Università
Ca'Foscari
Venezia

Master's Degree Programme
In Comparative International Relations -
Global Studies

Final Thesis

NATO Looking South:

New Security Challenges for the Atlantic Alliance in the Sahel region

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Academic Year

2020/2021

List of Abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
AFRICOM	United States Africa Command
AGS	Alliance Ground Surveillance
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
ASF	African Standby Force
ATF	Advisory Task Force
AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AU	African Union
BRI	Belt Road Initiative
BUILD	Utilization of Investments Leading to Development
CMO	Crisis Management Operation
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
CNSP	National Committee for the Salvation of the People
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
DCB	Defence and Related Capacity Building
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EEAS	European External Action Service
ETTF	Educational and Training Task Force
EU	European Union
EUCAP	European Union Capacity Building Mission
EUNAVFOR MED IRINI	IRINI Operation
EUTF	EU Trust Fund
EUTM	EU Training Mission
FACT	French acronym for the Front for Change and Concord in Chad

FC-G5S	Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel
GFOAC	General, Flag Officers, and Ambassador Course
GSPC	Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat
IFOR	Implementation Force
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISCAP	Islamic State Central Africa Province
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISWAP	Islamic State in the West Africa Province
JFC	Joint Force Command
JISD	Joint Intelligence and Security Division
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen
KFOR	Kosovo Force
LCBC	Lake Chad Basin Commission
MD	Mediterranean Dialogue Partnership
MINUSMA	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNJTF	Multinational Joint Task Force
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MSO	Maritime Security Operation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDC	NATO Defense College
NRCC	NATO Regional Cooperation Course
NSD-S HUB	NATO Strategic D – South Hub
NSPA	NATO Support and Procurement Agency
OEF-TS	Operation Enduring Freedom – Trans Sahara
PMC	Private Military Company
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Teams
RACC	Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell
RAP	Regional Action Plan

SADAT	Turkish International Defense Consultancy Company
SERC	Senior Executive Regional Conference
SFOR	Stabilisation Force
SNMG2	NATO's Maritime Group 2
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TSCTP	Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership
UK	United Kingdom
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNPROFOR	UN Protection Force
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
VEO	Violent and Extremist Organization
VERO	Volunteer for Education, Research and Outreach

Introduction

The African continent is frequently represented as the most unstable one: protracted conflicts, underdevelopment, weak and failed states, climate change, and other types of challenges pose a threat to African societies, creating at the same time repercussions for the rest of the international community. In 2011, the Arab uprisings and the ensuing conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen have profoundly changed the political scenarios of North Africa and the Middle East, involving not only the States directly affected, but neighbouring countries too. Among the latter group, the Sahel is one of "the most challenging" regions, due to chronic pressures such as the consequences from climate change, terrorism, migration fluxes going beyond the Mediterranean Sea, and poverty (Melly, 2021). After the collapse of Qaddafi's regime, and the subsequent Malian crisis, "the Sahel has become increasingly exposed to hybrid, transnational threats" (Aynaou, 2015). Indeed, the instability in the region has demonstrated potential to alter political and economic balances in world politics, leading both African and non-African countries to develop strategies to contain and prevent such critical situation. Such strategies have been implemented in the form of intense mechanisms of support and cooperation in the area, where Western countries have deployed military troops, as well as a significant amount of financial aid programmes. However, despite these efforts, the situation has not changed. Indeed, taking as an example the case of Mali, the *coup d'etat* in which former President Keita had to resign, raised several doubts on the efforts done by the Malian government about international stabilisation. This led to the suspension of assistance programmes from European countries and the EU. Clearly, this had consequences also within the entire region. Moreover, the Coronavirus pandemic has worsened the situation, leading to dramatic economic downturns, with "unprecedented measures" taken by African governments, further damaging their weak economies and health systems (Çonkar, 2020).

As the Sahel is growing as an international concern, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has developed several interests in the region too. "Well before Crimea, NATO was taking major actions that were oriented to the South and the Wales Summit", as Robert Bell argued during a seminar in 2020.[1] Especially concerning the

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[1] Seminar on "NATO's Southern Flank security around the Mediterranean Sea", available at https://www.iiss.org/events/2020/10/natos-southern-flank .

instability created by failed States and migration, NATO enduring interests in the South demonstrate an important recognition of the consequences that the instability in the region may bring beyond the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, considering the latest Brussels Communiqué from the last NATO Summit of June 2021, the 30 member States of the Alliance further underlined the need for a common response to the incoming threat of the Sahelian instability. From the long-standing relationship with Mauritania (within the Mediterranean Dialogue partnership), to the cooperation with regional and international actors, such as the African Union, the G5 Sahel, the UN and the EU, NATO recalled for an improved cooperative engagement. However, the only military intervention in scenarios where governmental institutions fail to provide a proper social contract will not lead to proper solutions (Bagnara, 2021). At the same time, as Dr Schwarz argues in an interview (ibid.), transparency is a key element for the Alliance, in order to enhance partnerships. Moreover, the fact that only Mauritania has a formal partnership with NATO represents another issue that may be slower the Atlantic approach to the Sahel.

Nevertheless, it is in analysing how NATO can approach to the Southern Flank that the Strategic Direction South Hub in Naples ("the Hub") emerges, as a NATO eye towards the continent. The Alliance managed to create solid networks with countries and entities in Africa and the Middle East, for a better understanding of the "unfamiliar region which lies to the south of the Euro-Atlantic area" (Mariano, 2020). As the issues in the region may generate direct consequences outside the African continent, NATO has enhanced cooperation with African partners, in order to provide assistance and prevent possible instabilities. At the same time, as Melly (2021) highlights, African countries have tried to cooperate with each other, in order to create a common ground from which the main challenges can be faced. An example of this kind of cooperation is represented by the G5 Sahel, established in 2014 by Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Niger, for a better coordination of strategies against regional security crises. By considering a common ground where to operate, the G5 Sahel represents an example of arena in which Sahelian countries may encourage international cooperation, in line with the main objectives at the basis of the African Union's mandate.[2] However, despite the effort from the international community in training and funding Sahelian forces, the G5 Sahel did not manage to bring stability in the region, due to its lack of coordination among its own

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[2] For more information regarding the African Union's mandate, see the Constitutive Act of the African Union (2001), available at https://au.int/en/treaties/constitutive-act-african-union .

troops (despite the "common background" underlined by Melly – 2021 –, because of the five countries' French colonial past), as well as its constant request for funding. Moreover, capacity-building through international support represents a key element for G5 Sahel forces, especially in the context of its Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF) in countering terrorism. However, concentrating on security-focused initiatives leads to further limitations, as such strategies will be at the expense of other actions promoting development or human rights. Indeed, as noted by Dieng (2019), capacities dedicated to defensive purposes preserved security forces' misbehaviours, thus leading to further violence and resentment, and reducing "the efficiency of counterterrorism efforts".

In this environment, the role of NATO is enhanced by the assistance provided to its partners of the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) Partnership, and the African Union (AU). The Alliance can thrive from cooperative security activities in the region, by further developing its ability to adapt, strengthening at the same time its role in the international arena. As the Sahel represents a complex security environment, NATO has the opportunity to demonstrate that it is still credible to accomplish its main tasks ("collective defense, cooperative security, and crisis management" – General Lanata's statement in Strategic Foresight Analysis, 2020). However, as one of the main challenges for the Alliance is the cohesion among its own members, what will be necessary to develop is not only an external image for Sahelian countries (considering that some NATO countries have a colonial past in the African continent), but also a deeper cohesion among its own Allies, confirming that what has been considered as "brain dead", indeed still operates with a solid network.[3]

The aim of this study is to achieve a better understanding of the role of the Atlantic Alliance in the Sahel. Even though this region can be analysed under different threats perceived by the international community, this research will be focused on only some of the main security challenges for NATO. Giving an initial framework on the Sahelian situation and of the actors already involved in the territory, the study will further develop an analysis of NATO's current efforts in the South, focusing then on security interests in counterterrorism operations and migration, the latter considered as a symptom brought by the instability that can have repercussions outside the African continent, as what is happening in the Sahel clearly influences the future of international security, especially

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[3] On the statement about NATO's "brain death", see https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead ;

in the Mediterranean and within NATO countries. Clearly, counterterrorism and migration represent only two aspects that are characterizing the Sahel region nowadays. Indeed, while analysing this area it is possible to highlight several other issues, such as energy security, humanitarian interventions on local populations, climate change, weak and failed States. However, in order to have a better understanding of NATO's role in the region, it is necessary to concentrate our view on few topics, considering the others as a starting point for future research.

In the following part of this thesis, a chapter will be dedicated on a new and innovative perspective of NATO's contribution in the Sahel, that is the cooperation initiative with the G5 Sahel's Defense College (*Le Collège du Défence du G5 Sahel*), that will represent a further improvement in both NATO's role in the region, as well as in the G5 Sahel's ability to provide a better academic education for its personnel, going beyond the more practical military operations.[4] Finally, the last part of this chapter will be dedicated to some key suggestions for a more cooperative approach, that will emphasize the potential role of NATO inside the region, as well as improving the role of Sahelian countries in the territory. Furthermore, along with these key suggestions, some final recommendations for the Alliance will be provided at the end of the chapter.

This study on the potential role of NATO in the Sahel will combine at the same time my personal experience as an Intern and Assistant at the NATO Defense College in Rome, the Alliance's honourable academic institution, that aims at the educational development of nations' senior officers and officials, providing relevant resources for future policy-making strategies. During my experience as VERO (Volunteer for Education, Research and Outreach) Assistant, and Intern in the Academic Operations Division, and then Assistant in the Research Division, the current study has been enriched with interviews to the Organization's representatives, as well as NATO partner countries. These have provided a multi-layered perspective of NATO's role in the Sahel. By adding interviews to this thesis, I aim at giving a more realistic perspective of the situation in the Sahel, and of the Atlantic Alliance's position nowadays, seen both by NATO countries and partners, such as the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD).[5] Thus, a more practical view

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[4] On the G5 Sahel's Defense College, see http://cdg5s.org/ ;

[5] On the Mediterranean Dialogue Partnership, see https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_60021.htm? , and https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/51288.htm .

from military and civilian personnel working in this international security environment will be provided.

In my analysis of NATO's potential role in the Sahel and its relations with regional actors (including the G5 Sahel Joint Command), I intend to answer the following operational questions, following a combination of exploratory and normative analyses, describing what NATO is doing at the moment, and what can be its potential role in the region:

1. Considering the individual role of NATO and non-NATO countries in the region, how the Alliance poses itself as international entity?
2. What kind of cooperation with the G5 Sahel should NATO develop, along with the already-established support to Sahelian countries' operations?
3. If there will be some changes in the stability of the Sahel, how will NATO change its posture in this region?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to start with an initial analytical framework on the Sahelian countries are reacting to the stability in the region, as well as how many actors are involved in the region: hence how they are operating, how they are efficient, and how do they influence the current scenario through their influence over the Sahelian countries. At the same time, it is necessary to understand what the key role can NATO portray while dealing with the Southern Flank in the process of projecting stability, as well as the role of the G5 Sahel in the coordination of security operations.

As General Lanata argues in the Report from the Strategic Foresight Analysis (2020), "North Africa and the Sahel will require continuing focus and attention from Europe and NATO for the next 20 years and beyond". Thus, more studies on the Sahel region will represent a further improvement in the application of strategies for future regional and international stability. Indeed, this research can also represent an initial start for next studies, from which NATO and its partners could benefit by developing coordinated strategies against future risks and critical situations.

The G5 Sahel – Source: https://eutmmali.eu/g5-sahel-map-1200/
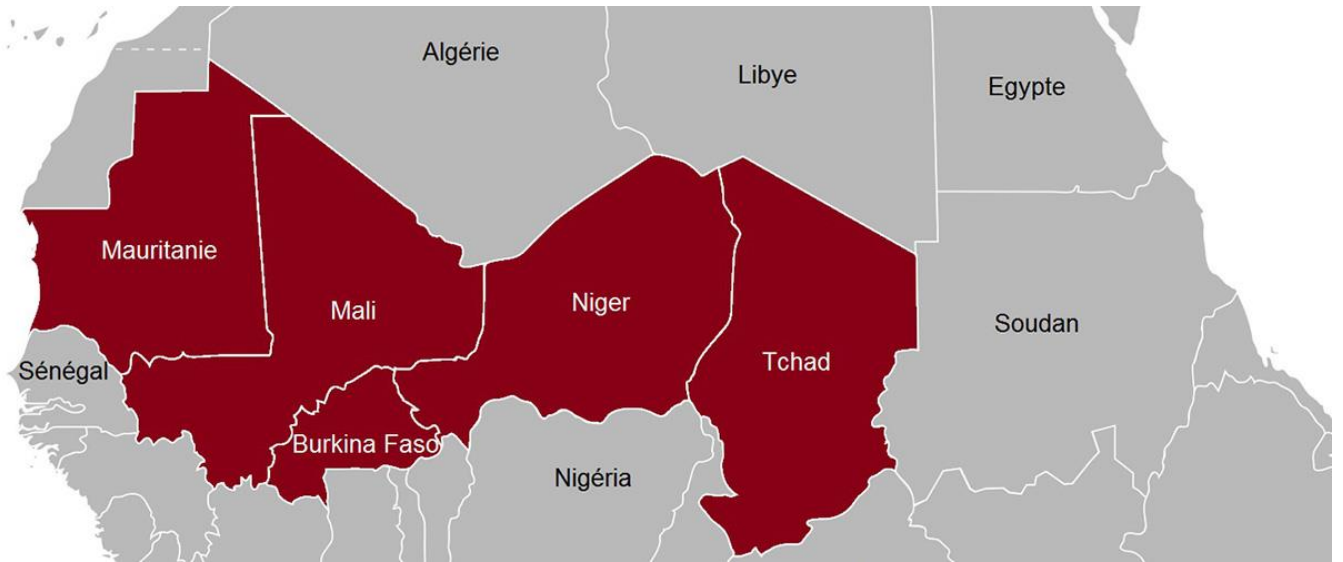
1. The actors involved in the Sahel

Due to its increasing need for stability, the Sahel region is continuously receiving aid from several actors, both at regional and international level. In response to the growing security threats, not only given by the presence of terrorist groups, but also by the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues related to illegal activities, such as human trafficking and drug sale, or conflicts based on ethnic diversity, many regional security initiatives have been deployed in the region. However, despite the effort provided over the time, the entire region is facing a constant "fragility dilemma", in which States are in a desperate need for an external assistance, making them dependent to the aid from the international community and other countries' efforts, but they do not have enough capacity to absorb completely the assistance provided (Bøas, 2019). This sort of paradox leads to a constant state of instability in the region, as the governance of the Sahelian States is too weak to respond effectively to security challenges. With millions of people displaced (Le Monde, 2021), change of governments in an already unstable region, as it is possible to see by the case of Mali and Chad for example (in which respectively a coup d'état and the death of a President created more challenges to these States in keeping stability within their territories), and increasing jihadist insurgencies threatening the States' integrity, the Sahel keeps its position as one of the most unstable regions under a serious humanitarian crisis. What has been done so far achieved only short-term gains, and the relationship between Sahelian countries and local communities is highly affected by those armed groups that are exploiting ethnical differences to gain the upper hand, leading to "some of the deadliest violence ever recorded in the Sahel" (Nsaibia, 2021).

At the same time, a further element of instability is given by the opposition of the local population against some of the international efforts provided. Mostly in the case of France in Mali, public demonstrations have shown a loss of legitimacy over the role of external supporters. Thus, another important challenge for both regional and international actors is presented by the building of trust within local communities, especially those in the most remote areas, where terrorist and violent groups have stronger influence (Olojo, Dakono, and Maïga, 2020).

Considering the international support provided so far, one of the main missions in the Sahel is the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which was adopted through a Security Council Resolution (n. 2100) in

2013. Based in Bamako, the UN mission's first mandate aimed at supporting "the transitional authorities of Mali in the stabilization of the country and implementation of a transitional roadmap", preparing the basis for Mali to have a solid governmental structure that could provide protection to its population, respect of human rights, and inclusive and democratic elections. The deteriorating situation in Mali, however, showed that much more needs to be done. And indeed, with resolution 2531 (2020), the Security Council renewed its mandate, to "facilitate the implementation by Malian actors of a comprehensive politically-led strategy to protect civilians, reduce intercommunal violence and re-establish State authority, State presence and basic social services in Central Mali". At the moment, the MINUSMA mission counts nearly 13 thousand soldiers deployed in Mali, with other 1,746 police forces, as well as 1,180 civilians, but even with such deployment of forces, the situation in Mali is far from stable.[6] Many times, peacekeepers in the MINUSMA operations have been under several attacks while providing support in the region, as it can be demonstrated by the recent attack last February (MINUSMA, 2021), and by the fact that "the UN does not have a good reputation" within the Malian population, as communities "complain that they have been put in a cordon that has stifled their lives and shows no signs of achieving peace" (Watling, 2020). At the same time, the transitional process that Mali is experiencing at the moment represents a further challenge for UN Peacekeepers, as it would be more difficult for the MINUSMA forces to operate. Indeed, while the Security Council "condemned the [recent] arrest of the transitional President" and other officials by the security forces in Mali (De Luca, 2021; Le Cam, 2021), the current crisis in Mali may lead to additional challenges that would negatively affect further peace agreements in the country (UN News, 2021).

Another international effort was launched in 2017 by France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, the European Union, the World Bank, the UN Development Programme, and the African Development Bank. The so called "Alliance for the Sahel", today composed by 13 members and 11 observers, aims at developing a common forum where donors may effectively finance projects in the region. Along with the G5 Sahel, the Alliance tries to tackle the root causes of the crises in the region. It is indeed a mechanism that strengthens the coordination of development, avoiding scattering and

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[6] For more information on MINUSMA, see https://minusma.unmissions.org/en, and https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma .

accelerating its outcome. The commitment of the Alliance for the Sahel focuses on six main sectors, establishing a multilateral, territorial, and flexible procedures:

- Education and youth employment.
- Agriculture, rural development, and food security.
- Decentralization and basic services
- Domestic security.
- Energy and climate, notably energy access, green energy, and water.
- And governance.

More than of 800 projects have been launched by the Alliance for the Sahel, counting a total of 11,6 billion of euros.[7] And with the collaboration of the G5 Sahel, it plays a key role in the development of the Coalition for the Sahel, another operational framework that brings together stakeholders who provide collective security support, stability, and development in the region. Formed after the Pau Summit in 2020, the Coalition aims at facilitating "the coordination and interaction between the various dimensions of international action to support the G5 Sahel countries". While being supported by the International Community, this initiative works across four main pillars:

- Fighting terrorism by coordinating all the efforts provided by Sahelian armies, the G5 Joint Force, and the international operations in the region (Barkhane, Takuba, MINUSMA).
- Strengthening the capabilities of the G5 Sahel States' troops, following the Partnership established in 2019 by France and Germany during the G7 Summit in Biarritz, in order to identify the security needs.
- Supporting the return of governmental administration in the territory, providing training and enough equipment to national security forces.
- And development assistance, that focuses mainly on employment, education, healthcare, and infrastructure.[8]

Nevertheless, despite these efforts represent major steps towards stability in the region, the presence of terrorist and violent groups is still one of the main features. Indeed, the Sahel is also a complex area due to the variety of non-state actors, that are constantly challenging countries and the international community. Eight major radical groups are

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[7] For more information on the Alliance for the Sahel, see https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/ .
[8] For more information on the Coalition for the Sahel, seehttps://www.coalition-sahel.org/en/ .

operating in the Sahel. Following the NATO Southern Hub's reports on the Sahel (2020a, 2020b, and 2021), it is possible to identify two main categories: those linked to al-Qaeda (AQ) and its subsidiary, the al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), mainly under the name of *Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen* (JNIM – created in 2017); and those affiliated with the Islamic State (Daesh). Due to the porosity of the borders, these groups are able to spread their activities throughout the entire region, creating a spill over effect in neighbouring countries (Strategic Comments, 2012). Considering their geographical position, the groups are mainly found in two regional areas: the Central Sahel, between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and the Lake Chad Basin.

The damages caused by these violent groups range from attacks on civilian population and villages, to ambushes and attacks on military and public institutions. The variety of these attacks, along with the porosity of the borders between Sahelian countries, as well as the limited security presence in remote areas, allowed terrorist groups to widen their activities, increasing at the same time their engagement with illegal activities such as weapons, human trafficking, kidnapping ramson, and drug sale, further providing enough resources to survive. As a consequence, the instability created by these groups led to the displacement of populations, creating issues on a human security level too. An example of one of the main terrorists and extremist groups that is further creates instability in the region is Boko Haram, "a Salafist group seeking to impose sharia law and eliminate Western influence" (ibid.), that since the 2000s has claimed many attacks and killings in the region,

While operating mainly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and in the Lake Chad Basin, the year 2020 signed both positive and negative trends within the presence of terrorist groups in the Sahel region (NSD-S HUB 2020a, 2020b, and 2021). On the one hand, it was overall "the most intense year in terms of terrorist activity" and geographical dispersion. On the other, the lethality of such attacks decreased, due to disagreements and clashes between terrorist and extremist groups, which led to a subsequent decrease of their resources and more efficient Counter-terrorism efforts. Nevertheless, the situation has not changed.

In order to understand how NATO should improve in order to establish suitable solutions for the Sahel region, it is thus necessary to understand the context in which the Alliance would enhance its role, considering the actors involved in the regions. Moreover,

another aim of this chapter is to underline how countries that have individual interests in the region are trying to increase their role through different opportunities. By proposing different alternatives to the Sahelian countries, global powers are competing with each other for a major role. From NATO countries such as France, Turkey, Italy, and the United States, to others such as China and the Russian Federation, the Sahel represents another area in which countries try to increase their presence, first because of the consequences on international security, if no support is provided. Then, as it will be possible to see further in the research, countries will try to increase their role in order to satisfy their interests, either economic or, in case of Russia, to have more support at the UN level.

1.1 The G5 Sahel

The G5 Sahel represents the main effort from Sahelian countries to create a common institutional framework at monitoring regional cooperation and coordinating a common security and economic policies within five countries of the Sahel region, namely Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Chad, and Niger.

In February 2017 the G5 Sahel established its own Joint Force (also known as the *Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel* – FC-G5S). The idea behind it was to establish a proper response to the security and development challenges in the region. Having been supported by France since the beginning, the Joint Force represents an effort by the Sahelian countries to provide an "African solution to African problems". Indeed, its concept can be based on four main pillars: fighting terrorism and drug trafficking; restoring the countries' authority, permitting the return of displaced people and refugees in their homeland; facilitating humanitarian operations; and contributing to the establishment of concrete strategies within the G5 Sahel region.

At the moment, the Force counts over 5,000 military troops from the five member States, and counts two main operations, made in close cooperation with the Barkhane Force:

- Between October and November 2017, the first anti-terrorist operation (labelled *Hawbi*) was launched, aimed (Athie, 2018, and Reuters, 2017). The operation

involved Malian, Nigerien, and Burkinabe troops, deployed between the borders of the three States;

- Between the 15th and 29th of January 2018, the second operation (*Pagnali*), took place, in the border between Mali and Burkina Faso, aiming at destroying the supplies of terrorist groups (Athie, 2018).

Both operations were successful, and managed to send a message to terrorist groups, that a common force between the Sahelian countries was established. However, although it represents an important step towards the Sahelian effort in providing stability in the region, the Force is still facing many challenges, that are limiting its operations. The first, and perhaps main limit that the FC-G5S has to face, concerns the lack of funding. Even though the International Community is supporting the G5 Sahel and its Joint Force, funding long-term operations, training and modern equipment still represents a major challenge. Indeed, even if assistance by the United Nations is confirmed by two Resolutions from the Security Council (June 2017, and December 2017), explicitly stating that a "secure funding and support for the FC-G5S will make a critical contribution to a lasting stabilization of the Sahel region", the United Nations only "welcomed" the deployment of the Joint Force, instead of approving it. Furthermore, the Council recalled that it was responsibility of the G5 countries to provide enough resources, encouraging at the same time a substantial effort for further support with bilateral or multilateral agreements, in order to assist the G5 members in the region. Furthermore, the high level of dependency of the Joint Force towards external support, especially financial, further enhances the inability to act autonomously (Sandes, 2021). An example can be provided by training from EU, in which the EUTM has been criticised as Malian armed forces were not trained to reach self-sufficiency (Tull, 2020).

The second issue is represented by an internal concern, that is the unequal military capabilities within the G5 Sahel countries. Three G5's armies (namely Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) have significant challenges. After the 2020 coup, the Malian army had to face another challenge within its country's borders, thus slowing the process of reorganization of the military structure. Burkina Faso's army and intelligence are still experiencing a restructuring process since 2014, when President Compaore's government fell. Finally, Niger's army does not have enough budget to deploy effective measures for the security along sensitive borders between Mali, Libya, and Nigeria. Hence, this creates

a paradox, in which the weakest parts of the region are those in charge of most of the work.

Another internal challenge concerns the interconnections with other regional security initiatives. In fact, the G5 Sahel Joint Force lacks a clear institutional focus, while other regional initiatives present a solid mandate. Taking as an example the MINUSMA operation, its aim is to support political processes in Mali, as well as providing stability. Given that the same partners are deploying troops in other missions, the efforts provided in this G5 Joint Task Force is clearly limited, and it represents another main challenge in the fight of terrorism.

Troop Commitments by G5 Sahel Countries

Country	Commitment to G5 Sahel Joint Force	Total Armed Forces	Deployed to UN or Other Peace Operations
Mali	1,100 soldiers; 200 gendarmes	15,570	50 to UN missions
Burkina Faso	550 soldiers; 100 gendarmes	9,100	2,100 to UN missions
Niger	1,100 soldiers; 200 gendarmes	14,200	975 to UN missions; 1,000 to the MNJTF
Chad	550 soldiers; 100 gendarmes	30,300	1,500 to UN missions; 2,000 to the MNJTF
Mauritania	550 soldiers; 100 gendarmes	17,000	1,050 to UN missions

Troops Commitment to the G5 Joint Force (source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies)

Finally, the fourth challenge for the Joint Force is represented by an unclear common definition of the "enemy". Indeed, while the MNJTF operation has as common enemy Boko Haram, the FC-G5S considers all armed actors that are distributed in the region. Despite terrorist groups, that are affiliated to main organizations such as al-Qaeda or Daesh, since the fall of the Qaddafi regime in Libya the Sahel resulted in a region where to transit easily, due to the porous borders within the countries. Drug traffickers or human smugglers have taken the opportunity from this instability to profit with their illegal activities. And considering how many populations in the periphery started to profit from these activities as well, it is clear how local populations may not collaborate with

national governments. At the same time, local militias within the region have an influence in their territory, and it is unclear if they will cooperate with G5 Sahel countries.

1.2 Instability between porous borders: the Sahelian countries

First, for a better understanding on the region it is necessary to briefly analyze the situation in the countries of the Sahel, as they are characterized by different internal contexts, whose effects influence the regional scenario, thus the stability of the region. As Bøas and Strazzari (2020) argue, the countries in the Sahel region are placed "at the bottom of the world's fragility indexes", due to their high levels of poverty and fragility of their public institutions.

1.2.1   Mauritania

As Bøas (2019) argues, "of the G5 Sahel countries, Mauritania stand out as the strongest", as it is emphasized by its effort in supporting the West in the fight against Islamic insurgencies since the outbreak of the Malian crisis in 2012. However, even Mauritania is characterized by many political challenges, represented by a general lack of "a real democratic space" (ibid.); the persistent ethnic divisions within the country and the historical issue of slavery; and the high level of youth unemployment and the weakness of the economy to external shocks.

From 2005 to 2011, Mauritania represented a major theatre in which extremist groups coming from Algeria sought for a safe haven. Particularly from the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), and later by its successor, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), during the 2000s Mauritania experienced different attacks to which the government had to respond. Due to its history of having a poorly equipped army (Boukhars, 2020) extremist groups thought that that Mauritania could be an easy target. However, after the attacks in Lemgheitty (2005), and in Tourine (2008), the Mauritanian government aimed at launching many military reforms, as General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (president until 2019) seized power in a military coup and increased the military budget. Thus, the Mauritanian military experienced a substantial transformation, changing into a well-trained and fully equipped force, able to counter terrorist groups with efficiency.

At the same time, other important elements affected the failure of extremist groups in gaining influence in the territory. After Lemgheitty, the GSPC/AQIM cells that were operating in Mauritania started to organize many attacks, either military operations with large numbers of participants and field commanders, or unsupervised attacks by local recruits without any leadership (Thurston, 2020). However, small numbers of Mauritanians were attracted by GSPC/AQIM's rhetoric. Indeed, as Thurston (ibid.) describes, Mauritanian cells were under arrest easily, due to their lack of coordination, and no place where to hide, as well as the lower support from the local population due to the atrocities that these groups did to foreign visitors or civilians. Furthermore, governmental "carrots and stick" used with jihadists in jail, thus dialogues with Arab scholars, or prosecutions, managed to reduce the appeal of Mauritanians to these groups, lowering the level of the jihadist threat in the territory, and moving the Mauritanian effort beyond the borders, as Mali represented the right hotspot for violent and extremist groups, especially after the Libyan crisis.

Mauritania may represent a safer and more stable place in the Sahel region. However, even if no attacks materialized in the recent period, many communiqués from AQIM are spread through Mauritanian medias, and within these messages to their cells, Mauritania has been mentioned many times (Porter, 2018). At the same time, the country is experiencing many internal challenges, such as corruption, as it is possible to underline from the arrest of former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (Rédaction Africanews, 2021b), and strict ethno-linguistic and racial stratifications, as the difference between *bidan* ("whites"), and *haratin* ("blacks") and its history of politics of repression by previous governments, still characterizes the political arena. Indeed, as Wehrey (2019) argues, "the government's triumphalist narrative is ultimately built on a shaky foundation, especially given Mauritania's bleak socioeconomic picture, ongoing corruption, and existing social tensions", that jihadists have tried to exploit, but unsuccessfully. Its partnership with the Atlantic Alliance through the Mediterranean Dialogue may represent an important element for Sahelian countries to take into consideration, as such Partnership have helped Mauritania on many occasions. Indeed, the Alliance has supported Mauritania with the building of safe munition deposits, as well as in training military personnel, and managing crisis management centres (NATO, 2021o).

1.2.2   Mali

In January 2012, armed insurgencies led by Tuareg fighters in northern Mali brought the country in an ongoing spiral of conflicts and instability. After the fall of the Qaddafi regime in 2011, Tuareg rebels came back to the northern part of Mali and formed the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which started to fight against the army. Fueled from the Libyan conflict and supported by extremist groups related to the Algerian Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), northern rebels declared independence in Azawad. As a response to the crisis, in 2013 military operations have been initiated against jihadist and extremist groups, and have characterized Mali since. Starting with Operation Serval, France managed to free most of northern Mali from jihadist groups. Even if the intervention was seen with reluctance by the former French Minister of Defense, Jean-Yvres Le Drian, the decision of President Hollande to deploy French troops in support of the Malian government aimed at avoiding the fall of Bamako under the pressure of rebels coming from the North (Haine, 2020). Along with this mission, the United Nations appointed a peacekeeping mission in the same year (MINUSMA), aiming at stabilizing and supporting local authorities. However, despite these efforts, nearly two-thirds of jihadist cells managed to escape. At the same time, the town of Kidal remained a safe haven for rebels, allowing the MNLA to keep its autonomous base (Haine, 2020). Seeing that the long-term objectives were not achievable, in 2014 France initiated Operation Barkhane, in order to counter the jihadist threat within an extended scope. Later in 2020, the Takuba task force started to assist operation Barkhane in the fight against the current threat.

To further destabilize the Malian territory, a coup d'état on 18 August 2020 heavily affected its political scenario. A group from the military, led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, seized power, forming a military junta as transitional government (the National Committee for the Salvation of the People, CNSP), and detaining the former President, Boubcar Keïta, who resigned. As local protests towards the French presence and Keïta's government were already weakening the already-unstable political scenario, the military group tried to exploit the popular opposition, as subsequent episodes of "corruption scandals, worsening insecurity, militia violence, and economic hardships", highlighted the lack of consensus towards the government (Arieff, 2020). In fact, such political paralysis was welcomed by the population (Haine, 2020), especially after the increased

opposition to the regime due to the imposition of stricter rule against the COVID-19 pandemic (Nsaibia, 2020b). But on the international level, Keïta's substitution has been condemned by the international community, in the UN, but also the African Union, the EU, and ECOWAS condemned the coup d'état, excluding at the same time Mali from its ECOWAS' membership, with a further suspension all of its economic and financial relations with the other countries (ECOWAS, 2020).

An important element that characterizes Mali, and that can be traced at the roots of the conflict in 2012, is the heterogeneity within Malian communities. Mali's internal division over ethnicities can be traced before the colonial period in the African continent. As appointed by Malenaar et al. (2019), the Sahel region is characterized by different ethnic and tribal groups with a long history of tribal governance, most of the time of nomadic origins. Considering only Mali, the country registers a relevant variety of ethnic groups, either from Tuareg, Dogon, Fulani, or Songhai communities, all with different cultural and social categorizations of their members, as well as social hierarchies (Malenaar et al., 2019; and Arieff, 2020). After independence from the French colonial power, these groups tried to keep their local governance over their territory. And even though many attempts of reconfiguration of the socio-political order within these communities have been done by the Malian administrations over the time, competition over territorial and resource control increased over the time. The 2012 further emphasized the role of these traditional authorities, as national forces withdrew from parts of the periphery, empowering local leaders in the management of the territory. Within this context, the role of the *qadis* was further emphasized, as important religious leaders and mediators. This led to an increased application of the Islamic *sharia* within local context, giving the opportunity to *qadis* to replace local authorities that were initially appointed by the government. During the 2012 crisis, qadis represented an important point of contact with extremist groups, and received much more support from the local population than national forces (Malenaar et al., 2019).

Within the Malian crisis, one document represents an important attempt towards reconciliation between the conflicting parties, and that is the Algiers Accord, signed in 2015, that aimed at designing a road map towards a durable peace between the rebel and extremist groups in northern Mali, and the national government. Following Devermont and Harris' analysis on the Algiers Agreement (2020), after six years of the peace agreement between northern armed groups, the situation in Mali remains critical. The

Algiers Agreement failed to provide a concrete response to the fundamental challenges brought by the 2012 Malian crisis. More specifically, it dealt only with rebel groups from the north (namely the Coordination of Azawad Movements – CMA – and the pro-unity Platform of Movements), excluding any possible negotiation process that can be initialized with Islamist groups and the civil society and their internal ethnic diversity, especially with those in the central regions of the country. Secondly, the Accord did not provide a clear monitoring system of the respect of the agreement by the signatory parties. In 2017, AQIM's groups merged with two affiliates, forming the Union for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM in short), and since then they have claimed several attacks on U.N., French, and G5 Sahel forces. The persistence of these groups in countering efforts towards Malian stability clearly states that violent and extremist groups are resilient, and further strengthened by those local tensions within the Malian communities, as well as by abuses committed by Malian forces (Arieff, 2020). Thus, within the framework of the Algiers Accord, the current agreement does not consider the internal struggle within local communities, hence those that have been excluded in the negotiation process. And within this political struggle, violent and extremist groups have thrived so fare from the instability that the Accord did not manage to solve.

From one hand, the agreement is outdated, considering the developments in the insecurity in the Sahel. Indeed, Islamist groups and ethnic militias committed several attacks, leading to the death of many civilians, and displacement of thousands more. On the other hand, the parties involved in the agreement "lack of political will and buy-in required to implement essential pillars of the Accord" (Devermont and Harris, 2020). The agreement remains the only "valid and viable framework" for the Malian peace process (UN Security Council, 2019), but as the authors argue, Malian stakeholders need to implement another strategy, as "sticking to this script" may persist in not providing a clear solution to the Malian crisis. First, parties need to understand the advantages of peaceful negotiations rather than military actions, as currently they do not have incentives to promote reconciliation. By promoting incentives and warning the stop of further donations from main international stakeholders may represent an initial step towards a "carrots and sticks" leverage that would incentivize parties to design a road map for peaceful negotiations. Secondly, inclusion represents another important element. Due to the ethnical diversity within the country, particular importance needs to be given to local communities and traditional authorities, that are characterized by a higher level of

influence within the population. Thus, decentralization and a substantial reform of the judicial system might be required, as it would outline a mutual recognition of national and local authorities. Thirdly, the international community should support a negotiation process. As Devermont and Harris (2020) argue, "the United Nations should rework MINUSMA's mandate", in order to include a framework on the protection of peace efforts in Mali. So far, 2020 represented the deadliest year by record in Mali. Thus, it is necessary to revaluate the current framework provided by the Algiers Accord, as it cannot provide any further solutions to the crisis in Mali, especially when signatory parties do not have the will to respect the agreement.

1.2.3   Burkina Faso

Since the attacks in 2016, security in Burkina Faso has deteriorated over the time. Although the government declared the state of emergency in 14 provinces, the country still represents one of the most violent and deadly theatres in the Sahel region. Consequently, the humanitarian crisis that this violent environment causes confirms the country as one of the most fragile in the world (UNDP, 2020a).

By analysing the current situation in Burkina Faso, it is possible to highlight a set of elements, at the roots of the Burkinabe instability. First, the ongoing conflict nearby the borders with Mali and Niger led to the internal displacement of millions of people (Le Monde, 2021). According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), "conflict reached near-record high levels between April and June 2021". At the same, climate change represents a further element in the destabilisation process. As more land becomes arid and without any resource, the population in Burkina Faso is experiencing a massive internal displacement. Being in a constant need for primary resources, displaced people are forced to compete with each other and other communities.

The second element behind Burkina Faso's instability may be seen on the political level. The country's democratic transition, which started with President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré's victory at the 2015 elections, experienced immediately three main challenges, which remained priorities for Kaboré's first mandate: developments in governance and human capital, and economic reform (Ariotti, 2020). Soon after his election, the President had to face an escalation of violence, as in 2016 a luxury hotel in Ouagadougou became target of a terrorist attack, causing the death of 30 people. At the time, such attack was seen by experts as part of a major jihadist plan to hit locations

frequented by tourists, aimed at capturing international attention on the threat, and challenging at the same time Burkinabe forces (Nickels, and Siegle, 2016). At the same time, the attack had implications also on the support on Kaboré's government, as he lost part of his support from the local population (Ariotti, 2020). However, such dissatisfaction over the government did not prevent him to win again in 2020 elections.

Third element of Burkina Faso's instability is represented by the terrorist threat. In 2019, jihadist expanded their range throughout Burkina Faso's borders with the Ivory Coast, exploiting the lack of border security. The change of location of the attacks, as noted by ACLED (Nsaibia, 2020a), did not find a well-prepared Burkinabe army, as officials underestimated many times the tensions in the south-western regions. Consequently, such situation was exploited by extremist groups, proving that the threat of violent and extremist attacks may rise from bandits, rebels, or even smugglers, who started to build relationships with jihadist groups and affiliates, in order to maintain their illicit activities (ibid.). This led to a further expansion of jihadist groups towards the Ivory Coast, clearly setting another theatre in which to expand. The Ivorian government launched in response the so-called *Operation Frontière étanche*, deploying troops nearby the border in order to counter any possible attack from jihadist militias (Gourlay, 2019). Such spillover led to an increase in the cooperation between Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast, finally establishing in 2020 a joint operation (Operation Comoé), aimed at countering jihadism on both sides of the border (Thienon, 2020). However, even if the bilateral operation was successful, JNIM affiliates continued to operate, demonstrating their adaptability in response to joint military operations. Thus, the southern-western regions of Burkina Faso may represent in the future an important scenario in which the fight against violent and extremist groups will be oriented. President Kaboré will have to face a serious challenge, in which international cooperation may represent a key element. Not only with the G5 Sahel, but also with a more solid cooperation with the Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso will have more chances in countering terrorism at its borders.

1.2.4   Niger

Niger finds itself in the middle of two unstable scenarios, the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin. Due to intensifying conflicts within two borders of the country, Niger has to deal with rebel attacks from Boko Hara from Nigeria, and the Islamic State at the border with Mali. Since 2015, the Nigerien government proclaimed the state of emergency in the Diffa

region, where cells of the jihadist group, Boko Haram, have managed to expand its military operations. As a consequence, thousands of Nigerian refugees and locally displaced Nigeriens are moving throughout the territory. These displacements caused an enormous need for resources, leading to further social tensions between local groups, as well as re-inventing livelihood strategies (Smirnova, 2002). To further destabilise the Nigerien crisis were the mechanisms adopted while providing basic assistance to those in need. In fact, even though humanitarian aids provided support, these "were not adapted to the local context and contributed to distorting the complex socio-economic dynamics of the region", in which people started to compete for primary needs (ibid.). Such local frustration may represent an important element for jihadist groups, as they can exploit people's necessities by providing them alternatives of living, improving their groups with new recruits, as well as creating a proto-state that aims at substituting the one proposed by the national government.

Nevertheless, as argued by Mahanty (2019), Niger has managed not to create spillover effects in the centre, keeping armed conflicts within the border with neighbouring countries (the western Tillabéri, eastern Diffa and northern Agadez regions). At the same time, unlike its neighbours, Niger managed to deal delicately with its internal issues regarding ethnical differences. Indeed, approaches such as the inclusion ethnic groups led to a more sustainable relationship between local authorities and the national government. Indeed, since the 1990s, and recently updated in 2015, the relationship between the government and local authorities (tribal chiefs), has been improved gradually over the time, leading to an official recognition of local tribes and chieftaincies in Niger. Clearly, this recognition from the State has led to fewer clashes between traditional authorities and national ones. However, it is still not a perfect system, as the empowerment of selected and more influent authorities rather than others came at the expense of other tribal groups, that have been marginalised, leading them to categorize each other by the level of influence, mainly based on the control over resources (Molenaar, et al, 2019).

On a political level, the election of President Mohamed Bazoum through a democratic process may represent one of the first democratic transitions within the Sahel region. However, post-elections violence in Niamey could not be avoided, thus the democratic transition in Niger still lacks its proper stability (Calvin-Smith, 2021). Nevertheless, President Bazoum is not a new face for the international actors involved in
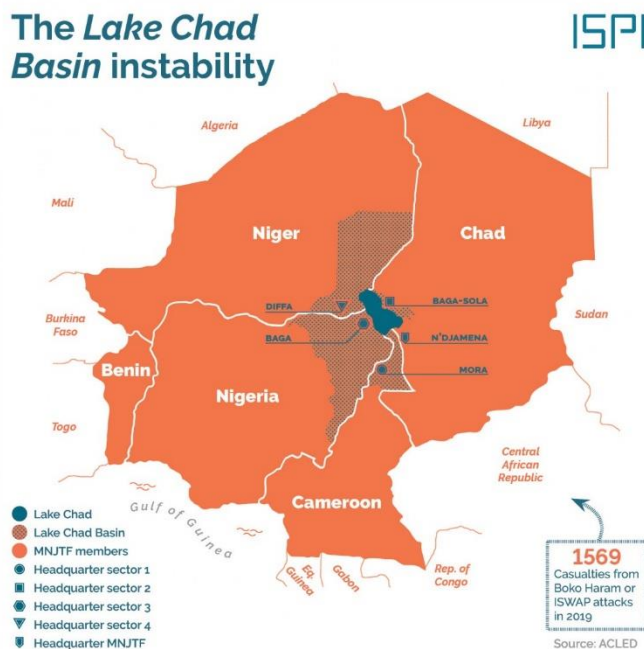
the Sahel. As former Minister of the Interior and Public Security, Bazoum has been one of the main actors as point of contact with EU institutions, which led Niger to be one of the first Sahelian countries to receive European funds through the EU Trust Fund project, counting over €285 million since 2014, due to the increasing concern over irregular migration flows, through which Niger represents one of the main channels (Casola, and Iocchi, 2021). However, being a strategic partner of the European Union leads at the same time to negative consequences for Niger. In fact, as Raineri (2018) argues, blocking irregular migration channels in Niger may lead to repercussions within the local population, which finds in these mechanisms an opportunity for income. Thus, seeing a government that does not care about the needs of the population (as it removes a source of income, even if illegal), leads to increasing armed violence in the country, as well as the radicalization of younger Nigerien, due to the frustration created by the tensions between the government and local communities.

Niger's stability may represent an important element within the Sahel region. As one of the main corridors for irregular migrant flows, it is critical for the international community to prevent violent and extremist groups from worsening the situation in the country, by exploiting the frustration within the local population. As the connection between local authorities and national one is more developed than its neighbouring countries, to prevent any further support to violent groups. Not only through military actions against them, but it is also necessary to develop policies aimed at recognising the diversity between ethnic groups and their presence in the territory. Thus, creating even more cohesion between the national governance, and local communities.

1.2.5   Chad

Chad's involvement in the Sahel region in countering the threat posed by violent and extremist groups represented until today one of the most important commitments from Sahelian States in region. Indeed the country's former President, Idriss Déby, gained much influence within the G5 Sahel scenario, especially in the provision of troops in the fight against terrorists, making him an important "acute observer of the turbulent landscape in the Sahel" (Iocchi, 2020). However, in the aftermath of his death, and subsequent decision of the military junta to withdraw troops from the G5 Sahel force, represents an important element that may lead to several consequences in the fight against violent and extremist groups in the Sahel. Indeed, Déby's government managed over the

time to guarantee a military strategy to cope with the region's terrorist threat, especially within the cooperation with international efforts, such as France's Operation Barkhane. The sudden change of government, however, may lead to a more unbalanced situation while fighting violent and extremist groups in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin. Even if Déby was an important leader for the G5 Sahel and for the Western powers' perspective (Nebe and Sandner, 2021, and Nebe, 2021), in national politics gained much criticism, as he aimed at expanding his powers, creating consequently many enemies within his own borders, as demonstrated by the attack from the rebel group FACT (French acronym for the Front for Change and Concord in Chad), who killed him during the 2021 elections, and other clashes that occurred around N'Djamena (Nebe, and Sandner, 2021).

Source: Casola (2020)

Concerning Chad's stability, one of the main scenarios related to the country is the one of the Lake Chad Basin, which presents until today multiple instabilities. Jihadist groups, namely from Boko Haram and the Islamic State in the West Africa Province (ISWAP) are challenging national governments over local populations, using their insecurity and social tensions at their advance. Boko Haram was able to expand over the time, slowing the process of regional cooperation against the Sahel's terrorist threat, as Boko Haram's presence became increasingly relevant within the Lake Chad Basin's area. In the end, the African Union mandated the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) created by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) in the 1990s, with the aim of securing the environment of the region, preventing a further expansion of Boko Haram, and restoring the State's authority (Casola, 2020). In 2015-2016, the jihadist groups retreated. But soon they were able to recover and re-emerge in 2018, with ISWAP establishing a proto-state, providing services to the local population (Foucher, 2020). Until today, several initiatives countering violent extremism have been deployed, either limiting access to supplies and vehicles (Olojo, 2021), or confronting

Boko Haram through tactical operations (Colonel Dole, 2021). However, as a good relationship between the military and the local communities represents a critical element in preventing Boko Haram to expand, the mutual mistrust between the two social groups that is presented in reality, creates further difficulties in bringing stability in the Lake Chad Basin, as well as development and humanitarian aid (Olojo and Anlekwe, 2021). Indeed, suspicion over people accused to help Boko Haram on one side, and those who are punished by the latter if they cooperate with security forces on the other, force communities not to trust the military and vice versa (Olojo, 2021).

As Déby's son, Mahamat Idriss Déby, was appointed as successor for 18 months, he will have to face many challenges that are still characterizing the country until today. The most immediate is the FACT group, along with the other rebels that are expanding over the territory (Bish, 2021). Even though the Chadian army is well equipped and experienced, illicit economic activity in the areas controlled by rebels may be increased, due to the latest political vacuum, hence the more resources rebels will obtain, the more it will be difficult to counter this internal threat. Moreover, the latest decision of withdrawing troops from the 'three-border' region of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso will even worsen the situation in the short term, as the duty of providing more forces will be on the hands of the other Sahelian countries, creating at the same time more opportunities for jihadist groups to exploit the withdrawal and control much more territory. To further worsen the situation is that the repositioning of Chadian forces happens in the same moment in which France announced the end of Operation Barkhane by early 2022 (France24, 2021). Thus, if previously Chad was considered as one of the top contributors to the MINUSMA, the MNJTF, and the G5 Sahel, the unexpected political vacuum and the latest decisions on where its troops will fight, will certainly have an impact in illicit activities and jihadists' influence in the region, creating even further instability in the Sahel.

1.3 NATO Countries in the region

While analysing the Sahel region, along with the countries within this unstable region, it is important also to analyse those individual countries within the Atlantic Alliance that are involved in countering the instability that may have several repercussions outside the Sahel.

1.3.1   France

France is the country with the largest effort in the Sahel region. Starting with Operation Serval in 2013, prolonged later in 2014 with Operation Barkhane, the French government has led the international effort to fight the terrorist threat in the Sahel. However, this challenge still remains a main issue that destabilises the region.
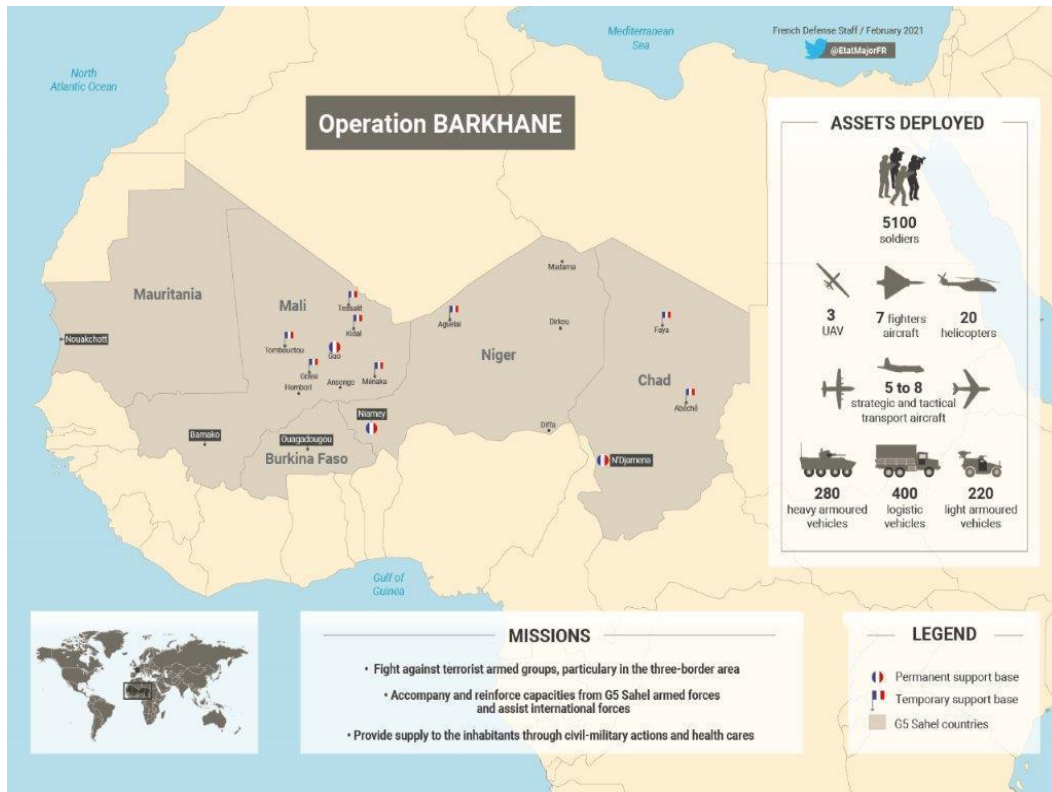
France's interests in the African continent represent a significant and historical part of the nation's history, considering its colonial past. As Haine (2016) argues, both diplomatically and militarily, Africa represents an important image within the international arena for France, as it "remains the continent where France can conspicuously assert its power", but at the same time it can represent the theatre in which many weaknesses may be highlighted, due to the "mismatch between its strategic objectives and its military capabilities". During President Hollande's mandate, France aimed at leaving behind the pejorative term of *Françafrique*, aiming at a more horizontal and transparent relationship with African countries (ibid., see also Melly and Darracq, 2013). As the Malian crisis broke out, Hollande's Africa strategy was mainly characterized by the military intervention in Mali, as it could affect national interests, as well as further increasing the threat of terrorist attacks in France and the instability in West Africa (Melly and Darracq, 2013). Starting with the support on the UN mission ECOWAS, Hollande's government launched in 2013 Operation Serval, under request of the Malian government. The operation aimed at reducing the presence of terrorist groups in the region, that could threaten Bamako's government while advancing from Northern Mali. Serval made possible the destruction of the major training camps of terrorist groups, and the end of the nine-month militant occupation in northern Mali. However, despite this effort, the Sahel region remained an unstable territory.

Due to the cross-border nature of the terrorist threat, Operation Serval was later replaced in 2014 with Operation Barkhane, which prolonged the French support in the Sahel, and increased the number of troops throughout the territory, comprising approximately 5,000 French soldiers deployed, as of today. Aim of this operation was to create a partnership with the main Sahelian countries, especially with the G5 Sahel Coalition, able to establish and coordinate more effective measures against terrorist and armed groups. Particularly after the Pau Summit in January 2020, where the leaders of

the G5 and President Macron met to better define the type of cooperation between France and the Sahel countries, Barkhane has been recognised as a central operation in the counterterrorism policy agenda of the region. This partnership-based operation provided a "structure to the relationships between Barkhane and the other forces committed" (Ministere des Armes, 2021). Thus, counting on a solid cooperation with regional and international partners, the Barkhane operation aims at ensuring that partner countries in the Sahel acquire the necessary resources to become autonomous in providing security within their territories. And in order to accomplish such objective, its strategy has been further amplified with three closely linked objectives:

- Fighting against the threat of terrorism by destroying their communication assets, neutralizing their leaders, and reducing their weaponry. This aim is also linked also to another French anti-jihadist operation, Operation "Sabre", which is responsible for the majority of the deaths of jihadist leaders (see Annex B).[9]

- Supporting partner forces through training and assistance in the field with multipartite and joint cross-border operations, as well as reinforcing them with operational capabilities.

- And reaching the population with supporting projects, that aim at creating access to water, energy, healthcare services and education. This intends to reduce the local influence on which terrorist groups are thriving, creating at the same time favourable conditions for good governance system (a "return of the State" – ibid.).
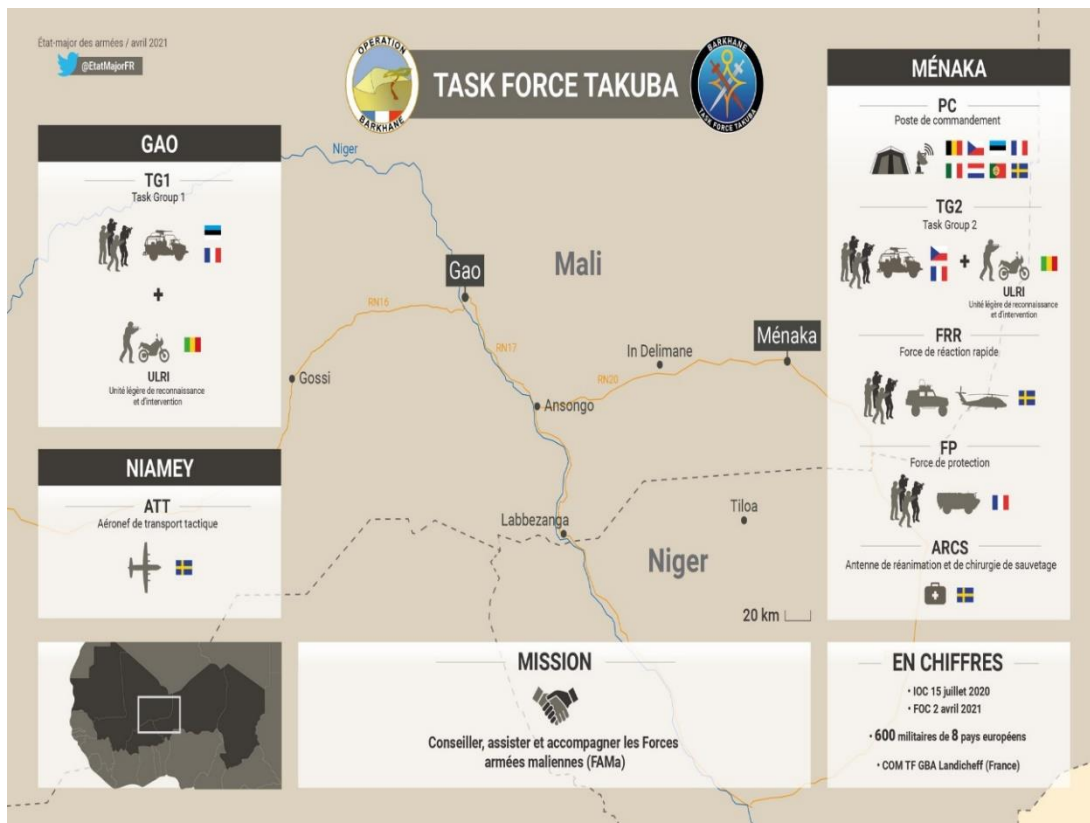
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[9] On Operation Sabre, see Hafidi (2020) and Porcher (2021).

Overview of the Operation Barkhane (Source: Ministère des l'Armées, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/afrique/bande-sahelo-saharienne/operation-barkhane/dossier-de-reference/operation-barkhane)

Another operation that France leads is the so called "Task Force Takuba". Since the summer of 2020, this European task force formed by soldiers from different European countries and having quick reaction capability, has provided assistance to the Barkhane operation in supporting Malian armed forces until they become fully independent in operations. This force further helps the French effort in the Sahel, by creating another network in which other European countries might join with their own special forces, in countering the instability threat of the Sahel. However, despite the French effort to involve European countries in the region, not all of them agreed to the proposal of the Takuba Task Force. Of the eleven signatory countries,[10] not all of them have deployed troops in the territory (Germany or the UK for instance). With Italy being one of the latest partners, although not initial signatory country, France managed to present a further appeal to the European continent, in order to develop another joint effort against the threat of terrorism.

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[10] Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, Portugal, the UK, Czech Republic, and France.

Overview of the Task Force Takuba's Operational Strategy (Source: Ministère des Armées, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/actualites/articles/pleine-capacite-operationnelle-de-la-force-takuba)

However, considering the latest decision to pull troops out of the Sahel, and end operation Barkhane by early 2022 (France 24, 2021), it is possible to underline the reason why the sole military intervention does not work. Indeed, Sahelian States are characterized by an important divide between different communities. Usually, the periphery of these States presents lower levels of national governance. Thus, communities rely much more on their traditional authorities, either being a tribal chief or a religious leader. As Molenaar et al. (2019) argue, since pre-colonial times these traditional authorities have gained much more legitimacy from their communities rather than the national government. And even they have been incorporated into the State, many times traditional authorities are undermined or unrecognised, due to the lack or resources, or the minimal State presence in the territory. Adding to this situation the conflict based on ethnical diversity, the situation becomes much more complicated. Thus, violent and extremist groups may capitalise on these realities, providing a different model than the one proposed by the national government, and supported by France and the international community. Clearly, this does not provide a long-term solution, if only military solutions

are provided. Even though the Barkhane operation also aims at the so called "action for the population", in creating favourable conditions for medical healthcare, or providing resources for people's education, in cooperation with the G5- Sahel countries, much more could be done if traditional authorities are involved, supporting at the same time the creation of a point of contact between them and national authorities, in order to foster the development of a more unified country over a common objective: stability.

Moreover, the French presence in the territory has not been seen positively, as protests and criticism over France's presence in the region spread over Mali. Indeed, local demonstrations were held in Bamako against the French military presence, calling for other countries' action (Rédaction Africanews, 2021a). Furthermore, heads of State in the region had been unwilling to take their own responsibilities, thus irritating the French government, which threatened to withdraw the troops after the latest coup in Mali (de Fougières, 2021).

Another critical element can be found by analysing the scope of the French operations in the Sahel. As Roy (2013) argues, the official objectives of France in Mali were the fight against Islamic terrorism, and Malian territorial integrity. However, one problem may arise, and that is how the term "Islamic terrorism" is perceived. Indeed, if we consider U.S. President Bush's slogan "war on terror" after the 9/11 attacks, it is important to well-define what can be labelled as Islamic terrorism, to which some groups may be rightly defined as such (see Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State), but not others, such as nationalist groups that want to establish the *sharia*, or religious communities as well. In the case of Mali, the White Paper provided by the French Presidency, at the time of Operation Serval, clearly represents an example of the use of generic terminology while dealing with the threat caused by jihadist and extremist groups in the region (Haine, 2020; and Presidency of the French Republic, 2013). Thus, this thin line that divides who can be approached with peaceful negotiations, and those who can be considered as a threat, makes it much more difficult to conduct an operation against violent and extremist organizations with a clear target.

On the one hand, France is trying to leave more space to its partners in the region, maybe to do more heavy lifting. On the other, some partners did not have participated so far, such as Germany or the UK within the Task Force Takuba. Moreover, comparing the French position in the Sahel and the recent events in Afghanistan with the new Taliban

government, France may be seen in the Sahel in the same position as the United States found itself during the crisis in Kabul (Tertrais, 2021). Despite having different dynamics, there are also some similarities between the French and the U.S. presence in the Sahel and Afghanistan respectively: first, it has been nearly a decade since French troops have been deployed in the Sahel, starting in 2013 with Operation Serval, and later with the ongoing Operation Barkhane, that has spread its range beyond the Malian borders, due to the interconnections with neighbouring countries; second, both operations have suffered many casualties, and lower local support; and third, both operations were against jihadist groups (Bryant, 2021). Even though France is not withdrawing entirely from the region, the decrease of troops may lead to important consequences. Indeed, the less foreign troops will be involved within the Sahel, the more there will be an opportunity for jihadist groups to gain more influence over Sahelian territories. At the same time, the end of the Operation Barkhane by early 2022, as announced by President Macron last July (France24, 2021), might be seen as a failure for the French for not stopping the spread of jihadist troops within the Sahel (Shurkin, Michael, et al., 2021). Thus, it would clearly represent an impetus to these groups to prevail over national forces in the control of the territory. After the Afghan experience, France will have to consider any possible consequence, including an increasing number of refugees in Europe. Even though other operations such as the Task Force Takuba, or the U.N. missions will be still deployed in the territory, closing one of the main operations in the Sahel will have a significant impact in the region, as well as elsewhere.

1.3.2   Turkey

Another NATO member worth to analyse, due to its role in the Sahel region, is Turkey. Aiming at building different partnerships in the region for its strategic objectives, Ankara's government supported at all costs Sahelian countries in providing stability in the region. As Askar (2020) argues, "this is done in light of the urgency of some issues that are intertwined in defining Turkey's relationship with the Arab world, Europe and Africa", that can be depicted as the fight against terrorist organizations; the crisis brought by illegal migration flows; "as well as the scrambling of some European powers in the Sahel and Sahara". The Turkish intervention tries to emphasise a more *African solution*, applying "a combination of soft and hard power" (Cengiz, 2021). In fact, from running

schools "associated with the Fethullah Gülen movement" (Askar, 2020, and Al Jazeera, 2018), to the support of activities run by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency and the SADAT Company, or other humanitarian initiatives in response to the COVID pandemic (Aydoğan Ağlarcı, 2020), Turkey increased its strategic presence. However, these measures have been seen by other actors as part of the process of "Turkification" of African people, as well as part of the support towards organizations in favour of the Turkish regime (Askar, 2020).

The Turkish support has been also emphasised by several officials visits from governmental representatives. During his visit in 2018, President Erdogan visited Mauritania, and Mali within his tour in Africa. Among the main topics tackled during the talks, President Erdogan highlighted how important is the stability of the Sahel region for Turkey, confirming a five million-dollar contribute to the G5 Sahel Joint Force, aimed at countering the increasing presence of terrorist organizations. At the same time, Erdogan underlined to need to bring stability in Mali, ensuring that Turkey will strengthen the cultural and economic relations between the two countries (Al Jazeera, 2018). Many times, Turkey underlined how its position better understands the issues that the Sahel is experiencing, presenting an alternative to what has been presented by former colonial powers such as France (Cengiz, 2021, and Al Jazeera, 2018).

An example of the bilateral relations that Turkey has established within the Sahel is presented by those with Mali, also considering the last coup that replaced President Keita's government with a military junta. Turkey often criticized the French counterterrorism interventions for Sahel's stability, starting with operation Serval of 2013, questioning the timing and the actual solution provided by the operation (Jones, 2013, and Ramani, 2020). At the same time, considering the 2020 coup and the anti-French protests that are arising within the Malian territory, Foreign Minister Cavusoglu met with the National Committee for the Salvation of the People, confirming Turkey's intentions "to expand its influence over the transition process" (Nordic Monitor, 2020). Indeed, such visit clearly highlights how Turkey may consider the coup as a further opportunity to assure a strong relationship with Mali, "benefitting from the anti-French tendencies in the country and Keita's close links to Paris" (ibid.).

Turkey is expected to increase its role in the Sahel region, and the recent Malian coup represents an additional step towards this goal. However, it is undeniable how the

Turkish presence will clash with those of other actors already operating there. Not only France, but also China, Russia, the European Union, and many others. According to Askar (2020), concerning the French presence in the Sahel, the conflict of interests between Ankara and Paris may rise in the future, and it will take "different forms of expressions". And considering that both countries are part of NATO, it will certainly create a challenge for the latter to have an improved role in the Sahel.

1.3.3   The United States

According to Haine (2016), the African continent has seen initially a limited interest from the United States since the launch of President Bush's "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and the Middle East, more precisely with operations within the Pan-Sahel Initiative, which became in 2005 the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), and Operation Enduring Freedom – Trans Sahara (OEF-TS) (Warner, 2014). As Al-Qaeda's spectrum started to develop in other scenarios (Somalia and Yemen), the Bush administration planned the creation of a specific regional command for the African continent. Thus in 2007, the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) was established in Germany, with the main aim of countering transnational threats and crises that could affect U.S. national interests, regional security, and stability.[11] As of today, the Command represents the main point of contact of the United States in the African continent. With the election of President Obama, AFRICOM's approach on the African continent evolved, showing a renewed posture on keeping a "minimal footprint" when deploying forces. Washington aimed at developing two main strategies, "maximising the impact of a relatively modest military presence in Africa" (Haine, 2016):

- First, the U.S. administration aimed at promoting the use of drones rather than military troops, lowering the number of casualties. In fact, during the French operation Serval, the U.S. supported the allied forces with the use of drones, deployed in Niger.
- Second, the deployment of special forces aimed at reducing the number of troops in the continent, and supporting regional efforts by eliminating extremist leaders,

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[11] On AFRICOM see its official website, https://www.africom.mil/ .

as well as training and cooperating with local armed forces (Sheehan, and Porter, 2014).

However, the rhetoric of a "light footprint" in Africa by the U.S. forces becomes contradictory, if we consider the number of U.S. personnel involved. As of January 2020, over 6,000 U.S. personnel (either from the military or civilians) are deployed in Africa (Husted et al., 2021). Thus, even with the deployment of drones or special forces, it is clear that the "light footprint" does not coincide when looking at the number of people deployed.

With the new U.S. presidency, the fight against terrorism, a response to competitors in the region, as well as the promotion of democracy and international cooperation, have been described as main security priorities for President Biden. However, as von Soest (2021) explains, even if "America is back", this does not mean that the sub-Saharan Africa will become immediately a number one priority for the U.S. administration. Nevertheless, after the complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Sahel might become another theatre in which the new U.S. administration may strengthen its interests with a renewed Africa policy. During the last Summit of the G5 Sahel, held last February, the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken underlined how security and stability in the Sahel was important for the United States, expressing full support to what the G5 coalition is doing:

> "The G5 Sahel does vital work to bring security, stability, and good governance to your region. The United States is committed to being a strong partner to you. Like you, we are concerned about rising violent extremism, governance challenges, and humanitarian concerns in the region". (U.S. Embassy Cotonou, 2021).

Unlike his predecessor, Joe Biden opted for a more cooperative foreign policy. Indeed, an important element that characterizes Biden's presidency is his will to take the "lead" again at the international level (Biden, 2020). Thus, the Sahel would represent an important scenario in which the U.S. may present an improved cooperative strategy against the instability in the region brought by climate change, violent and extremist groups, and massive migration flows. As affirmed by AFRICOM's Commander, General Townsend:

> "USAFRICOM's active participation in multi-national efforts reinforces cooperation for mutual benefit, assures partners of U.S. commitment, and denies competitors opportunities to erode U.S. influence" (Townsend, 2021).

Thus, stronger partnerships while dealing with the instability in the Sahel would enhance interoperability, readiness and strong relationships between allies, as well as a better preparation in dealing with counterparts such as the People's Republic of China (PRC), or the Russian Federation. Especially in the case of NATO, a stronger effort from the United States would represent an important pillar in presenting the Atlantic Alliance in the Sahelian arena.

Another type of support provided by the U.S. in the Sahel is represented by its investment aimed at countering Chinese and Russian activities and influence in the region. As it will be shown later, China is increasing its role in the African continent, improving its economic relations with sub-Saharan countries. Thus, the immediate effect would be on U.S. economic relations within the African continent, which would lower over the time. During the Trump administration, the BUILD (Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development) Act passed, which aimed at protecting U.S. investments in developing countries. Clearly, this bill may be seen as a response to the increasing role that the Chinese Belt Road Initiative is having over the Sahel region, considering the massive investments that Beijing is delivering to African countries (Townsend, 2021). At the same time, the Chinese "vaccine diplomacy" during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a soft power challenge for the U.S. influence in the African continent. In order to respond, the U.S. will have to face Beijing within the political potential that lies in investments over Sahelian healthcare systems and vaccination programmes, in line with the already-deployed investments through the USAID plan (von Soest, 2021). As for Russia, its private military companies (PMCs), such as the Wagner Group, have been already deployed in the African continent, improving the Russian influence over the territory. Moscow continues to seize opportunities to increase its influence across the continent, posing many challenges to other global powers (Townsend, 2020 and 2021). Thus, both China and Russia are proposing alternatives to African countries, that might certainly destabilise the relationships that the U.S. and its partners have built so far.

As Devermont (2021) argues, the U.S. administration needs to be smart in addressing the different challenges that are characterizing West Africa, and the Sahel in particular. By addressing three key areas of concern (violent extremism, democratization, and strategic competition), the United States will need to prioritize responses to local dynamics, with a simultaneous response to "drivers of extremism and democratic

backsliding" (ibid.), enhancing at the same time cooperation among partners, without clashing between each other. And it is in this scenario that diplomats play an important role, in promoting U.S. support. As Biden announced a Summit for Democracy (White House, 2021), the U.S. will have the opportunity to show its support for African communities by providing a forum where to highlight African issues through civil societies representatives, avoiding championing certain leaders, that would represent a contradiction to the U.S.' interests in supporting democracy worldwide, while they will be governing their country (Devermont, 2021b).

The United States plays an important role also in the support of the operation Barkhane. By supporting in terms of "intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and air-to-air refuelling capabilities", the U.S. has provided an additional aid to France, enhancing the international cooperation in the development of stability in the region. As noted by Dr Schwarz in an interview, "the new US administration can certainly help NATO shoulder this new strategy" (Bagnara, 2021). However, despite President Biden called for an increased cooperation with European and African countries, especially in countering climate change with the latter (as "it cannot happen without Africa being onboard" – von Soest, 2021), the Sahel has not yet changed its importance in the President's agenda (ibid.). Considering the recent events in Afghanistan, in which the Taliban forces have taken control over the country, following the U.S. withdrawal after twenty years of deployment, it is possible to underline many implications this event may have on the U.S. position in the fight against terrorist groups in other parts of the world, especially in the Sahel. As it was argued in the Economist (2021a, and 2021b), the "victory" of the Talibans over the Afghan territory represents an important incentive to other jihadist groups elsewhere. Even with lower engagement than France, the United States has been involved in the Sahel. And recalling also what President Macron affirmed on the future of Operation Barkhane, the announcement of reducing French troops in the Sahel may lead to another international crisis, that the United States will have to face along with its European partners. In that matter, the U.S. needs to learn from the Afghan experience, as if jihadists troops would prevail in Sahelian territories, an immediate consequence would be an increase in the refugee flows, that could further destabilise the region, to which the U.S. cannot watch without any reaction. Thus, it would be important to revaluate strategies that would consider not only a military approach, but a multilateral one, that would keep an improved governance, promoting democracy at the same time,

as "if […] the vast expanses of the Sahel were more benignly ruled, they might not be havens for jihadists" (ibid.).

1.3.4 Italy

As NATO's interests have increased over the years, after the 2016 Warsaw Summit, the Alliance agreed on the increase on the capabilities available for a renewed strategy for the so called "Southern flank". Since 2017, with the creation of the Southern Hub in the Joint Force Command (JFC) in Naples, Italy represents an important point of contact in which the country shines as "NATO's eye to the South". Thus, it is important to underline how Italy may represent an important actor in the Sahel not only for NATO, but also for its own interests.

Italy's engagement in the African continent has been characterized so far by a multidimensional approach, characterized by military involvement, as well as diplomatic and investments on development. Italy's presence in the Sahel is based on two main concerns behind the nation's strategic interests: the phenomenon of irregular migration and its effects on the European continent, and the fight against terrorist groups (Casola, and Baldaro, 2021). Migration and terrorism represent an important issue within the Italian political agenda, especially considering its strategy in the Mediterranean Sea. Within this context, the Sahel represents an important core in which irregular migration flows and terrorism represents the core of instability in the region. As demonstrated by the 2015 White Paper of the Italian Ministry of Defence, the Italian security concerns went beyond the Mediterranean itself. According to the report:

> "The Mediterranean basin joins five areas each bearing different characteristics […]. In some of these areas, fundamental economic, political, and social unrest gave rise to new and violent criminality as well as bloody civil wars. Terrorism and transnational uprisings have taken root illegal immigration and militant proselytizing are seen as a potential means of expansion into Europe. These issues and the dependence on some of these countries for energy, make the stability of the Euro-Mediterranean region of vital national interest" (Italian Ministry of Defence, 2015).

New security threats have been identified, leading the Italian strategy to be updated, in response to the threat posed by these new challenges. And those operations such as the MISIN in Niger, and the participation to the Takuba Task Force and EU training missions,

confirm the new strategic thinking of the Ministry of Defence.[12] This progressive reinforcement helps enhancing the Italian role, especially in the relationship with other European countries, particularly France and Germany (Michelin, 2021). Indeed, an important aspect that may concern the Italian role in the Sahel is its relationships with the former. With the election of Mario Draghi as Italian Prime Minister, France has seen Italy as a new European political lab, in which stronger relationships may be built (Thomann, 2021). In fact, among the political projects that may strengthen the relationship between Paris and Rome, the *Quirinale Agreement* represents an important opportunity for Italy to show its pivotal role in the Mediterranean, as well as in the Sahel. This agreement, born in 2018 after President Macron's visit to President Sergio Mattarella and former Prime Minister, Paolo Gentiloni, aims at rebalancing the role of the two countries within the European context, along with the balance with other nations, such as Germany (Caracciolo, and De Sanctis, 2021). Moreover, along with several topics regarding the two nations' industrial and economic power, the Quirinale Agreement aims at strengthening the relationship between France and Italy also on other issues, and the Sahel is on that list. Indeed, a stronger relationship between the two countries would lead to a solid bilateral effort on the Sahel region, that will protect the two countries' interests, as well as reinforcing their commitment in the operations already deployed, such as those of the European Union, or the French-led Takuba task force. With this agreement, Italy will have the opportunity to enhance its interests in the region as well.

Along with a stronger relationship with France, the will of participating in the Sahelian stability-building process has been renewed last June with a new press release by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which it claimed that a more stable Sahel would have meant a safer Europe, as common challenges such as the jihadist menace or climate change, could lead to further expenses, as well as further insecurities within European populations (Rutigliano, 2021b). The increasing Italian presence in Niger, especially with the bilateral support mission MISIN represents a clear example of a renewed image towards a more solid African policy for Italy.

Another element that would strengthen the Italian participation in the region will be the figure of the EU Special Representative for the Sahel (EUSR), whose role has been

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[12] On the MISIN Operation, see
https://www.difesa.it/OperazioniMilitari/op_intern_corso/Niger_missione_bilaterale_supporto/Pagine/default.aspx .

appointed until August 2022 to Ms. Emanuela Claudia Del Re, former Deputy of the Italian Parliament with experience in the Middle East, Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (Council of the EU, 2021). Undoubtedly, her position will further highlight Italy's involvement in the Sahel region, along with the above-mentioned operations and efforts in which the Italian Republic has participated so far.

Italy may represent another important power in the region. However, as Dentice and Donelli (2021) argue, it is necessary that the country presents itself with a comprehensive agenda for Africa that can be managed at its best, exploiting the instability in the Sahel region in order to propose a new image of Italy, as "political mediator between Europe, the Mediterranean, and Africa". President Draghi's strategy with France and the future Quirinale Agreement might lessen the impact of the gap between the current Italian effort in the region, that is still lower than the one from other countries. However, even if this agreement will foster the relationship with France, it will be important for Italy to be well prepared in dealing with an increased role in the Sahel, especially considering the withdrawal of French troops from Operation Barkhane. Already with the Operation Takuba, its presence in Niger, and its Special Representative of EU in the Sahel, Italy is demonstrating its support within the European context, that still represents few initial steps towards a more comprehensive and cooperative approach to the "enlarged Mediterranean".

1.4 Other Major Powers in the Region

NATO Countries are not the only actors involved in the Sahel. In fact, it is possible to analyse how two of the main counterparts of the Alliance are increasingly developing relationships with African countries in the continent, including in the Sahel. Both with different tools, China and Russia represents two other main actors in the Sahel region that are trying to gain as much as influence as possible, consequently increasing their importance within the international arena, either for economic or strategic interests in the region, or for a major political role at the United Nations.

1.4.1 China

Among the non-NATO actors that are supporting the Sahel with their own initiatives, the People's Republic of China represents one of the main ones. While the Chinese government has contributed to the deployment of peacekeepers for the UN operations (Benabdallah and Large, 2020; see also Benabdallah et al., 2021), and built a strong relationship with the African Union, and the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel, the way Beijing has provided assistance to security within the African continent is developed not only around military presence, or arms deals. Rather, cooperation with African countries has been built by considering development as the core element for peace in Africa. Many times, China has stated its belief that investments on human capital that would foster economic development represent a central nexus with which security and stability can be provided in African countries. On December 4, Special Representative of President Xi Jinping, the State Counsellor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, expressed such belief during the UN Security Council's High-Level Debate on cooperation between the United Nations and the African Union. Among the main points raised during the debate, Minister Wang Yi argued:

> "Developed countries should take more concrete steps on Official Development Assistance, debt relief and technological transfer. International financial institutions need to channel more resources and projects to Africa, as an investment in the future of humankind" (Wang Yi, 2020).

This emphasis on a security approach based on development is represented as an alternative to the Western-liberal model of peacebuilding, which underlines how solid democratic principles and good governance may be the roots for security (Grieger, 2019, and Benabdallah, 2016).

China's increasing role as a security actor in Africa has been enhanced continuously over the time. In 2000, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established, with the aim of improving cooperation between China and African countries that "adhered to the one-China policy, for a structured dialogue on a range of policy areas", which has broadened over the years (Grieger, 2019). This was followed by further commitments to work closely with the African Union and UN peacekeeping operations in 2007, and several other initiatives, such as the 2012 FOCAC declaration on a China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security. Moreover, especially considering the current COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing expressed its intent to support at

all costs African countries to "pursue the great dream of development and rejuvenation of their continent" (ibid.), by sending emergencies supplies and temporary establishing a debt relief (Cochi, 2020).

An example of the Chinese increasing interest in the Sahel region is represented by the case of Mali, as described by Benabdallah and Large in their research (2020). Within its logic of peace and security through an approach focused on development, China has built a strong relationship with the Malian government, reinforcing its "political and economic links" (Benabdallah and Large, 2020). Even if the economic ties between the two countries are not the main ones for Mali, Chinese companies are increasingly involved in several infrastructure projects in the country.[13] At the same time, by establishing scholarships for Malian students through its Confucius Institutes (currently there are 61 in the African continent, 4 of which are in the Sahel region)[14], and trainings, China has increased its effort in providing assistance in the development of the Malian human capital, especially concerning state-owned enterprises involved in this process. More particularly, with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese assistance through the deploy of material support and expertise sharing, represents another example of the Chinese increasing partnership. However, considering the presence of non-state actors threatening Malian stability, as well as the lack within the Chinese effort of recognizing the "diverse cultural and linguistic background" inside Mali, development projects are constantly under a risk of being slowed down, or eventually interrupted (ibid.). And such risk has been further emphasized by the last coup in 2020.

Considering a more recent event, that is the death of the Chadian President Idriss Déby and election of Mahamat Kaka as interim leader, it is possible to analyse the impact of Chinese interests in this country in the Sahel region. In this case, Beijing's strategy focused mainly on oil, with "billions of dollars that CNPC [China National Petroleum Corporation] has invested over the years to develop Chadian oil fields, build new pipelines, and refining capacity" (Olander, 2021).

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[13] According to the OED's data, China is placed as the fourth most important importer of Malian goods, and the third most important exporter of goods in the country. For more information, see https://oec.world/en/profile/country/mli .

[14] On the number of Confucius Institutes in the world see https://www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html .

Finally, considering China as a powerful economic actor in international trade, with its interests in Africa through increasing investments, it is important to highlight how North and East African have been prioritized in Chinese loans. Considering what Chen (2018) describes as the "centrepiece of China's foreign economic policy", an expansion of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) in the Sahel region would represent a substantial increase in Chinese exports of goods and services, as well as investments in Sahelian countries would support African development strategies. Indeed, as the author argues, "African leaders can leverage Chinese capital and technical capacity to meet infrastructure needs, which in turn can attract greater foreign investment". However, this would increase the debt of the country towards China, "crowding out the government's ability to borrow elsewhere" (ibid.), as well raising doubts on the ability to repay these debts. Due to the increasing economic difficulties during the COVID pandemic, China has recently decided to suspend temporarily the "payment of interest and instalments of the debt capital" (Cochi, 2020) of African countries. Nevertheless, despite the temporary relief from the debt, and the willingness from the Chinese government to maintain good relationships within the African continent, the debt trap in which African countries are bound still exist (Solomon, 2020). As Cochi (2020) argues, it would be difficult for Beijing to completely forget African debts, considering how profitable those investments are, since financing development strategies are essential for achieving "many of the Sustainable Development Goals contained in the United Nations 2030 Agenda".

Alongside Chinese loans aimed at making development in Africa possible, as the PRC is deepening its economic and diplomatic ties with African countries, it is possible to underline how the relationship between China and these countries is imbalanced, as China reaches high levels of GDP, while African countries still have an enormous gap. This further strengthens the Chinese position, comparing with the situation of other trading partners. Indeed, in 2019 the PRC's share of trade reached between 10% and 20% in imports and exports, having ahead only the EU, with its 20% and 25% (Benabdallah et al., 2021). At the same time, China needs more natural resources in order to keep its domestic growth, thus increasing African exports of primary resources, such as oil. However, the more these commodities are exported, the more "they suffer commodity price crashes", lowering their GDP growth rates, and deepening the imbalance within their relationship with the PRC (ibid.).

Moreover, the value that the Chinese currency would obtain through this enlargement has to be considered too. If the renminbi convertibility increases, it will play an even greater role in the international monetary system. As Amighini (2021) argues, the international flowing of renminbi would lead to its strengthening, along with the improvement of the BRI. As the latter represents a successful platform where to enhance the Chinese currency, it would lead to an increasing international demand for renminbi, and through the idea of "a controlled system based on renminbi deposits within a network of banks in several countries" and "emission of digital currency for international payments", the internationalization of the Chinese currency, and the increase of its influence that would become parallel, if not challenging, to the dollar's.

1.4.2   Russia

Another important actor that is increasing its role in the African continent, especially in the Sahel region, is the Russian Federation. In the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has increased its efforts to improve relationships with African countries. Especially in the Sahel, Moscow emphasised its role via a multi-layered action: from a political point of view, the Russian Federation "is likely to attempt to obtain political leverage on the European Union by taking control of the major migration route crossing the Sahel and North Africa" (Grey Dynamics, 2020); whereas from an economic perspective, Russia offers support, securing natural resources and deals on nuclear energy in exchange, especially in countries that are rich of oil, gas, or minerals, such as Burkina Faso, Mali, or Chad (Bashir, 2020, and Adibe, 2019). As the global pandemic worsened the situation, in terms of creating serious humanitarian consequences with more people in need for medical care, the Russian government showed its concern over the Sahelian countries, demonstrating its support during these difficult times. On this matter, the Russian Permanent Representative at the UN Security Council, Vassily Nebenzia, argued:

> "this state of affairs creates fertile soil for the radicalization of the population. In this regards, the countries of the region must be assisted to effectively oppose the expansion of extremist ideology, begin to address severe socio-economic problems, strengthen State institutions, and foster a culture of respect for human rights" (Nebenzia, 2020).

Again, by addressing to the threat of an increasing trend of violent extremism in the region, Moscow emphasised how important the situation in the Sahel is. "Russia is closely monitoring the developments of the situation in the region", the Permanent Representative continued (ibid.). And by the provision of military support, as well as

stronger economic bilateral agreements, it is undeniable how Russia is trying to have a major role in the Sahel. A more practical example of such interest from Moscow is given the military cooperation agreement between Russia and Niger, that will let the two parties to interact with each other in the exchange of information, fighting together terrorist and extremist groups (Russian News Agency, 2017).

According to Elbassoussy (2020), there are some factors that may facilitate the Russian influence's expansion. First, it does not have a colonial past in the continent, as other powers already present in the region. Rather, "it has contributed to supporting national liberation movements" (ibid.), which gave the opportunity to build trust with African States, emphasised at the same time by its "positive attitude towards African intellectuals", and its initiatives promoting African scholarship's development (World Economic Forum, 2019). Secondly, Russia represents the second biggest exporter or weapons, right after the United States (Simoncelli, 2019). Thus, arms trade represents an important concern for the Russian economy, as more than 30% of arms exports are deployed in the African continent.[15]

As argued by Bashir (2020), Russia is developing a variety of mechanisms to improve its role in the Sahel region. By signing military and security bilateral agreements to offer "training, educational and medical programmes for military purposes", supporting positions that are mining the other engagements in the region, or increasing the role of the Wagner Group, the Russian Federation is gradually enhancing its role in the Sahel by providing another alternative, exploiting at the same time "the deteriorating security situation in the African Sahel region" to increase its influence. This argument follows what former Minister Franco Frattini mentioned in his speech at the NATO Defense College, comparing international relations to physics, as "when there is an empty space, rapidly it is replaced by somebody else".[16] Clearly, the Kremlin has established many measures to develop its strategic presence in the Sahel. Some examples can be seen in: the support against Boko Haram; the establishment of "joint security cooperation agreements" with Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger; or in the economic cooperation between Russian enterprises and African countries rich of natural resources (Elbassoussy, 2020). Another case is presented by Mali, where after the coup that led to the fall of

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[15] For more information, see Wezeman, et al. 2019.
[16] For the complete transcript of the speech from former Minister Franco Frattini at the NATO Defense College, see Annex A.

Keita's government, there were rumours that some of the officials trained in Russia, before coming back to Mali to overthrow the government. Although the evidence is insufficient to determine this relationship between the Malian military and Moscow, it is clear that there are some interests in keeping solid relationships between the two countries, as demonstrated by the Russian Ambassador's meeting with the transitional military junta (Ramani, 2020). Furthermore, the fact that the United States decided to suspend cooperation initiatives with Malian forces in the aftermath of the coup (Diallo and Ross, 2020), marks again another opportunity for Russia to "fill the gap", as Frattini would argue.

Nevertheless, the Russian Federation still faces challenges while approaching to the South. As Blank (2020) argues, "Russia lacks the resources with which to compete in Africa against the United States and China". Even if it is emphasized how the Kremlin focuses primarily on the trade of weapons, with mainly "economic rather than strategic objectives" (Puddu, 2019), AFRICOM reports underline how Russia continues to seize opportunities to increase its influence across the continent, posing many challenges to other global powers (Townsend, 2020). The international competition within global powers confirms what Frattini argued in his speech, as Russian efforts try to propose an alternative to those presented by Chinese, French, and other powers. Especially in this period, as President Macron announced that there will be some gradual changes in the number of French troops, hoping for more support from European partners in the Takuba Task Force (Nako and Rosem 2021, and France 24, 2021), it could represent an opportunity for Russia to have more influence in the region. Another challenge is posed by the reaction of the other powers to the Russian interests. In 2018, the former US National Security Adviser John Bolton accused Russia for its "predatory practices" in Africa, in order to gain more votes at the United Nations (The Guardian, 2018). A similar reaction was President Macron's warning at the Pau Summit (2020), against the assistance from "third countries" through mercenaries, and its subsequent increase of troops deployment in the region (Maślanka, 2020).

Following Bashir's analysis (2020) on the possible scenarios in the Sahel with an increased role of Russia in the region, the author concludes that the situation can lead into two possible endings. From one hand, Russia can increase its role in the Sahel, replacing other powers already operating there, such as France. On the other, Moscow's role would remain limited in its military assistance, due to the interests of the other actors. Clearly,

with an increased role of NATO in the Sahel, this would undermine Russian (and Chinese) interests in being a major power in the region, strengthening at the same time the competition between powers.

1.5 The European Union

The European Union represents another important international actor in the Sahel region that is worth to analyse. In March 2011, the EU launched what has been labelled as the "Sahel Strategy", which emphasised the EU interest in providing a collective response addressing key security and development issues in the Sahel. The strategy was further improved with launch of the Regional Action Plan (RAP) in 2015, which amplified the EU's action in the region, focusing on four key strategic concepts: 1. Prevention of radicalisation and extremism; 2. Creation of a proper environment for the young generation; 3. Migration and mobility; and 4. Border management and fight against illegal trafficking (General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union, 2015). Since the establishment of the G5 Sahel, the European Union has always provided support fostering cooperation, in order to tackle the major challenges that the countries had to face. The EU's aid focuses around three main areas (EEAS, 2019):

- political partnership,
- development assistance,
- and security support.

Concerning the first area, the European Union has established a solid political dialogue with the G5 Sahel countries. Indeed, not only the former High Representative Vice-President, Federica Mogherini, held annual meetings with G5 Sahel Ministers in order to strengthen cooperation in areas of interests, but also European leaders such as Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, and the EU Special Advisor on the Sahel, Angel Losada, visited many times the region in order to promote better cooperation in issues regarding the development of fragile areas, and the fight against terrorism, illegal trafficking (Fiott and Theofosopoulos, 2020).

Regarding the support through development strategies, the European Union is the "biggest provider of development assistance to the region with €8 billion over 2014-2020" (EEAS, 2019). Such initiative was further emphasised by the establishment of the

Alliance for the Sahel, in which the EU represents the main supporter within the external donors. An example of such assistance is given by the EU Trust Fund for stability (EUTF), which aims at countering the root causes of irregular migration in the African continent, with which the European Union has devoted more than 800 million euros. Another aim of this project is to create a "comprehensive approach to support all aspects of stability, security, and resilience". As the Sahel is characterized by massive displacement of people, along with climate change, population growth, and poverty, the EUTF aimed at providing opportunities to promote employment with labour and training programmes, as well as building "resilience of economic actors to both the health and economic crises" (European Union, 2021). Moreover, governance represents another key issue to which the Trust Fund aims at improving. Indeed, by supporting national forces with adequate equipment, as well as launching "specific activities on conflict prevention and peacebuilding", the Trust Fund tried to support the Sahel with a comprehensive approach of the main challenges that these countries are living, supporting them with large amounts of money aimed at developing those structural elements that could foster development. As the COVID-19 pandemic created more difficult scenarios within the Sahel region, it led the EU to reaffirm its support with vulnerable population in the Sahel, by funding humanitarian projects with a total of 210 million euros of budget on humanitarian projects in 2021 (EU Commission, 2021).

Finally, considering the security effort provided by the EU in the Sahel, the European effort in supporting security initiatives represents another key element in the EU's presence in the Sahel. As violence escalated in the Sahel in 2019, the EU increased its support in the region by deploying a number of civilian and military personnel through its three Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations, which allow the EU to develop of civilian and military skills for crisis and conflict management. Within the scope of these operations, the EU aimed at enhancing "cross-border cooperation and national capacities", focusing at the same time at increasing its role in region with the enlargement of the number of security experts in the EU delegations in the Sahel via its Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell (RACC). Within the Sahel region, there are three key CSDP missions: EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali, and the EU Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali.

Regarding the missions in Mali, the EUTM played a significant role in restoring those capacities within the Malian Armed Forces and the G5 Sahel Joint Force that would

enable them "to conduct military operations aiming at restoring Malian territorial integrity and reducing the threat posed by terrorist groups" (EUTM, 2021). More specifically, since 2013 the EUTM launched its operations via two main task forces: the Advisory Task Force (ATF), which is responsible for "advising and training the personnel of the Ministry of Defence, the General Staffs of the Army, and the Headquarters of the Military Regions"; and the Educational and Training Task Force (ETTF), which focuses in the training of units by improving their operational management skills (ibid.). On the other hand, the EUCAP mission in Mali represents another element of the European position in the Sahel. Since 2015, the mission aimed at fostering conditions for a democratic order in the country, enhancing State authority in the entire territory. Through the training of internal security forces, such as the police, in coordination with the international support, the EUCAP Sahel Mali tried to increase the role of the central government. However, so far this goal has not been achieved, as the northern part of the country is still characterized by the presence of non-State actors. In fact, taking into consideration the scenario in Northern Mali, the lack of public services, as well as the lower level of trust in the government within the population, leaves space for jihadist groups to "win over the local population […] by presenting themselves as a more legitimate, less corrupt alternative to a predatory state" (Pye, 2021).

Regarding the EU and Niger, the EUCAP Sahel Niger mission operates since 2013 in the fight against violent and extremist groups. By providing advice and training to Nigerien troops, this mission tries to reinforce them, promoting "interoperability of Nigerien security forces", helping in the development of capacities and activities against terrorist groups (Ray, Koijancic, and Puglisi, 2016). According to the reports, the mission achieved several results, which improved substantially the capacities of Nigerien forces. From an improvement in technical equipment, intelligence, to the strengthening of the "penal chain" for a more

In April 2021, the Council of the European Union approved further conclusions on the EU's Strategy in the Sahel. According to the official text (Secretariat of the Council of the EU, 2021), the Council reaffirmed the importance of the long-standing partnership between the EU and the Sahel, emphasizing at the same time the instruments at its disposal, to support local populations, in order to address multiple challenges that jihadist violence, inter communal conflicts, or discontent over Sahelian governments are characterizing the region. Indeed, reconsidering its previous strategies and keeping the

stability in the Sahel as the main goal, these latest conclusions reordered the EU's priorities, that can be summarized with four main pillars:

- Fighting the terrorist threat, as well as cross-border trafficking and organised crime.
- Strengthening cooperation with regional entities, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, as well as other international actors already placed in the region, such as the UN.
- Developing capabilities within national security forces and basic services, ensuring a Security Sector Reform (SSR), in support of the rule of law, the respect of human rights, and the end of corruption.
- Supporting projects aimed at promoting sustainable development in the region, with particular attention to gender equality, any issue related to children's protection during security crises, and the promotion of investments aimed at fostering youth employment and young people's participation.

Nevertheless, despite the increasing investments from the European Union in the Sahel, the situation has not changed, and violence has continued to worsen the situation in the region. At the same time, as Pye (2021) argues, the European effort in the Sahel risks to be conceived as a neo-colonial attempt to increase Western interests in the African continent. Indeed, several protests in Mali in the aftermath of the Pau summit demonstrate how European, and especially French, efforts are not well perceived by the local population, as they saw Europe and France "as partners to corrupt national elites who profit from international funds while violence and poverty outside the capitals get worse".

Considering how the European Union plays a key role in the Sahel region, it is important to consider how profitable would be for NATO to strengthen its relationships with it. Despite the tensions between these two actors, "the EU and NATO continued to build on the two Joint Declarations of 2016 and 2018 and the 74 common proposals" (Fiott and Theofosopoulos, 2020). The relationship became even stronger over the time, as meetings between representatives of the Atlantic Alliance and the EU have been organized several times, in order to create a common forum political dialogue and exchange of information. However, as Lindstrom and Tardy (2019) argue, "there are concerns over how NATO-EU relations are faring at a time when the transatlantic relationship is going through turbulent times". But especially in the case of the Sahel region, it is undeniable how a stronger relationship between the two actors would be

profitable not only for NATO, but also for the EU. This reminds also what former Italian Minister Franco Frattini said: "more European defence capacities should never be seen as an overlapping or a weakening factor for NATO. What is important is to work together".[17] Indeed, by developing a stronger political dialogue between NATO and the EU, it would be possible to coordinate more effective measures in providing stability in the Sahel. And especially with Biden's presidency leading the United States, "a stronger Europe, stronger NATO European members are much better that having just some consumers of security at the expenses of the US. NATO and Europe can complement each other. The EU has not often shown united leadership on key issues having global geo-strategic relevance. It is time to work on more leadership to be coherent and stronger".[18]

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[17] See Annex A.
[18] Ibid.

2. NATO's Role in the Sahel

Following the previous framework on the actors already involved in the Sahel region, it is possible to outline how NATO should develop a hypothetical response to the southern instability, and its negative consequences in the Euro Atlantic area. The following chapter aims at describing how NATO should deal with the Sahelian challenge. First, it is important to describe what kind of experience NATO has on its shoulders, through a critical analysis on the main founding principles behind its strategies, with a further look at the experience in Crisis Management Operations outside the Alliance's borders. This initial overview will also outline the limits behind NATO's strategies over time, emphasising how the Euro-Atlantic organization needs to revise its agenda before approaching the Sahel. Secondly, the current research will try to analyse two main cases that represent important challenges, both for the Sahel and the international community: terrorism and migration. Following a general overview on these phenomena, their persistency and adaptability over time, and the key factors that fuel them, this research will outline a renewed Crisis Management Operation system that may be applied to the Sahelian scenario, in line with what has been highlighted by the Allied members so far, in the aftermath of the Brussels Summit from June 2021.

While analysing the Alliance's potential role in the South, it is important to understand its main pillars. NATO is built upon the principle of Collective Defence, which emphasises solidarity among its allies and partners, sharing a common set of values and principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the respect of human rights and the rule of law (NATO, 1949). Within this framework, the promotion of stability and well-being of its own Allies represents a key aspect behind the solidarity between its members. In order to reach these goals NATO has always tried to expand its scope over its neighbourhood, as providing a stable environment around the Alliance would represent a further advantage for its internal stability. Since the end of the Cold War, due to the disappearance of the Soviet threat and the emergence of new global challenges after 9/11, the Alliance felt the need to revise its attention on the European continent, with a further focus on operations outside its borders, both in the Eastern and Southern Flanks (Larsen and Koehler, 2020). Thus, a new comprehensive approach towards its neighbourhood was then introduced at the Riga Summit (2006), opening the way to what is known today as the NATO Strategic Concept of 2010 (Debuysere, and Blockmans, 2019), which still

represents a clear statement on NATO's main tasks, values, and objectives. This framework called for a renewed strategy based on enhanced information sharing among allies, intensified political consultations, and the formation of "a civilian crisis management capability to liaise more effectively the capability to train local forces in crisis zones" (ibid.; and NATO, 2010). At the same time, the 2010 Strategic Concept aimed at describing the ever-changing security environment, emphasizing the importance of solidarity between Allied countries and partners, especially while operating outside the Euro-Atlantic area (NATO, 2021s). However, the South was barely mentioned in the document. Furthermore, being a community of sovereign States with individual interests, out-of-area interventions have always been at the core of many debates, characterized by many emotional factors that have been exploited by allied members during the decision-making process (Hall, 2015).[19] Clearly, being based on consensus, national interests play an important role within the NATO environment, and if allied countries have different interests, there will be a higher tendency towards stagnation.

Within the framework of the Strategic Concept, three main pillars for a NATO strategy were outlined: collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security. As Larsen and Koehler (2020) argue, despite the equal importance given by the Alliance, only the second and the third key pillars were mainly pursued, at the expense of the former one. This was further demonstrated in 2016 with the Warsaw Summit, in which Allied members emphasised the importance of out-of-area challenges, pushing for a further NATO approach towards those crises outside the Euro-Atlantic area, able to challenge the security of its members (ibid.). As it is possible to read from its Communiqué, the Warsaw Summit highlighted the insecurity and instability of NATO's neighbourhoods, characterized by a variety of security concerns, "from state and non-state actors; from military forces and from terrorist, cyber, or hybrid attacks" (NATO, 2016d). Thus, the ever-changing security environment around NATO led to a serious debate on how it should react to the events around its borders, keeping at the same time its reputation of a strong and reliable alliance. But to face such challenges, NATO countries realized they could not develop successful operations without any support. Thus, creating a new environment with a stronger global partnership represented an essential element for the Alliance's own security (as the former Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, would

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[19] Considering emotional diplomacy, policy makers tend to use explicit and coordinated expressions as an integral part of their political strategy, while making a decision. For more information, see Hall (2015).

argue, "not a global NATO, but a NATO with global partners that share our values" – de Hoop Scheffer, 2006). And it is in this context, that the concept of *Projecting Stability* was introduced through a report from NATO Foreign Ministers, "assessing how to enhance the Alliance's contribution to international community efforts to project stability and strengthen security outside of its territory" (Hope, 2018a).

The concept of Projecting Stability aims at developing a 360 degrees spectrum towards challenges that may threaten NATO's integrity. As Secretary General Stoltenberg argued, Projecting Stability introduces an approach that applies a variety of solutions, with military means through the deployment of troops, but also by presenting NATO as a strong supporter to its partners through training missions, with its upgraded and new capacities (Stoltenberg, 2016). Later with the Warsaw Summit, Allied leaders highlighted that NATO was not excluding a more comprehensive approach towards security (Díaz-Plaja, 2018). Rather, as the core tasks designed by the 2010 Strategic Concept did not manage to tackle several security issues, Allied leaders reviewed the operating framework, "not solely to provide mutual benefit to partner nations, but to shape the environment in regions where the Alliance has strategic interests" (Hope, 2018a). Considering the Sahel as an example, NATO clearly has interests in countering emerging threats in the region, as if they will further destabilize the already weak and failed Sahelian states, the Euro Atlantic area will be affected by the negative consequences of their instability.

However, it is possible to underline some limitations over the concept of Projecting Stability, that NATO needs to revise before planning a potential effort in the Sahel. First, the different interests of its members State and the loss of cohesion within the Alliance may represent obstacles to the collective action in out-of-area operations. As NATO works on consensus, if countries do not have interests in intervening within a common framework, it would be impossible to proceed and it will lead inevitably to stagnation (Hope, 2018b). Secondly, while dealing with partnerships, NATO usually faces several challenges, that Tardy (2021) divides into five different categories. From one hand, for an effective partnership NATO needs to be characterized by an internal cohesion. Yet, different internal priorities from allied countries (that may lead in extreme cases in seeing allies on opposite sides during a conflict), the difference between geographical scopes of NATO and partners, and the need to identify drivers of cooperation, lead to negative consequences on partnership efforts, such as the lack of

consensus while dealing with partners. On the other hand, NATO usually places itself in a dominant position, while dealing with its partners. Thus, such asymmetry creates instability in the relationship between NATO and partner countries, easily "lead[ing] to an uneven relationship" (ibid.). This has further damaged the Alliance's image among partner countries and their local population, which tend to be more reluctant in dealing with NATO and prefer to accept alternatives from other actors.

The third limit is represented by the gap between political ambitions of members states, and the NATO strategic thinking. In fact, not only many definitions in official documents do not provide a concrete political aim for the Alliance. But at the same time, "the definition of stability is rather ambitious", as it suggests an involvement of the Alliance in the political scenarios of the regions where it operates, which many times leads to a general lack of legitimacy, as the local population will be biased in seeing another western actor imposing its principles while operating (Costalli, 2017; see also Larsen and Koehler, 2020). Concerning the Sahel, local populations often look at western countries through lenses based on their colonial heritage. Especially with France, as Dr Gouyez Ben Allal argued during his interview (Annex C), African populations tend to be against the approach that western countries have provided so far, especially due to their interference in their local political arena. Because of this, alternatives provided by China for example, which do not interfere with Sahelian internal affairs, are more appreciated by these populations. Thus, even though NATO represents an important forum where western values are highly emphasised, it will be important for the Alliance to consider how it will be perceived by the local population.

At the same time, finding a proper definition for *stability* is extremely difficult, as it needs to be context specific. NATO needs to revise stabilization missions by preparing specific solutions for specific scenarios, "combining national and local political dynamics", and including actors who may be interested in collaborating (Costalli, 2017). Moreover, as NATO did not prepare an adequate guidance for a common action in the South yet (Larsen and Koehler, 2020), it is necessary that the Alliance defines the end of state of its missions before operating. And its previous experiences in Crisis Management Operations are clear examples of the need for the establishment of clear guidelines before operating in a territory outside the Euro-Atlantic area.

Being part of the *Projecting Stability* framework, Crisis Management Operations (CMO) aim at countering out-of-area security challenges and represent an important step towards the prosecution of stability across the periphery, especially while dealing with emerging threats originated in the Sahel region. NATO's experience in Crisis Management Operations dates back even before the establishment of the 2010 Strategic Concept. Indeed, the intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s was the first attempt from the Alliance to act outside its own borders, as the chain of events that led to the Dayton Agreements (1995) and the withdrawal of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR), expressed the need for the Alliance to act as a regional stabilizer. In fact, the NATO-led international Implementation Forces (IFOR) and later the Stabilization Force (SFOR) represented important coalitions of States, which later were represented as symbols of a cooperative approach towards a regional crisis, in which thousands of troops were deployed. However, the Alliance's response to the crisis was not immediate, and this clearly confirms the above-mentioned gap between the political aim and the actual strategic thinking of the operation. Only after the Srebrenica massacre (1995) and the decision of the United States to deploy troops in Bosnia Herzegovina, NATO managed to approve airstrikes that later on paved the way to the Dayton Agreements (Daalder, 1998).[20] Nevertheless, IFOR and later SFOR remained essential within the post-Dayton peacekeeping process.

Kosovo is the second NATO intervention in the Balkans, even if it has been severely criticised for using humanitarian assistance as main excuse to use force in the region (Wedgwood, 1999). In this case scenario, due to the increasing threat of a mass expulsion of people coming from NATO's neighbourhoods, Allies agreed to intervene, especially after signing the Military-Technical Agreement with the Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia, and the approval of Resolution 1244 (1999) by the UN Security Council. The Kosovo Force (KFOR) was later deployed, and until today it contributes at keeping a safe environment in Kosovo (NATO, 2021m), even if it still raises many doubts on the legal basis that legitimized it (Solana, 1999).

Another major out-of-area operation for NATO regards Afghanistan. Following its previous experiences in CMOs and the 9/11 attacks, international support to the U.S. decision to intervene in the Middle East was desired, aiming at stabilizing the country,

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[20] For more information on the war in Bosnia Herzegovina, and the road to the Dayton Agreements, see also Richard Holbrooke's book, *To End a War* (1999).

ensuring that the country would not become a safe haven for terrorist groups (NATO, 2021l). NATO contributed to countering the threat posed by Al-Qaeda by improving the capacity of Afghan forces. With its International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), it managed also to support projects aimed at development and reconstruction through multinational Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and the Resolute Support Mission (RSM), in close cooperation with the Afghan government (NATO, 2021j, and 2021l). However, as Rynning (2012) argues, being too focused on liberal principles rather than the actual consequences of the operations let NATO lose its "balance in Afghanistan". Again, this reminds what has been considered by Larsen and Koehler (2020), arguing that operating without a clear overview of the scenario in which the Alliance should operate, especially in considering the vague terminology within its main pillars, does not provide an effective effort from the Alliance. Moreover, as a new Strategic Concept will be re-evaluating NATO's role in the world, allied members will have to consider fixing what has been labelled by Rynning (2012) as NATO's "enduring problem", thus the disconnection between high liberal principles at the basis of out-of-area operations, and the real operation in itself. However, concerning the recent developments in Afghanistan and the takeover from the Taliban forces, NATO should not be considered within the failure of the Western approach in response to the new Afghani State. As Ambassador and President of the NATO Defense College Foundation, Alessandro Minuto Rizzo, argued during an interview:

> "if we talk about NATO as an organization, I do not think we should talk about a failure from NATO. Because NATO went to Afghanistan, and I repeat, under the authorization of the UN Security Council in 2003. After that in 2014 it withdrew as 'fighting force' (even if the terminology is not precise, and it is not actually like this), and since 2015 what NATO is doing in Afghanistan is called training equipment, so a mission purely aimed at training, to which not all the members of the Alliance are taking part […]. To train means being in a place, address specifically to people who need to be trained, and not having a role neither in the contrasts in Afghanistan, nor the Afghani politics" (Minuto Rizzo, 2021).[21]

Nevertheless, the lack of an end state from the Alliance has been also seen also in Libya, with operation Unified Protector. The latter was the first military operation under the Responsibility to Protect principles, which legitimized NATO's efforts through UN Resolution 1973, with the mandate of protecting those civilians in Benghazi, who went against Qaddafi's regime. Within this operation, military officials in command "had large

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[21] Informal translation of Amb. Minuto Rizzo's speech at the Italian TV programme "Omnibus" (Minuto Rizzo, 2021).

'marge de manoeuvre'" in pursuing the mandate stated by the U.N. (Wester, 2020). Yet, given the fact that specific guidelines were missing, and there was a clear lack of legitimacy on removing Qaddafi's from power (the "real goal", as Mezran and Miller – 2017 – affirm), it became evident how it was difficult for NATO to act properly. As Wester (2020) argues, "the unspecified nature of the Security Council's mandate turned out to be a double-edge sword". Despite NATO had wide range of action within Operation Unified Protector, the context within the instability in Libya had to be considered. Following for example what Minister Frattini expressed (see Annex A), Libya is composed by *many Libyas*, as the difference between ethnic groups from different regions represents an essential element that need to be considered. And the same needs to be noted while dealing with the Sahel region, as ethnic groups who feel themselves as marginalised from governmental support, represent further factors for radicalization in the Sahel, thus another element of instability that will worsen the situation, liming the potential positive impact of a NATO strategy towards the Sahel (NSD-S HUB, 2020a).

Finally, considering other security challenges, CMOs played an important role as international disaster relief. Events such as the earthquake in Pakistan (2005) demonstrates how NATO could provide an additional value in disaster relief operations with its specific capabilities, and its ability to coordinate measures with involved actors (Popa, 2019). COVID-19 represented another challenge for NATO but again, the Alliance managed to assist allied and neighbouring countries, with the provision of many supporting initiatives, such as in the Republic of Moldova (NATO, 2021f), and Ukraine (NATO, 2021g). Despite these initiatives, the long-lasting period of uncertainty brought by the pandemic generated several risks within the NATO environment over the time, especially in terms of monitoring the Alliance's borders in response to Russia's campaigns of disinformation, aimed at sowing "discord and [undermining] cohesion in the Alliance through social media, information manipulation, and brazen publicity events" (Ozawa, 2020). The pandemic created an excellent platform where to publish any kind of information, paving the way for more hybrid confrontations within the international community. And misinformation campaigns led by Russia and China represent an example. Obviously, NATO did not observe such campaigns without any response. Thus, the Alliance provided a multilateral approach that can briefly summarized with two key countermeasures, namely fact-checking and debunking (Pamment, and Lindwall, 2021).

In summary, CMO strategies have shown the Alliance's preparedness and determination to act against different threats. However, those limits presented by the gap between political ambitions and operational strategies need to be revised before acting in the Sahel region. First, NATO needs to define its end states before planning an operation, especially considering the different variables that make the Sahel a unique scenario where to operate. At the same time, its experience in other arenas will be essential to effectively manage crises that affect the security of its allies. Moreover, by cooperating with those actors already involved in the region, NATO would represent an important source of information for its allies and partners, especially African partners, which may find in NATO an important source of experience in Crisis Management Operations.

A revised CMO approach in the Sahel region may be considered as an effective alternative. But only if Allied members will be able to present a new Strategic Concept, that poses more attention on a symmetric cooperation with partners, on the difference between each scenario that may threaten the Euro-Atlantic area, and that presents a clear end state prior to the actual operation. With the last Summit in Brussels (NATO, 2021c), new ambitions have been presented to the Alliance, in line with the new NATO 2030 Agenda. By addressing how NATO should face future challenges in the next decade (i.e. climate change, migration flows, terrorism, etc…), NATO leaders called for a renewed Strategic Concept, as the current one "was developed prior to the emergence of many current security setting's key features", such as the new threats coming from China and Russia, the persistent instability in the Sahel, or increasing hybrid threats such as disinformation campaigns against the its reputation (NATO, 2020a). With this new Strategic Concept, NATO aims at strengthening cohesion and political consultations among its members, as well as increasing investments on capacity building and training, in order to guarantee rapid responses to future challenges, and present the Alliance as a reliable organization to its partners. Moreover, as the Report from the Reflection Group for NATO 2030 states, the Alliance will need to adapt to new realities. More concerning the South, it will need to be more consistent in the approach towards the African continent, as terrorism and the increasing presence of Russia and China will need, along with more frequent consultations among its members, "portfolios clearly allocated" on those specific challenges, in order to ensure military preparedness and immediate responses (ibid.).

Thus, considering the above-mentioned context, what could be NATO's contribution to the Sahel region, that would eventually enhance stability and prevent a threat to the Alliance's security?

2.1 Countering terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel

Several actors, either terrorist groups, armed militias, and various criminal groups have made the Sahel a privileged scenario where to develop their activities, all facilitated by the institutional and social conditions of the entire region. These groups are interconnected with each other, in a context where the porosity of borders lead to several channels of illicit activities, which such groups thrive from. From the Sahel region, these groups have been operating, leading to several consequences beyond the region, thus increasing the instability's frame in the African continent. Their activities have included attacks on civilians in remote villages, ambushes on military bases and personnel, and high-profile bombings in capital cities in the region (especially in the Burkinabe capital, Ouagadougou, which was hurt by deadly terrorist attacks between 2016 and 2017 – Fessy, 2016). Thus, armed groups did not only take advantage of the internal division between national governments and local populations in each country in the Sahel. But they have also shown an ability to organize their own form of governance in the territories that they control.

As already mentioned before, within the Sahel region it is possible to re-group jihadist groups under two different categories: those related to Al-Qaeda (Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen - JNIM), and those with Daesh (the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara - ISGS). The former one was founded in 2017, and it has been a highly relevant actor in spreading religious radicalisation in the region, along with its claimed attacks (NSD-S HUB, 2021d; and Rémy and Zerrouky, 2021). The latter formed in 2015 after a separation with AQIM, and has gradually established its legitimacy throughout the Sahel, strengthening its link with other Daesh-related groups, ISWAP (Islamic State's West Africa Province) and ISCAP (Islamic State Central Africa Province) (Karasik, 2021). However, despite the global network that characterize Al-Qaeda and Daesh, it is important to distinguish some of the groups in the Sahel, as despite being part of other major terrorist organizations, they might differ from them, as jihadists leaders have to deal with "complex, give-and-take interactions with local power brokers", thus taking many times initiatives without any guidance from superiors (Thurston, 2020). First, there

is AQIM Al-Mourabitoun, which finds its origins from the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), that fought against the Algerian government during the civil war. In 2007, it claimed its affiliation with Al Qaeda, expanding at the same time its network and its range of action throughout the entire Sahel. AQIM organized itself into different brigades, which multiplied the attacks and kidnappings between 2010 and 2015. As part of the Al Qaeda network, AQIM is part of the Salafist jihadist movement, which aims at countering the so called "enemies of Islam" towards the creation of an Islamic Caliphate governed by the *sharia* (ibid.).

Secondly, there is Boko Haram. Founded in 2002, this group claimed many attacks and shootings in northern Nigeria and in the region of the Lake Chad Basin, providing forms of informal governance to the local populations in the territory it controls (Felter, 2018; and Raineri, 2017). Since 2015, Boko Haram claimed its affiliation with Daesh, exemplified by its ideological connections with the latter, as they both want to establish a Caliphate under the *sharia* law (Montanini, 2015).

Along with terrorist groups, the Sahel is characterized by the presence of non-state armed groups and militias, mainly based on ethnic identities. Among them, the MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) represents an example. Initially formed by Tuareg rebels coming back from Libya, in 2012 the group gained control of the northern part of Mali, proclaiming independence from the State. While Mali managed to gain part of its territory, especially through the French intervention with Serval, the MNLA's ambitions on gaining independence remained intact. However, it has been weakened over time by attacks from AQIM militias or other armed groups (ECFR, 2019).

2.1.1 What does fuel the threat?

After listing some of the main groups in the Sahel region, it is also important to understand how these groups fund themselves. Considering their persistence, it is possible to underline several factors that until today provide necessary resources for their survival across the region. The intensity and devastating impact of violent and extremist groups on the countries of the Sahel are the result of the convergence of multidimensional factors, which maintain instability in the region, from which these groups can thrive. The current paragraph aims at outlining the main sources of income of these groups, emphasizing how

such resources worsen the challenges that Sahelian governments and the international community are facing, while countering them in the Sahel.

The first dimension from which terrorist and violent groups thrive is represented by the governance deficit that characterizes Sahelian states, and their inability to provide a concrete framework for countering security threats, both individually and regionally. The lack of confidence and legitimacy from the local population towards Sahelian governments is a typical feature of these weak and failed States. Specifically, countries in the Sahel are registered as the poorest countries in the world, and therefore weak).[22] Such weakness is further emphasized by a lack of a proper governance structure within their territories, that is able to govern in the territory without being challenged, especially in the peripheries. Furthermore, as governments are not able to provide enough security to local populations, it creates the perfect environment where terrorist and armed groups may establish their own informal governance structure, where people might radicalize even more, feeling themselves forgotten by the central government.

Considering the informal alternatives provided by local groups, it is possible to underline some key elements. First, violent and extremist groups provide security to peripherical areas, through their control over the territory, especially across trading routes where they thrive from illicit activities such as human smuggling or trafficking, but also trade of weapons and drugs. Second, since the States does not provide services in those territories, armed groups establish their own judicial system, in which violence may represent the main tool for punishment. Third, groups establish their own form of taxation to the communities they control, and at the same time they provide public services, such as healthcare, education, primary goods to the population. In this way, armed groups gain further legitimacy, leading the population to support them (NSD-S HUB, and Toros, 2019).

Another element that further lower the government's legitimacy from the local population is represented by the series episodes of indirect abuses from national security forces, as noted by Raineri (2020). Indeed, what the author labels as "indirect states abuse", as perpetrated by proxies and armed groups with ties with the national government, further destabilise the situation, paving the way to the rise of extremism

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[22] According to the latest Human Development Index (HDI) Report from the UN development Programme (UNDP, 2020), Sahelian countries are characterized by high levels of poverty per capita: Niger (90,5%), Chad (85,7%), Burkina Faso (83,8%) Mali (68,3%), and Mauritania (50,6%).

among local communities (ibid.). Furthermore, as Dr Berger argues in her interview, Sahelian forces lack of professionalism. Even if they may know the territory, the chain of command is barely structured. At the same time, being composed of only few battalions with scarce mobility, they cannot pretend to control vast territories that have been taken back from jihadist and violent groups.[23] The absence of a decentralized State structure and of public services in the periphery (lack of healthcare and education services, or other public services) have a striking impact in the Sahel region, making the alternative proposed by jihadists and extremists even more appealing. Indeed, populations in the periphery that do not receive any services or assistance from the State tend to support these groups. As a result, people find themselves in a complex situation, in which national forces may consider them as supporters of VEOs, leading to their arrest, or death in the worst-case scenario. For example in the case of Niger, its relationship with armed groups supporting counterterrorist strategies in the territory, has led to an "indirect authorization of abuses committed by proxies", and a further "escalation of violent extremism" (Raineri, 2020).

Another element related to the lower level of governance, is further aggravated by the corruption within governmental institutions. As the elites gain much more power and resources, especially being at the highest spheres of national institutions, lowers even more the legitimacy from the local population. As a result, as basic needs and resources are fully provided only to a certain part of the society, the rest of the population experiences high levels of poverty. Without a proper and equal distribution of resources, the Sahel continues to be one of the poorest regions in the African continent, with lower levels of development as well. At the same time, within this framework, it is important to underline the ethnical differences within societies. Indeed, being part of a community that is not even represented within the State's institution further aggravates the situation, leading again to lower trust towards institutions, as well as higher chances of radicalization (NSD-S HUB, 2020a).

Finally, an important feature that supports the rise of jihadism and violent extremism in the Sahel is given by the increasing role of women within their framework. Indeed, among the "push" and "pull" factors, dissatisfaction with their status-quo, having experienced of abuses from national forces, as well as the rejection of western values, and

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[23] See Annex B.

the incentives that terrorist groups provide people in order to join their cause, these are all elements that bring women to participate in episodes of violence. Not only being supporters of determined groups, especially through their channels and on the internet, but also in committing suicide bombings in the name of the group, women have increased their role inside terrorist organizations, playing an even more strategic role, that is less evident than the one portrayed by male extremists (NSD-S HUB, 2021g).

Overall, it is clear how these issues, mainly related to governance, are affecting people's perception on the national government, leading them to choose illicit activities for more income, such as drug, arms, and human trafficking, as well as increased support on non-state armed groups' informal governance structures. As terrorist and violent groups look for safe havens characterized by a weak security network and insufficient presence of national forces, the inability of national armies to provide a stronger presence in the territory marks another important factor that fuels terrorists and violent groups' presence in the Sahel, which is further emphasized by the porosity of the borders within the entire region. Indeed, there is a structural weakness in security apparatuses, in which armies are most of the time under-equipped, not trained enough, and unprepared in confronting the threat coming from their own territory. And even with the support from international actors with operations aimed at training armed forces (see for instance EUCAP and EUTM operations in Niger and Mali), Sahelian forces still lack operational effectiveness. And such inefficiency can be explained under different factors:

- First, armies lack of enough logistical resources.
- Secondly, corruption and the involvement of military officials in illicit activities further destabilize the situation, enhancing criminal groups that thrive from the instability in the region.

Furthermore, the scattered nature of these attacks, as well as the porosity of the borders within the entire region, and the limited security presence in remote areas, allowed militant terrorist and violent groups to extend their activities across the region. Moreover, as they gained control of trade routes, they managed to engage also in illicit activities, aimed at providing resources through the sale of drugs and narcotics, weapons, and trafficking human beings. This further harmed the economic conditions of the Sahelian communities. However, as many areas in which governments do not have a constant

presence, the local population that feels marginalised tend to support these illicit activities, as they represent appealing sources of income for their families.

2.1.2   Applying a CMO strategy in the Southern Flank

Keeping in mind that NATO's involvement in the Sahel region may be developed under its principles of Collective Defence and within a revised Strategic Concept, the current paragraph may illustrate how a renewed CMO approach may represent an ideal measure that would enhance the Alliance's role in the Sahel, fully cooperating with partners and regional and international actors in the region and avoiding at the same time an overload of tactics aimed at dealing with the same threat. Considering the outcomes of the Warsaw Summit (2016), that emphasized NATO's attention both to the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, the Alliance could cooperate with the European Union, as well as the African Union and the United Nations in expanding the security scope in the Sahel, investing on a stable Africa, that would lead to future benefits not only for the Alliance, but also for its individual members States.

NATO's contributions in the Sahel should concentrate mainly on two issues. First, Allies should focus on security-related challenges, linked to the status of Sahelian weak and failed States (as they are not able to counter with their own initiatives the global threats within the region), governance issues, terrorism, and migration. Secondly, NATO should focus on mitigating the influence that counterparts are increasingly achieving in the region, providing alternatives to the Western effort. As already mentioned, Russia and China are already present in the region. Quoting what Minister Frattini emphasized in his speech, "foreign politics has similarities with physics, as when there is an empty space, the latter is filled with somebody else".[24] And indeed, as Operation Barkhane will come to an end by 2022, Russia and China will have the opportunity to prevail in gaining much more interests in the region. Russia has already military partnerships with Algeria and Egypt, with an important focus on Libya, aiming at a full immersion in the African continent (Polat, 2010). As for China, the Belt Road Initiative still represents an important tool to gain African countries' trust, further increasing both the Chinese interests in the

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[24] See Annex A

continent, as well as its economic power, challenging the allies' interests in the future (Nantulya, 2019).

The Sahel region might represent an important scenario for NATO where to explore a new strategy in CMOs. As mentioned before, the peculiarity of this theatre, in which many threats represent further challenges for the international community. At the same time, within every Sahelian country, there are different geopolitical circumstances, either based on different ethnic groups that have different relationships with national governments, or on the presence of extremist and violent groups, with enough power to provide alternatives to the governments' efforts in stabilizing the territory. A renewed Crisis Management effort from the Alliance, would emphasize how the Alliance may adapt to unique scenarios, keeping in mind its past experiences, such as Libya and Afghanistan. Furthermore, the Alliance needs not to represent another western actor imposing its own measures to Sahelian countries, as it would increase discontent with the local population. At the same time, it is important to consider that the security-development nexus of the strategies applied so far, does not provide stability in the region. In fact, the idea of establishing development projects after military operations cannot be fully satisfied, as security conditions are still fragile and most of the time it is impossible to provide effective support without a proper support from military forces. Secondly, the resources are directly

Apart from direct engagement, NATO could also facilitate the response of African countries to their own crises, through its robust relation with the African Union (NATO, 2021e), and the development of support packages aimed at training armed forces. Concerning AU-NATO cooperation, this relationship was formalised in 2005, when NATO cooperated with the African Union in Sudan. Over the time, it evolved around three main key areas: operational support, such as with the AMISOM mission in Somalia (2007); capacity building, such as the training of military and civilian staff; and assistance to the establishment of forces, such as the African Standby Force (ASF – the main tool with which the African Union operates in the context of inter- and intra-State conflicts in the African continent). In 2014, the two parties signed the Technical Agreement, which led to a stronger cooperation with the solid network represented by the NATO Liaison Office at the AU Headquarters (NATO JFC Naples, 2017). Later in 2019, a further agreement between NATO and the African Union was signed, aimed at strengthening their partnership, incorporating new measures.

Within the framework of CMOs, NATO can also improve cooperation with individual countries and regional actors. Through its Southern Hub in Naples, the Alliance will be able to foster such strategy by identifying potential areas of cooperation, that would improve military activities aimed at mitigating the terrorist threat (Mariano, 2020). Examples may be represented by Defence and Related Capacity Building packages (DCB), that would encompass several types of support, such as strategic advice on defence, Security Sector Reforms (SSRs), and development of local forces through training and education (NATO, 2021h). Indeed, considering the G5 Sahel Joint Force, a stronger cooperation with the latter in the development of a well-prepared Sub-Saharan force aimed at stabilizing the Sahel region with counterterrorism operations, but also with other soft power strategies, aimed at increasing the dialogue with local communities and armed militias willing to negotiate, NATO would be able to establish an important network in the Sahel, in which stronger partnerships may be developed, that will be based on sharing expertise, training initiatives, and capacity building projects.

More importantly, as the lack of a strong governance represents one of the main reasons of instability in the Sahel, the Alliance should provide support on development projects related to governance issues in the Sahel. And it is in this case where NATO institutions such as the NATO Defense College may arise in providing an additional support from the Atlantic Alliance towards its partners and regional actors already operating in the region. At the same time, another effort might be represented by supporting the effort already provided by the European Union and the United Nations. Example of such cooperation can be found in Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) projects, and (again) the Security Sector Reforms (SSRs). While the former one "is a highly visible process that can increase public confidence in the peace process" that aims at destroying weapons, dismantling armed united, and reintegrate former fighters into civil society, the latter is "an umbrella term" comprising activities that promote the establishment of a legitimate, transparent, and accountable governmental authority (Mosinski, 2019). By applying these two frameworks in the Sahel, NATO might play an important role in organizing military activities, while supporting at the same time the EU and other actors in reintegrating former militias and ex-combatants into local security forces. Furthermore, by participating in the demolition of dangerous weapons (as already done in Mauritania – NSPA, 2020), NATO's positive reputation may be strengthened with a positive impact on the African political and social contexts, limiting

perhaps the potential bias on the "Western power operating in the African continent". On the other hand, considering an improved SSR strategy in coordination with other actors involved in the Sahel, the Alliance needs to take into account the need for the Sahelian governance system to be improved. Therefore, following Mosinski's suggestions (2019), a potential SSR should consider a holistic approach that would address local security forces and all relevant national institutions. In the case of the Sahel, measured aimed at reducing corruption, the increased opportunities for a dialogue between the State and those armed militias that are willing to negotiate, would represent a further step towards a proper governance in the region.

Along with a stronger partnership with the African Union, the G5 Sahel Coalition, and other actors in the region, within its CMO strategy NATO could provide a more practical support, through the deployment of drones and aircrafts. With its Alliance Ground System (AGS) for example, NATO would be able to contribute on a variety of missions: from the protection of troops and civilians, to border controls, maritime safety, as well as in the fight against terrorist and violent and extremist groups. Deployed in the Sigonella base in Sicily, the AGS system represents an important drone support in missions with long-endurance ground surveillance, that can cover more than 100,000 km^2 in one day. Such drones may be deployed in performing a continued surveillance of the territory from a high altitude, with advanced radars (NATO, 2021b). Thus, with the deployment of such high-level technology, the Alliance would be able to have a better view on what is happening in the Sahel, and this would facilitate further operations in the territory.

Applying a renewed CMO strategy in the Sahel may represent an important opportunity for NATO to increase its engagement in the continent. With its expertise in dealing with several crises since the end of the Cold War, the Alliance represents an important actor, able to share its experience in countering threats such as terrorism. But at the same time, the Sahel may represent an important theatre in which NATO could enhance its cohesion, despite tensions between individual allied countries. In the Sahel, NATO will have the chance to strengthen the transatlantic link, enhancing European strategic autonomy, preserving its main values, and containing at the same time the expansion of its counterparts, presenting a valid alternative to Sahelian countries.

2.2 Migration trends in the Sahel

Migration flows across the Sahara and northern Africa are not a recent phenomenon. Especially with the migration crisis of 2015, it has become one of the most relevant issues in European politics. Even if the majority of migration flows related to the African continent have been intra-continental, the expected growth in the number of people in Africa by 2050, and the subsequent migration flows due to the lack of resources in the territory, have been further emphasised the impact of massive movements of people as an important challenge to international security (Strategic Foresight Analysis, 2020). Therefore, it is important for NATO to analyse what can be done in preventing negative consequences for its members. Even if flows across the Mediterranean Sea have decreased in recent years, especially due to the Coronavirus pandemic, mass movements of people coming from unstable countries (the Sahel in particular) remains one main strategic concern, in which movements through illegal channels, human trafficking and smuggling represent important challenges both for national and international security.

Although it is possible to distinguish between episodes of internal and international migration, for the sake of the current research this paragraph will deal mainly on the latter concept, as movements of people outside the African continent represent a major issue on European security, related at the same time to the potential response from NATO as security provider. However, the following analysis will mention also an example of internal migration, mostly related on issues linked to climate change, as such internal movements of people may lead to increased conflicts between communities, which will further destabilise the region. At the same time, the paragraph aims at analysing the impact of human smuggling and trafficking on international security, that may lead in the long-term to an urgent concern for the Atlantic Alliance through a human security approach.

2.2.1 Human smuggling and trafficking in the Sahel

Concerning human smuggling and trafficking and their impact on the Sahel, it is necessary to distinguish three main concepts, clarifying the main differences between them:

- **Human migration**: unlike the concept of "refugee", there is not a common definition on migration. The International Organization for Migration (IOM)

considers it as "an umbrella term" (NSD-S HUB, 2020b). Thus, any kind of movement of people from their place of residence, towards other locations, either in the same or another country, falls into this definition (Carling, 2017). Within this concept, cases related to irregular migration concern those movements of people through illicit channels, that can be defined as "outside the law, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry or the exit from the state of origin, transit or destination" (IOM, accessed 20 Sep. 2021).

- **Human (or migrant) smuggling**: it comprises those actions aimed at supporting any illegal entry into a country, in exchange for financial benefits. Unlike the previous concept, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) provided a common definition on what to define as human smuggling, clearly described in the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. Indeed, on Article 3 of the attached Protocol, human smuggling is defined as "the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident" (UNODC, 2004).

- **Human trafficking**: finally, this concept regards a crime that represents a severe violation of human rights, under the supervision of the UNODC (2004). As it consists in a serious crime against human rights, the UN recalls for national regulations for a multilateral legal framework countering this issue.

Having marked the difference between these concepts, it is important to underline their relevance in the migration issue. Trafficking and smuggling of human beings represent serious challenges of human security in the Sahel region. Concerning the former, the exploitation of people for financial benefits represents an important source of income for non-state armed groups in the Sahel, fostering corruption, and criminal networks (NSD-S HUB, 2020b). On the other hand, smuggling represents another source of income for violent groups, as it is also related to the traffic of different kinds of goods through illicit channels, that many times these groups control, and from which communities excluded by the national government find as alternative sources of income.

Recent policy and security changes in the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Sahel over the last five years, as Malakooti (2020) argues, changed the course of irregular migration flows towards Europe. With more detention centres in main departing harbours, such as Libya, as well as bilateral agreements between countries (Libya and Italy for example) aimed at preventing such activities, it has become much more difficult for illegal networks to smuggle migrants across the Mediterranean. However, considering the case of Libyan detention centres, the country's policy has further exposed migrants to dangerous situations, as "the poor control exerted by the Libyan authorities over local war-lords has further amplified the problem", especially when corrupted militias are involved in the process, who are responsible of many episodes of kidnapping for ransom, aimed at gaining much more money (NDS-S HUB, 2020b). Thus, such deteriorating situation originated from abuses committed from local forces might generate further discontent among migrants who did not manage to travel, and may lead to further radicalization of people. At the same time, developments in policies aimed at preventing human smuggling and trafficking led to the organization of other routes in North Africa. As one the NATO Southern Hub Reports (2021e) argues, migration flows have been rerouted in other north African countries. Thus, one the one hand, it is possible to understand how the phenomenon of illegal migration can adapt to different situation, proving that there is "no silver bullet" that may deal completely with the issue. On the other hand, countries that are experiencing new dynamics of illegal migration could face in the long-term growing pressure within their territory, leading them to "find themselves overstretched", as expanded criminal networks may lead to an increased number of irregular migrants that would consequently bring further public and political pressure (ibid.).

2.2.2   Root causes of migration

While analysing international migration, it is possible to highlight some of its root causes and enabling factors that further push people to leave their country of origin. These elements are interrelated with each other and represent many reasons that influence the decision to migrate to another place. First, violence and conflicts represent one of the main and most visible pushing factors on migration trends. Many people decide to move outside their country of origin due to a general fear of being persecuted or targeted within

episodes of indiscriminate violence. More concerning the Sahel, violence in the region has increased over time, and conflicts based on ethnic differences have intensified, providing further instability in the region. As the Sahel is composed by several ethnic communities, cleavages that can begin from territorial disputes, or competition over primary resources, have been exploited by violent and extremist groups in order to provoke further radicalisation in the region (NSD-S HUB, 2020a). This kind of violence is further exacerbated by the lack of proper governance and capacities. As Dr Berger argues in her interview, local forced cannot control massive territories, especially when these forces are composed only by few battalions.[25] Thus individuals, being at the centre of a constant cycle of violence, may decide to escape from the country, looking for better standards of living, but most importantly to save themselves from a certain death.

Secondly, poverty and fewer opportunities to improve personal standards of living represent another example. Especially considering young people, who find themselves without proper realities where to develop their skills and gain satisfactory wages (NSD-S HUB, 2020a), the population growth and higher unemployment rates lead to an increased trend of young people leaving their countries for better living standards. Thus, the subsequent "brain drain" will further destabilise the region, as Sahelian countries will find themselves without the right labour productivity, that might contribute to the development of their countries.

Thirdly, the population growth represents another influent element. The population of sub-Saharan Africa is expected to increase over the time, reaching 3.7 billion of people in 2100 (NSD-S HUB, 2021h). Again, the massive growth within Sahelian population will further produce brain drain (as there will even fewer opportunities for the you labour force), lowering chances for social change, as the younger generation will look for better opportunities abroad.

Finally, climate change and natural disaster influence the movement of people across the region as well. As Vigil (2017) argues, the Sahel is characterized by a variety of links between climate change and migration, "due to a high geographical exposure to calamitous events, and wide-ranging vulnerabilities". Higher temperatures and frequent episodes of earthquakes, floods, and droughts further damage the Sahel. Thus, people will have to face challenges derived from water scarcity, food insecurity, and natural hazards.

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[25] See Annex B.

Furthermore, as the Sahel is already an area of transit for migrants (ibid.), increasing temperatures will lead to a substantial rise of natural disasters in the region (Niang et al., 2014), leading to further movements of people. At the same time, while looking for new resources, people will move in other territories, that are controlled by other communities. Consequently, migrants will have to compete for their necessary needs, further increasing the instability in the region. An example of such issue can be demonstrated in Burkina Faso, which has registered higher levels of internally displaced people, due to the tragic climate conditions (Lompo, 2020). Even if this is related to an episode of internal migration, if climate conditions will worsen over the time, populations may find other places outside their country of origin where to move. At the same time, conflicts over resources further destabilises the Sahel region, making it more difficult to find solutions aimed at providing stability in the Sahel.

Clearly, issues related to massive movements of people would represent other challenges to national and international security. Although NATO may not represent the primary actor in countering migration trends, it might represent an important supporter of policies and measures from other actors involved in the region, in line with the Projecting Stability principles.

2.2.3   How should NATO respond?

Issues related to migration have been formally integrated within the Atlantic Alliance's agenda only recently. Indeed, an important event that might represent the first concrete step towards an Atlantic approach on migration dates back to 2016, in which NATO Defense Ministers agreed in supporting Greece and Turkey, and the European agency, Frontex, during the migration crisis, by deploying maritime forces in the Aegan Sea. Within this operation, NATO's Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) managed to provide an immediate response (within 48 hours), by conducting surveillance and monitoring operations (NATO, 2016c). Following the impact of the migration and refugee crisis on the European continent, along with this first step towards a safer and more controlled Mediterranean, NATO launched operation Sea Guardian, to which the SNMG2 has been affiliated. Administered by a Command located in Northwood (UK), this operation has a broader mandate on responding to several kinds of Maritime Security Operation (MSO) tasks, aimed at keeping the Mediterranean safe. Among these tasks, Sea Guardian is responsible for providing maritime situational awareness, capacity building, information

sharing, and maritime counterterrorism. Most importantly, operation Sea Guardian aims at keeping a tight surveillance in the Mediterranean Sea, in cooperation with the EU and its Operation Sophia (NATO, 2021q).

As migration trends will inevitably increase in the future, due to the expected population growth in the African continent, movements of people across the Mediterranean will remain a major concern for Europe and the Atlantic Alliance. Thus, it is important to understand what are the security implications that may concern NATO. One of the main factors that emphasizes the need for an improved strategy is related to human trafficking and smuggling, and the criminal networks related to them. Both crimes represent two lucrative networks for non-State armed groups in the African continent. Despite improved management and law enforcement have strengthened controls over the border, criminal activities still represent a major issue. Thus, this creates the opportunity for NATO to propose a more comprehensive approach, in which the Alliance and other regional actors should cooperate, in order to guarantee a stronger surveillance system of the main routes in the Mediterranean Sea. Even though NATO is not the main organization responsible for countering human trafficking (NATO, 2007), it has taken into account the issue as major concern (NATO, 2004). But still, more can be done.

Considering its development over time, especially with the Warsaw Summit in 2016, the Alliance's approach on irregular migration and illicit trafficking coming from the African continent might be revised, in order to present a stronger Atlantic response to the increasing threat. With the 2016 Summit, NATO created a new Joint Intelligence and Security Division (JISD), which aims at promoting a more comprehensive approach to security, by providing strategic warnings and situational awareness at the NATO Head Quarters. This new Division, according to von Loringhoven (2017), "the most significant reform in history of Allied intelligence". Not only it manages to provide immediate information on possible threats for the Alliance, but it represents an important network that is helping NATO to monitor the magnitude of different threats, that can vary from cyber-attacks, to terrorism and other threats posed by NATO's counterparts. Thus, within the increasing importance of migration flows and their security implications within the Euro-Atlantic area, the JISD would provide an essential network that will be able to monitor the main routes in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, by improving NATO's relationships with its African partners, as well as increasing the role of the Southern Hub

in Naples, the Intelligence system would be further strengthened, as it would amplify its networks toward the Southern Flank.

Along with a stronger intelligence system, following the "softer part" of Projecting Stability (as Dr. Tardy called it in his interview – see Annex D), the development of capacity building projects aimed at improving the effectiveness of operations in the African continent may represent another important tool aimed at countering human trafficking. Indeed, considering the African Union's Standby Force (the Africa Standby Force – ASF), would be an important operating tool, in which the Alliance could provide enough resources to the African Union, that would foster interregional security cooperation (Akuffo, 2011). Along with the African Union, the G5 Sahel might be another force to with which NATO should organize capacity building projects aimed at strengthening a Joint Force from the Sahel, which would be able to better identify the main channels and organizations responsible for those illicit activities.

At the same time, NATO should develop a more coordinated approach with the European Union in countering irregular migration. After the experience in the Aegean Sea, a stronger cooperation between NATO and Frontex might represent an important practical cooperation, in which both the organizations can share their expertise and information with each other, in order to provide a comprehensive strategy in the Mediterranean Sea. Following what has been argued by Frattini in his speech (see Annex A), "NATO can and should complement and implement together with EU missions the political goal", and a stronger military cooperation in the Mediterranean between NATO and European capacities would lead to a stronger Europe, that would produce more results than what has been done by other operations, such as the IRINI (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI) mission, whose arms embargo declared by the UN Security Council has not provided enough responses against illicit traffics of resources and human trafficking across the Mediterranean Sea (UNSC, 2021).[26]

Since only few steps have been made so far on this topic, NATO's further involvement in migration issues represents an important step to be taken in countering threats that might affect the Alliance's security. Not only by strengthening its own capacities, but also by promoting stronger cooperation initiatives with the European

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[26] For more information on Operation IRINI, see https://www.operationirini.eu/about-us/ . Regarding its few results, see https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2047327/S_2021_229_E.pdf .

Union and the African Union, in order to provide a on both shores of the Mediterranean, NATO would bring an important additional value in the monitoring process of the Mediterranean, aimed at countering irregular flows of migrants generated from human smuggling and trafficking.

3. Going beyond military operations: how NATO can improve cooperation

Along with the previous chapter on how NATO should respond to terrorism and migration issues in the Sahel, the following chapter will present an innovative strategy for the Alliance that may represent a further approach towards the stabilization of the region. As this research has been written at the end of one year of work experience within the NATO Defense College, the following paragraphs will outline how NATO should develop a renewed path of cooperation with partners and regional institutions, but also non-official groups within Sahelian societies, through a stronger cooperation based on strategies of public and military diplomacy. These two strategies aim at providing multicultural settings in which, on the one hand, NATO will have the opportunity to re-shape its image in the southern neighbourhood, while on the other, future leaders would thrive from building networks with each other, in order to enhance stronger cooperative initiatives in the future.

This kind of cooperation can be described by analysing two related branches of diplomacy, namely public and military diplomacy. Concerning the former one, "public diplomacy" represents a typical soft power instrument, that countries have used over the time. Such practice has evolved during history and managed to better distinguish itself from the traditional diplomacy approach: while the latter mainly concerns those relationships between national and international representatives, the former aims at targeting "the general public in foreign societies and more specific non-official groups, organizations and individuals" (Melissen, 2005). Public Diplomacy is not only related to individual countries, but international organizations as well. Indeed, within NATO, the Alliance communicates and develops programmes aimed at raising awareness on security issues all over the world through its Public Diplomacy Division, which is in charge of promoting the Alliance, as well as public debate and direct engagement while dealing with important security concerns. An example of public diplomacy activities that NATO offers is represented by "Co-Sponsorship Grants", which aim at fostering "awareness and understanding of the Alliance, its values, policies, and activities", through the organization of conferences, seminars and other public events (NATO, 2020b). Especially during the pandemic, the Public Diplomacy Division played an important role in countering misinformation campaigns coming from NATO's counterparts, by

publishing documents and sharing information that aimed at countering those myths that these counterparts were spreading across the European continent.[27] In summary, improving NATO's approach towards the South through its Public Diplomacy division would pave the way to an important strategy. First, with events related to the Alliance, its values, and its major concerns over security issues, the Division would present new opportunities for NATO to approach the local population and its traditional authorities. This would help the Alliance in countering the psychological bias that African populations use when thinking about western actors. Of course, considering the colonial heritage that many western countries have within the African continent, it will be very difficult to change their minds. Nevertheless, by improving a public diplomacy strategy another approach in which dialogue represents the main tool would be created. Moreover, considering what Dr. Berger emphasised in her interview (Annex B), on the disconnection between local aspirations and support to national forces, promoting dialogues with the local populations will be an opportunity for NATO to understand what are their main concerns that might affect any solution on the governance issues that are characterizing Sahelian governments.

Parallel to a public diplomacy approach, NATO might develop another one, mainly related to what has been labelled as "military diplomacy". As Swistek (2012) and Shea (2005) argue, military diplomacy was usually related to any business of military attachés. However, as the perception of security changed over time, the role of attachés changed its scope as well. If initially this kind of approach aimed at providing forces against any hostility, after the Cold War military diplomacy developed a new strategy, "framed by cooperation among allies, and other foreign countries" (Swistek, 2012). From creating multilateral networks, to providing common training activities, expertise on determined issues, and exchanging of relevant information, military diplomacy would represent another approach that NATO might explore while dealing with the Sahel. Indeed, partnerships with North African countries, such as the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) might represent the current example of such strategy. However, to counter issues coming from the Sahel, it is necessary to improve cooperation initiatives with the regional actors as well. And it is in this case that a stronger cooperation between the NATO

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[27] For more information on the myths on NATO during the COVID-19 pandemic, see NATO (2020c), 'Russia's Top Five Myths about NATO & COVID-19', available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/2004-Factsheet-Russia-Myths-COVID-19_en.pdf .

Defense College and the G5 Sahel Defense College would represent an innovative way of promoting a new military diplomacy strategy between NATO and the Sahel.

Such cooperation initiatives, based on means that are different from mere military operations, might represent two important approaches in which a new image of the Alliance in its Southern neighbourhood would be portrayed. Therefore, a stronger approach focused on public and military diplomacy with actors in the Sahel would create a mutual beneficial relationship, in which on the one hand, the Alliance would further improve its knowledge on issues that might affect its security in the future, enhancing the definition of concrete end states, in case of further operations. Whereas, on the other hand, Sahelian countries would thrive from the experience that NATO has to share, as well as having access to another forum where to make their issues heard. It is thus clear that this kind of cooperation would further enhance what the NATO's Southern Hub in Naples aspires to do since its establishment: connecting through improved networks; consulting through an inclusive forum where to discuss on important issues; and coordinating actions towards a common objective (Mariano, 2020).

3.1 A strategic approach through the NATO Defense College

Within NATO, one of the main institutions that offers an important setting in which national representatives, both from the Alliance and partner countries, may thrive from high level training, is represented by the NATO Defense College (NDC) in Rome. Since 1951, the NDC represents a premiere academic institution, in which senior officials, both military and civilians, attend to different high-level courses, aimed at addressing those challenges that are mining the Alliance's security, as well at fostering the development of important skills that will help them in the future. Being a unique and major centre of education, outreach and research, the mission of the NDC is to contribute to the effectiveness and cohesion of the Alliance by developing future leaders' knowledge on transatlantic security issues and to foster forward and creative strategic thinking on key issues facing the Alliance. By providing senior-level courses to military and civilian officials, who interact with each other on NATO issues within a multicultural setting, the NATO Defense College provides the perfect environment in which national representatives may create a stronger multinational networking, strengthening at the same time cohesion between NATO countries and their partners. Furthermore, by analysing

important topics related to the Alliance and international security, military and civilian officials share their own experiences with each other, enhancing a multilateral overview of NATO's wider goals.

At the NATO Defense College, partner countries particularly enjoy the academic offer, sending many representatives in Rome to attend the NDC high-level courses. Three of them in particular are usually intended to deal with partnerships: the NATO Regional Cooperation Course (NRCC), the Senior Executive Regional Conference (SERC), and the General, Flag Officers and Ambassadors' Course (GFOAC). All three aim at ensuring a mutual understanding on common issues related to the Alliance, but also the entire security environment. For the NRCC, the course prepares senior officials for future positions, providing them a complete training on the strategic issues related to NATO, the Mediterranean Dialogue, and the broader Middle East. On the other hand, for the GFOAC and SERC, these two courses are mainly attended by today's high-ranking officials, enhancing again a mutual understanding of the challenges, giving the opportunity to establish networks that will be useful for future decisions. Taking as an example the previous SERC, this year's edition focused on the dynamics that will likely impact the aspects of warfare and the nature of the stability in the region over the next decade, and their implications for NATO and its partners in the South. Even if it lasted only one week, this strategic conference managed to introduce partner countries' officials to NATO's values, missions, and policies, with a specific focus on the Alliance's approach to South, its instruments, and ambitions. At the same time, the SERC offered a unique opportunity for participants and speakers to conduct a collective reflection on possible ways for adapting NATO's approach to the South, and to oncoming challenges by identifying ways to:

- Increase its strategic desired effects.
- Strengthen partners' resilience.
- And enhance regional stability.

As already mentioned, of the objectives within the courses at the NDC is the development of strategic thinking, as well as skills that will be useful in the future. Indeed, as General Curtis Scaparrotti argued during his speech at the last Senior Course Graduation Ceremony:

> "trust, teamwork, inclusivity, and respect. These are characteristics of teams that value every individual's contribution and embrace diversity. That discover innovative solutions, and

understand that collaboration inside and outside an organization, is the key to their success […]. As a senior leader, old skills will need improvement, and new skills will have to be embraced. ".[28]

Clearly, by developing stronger relationships with the G5 Sahel Defense College, the latter would gain many benefits, as the NDC will be able to share more knowledge on security issues, thus providing an effective training to senior Sahelian officials. At the same time, as training does not only mean the military one, an advanced cooperation between these two institutions would help in countering issues related to the lack of governance, that is characterizing the South. Indeed, as new soft skills will be acquired, Sahelian officials will be able to develop many strategies in the future, aiming at enhancing dialogues with local populations and groups controlling territories (through new negotiation skills).

If from one hand, the NATO Defense College represents an important institution where to strengthen cohesion among Allied countries, it provides on the other an important environment where to learn about NATO and the security environment that countries are experiencing. And especially by inviting representatives of Partner countries, NATO and partner countries might develop new strategies together, while dealing with common security concerns, thus an important framework of mutual enrichment. As the Brussels Summit highlighted concern over the deteriorating situation in the Sahel region, and its possible consequences on the Alliance, leaders called for a stronger commitment on long-standing partnerships with Sahelian countries, in particular Mauritania. At the same time, Allies promoted a more constructive dialogue with regional institutions, and the recent visit of the Commandant of the NATO Defense College (Lieutenant General Olivier Rittimann) clearly represents the beginning of a more cooperative relationship between NATO and one of the main regional institutions in the territory, the G5 Sahel Defence College. Following an initial exploratory mission in Mauritania, LGEN Rittimann met officials from the G5 Sahel institutions, discussing how the Alliance should support them through the development of educational programmes. This examples of dialogue within multinational environments, clearly represent an intention from the Alliance to better understand how to better deal with the security

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[28] General (ret.) Curtis Scaparrotti (U.S. Army) is the former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe and Commander of the U.S. European Command, and worked to preserve the security and stability of the Alliance, and strengthen it in the face of traditional and new-age adversaries. On the 16th July, he gave an introductory remark to the Graduation Ceremony of the Senior Course 138 at the NATO Defense College, discussing about the importance of being a good leader, especially in an international environment. For the entire speech, as well as the entire Graduation Ceremony, please see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtN5g0iiusU&t=3543s .

challenges in the Sahel, but most importantly how to create an efficient link between NATO institutions and Sahelian ones, as a stronger network would enhance better coordination of the activities, as well as better guidelines for both actors while dealing with security threats in the region.

Clearly, by improving relationships between institutions aimed at training officials on current and future challenges, NATO and the Sahel may find an important framework where to develop cooperation initiatives, aimed at improving capacities that will further support any process dedicated on the stabilization of the region. Indeed, following what Swistek (2012) considers as the two main pillars of public diplomacy, a potential and solid cooperation between NATO and the Sahelian governments through the NATO Defense College and the G5 Sahel Defense College would seek to encourage a common understanding on the different issues that are challenging both the Alliance and its partners, paving the way towards a concrete dialogue between involved nations.

Conclusions and Key Recommendations

With the upcoming 2022 Strategic Concept in the Alliance's agenda, NATO will need to better identify the security challenges that are originating from the southern neighbourhood. The Sahel region, in particular, remains one of the main cores of instability in the African continent, as Sahelian countries are characterized by increasing episodes of violence from terrorist and violent groups, high level of migration flows, that will tend to increase in the future, and lower level of efficiency from national forces. Despite several interventions from the international community, the situation has not changed. As the Alliance's security might be affected in the long term by the negative consequences coming from the Sahel, it is time for NATO to develop a new strategic approach towards the Southern neighbourhood. Allied members will have the opportunity to better analyse what are NATO's current and future challenges; how Russia and China are developing their interests around in the South, especially in the Sahel; and what kind of guidelines do Allies need in order to provide concrete efforts outside its borders, without repeating the same mistakes of previous missions, and avoiding at the same time what has been done so far by other actors in the region. Therefore, it is possible to suggest some key recommendation for the Alliance, in line with the future 2022 Strategic Concept:

- **Develop clear guidelines before operating.** As one of the main issues that have been raised on NATO's operations outside concerned the lack of guiding principles, it is necessary for the Alliance to provide a better understanding on the context in which it will be operating. At the same time, the Alliance should consider a deeper analysis on which actor should be involved in cooperative initiatives. Within the African continent, the G5 Sahel might represent an important resource for NATO, to be develop through Capacity Building projects.
- **Improve partnerships and cooperation with regional actors**. As the Sahel represents a very complex scenario, NATO cannot operate without the support of its partners. Thus, it is important for the Alliance to reinforce its networks with partner countries, that can provide detailed information on the different scenarios in the Sahel, where to operate, as well as on the actors that are providing instability in the region, and how they are seen from the local population (i.e., if there will

be an opportunity for dialogue in the future or not). At the same time, stronger partnerships should be developed also with the European Union and the African Union, to provide a comprehensive and common approach towards an unstable environment such as the one in the Sahel.

- **Create measures that would prevent the expansion of terrorism**: by sharing best practices, and suggestions based on previous experiences in CMOs, NATO could facilitate and support regional actors in formulating their own solutions. To further provide support to Sahelian countries, NATO should consider increasing its support by providing capacity building initiatives, in particular:
    - o Training sessions in the field.
    - o Developing cooperation strategies through institutions aimed at providing information sharing and training to national forces, such as the NATO Defense College and the G5 Sahel Defence College. Such cooperation would further prepare national forces in being more professional.
    - o Supporting and DDR and SSR projects that would deal especially with governance and corruption issues within governmental forces.

- **Support strategies aimed at preventing irregular migration flows and illicit activities.** As NATO gave its contribution on migration issues only in 2016, the upcoming Strategic Concept will be an opportunity for the Alliance to improve its strategies towards the security of the Mediterranean, with operations countering illicit activities such as the trafficking of human beings or illicit goods. Within this context, cooperation with other regional actors (the EU and the AU) will be essential, in order to provide cooperative operations on both the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

- **Develop negotiation strategies and engage with local populations**. Armed groups in the Sahel have gained much support from local populations, as they managed to provide services through the organization of informal governance systems. Thus, it is important for NATO to support an environment for peace negotiations between local forces and armed groups in the region. Thus, especially considering DDR projects, peaceful negotiations will facilitate the reintegration of armed militias. Within this context, traditional authorities, such as chiefs and religious leaders, would represent the perfect channels of communication where to develop a negotiation process (Molenaar, et al., 2019). At the same time, it will be important for NATO and its partners to include in the negotiation also the

female and young population, as it will further reduce the chances of radicalization within the society (NSD-S HUB, 2021g).

The new Strategic Concept will be an opportunity for NATO to emphasise the need for a renewed strategy in the South, revising at the same time the concept of Projecting Stability, with more solid rooting guidelines behind NATO's operations. And it will be in this scenario that specific NATO institutions, the Southern Hub and the NATO Defense College, will provide innovative instruments that will let the Alliance develop a proper comprehensive approach towards the Sahel.

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Appendix

Rome, 23 April 2021

Transcript of the Address from the President of the Italian Society for International Organization (SIOI) and Former Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Franco Frattini,

Graduation Ceremony of the 25th NATO Regional Cooperation Course (NRCC25)

NATO Defense College

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We talk today about one of the key points, in my view, for the further development of NATO's role in the world. It is not the first time. We talk and act, as NATO and other supranational organizations, like the European Union, looking at the South. It is not the first time that we are interested in what is happening in Northern Africa, in the Saharan Africa, in the region of Sahel. I will just mention, well known to all of you, the mission in Darfur, the activities of supporting training to Somali forces, the maritime patrols to prevent and counter piracy. You will remember better than me, the Allied Provider NATO mission, and the Atlanta EU Mission, as well the NATO Ocean Shield operation, and of course you will remember (and I do remember, being at the time Minister of Italy), that after Qaddafi's regime fall, we EU and we NATO members, have been working on "what is next?", what are the next steps on what to do, and how to do, after the fall of Qaddafi's regime. We have been talking, and we talked, about a European institution building mission. We talked about a NATO mission. And I remember myself, since we had at the time a group of contact, made by Italy, France, UK, plus United States of course, and Qatar, and United Arab Emirates, represented at the level of at least of Foreign Ministers, and in some cases Prime Ministers, like in the case of Shah Hamad from Qatar. In this period of time (it was the end of 2011, because I left the government at the end of 2011), we even organized upon request of the transitional government of Libya (the Prime Minister of the time was Mr Jibril), an exploratory mission of NATO, to understand what to do, how to help the new Libya, the "newly liberated Libya", to build a military

structure, a system of intelligence, a valuable police system in the whole territory. And, you know very well, that the first European Integrated Strategy on Sahel dates in 2011. It is not new. Since then, despite increasing involvement in the Sahel, the EU did not always (unfortunately) showed a clear, strategic vision, and effective coordination. I just want to mention the G7 Summit of Biarritz, recently (2019), when of course there were important EU members. And immediately after the Pau Summit, January 2020. It was the outcome, how was the feeling after these two important meetings? I felt, after analyzing results, documents, declarations, a feeling of frustration, with low progress on better governance and security, despite the European Common Defense Security Programs, during the years. After the Summit in Ndjamena, the High Representative of Europe, Security and Defense Mr. Borrell, emphasized: "good governance, fighting corruption, curbing impunity on abuses against civilians are at the heart of European actions in the Sahel". But the European Union is still debating: what a focus on governance means in concrete, policy terms? And how to address the key issues of trust vis a vis the states and the ruling governments in the region of Sahel. This is why I see even more reason to support NATO looking at the South, including North Africa and the Sahel of course.

The United States considers Africa as a potential, both as space of economic growth, but also as one source of threat for American interests. The EU looks at Africa potentially, rapidly as expanding new markets, working on a traditional link between the two continents. But Europe is directly affected by huge illegal migrant flows, terrorist influx, and instability, mainly in Libya. We have to take into consideration some factors, that not only justify, but in my personal view make necessary more than ever a stronger engagement of NATO towards the South.

- First, the disengagement of the U.S. from Africa in the last years. Until the final months of the Trump term, decisions of even to only withdraw U.S. troops from Somalia, it was a decision seriously affecting some equilibria in a region, I mean Somalia and the Horn, which is always a sensitive one. And of course, that decision was just the last contribution to open ways to great power competition on the Africa's theatre.

- And the second element concerns the role of the other global players. I used to say, in foreign politics it is like physics: when there is an empty space, rapidly the empty space is filled by somebody else. Russia. Russia signed since 2014 military deals with at least 19 African countries. And you know very well that Russia is

the top arms supplier to the continent. In parallel with I mentioned, the withdrawal from Somalia of U.S. troops in 2020, in parallel more or less in the same weeks Russia reached an agreement to establish a new naval base in port Sudan. All these elements cannot be forgotten. Russian forces, and Russian mercenary companies all play now in the Middle East. What can you say about the Syrian situation? There is no time to elaborate, but you know better than me what is happening. They support Egypt after another decision, that I personally did not agree with, of America's disengagement from supporting Egypt as a factor of stability instead of opening the way to other powers aspiring to play a role in that country. Russia deployed troops in Libya. Troops, mercenaries (the quite well-known Wagner brigade), and they work in Central African, until Mozambique.

What about China, the other global power? China is not only strengthening what some used to call neo-colonial approach to Africa. What is that? It is expanding their bureaucratic authoritarian system, investing huge amounts of money for infrastructure, or multiplying land practices. By guaranteeing some non-properly democratic regimes. You will remember the strong support before the UN Security Council from China to the former President al-Bashir of Sudan, under recrimination from the International Criminal Court. So, China is now buying good will and votes in international organizations like the United Nations. It is a matter of fact but is has to be taken into consideration.

More than that, threats and sources of instability are global in nature: from terrorists and criminal groups, that never recognize borders, and can easily join forces, for profit or destabilization of states, to massive migration, to energy security, where Northern Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean form a unique complex puzzle, where not always (sorry for that), the "friends of my friends, are my friends". This is a situation you can note on this, or that particular important issues at stake. So, even the most powerful country in the world is no longer enough strong to act alone. The transnational country-to-country approach, to Northern Africa, Libya, Sahel, fails to address coordination issues, and must be replaced by a regional approach. This is my introduction to say that thinking regionally is what NATO is commendably doing by looking South.

President Biden just started at the end of March, a very important joint intelligence shared exercise with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In June, AFRICOM, again U.S., is expected to coordinate a great military exercise they have called "Africa Lions", with

more or less 5,000 soldiers, if confirmed. Very good. Not enough in my personal view. Europe is strengthening an increasing number of participants to mission Takuba. Lastly, my country, Italy has decided to join the mission, thanks to Minister Guerini for that. And for the EU partners, a new triangle, the Horn, the Guinea Gulf, and Libya, with the Sahel in the middle can be seen as the projection of a new concept of broader Mediterranean region. Very good as well, but not enough as well.

President Biden, whom I know since he was the Vice President of President Obama, and whom I admire for his wisdom. I suspect he will not translate his very long-awaited message "America is back", after four years, into a U.S. front-runner role in the heart of the Arab world and European neighborhood, where we the European members of NATO are called to do much more, not less. Those that by praising and commenting the victory of President Biden have said: "ok, that is fantastic for Europe, for EU members, America will be back in its global role of global security provider". They have made a mistake. America cannot be the only security provider, and we the only security consumers. And this has just been reaffirmed, rightly by President Biden. Now it is time for NATO to act. And to act in coordination, while keeping different roles, and respective added values. How?

NATO has been making huge progress. It has been showing a significant evolution. I remember myself, I was in Lisbon in 2010 as Foreign Minister, where we adopted NATO's Strategic Concept, that you know perfectly. In that Strategic Concept (2010), in no way the concept mentioned the Southern Mediterranean shore as a key priority for NATO. Today, not only NATO has taken much more political and strategic role, confirmed among others by improving its capacity of reaching out to non-NATO strategic partners (that you represent here very well), playing a role in difficult regions of our common interest. But also, NATO undertook a political reflection, moving from the States and non-States actors, and sources of instability, to consider among other points how to revisit the NATO Strategic Concept, feeding the initiative NATO 2030. Here, very precisely the Southern Flank, largely coinciding with the broader Mediterranean region, has a key role. If you ask me, what I consider as broader Mediterranean region, I used to answer that way: "the Mediterranean has not only two shores, the south and the north. But it has three: the eastern one". Expanding the Mediterranean region to include the system of the Gulf. Because in the Gulf many of the equilibria having reflections and impact on the whole region are originating.

Let's not forget, you cannot imagine how was the deal with Libya (I will say something later). You cannot deal with Syria without taking into consideration the dynamics in the Gulf. I was very happy for the messages of reconciliation between Qatar and the other Gulf States. I was happy for the idea, which is behind the Pact of Abraham. But ideas cannot be translated into deeds. Ideas alone cannot work if they remain just ideas. And if you want to have a united and well-coordinated policy vis a vis Iran, just to make an example, in a moment where President Biden is exploring a possibility to reopening a negotiating way. You have seen the reaction from Iran. You have seen even the words of the Supreme Guide, Khamenei, who never expresses his opinion. But he did in this case. So, is it possible to deal with that without having a permanent involvement with the countries in the regions that are directly affected?

Just to open a very brief point on that, I think that one of the great mistakes made at the beginning, during, and at the end, of the so called "nuclear deal" with Iran (a mistake made by the P5 + 1) was not to have involved in full the Gulf States. I would have liked very much to see those States, heavily affected by the impact of any kind of agreement concerning Iran around the table, through consultations and exchanging, sharing of experiences and best practices. This was a mistake that should not be repeated, in a moment in which we are exploring a possibility, and also optimistic (by the way) of reopening negotiating dialogues with Iran, in a moment in which Iran announces the enrichment of Uranium about 60% (frankly speaking, it makes things more difficult). But for all those reasons, NATO in cooperation with the EU as I said, have now more than ever a role, and have an institutional duty to work together by optimizing respective resources. Why? Because the European Union has been always championing its traditional soft power.

The European soft power can go hand in hand with some strengthening, or in Mediterranean operations can also require also military force. I will just mention one mission: the mission IRINI, the maritime anti-embargo violations, which is led by an Italian Admiral. And this is working, unfortunately, under rules of engagement that are weak. Weak under the point of inspection powers, and effectiveness of sanctions. Will the Security Council do more to strengthen this security mission? You will know for sure, but exactly in the same days when the IRINI mission has been renewed for further two years, the Security Council, that is the responsible to dictate the rules of engagement,

published a report (roughly 500 pages), dated March 2021. Well, I do not want to mention more than one phrase. This is what the UN SC says:

> "The arms embargo remains totally ineffective. For those Member States directly supporting the parties to the conflict, the violations are extensive, blatant, and with continuous disregard to the sanction measures. The control of the entire supply chain complicated detection, disruption, and interdiction".[29]

This is just a phrase in the preamble of the Security Council Report of March 2021. This is one of the reasons why we have to do more, and I will say a few words about it. In parallel with the EU, we have the invariable role of NATO.

NATO's experience on the training of security forces, building security systems is very essential. Especially for Libya and the countries in the Sahel, where only in Libya more or less 20 thousand foreign troops are deployed, defending the two opposite fronts, despite the government of national unity and the ceasefire. The first phrase said by the new Prime Minister of Libya to my Prime Minister, President Draghi, was: "our number one goal is to make our country free from the more that 20 thousand foreign troops in the territory". "Fantastic", told my Prime Minister, "But how?". Is that just a wishful thinking? Can it be translated into reality? I will say a few things about it on NATO.

There is the traditional point, concerning EU Defense capacity, and NATO. My opinion is that more European Defense capacities should never be seen as an overlapping or a weakening factor for NATO. What is important is to work together. And for a president like President Biden, I think, a stronger Europe, stronger NATO European members are much better that having just some consumers of security at the expenses of the US. NATO and Europe can complement each other. The EU has not often shown united leadership on key issues having global geo-strategic relevance. It is time to work on more leadership to be coherent and stronger. I take the liberty to be very frank, having been the President of the European Commission, so a very pro-European person. But we have to be honest and sincere, when considering issues like these. Also, NATO has been facing internal problems. I want just to mention the recent frictions between Greece and Turkey. Turkey is a powerful country, and a loyal member of NATO. It is the third largest military members/component in NATO: But the Turkish stance on Human Rights and the transmit of energy network are very sensitive issues to be dealt with. And you know, after

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[29] Full documentation available at https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2047327/S_2021_229_E.pdf .

what my Prime Minister said, yesterday President Biden mentioned the Armenian history as a genocide. Will it have repercussions? I personally know President Erdogan, and I think yes. So, there will be another extremely sensitive problem within the context of our common family that is NATO. Not to mention the decision of Turkey to buy S400 missiles from Russia, and to deploy in a country which is hosting patriots in defense of security of Turkey. So, all these elements to be taken into consideration to address the needs for NATO: to be stronger, united, and pro-active. NATO, however, can (and this is my opinion, my suggestions):

- First, engage much more than in the past with non-NATO partners. This course, which ends today, is one of the good examples. So, to have steps forward, even in the field of data and intelligence sharing. I know that we are talking about sensitive problems. But in my opinion, our interest, NATO interest is to have an even stronger network, with reliable powers well entitled to play a role within the Arab role. I am perfectly aware that it is difficult to succeed in an area like Sahel or Libya, or Sahara, by putting American and even Italian foots on the ground. In the middle of the Arab world, with countries that have great history, great traditions, and great capacity to support us, the western allies. This is why I think in this concept, in view of NATO 2030, I think that data sharing, information sharing, intelligence sharing (which is one of the elements the P5 +1 should have invested more while negotiating with Iran) will remain one of the key points to be taken into consideration.

- My second suggestion is to go directly straight on the direction already agreed on a NATO level to strengthen the relationship with regional organizations. I mentioned just report, Arab League and African Union, for the topic of interest of today. I used to work with Minister Aboul Gheit, former Minister of Foreign Affairs in Egypt, who is now the Secretary General of the Arab League. I have been working closely with the African Union Commission. I think they deserve our confidence; they deserve a gesture of trust. Because we like it or not, in countries of a region like the Sahel, it is true that the population very often hates the government in office, but they don't like us as well. I remind, it is not easy that we will replace the dictator, and we (French, Italians, Hungarians, etc.) will help to get out from the abuses, violations of human rights… not so easy, and you know it perfectly.

NATO can and should complement and implement together with EU missions the political goal. And this a very political goal. And I have been appreciating it very much: the improvement of the political dimension of NATO during the years. The political goal to strike the right balance between security and non-negotiable rights of individuals. We should be considered as those supporting the poorer, the weaker, the vulnerable categories. And this is the political and strategic goal, that I wish very much for my Europe and NATO as well. This is particularly true in the Sahel. As I was saying, a policy of involvement towards an improved governance, a rule of law is badly needed, instead of simply "running the risk" of funding and supporting undemocratic governments, that the citizens often deeply hate. Why? Because this is also undermining our role, NATO role, European role, as "presumed" promoters of security and stability. This is another element, highly political.

Finally, something on Libya. My title on Libya, to summarize my opinion after many years working on Qaddafi's Libya, signing the friendship that the New Prime Minister wants to revitalize as the first action, as he said to Prime Minister Draghi, [the title] would be in my view: "ten years war in Libya, not a single day of war for Libya". We have to be honest. We have been paying attention, but this was not enough. I remember myself, in the autumn of 2011, when during the beginning of the economic crisis in Europe in 2012, the attention was completely diverted. And my former colleague at the time, Hilary Clinton, said at the time: "Dear Franco, now, America is disengaging, this is your role". Was Europe able to take the lead? No. And of course our friends in Qatar, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, took the opportunity to fill the gap. And this is the reality, absolutely normal. During the years we have been creating (and I would say consolidating) the idea that a status quo is possible. What is the status quo? I will mention to you a phrase that I will never forget that ad interim President of Libya, Abd al-Jalil, told me during the visit to Benghazi, even during the bombings of Qaddafi:

> "My friend, for me, I was born in the region of the Green mountains of Libya. Libya has been kept united only by the King Idris or by the dictator Qaddafi. Otherwise, Libya is more *Libyas*. You do not consider the tribal structure of the country". "Never", he said, "I will take order from Tripoli, or a Tuareg tribe will obey to instructions coming from Tobruk (they even don't know where Tobruk is)".

This gives the idea, that I would say is the big mistake that the international community was to underestimate the tribal structure of Libya, the key importance of inclusiveness of

any possible attempt to reconcile, and the risk of important players to feel to be excluded. I mentioned the South of Libya, exactly the part where there is a full porosity of the borders. How can EU missions be able to patrol and control the borders, between the Southern of Libya, in the middle of the Sahara Desert, and the States of the Sahel region. A mission impossible. And this is the route for the organized crime, terrorist groups, traffickers in human beings, weapons, and drugs. A free route, because the weapons are in the hand of militias, fighting against each other, and if there is not enough inclusiveness, nobody feels completely at home. This is the problem.

In addition to this, what will we see in recent years? Again, the empty space, filled by foreign actors: Turkey, and Russia. Turkey supported by Qataris, and Russia plus Egypt, Emirates, and of course the support of Saudi Arabia. Do you think that these two actors, after having deployed thousands of soldiers, having provided systems support, will be easy and ready to leave Libya, and withdraw the troops, by I would say international unity. I mean, who snaps the fingers and says: "ok, there is a new national government now, it is the moment for you to leave".

One word on the new government. I appreciate the new Prime Minister. Is he really representing the whole Libya? I doubt it. Are there Ministers representing Sirte, or Misrata, or Tripoli? I am not sure. Highly important is the gesture of the Prime Minister plus 13 Ministers rushing to Ankara. Immediately, President Erdogan called for a visit.

My final point: we will have interconnection, between security, energy security. And energy security will be on the table as one of the key topics for the future of Libya. I have no solutions or proposals. I can only say, and this is my concluding phrase: if you have a look at this document [shows a document]. This is the annual threat assessment of the National Intelligence of the United States, published on the 9th April. 27 pages, there is a small phrase on Libya at page 26, out of 27. And what it is said is the following:

> "The interim Government of National Unity will face enduring political, economic, and security challenges that have prevented previous governments from advancing reconciliation. Instability and the risk of renewed fighting in Libya's civil war will persist this year".[30]

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[30] Full documentation available at https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf .

This is the Assessment of the Intelligence American Security. With that I conclude. We would need much more time to elaborate, but the only message is: thank you NATO for changing and adjusting its policy at looking at the South.

Rome, 27 September 2021

Interview with Dr Chloe Berger,

Faculty Adviser and Researcher at NATO Defense College

Biography:

As a Researcher, her work focuses mainly on the broader MENA region and NATO's Agenda for the South (Projecting Stability, partnerships, etc.). As a Faculty Adviser, she oversees the Curriculum Planning of the NATO REGIONAL COOPERATION COURSE and the Senior Executive Regional Conference. Before joining NDC, Chloe Berger held different positions in French educational institutions, public and private, in Syria and Egypt. She worked as a consultant for risks analysis and strategic monitoring on Middle-Eastern issues (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine).

Chloe Berger is a graduate from the Political Studies Institute of Paris (Sciences-Po Paris) and she received a PhD in Political Sciences from Paris II – Assas University. She also holds a Master 2 in "International Security and Defence" from Pierre-Mendes France University (Grenoble). Her research work focuses mainly on security, political and socio-economic issues in the MENA region and their implications for NATO; security issues related to MENA non-state actors and hybrid warfare; Innovation and Defence in the MENA region.

Areas of expertise: Levantine non state actors, Arab-Israeli conflict, partisan warfare

Interview

What is in your opinion the main reason why NATO is interested in the Sahel?

I think that for a large extent, we are not interested in terrorist attacks, for the moment. I mean, if you look at AQMI or other groups, they have not attacked a NATO ally. For NATO the problem is probably migration. This is the real reason why NATO countries are considering the Sahel issue. For France, counterterrorism, this was linked to the fact that France has a long and traditional historical presence in the region, supporting armed forces in the region, and Chad is a very good example. So, that is one thing. The second layer is that those groups have attacked and taken hostages that were French citizens, so that is another good reason to react.

But when you address to the French approach, there are two different things that should not be mixed. There is probably one thing that people often forget, or disregard. And it is the fact that there are two different operations, in the case of France. First of all Barkhane, or Serval, were not operations dedicated on supporting or fighting terrorism, but to fight an insurgency that has destabilized the north of Mali. And from there it has spread. So, and this is still the case for Barkhane, this has linked (because there are some linkages

today between those armed groups for insurgency, and AQMI or other groups), but there is another operation (Operation "Sabre"), which is the real French CT [Counter Terrorism] operation in the Sahel, and it is the responsible of most of the killings of jihadists in the Sahel. People often associate that with Barkhane, but it is not the mandate of Barkhane. So, this is important, and it is something that is often disregarded, and another thing is that in this kind of conflict one thing that makes it very complicated is the fact that basically what is key for this conflict is governance issues. Grievances that are inherited from the pre-independence period, and that have been consolidated by the independence. And so, on the top of that, these militias have just found some enabling factors, or circumstances, linked to the situation in Libya. For a good reason, which is that Qaddafi was very much influent in his neighbours and had huge military arsenals. So, the problem is that the fall of Qaddafi has led to the dissemination of these arsenals all over the Sahel, beyond the borders.

Is it also related to the Tuareg population? As group, they participated to the Libyan conflict…

Not only them. That is all over the region. So, this is a really important thing to consider, as it has encouraged the militancy. What is the very obvious link for the Tuareg is the fact that they were mercenaries in the Qaddafi system. So those tribes that lost their jobs because of the fall of Qaddafi, they went back to their regional origins. I mean, it is something that is quite basic, as it is a place where there was nothing. The problem is not that they stormed northern Mali and claimed independence against the State's authority. The point is that there was no State authority there because that region has been totally abandoned since the independence. Even with schools, facilities… there was nothing. So, the problem is that those guys found themselves without anything, so here it comes the circumstance or the perfect situation where you have: armed groups that do not have someone who can pay them to fight. These people come back to their region of origin, where there are already some traditional grievances. And so, you can understand that it is very clear: they went back to their families, no more money, and that is just a very logic situation. And that is why they decided to make their grievances heard in a different manner. So, they took the fact and tried to pressure the Malian authorities, and so that is how it happened.

Now, Malian authorities were not really responding, and there was an efficient military intervention (I guess, Serval was very efficient). The problem is that, especially with MINUSMA, if in the aftermath of the Serval Operation, the Malian authorities have really played their role, all this would have stopped. The problem was: we had a military operation, and so the population was expecting something to change. But nothing changed. And so, this explains that when you are in desperate need for resources, this area is a perfect place for a criminal organization, the only thing you can do is to do business with these organizations, as it is the only way for you to get money for you and your family. So that is how it started to be a good place for traffickers, smugglers, as well as violent and extremist organizations.

Is it more a local-based phenomenon, or it gained also external support?

The idea is to which extent this was an insurgency that attracted or relied on external support from criminals or violent extremist organizations, or to which extent this is at the very beginning about counter terrorism. I think it is clear. It is just that at one point this mess created the perfect environment for these organizations to emerge. There were some favourable circumstances, and so here it just came "out of the ground" groups such as AQMI and others. But if you look at AQMI, at the end of the day is very a local product. It is basically tribes that allied with some former Algerians jihadists that have been expelled by Algerian authorities, beyond the southern borders. So, it is basically a product from GIA/GSPC that evolved over the last two decades. So, in the case of Sahel, it is important to have in mind this dimension of armed militancy. And not to address everything though CT lenses. Why? Because otherwise you cannot understand why the CT approach is not working. Then, there are pure operational reasons and scarcity of resources that explain why it does not work.

So, why is it not working also at the military level?

Well, think about, for example, at the G5 Joint Force. What is its limitation? It is actually not a joint force; it is just national forces that are responsible for different areas. But there is nothing really "joint" in that, being on a very strategic level. So, the problem is that you have few battalions, that are controlling the borders, but at the end of the day these few resources that are spread in these very huge countries (as if you look at the operational conditions, you have like one man to control over 2,000 square kilometres). Then, what is the training of these guys? You have also a lot of pressure on these national forces, who

are already weak for many reasons. Some of them have good fighting skills, but they have other weaknesses, like the Chadian forces. They are very good, but the problem is that they have a huge discipline problem. Huge problem in the command and controlled area. The chain of command in Chad is super messy. So, you have little battalions deployed in these huge countries, and there are also problems in the chain of commands, in mobility, absence of surveillance. I mean, what do you expect honestly? Ok, you can track and chase these groups. You target them and you get rid of some. But you do not have forces to be deployed and actually take control of the territory that you have just freed. The nature of the environment, and the scarcity of resources just make it impossible. Even if we assume that these countries were actually very keen in fighting these groups, and there are no imbalances between the population and armed forces. Even with their resources, assuming they can maximise what they have available, it would be just impossible. So, imagine this situation, with the problematic conditions that they have. It is just impossible, as long as you will not have forces that are able to be deployed and control these huge areas. And to do that, you need to have investments, in terms of governance, to develop cities, etc… Hence, having points where you can attract and fix populations on this territory. Otherwise, it is impossible.

But what about any Counter Terrorism perspective on this situation? Is it too limiting?

There is something regarding the CT perspective on this situation. But this makes you miss some important issues. If you think at the West, we are looking at this situation with a certain perspective. But it is not per se a CT problem, because looking at it as a counter-insurgency issues, this is only the military perspective. So, the question is why are we interested in addressing that? Only because this problem allowing migration flows to reach actually our coasts. Otherwise, we will not care, to be honest. Because these rivalries have problems in the African continent for ages. I mean, worst case scenario, looking at RDC and Central Africa, we will just place a UN Peacekeeping mission that will not do anything (sorry for being super cynical, but I think that is reality). And so, what is pressuring for us is this migration issue. So, this is totally for me the primary reason. But the problem is that if you look at this priority, it has nothing to do with what the population expects. What are their local aspirations? They have nothing to do with that, and this explains why you have already a problem of intervention (why do you intervene in this theatre?). These forces need to be supported, but the problem is that every

time you have foreign forces supporting them, and they are considered in best case as foreign forces placed for interference. In the case of France, it is seen as colonial occupation. So, this explains why you cannot fight an insurgency and obtain any fain if you do not have the support of the population. Maybe the local population is not supporting insurgents or terrorists, but they are not supporting you at the same time. So, you have to fight on too many sides. And so this is probably is one of the reasons why this Takuba Force is not super successful from the moment it was set up. Because you do have countries that are super reluctant to go, and take a real part of the fight, because they do not want to have backfire effects on their own forces. In the case of Germany, it is super clear. So, for Belgium, they wanted to have a battalion integrated into Barkhane, but at the last minute they decided to hold on, as France was becoming to impopular, so this could backfire to us as well.

So, this is basically what I think about this situation. This disconnection between local aspirations and what is available to support local forces, make the problem very difficult to deal with. Also, consider that at the moment with have a COVID situation, coup d'etats… also this is the problem: these guys want training and capacity building, in the best case. But the problem is that you want to supply them, but this is also difficult. I mean, with whom are we speaking. Ok, France did it for a long time, but we need someone stable, because they need to start to build on something. And so, it is not about democracy, that having someone that is reasonably acceptable (politically speaking). The real question is: with who am I speaking? And this was also the problem for Libya. And it is also difficult to build a strategy.

Interview with Dr Anass Gouyez Ben Allal

Fellow Researcher from Morocco at NATO Defense College

Biography:

Dr. Anass Gouyez Ben Allal is the 2021 MD Fellow at the NATO Defense College. He is a temporary professor at the Faculty of Law of Tangier / Abdelmalek Essadi University, as well as a visiting professor and member of the UNESCO Chair for the Culture of Peace and Human Rights at the Autonomous University of Madrid. He is Co-Executive Director of the International Peace and Security Review, and Senior Researcher at the Afak Center for International Studies at Abdelmalek EssaadiUniversity. Anass Gouyez Ben Allal holds a Doctorate in Law and Political Science from the Autonomous University of Madrid.

Areas of expertise: International Relations, Geopolitics, Geostrategy, International Law, Military Strategies, Civil-Military Relations, and Foreign Policies.

Interview

Considering your experience as a researcher, I would like to ask you about your opinion on the situation in the Sahel region, as well as how is your country involved in the region?

Well, the position of Morocco aims at helping those countries, specifically Mali. The Moroccan approach in this region can be described with three key elements: security, development, and building. Mali for example is a very close partner to Morocco. Niger, and Chad too, but Mali is closer, as it is a Muslim country. Thus, we ha stronger links with this country.

Regarding the criminal and terrorist groups in the region, those groups are coming from many regions, not only from Mali (indeed, also Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso). In this region, those countries are very poor, so States can be defined as failed States. That is why terrorist groups chose this platform to proliferate. They can for example receive arms and have contacts with each other.

The EU and Morocco see this region as a source of instability, in Africa and in the Mediterranean Sea in general. Why? Because the instability of the region increases migration, the traffic of illicit arms and narcotics, and the instability overall. Morocco is not concerned about the stability, as we do not suffer from consequences of this

instability. But we do have to deal with it in the borders. And we have to manage this situation. Algeria did the same, as it needs to stabilize the region, but they do not have suffered a lot from the terrorist threat [from the Sahel]. But they tried to influence those countries. Algeria knows that those countries are more affiliated with Morocco rather than Algeria. Why? Because we have historical links, related also to Islam.

As you said, Morocco promotes development in the region. And regarding this issue, we can consider also what the European Union is trying to propose, with its missions (EUCAP and EUTM for example), which consider development as one of the main objectives (either related to governance reform, or the provision of resources). But what about Morocco's relationship with Sahelian countries?

Morocco is interested in the region, as we act as a mediator with these countries, the EU and Africa. And in fact, we have a strong relationship with France and the EU in general. We know the region and the area, and we have links with Sahelian countries. For example, when we host students in our universities from Mali or Chad (I had many students coming from there for example), and they all look at Morocco as an example, because Morocco is a stable and developed country, more than other countries in Africa.

Morocco is part of the Mediterranean Dialogue Partnership with NATO. So, as it will be essential for NATO to develop other means rather the mere military approach to engage in the Sahel, and a stronger partnership with Morocco would be essential for the Alliance. Do you think that an improved cooperation between NATO and its partners may provide a positive impact?

I think that NATO cannot do anything without a prior French approval, as France knows the region better than other NATO or EU countries.

Indeed, but if we consider the French decision to reduce the number of troops within the framework of the Barkhane Operation…

Yes, it is similar to what the United States experienced in Afghanistan. I think that terrorism is very hard and expensive to fight. And those countries realized that fighting terrorism directly does not give big results. So, they are trying to find other solutions, and that is why they are limited. Because if you read about terrorism, you can never control terrorism. You can control the consequences for example, and that is what NATO is doing in the Mediterranean Sea, with operations such as the Active Endeavour operation in

2007. It is aimed at strengthening borders, and financing countries to limit immigration and terrorism. But it does not attack terrorism at its origins. So, we cannot go in the Sahel to fight terrorists, because maybe the entire population can be considered as such. Why? Because they are fighting for their position. For example, there are many groups, and every group would like to govern. So, it is like a civil war, not terrorism. And that is how Boko Haram or other terrorist groups are seen.

Indeed, considering relationships between local groups. If we take northern Mali, as an example, this region is characterized by the presence of Tuareg communities, which had experience in fighting in Libya a few years ago. And, when they came back, they managed to have enough power to claim independence. Not only the Tuareg, but the presence of different communities makes it even more important to consider the ethnic diversity within the entire region, otherwise it will be even more difficult to make distinctions between terrorists and violent groups, and who is not affiliated with them. And I believe NATO should give more importance on this before planning a more practical involvement in the Sahel...

Yes, that is right. Consider the situation in Afghanistan, for example. I read that the majority of Afghani people was against the interference of the U.S. in countering the Talibans, even if they hated them. And that is why the United States decided to retire, because they could not fight the mentality of people. In the Arab world it is the same, think about Iraq and Syria. I know people from Syria, and even with the massacre that happened there, they were against the interference of the United States. And it is the same also in Libya. Libyans refused NATO interference, until now. So, it is like a risk that countries need to take, if they want to intervene. And that is why foreign policy on terrorism is established in a vague way. Like China, it is more about not interfering and being ready to collaborate. That is the solution. And that is why Morocco has really good relationships with a lot of countries in Africa. Especially in those unstable countries in the Sahel, we will never intervene, even if we know that it can be in our interest to do so.

Especially economically speaking, Morocco is the second investor in Africa, after South Africa. So, we are interested in having the whole continent interested in our region. But we do not prefer to intervene, even if France (for example) prefers to have a Moroccan support in Mali. But it will be more like an adventure, without any results. So, why do we have to intervene if it can be against our interests? I would like to suggest two articles

that I have written, considering this topic. The first one is related to the Moroccan strategy towards terrorism. In Morocco we have just one or two specialists on terrorism, but our strategy is not written. It is more based on the actions and behaviours that we show. And I think I am the first one in Morocco to have collected all these actions against terrorism in one paper.[31] There are many reasons on why we do not have much information on a written form. First, because it is secret. Secondly, we simply prefer to have more freedom and flexibility to act. Third, and this is more important, we do not have a full cooperation within our institutions. Like in the U.S., there is competition between government institutions, and every institution is independent, even if they are all under the King's power. But it is difficult to combine a common action. In this research, I compare Moroccan strategies the Spanish, French, and Canadian ones, and it is interesting as Morocco is an important consultant for the EU, as we know the region and we have links with other African countries and groups. The other work that I have written is a short paragraph on terrorism, in my article on challenges in the Mediterranean Sea (for NATO too, because this paper was sent also to Brussels). So, in this chapter, you can see my point of view on the meaning of terrorism, and which challenges are characterizing the Mediterranean Sea, and are presented to the EU and NATO.

Apart from secret information, we need to build a model to learn about terrorism. But it is very difficult to define what is terrorism, and that is why I do not write that much about it. There is no common definition on the concept, it is very subjective. We cannot delimit it, and it is always under development. Thus, that is why there is no common strategy against it. But, the most important thing is to learn the objectives of these groups; who is financing them; how do they populate and adapt to the environment.

For example, I learned that in Morocco we are so proud that we had only once a terrorist attack in history. This is because our intelligence is very strong, and our borders are solid. I wrote in my article that unfortunately this is not the main reason behind this. It is because Morocco is not in the aim of terrorist groups. They do not care about Morocco, but they have other objectives, such as to fight against the U.S., France, the

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[31] Dr Gouyez Ben Allal collected several declarations, statements, and interviews on the Moroccan strategy against terrorism. For more information, see https://observatorioterrorismo.com/terrorismo-internacional/analisis-de-la-estrategia-antiterrorista-marroqui-estudio-comparativo-con-las-estrategias-de-espana-francia-y-canada/ .

West. So, they will never attack Morocco or Algeria, because they are not within their objectives. Maybe we [Morocco, Algeria, and the Sahel] can be platforms of transit.

At the same time, Morocco is the seventh country in the world that exports terrorists all over the world. And that is the real problem for Morocco, thus its reputation of being a country where terrorists come from. For example, in my city, Tangier, at the beginning of the war in Syria, I knew people who went to Syria fight with terrorist groups. On the other hand, it is an advantage. Why? Because we can give information, as we know these people. And it is possible for us to share this information with other countries and prevent attacks. That is why Morocco is a very close country for Europe, as we have an international network. Another example are the Mosques, especially those financed by the State. In these mosques, the government appoints an *imam*, and he can provide information on people who come to pray. Terrorists go to pray and try to convince people to join their cause. So, we have a lot of information about these groups, and we provide it to our allies in Europe.

So, Morocco is interested in keeping the Sahel stable. We cannot intervene, because it is not in our policy (it does not affect us directly). But at the same time we are there, with a lot of information for our allies.

Indeed, the strategic role of Morocco would be essential to develop a solid Atlantic approach towards the Sahel region. But what about the other actors involved? Being here at the NATO Defense College in order to research on the Chinese presence in the African continent, how do you think China can be perceived in the Sahel so far? Considering its projects (for example the Belt Road Initiative), and the fact that China does not get involved directly in the region, but with other methods. And this makes China more appealing than other countries…

China has a lot of interests in Africa. It is building many things in the continent, and African perceives it as a messiah. China is very intelligent, because they understand the needs of a country. So, they do deep sociological studies on countries, and they adapt their strategy on the needs of the local population of that specific country, avoiding all types of disagreements. They do not help specific groups or political parties. They relate directly with the national government, just in building and supporting development. This is the main pillar of the Chinese Foreign Policy all over the world. But in the African continent, China is very careful. It knows that if it interferes with the countries' national

affairs, it will lose its market in the future. Because if the government changes, the successor may decide to counter China by dealing with the U.S.

And this can be compared also to the French presence in the Sahel…

Yes. They still hate France. Because they are perceived in general as an authoritarian system. So, France is not perceived well by the local mentality. Especially comparing African countries that were under the British rule, like Rwanda: they are more developed than them, and this is one of the reasons behind they still consider France as an authoritarian ruler. And that is why they accepted other alternatives posed by China, or Turkey too. In fact, they are both increasing their presence in Africa. And this makes it more difficult for France because the latter sees how its role is decreasing in the region.

So, Africans are tired of the French mentality and its colonial past. Because the French policy is seen as very malign. They favoured specific groups rather than others during civil wars, in any country. And that is a political interference. Why do they do that? Because they need stability in the region, in order to invest in these countries. They do not care about development in these countries. And that is why the reputation of France all over the world (not only in Africa) is decreasing. China, on the other hand, is smarter: for example, if there is a dispute between two different groups, it remains an observatory actor, without doing anything. When the conflict ends, they start to support on development projects. All this based on the needs of the people.

Does this approach make African countries more vulnerable and dependent on China? Because, the more China invests, at the same time it is logic to think that the dependency between China and African countries becomes even more solid…

I can agree on that. But this position is the Western position, not the African one. European countries and the United States tell that the Chinese approach creates more dependence. But I realized, and I think, that China is smarter that that. It does not create links to control these countries (it will never happen). Because they know that if they do that, they will lose many regions in the world. So, they will just give what that specific country can return back. For example, they know these countries cannot build airports, if the government does not have resources available. That is why the Chinese policy is different from a country to another. For example, in Morocco China proposed to provide resources for our needs. And it does not interfere with other affairs (for example, questioning other dealings with other countries), as they do not care. And they do not care

about national politics, the form of government, etc. And this is different from the Western approach, as when European countries arrive in Africa, they impose their position to the national government, by demanding for the respect of women, democratic principles, etc., in exchange for resources. China does not do this, because it knows that it will lose opportunities.

Egypt represents a clear example. I was surprised to see, when Al-Sisi came into power, all Western countries broke its relationships with the Egyptian army, because it was authoritarian. But over the time, they realized that they had to re-establish relationships, because the majority of people there supported the military. People in Egypt loved the military, historically speaking (not at the moment). In the case of Egypt, China started to support the Egyptian government only after they understood who governing as President. When Al-Sisi they re-established the relationships between the two countries, with more than 20 agreements. So why does the Egyptian military prefer China? Because Europeans will always provoke problems, with their principles as main basis to the establishment of agreements. At the same time, the population will never forgive how democratic countries cooperated with authoritarian regimes.

So, every country has its challenges. And China is useful all over the world, especially in the South, as it provides support without interfering. And Europeans and the United States know that. And this is why there is main problem between the U.S., Europe, and China. The United States counter China along with the EU. But Europeans have a different interest and expectation. They need stability in Africa, in order to make investments, and prevent challenges such as migration in the Mediterranean Sea. So, we have another clash of interests between Europe and the United States. Not only about China, but regarding the entire geopolitical scenario.

Rome, 28 September 2021

Interview with Dr Thierry Tardy

Head of the Research Division at NATO Defense College

<u>Biography</u>

Thierry Tardy is Director of the Research Division at the NATO Defense College (Rome). Previously he held senior research and management positions at the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) in Paris, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), and the Foundation for Strategic Research in Paris.

His fields of expertise include NATO's policy and adaptation, the European Union Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), NATO-EU relations, the politics of crisis management, UN peace operations, and French security and defense policy.

He has published six books and more than 100 articles or book chapters. His recent publications include: "French Military Operations in Africa: Reluctant Multilateralism", Journal of Strategic Studies, Special Issue, Vol.43, No.4, 2020 (with S. Recchia); "NATO's Approach to Peace Operations and Peacebuilding", in O. Richmond and G. Visoka (eds), The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021; "COVID19: NATO in the Age of Pandemics", NDC Research Paper, No.9, NATO Defense College, May 2020; "NATO at 70: No Time to Retire", NDC Research Paper, No.8, NATO Defense College, Jan. 2020; "The EU and NATO: The Essential Partners" (ed. with G. Lindström), NDC Research Paper, No.5, NATO Defense College, Sept. 2019; "Does European Defence Really Matter? Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Common Security and Defence Policy", European Security, Vol.27, No.2, 2018, pp.119-137; "Permanent Structured Cooperation: What's in a Name?", Chaillot Paper, No.142, EUISS, Nov. 2017 (with A. Missiroli and D. Fiott); The Oxford Handbook of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (Oxford University Press, 2015, 908 p., coedited with J. Koops, N. McQueen, P. Williams).

He will release in early 2021 a book (co-edited with S. Recchia) titled French Interventions in Africa: Reluctant Multilateralism (Routledge), published in 2020 as a Special Issue of the Journal of Strategic Studies; as well as "The risks of NATO's maladaptation", European Security.

Thierry Tardy holds a PhD in Political Science. He has taught at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (HEID, Geneva), the War College in Paris, the Sorbonne, the Paris School of International Affairs (Sciences Po) and the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations (INALCO, Paris). He is also Visiting Professor at the College of Europe in Bruges.

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Areas of expertise: NATO policy, crisis management and projecting stability, NATO-EU, European security

Interview

I think there are several levels of analysis. One is how much NATO priorities the South, against the East. And what it would be is how much Allies are pushing in support of this.

Some of the allies might say NATO should concentrate more on Collective Defense, maybe against Russia, so the South will not be a priority. While others would argue that the South is something we should care about, and NATO has a role to play. The parallels in this debate is that one ally that is much involved in the South, in the Sahel (France), is also a country that is reluctant in seeing NATO involved there. So, the "East vs. South" divide is not a clear cut. Because some countries, France again for example, would be happy to see other actors in the South, but it would not favour an improved role for NATO, for different reasons, such as the French preferences over the EU rather than NATO, and many others. So, this is one level of analysis.

The second level is slightly different, and it is the debate on "narrow vs broad", whether NATO should be a Defence organization caring about only the Euro-Atlantic area and its issues, or if it has to broaden its agenda, including the fight against terrorism, migration, or training as a policy tool. And that brings us again to the Sahel, depending on how you respond to that situation.

Well, it is slightly different from the first level of analysis, and maybe the third level is how you ended, so how NATO should develop a training dimension of cooperation between institutions. Which is indeed something that NATO is willing to do, and there is one famous speech from the Secretary General when talking about Projecting Stability, when he said NATO needs to be seen also as a training institution. And that debate is interesting partly because it draws a kind of line between what is strategic and what is not. So, if what NATO is doing is based on training and capacity building, they probably can provide value to other security actors. But it is not going to be strategic, rather it is going to be a different level. So, if the idea for NATO is about strategic impact, we have to beyond training and capacity building.

Finally, maybe the last level of analysis is the question on how much NATO is wanted in the Sahel. And of course, considering the Libyan case, even if the latter is not in the Sahel, it is one debate to look at what NATO can do in the South, but it is also a debate on how much they want us there. And the Libyan operation, and the perception on the U.S. dominating the Alliance is something that in Sahel is considered. It is not sure if NATO is wanted in the region. There is a kind of presumption on us being "so good and beautiful", while the local perception is totally different, and one characteristic of the Project Stability Agenda, is the concept based on partnerships. We are not imposing

ourselves, because we tried it and it did not work, so we want them to ask us, based on their needs. But we also have an interest-based approach, and that is a kind of *leitmotiv* as well. So, how to reconcile the pull and push factors, which is not very clear. But I believe if you combine these four elements, you realize how discussing on the role of NATO in the Sahel is really complicated to conceptualize, both politically and operationally.

Considering the first part of my research, I tried to understand why the Sahel is important, considering also who is already involved in the region. Among these actors, I tried to understand what the role of Russia and China is, being NATO's counterparts. So, if we think about what you said on which focus should NATO concentrate, could these two countries' presence in Africa might represent another element that would push NATO to further consider the South in its debates?

Well, in theory it might be an argument to further consider the Sahel. But in practice I do not think so. When I mean by this is that I do not think that any policy maker would take the argument that another reason why NATO should act in the Sahel is because Russia and China are already there. I think it would be a very difficult argument. In theory you might think in strategic terms that we need to be aware of where they position themselves, and the Balkans are a clear example, as well as the MENA region and the Sahel. So, in a strategic point of view on where NATO should counter them, the Sahel would represent an important theatre for that. So, in theory why not? But in practice, I believe NATO is very far from this. Simply because I believe the debates have not reached that level, and I do not think that any country would push for that. I have never heard anything around those lines. So the rationale for the time being on why NATO should go in the Sahel is elsewhere: it is more about stabilization, counterterrorism, migration-related. But I do not think it would be because the Russian and Chinese presence in the region.

Again, there might be a difference between what should happen, and what is going to happen. And I think it is going to be based on other motivations. I think it is seen more as a constrain rather than a reason on why we should go there. So, if you need to list all the constrains, I was mentioning the question on if NATO is really wanted in the region; the fact that Russian and Chinese are there. These are all constrains.

Well, considering also what President Macron announced on reducing the troops within the Barkhane Operation, opting for a more international approach (the Takuba Task Force for example, even though some European countries did not provide any support yet). So, that is why I was thinking about NATO, because we have expertise in Crisis Management Operations all over the world, and we have strong partnerships that can be even stronger (such as with Morocco, or Mauritania). However, if we consider other geopolitical impacts between NATO countries (see the AUKUS issue), I was trying to understand also how NATO should act in the region, considering all the scenarios that are happening outside the Sahel…

Well, I think we need to make again a clear distinction between theory and practice. In theory, you can make the case of NATO's role and a kind of substitution approach with France is pulling out. That is very theoretical, because essentially NATO is what its members states want to do. And the reason that wxplains why so few countries are in the Takuba Task Force, would be the same reason that would state why allies do not want NATO to be in the Ssahel region. Those are the same countries: the U.S. is already there with France; the latter is there but it is partially pulling out; and suggesting that NATO could somehow replace France means that you will have NATO countries willing to feel the gap. But the UK was never being willing to support Barkhane, except for transportation matters; Germany is not willing; Denmark is entering in Takuba in 2022; Sweden is there but it is not a NATO country; Czech Republic and Estonia are there but in small numbers… It is not as if you have a reserve of countries from NATO that would be interested or keen to go in the Sahel. So, I am not sure NATO would be an institution that would push for it. And certainly, all the allies will not totally agree on this idea. So, if you want to make a theoretical case on NATO's role, as stability provider, is of course possible. But I do not see it in practical terms.

Indeed, considering the difference of interests between countries is actually one of the limiting factors for the Alliance…

Exactly. But frankly I do not see it coming. Just for the sake of the argument, as France is changing, let's consider a way to attract European partners through NATO. First I believe this is very unlikely, but indeed that was the case. It is very difficult to find countries willing to do that, especially on the risks on fighting armed groups in the Sahel.

And that leads us to the issue of capacity building, training, and governance issues, so the *softer side* of Projecting Stability. And if NATO does that, you need have questions on the local consent, the added value for the Alliance, and how much would be at the expense of the Collective Defence mandate. So, overall I think it is very difficult in the future seeing NATO in the Sahel.

In fact, the local consensus is very important, especially because populations in the Sahel are really divided, form many reasons. Some of them may regard the ethnic rivalry between different communities, the lack of political representation, the general feeling of perceived marginalisation… And one thing that may aggravate the situation would be supporting corrupted governments. An since armed groups provide alternatives, t

I would disagree with the argument that because the situation is deteriorating, then NATO has to do something. Simply because I would see mismatch between the problem and the solution, and I do not think NATO is the right actor to address. I could look at what the EU could do, policy speaking, or individual member States as well. But NATO as a political military organization that is mandated to defend its member states, I would not put NATO on the list of obvious actors that need to be involved. And that is only from an analytical point of view, just looking at the mandate of the institution on what it can do. NATO's mandate is different and it is functionally different that what is required

So, would it be better for NATO to support what the EU and the UN are doing at the moment?

Yes. I could see in the margins of its mandate some capacity building programmes, why not? You know, when you have training needs for special forces, IT, etc… you can think about NATO (why not?). But I do not think it would be strategic, and personally I do not think it would be a good idea for NATO to do another Barkhane, for example. I would see the EU doing this, but a NATO-Barkhane with the particular signal that it would send, and the risks on diminishing NATO's mandate elsewhere? I do not think it would be the case.

So, when you consider support, another thing that we did not discuss, and it was in the media a few weeks ago, is: what if NATO offers France some logistical air-to-air refuelling support for example? Maybe it can be something that NATO can do. And I think this would be quite innovative (why not?). So, the kind of support from NATO to a

coalition of states, that happened to be allies, and are involved in counterterrorism activities in the Sahel, maybe it would an opportunity. For the U.S. it would mean a way to share the burden with other countries, for example. Or maybe in the future (even if it is difficult) France and the UK will do something together, or Germany willing to be part of the kind of NATO logistical support missions… This is not absurd, and it would be another way on how to share costs. And maybe it would be a way for France to accept the Alliance's role in the region. So, this is support, but we are not very far from capacity building, as we will just change the target of these capacity building programmes, thus not states in the region, but internal support. I think that is considerable.

But what about the partnerships? Do you think a stronger cooperation with them (especially Morocco or Mauritania) would be an ideal support to NATO?

I mean, why not? But I think you chose the wrong countries. Mauritania has zero capacities, so it would be more a political support, as Mauritania is the only Sahelian state that is partner with NATO. So, for Mauritania, the partnership can be implemented. But this country has zero capacity, and the G5 Sahel armed forces have produced very little outcomes since their establishment. For Morocco, I am not sure it will be the best regional actor. And even if Morocco is an important country in North Africa, that connects European and African countries [referring to the interview with Dr Gouyez Ben Allal, Annex C], would we need that kind of bridge? I am not sure. If NATO wants to be involved in the region, it would be helpful to have support from North African countries. I would consider Algeria, that is more powerful. But probably we will engage without any diplomatic help from neighbouring countries.

The situation is a bit bizarre, because if you look at Mali for example, on the one hand they are strong on their own sovereignty, and the fact they want to choose who to partner with, and being very tough on France (not only the current government, but also before). And at the same time, when Macron announced ton pull out forces, the speech by the Malian president at the UN General Assembly, and the diplomatic fallout that has followed, it shows they are feeling abandoned if France decides to leave the region. So I think they are playing a little bit with the French presence in the region. I am saying this because there is on the one hand the importance of local consensus, and the respect of their sovereignty. But on the other, they are in need of external help. So, sovereignty is a

nice concept, but when you are in bad shape and in need of an external help, it is not very pragmatic as a principle. And it is possible that those countries have been facing offers of external support. And I think they did not refuse them immediately. But personally I have always doubts on presenting what the Russians and the Chinese are doing as more effective of what we are doing. Well, let's see how they perform, but I do not see no reason why they should be more efficient, as they will confront the exact same issues. I think this is an illusion.

Acknowledgements

After concluding this thesis, which I hope it will be interesting for you to read, I would like to thank the following people, without whom I would not be here writing these final remarks at the conclusion of an important path of my life.

First, my family. To my parents, Luisa and Giancarlo, who always supported me in my decisions (even if we had many disagreements over the time), and who I hope to make them proud, as I have approached to another path in my personal career. And to my older brother Lorenzo, who is until today an important example to follow, who has supported me during the most difficult times during my academic career, and for being always there for me, even though we are so many miles apart from each other.

Of course, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Federico Donelli, for his enthusiasm for the project that I had in mind, for his support and encouragement, and last but not least for his patience while dealing with my research. Thank you very much also to Professor Basosi, who will chair the discussing session as supervisor. Both Prof Donelli and Prof Basosi were really inspiring during their lectures, and helped me develop critical thinking skills while analysing such important and complex research topics.

Thirdly, I would like to thank the people from the NATO Defense College, that since my first experience as Assistant, they have always supported me in my projects and future plans. First, Colonel Angelo Iachetti, for all the support during my research, and for being one of the most important mentor figures at the College, to which I could always rely on. With him, I would like to thank three other important people, that have always supported and believed in me while I was working for them in the Academic Operations Division: Colonel Lance Varney, Brigadier General Ferenc Molnar, and Brigadier General Riccardo Brizi.I would like to thank also the other people of the NATO Defense College:

From the Academic Operations Division:

- LTC Aldo Rutigliano
- Aurora Pompei
- Elena Iannuzzi
- Frances Ferraiuolo
- COL Alessandro Concari
- Maria Grazia Romano
- COL William Foster
- First Secretary Stylianos Gavriil
- CAPT Naser Maarafi
- And Maria Consolata Spano

From the Research Division:

- Dr Thierry Tardy
- Dr Chloe Berger
- Dr Cynthia Salloum
- Dr Andrea Gilli
- Dr Marc Ozawa
- Dr Anass Gouyez Ben Allal
- Prof Tracey German
- Prof Amelie Theussen
- Dr Julia Rushchenko
- Mary di Martino
- Isabella Silvestri
- And Lucrezia Scaglioli

Last but not least, I would like to thank General Teo Luzi and General Giuseppe Morabito, for all their support during my stay in Rome, especially from the first days in this city; and my friends (Elisa, Davide, Daniel, Chiara, Marco, Juan Pablo, Arianna, Davide, Anna, Pietro, Benedetta, Chiara, Gloria, Andrei, Alice, Teresa, Angela, Edoardo, Martina, Alfredo and Patrizia), for all their support and friendship.