



# SAHELIAN LOCAL PERSPECTIVES ON WESTERN MODELS OF SECURITY COLLABORATION

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HUB**

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AND  
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## 1 BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum is an academic initiative launched in 2021 at the Centre for International Security and the Observatory for Africa at University Francisco de Vitoria (Spain). This multidisciplinary network of international experts aims to promote dialogue and collaborative research between the Sahel, the Maghreb, West Africa, and Europe, as well as engaging the broader international community focused on security, peace, and stability in the Sahel.

The NATO Strategic Direction-south Hub (Hub), established as a focal point for enhancing mutual understanding of regional dynamics in North Africa, the Middle East and the Sahel, has participated in the Forum since its inception.

The Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum is held under the Chatham House Rule, which encourages panellists and attendees to be open and direct. Since its first edition, the Hub has viewed the Forum as one of its essential, must-attend activities, with its involvement steadily increasing – from initially attending as part of the audience, to providing moderators, and, this year, co-organising one of the panels of the Forum that was a panel aimed at stimulating debate and driving discussion on “Perspectives of Sahel countries on Western models of security collaboration” –. The panel was composed of regional experts with diverse backgrounds to provide a more localised perspective on the issue. Additionally, a large number of attendees, representing local and regional views of the Sahel, contributed significantly to the discussion, enriching the dialogue with their first-hand perspectives.

This paper explores Sahelian perspectives on Western countries security collaboration models from military and civilian points of view. It highlights key areas of friction and alternative approaches that may better address the region’s specific needs and realities, offering a pathway for more sustainable and regionally driven solutions.

It is not based on a typical research process but on the presentations made by the panellists and the opinions expressed during the discussion by the other forum participants, mainly Sahelians or experts on the Sahel.

The purpose of this paper is to contextualise these regional views on security collaboration, presenting insights that may not necessarily reflect the views of UFV or the Hub, but rather seek to amplify local voices and perspectives on key security challenges. Such insights could guide future initiatives, offering a foundational understanding that can inspire more locally grounded approaches to security cooperation in the region.

## 2 INTRODUCTION: VOLATILE CONTEXT AND PARTNERSHIP<sup>1</sup> RECONFIGURATION

The Sahel region, stretching from West to East Africa, is a complex and volatile geographic area facing numerous challenges, including terrorism, intercommunal conflicts, organised crime, and human rights violations. Over the past decades, Western countries have supported Sahel countries in addressing these security

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<sup>1</sup> The terms partner(s) and partnership(s) as used in this document are generic and do not refer to NATO.

challenges through various security collaboration models, including a considerable package centred on security sector reform, counter-terrorism, and other capacity-building efforts. The West has promoted its own security models based on principles of democracy and human rights. However, over the past few years, such models have come under increasing scrutiny from Sahel countries, which have argued that they are not suited to the unique context of the region.

## 2.1 Western Powers in Sahel Countries

Sahel countries and more broadly West African nations used to be under French colonial ruling. Independence processes started in the early 1960s, in the context of the Cold War (which led to proxy wars on the continent) and were eventually characterised by military dictatorships for several decades. A second wave of political turmoil and change started in the early 1990s, allowing Sahel countries to liberate themselves from military rule, thus exploring Western models of democracy. The colonial legacy helped France to maintain its privileged relationship with such countries, essentially through military and defence accords. Additionally, the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) rapidly became major cooperation partners.

The 9/11 attacks on the United States (US) had a profound impact on how Western countries, particularly the US, approached security in the Sahel and West Africa. The emergence of global terrorism reshaped strategic priorities, with the rise of groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) directing much of the focus toward counter-terrorism efforts. This shift altered the nature of security cooperation in the region, often prioritising immediate military responses over broader development and governance goals. The result was a security-first approach, which while addressing pressing threats, often side-lined the underlying socio-economic and political drivers of instability.

In 2011, the EU launched its first comprehensive strategy for the Sahel, aiming to reinforce the security-development nexus in the region. The initial beneficiaries of this approach were Mauritania, Niger, and Mali, with the programme focusing on addressing the root causes of instability, including weak governance, poverty, and the threat posed by extremist groups. However, the deteriorating security situation, marked by the growing influence of terrorist organisations and a military coup in Mali, prompted the EU to broaden its scope. Burkina Faso and Chad were incorporated into the strategy as the Sahel's geopolitical landscape shifted in response to escalating violence.

In February 2014, Mauritania, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad formed the G5 Sahel, a regional organisation designed to promote development and security within these countries. Despite its initial promise, the G5 Sahel struggled to assert itself as a credible leader in coordinating security and development initiatives. Challenges in managing the balance between military operations and development goals, combined with internal political instability, weakened the organisation's effectiveness.

## 2.2 Recent Shifts: Paradigm Deconstruction

A series of military coups – first in Mali (2020 and 2021), followed by Burkina Faso (2022), and then Niger (2023) – have significantly changed the geostrategic landscape



in the Sahel. As a result, the balance of power in the region was reshaped, and former international regional security partnerships were severely weakened. Some, like the G5 Sahel, dissolved. Indeed, as the political landscape in the region shifted, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger opted to withdraw from the organisation, making it incapable to fulfil its mandate and leading to its end.

In September 2023, the three aforementioned countries signed the “Liptako-Gourma” Charter that gave birth to a new regional security body: the Alliance of Sahel States (L’Alliance des États du Sahel). In July 2024, the Alliance became a Confederation whose core business is to bolster security and defence cooperation amongst its members, reflecting a regional aspiration for independence. Several security experts have raised deep concerns about the future of regional security cooperation and how the people of the Sahel perceive this new entity.

Besides the reasons linked to the ineffectiveness of the existing security cooperation, the shift was driven by a strategy of partnership diversification which has characterised Sahelian foreign policy under military governments since 2021. This approach emphasises national sovereignty and the renewal of partnerships to seek strategic “win-win” associates tailored to specific sectors, rather than relying on a single partner for all needs. This strategy has led to the re-evaluation of previous agreements with traditional Western partners, as the new military governments increasingly perceive these partners as potentially not acting in the best interests of the Sahelian people or not aligning with the government’s strategic goals. Furthermore, countries like Russia and China have increased their influence, at the expense of traditional Western partners such as France and the US, which have experienced a decline in their previous fruitful relations and cooperation.

## 3 THE CONCEPT OF WESTERN SECURITY MODELS

### 3.1 Absence of a singular Western model

The lack of a common Western approach to the Sahel presents a striking paradox, especially given that nearly twenty regional and international strategies have been developed for the region, all of which ostensibly promote the same core priorities: good governance, the security-development nexus, adaptation to climate change, human security, and the inclusion of youth and gender perspectives. Despite these shared objectives, the proliferation of these Western-sponsored or led strategies has failed to bring about consistency, creating what many refer to as a ‘security traffic jam’, as these overlapping efforts appear disjointed and poorly coordinated (EU missions and programmes, G5 Sahel, different development mechanisms such as the Sahel Alliance, the Sahel Coalition, and the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel, among others).

This approach may have been the cause of some dysfunction, generating an environment in which the sheer number of actors breeds competition rather than collaboration, resulting in accumulated delays and missed opportunities to address Sahel’s problems effectively. Faced with several external partners, each with different priorities and visions, Sahelian leaders have started voicing their concerns and have struggled to implement a coherent and sustainable strategy to address their security challenges. This is compounded by the perception that Western partners have struggled to provide local partners with the most suitable means to tackle the terrorism

threat, which has fuelled frustration over the perceived lack of tangible results and the gap between promises and results.

In this context, there is growing disillusionment among the Sahel countries. Many argue that the presence of so many foreign actors only perpetuate rather than resolve insecurity. According to local perceptions, the complexity of foreign actors' involvement in the region, combined with poor coordination and communication, has hampered local governments' ownership of the process designing and implementing mid- to long-term security strategies aimed at achieving sustainable and lasting solutions.

### 3.2 Western-driven anti-terrorism initiatives

The concept of anti- or counter-terrorism was further developed by Western countries after 9/11. Since then, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) has been the dominant paradigm and the common denominator that has brought the international community together in a common effort to tackle this threat. Although the risk was initially underestimated by local leaders, so that the concept and its consequences did not directly or primarily affect or target Africa, the increasing presence, functioning, and attacks of terrorist groups on the continent, particularly in the Sahel, rapidly pushed African countries to the frontline of the GWOT.

Then, Western powers decided to bolster their cooperation with some countries (e.g. Mauritania, Mali, Niger), through bilateral and regional security programmes. This move created a sort of diplomatic and security dependence for Sahel countries towards their international partners, resulting in impacts on local governance. It also helped local governments to structure and increase their power by localising the international narrative of the GWOT. Some research and analysis argue that these relationships led to a form of paternalism and infantilisation of Sahel countries. Others focus more on the selfishness and power-seeking of local leaders who have used the goodwill and funding of Western partners to advance their personal agendas on the bases of local corrupt systems.

## 4 CHALLENGES FACING WESTERN SECURITY ASSISTANCE

### 4.1 Perceptions of capacity-building initiatives and their limitations

International support for capacity-building, particularly in the security and defence sectors, has recently been described by some local officials as misaligned with the actual needs of Sahelian beneficiaries. Many recipients perceive this assistance as ineffective or irrelevant to their operational challenges (e.g. one of the criticisms to MINUSMA was that their mandate did not address security challenges).<sup>2</sup>

After a decade of substantial international commitment to bolster local forces in the fight against terrorist and violent extremist organisations, the current situation in the Sahel suggests the need for a reassessment and, eventually, the readjustment of military and security cooperation. Strategies should adapt to the new realities, such as

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mali in 2023: *“Realism requires acknowledging the failure of MINUSMA, whose mandate does not address the security challenge.”*

intra-communal conflicts and evolving geopolitical dynamics. Western countries and organisations have invested heavily in capacity-building initiatives, aiming to strengthen local security forces and governance structures. However, despite substantial efforts that involved ongoing collaboration with local leaders and officials, ensuring that every strategy was both discussed and approved by them, these initiatives have often faced criticism for lacking a deeper understanding of local contexts and needs.

Furthermore, the reliance on foreign expertise, as exemplified by the limited coordination between the Malian government and a number of Western technical assistance companies, can lead to a lack of local ownership and sustainability. During the panel, a local SME shared a specific example illustrating this dynamic: Malian authorities were unable to communicate directly with a Western government and were instead required to engage solely with representatives from the Western technical company hired to implement the project. This arrangement left the Malians feeling side-lined in the decision-making process. Experiences like these emphasise that effective capacity-building in the Sahel must be grounded in local realities and led by local actors to ensure sustainability and long-term success. Effective capacity-building in the Sahel needs to be grounded in local realities and led by local actors to ensure sustainability, if it is to have a realistic chance of achieving the desired results.

## 4.2 Local perspectives on Western powers' decision-making

In the Sahel, Western powers are sometimes seen as prioritising stability over democratic governance, prone to supporting authoritarian regimes when it suits their strategic interests. This approach is well known and often criticised by political opposition groups, civil society and the region's youth. It is seen as contradictory to Western rhetoric on the fundamental importance of what are labelled as core values, such as democracy and good governance.

For instance, the Pau Summit with the G5 Sahel, which took place in January 2020, was perceived as a rather top-down initiative. This approach led to feelings of frustration among Sahelian leaders and segments of the population, highlighting broader concerns about the Western approach to security cooperation. Many local experts perceive Western powers approach to these partnerships as having a sense of superiority rather than as partners. Such a feeling, even if wrong, can seriously reduce the effectiveness of these efforts. This raises questions about how well such cooperation was framed around a genuine intent, mutual understanding, and stated interests and priorities, which are considered as 'sine qua non' for successfully stabilizing the Sahel.

Furthermore, since 2020, the Western implementation of its agenda in the Sahel has become one of the most relevant topics exploited by the junta-led countries of Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Niger to justify their agenda and their recent misalignment with the rest of the West African region.

During the 2023 crisis in Niger, when the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) threatened military intervention to restore constitutional order, both Mali and Burkina Faso opposed such action, accusing ECOWAS leaders of being influenced by Western powers. They argued that external intervention would only exacerbate instability and questioned the legitimacy of force as a means of restoring

governance. This growing distrust of Western influence underscores the need for a more nuanced and locally driven approach to security and governance in the Sahel.

The perception of Western interventionism in the Sahel is significantly affected by NATO's 2011 involvement in Libya, which local experts consider to be one of the major triggers linked to the widespread instability in the region. This narrative, echoed by leaderships such as Mali's current government, has bolstered fear of Western and NATO interventions and has contributed to the aforementioned rapprochement and increased cooperation with non-Western foreign actors, such as Russia and China, which are perceived as more respectful of local sovereignty.

### 4.3 The Need for Independent Sustainable and Fair Partnerships

Heavy reliance on foreign powers for security and governance reforms poses significant risks to Sahel countries. When leaders become overly dependent on external actors, they risk entering partnerships that could severely compromise their sovereignty, leaving them vulnerable to the agendas and interests of foreign powers. Such dependency can limit a nation's ability to make independent decisions and shape its own security policies, ultimately compromising national autonomy, regardless of the partner's identity.

Achieving independence in security matters is crucial for Sahel countries to ensure that their national interests are respected and prioritised. An endogenous approach – where strategies are led, owned, and designed by local actors – offers a way for these nations to assert their leadership in addressing security challenges. Leaders who are seen as highly influenced by foreign actors, to the point of being accused of acting as local proxies, risk losing legitimacy in the eyes of their populations, which can fuel instability and distrust. To mitigate these risks, Sahel countries should frame and welcome partnerships that not only respect their sovereignty, but also guarantee the local leadership since the beginning, while benefiting from fair and collaborative support.

### 4.4 Addressing Community Tensions through Local Leadership: A Key to Lasting Security

Unresolved communal tensions are one of the primary drivers of conflict in the Sahel, particularly over natural resources like herders and farmers. These tensions, often exacerbated by external security interventions that overlook local dynamics, can worsen instability. For instance, the mistrust over some nomadic herder communities such as the Fulani or Tuareg has been unfairly associated with terrorism. This oversimplified narrative has alienated those communities, exacerbating the very conflicts that security interventions aim to reduce.

To achieve lasting security, western partners should keep working closely with local authorities and leaders to be more efficient in addressing these deeply rooted tensions. This requires a deeper and nuanced understanding of the social dynamics and local governance structures, as well as a commitment to inclusive governance that fosters reconciliation and social cohesion.

Traditional governance systems in the Sahel, which play an essential role in maintaining social order and resolving disputes, should always be a pivotal reference in the development of more inclusive security collaboration models, especially in the

management of resource disputes. These indigenous systems have evolved over centuries and are more in tune with local conflicts and societal needs than externally imposed frameworks. Human security, with its focus on individuals, should be prioritised in Sahelian security strategies. This approach aligns more closely with the realities of local populations and their needs, offering a more sustainable path to stability than the current counter-terrorism-dominated approach.

For this approach to succeed, Sahelian governments need to empower foreign partners to work alongside local and regional actors, such as municipalities, elected officials and border management agencies. However, the current political landscape, particularly in the Liptako-Gourma (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso), possesses challenges to such initiatives. In these areas, the uncertainty linked to and generated by the transitional governments dominated by military figures and changes in local administrations have made it difficult to implement local programmes effectively.

To date, Western nations have been at the forefront of recognising the importance of local leadership in fostering social cohesion and have dedicated significant project funding to support these frameworks. By involving local leadership, projects by partners like USAID, the EU and other key stakeholders have helped bridge divides in the community. However, one of the challenges has been to ensure genuine local buy-in. While many locals acknowledge the benefits of these programmes, there is sometimes a perception that international initiatives are driven by external agendas, potentially making local involvement appear more instrumental than genuinely collaborative. Furthermore, for local staff involved in these large-scale initiatives, employment in foreign-supported projects can be seen as a pathway to personal advancement rather than as a long-term commitment to strengthening community ties.

Effective engagement also requires recognising the role of civil society in managing local conflicts and supporting community resilience. The balance between working with national and local entities, while enhancing the role of youth and civil society, is delicate but crucial. Although governments may view civil society actors with suspicion, these groups can serve as valuable partners in preventing and resolving ethnic and local conflicts. By building stronger ties with local civil society, international partners can help create a more inclusive and peaceful environment.

The benefits of involving local leadership in stability projects often require a long-term commitment, with significant results only becoming visible after decades of consistent work. This timeframe can be a challenge for international partners accustomed to shorter project cycles, but sustaining partnerships in the Sahel will require a shift toward longer-term strategies. Developing social cohesion tools that local people see as truly effective, rather than externally imposed, will require patience, adaptive management, and close collaboration with local communities.

## 5 LOCAL PROSPECTS FOR WESTERN COOPERATION

### 5.1 Western withdrawal scenario

If Western partners were to withdraw from their security and development cooperation engagements with Sahel countries, the region would face a cascade of significant consequences, both in the immediate and long-term. It is difficult to assess the

resulting impact on the already fragile security environment and the effects on the geopolitical landscape:

### **Immediate Implications**

The unforeseen withdrawal of Western powers, which started in 2021 when Barkhane and other French forces, MINUSMA, EUCAP Sahel Niger and the US contingent left Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, widened the security vacuum. The end of ongoing military and development initiatives would leave gaps in governance and security provisions. Nevertheless, the impact of Western withdrawal would vary from one Sahel country to another. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have different political and security dynamics. For instance, in Niger, where military cooperation with France has been more robust, the security situation has deteriorated more sharply than in Mali or Burkina Faso, which turned towards non-Western alliances earlier.

The loss of financial and technical support would severely undermine ongoing counter-terrorism operations and developmental programmes, further weakening state capacity and forcing countries to look for alternative partnerships or to accept unilateral and potentially unfair cooperation agreements. Many local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), whose work is one of the most important drivers of sustainable stability, are already critically underfunded and would be unable to continue their activities in key regions, although the impact may vary among Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

### **Long-term Implications**

In the absence of Western support, Sahel countries, which have sought alternative sources of aid, both military and economic, could significantly shift in their geopolitical positioning. This trend is likely to persist if western support continues to decline.

Sahel countries may prioritise forging closer ties with emerging powers like Russia or China, which have demonstrated a growing interest in expanding their influence in Africa. These countries are perceived by Sahelian partners as more reliable and stable partners, as their support is not contingent on internal political changes or demands for democratic reforms. Russia has already established a presence in Mali through groups like the Africa Corps (formerly Wagner), and training teams have been sent to Burkina Faso and, to a lesser extent, Niger. Such realignments could undermine the influence of Western governments and shift the balance of power in the region, potentially leading to further destabilisation, particularly if these new partners prioritise short-term military solutions over long-term development and stability.

On the other hand, while the change to alternate powers may offer primarily short-term benefits, Sahel countries might also pursue greater self-reliance. This could result in increased efforts to strengthen their internal security apparatus and governance structures. However, such efforts will likely take time to bear fruit, possibly a decade, and during this transition, instability and conflict could worsen.

As Sahelian governments potentially align with partners that may not prioritise human rights and governance reforms, there is a real risk that hard-won progress on issues like democratic governance and protection of human rights could be eroded. Moreover, the emphasis on state security over human security might lead to authoritarian tendencies, increased militarisation and suppression of civil liberties.

In summary, a Western withdrawal from the Sahel could trigger immediate instability, disrupt development projects, and lead to long-term geopolitical realignments that could further entrench conflict and authoritarianism in the region.

## 5.2 Prioritizing bilateral approach

Should relations between Sahel countries and Western powers continue on the current one-to-one approach, the following outcomes are likely:

### Immediate Implications

A one-on-one approach could lead to fragmented and inconsistent support, with individual countries receiving assistance tailored to their specific circumstances but disconnected from broader regional priorities. This lack of coordination may possibly result in inefficiencies and duplication of efforts, as there is a significant risk that each Western partner will focus on its own interests, rather than collective regional challenges. In addition, selfish and power-driven local leaders could profit from the lack of coordination to use funds to further their own domestic agendas, hence exacerbating corruption.

The absence of a cohesive strategy could further hinder efforts to tackle transnational threats, such as terrorism, international organised crime, and migration.

Nevertheless, a positive outcome might be that it would be easier to engage in bilateral cooperation if projects or initiatives were very specific to both partners.

### Long-term Implications

Over time, this disjointed approach may widen the gap and increase misunderstandings between Western assistance and the actual needs of Sahel countries. If support remains fragmented and fails to address the root causes of instability, countries in the region may be increasingly frustrated with Western models of engagement. This could push them to move beyond the search for alternative alliances and focus more on self-reliant strategies that could disrupt the international coordination and cooperation system. This will increase the chance for malign actors, such as terrorist groups, to pursue their agenda in the region and across the continent.

## 5.3 Balanced, pragmatic and transparent cooperation

A more balanced, pragmatic, and transparent cooperation model could offer the following advantages:

### Immediate Implications

In the short term, this model would enhance the effectiveness of ongoing security and development efforts by establishing a framework based on mutual respect and aligned interests. Transparent communication between Western and Sahelian partners would ensure that priorities are understood and interventions are better coordinated, reducing redundancy and improving resource allocation.

A balanced and pragmatic partnership would also strengthen local ownership of initiatives. By aligning external support with national and regional priorities, it would enable Sahel countries to play a more active role in shaping strategies that directly impact their future. This would encourage more effective use of Western technical expertise and financial support, while ensuring that Sahel countries retain their

decision-making capacity. Additionally, transparent engagement fosters trust, which can facilitate smoother cooperation and mitigate misunderstandings that often arise from opaque interactions.

It could also help mitigate the growing influence of Russia and China in the region. By fostering clear communication and trust, this approach could reduce the appeal of Russian disinformation tactics aimed at undermining Western credibility. In turn, it would offer Sahel countries a transparent, reliable partnership model that prioritises regional stability and helps resist influences that may not align with their long-term goals.

### **Long-term Implications**

Over time, the adoption of a balanced and transparent approach could significantly strengthen the foundations of cooperation between Western and Sahelian partners. By moving away from perceptions of externally imposed agendas, this model allows for the gradual development of trust, which is critical to long-term stability and success. Sahel countries would increasingly feel empowered to address their local and regional needs, with Western assistance serving as a complement rather than a driving force. This empowerment would lead to more sustainable outcomes, as locally-led initiatives are often more contextually relevant and culturally sensitive.

A transparent cooperation model would also promote greater accountability from both sides. Western nations would be held accountable for aligning their support with the actual needs of Sahel countries, while Sahelian governments would be encouraged to meet the benchmarks set for development, governance, and security progress. This mutual accountability not only drives higher standards of governance, but also serves as an added value for local populations, as it increases leaders' responsiveness to local needs. Such responsiveness, in turn, can act as a driver of stability and make interventions more effective, as both partners are equally invested in achieving shared goals.

One of the most significant long-term benefits of this approach is its potential to foster a new paradigm for North-South cooperation. Rather than adhering to traditional donor-recipient dynamics, this model emphasises co-construction strategies where both Western and Sahelian actors collaborate as equal partners in developing the governance apparatus for security and development. This shift could redefine how international cooperation is perceived, leading to more equitable and lasting partnerships.

## **6 CONCLUSIONS**

At this point, it should be noted that this paper is based on the opinions of third parties, local experts who were given the opportunity to express their views in a frank and open manner during the Sahel-Europe Forum, and more specifically during the panel dedicated to the topic at hand. The views of the UFV and the NSD-S HUB do not necessarily coincide with those expressed in this paper.

The gap between Western nations and Sahel countries in terms of cooperation has widened due to rapidly changing security dynamics, divergent priorities, and inconsistent approaches. To overcome these challenges and establish a more



balanced and effective framework, it is essential to rethink and reimagine how partnerships should be structured. The following conclusions intend to address the root causes of instability, promoting sustainable development and fostering long-term regional stability. They are anchored in the recognition that local ownership, regional cooperation, and a more holistic approach to security and development are key to addressing the complex challenges in the Sahel.

### **Enhanced Integrated Regional Approaches**

One of the most pressing needs is to develop regional strategies that reflect the interconnected nature of security and development challenges in the Sahel. Rather than fragmented, country-specific interventions, Western nations could prioritise coordinated efforts that align with broader regional priorities. This includes working closely with regional organizations, such as the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, to ensure that security strategies and development initiatives are integrated across borders. However, it is equally important for international partners to recognise the limitations of the regional approaches that have been implemented over the years without yielding significant changes. The recent changes in the G5 Sahel framework, which once served as a critical platform for regional security cooperation, require new thinking about a peace and security architecture for the Sahel in the post-G5 era. To be effective, this approach should include a thorough reassessment of the performance of regional and international organizations, ending support for those that fail to meet standards of effectiveness. A regional approach would help prevent duplication of effort while addressing transnational threats such as terrorism, organised crime, and human trafficking, which cannot be contained within the borders of a single state.

### **Local Capacity Building**

Sustainable development and long-term security can only be achieved by empowering Sahelian institutions to take ownership of their own future, including successes and failures. This requires targeted investment and a more transparent and efficient selective process of the people and institutions participating in building local capacities programmes – whether in governance, security or civil society –. External interventions must move away from a top-down model where Western actors dictate terms, and instead focus on strengthening the capacity of national and local institutions to lead and manage their own security and development programmes. This includes not only financial and technical support, but also ensuring that assistance is culturally sensitive and adapted to local contexts. Supporting governments in improving service delivery, governance reforms, and community-driven development projects can foster greater trust between the state and its citizens.

### **Enhanced Dialogue and Partnership**

Successful cooperation between Western powers and Sahel countries depends on open, transparent and continuous dialogue. Historically, the lack of such engagement has led to misunderstandings, misaligned priorities, and mistrust. Western countries must engage in deeper discussions with Sahelian governments and civil society, addressing grievances and aligning mutual interests. Western powers should also increase and improve their engagement with non-state actors and local leaders to gain a more nuanced understanding of the realities on the ground, ensuring that interventions are not solely state-centric but consider community-based needs and perspectives.

## 6.1 Actionable Pathways

### Short- to Near-Term (0 to 2 years)

In the short term, bearing in mind that relations between the Sahelian and Western countries are currently fragile, the focus should be on finding the best way to efficiently re-build trust that could lead to re-thinking and agreeing on new terms to lay the groundwork for stronger, more beneficial cooperation. This can be achieved through pilot projects that showcase the value of a more integrated and collaborative approach to regional security and development. These pilot initiatives should involve both security and civil-military components, demonstrating how coordinated efforts can address both the symptoms and the root causes of instability. Additionally, a dedicated platform for follow-up, monitoring, evaluation, and advocacy on Sahel issues should be established. This platform would ensure accountability and provide space for continuous dialogue between international partners and local actors, should they be represented by governmental or non-governmental entities.

### Mid-Term (3 to 5 years)

In the mid-term, successful pilot initiatives should be expanded into broader regional programmes. This stage should be the outcome of pro-activity, active engagement, and enhanced coordination between regional and continental organisations, such as the AU and ECOWAS, which should take steps to owning the programmes and tailoring them according to local needs. Furthermore, the participation of the local entities and groups' representatives should be a 'sine qua non'. This means leveraging regional and continental systems to drive strategies, align resources, and shape decision-making processes. At the same time, efforts to strengthen local institutions should be intensified, ensuring that Sahelian governments have the capacity to respond to emerging challenges. Furthermore, it is also important to look for a more cohesive and resource-efficient oriented regional coordination and response, by drawing from lessons learned experiences from unsuccessful projects such as the G5 Sahel, or relatively efficient security cooperation frameworks (e.g. the Multinational Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad Basin). The achievement of this goal could then lead to enhancing coordination at inter-regional and continental levels. Adaptive partnerships are crucial during this phase, as the region will continue to face evolving threats, whether from climate change, extremist groups, or political instability. Western partners must remain flexible in their approach, ensuring that their strategies evolve in line with the changing needs and capacities of local actors.

### Long-Term (6 to 10 years)

In the long-term, the ultimate goal should be a fully integrated, regionally driven model of cooperation, with local institutions leading both security and development. This vision requires a gradual transition from external dependency to local ownership. By this stage, the effectiveness of new approaches should be rigorously evaluated and necessary adjustments made to ensure that they remain aligned with both Sahelian priorities and international interests. This phase should also focus on ensuring that the progress made in local governance, security capacity, and community development is sustainable, even in the absence of continued external support.

## 6.2 Key Principles for Success

### **Prioritize Local Needs**

One of the major failures of past interventions in the Sahel has been the reliance on one-size-fits-all solutions. Future efforts must prioritise tailoring interventions to the specific needs and contexts of Sahel countries. This means developing strategies that are flexible enough to address local realities, whether in terms of security, governance, or development. In addition to national governments, the voices of local communities and civil society should play a prominent role in shaping these strategies.

### **Commit to Transparency**

Building trust between Western and Sahelian partners is crucial, and can only be achieved through transparent, respectful, and consistent communication. Western powers need to be clear about their goals and limitations, while Sahelian governments should feel empowered to express their concerns and priorities. Transparent communication will not only foster better cooperation but will also help prevent misunderstandings that can lead to disengagement or conflict.

### **Strengthen and Improve Regional Cooperation**

A fragmented approach to regional security and development will not suffice. The Sahel's challenges – ranging from terrorism to climate change – are transnational in nature, and solutions must reflect this. Supporting regional organisations and fostering regional cooperation is essential to addressing these interconnected challenges. Western countries should work to strengthen the capacity of regional organisations, which are well-positioned to lead on regional strategies, while also fostering greater cooperation between neighbouring countries.

### **Encourage Local Ownership**

Local ownership is key to the long-term sustainability of any initiative. Western partners should aim to complement, rather than dominate, local efforts, and to empower Sahelian governments and institutions to take control of their own development and security agendas. Building capacity at the local level, ensuring that governance is responsive to citizens' needs, and fostering a sense of ownership among local communities will help ensure that external interventions have a lasting impact.

These are principles that could enable both Western and Sahelian partners to transition toward a more effective, efficient, and balanced model of cooperation. By prioritising regional integration, local ownership, and enhanced dialogue, the international community can help foster long-term stability and development in the Sahel. A more holistic and collaborative approach – one that goes beyond military intervention to address governance, development, and community resilience – will be key to navigating the region's complex challenges.