



What's Really Going on with the G5 Sahel Joint Force?

In order to understand what the G5 Joint Force might achieve, it is important to examine the motives and objectives of all actors around the table. Most importantly, repeated calls for “increased security” must extend beyond the interests of the State, and tangibly contribute to increased safety for vulnerable populations.

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The security situation in the Sahel has been infamously perilous for decades; porous borders and large, ungoverned swaths of land permit a vast network of criminal groups, militants, and extremist organizations to operate with impunity. For years, the situation appeared to stalemate even with considerable international efforts mobilized¹ – all of which have failed to prevent numerous attacks on the capitals of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and countless attacks on border areas.

¹ France's Operation Barkane; the UN Multinational Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, MINUSA; the Multinational Joint Task Force, MNJTF; and numerous EU CSDP training missions, EUTM, EUCAP, etc. See, “Understanding the G5 Sahel Joint Force: Fighting Terror, Building Regional Security,” by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-g5-sahel-joint-force-fighting-terror-building-regional-security>

However, in recent months the Sahel has gripped the world's attention, and on 23 February, EU and G5 leaders mobilized unprecedented political and financial support² for the new G5 Sahel Joint Force, which was set up to foster regional stability and fight violent extremism.³ Leaders justified the financing by repeatedly insisting that the international community must step up efforts to provide both "security" and "development" to the region. While these arguments seem compelling at face value, closer examination reveals a concerning, oversimplified narrative that conveniently overlooks the key drivers perpetuating regional insecurity.

In order to understand what the G5 Joint Force might achieve, it is important to examine the motives and objectives of all actors around the table. Notably, whose security is actually being prioritized? Why are global powers such as France and the EU rapidly boosting engagement? Why are Sahel leaders lobbying to finance a new initiative instead of reinforcing or improving one of numerous existing parallel structures? While there is no question that the G5 Joint Force will provide some form of security presence, its true impact largely depend on the answers to these questions.

Whose security are we talking about?

Unpacking the discourse at the 23 February Summit begins with one key question- what do leaders concretely mean when they call to "improve security" in the Sahel. There is no shortage of existing military operations in the Sahel, and consequently, there is more than sufficient research on the underlying factors driving insurgency, extremism, and conflict in the region. Diverging perceptions of state legitimacy and distrust of national security forces, for example, is a persistent driver of conflict and contributes to severe tension between State capitals and populations in local areas.

It is frequently overlooked that the Westphalian concept of the nation-state was only introduced to the Sahel through colonialism over the past half-century, and it was rapidly adopted by ruling elites that consolidated power. While it is clear that the strict definition of borders allowed for some temporary stability, many analysts question whether local populations were able to internalize the concept of the state in such a short time-frame.⁴ On many levels, it appears that a disconnect between rural local and ruling elites drives persistent insurgency.

This is observed in the northern areas of Mali, for example, where insurgency is driven by Bamako's failure to provide support to the north, abuse from national security forces, and a broad refusal from locals to recognize the Malian nation-state.⁵ In April 2017, Crisis Group recommended to the UN Security Council that MINUSA needed to better facilitate regional

² The Summit mobilized EUR 414 million to support the G5 Sahel Joint Force. See: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-rome_en/40786/Sahel:%20The%20EU%20mobilises%20%E2%82%AC414%20million%20in%20international%20support

³ The G5 Joint Force was launched in February 2017, and was welcomed by the UN Security Council in June 2017 under resolution 2359. See: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc12881.doc.htm>

⁴ Bassou, Abdelhak. "State, Borders and Territory in the Sahel: The case of the G5 Sahel." OPC Policy Center. October 2017. See <http://www.ocppc.ma/publications/state-borders-and-territory-sahel-case-g5-sahel>

⁵ BIC. "Rethinking the Security Situation in Mali." Available at: <http://www.bic-rhr.com/rethinking-the-security-situation-in-mali/>

reconciliation in the north to build durable peace in Mali.⁶ It stressed that the mission needed to drastically strengthen its political and civilian affairs components, broaden peace dividends, and facilitate local solutions that might prevent the growth of radical groups in rural areas.

This contextual lens begs a serious question of the discourse set forth at the 23 February conference: do the repeated calls for “increased security” reflect the interest of the ruling elites to reinforce the security of the State, or do they reflect a more nuanced response to facilitate peace and increase the safety of vulnerable populations. While the two are not mutually exclusive, the absence of serious commitments from Sahel leaders to address security sector reform, military accountability, and judicial reform raises serious flags.

Why are global powers engaging?

The rapid mobilization of support- particularly from the EU and the US- should not be overlooked as a clue to what the G5 Joint Force actually intends to achieve. On one hand, increased attention is due to the continued deterioration of the security situation, and France hopes to reduce its number of troops in Operation Barkane. Conversely, it is equally evident that global powers are increasingly wary of the Sahel’s strategic potential- and are keen to protect their own political, economic, and security interests however possible.

The European Union’s growing interest can be traced back to several years of lackluster migration policies that have failed to achieve the EU’s ultimate goal of stemming the flow of people traveling north to Europe,⁷ mostly through Libya. Weak borders are viewed as contributing factors to the migration crisis, and the EU has controversially channeled millions of development funds through the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa to sponsor improved border management programs.⁸ The G5 states’ incapacity to manage these pressures is viewed as a liability, and the EU likely sees its EUR 100 million investment in the Joint Force as a temporary remedy.

The United States views the Sahel through the binary lens of its counterterrorism efforts. In recent years, the U.S. expanded its presence in the Sahel with drone bases in Burkina Faso and Niger, and roughly 1,000 soldiers deployed, primarily to defeat Boko Haram and other Al-Qaeda associated groups. After initially declining to fund the G5 Joint Force (and fiercely lobbying against its funding through a UN Security Council mechanism) it quickly changed tone after four soldiers were ambushed in Niger in October 2017.⁹ By the end of the month the U.S announced a contribution of \$60 million to the G5 Joint Force.¹⁰

⁶ See: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/open-letter-un-security-council-peacekeeping-mali>

⁷ See, EU Migration Partnership Framework, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication_external_aspects_eam_towards_new_migration_ompact_en.pdf

⁸ Concord. “Partnership or Conditionality: Monitoring the Migration Compacts and EU Trust Fund for Africa.” January 2018. Available at: https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/CONCORD_EUTrustFundReport_2018_online.pdf?7c2b17&7c2b17

⁹ New York Times. “An Endless War: Why 4 U.S. Soldiers Died in a Remote African Desert.” February 2018.

Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/17/world/africa/niger-ambush-american-soldiers.html>

¹⁰ US Department of State. “United States Pledging up to \$60 Million in New Support for Security Assistance in the Sahel Region.” Available at: <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/10/275175.htm>

As the G5 Joint Force works to solicit continued international support from both the EU and US, it will be key to reexamine how donors' political interests are reflected in the Force's operations, and where funds are earmarked. If U.S. and EU encourage a narrow range of counter-terrorism or border management operations, it may reinforce emphasis on state security, and inhibit the Force's effectiveness at improving the safety of local populations.

Conclusion:

Any efforts to mobilize additional security financing- however necessary- should be taken with a grain of salt. Sahel countries have poor track records of mismanagement and corruption in over-inflated defense budgets, and yet all leaders appear reluctant to address the urgent need for financial accountability in military spending. The second paper in this series will more closely examine the accountability mechanisms for financing and human rights set up in the G5 Joint Force, and discuss what challenges lie ahead in building effective, responsible cooperation between partners.