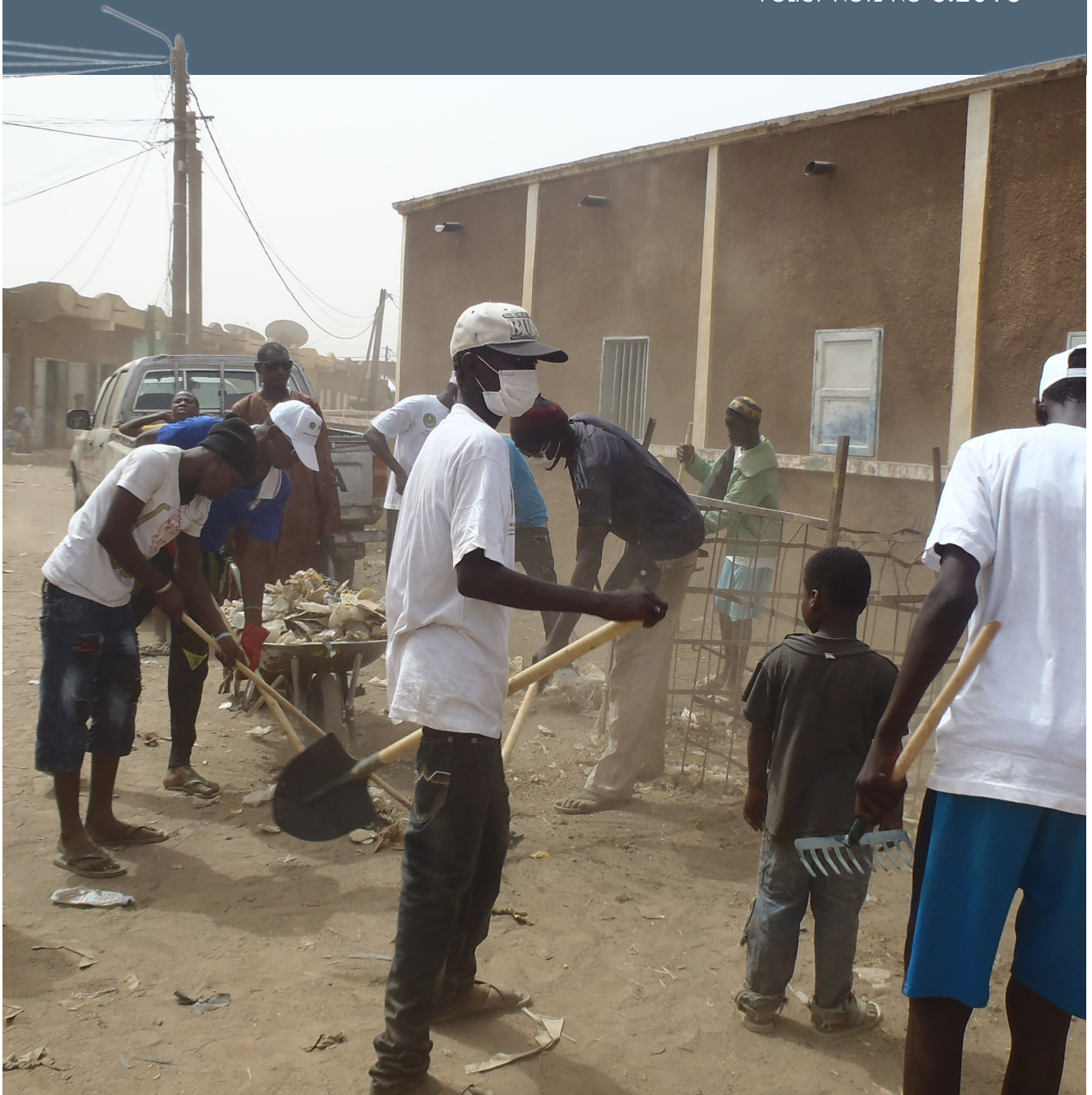


# RIVAL PRIORITIES IN THE SAHEL

– FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN  
SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

POLICY NOTE NO 3:2018



Rival priorities in the Sahel – finding the balance between security and development

Policy Note No 3:2018

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Front cover: Selibaly, Southern Mauritania, 5 June 2014. Hundreds of people, members of youth networks and civil society organisations, clean the streets in a campaign to raise awareness for the promotion of peace and social cohesion. Photo credit: UNDP Mauritania. Back cover: Mogadishu, 15 October 2017, AMISOM's Ugandan Contingent. Photo Tobin Jones, AMISOM, Public Domain.

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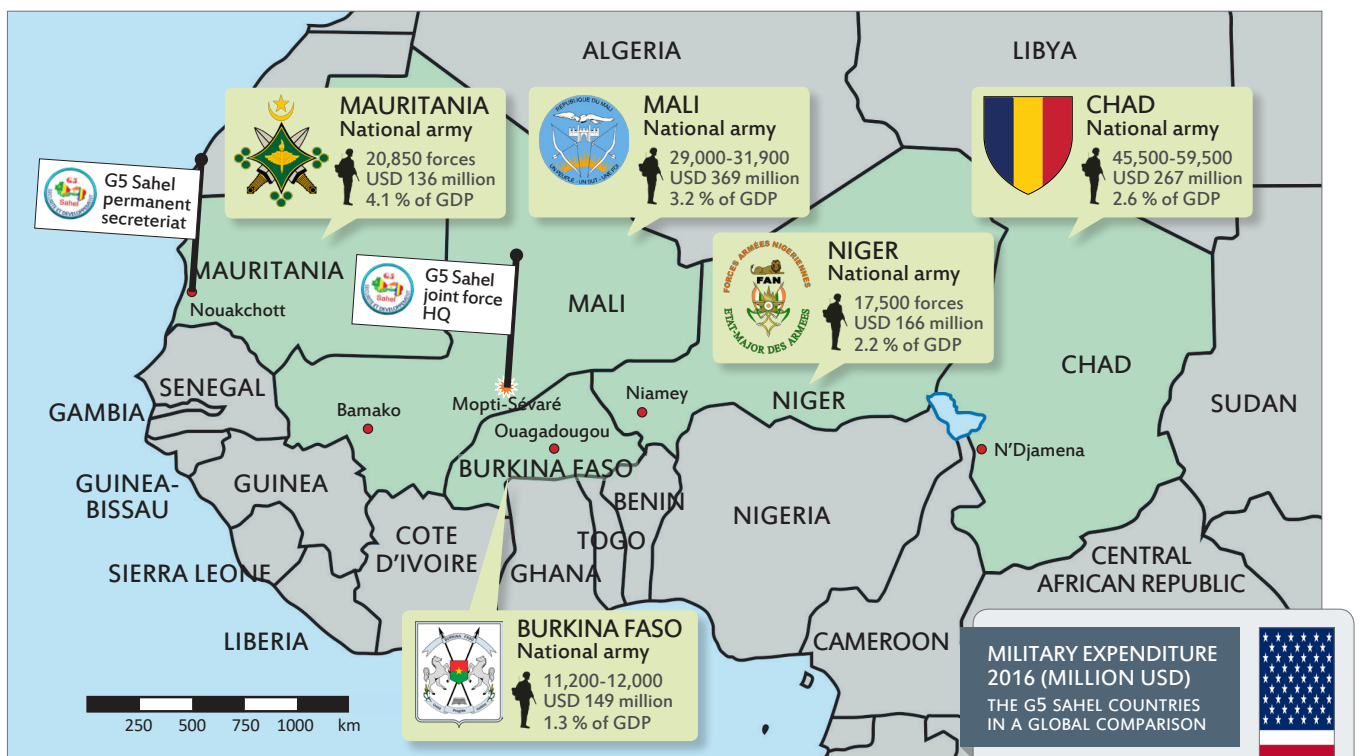
## – FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

The G5 Sahel initiative goes some way to make up for the lack of supranational coordination in the troubled Sahel region. If moulded in the interests of development, it could bring about positive change. But the initiative risks becoming yet another excuse to get more ‘boots on the ground’, if external stakeholders place too much emphasis on fighting terror and stopping migration.

MORTEN BØÅS, Research Professor at NUPI, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

The Sahel region confronts global policy-makers with a huge set of serious challenges – fragile states, poverty, refugees and migrants, transnational organised crime and armed jihadist rebellions. Thus, as the international community fears a general meltdown of statehood, the region has never been higher

on the international agenda, has never been in receipt of more international assistance and has never seen more international interventions of various types than now. The instability that erupted in Mali in 2012 led to military interventions by France (first Operation Serval and more recently Barkhane), the African Union (AFISMA) and the United Nations (MINUSMA). It has also



The total military expenditure of all five G5 Sahel countries amounts to 1,087 million US dollars, which as a comparison is 1,9 percent of France’s military expenditure and 0,2 percent of USA’s military expenditure.

Sources: Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat (2018), based on Touchard’s *Forces Armees Africaines* (2017), SIPRI Military expenditure database (2016), MINUSMA and the French Ministry of Defense.

\* NB: Total military expenditure of all five G5 Sahel countries, not of the G5 Sahel joint force.



prompted the deployment in Mali of a European Union (EU) police and rule of law mission (CIVCAP-Sahel) and an EU military training mission (EUTM).

### Fear of spill-overs

Despite all these efforts and the conclusion of a peace agreement for Mali in Algiers in 2015, the situation on the ground has gone from bad to worse, as the conflict has spilled over from northern to central Mali. Consequently, sections of the international community are increasingly coming to fear a spill-over into neighbouring countries, too. This is evident in Niger, where the US is building a major drone base at Agadez and has deployed around 800 special forces on the ground. Italy has a presence of 470 soldiers; there are German troops in the country; and even Norway announced recently that it had reached agreement with Niger on a military training mission.

External interventions have increasingly taken a narrow security approach, and there may well be good reason for providing military assistance to Mali and Niger. Nonetheless, we should ask ourselves not only what it is that these countries seem to need, but also what balance there should be between the priorities of external stakeholders and the needs of the locals. Europe wants fewer northbound migrants and refugees, as well as a reduction in what it sees as the terrorist threat.

But that is not necessarily the main priority for the local inhabitants: they are more immediately concerned with their living conditions, which have come under immense pressure.

### The many facets of the crisis

The situation in other parts of the Sahel is not yet as dire as it is in Mali, but all states in the region suffer from varying degrees of fragility and weak state capacity. Individually, none of them can respond adequately to the livelihood challenges that currently confront their populations. The countries of the Sahel have contributed very little to global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, yet they are in the unfortunate position of being among those that will be most hurt by its consequences. The current projection of an increase in global temperature of 2 to 4 degrees Celsius will have negative consequences everywhere, but in the Sahel they will be devastating if the region's countries do not become more resilient to climate change. If the problem is left unaddressed, it will constitute an escalating threat to local livelihoods, with an increased potential for violent conflict between subsistence farmers and pastoralists.

With resources becoming even scarcer, both old and new flashpoints over access to natural resources could turn increasingly violent, as people struggle to control what matters in their lives. This has created fresh scope

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## The situation in other parts of the Sahel is not yet as dire as it is in Mali, but all states in the region suffer from varying degrees of fragility and weak state capacity

for violent Islamic insurgencies and transnational organised crime. In peripheral areas of the Sahel – like northern and central Mali – a void has emerged that neither the Malian state nor international responses have been able to address adequately. Exacerbated by the multidimensional crisis of the Sahel, this is about conflict and chronic violence; but the crisis is also humanitarian, and its consequences are human displacement and large-scale migration. The many facets of the crisis throw up huge challenges for the international community, as the very weakness of the states of the Sahel means that they lack the institutional response capacity required to render conventional large-scale external crisis responses effective.

### Artificial state-building efforts

In abstract terms, we know what is required: the states of the Sahel need stability, transparency and legitimate

institutions that can extract revenues from taxes, fees and duties to deliver economic development and services, and to make their countries more resilient to climate-change effects. The problem is how to achieve this in fragmented, conflict-prone societies. The challenge is obvious when we consider the international community’s track record of assisting state-building efforts in fragile states. Most often these fall short of achieving their stated objectives – and at times even make a bad situation worse, leaving countries on an artificial international life-support system. This may prevent total state collapse, but it is certainly not a sustainable path to recovery, stability, reconciliation and development.

In the Sahel, assistance from the international community must be knowledge based, with a firm understanding of what these states are and how they work. Unfortunately, a grounded, knowledge-based approach is still at odds with the dominant perspective

Photo credit: Sgt. 1st Class Mary S. Katzenberger, 3rd Special Forces Group, US Army



Agadez, Niger, April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Nigerien soldiers raise the Nigerian and U.S. flags at the opening ceremony of Flintlock, an annual, African-led, military and law enforcement exercise involving forces from USA and its key partner nations in West and North Africa.



# The external stakeholders are mainly interested in the G5 Sahel as an arrangement to get more ‘boots on the ground’

for understanding these challenges, since typically the states of the Sahel are defined as lacking the elements that modern states are supposed to have: control of their borders, a monopoly on violence, procedures for taxation and dispute settlement, and a legitimate design for the transfer of power from one ruler or regime to another. This whole problem comes to the fore when we consider the root causes of conflict.

## Root causes of conflict

The periphery of the Sahel is often depicted as an un-governed space – a geographical area characterised by an absence of state control and state sovereignty: a lawless zone, a no-man’s land. The implication is that as state capacity has eroded and collapsed, so large parts of the Sahel have turned into an ‘ungoverned space’, at the mercy of a coalition of forces, including transnational crime and global jihad.

While in general terms few would dispute that the Malian state is ‘too weak’, that drugs are trafficked through the Sahel and that forces aligned to global jihad are present in the region, none of that tells us very much about the local dynamics. Our concern, therefore, is that these concepts are being employed in a way that is less analytical than categorical; for the danger is that a narrow, checklist approach to policy may result in extremely misguided planning and interventions.

There is no doubt that illicit goods are being transported across the Sahel. This is criminal activity. There is also a wide spectrum of political and social resistance at play in the area – some of it peaceful, some of it armed. Sometimes it is more secular, other times more religious. And some of those involved are also active in the transportation of contraband. Some of those implicated in this business do it mainly for the profit, while others do it to fund resistance activities. However, many are drawn into minor roles in both the smuggling operations and the resistance activities as a coping strategy.

Increased climatic variability and the lack of an adequate response from governments and international organisations mean that people must carve out a livelihood wherever they can; for some (but not all), participation in trafficking or an armed group has become a new means of survival. Thus, we need to focus much more on understanding the continuum that runs through the different contours of criminality, coping and resistance, and the subsequent logic behind these activities – quite different from the logic on which an ‘ungoverned-space’ lens focuses our analyses and policies.

## The G5 Sahel – a new regional body

The situation in Mali is not improving, and insurgencies are becoming prevalent in most other Sahel states as well. The precarious security situation in the region is further exacerbated by the almost total absence of any functional regional arrangement. In contrast to the regional war zone that developed in the Mano River Basin in the late 1990s, the Sahel has no regional body (like the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS), nor any obvious regional hegemon (like Nigeria). The few regional bodies and communities that exist are either dysfunctional or are severely hampered in their ability to execute policy by the old rivalry between Algeria and Morocco. This situation is not likely to change any time soon.

This is a major reason why France, Germany and the EU are placing considerable emphasis on a new regional arrangement, the G5 Sahel. This new regional body, created in 2014 by the leaders of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso, will formally work to strengthen regional cooperation on security and development, aiming to identify common projects that focus on infrastructure, food security, agriculture and pastoralism, and security – important issues that host some of the root causes of conflict in the region.

## More boots at the expense of development

External stakeholders in search of a regional framework have expressed considerable interest in the G5 Sahel initiative, and it could become a new functional framework for security and development co-operation in the Sahel. However, if this is to take place, external stakeholders need to realise that rarely is a regional arrangement more than the sum of the member states; and the member states in question here are all relatively weak states. Thus, alongside institutional support for the G5 Sahel, state capacity must also be strengthened in the member countries. This is not impossible, but it will be a slow and difficult process, with several setbacks likely. This is evident from the international community engagement in Mali since 2013.

The danger, however, is not only that the process will be rushed by external stakeholders (who want to see swift results on the ground), but also that too much emphasis will be placed on narrow security parameters and far too little on the development parts of the G5 Sahel agenda. The outcome of the process is still not entirely clear. However, right now it seems as though the external stakeholders – who will have to bear most of the cost – are mainly interested in the G5 Sahel as an arrangement to get more ‘boots on the ground’. And

those boots will be directed mainly toward the external priorities of improved border control, in order to reduce northbound migration flows and combat those defined (by those same external stakeholders) as jihadist terrorists – and thus a threat to global security. That would turn the Sahel into yet another front in the global war on terror.

It is in the light of such priorities that we should interpret the pledge of half a billion dollars for a G5 Sahel military force. As Reuters reported from the meeting that took place in Brussels on 23 February 2018, ‘The European Union, which believes training local forces will allow it to avoid risking the lives of its own combat troops, doubled its contribution to 116 million euros.’ There is therefore every reason to be concerned that if this goes through, the G5 Sahel contribution will be framed in the same narrow ‘war on terror’ approach as other ongoing international initiatives, at the expense of the development agenda of the G5 Sahel, which at least contains some hope of tackling the real root causes of turmoil in the Sahel. This pledge of support for the Sahel is thus in fact a pledge of support for European political stability, and not necessarily for sustainable investment in a peace, reconciliation and development agenda for the Sahel.



Headquarters of the G5-Sahel Joint Force in Mopti, Mali

Photo credit: MINUSMA



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## About the Author



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