 2020.

⁷⁷ “France, G5 Sahel leaders pledge to boost military cooperation at Pau summit”, RFI, 14 January 2020.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Paris, August 2020.

⁷⁹ In March, Operations Monclar (Barkhane) and Sama (G5 Sahel Joint Force) coordinated from a joint command post set up in Niamey following the Pau summit during a three-week military operation, with 3,000 soldiers from Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso working with a French deployment.

offensive with security forces from Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, which killed dozens of Islamic State militants in Liptako-Gourma, destroyed hideouts and seized weapons, as proof that the new strategy was working.⁸⁰ The June killing of al-Qaeda's regional emir Abdelmalek Droukdel, one of the JNIM's most senior leaders, prompted President Macron to say in June that "victory is possible in the Sahel ... thanks to the efforts that have been made over the past six months".⁸¹

But the advances may be short-lived. Gains have been undermined by a spike in abuses committed by the national security forces.⁸² Indeed, during the course of 2020, killings of civilians by state forces in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have surged.⁸³ On 9 April, Burkinabé soldiers allegedly arrested and summarily executed 31 men in Djibo following a counter-terrorism operation in the area.⁸⁴ A month later, Burkinabé security forces raided a refugee camp at Mentao, wounding dozens.⁸⁵ At roughly the same time, Nigerien forces reportedly disappeared or executed 102 residents of the border area between Inates and Ayorou.⁸⁶ They also reportedly killed dozens of civilians on the Malian side of the border.⁸⁷ In Mali, MINUSMA documented 101 summary executions in Mopti and Segou, attributing the killings to Malian security forces.⁸⁸ All of these attacks created new grievances against the state among rural dwellers.

Moreover, the success of the operations against the JNIM and Islamic State owes partly to infighting between the two groups that has erupted after five years of fairly peaceful coexistence. That infighting saw both groups waste combatants and resources and exposed them to airstrikes.⁸⁹ Indeed, in early 2020, tensions over territorial control and competition over recruitment that had begun building the previous year came to a head.⁹⁰

See "Barkhane : Monclar et Sama, deux opérations coordonnées entre la force Barkhane et la force conjointe du G5 Sahel", press release, Ministère des Armées, 2 April 2020.

⁸⁰ Nicolas Barotte, "En attendant 'Takuba', 'Barkhane' poursuit ses opérations au Sahel", *Le Figaro*, 1 April 2020.

⁸¹ "Emmanuel Macron et le G5 Sahel 'convaincus que la victoire est possible contre les jihadistes'", France 24, 30 June 2020. In November 2020, Barkhane forces operating in north-eastern Mali also killed Bah ag Moussa, known as the right-hand man of JNIM leader Iyad ag Ghali. See "France says it has killed senior Al Qaeda operative in Mali", France 24, 13 November 2020.

⁸² According to ACLED data, from 1 January to 1 June 2020, the military campaign in the tri-border area killed at least as many civilians as militants.

⁸³ See "State Atrocities in the Sahel: The Impetus for Counterinsurgency Results is Fueling Government Attacks on Civilians", ACLED, May 2020.

⁸⁴ "Burkina Faso: Security Forces Allegedly Execute 31 Detainees", Human Rights Watch, 20 April 2020.

⁸⁵ "Burkina Faso: UNHCR Condemns Violence against Malian Refugees", UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 4 May 2020.

⁸⁶ "Liste nominative des personnes arrêtés par l'armée nigérienne, recherchées par les communautés", Inates Mayor's Office, 3 April 2020.

⁸⁷ "Note sur les tendances des violations et abus de droits de l'homme", op. cit.

⁸⁸ See Matteo Maillard, "Les forces de sécurité Maliennes accusées de 101 exécutions extrajudiciaires par l'ONU", *Le Monde*, 4 May 2020.

⁸⁹ See Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 13, no. 7 (July 2020).

⁹⁰ "Dans le centre du Mali, les combats entre groupes armés s'intensifient", RFI, 10 April 2020. "Al-Naba 233", Jihadology, 7 May 2020. In May, for the first time, ISIS aired its frustrations, complain-

Almost a year after the Pau summit, not a single insurgency-affected area can claim to be rid of jihadists or to be reaping benefits from the return of state authority. Indeed, for the most part, violence continues to take a heavy toll on civilians and the conflict appears ever more intractable.

ing in *Al-Naba* that even as French and G5 forces moved against it from three axes in Liptako-Gourma, JNIM leaders Iyad ag Ghali and Hamadoun Koufa were exempted from the French-led military offensive as they had entered negotiations with the Malian government.

IV. Looking for an Alternative

A range of partners, including Sahelian states, European governments and the U.S., officially support the French-led stabilisation strategy in the Sahel. Behind closed doors, however, some Western officials express disquiet about its achievements, though they offer few concrete alternatives. The African Union plans its own mission, but even if it does deploy, it appears unlikely to change the tide in the Sahel.

A. *Western Concerns*

While European partners officially back the French approach, signs of dissent are emerging, with diplomats privately suggesting that the overall strategy needs adjusting.

Europeans express a number of concerns. Some European officials question the extension of the EUTM training mandate beyond Mali. “If EUTM was not effective in Mali, why would it be more effective in Burkina Faso?”, one diplomat asked.⁹¹ Others are increasingly worried that Western troops in the Sahel will end up in a quagmire and fear for European credibility among the Sahelian public as conflicts continue to rage.⁹² As one EU official noted in the August coup’s wake: “If the EU wants to make a difference, the only conclusion that should be drawn from Mali is that our strategy has failed”.⁹³ Some suggest that a more effective approach would, broadly speaking, require greater African ownership and lesser prominence for military operations.⁹⁴

Meanwhile, Brussels has begun a review of the EU’s broader strategy. Some officials acknowledge that Europe’s emphasis on curbing terrorism and countering illicit migration has led to the capacity-building focus, support for a security-centred approach, and reluctance to press Sahelian governments and their security forces on their own failings.⁹⁵ Some also stress that the EU should adopt policies better tailored

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, March 2020. Germany has agreed, however, to raise the number of Bundeswehr officials deployed to the EUTM from 350 to 450 and approved an expansion of their field of action from Mali into the other central Sahel countries. Crisis Group interview, EU officials, May 2020.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, European diplomat working in the Sahel, October 2020. Crisis Group interviews, EU officials, June 2020. See also Remi Carayol, “Mali : Le coup d’état marque la fin des illusions françaises”, *Orient XXI*, 28 August 2020. “Les États membres de l’Union européenne dépendent en grande partie de son bon vouloir, et ils se calent plus ou moins sur les priorités fixées à Paris”. EU officials are particularly wary of new political and military interventions by Russia and Turkey in the Sahel. Crisis Group interviews, EU officials, September 2020.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, EU officials, August 2020. The diplomat also said: “Eight years of investment has only led to a situation where Russia is celebrated in the streets”. Some Sahelian leaders and populations, frustrated by the failures of Western interventions, have directly appealed to Russia for help. Private Russian military forces have reportedly begun deploying to Mali. Crisis Group interview, Western security source, August 2020. See also “La Russie exerce-t-elle une influence au Mali ?”, *France Info Afrique*, 21 November 2019.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, February 2020.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Dakar, October 2020. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°285, *Managing Trafficking in Northern Niger*, 6 January 2020. For more on the EU’s migration and security approach, see Cold-Ravnkilde and Nissen, “Schizophrenic Agendas in the EU’s External Actions in Mali”, *op. cit.* The European Council, commenting on the 2015 action plan, stated that “the problems of the Sahel not only affect local populations but increasingly impact directly on the interests and security of European citizens ... thus, bringing security and development to the Sahel

to today's reality, namely mitigating local conflicts and supporting reforms targeting corruption, poor governance and security forces' impunity.⁹⁶

As for the U.S., its interest in supporting Sahel peace and security operations waned significantly during President Donald Trump's administration. The U.S. has been a pillar of counter-terrorism operations, providing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support, air-to-air refuelling and military transport to Operation Barkhane.⁹⁷ U.S. activities in the Sahel began facing more domestic scrutiny after 2017, when Islamic State fighters killed four U.S. servicemen in Niger.⁹⁸ Since then, U.S. officials have also begun losing confidence in the French-led approach, arguing that it has failed to reverse the trend of insurgency on the ground.⁹⁹ The U.S. also pushed back against earlier French requests to increase MINUSMA's resources and expand its role beyond Malian borders to support the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which would have been costly; instead of increasing support for MINUSMA, the U.S. argued for a force drawdown and a defined exit strategy.¹⁰⁰

A review of the U.S. military posture overseas undertaken by then U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper with a view to aligning military spending with the goal of competing with Washington's principal international rivals, Russia and China, raised fears in Europe that U.S. military engagement in Africa was set to dwindle.¹⁰¹ In the end, the Trump administration did not cut Sahel spending. Rather, it may have given Sahel diplomacy more political visibility by appointing J. Peter Pham, an academic specialising in African affairs, as the first-ever U.S. special envoy for the region in March 2020.¹⁰²

leads to a strengthening of the EU's own internal security". Despite months of mounting evidence, Brussels did not take seriously security force abuses of civilians in the central Sahel until Niger tried to block a G5 meeting at the Security Council that intended to address human rights abuses. Crisis Group interviews, EU official, August 2020; EU senior Sahel official, June 2020; Brussels-based EU official, October 2020.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, EU official, August and September 2020.

⁹⁷ U.S. assistance supplied "a lot of bang for the buck" during its time. Crisis Group interview, senior U.S. Africa Command official, April 2020.

⁹⁸ See "U.S. soldiers killed in Niger were outgunned, 'left behind' in hunt for ISIS leader", ABC News, 3 May 2018.

⁹⁹ Senior U.S. military officials say they perceive al-Qaeda, not ISIS, to be the more worrying long-term threat in the Sahel. They argue that eliminating leaders has not weakened terrorist groups in the region but rather produced a harder-line and more diffuse command structure that is tougher to fight. Crisis Group interviews, April 2020.

¹⁰⁰ As one Security Council diplomat noted: "MINUSMA is now the most expensive peacekeeping operation. That makes them a target. The U.S. doesn't like it". Crisis Group interview, UN Security Council diplomat, New York, October 2020. France has sought to maximise MINUSMA's support for French and regional counter-terrorism projects. In 2017, France sought Security Council backing for MINUSMA to support the G5 Sahel Joint Force's operations in neighbouring countries. It did not succeed, as the U.S. pushed back due to the financial implications. Crisis Group interviews, UN diplomats, May-June 2020. On how the Biden administration may handle friction with France over MINUSMA, see Richard Gowan, "Repairing the Damage to U.S. Diplomacy in the UN Security Council", Crisis Group Commentary, 18 December 2020.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, European and U.S. officials, April and June 2020.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, Western official, 11 January 2021. The U.S. likely still views the Sahel as a small part of the big picture in Africa. U.S. Africa Command officials say the Sahel is their lowest priority, after Somalia and Libya. The U.S. sees its imperative as lying less in resolving the Sahel

The turnover in administrations presents an opportunity for a fresh review of the U.S. posture. Yet the importance that the Biden team places on the transatlantic relationships with France and others would seem to make a troop drawdown or spending reduction fairly unlikely.

B. A Prospective AU Force

In 2020, the African Union said it was considering sending a force to the Sahel. On 27 February, AU Commissioner for Peace and Security Smail Chergui announced the Union's intention to deploy 3,000 troops to the region, calling for a strategic "reset" involving greater appropriation by African actors.¹⁰³ The Peace and Security Council has asked the AU to set up a technical planning committee, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and AU Secretariat to develop a Concept of Operations for this mission.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, Chergui has launched consultations with the G5 and ECOWAS to drum up more political support for his idea.¹⁰⁵

For the time being, however, the chances of this force coming into existence appear low. Indeed, in Addis Ababa, many AU officials and diplomats concede that great uncertainty surrounds the questions of which African countries would commit troops and where funds for the deployment would come from.¹⁰⁶

Some German and U.S. policymakers like the idea of handing over more security responsibility to Africans. German officials already support the extension of the G5's capabilities.¹⁰⁷ Some U.S. diplomats go a step further, suggesting that an African force could one day take over MINUSMA, which itself grew out of an ECOWAS military mission deployed in 2013, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali. Others are less enthusiastic, however, arguing that such a transition is unlikely to get off the ground any time soon, with the major questions regarding funding unresolved.¹⁰⁸

Still, even were it to come about, it is doubtful that an AU mission would have a transformative effect. It could instead end up as yet another vehicle in what has

crisis than in keeping it from spilling over into coastal states where Washington has more direct interests. Crisis Group interviews, senior U.S. military officials and diplomats, April and June 2020.
¹⁰³ At the February 2020 AU summit, on the eve of the pandemic, the AU Assembly in consultation with the defence ministries of the G5 Sahel countries and ECOWAS voted to deploy a 3,000-strong force to the Sahel for six months. The announcement caught some AU actors and Western diplomats off guard: they thought Chergui was putting the cart before the horse as officials had barely broached questions of mandate and funding. "Terrorisme au Sahel : Chergui déplore l'insuffisance de la mobilisation internationale", APS, 6 February 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, AU diplomats, July 2020. See "Communique of the 950th meeting of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union on the consideration of the revised Draft Strategic Concept Note on Planning Guidance for the Deployment of 3000 troops", AU Peace and Security Council, 4 November 2020. A draft concept note initially forecasted a July 2020 deployment.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, AU diplomats, July 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Algeria, Burundi and Senegal have expressed interest in sending troops. Some AU diplomats say the Union would look to the EU for funding. Crisis Group interviews, AU diplomats, July 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Berlin is already a backer of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, committing roughly €50 million to the force between 2018 and 2020. See "Significantly more assistance for the Sahel region", German Federal Cabinet, 23 February 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. diplomats, October 2020. For more on U.S. reservations, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°286, *The Price of Peace: Securing UN Financing for AU Peace Operations*, 31 January 2020.

become a “traffic jam” of security operations in the Sahel.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, AU officials remain unclear about how such a force would integrate into an already crowded field, alongside MINUSMA, Barkhane and the G5 Sahel Joint Force, although the Concept of Operations document might help answer these questions.¹¹⁰ It is also doubtful that an AU force would succeed where France and others have failed. The challenges still facing the African Union Mission in Somalia, deployed now for almost a decade and a half and allied with low-performing state forces in a war with no end in sight against Islamist militants, should serve as a cautionary tale.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ “Open Letter to the UN Security Council on Peacekeeping in Mali”, International Crisis Group, 24 April 2017.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, July 2020.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, AU diplomat, November 2020.

V. Righting the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy

COVID-19 and the coup in Mali have dealt further blows to already staggering international efforts to stabilise the Sahel. The virus has meant that military operations are today relatively more prominent in those efforts, while Mali's coup and protests elsewhere throw into stark relief the anger that many citizens, even beyond rural areas wracked by insurgency, feel toward the state. No end is in sight to the violence roiling much of the region. A rethink is urgently needed. The EU's plans to revise its Sahel strategy in the coming months provide one opportunity for a course correction, and the arrival of a new U.S. administration another. But it is Paris in particular that should consider revising its approach.

The first step would be to shift the narrative to give greater weight to the idea that a crisis of governance underpins the Sahel's insecurity. The growth of jihadist militancy in the Sahel has many causes, but in large part it is a symptom of this governance crisis, which has led many citizens to distrust underperforming states. Decades of mismanagement of public finances and rural resources have fuelled popular resentment that contributes to both rural insurgencies and urban protests.

A new approach would flow from this new narrative. It would not require fully rewriting the multidimensional strategy. It would, however, reorder priorities, setting out a focus on, first, political dialogue as a means of presaging the state's return to rural areas, and, secondly, wider governance reform. Military operations, while still key, should be subordinate to such a strategy. In places, this might mean using military pressure to counter jihadists, keep them from expanding into new areas, disrupt their supply chains or, perhaps, encourage them to come to the table. Elsewhere, it might mean pressing the pause button to allow state authorities to initiate peacemaking efforts, even with local militant leaders.

A. Dialogue and Reform

External actors usually agree in principle on the need for government reform in the Sahel but are often lost on how they might support such efforts. Making headway on this matter is more challenging and the horizons longer-term than dispatching military forces. Whereas international counter-terrorism efforts often bypass local sovereign decision-making, changes in governance depend principally on whether leaders themselves buy into such reforms and whether outside actors can create incentives and pressures that encourage them to do so. There are, however, steps external partners can take.

First, they should encourage states much more assertively to mediate and engage in dialogue to resolve disputes between and within local communities and between them and state actors, especially in Liptako-Gourma, where international efforts have recently focused, as well as in other hotspots like central Mali and eastern Burkina Faso. Such efforts should underpin the state's return to rural areas. External partners should also encourage Sahelian governments to launch dialogues to peacefully regulate competition, increasingly stoked by climate change, over access to natural resources, especially between farmers and herders. They could both push authorities to undertake such efforts and contribute expertise. If local authorities reach the conclusion that talking to jihadist militants is necessary to such an approach, foreign

partners should give them space to do so. Governments that have shown an interest in talking to militants – like Mali’s – encountered obstacles, especially from France, up to and including outspoken opposition.

Secondly, external actors could support state authorities in providing basic services, notably health care and education, including in areas where security forces are not yet deployed. By leading with a security approach, external actors are implicitly encouraging Sahelian states to do the same. At present, Sahelian states spend as much as 40 per cent of their budgets on security. State resources are no doubt limited, but some of this money could perhaps be used toward trust-building measures in the form of improving health, education and more equitable systems for managing rural resources. Such measures would be a useful step toward persuading communities to welcome the state.

Local governments themselves should consider building up such services in vulnerable areas before, for example, constructing new gendarmerie camps and courts. There would be risks in doing so. Militants could capture medical supplies or destroy schools before they can be used. But such risks could be mitigated if any provision of basic public goods is based on the dialogue described above and meets local needs. Jihadists tend to be less prone to disrupting activities that enjoying local support, particularly as many militants are intimately connected to communities and share their grievances.

Thirdly, external actors should consider encouraging Sahelian states to improve public-sector financial management. Citizens in all these countries call for such reform. Nudging governments in this direction is never easy, but one option might be to more strongly link aid packages to fiscal transparency and accountability. In Mali, for instance, donors could ask the transitional authorities to develop an action plan committing to transparent use of state resources before they unlock assistance suspended after the coup. In Niger, partners should push authorities to prosecute those who, as the audit published in August 2020 revealed, embezzled funds and be ready to halt security cooperation until proceedings are at least under way. In Burkina Faso, donors might condition assistance on government commitments to prosecute security personnel who abuse civilians. Such an approach would not entail threatening to end military support but instead tying some programs – and thus resources that Sahel leaders value – to reforms. Suspending these programs would likely not have a major impact on the balance of power between state forces and militants.

B. Military Efforts in Support of a New Political Approach

Military efforts remain a key component of multidimensional strategies, but they need to be conducted in ways that fit with overall priorities. Interventions in insurgency-affected zones should be built around strategies adjusted to the local political environment and designed to defuse – instead of aggravating, which too often is the case now – the tensions underpinning violence. In the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area, for example, those trying to overcome distrust between state actors on one side, and local leaders and communities on the other (as well as between communities themselves) should begin the hard work of addressing resentment toward and fear of the state. Local settlements, which in some cases would require dialogue with militants, might precede the redeployment of state services, especially the gendarmerie

and national guard. Development projects should also be rolled out only once such settlements are in place. While settlements are being forged, Western militaries should refrain from getting involved on the side of communities or local political leaders whom they regard as allies.

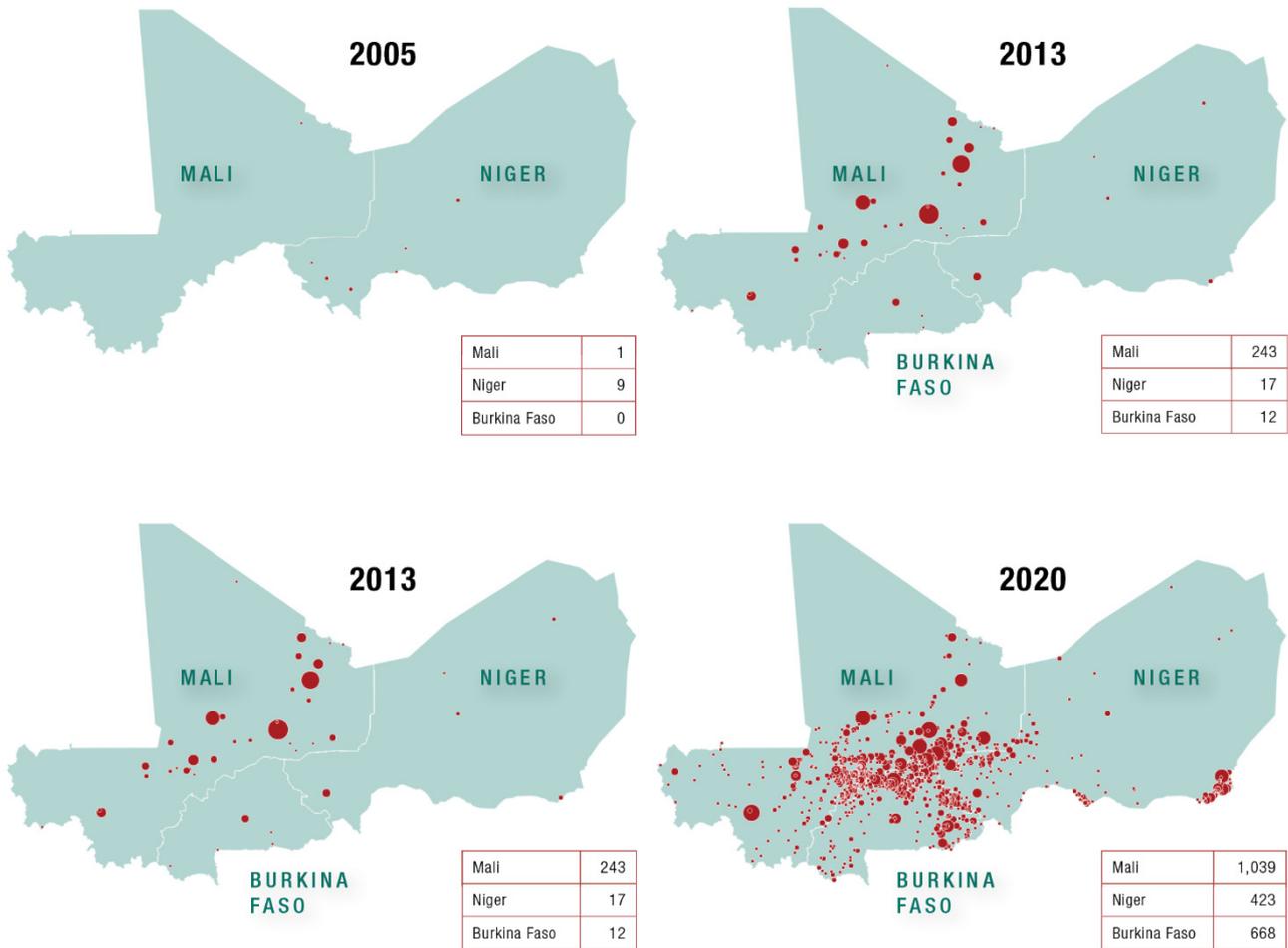
For their part, Sahelian security forces must do more to protect civilians. First and foremost, they must prevent abuses by security forces and their non-state allies. They should also diversify their role to include activities that aid local livelihoods, such as recovering stolen livestock in rural areas where cattle theft has been a catalyst of conflict. Thus, they could complement efforts to win over rural populations in insurgency-affected areas, who often perceive the state as more devoted to repression and helping Westerners get rid of jihadists than to providing them basic public services.

VI. Conclusion

The French-led Sahel stabilisation strategy is at a critical juncture. COVID-19 has set back some of its multilateral components and could even lead to budget cuts affecting Operation Barkhane. Meanwhile, the Sahel's problems, which have only grown as the nature of conflict has changed and its geographical scope widened, require a more nuanced approach. France's allies – and indeed some French officials – are increasingly aware that the strategy needs updating. Sustaining the suite of stabilisation efforts or adding more financial or military resources will not reverse the deterioration of security, which continues after almost a decade of well-intentioned efforts costing billions of dollars. What is needed is a strategic reset that centres stabilisation efforts around improved governance and political engagement at the grassroots where the conflicts are burning. Only then can security deployments and development projects help build links between states and their rural inhabitants.

Dakar/Brussels, 1 February 2021

Appendix A: Violent Events in the Sahel (2005-2020)



Source: ACLED (Armed Conflict Event Data Project), 2020.
CRISIS GROUP / P-RC / CB-G.

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Óscar Arias
Richard Armitage

Diego Arria
Zainab Bangura
Nahum Barnea
Kim Beazley
Shlomo Ben-Ami

Christoph Bertram
Lakhdar Brahimi
Kim Campbell
Jorge Castañeda
Joaquim Alberto Chissano
Victor Chu
Mong Joon Chung
Sheila Coronel
Pat Cox
Gianfranco Dell'Alba
Jacques Delors
Alain Destexhe
Mou-Shih Ding
Uffe Ellemann-Jensen
Stanley Fischer
Carla Hills
Swanee Hunt
Wolfgang Ischinger

Aleksander Kwasniewski
Ricardo Lagos
Joanne Leedom-Ackerman
Todung Mulya Lubis
Graça Machel
Jessica T. Mathews
Miklós Németh
Christine Ockrent
Timothy Ong
Roza Otunbayeva
Olara Otunnu
Lord (Christopher) Patten
Surin Pitsuwan
Fidel V. Ramos
Olympia Snowe
Javier Solana
Pär Stenbäck