

Matteo Peccini

THE SECURITY-DEVELOPMENT NEXUS IN THE EU'S POLICIES TOWARDS THE SAHEL

A Critical Appraisal of the Malian Case

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in the EU's Policies Towards the Sahel

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A Terry e Cesare,
i cui insegnamenti vanno ben oltre
quelli scritti nei libri

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List of Abbreviations

ACP	African, Caribbean, and Pacific States
AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission in Mali
APF	African Peace Facility
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AU	African Union
CAR	Central African Republic
CNRDRE	National Committee for the Recovery of Democracy and the Restoration of the State
CNSP	Comité national pour le salut du peuple
CSDP	Common Security and Defense Policy
DG DEVCO	Directorate-General of Development and Cooperation
EAC	East African Community
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EDF	European Development Fund
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEC	European Economic Community
EPA	Economic Partnership Agreements
EU	European Union
EUGS	European Union Global Strategy
EUMPM Niger	EU Military Partnership Mission Niger
EUTF	Emergency Trust Fund for Africa
EUTM Mali	EU Training Mission in Mali
FAMa	Forces Armées Maliennes
FDI	Foreign Direct Investments

G5S	G5 Sahel
GIZ	German Development Agency
GSPC	Groupe Salafiste de Prédication et de Combat
IcSP	Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace
IS	Islamic State
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISWA	Islamic State in West Africa
JAES	Joint Africa-EU Strategy
JNIM	Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
MINUSMA	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad
MUJAO	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
PARSEC	Support Programme to Strengthen Security in the Mopti Region and Improve the Management of Border Areas
PMC	Private Military Company
PRISM	Prevention of Conflict, Rule of Law/Security Sector Reform, Integrated Approach, Stabilization and Mediation
PROJES	Programme Jeunesse et Stabilisation- regions du centre du Mali
SADC	Southern African Development Community
UN	United Nations

Introduction

By 2050, the world's population is projected to reach between 9.4 and 10 billion people, potentially exceeding 12 billion by 2100. Most of this astonishing growth will occur in Sub-Saharan Africa, which, by 2060, will become the most populous of the eight geographic regions identified by the UN. These remarkable figures illustrate how Africa, in the coming decades, will play an increasingly critical role in the international arena and in global political dynamics. African states, characterized by developing economies and weak social systems, will face massive population growth, generating significant political and social pressures on the entire international community. Indeed, Sub-Saharan Africa, in addition to having fertility rates that will lead to a doubling of its population, is also one of the poorest and most unstable regions in the world. Given its fragile political systems, rudimentary healthcare infrastructure, vast social disparities, and scarcity of essential resources, most African countries rank among the lowest in all economic and social indices.

One of the greatest challenges is likely to be climate change, which will threaten the survival of a large number of communities. Sub-Saharan Africa is already one of the regions most affected by climate change, but the most devastating impacts are yet to come. Desertification, the drying up of waterways, and extreme weather events will become increasingly frequent, particularly in the Sahelian region, testing the adaptive capacities of local populations. As a result, social imbalances are likely to deepen, leading to greater migratory flows, security threats, humanitarian crises, and political instability.

Against this backdrop, the development of bilateral relations with the African continent has become one of the European Union's key foreign policy priorities.

Notably, the EU aspires to establish itself as a crucial geopolitical actor on the international stage and, therefore, must not miss the opportunity to strengthen its relations with African states, both in light of Africa's evolving dynamics and due to the geographical proximity of the two continents. Political and social imbalances in Sub-Saharan Africa are already having repercussions on Europe, where issues related to migration and intercontinental security play a central role in political debates, both in Brussels and within the domestic politics of Member States. For these reasons, among many others, the European Union must develop a comprehensive and effective foreign policy toward Africa, fostering increasingly structured cooperation.

Building on these considerations, this study aims to examine EU-Africa relations by focusing on the case study of Mali, one of the primary theaters of European external action over the past decade. While some historical background is provided at the outset, the study primarily analyzes the period from 2012 to early 2023, with political reflections extending to the end of 2024. The time-frame under review begins with the outbreak of the Malian northern crisis in 2012, a pivotal moment in EU activities in the region, and extends to early 2023, by which time many of the current political and constitutional transformations had already taken place.

The availability of extensive data from international organizations, think tanks, associations, and research institutes has been invaluable in drafting this work, alongside traditional academic sources. Primary sources, such as treaties, official documents, and legislative acts, have been essential in outlining the political and legal framework of the subject. Likewise, academic literature has played a crucial role in capturing the current state of research on the topic. Additionally, the author has drawn upon personal materials, including interviews, conferences and documents collected over several months of work in projects related to the area under investigation.

As previously mentioned, since the outbreak of war in 2012, various international actors, including the European Union, have intervened extensively in Mali, both through military and civilian missions and by developing cooperation policies. As a result, Mali has become one of the focal points of international politics in recent years. By examining European policies in Bamako, this study aims to investigate the limitations and fragilities of the EU's external action in a crisis context such as the Malian one, while also providing a broader perspective on the nature of the crisis and the balance of power between the EU and other international actors. Given the political centrality of the Malian crisis in the Union's recent foreign policy, the body of literature on the subject has expanded significantly since 2014. However, despite some exceptions, much of the scholarship has focused on specific aspects of the European approach in the region. The EU's security-oriented approach and the post-Valletta migration policies have frequently been criticized by scholars for their lack of a long-term vision and the inadequacy of Brussels' foreign policy in the Sahel.

Regarding the specific case of Mali, much of the literature has concentrated on the crisis following the 2012 war, with a primary focus on French stabilization

efforts and UN peacekeeping activities. Therefore, building on existing scholarship, this analysis seeks to broaden the scope of research by shedding light on the complex dynamics that have shaped both the Malian security crisis and the geopolitical role of Brussels in that context. Accordingly, while this study aligns with much of the literature on the subject, it aims to provide a more detailed examination of the root causes of the Malian security crisis and to investigate the nature and impact of European cooperation policies in addressing it. Moreover, this analysis is set within a moment of transition that will be crucial to the future of the region's political dynamics, further underscoring the need for an in-depth examination of recent developments. Following the two *coups d'état* in Mali in 2020 and 2021, the emergence of the new military junta fundamentally altered the diplomatic landscape, prompting international actors such as the European Union and France to reassess and modify their political approaches. For these reasons, analyzing current developments remains an urgent necessity, particularly given the extreme volatility of the region.

This study is structured into four chapters, primarily analyzing the issue from a European perspective while also considering the role and influence of other international actors active in the region. The first chapter provides a historical overview of EU-Africa relations from the Treaty of Rome onward, highlighting the key features of these relations across different periods. EU-Africa relations are critically examined, with particular attention to the underlying asymmetries and inequalities that have shaped their development. The chapter then explores the limitations and weaknesses of the EU's external action, emphasizing their impact on the Union's role in the international arena. Narrowing the scope of analysis, the chapter proceeds with an examination of European strategies and actions in the Sahel, a region that has been central to EU foreign policy over the past decade, particularly in relation to migration and security issues.

The second chapter shifts the focus to the Malian case study, providing a contextual analysis that considers various dimensions. The first part of the chapter explores the social, economic, and environmental conditions of the Sahel, introducing the complexities of Mali as a state. It then offers a chronological review of major events in Mali from the outbreak of war in 2012 to the most recent *coup* in May 2021. The chapter thus serves a dual purpose: first, to outline the political, geographical, and social transformations of the past decade, and second, to identify the main actors operating in the Malian context, including regional and international stakeholders as well as various terrorist groups active in the country.

By contrast, the third chapter adopts a more analytical approach, examining in detail the fragilities and shortcomings of the European Union's policies in Mali. However, the chapter begins with a comprehensive discussion of the terrorist groups and criminal organizations operating within Mali's borders, analyzing both the scale of the threat and its impact on the country's complex social fabric. In response to these security challenges, the European Union has implemented a series of policies in cooperation with Bamako over the past several years. These policies form the core focus of the third chapter, which exam-

ines the objectives and activities of EU missions and projects on Malian soil. Brussels' strategic interest in Mali has steadily increased over time, leading to the deployment of two civilian missions and the implementation of several cooperation initiatives. The purpose of this chapter is to assess the nature and impact of EU policies, both in terms of addressing the crisis itself and advancing the Union's broader geopolitical interests in the region. However, the EU is not the only international actor engaged in Mali; consequently, it is essential to analyze the balance of power among Bamako's principal international partners. The final section of the chapter thus examines the political and military role of France in Mali and its inevitable influence on European Union policies in the region.

In conclusion, the fourth chapter examines the most recent political and diplomatic developments in the Malian context. With the military junta's rise to power in May 2021, Mali's international relations landscape has undergone a profound transformation. France, which had maintained a military presence in Mali for nearly a decade, decided to sever ties with the authoritarian government in Bamako and withdraw its troops following a serious diplomatic crisis. Simultaneously, Russia has progressively strengthened its relations both with Bamako and with the broader Sahel region, aiming to establish itself as one of the predominant actors in the area. Consequently, the final part of the chapter focuses on the current and potential future effects of these new political dynamics on the European Union's role in Mali, considering the remote possibility of re-establishing cooperative relations with Bamako.

Thus, through the analysis conducted across the four chapters, this study seeks to investigate the overall impact of the EU's foreign policy in the Malian case. By adopting a multidimensional approach to the political and social context, the objective is to highlight the defining characteristics of Brussels' policy choices, shaped by the significant political and economic attention devoted to the Sahel over the past decade.

Europe-Africa Relations: a Geopolitical Challenge

1.1 EU-Africa Relations: a Brief Historical Overview

1.1.1 From Rome to Lisbon: the Historical Asymmetries

As mentioned in the introduction, Africa has represented and will continue to represent a crucial geopolitical partner for the European Union. Their relations have developed over centuries, during which Europe and Africa have remained strongly interconnected, with the Mediterranean Sea serving as a fluid and nuanced border that has fostered extensive cultural exchanges and interactions. Economic, social, and cultural ties date back thousands of years, primarily built around intercontinental trade and historical conflicts, which have shaped numerous aspects of societies, from daily habits to urban architecture.

Condensing centuries of history, empires, wars, and human development into a few lines is almost impossible, particularly given the dynamic nature of the Mediterranean region, the cradle of the deepest connections between the two continents. However, to narrow the scope of this analysis, it is necessary to establish a clear analytical starting point, and the colonial period undoubtedly represents a decisive turning point, one that continues to influence contemporary dynamics. European colonialism was destined to transform relations between the continents more profoundly than other historical events. While this analysis cannot provide a comprehensive focus on it, its fundamental significance must nevertheless be emphasized. Since that period, the relationship between the two continents has been permanently altered, and the colonial legacy has

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continued to shape and influence the nature of their interactions to the present day. In this regard, since the establishment of the European Economic Community as an international political actor, its relationship with Africa has been burdened by the weight of its colonial past, navigating the interests, preferences, and political orientations of its Member States.

Indeed, right from the start, the relations were mainly focused on economic aspects and development policies, which allowed the Member States to keep their influential position on the subject. Accordingly, this was visible even in the European Development Fund (EDF), defined by the Commission as “the main instrument for providing aid for development cooperation to the African, Caribbean, and Pacific States and Overseas Countries and Territories” (EU Commission). However, even if they represented the EEC financial channel for the development policies, the EDF were not part of the European budget until the recent 2021 Multiannual Financial Framework. On the contrary, they were managed and controlled by the Member States, which were directly providing the EDF financial resources. Consequently, for decades, this logic inevitably linked the EDF resources to the Member States’ political references, granting them an enormous level of discretion concerning their size and management.

In addition, probably the most emblematic example concerning the influence of the colonial heritage lies even inside the first historical document of the EU: the Treaty of Rome of March 1957.

Les États membres conviennent d’associer à la Communauté les pays et territoires non-européens entretenant avec la Belgique, la France, l’Italie et les Pays-Bas des relations particulières (Treaty on the European Union 1957, Part Four, Article 131).

This section of Article 131 highlights the foundational characteristics upon which EU-Africa relations have been established. The inclusion of all colonies within the European integration process, without initiating any form of dialogue with them, underscores the profound asymmetry that characterized the relationship from its inception. Even after the independence of many African countries, European powers continued to pursue strategic positions and interests in their former colonies, ensuring that the relationships never truly transcended their initial imbalances.

Indeed, little fundamentally changed during the first decades of EU-Africa political relations. European countries primarily maintained bilateral partnerships with African nations, aiming to preserve colonial economic and political ties. As a result, even the Yaoundé Convention of 1963, the first EEC agreement with Africa, represented a continuation of the Member States’ colonial influences in the region (CVCE 1963). Essentially, the Convention was crafted to adhere to the same principles as Article 131 of the Treaty of Rome, prioritizing those African countries that had formally gained independence in 1960. In practice, the Yaoundé agreement concentrated on trade and special customs duties arrangements, effectively attempting to sustain the advantages of colonial free trade even after the African states’ independence. Consequently, there

was no substantial shift in the political and economic status quo following the adoption of the Yaoundé Convention. Bilateral relationships between Member States and African countries remained central to EU-Africa relations, a pattern that persisted in the ensuing years.

In 1975, the Lomé Convention was signed, marking another significant agreement between the European Community and a broader coalition of states known as the ACP: African, Caribbean, and Pacific states. The Convention can be regarded as a decisive turning point for several historical reasons. First, the United Kingdom's accession to the European Community necessitated expanding European external relations to encompass the UK's global interests. Second, there was a growing need to reassess the nature of these relationships, striving to diminish asymmetries and foster a form of equitable cooperation with emerging countries. While the agreement remained primarily focused on economic matters, echoing the original Yaoundé framework, it introduced new measures in international trade, such as special export concessions and commodity price stabilization (Kotsopoulos and Mattheis 2018). Over the subsequent decades, the Convention underwent numerous revisions, culminating in the final version of 1995 (Lomé IV bis). However, the fundamental hierarchies within these relationships remained largely unaltered, and the asymmetrical dialogue between the EU and African countries continued to uphold the established status quo, wherein economic and political bilateral relations between Member States and former colonies continued to dominate.

Beyond the political strength of the European countries, these asymmetries were also evident within the economic dimension of the dialogue. Measures such as the reduction of customs duties in specific trade sectors were ambivalent. While African countries undoubtedly benefited from lower taxes on their exports, enabling the trade of natural resources and raw materials with European partners, European countries, in turn, gained access to an open market for their manufactured goods. This dynamic hindered African industrial development and exacerbated economic disparities between the partners.

In addition, the asymmetries were already evident when considering the very nature of the two interlocutors. It can be observed that the EEC, or more precisely its Member States, was not genuinely establishing a partnership with Africa by promoting a comprehensive political vision for the future relations between the two continents. In fact, the African states, grouped under the broad ACP umbrella, were essentially treated as mere recipients of investments, historical trade preferences, and international aid policies, strongly tied to their colonial past. In other words, the Community continued to shape its policies in line with the colonial preferences of its Member States, taking into account the fact that ACP countries were the political and economic legacy of Europe's former overseas possessions. In this sense, there was no unified EU-Africa dialogue but rather a sum of multiple political and economic preferences of the Community or individual Member States in various regions of the world, including Africa.

Nevertheless, in the years leading up to the new millennium, some steps were taken towards strengthening Africa's regional actorness, with the hope of achiev-

ing a stronger bargaining position in the international arena. In 1999, the Sirte Declaration, issued by the Organization of African Unity, laid the groundwork for the establishment of a new organization aimed at uniting African interests under a single framework. Within this context, two years after the declaration, the African Union (AU) was officially founded, seeking to advance the process of regional integration on the continent. In this new setting, the need to reshape the terms of engagement between Africa and the EU led to significant developments. Notably, the first EU-Africa summit, held in Cairo in 2000, provided African countries, for the first time, a dedicated forum, independent of the ACP framework, in which to negotiate directly with Brussels. This initiative has continued to the present day, with the AU-EU summit now representing the most significant platform for dialogue between the two actors.

Since the establishment of the African Union, Brussels, as will be further explored later in this text, has made substantial investments in both financial resources and political support for the development of the AU. However, this decision has faced, and continues to face, considerable criticism on multiple fronts. In particular, the African Union has never fully succeeded in becoming the definitive political reference point for the continent. Instead, regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have remained strong predominant supranational actors, often hindering the realization of a genuine Pan-African integration process in order to maintain their influence in specific regions. For this reason, the EU's unconditional support for the African Union has been widely criticized, both for its inefficacy, given the AU's ongoing struggles to establish itself as a true political game-changer, and for its inadequacy, as it has frequently sidelined key regional actors in political negotiations.

Nevertheless, in the same year as the Cairo Summit, the political continuation of all the Lomé Conventions was formalized. Specifically, the European Union and the ACP countries signed the 2000 Cotonou Agreement, establishing its validity for the following 20 years (EU Council). The agreement was negotiated in a favorable climate, with the European Union acknowledging the need to redefine its approach towards the Global South and address its historically paternalistic stance. However, as suggested by several scholars (Kotsopoulos and Mattheis 2018; Haastrup, Duggan, and Mah 2021), the agreement ultimately failed to bring about substantial changes in the hierarchical structure of EU-Africa relations, despite introducing a more structured form of cooperation compared to previous frameworks.

Following three main pillars, development cooperation, economic and trade cooperation, and political dialogue, the Cotonou Agreement sought to establish a broader yet more targeted framework for collaboration between the EU and its partner countries. In particular, the introduction of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), which consisted of bilateral economic negotiations for the establishment of free trade areas, facilitated increased access to investment and trade between the European Union and individual ACP countries. On the one

hand, EPAs represented a beneficial measure from an economic and developmental perspective, fostering the growth of specific regional markets. On the other hand, numerous scholars have highlighted the counterproductive effects of these agreements, as they reinforced specific and localized regional interests rather than actively promoting comprehensive African integration, such as that envisioned by the AU (Olund 2012).

In other words, while the European Union, both before and after Cotonou, actively supported and encouraged the African integration process, recognizing the establishment of the African Union as a turning point for greater African ownership and authority in bilateral relations, the simultaneous promotion of EPAs worked in the opposite direction. These agreements created disparities between individual sub-regional arrangements, ultimately weakening the collective bargaining power of African countries as a whole (Haastrup et al. 2021).

Despite considerable criticism, in the years that followed, the EU continued to develop and uphold EPA policies within the framework of the Cotonou Agreement, which was extended until 2021. However, although the 2000 Cotonou Agreement represented a milestone in the historical trajectory of EU-Africa relations, it failed to bring about tangible improvements in addressing the asymmetry of the relationship and the balance of power between the two parties (Kotsopoulos and Mattheis 2018). In fact, only five years after Cotonou, Brussels felt compelled to issue another political document outlining its engagement with Africa. The 2005 EU Strategy for Africa was drafted to address some of the challenges that the Cotonou Agreement had not successfully resolved (EU Strategy for Africa 2005). Nevertheless, given that the 2005 Strategy was exclusively a European document, developed without the direct involvement of African stakeholders in the decision-making process, it ultimately reaffirmed the paternalistic nature of the relationship. Despite that, the new document paved the way for another crucial paper published in 2007, only two years after the previous one: The Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES). It was adopted at the Lisbon summit, and it represented, at least on paper, the willingness to change the partnership dynamics between the two actors. As stated in the first part of the official document (Council of the EU 2007):

In order to meet these fundamental objectives, Africa and the EU will need to jointly address a number of key political challenges that are essential for the success of the new partnership, including:

(a) To move away from a traditional relationship and forge a real partnership characterised by equality and the pursuit of common objectives.

In other words, the idea of equality and reshaping of the power balances was clearly expressed for the first time in a document. In addition, taking into consideration that the JAES was the product of the discussions during the Africa-EU summit, the African side took an active part in the drafting of it, contrary to the 2005 Strategy. For these reasons, from the starting point, the Joint Africa-EU Strategy seemed a concrete game changer for the political, economic, and social relations of the continents. Indeed, another interesting approach was pointed

out in the document. The need for stronger and more structured cooperation with the African Union was reaffirmed. As written (Council of the EU 2007):

The African Union has emerged as a natural interlocutor for the EU on continental issues and as the most important institutional partner for the EU. Therefore, the institutional architecture promoted by the Joint Strategy will, on the African side, be centered on the AU.

The EU and its multiple African interlocutors, at least on paper, acknowledged the importance of the Pan-African integration process, designating the African Union as the supranational actor responsible for negotiating, designing, and implementing the new EU-Africa partnership. Thus, although African regional organizations continued to play an important role on the continental stage, this development could nevertheless be considered another step forward in the African integration process from an international point of view.

With regard to the Strategy, key areas of interest were outlined in the document, establishing policy guidelines for the subsequent decade. As in previous decades, economic aspects occupied a central place within the strategy. However, other significant policy areas were also developed. Good governance, peace and security, and human development emerged as crucial political objectives, reflecting the EU's intention to shift its approach from the traditional donor-client dynamic (centered on aid) toward a more balanced and equitable dialogue. For all these reasons, the implementation of the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) was initially intended to signal a substantial change of direction, which seemed feasible given the higher levels of democratization observed in many African countries compared to previous decades. Indeed, several African states appeared prepared to engage in a more democratic and equitable dialogue, assuming responsibility for the considerable costs associated with human and social development. Consequently, the initial premises and objectives of the JAES were regarded as an important step towards redefining EU-Africa relations, supported by new theoretical approaches, enhanced financial and institutional instruments, and expanded international engagement through meetings and summits (e.g., AU-EU summits). However, to what extent did the JAES truly represent a turning point in EU-Africa political relations?

Unfortunately, in the years that followed, various factors prevented the Strategy from fulfilling the ambitious promises made in 2007. While numerous projects and policies were implemented within the JAES framework, largely supported by the European Development Fund (EDF) and the African Peace Facility, many of its achievements were undermined by persistent contradictions on both sides. Notably, the African Union benefited from stronger EU financial and political support, facilitating the organization's expansion into additional areas of the continent, despite the enduring influence of various regional organizations.

Nevertheless, significant obstacles remained. On the African side, most countries failed to achieve consistent progress in strengthening the rule of law, fostering political pluralism, advancing social development, and upholding human rights. Funds and resources continued to be misallocated, exacerbating en-

trenched clientelist dynamics and reinforcing the reluctance of small political elites to invest in human development. On the European side, the fundamental support provided to the African Union, aimed at fostering a cohesive and integrated African framework, was at odds with the EU's simultaneous pursuit of numerous sub-regional Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) (Olund 2012). These agreements limited economic relations to specific regions rather than encompassing the entire African continent.

For these reasons, even after the adoption of the JAES, a genuine reversal of traditional hierarchical structures was never fully realized. Brussels continued to occupy a dominant position in both political and economic discussions, while African counterparts made limited efforts to dismantle the historic donor-client relationship, which continued to serve the interests of a narrow group of powerful and influential actors.

1.1.2 EU-Africa Relations in the Last Decade: a Change of Priorities

In order to highlight another major shift in EU-Africa relations its crucial examining the subsequent years. Indeed, from 2010 onward, the political narrative and key areas of interest underwent significant transformations. The Arab Spring, the Libyan war, and the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria generated enormous instability across the eastern and southern regions of the globe, prompting large-scale displacement as local populations fled wars, terrorist attacks, violence, and famine. Consequently, between 2011 and 2015, international migratory flows increased rapidly, with Europe emerging as a principal destination. As a result, migration became a highly salient political issue both within the domestic politics of EU Member States and at the institutional level of the European Union, generating intense frictions between southern and eastern Member States, directly affected by the continuous influx of migrants, and northern and western countries, which displayed relatively less concern over the issue.

The European Union thus found itself facing another internal crisis, following the economic one, in which two distinct groups of states became protagonists of recurrent political disputes. Migration and migratory policies moved to the center of the European agenda, posing a potential threat to the process of European integration. Countries such as Italy, Spain, Greece, and Hungary, which bore the brunt of arrivals from Africa and Asia, voiced strong criticisms regarding the perceived lack of solidarity from other Member States, characterizing the new migratory flows as a pressing emergency. Moreover, the rise of political propaganda, largely propagated by right-wing and far-right parties, exacerbated the issue, fostering a distorted perception of migration as an unsustainable burden on the state. Conversely, western and northern Member States kept claiming they were making sufficient efforts to accommodate migrants, emphasizing the responsibility of southern states, as countries of first arrival, to manage refugee inflows in accordance with the provisions of the Dublin Agreement. Without delving into details that would require an entire dissertation, it is important to note that the refugee crisis compelled the European Union to

prioritize migration as a central concern in both domestic and international policymaking over the past decade.

Consequently, in the context of EU-Africa relations, Brussels sought to recalibrate its priorities concerning African interlocutors, increasingly placing migration policies at the forefront and attempting to implement a strategy akin to the one previously adopted with Turkey. As a result, the Valletta Summit was convened in November 2015, bringing together EU and African Heads of State to discuss potential solutions to the refugee crisis (EU Council 2015a). This conference must therefore be regarded as a critical juncture in the history of EU-Africa relations. The discussions in Valletta profoundly shaped EU policies towards Africa, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, in the years that followed, intertwining migration issues with development and security concerns.

Furthermore, the Valletta Summit saw the launch of the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), an EU financial instrument established to promote “stability and address the root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa.” Ideally, the EUTF was founded on two primary objectives: to reduce migratory flows, which were generating internal political tensions among EU Member States, and to address the underlying economic and social drivers of migration. However, as will be further analyzed in the text, the EUTF ultimately became another mechanism for the externalization of EU borders in Africa, particularly in the Sahel, deviating from its initial objective of tackling the root causes of migration. The critical limitations of the European migratory strategy in Africa, persistently characterized by short-term responses, and the limited efficacy of the Emergency Trust Fund will be examined later in this chapter. However, at this stage, it is important to highlight the complete halt in the implementation of the guidelines and principles outlined in the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), which had dominated EU-Africa discourse merely eight years earlier. Indeed, the European aspiration to move beyond paternalistic donor-client dynamics and foster a genuinely equal partnership with Africa was swiftly abandoned in the face of what was perceived as a severe crisis. This crisis triggered significant internal imbalances that threatened the political stability of European institutions. As a result, once again in the historical trajectory of EU-Africa relations, the European Union and its Member States monopolized the political dialogue at the Valletta Summit, prioritizing short-term European security concerns, particularly those related to southern migratory flows, over a more strategic and forward-looking assessment of mutual interests (Fargion and Gazibo 2021).

Consequently, the migratory narrative has continued to dominate relations between the two continents to the present day. Structural inequalities remain evident, and the management of the migration crisis has further reinforced them. Throughout this period, migration policies have consistently been framed through a Eurocentric lens, with European stability and security positioned at the center of discussions. By contrast, the African side has demonstrated limited cohesive contractual power, frequently ceding the negotiating advantage to the stronger political actor, the EU. The outcome of this imbalance has been the es-

tablishment of bilateral agreements between the EU and specific African states, such as Niger, Mali, and Nigeria, which are strategically pivotal in addressing the largest migratory flows. While the effectiveness of these agreements will be analyzed in the following section of this chapter, it is crucial to recognize the contradictions embedded in the EU's recent external strategies toward Africa.

On the one hand, the Joint Africa-EU Strategy was initially conceived as a transformative framework for EU-Africa relations, marking a shift toward an equal partnership and a commitment to fostering African integration, with the African Union designated as the primary interlocutor. On the other hand, Brussels has pursued an entirely different approach with respect to two of the most significant issues of recent history: economic relations and migration management. The former has remained largely governed by Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), which have exacerbated economic disparities between sub-regional areas due to the varying nature of these agreements. The latter, despite being addressed in the intercontinental framework of the Valletta Summit, ultimately led to a series of bilateral agreements rather than a unified African partnership. In effect, these agreements have facilitated the externalization of European borders by seeking to curb migratory flows at their source (Idrissa 2021).

This contradictory policy environment underscores the inconsistency of EU actions, which appear to shift depending on the nature, political salience, and domestic relevance of the issues at hand. Such incoherence has become increasingly visible in recent years, undermining Brussels' credibility as a powerful, reliable, and advantageous political partner. Indeed, the persistent asymmetries in EU-Africa relations, as outlined in this discussion, have driven the African counterpart to seek alternative geopolitical alliances. In recent years, China, Russia, and Brazil have expanded their investments in the region, and many African states have welcomed the growing presence of these new international actors. These geopolitical powers have rapidly increased their influence on the continent, challenging Europe's historical economic and political hegemony in Africa. Beyond economic considerations, these actors also hold a politically advantageous position in their engagement with African states, as they are unencumbered by the painful colonial legacy associated with Europe.

Taking China as an example, in recent decades, Beijing has identified substantial economic and political opportunities in Africa, particularly in the Sub-Saharan region.

The astonishing rise in the level of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) is one of the indicators showing the increase of China's interest in the African market (Fig. 2). With a market-oriented approach focused on infrastructures, energy, and resources and free from strong political conditionalities, China didn't find difficulties to develop relations with many African countries. Indeed, in many areas of the continent, China outpaced the European Union in terms of import and export of goods, especially raw materials, and the presence of Chinese firms on the territory is constantly increasing over the years, mostly in Nigeria, Zambia, and Tanzania (Statista). In fact, investments in infrastructures and displacement of the workforce are at the center of the Chinese geopolitical strategy.

Thus, Beijing didn't hesitate to include the African region in the grand design of its Belt and Road Initiative, finding the fertile ground for its enormous infrastructure projects (Cai 2017).

Furthermore, even the presence of Russia increased in the last few years, and it clearly became more geopolitically relevant since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Moscow started to re-create or strengthened a lot of political relations with historical partner countries, such as Angola or South Africa, and forged new ties with some other countries, mostly characterized by authoritarian or unstable political situations, such as Mali or the Central African Republic. Having said this, the presence of Russia in the continent, especially in Mali, will be discussed in the final chapters of this analysis, since it will represent a crucial variable for future political developments. However, what stands out from this analysis is the fact that the European Union is no more the single hegemon actor in the area. Geopolitical challenges are increasing each year and they are starting to be difficult to address if the next EU external policies will be similar to the past ones described in this paragraph. Therefore, why does the European Union seem so contradictory in its African external policies? What are the real limits that EU foreign policy is facing? To what extent Brussels represents an influential international actor in Africa?

1.2 EU Foreign Policy's Limits and Fragilities

Following a brief historical contextualization of EU-Africa relations in recent times, this paragraph aims to provide a deeper analysis of the nature of the EU's external actions, with a particular focus on its engagement with the African continent. The academic literature has extensively examined the key characteristics of EU foreign policy, particularly its limitations and weaknesses. Indeed, scholarly discussions on the subject frequently adopt a critical perspective on Brussels' external policies, emphasizing the necessity of significant reforms to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, and strategic impact. This analysis aims to deepen this debate, trying to place the discussion in the specific context of the Sahel.

Since the Maastricht Treaty, the European Union has made considerable progress in its internal integration, particularly in political, economic, and social spheres. However, these advancements have not been accompanied by a comparable increase in the EU's international actorness. The dynamics described in the previous paragraph serve as a clear example of this discrepancy. Despite the EU's long-standing historical ties with Africa, new geopolitical actors, including China, Russia, and Brazil, among others, have significantly expanded their presence and influence in the region, in some cases surpassing European economic and political hegemony, even in countries traditionally considered close European partners.

For these reasons, it is essential to identify some of the EU's key structural weaknesses in the realm of external action, as these vulnerabilities are undermining its ability to compete effectively within an increasingly complex and competitive geopolitical landscape. However, does the EU represent a powerful

and influential international actor? Addressing this question becomes fundamental to overcoming what several years ago was defined by Christopher Hill as the EU “capability-expectation gap” (Hill 1993).

“The Community does not have the resources or the political structure to be able to respond to the demands which the Commission and certain Member States have virtually invited through their bullishness over the pace of internal change. The consequential gap which has opened up between capabilities and expectations is dangerous” (Hill 1993, 315).

Three decades ago, Hill wrote these words while questioning the extent to which the European Economic Community (EEC) was capable of achieving meaningful outcomes in foreign policy and external actions. He critically assessed the EEC’s effectiveness as an international actor, identifying numerous contradictions, limitations, and structural weaknesses that constrained its role in the global arena. The predominance of individual Member States’ preferences continued to shape political dialogues, preventing a significant transfer of competences to the supranational level. Consequently, the absence of a unified European voice, due to the persistent influence of Member States, resulted in a plurality of conflicting interests, thereby impeding the development of a cohesive European vision.

Furthermore, the lack of a European military force, directly managed and financed by Brussels, imposed clear constraints on the EEC’s capacity to undertake interventions and operations, both in terms of strategic autonomy and practical resources. These challenges, which Hill vividly described, led him to introduce the concept of the “capability-expectations gap.” In other words, he argued that the EEC lacked the concrete resources and capabilities necessary to accomplish a specific type of political and material achievements, consequently, preventing it to meet the expectations, self-imposed or external, associated with the foreign policy responsibilities of a major geopolitical actor. Nevertheless, Hill and many scholars of the time expressed optimism regarding the future of EEC foreign policy (Hill 1997), encouraged by the substantial progress in European integration that was becoming increasingly evident in public discourse during those years.

“It is possible that this is essentially a transitional condition, brought on by growing pains, and that the general direction of the Community’s development will eventually resolve it” (Hill 1993, 315).

However, even if Hill’s position could be defined as outdated, unfortunately, the geopolitical fragilities of the European Union are basically the same highlighted in 1993. Indeed, the reluctance of Member States to transfer competences in foreign policy from the national to the supranational level remains the fundamental weakness of the European Union’s external actions. The primary consequence of this reluctance is the persistent absence of a European military force directly managed by Brussels, which significantly undermines the EU’s ability to position itself on equal footing with other global actors. While foreign policy does not necessarily equate to military capability, and the EU possesses various instruments to address international challenges, Hill’s “capability-expectations gap” remains evident, particularly in the realm of security and defense.

Over the past decade, conflicts, violence, and terrorism have increased in several regions of strategic importance to Brussels, such as the Middle East, Libya, and the Sahel. In these contexts, the lack of a structured and independent military force has prevented the EU from assuming a leading role in stabilizing situations of instability and conflict. A case in point, one that will be analyzed in depth in subsequent chapters, is France's military intervention in the Sahel. Countries such as Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad have been, and continue to be, central to the EU's external engagements. However, following the outbreak of the Malian conflict in 2012 and the consequent risk of national collapse, France launched a direct military intervention to support the stability of Bamako's national government (Sheehan, Marquardt, and Collins 2021). As a result, France, whose influence in the region has been significant since the colonial era, further consolidated its dominant role, deploying more than 5,000 troops and engaging with key regional stakeholders. This scenario raises a critical question: how can the EU establish itself as a credible and effective geopolitical actor when it lacks the capacity to intervene in and stabilize crises?

Beyond weakening the EU's political influence, these structural limitations are intrinsically linked to the Union's lack of a unified foreign policy voice and its broader policy inconsistencies. Since there has been no significant transfer of foreign policy competences to the supranational level, individual Member States continue to shape external relations in line with their national interests, as exemplified by France's unilateral intervention in the Sahel. The result is a fragmented and often incoherent policy landscape, in which each Member State pursues its own foreign policy agenda, frequently influenced by domestic political considerations. Consequently, a unified European foreign policy approach is frequently sacrificed in favor of compromises designed to prevent internal disputes among Member States.

This fragmentation is evident not only in military affairs but also in areas such as international diplomacy, trade, and development cooperation. As a result, the EU's external policies often lack a distinct and coherent European identity; instead, they tend to reflect the historical and economic interests of individual Member States, loosely integrated into a broader EU framework. A particularly revealing example, which will be examined in detail in the following section, is the EU's foreign policy in the Sahel. The shift in priorities following the Valletta Summit, where migration became the dominant concern, illustrates the extent to which Member States' interests dictate the EU's external engagements. From that point onward, Brussels reoriented its policy focus, moving away from the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) framework and channeling most of its efforts into addressing migration, which was perceived as an urgent, politically salient, and potentially destabilizing issue by many national governments.

These dynamics have contributed to numerous contradictions in EU-Africa relations, particularly given the sensitivities surrounding Europe's historical and contemporary engagement with the continent. If domestic political considerations within Member States continue to play a decisive role in shaping EU foreign policy, the problem of short-termism, already a defining feature of many

national political agendas, will inevitably be reflected in the EU's external actions (Fargion and Gazibo 2021). As in the context of the refugee crisis, previous political priorities were set aside in order to address new, pressing challenges, in this case, migratory flows, providing an immediate response to internal political pressures. However, EU-Africa relations should follow an entirely different trajectory. As outlined in the previous paragraph, the relationship between the two continents remains deeply complex. The European Union continues to grapple with historical imbalances that are a direct legacy of colonialism, which, in turn, foster a persistent sense of distrust among African nations toward European political initiatives.

To overcome these historical legacies, Brussels must articulate a clear and credible vision for its future external engagements in the Global South, one that distances itself from past colonial dynamics and positions the EU as a reliable economic, political, and social partner. Achieving this objective requires a long-term, structured political strategy, particularly given that the EU is dealing with a partner characterized by democratic fragility. Many African countries experience entrenched clientelist systems, widespread public corruption, and, more recently, an expanding wave of authoritarianism, all of which are reshaping the continent's institutional landscape. Consequently, only a coherent and well-defined strategy will enable the EU to effectively compete with other global actors.

Unlike the EU and its Member States, geopolitical rivals such as China, Russia, Brazil, and the Gulf states do not bear the burden of a colonial past, allowing them to establish partnerships untainted by historical grievances. For this reason, given Africa's strategic importance, the EU must abandon the policy inconsistencies that have characterized its approach over the past decade and instead develop a distinct and forward-looking framework for engagement.

Despite its persistent lack of capabilities and the diverging interests of its Member States, it is important to acknowledge that the EU has made some progress in structuring its foreign policy mechanisms. A key example of this progress is the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS), which was first introduced during the drafting of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007 and formally created by the European institutions in 2011.

An effective EEAS is critical to allowing the High Representative, together with the Member States and the Commission, to accomplish the strategic objectives set by the Lisbon Treaty. It will help strengthen the European Union on the global stage, give it more profile, and enable it to protect its interests and values more efficiently (EU Council 89/10).

The EEAS is basically defined as the diplomatic service of the European Union and during the last years, it had the objective to strengthen EU presence globally, thanks also to the establishment of European Union diplomatic delegations. Obviously, the creation of the EEAS also constituted a source of internal friction, because the establishment of a new powerful organ in the EU's institutional landscape inevitably generates internal power imbalances. For example, the Directorate-General of Development and Cooperation (DG DEVCO), the

historical Commission's department in charge of European external activities, suffered from a reshaping in its competencies since the EEAS appearance, even developing internal asymmetries or contradictions between the actors (Lopez 2019). However, despite what was mentioned before, it can be affirmed that after the birth of EEAS and during the last 10 years, European Union recognized, even more, the need to empower its foreign policy activities to compete inside the geopolitical arena. The European Union Global Strategy (EUGS), launched in 2016, precisely represents Brussels' need to become a real protagonist in the world. Citing the opening part of the document:

We live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, is being questioned. To the east, the European security order has been violated, while terrorism and violence plague North Africa and the Middle East, as well as Europe itself. Economic growth is yet to outpace demography in parts of Africa, security tensions in Asia are mounting, while climate change causes further disruption. Yet these are also times of extraordinary opportunity. Global growth, mobility, and technological progress—alongside our deepening partnerships—enable us to thrive, and allow ever more people to escape poverty and live longer and freer lives. We will navigate this difficult, more connected, contested and complex world guided by our shared interests, principles and priorities (EEAS 2016).

In these few lines, as in the entire EUGS document, the EU demonstrates to have a clear knowledge of the international arena complexity, which would be almost impossible to address without both a strong internal consensus and strategic political partners. Certainly, within the latter group, Africa, should hold a special position. Europe's historical neighbor will become a crucial actor for the future world's balances, affecting in many ways the European Union equilibria. For these specific reasons, why did the European Union fail in developing a better political relationship with Africa? Having understood the essentiality of African strategic partnership, why did Brussels miss changing the historical relation's asymmetries to be a more reliable actor for African interlocutors?

It would be overly reductive to attribute the challenges outlined above solely to the influence of Member States and the absence of a unified European voice. While these factors have played a significant role in shaping European foreign policy, both at a global level and in the specific context of Africa, they are insufficient to fully account for the European Union's difficulties in fostering substantive change in EU-Africa relations. This is particularly evident in areas where Brussels holds greater competencies, such as international trade, development, and cooperation. In these domains, the EU should have taken more decisive steps to reshape its narrative toward Africa, addressing historical imbalances to promote a more equitable dialogue and break away from enduring colonial legacies.

However, as demonstrated in the previous paragraph, even after the implementation of key agreements such as the Cotonou Agreement, the Joint Africa-Europe Strategy, and the Valletta Summit, the EU has failed to transition from

a position of dominance to one of equal partnership. As a result, these dynamics have generated paradoxical side effects. Despite the EU's increased financial commitments and expansion of activities in Africa in recent years, this growth has not been accompanied by a proportional rise in its geopolitical influence or strategic importance in the region. On the contrary, numerous African nations have increasingly redirected their focus toward alternative global actors, forging new strategic alliances (see par. 1.1).

Thus, the European Union's reluctance to reform the nature of its relations with Africa warrants further investigation. In this regard, the concept of "ontological security," as outlined by Haastrup, Duggan, and Mah (2021), offers valuable analytical insights. Drawing from the classical definition of ontological security, where an actor maintains a consistent sense of "self" through actions that reinforce its identity, the authors propose a contextualization of this concept within the framework of EU-Africa relations.

The idea at the basis is the presence of a direct or indirect European unwillingness to change its predominant position in the relationship, supporting the current status quo. The latter must be preserved to not create political uncertainty or critical changes in the power balances, which are perceived as enemies for the "ontological security" of the Union.

"In other words, this hierarchical relationship is a basis for the EU's ontological security. Yet, in the desire for a change to a less hierarchical partnership and African shifting interests and international partnerships over the past two decades, which has allowed for the emergence of African agency, this ontological security is challenged externally. The external challenge is further exacerbating, as we show, internally, by political and policy fragilities. These challenges to the EU's ontological security and the EU's response, we show, have important implications for the future of EU-Africa relations... Presently, the EU is ontologically insecure as a result of multiple ongoing crises starting with the Eurocrisis, exacerbated by the so-called migration crisis, Brexit and reinforced by the boldness of far-right extremism. In this state, the EU is threatened by the sense that it is losing its equilibrium, its sense of self in terms of its external policy". (Haastrup, Duggan, and Mah 2021, 542).

Hence, the concept of "ontological security" seems to add another important contribution to explaining the limits of EU foreign policy, especially in relation to Africa. A fundamental transformation of the original asymmetries in EU-Africa relations poses a challenge to the European Union's internal equilibrium, as it seeks to derive stability from its international role—a stability that remains elusive within the Union itself. This notion aligns closely with Pierson's concept of "path dependency" in EU decision-making (Pierson 1996). In essence, past political choices significantly constrain the EU's present decision-making processes, as the "sunk costs" associated with altering established trajectories render such shifts both overwhelming and impractical. In this specific context, the EU's reluctance to deviate from its entrenched policy approaches toward Africa serves to reinforce its sense of ontological security, systematically preserving the historical hierarchies that Brussels perceives as stable, advantageous, and easily manageable.

In summary, while European integration has undoubtedly expanded Brussels' supranational competencies and enhanced its influence in the international arena, significant limitations in EU foreign policy remain both visible and persistent. These constraints constitute a critical variable in EU-Africa relations, producing tangible consequences for the evolution of the partnership. The absence of a coherent and assertive European approach has resulted in policies marked by inconsistencies and contradictions. Several key weaknesses have been identified: the absence of a unified European military force, the lack of a singular European voice due to divergent national interests, the predominance of short-term political decision-making, the enduring impact of colonial legacies, and, crucially, the role of ontological security. Each of these factors has influenced Brussels' policies toward Africa and, more specifically, has shaped its response to the Sahel crisis. The following section will examine this case in greater depth, narrowing the scope of analysis to assess recent EU policies in the Sahelian context.

1.3 EU External Actions' Theatre of Practice: the Sahel

During the last years, European Union significantly increased its attention in the Sahelian region. Since the beginning of EU-Africa relations, this area was already perceived by the EU as important in terms of relations, resources, and development policies. However, the landscape completely changed in the last 15 years. Waves of violence, political instabilities, and terrorism started to reshape the region's equilibria, becoming a serious threat to the national security of Sahelian countries. Until that moment, European Union's influence in the area was mainly focused on trade and development assistance, using the EDF financial instrument as the primary channel of cooperation. Nevertheless, local countries like Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Algeria started to witness a constant increase in violence and terrorist activities, which were seriously undermining the regional actors' capabilities to face such a crisis. Hence, this situation paved the way for a different European Union approach to the region, which would have made the Sahel what many scholars defined as a "laboratory of experimentation" for EU foreign policy (Lopez 2019; Raineri and Strazzari 2019; Plank and Bergmann 2021).

The Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, also called the "Sahel Strategy", was published by the Commission in March 2011. This document represented the starting point for all the following European policies in the Sahelian area, changing the logic of EU external actions forever. In the Sahel Strategy, Brussels shifts its political priorities in the region, linking its classical economic and development policies to security and stabilization matters.

The EU's development policy in the Sahel, drawn up in partnership with the countries concerned, is geared towards tackling the root causes of the extreme poverty and towards creating the grass-root conditions for economic opportunity and human development to flourish. But it will be hard for this policy to achieve a high impact unless security challenges are also tackled (EEAS 2011).

Hence, for the first time, European Union pictured itself, at least in the official discourse, not only as a development partner but also as a possible security provider. As explained in the document, every kind of development becomes impossible without a safe political and social environment, giving birth to the logic of the security-development nexus. Unfortunately, in the Sahel, that level of security was just a memory since the increasing presence of terrorist groups and criminal organizations. Consequently, the Sahel Strategy set the basis for the following EU security policies in the region, both in terms of political and financial support, but also with an active role on the ground through the EU Common Security and Defense Policy¹ missions in Niger and Mali. However, before taking into consideration Brussels's active role as a security actor, it must be underlined what were the drivers leading the EU to completely shift its priorities towards the Sahel. Why did security become essential in the regional political narrative?

European Union's new activism in the Sahel can be explained by severe aspects. Clearly, the security-development nexus was tangible, and it was evident that only in a safer situation the development policies could have been efficient and impactful. However, besides the nexus, other critical reasons led the EU to be more involved in the region, especially concerning delicate subjects such as security and conflict prevention. Probably, the most important one lay in the fact that the EU started to perceive the Sahelian insecurity as near and frightening. In fact, possible internal consequences concerning terrorism, violence, and irregular migration represent the main drivers for European actions in the area, since they are intercontinental and cross-border threats, able spread their effects on both continents.

For this reason, from a European Union perspective, talking about the security in the Sahel became not so different than talking about its own internal security.

Improving security and development in Sahel has an obvious and direct impact on protecting European citizens and interests and on the EU internal security situation. It is therefore important to ensure and strengthen coherence and complementarity between internal and external aspects of EU security (EEAS 2011).

Therefore, the security-development nexus became fundamental in Brussels' foreign policy framework and the concept of "stabilization" strongly entered the political narrative (Raineri and Strazzari 2019). Further, a second important driver of action can be identified in the new institutional setting of the EU. Indeed, with the appearance of the European External Action Service' a new political season began. The willingness to reinforce the EU's international role

¹ EEAS. EU security, defense and crisis response. Common Security and Defense Policy: The Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) enables the Union to take a leading role in peace-keeping operations, conflict prevention and in the strengthening of the international security. It is an integral part of the EU's comprehensive approach towards crisis management, drawing on civilian and military assets (see EEAS n.d.).

increased and the EEAS started to promote a higher level of activism and engagement in foreign affairs. As argued by Lopez (2019, 19):

Bringing security and development together through the Comprehensive Approach was not merely an attempt to adapt to the EU's external environment. It was also a way for groups of actors within EU institutions and in particular, within the EEAS, to further their position in the new post-Lisbon institutional setting and transform the EU into a more strategic and political actor on the international stage.

The result was immediately visible in the different approaches towards the Sahel, trying to distance the EU from its classical soft-power dynamics. However, the articulation of new objectives and ambitions in EU foreign policy also implies a theoretical expansion of what Hill referred to as "expectations," with aspirations for a more significant strategic role and greater geopolitical influence. As will be demonstrated in the subsequent chapters, these expectations have not been met, and Hill's concept of the "capability-expectations gap" continues to represent a fundamental weakness in EU foreign policy.

Furthermore, the regional interests of individual Member States constitute another key factor shaping the EU's policies in the Sahel. Economic and political considerations, particularly those of France, but also of Germany and certain Northern European countries, have driven a push for a more active EU presence in the region. This engagement has, in turn, resulted in an expansion of projects, financial contributions, and security initiatives, thereby increasing Member States' involvement across the Sahelian belt.

In summary, the EU's Sahel Strategy emerged as a product of the political, strategic, and economic imperatives outlined above, which were sufficient to redirect European policies toward a prioritization of Sahelian security concerns. However, the events of the following years further reinforced the centrality of these issues. In 2012, the outbreak of conflict in northern Mali and the subsequent *coup d'état* exacerbated the already fragile political landscape of the Sahel. Moreover, the weakness of the Malian state facilitated the expansion and consolidation of terrorist groups and criminal organizations, leading to a surge in violence, deadly attacks, human trafficking, and smuggling activities.

Simultaneously, in the Middle East, the Islamic State was waging war in Syria and Iraq, expanding its territorial control and causing widespread destruction, displacement, and mass migration. As a result, security concerns became a dominant theme in European political discourse, particularly as the repercussions of these conflicts became increasingly visible within the EU itself. The devastating terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, and Germany heightened the sense of insecurity across Europe, making the threat more tangible and politically urgent. At the same time, the steady increase in migration flows toward Europe fueled internal disputes over refugee management, placing additional strain on EU institutions and intergovernmental relations.

Against this backdrop of instability, the Sahel emerged as a critical geopolitical nexus. The region not only harbored numerous criminal networks and vio-

lent groups but also served as one of the principal migration routes to Southern Europe. Consequently, security considerations became the paramount focus of the EU-Sahel Strategy, with migration emerging as an additional priority following the Valletta Summit.

1.1.3 Among Civilian Missions and Financial Contributions: an Overcrowded Landscape

Since that moment, the Sahel has become the focal point of EU foreign policy and a significant arena for the practical application of its new external actions. As mentioned earlier, in 2015, migratory issues emerged as another key factor influencing the political dynamics in the region. The promotion of peace, conflict prevention, and defense capacity building remained central to the security measures outlined in the Sahel Strategy (2011), while border control policies and migrant management were introduced after the Valletta Summit and the drafting of the Regional Action Plan (2015–2020) (Lopez 2019).

Specifically, Brussels launched three CSDP missions in the region: EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali, and EUTM Mali. EUCAP Sahel Niger was the first mission to be implemented in August 2012, following the guidelines of the Sahel Strategy from the previous year. The mission aimed to enhance the security capabilities of the Nigerien authorities in order to stabilize the region. As such, the mission focused on providing training and equipment for the national defense sector, while also offering practical support for other European stakeholders active in the area. The other two missions in Mali, which will be analyzed in greater detail in the third chapter, followed a similar model. EUCAP Sahel Mali, launched in January 2015, was designed in the same manner as its Nigerien counterpart, with particular emphasis on addressing the Malian national weakness in implementing security reforms to address the ongoing crisis in the central and northern regions of the country. On the other hand, the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) was launched earlier, becoming operational in 2013 following the French military intervention in the country. The mission's mandate was to provide specialized training and resources to the Malian National Army (Forces Armées Maliennes, FAMa), strengthening their capacity to confront terrorist activities outside of Bamako. Thus, through these three missions, the European Union's physical presence in the Sahel increased, as it sought to play an active role in stabilizing the region.

In addition to its security interventions, Brussels also intensified its engagement in the Sahel through substantial financial contributions. Security concerns increasingly took precedence in EU actions, and, as attention to Sahelian dynamics grew over the years, a range of financial instruments were mobilized, creating a complex and often overcrowded landscape that sometimes undermined the effective implementation of the programs. The traditional financial channel, the European Development Fund (EDF), was used to allocate more than 2.6 billion euros to five Sahelian states during the 2014–2020 period for local development and cooperation activities (Bergmann and Plank 2021). Originally,

these funds were intended primarily for development and cooperation policies, reflecting the donor-recipient dynamic in EU-Africa relations. However, from 2014 to 2020, security concerns increasingly shaped the use of the EDF channel, with many development projects incorporating stabilization objectives. For example, more than one-third of the EDF funds allocated to Mali during this period were directed toward security, rule of law, and structural reforms, which were all linked to budget support programs (Lopez 2019). These funds were conditioned on specific security reforms, negotiated by the EU, as a precondition for disbursement.

Another crucial instrument was the European Union Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF), created following discussions at the Valletta Summit, with the purpose of addressing the root causes of African migration to Europe. The EUTF allocated more than 2 billion euros to the Sahel and the Lake Chad region, with approximately 21% of these funds earmarked for migration-related policies. These policies included border control management (supported by CSDP missions), economic alternatives for populations affected by reduced migration flows, and local management of migrants, underscoring the prioritization of the migration issue in the fund's allocation.

Additionally, the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), established in 2014 and financed by the European budget, provided financial support for 12 projects (30 million euros) aimed at enhancing the role of civil society in conflict and violence prevention. To further coordinate the various CSDP missions, additional funds were allocated to establish the Prevention of Conflict, Rule of Law/Security Sector Reform, Integrated Approach, Stabilization, and Mediation (PRISM) initiative under Article 28 of the Treaty of Lisbon. This initiative created an EEAS coordination cell for crisis response, which first operated in response to the Malian security crisis, leading to the launch of EU-STAMS (EU Stabilization Action in Mopti and Segou). The PRISM Sahelian cell, active since 2017, not only coordinated the activities of CSDP missions in Mali and Niger, but also served as a link between the EU and the G5 Sahel organization. It is worth noting the growing importance of the G5 Sahel, which has emerged as a significant EU interlocutor in recent years.

The G5 Sahel is an international organization established in February 2014 by a group of five Sahelian countries: Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger. In other words, since its appearance, the G5S started to act as another regional actor within a political landscape which was already crowded and complex. However, right from the start, the G5S foundation was supported both by France and the EU, claiming its indispensability to find a local solution for the security and social crisis. Hence, even if on official papers the UE and the Member States were promoting the rising of the African Union as the main African interlocutor, on the contrary, in the Sahelian case they backed the creation of a new political actor, showing once again signs of contradiction. The predominant narrative was presenting the G5 Sahel foundation as a response to the inefficiency of the regional and continental actors, such as the AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to address the security crisis.

However, other crucial reasons must be underlined. In fact, the G5 Sahel creation and the consequent support by France and the EU were guided by other political share interests. On one hand, considering the five Sahelian States, the setup of a new organization meant both more independence from the other supranational actors and new economic resources for the military sector, especially thanks to the EU financial support. On the other hand, even for Paris and Brussels, the G5 Sahel seemed the most appropriate solution to back up. Indeed, France immediately became extremely influential for the new organization, following its interest to better coordinate the Barkhane activities on the five States' territory, with the aim to slowly begin an Africanization process of crisis management. Hence, to pursue that objective, France supported the creation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, basically the military branch of the organization, with the purpose to substitute Barkhane operations and progressively reduce its territorial presence in the region (Rupesinghe 2018). Instead, for the European Union, the G5 Sahel, with its Joint Force, represented a more flexible and dynamic actor, finding in it a more convenient interlocutor to promote EU security interests in the area. As a matter of fact, Brussels channeled over 100 million euros from its African Peace Facility² (APF) fund to support the G5S regional activities, which primarily consisted of anti-terrorism and border control policies, thus, the two EU main priorities in the Sahel. However, numerous scholars have raised concerns regarding the European Union's support for the G5 Sahel and its effectiveness as a security provider in the Sahelian context. Despite receiving financial and political support, the G5 Sahel has yet to achieve significant improvements in the region, both in terms of development and security. The military Joint Force has faced challenges, including a lack of adequate equipment, strategic organization, and multilateral coordination, rendering the G5 Sahel unable to serve as a transformative force in the crisis. Furthermore, the initial spirit of cooperation among the five member countries has increasingly weakened, especially following recent *coups d'état* in Mali and Burkina Faso, which ultimately led to Mali's withdrawal from the coalition in 2021. By December 2023, even the authoritarian regimes of Burkina Faso and Niger decided to withdraw from the organization, presenting what appears to be an almost definitive ultimatum for its continued existence.

Given these challenges, the European Union's continued support for the G5 Sahel has been met with significant criticism, as the organization has proven to be ineffective and, at times, counterproductive to regional stability.

As highlighted in previous sections, the Sahel has become a central arena for the European Union's foreign policy since 2010, creating a complex environment characterized by a multitude of activities, instruments, policies, and initiatives. In this context, the weaknesses of the EU foreign policy, as described earlier, remain visible in its approach to the Sahel. The large number of political

² Funded by the EDF, the Africa Peace Facility was established in 2004 to promote activities of peacebuilding in the African Continent.

and financial instruments has contributed to an overcrowded landscape, where the EU has pursued a variety of interests. This approach risks generating high costs with limited outcomes. Instruments such as the EDF, EUTF, IcSP, and African Peace Facility, as well as the CSDP missions, PRISM, and G5 Sahel, reflect a fragmented environment in which the multiplicity of preferences can undermine the efficiency and effectiveness of policies.

This fragility is a result of the short-term orientation that continues to affect the EU's decision-making process, compelling Brussels to provide rapid responses to crises in order to avoid internal imbalances within Member States and European institutions. Consequently, security and migration have emerged as the new priorities, often at the expense of long-term development policies that could foster more sustainable, equitable outcomes. These priorities reflect an attempt to address the EU's "ontological insecurity" through immediate action. Moreover, the Sahelian approach continues to highlight the absence of a unified European voice, with Member States' preferences playing a dominant role in shaping the EU's external actions. The powerful French influence in the region is particularly evident, often functioning more as a competitor than as a complement to the EU's broader interests. Furthermore, the contradictions and asymmetries inherent in EU-Africa relations remain evident in the Sahel, where critical issues such as security and migration have not been managed in a way that promotes an equal dialogue between the two parties.

The following chapters will examine and delve deeper into the limitations and vulnerabilities of the EU's Sahelian approach, using Mali as a case study. Key questions to address include: Has the European Union effectively become a security provider for the region? Was the Sahel a successful arena for the EU's foreign policy practice?

A Case Study in the Context of the Sahelian Major Imbalances: Mali

2.1 A Complex Land

As one of the most influential actors in the Sahel region, Mali represents a particularly compelling case study for shedding light on EU-Africa relations. However, a general background analysis is necessary to better understand why this country has emerged as a game changer in the Sahelian region over the past decade. Mali's recent history shares many commonalities with other narratives characterizing the African continent. France colonized the region in 1864, and like many other French colonies, it remained under its control for nearly a century. Initially united with contemporary Senegal in the Federation of Mali, the country gained independence from France on 20 June 1960. However, the federation quickly dissolved, leading to the birth of modern Mali. The country's recent political history follows a trajectory similar to that of other Sub-Saharan states that gained independence during the same period. Mali's first elected president, Modibo Keita, held power until 1968, imposing a Marxist single-party system that represented a clear and concrete break from the previous political order. However, historical tensions among Mali's various ethnic groups, particularly the Tuareg, began to surface almost immediately after the French withdrawal, generating instability. In 1968, after years of coercive national rule, military strengthening, and interventions in the north, Keita was overthrown in Mali's first *coup d'état*, an event that would not remain an exception in the decades to come. The national army, led by Moussa Traoré, seized power, and the new president ruled the country for over 20 years, employing the same coercive methods as his predecessor, despite recurring waves of civilian protest (Gazeley 2022).

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However, the March Revolution of 1991 represented a turning point in Mali's modern history. After persistent protests against the Traoré regime, the country appeared to reach a critical juncture in its democratic development. The demand for a constitution and democratic elections became increasingly evident, leading students and civil activists to engage in prolonged demonstrations. Although the government, as in previous years, responded with violent repression, the protests intensified and began to garner support from certain sectors of the military. On 26 March, the revolution culminated in the arrest of the president, an event that paved the way for a new constitution and future democratic elections. In 1992, Alpha Oumar Konaré was elected president, securing a second term in 1997 and governing the country during a comparatively stable period. This stability was evidenced by the implementation of democratic elections, the adoption of a new constitution, and peace agreements with the Tuareg minority, all of which contributed to Mali being regarded as one of the most democratic countries on the African continent (Wing 2013).

Following Konaré's two terms, Amadou Toumani Touré was elected president in 2002, leading the country until the infamous *coup d'état* of 2012, which marked the beginning of the current crisis. Given its critical importance in shaping the challenges of Mali's recent history, this event will be examined in detail in the second section of this chapter.

While a brief historical contextualization is essential, numerous scholarly works have already explored Mali's post-colonial political landscape, as they have for other Sahelian countries. For this reason, the present study also seeks to examine aspects of Malian society that are often relegated to secondary importance when political and policy-related matters take center stage. Indeed, an in-depth analysis of the Sahelian region immediately reveals the extreme complexity of its societal structures. This observation may hold true for many other geographical areas, but it is particularly evident in the case of Mali. How, then, is this complexity expressed? The focus should be placed on three primary dimensions: geography, society, and economy.

From a geographical perspective, Mali, along with Niger, lies at the heart of the vast Sub-Saharan region known as the Sahel. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, it is crucial to comprehend the area's distinctive geography and environmental conditions. This horizontal belt of land spans parts of Mauritania, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, Sudan, Chad, and Eritrea. However, the dynamics and challenges faced by these states vary considerably, depending on whether a small or large portion of their territory is subject to the inhospitable climate of the Sahel.

Taking the broader picture into account, the Sahel's environment can be described as almost surreal. The northern region is dominated by the most historically significant geographic feature: the Sahara Desert. This vast expanse of sand has, for centuries, acted as a natural barrier, separating North Africa from the rest of the continent and shaping both the development patterns and cultural heritage of local populations. As one moves southward, this formidable natural divide gradually recedes. Here, the environment begins to serve as a re-

source for human life, though never in a fully sufficient or exhaustive manner. Agriculture has rarely progressed beyond the subsistence level, and pastoralists have traditionally been compelled to adopt a nomadic lifestyle, perpetually in search of fertile land within an arid landscape.

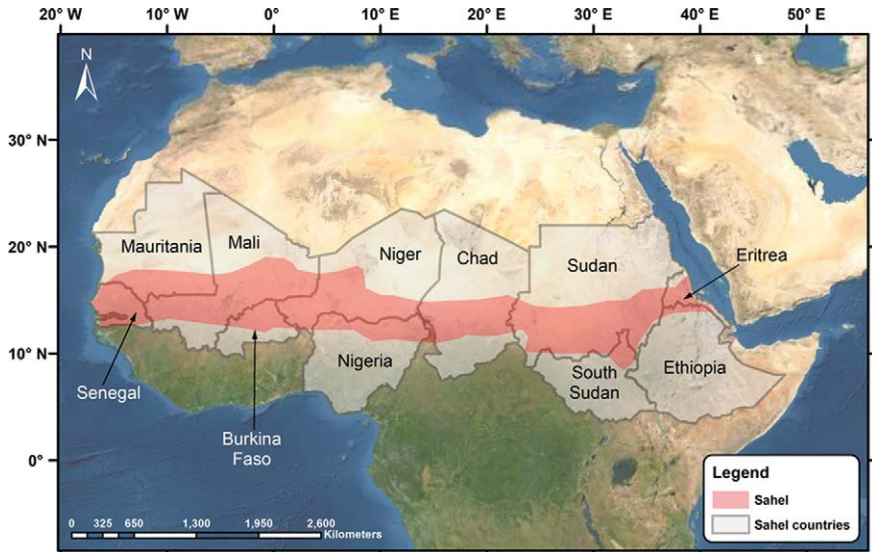


Figure 1 – Sahelian Map. Source: Al-Saidi et al. 2023.

Indeed, the key concept for understanding life in the Sahel is balance. For thousands of years, local populations have existed in a delicate and precarious equilibrium between the positive and negative forces of nature. High temperatures and cyclical droughts have profoundly influenced livelihoods, social structures, and human interactions. This is why, in the Sahel, climate, often considered a secondary variable in other regional analyses, assumes a fundamental role, comparable to that of economic and political factors. Geographically, the inhabitable areas of the Sahel coincide with the most historically and culturally significant cities, which have played a central role in major African historical events. Due to their environmental conditions, cities such as Timbuktu emerged as centers of power, trade, and intellectual exchange for numerous local civilizations (Aime and De Giorgio 2021). These sporadic urban hubs in the Sub-Saharan region facilitated all forms of societal interaction, from the renowned gemstone and gold trade, particularly Malian gold, to diverse intellectual engagements. For centuries, Timbuktu, Agadez, Ouar, and many others represented the true wealth of the Sahel, while the rest of the region remained constrained by environmental hostility, which impeded sustainable development.

Droughts, in particular, have long been one of the region's greatest challenges. For centuries, water scarcity has been a decisive factor in shaping the historical events and socio-political dynamics of the Sahel. Populations have

endured cyclical periods without rainfall, during which even the cities struggled to survive (We are Water 2019). Without the need to examine distant historical data, one need only look at the last fifty years, during which multiple water crises have led to catastrophic consequences. Notably, the droughts between 1968 and 1974 resulted in a severe and prolonged famine, which, for the first time, drew significant global attention to the precarious living conditions in the Sahel. In both historical and contemporary contexts, there has always been an urgent need to respect and maintain the fragile equilibrium between natural resources and human activity.

Climate change further exacerbates this already delicate ecosystem. In recent years, desertification and rising temperatures have intensified at an alarming rate, allowing the Sahara to encroach ever further southward (Benjaminson et al. 2012). Consequently, from north to south, pastures are shrinking, and the traditional seasonal cycles that shepherds have long relied upon for their livestock are being disrupted. Additionally, the region's major water sources, such as Lake Chad and the Niger River, are diminishing, leading to severe food and water shortages as well as significant disruptions in the local labor market, which was already limited in its opportunities.

Thus, only by assigning the geographical variable its proper weight can a comprehensive analysis of Malian society's dynamics and characteristics be developed. Over the centuries, environmental challenges have shaped Mali's social landscape. Given the region's harsh climate, it would be logical to perceive the Sahel as an impoverished, isolated, and geopolitically irrelevant area. However, history tells a different story. For centuries, and particularly within the territory of present-day Mali, the movement of people and goods played a fundamental role in material and intellectual exchanges. As early as 500 years ago, cities such as Timbuktu, Mopti, and Gao were already home to significant populations, composed of diverse ethnic groups engaged in various economic activities.

The balance among these groups, such as the Bambara, the nomadic Tuareg, and the Peul pastoralists, was crucial for fostering cooperation and survival in such a hostile environment. As a result, Malian society is incredibly diverse, delicate, and complex, making it a key factor to understand when attempting to analyze the country's present-day situation. Social ties between communities are the product of historical compromises, which have delineated the roles, activities, and territorial boundaries of each ethnic group. However, this fragmented reality stands in stark contrast to the classical Western conception of the state, which is typically characterized by centralized governance, territorial unity, and sovereignty. In fact, when analyzing countries such as Mali, one of the most challenging research questions paradoxically coincides with the most fundamental one: What is Mali?

Unfortunately, the answer to this question is neither simple nor straightforward, as one might assume. The complexity lies in the legacy of colonial empires in the Sahelian region, which persisted until the last century. In other words, what is now recognized as Mali is the territorial outcome of borders delineated by France throughout the colonial period. These borders were retained after in-

dependence, effectively crystallizing the territorial framework of the modern Malian nation-state. Consequently, the geographical entity now called Mali encompasses a diverse array of ancient populations, cultures, ethnicities, and religions, all confined within an artificial colonial perimeter. While the relationships and interactions among local populations predate the colonial era by centuries, they are now embedded within a sovereign and unified national context. This has led to persistent frictions and imbalances, particularly affecting certain Malian minorities (Aime and De Giorgio 2021).

The historical ties between the northern nomadic populations, such as the Peul and the Tuareg, and the southern sedentary communities, primarily the Bambara and the Dogon, have always been fragile and complex. However, in recent decades, these relationships have become even more precarious. Before the establishment of the Republic of Mali, disputes among these groups were mediated through a traditional, quasi-feudal hierarchy, in which local lords held the authority to negotiate and resolve conflicts between pastoralists and agriculturalists, though violence remained a persistent feature for centuries. However, in the 1960s, with the emergence of new Malian national institutions, these long-standing dynamics came into conflict with modern governmental regulations regarding land ownership, legal rights, territorial boundaries, and taxation. The state struggled to assert its authority, or even maintain a tangible presence, across all national territories. As a result, regional disparities and the marginalization of certain groups became inevitable, further exacerbating ethnic, geographic, and economic divisions.

Given the geographical and social complexities outlined above, Mali's economic situation offers little room for optimism. The Sahelian belt is among the poorest regions in the world, and Mali is no exception. For instance, according to data from the World Population Review in 2022, Mali ranked 173rd in GDP per capita (PPP), placing it among the world's 20 lowest-ranking economies (WPR 2022). Indeed, Mali performs poorly across all major economic indicators. Unfortunately, in recent decades, even before the onset of the 2012 crisis, the government failed to implement effective development policies across multiple sectors. The promotion of economic liberalization, in line with the international pressures of the Washington Consensus, proved ineffective in improving economic conditions and, consequently, broader societal well-being.

Furthermore, following a pattern already encouraged by the French administration during the colonial era, the agricultural and livestock sectors continued to operate under a model focused on maximizing land exploitation to meet external demand, particularly for goods such as leather. However, these practices accelerated desertification and land degradation, already exacerbated by climate change and political instability. As a result, vast areas of land have become unsuitable for both employment and the basic provision of food and water. These dynamics have contributed to rising poverty, unemployment, social unrest, and large-scale internal and external displacement.

In this context, the Malian state has failed to provide essential services and implement policies aimed at reducing geographical and social inequalities. This has

led to a stark divide between the southern and northern regions of the country (Devermont 2020). Bamako, the capital, presents itself as a developing African city, hosting various institutional and international offices and offering more than just basic necessities to its residents. Its modern skyscrapers, newly developed districts, and the presence of numerous international organizations reflect the global community's heightened interest in Mali over the past decade. By contrast, moving northward, the landscape shifts dramatically, revealing a vastly different reality.

As a result, disillusionment and dissatisfaction have spread across various segments of society, leading to a decline in support for President Touré, who came to be viewed as a symbol of political corruption and the primary architect of the failed decentralization policies. Indeed, during his administration, discontent grew in response to several controversial decisions (Wing 2013). Notably, in the months leading up to the 2012 elections, President Touré introduced a major constitutional reform that appeared to consolidate executive power. This move provoked strong reactions both from public opinion, raising concerns over the country's democratic stability, and from northern ethnic minorities, who already faced systemic underrepresentation. These growing tensions, combined with deepening poverty and institutional fragility, created the ideal conditions for the profound and widespread crisis that erupted in Mali in 2012.

2.2 The Northern Rebellion and the Military Golpe of 2012

The year 2012 stands as one of the most dramatic chapters in Mali's recent history. The profound social, political, and economic imbalances outlined in the previous section created the ideal conditions for the outbreak of the most severe Sahelian crisis in recent years. In January 2012, the Tuareg-led Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) launched an armed rebellion in northern Mali, rapidly seizing territory. The MNLA, named after the historic northern region of Timbuktu, is a Tuareg ethnic militia that has long advocated for the secession of northern Mali from the republic. The Malian National Army failed to contain the rebellion in its early stages, enabling the MNLA to secure strategic positions and inflict casualties on national forces.

As the conflict escalated, President Amadou Toumani Touré and his administration came under mounting pressure. On one front, they struggled to suppress the violent insurgency in the North, while on the other, they faced growing discontent from the Malian armed forces, frustrated by inadequate military resources. As the days passed and the situation deteriorated, unrest within the army intensified, garnering support from sectors of the public alarmed by the MNLA's rapid territorial gains. In March 2012, following an internal military mutiny near Bamako, the national army seized political control of the state, establishing the National Committee for the Recovery of Democracy and the Restoration of the State (CNRDRE) and forcing President Touré from power. Meanwhile, the MNLA continued its advance toward central Mali, bolstered both by the country's political instability and by the practical military support of various terrorist groups.

To fully understand the factors driving the MNLA's rapid success, it is necessary to examine deeper underlying causes. As previously noted, the Tuareg people have long been a source of instability not only for the Malian state but also for other Sahelian nations. Although the MNLA formally emerged in 2011, Tuareg separatist movements and armed uprisings have been a persistent feature of the region's political landscape. Historically present across the Sahel, the Tuareg have played a key role in trans-Saharan trade for centuries. Using camels as their primary means of transport, they established extensive trade networks that linked the Maghreb to the rest of Africa. As a nomadic people, their geographic distribution has always been fluid and difficult to quantify.

It was precisely this nomadic character that led to significant challenges following the wave of African independence in the 1960s. With the withdrawal of colonial powers, the newly sovereign states inherited the arbitrary borders imposed by European powers during the Berlin Conference (1884–1885). These artificial boundaries severely disrupted the lives of many nomadic groups, including the Tuareg and the Peul, who found themselves divided by formal state borders that restricted their traditional patterns of movement. From the outset of its independence, the Republic of Mali faced persistent discontent among its northern populations, particularly the Tuareg, who felt politically marginalized and deprived of their traditional freedoms. Despite intermittent efforts to promote integration over the decades, tensions remained high, frequently culminating in protests and armed uprisings.

However, given that instability in northern Mali was not a new phenomenon, what made the 2012 MNLA rebellion so particularly violent and effective? Two critical factors must be considered. First, the substantial presence of terrorist groups and criminal organizations within Malian territory provided a destabilizing force that exacerbated the conflict. Second, the collapse of the Libyan regime in 2011 had far-reaching consequences for the region, leaving behind a legacy that significantly influenced the dynamics of the rebellion.

In the first place, it must be noted that, since the beginning of the century, various terrorist groups and criminal organizations have expanded their presence and activities in the Sahel. Exploiting the institutional weaknesses of many Sahelian states, these groups found fertile ground to thrive and establish new economic networks. A study conducted by the Danish Institute of International Studies in Copenhagen (Boserup et al. 2018) highlights two primary routes through which terrorist organizations have spread across Mali.

The first route originated in Algeria, with the Groupe Salafiste de Prédication et de Combat (GSPC) seeking to extend its influence into northern Mali. Taking advantage of the country's instability, the GSPC successfully entrenched itself within Malian territory and forged strong ties with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the North African branch of Al-Qaeda. The second significant route emerged from the south, particularly from Nigeria. The internationally notorious group Boko Haram began expanding its operations toward Niger and the Lake Chad region, positioning itself as another key actor in the Sahelian context.

The presence of active terrorist groups and criminal organizations even before 2012 contributed significantly to the destabilization of an already fragile region. Exploiting the institutional vacuum in these territories, jihadist groups successfully developed extensive illegal economic networks both within and beyond Mali's borders. Drug and human trafficking, smuggling, armed attacks, and kidnappings have represented, and unfortunately continue to represent, the primary activities of these non-state actors. While a more detailed analysis of these groups will be provided in later chapters, their strategic role in the MNLA rebellion of 2012 is already evident. During the uprising, Tuareg insurgents found powerful allies among jihadist groups, which welcomed any opportunity to weaken the Malian state's presence and control.

Indeed, shortly before launching its armed campaign, the MNLA established connections with two organizations closely linked to AQIM. The first was Ansar Dine, another Tuareg group distinguished by its strong Islamist fundamentalist orientation. The second was the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), a splinter faction within AQIM (Demuyne and Coleman 2020). Within the context of the rebellion, the support of these groups proved crucial in accelerating the Tuareg advance, enabling them to seize control of key cities such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal in a remarkably short period. However, while these alliances were instrumental, another key event significantly bolstered Tuareg forces.

On September 20, 2011, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was assassinated, and the country collapsed following nearly ten months of conflict. While a detailed analysis of this event lies beyond the scope of this discussion, what is particularly relevant is the instability generated by the Libyan war. The collapse of Libya had profound ripple effects on neighboring states, triggering widespread arms smuggling that directly benefited Sahelian jihadist groups and the MNLA. Additionally, the movement of mercenaries, many of whom had fought for Gaddafi, intensified immediately after the war. Among these fighters were Tuareg combatants who would later form Ansar Dine, a group that, as previously mentioned, played a pivotal role in the Malian insurgency (Boserup et al. 2018).

Consequently, the fall of Libya is widely recognized in academic studies as a turning point for regional instability, fostering conditions conducive to conflict, mass migration, and illicit activities. In this regard, the 2012 rebellion in Mali was no exception. The MNLA and other armed factions were able to access weapons and resources that had flowed out of post-war Libya, fueling yet another violent conflict in the Sahel.

2.3 The International Community Interventions and the Fear of Terrorism (2012–2020)

As briefly indicated in the first paragraph, the Malian *coup d'état* rapidly altered the country's political landscape. After many years under the leadership of President Amadou Toumani Touré, growing dissatisfaction with the political elite culminated in widespread support for the military coup. However, the

international community, primarily through the United Nations, unequivocally condemned this authoritarian shift and exerted increasing pressure on the CNRDRE. Furthermore, in Resolution 2085 (2012), the UN Security Council outlined a concrete intervention plan, recognizing the serious risk of state collapse due to the high level of political instability exacerbated by the ongoing conflict in the north.

The initial international response materialized in the form of the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA). While this initiative was a direct response to the urgent need to stabilize the Malian crisis, it lacked the operational capacity to halt the rebels' advance. Nonetheless, the same resolution also encouraged a coordinated intervention with the involvement of other international actors, including the European Union and its Member States, the African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Meanwhile, the Ansar Dine group, emboldened by a series of strategic victories in both the northern and central regions of the country, began advancing towards the capital, Bamako. This development heightened international concerns over the potential collapse of the Malian state and the prospect of the entire national territory falling under jihadist control. Given that AFISMA, which was not a UN-led mission, failed to provide adequate military and strategic support, Malian interim President Dioncounda Traoré formally requested direct military assistance from France in January 2013 to counter the growing jihadist threat.

France, under President François Hollande, had already been assisting Mali at an intelligence level. However, following the Malian government's official request and within the legal framework established by Security Council Resolution 2085, France decided to take direct military action. Consequently, Operation Serval was launched, deploying French troops on Malian territory and rapidly increasing their numbers to 5,000 soldiers within a month.

Subsequently, in April 2013, the United Nations adopted Resolution 2100, which led to the establishment of the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). This peacekeeping mission, endowed with a comprehensive mandate, was tasked with promoting stability and security throughout Malian territory and facilitating a smooth institutional transition (MINUSMA Website). The resolution also called upon the Malian government to swiftly organize peaceful and democratic elections to restore a legitimate political framework.

As Operation Serval continued its rapid northward advance, President Traoré faced mounting international pressure and scheduled presidential elections for July 2013, followed by legislative elections in November of the same year. With the support of French troops, alongside UN-backed forces and contributions from states such as Chad and Niger, most Malian territories were liberated from jihadist control. This military success enabled international stakeholders, in collaboration with MINUSMA forces, to ensure a secure environment for democratic elections. Consequently, the electoral process took place as planned, resulting in the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta as the new President of the

Republic of Mali. His party also secured victory in the legislative elections held in November 2013 (Sheehan, Marquardt, and Collins 2021).

Unfortunately, since 2013, Mali has not undergone the democratic transition that the international community had anticipated. The United Nations' MINUSMA mission continued its efforts to promote security, stabilization, and peacekeeping across the country, deploying more than 15,000 troops. Although Operation Serval formally concluded in 2014, it was immediately succeeded by another French military intervention, Operation Barkhane. Unlike its predecessor, which focused on emergency stabilization, Operation Barkhane adopted a longer-term approach (intentionally or not) aimed at sustaining security over time. As the security threat was no longer at the same critical level as in 2012, the operation concentrated on patrolling and striking specific targets, with its geographic focus primarily in the northern regions of the country.

In addition to France's ongoing involvement, the European Union also played an increasingly active role in Mali, launching two international missions under the auspices of the United Nations. As a key geopolitical actor, the EU could not remain uninvolved, particularly given the leadership of one of its most influential Member States in the Malian intervention. The first mission, initiated in early 2013 following Council Decision 34/2013, was the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali). This initiative was designed to provide practical military and strategic training to the Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMA) (EUTM Mali website). Its primary objective was to strengthen Mali's security forces, enabling them to become increasingly self-reliant in addressing internal terrorist threats. EUTM Mali coordinated its efforts with other international missions while strictly adhering to the mandate established by the European Council. Consequently, its training and support activities were confined to the southern regions of the country, particularly around Bamako, and were deliberately structured to avoid direct military engagement.

Two years later, in 2015, the European Union launched a second civilian mission in Mali at the request of the Malian government. EUCAP Sahel Mali, initiated at the beginning of the year, was modeled closely on EUTM Mali, though applied in a civilian context. Its primary focus was on organizing specialized training programs for high-ranking public officials, government personnel, and law enforcement officers. The mission aimed to support the development of new policies and reforms in the areas of security, human rights, and crisis management.

From the preceding analysis, it becomes evident that, since 2013, Mali has occupied a central position in international diplomatic discussions, with various political interests converging within its borders. The continuous presence of multiple external actors significantly influenced domestic political and security dynamics for many years.

Finally, in 2015, after substantial pressure from the international community, the Malian government and northern Tuareg rebels signed the Algiers Peace Agreement (Pellerin 2020). The accord was brokered under the supervision of MINUSMA, ECOWAS, the African Union, the European Union, and individ-

ual stakeholders such as France, the United States, and Algeria. As a result, a temporary peace was established, and, two years after the crisis, the likelihood of a complete Malian state collapse appeared significantly reduced. The role of international actors in facilitating this mediation process was crucial, although their persistent efforts to secure an agreement may have exceeded the genuine commitment of the primary domestic stakeholders.

However, did the peace bring some concrete security, economic and social improvements? Generally speaking, and taking into consideration a wider perspective, really few things changed in Mali between 2013 and 2020. On the one hand, clearly, international interventions helped the FAMA to regain many portions of territories that fell into terrorists' hands, providing security, military support, and constant patrolling. On the other hand, jihadists' presence was never completely eradicated, and their connections continued to increase and proliferate. The main reason must be found in the unsolved instability characterizing the northern part of Mali. Even if French military intervention physically cleared most of the country from the terrorists' control, the State continued to fail in providing basic services in those regions. Poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion remained the most important problems, which represented the perfect environment for the proliferation of jihadist groups. Specifically, inside this context, new actors made their appearances in the scene. First, in 2015 Katiba Macina, another terrorist group affiliated with AQIM, started to be more active and dangerous in the area. The peculiarity of this group stands in its Peul's ethnic origin and composition. In other words, another nomadic population suffering from discrimination and underrepresentation similar to the Tuaregs. Hence, as a result of those difficult conditions inside the Peul's community, the jihadists' recruitment process becomes extremely simple and convincing, turning Katiba Macina group into a powerful force in a short period of time. Second, many terrorist groups began to establish more and more connections and relations among themselves. With French counterterrorism actions hitting hard, jihadist groups tried to create new strategic alliances in order to be more effective and less scattered over the territory. In this sense, in March 2017 Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) was established, which was a coalition composed of some AQIM-affiliated groups in Mali, Ansar Dine, and the aforementioned Katiba Macina. In this way, under the umbrella of JNIM, Al-Qaeda succeed in increasing its power and influence on the region, despite the presence of Operation Barkhane. Indeed, JNIM facilitated coordination between the single jihadists' groups, and it has covered a functional strategic role in protecting its affiliates from specific international attention. In other words, single actors, such as Katiba Macina, are incentivized to increase their activities and attacks thanks to the fewer responsibilities and risks covered by the large JNIM umbrella. Inevitably, the situation led to a consistent growth in the number of attacks, and consequently in the number of fatalities. As a result, until 2019, JINM was responsible for the highest number of deadly attacks in the Sahel area, which means 65% of the total fatalities (Le Roux 2019). Third, the Malian security situation started to be undermined even by the emergence

of another prominent actor. In May 2015, from an internal division of a fringe group affiliated with AQIM, the Islamic State (IS) made its appearance in the Sahel. Under the name of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the local hotspot of the Syrian caliphate, the group started to be more active in 2017, when, due to the serious defeats in the middle east area, began to see the Sahel as a new possible region of influence. Since that period, ISGS really turned into one of the major threats concerning security, trying to overcome decades of AQIM presence and power in the region. Indeed, ISGS, even with many lacks in organization and trafficking in comparison to JINM, represented the crucial variable causing the consistent spike in violent attacks during the last years, due to their more intimidating and aggressive approach.

Summing up, it appears evident that a concrete improvement in the general security of Malian territory was not achieved. Despite the presence of powerful external actors, the country remained unstable from many points of view. The national armed force never reached complete control of the lost territories and the institutional presence struggled to spread its influence outside of Bamako. As already said, violence and terrorist attacks increased and, by their side, social and economic inequalities developed even more. Therefore, Mali of 2020 was not very different from the country that almost collapsed 8 years before, and, consequently, a new series of instabilities and crises appeared as inevitable.

2.4 The Recent *Coups d'État* and the Transition Government (2020–2024)

In 2020, social discontent in Mali was both palpable and widespread. The MINUSMA and Barkhane missions helped maintain the status quo and territorial control of the country. However, during this period, jihadist attacks and fatalities continued to increase. Outside the Bamako area, the general population faced poor and precarious conditions, and disaffection towards institutions and President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's government was on the rise. Political elites were often accused of corruption and incompetence, failing to bring about tangible change from the center to the north of the country. Despite substantial investments from international organizations and states, the situation in the north remained largely unchanged since 2012, fueling public skepticism regarding the concentration of investments in the south, where political elites controlled 90% of their electoral base (Devermont and Judd 2020). In other words, public opinion began to question both the government's willingness to address the situation outside the capital and the integrity or effectiveness of its political representatives. At the heart of protests and strikes were political figures from the opposition, such as former presidential candidate Soumaila Cissé, as well as new civilian and religious activists like Ras Bath, leader of the Collective for the Defense of the Republic, and Mahmoud Dicko, former president of the Islamic High Council. The political landscape was thus unstable, and the transition government was under constant pressure from civil society and, above all, from the military. Furthermore, the longstanding presence of external actors on Malian territory began to appear burdensome, particularly due to the lack of significant

improvements in security. In this context, the population's perception of international actors, especially former colonial power France, deteriorated. Consequently, the national government lost further credibility and public support due to its alignment with the pressures and demands of the international community. As a result, national institutions and political elites, already perceived as corrupt and unqualified, further tarnished their public image by aligning with international actors seen as illegitimate and ineffective.

The political instability described above created fertile ground for the first *coup d'état* in four years. Waves of protests and social pressures weakened both the position of the President and the transition government. Thus, the parliamentary elections of March 2020 marked a turning point for public discontent (ISPI 2020). Just days before the elections, opposition party leader Soumaila Cissé was kidnapped, an event that triggered a significant wave of riots as citizens claimed that the government had failed to ensure transparent and safe elections. Furthermore, the ambiguous results of the elections exacerbated public frustration as voters began to question the legitimacy of the electoral outcomes. On the one hand, civil representatives continued to accuse the government of corruption and poor administration, fostering dissent groups such as the 5th of June Movement, led by Imam Dicko. On the other hand, President Keita attempted to defuse the situation by seeking a compromise with public opinion, mediated by the presence of ECOWAS. To this end, Keita decided to dissolve the Constitutional Court, which had played a central role in the March electoral dispute (S/2020/952). However, no substantial changes were made, and protests continued to proliferate in Bamako, with some sectors of the military beginning to express strong doubts about the ruling class. The Malian National Armed Forces (FAMA) have historically played a crucial role in the country's power dynamics, and during the post-colonial period, their significant influence led to multiple instances of political intervention. One such moment occurred in August 2020, when the unstable political and social environment created the perfect opportunity for certain factions of the military to seize power. Colonel Assimi Goita, leader of the FAMA rebellion faction, orchestrated the arrest of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and Prime Minister Boubou Cissé. Shortly thereafter, the military appeared on national television, proclaiming the formation of the Comité national pour le salut du peuple (CNSP), with Goita as its president. In response, the international community reacted swiftly. The United Nations, the European Union, the African Union, and ECOWAS unanimously condemned the *coup* and exerted political pressure to stabilize the situation. A democratic transition, characterized by rapid and legitimate elections, was immediately demanded. On August 27th, former President Keita was released, and the CNSP took initial steps toward meeting international demands (S/2020/1281). By the end of September 2020, Bah N'Daou, a former member of the national army, was appointed as President of the transition, and Assimi Goita accepted the position of Vice-President. Following this decision, the new President continued negotiations with international actors, particularly ECOWAS and the United Nations, reassuring them of the ruling class's commitment to democratic prin-

ciples. Consequently, a Transition Charter was adopted, reflecting a compromise reached through negotiations. The document outlined the priorities and objectives of the new political direction and established an 18-month transition period that was to culminate in presidential and legislative elections.

During the initial months following the second *coup*, the situation appeared to stabilize, and tensions seemed to ease. Political dialogues increased with both internal and external actors. In accordance with the Transition Charter framework, a new government was appointed after consultations with various national stakeholders. Additionally, all international missions remained active on Malian territory, as there was a genuine possibility of maintaining an open political dialogue with the Malian authorities. However, in May 2021, the situation was destined to collapse once again, just nine months after the first *coup d'état*. In mid-May, the Prime Minister decided to resign, and public opinion began to demand a reshaping of the government's composition. On May 24th, the new members of the government were appointed, responding to the political and public pressures that had characterized the preceding weeks. Representatives from MINUSMA, the African Union, and ECOWAS understood the delicate political moment and, in alignment with many political and civilian stakeholders, continued to advocate for the transition process and a democratic resolution to the political deadlock (S/2021/S19).

In an effort to strengthen the transition and send a strong political message, the reshuffling of the government included several controversial positions and actors. Notably, the Minister of Defense, Sadio Camara, and the Minister of Security, Modibo Kone, both significant members of the CNSP rebellion group, were replaced. This risky decision was intended to signal the government's commitment to reducing the military's influence in national politics. However, the move had the opposite effect, triggering an immediate response from the CNSP. Within hours, the President and Prime Minister were arrested and moved to a military camp outside the capital. Just two days after the arrest of the highest-ranking state officials, the Supreme Court declared Assimi Goita, already Vice-President and leader of the CNSP, as President of the Republic of Mali, marking the second successful *coup* within a year (Dion and Sany 2021).

Once again, the international community and its representatives in Mali condemned the actions of the CNSP, demanding the immediate release of both the President and the Prime Minister. The request was eventually met, and President Goita expressed his intention to continue following the transition process, promising national dialogue and democratic elections. The transition period was set at six months, with plans to hold free and democratic elections in February 2022. However, in the months that followed, the new ruling class seemed to renege on the promises made immediately following the *coup*. ECOWAS, MINUSMA, the EU, and other international actors continued to press Malian authorities, emphasizing the necessity of adhering to the transition timetable. Nevertheless, the President failed to make any concrete commitments or progress toward the much-anticipated elections. ECOWAS repeatedly requested a clear electoral calendar, but the government frequently failed to provide specific answers.

Under Assimi Goita's leadership, relations with France and the Barkhane Operation deteriorated rapidly. The anti-French sentiment among the new political class became increasingly apparent, and by the time of the second coup, the security partnership with Paris was seriously questioned. Unlike the 2013 government, which had welcomed French military intervention, the new political elite took an entirely opposing stance. France, once welcomed as a partner to combat terrorism and restore peace, was now viewed as the old colonial power that had left Mali in the middle of the last century. This sentiment was widely reflected in government propaganda, and many sectors of the population began to protest and strike against what they perceived as the illegitimate French presence in the country. The result was the beginning of a diplomatic crisis between Mali and France, even as the security situation in the north remained dire.

In the following months, political dialogues were marked by minimal or even imperceptible progress toward the changes outlined in the transition calendar. The reluctance of Malian authorities became increasingly evident, and the international community began to recognize the inconsistency of the negotiations. Terrorist attacks escalated, as did fatalities and internal displacement, placing immense social pressure on the Bamako area. A large portion of the population was moving to the capital and its periphery, attempting to escape the untenable situation in other parts of the country. In this context, national propaganda found fertile ground, portraying international actors, particularly France, as ineffective and counterproductive in addressing security issues in the north. By blaming external actors for Mali's problems, Assimi Goita was able to bolster popular support. Indeed, Bamako saw numerous protests and demonstrations calling for "independence," demanding the liberation of Mali from foreign powers perceived as neo-colonial.

As a result, Malian authorities recognized that their political maneuvering space had expanded, and there was less pressure to adhere strictly to the transition calendar and its deadlines. This realization led to another significant political shift in December 2021, when the Malian government decided to extend the six-month transition period to a much longer one of five years. Consequently, the Presidential and Legislative elections scheduled for February 2022 were postponed indefinitely. This decision prompted strong reactions from the international and regional communities. ECOWAS, which had lifted previous sanctions in the hope of facilitating the transition process, responded by imposing a new set of severe economic and political sanctions. The sanctions package included the suspension of Mali from the organization, closure of land and air borders with other member states, suspension of commercial and financial transactions (except for basic goods), and the freezing of Malian assets in the ECOWAS bank (Kofi Aubyn 2022). This comprehensive package was expected to have a profound impact on the country's economy, already weakened by years of conflict and the COVID-19 crisis. However, it was intended to pressure the transition authorities into reopening a democratic dialogue.

Additionally, both the European Union and France expressed discontent and disappointment with the actions of the Malian junta. On one hand, Brus-

sels, while condemning the political situation, decided to continue providing military and civilian training through the EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel missions. On the other hand, France began to consider the situation unsustainable and problematic. Given the strained diplomatic relations over the preceding months, the Malian decision to disregard the transition calendar and delay the elections was seen as conclusive evidence of a breakdown in relations. As will be described in the next chapter, the political developments of 2021 and 2022 prompted France to reassess its intervention in Mali, culminating in the announcement of the withdrawal of Barkhane's troops on February 17, 2022, despite ongoing concerns about the country's security situation.

While the most recent events will be discussed at the end of this work, the main takeaway from this chapter is the troubled history of a highly complex country. For over a decade, Mali has been at the center of international discussions and has been a critical factor in shaping the external policies of both the European Union and France. Given this, it would be insightful to examine and explore the nature, characteristics, and impact of EU and French interventions in Mali over the past decade. In such a complex and pluralistic landscape, were European actors able to promote a structured and coherent strategy? Were they successful in fostering a win-win and credible outcome for Malian development? Did they address the root causes of Malian instability and the underlying security challenges?

EU's Policy Weaknesses in the Malian Security Crisis

3.1 The Security Crisis: Historical Tensions in a Contemporary Context

3.1.1 The Root Causes of the Malian Security Crisis

Before investigating the European Union's activism in the Sahelian region, it is essential to analyze more deeply the fundamental causes of the current Malian security crisis. This crisis is an incredibly complex phenomenon shaped by a range of historical tensions that must be considered to truly understand contemporary dynamics. As briefly described in the second chapter, the Sahelian social landscape has developed over centuries, built on fragile and delicate equilibria. The limited availability of natural resources and the harsh climate conditions have shaped the behaviors of the population, which has had to constantly find numerous compromises to coexist peacefully and prosper.

Thus, even within the Malian context, the relations between the different ethnic groups evolved around the concept of compromise, aiming to foster basic economic exchanges and practices conducive to peaceful coexistence. In fact, the social fabric was essentially divided into two parts, which constituted the majority of the regional economy. On one hand, the agricultural sector, which mainly produced millet and sorghum, was more developed in the southern part of the territory, due to favorable climate conditions. Historically, the agricultural fields were controlled by the Dogon and Bambara, two sedentary Sahelian populations focused on the production of basic foodstuffs. On the other hand, the livestock sector, which represented a crucial resource, was largely managed

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by the Peul community, also known as the Fulani. This nomadic population was located in the northern part of the territory (Aime and De Giorgio 2021).

Therefore, although the shepherds and farmers were marked by profound ethnic, cultural, and social differences, they were compelled to accept many compromises in order to facilitate productive coexistence for both communities. This created a form of equilibrium, where each side benefited from the other's activities. On one hand, the shepherds, driven by the harsh dry season in the north, were allowed to pass through southern lands to find fresh pastures. In exchange, the Peul's herds provided valuable benefits to the farmers: the animals grazed brushwood, cleaned the fields, and naturally fertilized the land. In turn, many Dogon and Bambara villages, receiving these benefits, compensated the Peul with agricultural goods or even small amounts of money.

Thus, these practices fostered collaboration between the different ethnic groups, stabilizing a positive equilibrium in the region. The resolution of potential conflicts was managed by the heads of the local villages, who were, in effect, the territorial authorities of the area.

However, despite the economic and social equilibrium described above, the Sahel's social fabric was never free of tensions between its populations. Violence, conflicts, and territorial disputes have always been characteristic of the Sahelian landscape, especially considering the presence of various ethnicities, economic models, and cultural heritages. In recent decades, however, these tensions have increased substantially, breaking the historical relationship between the groups. The main causes of this must be sought by considering different aspects, which, when interconnected, contributed to worsening the security situation.

For instance, the economic legacy of colonialism encouraged the Malian production of leather to meet growing international demand, leading to the need for larger herds and the exploitation of bigger portions of land. These economic pressures created imbalances between the agricultural and livestock sectors, as farmers began to claim the loss of their historical land due to the growing presence of livestock. Additionally, climate change must be considered a key variable, particularly due to its more evident effects in recent years. Desertification and the lack of water in the north have forced shepherds to migrate south earlier than usual, resulting in conflicts and disputes as they encroached upon Dogon or Bambara cultivated fields before the harvest period (Benjaminsen et al. 2012). Furthermore, climate change, in addition to generating economic and social grievances, has become a serious threat to the lives of ordinary populations. Water supplies are steadily declining, impacting the production of basic foodstuffs, public health, and even the quality of animal husbandry (UNHCR 2022).

However, regarding climate change, further information on future Sahelian challenges will be provided in the last chapter. For now, it should be emphasized that ethnic and social tensions in Mali are not only part of the country's contemporary history, but also represent centuries-old dynamics of forced coexistence in a scarce and hostile natural environment. Additionally, the extreme poverty of the region exacerbates social inequalities and ethnic disparities. Over time, the Malian state has failed to implement an effective political and economic de-

centralization process, neglecting certain areas of the country, particularly the center-north. As a result, the underrepresentation of certain groups in these areas, such as the Tuareg and Peul populations, has become systematic, contributing to a stronger polarization of society. The institutional weakness outside Bamako has played a significant role in exacerbating historical ethnic grievances and facilitating the rise of discrimination, friction, and violence among the groups.

Only by understanding this complex social and economic environment, it is possible to deeply study the contemporary security challenges. Indeed, the increasing presence of terrorist groups, criminal organizations, and insurgent groups is strictly linked to the fragile social fabric of the Malian context. As brilliantly described by Boserup et al. (2018, 11):

“They offer protection, control and access to resources and basic services that the Sahel states fail to deliver. They point to the generalised use of disproportionate force by local and international coercive agencies to justify their own violent practices. They utilize animosities and conflicts among ethnic and tribal groups and exploit the strains generated by the rapid population growth to garner support. Finally, they appeal to individuals whose expectations of life are hampered by the insufficient opportunities generated by domestic job markets and slumping growth rates in the already poor Sahel states.”

In fact, it is precisely for these reasons that Mali became the perfect setting for the development and proliferation of those groups. As already mentioned, ethnic and social frictions are part of the country's history, thus, they represented the ideal ground to feed the terrorist and criminal organizations' desire for growth. Therefore, since the beginning of the century, the illegal presence of non-state actors constantly increased, reaching a turning point in the Tuareg rebellion of 2012. In that rebellion, for the first time, it was clearly visible the link between the old national historical grievances and the new terrorists and criminal organizations' influence. In the north of the country, Tuareg's independence instances were part of the political and social debate since the creation of the Republic of Mali in the 60s. However, only thanks to the military and economic relations with the criminal groups AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO, the Tuareg rebels succeed in taking control of many cities and strategic hotspots during the 2012 civil war (Demuynck and Coleman 2020b). In other words, non-state actors had the opportunity to exploit the historical Tuareg's discontent toward Bamako, in order to increment their power and their influence in the Malian territory. As a matter of fact, the 2012 crisis represented the ideal win-win situation for the MNLA rebels and the regional terrorist groups. The former had significant military help in seizing many strategical territories in the northern part of the country, causing several casualties among the National Armed Force. The latter became more and more influential on the territory, widening the scope of their activities in half of the country and empowering their military capabilities. Following the same logic, all the terrorist groups and criminal organizations took advantage of the Malian weak social and economic context. Indeed, that logic must be highlighted as the main driver for their exponential growth in recent years, despite the presence of French and Sahelian counterterrorist missions.

For example, the rise of the Katiba Macina militia, largely composed of Fulanis, is seen as another interesting case. This group was created in 2015 by the spiritual leader Amadou Kouffa and it represents the synthesis between the jihadist presence in the region, promoted during the years by the AQIM, and the historical Peul's grievances against the State and the other Malian ethnic groups. For this reason, since the beginning, Katiba Macina was able to rapidly widen its ranks thanks to the support of the local Peul population, which was suffering from food insecurity, discrimination, ethnic conflicts, and institutional indifference. Thus, recruiting new components or getting support from the ordinary population became easier and the group started to be more and more active in the region, becoming an important branch of the larger JNIM terrorist coalition. Hence, the institutional weakness outside Bamako and the marginalization of a big community, such as the Peuls one, provided the Katiba Macina the perfect leverage to make grip on the population, which started to perceive those non-state actors as the most convenient solution to fight their condition. Quoting the 2022 report on terrorism made by the Institute for Economics and Peace (p. 45):

Anecdotal evidence and fieldwork research indicates that both Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) are solving family, land and cattle disputes. They provide swift and effective justice non-state actors provide security, justice, education and other core services that locals need, adding to the accepted assumption that state institutions are slow, inefficient, sporadic, and corrupt.

Thanks to these ties, in the last decade, criminal organizations and terrorist groups, even if often territorially defeated by French operations, managed to create stronger relations and connections with the society. As a matter of fact, another significant example can be identified in the Dan Na Ambassagou militia. This association was created in the central and eastern part of Mali in 2016 and it represented the self-armed militia of some portions of the Dogon community. As a non-jihadist actor, this militia was organized by some Dogon villages in response to the violent attacks suffered by the Katiba Macina front (ECFR). Therefore, even if it is part of the other side of the conflict, the creation of the Dan Na Ambassagou follows the same logic as the basis of the Katiba Macina creation. The ethnic and social tensions between the communities have constituted the engine to form this type of organization, trying to provide an alternative both to the absence of basic needs and to institutional abandonment. Thus, the governmental failure in promoting peace, security, and services resulted in the need to independently generate a private and violent response, leaving these militias ample room for maneuver for perpetrating violence and atrocities.

3.1.2 The Spike in Terrorist Activities and the *Crime-Terror* Nexus

In line to what previously said, the population's struggle in finding stable economic and social conditions can be defined as one of the root causes for the substantial development of terrorist activities in recent years. Across a territory that

was already poor and fragile, the security crisis of 2012, as well as the military *coup d'état* of 2020 and 2021, had a brutal impact on Malian populations, especially the ones located in the center and in the north of the country. Indeed, despite the territorial regaining made thanks to the support of Operation Serval (then Barkhane), the institutional presence in that region remained weak and inefficient, far from providing concrete improvements for the society's life conditions.

Regions affected by conflict have been losing non-agricultural jobs, which has likely led to more households (in these regions) relying on subsistence agriculture, which suffers from declining productivity and low incomes. By contrast, regions largely shielded from conflict have continued their structural transformation, reducing their reliance on agriculture, and increasing employment in other sectors with higher productivity (World Bank 2022).

Hence, terrorist groups and criminal organizations had the opportunity to proliferate more and more during the last ten years, exploiting the difficult economic and social situation, not only in Mali but in the entire Sahelian belt. In fact, as highlighted also in the previous paragraph, alongside the JNIM coalition even the Islamic State, which was suffering many defeats in the Middle East, made its appearance in the region, generating the branch of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Due to the increasing power of these two actors, violence, attacks, and illegal activities have soared dramatically, becoming the most significant threat to Sub-Saharan security.

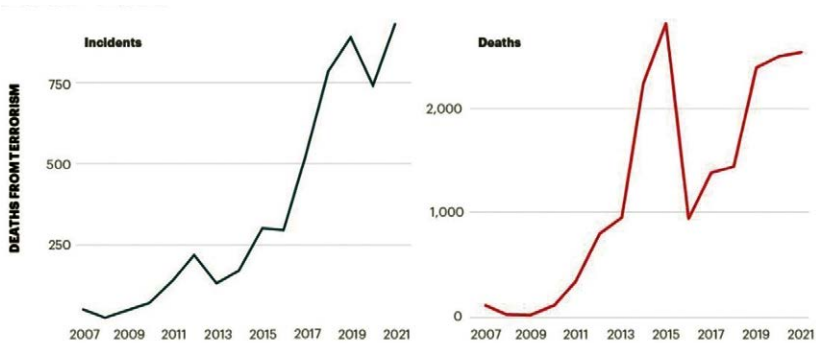


Figure 2 – Incidents and Deaths from Terrorism in the Sahel (2007-2021). Source: Institute for Economics & Peace 2022.

Providing a closer look, the terrorist issue in the Sahel, due to its scale and power, represents a serious concern not only for Africa but also for intercontinental actors. Indeed, in 2021, the JNIM coalition recorded the largest increase in deaths and violent incidents globally, almost 70% more than the previous period, being responsible for 351 casualties in that year alone (Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2022). Specifically, most JNIM attacks occurred on Malian territory, and while originally aimed at military forces, the number of civilian casualties was higher, with fatalities tripling between 2020 and 2021.

In the meantime, the Islamic State also became a growing concern in the security landscape of the region. Starting in 2017, the group entered the Sahelian dynamics through two branches: the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA). The former was more active within Malian territory, while the latter had stronger ties with Boko Haram in Niger, near the Malian border. Their activities escalated exponentially over the past four years, with ISGS responsible for several attacks on Malian and Nigerien military camps, demonstrating an improvement in their military tactics and resources.

In contrast to other regions globally, the JNIM and the IS's Sahelian branches chose to cooperate or, at the very least, avoid direct conflict with one another. The result was the aforementioned intensification of violence, attacks, and casualties in recent years, as both groups were able to proliferate across the territory without competitors, exploiting historical imbalances in the central and northern parts of the state.

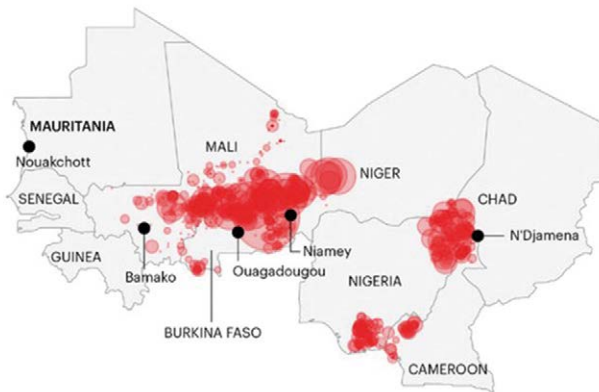


Figure 3 – Terrorist attacks in the Sahel (2007-2021). Source: Institute for Economics & Peace 2022.

Furthermore, the so-called crime-terror nexus complicates counterterrorism efforts in addressing the terrorist presence. The crime-terror nexus can be defined as “the connection between two distinct actors with different aims and methods, yet capable of cooperating for practical purposes” (Irrera 2021). In this context, the interconnections between the two groups are manifested in the mutual exchange of tactics and practices between terrorist organizations and criminal groups. This phenomenon poses significant concerns for regional and international security actors due to its potential to generate hybrid threats. The mutual exchanges make criminal groups more difficult to label and predict, creating a “grey zone” where terrorist groups and criminal organizations begin to cooperate or operate in similar ways.

In Mali, over the past few years, the interconnection of terrorist and criminal activities has become increasingly evident. Mali’s strategic geographical

position has a long history of smuggling, narcotrafficking, and weapons trade across the Sahel. The Sahara Desert, in particular, offers an ideal, uncontrolled environment for trade, linking both the northern and southern regions of Africa, as well as east and west. As a result, organized crime has become a constant variable in Malian dynamics, with cities such as Timbuktu and Gao serving as hubs for illegal trade in the region. However, since the 2012 crisis, the institutional vacuum in the central and northern parts of the country has created even greater opportunities for the expansion of the smuggling market.

This environment enabled criminal groups to forge alliances with the new jihadist terrorist organizations, fostering a fertile ground for to thrive. As a result, terrorist groups strengthened their ties with actors in the smuggling sector, even securing financial support during the 2012 crisis (Aime and De Giorgio 2021). Conversely, criminal organizations that had historically operated in the northern drug and weapons markets increased their violent activities, adopting the terrorist modus operandi. Consequently, data from the Sahel reveals a notable correlation between terrorism and criminal practices, where the rise in terrorist activities is mirrored by an increase in criminal actions. For example, violent practices such as kidnapping, primarily associated with terrorist groups, have surged in recent years, as they are used to finance the local illegal economy managed by organized crime.

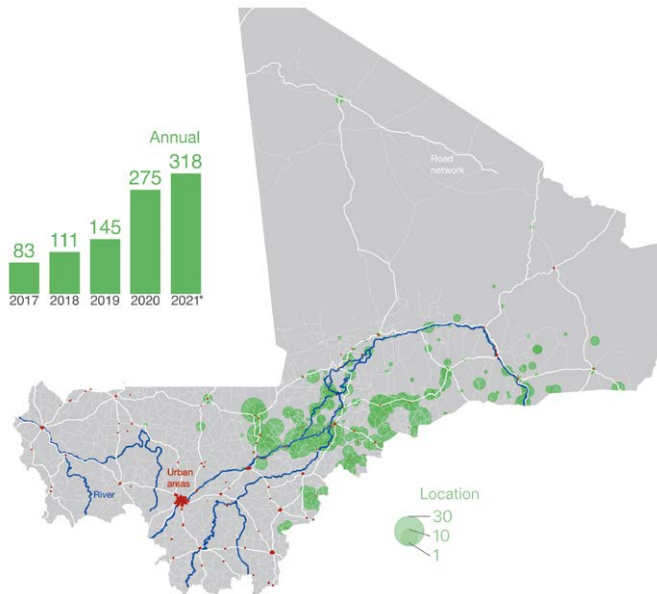


Figure 4 – Abductions in Mali (2017-2021). Source: Institute for Security Studies, ISS.

In conclusion, the complexity of the security crisis in Mali is striking. The increase in terrorist and criminal activities cannot be solely attributed to the

military and security weaknesses of the State. Rather, it is the result of deep, interconnected root causes. To effectively address regional security threats, a comprehensive set of policies must be developed, which goes beyond just the security dimension. The success of terrorist groups in recruitment is a direct manifestation of the state's institutional failure to provide a concrete and viable alternative for local communities. Therefore, the lack of essential services, extreme poverty, and historical grievances create a fertile ground for conflict and violence, fostering a fragile social environment in which terrorist groups can operate with relative freedom. Consequently, if security policies remain the sole focus, the root causes of the crisis will remain unaddressed, allowing for continued ethnic polarization, social conflict, and rebellion.

Within this complex context, the Malian government has failed to develop a political vision aimed at addressing the problems in the central and northern regions of the country. On one hand, political instability in Bamako, exemplified by the *coups d'état* of 2020 and 2021, has further exacerbated the situation, revealing the ruling class's unwillingness to address issues beyond the capital. Meanwhile, violence and attacks continue to escalate, and the number of internally displaced persons is growing dramatically, threatening the stability of southern Mali as well (UNHCR). Therefore, the security situation in the central and northern regions, coupled with the growing presence of terrorism, must be taken seriously by the Malian authorities, especially in light of France's decision, which will be examined later, to withdraw troops from the Barkhane mission.

On the other hand, when considering the role of international actors in Mali since 2013, it becomes evident that military and security measures have been the primary focus of policy actions in the region. While prioritizing security made sense for France, which had troops stationed on the ground, it has been a far more limited and inefficient approach for the European Union. Despite Brussels' repeated claims of commitment to addressing the root causes of the crisis, EU policies in Mali have often been confined to security and migration issues. As a result, the following section will analyze the European Union's specific policies in Mali, emphasizing their limitations and shortcomings in fostering real, lasting change in the country's dire security situation.

3.2 EU's CSDP Missions and Projects in Mali: a Security-Focused Approach

3.2.1 The Stabilization Efforts on the Ground

As already mentioned in the first and in the second chapter, the concrete activism of the European Union in the Sahel resulted in the development of three CSDP missions, with two of them located in Mali. The first one deployed was the EU Training Mission Mali, which was characterized by a military capacity-building mandate.

The Union shall conduct a military training mission (EUTM Mali), to provide, in the South of Mali, military and training advice to the Malian Armed Forces

(MAF) operating under the control of legitimate civilian authorities, in order to contribute to the restoration of their military capacity with a view to enabling them to conduct military operations aiming at restoring Malian territorial integrity and reducing the threat posed by terrorist groups. EUTM Mali shall not be involved in combat operations (Council Decision 2013/34/CFSP).

Currently, the Mission's fifth mandate expired in May 2024 and given the political situation on the ground, the EU has decided to withdraw the forces from the country. The activities implemented followed a similar path since the beginning of the mission in 2013 even if, over the years, some economic and political adaptations were provided. However, basically, the EUTM Mali operations continued to focus on military training or capacity-building workshops, presenting as results, even in the official documents, no more than simple lists of trainees or institutional advisory activities.

On the other hand, the second mission deployed on the Malian territory is the EUCAP Sahel Mali. Launched at the beginning of 2015, even this Mission started to operate as a security capacity-building provider for the larger sector of the Malian internal security forces, such as the police, the gendarmerie, and the national guard, widening the scope of the EUTM Mali's operations.

The objective of EUCAP Sahel Mali shall be to allow the Malian authorities to restore and maintain constitutional and democratic order and the conditions for lasting peace in Mali, and to restore and maintain State authority and legitimacy throughout the territory of Mali by means of an effective redeployment of its administration (Council Decision 2014/219/CFSP).

However, differently from the EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali, right from the start, also showed the willingness to be involved in the promotion of national security reforms, setting as an objective the creation of a constructive dialogue with the Malian ruling class. "EUCAP Sahel Mali shall assist and advise the ISF in the implementation of the security reform set out by the new Government" (Council Decision 2014/219/CFSP).

Hence, the dimension of training and advisory activities was not the only objective of the mission, on the contrary, European Union expressed the intention to incentivize larger and deeper structural reforms in the security sector. However, in seven years of activities, EUCAP Mali achieved very few results concerning the promotion of structural reforms, focusing its operations mainly on training, capacity building, and border management. Indeed, since 2017, the shift of priorities toward the migratory "crisis" started to be visible even in the CSDP missions' activities. The focus on border management and migratory policies increased, and the Member States' pressure to prioritize those aspects affected the implementation of the original objectives of the missions. In addition, even the Malian Government incentivized those types of politics, since it was gaining benefits from capacity building and border management without undertaking a serious and expensive path of structural reforms (Lopez 2019). Therefore, even if the two CSDP missions were, and sometimes still are,

presented as the main EU's tool to act as a security provider in the region, the final outcomes don't fulfill the general expectations. Both missions show numerous weaknesses and limits that were only partially addressed during the years, which undermined their results and the impact to improve the difficult security situation described in the first paragraph.

As pointed out in the first chapter, Brussels has repeatedly expressed the will to become a strategic and significant actor in the Sahelian panorama, presenting itself as a security provider, especially in Mali. In this sense, recalling one more time Hill's theoretical "capability-expectation gap," the impact of EUTM Mali and EUCAP Mali resulted as insufficient instruments to fill those expectations and to put the European Union in a relevant and crucial geopolitical position. As an example, various criticalities can be highlighted in the implementation of the two missions. First of all, both of them were characterized by short-term mandates, disadvantaging the development of a long-term dimension in their activities. At the moment, EUTM Mali has closed its fifth mandate that was longer than the others, which, instead, had an average duration of no more than two years, and, considering the difficult security situation and the complex political and social context, operating with such short deadlines undermined the establishment of a better structured long-term strategy. At the same time, the extension of the mandates also constituted a shift in the mission's objectives, as was the case with the migratory priorities in the EUCAP Mali, compromising the continuity dimension of the activities. Secondly, even the implementation of the missions has presented several limits. As underlined previously, both missions were mostly focused only on the organization of training, capacity-building workshops, and advisory activities. Nonetheless, those objectives cannot be taken as sufficient to make the European Union a significant security provider in Mali. Indeed, taking into account the dramatic situation of the country, Brussels should have done more in order to present itself as a reliable and influential partner comparable to the other international powers active on the territory, especially considering UN and France operations. Thus, even if EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel have shown positive results considering the number of trainings delivered and workshops organized, both for the military and for the internal security sector, the tangible impact of those activities remains unclear (EEAS 2022a) As a matter of fact, due to Operation Barkhane's presence on the ground, the major achievements (or mistakes) in the military field were strictly linked to the capacities of the French contingent and not to the FAMa internal operations. In addition, the latter seems to not have reached some real improvements in crisis management, security response, and military capabilities, confirmed by the progressive deterioration of the security environment. Furthermore, many international organizations have highlighted several criticalities in the FAMa military operations, also reporting many cases of force abuse incidents or human rights violations committed during their interventions in the north of the country (Human Rights Watch. Report on Mali 2021). All these aspects contribute to undermining the image of the CSDP missions,

which are converging most of their efforts to work alongside a partner who has proven to be ambiguous and inefficient. Thirdly, as underlined before in the case of border management policies, the shift of priorities between the mandates showed many limits and contradictions. Another example can be found in the EU's and French obsession with the development of the G5 Sahel, which was also visible in the two missions' mandates. Indeed, the support to the organization, especially to its military Joint Force, became one of the objectives of the CSDP missions, enlarging the scope of their activities to the G5 troops. However, as mentioned in the first chapter, the G5 Sahel has yet to prove itself as a valid and effective actor in the security area and the future perspective is not so optimistic. In fact, after the recent *coups d'état*, the political dialogue between Mali and the other Sahelian countries has progressively worsened, leading Bamako to withdraw from the G5 organization on the 16 of May 2022, followed by the Burkina Faso and Niger decision of December 2023 (Kone 2022). Hence, the latter decision leaves serious doubts about the real G5 Sahel's potential to be a serious security provider in the region, especially in Mali. Consequently, even the priorities of the CSDP Malian mission should be restated, challenging the idea that the G5 Joint Force will be able to substitute the military Barkhane's activities.

Summing up, the CSDP missions in the Sahel, and especially EUTM Mali and EUCAP Mali, have always been described as the most important European instrument to provide security and stabilization. However, despite the decade of activities and the funds allocated, the missions produced no more than sub-optimal results, not becoming a powerful response among the other international actors' activities. Therefore, the nature of Brussels' political approach in the Sahel must be questioned, particularly given that the security situation is continuing to deteriorate, and the political dynamics changed significantly with the contemporary Bamako's ruling class.

3.2.2 EU Projects in Mali: Far from Tackling the Root Causes

Other than the CSDP missions, European Union is also present on the Malian territory with the implementation of development and cooperation projects financed by different frameworks. As pointed out in paragraph 1.3.1, the EU's funds allocation in the Sahel can be described as overcrowded, and Mali doesn't represent an exception to that statement. Most of the funds came from the traditional instrument of the European Development Fund and from the 2015 European Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. The former is obviously the biggest channel of funds between Brussels and Bamako, and, in the period 2014–2020, it was composed of 615 million euros. However, simply taking into consideration the allocation of those funds, the hierarchy of priorities becomes clear. Security, governance, and rule of law took the largest portion of the funds with 280 million euros, trying to address the security crisis and promote internal structural reforms. Then, 110 million euros were allocated for the development of road infrastructures, overcoming the funds destined for food security and

education (100 million euros each).¹ Hence, security-related problems played the predominant role in the 11th EDF allocation of the funds, underestimating the aspects related to the root causes of the crisis, which often reside in the lack of essential goods and in the absence of national basic services. Indeed, as pointed out by Raineri and Strazzari (2020, 7):

In Mali, civil society representatives observe that the European Development Fund (EDF) allocations to local NGOs and CSOs focusing on humanitarian action are falling: from EUR 20 million in 2011 to EUR 3 million in 2016.

Therefore, without engaging in a real dialogue with society and without understanding the real population's needs, tackling the root causes of the security crisis remains no more than a utopia. In addition, allocating funds for security, governance, and rule of law must also take into account the reliability of the interlocutor in promoting concrete changes in those fields. As a matter of fact, Bamako's ruling class failed to play that role, on the contrary, the military *coups d'état* worsened, even more, the contractual position of Mali, showing their reluctance to guarantee democratic and stabilizing policies. For these reasons, from 2014, the investments made in governance, rule of law, and security didn't become a game changer in the Malian situation, as demonstrated by the increase of the national political instability and the rising of terrorist actions across the country. Thus, the European Union should have focused more on directing funds with the purpose to address the deep social and economic imbalances, which are systematically exploited by non-state actors to proliferate and develop among the population.

In this sense, the EUTF, since its appearance in 2015, raised political expectations even higher, due to the fact that, right in the Valletta political declaration, the EU recognized the need to fight the root causes of the migratory crisis (strictly related to the security one). Thus, the EUTF, characterized by a higher level of flexibility and immediacy, certainly should have acted on providing a rapid response to the refugee problem, but also, it should have been a tool to address the underlying problems of the Sahelian societies. However, unfortunately, those expectations have not been met both considering the entire region and Mali in the specific.

The EU has contracted, considering the data until 2021, 249.3 million euros for EUTF projects in Mali (EU Commission 2021). Even inside this instrument the largest portion of the funds, more or less 41%, is allocated to security, governance, and rule of law, even if the biggest project (PROJES) belongs to the resilience framework. Hence, it must be highlighted that even concerning the EUTF instrument, the security and governance areas still represent the priority for the EU. For this reason, the EUTF didn't bring a different approach in the context of the EU-Mali relations in comparison to the other instruments, such

¹ Delegation of the European Union to Mali 2021.

as the CSDP Missions or the EDF, where the prioritization of security policies was already omnipresent.

Certainly, at least some projects have been following the idea of trying to tackle some of the root causes of the Malian political and social instability. For example, strictly considering its objectives and premises, the Programme Jeunesse et Stabilisation- regions du centre du Mali (PROJES) is one of those. PROJES is one of the most important EUTF projects in Mali, which aims to incentivize stabilization activities in the center of the country through the development of basic services and safety nets for fragile communities. Hence, PROJES, that is implemented by the German Development Agency GIZ, aims to help the development of a set of the most significant lacks in that area of the country, such as health infrastructure, education policies, water supplies, and electrical access (EU Commission 2023). Furthermore, the same can be underlined for the project "KEY", which ended in 2020, designed its main objectives around the principle of food security (EU Commission 2023), which is still a significant problem in the center and in the north of Mali. Indeed, taking into consideration these 2 projects it can be said that something was done toward the direction of addressing the social and economic problems of the country, which, in the end, also constitute the root causes of the security crisis. As a matter of fact, many social infrastructures were built or, more often, rehabilitated, guaranteeing access to schools, markets, and better water supplies. Nevertheless, even considering only these two projects, some critical issues need to be highlighted. First of all, within a critical and complex situation such as the Malian one, time is a precious resource. Unfortunately, both of the projects suffered from important delays and management difficulties. For example, the KEY program started in 2018, when the security situation was already deteriorating, and it ended only two years after in 2020. In this sense, the project lifespan seems extremely short and inefficient, especially considering its incredibly complex objectives (reduce malnutrition and food insecurity). Hence, even the real impact of the project becomes difficult to evaluate, leaving some doubts regarding the effective utility of the instrument (URD 2020). Furthermore, even the PROJES activities presented some difficulties at the beginning, starting to slowly implement the project only during 2018 (Lopez 2019). Therefore, unfortunately, those dynamics have reversed what were supposed to be the strengths of the EUTF, namely a greater deal of flexibility and promptness than the classic funding channels.

However, setting aside the KEY and the PROJES examples, the main criticism of the EUTF remains that of, once again, putting security, conflict prevention, and migratory policies first. One example, among the 102 million euros contracted projects until 2021, is the Support Programme to Strengthen Security in the Mopti Region and Improve the Management of Border Areas (PARSEC) (Expertise France). In 2021, PARSEC had contracted around 28 million euros, however, considering even the general allocation of the funds (also for PARSEC 2), the project should benefit from a larger amount of money, more than 43 million euros in 2022 (EU Commission 2023). The PARSEC project, managed by

the French cooperation agency Expertise France, does not deviate much from the policies and objectives that are already promoted by the CSDP missions on the ground. In fact, the project is basically designed following the same type of operations, such as training, capacity-building, and advisory activities, which therefore need an efficient level of cooperation with those of EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Mali. A level of cooperation was not reached at the beginning of the project, causing delays in the implementation and distrust by the EU's actors already in the field. Indeed, these dynamics showed Expertise France's inadequacy to fit within a social fabric as complex as Mali's, raising serious questions about the efficiency of funding a project so similar to the policies managed by the CSDP missions. Hence, the project suffered from various problems, from the lack of contextual knowledge and practical equipment to the low level of trust from the EU and the local Malian institutions, leading to the conclusion rightly pointed out by Lopez (2019, 38):

This experience shows that politically sensitive and security-focused projects such as PARSEC need the political guidance of the Delegation of the EU and the security expertise that only CSDP missions can provide. It also raises the question of the pertinence of contracting development agencies to implement security projects in environments in which they cannot even ensure the security of their staff.

Consequently, after taking all these aspects into consideration, it can be argued that the European Union's approach in Mali, both in its field missions and in its cooperation and development projects, has been predominantly related to security policies. However, the focus was only on those security policies that are also perceived as such by the Union itself, namely the intercontinental threat of terrorism and uncontrolled migration flows. For this reason, all the dimensions of European activism in Mali fail to deviate from those priorities, despite much of the literature on the topic expressing strong doubts about the usefulness of a security-focused approach. As a matter of fact, the results are numerous instruments, funds, activities, and objectives that would have the economic and political potential to widen the scope of the EU's actions in Mali, but, instead, end up focusing on the same targets. This dynamic creates an overcrowded environment, undermining, not only the real development policies and the tackling of the root causes but also, the efficiency of the security activities themselves. For this reason, EU policies in Mali in recent years have always remained far from successful in combating the underlying drivers of the crisis, always promoting short-term security responses that have not produced a concrete impact on the situation. The motivations can be found in the weaknesses and fragilities, already highlighted in Chapter 1, of the European Union's foreign policy. Among these, one of the most significant in the Malian context is surely the strong influence of Member States, in this case, that of France. In fact, the next paragraph will briefly address the role of Paris in Mali and its inevitable influence even on the European Union's actions, showing that Mali could be seen as an interesting example of the lack of a "single European voice."

3.3 The Role of France in Mali and the Absence of a Univocal European Vision

Only considering the European side of the dialogue and leaving aside the fundamental international action of the United Nations, it must be highlighted that France played the predominant role in the Malian political relations, confining the European Union to a second-rate position. Even after the independence of the Republic, France continued to be the first Bamako's interlocutor, exerting a bulky influence, especially in the commercial sphere. In fact, throughout the decades France has always been a strong trading partner for both Mali and all the other former colonies. Because of this, as well as for historical reasons, Paris's interest in the political dynamics in the Sahel has always been high. In addition, taking into consideration the energy sector, which is one of the most important for Paris, the northeast of Mali and the west of Niger constitute a fundamental resource. Indeed, one-third of the uranium used in the French nuclear power plants comes from mines located in that region (Henke 2017), which are routinely attended by French professionals. Hence, all these aspects explain why France needs a strong partnership with those Sahelian countries but also wants to ensure a stable and secure political environment. In this sense, it can be affirmed that Paris never lost its historical relations with Mali, which were a direct legacy of France's important colonial past throughout the Sahel region. For this reason, in order to understand the aforementioned limits of the EU policies in the country, it can be interesting to analyze the importance of France as a single actor more than a Member State in the Malian political context.

As a matter of fact, Mali is one of the explanatory cases to show how the European Union's external action is strongly conditioned by the interests and preferences of its Member States. Every political and economic decision made by the Union must, therefore, take into account the strong French influence in the territory, which shows itself as the first European interlocutor in the dialogue. In addition, since the 2012 crisis, the role of Paris has increased even more, due to its military intervention. As briefly described in the second chapter, the Malian Government, after many bilateral negotiations and external political pushes, decided to request the intervention of France to stop the military advance of rebel and terrorist groups. Hence, since that moment, although French influence had always been very present, Paris's political weight towards Mali has grown exponentially. Indeed, with Operation Serval and the deployment of more than 5,000 troops, France held the reins of Malian internal security, making it the most significant international actor for Bamako. The military intervention, despite the fact that was unilateral and requested by an interim non-elected government, was approved both by the international community and the regional actors (Francis and David 2013), especially considering the risk of a national collapse of Mali. Therefore, since 2013, Operation Serval was active on the Malian territory, giving fundamental help to the FAMA to regain some strategic central and northern territories that had fallen under the control of terrorists (Sheehan, Marquardt, and Collins 2021). From the outset, France expressed the momentary nature of its operation, which was intended to serve the function of supporting national mil-

itary forces in regaining sovereignty over territories lost during the first months of the conflict. However, this vision changed completely after the substitution of Operation Serval with Operation Barkhane, spreading counterterrorism activities across the Sahel. Barkhane could count on around 4500 French soldiers distributed in, of course, Mali, but also Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.

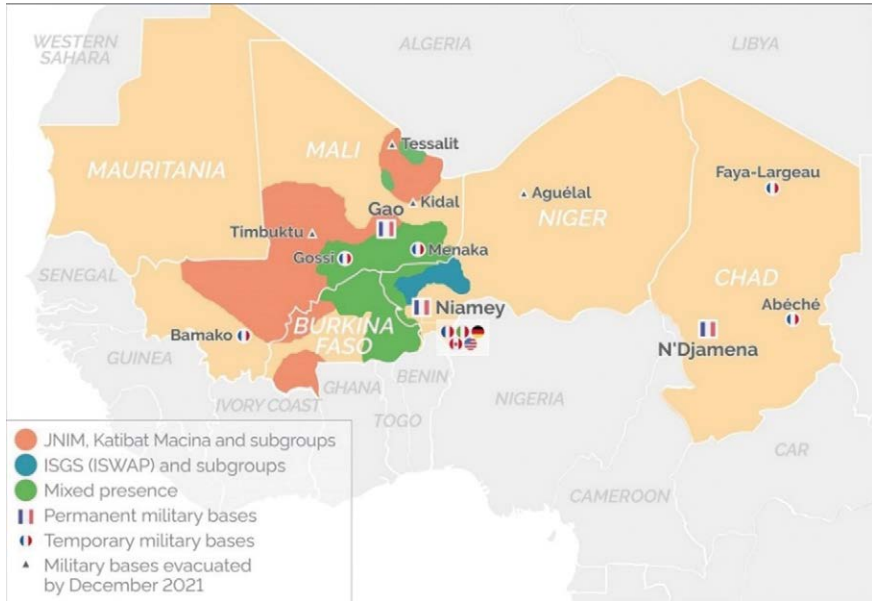


Figure 5 – Barkhane military bases (February 2022). Source: ISPI. Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale.

The operation started in 2014 and it represented an important public expenditure for Paris for the following years, considering that the budget allocated consisted of nearly 600 million euros each year. The mission has remained on Malian soil for nearly a decade, continuing to contribute to the fight against terrorist groups. Other than patrolling many strategic areas trying to ensure a constant level of security in the major cities, Barkhane was the protagonist of some significant military operations during the last years. The most important example is the elimination of Abdelmalek Droukdel during a raid in June 2020 (Demuyne and Coleman 2020a), which constituted a powerful signal for all the terrorist groups. Indeed, Droukdel was the leader of AQIM and the originator of the exponential rise of the organization’s power and activities in the Sahel in the last two decades.

However, despite some practical successes, the evaluation of the entire French operation leaves some doubts, mainly because of its duration and poor results on the ground. As a matter of fact, following the data and the description provided in the first paragraph of this chapter, terrorist activities continued to rise

during the last 10 years, recently reaching a dramatic level of violence. In this sense, given the main purpose of Barkhane, which was to increase the level of security and reduce criminal presence, it can be said that the general results are not satisfactory. Clearly, the causes are numerous, and it will be extremely reductive to link the worsening of the security situation only to the inefficiency of the French operation, nevertheless, Barkhane played an important role in it. Indeed, the French operation has often proven to be inadequate to fight in a context such as Mali, ending up with counterproductive effects. The use of air strikes or rapid military operations on the ground precluded Barkhane to weaken the real strength of the terrorist groups, namely their connection and influence with the local populations (King 2023). As highlighted before in the text, terrorist groups successfully exploited the social and economic imbalances of Malian society, especially ones of some specific ethnic groups, widening the scope of their activities thanks to the support of a larger population portion. Within this context, Barkhane military operations have proven powerful in the precise moments of confrontation but, on the contrary, inadequate in combating the structural problems underlying the crisis, such as the political vacuum in the region or the lack of basic services for the community.

In addition, over the years, for a variety of reasons Malian public opinion began to develop a progressive anti-French sentiment. On one hand, one aspect is certainly related to the difficulty for French troops to clearly distinguish the terrorists from the local population within the small rural villages in the north-central part of the country. Consequently, this dynamic increased the risk of unjustified involvement of the civilian population, thus, rising the general discontent with the French presence. On the other hand, the lifespan of the operation, which began with the purpose of being temporary, instead, it has continued over a period of eight years. For these reasons, after the military coups of 2020 and 2021, that discontent within the population was both exploited and supported, questioning the willingness to prolong the relations with Paris. Indeed, the anti-French sentiment started to be one of the main political narratives in the Goita's mandate, even presenting the European partner as counterproductive for the wellness of the State (Dinc and Donmez 2022). On the opposite side, France, which was already disappointed with the high costs and few results of the Barkhane operation, began to express its disapproval toward Bamako. The Malian government was being presented as reluctant to resolve the security crisis and cooperate with Paris. Thus, the result was the opening of a diplomatic crisis, which led directly to President Macron's decision to withdraw Barkhane's troops from the Malian territory in the first months of 2022. However, a more detailed focus on the end of Operation Barkhane and its implications will be made in the following chapter. What remains as interesting is the connection between the French presence and role in Mali, from 2013 to 2022, and the European Union's foreign policies, practically showing the weight of Member States' preferences in their development.

The European Union's role in Mali has been inevitably shaped by France's actions, as France has frequently served as Bamako's primary interlocutor, par-

ticularly on security matters. This necessitates a reflection on the EU's strategic positioning in the region. As previously discussed, the EU has presented itself as a security provider for Mali, directing the activities of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and prioritizing funding in this area. However, France has always been the dominant actor in the security domain due to its active military presence and the centrality of Operation Barkhane in ensuring military successes. In other words, European security policies, largely centered on training and capacity-building, have consistently played a secondary role in comparison to France's direct military engagement, which was naturally perceived as more critical by the Malian government. Within this context, bilateral relations between a single EU Member State have carried greater weight than a unified European approach, once again highlighting Brussels' difficulties in asserting itself as a credible and strategic actor in external affairs.

This reality underscores why the EU should have pursued an alternative strategy that moved beyond a predominantly security-focused approach, given that France already exerted significant influence in this area. Had Brussels prioritized policies aimed at addressing social inequalities and economic disparities, it would not have remained in a subordinate position relative to French interests. However, this strategic shift never materialized in Mali, and EU policies remained closely aligned with those of France.

A notable example of this alignment is the EU's involvement in the G5 Sahel and its Joint Force. As previously mentioned, the EU has been a strong proponent of the organization's development in recent years, allocating approximately €100 million through the African Peace Facility (Lopez 2019). Political and financial support for the G5 Sahel has thus been a key element of the EU's regional strategy, despite well-documented concerns regarding the organization's actual military effectiveness. However, what is particularly noteworthy is France's predominant role in this framework as well. The G5 Sahel, especially its Joint Force, was largely the result of a strong French political initiative, driven by Paris's vested interest in promoting the organization's development. Indeed, Operation Barkhane served as the principal partner in supporting, training, and equipping the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

Furthermore, the creation of a regional organization capable of ensuring security would enable France to significantly reduce both its economic and military commitments. In this regard, French support for the G5 Sahel was primarily motivated by the objective of "Africanizing" the fight against terrorism in the Sahel, thereby lessening France's direct involvement in managing the security crisis. For these reasons, the G5 Sahel has always been central to French policymaking, making Paris the most significant external actor for the five Sahelian states. The Pau Summit of January 2020 serves as a clear example of this dynamic, as the five Sahelian Heads of State convened around President Macron to discuss the future challenges and strategic direction of the G5 Sahel. Consequently, despite Brussels' substantial political and financial backing, the EU has failed to assert itself as a leading actor within the G5 Sahel framework and is not perceived by its regional partners as the primary European interlocutor. In

summary, the primary challenge for the European Union is not the necessity of aligning with the interests of its Member States, as disregarding these would be highly disadvantageous given their historical and political significance. Indeed, understanding and accommodating French interests in the Malian context is essential for the development of coordinated policies that do not conflict with one another. However, the EU must also pursue its own strategic objectives and assert itself as a significant geopolitical actor. To achieve this, Brussels should prioritize policies in areas where its capabilities align with its ambitions, rather than focusing on domains—such as security—where it has yet to develop the necessary capacity. This strategic recalibration has not materialized in its approach to Mali, where security and border control policies continue to reflect the strong political influence of individual Member States.

In this regard, the EU's external actions in Mali have been counterproductive to its broader strategic interests in two key ways. First, its approach has failed to effectively address the root causes of terrorism and escalating violence. Social, health, and environmental policies have been largely sidelined in favor of security and migration-focused policies, often shaped by pressure from Member States seeking short-term solutions to complex, structural challenges. As a result, these policy choices have yielded limited improvements in Mali's social fabric and have prevented the EU from establishing itself as a key international actor capable of delivering meaningful change.

Second, by prioritizing security and governance, the EU has closely aligned its interests with those of France, the primary stakeholder in these areas. This alignment has not only relegated the EU to a secondary role, as previously discussed, but has also resulted in many of its initiatives, such as the CSDP missions and the PARSEC project, being closely linked to Operation Barkhane. However, the recent rise of strong anti-French sentiment in Mali, coupled with the withdrawal of French forces following a diplomatic crisis, has placed EU policies in a precarious position. Bamako's ruling elite has shown little inclination toward a genuine democratic transition, as evidenced by the postponement of elections and the deepening of bilateral relations with Russia. The latter, as will be examined in over chapter, has been expanding its presence in Mali, viewing the military regime as a potentially valuable regional partner.

As a consequence, the EU now risks inheriting France's increasingly untenable position, particularly as its focus remains centered on security policies that are progressively falling under the control of the Malian administration. This situation introduces multiple uncertainties regarding the future trajectory of EU-Mali relations, some of which have already become apparent in the political developments of late 2022. The final chapter of this analysis will therefore examine these recent shifts in the Malian context.

CHAPTER 4

The Most Recent Events: the End of Barkhane and the EU's Future in Mali

4.1 The French Withdrawal and the Strengthening of Russia-Mali Relations

4.1.1 The End of Operation Barkhane and the Rise of the Wagner Group

In light of Mali's evolving political landscape, the last few years were marked by a series of critical events that are likely to shape the country's future trajectory. As discussed in Chapter 2, the military junta initially postponed the democratic elections scheduled for February 2022, proposing a transition period of more than five years. This decision elicited strong reactions from both regional and international actors, prompting ECOWAS and the African Union to suspend Mali from their organizations and impose severe economic sanctions. However, towards the end of the year, the Malian government, partly in response to the economic impact of these sanctions, renegotiated its stance by introducing a revised electoral timetable of 24 months. As a result, some economic and trade sanctions were lifted, although Mali's suspension from ECOWAS and the imposition of individual sanctions remained in effect.

Thus, 2022 was characterized by continuous diplomatic engagement between Mali's military government and international and regional actors, even as Bamako demonstrated increasing reluctance to align itself with the demands of ECOWAS, the AU, MINUSMA, and Operation Barkhane. In particular, the Malian government progressively reassessed its relationship with international actors on the ground, especially with France. As discussed in the previous chapter, strong anti-French sentiment within the military ruling class frequently led

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to the questioning of Operation Barkhane's presence in Mali. The government's populist anti-French rhetoric gained substantial traction among the public, fostering widespread support for severing ties with Paris. France became an easy target for national propaganda, with officials leveraging the deteriorating security situation in central and northern Mali to blame the French mission. Indeed, the prolonged presence of Operation Barkhane, without significant tangible successes, rendered it vulnerable to populist criticism, particularly in light of Mali's enduring anti-colonial sentiments.

A decisive turning point occurred in early 2022 when, following months of hostile declarations from the military junta, the French ambassador to Bamako was expelled, triggering a severe diplomatic crisis between the two nations (De Giorgio 2022). This escalation prompted a swift response from France, leading President Macron to announce the withdrawal of Barkhane troops and their re-deployment to neighboring countries (Harris, Doxsee, and Thompson 2020). The withdrawal process spanned the first half of 2022 and concluded in August of the same year. Concurrently, the Takuba Task Force, a European military initiative closely linked to Operation Barkhane and led by French forces, also ceased its operations in Mali.

Takuba was established in 2020 following France's request for European partners to contribute special forces and additional equipment to support Operation Barkhane and enhance security efforts in the Sahel (Curci 2021). Twelve European states participated in this initiative; however, the task force struggled to achieve significant results, largely due to its limited operational timeframe. Consequently, with France's decision to withdraw from Mali, Takuba's continued presence also became untenable, leading to its momentary relocation, alongside French forces, to Niger. This move preceded the subsequent 2023 *coup d'état* in Niger, further complicating regional security dynamics.

It is worth briefly examining the nature and purpose of Takuba, as it serves as a revealing case study of European power dynamics. Although often misrepresented in public discourse as a "European" military coalition, Takuba was European only in a geographical sense, as it comprised France and its continental allies. From a "community" perspective, however, Takuba exemplifies the primacy of intergovernmental cooperation over collective European integration under Brussels' leadership. Its creation underscores the enduring perception that military and strategic sovereignty remain the prerogative of individual Member States, rather than being delegated to supranational European institutions.

In any case, what remains crucial to note is the recent departure of these two military operations from Malian soil, the consequences of which are still difficult to evaluate. Certainly, the withdrawal of Barkhane and Takuba troops has produced a power vacuum in the management of terrorist threats between Malian borders. The two missions were to relocate within a few kilometers of the Malian border, namely in Niger. However, due to the most recent political events, French and European military forces were asked to leave even the Niger territory as a decision coming from the new authoritarian military regime, which

came to power in the summer of 2023. Hence, the European military presence in the area almost disappeared in few months, and although the Barkhane mission was widely criticized (including in this text) for failing to combat the real roots of the Malian crisis, the presence of French and European troops ensured a basic level of security in various parts of the country. Thus, their absence on the ground could concretely lead to an exponential increase in violence, conflict, and terrorist activities, which were already growing exponentially over the past few years. In addition, the Malian National Armed Force, despite the decade of training and capacity-building activities, still appears to be unable to ensure security on their territory, both from an organizational and military perspective. However, the FAMA seems not to be the only actor that will act as a security provider after the withdrawal of European operations. Indeed, as only briefly mentioned in the first chapter of this analysis, during the last two years the military junta strengthened its relations with Russia, even presenting the Kremlin as a better partner with respect to the other international actors. Taking as an example statements made in an interview by Prime Minister Maiga in February 2022:

“We want to buy planes from European countries, but we are blocked. We want to buy from the United States; we are blocked. The solution is to go to those who are not going to block us. It’s as simple as that. We went and concluded military cooperation agreements with Russia. We bought weapons from Russia and Russia is not alone as we are dealing with other partners... Now, the whole debate around Wagner and the Russians... In any case, we know where we are setting foot. The safety of Malians is our government’s priority” (Dinc and Donmez 2022).

The remarks made by the former Prime Minister illustrate the underlying rationale behind the Malian government’s rapprochement with Russia. Following the military coups of 2020 and 2021, both regional and international actors strongly condemned the political developments in Mali, imposing stringent economic sanctions and political restrictions. In response, Bamako sought alternative strategic partners that were not bound by political conditionalities and were more financially accommodating. In this context, Russia emerged as an ideal ally for both Mali and the Kremlin.

For Mali, Moscow represents a strategic partner that does not impose the political preconditions typically associated with European engagement. Unlike Western powers, Russia has refrained from criticizing the authoritarian turn of the military junta and the two recent coups. Instead, it has been openly receptive to dialogue with Bamako, fostering both economic and political ties while expanding its influence in the region. For Russia, increasing its presence in the Sahel, particularly in Mali, offers significant geopolitical and strategic advantages. Firstly, it allows Moscow to position itself as the predominant international actor in the region, despite the prolonged political and economic investments made by France, the European Union, and the United Nations. This shift underscores the limitations and weaknesses of Western policies in Mali and presents Russia as a viable political alternative for other Sahelian

states. Secondly, within the broader geopolitical context shaped by the war in Ukraine, undermining Western influence in the Sahel constitutes a powerful strategic move for Moscow, both economically and diplomatically. Strengthening relations in the region not only enhances bilateral trade, particularly in the defense and energy sectors, but also ensures political support in the international arena.

This latter point has become particularly relevant following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As the conflict persists, the Kremlin is increasingly reliant on international backing to avoid diplomatic isolation. This support extends beyond economic and propaganda gains to tangible votes in the United Nations General Assembly, where a number of African states have the potential to align with Russian interests. A notable example is Mali's vote against the UN General Assembly Resolution (A/ES-11/L.7) of 23 February 2023 (UN News), which called for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. This marked the first time Mali had explicitly supported Russia's actions in Ukraine, a direct outcome of the deepening bilateral relationship between Bamako and Moscow in recent years.

Since late 2021, Russian influence in Mali has expanded significantly, primarily through the establishment of several military bases operated by the Wagner Group, now also referred to as Africa Corps. Wagner is a private paramilitary company (PMC), predominantly composed of former Russian military personnel, founded in 2014 by businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin. Although the Russian government has officially denied any formal affiliation with the group, its connections to Moscow are widely acknowledged, with Wagner frequently described as an unofficial extension of the Russian military. While the group has gained international notoriety for its involvement in the ongoing war in Ukraine, its operations extend back to 2014, with a significant presence across the African continent. Due to its military activities in the Central African Republic (CAR), Wagner has been frequently associated with human rights violations, indiscriminate violence, and abuses against civilian populations (ACLEDD 2022; CSIS 2022).

Given the already fragile humanitarian context in Mali, the international community has expressed serious concerns regarding the potential consequences of Wagner's military operations. Initially, both the Malian government and the Russian paramilitary group denied any official cooperation, despite substantial evidence documenting the construction of military bases linked to Wagner. However, as diplomatic relations with France and other international actors deteriorated, the increasing alignment between Bamako and the Kremlin became increasingly apparent.

As a result, from 2021 to the present, the Wagner group has become more and more active on the ground, accompanying the Malian National Army in military operations in the center and north of the country. As a matter of fact, the vacuum left by the end of operation Barkhane constitutes the perfect ground for the development of Wagner's activities, which have substantially raised in number during 2022. Despite the turbulent death of the head and founder Prigozhin, the African activities of the Group continued, as their political and operational

ties with the Kremlin. In exchange for monetary and natural resources, such as gold mines, the Group is presented as a security provider for the region, both helping the Malian government, without requiring heavy political or humanitarian conditionalities, and unofficially fostering the geopolitical interest of Russia. For this reason, the growing role of the Wagner group in Mali is viewed with particular concern by the international community, both considering the anti-Western turn that the military junta is promoting and the heavy humanitarian costs of the group's activities, visible in these 4 years of operations. Indeed:

The Wagner Group has been involved in attacks targeting civilians in Mopti, Segou, Tombouctou, and Koulikoro regions, which are core areas of the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). ACLED records nearly 500 civilian fatalities from these attacks, including the massacre of hundreds of civilians in Moura in the Mopti region in late March 2022. Overall, 71% of Wagner's engagement in political violence in Mali has taken the form of violence targeting civilians (ACLED 2022).

Unfortunately, considering those numbers, what emerges is the systematic use of indiscriminate violence in the Wagner *modus operandi*. Previously in the text, it was already highlighted the blurred boundary between the civilian population, which often finds itself forced to cooperate out of necessity, and terrorist groups, which seek consensus within the rural villages forgotten by the state. For this reason, Wagner's growing presence, which has been proven to act indiscriminately, is a serious concern from a humanitarian standpoint (Thompson and Doxsee 2022). In fact, various human rights violations and abuses of force have been recorded during FAMa and Wagner group military operations, often targeting mainly Peul communities. Those populations are often stigmatized and indiscriminately linked to terrorist activities based on ethnic criteria, becoming the target of most of the violence run by Wagner and FAMa (ACLED 2022).

4.1.2 Not only Wagner: the Strengthening in the Moscow-Bamako Relations

Wagner's military activities are not the sole channel through which Russia exerts influence in the Malian political landscape. Since the establishment of the military junta in 2020, and especially following the 2021 coup, relations between Mali and Russia have expanded both directly and indirectly. Some sources suggest that cooperation between senior Malian military figures, specifically those responsible for the two recent coups, and Moscow stems from political connections established years earlier, as many of these figures, including President Goïta, were reportedly trained in Russia. Regardless of the precise origins of these ties, diplomatic relations between the Goïta regime and the Kremlin have become increasingly evident in recent years, not only through Mali's support for Wagner but also in the economic sphere, as Bamako seeks to circumvent ECOWAS and European sanctions.

A key aspect of this economic partnership is arms sales, which have emerged, alongside military presence on the ground, as a major pillar of Russian foreign

policy in Africa. Between 2014 and 2019, Russia accounted for 49% of all arms transfers to the continent (La Bionda 2022). This trade has proven particularly successful in the Malian case, given Bamako's urgent need to bolster its defense sector and its reluctance to comply with the democratic and humanitarian conditions imposed by Western actors.

In addition to military and economic cooperation, Russia has expanded its influence in Mali through a strategic communication campaign, an aspect often underestimated in existing literature. Since the rise of the military junta, newspapers, television, and social media have played a crucial role in shaping public opinion through national propaganda, much of which has been actively supported and influenced by Moscow. The Russian government has not only been portrayed by Malian authorities as a reliable and advantageous partner but has also directly contributed to the dissemination of pro-junta and anti-Western propaganda. Russian state-controlled media outlets such as Sputnik and Russia Today supply news, information, and articles to over 600 websites across Africa, thereby facilitating the spread of Russian narratives on the continent. As a result, during public demonstrations in Bamako, it is not uncommon to see Russian flags, signs welcoming Wagner forces, and even portraits of President Vladimir Putin.

Furthermore, social media has played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and fueling anti-French sentiment, given the ease with which these platforms can be penetrated by external actors, fake news, and propaganda. Evidence suggests that the spread of misinformation, including fabricated images and anti-French narratives, intensified following the Malian government's rapprochement with Moscow and the arrival of Wagner troops in the country (ACLED 2022). A particularly striking example occurred in April 2022, following France's decision to evacuate its military camp near the town of Gossi and transfer control to the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa). On this occasion, the French military, along with several media sources, alleged that Wagner operatives attempted to fabricate a mass grave in order to discredit French forces and accuse them of humanitarian violations.

Since 2021, the military junta, highly critical of the presence of Western international actors in Mali, has increasingly viewed Moscow as an ideal partner for advancing its authoritarian policies. From a security standpoint, Wagner represents a fundamentally different ally compared to Barkhane, Takuba, or MINUSMA, as it operates without political conditionalities and is willing to engage in violent and indiscriminate military actions. Politically, Russia holds a clear comparative advantage over France, the United Nations, and the European Union, given the authoritarian, undemocratic, and military-driven nature of the Bamako regime. This alignment has resulted in a deepening of the partnership between the two actors, as demonstrated by the visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Mali on 7 February 2023. During his visit, Lavrov reaffirmed Russia's commitment to supporting Mali's security sector, pledging to continue providing weapons, military equipment, and training.

In addition, it didn't miss the chance to criticize, even if not directly naming any actor, the work of France in the region, underling the "neo-colonial" dynam-

ics of the western world operations in Africa. Even the Malian Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop has expressed his intention to work alongside the Kremlin, despite all the international criticism, saying:

“This decision is a decision of the Malians and a decision that is taken with full responsibility. And Mali wants to work with Russia” (France 24)

However, even if Mali is the predominant example of the Russian influence on the region, the entire international dynamics in the Sahel have changed and are still changing. While the Sahelian authoritarian wave of *coups d'état* is creating several concerns in the international community, Russia indirectly supports those dynamics, trying to spread its interest in the region. Indeed, Burkina Faso represents another interesting example. On 30 September 2022, Captain Ibrahim Traoré led a military *coup* in Ouagadougou to seize the power of Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henry Sandaogo Damiba, only 9 months after the previous *coup* (ACSS 2022). Traoré and its group justified the action by arguing the need for a radical change in the management of national security, which was deteriorating dramatically. Similarly to Mali, even Burkina Faso is seriously involved in an ongoing anti-terrorist war, where the state's control over the territory is severely challenged (around 40% in terrorist hands). In addition, even in the Burkinabe case, political instability plays a crucial role to worsen even more the security environment and the 2 recent *coups d'état* have constituted the main example. In order to eradicate the terrorist presence, France deployed a special task force of the Barkhane Operation in Burkina Faso, called Operation Sabre. However, as happened in Mali, in late January 2023 the new military junta submitted a formal request to withdraw French troops from Burkinabe soil and cease military relations with Paris. The decision was made by Traoré's military junta, which, from the outset, expressed strong nationalist, anti-French and populist sentiments, thus garnering political support from Moscow. Indeed, although relations between Burkina Faso and Russia are not yet entirely clear, the Kremlin's support for Traoré's authoritarian regime has not been lacking and it will probably become greater over the next years. Operating with a *modus operandi* similar to that developed in Bamako, contacts were created between the Burkinabe government and the troops of the Wagner group, who had already expressed in the moment after the seize of the national power, through the words of the former head Prigozhin, the congratulations for the military *coup* (ISPI 2023). Furthermore, the Russian footprint was visible even physically across the capital during the days of the coup, where it was possible to see many protesters waving Russian flags or displaying signs celebrating the cooperation between the new government and the Russians (*Al Jazeera* 2022d).

Therefore, considering the heavy Russian influence in Mali and the developing relationship with Burkina Faso, it can inevitably be argued that Moscow's role in the political dynamics of the Sahel has become increasingly important in recent years. The withdrawal of French troops from Mali has left a military vacuum that the Wagner Group has not hesitated to fill, especially from a political perspective. Nevertheless, the Africa Corps do not possess the military and organizational capabilities to guarantee the level of security maintained by the

French and, moreover, it is not in its interest to do so, focusing instead on the economic and political interests of working with Bamako. Therefore, this triggers a lot of international concerns regarding the security situation of the area, given the fact that the terrorist groups and criminal organizations will benefit from a broader scope for growth and empowerment. In addition, the increasing influence of Moscow will put in serious danger even the policies and the projects of the other international actors active on the territory, such as the UN missions and, especially, the European Union activities. In this sense, the next paragraph will be focused precisely on these concerns, trying to imagine the future role of the EU in Mali.

4.2 The Uncertain Future of Brussels in Mali

The recent political developments do not bode well for the prospects of future European Union (EU) actions in Mali. Even in previous years, the limitations and weaknesses of the European approach were evident, exposing several fragile aspects in the formulation and implementation of its external action policies. However, in light of the most recent political events, the future role of the EU in Mali appears more uncertain than ever. The deterioration of relations between France and Mali, the progressive breakdown of the relationship between the military junta and MINUSMA leading to its withdrawal, and the strengthening of Mali's political ties with Russia constitute external factors that will significantly influence Brussels' position in the country.

Firstly, the termination of Operation Barkhane in Mali and the diplomatic crisis between Bamako and Paris could have severe repercussions on EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and projects. As highlighted in Chapter 3, EU missions and projects have been closely intertwined with French military operations in the region. France had long been perceived as the predominant security provider, serving as the principal reference point for security and border control efforts. Consequently, EU initiatives in these domains, such as CSDP training missions or the PARSEC project (managed by Expertise France), have been closely linked to French operations. Another pertinent example is the G5 Sahel, an organization that emerged largely due to France's initiative and, despite being one of the EU's main political priorities, remained under Paris's strong influence in its interactions with the five Sahelian states. As a result, the crisis between Bamako and Paris and the withdrawal of Barkhane forces have created significant disruptions for the future of European policies in Mali, directly affecting the effectiveness and viability of EU missions and projects. Although the Malian government has not explicitly adopted an anti-European stance, the prospects for improving EU-Mali relations following the French diplomatic crisis and military withdrawal appear remote, particularly given the shifting positions of other international actors operating in the country.

Secondly, the UN MINUSMA mission no longer enjoyed the same level of legitimacy and public support that it commanded at the outset of its deployment in 2013. Since the two coups d'état and the rise of Colonel Assimi Goïta's

military junta, relations between the international peacekeeping mission and Malian authorities have steadily deteriorated. From the outset, the United Nations has consistently called for the restoration of constitutional order and the organization of free and democratic elections, urging the junta to establish a clear electoral timeline and adhere to basic democratic norms. However, over the past several years, Mali's ruling elite has shown little interest in reaching a democratic compromise, becoming increasingly resistant to external pressures for political reform. By late 2022 and early 2023, particularly following the French military withdrawal and Mali's growing bilateral cooperation with Moscow, the future of the UN mission was increasingly questioned, both due to internal reassessments by contributing states and the junta's worsening relationship with the UN (*Africa Rivista* 2022b).

One notable incident illustrates the growing tensions between MINUSMA and the Malian government. On 6 February 2023, Bamako officially requested the expulsion of Guillaume Ngefa-Atondoko Andali, the UN Chief of the Human Rights Division within MINUSMA (*Reuters* 2023). The Malian authorities accused him of "alleged" partiality, particularly for his strong advocacy of an international investigation into human rights violations committed by the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) in collaboration with the Wagner Group. However, this expulsion was merely one example of the broader political frictions between MINUSMA and Bamako, with little indication of any future improvement in diplomatic relations.

In light of these developments, several states participating in the MINUSMA deployment began reassessing their commitments, raising doubts about the mission's long-term sustainability. Following France's decision to withdraw its troops, the United Kingdom, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire also announced their intention to pull their contingents out of Mali before 2024. Similarly, Germany officially commenced its withdrawal process in 2024, reaffirming its decision despite a visit by the German defense minister to Bamako, during which Berlin reiterated the importance of holding democratic elections in February 2024 and ensuring a transition to civilian rule. The departure of Germany's 1,400-strong contingent was a significant setback for MINUSMA, further exacerbating concerns about the mission's viability. Ultimately, by the end of 2023, the only feasible political and operational course of action for MINUSMA was a complete withdrawal, marking the end of a decade of UN peacekeeping operations in Mali.

Within this political context, it becomes extremely difficult for Brussels to implement its activities and projects, being sucked into the political crises of the predominant international players in the area, namely France and the United Nations. For these reasons, although Bamako has never directly attacked European policies, the lack of international support, and especially the political proximity to Moscow, will seriously challenge the European partnership with Mali. In fact, as already pointed out, cooperation between Russia and Mali is growing exponentially. This dynamic poses a major obstacle to maintaining EU-Mali relations, particularly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the outbreak of hostilities between the Western bloc and Moscow. Nevertheless, even without

a greater development in Russia-Mali relations, the only presence of the Wagner group in the territory and its cooperation with the FAMa have become a problem for Brussels, whose activities were mainly focused on training and support of the National Internal Force System. In fact, although their respective mandates were initially extended, it became almost impossible for the EU to ensure the operation of EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Mali, which would find themselves working with the same national forces that cooperate with the Wagner group more and more systematically. Indeed, considering the short-term period, the effects on European operations and activities were already visible from early 2022. After several months of evaluations, Brussels decided to temporarily suspend EUTM Mali activities in April 2022, reducing the personnel and reorganizing the operations, and that decision continues its validity at the moment the author is writing. Even the former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell made important statements related to the management of CSDP missions on Malian soil.

“We have decided to suspend, to stop, certain formations of our training mission in Mali focused on the units of the armed forces of the Malian national guard... There are not enough security guarantees from the Malian authorities over the non-interference of the well-known Wagner Group” (*Reuters* 2022).

As Borrell's words described, the Malian government's future choice will also shape the European cooperation policies with the country. With a strengthening of the Russian partnership and heavy military interference by the Wagner Group, the possibility of pursuing European civilian missions will disappear completely. Consequently, even considering the recent political premises, characterized by the complete French disengagement and the withdrawal of the UN MINUSMA mission, the future of the Union's policies will also face troubled waters. For those reasons, becoming aware of the uncertain situation in the Malian context, in the last years Brussels tried to move with the purpose of reorganizing its presence in the Sahel. In fact, in December 2022, another CSDP mission was officially established by the EU in Niger, called the EU Military Partnership Mission Niger (EUMPM Niger) (Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/2444). EUMPM Niger started officially in February 2023, and it could be considered the identical copy of the EUTM Mali mission, focusing its activities on the training of the Nigerien military sector. However, less than six months after the beginning of the new Mission everything changed again completely. In fact, at the end of July 2023 another military *golpe*, very similar to the Malian and the Burkinabe ones, deposed President Mohamed Bazoum to deliver power into the hands of General Abdourahamane Tchiani, giving birth to a new authoritarian military regime in the region. This event created the political basis for Niger to act as the other Sahelian countries did in the previous years. Indeed, the military junta declared its intention to close the relations with the western partners, opening the doors to a new dialogue with the Russian counterpart. Hence, the European decision to launch a never born mission in Niger reflects, surely, the Union's intention to not abandon its activities Sahel, but above all, it shows its inability to assess the political climate of his Sahelian partners.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the next years will become crucial in understanding how the international political landscape in the Sahel will shift. The Malian government's change of path and its strong rapprochement with Putin's Russia will play a crucial role in both the overall security situation and the political dynamics of the other Sahelian states. In fact, the Wagner Group is unlikely to have the capacity and will to actually face the terrorist threat, thus triggering even more international concern over the unstable security situation. However, Bamako seems to have no doubts about its partnership with Moscow, as evidenced by the numerous enthusiastic visits of Russian Ministers, who did not hesitate to congratulate and support the work of the Malian authoritarian government. For this reason, given the political instability in the other Sahelian states, Russian-Malian relations could be the starting point for the Kremlin's expanding influence in the region. The first warning signs were coming from Burkina Faso, which seems determined in taking a similar path as Bamako, and the same could be said for the Niger situation.

In all of this, France is reorganizing (even forcibly) its approach and the United Nations will probably do the same. On the other hand, European Union built the foundation of its collaboration with Mali on security policies, in a context where the other international actors, France and the UN, enjoyed a predominant role in those matters. This has led Brussels to develop a type of cooperation that is also strictly dependent on the presence of other international players, failing to develop a truly unified European approach. Since those actors faced a serious crisis with the Malian military junta, even the EU had to rethink its approach in the region, taking into account the pace of political change. Indeed, in April 2021 the European Union published a new strategy for the Sahelian area called EU's Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (Council of the EU 2021). However, although the main objectives are and will still be valid for the next few years, some strategies, which may have seemed suitable in early 2021, will necessarily have to be reviewed and modified in light of the recent escalation of events. Described within the strategy was the role of the European Union in Mali as the centerpiece of foreign policy in the region, as well as the centrality of Malian CSDP missions to implement European policies on the ground. However, due to the clarifications made earlier, these objectives will inevitably need to be revised and refocused (if not abandoned). The same thing could happen concerning the G5 Sahel, on which the 2021 European Strategy bases many of the military cooperation policies in the region. Again, considering both the withdrawal of Malian, Burkinabe, and Nigerien troops from the G5 contingent and the military coups in all of the countries, the organization will be increasingly struggling to play a key role in the security of Sahelian states. Therefore, for all these reasons, the future of European foreign policies in Mali, as well as in the entire Sahelian belt, is more uncertain than ever and will be heavily influenced by political developments in the next future.

Conclusion

Based on the observations made thus far, it is possible to draw several conclusions regarding the objectives established at the outset of this research. The Sahel has frequently been presented as one of the most significant arenas for the development of European foreign policy, both in terms of strategic importance and geographical scope. However, as demonstrated in the first part of this analysis, the European Union's foreign policy continues to be characterized by significant limitations and structural weaknesses, which undermine its ability to assume a predominant geopolitical role. These limitations are evident not only in the broader context of EU-Africa relations but also when focusing specifically on the Sahelian region and, more precisely, on the case of Mali. The EU's external actions remain plagued by fundamental challenges that hinder the effectiveness of a genuinely unified European foreign policy. Although the nature of the relationship between the two continents has evolved over the decades, it continues to be shaped by longstanding historical dynamics. In practice, despite rhetorical commitments expressed in official discourse, EU-Africa relations remain marked by persistent inequalities, paternalistic approaches, and burdensome colonial legacies. Furthermore, the lack of military coordination, the absence of a unified European stance, and the strong influence of member states' domestic interests constitute major obstacles to the development of a coherent and effective communal external policy. These issues were also evident in the case of Mali, despite the initial optimism that accompanied European engagement in the Sahelian region in recent years.

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As emphasized throughout this study, Mali is characterized by a highly complex political, economic, and social landscape. The country's prolonged security crisis and the persistent threat of terrorism, which have severely undermined state stability, are primarily the result of deep-seated internal societal imbalances that require a multi-dimensional response. Politically, the much-anticipated democratic transition, long advocated by the United Nations in its engagement with Assimi Goïta's junta, has effectively stalled. Instead, the military regime has consolidated its grip on power, adopting increasingly antagonistic policies toward former international partners. Nevertheless, the various regional and international actors operating in Mali since 2013–2014, including the European Union, have predominantly focused on security and border management policies, largely neglecting the root causes of the country's internal crisis. As outlined in Chapter 3, terrorist activities have continued to expand at an alarming rate, spreading across the country and resulting in rising numbers of civilian and military casualties. The local population, often confronted with extreme poverty, lack of access to essential goods and services, and severe ethnic discrimination, is frequently compelled to seek alternatives outside state structures. In many cases, non-state actors, including terrorist groups, provide a semblance of economic and social stability in the absence of public welfare policies and institutional support. As a result, these groups have been able to strengthen their economic base and extend their territorial presence, posing an escalating threat not only to Malian sovereignty but also to regional and intercontinental security.

Within this challenging context, the European Union has failed to distinguish itself from other international actors operating in Mali, ultimately presenting itself as yet another security provider alongside France and the United Nations. Despite its stated commitment to addressing the root causes of instability, the EU's engagement has remained predominantly focused on military training, border management, and advisory activities. As demonstrated in this analysis, a substantial proportion of European funding has been allocated to security-related policies and projects, with limited emphasis on improving the living conditions of the Malian population. In the specific case of Mali, EU external actions have largely centered on the development of CSDP missions, which have constituted the core of European security policy in the region. Similarly, a security-driven approach has also shaped the allocation of various development cooperation funds. More specifically, as outlined in this study, a significant share of resources from the European Development Fund (EDF), the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), and the African Peace Facility (APF) has been directed toward security initiatives and migration management, rather than investments aimed at addressing the deep-seated ethnic, social, and economic disparities that underpin Mali's crisis and perpetuate its long-term instability.

For these reasons, European policies have proven ineffective in addressing the Malian crisis, yielding lackluster results despite the significant economic resources allocated to the region. Consequently, alongside existing literature on the subject, this analysis underscores the suboptimal nature of the EU's security-focused approach in tackling the crisis. However, what also emerges from

this study is an additional perspective that is often overlooked in scholarly discourse. From Brussels' standpoint, the decision to adopt a predominantly security-oriented approach in Mali has not only failed to mitigate the crisis on the ground but has also proven counterproductive to the EU's own strategic and political interests. The European Union has consistently sought to establish itself as a relevant geopolitical actor, particularly in a politically salient region such as Sub-Saharan Africa. However, by prioritizing security-driven policies, Brussels has inadvertently relegated itself to a subordinate position relative to other international actors that exert greater influence in this domain. In other words, the EU's short-term, security-centric strategy has not translated into geopolitical advantages, given the predominant roles occupied by France and the United Nations in this sphere. As a result, the EU's policy choices have not only placed it in a secondary position in its relations with Bamako but have also made it heavily dependent on and influenced by French and international strategic decisions.

Considering recent diplomatic developments, this dependency has produced even more counterproductive effects for the EU. First, the emergence of a severe diplomatic crisis between Paris and Bamako, coupled with the proliferation of powerful anti-French narratives and the subsequent withdrawal of Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA, has fundamentally reshaped the Malian political landscape, significantly impacting European activities in the region. A similar trend can be observed when broadening the scope of analysis to the wider Sahelian context. Following events in Mali, the political situation in Burkina Faso also underwent a dramatic transformation, culminating in an unconstitutional regime change that, from its inception, actively sought to sever ties with Western partners. A comparable scenario unfolded in Niger, which had long been considered the last reliable stronghold for French and European political and operational engagement in the region. The emergence of this authoritarian Sahelian bloc has resulted in an unprecedented level of hostility toward Western actors, particularly in recent years.

Second, the strengthening of diplomatic and military ties between Russia and Mali (as well as other Sahelian states) constitutes an additional warning sign for the future of the EU's role in the region, particularly in light of the geopolitical tensions exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Moscow's activities in the Sahel have been primarily security-focused, involving direct collaboration with the Malian National Army through the Wagner Group. The latter has already gained notoriety for engaging in indiscriminate violence, human rights violations, and ethnically targeted repression. Given that European policies in Mali were largely based on military cooperation, the increasing presence of Russian mercenaries has resulted in the suspension and termination of numerous EU initiatives, leaving little prospect for future re-engagement.

In conclusion, the findings of this analysis overwhelmingly illustrate the inadequacy of the European Union's approach across multiple dimensions. Over the past decades, Brussels has pursued the objective of enhancing its geopolitical and strategic influence on the international stage. Despite persistent structural limitations in the development of its foreign policy, the EU has intensified

its political and economic engagement abroad, with Mali serving as a prime case study. However, the Malian crisis has exposed the significant weaknesses and fragilities inherent in European foreign policymaking. The strong influence of individual member states, the lack of military coordination, and the need to accommodate domestic political pressures have collectively led the EU to implement policies that have proven counterproductive, not only in resolving the crisis but also in advancing its own strategic interests. The repercussions of these dynamics have become particularly evident in recent years. The authoritarian shift in the Sahelian region threatens to undermine years of European policy efforts and financial investments, which have ultimately failed to address the root causes of Mali's enduring instability.

A fundamental shift in the EU's approach to the region is imperative, as the structural weaknesses of its policies have been apparent for years. However, the events of recent years have further underscored the EU's strategic and political short-sightedness. These shortcomings include: the unwavering and largely uncritical support for the G5 Sahel, even as the organization was visibly disintegrating; the EU's secondary-level engagement with individual Sahelian states, in contrast to the dominant role played by one of its own member states, namely France; and, finally, Brussels' weak strategic and diplomatic foresight, as exemplified by its decision to launch a new mission in Niger and position Niamey as a key regional partner mere months before the military coup.

All of these challenges, along with others not explicitly addressed, provide the European Union with ample grounds for reflection regarding its foreign policy approach. It is crucial to consider whether the time has come for a qualitative leap in European continental sovereignty in managing its international political actions, so as to avoid multi-decade investments, such as those in the Sahel, that ultimately yield limited results and may be deemed failures. Clearly, the complexities at hand extend far beyond the scope of this conclusion and will undoubtedly remain the subject of extensive political analysis in the years to come.

Finally, while much more could be discussed in these few but necessary concluding pages, I will limit myself to offering a few additional reflections to underscore the urgency of the EU's efforts to restore a genuine partnership with the Sahel region. Global political, economic, demographic, and climatic dynamics make it imperative to establish credible and effective relationships with key partners. In this regard, the Sahel, West Africa, and North Africa occupy a central strategic position. In the much-discussed multipolar world order, the Europe-Africa partnership should be on a trajectory of continuous growth and institutionalization, yet, at present, this is not fully materializing.

This raises critical questions about the quality of governance concerning key transnational challenges that affect both continents. The most pressing example is the fight against climate change. Africa, and in particular the Sahelian region, is among the most severely affected areas by global climate change. The absence of robust international cooperation to address these challenges will only exacerbate the already catastrophic consequences for the region and its populations. The impacts of climate change are deeply intertwined with the economic and

social fabric of the affected areas. The decreasing availability of arable land and pasture, coupled with the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events, will place immense strain on communities already weakened by poverty and military insecurity.

These dynamics will also have significant repercussions on migratory flows, which, although largely occurring within Africa, are heavily influenced by the short-sighted international policies of European partners. The European Union's engagement with Sahelian states has been characterized by restrictive migration policies, stringent mobility regulations, and the externalization of border management. The centrality of migration in the domestic politics of key EU Member States, including France, Italy, Spain, Germany, and Greece, has resulted in a negotiation strategy that prioritizes containment over cooperation. This approach has led to particularly ineffective and counterproductive outcomes, as exemplified by the widely criticized case of Agadez. The combination of short-term thinking, misaligned objectives between African partners and the EU, the persistent fear of large-scale migration, and the imposition of asymmetric conditionalities has severely undermined the partnership with Sahelian states, bringing it to the brink of collapse.

As a result, what many scholars and commentators have referred to as the "experimental laboratory" of European Union foreign policy should perhaps now be reframed as the "learning laboratory" for the EU, an opportunity to develop a new and necessary global strategy for external action. The limitations and weaknesses of the EU-Sahel partnership, as analyzed through the case study of Mali, were evident from the outset. However, rather than being mitigated over time, they have been further confirmed and exacerbated. From what might now be described as a failure of the EU in the Sahel, Brussels should recognize the urgent need to recalibrate its diplomatic efforts and work toward the establishment of a supranational, structured, and competent foreign policy, one that is truly capable of responding to the evolving global landscape.

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The Sahel has become a focal point of EU foreign policy, particularly following Mali's security crisis since 2012. This analysis critically examines European policies in Mali, highlighting their limitations and weaknesses. Rooted in systemic limits of the EU's external actions and its colonial ties with Africa, these shortcomings stem from an overemphasis on security and migration, neglecting Mali's deep social and ethnic imbalances. Consequently, EU policies and activities in the region have prioritized short-term fixes over structural solutions. Furthermore, recent political shifts, including military coups, underscore the need to reassess Brussels' ineffective strategies and the evolving diplomatic landscape in the Sahel.

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