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The “G5 Sahel” Joint Force: A Marriage of Security and Development?

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Following the 2011-2013 war in Mali and faced with persistent insecurity in the Sahel region, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger established the G5 Sahel (G5S) framework in February 2014. It was designed to coordinate regional development policies and security matters in West Africa. Two assessments guided this initiative. The first was that each of the Sahel countries would be incapable of battling the threat of Islamist organizations operating in the region on its own, and the second was that defeating this threat requires strengthening the nexus between economic development and security.

Five years after the signing of the Sahel Convention¹ that created the G5 force, the security situation in the region appears to be deteriorating. An especially deadly attack occurred on December 12 against the army of Niger, illustrating the constantly-growing threat of violent extremism. In this incident, 71 soldiers were killed, and while no group has claimed responsibility, Niger authorities believe it was launched as a revenge over a joint Niger-Mali operation in the week before against Islamist groups operating in the Niger-Mali-Burkina Faso frontier region. In light of this, Sahel countries and international stakeholders wonder whether this initiative should be expanded or even altered in order for it to deliver the originally intended results.

From its outset, this framework designated only a handful of officials to be based at the permanent secretariat in Nouakchott, Mauritania. The convention stipulated that coordination would be organised on different levels. On the political level, heads of states meet once a year. The technical aspects of security are developed by national committees based in each of the five countries. The Chiefs of Staff of each country coordinate the military operations of the joint force.

The foundation of the G5S military project was accompanied by political elements, and by the political leadership's understanding that simply ramping up military efforts could only partially halt the proliferation of terror groups in the region. Deteriorating humanitarian conditions are mainly responsible for enabling the spread of extremist ideologies. Hence, alongside the G5S's prime objective of creating a multinational joint force to guarantee security in the Sahel region, the five members also sought regional development, which requires in turn externally financed development aid. Development aid thus became particularly relevant.

The G5S force is currently composed of almost 5,000 soldiers from the armies of the five countries. The force aims to maintain seven battalions – both Mali and Niger have contributed two each, and Chad, Burkina Faso and Mauritania each sent one battalion. Each battalion consists of 550 soldiers in addition to 100 police or gendarmes. The latter should assist in establishing local police and gendarmere forces and formation programs. Thus, associating police and gendarmery with this framework demonstrates the political willingness of going beyond battling Jihadi groups, towards building state capacities, highlighting one of the crossroads where security and development meet. The military troops do not constitute a multi-national African army corps. It is not a G5 army. Each army preserves its independence. Rather, the armies cooperate in joint (bilateral or trilateral) operations or pursue operations on the other side of a border shared by the two or three countries involved in the operation. The military structure benefits from training centers in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, which France operates and finances for the most part. They are primarily meant to be mechanisms of cross-border military cooperation and intelligence sharing.

According to a February 2018 report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies,² eight different Islamist groups have been linked to over 1,100 casualties since 2014,

including nearly 400 casualties in 2017. This increasing activity seems all the more alarming against the backdrop of the deteriorating humanitarian situation across the Sahel region. Such an environment fosters terrorist and criminal infrastructures. According to the UN,³ at the end of September 2019, more than one million people were displaced across the five G5 Sahel countries, representing more than double the number of those displaced in 2018. Nearly half a million people have been displaced this year in Burkina Faso alone, which represents about five percent of the total population. The World Food Program⁴ warned on November 2019 that 2.4 million people in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are in urgent need of food assistance, stating that this figure that could rise due to ongoing displacement. Malnutrition threatens the lives of five million children. Education has been significantly hit, as well, with more than 4,000 schools closed or not functional and 900,000 pupils affected by the crisis.

On the backdrop of increased insecurity, and recognizing the urgency of the humanitarian situation, France, Germany and the European Union launched the Sahel Alliance on July 2017.⁵ The World Bank, the African Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme and other European countries also joined. The initiative targets six priority fields, including among others, youth employment, rural development, governance, decentralization and internal security. In January 2019, the Alliance declared that it aims to launch 700 projects by the year 2022, which would cost 11 billion euros. The Alliance embraces a holistic approach for developing rural, meridional, and more densely habitated areas, while not necessarily targeting zones that have been weakened by the presence of terror groups.⁶ Though it is still only in its early stages, this development-aid program is already showing signs of success. Stakeholders agree that the planned projects should be implemented at a faster rate, and at the same time they would like to employ locals to manage them.

In parallel with the Sahel Alliance, the G5 Sahel group identified at their 2018 summit meeting four axes of development, particularly within fragile and cross-border communities including: defense and security, governance, resilience and human development, and infrastructure. Together with (wealthy) G7 members, they agreed on a plan – the Priority Investment Program (PIP)⁷ for the development of the Sahel region, which will be implemented in two phases. The program was estimated to cost 2.4 billion euros for the first 2019-2021 phase, comprised of some forty regional

development projects. The Sahel Alliance pledged to finance 1.3 billion euros for specific projects that fit its vision. In total, the PIP program includes 105 development projects estimated to cost six billion euros in the domains of roads, railways, energy, infrastructure, strengthening governance and security, and human development in fragile areas vulnerable to terrorist threats.

The G5 initiative as a whole was applauded by international actors, eager to see the Sahel countries engaging in the battles against extremism and poverty. France was also keen to transfer security responsibilities to the Sahel countries. Present in Mali since 2013, first with Operation Serval and later with Operation Barkhane, France has invested significant resources and funds in the battle against insurgents. But over the past year the morale of the 4,500 troops involved in Barkhane has shown signs of weakening in the face of military setbacks, and the financial burden continues to grow. In addition, while France and other European countries may not be concerned at present about the influx of jihadi fighters, since no attacks in Europe are known to have been carried out by people from the Sahel, they have reason to worry about the rapid rise in illegal emigration from this part of Africa in recent years.

Even with a sense of urgency regarding the humanitarian and security in the Sahel, setting up the goals, structure, and financing of the joint military force took considerable time, especially over issues of financing and external contributions for the joint military force. While the Sahel Alliance has made apparent progress with its development projects, the military results so far have been meager. Moreover, extreme Islamist movements and narcotrafficking groups have increased their activities within rural societies, not only in Mali, but also in Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad.

On the one hand, rapid action groups for surveillance and intervention have been established, along with ongoing operationalization of N'Djamena regional police academy and the G5 Sahel defense college in Nouakchott. Also, the Sahelian college of security of Bamako was launched. On the other hand, there have been failures in military effectiveness. The force has executed only a handful of operations, while regional insecurity keeps increasing rapidly. Funding has been slow to pour in, and as a result the troops are badly equipped and badly trained. Earlier this year (August 19), Burkina Faso's military sustained its greatest losses ever in a single incident when 24

soldiers were killed in the region of Koutougou, near the Malian border. The Islamic State claimed that the attack was carried out by its affiliate the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), a splinter group of Boko Haram.

The case of Burkina Faso illustrates the rapidly deteriorating security situation. Faced with multiple terror attacks in 2018, in October the country decided to ask Paris for help. They requested that the Barkhane force would extend its operations to Burkina. This included aerial attacks against Islamic militant groups, launched from the French base in Niamey, Niger. The fact that Ouagadougou asked for French assistance after nearly a year of trying to handle the problem on its own, testifies to the depth of the security threat Burkina Faso faced. The French government is concerned that this trend of increased terror attacks in Burkina could trickle down and spread into neighboring Ghana⁸ or Ivory Coast⁹, two countries considered so far stable and secure.

In Mali, Islamist groups continue to attack the Malian army, notwithstanding the presence in the north of Mali of the French Barkhane force or the presence of the UN peacekeeping force, MINUSMA. Six years after the war that sparked the creation of the G5S, Mali is still a failing state, where corruption and nepotism leave little room for practices of good governance or for a significant process of building competent state institutions. Visiting Bamako in October this year, UN Security Council representative José Singer Weisinger “underlined the need for signatory parties to speed up the implementation of the [peace] Agreement. The Chair reiterated that spoilers from all parties to the Agreement may be subjected to sanctions.”¹⁰

With these concerns in mind, and in the framework of the Biarritz G7 summit on August 25, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasized the importance of socio-economic development in battling insecurity in West Africa, and called for a new, larger initiative for the development and the security of the Sahel region.¹¹ But while the Biarritz Declaration received positive feedback from African partners, its language is vague and the details for a new G7-Africa partnership have not been defined yet.

Officials who participated at the Biarritz discussions emphasized that the threat of terrorism has been expanding and infiltrating countries outside the G5 space, hence

the need to rethink the Sahel Alliance, perhaps include other countries from the region. But will this new initiative also aim to alter the G5 military force framework?

Echoing these assessments and concerns, Niger President Mahamadou Issoufou admitted¹² in November that in certain regions of the Sahel the security situation is completely out of control. The north of Mali, the north of Burkina Faso and Niger are at stake, as well as the relatively stable countries of Togo, Ghana, Benin and Ivory Coast. Issoufou blamed lack of international financial support for the fact that the G5S is not yet in operation as a multi-lateral military force.

Meeting in Niamey on December 15 on the backdrop of the deadly Niger attack mentioned above, the leaders of the Sahel reiterated their message to the international community. Money has yet to be put on the table for the soldiers to be better trained and better equipped, and development coordination clearly must extend beyond the frontiers of the G5 Sahel to better address the double-edged challenge of security and development.

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¹ "[Convention Portant Creation Du G5 Sahel](#)", *G5 Sahel*, December 19, 2014.

² "[The G5 Sahel Joint Force Gains Traction: The Africa Center for Strategic Studies](#)", *Africa Center*, February 9, 2018.

³ "[Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel - Report of the Secretary-General](#)", *Reliefweb*, November 11, 2019.

⁴ "[Central Sahel: The Humanitarian Emergency the World is Ignoring](#)", *World Food Program*, November 2019.

⁵ [The Sahel Alliance](#).

⁶ Laurence Caramel, "[Nous devons aider plus rapidement et mieux le Sahel](#)," *Le Monde Afrique*, July 18, 2019.

⁷ [Priority Investment Program \(PIP/G5 Sahel\) First Phase 2019 – 2021](#), *G5 Sahel Permanent Secretariat*, October, 2018.

⁸ [The World Bank in Ghana](#).

⁹ "[Ivory Coast – Echo Factsheet](#)," *European Commission*, January, 2016.

¹⁰ "[Chair of Security Council 2374 Committee Visits Bamako, Mali](#)", *The Security Council - UN*, November 7, 2019.

¹¹ "[Biarritz Declaration for a G7 & Africa Partnership](#)", *G7France*, August 26, 2019.

¹² Antoine Malo, "[Le président du Niger alerte sur les groupes djihadistes](#): 'Si le Sahel cède, la menace touchera l'Occident'," *Le Journal du Dimanche*, November 16, 2019.