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# I. INTRODUCTION: THE SAHEL REGION IN 2023

In February 2023, the remaining four member states of the G5-Sahel deemed the organisation ready for a dynamic restart.<sup>1</sup> The first high level conference since 2021 and since Mali's withdrawal demanded international as well as regional mobilization to boost the organisation. However, the G5-Sahel finds itself in no easy position and is most times labelled: ineffective.

According to Giovanie Biha, deputy head of the UN office for West Africa and the Sahel, more than 10,000 schools and nearly 7,000 health centers were shut down by 2023 across the Sahel region. 6 million people are displaced, and 18.6 million people are suffering from severe food insecurity in the region. She highlighted the region's "unprecedented levels of security and humanitarian challenges, socio-political instability, further compounded by the impact of climate change, and food insecurity which was exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine."<sup>2</sup> In addition, terrorism, illicit activities and tensions between communities are spreading. In particular the border region between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, the Liptako-Gourma region, is central to rebels' and extremists' arms trafficking.<sup>3</sup>

Unmet basic needs "such as protection, water, sanitation, healthcare, and unresolved conflicts among local communities" only increase the persuasiveness of violent extremism,<sup>4</sup> while political systems suffer from a persistent crisis of trust, legitimacy and efficiency.<sup>5</sup> The concept of good governance is largely missing.<sup>6</sup> State and policy shortcomings revolve around structural marginalization and weak levels of political participation and weak institutional capacity opposed to elite capture and political conflict.<sup>7</sup> A fast-growing population, despite proliferating inter-communal violence and violent extremism, and low economic productivity, further exacerbates these shortcomings.<sup>8</sup> What makes the dire situation in the Sahel region unique is a fragmented security environment of multiple local, international and private military actors, self-defense groups and violent extremist groups.<sup>9</sup> Within this fragmentation, the G5-Sahel tries to position itself as a regional security institution; "as an African solution to an African problem."<sup>10</sup>

Reflecting the multitude of issues the region faces, a multitude of recommendations are being formulated how to tackle insecurity and violence. Recommendations that seem excessive and hence overwhelming sometimes. In a similar vein, this policy brief provides recommendations to restructure the G5-Sahel which may seem unrealistic at first as they would, most crucially, require secured funding. However, one recommendation will be prioritized over the others: To increase its effectiveness, perception, and stability the G5-Sahel must agree on a geopolitical consensus defining its own role as security cooperation of intentional regional decision-making. Lacking a sustainable perspective based on an institutional purpose of its own, the organization's long-term stability relies on increasing its attractiveness to all member states including the outlier Mali.

## II. WHAT REGIONAL COOPERATION FOR THE SAHEL?

Political systems in the Sahel region suffer from a major crisis and a need to rethink societal contracts.<sup>11</sup> Mali saw its president Amadou Toumani Touré ousted in a military coup in 2012.<sup>12</sup> After a failed counter-coup, presidential elections in 2013 and 2018, and military coups in 2020 and 2021 the country is now waiting for its transitional government to return to a democratic constitution.<sup>13</sup> In Burkina Faso, President Blaise Compaoré was ousted by the military in 2014. The following years continued with political turmoil and two military coups in 2022 alone.14 In the G5-Sahel's east, after Chadian president Idriss Deby was killed in 2021, not the speaker of parliament as stipulated by law but a military council stepped in and positioned Mahamat Idriss Deby as interim president.<sup>15</sup> The transitional period not progressing,<sup>16</sup> oppositional protest against the government erupted in 2022 and faced violent crackdowns by state forces.<sup>17</sup> The current political landscape in the Sahel is attuned to coups and (military) elites stabilizing their power, albeit unconstitutionally. A dynamic that is not foreign to Niger either where the government was able to thwart a coup in 2021<sup>18</sup> but fake news on ousters continue to circulate easily.<sup>19</sup>

Debates on regional cooperation must reckon with these volatile, violent and unconstitutional dynamics. What kind of regional cooperation can be envisioned? What kind of cooperation might be envisioned by the elites in power? Such considerations are important if research wants to address institutional ineffectiveness as such considerations re-evaluate ineffectiveness in the first place. How are motivations, targets and ambitions informing political decisions to engage in regional cooperation: A process of intentional deliberation by officials observing "the situation at the moment of choice" leading up to an institution of security cooperation.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, from its initiation on, an institution serves a political purpose and must live up to (functional) expectations.<sup>21</sup> If those are not being fulfilled the aforementioned deliberation might realign.

Here the objective to preserve "the status quo, security and stability" of a ruling system becomes the underlying logic.<sup>22</sup> The benefits to engage in regional cooperation must therefore face the possibility of being outperformed by presumed costs and constraints. A stipulation to keep in mind by both, G5 members as well as external partners and observers.

### **III. WHY INEFFECTIVE?**

Ultimately, the G5-Sahel's ineffectiveness is derived from the organization not living up to its stated purpose of fighting and limiting terrorist and violent extremist threats in the region. The three main areas the G5-Sahel was supposed to be responsible for are (1) Political deficiencies in governmental management, law compliance, and human rights protection. (2) Security threats from terrorism, extremism and organized crime. (3) Developmental and socio-economic issues.<sup>23</sup> To this end, the G5's Joint Forces, composed of military and police forces, are combating terrorism and organized crime in the members' border areas, while the mandate includes support to humanitarian actions and displaced people as well.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, in three out of five G5-countries the head of state came to power by coups d'états and by uncon-



stitutional changes in government. Moreover, insecurity from terrorist groups is proliferating and spreading more than ever.<sup>25</sup> Jihadist attacks are not only occurring in the Malian North and its central region, but are increasingly threatening Niger, Burkina Faso as well as countries further South like Benin, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>26</sup> Instead of mediating these conflicts the G5-Sahel continues to search for "its place in the region."<sup>27</sup>

Already, the organization can be seen as ineffective as long as its name does not correspond to today's make-up of G4-Sahel. The objective to fight regional insecurities is challenged then as long as Mali, with its central geographical location vital to a successful G5, is no member state.<sup>28</sup> The territorial discontinuity exacerbates extremist activities in the Liptako-Gourma region.<sup>29</sup>

Being dependent on external support for its institutional and operational functionality,<sup>30</sup> internal cohesion is pivotal to present itself to such outside funding as a reliable recipient. Likewise, an internal consensus is required to select strategically and jointly external partners and their support. Nonetheless, unilateral foreign policy decisions limit the common ground for joint action and proliferate internal divisions. Mali and Burkina Faso on the one hand call for diversification of partners, corresponding to their own domestic, political expectations of transitional governments which would allegedly allow for "endogenous" initiatives and institutions.<sup>31</sup>

Remaining heavily dependent on external support, financially and technically, the G5-Sahel succumbs to opposing ideas where this external support ought to come from. Especially Mali sees not only the organization but the external support that comes with it as dysfunctional and hence redirects attention to other "solutions" namely Russia.<sup>32</sup> Relying on the Russian Wagner group<sup>33</sup> while duping Western forces has led to Mali being largely isolated in the region.<sup>34</sup> Rejecting the Western support has unhinged power relations and caused a geopolitical predicament, of regional and global implications, which fragments the prospects of regional cooperation.<sup>35</sup>

In this predicament, Chad<sup>36</sup> and Niger<sup>37</sup> continue to work with Western partners. Pragmatism and opportunism have informed the objectives to opt for a global recognition as indispensable partner in the fight against terrorism and to benefit as reliable recipients from military and financial aid.<sup>38</sup> To be indispensable implies then not to be criticized or sanctioned on domestic politics. The government in N'Djamena enjoys rather silent and conceding reactions from Western partners regarding its repressive and undemocratic transition.<sup>39</sup> France in particular does not want to risk any further its military presence in the region or increase Russian influence and anti-French sentiments.

The missing clarity of a common enemy becomes one prime obstacle to a re-strengthened G5 conditioned on Mali re-joining the organization.<sup>40</sup> Discussions in the last months have been preoccupied with Western troops being forced out of the region. Instead of the shared positions on peace and security, development and governance, the G5-Sahel was meant to implement, disunity and incoherent prioritizations persist.<sup>41</sup> Member states, for instance Niger, are hence looking beyond the G5-Sahel for national strategies and bilateral solutions to security issues counteracting a cohesive G5 strategy.<sup>42</sup>

### IV. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: REINITIATING THE G5-SAHEL

Preventing the G5-Sahel from strengthening its profile are differing expectations towards a "home-grown" regional cooperation and it being too dependent on external support.<sup>43</sup> Susceptible to internal disagreements on how to manage the organisation and where to find support, societies' expectations and hopes of the G5-Sahel dwindle. The following recommendations target a long-term stabilization. However, they remain conditional on the ability to agree on a broader consensus concerned with the organization's self-understanding.

 The need to focus on human security which strengthens development and economic cooperation and addresses structural causes of instability and insecurity among local populations. Subsequently, actions are not solely based on military and security structures but take a more holistic approach.<sup>44</sup> To increase the economic potential of member states would become a priority.<sup>45</sup> The great potentials, especially in the areas of agriculture and energy, should be tapped and new avenues to cooperate and to share know-how and experiences institutionalized. For instance, around Mauritania's projects on renewable energy and green hydrogen



production<sup>46</sup> regional exchanges can be initiated on how to benefit from said potentials, how to foster in-country value creation and how to enable economic development and diversification. Moreover, such dialogue and exchange can address issues of infrastructure and logistics, bringing populations and markets closer together, as well as reduce geographical seclusion in favor of global connectivity.<sup>47</sup>

- 2. The need to listen to local populations to understand security concerns of communities in their daily struggles. The G5-Sahel must show awareness for societal challenges, for example for demands by Fulani and Dogon communities in central and northern Mali. The G5-Sahel could become the mediating institution between minority communities and central governments. Societal ostracism and marginalization would be put on the agenda.48 It would become apparent, in this specific context, how local populations are not protesting against the government, demanding independence, but advocate for an increased "regulatory and arbitration role," for stronger presence and capabilities by the state.<sup>49</sup> A demand the G5-Sahel should thematize regionally. On a domestic-state level, as well as on a regional-institutional one, effective and responsible administration is a core demand by populations who struggle with unreliable authorities.<sup>50</sup> The G5-Sahel cannot ignore these daily realities of local populations. Local grievances and local outlooks must inform strategies to reduce threats of insecurity, including extremism and terrorism. By the same token, theborderregime would be moved beyond a militarized complex, encompassing then socio-economic factors of mobility, income and communal relations.<sup>51</sup> Here, progress could be achieved on regional integration as well as on the G5's image itself. To increase its presence locally, to make it "known" as a reliable and proactive institution must be a prime ambition.
- 3. This presupposes the **need for a sound communication strategy.** Strengthening the G5-Sahel as an institution requires information and communication campaigns which depict the purpose, goals and shortcomings of the G5-Sahel. They must equally address and rectify disinformation and fake news that fuel popular disengagement not only with national politics but with regional institutions. Populations ought to be capable to identify in which areas the organization is active, where it is falling

short to act and where it ought to become an effective stakeholder.

- 4. The need to strengthen communication with neighbouring organizations and platforms. It is important to reconcile responsibilities and capabilities between different institutions. Duplication or imitation of cooperation structures could be reduced, improving effectiveness and the allocation of resources between security stakeholders<sup>52</sup> as well as their transparency and accountability.53 To reach out to the Accra Initiative,<sup>54</sup> ECOWAS or the AU<sup>55</sup> would mean, firstly, to aim for coherent and comprehensive security management and secondly to strengthen the regional ownership of such management structures. The spread of violent extremism beyond the Sahel region requires a well-coordinated network of institutions that goes beyond purely military and security means,<sup>56</sup> but which faces socio-economic grievances.
- 5. The need for increased capabilities, secured funding and reliable partners. Above listed recommendations to widen responsibilities and actions require resources. The G5-Sahel is already struggling with financial uncertainty. Where member states cannot account for the required funding, reliable partnerships must be established. A regional dialogue on who ought to be considered a "reliable" source for funding must be envisaged. This implicates a negotiation, if not consensus, on the region's international position especially in today's context of rising anti-French sentiments and a global power struggle between Western countries, Russia and China. Such dialogue must equally discuss the issue how to increase "regional ownership" of political institutions.<sup>57</sup> Even if a strategic, perhaps geopolitical, re-orientation would be agreed on, this would not automatically mitigate the organisation's dependence on external support. This debate ought to address the issue if one wants to merely rebalance external partners along short-term political tensions or if one aims for a long-term vision of regional cooperation. In a first step, this necessitates Mali and Niger58 to put aside bilateral tensions and engage in goaloriented diplomacy. For the sake of regional security, a pragmatic approach is required, that brings the G5members together, focuses on common goals and discusses disagreements step-by-step.



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