

From engagement to rupture to re-engagement: Analysing the path to the EU's renewed approach to the Sahel



Author:
Nina WILÉN

European Parliament coordinator:
External Policies Analysis and Support Unit
Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union
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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the European Union's (EU) evolving engagement with the Sahel region, with particular attention to the Alliance of Sahelian States – Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Drawing on interviews with EU officials and external experts, as well as academic and policy literature, this paper examines three interrelated dimensions. Firstly, it reviews the EU's past approaches to the region since 2011, highlighting how shifting strategic logics, strong Member State influence and limited responsiveness to local political dynamics have shaped EU engagement. Secondly, it assesses the current political and security context in the Sahel. This is characterised by military rule, worsening jihadist violence and a strategic realignment towards non-Western partners, such as Russia, Türkiye and Gulf states, all aspects which influenced the partial rupture with the EU. Finally, it analyses the EU's recently adopted renewed approach to the Sahel and the challenges of re-engaging in a volatile and competitive geopolitical environment. The paper concludes with policy options for a more pragmatic and differentiated EU engagement in the region, emphasising the need for flexible policies, connecting with the populations and lowered ambitions.

AUTHOR

Dr Nina WILÉN, Director of the Africa Programme, Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, Belgium

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CONTRACTOR

Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) (Coordinator: Mathilde CHIGNESSE, TEPSA)

CONTACTS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Coordination: Michal MALOVEC

Editorial assistance: Inge BRYS

To give feedback or obtain copies, please write to: exas@europarl.europa.eu.

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List of abbreviations

AES	Alliance of Sahelian states
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
EUCAP	European Union Capacity Building Mission
EUMPM	European Union Military Partnership Mission in Niger
EUSR	European Union Special Representative
EUTM	European Union Training Mission
EPF	European Peace Facility
FLA	Front de Libération d'Azawad
G5 Sahel	Group of Five for the Sahel
INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
IS Sahel	Islamic State Sahel Province
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
RAP	Regional action plan
VDP	Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations

Executive summary

The Sahel region has undergone profound political, security and geopolitical transformations over the past six years. A wave of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the expansion of jihadist armed groups and a strategic realignment of regional governments toward non-Western partners have weakened the European Union's (EU) presence and influence in the region, raising fundamental questions about the future of EU engagement.

This paper analyses the EU's relationship with the Sahel – with particular attention to the Alliance of Sahelian States comprising Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali – and assesses implications for the EU's recently adopted renewed approach to the region. Drawing on interviews with EU officials and external experts, as well as academic literature and policy documents, the paper examines three key dimensions: past EU engagement, current regional dynamics and the prospects for renewed EU involvement.

Firstly, the paper reviews the evolution of EU engagement since the adoption of the first EU Sahel strategy in 2011 through a comparative analysis of the EU's different strategic documents framing its relationship with the region and through the work of EU special representatives to the region. The analysis argues that while the EU's comprehensive approach allowed it to position itself as a significant external actor in the region, it also revealed important limitations. EU policy has often been strongly influenced by individual Member States and has sometimes prioritised European interests – notably migration management and counter-terrorism – over local political realities, while failing to consider the impact and consequences its policies will have in the Sahel. As a result, EU initiatives have struggled to achieve their overarching – and often over-ambitious – objective of stabilising the region.

Secondly, the current political and security environment in the Sahel is analysed. Since 2020, military regimes have consolidated power in various countries, bringing about democratic backsliding, repression of civil society and shrinking civic space. At the same time, jihadist violence has expanded significantly, making the Sahel the global epicentre of terrorism-related fatalities. These developments have been accompanied by a diversification of external partnerships, with Russia, Türkiye and the Gulf states increasing their presence in the region through security cooperation, infrastructure investments and resource diplomacy. This increasingly crowded geopolitical landscape complicates EU re-engagement.

Finally, the EU's renewed approach in the Sahel, which was validated by the Foreign Affairs Council on 20 November 2025, is analysed. This new framework reflects a more pragmatic and flexible strategy focused on political dialogue, human security and socio-economic opportunities, while recognising the need to operate in a context characterised by military rule and intensified global competition. However, early implementation has already encountered obstacles, including internal divisions between EU Member States and difficulties in operationalising financial instruments, which suggests that implementation of the approach will be complicated.

The report concludes that successful EU re-engagement will require a pragmatic and differentiated strategy which acknowledges the limits of EU leverage while maintaining engagement with both states and societies in the region. Four possible pathways are identified: (1) a differentiated engagement with Sahelian states; (2) a people-centred approach focused on human security; (3) transactional cooperation and (4) regional buffering through neighbouring countries. A flexible combination of these approaches may provide the most realistic basis for sustaining EU engagement.

1 Introduction

The last five years have witnessed three mutually reinforcing trends in the Sahel region: a new wave of military coups¹; the exponential territorial expansion of jihadist groups, resulting in a strongly deteriorating security situation on the ground², and a strategic realignment of the Sahelian states which have opted to change security partners, from Western and multilateral actors to Russia and other authoritarian regimes in the midst of a global power competition³. These developments have contributed to a situation where the European Union (EU) and its Member States' presence and influence in the region have decreased significantly. This has led to the forced withdrawal of EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in Niger in 2023 and the withdrawal of the politically constrained EU military training mission from Mali a year later, leaving the EU Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) Sahel Mali as the sole regional CSDP mission. The unfolding situation has led to something of an identity crisis for the EU in Africa more broadly but specifically in the Sahel⁴, provoking questions about whether and how it should continue its engagement. After almost two years of discussions between Member States and Sahelian states, spearheaded by the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the Sahel, the EU validated a renewed EU approach to the Sahel region in November 2025 at the Foreign Affairs Council, with the aim of providing a strategic compass for future engagement.

The Sahel has become a strategically important region for the EU due to its geographical proximity, migration dynamics and security concerns. Yet, it has also become a critical test case for the EU's credibility as a global actor. The region represents one of the most sustained and resource-intensive engagements of EU external action over the past decade, combining diplomacy, development and security instruments. A continued deterioration of relations with Sahelian states therefore risks not only reducing the EU's operational presence on the ground, which already is limited, but also weakening its broader credibility and capacity to act as a coherent and influential geopolitical player. Whatever presence the EU wants to maintain, however, should be carefully weighed against the potential negative consequences in terms of security and reputation risks.

In an increasingly competitive environment marked by the growing presence of actors such as Russia, Türkiye and Gulf states, the Sahel has also become a space of strategic contestation, where the EU's relative influence is being challenged and, in some cases, replaced. This has implications beyond the region itself, affecting the EU's standing across the African continent and in multilateral fora, such as the United Nations (UN), where perceptions of double standards and declining engagement can undermine its legitimacy. In this sense, the Sahel is not only a regional priority but also a key arena shaping the EU's global positioning, partnerships and normative influence.

Today's situation in the Sahel and the EU's regional repositioning warrant new reflections regarding past practices, current developments and future possibilities. The drafting and implementation of this renewed EU approach has already encountered obstacles, both political and security-related, making re-engagement a difficult balancing act. The overarching aim of this paper is to provide evidence-based research that will enable relevant EU bodies to draw on lessons learned, with the aim to improve the chances that this renewed approach will provide a fruitful way forward towards more sustainable and mutually beneficial relations with the Sahelian states.

¹ A. O. Akinola and R. Makombe, '[Rethinking the Resurgence of Military Coups in Africa](#)', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol 60, No 5, 2024; N. Wilén, '[Contagious Coups in Africa? History of Civil-Military Imbalance](#)', *African Affairs*, Vol 123, No 491, 2024, pp. 243–261.

² Center for Preventive Action, '[Violent Extremism in the Sahel](#)', February 2026.

³ W. Brown, '[The bear and the bot farm: Countering Russian hybrid warfare in Africa](#)', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 October 2025; J. Watling and N. Wilén, '[Assessing the Causes of Strategic Realignment in Sahelian States](#)', *RUSI Journal*, 2024, Vol 169, No 4, 2024, pp. 64–77.

⁴ N. Wilén, '[Have African Coups provoked an Identity Crisis for the EU?](#)', *Egmont Institute*, 7 December 2023.

The paper is split into three parts. Firstly, it provides a broad critical assessment of the EU's past approaches in the region to identify trends and lessons learned. Secondly, an in-depth analysis of the current evolving political and security context in the Sahel offers situational awareness of possibilities and constraints. Thirdly and finally, the EU's repositioning is studied, focusing on the challenges and opportunities stemming from its recently adopted renewed approach.

The conclusion argues that successful EU re-engagement will require a pragmatic and differentiated strategy that acknowledges the limits of EU leverage while maintaining engagement with both states and societies in the region. The EU's engagement in the region also relies on a broader set of financial and operational instruments, including development, humanitarian and peacebuilding tools. Yet, these are not analysed in detail in this paper, but remain essential to its overall approach.

Four possible pathways for re-engagement are identified: (1) a differentiated engagement with Sahelian states, (2) a people-centred approach focused on human security, (3) transactional cooperation and (4) regional buffering through neighbouring countries. Basing re-engagement on a differentiated approach while remaining flexible about inclusion of aspects from the other three pathways may be the best way forward.

1.1 Method, approach and material

This research project has adopted a qualitative approach, combining literature review, desk research and interviews to provide a comprehensive in-depth investigation. A literature review of relevant academic articles, think tank reports, policy briefs and official documents forms the basis for analysis. This includes a critical assessment of previous EU strategies, approaches and initiatives. The literature review was complemented by 16 semi-structured interviews with representatives of, *inter alia*: the European External Action Service (EEAS); the EUSR's Sahel team; representatives from the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (INTPA) at the Commission; EU delegations in the region; leading Sahel researchers from think tanks and universities; along with European Parliament staff. Interviews were conducted both in person and online, albeit for the purposes of this paper, all interviewees will remain anonymous. Interviews were chosen based on functional and institutional representativeness as well as experience and expertise.

It should be noted that it is not possible to produce a causal evaluation of the EU's initiatives in the region given the present circumstances. Firstly, the context is highly volatile, with the past few years having seen coups, insurgencies and external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, the EU is only one actor out of many, which makes it difficult to attribute events and developments specifically to the EU. Finally, many of the EU's initiatives are indirect, whether they regard training, dialogue or coordination, rendering any assessment of their direct effects problematic. The paper therefore analyses some of the EU's contributions, their intended effects and possible constraints on effectiveness, yet cannot provide a complete evaluation.

1.2 Map of the region



Source: Haruna, Abdallah. (2022). *The rising trends of violent extremism in West Africa: A threat to regional security*. 2. 111-131.

2. Lessons from the past: Evolution and limits of EU engagement in the Sahel

The EU has used its full toolbox of diplomacy, development, humanitarian assistance, security instruments and migration agenda in the Sahel over the past 15 years, prompting some researchers to call the region a 'laboratory of experimentation'⁵. It has indeed initiated a number of different approaches, programmes and initiatives, including developing two regional strategies in 2011 and 2021, with a Regional Action Plan (RAP) 2015-2020 in between. In 2013, it created the regional position of EUSR to improve coordination and visibility, which remains part of the EU's comprehensive approach more than a decade later. Four CSDP missions have been deployed to the region since 2012: EUCAP Sahel Niger (2012), EU Training Mission (EUTM) Mali (2013), EUCAP Sahel Mali (2014) and the EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger (EUMPM, 2022). Moreover, in 2017, the EU created a Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell to coordinate activities between the different missions and regional security architecture. As stated in the first regional strategy from 2011, the Union has been 'drawing on all the instruments that the EU has at its disposal'⁶, see table 1 summary.

The following pages analyse comparatively two key dimensions of the EU's previous engagement in the Sahel: firstly, the evolution of its regional strategies and approaches and secondly, the role of EUSRs in translating these approaches into political coordination and diplomatic engagement. Given the paper's focus on EU policymaking, strategic adaptation and political relations with Sahelian states, this chapter does not provide a separate assessment of EU CSDP missions in Mali and Niger. While these missions formed an important part of the EU's regional presence, their operational record has already been

⁵ E. Lopez Lucia, 'Performing EU Agency by Experimenting the "Comprehensive Approach": The European Union Sahel Strategy', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol 35, No 4, 2017, pp. 451-468.

⁶ EEAS, *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel*, 2011, p. 2.

extensively documented in the literature⁷. In this paper, therefore, they are treated as instruments reflecting broader shifts in EU strategic priorities – particularly the move from a security-development nexus toward stronger securitisation and migration management – rather than stand-alone objects of evaluation. More broadly, this section does not provide an exhaustive review of individual instruments, strategies, delegations or missions but instead analyses EU engagement through its underlying strategic logics over time and identifies cross-cutting lessons.

2.1 Evolving strategic logics, from comprehensive approach to renewed engagement

Between 2011 and 2025, the EU developed four major strategic policy frameworks regarding its engagement with the Sahel: the EU's first comprehensive strategy for the Sahel in 2011; the RAP in 2015–2020; the EU's second strategy for the Sahel in 2021 and the renewed approach to the Sahel at the end of 2025. The focus of these documents has evolved considerably over time, in line with a changing international and regional context as well as internal developments within the EU. Present throughout this period, though, is the strong implication of certain Member States in the drafting and orientation of these documents:

For the Sahel it was very striking about how the EU talked about having an EU strategy, but the EU Member States were always very inclined to pursue their own strategies⁸.

The fact that individual Member States have been pushing the EU's foreign policy towards their own foreign policy objectives is nothing new, yet it has had significant implications for the EU's role, power and reputation in the Sahel over the 15 years, both positively and negatively, which will be reflected upon in the following pages.

In its first 2011 regional strategy for the Sahel, the EU articulated a relatively balanced understanding of the security-development nexus through its comprehensive approach. This was during the post-Lisbon treaty period and it became one of the first regional strategies for the EEAS to lead, reflecting the Union's broader ambition to position itself as a global foreign policy and security actor⁹. Geographically, its core focus was on Niger, Mauritania and Mali¹⁰, which was expanded to include Chad and Burkina Faso only three years later¹¹. From an internal EU perspective, it was heavily driven by France, which had already written its own Sahel strategy in 2008, during which the Sahel had been identified as a region warranting special attention, referred to as an 'arc of crisis' in defence documents¹². During the early years, implementing this EU strategy effectively institutionalised the security-development nexus and allowed the EU to position itself as a security actor in an African region within which it had previously had only limited presence, thereby reinforcing relations between the EU and the various regional states. In short, it fulfilled the EU's objective of forging a new international role for itself while testing its comprehensive approach in a permissive environment. Yet, coincidentally, the region's security situation was worsening.

In 2015, the EU changed strategic direction with the adoption of the RAP, which, although it was supposed to pursue the first Sahel strategy's objectives, pivoted heavily towards a more security-oriented focus with four priority areas: radicalisation, youth conditions, migration and border management as well as the fight

⁷ J. Van der Lijn et al., [Assessing the effectiveness of European Union Civilian CSDP Missions involved in Security Sector Reform](#), SIPRI, May 2024; EEAS, ['European Union Training Mission Mali, 2013–2024: More than 11 years in Mali'](#), 4 May 2024; V. Baudais and S. Maïga, ['The European Union Training Mission in Mali: An Assessment'](#), SIPRI, April 2022.

⁸ Interview with external expert, 28 January 2026.

⁹ S.M Cold-Ravnkilde and C. Nissen, ['Schizophrenic agendas in the EU's external actions in Mali'](#), *International Affairs*, Vol 96, No 4, 2020, pp. 935–953; E. Lopez Lucia, [The European Union Integrated and Regionalised Approach towards the Sahel: A Stabilizing Mali Project Report](#), Chaire Raoul-Dandurand and Centre FrancoPaix, February 2019, p. 20.

¹⁰ EEAS, [Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel](#), 2011.

¹¹ Council, ['3304 th Council meeting'](#), Press release, 17 March 2014.

¹² N. Wilén, [Securitizing the Sahel: Analysing External Interventions and their Consequences](#), Oxford University Press, 2025, p. 55.

against illicit trafficking and organised crime¹³. This turn came partly in response to two major developments affecting the EU: a wave of terrorist attacks and a migration crisis, driven partly by changing conditions on the ground¹⁴. In 2015, the EU's Valetta summit on migration was also held, setting up the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, which further reinforced the focus on border control and irregular migration¹⁵. By the time of the RAP's adoption, the EU had already deployed three CSDP operations to the region: two civilian training missions to Niger and Mali: EUCAP Sahel Niger (2012) and EUCAP Sahel Mali (2014) together with a military training mission in Mali (EUTM (2013)), mirroring the turn towards a more visible security role for the Union. The RAP's new strategic orientation was reflected in updated mandates for the CSDP operations with more focus on migration management.

Table 1. Summary of EU external actions in the Sahel

Category	Instruments	Years	Core function
Strategic frameworks	2011 EU strategy for security and development in the Sahel; 2015–2020 Sahel RAP; 2021 EU integrated strategy in the Sahel; 2025–renewed EU approach to the Sahel	2011–	Defined and updated the EU's overall political framework for engagement in the Sahel, combining security, governance, development and regional cooperation.
CSDP missions & security tools	EUCAP Sahel Niger (2012–2024); EUTM Mali (2013–2024); EUCAP Sahel Mali (2014 –); EU Military Partnership Mission Niger (2022–2024); Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell (2019–2026)	2012–	Civilian and military missions providing training, advising, coordination, security sector reform, border management and regional security cooperation.
Diplomatic tools	EU Delegations in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger; EUSR for the Sahel (2013 –)	2011–	Conducted political dialogue, represented the EU, coordinated relations with governments and partners and ensured strategic coherence across EU engagement in the region.

Source: Author's own compilation.

The years between the release of the RAP in 2015 and the publication of the second EU strategy for the Sahel in 2021 were characterised by two trends: (1) a multiplication of new coordination frameworks for and with the EU and its Member States¹⁶ and (2) a heavily deteriorating security situation on the ground¹⁷. The latter came about despite significant international security support, including: the French counterterrorist operation Barkhane; an EUTM and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), a UN peacekeeping mission comprising 13 000 troops. Politically, the 2020 military coup in Mali effectively instigated a new wave of regional coups and consequent strong democratic backsliding. These developments notwithstanding, in the period between 2015 and 2020, the EU was

¹³ Council, [Council conclusions on the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015–2020](#), 7823/15, 20 April 2015.

¹⁴ L. Raineri, 'The Bioeconomy of Sahel Borders: Informal Practices of Revenue and Data Extraction', *Geopolitics*, Vol 27, No 5, 2022, pp. 1470–1491.

¹⁵ EU, 'Emergency Trust Fund for Africa: Objective and governance', webpage, 10 April 2024.

¹⁶ In 2017, the 'Sahel Alliance' was set up by France and Germany and the EU to coordinate development assistance to the G5 Sahel, in 2019, the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S) was set up by France and Germany with the purpose of strengthening security sector governance and improve coordination of international support; in 2020 the Coalition for the Sahel was set up by the EU and the G5 Sahel states to improve coordination between security, development and governance efforts.

¹⁷ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Spike in Militant Islamist Violence in Africa Underscores Shifting Security Landscape', 29 January 2021.

heavily invested regionally, with EU officials frequently framing Sahelian stability as directly linked to European security. The EUSR at the time, Ángel Losada, noted that 'security in the Sahel is also security in Europe'¹⁸.

The new EU strategy in 2021 marked another recalibration from previous strategies, moving away from a predominantly security-driven framework toward a more political approach centred on governance, mutual accountability and a 'civilian and political leap forwards'¹⁹. It contained a broad range of objectives, centred on democracy, social contract, legitimacy and civil society. This shift reflected concerns over democratic backsliding, as well as perceptions of limited local ownership *vis-à-vis* external interventions. Following the death of 13 French soldiers in Mali, who were part of the Barkhane operation, President Macron convened the Pau Summit in 2020, which called on invited Sahelian leaders to demonstrate their willingness to collaborate with external actors more clearly, specifically France²⁰. The meeting was intended to be a turning point for France's regional military strategy, but also became known as a moment that, rather than easing relations between France and the Sahelian states, further complicated them, due to a perceived summoning attitude by Macron towards the Sahelian leaders²¹.

Finally, the EU's renewed approach in 2025 emerged against a backdrop of relations between the EU and the Sahel having partially broken down in light of: six coups in less than five years; the strategic realignment by three of the Sahel states from Western partners to Russia and the expulsion of the EU's CSDP operations from Niger in 2023²². The renewed approach sought to gather a consensus between EU Member States who were divided about whether and how to re-establish dialogue with the Sahelian states and redefine mutual interests²³.

The three major strategic documents produced by the EU for its Sahel policies between 2011 and 2021 can be examined from different perspectives. Two are singled out here, namely those on strategic coherence and adaptability over time. In terms of strategic coherence, key objectives in the different documents were clearly defined, albeit later broadened and multiplied. The 2011 Sahel strategy stated clear objectives over a ten-year timeline with a detailed yet concise country-by-country analysis.

The 2015–2020 RAP was internally consistent with the 2011 strategy, albeit reoriented and more narrowly focused on security and migration. It was considerably more extensive, with a 39-page addendum of the 65 pages focused on outlining ongoing, planned as well as potential projects and programmes in each of the five countries on different lines of actions, with Member States' individual contributions, showcasing France's dominance as the largest contributor for each of the Sahel states.

Taken together, the RAP seemed to show that the Sahel had gained in strategic importance for the EU, due largely to the changing international context. At the same time, a strong focus on migration was seen as problematic by the Sahelian states, according to some observers:

It's the whole migration issue, for instance. How many times have local actors repeated that an anti-migration policy was not a priority for the Sahel?...the tendency to extrapolate the EU's own interests as if they were by definition common interests and

¹⁸ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, '[EU Security Strategy in Sahel Focused on Security-Development Nexus](#)', 7 March 2019.

¹⁹ European Parliament, '[The European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel](#)', webpage, nd.; E. Pichon and M. Betant-Rasmussen, '[New EU strategic priorities for the Sahel: Addressing regional challenges through better governance](#)', *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 9 July 2021.

²⁰ C. Okello, '[France, G5 Sahel leaders pledge to boost military cooperation at Pau summit](#)', *RFI*, 14 January 2020.

²¹ Y. Guichaoua, '[The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel](#)', *International Affairs*, Vol 96, No 4, 2020, pp. 895–911.

²² J. Watling and N. Wilén, '[Assessing the Causes of Strategic Realignment in Sahelian States](#)', *RUSI Journal*, 2024, Vol 169, No 4, 2024, pp. 64–77.

²³ Council, '[Joint EEAS-Commission paper: "A renewed EU Approach to the Sahel"](#)', 14296/25, 21 October 2025. The last section of this report will come back to the renewed approach.

the inability to understand that things that seem important or even obvious for the EU may not be as important for the Sahelians²⁴.

Indeed, a number of interviewees reiterated the point that the EU was not necessarily listening to counterparts in the Sahelian states:

I think the EU sometimes treated Sahelian policymakers like they were stupid or like they were beholden to the EU²⁵.

The 2021 regional strategy did not explicitly contradict the previous two, yet there was a clear rupture of strategic coherence, as the focus shifted from security to political action. This was too little and too late, according to one interviewee:

It was a collective failure, to have focused so much on security and to have depoliticised that...so it [2021 strategy] was a late awakening, and still it didn't necessarily translate into...any proactive programming²⁶.

The strategy was also much broader in scope, with an *à la carte* menu of 14 strategic objectives ranging from stabilisation and the fight against terrorism to gender equality, children in conflict and private investment. The lack of a clear prioritisation with a limited number of objectives allowed the EU to be flexible, picking and choosing feasible priorities at a time when it was politically constrained. Yet, it also gave a fragmented and somewhat ambiguous impression both internally and externally of what the EU's actual objectives were, especially as some key concepts, like governance, were left undefined²⁷. This made the strategy more unrealistic which undermined its credibility.

However, this was also a result of efforts from the EU to demonstrate its capacity for adapting over time to a shifting environment. All three documents examined reflected priorities which were specific to the time periods in which they were drafted, shifting focus from one nexus to another: from security-development, to security-migration, to politics-security. In this way, whilst the EU reacted to changing geopolitical conditions, it was nevertheless often a bit too late, given the time it took to draft documents and achieve a consensus, which often excluded local political realities: 'the EU remained deaf to some of the national demands and insisted that its way was the right way'²⁸. In many ways, then, the EU was driven by a logic of its own²⁹.

That logic was, though, often close to French national interests, which was both a driving factor for the EU's Sahel politics more broadly and also a constraining factor for the EU as an independent actor: 'the EU claimed a lead role in the policy towards the Sahel, but it was always going to be subject to France's approval'³⁰. Indeed, up to the 2023 military coup in Niger, when France was forced to leave the third Sahel country in less than two years, France was the lead EU actor, thereby choosing the strategic direction, but also operationally, on the ground, as a security actor. According to interviewees, France's lead role did not result from member states' indifference to the region, but a conscious choice:

I don't think there was an indifference...there was a consensus building... and member states in general they know what they are doing when they let another member state lead. I don't think it was by default or by omission, it was a choice...but not without tensions³¹.

²⁴ Interview with external expert, 21 January 2026.

²⁵ Interview with external expert, 28 January 2026.

²⁶ Interview with external expert, 21 January 2026.

²⁷ D. Goxho, '[Unpacking the EU's new Sahel strategy](#)', *PeaceLab*, 22 April 2021.

²⁸ Interview with external expert, 21 January 2026.

²⁹ N. Wilén, '[A logic of its own: the external presence in the Sahel](#)', *Real Instituto Elcano*, 24 November 2020.

³⁰ Interview with external expert, 28 January 2026.

³¹ Interview with EU official, 26 January 2026.

Those tensions returned in the aftermath of France's forced withdrawal from the Sahel in 2023 and were later evident in the discussions, drafting and implementation of the EU's renewed approach. Yet, until 2023, France played an important role both in terms of provoking and sustaining EU attention and as the major external security actor on the ground. France was also instrumental in creating the position of EUSR for the Sahel³², a function which the next section will analyse.

2.2 The role of EUSR and the politics of coordination

Each of the EUSRs has had to adapt to the Sahel that they found and the political will that they found both from Member States and the HRVP [High Representative and Vice-President]³³.

The EU appointed four EUSRs between 2013 and 2025, with these positions' overarching aim being to ensure visibility, presenting the EU as speaking with one, coherent voice. The Council officially nominated these EUSRs via a legal act³⁴. Each EUSR has gone through different conjunctures, characterised by changing international, regional and local dynamics as well as shifting EU priorities, driven by Member States' consensus or divergences over how, when and where to engage. These different conjunctures can be categorised as: (1) engagement and development of relations; (2) expansion and intensification of engagement; (3) rupture and damage-control and (4) consensus-building and re-engagement. Yet, although the EUSRs' tasks and contexts have evolved in accordance with different phases, the role has remained crucial, both internally in coordinating actors and building consensus as well as externally in presenting a visible signal of how much importance the EU attaches to the region.

Institutionally, the EUSR's role is not clearly positioned within the EEAS. Any holder of this post is supposed to work in close coordination with the EEAS – as with all EUSRs – yet not integrated within the hierarchy, but standing directly under the High Representative's authority, albeit also reporting to the Political and Security Committee as the primary link to the Council³⁵. While this positioning provoked tensions and frictions in 2014 between the EUSR and the EEAS Sahel Coordinator, whose competences overlapped, the EU nevertheless maintained the EUSR's unclear position³⁶. This was supposedly aimed at providing the EUSR with greater autonomy, while at the same time being able to draw from a number of different EU organs. Actual relations between the different EUSRs and their teams *vis-à-vis* EEAS personnel have determined whether this unclear positioning would result in friction or smooth collaboration. The European Parliament can invite the EUSR for hearings and briefings, both before taking up the position, as well as throughout the mandate, and make recommendations to the Council, the Commission and the High Representative/ Vice-President³⁷. However, for the EUSRs to the Sahel, as with many other EUSRs, in practice the frequency of such invitations is irregular³⁸. The following paragraphs will analyse the first three EUSRs, which illustrate how the role evolved across earlier phases of EU engagement, while the fourth is subject to separate analysis, given that the holder's mandate is inseparable from negotiation and early implementation of the renewed approach.

³² Interview with EU official, 28 January 2026.

³³ Interview with EU official, 26 January 2026.

³⁴ For more information on the role of the EUSR, see, F. Costa Reis et al., [The Scope and Mandate of EU Special Representatives \(EUSRs\)](#), European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies, January 2019.

³⁵ Art 4(2), Council, [Decision Appointing the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel](#), Official Journal of the European Union, L 75/29, 19 March 2013

³⁶ N. Koenig, ['Resetting EU External Action: Potential and Constraints'](#), Jacques Delors Institute, 3 February 2015, p. 9.

³⁷ F. Costa Reis et al., [The Scope and Mandate of EU Special Representatives \(EUSRs\)](#), European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies, January 2019, pp. 22–23.

³⁸ F. Costa Reis et al., [The Scope and Mandate of EU Special Representatives \(EUSRs\)](#), European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies, January 2019, pp. 22–23; Interview with EU official, 12 January 2026.

EUSR 2013–2015: Engagement and development

In 2013, a decision was taken to appoint the first EUSR for the Sahel, two years after the adoption of the EU's first regional strategy and against a backdrop of the rapidly internationalised crisis in Mali, marked by various military deployments including operation Barkhane, EUTM Mali and MINUSMA. The EUSR was mandated to support regional and international efforts actively so as to promote sustainable peace, security and development, while 'enhancing the quality, intensity and impact of the Union's multifaceted engagement in the Sahel'³⁹. In addition, the EUSR was tasked with contributing to the coordination and implementation of the EU's comprehensive approach, notably through engagement with relevant stakeholders as well as strengthening the overall coherence and effectiveness of EU action in the region.

France was the driving force behind the establishment of the EUSR function, with French diplomat Reveyard-de-Menthon being appointed as the first EUSR for the region⁴⁰. He was tasked with contributing to the newly developed comprehensive approach to the regional crisis, based on the first Sahel strategy, with an initial focus on Mali, as most of the EU's instruments were centred there⁴¹. The initial mandate was short and transitional, yet two subsequent extensions in 2014 and 2015 progressively prolonged this role to maintain the EU's presence and visibility during a decisive phase of the Union's Sahel engagement⁴². According to the United Kingdom's government view at the time, the EUSR was considered to have done 'a good job', while being 'instrumental in developing relations across the region'⁴³. Yet, the security situation on the ground deteriorated, hence the EU's strategic priorities shifted from the security-development nexus to a security-migration nexus⁴⁴.

EUSR 2015–2021: Expansion and intensification

Under the second EUSR's mandate, that of Spanish diplomat Losada⁴⁵, the EU doubled up on efforts to control borders and migration, while building capacity with local security actors. The Valetta summit in November 2015, just before Losada's appointment, 'brought migration issues to the heart of the EU's relations with African countries'⁴⁶, identifying Western Africa as a 'key region of origin for irregular migration towards Europe'⁴⁷. This policy shift was mirrored not only in new or reinforced instruments and broadened mandates, including border control and migration tasks for CSDP missions in the region, but also in the institutionalisation and backing from the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) along with the G5 Joint Force as the EU's primary regional partner⁴⁸.

³⁹ Council, [Decision Appointing the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel](#), Official Journal of the European Union, L 75/29, 19 March 2013.

⁴⁰ See F. Costa Reis et al., [The Scope and Mandate of EU Special Representatives \(EUSRs\)](#), European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies, January 2019.

⁴¹ Council, [Decision on appointing the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel](#), Official Journal of the European Union, L75/29, 19 March 2013.

⁴² Council, [Decision on extending the mandate of the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel](#), Official Journal of the European Union, L71/14, 12 March 2014; Council, [Decision on extending the mandate of the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel](#), Official Journal of the European Union, L 72/27, 17 March 2015.

⁴³ House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee, [Eighth report of Session 2015–16](#), 13 November 2015, p.13.

⁴⁴ E. Cuny, [The EU's New Migration Partnership with Mali: Shifting towards a Risky Security-Migration-Development Nexus](#), Egmont Institute, 28 August 2018; A. Lebovich, [Halting Ambitions. EU Migration and security policy in the Sahel](#), European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2018.

⁴⁵ Council, [Decision on appointing the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel](#), Official Journal of the European Union, L 322/44, 8 December 2015.

⁴⁶ European Commission, [Communication on establishing a new Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration](#), COM(2016) 385 final, 7 June 2016, p.2.

⁴⁷ European Commission, [Communication on establishing a new Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration](#), COM(2016) 385 final, 7 June 2016, p.14.

⁴⁸ B. Venturi, [The EU and the Sahel: A Laboratory of Experimentation for the Security-Migration-Development Nexus](#), Istituto Affari Internazionali, December 2017; Council, [Decision on extending the mandate of the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel](#), Official Journal of the European Union, L 161/22, 26 June 2018.

Losada's tenure was extended three times (2015–2021) and consequently transformed the position from a medium-term to a long-term strategic role as engagement between the regions intensified⁴⁹. According to interviewees, Losada sustained high-intensity political engagement in a 'period of constructive relations'⁵⁰, with the EU building a presence through a variety of different instruments carrying an increasingly large budget. Yet, some interviewees found that the EU's strong focus on migration became problematic as it was not a priority for national authorities in the region, which is known for decades of cross-border interactions and relations.

The migration agenda, which was particularly dominant during the second EUSR's mandate, was also highlighted as a source of tension by another interviewee:

I think the migration agenda has never been like a long-term perspective...that agenda was pushed through, through all these kinds of externalisation projects...the laws and instruments that were implemented were actually going against the ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States]' legislations on free movement of people and goods across borders⁵¹.

At the end of Losada's mandate, Mali's military coup in 2020 started the wave of coups, which were to restructure relationships, both within the Sahel and with external actors. The EU condemned the first coup in Mali and temporarily suspended the two CSDP missions, EUTM and EUCAP Sahel Mali's work in August 2020⁵² as well as other non-lethal training and infrastructure building provided by the Commission. This suspension lasted only until the Malian junta appointed a civilian-led transitional government two months later, following which the EU's work was quickly resumed.

In April 2021, Chad experienced a 'constitutional coup', whereby the son of the deceased President General Déby repealed the constitution and took power as head of a military council⁵³. Contrary to the Malian case, there was no official declaration or condemnation from the EU High Representative, Joseph Borrell. Instead, he and French President Macron attended the funeral of long-term autocrat Deby alongside his son, the new leader⁵⁴. In Chad, the EU thus opted to look the other way regarding the coup, influenced by France, but also following the African Union, which in a move unprecedented since 2003, decided not to suspend this country from the institution⁵⁵. Not unsurprisingly, in the years that followed, the EU was heavily criticised for operating with double standards⁵⁶.

EUSR 2021-2024: Rupture and damage-control

The third EUSR mandate (2021–2024) coincided with the wave of coups in the Sahel and was therefore centred on preserving diplomatic continuity and recalibrating engagement. Italian diplomat Del Re started her mandate in June 2021, only a month after Mali had experienced its second military coup in less than a year, the constitutional coup in Chad and an attempted coup in Niger linked to its elections in March⁵⁷. The

⁴⁹ Council, [Decision on extending the mandate of the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel](#), Official Journal of the European Union, L 161/22, 26 June 2018; Council, [Amending decision on extending the mandate of the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel](#), Official Journal of the European Union, LI 54/9, 26 February 2020; Council, [Amending Decision \(CFSP\) 2018/906 on extending the mandate of the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel](#), Official Journal of the European Union, L 62/47, 23 February 2021.

⁵⁰ Interview with EU Official, 26 January 2026.

⁵¹ Interview with external expert, 29 January 2026.

⁵² EURACTIV, ['EU freezes Mali training missions after military coup, denies responsibility'](#), 27 August 2020.

⁵³ Aljazeera, ['Slain Chad leader Deby's son named 'president of the republic''](#), 21 April 2021.

⁵⁴ European Council, ['EU HR Borrell visits Chad 22 April – 23 April 2021'](#), News Room, 22 April 2021.

⁵⁵ R. Lwere Kato, ['Coups: Why the AU acted tough on Mali but ignored Chad'](#), *African News*, 13 August 2024; N. Wilén, ['Have African Coups provoked an Identity Crisis for the EU?'](#), *Egmont Institute*, 7 December 2023.

⁵⁶ R. Lwere Kato, ['Coups: Why the AU acted tough on Mali and ignored Chad'](#), *Africanews*, 13 August 2024; D. Cisse, ['What future for Europe in the 2040 Sahel?'](#), *Fondation pour la recherche stratégique*, 10 March 2025, p.6; A. Meyer et al., ['The European Union and the Sahel: the day after'](#), *OIIIP*, 2025.

⁵⁷ Council, [Decision on appointing the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel](#), Official Journal of the European Union, L 222/21, 22 June 2021.

situation was further complicated by the EU having released its second regional Sahel strategy only months before, which focused on democracy and governance, two topics which military juntas are unlikely to promote. The EU's divided response to these different coups affected its credibility in the region and, as a consequence, the EUSR's work.

EU credibility and legitimacy were further tainted during the EUSR's visit to Chad in the autumn of 2022 following the military regime's violent crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, resulting in more than 50 casualties on 20 October⁵⁸. While the High Representative issued a statement strongly condemning such violence, joined later by the European Parliament which issued a resolution condemning the use of violence against the protesters⁵⁹, the EUSR issued a positive tweet during her visit to the country only three weeks later, not mentioning the deadly crackdown:

What a joy to be back in #N'Djamena! A busy work agenda for the coming days.
Delighted to be in #Chad!⁶⁰.

The tweet drew significant criticism from observers:

When she posted on LinkedIn and X happy pictures of her with comments like, 'it's so good to be back in this wonderful and sunny country' when, like two months earlier, hundreds of people had been crushed and killed in state repression...I think that didn't land well with many people. We still remember it...even the Europe director of the Malian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for instance, raised with me like a year later as an example⁶¹.

Yet, other interviewees maintain that Del Re did a good damage limitation job, which essentially became her main task given the political and security turmoil that followed the coups:

I think she had the strength of maintaining the relationship, she was received and she continued to be received, the people picked up the phone when she called. Despite a lot of crisis situations, in spite of all the problems, as a diplomat, I think this is the first mandate⁶².

However, the EU's forceful response to the July 2023 coup in Niger, which entailed suspension of development and military cooperation, sanctions against the junta leaders and support for ECOWAS's attempt to solve the crisis, significantly strained relations⁶³. France was pushing for a strong response and, contrary to other EU Member States' decisions, supported ECOWAS' threat of military intervention to reinstall constitutional order, which also resulted in the expulsion of the French ambassador as well as French troops from the country⁶⁴. The French embassy closed shortly after.

The EU's changing approach towards Niger earned it accusations of double standards from external observers, including neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso, but it also divided the EU internally, provoking an 'identity crisis' regarding the EU's role, values and interests in Africa, particularly in the Sahel⁶⁵, provoking questions about whether and how it should continue its engagement with the region. The division was clear-cut between France, which was against continued engagement in Niger, joined to a certain degree by the Scandinavian states, *versus* Germany and the southern Member States, such as Spain and Italy, which wanted to maintain engagement mainly due to their migration agenda, but also to counter Russian

⁵⁸ M. Ramadane, 'About 50 people killed in Chad protests, government says', *Reuters*, 21 October 2022.

⁵⁹ European Parliament, [Resolution on military junta crackdown on peaceful demonstrations in Chad](#), 2022/2993(RSP), 15 December 2022.

⁶⁰ Emanuela C. Del Re, 'Quelle joie d'être de retour à #Ndjamena!', X post, 14 November 2022.

⁶¹ Interview with external expert, 21 January 2026.

⁶² Interview with EU official, 26 January 2026.

⁶³ B. Bilquin and E. Pichon, [The Coup in Niger: Consequences for EU policies in the Sahel](#), *European Parliament Research Service*, 29 September 2023.

⁶⁴ T. Vircoulon, 'Niger: le putsch de trop' [Niger: one putsch too many], *The Conversation*, 21 August 2023.

⁶⁵ N. Wilén, 'Have African Coups provoked an Identity Crisis for the EU?', *Egmont Institute*, 7 December 2023.

influence in the region⁶⁶. The expulsion of EUCAP Sahel and EUMPM to Niger in December 2023 effectively ended more than a decade of collaboration in a matter of months⁶⁷. At the same time, France's loss of its EU lead role in the region also meant that temporarily, there was no longer any clear driver, nor clear strategic orientation for EU policy in the Sahel⁶⁸:

The others would voice complaints about the French, but when it was time for another policy they would back down and say it was too difficult⁶⁹.

The EUSR's role during this period was, by all accounts, not a thankful position to have, as in addition to the external relations with Sahel countries, relations between EU Member States also soured. By the end of Del Re's mandate, the EUSR function had shifted from a coordination tool within a period of expanding EU engagement to one of diplomatic damage control amid rupture, expulsion and internal EU disagreement. The fourth EUSR's position is examined in Chapter 4, since his mandate is closely tied to the negotiation, adoption and early operationalisation of the EU's renewed approach to the Sahel.

2.3 Cross-cutting lessons from the EU's past approaches

The fact that there are several Sahel strategies is already a sign that the previous ones did not work, no?⁷⁰.

Since the first EU Sahel strategy was released in 2011, the EU has implemented a comprehensive approach for the region, using all its instruments, including CSDP operations, development cooperation, humanitarian assistance, migration agenda and diplomatic leverage. It has done so with the explicit objective of stabilising the Sahel, a region considered strategically important for the EU due to its geographical closeness, security crises and migration routes leading for the most part to neighbouring states, but also to Europe. After 15 years, 4 CSDP operations, 4 EUSRs and 2 regional strategies, the Sahel situation has deteriorated on political, security and humanitarian levels. Whichever way you evaluate the EU's efforts, it has not achieved its aim of stabilising the Sahel.

Yet, it also seems clear that for an external organisation to stabilise a region experiencing numerous overlapping crises was from the outset an impossible mission. The EU's official ambitions were not in line with reality on the ground and often underestimated the role of local and national politics in the five states. Depoliticisation of security assistance provided by the EU played into the hands of small groups comprising military elites, while the *de facto* lack of ownership for many of the policies put in place – whether due to the absence of political will from Sahelian actors or lack of inclusion by the EU – rendered many of the different initiatives hollow in terms of structural reforms and improvements. Nevertheless, interviewees were keen to mention that many smaller projects and programmes, which the EU had put in place related to infrastructure building, education or civil-military trust building, were deemed to be useful and successful, yet under-reported in strategic communication.

Despite meagre results on the ground, the EU managed to realise two of its informal objectives: (1) implement and test its comprehensive approach and (2) profile itself as a global security actor⁷¹. Ten years after it deployed its first CSDP operation, the EU is still represented in Mali with the EUCAP Sahel. It is also still present with delegations in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania, who are actively maintaining

⁶⁶ Interview with EU official, 12 January 2026; Interview with EU official, 30 January 2026.

⁶⁷ The EU decided on 27 May 2024 to terminate the missions, by not extending their mandates beyond 30 June 2024. See: Council, '[EUMPM Niger: Council decides not to extend the mandate of the mission](#)', Press release, 27 May 2024; B. Bilquin, '[EU missions and operations abroad](#)', *European Parliament Research Service*, October 2024.

⁶⁸ C. Bensimon et al., '[The insurmountable failure of France's strategy in the Sahel](#)', *Le Monde*, 4 November 2023; T. Viercoulon, '[Niger: le putsch de trop](#)' [Niger: one putsch too many], *The Conversation*, 21 August 2023.

⁶⁹ Interview with external expert, 28 January 2026.

⁷⁰ Interview with an external expert, 28 January 2026.

⁷¹ N. Wilén, [Securitizing the Sahel: Analysing External Interventions and their Consequences](#), Oxford University Press, 2025.

engagement with local and national actors on the ground, despite often being understaffed⁷². Their work is crucial to sustaining and developing EU relationships with the states in question. Overall, the EU's maintained presence in the region is considered a success by interviewees:

The good thing is that we manage to remain engaged on security-related issues... we demonstrated that we never left the Sahel⁷³.

What we have done well is to maintain engagement⁷⁴.

Indeed, the fact that the EU remains engaged despite a shifting political and security context is something that could be considered successful, albeit from a 'low bar' perspective. Table 2 below summarises the main conclusions regarding the EU's Sahel strategies and the function of EUSRs in the Sahel from 2011 until 2026.

Table 2. EU external action analysis matrix

EU intervention	Intended mechanism	Observable contribution	Limitations
Sahel strategies	Policy coherence, testing comprehensive approach	Shared language, funding alignment, overarching strategic framing	Over-ambition, adapting to logic of its own, not including partner preferences
EUSR Sahel	Political coherence internally and externally, signal importance	Visibility, coordination, relationship building	Limited leverage, personality over function

Source: Author's own compilation.

Lessons from the EU's 15 years of engagement can be summarised as four key points. Firstly, the EU has struggled to maintain a coherent foreign policy, as other Member States largely allowed France to drive policy due to their own limited willingness or capability to lead or be engaged. Secondly, the EU as a whole often pursued its own agenda without listening enough to Sahelian partners, particularly on issues such as migration. Thirdly, weak strategic communication meant that the EU often 'punched below its weight', failing to highlight successful initiatives or present a coherent narrative. Finally, inconsistent responses to coups in the region created accusations of double standards and damaged the EU's credibility.

France's leadership has been the main driver of EU engagement in the Sahel since 2013. Strategies and missions – including CSDP operations, EUTM, operation Barkhane and the UN peacekeeping mission – were closely aligned with French priorities⁷⁵. This leadership gave the EU visibility, access and opportunities to apply its comprehensive approach. However, it also reinforced perceptions that the EU served as a vehicle for French interests, undermining its reputation and limiting its ability to act independently, not just as a representative for France⁷⁶. This was especially problematic when relations between France and the Sahelian governments deteriorated, but nevertheless, the vast majority of the EU Member States wanted to pursue relations.

⁷² As an example, the EU delegation in Niger has remained without an ambassador since the previous one was expelled in November 2024.

⁷³ Interview with EU official, 9 March 2026.

⁷⁴ Interview with EU official, 26 January 2026.

⁷⁵ N. Wilén, *Securitizing the Sahel: Analysing External Interventions and their Consequences*, Oxford University Press, 2025.

⁷⁶ See for example: 'It could also be observed in the 2013 Malian crisis where the EEAS's role was reduced to adapting and 'soft-washing' French-drafted Council Conclusions', in N. Koenig, *'Resetting EU External Action: Potential and Constraints'*, Jacques Delors Institute, 3 February 2015, p. 10.

At the same time, the EU's focus on its own priorities often strained relations with local partners. Critics argue that the EU did not sufficiently consider Sahelian perspectives, particularly regarding migration policies, as illustrated by Niger's repeal of the EU-backed 2015 anti-smuggling law. More discussions and consultations between the EU and local communities regarding cross-border movements might have been useful to present more tailor-made proposals and avoid criticism. While the EU has been accused of imposing its agenda, it has also been criticised for unclear objectives and weak communication, sometimes under-reporting successful local initiatives, while emphasising more politically sensitive issues.

Finally, the EU's responses to coups in Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso and Niger exposed internal divisions and accusations of double standards. Early coups received relatively soft responses, partly due to domestic support for regime change and strategic considerations. The EU may have bet on the possibility of no more coups in the region and therefore provided a 'soft acceptance'⁷⁷. For the constitutional coup in Chad, the EU's lack of response was clearly aligned with French interests in maintaining relations with Déby junior⁷⁸, yet EU Member States overall were not against that idea. However, the Niger coup triggered a much stronger reaction, dividing EU Member States and deepening tensions with regional actors. These developments contributed to an internal EU crisis and policy paralysis, while the overall security and political situation in the Sahel continued to deteriorate. The next section will analyse the security and political situation.

3. Examining current security and political challenges in the Sahel

The different intersecting crises which have plagued the Sahel for more than a decade are worsening. The military regimes which came to power in the latest coup wave in the Sahel on the promise of quelling jihadist violence have not been able to deliver on this promise⁷⁹. Instead, jihadist groups are expanding across the region, with deadlier attacks against civilians in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, the three states which created the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES) in 2023⁸⁰. In April 2026, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) formed an alliance with the *Front de Libération d'Azawad* (FLA) and conducted coordinated attacks across Mali, targeting at least six major cities with military infrastructure and at the same time targeting and killing the Defence Minister⁸¹. In May 2026, at the time of writing this paper, it is too early to accurately assess the impacts of these attacks, but they will have major consequences for Mali and the broader Sahel region.

The border between Mali and Mauritania remains fraught with tensions related to the increasing number of attacks in the West of Mali and the refugee camps on the Mauritanian side of the border, while Chad is facing constant danger from armed groups on the northern borders. At the same time, the country is both feeding into and suffering from the civil war that is unravelling on its eastern border in Sudan. A drone strike in December 2025 near the border with Sudan, which killed two Chadian soldiers, became one of the first concrete signs of the war in Sudan spilling over into Chad. A month later, seven more were killed in clashes with the Sudanese paramilitary group on the border, which pushed Chad to deploy thousands of troops along the nearly 1 400-kilometer-long border⁸². Chad also borders on six unstable countries, out of

⁷⁷ A. Thurston, 'The International Community's Soft Acceptance of the Coup in Mali', *IPI Global Observatory*, 3 September 2020.

⁷⁸ J. Irish and T. Salaün, 'With eye on Islamist fight, France backs Chad military takeover', *Reuters*, 22 April 2021.

⁷⁹ N. Wilén, 'Dans les pays du Sahel, les juntas en échec face aux djihadistes' [In the Sahel countries, the juntas fail in the face of jihadists], *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 2025.

⁸⁰ AES was created initially as a defence alliance in response to ECOWAS threat of military intervention following the coup in Niger in 2023, and to jihadist groups' expansion. The alliance later developed into what the leaders have called a confederation, but so far this seems to be more a rhetorical rather than practical move.

⁸¹ N. Wilén and C. Belli, 'Mali Meltdown: the coordinated attacks and their consequences', *Egmont Institute*, 27 April 2026.

⁸² B. Tchoudba, 'Chad risks greater instability from engagement in Sudan's conflict', *AllAfrica*, 9 March 2026.

which Russia is present in four: Libya, Niger, Sudan and the Central African Republic, further contributing to unpredictability⁸³.

Today, Sahel is the region most affected by jihadist violence globally, according to the 2025 Global Terrorism Index, accounting for over half of all terrorism-related deaths in 2024, with an increasing number of countries being affected⁸⁴. At the same time, the AES countries and Chad are experiencing a deepening authoritarian turn, as transitions to democratic elections and a return to constitutional order have been stalled with continual extensions of the transitional period and repression against opposition voices. These developments are unfolding within a heavily restricted media landscape, where local independent and foreign journalists as well as news agencies are either silenced through repression or driven into exile. Meanwhile, civil society is facing continued intimidation and oppression, including forced military recruitment, arbitrary arrests and in some cases summary executions⁸⁵.

This section will examine broader security and political developments in three stages. Firstly, it will take stock of the security situation, analysing the current expansion of jihadist groups and other armed non-state actors in the five Sahel states being examined here, with a particular focus on the three AES states. Secondly, it will analyse the political context and the authoritarian turn. Thirdly, the new or intensified relationships with external authoritarian partners, such as Russia, China, Türkiye and the Gulf states, will be examined.

Given the rapidly evolving and highly complex nature of political and security dynamics in the Sahel, this section does not aim at providing an exhaustive account of all developments since 2020. Rather, it seeks to identify the main structural trends and political inflexion points most relevant to assessing the EU's renewed approach.

3.1 A deteriorating security context: Jihadist expansion and non-state armed actors

In 2014, the Sahel region faced the fewest deaths linked to violent extremism⁸⁶. Yet, since then, Islamist violence has escalated sharply, particularly following the coup wave between 2020 and 2023, sustaining a high level of lethality tied to jihadist violence with figures in 2025 representing a sevenfold increase in annual fatalities since 2019⁸⁷. By 2024, the Sahel had become the continent's deadliest region, with fatalities reaching approximately 11 200⁸⁸, and in 2025, the Sahel accounted for more terrorism deaths than those in South Asia combined with the Middle East and North Africa⁸⁹. These figures, though, exclude civilian deaths attributed to national security forces. In some recent years, state security actors, including the state-armed self-defence groups in Burkina Faso (*Volontaires de la Défense de la Patrie* (VDP)) and the national military in collaboration with Russian partners in Mali, may have killed more civilians than militant Islamist groups, bringing civilian casualties to unprecedented levels⁹⁰. Mauritania, in comparison with its Sahelian neighbours, is comparatively stable, although JNIM expansion towards the West in Mali also adds to border tension and spill-over risks. In Chad, armed rebels in the north at the border with Libya have been fighting state forces for decades, yet since April 2021, when the former President Idris Déby was

⁸³ J. Guiffard, '[Afrique: les rivalités stratégiques – Tchad, Côte d'Ivoire, RDC: dans le viseur de Moscou](#)' [Africa : Strategic Rivalries – Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC : in Moscow's sights], *Institut Montaigne*, 15 July 2024.

⁸⁴ Institute for Economic and Peace, [Global Terrorism Index 2025](#), March 2025.

⁸⁵ N. Wilén, '[Silence in the Sahel does not Equal Stability](#)', *Egmont Institute*, 17 April 2025.

⁸⁶ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, '[Africa's Constantly Evolving Militant Islamist Threat](#)', 13 August 2024.

⁸⁷ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, '[Africa Surpasses 150,000 Deaths Linked to Militant Islamist Groups in Past Decade](#)', 28 July 2025.

⁸⁸ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, '[Africa's Constantly Evolving Militant Islamist Threat](#)', 13 August 2024.

⁸⁹ Institute for Economic and Peace, [Global Terrorism Index 2025](#), March 2025, p. 34.

⁹⁰ See for example: H. Nsaibia, '[Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland \(VDP\): Detailed exploration of Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland \(VDP\) in Burkina Faso](#)', *ACLEDA*, 26 March 2024.

killed by rebels, the security situation has become much worse⁹¹ and the recent spillover from the Sudanese war threatens to engulf Chad in a regional war.

The main Islamist non-state armed groups active in the Sahel region are JNIM and the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) with the former most present in Mali and Burkina Faso and the latter more dominant in Niger. Following the withdrawal of the French operation Barkhane and MINUSMA from Mali in 2022, the jihadist groups have expanded further, taking control over more territory. IS Sahel doubled its territorial presence in Mali in the year after Barkhane left the country in 2022⁹², while armed conflict between the Malian regime and the Tuareg separatist movements in the North resumed following the Malian regime's request to immediately withdraw MINUSMA in June 2023⁹³.

New technology and economic warfare strategies account for some of JNIM's expanded presence in the Sahel region. In 2025, JNIM was estimated to account for 83 % of all fatalities in the Sahel⁹⁴. After consolidating its positions in Mali, the group has also increased its reach in the three-border area – Liptako-Gourma – between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger⁹⁵. The coordinated attacks in several major cities in Mali, including Bamako and Kati – the military headquarter – in coalition FLA in April 2026 were the largest and most complex coordinated attacks in the country's history. It showcased not only the capabilities of JNIM, and to a lesser extent FLA, to conduct several attacks across the country, but also that it decided and was capable of targeting individuals from the military junta in their homes⁹⁶. Yet, the recent attacks were not the first coordinated attacks by JNIM. In the summer of 2025, it opened a new front in the west of Mali, carrying out an unprecedented seven simultaneous attacks during July 2025 in the region of Kayes⁹⁷, situated close to the borders of Mauritania and Senegal, thereby creating a new dangerous 'three-border area'⁹⁸. More generally, JNIM has expanded north within the Gulf of Guinea, affecting Benin, Togo and the Ivory Coast in particular, hence creating a problem that now goes beyond the Sahel states⁹⁹.

A fuel blockade initiated by JNIM in Mali in September 2025, and continued into 2026, indicated a new economic warfare strategy to put pressure on the Malian regime. Besides other actions, the group attacked fuel trucks arriving from ports in neighbouring countries; isolated various major towns, including the capital Bamako. This blockade came a year after the Jihadist group had conducted symbolically important attacks against a gendarmerie school and the military airport in Bamako in September 2024, killing over 70 Malian security forces and putting the Malian security forces' flaws on full display¹⁰⁰. In January 2026, the fuel blockade was temporarily weakened, both due to negotiations with JNIM, but also a stronger Russian military involvement in escorting fuel and food convoys¹⁰¹. Yet, JNIM's ability to block the capital and pressure the regime provoked new discussions about the possibility of negotiations between the military regime and the jihadist group, not just in Mali but beyond¹⁰². After the latest attacks, it seems clear that JNIM will become an essential player in any negotiation about state control and power in Mali. A military

⁹¹ CEDOCA, [Tchad: Situation sécuritaire](#) [Tchad: security situation], 12 July 2024, p. 14.

⁹² E. M. Lederer, ['UN experts say Islamic State group almost doubled the territory they control in Mali in under a year'](#), AP, 26 August 2023.

⁹³ France 24, ['Fighting resumes in Mali between army and rebel groups in key northern area'](#), 12 November 2023.

⁹⁴ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, ['Africa Surpasses 150,000 Deaths Linked to Militant Islamist Groups in Past Decade'](#), 28 July 2025.

⁹⁵ H. Nsaibia, [Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin \(JNIM\) : A detailed profile of JNIM, their operations, economic warfare, and influence in the Sahel](#), ACLED, 13 November 2023.

⁹⁶ N. Wilén and C. Belli, ['Mali Meltdown: the coordinated attacks and their consequences'](#), Egmont Institute, 27 April 2026.

⁹⁷ B. Roger, ['Mali : attaques djihadistes d'envergure dans l'ouest du pays'](#) [Mali: Large-scale jihadist attacks in the west of the country], *Le Monde Afrique*, 1 July 2025.

⁹⁸ Timbuktu Institute, [Menace du jnim dans la zone des trois frontières du Mali, de la Mauritanie et du Sénégal](#) [Threat from JNIM in the tri-border area of Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal], May 2025.

⁹⁹ D. Eizenga and A. Ganguénon, ['Recalibrating Coastal West Africa's Response to Violent Extremism'](#), *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 22 July 2024.

¹⁰⁰ J-H. Jezequel, ['The 17 September Jihadist Attack in Bamako: Has Mali's Security Strategy Failed?'](#), *International Crisis Group*, 24 September 2024.

¹⁰¹ Interview with external expert, 23 January 2026.

¹⁰² Y. Guichaoua et al., [Prospects for Dialogue in the Central Sahel](#), *Folke Bernadotte Akademin*, 2025.

solution alone is not going to end the conflict, and given the current balance of power, the Malian junta is likely to have to negotiate from a weaker position.

JNIM is also the non-state armed group that is most present in Burkina Faso, controlling large parts of the territory outside of the urban centres¹⁰³. Notable attacks over the past few years have resulted in a large number of victims amongst the security forces. On 11 May 2025, the attack on a military base in Djibo killed up to 200 soldiers, while assaults on eight other locations – demonstrating its capacity to conduct simultaneous operations across the country – resulted in a further 80 soldiers killed¹⁰⁴. However, it is civilians who continue to bear the heaviest cost from the armed conflict in Burkina Faso, as they do elsewhere in the region. A vicious cycle of revenge massacres has taken place throughout 2024 and 2025 in Burkina Faso between Jihadist groups and VDPs, the latter predominantly targeting the Fulani ethnicity due to their over-representation in the Jihadist movements.

Some of the worst massacres in recent years include the summary execution of at least 223 civilians by the VDPs in two villages on the same day in February 2024¹⁰⁵, the Basalgho massacre in 2024 where between 130 and 600 civilians were killed by JNIM while they were tasked with digging defensive trenches by the security forces¹⁰⁶. In 2025, attacks by state forces and revenge attacks by jihadist groups in the Banwa and Sourou provinces resulted in hundreds of victims¹⁰⁷. Yet, while the number killed decreased by 21 % in 2024, Burkina Faso remained the country most impacted by terrorism globally¹⁰⁸. However, while it recorded a further decrease in the number of deaths from terrorism in 2025, lethality increased, indicating a pattern of fewer but deadlier attacks, demonstrated by holding the top three places for deadliest attacks in 2025 globally¹⁰⁹. JNIM's recent success in Mali may have implications for its presence and status in Burkina Faso, increasing the likelihood of more attacks in urban areas and possibly even the capital, which so far has been protected from attacks.

Niger has been comparatively less affected by jihadist violence than its AES neighbours, yet in 2024 the country recorded a 94 % increase in deaths from terrorism, the largest globally¹¹⁰. In 2025 the Tillabéri region, where the capital Niamey is situated, became the deadliest region across the central Sahel with more than 1 200 fatalities recorded¹¹¹. In 2025, Niger also saw an increase in kidnappings of foreign nationals by JNIM and IS Sahel, demonstrating both the group's growing capabilities and a new kidnapping campaign. This is designed as an economic warfare strategy, whilst at the same time putting pressure on the security forces¹¹². The abduction of a citizen of the United States of America from his home in Niger's capital Niamey during October 2025 increased foreign nationals' concerns but was not met with significantly changed routines by the Nigerien security forces¹¹³. In January 2026, a drone attack claimed by IS Sahel targeted the airport and a military base hosting foreign and national troops in Niamey, suggesting a further deterioration in the security situation. The attack reportedly also destroyed drones recently acquired from Türkiye¹¹⁴.

The use of drones both by the Sahelian regimes and their security forces, as well as non-state armed actors opposing them, has increased in recent years, which has transformed the security landscape in the region.

¹⁰³ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, '[Africa Surpasses 150,000 Deaths Linked to Militant Islamist Groups in Past Decade](#)', 28 July 2025.

¹⁰⁴ BBC, '[Briefing: Many casualties feared in Burkina Faso attacks blamed on insurgents](#)', 12 May 2025.

¹⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch, '[Burkina Faso: Army Massacres 223 Villagers](#)', 25 April 2024.

¹⁰⁶ CNN, '[Massacre in Burkina Faso left 600 dead, double previous estimates, according to French security assessment](#)', 4 October 2024.

¹⁰⁷ BBC, '[Briefing: Nearly 200 killed in militant attacks in northern Burkina Faso](#)', 5 April 2025; Human Rights Watch, '[Burkina Faso: Army Directs Ethnic Massacres](#)', 12 May 2025.

¹⁰⁸ Institute for Economics and Peace, '[Global Terrorism Index 2025](#)', p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ Institute for Economics and Peace, '[Global Terrorism Index 2025](#)', p. 8.

¹¹⁰ Institute for Economics and Peace, '[Global Terrorism Index 2025](#)', p. 2.

¹¹¹ L. Serwat et al., '[Africa Overview: January 2026](#)', ACLED, 13 January 2026.

¹¹² H. Nsaibia, '[Economic warfare escalates as militants expand beyond the Sahel](#)', ACLED, 11 December 2025.

¹¹³ Interview with EU Official, 2 February 2026.

¹¹⁴ Jeune Afrique, '[Niger: ce que l'on sait de l'attaque qui a visé Niamey](#)' [Niger: what we know about the attack that targeted Niamey], 29 January 2026.

Burkina Faso and Mali are among the six countries which account for 93 % of recorded drone strikes in offensive operations on the continent¹¹⁵. At least three different types of drones were for example used in the coordinated attacks in Mali in April 2026, both by the jihadist/separatist coalition and the state armed forces and their Russian partners, demonstrating the expansion of drone warfare¹¹⁶.

Observers note that Sahelian regimes' use of drones is often less driven by strategic military objectives than by revenge, frequently against civilians or status considerations, showcasing the purchase of 'advanced' technological equipment. In August 2024, regime strikes in northern Mali killed more than 20 civilians in what was widely seen as retaliation for the Malian army's humiliating ambush in Tenzaouaten a month earlier by the armed Tuareg separatists and JNIM. The strikes also heightened tensions with neighbouring Algeria as they were carried out without prior coordination¹¹⁷.

Chad has also used drones against insurgent groups operating from bases in neighbouring Sudan and Libya. As with its Sahelian neighbours, it acquired Bayraktar drones from Türkiye in 2023, shortly before ending its decades-long military partnership with France. However, unlike Mali – and to a lesser extent Burkina Faso – Chad has more strategically targeted rebel bases, at times across the border in Libya¹¹⁸. Chad's security situation has deteriorated significantly since the end of 2025, with the spillover from the Sudanese war and the clashes between Chadian soldiers and the Rapid Support Forces on the border between the two countries. Yet, in terms of Jihadist violence, Chad remains less affected than its AES neighbours. However, all four states have experienced a strong authoritarian turn since the new military leaders came to power.

3.2 Military governance: Repression and democratic backsliding

The regimes in Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso and Niger have extended transition timelines and amended constitutions to consolidate power after taking office through coups. Between 2020 and 2026, AES authorities repeatedly delayed promised elections, effectively entrenching military rule and thus removing any prospects for early democratic transitions¹¹⁹. While elections were held in Chad during May 2024, the campaign was marked by repression, including security forces killing the main opposition leader and limited independent scrutiny, while Déby maintained his hold on power¹²⁰. Mauritania stands out as relatively stable and electoral, although its political system remains tightly controlled and strongly influenced by the military, partly due to President Ghazouani's former role as army chief.

Across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, post-coup authorities have followed a broader regional pattern of authoritarian consolidation marked by shrinking civic space, repression of dissent and tighter information control. AES regimes have targeted independent and foreign media – suspending outlets such as Radio-France Internationale and France 24¹²¹ – while shutting down local stations, intimidating journalists and

¹¹⁵ N. Allen, ['Military drone proliferation marks destabilizing shift in Africa's armed conflicts'](#), *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 21 April 2025.

¹¹⁶ N. Wilén and C. Belli, ['Mali Meltdown: the coordinated attacks and their consequences'](#), *Egmont Institute*, 27 April 2026.

¹¹⁷ Z. Rahmouni, ['Au Sahel, la guerre des drones se généralise et terrorise les populations locales'](#) [In the Sahel, drone warfare is becoming widespread and is terrorizing local populations], *Slate*, 12 September 2025.

¹¹⁸ G. Kurtz et al., ['The Myth of the Gamechanger: Drones and Military Power in Africa'](#), *Megatrends Afrika*, Policy Brief n°33, March 2025.

¹¹⁹ A. Olaoluwa and N. Ogbonna, ['Niger coup leader sworn in as president for five years'](#), *BBC*, 26 March 2025; BBC, ['Mali coup: Military agrees to 18-month transition government'](#), 12 September 2020; M. Toulemonde, ['Transitions en Afrique: un provisoire devenu permanent'](#) [Transitions in Africa: a temporary phase that has become permanent], *Jeune Afrique*, 7 June 2024; C. Ewonor, ['Mali coup leader granted five-year term in power'](#), *BBC*, 4 July 2025; France 24, ['Burkina junta chief says elections 'not a priority', eyes constitutional change'](#), 30 September 2023; B. Ahmed, ['The head of Mali's military junta appoints himself to the highest rank in the army'](#), *Associated Press*, 16 October 2024.

¹²⁰ M. Ramadane, ['Chad's Mahamat Deby confirmed as winner of disputed election'](#), *Reuters*, 16 May 2024.

¹²¹ Agence France-Presse, ['France 24 TV, RFI Radio Say Mali Has Banned Them for Good'](#), *VOA*, 28 April 2022; Committee to Protect Journalists, ['Burkina Faso suspends third French media outlet in under 8 months'](#), 17 July 2023; France 24, ['RFI and FRANCE 24 condemn the suspension of their broadcasts in Niger'](#), Press release, 3 August 2023.

restricting political reporting¹²². Throughout the region, political opposition and civil society have also been curtailed by means of party suspensions, arrests and banning of organisations, alongside actions such as Mali's expulsion of the UN human rights chief¹²³ and Niger's detention of former President Mohamed Bazoum. More recently, reports of abductions, forced conscription of journalists and the use of terrorism charges against critics¹²⁴ illustrate a deepening trend toward entrenched military rule with limited tolerance for scrutiny or pluralism.

This authoritarian turn has complicated EU engagement with the military regimes, as cooperation risks contradicting the democratic values the EU seeks to promote. Nevertheless, the EU has maintained political dialogue with Chad and increased humanitarian support in 2024–2025, while the Council approved EUR 14.5 million in European Peace Facility (EPF) assistance to strengthen the Chadian armed forces in 2025. Perceived EU double standards have drawn criticism from regional leaders. However, more broadly the new regimes' unpredictability and their strategic realignment away from Western and multilateral partners toward authoritarian allies have further exacerbated efforts to rebuild partnerships and trust. In Mali, the arrest of a French diplomat in August 2025 on suspicion of spying has, for example, significantly compounded the EU's re-engagement, as has the Malian regime's reluctance to work with French non-governmental organisations within the country¹²⁵.

3.3 New and old authoritarian partners: Russia, Türkiye, China and the Gulf states

As the coup wave developed, partnerships between Sahelian states and their Western partners – particularly France – rapidly unravelled. The new military leaders ended security cooperation with France shortly after taking power, while Mali and Niger also expelled MINUSMA and two EU CSDP missions, respectively. EU's reputation in the broader region also took a blow due to its positions on international crises such as Ukraine and the Middle East, which have been instrumentalised in local and transnational narratives, often portraying Western actors as inconsistent or selective in their application of international norms. These perceptions, amplified through disinformation campaigns and local political discourse, have affected the EU's credibility and room for manoeuvre, particularly in contexts where authorities are already seeking to distance themselves from Western partners.

Since early 2022, Russia has thus emerged as the preferred security partner for some of the region's military regimes. China was already maintaining a strong presence focused on natural resource extraction, yet the completion of the Chinese-built pipeline in 2023, transporting oil from Niger to Benin, deepened and complicated this relationship. At the same time, new actors – including Türkiye and the Gulf states – expanded their influence, benefitting from relatively 'non-aligned' positions in global power competition¹²⁶. The following sections outline key trends in these evolving partnerships and their implications for the EU's renewed approach.

Russia

Russia's presence in the Sahel reflects its broader strategy across Africa of combining disinformation campaigns, security cooperation as well as access to natural resources and critical minerals. Its engagement has primarily taken the form of both official and unofficial military cooperation – including arms exports, provision of military equipment and deployment of troops – alongside sustained information operations

¹²² International IDEA, [Mali – November 2022: TV station suspended after editorial on threats to freedom of expression](#), November 2022.

¹²³ Reuters, ['Mali expels U.N. mission's human rights chief'](#), 6 February 2023.

¹²⁴ Reporters without borders, ['Burkina Faso; RSF condemns three new cases of forced military conscription'](#), 3 April 2025.

¹²⁵ Interview with EU official, 3 March 2026.

¹²⁶ Parts of the following sections come from: N. Wilén, ['Stepping up Engagement in the Sahel: Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States'](#), *Egmont Institute*, April 2025.

aimed at reducing Western influence¹²⁷. A central vehicle for Russia's foreign manipulation activities is the Moscow-based news agency 'African Initiative', established in September 2023 coinciding with the creation of the AES. The agency disseminates anti-Western narratives across websites and social media platforms, recruiting local actors to amplify pro-Russian messaging among regional audiences. Influencers such as Nathalie Yamb and Kemi Seba have played visible roles in spreading pro-Russian narratives¹²⁸. The 'African Political Science' is another major initiative which has an estimated monthly budget of approximately USD 750 000 to coordinate operations spanning more than 30 countries¹²⁹. These disinformation campaigns aggravate efforts by Western actors, such as the EU, to re-engage and promote alternative narratives while amplifying Russia's influence in other domains such as security cooperation.

Russia has also deployed troops to all three AES states, first to Mali in late 2021 and later to Burkina Faso and Niger in 2024. In Mali, between 1 000 and 2 000 Wagner troops have operated alongside Malian armed forces against jihadist and separatist groups, frequently resulting in serious human rights violations and civilian casualties¹³⁰. In Burkina Faso and Niger, deployments remain smaller, numbering only a few hundred troops coming from the Wagner group's successor, the Africa Corps.

The Africa Corps officially replaced Wagner in Mali during May 2025, although many personnel remained the same. Observers note that Africa Corps units have been less willing to patrol far from their bases or engage directly in combat, resulting in fewer civilian casualties¹³¹. During the JNIM fuel blockade, the Africa Corps initially faced criticism for failing to protect convoys but increased its involvement later in the year. Yet, during the latest attacks in Mali in April 2026, Africa Corps soldiers were seen negotiating their way out of the city of Kidal with FLA and JNIM fighters, while leaving their Malian counterparts behind¹³². Although the decision was said to be coordinated with the Malian soldiers, it will surely taint the image of Russia as a security partner in Mali and beyond for the coming months, possibly longer. Nevertheless, in President Goïta's first public address to the population following the attacks, he reaffirmed Russia as a security partner, demonstrating that the collaboration remained – at least for the time being – in place, despite the setbacks.

Russia's strategy also includes gaining access to natural resources, while weakening Western commercial influence and sanction-proofing its economy. Russian advisers have encouraged Sahelian governments to revise mining codes and increase state control over natural resources. All three AES states have introduced such reforms. Burkina Faso revised its mining code in 2024, strengthening state oversight and granting licences to companies, including the Russian-linked firm Nordgold¹³³. In Niger, the military junta nationalised the Somair uranium mine, previously operated by France's Orano, while courting Russian and Iranian investors¹³⁴. In Mali, authorities have taken a hard line toward Western mining firms, including detaining senior staff from Canada's Barrick Gold and seizing gold stockpiles¹³⁵. Russia's growing role in the natural resources sector echoes China's longer-term strategy across the continent.

¹²⁷ M. Audinet, « [A bas le néocolonialisme !](#) » *résurgence d'un récit stratégique dans la russie en guerre* ["Down with Neocolonialism!": Resurgence of a strategic narrative in wartime Russia], *IRSEM*, October 2024.

¹²⁸ Institute for Strategic Dialogue, '[Investigation: Pro-Kremlin influencers target audiences in the Alliance of Sahel States](#)', 27 August 2025.

¹²⁹ V. Litnarovich and T. Frolova, '[Leaked Documents Reveal Russia's Plot to Stage Coup in Senegal](#)', *United 24 Media*, 16 February 2026.

¹³⁰ Reuters, '[Russian troops deploy to Burkina Faso](#)', 25 January 2024; C. Ewokor and K. Armstrong, '[Russian troops arrive in Niger as military agreement begins](#)', *BBC*, 12 April 2024.

¹³¹ Interview with external expert, 12 November 2025.

¹³² K. Hoije, '[Russia bet backfires for Mali as rebels retake pivotal town](#)', *Bloomberg*, 28 April 2026.

¹³³ S. Paul Atwood and B. Sala, '[Coups d'État and Critical Minerals: Reclaiming Power or Rebranding Neocolonialism in the Sahel?](#)', *Mondo Internazionale*, 20 November 2025.

¹³⁴ P. Melly, '[Russia outsmarts France with nuclear power move in Niger](#)', *BBC*, 27 August 2025.

¹³⁵ S. Paul Atwood and B. Sala, '[Coups d'État and Critical Minerals: Reclaiming Power or Rebranding Neocolonialism in the Sahel?](#)', *Mondo Internazionale*, 20 November 2025.

China

China's presence in the Sahel mirrors its broader footprint across Africa: stable and expanding influence primarily in economic and natural resource sectors. Investments in oil and mining remain central, although China has also increased security cooperation in recent years. France's withdrawal from the region and Russia's reduced arms exports following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine created opportunities for Chinese arms sales. China reportedly now accounts for approximately 26 % of West African arms imports, surpassing France, Russia and Türkiye, and occupying the place as the largest supplier of weaponry to all of sub-Saharan Africa¹³⁶. Mali and Burkina Faso increasingly deploy Chinese armoured personnel carriers in counter-insurgency operations¹³⁷.

Despite this, China's engagement remains largely commercial and state-corporate driven rather than overtly military. In Niger, a Chinese national oil company developed the Agadem oil field and spearheaded construction of the 2 000-kilometre pipeline to Benin, Africa's longest, at a cost of roughly USD 6 billion¹³⁸. However, political disruptions following the coup, including border closures with Benin and tensions with Chinese firms, have exposed vulnerabilities in large-scale infrastructure investments. The expulsion of Chinese oil executives and revocation of the Soluxe hotel's licence reflect a broader attempt by Nigerien authorities to renegotiate terms and assert greater control over foreign investors¹³⁹.

China also maintains a significant economic presence in Mauritania. Nouakchott's deep-water 'Friendship Port', originally built by a Chinese company in 1986, has been expanded a number of times thanks to Chinese financing, most recently in 2024. The establishment of a Confucius Institute in Nouakchott in 2019 has further reinforced China's influence¹⁴⁰. So far, though, there is scant evidence of new projects that fall under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework, which was signed in 2023 by Mauritania. The only concrete project that falls under the BRI umbrella is an overpass on the N2 road in Nouakchott, completed in May 2025¹⁴¹. In this sense, the EU's Global Gateway initiatives and China's BRI projects do not overlap each other – so far.

In Mali, Chinese nationals have been involved in largely unregulated artisanal mining activities alongside larger international companies. The collapse of certain artisanal gold mines in early 2025, causing more than 50 deaths, increased scrutiny of these operations¹⁴². Malian authorities subsequently demanded an immediate halt to illegal mining activities involving Chinese nationals and summoned the Chinese ambassador to address environmental concerns, including the use of mercury¹⁴³. Since these miners do not operate directly on behalf of the Chinese government, the issue is unlikely to affect bilateral relations significantly.

Türkiye

Türkiye has markedly expanded its presence across Africa over the past 15 years, with its embassies increasing in number from 12 in 2002 to 44 by 2024, with seven more planned¹⁴⁴, thereby approaching the diplomatic footprint of France and the United States of America. In the Sahel, Türkiye opened embassies

¹³⁶ IISS, '[Chinese arms sales in Sub-Saharan Africa](#)', *Strategic Comments*, Vol 30, No 10, 2024.

¹³⁷ J. Nyabiage, '[How a 'military vacuum' in West and Central Africa opened new markets for China](#)', *South China Morning Post*, 15 February 2026.

¹³⁸ M. Maillard, '[Au Niger, la face cachée de l'or noir et de l'oléoduc chinois](#)' [In Niger, the hidden face of black gold and the Chinese oil pipeline], *Jeune Afrique*, 4 March 2025.

¹³⁹ G. Ikeh, '[Niger: Soluxe International Hotel Loses Operating License](#)', *Agence de Presse Africaine*, 14 March 2025.

¹⁴⁰ Xinhua, '[China-Mauritania ties mark 60 years with enduring "Friendship" projects](#)', *The State Council – The People's Republic of China*, 19 July 2025.

¹⁴¹ Xinhua, '[China-aided overpass to improve mobility in Mauritanian capital](#)', *The State Council – The People's Republic of China*, 17 May 2025.

¹⁴² Qiraat Africa, '[Mali suspends artisanal mine permits for foreigners after accidents](#)', 6 March 2025.

¹⁴³ Agence de Presse Africaine, '[Mali, Niger tighten regulations on Chinese mining and oil companies](#)', 27 March 2025.

¹⁴⁴ Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Trade, '[Türkiye-Africa Trade and Economic Relations](#)', webpage, nd.

in Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso between 2010 and 2013¹⁴⁵. While its early engagement focused on trade and development aid, Ankara has since deepened ties through arms sales, infrastructure projects and growing interest in natural resources¹⁴⁶.

Before the coups in Mali and Niger, Türkiye invested in mosques, hospitals and other public infrastructure as part of a broader nation-branding strategy aimed at presenting itself as a reliable partner. Major projects included the reconstruction of Niger's international airport by the Turkish company Summa and the construction of the Radisson Blu Presidential Hotel in Niamey ahead of the African Union summit. Turkish Airlines flights to the AES capitals have further strengthened connectivity.

Türkiye has also expanded into the security domain. It contributed USD 5 million to the G5 Sahel Joint Force in 2018 and signed a defence agreement with Niger in 2020. More recently, it has become Africa's leading supplier of drones, with 32 agreements, most signed since 2021¹⁴⁷. The Bayraktar TB2 drone, costing roughly USD 4 million compared with USD 30 million for an American Reaper drone, offers a significantly cheaper option. Purchasing Turkish drones also allows Sahelian governments to avoid overt alignment with major powers such as Russia and China¹⁴⁸. In 2026, Turkish personnel are reportedly operating in the AES states and Chad to provide training and maintenance. Türkiye has further expanded its security cooperation in the region following France's withdrawal, including taking over Chad's Abéché military base in 2025¹⁴⁹. A framework agreement on military cooperation with Mauritania signed the same year suggests further collaboration ahead¹⁵⁰.

Reports also indicate the presence of Syrian mercenaries affiliated with the Turkish private military company SADAT, particularly in Niger. They reportedly protect mining and military infrastructure, occasionally engaging with jihadist groups in the tri-border region¹⁵¹. SADAT's religious orientation adds an ideological dimension to Türkiye's growing influence, particularly in Niger, where Salafist networks have strengthened since the coup¹⁵².

Energy security is another driver of Türkiye's engagement. Producing only about a quarter of its own energy needs, Türkiye is interested in Niger's uranium as a potential alternative to Russian imports for future nuclear power plants. In October 2024, Türkiye signed a memorandum of understanding on mining cooperation with Niger¹⁵³, while discussions on gold mining in Mali are ongoing. Trade between Türkiye and Mali has also increased substantially over the past two decades.

Gulf states

The Gulf states – particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Qatar – have also expanded their regional influence since the coups. Their engagement combines economic investment, security cooperation and religious outreach. The UAE has taken the lead with a more securitised and transactional approach, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar have focused more on diplomacy, development and religious engagement.

As early as 2017, Saudi Arabia and the UAE pledged EUR 100 million and EUR 30 million respectively to the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Since the coups, their presence has deepened. The UAE signed a military cooperation agreement with Mali in 2019 and provided armoured vehicles the following year, while also delivering

¹⁴⁵ Z. Nur Duz, [‘Number of Turkish embassies in Africa rises from 12 to 42’](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 19 October 2019.

¹⁴⁶ A. Lebovich and N. van Heukelingen, [‘Unravelling Turkish involvement in the Sahel’](#), *Clingendael*, 28 July 2023.

¹⁴⁷ N. Allen, [‘Military Drone Proliferation Marks Destabilizing Shift in Africa’s Armed Conflicts’](#), *African Center of Strategic Studies*, 21 April 2025.

¹⁴⁸ R. Parens and M. Plichta, [‘Turkey’s Return to Africa’](#), *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 2025.

¹⁴⁹ K. Abdul, [‘Turkey takes control of Abéché military base in Chad’](#), *Military Africa*, 9 February 2025.

¹⁵⁰ A. Ribeiro, [‘Turquía y Mauritania firman un acuerdo marco de cooperación militar’](#), *Defensa.com*, 4 August 2025.

¹⁵¹ Africa Defense Forum, [‘Turkey Adds Mercenaries to Sahel’s Violent Mix’](#), 17 December 2024.

¹⁵² A. Bozkurt, [‘Turkish intelligence has established an operations hub in Niger to project power across Africa’](#), *Nordic Monitor*, 20 January 2025.

¹⁵³ H. Kazanci, [‘Türkiye, Niger sign memorandum of understanding for cooperation in mining’](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 22 October 2024.

vehicles to Chad in 2023¹⁵⁴. Abu Dhabi has increasingly relied on a model of 'military support without an army', using mercenaries, proxies and logistical networks to influence conflicts across the region, including arms transfers to Sudan's Rapid Support Forces via Chad¹⁵⁵. The UAE has also become a key hub for gold flows from Mali and Sudan to Dubai, contributing to shadow economies that can finance armed actors. Weak regulation in Mali has facilitated this trade, with illicit gold often transported directly to the UAE¹⁵⁶.

By contrast, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have emphasised soft-power tools. Riyadh hosted the first Saudi-Africa summit in 2023, where Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman pledged USD 25 billion in investments by 2030, targeting clean energy, infrastructure and mining¹⁵⁷. Qatar has positioned itself as a mediator and development partner. It finances infrastructure and humanitarian projects such as a cancer treatment centre in Burkina Faso¹⁵⁸, signing a USD 50 million loan and grant agreement with Mali in 2025¹⁵⁹.

In sum, the Gulf states try to increase their influence in the Sahel on many fronts, economic and security-related, but also to a more limited extent, ideological and political. While the UAE pursues a more assertive and securitised strategy, Saudi Arabia and Qatar emphasise economic investment and diplomatic mediation, with each shaping a distinct Gulf footprint across the Sahel. Yet, all share a desire to develop Africa more broadly into a strategic 'backyard' essential to their long-term security and development¹⁶⁰. Table 3 below presents a visual summary of the different external actors' main engagements in the Sahel, but should not be seen as an exhaustive account.

3.4 What does it mean for the EU?

The current security and political situation in central Sahel states is in many ways worse in 2026 than it was in 2013 when the EU, UN and France intervened in an effort to establish stability. Predictions for the short, medium and long term are not looking encouraging either, given rapid jihadist expansion, a strong authoritarian turn and hard military approach by Sahelian regimes. The 'playing field' is today more crowded with actors either actively or implicitly competing with the EU, which complicates re-engagement.

Chad is facing its own security threats and while the AES's jihadist expansion does not seem to spill over, the war in Sudan certainly is, drawing Chad into what seems to be a possible regional armed conflict. The increasingly difficult humanitarian situation in Sudan has also had consequences for Chad, which already is hosting roughly 1.3 million Sudanese refugees. This development is placing a significant strain on Chad's eastern provinces and augmenting an already acute food insecurity¹⁶¹.

In addition, the situation in Libya and Chad's internal political situation are all threatening its relative stability. Yet, the EU's support to Chad has continued, while Hungary has increased its bilateral relations through the provision of military support and plans to deploy Hungarian troops to the country, largely excluding the EU from this cooperation. Given that the security collaboration project was planned by former Prime Minister Orbán's son and suspended before its deployment, it seems unlikely that this will continue under the new government¹⁶². At the beginning of 2026, Chad and France discussed the revival of cooperation in other domains than security, suggesting that Chad's diversification of partners may not

¹⁵⁴ O. Lafay, '[Les nouvelles routes africaines de l'influence émiratie](#)' [The new African routes of Emirati Influence], *Portail de l'Intelligence économique*, 6 July 2025.

¹⁵⁵ R. Parens, '[Casting a Shadow: The UAE in Africa](#)', *International Code of Conduct Association*, 4 December 2024.

¹⁵⁶ A. Abderrahmane, '[Mali to Dubai: artery for West Africa's booming illegal gold trade](#)', *Institute for Security Studies*, 3 August 2022.

¹⁵⁷ N. Gbadamosi, '[Saudi Arabia Courts African Leaders](#)', *Foreign Policy*, 15 November 2023.

¹⁵⁸ Qatarfund, '[Launching of Qatar cancer treatment center in Burkina Faso funded by Qatar Fund for Development](#)', 11 April 2021.

¹⁵⁹ Qatarfund, '[Qatar Fund for Development signs a 50 million Loan and Grant Agreement with the Ministry of Economy and Finance in the Republic of Mali](#)', 27 February 2025.

¹⁶⁰ Y. Guzansky and A. Lubotzky, '[Gulf Involvement in Africa: Motives and Implications](#)', *INSS*, 11 November 2025.

¹⁶¹ B. Tchoudba, '[Chad risks greater instability from engagement in Sudan's conflict](#)', *AllAfrica*, 9 March 2026.

¹⁶² C. Finta, '[Hungary's military mission to Chad leaked: "direct combat operations" were in plans](#)', *Daily News Hungary*, 11 April 2026.

have produced the expected results, thereby opening the door for a new chapter in France-Chadian relations and possibly also expanding on the EU-Chad relations¹⁶³.

Mauritania's relative stability, its geostrategic position as a migration route and importantly its willingness to cooperate with the EU, is therefore the obvious re-engagement choice. Learning from previous lessons in the Sahel with Niger, though, it is important not to overburden the country with EU projects, presence and visibility. Not only is there a question of absorption capacity, but also questions of political rivalry and power balance related to EU funding and presence. As one interviewee framed his comment regarding the EU's approach in Niger:

Clearly, looking at the past, we have done something wrong. We should have thought through our approach: we hug them to death¹⁶⁴.

Avoiding that scenario is what the renewed approach will have to pay attention to, as will be analysed in the next section.

Table 3. External non-Western actors' engagement in the Sahel states

State	Russia	China	Türkiye	Gulf States (UAE, Saudi, Qatar)
Mali	 Wagner/Africa Corps  Resource leverage  Disinformation	 APCs  Refinery deals	 Drones + training	 UAE vehicles  Qatar finance
Burkina Faso	 Russian troops  Resource deals  Disinformation	 APCs	 Drones  Drones + training	 Qatar health
Niger	 Russian troops  Mining (intel) nationalisation  Disinformation	 Oil pipeline	 Drones + training  Airport  Uranium	 Qatar health
Mauritania	 Diplomatic agreements		 Mil. cooperation (2025 framework)	 Trade/ investment
Chad	 Equipment/support (ongoing)  Disinformation	 Oil development	 Instructors/drones Abéché base (2025)	 UAE armoured vehicles

 Security (troops, arms, training)

 Infrastructure (ports, roads, refineries, airports)

 Natural resources / CRM (oil, uranium, gold)

 Trade / investment / financing

 Religious outreach

 Disinformation / political influence

Source: Author's own elaboration

4. Challenges and opportunities with the EU's renewed approach to the Sahel

The EU's uneven response to the coup wave in the Sahel, in combination with the AES states' strategic realignment and Niger's expulsion of EU missions led to a significantly fractured relationship between the EU and the AES. It also triggered a broader 'identity crisis' regarding the EU's role in Africa, which was divided internally not only about how to respond to the coups, but also more importantly whether and how to go forward in the Sahel region¹⁶⁵.

¹⁶³ RFI, 'France and Chad seek to reset ties, one year on from military split', 30 January 2026.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with EU official, 4 February 2026.

¹⁶⁵ N. Wilén, 'Have African Coups provoked an Identity Crisis for the EU?', *Egmont Institute*, 7 December 2023.

Developing a new strategic EU compass was also influenced by an international context characterised by intensified global power competition and a rise in armed conflicts around the world. These included: war in Ukraine on the EU's doorstep; renewed armed conflict in the Middle East; intensified armed conflict in the east of the Congo and civil war in Sudan. These international developments, combined with the Sahelian states' decision to change partners, relegated the Sahel from the top of the EU's foreign policy agenda, which had implications in drafting a renewed approach.

4.1 From rupture to repositioning: The Niger coup and the EU's identity crisis

EU relations with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger deteriorated in phases. The regional organisation repositioned itself and maintained relations after the first two coups in Mali and Burkina Faso respectively. However, after the Niger coup in July 2023 relations reached rock bottom. It was a 'putsch too much'¹⁶⁶. This provoked confusion within the EU whose bets had been firmly fixed on the last state perceived as democratic in the Sahelian belt preserving this position, with a newly approved CSDP military partnership mission about to start up its activities alongside EUCAP Sahel Niger¹⁶⁷. Such an unexpected coup in Niger not only provoked national and regional chaos in the Sahel, but it also triggered tensions between EU Member States and France, the latter having been rapidly pushed out by the newly established military junta, thereby losing its lead role in the region.

The coup drew stronger reactions from both the EU and the West African regional organisation ECOWAS than preceding coups in the region. On 29 July 2023, EU High Representative Borrell declared that the EU 'did not recognise and will not recognise the authorities resulting from the putsch in Niger'. In addition to the immediate suspension of budget support, all security cooperation activities were halted with immediate effect¹⁶⁸. ECOWAS went further by threatening military intervention to restore constitutional order in addition to the usual suspension and sanctions. The ECOWAS role in addressing the crisis in Niger received backing from all major international players, including the EU, the African Union and the USA, but while France publicly voiced support for possible ECOWAS military intervention, the EU dodged this issue with Italian and German officials openly discouraging such a move¹⁶⁹.

Adding further insult to injury for France, disputes with Germany regarding military support surfaced during France's stand-off with the junta in August, while other EU Member States officials in the country saw France's harsh stance as an obstacle to more pragmatic EU engagement with the junta. Hence, France's forced withdrawal from Niger resulted not only in a humiliating loss of presence and influence but also in broken trust and open disputes with Western partners and a dent in the EU's cohesiveness¹⁷⁰. At the same time, the fact that France lost its lead role meant that there was neither a clear driver nor a clear strategic orientation for EU policy in the Sahel, which prompted the decision to launch negotiations for a renewed approach.

4.2 Negotiating the renewed approach: The EUSR, the Commission and the Member States' divisions and re-engagement

In December 2023, the State of the Union address from European Commission President von der Leyen announced that the EU's strategic presence in the Sahel region would be revised, following the expulsion of the two CSDP missions in Niger earlier the same month. This call was translated into the mission letter

¹⁶⁶ T. Vircoulon, '[Niger: le putsch de trop](#)' [Niger: one putsch too many], *The Conversation*, 21 August 2023.

¹⁶⁷ EEAS, '[EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger](#)', website, nd.

¹⁶⁸ EEAS, '[Niger: Statement by High Representative Josep Borrell on the latest developments](#)', 29 July 2023.

¹⁶⁹ P. Jacqu  , '[France isolated from rest of EU over Niger](#)', *Le Monde*, 1 September 2023; Reuters, '[Italy fears military solution to Niger crisis could foment migration](#)', 31 August 2023; A. Wasike, '[Germany's development minister warns Niger military intervention poses setback for Sahel development](#)', *Anadolu Agency*, 15 August 2023.

¹⁷⁰ N. Wil  n, '[Have African Coups provoked an Identity Crisis for the EU?](#)', *Egmont Institute*, 7 December 2023..

for the new EU High Representative Kaja Kallas, who was tasked with developing a 'renewed approach to the Sahel'¹⁷¹, a task which fell on the EEAS and the new EUSR to execute. The fourth EUSR, former Portuguese Foreign Minister João Cravinho, was appointed in November 2024. At the time of his arrival, relations between Member States regarding the Sahel were still divisive, with France blocking all initiatives to re-engage, especially with Niger, where the elected President Bazoum was still being held under house arrest by the military junta¹⁷². France's position was supported by some of the Baltic and Scandinavian states immediately following the coup expulsion of the CSDP operations, while southern states Italy and Spain were focused on the migration agenda and opted for a complete re-engagement, including security collaboration. These contrasting positions made negotiations particularly difficult¹⁷³.

This internal blockage within the EU led to the EUSR having to devote considerable time within his mandate period to discuss and coordinate between EU Member States¹⁷⁴. Within this cemented division between Member States about how the different Sahel states should be categorised, Chad and Mauritania were seen as 'good', whilst Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso were regarded as 'bad'. This had repercussions for all EU instruments, reviving the debate about values versus interests¹⁷⁵. More broadly, as the new High Representative Kallas had shown only limited interest in Africa at the beginning of her mandate, it made it more difficult to garner attention for the Sahel. The recruitment of a former EU Ambassador to Niger as the new Africa advisor to the High Representative provoked criticism from external observers¹⁷⁶. He had previously been expelled from Niger in 2024 amid a public dispute related to the distribution of EU aid. His appointment as Africa advisor was seen as playing against re-engagement in the Sahel, given such a bitter history¹⁷⁷.

4.3 Adoption and early implementation: Language, instruments and blockages

These obstacles notwithstanding, the EUSR managed to create a consensus between Member States to endorse the principles of a renewed EU approach to the Sahel at a Foreign Affairs Council meeting in November 2025¹⁷⁸. External diplomats lauded it as 'nothing short of a miracle', given the internal divisions and attributed this positive result in part to the EUSR's personal approach, seen as 'pragmatic', 'humble', 'always in a listening mode'¹⁷⁹ – attributes which were also mentioned as having been appreciated by the Sahelian counterparts. Member States' pressure on France to move forward with the policy also contributed to the creation of a consensus:

For the Member States that were mostly against re-engagement, there was also an evolution. They were a bit less tense and more pragmatic...Let's maybe use the EU this time, not to push it down, and not upward and forward, but as a platform¹⁸⁰.

The detailed renewed approach, as presented at the Foreign Affairs Council, was initially supposed to be an internal rather than a public document. However, a joint EEAS-Commission paper entitled 'A renewed EU approach to the Sahel' was published after demands for access from non-governmental institutions in

¹⁷¹ U. von der Leyen, '[Mission Letter to Kaja Kallas: High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission](#)', European Commission, 17 September 2024.

¹⁷² At the time of writing in March 2026, this is still the case. P. Ricard, '[Confrontation between France and Niger junta intensifies](#)', *Le Monde*, 26 August 2023.

¹⁷³ Interview with EU official, 12 January 2026; Interview with EU official, 30 January 2026.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with external expert, 23 January 2026.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with EU official, 30 January 2026.

¹⁷⁶ Africa Intelligence, '[EU's ex-Niger ambassador to helm bloc's Africa policy](#)', 3 December 2024; Africa Com, '[Niger demands replacement of EU Envoy amid aid dispute](#)', 26 November 2024.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with external expert, 23 January 2026.

¹⁷⁸ Council, [Joint EEAS-Commission paper: "A renewed EU Approach to the Sahel"](#), 14296/25, 21 October 2025.

¹⁷⁹ Interview with external expert 28 January; interview with external expert 21 January, interview with EU official 9 March 2026.

¹⁸⁰ Interview with EU official 30 January 2026.

January 2026, which is interpreted as the official version¹⁸¹. As there are no Council conclusions, it does not have a legal status, yet it does have a political mandate, given that it was approved unanimously. It frames re-engagement around two principles: firstly, disengagement is not an option and secondly, the quality of dialogue between the EU and the Sahel states should be improved. It also openly acknowledges the presence of EU competitors and hence a need to counter rivals and hostile actors. Within that frame, the document singles out three priority actions: (1) political and diplomatic engagement; (2) human security as well as (3) social cohesion, economic opportunities and people-to-people ties. Topics under (3) are deemed specifically important for the EU, such as the improvement of strategic communication and tackling irregular migration.

As with many issues in EU policy, what we have is a document of minimum consensus, minimum common denominator... an advantage is the opening to a political interpretation that can adapt, while previous strategic documents may take for granted a state of affairs and common interests between the Sahel and the EU that were a bit of a bit on shaky grounds, as it proved to be¹⁸².

By comparison with previous EU strategic documents for the Sahel, this is a refreshingly short paper with a more pragmatic and limited approach outlining 'only' three priority actions, specifically mentioning that this is not a static framework, but rather a guiding compass. In the current context, the country-by-country approach, as opposed to the previous regional policy, also seems to be the only feasible way forward. While the document does acknowledge the need for a better understanding of Sahelian countries' interests and a clear expression of the EU's focus, it also notes that: 'an agreement to disagree should not be an impediment to a pragmatic focus on areas of converging interests'¹⁸³, which is a strong statement. While this could be criticised for overlooking the military juntas' abuses, it could also be seen as a pragmatic way forward without condoning such practices, given that the relations differ considerably between the EU and individual states.

More broadly, the document avoids over-ambitious aims, but keeps those stated as relatively vague, which, according to interviewees, was intentional: 'if we are forced to specify more it will come with...reputational risk...and...commitment risk in rolling out a policy that will then create backlash'¹⁸⁴. It is also notable that the EU has avoided the previously often-repeated slogan of 'bringing the state back in'¹⁸⁵, instead concentrating on the individual through vague concepts such as 'human security' and more concrete 'people-to-people ties'. Such wording avoids publicly supporting the military regimes, while maintaining engagement with the local population and has been encouraged by civil society organisations¹⁸⁶.

While the emphasis on education and culture is a welcome avenue for re-engagement with civil society, the focus on women and youth as 'agents of change' has become some sort of 'ticking the box exercise' for most multilateral organisations, yet while the intentions might be to promote gender equality, it confuses categories. Women are 50 % of the population and not a sub-group, which puts an additional burden on women as they are paradoxically being seen as responsible for change in a heavily male-dominated context where they are marginalised. All in all, though, the EU's renewed approach appears to be the most feasible and pragmatic strategic compass that the Union could put forward in the current context with a political mandate including sufficient open possibilities to move forward.

¹⁸¹ Council, [Joint EEAS-Commission paper: "A renewed EU Approach to the Sahel"](#), 14296/25, 21 October 2025.

¹⁸² Interview with EU official 30 January 2026.

¹⁸³ Council, [Joint EEAS-Commission paper: "A renewed EU Approach to the Sahel"](#), 14296/25, 21 October 2025, p. 2.

¹⁸⁴ Interview with EU official 30 January 2026.

¹⁸⁵ N. Wilén, [Securitizing the Sahel: Analysing External Interventions and their Consequences](#), Oxford University Press, 2025, p. 207.

¹⁸⁶ P. Dam and I. Allegrozzi, [After three military coups, EU must focus on civilians in Sahel](#), *EU Observer*, 17 November 2025.

Implementation problems

Adoption of the EU's renewed approach in the November 2025 Foreign Affairs Council was seen by observers as paving the way for a concrete re-engagement through different instruments: '2026 is the implementation year of the renewed approach'¹⁸⁷. Yet, implementation was stalled in early March due to events on the ground in the Sahel and states' divisions regarding with whom, where and how to engage. Regarding this renewed approach, a first meeting with the EUSR and Member States in the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) committee took place at the end of January 2026. The adoption of a joint development cooperation package for the AES states – 'the EU Mechanism for the Central Sahel' – took a somewhat surprising turn as INTPA removed this item from the agenda shortly before the meeting, provoking new tensions between Member States.

The Mechanism is an envelope of EUR 195 million for the three AES states, which is supposed to be disbursed by INTPA before 2027: 'it is an invention by INTPA to disburse development aid in a central envelope since bilateral negotiations with the AES states were suspended...it is not extra money, it is money that was frozen'¹⁸⁸. Yet, questions regarding governance of the disbursement were highlighted as problematic for France, which continues to refuse any financing of projects in Mali, whilst the French diplomat is imprisoned¹⁸⁹. President Bazoum's house arrest also continues to pose a problem for funding projects in Niger, leaving only Burkina Faso as a possible receiver of the funds. In mid-February, another NDICI meeting presided by the head of INTPA, Koen Doens, confirmed that the mechanism had been withdrawn from the agenda and that INTPA did not accept a governance structure that would overlap with NDICI comitology¹⁹⁰.

At the beginning of March 2026, the issue was still not resolved, provoking frustration with some EU officials and external experts:

At least the Americans have a plan forward. Compare this to the EU, which last week failed again to agree on a 195 million euro aid fund for Niger, Mali and Burkina. It had been expected to get approved late last year... It fits a pattern why the EU as a bloc is often on the sidelines of international politics and conflicts¹⁹¹.

The Sahelian states are waiting for us to sign the next part of the development cooperation money, but we have nothing, and we couldn't really sell in the Mechanism either because it was not adopted...It is very difficult for the EU now and for Cravinho, because he can't offer anything to restart the engagement¹⁹².

The EU has nevertheless managed to include Burkina Faso in discussions related to building West African corridors under the Global Gateway Support Project-Corridors Abidjan-Lagos et Abidjan-Ouagadougou. A forum on the topic was organised at the end of March 2026 with the aim of mobilising investments for priority projects in the six countries linked through the two corridors: the Ivory Coast, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo and Nigeria¹⁹³.

If EU relations with the AES states remain difficult, the opposite could be said for the EU-Mauritania relationship. Since Mauritania became the new transit route for irregular migration via the Canary Islands, Spain has taken a lead on this topic for the EU, intensifying relations and striking new deals:

¹⁸⁷ Interview with EU official, 30 January 2026.

¹⁸⁸ Interview with EU official, 6 February 2026.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with EU official, 29 January 2026.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with EU official, 29 January 2026.

¹⁹¹ Ulf Laessing, [Linkedin post](#), 11 February 2026.

¹⁹² Interview with EU Official, 6 February 2026.

¹⁹³ Délégation de l'UE en République de Côte d'Ivoire, '[Forum d'affaires UE-Régional-Corridors d'Afrique de l'Ouest](#)', webpage, 8 April 2026.

Mauritania became the new Niger. Initially, Mauritania had an envelope of EUR 127 million from 2021-2027... then they got an additional 53 million...and in February 2024 you have 210 million more. And in November last year, during the Global Gateway Forum, 269 million, so you make the calculation: Mauritania moved from an envelope of 127 to one of more than EUR 600 million¹⁹⁴.

Mauritania, as the most stable country out of the five Sahel states, has thus become the new hub for EU investments, partly due to migration reasons and the fact that it is 'at the doorstep of the EU' and partly since it is 'at a crossroads between North Africa and the Sahel...The sort of line of containment for Islamism'¹⁹⁵.

In March 2024, the European Commission announced an EU-Mauritania migration partnership, which unlocked EUR 210 million to improve Mauritania's migration management capacity¹⁹⁶. In October 2025, the Global Gateway forum announced a EUR 269 million investment package for energy transport and budget support tied in part to sustainable development, the health sector and migration management¹⁹⁷. In addition to these packages, between 2022 and 2025, Mauritania received EPF funds totalling EUR 47 million to improve the country's armed forces capacities¹⁹⁸. To these funds should be added a lucrative fisheries agreement between the EU and Mauritania signed in 2022, totalling EUR 57.5 million annually over six years, the EU's largest fisheries agreement¹⁹⁹. Mauritania has adopted a transactional approach towards the EU, according to interviewees, and is making the most of its new status, yet declares that the EU is Mauritania's first partner, which is appreciated by the EU in a region where many states have aligned with non-Western actors²⁰⁰.

Chad, despite documented ties with Russia, is nevertheless also benefiting from both EPF funds for its army and from the Global Gateway funds. Yet, it is not seen in the same light as Mauritania:

Chad doesn't see us (the EU) as the first partner. And it's much more difficult to obtain things from the Chadians than from the Mauritians. It's a completely different 'animal'²⁰¹.

This notwithstanding, in 2025, the military junta transformed into an elected government received its first bilateral EPF funds amounting to EUR 14.5 million aimed at strengthening the Chadian National Army²⁰². These EPF funds are in addition to those that Chad has received as part of the Multi-National Task Force against Boko Haram and the now-defunct G5 Sahel. Chad is also benefiting from the EU's Global Gateway financing for its infrastructure, including the flagship project the N'Djamena-Douala corridor at EUR 176.2 million²⁰³.

In sum, whereas adoption of the EU's renewed approach to the Sahel could be considered a success given the difficulties related to achieving consensus from the Member States, its implementation seems to be both lopsided and stalling. This is due to continued divisions between Member States and the military juntas' bad faith in Niger and Mali regarding President Bazoum's house arrest and the French diplomat's imprisonment. Almost three years after his imprisonment, on 12 March 2026, the European Parliament

¹⁹⁴ Interview with EU Official, 9 March 2026.

¹⁹⁵ Interview with EU Official, 7 March 2026.

¹⁹⁶ L. O'Carroll, 'EU leaders unveil 210 million Mauritania deal in bid to curb people-smuggling', *The Guardian*, 8 February 2024.

¹⁹⁷ European Commission, 'EU and Mauritania advance partnership through Global Gateway', 8 October 2025.

¹⁹⁸ Council, [Decision \(CFSP\) on an assistance measure under the European Peace Facility to Support the Armed Forces of Mauritania](#), 2025/609, Official Journal of the European Union, 25 March 2025.

¹⁹⁹ European Parliament, 'MEPs endorse the largest EU's fisheries agreement, with Mauritania', Press release, 8 June 2022.

²⁰⁰ Interview with EU official, 7 March 2026.

²⁰¹ Interview with EU official, 9 March 2026.

²⁰² Council of the EU, 'European Peace Facility: Council adopts assistance measures in support of the armed forces of Jordan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Chad', Press release, 24 November 2025.

²⁰³ European Investment Bank, 'Global Gateway: Team Europe finances road corridor project between Chad and Cameroon to the tune of €176,2 million', Press release, 28 March 2023.

passed a resolution asking for his immediate release and urged the international community to intensify efforts to liberate him²⁰⁴. Yet, rather than increasing the chances of release, the resolution provoked outrage by AES states, accusing the EU of 'meddling in an independent state', while the Nigerien prime minister stated that it was an act of aggression against his country²⁰⁵. Further complicating the reengagement are the coordinated attacks in Mali by JNIM and FLA, which considerably alter the dynamic of the situation in Mali. Especially so as both JNIM and FLA seem to be gaining in influence in the internal political landscape. The EU will thus need to reflect on how to approach such non-state armed actors, should they take over *de facto* and/or *de jure* power and control in Mali. The following paragraphs outline different ways forward for the EU in the Sahel and highlight both opportunities and difficulties with each.

5. Conclusion: Strategic options and recommendations for engagement

The EU has moved forward since its complete blockage after the Niger coup in 2023 and the aftermath of CSDP operations being expelled. Yet, it remains deeply divided internally which prevents it from fully embracing a new re-engagement with regional countries. However, that is understandable given a deteriorating security situation in the AES states which exposes external actors to risks of kidnapping and attacks, clearly not conducive to investments from risk-aware European companies. This is especially so, given that other Western companies, such as the Canadian firm Barricks Gold or the French Orano, are involved in high-stakes disputes with the military juntas in Mali and Niger. Such a context is not favourable to the development of Global Gateway in these countries. Mali's imprisonment of a French diplomat has also negatively impacted any re-engagement, as it is breaking the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, suggesting that Mali's military government is not a reliable partner. The latest developments in Mali in April 2026 regarding the coordinated attacks by JNIM and FLA will also further complicate the EU's reengagement since it will be increasingly difficult to exclude JNIM from any negotiations, given its expanding control over the country. The question the EU has to answer is whether it can and should engage with a jihadist organisation, and in that case, what the conditions for such an engagement should be, including possible continued relations with the military junta.

The EU, therefore, needs to re-engage with caution, bearing in mind that it is dealing with unreliable actors who can quickly change their minds and break commonly agreed deals. Yet, the EU should proceed for all the reasons outlined earlier in its renewed approach to the Sahel, most importantly to support populations who have not voted for their current leaders and therefore cannot be held responsible for the latter's actions. As one interviewee said: 'Are we developing a policy based on who is in power or not. Or are we developing something beyond that?'²⁰⁶ It is, of course, impossible to ignore the fact that three of the five states in the Sahel are ruled by military regimes and the fourth – Chad – has used irregular elections to create its government in dubious circumstances. Any re-engagement, therefore, needs to be driven less by questions about 'which projects' and more about 'what political posture' with 'what trade-offs' in a region where leverage is thin and competition is thick. Four possible pathways forward are identified here: (1) pragmatic differentiation (anchor-hedge-hold); (2) human security compact (people-centred); (3) narrow mutual-interest deals (transactional) and finally (4) regional buffering (containment via periphery).

Differentiated engagement

Option 1: 'differentiated engagement' builds on the idea of breaking the regional approach adopted towards the Sahel over the past 15 years and develops re-engagement around a country-by-country approach, something that is already part of the Sahel plan. The EU can then continue to anchor its

²⁰⁴ European Parliament, [Resolution on the arbitrary detention of President Mohamed Bazoum by the junta in Niger](#), 2026/2642(RSP), 12 March 2026.

²⁰⁵ Africanews, ['Alliance of Sahel states outraged at EU demand to free Niger's president'](#), 20 March 2026.

²⁰⁶ Interview with EU official, 30 January 2026.

engagement around one comparatively stable anchor, Mauritania, limited engagement with an increasingly unstable Chad, while keeping minimal but deliberate connections with the AES states, shifting much of the human security effort to non-regime interlocutors. Such an approach would deepen the state-to-state cooperation with Mauritania and, to a more limited extent, with Chad, through mutually acceptable and beneficial projects such as the Global Gateway, while also maintaining the importance of human security and the rule of law. Engagement with Chad should be approached with greater caution than previously assumed, however. While Chad continues to represent an important interlocutor for the EU, its internal and regional stability has become increasingly fragile due to spillover from the Sudanese conflict, growing refugee pressure and heightened security tensions along its eastern border. This limits its reliability as a long-term anchor for EU re-engagement and calls for a more flexible and risk-aware approach.

In AES states, the EU would hedge: that is, it would maintain a discreet connection and presence, focused on humanitarian access, conflict de-escalation, border communities (in line with current regional borderlands projects), critical infrastructure protection and similar non-sensitive areas of cooperation, while being realistic about the low possibility of strategic alignment on matters such as democracy, human rights and gender equality. Finally, in the coastal Gulf of Guinea states, the EU would maintain its current engagement, such as the EU security and defence initiative in support of West African Countries of the Gulf of Guinea and invest in border zones to prevent further spill-over.

This option aligns with the 'human security' frame without assuming that the EU can democratise regimes in the region. It also engages where it can, without taking risks of expulsion and it maintains a certain flexibility of scaling up/down in line with changing contexts. The main risks are that the EU is seen as maintaining double standards, promoting democracy, the rule of law and human rights elsewhere, while still engaging with military juntas which clearly do not follow such norms. However, that is precisely what the EU is doing with other states, such as Egypt, so this would not be a unique case. That being said, the EU has also recently put pressure on the Commission to withdraw its draft funding to Tanzania due to democratic shortcomings, showcasing the intention to maintain a focus on promoting democracy²⁰⁷.

People-centred engagement

Option 2: 'people-centred engagement: human security first', revolves around the idea of focusing mainly on populations in the different AES countries, by providing visible benefits to populations, through protection, the provisions of basic services, livelihoods and so on. Such a way forward focuses on humanitarian instruments and protection, with food security and medical supply as core parts of the approach, the main interlocutors being local authorities and members of civil society in the different states. The EU would bypass the state elites and/or the security forces, which in many cases are the same and thereby avoid criticism of double standards and endorsing military juntas. The main risk with such an approach is gaining access to credible civil society partners – something that will prove difficult, given the strong authoritarian crackdown in all three AES states on civil society – but also to ensure partner organisations' safety. The EU must not infringe on the 'do no harm' principle and put local civil society partners at risk. This approach is long-term, which aims to build stronger relations with the local populations over time, without entering directly into the political realm. It might prove less effective in the short-term when it comes to countering hostile competitors and it could also be seen as a way of maintaining the juntas in power, providing services to the population that they are not willing or able to do.

Transactional reset

Option 3, 'transactional reset' with AES builds on a completely transactional approach where the military regimes in the three AES states are treated as durable and acceptable partners. The focus in this approach would be on the EU's regional security and migration interests. Instruments would revolve around deals

²⁰⁷ European Parliament, [Resolution on the draft Commission implementing decision on the financing of the annual action plan in favour of the United Republic of Tanzania for 2025](#), D110180/02 – 2025/2979(RSP), 27 November 2025.

regarding migration routes, limited counterterror cooperation, organised crime or collaboration around access to natural resources, such as uranium or gold, without broader governance conditionality or any emphasis on human rights or human security. Such an approach would be most feasible for organised crime or border security cooperation that is more technically, rather than politically framed. As such, it targets the EU's interests directly without necessarily legitimising the regimes. Nevertheless, this approach is risky in terms of reputation and actual impact for the EU, while it could still lead to reinforcing the regimes through indirect support and recognition of security forces as legitimate actors. It also does not ensure the EU against an abrupt termination of cooperation. Reflecting on this does, though, help to define red lines, namely how far Member States are willing to negotiate on values and norms in exchange for access and interests.

Regional buffering

Option 4, 'regional buffering' takes the Sahel without a central Sahel approach and accepts minimal influence and cooperation with(in) the AES states and instead focuses on preventing wider regional destabilisation through the coastal states, Mauritania and, to a lesser extent, Chad, with an eye to Algeria and Morocco. This approach provides stronger support to the coastal and spillover states for border governance, early warning, intelligence sharing, social cohesion and livelihoods in border areas. It also focuses on connectivity and trade across the borders without necessarily connecting politically with the AES regimes. While Chad has often been considered part of this regional buffer, its role should be reassessed in light of recent developments. Spillover from the war in Sudan, combined with increasing refugee pressure and growing security tensions along its borders, has rendered Chad more fragile and exposed than previously assumed. More broadly, the regional buffering approach is politically easier, but strategically it may backfire in the long-term as the core of regional instability and security crisis is found in the AES states. Hence, it could be interpreted as abandonment rather than re-engagement with the AES.

Recommendations

The four different options all display benefits and risks, some more than others. **Differentiated engagement, option 1, is perhaps the most feasible approach for the EU** in the current context and resembles in many ways the strategy that has developed organically with the help of the EUSR since the partial rupture with the AES states. Yet, some notions may also be borrowed from other options to adapt the approach to different contexts in a better way. However the EU decides to go forward, it should protect itself from future possible disengagement.

Given the volatile context and the political risks associated with engagement in the AES countries, the latest attacks in Mali being a case in point here, the EU should **design its engagement for discontinuity** by focusing on **modular programming with small units** that can be paused, moved or replicated across borders. In other words, these would be smaller programmes and projects that can easily be suspended and relaunched in case of temporary instability or political tensions, without putting into question or cancelling overall, broader cooperation. That would allow the EU to signal its discontent or disapproval by suspending a smaller project, yet maintaining the broader commitment to stay engaged. To be better prepared for new expulsions, bans or closure of embassies, the EU should invest in better intelligence and analysis of the local context to identify contingency triggers.

In addition, the EU could strengthen its role in **supporting dialogue and mediation** efforts in the region, building on existing experiences in peacebuilding and conflict prevention elsewhere. This could include support to Track II initiatives, facilitation of dialogue processes where politically feasible, and coordination with African Union and UN-led efforts, especially if the African Union takes a larger role in the region after the appointment of a Special Envoy in July 2025. While such engagement remains constrained by political realities on the ground, it nevertheless represents a complementary avenue for maintaining relevance and supporting longer-term stabilisation without too heavy political risks. Finally, strategic presence through discreet delegations or low-visibility missions may be a safer option rather than flagship projects.

Global Gateway is currently seen only as a vague and broad investment label by observers in Europe: 'it is an enormous branding, it is like you said Nestlé, and inside Nestlé you have coffee, chocolate, washing powder, everything!'²⁰⁸. In Africa, it is even less well known and the fact that it is focused on private-public investment has made it difficult to apply to fragile or conflict-ridden contexts, meaning that large parts of Africa are excluded from this new type of cooperation instrument. It seems **unfeasible to start any Global Gateway project in the AES countries as long as the security situation remains difficult**, yet the EU should **try to make the Global Gateway less of an investment label and more of a political instrument, according to the corridor logic**, focusing on building infrastructure in the anchor and coastal states which provide benefits to Sahelian borderlands indirectly, such as creating new jobs for local populations.

The EU must remember that **its normative framework is a compass, not a straitjacket**. This means that it cannot adopt an all-or-nothing approach to partnerships with Sahelian states. It does not do that with states in other regions, so there is no reason why the Sahel would be an exception, unless its strategic value is not considered sufficient for such an engagement. This means that there will have to be **trade-offs** between bad and worse choices, which will entail an honest discussion about what those trade-offs are, while avoiding the delusion of false alternatives²⁰⁹. **Focus should be on de-escalation, access and prevention of regional conflict dynamics, not on regime change and public democracy promotion.**

The **European Parliament should support the EU's renewed approach to the Sahel as a pragmatic basis for re-engagement**, while insisting on regular reporting from the Commission, the EEAS and the EUSR on implementation, funding and political developments. Given the diversity of political contexts across the region, the European Parliament should also encourage a differentiated country-by-country approach rather than a single regional framework.

In its budgetary role, Parliament should prioritise **flexible NDICI/Global Europe funding** for programmes that **directly benefit populations**, in line with the people-centred engagement, including education, livelihoods, local services, civil society and mobility opportunities. These domains are usually also less politically sensitive and therefore less at risk of suspension during political tensions. Concerning the proposed EUR 195 million for the AES states, **support should be conditional on strong monitoring and clear civilian benefit, avoiding reinforcement of repressive state structures**. The **release of the French diplomat held hostage in Mali** is one such condition, which is not and could not be considered as meddling with the internal affairs of Mali.

On **democracy and governance**, the European Parliament should **continue to uphold norms of constitutional order and human rights**, while adopting **realistic expectations regarding rapid transitions to civilian rule**. A gradual approach based on benchmarks, civic space and political dialogue is likely to be more credible than rigid timelines. The strong reaction and backlash from the three AES states regarding the **resolution demanding President Bazoum's release** demonstrates the politically delicate balance that needs to be struck in order to maintain engagement without losing track of values.

Regarding **security cooperation**, the European Parliament should favour **limited and conditional support** focused on civilian protection, accountability and resilience, while avoiding large-scale assistance that could strengthen authoritarian rule without addressing underlying political drivers of instability. To draw lessons on what works and what does not, more research could be undertaken regarding the role of EUCAP Sahel Mali, which has managed to stay in the country despite other external missions being expelled.

For the European Parliament specifically, which has a 'watchdog' role, the previous recommendations should be accompanied by a **strengthened parliamentary engagement and oversight**. This may include regular hearings with the EUSR for the Sahel, continued scrutiny of the implementation of the EU's renewed approach and closer engagement with inter-parliamentary platforms such as the African-EU Parliamentary

²⁰⁸ Interview with EU official, 20 January 2026.

²⁰⁹ N. Wilén, '[Security collaboration between Europe and Africa in an age of amorality and impunity](#)', *Egmont Institute*, 14 June 2024.

Assembly (as foreseen in the framework of the Samoa agreement between the EU and the Organisation of Africa, Caribbean and Pacific States, signed by all Sahelian states, with its first plenary session held in Eswatini in May 2026), as well as the European Parliament delegation for relations with the Pan-African Parliament. In doing so, the European Parliament can play a key role in sustaining political dialogue and ensuring coherence between the EU's strategic objectives and its instruments.

Over the past two decades, relations between the EU and Sahel states have gone through many different phases: initial connection, intensified engagement, rupture of trust, strategic realignment and the beginning of re-engagement. This paper has focused primarily on the EU's side of the relationship, analysing its past approaches, practices and errors. Yet, a relationship involves more than one actor and it is impossible to make sense of the EU's approaches, stances and decisions without taking into account development on the ground in the Sahel. That is, nevertheless, perhaps the aspect which has been most overlooked from the EU's side over the past decades, namely the political and security agendas of the actors with whom EU representatives are interacting. Often, it seems as if the EU has pushed through policies and decisions that are logical and make sense from a European point of view and which might produce the desired outcome in the short term. Yet, it has overlooked how those actions would alter circumstances between political and security actors in the region and beyond, ignoring the long-term consequences which have not always aligned with EU interests.

The EU's renewed approach to the Sahel seems to have taken into account past mistakes, with more focus on clarity, dialogue, strategic communication and agreement to disagree on certain topics. Yet, re-engagement can be successful only if local counterparts also agree to play within the commonly agreed framework. It is therefore important that the EU does not repeat previous mistakes and carefully reflects on how the local political and security environment will influence any action undertaken, and moreover, in an initial time period build its re-engagement around the possibility of discontinuity.

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