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The G5 Sahel: The End of the Road

Dr. David Doukhan

On December 2, 2023, Burkina Faso and Niger announced their withdrawal from the G5 Sahel joint military force.¹ Their withdrawal brings the number of member states that have ended their participation in the force to three after Mali's withdrawal on May 15, 2022.²

On December 6, Mauritania and Chad, the last two members of the force, also announced the upcoming dissolution of the G5 Sahel and its mechanisms.³ Mauritania and Chad read the map correctly and respected the sovereign decision of Burkina Faso and Niger to withdraw from the alliance. The decision is in accordance with Article 20 of the agreement establishing the G5 Sahel, which states: "The force can be dispersed at the request of at least three member states."⁴

The G5 Sahel is an institutional framework that coordinates regional cooperation in development policies and security challenges in West Africa. The framework was created on February 16, 2014 in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, at a summit of five Sahel countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The framework adopted a founding charter on December 19, 2014. The coordination between the member states is organized at different levels. The chiefs of staff of the respective countries coordinate the military aspect. The objective of the G5 Sahel was to strengthen the link between economic growth and security and jointly battle the threat of jihadist organizations operating in the region (AQIM, MOJWA, Al-Mourabitoun, and Boko Haram).

The purpose of the G5 Sahel is to ensure development and security conditions in the region of its member states, propose a strategic intervention framework, combine development and security, support democracy and good governance within the framework of mutually beneficial regional and international cooperation, and promote inclusive and sustainable regional development.

1 Burkina, Niger to Quit G5 Anti-jihadist Force See the link: <https://www.barrons.com/news/burkina-niger-to-quit-g5-anti-jihadist-force-ae8d045d>

2 Mali announced its withdrawal from the G5 Sahel regional organization. See the link: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/05/16/le-mali-annonce-son-retrait-de-l-organisation-regionale-g5-sahel_6126249_3212.html

3 Chad, Mauritania pave way for dissolution of G5 Sahel alliance. See the link: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/6/chad-mauritania-pave-way-to-dissolve-g5-anti-rebel-alliance>

4 Convention portant : Création du G5 Sahel. See the link: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170602170931/http://www.g5sahel.org/images/convention.pdf>; <https://www.oecd.org/swac/maps/64-G5Sahel.pdf>

In this article, I will address the lessons that may be derived from the experience of interstate cooperation against terrorism and the spread of radical Islam, particularly for African actors.

In 2017, member states launched the G5 Sahel Joint Force to combat rising Islamic terrorism and organized crime. The G5 Sahel is an ad hoc force in the sense that it is not affiliated with the African Union's (AU) African peace and security architecture.

In addition to the benefit of avoiding bureaucracy and delays caused by the search for consensus, ad hoc responses frequently provide flexibility and autonomy in selecting the geographic region of involvement. They also allow the member states to choose their allies and provide logistical and financial support essential to the success of an ad hoc mission.

Thanks to cooperation while removing state obstacles, the G5 Sahel countries were able to launch cooperative initiatives for development and enhance shared channels of action and coordination in matters of defense and security. The G5 Sahel and the joint forces made it possible to open lines of communication between countries that, in the past, had very little interaction, such as Mauritania and Chad.

Disagreements Between Member States

In terms of the fight against insecurity in the framework of a state grouping, the commitment of all organization members is necessary to pour content into the union of efforts. Within the Joint Force-G5 Sahel framework, each member's military involvement was not equal and binding for each country but rather functional. For example, Mauritania, which was not affected by radical Islamic terrorism like the other coalition countries, remained within its borders in a defensive position, even though it benefited from the interstate and Western cooperation led by France later in 2017. Mauritania housed the headquarters of the permanent secretariat of the G5 Sahel and the organization's defense college - Beit, a war book whose role is to train and prepare the military commanders of the organization's member states.

Disagreements between member states were inevitable. Mauritania, for example, has been accused, rightly or wrongly, by Mali of entering into a non-aggression pact with jihadist terrorist organizations. Before the recent military coups in Mali and Niger, Niger criticized Mali for failing to prevent radical Islamic terrorist groups from establishing hideouts and shelters in areas near the border with Niger - the zone des trois frontières.

The Limits of This Initiative

Leadership is portrayed as an essential component in global military cooperation. However, the G5 Sahel joint force's leadership does not come from the member states. The joint force is often perceived as a 'French project'; it is sometimes seen as an African

initiative monopolized by France, which is the main source of the task force's diplomatic, political, and military influence.⁵ Instead of supporting the countries and the joint force of the G5 Sahel, France behaved autonomously, dictating the course of affairs to the members of the organization, thereby creating a lot of frustration on the part of the security forces of the Sahel countries, which also spilled over into public opinion in those countries. Its moves actually created and supported the phenomenon of neo-colonialism, which is why, later on, France was expelled from several countries in the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger), and Russia entered its place through the 'Wagner force'.

The experience within the scope of the combined force demonstrates that countries can request international support, including financial assistance. Still, they must avoid getting into a position of strong or absolute dependence. International actors, motivated by personal interests, will seize the opportunity to exploit this dependency by enforcing their personal agenda and solutions that are not particularly relevant to local, national, and regional realities.

Within the framework of the G5 Sahel, the security approach desired by France, the European Union (EU), and their international partners was the overwhelming prevalence, and it was imposed on the organization's members.

The political summit in Pau (Le Sommet de Pau) on January 13, 2020, redefined the military commitments in the Sahel within the framework of an alliance called: 'Coalition pour le Sahel'.⁶ The heads of state of the G5 Sahel called on France to continue its commitments. The Pau Summit was also an opportunity for French President Emmanuel Macron to clarify France's commitment to Africa: "Why is France in the Sahel? A question that has come up often", asked President Macron before responding in these terms: "It is for two simple reasons: the first, which has been mentioned many times - the fight against terrorism. The second is that we are here to allow the Sahelian countries to accept their full sovereignty in their territories...". The French president heard statements that were particularly unfavorable to France's strategy in Africa and used the stage to say: "The speeches I have heard in recent weeks are inappropriate. Your leaders reject the content of the speeches, and I thank them. They are not worthy because they also serve other interests," said the French president, looking for clear and certain answers.⁷

5 Mali: France proposes to the UN the deployment of an African force in the Sahel. See the link: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/niger/mali-la-france-propose-a-lonu-le-deploiement-dune-force-africaine-au-sahel_3060181.html

6 This new entity is supposed to bring together all the future and already operational initiatives in the region - mainly the G5-Sahel, the 4,500-strong French Barkhane force, as well as the Takuba special forces group. See the link: <https://www.dw.com/fr/une-nouvelle-coalition-annonc%C3%A9e-%C3%A0-pau-pour-pacifier-le-sahel/a-52013018>

7 Sommet de Pau - Déclaration conjointe des Chefs d'État. See the link: <https://de.ambafrance.org/Sommet-de-Pau-Declaration-conjointe-des-Chefs-d-Etat>

Economic Dependence

A heavy dependence on external financial aid also has the disadvantage of creating a lot of uncertainty due to delays in implementing and realizing funding promises. All these depend on the agenda of the actors whose interests change according to geopolitical circumstances. The G5 Sahel Joint Force has received many funding promises, but few have been fulfilled.

Furthermore, it is well known that when regional organizations receive direct funding from non-African actors, the influence of the African Union tends to be reduced. Most of the funding for the G5 Sahel came from the European Union and did not go through the African Union. This reality, and the strong French influence on the task force, played an important role in the position of the European Union, which did not support the joint force as it did for the Joint Multinational Force of Lake Chad, the FMM (Force multinationale mixte du Bassin du lac Tchad).⁸ The African Union's support is important, especially to strengthen the legitimacy of military initiatives and mobilize and produce resources, even if in a limited way.

The Importance of Political Stability

The accumulated experience of the G5 Sahel also shows that when it comes to a military coalition against terrorism, the state stability of the countries involved in the organization is important. Internal political crises, by definition, degrade a country's security institutions and policies, which impact regional and international cooperation, particularly when the country's policies alter or break down. The changes following the coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso prevented the appearance of a coherent strategy against insecurity. The military coups also tend to damage and weaken the state defense and security forces that are supposed to fight public insecurity and the spread of terrorism by Islamic jihadist organizations.

Many hopes were placed on the G5 Sahel when it was established in 2017. The member states will not regret its dissolution due to its limited contribution on the ground. The organization's member states failed to meet the military quota required to carry out its mission. Furthermore, despite numerous efforts, the organization failed to gain the support of the international community, particularly the United Nations, which refused to give it a significant mandate and allow it to operate in the field. Despite the wishes of its members, together with France, to make it a central tool in the fight against terrorism,

8 Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. See the link: https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/results/monitoring-and-evaluation_en

In connection with Lake Chad and the FMM force, see the section of: Sahel & Lake Chad report from 2023 at the link: https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/document/download/c891c32f-3405-43d3-89c8-d41ddef5345c_en?file-name=2023%20First%20Semester%20-%20Monitoring%20report%20for%20Sahel%20and%20Lake%20Chad%20-%20Full%20report.pdf

the lack of a strong and acceptable sponsor on the timeline caused its weakening and dissolution.

Over the years of its existence, the G5 Sahel exposed its limitations and ineffectiveness for all to see. The violence of the radical Islamic Jihad organizations continued to spread. It caused the death of thousands of civilians and soldiers, as well as the displacement of millions from their homes. The violence of criminal organizations also increased. In addition, political instability and a series of military coups further weakened the Sahel countries.

The failure of the G5 Sahel can be used as an example with insights and lessons for other military cooperation structures on the African continent such as: 'The Accra Initiative' (The Accra Initiative) from September 2017 which aims to prevent the spillover of radical Islamic terrorism from the Sahel and to deal with cross-border organized crime and violent extremism in the border areas of the state's member (Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and Burkina Faso - observers: Mali and Niger). Another example is that of the 'Alliance of Sahel States' AES (Alliance of Sahel States) based on a mutual defense agreement created between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso on September 16, 2023. The agreement was signed during the Niger crisis in 2023, in which the West African political/economic bloc ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) threatened military intervention to restore civilian rule after a coup in Niger earlier that year. The stated purpose of this alliance is to protect against possible threats of armed rebellion or external aggression while emphasizing that: "Any attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of one or more parties will be considered as aggression against the other parties" - like Article 5 of the NATO alliance. When three countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) from the organization are confiscated by the others due to military coups and damage to democracy, there is no point in the existence of the organization as the G2 Sahel.

The dissolution of the G5 Sahel alliance marks a turning point in regional security cooperation. This is a significant event that raises many questions about the future of security in the Sahel. Some fear the weakening of the fight against the radical Islamic Jihad organizations and an increase in personal and public insecurity; some believe that the dissolution of the G5 Sahel may open the way to new forms of cooperation that are more adapted to the specific challenges of each country in the expanses of the Sahel. There is no doubt that the dissolution of the G5 Sahel alliance could result in less effective military coordination in the region. In this situation, jihadist groups can take advantage of the situation to expand their influence. This is why the affected countries must act immediately and aggressively, reorganizing themselves in a new way in order to build a coordinated and effective response to the spread of radical organizations.