CHAPTER 22

Crisis and Transition in the Sahel

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Introduction

Africa is frequently depicted as the most chronically unstable part of the world. War, terrorism, and the mass displacement of populations have not been uncommon. Peacebuilding has posed complex challenges for African societies and states affected by conflict and instability and for their partners—both fellow Africans and international organizations and allies. But Africa has also exhibited a notable readiness to assume the tasks of crisis management and engage in mutual cooperation between states to restore stability through diplomacy, negotiation, and the deployment of intervention forces and peacekeepers. The continent's capacity for common action is one of its greatest strengths.

Of the African regions currently suffering crisis, conflict, and threats to peaceful normality, the Sahel is among the most challenging—geographically vast, with a tough, arid environment exposed to the pressures of climate change, a thin economic base, and some of the world's highest levels of poverty. But it is also a region characterized by a strong culture of collaborative inter-governmental action in tackling common problems

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T. McNamee and M. Muyangwa (eds.),
The State of Peacebuilding in Africa,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46636-7_22

and is set within the wider context of a West Africa with a long track record of peer review in support of essential standards of governance, and common engagement in conflict resolution and confronting threats to security.

This chapter tracks the evolution of efforts to contain the threats to peace and security in the Sahel—threats that have become gradually more serious over the past 15 years, despite a steady reinforcement of the national, regional, and international campaign to stabilize the region.

Peacebuilding in the Sahel

Setting the Scene

Some years ago, a senior European Union (EU) official was asked to list the policies for EU engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa. His answer: "Sahel, Sahel, Sahel."

This vignette illustrates how far the restoration of security and stability across this vast region—extending from the Atlantic coast of Mauritania and Senegal to the eastern fringes of Chad—has become a major concern for the international community, and for European policymakers in particular. The crisis that now subjects large parts of the Sahel to extreme stress, with sometimes devastating human consequences, is widely perceived to pose threats to other regions of Africa and to Europe in a way that the long-running problems of the Great Lakes region or even Somalia supposedly do not. Whether that is a fair judgment is a moot point. Western governments and institutions have been prepared to commit not just money for security and development but also significant numbers of their own military personnel to the cause of stabilization and peacebuilding in the Sahel. In the latter half of 2019, a broadening out of the active military engagement was evident. A wider range of partners, to collaborate with the current principal actors—the Sahel countries themselves, France, and the United Nations (UN)—in the peacekeeping operations and proactive military action, was enlisted. The aim: to restore a measure of security and calm to a region where violence has become steadily more frequent, more brutal, and wider in geographical reach since 2016.

Concerns about terrorism and informal migration are the headline grabbers that induce European political actors to fret about this vast region lying just south of the Sahara and, thus, just a couple of borders away from the southern Mediterranean boundary of the EU. But there

is also an acknowledgment that the serious scale of the Sahel crisis threatens the peace and gradual development progress of West Africa as a whole, including the coastal areas that have been the drivers of recent progress toward prosperity. Over the course of 2019 and beyond, this concern increasingly began to impinge upon the thinking of governments in the region and that of key international partners. Two decades of mostly sustained economic growth and democratic consolidation could be in jeopardy, with profound consequences for the equilibrium of many Sub-Saharan societies and for their interaction with the outside world.

That is the context for the present concern with peacebuilding in the Sahel—which can fairly be described as a "region," despite its great geographical extent, and the diversity of physical environments, social and economic contexts, governance, and state polities that it encompasses. There are shared characteristics and influences that prevail almost universally; the strategies that have been developed for managing these problems, and for trying to control the negative impacts, are also largely shared and often mutualized through regional structures for cooperation and partnerships with external sources of support.

An Evolving Internationalization—And Mutualization—Of Crisis Management

The decade from 2010 to 2020 has seen responses to conflict and instability move from essentially the national—in which the official security actors have been national governments operating within national territory—to the regional and international. That is, in part, a reflection of the increasingly cross-border nature of the threats to stability in the Sahel; but it is also a measure of the extent to which countries outside the region have come to perceive Sahelian insecurity as a potential danger to their own societies.

There is a long history of rebellions in north-east Mali, as sections of the indigenous Tuareg population sought autonomy or even independence for a new national entity, *Azawad*, that would reflect their specific identity and interests. Tuaregs in adjacent areas of Niger also rebelled, largely in pursuit of this agenda. But prior to 2011, the governments of Mali and Niger sought to restore order and state control through campaigns by their own national security forces or through negotiation. Algeria, and sometimes Libya, would frequently play a mediating role, but the military actors on the ground were national.

The first decade of the twenty-first century also saw the emergence of jihadist terrorism in Sahelian countries, with militants—many of whom had migrated south from the former civil conflict in Algeria—engaged in trafficking and, in particular, the kidnap for ransom or occasional outright murder, of Westerners. In Mauritania, they also began to challenge the state, notably attacking the isolated Al-Ghallaouia military base in the north-east, in December 2007. Meanwhile, Nigeria treated the emergence of the militant group Boko Haram in Borno state—which lies within the Sahel—as a purely internal security problem, strongly resisting suggestions that it should invite help from neighboring countries.

All these countries benefitted from external training support from Western partners—particularly the United States and France, with the United Kingdom also involved to some extent. The US-led Flintlock exercise, involving troops from several countries, became an annual event, while France organized the Guidimakha exercise with several Sahel states under its RECAMP training initiative in 1998. Outside countries were not, however, significantly involved in active operations in the region.

There had always been one distinct exception to this pattern—Chad, where French forces had been based for decades. President Idriss Déby Itno is a close ally of Paris. In the past, French troops have come directly to his aid to help drive back internal rebellions that threatened his hold on political power. Such uprisings have been fueled frequently by personal or even family rivalries within the regime's own clan support base. France's security support for Déby has been quite different in nature from its operations elsewhere in the Sahel, where it has been exercised in defense of state authority rather than a particular political regime. Across the rest of the region, the pattern of crisis management by national authorities had continued through the first decade of this century.

Mali Crisis—A Step Change

The situation was transformed by the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya in 2011, following an internal rebellion and an Anglo-French military air campaign. This coincided with a renewed upsurge in Tuareg separatist activism in north-east Mali—a movement that was dramatically accelerated after fighters of Malian Tuareg origin, who had been serving the Gaddafi regime, fled home after their camp's defeat in the Libyan conflict.

Bringing substantial weaponry with them, they joined the reemerging separatist movement, the *Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA). This group then allied with the jihadist militants already present in northern Mali and launched an offensive in early 2012 that rapidly took control of settlements across the north, including Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, as the morale of the Malian army collapsed. Eventually, after demoralized soldiers had displaced the elected president in Bamako, the situation stabilized, leaving government authority limited to the southern half of the country, while the jihadists pushed aside the MNLA and imposed Islamist rule on the main northern towns.

This was the transformative event that internationalized issues of security and peacebuilding in the Sahel. It was quite clear then that the Malian army would be incapable of defeating the jihadists and restoring state authority in the north. The *Forces Armées Maliennes* (FAMA) lacked not only the necessary equipment, desert fighting expertise, and strategic planning capacity, but also the cohesive institutional culture required for the fight. As such, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) member countries began to develop plans for a force to restore government control in northern Mali. Over more than two decades, ECOWAS had developed a political culture of cooperative diplomacy and military intervention to tackle threats to security and stability in member states, notably in Liberia and, later, Sierra Leone.[1]

Confronted with the jihadist takeover of northern Mali and soldiers' assumption of power in Bamako, regional leaders pursued both political and military tracks. They put pressure on the army putschists in order to secure the installation of a constitutionally legitimate interim head of state—the parliamentary speaker, Dioncounda Traoré—and they began to plan the dispatch of a regional military force to recover the north. These plans for military intervention met with skepticism in the international community: many members of the UN Security Council[2] felt that while the scheme was legitimate in principle, it would be far more difficult than the previous ECOWAS interventions in small, coastal states. While France was sympathetic to the basic idea, senior U.S. officials felt that there was a serious risk of catastrophic failure, amidst the heat and vast distances of the Sahel and the Sahara.[3] After much discussion on the margins of the Security Council, the major UN powers indicated that authorization for the ECOWAS force might be forthcoming, but only after extensive preparation.

In little more than a year, the management of security and peace-building in the Sahel was transformed from being an essentially internal national affair into, first, an issue of regional political and, potentially, military action—and then, second, into a question of international concern and authority. It soon became apparent that ECOWAS lacked the capacity on its own to organize the large-scale military intervention that would be required. It would need not only international authorization from the UN, but also substantial practical military strategic and logistical support from international allies. By the end of 2012, the proposed ECOWAS intervention was still at the negotiation and planning stage, with the operation tentatively penciled in for some time in 2013, after the Security Council had finally given authorization on December 20, 2012, via UN Resolution 2085.[4] But the situation was then dramatically transformed by events on the ground, which provoked an immediate full internationalization of the response to this crisis.

French and UN Intervention

In January 2013, large numbers of jihadist fighters traveling in technicals (armed jeeps) gathered on the fringes of central Mali and then attacked Konna, the northern-most town in government hands, on January 9 and 10. Government troops resisted but were clearly unable to hold out for long. Interim President Traoré feared that the militants might also seize the key garrison town of Sévaré, just 56 km further on which also served as the effective security gateway to southern Mali and the road to Bamako itself. Traoré sought assistance from France's President, François Hollande, who dispatched helicopter gunships from Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) to help hold the line at Konna until more forces could arrive. Over several days, 4,000 French troops flew into Mali from Europe, and arrived by land with armored vehicles from Côte d'Ivoire. AFISMA, the African intervention force that had been in preparation, with 2,900 troops, was rapidly accelerated. Malian troops then joined the French and African forces in launching a counteroffensive which, backed by air power, paratroopers, and all the paraphernalia of a modern European military, rapidly regained control of all urban centers across northern Mali.

This dramatic shift in power on the ground produced both military and political effects. The jihadists mostly melted away, occasionally putting up fierce resistance, notably in the *Adrar des Ifoghas* massif in the Sahara.

By contrast, their erstwhile, secular Tuareg separatist allies in the MNLA agreed to enter a political process. Under the June 2013 Ouagadougou Agreement, they forswore the use of armed force to pursue their ends in return for a place at the negotiating table. Groups that refused to sign up to the Ouagadougou Agreement were formally categorized as terrorists and potential targets of further military action.

Meanwhile, given the continuing insecurity and the deep mistrust bequeathed by the events of the previous several years, the African intervention force was "rehatted" as a UN peacekeeping force, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), whose membership was gradually internationalized. The French emergency intervention force, Operation Serval, was also reorganized into a long-term deployment across the Sahel (Opération Barkhane), with a fixed troop strength of 4,500, headquartered in Ndjamena, Chad, with bases in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali. The European Union also established a technical mission (EUTM) to retrain the Malian army, at Koulikoro, near Bamako.[5]

These developments completed a fundamental transformation of the effort to restore peace and stability to the Sahel in both military and political terms. Military and security force operations had moved rapidly from being a national affair into one that was both regional and international, and on a large scale. Meanwhile, the Ouagadougou Agreement launched a fresh effort to resolve long-standing northern discontents through political negotiation. Previous separatist uprisings in the 1990s and the mid-2000s were also provisionally resolved through political settlements, but these had not proved durable. The question was whether, in this newly internationalized military context, a fresh political process could prove any more sustainably successful.

A Parallel in the Lake Chad Basin

The tackling of the Boko Haram crisis was also internationalized, shortly afterwards, but in a slightly different manner. The driver here, in the Lake Chad Basin, was the fact that the activity of the militant group was also becoming a threat to the security of neighboring countries—Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.[6] Thus Nigeria came under huge pressure to rethink and look toward a more mutualized management of the problem. In 2014 Nigeria's President, Goodluck Jonathan, attended talks in France with the leaders of neighboring countries impacted by Boko

Haram. This triggered a process of negotiation that culminated in Nigeria accepting the direct participation of forces from Chad, Cameroon, and Niger in the fight against Boko Haram, including on its own territory.[7] The arrangement—the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), has resulted in a degree of integration of command structures and substantial, though sporadic, collaboration in operations in the field, with political and practical advisory support provided by the United States, the UK, and France.

But as we shall see in the case of the wider Sahel, while a coordinated and internationalized military effort may produce short-term security gains on the ground, it cannot substitute for the political action and social and economic development that is essential to restoring peace and stability.

Peace Process Struggles to Gain Momentum

Initially, it was hoped that the deployment of 15,000 person-strong MINUSMA and 4,500 person-strong Barkhane, would provide the international support that would enable national security forces and public authorities in Mali, and the wider Sahel region, to re-establish stable conditions.

While jihadist groups continued to stage sporadic terrorist attacks, they did not actually control territory or settlements. Meanwhile, the secular armed groups were engaged in peace negotiations and it was hoped that gathering momentum in the peace process would exert a growing attraction for individuals and factions still engaged in violent terrorism or criminality.

In 2013, in the aftermath of the Franco-African intervention, the influence of the military putschists had gradually faded in Bamako, allowing Mali to restore normal constitutional democracy, with the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, a former prime minister, as head of state. The presidential election was followed by legislative elections. Having been elected with a thumping majority in the runoff ballot, President Keïta entered office with a powerful personal mandate, which he had kept shrewdly vague during the election campaign itself. However, he was slow to deploy his popularity and political capital in the cause of negotiation and compromise in order to consolidate an agreement with the non-jihadist northern armed groups. It took further pressure from Algeria, the mediator for the peace negotiations, and the international

community to finally persuade the Tuareg nationalist alliance, the *Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad* (CMA), to agree to a settlement with the government and other pro-government northern militias in the *Plateforme* alliance. This "Algiers Accord" was finally signed by the government and the *Plateforme* in May 2015, and the CMA signed the following month.

The fundamental basis of the deal was that the armed groups would accept Mali's territorial integrity, as a united sovereign state, and thus abandon any aspiration to *Azawad* independence. In return, the government would decentralize power and, implicitly, patronage to the regional level, thus allowing the leadership of the Tuareg nationalist groups to maintain their predominance in the north-east. The security context for the deal would be underpinned by a program of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), with some former fighters from the armed groups being brought into the official security forces while others were provided with support to transition into civilian life.

The hope was that as the process advanced, those fighters and notables who continued to dabble in jihadist or criminal activity would be gradually persuaded that the peace process offered them better prospects, in both material and political terms. However, the prospects for successful implementation of the Algiers Accord were heavily contingent on both the government and the armed groups throwing their full weight into the process. This did not happen. Senior former rebels were reluctant to surrender the military influence they enjoyed, especially in and around Kidal; meanwhile, President Keïta, heavily rooted in the politics of Bamako and the south, allowed the process to meander along rather than commit his personal political capital to convince southern voters that it was worth making compromises to ensure the "buy-in" of the one-time northern Tuareg rebels.

Momentum Is Lost Before Bamako Finally Moves

The faltering of the northern peace process, in an ambience of drift even after the Algiers Accord had been signed, meant that there was little pressure on hold-out jihadist or criminal elements to give up armed activity and engage. Indeed, the reverse happened. In a festering atmosphere already low levels of trust on all sides declined further and security conditions worsened, with a steady trickle of jihadist attacks in the north and bloody incidents of urban terrorism in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and

even the coastal resort of Grand Bassam in Côte d'Ivoire. MINUSMA found its resources increasingly consumed in protecting its own troops against jihadist attacks, including through improvised explosive devices, while raids by France's Barkhane force regularly captured or killed jihadist fighters without fundamentally altering the dynamics of the situation. Meanwhile, in central Mali, a fresh jihadist movement appeared, the *Front de Libération du Macina* (FLM), had emerged. The FLM, *Al-Qaeda au Maghreb Islamique* (AQMI), and the Tuareg jihadist group, Ansar Dine, even announced a strategic alliance, the *Groupe de soutien à l'islam et aux musulmans* (GSIM). President Keïta finally reacted to the seriousness of the situation, appointing the experienced Soumeylou Boubeye Maïga, a former foreign and later defense minister, as secretary general of the presidency—de facto chief of staff—in August 2016. A native of Gao, in the north, and well connected in Algiers, Maïga came to the post with an acute understanding of northern issues and the factors that might influence the situation. The result was a decision to re-divide the existing three northern regions—Timbuktu, Kidal, and Gao—into five by carving out two new northern regions, Taoudeni and Ménaka, and to appoint interim authorities to govern all of these, on the grounds that security problems would prevent the holding of elections for some time.

This ingenious move was implemented in late 2016 and early 2017 and marked a concrete step toward the decentralization envisaged in the Algiers Accord as the response to local demands for more autonomy. The government then used its appointments to the new authorities as a political tool to bind northern armed groups into the peace process; in particular, it gave a disproportionate share of key roles to the CMA, the alliance of ex-separatists, effectively buying their adherence to this new model for northern Mali. This aggrieved some smaller moderate factions, but the government saw this as a price worth paying for securing the CMA's support. Maïga, who in December 2017 was promoted to prime minister, also engaged in a political charm offensive, regularly visiting troubled areas of the center and north, to meet with local dignitaries, listen to their complaints, and promise aid. Critics dismissed this as touting for votes, to support Keïta's campaign for re-election in 2018; whatever the motivation, it was a necessary process of engagement—and one that has continued since the election of Maïga's successor as prime minister, Boubou Cissé. Even so, government services are still thin on the ground across much of the north; partly because of security fears, it has proved difficult to persuade public servants to accept

postings to northern towns, and there are areas where the Malian army was still absent at the end of 2019. Efforts to promote reconciliation or even basic dialogue have been fitful and lacking in sustained, high-profile government support.

In central Mali, the FLM was playing on local tensions between Peul pastoralists and Dogon and Bambara farming communities. This worsening local conflict was geographically much closer to Bamako than the north, and in a region regarded by Malians as part of the country's heartland. Yet the nature of the local crisis was not perceived as posing a threat to the country's territorial integrity and cohesion in the way that Tuareg separatism had done. Perhaps for this reason, the developing crisis in the Mopti region, in particular, suffered from a lack of political prioritization—or external mediation—until the situation had almost spiraled out of control and local society had been scarred by deep rifts, fueled by killings on all sides and the abuses of heavy-handed soldiers.

It was only in mid-to late 2019 that serious mediation began to make progress in the central region. The area has never benefitted from the sort of external peacebuilding diplomacy applied to the north with the Algiers negotiating process. Armed groups and those related to them are much less structured in political terms than their northern counterparts, which increases the difficulty of organizing effective peace talks.

On the other hand, precisely because this fissiparous and localized crisis may well have to be resolved through local negotiation and mediation it could foster a gradual peace process that has deeper and more sustainable roots than the Algiers Accord in the north. It has often proved difficult in this region to secure the sustained local adherence of factions or commanders, whatever the headline commitments made by their nominal leaders.

G5—A Fresh Regional Military Approach

However, as the political processes inched forward, it became increasingly clear that this would not be sufficient to restore peace and stability in the Sahel. The scale and the geographical spread of the violence was spiraling out more widely, with jihadist violence spreading across much of northern Burkina Faso and sporadic attacks from Mali into western Niger.

Sahel countries formed the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5) in 2014 to coordinate action to tackle the spreading regional security crisis. The initial priority was to identify development projects that could foster

economic activity and livelihoods in marginalized areas and, thus, reduce the social and economic pressures that might lead some people, particularly young men, to be tempted by the money that jihadist groups and narcotics trafficking gangs could offer. But as security conditions deteriorated, the G5 member states (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) increasingly began to focus on developing a stronger military response, eventually conceiving of the idea of a 5,000-strong joint force to be composed of units of 1,000 troops each reassigned from their existing militaries.

These ideas found willing external partners in the newly-elected French President, Emmanuel Macron, and the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Policy, Federica Mogherini.[8] During mid-late 2017, the concept of a joint force in the Sahel was rapidly refined, while Brussels and Paris worked diplomatic channels to mobilize the funding required to equip the force, culminating in a February 2018 meeting that mobilized more than EU €400 million in pledges.

There were key differences between the proposed G5 force and the ECOWAS proposals for a joint force that had met with such international skepticism back in 2012.

i. The G5 force would be drawn from the armies of the Sahel countries themselves, and its soldiers would therefore be accustomed to the region's daunting climate and environment.
ii. All five countries were former French colonies, thus sharing a degree of common background in terms of administrative culture and training cooperation with the French. The five member governments were also accustomed to collaborating in other policy areas, notably food security and the monitoring of drought risk.
iii. The mission conceived for the force was relatively narrow and thus realistic: it would focus on border regions and would be mandated with hot pursuit rights permitting its units to cross national frontiers in search of jihadist groups and trafficking gangs.
iv. Being local troops, the G5 soldiers would be best suited to operating in these relatively more populated regions of the Sahel, where they could perhaps relate to local communities more easily than the French troops of the Barkhane force, who would provide support but otherwise focus substantially on fighting the jihadist groups in more thinly populated northern desert regions.

However, it soon became apparent that even this rather realistic initiative for joint action would have to overcome serious hurdles. Initial training exercises showed that despite some shared background, over the years the national armies had developed differences. A first exercise showed that their secure military radio systems were varied and they could not communicate with each other, forcing the troops to rely on their insecure personal mobile phones to communicate with units from other countries.

The "G5 Sahel had been set up with only a small secretariat, in Nouakchott, that was ill-equipped to handle large budgets or military procurement."[9] Many financial contributors were slow to pay the money they had promised. In early January 2020, almost two years after originally pledging EU €100 million for the force, Sahel presidents stated that the money had not been received, while the United Arab Emirates had paid only EU €10 million of a promised EU €30 million. This has held up the purchase of essential equipment.

The G5 force did make some progress in deployment and operational autonomy. Moreover, during 2019, France's Barkhane force began to reshape its operations. In more southerly populated areas, the emphasis was increasingly on "hearts and minds" and the provision of basic services, particularly health care, as insecurity had led local doctors to flee. The task of actively seeking out and fighting jihadist combat units was to be left largely to special forces. However, the phased implementation of the G5 plan and the reshaping of Barkhane's activity proved inadequate to the challenge.

Crisis Forces a Deeper Rethink

During the course of 2019 and early 2020, the central Sahel experienced a dramatic acceleration of violence. National security forces repeatedly suffered heavy loss of life in a series of large jihadist attacks, particularly in the "three frontiers region" where the borders of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso converge. At the same time, attacks spread south across large areas of Burkina Faso, this time with civilians frequently targeted. In a country once renowned for the quality of its grassroots development thinking and basic social services, the state's public service coverage was now shrinking in the face of the spreading violence; more than 1,000 schools had closed by late 2019.

Even before the wave of attacks had reached their highest intensity from September 2019 onwards, it was becoming clear that a much more

profound rethink would be needed if the situation was to be stabilized and the Sahel was to get back on a course of gradual progress toward peaceful normality and a renewed focus on economic and social development. At the G7 summit in August 2019, France's President Macron and German Chancellor, Angela Merkel met with the current chair of the G5 Sahel, Burkina Faso's President, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. They announced a process of review by African governments, Paris, and Berlin to culminate around the end of the year. The challenges facing governments were numerous.

The spread of violence southward across much of Burkina Faso and into the Niger River valley in western Niger raised concern that militants might begin to infiltrate the north of coastal West African countries.

Ghana, through the Accra Initiative, had begun to coordinate an enhanced border security effort by coastal countries, working with the Burkina authorities,[10] but a more strategic approach was needed. There was also deep concern, among both African governments and key international partners, that the Malian government and political class were still not making a sufficiently serious effort to fully implement the Algiers Agreement.[11] For example, the main opposition party was still boycotting the national dialogue launched by President Keïta, while Keïta's own government was accused of procrastinating over the restoration of public services to Kidal because the town was in the hands of the CMA, the former Tuareg separatist movement. Yet, the failure to restore effective services risked fueling local disenchantment and instability. The armed groups had begun to engage with DDR, but sought to extract extra revenue from the process by inflating the number of fighters they had who might qualify for it.

Meanwhile, it was clear that even the reshaped and strengthened partnership between G5 forces and Barkhane was failing to secure decisive military progress against armed groups. Indeed, the number of attacks was rising and they were becoming more violent. In central Mali, progress toward community mediation and dialogue was fitful and, in some areas, the localized violence persisted, while across the border in Burkina Faso an ever-growing number of areas were suffering attacks on civilians. Areas that had been secure in 2018 were now highly insecure.

The G7 discussions were followed by an ECOWAS summit in Ouagadougou in September 2019, to which the leaderships of Mauritania and Chad—Sahel countries but not members of the bloc—were also invited. It was resolved that ECOWAS would assume the political lead in the response to the crisis, in order to ensure a more comprehensive, all-region approach. President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger warned that

it was important not to neglect the contribution of the G5, notably, its joint military force, but there was a recognition that strategy needed to be coordinated beyond just this group of five countries.

Subsequent months saw the violence reach a new peak of intensity, with attacks on Malian army bases at Bouklikessi and Indélimane and Nigérien bases at Inatès and Chinagoder claiming the lives of hundreds of troops. *Etat Islamique au Grand Sahara* (EIGS), the local affiliate of Daesh, claimed responsibility for most of these attacks. After 13 French troops died in a helicopter crash in November 2019, while on operations against the group, Macron pressed for summit talks with his G5 counterparts. Niger began to press for a major international effort to tackle the group, similar to the coalition launched against Daesh/ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In December 2019, ECOWAS leaders met once more and then G5 leaders and Macron held their summit on January 13, 2020, in Pau, France. By this stage, the review process launched back in August 2019 had been largely completed and the leaders attending the summit were therefore able to set out a new approach which marked a clear shift in strategy.

A Way Forward—Questions and Challenges

The leaders announced[12] that the priority focus of their military operations would be the campaign against EIGS in the three frontiers region. Moreover, Sahelian and French forces would operate under a single command; an immediate, additional 220 French troops would be sent to the area. Furthermore, during the course of 2020, the campaign would be joined by special forces units from several other European countries (besides France)—an initiative labeled Operation Takuba. This would mark a further stage in the internationalization of the campaign to restore stability to the Sahel. Ever since January 2013, other European countries had provided logistical support for French troops, particularly helicopters, but these were not combat units. Now, it was agreed that for the first time, combat forces would be assigned to support the French.

The aim of this revised approach was to bring about a decisive shift in the direction of travel to massively reduce the threat posed by EIGS. But the implication was that in other zones, beyond the three frontiers area, politics, mediation, and local security negotiations would have to assume a much larger share of the peacebuilding burden. An initial positive example had already come with an agreement between the CMA and the *Plateforme* militia groupings over security in Ménaka, in the far east of Mali.

But the Pau summit also applied public pressure on the Malian government and political class to advance the wider process of dialogue. The importance of development efforts was also reasserted, which would mean a practical effort to start implementing a set of projects drawn up by the G5 and for which funding had been pledged at a meeting in Nouakchott in late 2018. But development and public service provision are contingent on an essential level of security. Restoring peace to the Sahel will, therefore, remain a difficult and uncertain task.

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The effort to manage security threats and restore peace and stability in the Sahel evolved substantially over the last ten years prior to 2020. While international partners have always been involved in the development effort, security and military engagement has moved from being an essentially national affair to one that is highly internationalized. But this has been mostly a gradual process with the exception of the Franco-African emergency intervention in Mali in January 2013. And key decisions have been, essentially, driven by assessments of the conditions on the ground, and taken in partnership between the countries of the region and their African and international partners.

Within the measure of what is practical, the process of crisis management has taken account of the political and social complexities of the Sahel. All participants are aware that progress is likely to be gradual, at best. This will remain a work in progress for the foreseeable future. Moreover, the security crisis is being tackled against the Sahel's varied, and often challenging, national contexts—and a sharp reminder of this reality came in Mali on 18 August 2020 when, after weeks of mass protest over corruption and electoral manipulation, the military took power and forced President Keïta to resign. The soldiers rushed to reassure international security partners of their continued cooperation, but then embarked on tortuous negotiations with political groups, civil society and ECOWAS over the shape and duration of a transition to new polls and a promised fresh start.

Key Recommendations

1. ***Establish a clear roadmap for the urgent restoration of public services***. In areas of the Sahel where insecurity is most acute, the violence—and fear of violence—has led to the retreat of essential public services: schools, health centers, basic development programs, policing, and justice. This only fuels the deprivation that can

contribute to instability. The security threat is intense and it is hard to manage or contain the risks faced by public service personnel. But, there is an urgent need for a carefully planned step-by-step restoration of key services, albeit shielded by additional security measures. This will be extremely difficult, and not without risks. But, it is essential to provide better services for local populations in insecure areas and begin to re-establish the foundations for economic activity and revived livelihoods, and, vitally, to slowly rebuild trust in state institutions and foster decentralized, accountable institutions of local administration.

2. ***Provide long-term, permanent funding to the G5 force***. The development of the G5 joint military force, and procurement of its equipment, has been hampered by uncertainty over when some funding pledges might be honored. Rather than wait for this money to arrive, it would be better to establish a permanent funding arrangement, with agreed ongoing contributions—both from G5 and other West African states themselves and from international partners. This would allow the more consistent forward planning of force operations and procurement that will be essential if the revised military strategy is to be sustained and effective over the medium term. Such consistency will also make it easier for France and other European governments to sustain their own engagement in partnership with the force.
3. ***Create a West African community mediation entity***. Community-level disputes over land, water, grazing rights, decentralization, and past acts of violence enhance the tensions that contribute to instability and violence. There could be a valuable role for a politically neutral and independent regional body. It would not act as an arbiter or compete with the prerogatives of sovereign states. But, it could act as a facilitator, acting in public to promote dialogue and dispute resolution through compromise and, perhaps, also acting in private as a channel of communication between parties that are reluctant to be seen publicly making contact. For example, if an armed group wishes to discuss terms for renouncing violence. Such a body could be formally attached to ECOWAS, or ECOWAS and the G5 together, to assure it of recognized status. But it would be firmly non-governmental, with a small staff and a presiding board of senior civil society figures, former politicians, and academic, religious, and legal figures.

Notes

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