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Better together? Franco-German cooperation in the Sahel

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The Sahel has become a hub for European security, migration and development-related activities. One of the political drivers has been the increasing Franco-German convergence around the aims of stabilisation and combating the root causes of migration. This blog post traces the trajectory of this strategic convergence and assesses its effective implications. While France, Germany and a core group of EU member states have gradually strengthened the implementation of the comprehensive approach, this blog post also underlines potential pitfalls and the need for systematic vertical and horizontal EU coordination.

1 Arc of crisis and new frontier

Placed at the centre of the so-called African ‘arc of instability’, the Sahel zone has taken an increasingly important place in Europe’s strategic considerations. Interlinked challenges emanating from the region, including state fragility, jihadist terrorism, organised crime and migration have direct implications for Europe’s own stability. The EU had already recognised these stakes in 2011 when the Libyan crisis was shaking the region. It dedicated its first post-Lisbon comprehensive strategy to the region. However, as critics pointed out, the strategy had a strong focus on development, but shed a blind eye on strategic and defence-related questions. In fact, security-related challenges, culminating in the Islamist offensive on the Malian capital in 2013, caught the EU asleep at the steering wheel.

A second wakeup call followed soon. The Sahel zone became a major transit route for asylum seekers during the so-called ‘migration crisis’ in 2015. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) more than half of the [migrants who arrived in Lampedusa](#) in 2014 passed through the Nigerien town of Agadez. Between the early 2000s and 2016 the [number of migrants transiting the Sahel](#) increased from around 40.000-60.000 to roughly 250.000. As Libya remained in a state of turmoil, its coastal cities became prominent places of departure connecting the trans-Sahelian route with the EU. Consequently, the number of sea [arrivals in Italy](#) increased from approximately 43.000 in 2013 to around 181.000 in 2016. As of 2015, [migrants from West Africa](#) made up roughly 35% of these arrivals.

With a broad range of activities, the Sahel zone has become a laboratory for the EU’s comprehensive approach linking diplomatic, security, development, and migration-related initiatives. It also stands for a growing strategic convergence between two key players within the EU: France and Germany. This blog post reviews the trajectory of this convergence, shows how it translates into bilateral and European practice and outlines remaining challenges and potential pitfalls.

2 A lonely France at Europe’s new frontier

France is among the few EU member states with a long-standing strategic interest in the Sahel zone. It has colonial ties with several countries in the region. This also explains the relatively large diaspora communities from the Sahel in France as well as the thousands of French citizens that still live in the region. France also has close economic ties with the region. A prominent example is the country’s heavy investment in Nigerien uranium mines. The Sahel had also been a focal area of French security policy due to France’s declared war against Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and repeated kidnappings of French citizens by Islamist groups.

The difference with Germany is striking. Until 2015, sub-Saharan Africa only played a marginal role in its foreign policy considerations or public discourse. Germany’s relationship with the region, and African countries more broadly, was predominantly shaped by development assistance and humanitarian concerns, shepherded by the German Development Ministry (BMZ). Furthermore, there were only limited commercial ties to the region. In 2014, the share of [German exports to Africa](#) amounted to merely 2% of its overall trade volume, while imports lingered at an equally low 2.2%.

The discrepancy between French strategic interests and those of other EU member states came to the fore in the run-up to the Malian crisis in 2013. Throughout 2012, France had been warning its fellow Europeans about Mali's destabilisation. However, they did not take these French warnings seriously and dragged their feet concerning collective action. When the Islamists marched on Bamako, France intervened unilaterally and within 24 hours. The other EU member states rapidly provided diplomatic and operational support, but the bulk of the burden was still carried by France. This triggered a domestic debate in France: [Some](#) argued that France was left alone, paying the "price of blood" for the security interests of the entire continent. France remained the key guarantor of Mali's security with its counter-terrorism operation *Serval* (2012 – 2014) and its predecessor *Barkhane* (2014 – ongoing), which counts 4500 troops.

3 Germany's pivot to Africa

Despite this imbalance, the following years saw an increased European engagement in the region. The French calls for more European solidarity particularly resonated with Germany. In 2013, it offered logistical support to operation *Serval*, became the second biggest contributor to the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM), and made significant aid contributions. In 2014, France and Germany decided to send parts of the Franco-German Brigade to Mali, and thus for the first time to Africa. These measures have to be seen against the backdrop of the Franco-German friendship as well as Berlin's coinciding promise for greater international responsibility.

However, in strategic terms, Germany's pivot towards Africa only occurred in 2014-2015. The so-called 'migration crisis' and the public's increasingly alarmed attitude towards immigration provided the German government with a new lens through which it perceived the African continent in general, and the Sahel in particular. Linking poverty, political instability and migration flows from Africa, Chancellor Merkel developed a powerful narrative whereby a key German interest on the continent consisted of mitigating the root causes of displacement. In October 2016, in an [interview](#) with the German newspaper *Die Zeit* Merkel explicitly defined Africa's wellbeing as a part of Germany's national interest. This narrative resonated well in the German public. [A poll from 2017](#) shows that 38% of Germans think Africa is the continent on which their government should be most actively involved.

Germany's strategic pivot towards Africa was accompanied by an increased willingness to act. Germany [assumed command](#) of the EU's capacity building mission EUCAP Sahel Mali between 2014 and 2017 and of EUTM Mali in 2015. As of [September 2018](#), it deployed 812 troops to the UN-led MINUSMA operation and another 143 troops to EUTM Mali. This makes Mali the country with the largest overseas German troop contingent after Afghanistan. In addition, Germany championed a more strategic approach to the development of North-African and sub-Saharan countries by presenting the '[Marshall Plan with Africa](#)' and the '[Compact with Africa](#)' under its G20 presidency in 2016-7.

4 Better together and more joined-up?

By pivoting towards Africa Germany moved closer to France in strategic terms. Meanwhile, France increasingly endorsed the German preference for a comprehensive approach combining civilian and military means. Addressing his ambassadors in September 2017, President Macron [stated](#) that a foreign policy that seeks to restore security needs to use three complementary levers: diplomacy, development and defence. He added that "the Sahel is an excellent example of this combination of action levers". Despite this rapprochement differences remain: France is still much more invested in military terms while Germany's continues to capitalize on humanitarian and development aid. Both strategic convergence and persisting differences are mirrored in

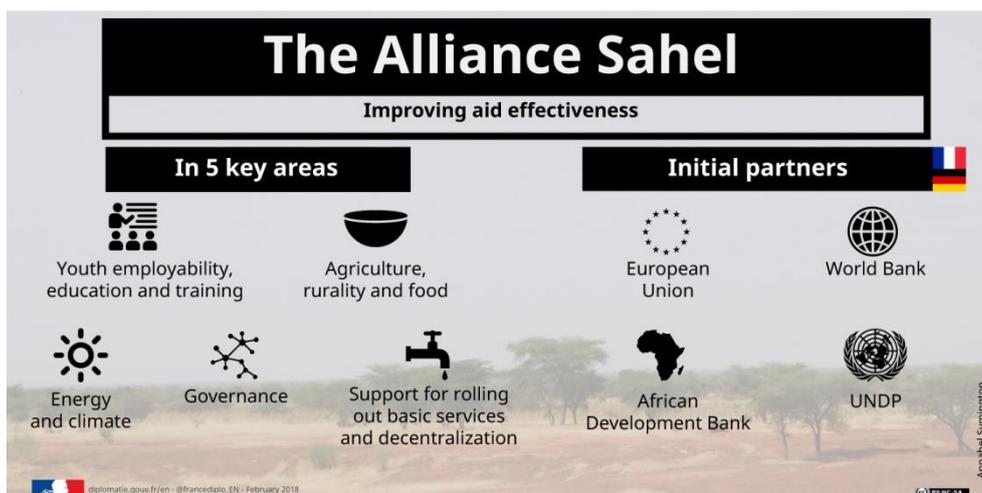
recent bilateral initiatives in the region. The answer to the question whether France and Germany are ‘better together’ in the Sahel is thus: “yes, but...”:

Yes,

Reflecting a shared interest in controlled migration, Germany and France played an important role in negotiating with Sahel countries to establish Compacts under the EU’s Partnership Framework on Migration. In 2016, then German and French foreign ministers Steinmeier and Ayrault [travelled](#) to Niger together to present their joint response to the security and development challenges in the region and negotiated an EU-Niger declaration on migration control and prevention.

Germany also joined France in its support to the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Launched in 2014, this security initiative aims at tackling terrorism, cross-border crime and human trafficking in the region. The G5 Sahel cross-border joint force includes up to 5.000 troops from Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and Mali. [Since April 2017](#), France and Germany have supported the establishment of the force through bilateral projects. The EU provided EUR 100 million for its set-up and established a [regional coordination](#) cell linking G5, bilateral and EU-led security initiatives.

In July 2017, this largely security-related initiative was complemented with the so-called Alliance for the Sahel (see graph below). A product of the [Franco-German Ministerial Council](#), the Alliance should be a platform for better coordination between European and international development partners in the region. Its non-exclusive nature allowed a core group of EU member states (Spain, Italy, the UK and Luxembourg) to join the Alliance along with the EU itself, the World Bank, the African Development Bank and UNDP. Between 2018 and 2020 the Alliance is supposed to [implement over 500 projects worth EUR 6 billion](#) which are made available to the G5 Sahel countries. Instead of replacing existing initiatives in the Sahel, the Alliance aims at bundling resources and enhancing their effectiveness. Backed by the political will of France and Germany, it could help put the EU’s integrated approach along the security-development-migration nexus into practice in the Sahel.



But...

While it might be too early to tell, two potential challenges to the effective implementation of the integrated approach can be identified.

First, there could be a **gap between rhetoric and action** based on two factors:

1. Financial structure and envelope: The EUR 6 billion promised to support the implementation of projects are not necessarily ‘new money’. Given the Sahel Alliance’s objective to provide a framework for already existing initiatives, there is a possibility that these funds might simply be redeployed from existing resources. A likely source of funding is the EUTF, which already [dedicates the largest share](#) (EUR 1.5 billion of its EUR 4 billion volume) to the Sahel and Lake Chad region. More generally, the EUR 6 billion made available under the Sahel Alliance appear limited if one considers that the same amount was provided to Turkey alone as part of its migration deal with the EU.
2. Complex interaction effects between migration, security, and development: Studies show that in the short run economic growth tends to lead to more outward migration. Emigration numbers are starting to decline only once a state has undergone a period of steady economic development and governance reform eventually reaching the status of a middle-income country. The Sahel Alliance might thus not immediately or visibly ‘deliver’ in terms of the aim to mitigate the root causes of migration. There can also be negative interaction effects when it comes to security and development if those providing aid end up being too closely associated with the military.

The second question is to what extent the **political momentum behind Franco-German co-leadership** can be sustained in the medium-term. Two factors explain this uncertainty:

1. Despite convergence, French and German priorities in the Sahel still differ. The French engagement is predominantly driven by security concerns. France has a keen interest in preventing a permanent and very costly stationing of operation Barkhane. Meanwhile, Germany’s interest has been closely tied to the issue of migration. Yet the public’s attention seems to shift from outward immigration to integration. In 2015, 76% of polled Germans identified immigration as the [most important challenge](#) facing their country – in 2018 this share declined to 30%. A decreasing public interest and the recognition that it is hard to deliver on the promise of fighting the root causes of migration (see above) could temper the government’s strategic interest in the region in the medium-term.
2. The different strategic cultures of France and Germany raise doubts regarding co-leadership on security matters. Their diverse approaches to military engagement are exemplified by the 2018 deployment of the Franco-German brigade to different missions. France deployed its troops to operation Barkhane. Germany [did not equip](#) its personnel with a robust mandate, merely allowing them to support the UN operation MINUSMA. Germany’s restraint continues to be backed by the public: A [recent poll](#) showed that 53% of Germans advocate more foreign policy restraint, while 69% are not even aware of the reasons behind their country’s engagement in Mali.

Conclusion

The European External Action Service (EEAS) had [recognised the strategic importance](#) of the Sahel region and the growing link between security and development issues already in 2011. However, it took a security and migration crisis to rally sufficient political support from the member states to support this narrative. In light of these interlinked challenges, particularly France and Germany have seen a convergence of their interests in the Sahel. This has led to a greater recognition of each other’s approaches and priorities. The coincident support for the G5 Sahel Force and the Sahel Alliance underline this trend. The region has thus become a laboratory

for the EU's comprehensive approach. Yet, it is too early to judge what the effective impact of the combined efforts led by Germany, France, the EU and other selected member states will be.

This blog post pointed towards two potential pitfalls. There could be a gap between the comprehensive approach on paper and in practice due to a lack of resources and negative interaction effects between security, development and migration-related measures. In addition, strategic convergence between France, Germany and other member states could decline due to shifts in domestic priorities or external events.

While the political drive mostly depends on the member states, the EU has an important coordinating role to play in three respects. First, it should strive to ensure consistency and coherence between supranational, intergovernmental and national contributions in the region. Second, it should foster synergies between security, migration and development-related activities while keeping a close eye on potential negative interaction effects. Third, it should actively involve the G5 countries and move from predominantly donor-led initiatives to more inclusive partnerships. Led by France and Germany, the member states are in the driving seat regarding the Sahel, but the EU should ensure that the various parts of the engine truly work better together and that it does not lose steam halfway.

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