

DISORDER FROM CHAOS: WHY EUROPEANS FAIL TO PROMOTE STABILITY IN THE SAHEL

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SUMMARY

- France, Germany, and Sahel countries launched the Sahel Alliance in 2017 with the aim of bringing together major international donors to better coordinate development assistance and other financing efforts for the region.
- The Alliance aimed to integrate security, development, and governance perspectives but has struggled to find coherence and effectiveness – although it has adopted some novel approaches.
- The worsening security situation in the Sahel led international actors to then set up new initiatives, including the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel and, more recently, the Coalition for the Sahel. However, the relationship between these initiatives remains largely theoretical, with the practicalities of cooperation and burden sharing yet to be fully defined.
- These new initiatives risk privileging security solutions to complex problems, meaning that necessary governance reforms may fall by the wayside. This is despite widespread acknowledgement, including from senior French officials, that there is no purely military solution to the varied conflicts and challenges in the Sahel.

Introduction

Hopes were high when French President Emmanuel Macron announced the creation of the Sahel Alliance at a G5 meeting in Nouakchott, Mauritania in July 2017. The new alliance's goal was for France and Germany, along with other international partners, to play a more effective role in improving stability in the Sahel by bringing development concerns together with security and governance work.

The [activities](#) of the Sahel Alliance since its formation demonstrate some of the wide-ranging ambitions of European and international policy in the region. But the Alliance has also revealed the difficulties facing efforts to coordinate ongoing work and make existing and future policies more effective. Confusion surrounding European programmes and [international strategies](#) in the Sahel has been made all the more serious by the worsening security situation there. In 2019, the deadliest year in the region since the 2012 jihadist occupation of northern Mali, at least [4,000 people](#), including soldiers and civilians, were killed. The dynamics of the conflict have also grown [more and more complex](#), with rival jihadist groups [clashing](#) and an increasingly diverse cast of other armed groups fighting for an advantage over one another. This troubled security environment is coupled with serious [political unrest](#) followed by a [full-blown coup d'état](#) in Mali, and with upcoming presidential elections in [Niger](#) and [Burkina Faso](#) that could further disrupt the region. Whatever the international community has been trying to achieve, it has clearly failed to make headway as desired. Regional politics remains troubled and, at times, highly unstable.

This paper analyses the Sahel Alliance and the way in which it has developed since it was founded, paying particular attention to how its approach and practices have evolved. The paper also examines shortcomings in the Alliance's approaches – particularly those related to governance, which remain [important](#) to ongoing events such as Mali's coup. It draws on official communiqués and Sahel Alliance programme documents, as well as on internal documentation and interviews carried out with key actors involved in security, development, and coordination work in the Sahel and in Europe. The paper also analyses two subsequent initiatives: the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S) and the

Coalition for the Sahel, announced in August 2019 and January 2020 respectively. It explains how they interact with the Sahel Alliance and the possible risks and advantages of the emergence of these new initiatives.

The P3S and Coalition, like the Alliance, aimed to address the poor political and security situation in the Sahel and to better integrate and coordinate European and international initiatives. In particular, they intended to further internationalise military and political responses to the Sahel's crises, draw greater attention to the region, and help France especially share the burden of military operations and political and development efforts there. This was even as French military forces remained predominant among international actors in anti-terrorist operations in the Sahel and French officials continued to take the lead on a number of non-military initiatives.

Layered on one another, these various initiatives have sometimes created enormous confusion among international actors and their Sahelian partners. The Alliance had a slow start, and has recently begun to focus its efforts on the integrated approach it was founded to promote. The P3S and Coalition risk diverting international activities back down a more security-focused path. But the tentative progress they have made in revamping and reconceptualising the Sahel Alliance show that positive shifts in approaches are possible when international actors recognise and pursue them on the ground – even if there remains a gulf between this recognition and real change.

The Sahel Alliance

Ambitious beginnings, uncertain outcomes

For several years prior to the establishment of the Alliance, it had become increasingly clear that greater coordination between the large number of international actors and development and security projects was needed in the Sahel. The international community sharply turned its attention to the region after the Tuareg rebellion and jihadist takeover of northern Mali in 2012, as well as the launch of Operation Serval, France's 2013 intervention to counter jihadist groups as they pushed deeper into central Mali. Stabilising the region would inevitably

involve restoring security while making progress on the development front.

The United Nations was among the first to identify the need for these efforts to go hand in hand with one another, and it [started to coordinate](#) development activities and funders at the beginning of 2013. Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger formed the G5 Sahel early the following year. The G5 aimed to address both security and development needs across the region, but its creation and the rush to support the new initiative meant that, [according to](#) G5 Sahel specialist Nicolas Desgrais, the UN's activity was “paradoxically ... paralysed by the launch of the G5 Sahel” as the latter organisation quickly garnered international support and emphasis. By the time Macron was elected in 2017, the Sahel's security situation was worsening, and few successful development projects were in evidence. Both the French president and German Chancellor Angela Merkel began to look for a new way to bring stability to countries in the region. Providing greater coordination and bringing in additional international support would be core parts of their effort. On 2 July 2017, Macron announced the creation of the Alliance. The organisation formally launched shortly afterwards, receiving a stamp of approval at a Franco-German Council of Ministers meeting.

The Alliance was initially established by France, Germany, the European Union, the African Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, and the World Bank. It has since expanded its membership to include Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Ultimately, the purpose of the Sahel Alliance was – and remains – for it to be development initiative, one that improves coordination on the ground in the Sahel. Its goal is to do so in an integrated way, so that development, political, and security actors are all, at least, in touch with each other, and complementing and supporting each other's work.

The Alliance's founding document confirms this intent in arguing that “development partners must as quickly as possible develop an integrated approach covering at the same time security, short-term stabilisation, and medium- and long-term development.” The emphasis of the new alliance was broad and ambitious: “the re-establishment of security, of justice, of the Rule of Law, of the peaceful coexistence of communities, of the providing of basic services, the creation of employment opportunities for youth, and true economic opportunities

for local populations, particularly in the most peripheral and vulnerable areas”.

The Alliance rested its wide-reaching vision on **four major pillars**. Its aims were to: **reinforce coordination** across key sectors and increase funding for security and short-term stabilisation and development; ensure **mutual accountability** of development partners in the region, and between development partners and the G5; develop **new innovative practices** to ensure effective action and sustainable results, especially in conjunction with the private sector, where the state is barely present; and, provide **greater support for security forces** to ensure the success of development work. This included immediate international help for Sahel countries’ security apparatuses, G5 internal forces, and the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel.

The creation of the Sahel Alliance was in keeping with the “**regionalisation**” of **other EU programmes** at the time, particularly the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions already present in Mali and Niger. This approach began to take shape in the EU in 2015 and closely resembled the approach of the Agence Française du Développement (AFD), which is a key implementing partner and one of the most influential members of the Sahel Alliance.^[1] The AFD had adopted a similarly regionalised approach in its programmes before the Alliance was formed, as seen in the creation in 2017 of a **regional coordination cell** for the AFD’s operations in G5 countries, based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. The purpose of this regionalisation – within the AFD and CSDP missions – was to improve and increase coordination between countries and across the region, aiming to deal with common cross-border issues and encourage information exchange between officials based in different countries on challenges and potential solutions to them. The lessons of the AFD’s regionalisation and other efforts have played an important role in the organisation’s thinking on the activities of the Sahel Alliance.^[2]

However, with a growing set of programmes and projects came a growing scope of operations. The Alliance’s member states and organisations are projected to have funded and coordinated some 800 projects by 2022, but it has undergone several relaunches to try to get itself back on track. At times, the Alliance has struggled to define and redefine itself, including in its governance structures and its place in the complex web of European programmes, operations, and coordination mechanisms in the region.

The security-development ‘nexus’

The AFD and the French military have also worked in the past several years to improve their cooperation in support of Operation Barkhane – France’s ongoing anti-terrorism operation in the Sahel. It is worth examining their successes and failures as an early concrete example of attempts to integrate development and security activities in the Sahel. Their aim was to better coordinate initiatives to promote stabilisation and eventually return governing authorities to areas like Ménaka, in north-eastern Mali. As part of this [collaboration](#) between the AFD and Operation Barkhane, a military liaison officer sits within the crisis prevention and conflict cell of the AFD in Paris; and an AFD adviser sits at Barkhane’s headquarters in N’Djamena, in Chad.

This ongoing collaboration, at headquarters and in the field, has seen some success in the eyes of French officials, and thus suggested that a development-security partnership could work in the Sahel. For example, according to one senior official, by mid-2018 soldiers and officers involved in Operation Barkhane were meeting with local communities in the course of their patrols and identifying quick-impact projects based on material, commercial, or even political needs. Staff from Operation Barkhane then provided this information to the AFD through the AFD liaison working within Barkhane. The AFD would in some cases begin a grant-making process focused on the local NGOs best placed to conduct the project, or would identify other ways to complete these quick-impact initiatives.^[3] All this would, in theory, go some way to filling the gap left by absent local governance institutions, and to helping prepare the ground to bring those institutions back as the security situation stabilised.

These joint AFD-Barkhane projects, although similar, are distinct from projects conducted directly by Barkhane or financed by Barkhane for local communities. In 2019 the latter type of project, known as CIMIC operations (civil-military operations), [focused largely](#) on the areas around Indelimane, Ansongo, and Ménaka in Mali. These are contested regions that were the sites of significant French and G5 Sahel operations between 2018 and 2020, and that have faced regular attacks from [jihadist groups](#) and [clashes between other armed movements](#). The prevalence of these projects in active conflict zones shows how the French military sees development and quick-impact projects as ways of winning locals’ trust and of

laying the foundation of basic stability – though their actual impact is very difficult to measure.

Collaboration has also [grown in this region](#) and elsewhere between Barkhane and other parts of the French government, such as the Stabilisation Unit of the foreign ministry's crisis and support centre, which is part of [France's 3D](#) (Diplomacy, Development, and Defence) approach to crisis zones. French military thought on development for the region largely falls into three phases: a short-term phase, where CIMIC responds to the immediate needs of local populations to help garner support for ongoing military operations and regional governments; a medium-term phase where the crisis and support centre develops projects and analysis to stabilise at-risk areas and help shore up stability in regions that they deem potential future trouble spots; and a more long-term development strategy under the leadership of the AFD.^[4] In practice, the Sahel Alliance's own projects follow much of this French model. They respond to each of these levels, but mostly have medium- and long-term development goals.

Both military and development officials acknowledge that, for some time, they have been out of synch in their goals, their vision of the kind of projects they should pursue, and the very language they use to describe the issues they face. One French officer, for instance, described a process of “learning to speak the same language” even within the French government.^[5] An AFD official, meanwhile, similarly acknowledged that a lengthy and constant exchange between the AFD and Barkhane helped build a shared understanding of regional security developments and challenges.^[6]

Perhaps surprisingly, the official added, this shared assessment and collaboration has helped foster a better understanding between development and military actors on the need to re-establish politics and governance at the heart of their activities, and particularly to highlight “weak links” in both military and development programming, especially with regard to justice and the functioning of internal state institutions.^[7] This realisation, according to the official, helped lead to the creation of the P3S – although, as discussed below, there remain numerous questions about how these approaches are conceptualised and implemented.

The regionalisation pursued by the AFD and Barkhane both mirrors some

approaches of the Sahel Alliance and serves as a kind of test case for more closely integrating development and security operations. But the closer integration of security and development projects and actors also demonstrates the limits of the effectiveness of some development work in this context, as well as the ways in which these initiatives often remain [heavily focused on security](#) to the exclusion of other priorities.

False starts and restarts

The initial goal of the Sahel Alliance was to act as a flexible coordination mechanism that could make a quick impact across a wide variety of environments and sectors to restore stability, security, and development prospects to the Sahel. This approach has been wide-ranging in scope, but has encountered numerous obstacles from the start. The Sahel Alliance has been hamstrung by maladroit communication, a lack of clarity among international actors about what it would actually represent institutionally, and how it should decide what to focus on.^[8]

One development expert involved in bringing the Alliance from inception to operation observes that it began with good intentions and wanted to break with older development approaches, since existing projects had failed to rectify the region's serious and deepening problems.^[9] Its founding members conceived of the Alliance as a high-level coordinating body rather than a new funder that would allocate additional money. But governments in the region took the message poorly, seeing it as a criticism of how they had spent money already provided to them for various programmes, requiring additional efforts (and time) to explain the Alliance's purpose and activities to its Sahelian partners.^[10]

In February 2018, the Alliance sought to cement its presence in the region as part of a high-level donor conference in Brussels. This conference [generated pledges](#) of more than €400m for the G5 Sahel. The Sahel Alliance also signed its own [partnership protocol](#) with G5 states in October 2018 to help raise money for some G5 programmes more efficiently, and to provide a distinct legal framework for the Alliance-G5 cooperation. In December the same year, the Sahel Alliance [secured](#) €1.3 billion in financing for the G5's Priority Investment Program (PIP). It did this at the Coordination Conference of G5 Sahel partners, where the total raised internationally was €2.4 billion – meaning that the Alliance made a significant financial contribution at that time, despite initial plans for it not to raise and

donate additional funds.

Over time, cooperation between the Alliance and the G5 has **become stronger**. But this has come at the expense of blurring the lines around what role the Alliance is meant to play and how much structure it needs to fulfil its growing responsibilities. On the one hand, increased collaboration between the Alliance and the G5 (especially with its permanent secretary, Maman Sidikou) has allowed for a clearer definition of priorities, both in the crucial PIP mentioned above and in another key workstream, the Emergency Development Programme. The Alliance has played a key role in supporting this programme – which is often known by its French acronym, “PDU”, and which G5 heads of state created to help finance and accelerate quick-impact projects in border areas of their countries. Sidikou’s presence at high-level Alliance meetings in Europe and, in 2020, in Nouakchott – along with G5 officials’ and Alliance representatives’ frequent back and forth between Europe and the Sahel – suggests a level of greater coordination and sharing of responsibility, and an effort to define priorities based on the needs identified by the G5 secretariat.

It is essential that Sahel states themselves implement a clear process for defining their priorities for development within the “mutual accountability” framework, whereby the Alliance’s partners and the G5 both work to ensure programme effectiveness and relevance. However, it is also essential that the Sahel Alliance works with Sahel states at all levels of government, to ensure that the programmes financed by its members respond to medium- and long-term needs, and not just short-term demands or quick-impact projects.

It would also be beneficial to shift the coordination process permanently to the Sahel, as for now it still remains largely centred in Europe and physically removed from Sahelian actors and realities. Initially, the Alliance’s small secretariat and Alliance Coordination Unit (UCA) were housed in Paris, within the French foreign ministry and the AFD. The UCA was initially headed by an AFD official, Jean-Marc Gravellini, and is currently led by Adrien Haye, another AFD official. In 2019 the UCA moved from Paris to Brussels, securing for itself a **dedicated budget** now paid for by the German Development Agency, GIZ – a clear indication of growing German interest in the Sahel and non-military forms of intervention (as explored below). But a more sustained institutional presence in the Sahel would help

strengthen ties between the Alliance and its regional partners, and make sure its efforts are focused on Sahelian needs.

Today, the portfolio of the Sahel Alliance has, as noted, grown to some 800 programmes to be carried out until 2022. The Alliance has sometimes struggled to achieve its goal of moving away from ‘traditional’ development practices.^[11] Many of its numerous programmes remain largely technical or based only on economic development and capacity-building.^[12] This mirrors a common framework in security and training or mentoring operations in the region, under which France and other actors **tend to regard issues** through a technical and depoliticised lens, with the fundamental political concerns and processes of Sahelian states and populations often eclipsed by other priorities. Accordingly, until fairly recently, the Alliance had not succeeded in genuinely rethinking how to better conduct development operations in the region.

Despite its growing membership and portfolio, the Alliance has for much of its existence largely put new labels on projects from Alliance partners that were already under way or already funded and planned.^[13] Additionally, although the Alliance has participated in regional meetings such as G5 summits, it initially held all its dedicated high-level meetings in European capitals or Washington. This changed with its first General Assembly – held in Nouakchott, Mauritania on 25 February 2020, at the same time as a G5 summit.^[14]

Furthermore, the problem of not just whether but how to ‘return the state’ went unaddressed for too long. The international community has placed a heavy emphasis on bringing back state institutions with little thought of how to reform them or otherwise ensure that they function more effectively. This has been especially true in **more rural areas** of the Sahel, where the state’s presence has often been light in terms of personnel or services, but still repressive. When discussing this issue, it is essential to think about **what kind of state returns**, and how it needs to change to avoid renewed instability in the long term. This is particularly true in areas like central Mali (discussed in detail below), where corruption, failures of governance and justice, and communal conflict have **helped fuel discontent with the state**. Appearing to recognise these concerns, Mali’s newly-installed military junta, calling itself the Committee for the Salvation of the People, has critiqued the alleged corruption and governance failings of the

former government and [pushed](#) in early regional negotiations to prioritise political and other reforms over a quick transition to elections.

In sum, following its founding in 2017, the Sahel Alliance struggled to gain traction in 2018 and 2019. This was despite growing financial and other commitments from EU member states that joined it, as well as from other international actors.

Ongoing violence and instability in the region led many, including some of its key founding member states like Germany, to conclude that the Alliance was failing to achieve at least some of its intended goals. In particular, there was a strong sense that local states had insufficient support in strengthening their internal security mechanisms and ensuring the return of state institutions in troubled parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This sense of lethargy helped give rise to the P3S.

The P3S: Old problems, imperfect instruments

The P3S, a joint initiative of France and Germany, was a key announcement made at the G7's Biarritz summit in August 2019. The purported goal of the partnership was to strengthen justice systems and improve internal security through capacity-building and training programmes for local forces. The partnership's work was supposed to complement the activities of international actors. In terms of how it related to the already-established Alliance, it was to "supplement the efforts deployed within the framework of the Sahel Alliance, based on the understanding that both long-term development measures and effective security measures are part of the solution to instability in the region." This focus on internal security forces and justice mechanisms was meant to balance the emphasis of international partners like France, the United States, and the EU on training and cooperation with regional militaries, and to improve access to governance.^[15]

Since its inception, the P3S has been a priority for Germany, which has [long been sceptical](#) of what it sees as an overemphasis on military force in the Sahel. In the past few years, there has been an increase in the presence of German diplomatic corps and security units in the region. These include significant troop contributions to the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Mali ([MINUSMA](#)), to the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM), and to what was, until recently, a [standalone](#) special forces detachment in Niger tasked with training Nigerian security forces. This training mission will now [fall under the auspices](#) of the expanded, region-wide

EUTM. The [new EUTM mandate](#), which runs until 2024, also provides for expanded training and “accompaniment up to the tactical level” of regional troops. While the mandate’s language does not explicitly allow for [involvement in combat operations](#), it is sufficiently vague to potentially permit EUTM personnel to work in more high-risk environments alongside the troops they train, bringing them closer to ongoing military operations than was previously the case. The CSDP missions in Mali have been temporarily suspended following the August 18 coup.

European officials involved in Sahel issues confirm that the idea of the P3S is important to Germany in particular due to its emphasis on stabilisation.^[16] French officials have also recognised the need to support programmes that focus on justice. This reflects recognition from the international community, especially France, of current security and development efforts’ neglect of the governance needs of the local population.^[17] Even within the Sahel Alliance, some officials felt that its work focused far too much on the “security-development nexus”, and that the P3S would fill a much-needed gap in helping shape a more coherent governance strategy for the region.^[18] According to numerous interlocutors, the P3S and the Sahel Alliance were partly created to facilitate closer Franco-German cooperation on the Sahel and broad defence issues.

But there is one major problem with the P3S – and that is that, effectively, it does not exist. This is in part because of continued confusion between France, Germany, and the EU over the exact role and structures of the P3S, and what its responsibilities and authority on the ground should be. Currently, the P3S still has no secretariat or even agreed terms of reference.^[19] However, at the Coalition for the Sahel’s first ministerial-level meeting in June 2020, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas enthusiastically [confirmed](#) that the P3S would fall within the Coalition’s second and third pillars. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done to make the P3S a reality.

The Coalition for the Sahel: A better division of labour, or just another initiative?

Adding to the many layers of initiatives in the Sahel, France and the G5 Sahel states announced the Coalition for the Sahel in January 2020. The organisation grew out

of ambiguity about existing international initiatives' role and lack of progress, as well as the political and security situation in the region in late 2019, which had continued to worsen. There were growing protests in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger against the foreign military presence in the Sahel – which fuelled frustration in Paris, due to the extent of French military, political, and development commitments in the region. On top of this came the deaths of [13 elite French soldiers](#) in a helicopter crash in north-eastern Mali and [devastating attacks](#) on Malian and Nigerian military bases by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the Sahelian affiliate of the Islamic State group.^[20]

This deterioration in security led Macron [to seek a response](#) from G5 leaders to the ongoing protests. However, a deadly attack on the Nigerien army base at Inatès that [killed at least 71 Nigerien soldiers](#) pushed a planned summit in the French city of Pau, originally scheduled for December 2019, back to [13 January](#). This wave of events also sapped energy from early efforts to give the P3S a coherent structure and function. And France's overall perception of the situation – and of the need for a new direction in Sahel policy – led to the announcement of the Coalition for the Sahel.

This all-encompassing initiative was [announced](#) by President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré of Burkina Faso in a joint press conference following the Pau meeting. The Coalition, [originally proposed](#) by G5 states in December but driven by Paris, planned to bring together these states, France, and all other countries engaged in the Sahel, while also providing an opening for other nations to join it.^[21] The Coalition for the Sahel is designed to absorb the Alliance and several other international partnerships in the region, and to offer a more effective way of coordinating the fluid and overlapping sets of operations and collaborations in place – as yet another attempt to impose some order on a confusing array of actors and programmes.

Like the Alliance, the Coalition will organise its actions around four pillars. These are to combat terrorism; reinforce the military capacity of regional states; support the return of the states and administrations throughout their territories; and provide development assistance.

The first pillar, covering the military aspects of intervention in the Sahel, focuses

on targeting regional jihadist groups, particularly ISGS. In addition to Operation Barkhane, the first pillar also includes the new French-led special operations Task Force Takuba, which is slated to combine direct combat operations under French command with [training and assistance missions](#) for the Malian armed forces, which will involve accompanying them on operations.

The second and third pillars cover the P3S and its as-yet largely undefined components. These pillars also include the many support, training, and capacity-assistance missions under way in the region, such as UN operations and the EU's CSDP activities. And they cover efforts to help train and deploy state administrators and judicial officials in addition to internal security forces, in an effort to restore not just basic services but also provide access-to-justice mechanisms – in theory. In April 2020, during a joint EU-G5 teleconference, the EU [pledged an additional €194m](#) in funding to strengthen the security and defence capabilities of G5 countries, as well as development assistance, which would fall largely within P3S areas of intervention.

Finally, the fourth pillar focuses on development – primarily, the activities of the Sahel Alliance. The assembled participants and observers of the Coalition for the Sahel lauded the “first results” of the Alliance and called for greater efforts from its partners and tighter coordination with security activities. They also called for continued efforts to engage in activities more in line with the priorities established by the G5 Sahel. Moreover, they asked donors to keep the promises to fund the G5's PIP they made in February 2018 – which showed how much some of these fundraising and coordination efforts have stalled, even as the EU and the G5 continue to introduced [new partnership frameworks](#) like the Cadre d'Actions Prioritaires Intégrés (CAPI), announced during the February 2020 G5 Summit in Nouakchott. Like previous initiatives, the CAPI focuses on “realistic, measurable, flexible” quick-impact programmes within the security-development nexus. The CAPI supports closer coordination and financial ties between the EU and the G5, with the express purpose of [integrating security, development, and governance](#) (albeit currently with little clarity about how the partnership will achieve such integration).

When the Coalition was announced, none of its structures was in place. France's European partners were largely kept in the dark for months about what the

creation of the Coalition would mean in practice.^[22] It was not until early February that French Sahel Envoy Ambassador Christophe Bigot **was also appointed** as secretary-general of the Coalition. As with the Sahel Alliance, there are reportedly plans to move the Coalition's secretariat from Paris to Brussels at some point, at least partly to Europeanise its activity.^[23]

In late June 2020, the heads of state from the G5 and France met in Nouakchott to evaluate the progress made by the Coalition. They celebrated what they described as significant, if fragile, military progress, but the leaders, and Macron especially, **highlighted** the worrying trend of civilian casualties and **alleged abuses** at the hands of regional security forces and militias. They warned against further ethnicisation of the region's conflicts and in particular against targeting Peul communities – a large ethnic group found across the Sahel – that have faced repeated attacks over allegations of support for jihadist groups. This recognition is welcome, but it also shows the challenges inherent in approaches that favour strengthening and reinforcing the very states that are at times allegedly involved in the repression of civilian populations, or in creating the conditions under which these abuses and killings can continue to take place. This is the risk posed by focusing on 'bringing back the state' without making significant changes to how regional states function and behave towards their populations – a risk that relates to some of the least-established parts of the Coalition for the Sahel.

2020: Faltering progress

Since the Pau Summit in January 2020, the Coalition for the Sahel, the P3S, and the Sahel Alliance have evolved in ways that show some promising changes but also further problems ahead.

According to several sources closely involved with the Sahel Alliance, the organisation undertook a kind of reset last year to concentrate greater effort on fully mapping and compiling information on each programme under it.^[24] The goal of this task was to better coordinate those programmes among the Alliance's different implementing partners. In June 2020, the Alliance **published** an interactive map of each programme and its budget that is searchable by country or category. This boosted the transparency of its efforts, but also revealed how, even in categories like governance or internal security, the Alliance's **projects** still often

remain highly technical and infrastructure-based, falling far short of a holistic integration of development, security, and governance concerns, and risking a repeat of the kinds of development practices the Alliance was meant to eschew.

While it is disconcerting how long it has taken to simply account for and provide this “dashboard” for programmes,^[25] the Sahel Alliance’s leadership and working groups have purportedly now developed a clearer understanding of governance reforms and agreed on the need to do more than just recreate past development practices. These practices frequently built infrastructure that was difficult to sustain or conducted projects with only limited follow-through and assessments of effectiveness or local needs. One conflict and development specialist who has worked closely with the Alliance observes that its internal discussions have moved from mapping and rebranding existing programmes to discussing new strategies, such as taking a more interconnected and territorial approach that looks at problems on a regional level rather than only a country level.^[26] This is not a new ambition for the Alliance, but it shows a somewhat more serious commitment to building an integrated approach – one buttressed by open sharing of information and analysis between security, development, and humanitarian actors.^[27] Indeed, it took nearly three years for the organisation to cogently approach what it set out to do at the very start of its life: provide an alternative to ineffective models of development in the region, and more fully take cross-cutting issues like governance and politics into account when planning future development interventions.

The Alliance appears to have begun to take governance issues more seriously than it did at the outset, particularly when it comes to understanding the role of the state and national and local governance structures in stabilisation efforts. One official closely involved in coordinating development efforts comments that, while cooperation between military and development actors has improved significantly, “we have seen little by little the need to put politics back in the centre of these questions”, particularly as it relates to how governance is enacted.^[28] There is also now a stronger recognition among development and military actors in particular that simply restoring state functions in troubled regions is not enough – and that Sahelian states need deep reform, better access to justice, and impartial security forces, as well as more equitable and representative political systems, rather than just capacity-building.^[29] This is an important development, as it is crucial to

consider not just whether the state returns but what kind of state returns, to ensure development and security efforts succeed and endure.

In an [official declaration](#) after the Sahel Alliance's first General Assembly, the Alliance adopted a much sharper tone on political issues than in previous communications – a symbol of its increased recognition of the importance of politics in development work. The declaration discussed the need to not only streamline funding and the organisation of projects, but also for “ambitious reforms in the public functions” of G5 states. To that end, the declaration advocated the creation of a high-level dialogue process between the Sahel Alliance and G5 states on governance reforms, timelines for their implementation, and how Alliance members could facilitate these processes.^[30] This is also in line with the Alliance's emphasis on [mutual accountability](#), which has led to the temporary suspension of some budgetary aid in Mali when progress on security-related projects has lagged behind expectations.^[31] Such accountability can be very helpful in ensuring progress and local ownership of these projects, but it must be continued and applied more widely, including when state or state-aligned security forces and militias commit abuses against civilians.

While this is a positive commitment to reform processes, it is unclear how a high-level dialogue might translate into real change. Much of the international community is applying pressure to return the state rather than reform it – or to do so before reforming it – in fragile areas (as shown in the discussion of the Coalition above and of Konna below). But the Alliance's actual implementation of these ideas and their impact on the ground remain to be seen. The discussions and shifts highlighted above largely took place just before the covid-19 crisis hit Europe and Africa. Consequently, some discussions and working-level processes have been temporarily placed on hold as staffers set about resolving more immediate issues related to the virus.

Growing security cooperation in the region and the emergence of the Coalition for the Sahel could mean that important conversations about governance take a backseat within the Alliance, since governance issues fall more clearly under the P3S and pillars two and three of the Coalition. Nearly every official interviewed for this paper expressed some confusion about the allocation of responsibility for coordinating and implementing the four pillars of the Coalition for the Sahel. The

Coalition's secretariat should work to sort out these problems of organisation as quickly and efficiently as possible, so that these mechanisms can start fulfilling their purpose. Multiple interlocutors also expressed concern about how French-driven many of these processes remain, describing France's sometimes ad hoc declarations of initiatives that it hands over to the EU in the hope of creating coherence out of a jumble of programmes, ideas, and actors.

So far, there are few encouraging signs of a serious effort to address governance issues, which risk being lost in the morass. For example, the Coalition for the Sahel officially launched in April 2020 and held a large ministerial meeting on 12 June with more than 60 representatives, including the foreign ministers of Mauritania and France and EU High Representative Josep Borrell. The “[informal conclusions](#)” of the meeting included the need to address the structural causes of instability in the Sahel, which were listed as “poverty, fragile growth and development, climactic shock”. But there was no mention of governance challenges and their relationship to stabilisation.

The Coalition's meeting and official launch, and a meeting it held at the end of June in Nouakchott, created an opportunity to reflect on changes in the security situation during the time since the Pau summit. French officials, in particular, have pointed to improved coordination since then, following the establishment of a [Joint Command Centre \(PCS\)](#) in Niamey, where Operation Barkhane, the G5 Joint Force command, and other partners can share intelligence and plan operations together. Barkhane and the G5 Joint Force have also pursued multiple joint operations during this period, including the [large-scale Operation Sama](#), which lasted several months and brought together thousands of troops, largely from G5 countries, as well as ongoing efforts to [attack and harass](#) jihadist forces in the Liptako-Gourma region.

These operations, as well as the recent killing by French Special Operations Forces of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leader [Abdelmalek Droukdel](#) and the capture of senior ISGS figure [Mohamed al-Mrabet](#) (also known as Higo al-Mauritani), have led French officials, in particular, to speak of an improved security situation and offer a tentatively hopeful outlook for continued efforts to weaken jihadist groups.^[32] Similarly, the French army minister, Florence Parly, told the French Senate's defence committee on 18 June that the situation in the Sahel was

improving – [saying](#), “we are on the right path” – but that it remained fragile and it was “too soon to proclaim victory”. However, these gains remain largely security-focused, and even they could prove illusory.

Parly, like other European leaders, has been far more vocal in recent months in condemning alleged waves of attacks on civilians by Sahelian security forces, which have [drawn fierce condemnation](#) from international observers and human rights monitors. In the same testimony, Parly [said](#) she believed Sahelian leaders knew what was at stake and understood the costs of attacks on civilians, and that “we cannot win hearts collectively if abuses such as those that we have seen for several months continue and perpetuate themselves.” Similarly, in August, Borrell [issued](#) a strong statement against abuses in Mali and on the need to prosecute those responsible, possibly including members of the country’s armed forces.

These statements, like Macron’s in Nouakchott, show a more public realisation of the need to protect against abuses of civilians, and of the impact of these crimes on efforts to stabilise the region. Yet these strong statements will have to be followed up with concrete actions to have credibility and an effect. For now, concrete action remains limited as the P3S continues to take shape. And even expanded French and European programmes are likely face difficulties in bringing about significant change. Despite [optimistic pronouncements](#) about Task Force Takuba and [new additions](#) to the force, for instance, the bulk of the mission [is unlikely](#) to be operational before 2021. And, while the EUTM has a mandate running to 2024 that envisions an expanded programme of training and capacity-building [beyond Mali](#), it will still be [unable to accompany trainees on combat operations](#), limiting its capacity to reinforce lessons and monitor human rights abuses.

Integrated approaches in action? The PSDG in Mali

From its earliest stages, the Sahel Alliance has sought to pursue new approaches to coordination and development programming. Some of its key pilot projects focus on the central Malian town of Konna, where previous World Bank initiatives were [brought](#) under the aegis of the Alliance and rebranded as such. These projects are meant to demonstrate the integrated approach that the Alliance was originally set up to promote. At the same time, the EU is also pursuing ambitious plans in Konna

to restore security to the area, which it views as a demonstration of its integrated approach to peace and security. This project, the Secured Development and Governance Pole (PSDG), consists of a fortified and self-sufficient base for a detachment of Mali's Garde Nationale and Gendarmerie – though it may house other state institutions in the future. The goal of the PSDG is to create expanding islands of security and restore state authority in various troubled places. The EU has already allocated funding to four more Konna-style undertakings in the Mopti region. The EU aims to eventually create as many as 15–20 similar projects in Mali and perhaps beyond.^[33]

However, while the integrated approach appears to have made some progress, it is not yet succeeding in such a way as to provide a replicable model for other areas.

The choice of Konna for reconstruction projects is understandable, as the town has both symbolic and economic importance. When jihadist groups began to launch attacks deeper into central Mali in January 2013, they **briefly occupied Konna**, **spurring** Malian and French troops into action to protect the city of Mopti. As part of Operation Serval, they swiftly freed northern Mali from jihadist control, but the town and surrounding areas sustained significant damage in the attack and counterattack. Along with physical scars, lasting economic damage was done to a trading crossroads and fishing activities that have not been able to fully recover since 2015, when the security situation in central Mali began to deteriorate.

In 2018 the World Bank's (later rebranded) programme aimed to encourage economic reconstruction in Konna. **Now classified** in the Sahel Alliance's "governance" category, Konna was one of five early priority projects **meant to demonstrate** innovative interventions in dangerous areas or those deemed to be at risk. It also demonstrated how "multi-sector and multi-donor" projects could be put at the heart of the Alliance's programming and thus appear to be fulfilling the partnership's stated overall purpose.

The project is assisted by MINUSMA and has been involved in restoring public works infrastructure. In addition to de-mining and repairing Konna's fishing port, the project had by April 2019 rebuilt 50 kilometres of rural road (further supported by the AFD under the Sahel Alliance); trained 200 people in activities designed to help relaunch milk production in an area with important pastoral stocks; trained

several thousand young people and vulnerable people in diverse professional activities; worked on literacy programmes for women; and helped create a small electrical network in rural areas around Konna.

During a presentation in Washington in 2019, a representative of the Sahel Alliance spoke about the “Konna approach” as an example of progress on operational cooperation, calling it an “emblematic project” of the Alliance whose approach was also being tried in Ménaka (led by the AFD), Gao (led by Germany), and Ansongo, near the Niger border (led by the World Bank).^[34] The lessons of these trial operations helped the AFD in particular shape its integrated approach to development operations in at-risk zones.^[35] However, the scope of these projects was orientated very much around traditional development operations, and remained poorly integrated into wider political and security goals.

As these programmes continued, the security situation in and around Konna remained fragile. [Joint MINUSMA-Malian army patrols](#) began in the area at the end of 2018 and helped restore some level of security and economic activity, but they could not take the place of an effective government presence in Konna or surrounding areas. In late 2019, the EU sought to adapt its approach as part of its support for the Malian government’s Plan de Sécurisation Intégrée des Régions du Centre (PSIRC). The plan – designed with significant support and input from the EU, particularly the EU Capacity and Assistance Programme (EUCAP Sahel-Mali) – aimed to establish centres of security and governance in Mopti and Segou. As explored in a [2018 paper](#) by this author, these programmes fell short on governance issues and faced a slow and uneven implementation process. For example, the fact that the military post built as part of PSDG Konna – the first of its kind – [was not inaugurated](#) until autumn 2019 is evidence of the delayed execution of these programmes.

In September 2019, Ambassador Boubacar Gaoussou Diarra, a Malian diplomat with extensive experience in conflict resolution in Africa, was appointed permanent secretary responsible for political aspects of crisis management in central Mali by the then prime minister, Boubou Cissé. This signalled to the EU a renewed commitment to a more holistic approach to implementing the PSIRC.^[36] Within the four components of the PSIRC – security, governance, socio-economic development, and communication – the EUCAP Sahel-Mali mission supports the

security efforts covering reinforcement of local security and penal architectures, while the other three receive support directly from the EU mission in Mali. The delegation has also deployed three experts to reinforce the governance component of the PSIRC – one in Diarra’s office, and two others with the governors of Mopti and Segou respectively.

An internal document from 2020 outlining the priorities, goals, and actions of the PSIRC and the PSDG shows project leaders’ clear understanding of the need for an approach that integrates security, development, and governance.^[37] As part of its integrated approach, the document makes clear that security is only a means of enabling socio-economic development and the return of state institutions. The presence of security forces is designed to build ties with local communities, discourage banditry, and deter abuses by the security forces.

The idea of secure camps is at the core of the PSDG and, in theory, designed to allow small detachments of security forces to safely engage in patrols, set up health services for local communities, and improve communication with state institutions and representatives. These state officials could also stay in camps to do their work if the security environment outside the posts proves to be too risky. These bases could, according to current plans, include stationed judges with expanded responsibilities to adjudicate on issues relating to land management or animal herding disputes, for example. These are the sorts of issues that, in heavily pastoral areas, have sometimes [eroded the credibility of the state](#) in favour of militants, due to long-standing [perceptions](#) of state favouritism towards agricultural communities.

The EU and its member states see the PSDG Konna model as promising and have plans to replicate it elsewhere.^[38] For them, it has a number of advantages over previous models. According to a European diplomat involved in the project, the PSDG in Konna represents the only concept that, at least for the moment, fully integrates development and security. It has allowed for the return of commercial life and has had positive security results overall.^[39] French military and diplomatic officials appear to share this perspective, arguing that in Konna, and in the Sahel Alliance more broadly, they can see the beginnings of a “shared vision” between partners beyond French government agencies.^[40] They recognise the potential to create “bubbles” in which internal security forces support civilian protection and

facilitate the return of basic services and state institutions.^[41]

Although the creation of a secure camp in its most basic form is not expensive in broad terms (costing a little over €1m per location), these camps' upkeep and supply will require sustained support from EU and potentially Alliance partners for some time. Moreover, while security appears to have gradually improved in the town of Konna itself, Malians who work in the area describe the environment as one in which militant groups remain nearby – in some cases, near to their villages and on just the other side of the Niger River.^[42] Other reports suggest that radical groups and other militias remain active not far from Konna, while insecurity **remains rife** in other parts of Mopti, both near the Niger Delta and closer to the border with Burkina Faso.

The integrated approach put into practice in Konna shows that significant challenges remain, as current security initiatives have not yet facilitated real progress on governance matters. At the same time, this model clearly demonstrates the limits of current international ideas about what governance is, and how security and development are often prioritised over governance aims. Here, again, talk in the development community of “governance” risks focusing on merely the return of the state and the reinforcement of its functions, particularly in the realms of justice and internal security. If this is the preferred model for an integrated approach, it does not necessarily augur well for the future of many Sahel Alliance programmes within the Coalition for the Sahel, even as political leaders and officials become more aware of the importance of a genuinely integrated and multi-dimensional approach.

Conclusion

At times, it can be difficult for policymakers to even keep track of the multitude of different programmes and strategies at work in the Sahel, not least since they must also monitor the additional initiatives and bodies put in place to coordinate them all. At its founding, the Sahel Alliance promised to implement a new approach to integrating security, development, and governance strategies and tools. From the start, however, it was unclear whether the Alliance was a coordination mechanism, a way to raise money, or a more structured grouping that could reduce waste and foster a new awareness and mode of operations for various parts

of the international community.

Failures in organising and communicating with and within the Sahel Alliance slowed its development. After repeated efforts to revamp and relaunch it, the work to chart a new approach to development, security, and regional politics appeared to bear some fruit. (At least until the covid-19 pandemic further complicated an already dizzyingly complex process.) The addition of new joint initiatives, like the P3S and now the Coalition for the Sahel, risks complicating rather than streamlining efforts; money continues to flow into the region, but human security and governmental stability [remain fragile](#).

So far, there has been only limited progress on reinforcing the importance of governance in international frameworks for the Sahel. And these newer initiatives may even make it harder for concerted governance efforts to succeed. More specifically, they present three risks. Firstly, they risk focusing primarily on security; and while this is no doubt essential, any approach to security in the region must also be balanced with medium- and long-term goals. The second risk is that, where governance has been taken into account or more fully integrated into operations, these new initiatives generally focus on the return of state powers without paying sufficient attention to preventing a repeat of past governance problems. Finally, with France continuing to have a dominant military and political role in the region, there remains tension over initiatives and programmes that are French-driven and have little input from the country's partners – even as French officials try to create greater burden sharing and discussion around these initiatives. As such, European and international partners should consider the following actions:

1. Within the mutual accountability framework of the Sahel Alliance, apply funding pressure to facilitate improvements in civilian protection and meet key governance benchmarks. This could include the withdrawal of budgetary support and sanctions on government or military officers found to have supported militias that commit crimes against civilians or commit abuses themselves.
2. Ensure that coordination mechanisms like the Coalition for the Sahel secretariat have real institutional authority. While over-institutionalisation of coordinating mechanisms is a risk, these efforts must be genuinely

multilateral and sufficiently staffed and funded to have the intended impact. Otherwise, they risk adding new layers of bureaucracy without improving actual processes on the ground.

3. Expand multilateral training missions like EUTM while ensuring that contributors can accompany troops into the field, when political conditions allow for the full resumption of programmes. This would remove some of the ambiguity from the language of current mandates. While different nations have different standards and conditions for allowing troops to engage in combat, it is essential that trainers accompany partner security forces in the field to ensure better absorption of the training and help prevent abuses against civilians.
4. Seriously consider the use of sanctions within the UN Sanctions Committee for Mali or an expanded regional authority. This should extend to other punitive measures against government officials or members of the security forces who were involved in crimes against civilians or who collaborated with non-state armed groups involved in such abuses.

About the author

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Footnotes

[1] Interview with a regional security sector reform specialist, August 2018.

[2] Interviews with European and regional development specialists, May and June 2020.

[3] Interview with a senior French diplomat, August 2018.

[4] Personal communication with Sahel specialist Yvan Guichaoua, June 2020.

[5] Remarks by a senior French military officer, Paris, November 2019.

- [6] Interview with a regional development specialist, June 2020.
- [7] Interview with a regional development specialist, June 2020.
- [8] Interview with a regional development specialist, June 2020.
- [9] Interview with a regional development specialist, June 2020.
- [10] Interview with a regional development specialist, June 2020.
- [11] Interviews with regional diplomatic and development specialists, March–June 2020.
- [12] Sahel Alliance presentation, Washington, April 2019 (document in the author’s possession).
- [13] Interview with a regional development and security expert, June 2020.
- [14] Interview with a regional development specialist, June 2020.
- [15] Interview with a European diplomat, June 2020.
- [16] Interview with an EU official involved in Sahel planning, June 2020.
- [17] Interview with a regional development specialist, June 2020.
- [18] Interview with a Sahel Alliance official, June 2020.
- [19] Interviews with European diplomats and political officers, June 2020.
- [20] Interviews with EU and French officials, and European diplomats based in the Sahel, May and June 2020. ISGS falls under the Islamic State West Africa Province in Islamic State communications.
- [21] Interview with a French diplomat, June 2020.
- [22] Interview with a German official, June 2020.
- [23] Interview with an EU official involved in Sahel planning, June 2020.
- [24] Interviews with Europe- and Sahel-based specialists and officials involved in Sahel Alliance activities, May and June 2020.
- [25] Interview with an EU official involved in Sahel planning, June 2020.
- [26] Interview with a regional development and security specialist, June 2020.
- [27] Interview with a regional development and security specialist, June 2020; interview with a French development official, June 2020.
- [28] Interview with a regional development official, June 2020
- [29] Interview with a French development official, June 2020.
- [30] Interview with a Sahel Alliance official, June 2020.
- [31] Interview with a French diplomat, June 2020.
- [32] Interview with a senior French military officer, May 2020.
- [33] Interview with a senior European diplomat in Mali, June 2020; review of internal EU planning and presentation documents provided to the author.
- [34] Sahel Alliance presentation, Washington, April 2019 (document in the author’s possession).
- [35] Communication with a regional development official, July 2020.
- [36] “Pôles sécurisés de développement et de gouvernance (PSDG)”, undated document in author’s possession.

Unless otherwise noted, the following information comes from this document.

[37] “Pôles sécurisés de développement et de gouvernance (PSDG)”.

[38] Interviews with European diplomats based in Mali, May and June 2020.

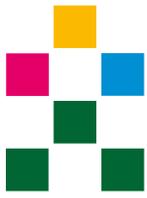
[39] Interview with a European diplomat in Mali, May 2020.

[40] Interview with a senior French military officer, May 2020.

[41] Interview with a French diplomat, June 2020.

[42] Interviews with Malian researchers and security specialists, June 2020.

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