

French Operation Barkhane

A Litmus Test of AU–EU Security Cooperation

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Date Received: 9 June 2023

Date Accepted: 8 May 2025

Abstract

The establishment of French Operation Barkhane is pivotal in addressing counterterrorism and the restoration of stability within the Sahel region. This military initiative represents a collective intervention that encompasses both France and the G5 Sahel states, operating through four military bases under French command. Various scholarly analyses perceive this operation as a deviation from France's traditional military policy in Africa; however, its conduct is indicative of a continued reinforcement of French imperial interests on the continent. This study aligns with existing literature, positing that Operation Barkhane is fundamentally a military intervention shaped by the dynamics of FrancAfrique policy, which appears to marginalize the EU–AU Peace and Security framework. The French military operation failed to

Keywords: Operation Barkhane, France, G5 Sahel, AU–EU Peace and Security Partnership, African Peace and Security Agenda (APSA)

Introduction

The historical trajectory of relations between Africa and the European Union (EU) yields significant insights into contemporaneous geopolitical frameworks. Notably, the enduring ties between EU member states and the African Union (AU) predate the inception of both institutions, tracing back to the colonial era. The modern partnership that emerged between the EU and African nations proliferated following the Cairo Summit in 2000, which established a structured political dialogue, further solidified by subsequent EU–AU summits (Pirozzi, 2010; Resti, 2021). This pivotal harbinger catalysed the promulgation of the 2005 EU Strategy for Africa, which delineated the parameters of EU engagement with the continent. A salient component of the Cairo Summit was the establishment of partnerships aimed at fostering political relations, economic growth, and developmental integration through trade.

In light of escalating terrorism and unchecked irregular migration patterns from Africa to Europe, peace and security considerations emerged as critical focal points within this partnership. Recognising the intrinsic link between peace, security, and sustainable development, the EU and AU instituted the Joint Africa–EU Strategy (JAES) in December 2007. A pivotal aspect of the JAES is its emphasis on peace and security, coupled with good governance (Tywuschik and Sherriff, 2009; Pirozzi, 2010; Resti, 2021). The African Union–European Union (AU–EU) partnership underscores the critical role of good governance in enhancing the security of African states. The European Union posits that the promotion of good governance and the fortification of democratic values are essential frameworks for establishing sustainable security in the African context.

The JAES was conceived as a response to evolving geopolitical landscapes, globalisation, and integration processes within both Africa and Europe (Tywuschik and Sherriff, 2009). The European Union Council (2018:2) emphasised the necessity of collaborative endeavours to achieve peace and security through preventive measures, conflict resolution, and counter-terrorism initiatives, asserting that these components are vital for sustainable peace and development across both unions. In contrast to the Cairo Plan of Action, which centred on five thematic areas such as economic integration and human rights, the JAES prioritises the elevation of Africa-EU political partnership to address shared concerns, encompassing peace and security, migration, human rights, multilateralism, development, and environmental sustainability.

Within the realm of EU-AU peace and security, the partnership is strategically designed to support the AU in its objectives of conflict prevention and peace promotion across the continent. This assistance entails training and funding for the African Peace and Security Agenda (APSA) through the African Peace Facility (APF), established by the EU (Pichon, 2020; Pichon and Fardel, 2020; Venturi, 2021). The European Development Fund (EDF) has been mobilised to underpin various initiatives, including the African Union Mission in Somalia, efforts against terrorism in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions, conflict prevention in Gambia and Guinea-Bissau, ceasefire monitoring in South Sudan, and oversight of human rights violations in Burundi. The security collaboration between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) is anticipated to be implemented through the interaction of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the African Peace Facility (APF). This partnership operates on the principle that African nations, through the AU, are responsible for their own security, while the EU offers support for the AU's security initiatives. According to the agreement, the EU is not permitted to deploy military forces to any African nation or intervene militarily in any conflicts on the continent.

Despite these collaborative efforts, France, as one of the principal EU members, continues to uphold its long-standing military and security cooperation with its former colonies in Africa. A range of bilateral accords has governed this military and security cooperation since the independence of these nations. This partnership is premised on two particular types of bilateral agreements: technical military accords and defence accords, which mandate France's capacity for military intervention in its former colonies when deemed necessary (Charbonneau, 2008; Siradag, 2014; Vallin, 2005). Under this principle, France initiated a military intervention in Mali in 2013 following the emergence of terrorist threats to Malian sovereignty. This operation, known as Operation Serval, evolved in 2014 into Operation Barkhane, encompassing the five former French colonies collectively known as the G5 Sahel. The operation is legitimized within the context of counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel region and represents a collaborative endeavour between France and the G5 states, which include Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

The intervention undertaken by France through Operation Barkhane contravenes the established agreements between the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) regarding the autonomy of the AU in managing security challenges within Africa. The military engagement and subsequent deployment of French forces in the G5 Sahel states fundamentally undermine the principles enshrined in the AU-EU security framework, which delineate the EU's role as one of support rather than direct intervention. This study posits that Operation Barkhane serves as a strategic instrument employed by France to reinforce its Francafrrique policy, thereby disregarding the foundational principle of non-interference that underpins the EU-AU security relations agreement.

France and the G5 Sahel: A Review of Security Relations and Military Interventions

France's security relations with its former African colonies are characterised by a framework of military accords and interventions that have evolved since the post-colonial era. These bilateral agreements, particularly those established in 1973, have facilitated France's direct involvement in the domestic affairs of several African states, most notably Mali (Siradag, 2014; Vallin, 2005; Stoicescu, 2020). The foundations of these relations were instrumental in prompting French military intervention in Mali in 2013, subsequent to a government request aimed at countering terrorist incursions and restoring political stability (Griffin, 2016; Shurkin, 2021). This intervention materialized in the form of Operation Serval, which mobilized approximately 4,000 French troops, supported by an additional 2,000 Chadian forces, in conjunction with the Malian army (Griffin, 2016; Shurkin, 2021; Roca, n.d.). The French Armed Forces Headquarters (2020) articulated that Operation Serval was conceived to thwart a jihadist offensive threatening Bamako, dismantle the burgeoning industrial organization of terrorism in Northern Mali, and transition the stabilization mission to Malian authorities and UN forces (specifically MINUSMA).

As the operational landscape expanded to encompass the Sahel region, the increased activities of various terrorist organisations necessitated a broader strategic approach. Consequently, in a bid to enhance regional counter-terrorism efforts, France merged its existing military operations—Operation Epervier in Chad, initiated in 1986, and Operation Serval in Mali—into the newly formed Operation Barkhane on August 1, 2014 (Griffin, 2016; Touchard, 2017; French Armed Forces Headquarters, 2020; Stoicescu, 2020; Shurkin, 2021). Operation Barkhane emerged as a multilateral military initiative designed to combat the expansion of terrorism across the Sahel-Saharan region, with a primary focus on assisting the G5 Sahel armed forces in countering terrorist movements (Stoicescu, 2020; French Armed Forces Headquarters, 2020; Shurkin, 2021; Roca, n.d.). Unlike earlier unilateral interventions, Operation Barkhane underscores a collaborative framework involving France and all member states of the G5 Sahel—namely, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—validated by the support of the United Nations, African Union, and European Union.

The G5 Sahel represents an institutional mechanism established in 2014 by the leaders of the five member states, aiming to coordinate regional cooperation in addressing shared challenges. This collaboration focuses on harmonising strategies and policies related to defence, security, governance, infrastructure, and resilience within the Sahel region (Sahel and West Africa Club, 2018). Since its inception, the G5 Sahel has cultivated both bilateral and multilateral partnerships with international entities, including France, Germany, the United Nations, and the European Union, facilitating financial support for joint military and security initiatives. Establishing the G5 Sahel Joint Force in 2017 further embodies the region's commitment to collective security, reinforcing the necessity of cooperative approaches in tackling the multifaceted challenges posed by terrorism (Pichon and Fardel, 2020; Venturi, 2021).

The European Union's Involvement in the G5 Sahel: An Overview

The European Union (EU) serves as a prominent international actor in supporting the G5 Sahel countries, which comprise Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Through a multifaceted approach, the EU provides significant funding for counter-terrorism operations and training initiatives aimed at bolstering the armed forces of G5 Sahel member states. The EU's support focuses not only on enhancing security measures but also on promoting political development and addressing humanitarian challenges within the Sahel region. According to the European Commission (2016), the EU collaborates with these countries on shared concerns including security, migration, terrorism, and long-term developmental goals.

At the state level, the EU employs its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework to implement three regional missions: EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUTM Mali, and EUCAP Sahel Mali. These missions are integral to enhancing the capacities of the armed forces within the G5 Sahel nations in matters of security and counter-terrorism (EU Commission, 2016; Venturi, 2017; Pichon, 2020).

The EUCAP Sahel Niger mission, established in 2012, seeks to aid Niger in combatting terrorism and organised crime. This mission provides essential advisory and training services to improve the capabilities of Nigerien security institutions, including the police, gendarmerie, and national guard. As specified by the EU Commission (2016), the civilian mission consists of 131 international experts alongside 71 local staff, all based in Agadez, the mission's headquarters. Funded by the EU, this initiative had a budget of EUR311 million from July 2017 to July 2018, reflecting its commitment to strengthening internal security mechanisms in Niger, including strategic policy support for the government.

Another critical mission, EUCAP Sahel Mali, inaugurated in 2015, is dedicated to assisting the Malian government in the reform of its internal security forces. This mission aims to enhance the provision of security and justice for the Malian population. Operating from its headquarters in Bamako, the mission comprises 100 European experts and 40 Malian personnel, tasked with advising the national police, national gendarmerie, and the National Guard in implementing security reforms advocated by the new Malian government (EU External Action, 2018).

The last of the CSDP initiatives is the EU Training Mission in Mali, which commenced in 2013. This military training mission has undergone several mandates since its inception, addressing the evolving security landscape in Mali. As outlined by EU External Action (2019), the mission, now in its fourth mandate, focuses on training and advising the Malian armed forces while also supporting the G5 Sahel Joint Forces. The mission, which included 620 personnel from various EU and non-EU member states by 2019, has recently expanded its mandate for an additional four years, increasing staff numbers to approximately 1,200 and broadening its scope to include training for national armed forces across all G5 Sahel nations (Pichon, 2020).

Beyond these missions, the EU has developed comprehensive Sahel strategies, initiating its first strategy addressing the region's security and development needs in 2011 and then updating it in 2015. The "Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel," initially focused on Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, was later expanded to include Burkina Faso and Chad. This strategy outlines four key areas of action: development, good governance, conflict resolution; politics and diplomacy; security and the rule of law; and countering violent extremism (Venturi, 2017). The subsequent "Sahel Regional Action Plan (RAP) 2015-2020," updated in 2016, reaffirms these priorities while adding emphasis on preventing radicalisation, enhancing youth opportunities, managing migration, and tackling illicit trafficking and organised crime.

In summary, the EU's engagement with the G5 Sahel countries illustrates its commitment to fostering security and stability in a region grappling with multifaceted challenges. Through strategic missions and comprehensive action plans, the EU continues to play a crucial role in shaping the security landscape of the Sahel region.

Operation Barkhane: France's Geopolitical Interests in the Sahel

Operation Barkhane represents a strategic extension of France's geopolitical interests across five former colonies in the Sahel region, specifically within the framework of the G5 Sahel countries. This military initiative serves as a vehicle for France to uphold its enduring economic, political,

cultural, and military ties with these nations. The establishment of Operation Barkhane can thus be interpreted as a manifestation of French military intervention aimed at consolidating its hegemony over its former colonies. As articulated by Pujari (2020), French actions in the G5 Sahel reflect a continuum that seeks to contain militancy that poses a threat to its national interests. In alignment with other French military operations on the African continent, these interventions function as conduits through which France can maintain its presence and safeguard its interests, ultimately enhancing its global standing (Chafer, 2005; Rosech, 2015).

The complexity of France's military collaborations with its robust African allies within the G5 Sahel complicates the narrative. Medessoukou (2018) contends that the French government ought to prioritize regional security rather than utilizing counter-terrorism as a pretext to advance its national agenda. The joint operations undertaken are ostensibly designed to fortify French interests in the region, with the French military's historical role as a long-standing ally of G5 Sahel nations further entrenching its position. This is an indication that French military intervention in the G5 Sahel countries is directed towards realisation of its *francafrique* policy on the continent.

Although Operation Barkhane is legitimized by the European Union, it remains under the command of French forces directed by the French Ministry of Defence. The purported partnership between the French military and the armed forces of the G5 Countries belies a predominantly French-driven decision-making process. This apparent asymmetry is underscored by a statement attributed to the French President, as noted by Toumi (2020): "I cannot ask our soldiers to take risks to fight against terrorism... and on the other hand have public opinions of these same countries believing in untruths." Such a declaration reveals the unilaterality of operational commands, highlighting the limited role of the EU in this context.

Moreover, the exclusion of other Sahelian states from Operation Barkhane, despite the broader geographic reality of the Sahel, underscores the bilateral security and military relations that France has cultivated with the G5 countries. This operation operates outside the established frameworks of the European Union and African Union (AU) regarding peace and security. While the AU's Agenda for Peace and Security in Africa (APSA) formally recognizes eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and two Regional Peace Mechanisms, the G5 Sahel does not fall within this categorization. According to the African Union Commission (2015), the recognized RECs and RPMs under the APSA framework include ECOWAS, ECCAS, SADC, COMESA, EAC, IGAD, CEN-SAD, and UMA, along with the East African Standby Force (EASF) and the North Africa Regional Capability (NARC). Each organization has established structures, such as Early Warning Systems (EWS), that collaborate with the AU to promote stability and peace.

It is noteworthy that all members of the G5 Sahel are also part of CEN-SAD, thus theoretically linking France's security engagements to established AU frameworks. Yet, similar to EU-supported AU initiatives in Somalia, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic, Operation Barkhane operates independently of AU oversight. The dynamics of collaboration between France and the G5 Sahel countries—premised on colonial historical ties—reflect the enduring nature of Franco-African relations that have evolved since the era of decolonization. This intricate web of relationships is often encapsulated in the term "*francafrique*" (Chafer, 2005; Bergamaschi and Diawara, 2014; Korkmaz, 2019).

The evident absence of AU or recognized RECs in the operationalization and establishment of French military bases reflects a broader pattern attributed to neo-colonial tendencies in France's interactions with its former colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, Operation Barkhane

underscores the complexities of contemporary security relations that remain deeply intertwined with historical legacies.

Conclusion

This article has contended that the French military operation Barkhane exemplifies a bilateral initiative predicated on France's military and security agreements with its former African colonies. Endorsed by the United Nations and the European Union, Barkhane represents yet another manifestation of French military intervention within its former colonial territories. Amid numerous missions executed in the Sahel region by the EU, UN, and African Union (AU), France unilaterally instituted Operation Barkhane in collaboration with the G5 Sahel countries—nations historically influenced by French colonial policy—thereby establishing the operation as an extension of the longstanding framework known as Francafrique. This term encapsulates the multifaceted and often contentious dynamics of France–Africa relations, driven by France's ambition to enhance its global standing through influence over African states.

While it is not posited that Operation Barkhane entirely diverges from France's traditional pattern of military interventions across the African continent, this analysis emphasizes that the operation undermines the established frameworks of the AU's Peace and Security Architecture. Furthermore, it contravenes the principles underpinning the EU–AU peace and security partnership, particularly by failing to engage the G5 Sahel countries through the recognized Regional Economic Community (REC), the Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN–SAD), to which all five nations belong. The AU security framework, grounded in the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), acknowledges eight RECs and two Regional Mechanisms (RPMs), notably excluding the G5 Sahel.

Consequently, this study asserts that Operation Barkhane signifies an ongoing pattern of French unilateral military intervention aimed at safeguarding its interests within Africa. This reality raises significant questions regarding France's commitment to the AU's principle advocating for African solutions to African problems. Moreover, such interventions are at odds with the EU–AU peace and security partnership framework, which espouses the tenets of capacity building and the empowerment of African–led operations across the continent.

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