

Shifting from

External Dependency

Remodelling the G5 Sahel Joint Force for the Future

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Executive Summary

After a decade of battling jihadist and violent extremist groups in West Africa, France has initiated the restructuring and relocation of its largest overseas military mission in the Sahel with an announcement of the withdrawal of Operation Barkhane (the French military counter-terrorism intervention) from Mali. The exit over the coming months may signify an important shift of western military operations in Mali and the Sahel. France's deployment in the Sahel was initially triggered by the activities of Tuareg separatists in the northern part of Mali. Islamic extremists closely associated with Al-Qaeda took advantage of the situation, seizing north Mali and spreading their activities southwards in 2012. Despite French counterterrorism operations, instability worsened, and Islamists controlled vast swathes of northern and central Mali, parts of Burkina Faso, and western Niger.

Over time, under the motivation of France, the G5 Sahel Joint Force (G5S-JF) was created to address the everyday challenges of terrorism and transnational organised crime among the five member states (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger). For a force supported by three United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2359 (2017), 2391 (2017) and 2480 (2019); and with a force strength of 5600 troops organised around three sectors,¹ its operational successes have been a mixed bag (ten joint border operations). Operation Barkhane together with European Union Training Mission Mali (EUTM), the Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali) and Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger) and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), has enhanced the operational readiness and capabilities of the G5 Sahel through mentoring, training, and funding of the joint-force operations.

1 An eastern sector (or fuseau in French) for Niger and Chad, with two battalions; a central sector for Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad with four battalions; and a western sector corresponding to Mauritania and Mali with two battalions.

Additionally, these external operations, particularly Barkhane, have been supportive of the activities of G5S-JF by providing intelligence, supporting logistical and joint planning, providing aerial and air support, and engaging in medical evacuation. Notwithstanding, the Joint Force has been contending with weak intelligence, shortfalls in equipment, limited aerial capabilities and a lack of rapid response, which invariably hinders operational effectiveness. The Joint Force represents an essential step toward addressing the instability that affects Mali and the broader Sahel, but as of yet, the G5S-JF has been unable to fully demonstrate its effectiveness as a force despite significant support from donor countries such as France. Moreover, it is uncertain how Mali's withdrawal from the Joint Force will impact on the overall strategy of the G5S-JF and its sustainability going forward, especially given Mali's recent announcement of withdrawing from the G5 Sahel.²

The departure of Barkhane, together with Takuba and other European arrangements from Mali, raises many unanswered questions about the funding, operational capacity and political cooperation between the other member states of the Joint Force. Even though France has reiterated that it will continue to support peacekeepers serving under MINUSMA; and Malian troops continuing to battle Islamic violent extremism after the Barkhane withdrawal, the response time to jihadist attacks and activities inside Malian territory will not be the same. Without Barkhane, the G5S-JF will struggle to protect civilians, evacuate soldiers in need of medical attention, and support effective joint planning and coordination of G5S-JF and intelligence sharing—which has been instrumental in the fight against jihadist.

To address emerging challenges, enhance the ability of the G5S-JF and sustain its support, this report proposes four possible options that could fill the gap resulting from the current security vacuum being created following the possible withdrawal of some of the external military forces from Mali, and Mali itself from the G5S-JF. In arriving at these proposed options, emphasis is placed on regional perspectives, which draws on African frameworks and the use of African resources, experience, capabilities and understanding. The report argues that this would allow better ownership and closer proximity to the issues, ensuring that international partners are not dictating how the region and African Union (AU) Member States (MS) should solve challenges. The evaluation considered the full spectrum of options to include:

- A reconfigured and scaled-up G5 Sahel Joint Force (Plus);
- A reconfigured G5 Sahel Joint Force and revised MISAHHEL through the AU, ECOWAS, ECCAS and CENSAD;
- An integrated ECOWAS (deployment of the African Standby Force) utilising the G5 Sahel force; and
- Elevating the G5 Sahel force to an AU (Peace Enforcement mission) with UN support.

² France24 (2022). Mali withdraws from the G5 Sahel regional anti-jihadist force. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220515-mali-withdraws-from-g5-sahel-regional-anti-jihadist-force>

The proposed options focus on military and hybrid solutions that can tackle existing challenges in the Sahel and West Africa as a whole. However, defeating jihadism and violent extremism is essentially a job that should include intelligence and police authorities to win the hearts and minds of the population, but this cannot be done solely with hard stabilisation efforts. Tackling the vast challenges in the Sahel requires a careful mix of adaptive, agile and sustained efforts that cut across social, economic, political, developmental, humanitarian and recovery instruments and support. Thus, the report suggests additional stabilisation efforts to support the Sahel focused on local, national, regional and international initiatives that can connect to the ground and tackle internal challenges comprehensively. These initiatives, it will be argued, can plug into existing structures but also help to support structures not fully recognised. Efforts to resolve the problems in the Sahel stand a much greater chance of success if fully supported with buy-in from the AU, together with ECOWAS and support from the UN, EU and donors that can draw on the full spectrum of available instruments which have a demonstrable desire to work with like-minded partners. The authors of this report believe that a scaled-up and reconfigured G5 Sahel Joint Force (G5 Sahel Plus) option (discussed below) would have been the optimal model. However, following the recent withdrawal of Mali from the G5S-JF and the deteriorating political landscape in the region and between states, the authors' reassessment calls for an AU Peace Enforcement mission as the most appropriate, given the current situation. It is important to note, the recommendations provided in this report hinge on the ability of the current and former G5S-JF states to address and resolve the deteriorating political situation, which is fluid in nature and continuously evolving. This will require all states (current and former G5S-JF) to recognise that they need each other to address these challenges, and that any reconfiguration (the models provided in this report) depends on the political situation being fully addressed. There is a need, as the models indicate, to have more joint efforts between the AU and ECOWAS to assist in resolving the current impasses in the region.

9. Conclusions

The withdrawal of Operation Barkhane, which has served as a critical partner of regional armies and international security arrangements such as G5 Sahel and MINUSMA, will be felt. Aside from the gains in providing military interventions like the G5 Sahel and MINUSMA with operational support in areas such as medical evacuations, aerial and air support, intelligence and information sharing, logistical support etc., Barkhane has faced a lot resentment (anger and frustration) from the local population over the last few years, primarily due to what they perceive as its inability to defeat armed groups and safeguard civilians from violence—against a backdrop of a worsening security environment and recolonisation of former French territory. Barkhane continues to draw down its effort in Malian bases signalling the end of its operations in the country. The operation’s relocation to the north-western part of Niger means that they will continue to operate in the restive border area where Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso meet.

Despite its past backing and formation (still seen as a western force), promoting the G5S-JF as the main and the sole regional security actor has proven insufficient as the organisation struggles to find its feet in the region and heavily depends on the assistance of France, MINUSMA and other international partners. The exit of Operation Barkhane will impact the activities of G5S-JF —primarily where the forces conduct joint regional tasks to deal with jihadists in the Sahel and with medivac support. However, since the force has only conducted a limited number of missions since its inception, it is unclear how significant the withdrawal will be in other areas in which the G5S-JF operates. However, we estimate that if states of the Sahel continue to focus inwards, then the G5 Sahel will face a very dire and abrupt end to its operations in the future.

While in the past the push to resolve the challenges in the Sahel has been mainly through a western interventionist lens, the solutions have rarely been geared towards understanding the

needs of the populations or approaching the solutions from a unique African perspective. This has resulted in the solutions to challenges being overtly western and missing uniquely African perspectives to the challenges, which are often rooted in systematic and institutional failures in governance and leadership, among many others.

Following the announcement of the withdrawal of Mali from the G5S-JF, the authors argue that the best option would now be to elevate the G5S-JF to an AU Peace Enforcement mission with a UN Support Office.

This means some tough decisions will need to be made ahead of the completed withdrawals, not only for the affected states but also for ECOWAS and the AU. Nevertheless, these changes present an opportunity to rethink the different options for affected states, the regional authorities, and the continental body regarding their involvement in resolving these emerging challenges and the types of international support they see as conducive to their efforts. Therefore, the report's authors argue that now is an optimal time to drive the efforts toward an adaptive, people-centred approach built on a sustained African understanding of the context and the needs of the affected communities to confront the threats in the Sahel. What is needed is a well-coordinated political strategy that utilises African resources, experience, capabilities, and understanding to address growing insecurity and challenges. Regional and continental actors such as ECOWAS and the AU have a major role to play in this endeavour.

As this report has started to do, now is the time to begin conversations that rethink how we approach insecurity in Africa, particularly in the Sahel. In doing so, four options have been put forward for the Sahel, but it is argued that now is not the time to abandon the G5S-JF. The best available option, if well sustained, would have been to reconfigure the G5 Sahel Joint Force and include other states to widen the contribution (G5 Sahel Plus model). However, following the announcement of the withdrawal of Mali from the G5S-JF, the authors argue that the best option would now be to elevate the G5S-JF to an AU Peace Enforcement mission with a UN Support Office similar to what was done in Somalia (UN Support Office for AMISOM). This would allow the AU to deploy the 3000 forces that the AU PSC requested to rehat the remaining G5S-JF. The Peace Support Operations Doctrine would allow the mission to access a range of combat support functions like surveillance, reconnaissance and targeting; command and communications support; civil-military coordination, medical evacuation and combat logistics. This must be done in conjunction with an adaptive stabilisation strategy rooted in serving the people affected by the instability and insecurity in the region. At the heart of this is the need to strengthen state-society relations. Adopting a principled process allows an adaptive stabilisation strategy to facilitate processes that enable and encourage state-society connections, but stops short of actions that can influence the content or outcome of these processes. Together with the proposed AU Enforcement Mission approach, the adaptive stabilisation strategy must

focus on enhancing development, strengthening decentralised governance institutions, building peace and promoting human development, respecting diversity and being inclusive.

The recommendations provided in this report are not possible unless the rapid deteriorating political environment between current and former G5 Sahel states is fully resolved. This means each state formally involved or not involved in the region must recognise that progress and defeating terrorism requires collective action and full awareness that states are interconnected, and that one state cannot go it alone. They need each other to address these challenges. As all models have suggested reconfiguring the G5 Sahel is crucial to any long-term security solution. Finally, as all models have indicated in one way or another, there is a need more than ever to ensure that there are more joint efforts between ECOWAS and the AU to help resolve the current impasses in the region.

10. Annex 1: The Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) Project Summary

Peace operations are among the most important international mechanisms for contemporary conflict management. However, their effectiveness remains the subject of confusion and debate in both the policy and academic communities. Various international organizations conducting peace operations, including the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the European Union (EU), have come under increasing pressure to justify their effectiveness and impact. Although various initiatives are underway to improve the ability to assess the performance of peace operations, there remains a distinct lack of independent, research-based information about the effectiveness of such operations.

To address this gap, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), together with over 40 partners from across the globe, have established an international network to jointly undertake research into the effectiveness of peace operations. This network has developed a shared methodology to enable the members to undertake research on this topic. This will ensure coherence across cases and facilitate comparative research. The network produce a series of reports that are shared with stakeholders including the UN, AU, and EU, interested national government representatives, researchers, and the general public. All the EPON reports are available via <https://effectivepeaceops.net>. The network is coordinated by NUPI. Many of the partners fund their own participation. NUPI has also received funding from the Norwegian Research Council and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support the Network and its research, including via the UN Peace Operations project (UNPOP) and the Training for Peace (TfP) programme.

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11. Annex 2: The Training for Peace (TfP) Programme Summary

11.1. What are the objectives of the TfP programme?

The Training for Peace (TfP) Programme works to generate knowledge, support the development of policy and builds the capacity of police and civilian peacekeepers.

The Programme also:

- Provides technical expertise, including for the African Standby Capacity;
- Supports the development of strategic policy and doctrine;
- Undertakes studies aimed at capturing lessons from AU missions; and
- Provides training and supports the development of training curriculum and material.

The programme's main objectives are to provide support to the AUC to enhance knowledge and understanding of the evolving conflict and security environment on the continent, and contribute to strengthening the AUC's comprehensive range of response capacities.

Overall, the goal is to contribute to strengthening the capacity of the AUC to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts and insecurity on the continent through deploying the full spectrum of peacemaking tools.

11.2. Partnership and trust amid uncertainty and flux

The TfP programme is currently in its sixth phase. It started with a focus on peacekeeping training in southern Africa 26 years ago. Today it has developed and adapted to Africa's changing peace and security needs.

TfP helps the African Union (AU) to:

- Generate new knowledge derived from its own and related African peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding experiences and drawing on evidence-based research;
- Develop innovative and world-leading policies, doctrine and guidelines that will guide the next generation of AU mediation, observer and peace missions; and
- Build the capacity of the personnel that will undertake, support and direct AU and African mediation, observer and peace missions, and support the AU to maintain the African Standby Capacity and the African Standby Force.

11.3. What do we work on?

Themes covered by the TfP contribute to preventing conflicts, Silencing the Guns and sustaining peace. These include:

- Emerging security threats, such as violent extremism;
- AU peace support operations, with a particular focus on the role of police and civilian peacekeepers;
- In-depth support and research on Conflict prevention, PCRD and SSR;
- Ongoing research on UN/AU relations, including support to the AUPOM and A3; and
- Inclusivity, with a particular focus on youth, women and gender.

11.4. Our theory of change

Support to the AU Commission (AUC) and regional economic communities (RECs)/ regional mechanisms (RMs) contributes to increased knowledge and institutional capacity at the strategic levels. This enables the organisation and its RECs/RMs to effectively prevent and respond to conflicts and complex security challenges, thereby promoting and sustaining peace in Africa.

The G5 Sahel Joint Force (G5S-JF) was created to address the security vacuum and respond to transnational terrorism and organised crime, particularly among the five-member states (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger). With the support of external actors, the G5S-JF has relatively enhanced its operational readiness and capabilities through mentoring, training, and funding joint operations. However, with the announcement of Barkhane exiting Mali and transferring to Niger, the exit may signify a vital shift in western military operations in Mali and the Sahel over the coming months. Questions remain on the impact of these external withdrawals on the operational effectiveness of the G5S-JF and insecurity in the region. Drawing on in-depth interviews and informal conversations with actors from the G5 Sahel countries, UN, AU and ECOWAS and other interlocutors, this report explores four possible options that could plug into existing gaps created by the current security vacuum following the withdrawal of some of the external military actors from Mali; and Mali itself from the G5S-JF.



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