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Conclusions of the II Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum¹

II Forum de Dialogue Sahel Europe

Introduction

On 14th, 15th and 16th of July 2022, the Centre for International Security of the Francisco de Vitoria University (CSI - UFV) organised the 2nd edition of the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum. Several workshops, conferences and *masterclasses* allowed international experts to exchange and analyse the situation of the Sahel and its stability.

The following article will elaborate on the conclusions of this second Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum, focusing on the closed-door meetings that took place during the Forum.

¹ This analysis is part of a series of research studies conducted by the International Security Centre on dialogue with the Sahel. Following the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum held in March 2021, the speakers belonging to the [Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum's](#) panel of experts have deepened the themes of their conferences, analysing the shared challenges, and the opportunities for cooperation on our common challenges. This analysis was carried out by Beatriz de León Cobo, Director of the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum, based on the notes of the conferences with the collaboration of Adriana Alvarez Enrique, international policy expert and consultant and Julie Bonin, French army reservist.

The Sahel context and its new opportunities

The Sahel is facing a multidimensional crisis - political, economic, security, social, climate, migration, terrorism, development - in a strategic region at the gateway to Europe. The promotion of stability in the region requires a redefinition of the geopolitical approach applied by the different actors (local, regional, national, and international) and of the European Union's responses. Thus, existing interventions are reflected in different policies, strategies, programmes, projects, and actions, which is necessary in this complex context that requires to do better in terms of results, coordination and quality.

The crisis in the Sahel has many structural and cyclical causes. Structural causes include:

- Demographic pressure, which makes it difficult to absorb young people into the labour market; the uneven distribution of the population over the territory, which has influenced the lack of development of the states by investing less in infrastructure and basic services in traditionally less populated areas. However, the territory has been subject to an increase in the rate of population growth. This has put pressure on the existing weak infrastructure as well as on natural resources.
- Other social factors are the management of transhumance flows with the difficulties of moving nomadic pastoral populations at regional level; the increasingly difficult sharing of natural resources between communities due to the climate crisis and desertification; the lack of social cohesion and inclusion of some communities.
- Other political and cultural factors with the absence of the state, faced with a crisis of governance, which is explained partly by their weakness, but also by the difficulty of coexisting between democratic values and traditional ideals of the countries, with social systems based on models imported from the West.

This already fragile situation finally imploded in the 2010s, with the consequences of the Libyan crisis on Malian territory, notably the flow of arms, the Tuareg revolution of 2012 and the arrival of jihadist groups and self-defence militias that spread from Algeria to the Liptako Gourma, now reaching the borders of the countries of the Gulf of Guinea (Benin, Ghana, Togo, Ivory Coast).

These armed groups, whose aim is to delegitimise the state, have launched an asymmetric war. This implies that the armed conflict facing the government is between a regular army and irregular forces, as in the case of guerrilla warfare in Latin America. It is precisely because of this asymmetry that the Sahelian states have found it impossible to put in place the measures that could be put in place if the war had been fought against a state. After 10 years of international operations and strategies to end the threat of terrorism, we have learned many lessons as an international community on how to deal with asymmetric warfare by a multitude of violent actors in the context of a multidimensional crisis. Despite military victories that have eliminated a multitude of jihadist leaders, the situation has not improved in the territories affected by this ever-expanding threat. Insecurity has spread throughout the Sahel, particularly due to the exponential number of civilian casualties. Part of the population and some Sahelian leaders are dissatisfied with traditional stabilisation and counter-terrorism partners, such as France and the UN, in the context of an internal political crisis, following a global pandemic that has affected the Sahelian economies.

The Malian population in particular, but also the Sahel in general, will begin to criticise former international partners and their inaction in the past. There will be a lot of criticism because they feel that the situation on the ground has not improved with their help. It is this discourse that will start to gain ground among the population and will turn into a growing acceptance of the new partners, who will therefore receive popular support. After the diplomatic and political crisis of the last twelve months, which led to the suspension and withdrawal of various international missions², the Sahelian countries, and Mali in, have decided to implement a competitive strategy that will allow them to opt for new alliances. Different Sahelian countries now find themselves with different offers of collaboration on the table, such as Russia, Turkey, China, and traditional partners such as France, the EU and the UN, and Sahelian governments, each in their own way, are asking themselves which 'offer' best suits their needs.

In this new context, international partners, as well as states in the region, are rethinking their strategies to better address these cross-border threats, by addressing the root causes of the multidimensional crisis, the needs of the Sahelian population and seeking to put in place basic services in all territories (notably justice, security, but also education, health, housing, etc). This moment of change can be used positively by all the actors involved, who have the opportunity to learn from what has not worked as planned by building on the positive experiences that have contributed, even if only partially, to stabilising certain regions.

Lessons learned on how to work with Sahelian security forces in this new context.

The knowledge gained about the current situation in the Sahel through reflection and critical analysis of the factors of fragility described above provides lessons on how to work with Sahelian security forces in this fragile and priority context.

First, the security challenges in the Sahel require a comprehensive approach that goes far beyond military operations, even though these are essential to combat threats such as violent radicalisation. The involvement of civil society and the establishment of economic models adapted to the specific needs of Sahelian communities are absolutely necessary.

Strengthening the armed forces is therefore a priority that requires building mutual trust between civil society and decision-makers in order to proceed with developments aimed at stitching the social fabric. Establishing positive relations with the local population is not only a question of morality or legitimacy, but also an essential means of undermining support for armed group fighters. It is therefore very important to conceive of security as collective, placing civil society at the centre of all strategies and concerns for the return of peace. Indeed, raising public awareness of terrorism and the dangers it poses must be treated as a top priority, as must the training of security forces to improve their operational effectiveness and the application of the "*do no harm*" principle, according to which armies must ensure that their actions do not create additional problems.

² Like Operation Barkhane and *Task Force Takuba*.

Improving intelligence capabilities through military cooperation is crucial in civil conflicts, especially when government security services are under-resourced and weak. To refocus the social link between armies and populations, the legitimacy of armies must therefore be strengthened by improving the perception of the military, especially in conflict areas. To achieve this, civil-military actions must be intensified. For example, by placing the community police at the service of the communities; by taking the gender dimension into account in all processes; or by promoting dialogue with the participation of the populations by organising frameworks for exchange between the communities so that they can collectively reflect on the contours of governance in their areas. In other words, it is necessary to encourage the creation of ongoing (rather than one-off) projects entrusted to an agency of the state institution, aimed at improving the quality of life of the population in conflict, with the provision of services (drilling of wells, education, veterinary services, medical care, construction of toilets, and support for horticulture and animal husbandry) in the localities according to need

At the level of governance, we - the international community and the countries of the Sahel - must work to enable the Sahelian authorities to maintain constitutional and democratic order and, in the case of the transitional authorities, to re-establish that order as soon as possible, as well as the conditions for a lasting peace in the restoration of state authority throughout the territory. To this end, Sahelian governments and their international technical and financial partners must promote good governance. To this end, they must fight impunity by strengthening the control mechanisms of security institutions and by prosecuting and punishing the perpetrators of human rights violations; strengthen their operational capacities through human resource management, training, specialisation, and equipment; and also combat bandits by destroying their sources of money laundering, cover and supplies.

Regarding the collaboration of the international community in strengthening the defence and security capacities of countries, it is also necessary to take into account the specificity of Sahelian armies by drawing on their past, i.e., by questioning the history, but also the values, local customs and different forms of social organisation. Given the local and social nature of the security threat in the Sahel, it is necessary to consider changing strategies by orienting the Sahelian armed forces towards counterinsurgency. Sometimes, international missions have not managed to adapt sufficiently to the context and its changes, respecting its socio-economic particularities, its territorial and administrative organisation, and above all, considering the limits of its resources. For several years, missions have been improving their ability to adapt to local contexts, but there is still a long way to go to adopt the lessons learned.

International missions have focused mainly on training. Logistical support is a difficult but necessary capability that tends to be neglected. The objective of this support should be to maximise the autonomy of the Sahelian security forces.

We have seen that the actions carried out in the framework of the different cooperation missions are working and should continue to do so, as should the regular meetings and exchanges. Despite this, more resources need to be made available for effective and efficient coordination between international, regional, national, and local partners, avoiding duplication of actions. The nature of the threats in the Sahel is regional and affects several countries in the region. To improve the effectiveness

of joint work with Sahelian security forces, international (international and cross-border) security support and cooperation is essential, and cooperation capacities need to be developed in coordination with the G5 Sahel countries to strengthen regional security. Sahelian governments therefore need a clear strategy and doctrine for their force structures in order to respond effectively to threats to their security. To do this, they need to strengthen their border presence by increasing the number of troops and establishing strategically located bases for operations, projecting forces into remote areas and combating the proliferation of small arms. Adapting the structures of the armed forces to lighter, more mobile and more integrated units will better support population-centred counterinsurgency practices.

The cooperation of international partners must respect the sovereignty of the host country, but this sovereignty must be interpreted in both directions: technical and financial partners must respect the choices of the host country, but it is also up to the national authorities to provide the means, particularly human resources - creation of posts, appointments - and financial resources - investments and, above all, operating budgets - which are their responsibility. A framework for consultation and coordination of partners' actions must be developed, including monitoring and evaluation of their actions. Understanding the political and diplomatic difficulties in the current context between the Sahel countries themselves and with some international partners, it is essential to encourage each party to overcome differences and cooperate on common objectives: to consolidate peace and sustainable development in the region and to fight against cross-border criminal threats (terrorism, organised crime, etc.). In other words, it is absolutely impossible to fight international terrorism effectively without considering Mali or Burkina Faso, and Mali cannot fight its security threats without considering its neighbours such as Côte d'Ivoire and Niger.

Good governance in West Africa

To address this multidimensional crisis and contribute to the stability, prosperity, and development of the Sahel, it is absolutely imperative that the region's political and governmental leaders, supported by their societies, and by their regional organisations such as the African Union and ECOWAS, and the international community improve state governance, which has so far been marked by fragile institutions and a reduced presence in parts of their territories. Now that several countries in the region are in the midst of political transition, it is the right time for the whole region to rethink its governance models.

Firstly, it is time for reforms to bring state institutions to deliver basic services to people across the country, and to do so it is imperative that they adapt to the realities of the country. Fragile, corrupt, or absent institutions prevent the implementation of the measures necessary for effective, nationwide economic and social development. When armed groups (jihadists or others) are entrusted with the provision of basic services such as justice, security or education, the state is delegitimised as it is replaced in its functions by these groups. Civil society also calls for an intensification of the fight against corruption, as well as collaboration with public authorities in the region to strengthen cooperation between judicial and security bodies. In order to carry out these reforms, a broad consensus of actors is needed to avoid blockages that would be detrimental to the smooth running of the transition. It is

therefore imperative to redouble efforts to ensure an inclusive transition and to bring political and civil society actors closer together around the transition's priorities.

Secondly, the organisation of transparent and free elections is an element of stability and legitimacy. To this end, Sahelian leaders must undertake the reforms they deem necessary for the holding of elections that offer citizens real alternatives. Among these reforms, strengthening the justice and election monitoring process, including digitisation and upstream preparation of the process, is vital. Another essential measure is the updating of the national census in many Sahelian countries, considering the reality of displaced persons and refugees, of whom there are several million in the region.

Thirdly, an important objective for the success of the democratic transition must be to increase national social cohesion and cohesion between communities. To this end, it is important to take into account the climatic challenges, the worsening food insecurity and the humanitarian crisis in the destabilisation of society and thus of the democratic transition. . Climate challenges are a priority to address in order to reduce conflicts, as more than 80% of these Sahelian localities depend on agriculture.³ Thus, with population growth and climate change, Sahelian citizens are faced with a shrinking land base that is no longer sufficient to feed their livestock, thus interfering with the peaceful coexistence between herders and farmers.

Finally, for a successful democratic transition, as mentioned above, good cross-border security must be ensured, as well as strong cooperation. In this sense, poor border management in the Sahel region has become a danger for the realisation of the democratic transition and thus for international and local peace and security in the border regions. This is due to the increase of violent non-state actors, terrorist groups and organised crime involved in the illicit trafficking of arms, drugs, and human beings. A multinational and cross-border approach is therefore needed to address the many challenges posed by this situation. As a border poses common problems, the solution must also be addressed jointly through cooperation between countries and by tackling the root causes. Support from regional institutions such as the AU or ECOWAS and bilateral cooperation with neighbouring countries, especially with the Maghreb region and the West African coastal states, are therefore essential.

Challenges and lessons learned in the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration of combatants from armed groups.

Reintegration of combatants is difficult, but it is of crucial importance for stability in the post-conflict period, becoming a key factor for peacekeeping. Similarly, it can be considered the most complex and critical component of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process, but is nevertheless given the lowest priority, as incomplete or ineffective reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life in turn presents greater risks of armed crime. There is a need to learn from past experiences in order to avoid making the same mistakes and to establish solutions for the continuation of the DDR process for combatants. Although reference is made to the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement and the DDR process in Mali, the aim of this section is also to apply these good practices and lessons learned to other demobilization processes of armed combatants from different groups (jihadists, armed

³ Average acquired with data from UNOPS, USAID and governments in the region.

militias, etc.). It is important to draw inspiration from the demobilization process of armed groups in the Malian Peace and Reconciliation Agreement because in the future, if there are similar dialogues, agreements, or negotiations with other types of actors, it will be important to have the challenges of implementing the Agreement and demobilizing combatants as a reference. The following paragraphs will therefore describe some of the challenges of this process in Mali, as well as outline the changes needed for the DDR process to be efficient and effective and contribute to peace and stability.

At the level of the signatory groups of the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, the multiplication of actors and internal divisions between signatory groups have led to a slow and inefficient demobilisation process, with problems of quotas and constant negotiations on the implementation of the agreement due to contradictory interpretations by the parties. In addition to these internal fractures, the multiplication of community militias and the growing power of terrorist groups weaken the DDR process.

At the operational level, despite the implementation of accelerated DDR by MINUSMA leading to the reconstituted armed forces battalions (BATFAR), there are still many combatants to be demobilised and these same battalions still have too many problems of integration between the parties and their effective deployment on the ground remains very complex.

At the institutional level of the Malian Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, many political and institutional reforms have yet to be implemented, sometimes because of the security crisis and sometimes because of internal divisions and the multiplication of actors mentioned above. This reality has contributed to mistrust between the armed groups and the Malian state. The mutual distrust of the ex-combatant towards the state and the community is an obstacle to economic, social, and political reintegration. The failure to respect agreements increases the mistrust of all parties involved. Now that there is a period of political transition during which institutional reforms must be put in place, it is time to restore confidence by resuming the implementation of the Peace Agreement, especially in terms of basic infrastructure, and by taking its reforms into account in the revision of the constitution and subsequent laws.

Laying down arms should be understood, among other things, as a confidence-building measure in a peace process, given the risks and challenges it poses for the combatant. In this context, support for reintegration programmes for ex-combatants is often insufficient to ensure that they find employment, and it is important that at the time of disarmament, the ex-combatant has the necessary support to access security, health, food, and general survival assistance. The conditions must then be created for the return of refugees and displaced persons to their places of origin.

However, most countries that need DDR require external funding and assistance to implement the programmes. Similarly, careful planning and negotiation, including donor involvement and effective coordination, can help avoid many problems in the reintegration of combatants, in most cases young people who need to build a life project more attractive to them than living as combatants. This project must ensure their safety and that of their families, but it must also provide them with an economic livelihood and personal development. To this end, involving communities, including all civil society actors involved in the process, who have the capacity to absorb combatants and help them return to a life of peace, must be a priority of any comprehensive and sustainable DDR process.