

The G5 Sahel and the European Union

The challenges of security cooperation with a regional grouping

SUMMARY

The August 2020 coup in Mali recalls the coup the country witnessed in 2012 and highlights the growing instability and insecurity the Sahel region has been facing for a decade now. The combined effect of population growth, poverty, climate change, unsustainable land tenure and marginalisation of peripheral populations has been fuelling community-based tensions and anger towards governments in the region. Weak state power and porous borders have enabled the proliferation of jihadist and other armed groups and the intensification of violence.

In 2014, as a collective answer to the growing security threat, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger created the G5 Sahel, an intergovernmental cooperation framework seeking to coordinate the security and development policies of its member states. In 2017, the G5 Sahel Joint Force was launched with the aim of fighting terrorism and organised crime in the region.

In addition to its own security and development strategy in the region, the EU has developed close links with the G5 Sahel in support of its work towards sustainable peace and development, including regular political dialogues and three CSDP missions to train and advise the G5 Sahel national armies and Joint Force. The recent coup in Mali has led to the suspension of some forms of cooperation between the EU and the G5 Sahel. However, while efforts to find common ground for action and to build a lasting partnership with unstable countries remains a challenge, the EU is not ready to leave this strategic field to other players.



EU-G5 Sahel video-conference, 28 April 2020.

In this Briefing

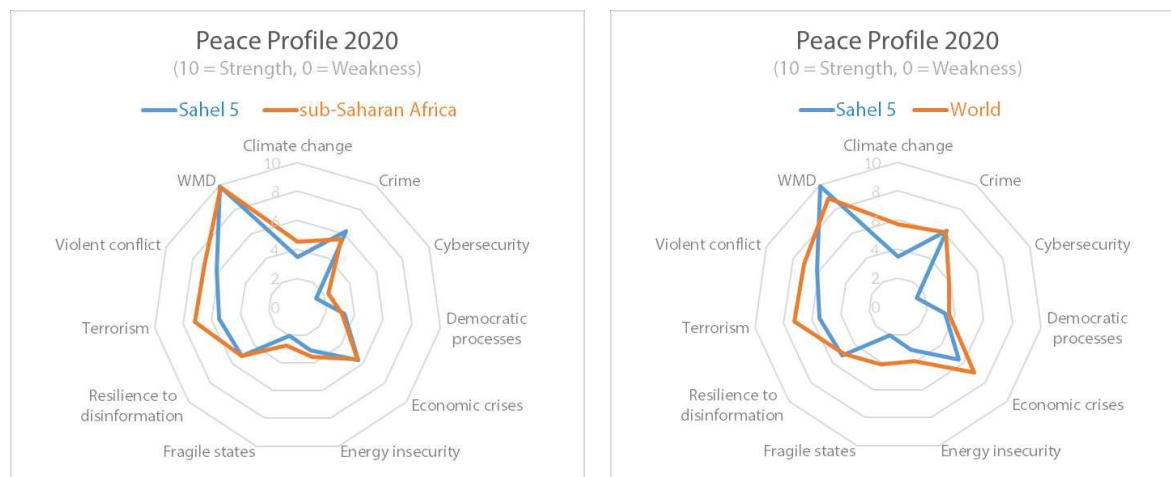
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The G5 Sahel and its Joint Force

In quest for the right scale

Established in December 2014, the [G5 Sahel](#) is an intergovernmental cooperation framework between Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger seeking to coordinate its members' development and security policies in response to growing regional instability due to the proliferation of armed groups, notably jihadists, in areas left outside central government control (these are often border areas such as the [Liptako-Gourma](#) one or the one of the Lake Chad basin).¹

Figure 1 – Peace profiles of the G5 Sahel countries



Source: EPRS, [Normandy Index 2020](#) – based on data available in May 2020 (mostly 2019), it does not reflect the most recent developments such as the surge of violence in Burkina Faso and Niger or the coup in Mali.

On average, the G5 Sahel countries score worse as regards most types of threats than the rest of the world, including other sub-Saharan countries. The main sources of instability include troubled economies, weak democratic processes, crime, violent conflicts and terrorism.

The creation of the G5 Sahel follows the launch of international and foreign missions and operations (UN mission MINUSMA 2013, EU Common Security and Defence Policy 2012 and 2013, France's operations Serval, 2013, then Barkhane, 2014 – see section on 'The G5 Sahel Joint Force in a crowded security field' below). France, the EU and the UN have [supported](#) the creation of the G5 Sahel as a good vector for their own objectives in the region.

In the same way as the United Nations, the EU brings the prospects for cooperation with the G5 back to the objectives of its own Sahel strategy, a position that the G5, in strong demand for international support in order to assert itself in the Sahelian game of African actors, does not seek to contest.

Hugo Sada, *Quel avenir pour le G5?*, FRS, 2017.

The G5 Sahel fits into an already dense institutional landscape characterised by the struggle to find the right scale at the sub-regional level in a context of [multiple frameworks](#) and forums of dialogue (among which the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Community of Sahel-Saharan states (CEN-SAD)). The [strategic approach in the region](#) could have included Libya, certain [north African countries](#), other Chad basin countries and other west African countries infiltrated by the same armed groups. However, the G5 Sahel is staunch and coherent due to the structural similarities among its members. Furthermore, its composition is shaped by geopolitical considerations, such as to avoid facing [reluctance](#) by some states (notably [Algeria](#)) to intervene beyond their borders, and to avoid power rivalries (for example, between [Algeria and Morocco](#), if they were to be included in the grouping) from blocking its decision-making process.

Thanks to the strong involvement of the five countries' top politicians in its affairs, the G5 Sahel has been able to go [beyond the scope](#) of wider groupings existing in the region.

A light and flexible structure

The G5 Sahel architecture

The **Conference of the Heads of State** determines the orientations and the strategic options.

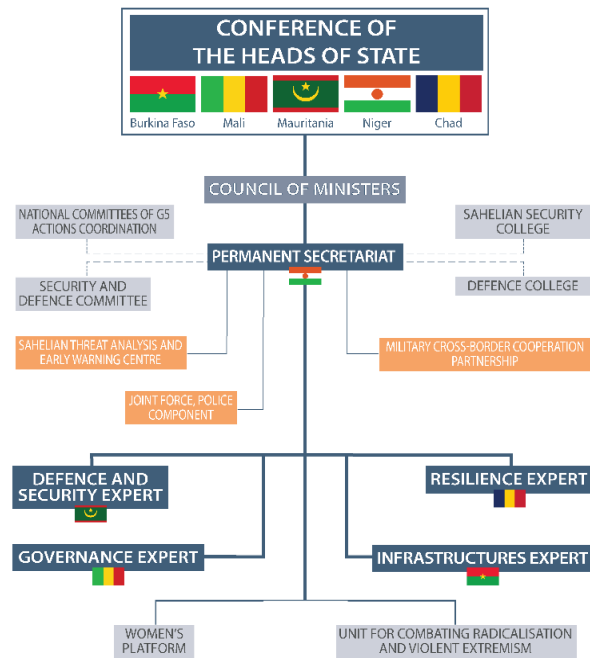
The **Council of Ministers** is responsible for implementing the G5 Sahel policy defined by the Conference of the Heads of State.

The **Permanent Secretariat** runs the decisions of the Council of Ministers under whose authority it is placed. The Permanent Secretary has a four-year mandate, renewable once. It has no more than 20 staff members.

The **Security and Defence Committee** includes the Chiefs of Staff and the duly authorised representatives for security issues of the Member States. Through the creation of the Military Partnership of Cross-Border Cooperation (PMCT), the Cooperation Platform in Security Matter (PCMS), and later the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S), the Security and Defence Committee has become the decision-making lobby of the Council of Ministers.

The **National Committees of G5 Actions Coordination** in each Member State answer to the Permanent Secretariat and are under the authority of the ministers responsible for development.

Figure 2 – G5 Sahel organisation chart



Source: [G5 Sahel website](#); translation: EPRS.

Being a cooperation framework rather than a full-fledged institution (although it has legal personality), the G5 Sahel has a lightly staffed Permanent Secretariat, as the execution of decisions falls within the competence of the member states. A [review of the functioning](#) of the G5 Sahel has found that its decision-making process is heavily reliant on in-camera discussions among the Heads of State.

While the strong commitment of the G5 Sahel countries' Heads of State has contributed to reinforcing the framework's credibility and securing international aid, it also has its downside. Too strong an involvement of its leaders might have a direct impact on its activities, should there be a shift in power. In this regard, the [overthrowing of Mali's president](#) by mutinying soldiers on 18 August 2020 is a [resilience test](#) for the G5 Sahel.

The limited number of staff working at the Permanent Secretariat does not allow it to coordinate and get enough funding for all G5 Sahel objectives, which [officially include](#) improving the G5 Sahel countries' living conditions, devising a security framework and promoting good governance and regional inclusion. Successive priority investment programmes ([PIPs](#)) feature regional projects grouped in four categories: defence and security; governance; resilience and human development; and infrastructure. However, the G5 Sahel has [struggled](#) to attract donors for projects not directly linked to security, and leaders reportedly have different views on the development priorities. The initial strong development component has therefore gradually [slipped into the background](#), while the one focused on security has come to the fore, leading to the construction of a joint armed force (and a transnational [defence college](#)).

The G5 Sahel Joint Force in a crowded security field

International security forces in the Sahel

At the launch of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, several international security forces were already present in the region.

The United Nations [established](#) the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (**MINUSMA**) in April 2013 to support political processes in Mali and carry out a number of security-related tasks. With more than 12 000 military personnel currently deployed in the country, the mandate of MINUSMA includes the protection of civilians, support for national political dialogue and reconciliation, and assistance with the re-establishment of authority by the Malian state. Its [mandate](#) currently runs until June 2021.

The French **Operation Barkhane**, established in August 2014 as a sequel to operation Serval, has its headquarters in N'Djamena (Chad) and [5 100 personnel](#). This well-equipped force aims to provide security in the region and fight terrorism in partnership with regional players, and launches joint operations with Mali, Niger and Chad.

The **EU** has three ongoing common security and defence policy (CSDP) missions in the region, totalling 900 experts deployed in the field. The mandates of [CSDP missions](#) do not provide for military intervention in the field.

In March 2020, 11 European countries together with Mali and Niger [launched](#) the **Takuba task force**. Mainly composed of European forces, it started deploying this summer under the command of Operation Barkhane, to fight terrorist groups in the Liptako region (along the Mali–Niger border).

The G5 Sahel Joint Force (or FC-G5S, for 'Force conjointe G5 Sahel') was [launched in July 2017](#) in Bamako (Mali). Pooling the five countries' resources to fight terrorism, human trafficking and organised crime in the region, it has about 5 000 staff. The African Union Peace and Security Council [authorised](#) the military component of the G5 Sahel in April 2017. The UN Security Council (UNSC) has expressed its support for the G5 Sahel in two resolutions: [Resolution 2359](#) calling on the international community to provide logistical, operational and financial assistance, and [Resolution 2391](#) providing for operational logistical support to the G5 Sahel Joint Force through MINUSMA.

Despite the '[regional security traffic jam](#)' (see box above), the FC-G5S was [designed](#) to [complement](#) other existing forces. Although it has a peace enforcement mandate, in practice the FC-G5S is rather a counter-insurgency operation, as its mandate includes counter-terrorism, fighting transnational organised crime and restoring the authority of the state. This is in line with the existing trend to create ad hoc forces, with a direct military intervention mandate going beyond the peacekeeping framework.² Indeed, the principles of impartiality and non-use of force except in self-defence that guide UN peacekeeping prevent MINUSMA from directly participating in counter-terrorism operations. Its direct participation would also [threaten the objectives](#) of its mandate to support the Malian political process and protect civilians. Counter-terrorism operations can exacerbate intercommunal violence and prevent UN soldiers from protecting local populations.

The G5 Sahel is also meant to flank the Barkhane and the Takuba forces, mainly in the zone along the common borders of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, while reinforcing the region's countries' ownership of the military operations. However, according to a [report by the UN Secretary General](#) the operations of the FC-G5S are hampered by persistent equipment and training shortfalls.

Challenges for the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S)

Need for sustainable funding. The G5 Sahel, its member countries being among the world's poorest, [lacks](#) a large donor from among its own members. The EU has provided €147 million (as of July 2019) out of €414 million pledged by [international partners](#). The FC-G5S's dependence on external funding is a threat to its sustainability. The G5 Sahel is still [asking](#) the UN to put the FC-G5S under [Chapter VII](#) of the UN Charter; some [authors](#) consider that the force should indeed benefit from a UN mandate, which would afford it sustainable funding, increased human resources and international legitimacy.

Operational challenges. None of the G5 Sahel countries has a military structure [capable of supporting](#) the multiple military commitments assumed by their leaders. For example, some of Chad's and Niger's troops are engaged against Boko Haram or in MINUSMA operations. Moreover, there is a risk that G5 Sahel states could be tempted to prioritise their participation in UN missions that often come with funding, at the expense of their regional or sub-regional commitments. Yet another challenge is the specific context in which the deployment of the Joint Force took place: the Burkinabe army has been engaged in a restructuring process ever since the fall of President Compaoré in 2014; Chad's army has battalions deployed both in Mali – as part of the MINUSMA troops – and in the Central African Republic; the Nigerien army is pressured by budget constraints; the Malian army is disorganised and poorly trained; Mauritania's overhaul of its military capacities has mainly addressed domestic considerations.

Strategic uncertainties. The main tasks of the FC-G5S include fighting terrorism, cross-border organised crime and human trafficking, among others. Nevertheless, UNSC [Resolution 2359](#) does not clearly identify the 'terrorist' groups it refers to. Various criminal groups in the Sahel region are not exactly terrorist and pursue activities that the FC-G5S's mandate does not cover. The [blurred distinction](#) between fighters moving from one group to another may lead the FC-G5S to attack armed groups that do not appear on any list of terrorist movements.

Relations with local communities. Another challenge for the FC-G5S are its [relations](#) with the inhabitants of the areas where it is deployed. The battalions are deployed in cross-border areas whose inhabitants often feel marginalised by the government and excluded from its public policies. Being on good terms with the local communities is a must for the FC-G5S as a way to boost acceptance of its presence and obtain the information it needs for conducting its operations. However, these communities often mistrust the government and prefer to seek protection from local armed groups.

Main source: [CARPADD](#), 2018.

EU cooperation with the G5 Sahel

An EU strategy tailored for the G5 Sahel countries

In the framework of its own development and security strategy in the region, the [EU has supported the G5 Sahel](#) since its creation in 2014 and promotes close collaboration with the G5 Sahel countries. The [EU Strategy for security and development in the Sahel](#) specifically targets the five G5 Sahel member states, envisaging active [political dialogue](#) between them and the EU about their common priorities. Topics covered include: reinforcement of governance in vulnerable areas; support for security and the fight against terrorism and organised crime; prevention of violence against civilians; and reinforcement of the respect of human rights and international humanitarian law; support for the implementation of the Malian peace process; and reinforcement of development actions.

The EU has three CSDP missions in the Sahel region: [EUCAP Sahel Niger](#) and [EUCAP Sahel Mali](#), two civilian missions providing expertise in strategic advice, training and equipment respectively to the Nigerien and Malian security forces; and [EUTM Mali](#), a military training mission for the Malian armed forces, established on the basis of [UNSC Resolution 2085](#). The EU has 'regionalised' the scope of its CSDP missions to make them better complement the G5 Sahel conduct of operations. Since June 2017, a regional coordination cell has been supporting capacity-building and cooperation between the five target countries and the three CSDP missions.

In [February 2019](#), the Foreign Affairs Council decided to beef up the CSDP missions' coordination cell, renamed it the **Regional Advisory Coordination Cell (RACC)**, and moved it from the EUCAP Sahel Mali premises to Nouakchott (Mauritania). The RACC provides strategic advice to G5 Sahel structures and countries, in synergy with European Commission-funded programmes aimed at improving cross-border regional cooperation. EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali are also allowed to 'conduct punctual and targeted activities' for the military in Burkina Faso, Chad and Mauritania.

Among the changes the Foreign Affairs Council introduced in the work of the CSDP missions, the most significant ones concern **EUTM Mali**, initially aimed at training Malian battalions, providing advice to the Malian authorities in the restructuring of the Malian armed forces and support for the elaboration of the first Defence Programming Law ever adopted in Mali. It is staffed by about 650 military personnel from 22 EU Member States and five partner countries. Since May 2018, the EUTM Mali mandate includes [advice to and training of the G5 Sahel Joint Force](#). In [March 2020](#), the Council decided to extend the EUTM Mali mandate by another four years, and increase its staffing to 1 200. The Council furthermore entrusted the EUTM Mali with training and advising the national armed forces of [other G5 Sahel countries](#) as well, notably Niger and Burkina Faso. The EUTM Mali is also tasked with closely coordinating and cooperating with the ECOWAS, and with the French ('Barkhane') and UN operations.

After the 18 August 2020 coup in Mali, the EU acknowledged that [some of the putschists](#) had benefitted from EU training for the Malian armed forces. This comes as no surprise, since 14 000 soldiers (of the [17 000-strong](#) Malian army), have [received training](#) from EUTM Mali.

Since the coup, the EU [has suspended the activities](#) of its missions in Mali. This does not, however, signal the end of cooperation with the G5 Sahel and its members: the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, has clearly vowed that CSDP missions in Mali 'will start working again as soon as possible'. Besides, the regionalisation of the scope of these missions will allow the [redeployment](#) of part of their staff to other G5 countries, probably Burkina Faso.

European Parliament's position

The European Parliament has commended the EU action in the Sahel and the operationalisation of the FC-G5S. It has expressed its support for regionalising the CSDP missions in several resolutions: considering on [23 November 2016](#) that this move could be an opportunity to strengthen the missions' efficiency and relevance, and underlining on [12 December 2018](#) the particular importance of this move for enhancing the G5 Sahel countries' capabilities for cooperation. After having, on [7 June 2016](#), recommended monitoring the trained soldiers and stepping up the capabilities of the training missions, in January 2020 the Parliament criticised the lack of suitable indicators used by the European External Action Service (EEAS) to monitor the outcome of the EUCAP Mali and Niger missions. In a resolution of [26 March 2019](#), it also stressed the lack of operational efficiency of those missions, and invited the EEAS and the Commission to coordinate the CSDP missions more effectively with other Union efforts at regional level, such as the G5 Sahel, while calling for increased cooperation and coordination between the Union and its Member States.

In a resolution of [19 December 2019](#), the Parliament commended the EU and its Member States for supporting the G5 Sahel, MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane. It also emphasised the need for more comprehensive and coordinated international security action, and stressed that the EU should be willing to engage even more with the whole region and integrate this in its new [EU-Africa strategy](#). On [15 January 2020](#), the Parliament considered that the establishment of a civilian and/or military mission could be justified with a view to strengthening the security forces of Burkina Faso, given the implications of the deteriorating situation in the country for the Sahel. The regionalisation of the scope of the existing CSDP missions has partly responded to this request.

The Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) adopted a [report](#) prepared by Javier Nart (Renew, Spain) on the EU-Africa security cooperation in the Sahel, West Africa and the Horn of Africa.

The report calls for coordination of the EU development and security initiatives by the High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission, under the authority of the Council. It furthermore calls for the EU to help the FC-G5S to become operational. It goes on to caution that the efficiency of EU CSDP missions is hampered, considering 'the fact that they cannot supply the necessary equipment to the unit they train and to the local defence forces, including weapons, ammunition and vehicles'. The report therefore calls for the EU to be allowed to provide 'military equipment to partner countries, including arms and ammunitions', while making sure 'that any military equipment is not given to recipients that are committing abuses, atrocities and other harms against civilian populations'. The Parliament is due to vote on a resolution on the topic in [September 2020](#).

Outlook³

The European Union is a strong partner of the G5 Sahel countries. By deploying missions aiming to train and provide advice to Sahel countries' forces, and by regionalising them, the EU provides strong technical support to its G5 Sahel partners. Josep Borell underlined during the EU-G5 Sahel video-conference in April 2020 that 'the Sahel must remain on top of the international agenda'. However, EU funding, training, technical advice and political support have not yet fully succeeded in helping the G5 Sahel fulfil its mission for stability and development, as shown once again by the rise of violence in Burkina Faso and Niger and the coup in Mali.

The EU missions' mandates do not include the [supply of military \(lethal\) equipment](#) to the units they train. Some [analysts](#) argue that this hampers their effectiveness and weakens the EU position in the field, while at the same time [other players](#), such as Russia, reinforce their influence through military presence and weapons supply. Others, on the contrary, believe such provision risks [fuelling conflict](#) – through escalating tensions or the potential diversion of weapons. As shown by the Mali coup, the risk of such a scenario is not unrealistic: neither the G5 Sahel nor the wider West African community, ECOWAS, were able to prevent it, or even to mediate a solution to the crisis. The suspension of the CSDP training and capacity-building missions in Mali following the coup illustrates how difficult cooperation with local security players actually is.

Some have questioned the relevance of the EU-G5 Sahel partnership. On one hand, the structural weaknesses of the G5 Sahel prevent it from developing its own [consistent plan](#) for stabilising the region, leading it to [endorse EU priorities](#) for security and migration that may have [unintended consequences](#) on the regional governance and development aspects. On the other hand, the EU presence in the Sahel might appear as '[schizophrenic](#)', as it shows both the EU's willingness to act as a security player and at the same time its limited impact on security in the field due to the limited scope of CSDP missions' mandates, structural weaknesses and lack of buy-in from its Sahel partners.

The increased violence in the Sahel countries calls for a reassessment of the EU's partnership with the G5 Sahel. The fact that the proliferation of jihadist and other armed groups in the Sahel builds on poverty and despair calls for reinforcing the security-development nexus. This proliferation also constitutes a [real threat](#) to the security of greater west Africa. Therefore, the focus on G5 Sahel countries might prove insufficient.

The proposed new [Comprehensive strategy with Africa](#) might help incorporate security cooperation with the G5 Sahel into a wider context. The proposal includes restructuring EU cooperation in the field of African peace efforts – including the review of the EU Sahel strategy (the latest related [action plan](#) ends in 2020), together with the other existing regional strategies for the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Guinea. It furthermore envisages the development of similar strategies for Libya and the Great Lakes – as part of a partnership for peace and governance, itself linked to other partnerships aimed at boosting growth and jobs on the continent. As a [panel of experts](#) on the Sahel pointed out in 2015, 'the human, financial and political cost of investing in this public good [peace] will be less than the cost of managing the fallout of an extended, deep-rooted and expanding crisis'.

FURTHER READING

Anghel S., The European Council and the G5 Sahel: security, development and the rule of law, Briefing, EPRS, European Parliament (forthcoming).

Ioannides I., [Peace and security in 2020: Evaluating the EU approach to tackling the Sahel conflicts](#), Study, EPRS, European Parliament, September 2020.

Pichon E., [Understanding the EU Strategy for the Sahel](#), Briefing, EPRS, European Parliament, September 2020.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For a detailed analysis of the security threats in the Sahel, see: I. Ioannides, [Peace and security in 2020: Evaluating the EU approach to tackling the Sahel conflicts](#), EPRS, European Parliament, September 2020.
- ² One such example being the [Multi-National Joint Task Force](#) set up to fight Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin.
- ³ For a detailed assessment of the EU contribution to peace and security in the Sahel, see: I. Ioannides, op. cit.

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