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# The European Union as a Security Actor in the Sahel

## *Policy Entrapment in EU Foreign Policy*

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### Abstract

In the past decade, the EU has significantly stepped up its profile as a security actor in the Sahel. Drawing on historical institutionalism, we conceptualise path-dependencies and lock-in effects as elements of a “foreign policy entrapment” spiral to analyse the EU’s policies towards the Sahel. Specifically, we seek to explain the EU’s increasingly widened and deepened engagement in the region. Hence, this article traces the evolution of the EU’s Sahel policy both in discourse and implementation. We identify a predominant security narrative as well as a regionalisation narrative and show that EU action has followed these narratives. Based on this analysis, we argue that the evolution of the EU’s Sahel policy can be understood as a case of “foreign policy entrapment”. Initial decisions on the overall direction of EU foreign policy have created strong path-dependencies and lock-in effects that make it difficult for EU policy-makers to change the policy course.

### Keywords

EU foreign policy – Common Security and Defence Policy – Sahel – Policy entrapment

## Introduction

In a globalised world in which transnational challenges affect the European Union's (EU) foreign policy, the EU has stepped up its engagement in many world regions (see introduction to this special issue). In particular, the Africa-EU partnership has developed into one of the main priorities of EU foreign policy, and intense relationships with several African actors, such as the African Union (AU), have evolved.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the EU has specifically focused on the Sahel-Saharan region as a key area of the EU's efforts to promote security and development on the continent.<sup>2</sup>

Many countries of the Sahel have witnessed violent conflicts, often having destabilising effects on the wider region. In 2014, the heads of state of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger established the G5 Sahel organisation. Identifying the Sahel as a priority area of EU foreign policy, the EU and its member states have been a key supporter of the G5 Sahel since its creation.<sup>3</sup> The EU's efforts in the Sahel include security and development policy interventions, such as three Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, channel support to the G5 Sahel's security and development initiatives as well as a significant amount of bilateral development cooperation with the individual G5 Sahel countries. Overall, the EU's involvement in the region has significantly increased over the last decade.

This increased engagement stands in stark contrast to the fact that the security situation in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has constantly deteriorated since 2016, putting into doubt the effectiveness of the EU's efforts.<sup>4</sup> Although the security situation in the Sahel has constantly worsened, the EU has substantially deepened and widened its efforts, but without a substantive impact on security dynamics in the region. This puts the EU into the dilemma of deciding on whether it wants to continue to pursue the chosen policy track, that has not yet proven effective, or rather to look for policy alternatives. So far, it seems that the EU has preferred the former to the latter.

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1 Carbone, *The European Union in Africa: Incoherent Policies, Asymmetrical Partnership, Declining Relevance?*; Haastrup, *Charting Transformation Through Security: Contemporary EU-Africa Relations*; Haastrup et al., *The Routledge Handbook of EU-Africa relations*.

2 Mattelaer, 'The EU's growing engagement in the Sahel: From development aid to military cooperation'; Lopez Lucia, 'Performing EU agency by experimenting the 'Comprehensive Approach': the European Union Sahel Strategy'; Venturi, 'The EU and the Sahel: A laboratory of experimentation for the security-migration-development nexus'.

3 Desgrais, *Cinq ans après, une radioscopie du G5 Sahel*.

4 *Ibid.*

Acknowledging these puzzling developments and the policy dilemma that has developed out of this increased engagement, there is a growing scholarship on the EU's foreign and security policy in the region, which has particularly focused on how the EU has used its engagement in the Sahel as a 'laboratory of experimentation' in the post-Lisbon Treaty period.<sup>5</sup> Empirically, scholars have focused on analysing the outcomes of specific EU interventions in the Sahel,<sup>6</sup> explained the EU's approach to engagement as 'nexus thinking' in EU foreign policy<sup>7</sup> or focussed on the implementation of the EU's comprehensive approach.<sup>8</sup> Some of these studies have identified specific stabilisation practices of the EU which legitimise (dubious) local partners,<sup>9</sup> analysed the constitutive effects of intervention practices among different interveners,<sup>10</sup> or conceptualised the Sahel as fluid regional imaginary re-arranged by EU decision-makers<sup>11</sup> – leading to profound dilemmas associated with the EU's Sahel engagement. However, less attention has been paid to providing an explanation of the longer-term evolution of the EU's engagement in the region and of the EU-internal and external dynamics that have shaped it, which is necessary to better understand how the policy dilemma that the EU is currently facing has come about. Hence, we argue that there is substantial room for additional research that specifically seeks to analyse how strategic decisions taken at specific points in time may pre-structure the future course of the

5 Lopez Lucia, 'Performing EU agency by experimenting the 'Comprehensive Approach': the European Union Sahel Strategy'; Venturi, 'The EU and the Sahel: A laboratory of experimentation for the security-migration-development nexus'; Cold-Ravnkilde and Nissen, 'Schizophrenic agendas in the EU's external actions in Mali'.

6 Tull, 'Rebuilding Mali's army: the dissonant relationship between Mali and its international partners'; Bøås, 'EU migration management in the Sahel: unintended consequences on the ground in Niger?'; Raineri and Strazzari, '(B)ordering Hybrid Security? EU Stabilisation Practices in the Sahara-Sahel Region'; Plank, 'Evaluating the effectiveness of the ECOWAS-EU interregional partnership on peace and security in the context of the Mali crisis'.

7 Venturi, 'The EU and the Sahel: A laboratory of experimentation for the security-migration-development nexus'; Plank, 'An unintended consequence of West Africa-EU relations: effects of regional security cooperation beyond the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)'.

8 Lopez Lucia, 'The European Union integrated and regionalised approach towards the Sahel. Stabilizing Mali Project Report'; Bagoyoko, *Le multilatéralisme sécuritaire africain à l'épreuve de la crise sahélienne*.

9 Raineri and Strazzari, '(B)ordering Hybrid Security? EU Stabilisation Practices in the Sahara-Sahel Region'.

10 Cold-Ravnkilde and Lindskov Jacobsen, 'Disentangling the security traffic jam in the Sahel: constitutive effects of contemporary interventionism'; Cold-Ravnkilde and Nissen, 'Schizophrenic agendas in the EU's external actions in Mali'.

11 Lopez Lucia, 'A tale of regional transformation: From political community to security regions the politics of security and regionalism in West Africa'.

EU's engagement in the region. Moreover, we argue that the study of the EU's interventions in the Sahel could benefit from further theorising the long-term dynamics of the EU's engagement.

Acknowledging these research gaps, we pose the following research question: How can we explain the EU's increasingly widened and deepened engagement in the Sahel over time?

To address this research question, we proceed as follows. First, building on insights derived from historical institutionalism and the existing literature on path dependencies in EU decision-making,<sup>12</sup> we develop the concept of 'foreign policy entrapment' to account for the long-term implications and dilemmas that fundamental decisions on the direction of EU foreign policy in a certain domain may trigger. In doing so, we expand the concept of policy entrapment and propose its applicability to the realm of foreign policy. Second, we provide an overview of the evolution of the EU's engagement in the Sahel over time, before, third, we analyse how the EU's discourse and action towards the Sahel have resulted in EU foreign policy entrapment in the way that the EU has become deeply involved in the security politics of the Sahel.

The main argument of our paper is that the evolution of the EU's Sahel policy can indeed be explained through the concept of 'foreign policy entrapment', showing that initial decisions on the overall direction of EU foreign policy towards the Sahel have created strong path dependencies and lock-in effects that make it difficult for EU policymakers to change the overall policy course.

### Conceptualising 'Foreign Policy Entrapment'

The idea that EU external action or specific policies can only be explained by looking at the history of past policies and decisions has increasingly gained ground in European integration studies in the last decade. Scholars have applied (variants of) historical institutionalism and its key concepts – path dependency in particular – to various facets of EU external relations, including foreign policy and crisis management,<sup>13</sup> trade policy<sup>14</sup> or development

12 Pierson, 'The Path to European Integration: A Historical Institutional Perspective'; 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics'; North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*.

13 Petrov, 'Introducing Governance Arrangements for EU Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management Operations: A Historical Institutional Perspective'; Juncos, *EU Foreign and Security Policy in Bosnia. The Politics of Coherence and Effectiveness*.

14 de Ville, 'The Promise of Critical Historical Institutionalism for EU Trade Policy Analysis'.

policy.<sup>15</sup> For example, de Ville<sup>16</sup> shows how a critical version of historical institutionalism can help explain the evolution of EU trade policy since the conclusion of the Uruguay Round, whilst Keijzer<sup>17</sup> illustrates how the historical institutionalist concepts of drift, layering and exhaustion contribute to an understanding of recent policy processes in EU-Africa relations such as the post-Cotonou negotiations.

An historical institutionalist (HI) lens on the evolution of the EU's Sahel policy perfectly matches this article's ambition to explain the long-term dynamics that have shaped the EU's engagement in the region, given that HI is "characterised by a particular concern with contingency and the unintended consequences of strategic action and with a focus on the path dependency of institutional change".<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, we do not aim for a rigorous test of historical institutionalist assumptions in the case of the EU's Sahel policy. Rather, we intend to use historical institutionalism more in a heuristic manner and as a basis for developing the concept of 'foreign policy entrapment', the plausibility and utility of which is then probed with regard to the EU's engagement in the Sahel region.

Along with analyses in EU studies of entrapment processes in strategic alliances and intervention decisions by individual states,<sup>19</sup> scholars of historical institutionalism have put forward the concept of 'entrapment' and applied it to decision-making process in various EU policies.<sup>20</sup> Building on this literature, our overall idea of policy entrapment in EU foreign policy describes a process of policy adaption pressures on EU institutions and the member states which is characterised by (1) path dependencies and (2) lock-in effects. While path dependencies set the EU on a specific policy track, lock-in effects accelerate and solidify the policy direction and render possible alternatives implausible. Policy entrapment based on specific path dependencies and lock-in effects creates strong pressures to increase the scope and intensity of EU action in a certain domain, in particular if previously taken decisions do not achieve the

15 Keijzer, 'Beyond "Donor-Recipient Relations"? A Historical-Institutionalist Perspective on Recent Efforts to Modernise EU Partnerships with Third Countries'.

16 de Ville, 'The Promise of Critical Historical Institutionalism for EU Trade Policy Analysis'.

17 Keijzer, 'Beyond "Donor-Recipient Relations"? A Historical-Institutionalist Perspective on Recent Efforts to Modernise EU Partnerships with Third Countries'.

18 Hay and Wincott, 'Structure, Agency, and Historical Institutionalism', p. 952.

19 Snyder, 'The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics'; Henke, 'A tale of three French interventions: Intervention entrepreneurs and institutional intervention choices'; Chafer *et al.*, 'France's interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A historical institutionalist perspective'.

20 Pierson, 'The Path to European Integration: A Historical Institutional Perspective'; 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics'; North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*.

desired results. Moreover, it results in a perception that the policy course taken is without alternatives, which decreases the chances that policymakers take action to change the overall direction of a policy.

First, path dependencies specifically focus on the initial policy decision and direction. Theorists of path dependency have argued that apparently small choices in institutional arrangements can create remarkable consequences at a later stage and that decisions might prove almost irreversible, regardless of the actor's initial intentions.<sup>21</sup> Narrow conceptualisations of path dependencies move beyond the notion of "history matters"<sup>22</sup> and point specifically to the cost of changing the approach taken, as the costs of reversal are very high.<sup>23</sup> Path dependencies constitute processes that make a reversal of decisions unlikely once institutions are put in place because of such costs.<sup>24</sup> Due to the density of institutional politics, an alternative approach "is often unavailable (or prohibitively costly) to actors who feel poorly served by existing political arrangements."<sup>25</sup>

Second, lock-in effects compel actors to proceed on the path. To some extent, historical institutionalism has also focused on these effects, which we understand as different from path dependencies. Whereas the former point to initial decisions taken and the high cost of policy reversal, lock-in effects refer to "other choice points"<sup>26</sup> decision-makers are confronted with. Lock-in effects produced by policy feedback thus accelerate "the momentum behind one path" and "render previously viable alternatives implausible."<sup>27</sup> Whereas traditional historical institutionalists have primarily focused on "self-reinforcing positive feedback,"<sup>28</sup> the critical version of historical institutionalism assumes that feedback may run in different directions, and that negative feedback can also produce lock-in effects if it suggests that the chosen path needs to be pursued more rigorously than in the past. This feedback leading to lock-in effects

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21 Peters et al., 'The Politics of Path Dependency: Political Conflict in Historical Institutionalism', p. 1287; Pierson, 'The Path to European Integration: A Historical Institutional Perspective'; 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics'.

22 Pierson, 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics', p. 252.

23 Levi, 'A Model, a Method, and a Map: Rational choice in Comparative and Historical Analysis', p. 28.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Pierson, 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics', p. 259.

26 Levi, 'A Model, a Method, and a Map: Rational choice in Comparative and Historical Analysis', p. 28.

27 Pierson, 'The Path to European Integration: A Historical Institutional Perspective', p. 146.

28 Krasner, 'Sovereignty: An institutional perspective', p. 83.

can both be material/structural and ideational as expressed through narratives and discourse.<sup>29</sup>

We hold that these historical institutionalist concepts can be transferred to the study of EU foreign policy and that they bear relevance to explaining how certain EU policies – such as the EU's Sahel policy – have developed. More specifically, we argue that initial decisions to develop an EU policy in a certain domain create path dependencies that set the EU on a specific track of action. Lock-in effects then solidify and accelerate the direction of the EU's foreign policy and render alternatives to that policy course implausible. Moreover, we argue that these lock-in effects are shaped by two drivers: First, EU-internal drivers such as inter-institutional competition constantly reinforcing a specific direction of EU external policy and making it harder for EU policymakers to 'escape' well-trodden paths; and second, external factors in the EU's foreign policy environment contributing to lock-in effects, in particular if they strengthen the perception that a previously taken action is insufficient to address a certain policy challenge. External actors have an effect on the EU's policy directions as they regularly interact with and shape specific initiatives and policies.<sup>30</sup> In the empirical part that follows, we probe the plausibility and utility of this conceptualisation with reference to the EU's Sahel policy.

### **The EU's Emerging Profile as a Development and Security Actor in the Sahel Region**

In the past decade, the Sahel has become what scholars have termed a 'laboratory of experimentation' for the EU's foreign and security policy in the post-Lisbon Treaty period.<sup>31</sup> The EU's engagement in the Sahel has changed gradually over time and has involved a security, development and migration-policy component.

The main strategic framework for the EU's policies towards the region is the 'Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel' (hereafter: Sahel Strategy) that the Council of the EU adopted in 2011. The strategy constituted a response

29 de Ville, 'The Promise of Critical Historical Institutionalism for EU Trade Policy Analysis', p. 620.

30 Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 'EU rules beyond EU borders: theorizing external governance in European politics'.

31 Cold-Ravnkilde and Nissen, 'Schizophrenic agendas in the EU's external actions in Mali'; Lopez Lucia, 'Performing EU agency by experimenting the 'Comprehensive Approach': the European Union Sahel Strategy'; Venturi, 'The EU and the Sahel: A laboratory of experimentation for the security-migration-development nexus'.



to EU member states' concerns about the deteriorating security situation due to the surge of terrorist organisations and thus strongly emphasised security as a precondition for development of the Sahel countries.<sup>32</sup>

Responding to the political crisis in Mali and the French intervention to counter a jihadist insurgency, the EU quickly stepped up its engagement. In 2013, the EU launched a training mission (EUTM) to Mali to provide training and advice to the Malian armed forces, whereas the EU Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) SAHEL Mali was deployed in April 2014. One and a half years earlier, the EU had already launched a civilian CSDP mission in Niger to train the country's civilian security forces. Apart from the deployment of military and civilian security personnel in the context of CSDP missions, from 2017 onwards the EU's engagement in the Sahel also included direct financial and operational support of the G5 Sahel and its G5 Sahel Joint Force.

Concerning its role as a development actor in the region, the EU has provided financial support totalling more than €4 billion between 2014 and 2020 through its various instruments, including the European Development Fund, the African Peace Facility, the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) and its humanitarian aid budget – in addition to the bilateral support provided by EU member states to the G5 Sahel countries.<sup>33</sup>

Taken together, since the adoption of the 2011 Sahel Strategy, we have seen both a widening and deepening of the EU's engagement in the region. On the one hand, the EU has considerably expanded the scope of its engagement: Initially focusing primarily on development aid as an instrument to promote economic development and good governance, the 2012 crisis in Mali prompted the EU to adopt a stronger profile as a security actor. This has been further exacerbated by the 2015 'refugee crisis' which led to a widening of the EU CSDP civilian missions' mandates deployed in the region, adding the fight against irregular migration and the disruption of human trafficking to their list of responsibilities.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, the EU's engagement has also deepened in terms of its political engagement with state and regional actors as well as in terms of the strategic priority EU institutions and member states attach to the region.

32 Lopez Lucia, 'Performing EU agency by experimenting the 'Comprehensive Approach': the European Union Sahel Strategy'; Mattelaer, 'The EU's growing engagement in the Sahel: From development aid to military cooperation'.

33 EPRS, 'Peace and security in 2020. Evaluating the EU approach to tackling the Sahel conflicts'.

34 European Commission, 'A European Agenda on Migration', p. 5.



Based on this assessment, the next section traces the evolution of the EU's engagement over the last decade, focusing both on the level of discourse and concrete EU action. Afterwards, we explain the gradual widening and deepening of EU activities in the Sahel through the lens of path dependencies and lock-in effects as put forward by historical insitutionalism. The empirical analysis builds on the triangulation of different qualitative data sources. First, we conducted a discourse analysis of official documents on EU-Sahel relations as well as of speeches by key EU foreign policy actors, including the High Representatives Ashton, Mogherini and Borrell. The discourse analysis served to identify the main narratives and meaning constructions inherent in the EU's Sahel policy.<sup>35</sup> Second, the discourse analysis was supplemented by a targeted and replicable media search conducted using the Nexis database, in which we searched for any remarks made by the key EU foreign policy actors mentioned above in both European and African news agencies between 2010 and 2020. A total of 3,645 media reports have been analysed. Finally, we draw on 14 semi-structured interviews with decision makers, conducted both in Africa and Europe between 2017 and 2020. These interviews were conducted under conditions of anonymity and involved questions on the current state of Africa-EU security relations and the EU's support to the G5 Sahel.

### **From the Rhetoric of Increased Engagement to Action: Analysing the Changing Patterns of EU Engagement in the Sahel**

We argue that two specific narratives prominent in the EU's discourse vis-à-vis the region reflect the EU's gradually growing engagement since 2011. The first narrative could be termed the 'security narrative', as it puts a strong focus on the security challenges that the Sahel is facing and, in turn, emphasises security solutions to address these challenges. This narrative has solidified over the course of the EU's engagement, from emphasising security as a precondition for development via a security-development-migration nexus as a response to the 'migration crisis' towards a strong emphasis on hard security measures (see below). The second narrative in EU policy discourse centres on a regional approach to the Sahel. Over time, this narrative has been transformed and further solidified, from an initial focus on 'African solutions for African problems' towards 'Sahelian solutions for Sahelian problems.' Both narratives have been accompanied by corresponding steps of EU action that have led to a gradual widening and deepening of the EU's engagement in the region. Hence, the

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35 Larsen, 'Discourse analysis in the study of EU foreign policy'.

subsequent analysis further elaborates on these two main elements of the EU's approach towards the Sahel, which we term the "security agenda" and the "regionalisation agenda".

*The EU's Security Agenda: from Security-Development to a Security-Development-Migration Nexus to Hard Security Measures*

As a main reference point for the security-related narrative, the Sahel Strategy emphasises a *security-development policy nexus* based on the idea that security is a prerequisite for development.<sup>36</sup> Despite earlier French attempts to build up a European approach to the Sahel, the 2011 Sahel Strategy of the EU constituted the first effort to find a shared vision among the EU member states in their approaches to the region. It specifies four key themes: First, it intertwines security and development, emphasising that security is integral for the Sahelian economies to grow. Second, it calls for closer regional cooperation in the Sahel and bestows upon the EU a potential supporting role. Third, it calls for capacity building and the provision of security and development cooperation. Fourth, it points to an important role for the EU in encouraging economic development and achieving a more secure environment.<sup>37</sup> The strategy thus hinges on the security-related narrative that the development-focused approach of the EU should be supported by combined efforts, placing a specific emphasis on security as a prerequisite for development.<sup>38</sup>

EU decision-makers had increasingly linked security and development policies in the Sahel, most prominently in response to the worsening of the security situation and the kidnappings of European citizens by extremist groups.<sup>39</sup> For instance, a 2011 EU Council meeting stated that security threats "jeopardise European and international development cooperation activities."<sup>40</sup> In a statement following a 2010 ministerial meeting of the Sahel states, High Representative Catherine Ashton highlighted "the constraints that terrorism and organised crime are posing to the economic and social development of the countries in the region."<sup>41</sup>

In addition, EU member state representatives have discursively linked security policy to development aid, for instance, in a letter to High Representative

<sup>36</sup> EEAS, 'Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel', p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Cold-Ravnkilde and Nissen, 'Schizophrenic agendas in the EU's external actions in Mali'.

<sup>39</sup> Lopez Lucia, 'The European Union integrated and regionalised approach towards the Sahel. Stabilizing Mali Project Report'.

<sup>40</sup> Council of the European Union, '3065th Foreign Affairs Council Meeting', p.17.

<sup>41</sup> Ashton, cited by African Press Organization, 'Statement by the spokesperson of HR of the European Union Catherine Ashton on Sahel region'.

Ashton signed by the French, Portuguese, Spanish, Danish, Italian, German, Swedish and Dutch foreign ministers after the kidnapping of European citizens.<sup>42</sup> These references culminated in the narrative of a security-development nexus emphasised in the Sahel Strategy as the main document for the relations between the EU and the region in the years to come.<sup>43</sup>

The importance of the security-development nexus in the EU's Sahel policy is also visible at the level of implementation. Following the adoption of the 2011 Sahel Strategy and its emphasis on the security-development nexus, the EU launched and reconfigured several activities to address the volatile security situation in the region. A clear indication of this are the new security-related priorities that were introduced in the financial envelope for the Sahel within the framework of the 11th European Development Fund (EDF) for 2014–2020, through which the EU has allocated more than €2.6 billion to the five Sahelian states and regional initiatives.<sup>44</sup> Although EDF funding is spent on a wide variety of priorities – including food security and resilience, good governance and the rule of law – the focus on security-related priorities has increased. This has involved the introduction of security sector reform indicators for the disbursement of EU budget support and an increased focus on advancing the five states' capacities to fight organised crime and terrorism.<sup>45</sup>

Another initiative to put the security-development nexus into action was the project *Contre Terrorisme Sahel Intervention* (CT Sahel) launched in 2011 and running until 2016, funded through the EU's Instrument for Stability (IFS). The project aimed at supporting national counter-terrorism capacities and also included the establishment of a Sahelian Security College (Collège Sahélien de Sécurité, CSS) in 2012 as a regional component, in which Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso participated. According to an EU official, the CSS was an important initiative because it represented the first genuine regional cooperation effort and provided the foundation for the creation of the G5 Sahel two years later.<sup>46</sup>

In this early phase of EU engagement after the adoption of the Sahel Strategy, the deployment of EUCAP Sahel Niger in August 2012 was another major step towards contributing to putting the ambition of the

42 French Foreign Ministry, 'Statements made by the Ministry of Foreign and European Spokesperson'.

43 EEAS, 'Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel'.

44 European Union 2017, pp. 28–29.

45 Lopez Lucia, 'The European Union integrated and regionalised approach towards the Sahel. Stabilizing Mali Project Report', p. 24; EPRS, 'Peace and security in 2020. Evaluating the EU approach to tackling the Sahel conflicts', pp. 18–19.

46 Interview 14.

security-development nexus into practice. As a civilian CSDP mission, EUCAP Sahel Niger has been tasked with training, advising and equipping Niger's internal security forces as well as strengthening their capacities in border control management, the management of irregular migration flows and the fight against terrorism.

The security narrative in the EU's Sahel approach was solidified and further intensified through a growing emphasis on the *security-development-migration nexus* after the 2015 'refugee crisis.' While the EU had already referred to migration in the 2011 Sahel Strategy,<sup>47</sup> after 2015, decision-makers focused intensively on the Sahel states as countries of origin and transit for migration.<sup>48</sup>

For example, the Regional Action Plan for the Sahel pays specific attention to "synergies between migration and development".<sup>49</sup> The document explicitly aims to "[r]einforce the development-migration nexus and mainstream migration into the EU and Member States' collective action"<sup>50</sup> and adds security to this nexus by referring to cross-border management as an important prerequisite for a reduction of security threats. Various other EU documents include this narrative of a security-development-migration nexus: The 2015 Agenda on Migration calls for coherent action in development cooperation and security.<sup>51</sup> It identifies several root causes for migration such as civil wars or poverty and seeks to engage in "the prevention and mitigation of these threats".<sup>52</sup> Likewise, the Valletta Political Declaration and Action Plan sought to "address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement resulting from state fragility and insecurity", also by "reducing poverty".<sup>53</sup> The security-development-migration nexus has been repeatedly acknowledged in later Conclusions on the Sahel<sup>54</sup> and Commission Communications.<sup>55</sup>

47 EEAS, 'Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel', p. 1.

48 Interviews 5, 7.

49 Council of the European Union, 'Council conclusions on the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015–2020', p. 15)

50 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

51 European Commission, 'A European Agenda on Migration'.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

53 Council of the European Union, 'EUCAP Sahel Niger to help prevent irregular migration', p. 2.

54 Council of the European Union, 'Council Conclusions on Mali and the Sahel'; 'Sahel: EU takes further steps to better support the security of the region'.

55 e.g., European Commission, 'Progress Report on the Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration COM\_COM(2017)0471'; 'Conférence internationale de haut niveau sur le Sahel - Communiqué des co-présidents.

The narrative of the security-development-migration nexus translated very quickly into concrete action. Migration-related tasks had gained acute relevance in 2015/16, moving migration policy-related objectives increasingly into the remit of civilian CSDP missions deployed in the region.<sup>56</sup> In March 2015, the EU extended the mandate of EUCAP Sahel Niger, adding the support for the Nigerien authorities “in preventing irregular immigration and combatting associated crimes” to its range of responsibilities.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the EU foreign affairs ministers decided on the establishment of a field office of EUCAP in Agadez in northern Niger, tasked with supporting Nigerien security forces in preventing migration at this major trafficking hub on the road towards Libya.<sup>58</sup>

A second indication of the EU’s move towards a stronger emphasis on migration issues in its Sahel engagement is the adoption of the ‘visiting expert concept’, which now also allows Frontex experts to be deployed to CSDP missions. Since 2017, Frontex has deployed a liaison officer to Niamey, Niger and Dakar, Senegal and has deployed one Frontex expert to the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya.<sup>59</sup>

A third indication is the creation of the EU’s Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) with a budget for the Sahel and Lake Chad regional window of €2.103 million.<sup>60</sup> Out of the total budget contracted by the EUTF for the countries in the Sahel and Lake Chad region, approximately 21 per cent is spent on migration management activities. Concerning the funding for migration management and reduction of forced displacement and irregular migration, however, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso rank as the top three recipients of all ten countries in the Sahel and Lake Chad regional window.<sup>61</sup>

Lastly, we hold that the security narrative has further expanded in recent years in a third phase, towards an *increased focus on hard security* measures. Back in 2013, there was scepticism within the EU over a mandate for EUTM Mali that would allow in-battle training. Initially, the mission was to actively engage in the training of forces in the combat zone, and experts had planned to open a training facility in the northern city of Gao.<sup>62</sup> With several EU member states, in particular Germany, being sceptical of this approach,<sup>63</sup> EUTM

56 Interviews 5, 7.

57 Council of the European Union, ‘Valletta Summit Political Declaration’, p. 1.

58 Lebovich, ‘G5 Sahel: Much done, more to do. European Council on Foreign Relations Commentary’.

59 FRONTEX, ‘Liaison Officers Network’.

60 European Commission, ‘EUTF Monitoring and Learning System SLCYEARLY 2019 Report’.

61 *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

62 BBC Monitoring Europe, ‘EU weighing options for helping Mali to recapture north’.

63 Ziedler, ‘EU-Militärhilfe für Mali. Eingriff ohne Kampf’.

Mali finally restricted its actions to areas far away from the combat zones.<sup>64</sup> Hence, EUTM conducted its training in Koulikoro, a town in the south of Mali 60 kilometres west of the capital Bamako, although Malian stakeholders perceived this training as impractical.<sup>65</sup> The deteriorating security situation in the Sahelian countries, specifically in Mali and Burkina Faso, amplified the narrative characterised by an increasing emphasis on the necessity of hard security measures.<sup>66</sup>

In particular, a debate on military hardware support for training missions has gained prominence within the EU since 2015, notably because EUTM Mali lacked sufficient provision of lethal equipment to trained soldiers.<sup>67</sup> This has been reflected in the rhetoric of key EU decision-makers. High Representative Borrell has repeatedly stated the need for the EU to step up its military engagement in the Sahel. As the effectiveness of the various missions deployed in the region had increasingly been put into doubt,<sup>68</sup> he stated at the EU-AU College of Commissioners' meeting in February 2020: "We need guns, we need arms, we need military capacities and that is what we are going to help provide to our African friends because their security is our security."<sup>69</sup>

Although this solidification of the 'hard security' narrative is still unfolding, there are empirical indications that it has already turned into concrete action. First, the Council of the EU extended the mandate of EUTM Mali in March 2020. The new mandate widens the tasks of the mission by pointing to the possibility of providing military advice, training and mentoring "through non-executive accompaniment up to the tactical level."<sup>70</sup> This mandate extension, in fact, allows EUTM Mali staff to accompany G5 Sahel Joint Force operations and provide tactical advice in combat situations, which means that EU military personnel are coming one step closer towards actual involvement in military operations on the ground.

Second, the debate about how to better equip the armed forces of partner countries that the EU is cooperating with through its military training missions has resulted in an initiative to create a new financial instrument for military

64 Tisdall, 'Analysis: France's lonely intervention'.

65 Tull, 'Rebuilding Mali's army: the dissonant relationship between Mali and its international partners', p. 418.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 417.

67 Bergman, Neofunctionalism and EU external policy integration: the case of capacity building in support of security and development (CBSD); Interviews 2, 3, 10.

68 Tull, 'Rebuilding Mali's army: the dissonant relationship between Mali and its international partners'.

69 'Borell: Africa "needs guns" for stability'.

70 Council of the European Union, 'COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2020/434', p. 2.

capacity building – the European Peace Facility (EPF). The EPF was formally established on 22 March 2021 and includes, among others, the possibility to fund military equipment – including lethal weapons and ammunition – for the armed forces of partner countries. EU policymakers have made it clear that the EPF would be the primary instrument to provide Sahelian security forces with equipment to increase their fighting capacities. At the same time, it remains to be seen whether the limited funds available for military capacity building measures under the EPF will be of major strategic relevance compared to the investments of other international security actors operating in the region, such as the US.<sup>71</sup>

*The EU's Regionalisation Agenda: from 'African Solutions for African Problems' Towards 'Sahelian Solutions for Sahelian Problems'*

A second agenda the EU is pursuing in its Sahel policy is a regionalisation approach. Initially, the EU Sahel Strategy of 2011 identified an “absence of a sub-regional organisation encompassing all the Sahel and Maghreb states,” which “lead[s] to unilateral or poorly coordinated action.”<sup>72</sup> Beyond the Sahel Strategy, EU policymakers had repeatedly referred to the normative value of African regional cooperation in the Sahel as early as 2010.<sup>73</sup>

Statements by EU member states' representatives during the 2012 Mali crisis reinforced this emphasis. For instance, German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle demanded an “African face” in the response to the crisis<sup>74</sup> and French President Hollande explicitly referred to the efforts made alongside African partners such as ECOWAS.<sup>75</sup> However, the failure of ECOWAS to effectively stabilise Mali culminated in a premature transfer of the matter to the UN.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, this failure contributed to the regional power vacuum that created favourable conditions for the creation of the G5 Sahel.

Key documents of the EU's Sahel policy provide ample evidence for a change in narrative from ‘African solutions for African problems’ towards ‘Sahelian solutions for Sahelian problems’, the latter putting the five G5 Sahel

71 Hauck, ‘The latest on the European Peace Facility and what's in it for the African Union’, pp. 5–7.

72 EEAS, ‘Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel’, p. 3.

73 African Press Organization, ‘Statement by the spokesperson of HR of the European Union Catherine Ashton on Sahel region’.

74 Westerwelle cited by *Kölner Stadt-anzeiger*, ‘Bundeswehr vor Einsatz in West-Mali: Nebel warnt vor einem “neuen Afghanistan”’.

75 Hollande cited by BBC, ‘Mali crisis: France ready to stop rebels, says Hollande’.

76 Interviews 3, 11, 12.



member states in the driver's seat of regional efforts. In its conclusions on the implementation of the Sahel Strategy on 17 March 2014, the Council of the EU stated that:

“[t]he primary responsibility and ownership for peace, security and development is with the governments of the Sahelian region. [...] the EU will work in close cooperation with regional organisations and national governments in the Sahel to ensure a broadly rooted implementation of the EU Sahel Strategy. The EU welcomes the decision taken by the Heads of States of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso in Nouakchott on 16 February 2014 to establish a permanent framework for their own regional coordination efforts.”<sup>77</sup>

This prominent and clear reference to the G5 Sahel had its roots in the objective of emphasising African regional coordination in the Sahel.<sup>78</sup> Calling for Sahelian ownership, the EU reiterated its support of regional cooperation in the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015–2020.<sup>79</sup>

The regionalisation narrative has also been accompanied by concrete EU action. The EU has demonstrated its recognition and endorsement of the G5 Sahel as the legitimate regional organisation representing the five Sahel countries through its interaction with the organisation and its institutions, particularly with the G5 Sahel Council of Ministers. In 2017, the EU has established a permanent political dialogue with the foreign ministers of the five countries, in which they discuss such diverse challenges as fighting terrorism, human trafficking and climate change, as well as how to support governance and development.<sup>80</sup> One key result of this dialogue was the 2018 Joint Communiqué by the presidents and secretaries of the European Commission, G5 Sahel, African Union Commission and the United Nations. The Communiqué re-affirmed the international community's support to the G5 Sahel's efforts to promote

77 Council of the European Union, 'Council conclusions on implementation of the EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel', p. 3)

78 Lebovich, 'G5 Sahel: Much done, more to do. European Council on Foreign Relations Commentary'; Baldaro, *Rashomon in the Sahel: Conflict dynamics of security regionalism. Security Dialogue*.

79 Council of the European Union, 'Council conclusions on the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015–2020'.

80 EPRS, 'Peace and security in 2020. Evaluating the EU approach to tackling the Sahel conflicts', pp. 13–14.

security and threatened those who would undermine the peace process in Mali with the adoption of sanctions.<sup>81</sup>

In early 2020, the EU underscored its diplomatic commitment to supporting the G5 Sahel, as the most relevant regional actor in tackling the development and security challenges in the Sahel by getting involved in the creation of the Coalition for the Sahel (hereafter: Sahel Coalition). The Sahel Coalition, announced on 13 January 2020 at the Pau Summit of the Heads of State of France and the G5 Sahel countries together with the UN Secretary General, the European Council President, the EU High Representative and the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, is supposed to reinforce and channel the international community's support to the G5 Sahel.<sup>82</sup>

Through the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S), the EU supports the G5 Sahel's Priority Investment Programme (PIP), which is the organisation's main vehicle to implement its 2016 Development and Security Strategy in four priority areas: defence and security, governance, resilience and human development, as well as infrastructure.<sup>83</sup> At the December 2018 international donor conference in Nouakchott, the European Commission pledged an additional €125 million in funding for various PIP projects, with €70 million alone intended for the stabilisation of the G5 Sahel border areas channelled through the EUTF.<sup>84</sup>

The EU has channeled €100 million through the African Peace Facility for direct support of the G5 Sahel Joint Force. The operationalisation of the Joint Force (JF) in terms of creating a force of 5,000 troops and police officers was announced by the G5 Sahel heads of state during their February 2017 summit. The G5 Sahel JF is mandated to fight terrorist groups, cross-border organised crime and human trafficking. The EU's contribution of €100 million to the initially envisaged €424 million envelope needed for the JF's operationalisation underscores the significance the EU attaches to the G5 Sahel's efforts.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, the materialisation of the 'Sahelian solutions for Sahelian problems' narrative is observable in the regionalisation of the EU's CSDP missions as an additional means to support the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which has been put into practice since June 2017. Based on a decision by the Council, the EU established a regional coordination cell (RCC) under the authority of the

81 European Commission, 'Conférence internationale de haut niveau sur le Sahel - Communiqué des co-présidents'.

82 [www.coalition-sahel.org/en/](http://www.coalition-sahel.org/en/).

83 G5 Sahel, 'Sahel Priority Investment Program (PIP/ G5 Sahel). First Phase 2019–2021'.

84 European Commission, 'Fact Sheet. EU Support to G5 Sahel Joint Force'.

85 *Ibid.*

EU Military Staff (EUMS). The RCC was comprised of internal security and defence experts, both based in Bamako, Mali, and with the EU delegations in the other G5 Sahel member states. In a second phase launched in February 2019, the RCC was transformed into a regional advisory and coordination cell (RACC) and moved to G5 Sahel headquarters in Nouakchott to provide strategic advice on security and defence issues, in concert with EUTM Mali staff members already deployed at the Joint Force Headquarters based in Mali, Niger, Mauritania and Chad.<sup>86</sup>

In sum, the analysis shows that the evolution of the EU's actual engagement in the Sahel has centred around two main agendas: a security agenda and a regionalisation agenda which focuses on 'Sahelian solutions for Sahelian problems.' In the following section, we explore how the concept of foreign policy entrapment helps to explain the evolution of the EU's approach to the region.

### Foreign Policy Entrapment and the EU's Sahel Engagement

In this section, we argue that the findings of our empirical analysis on the EU's engagement in the Sahel reflect the proposed process of foreign policy entrapment created through path dependencies and lock-in effects. First, path dependencies are inherent in the EU's Sahel policy and explain its evolution in a particular direction over the past decade.

By adopting a security-focused approach to the region both in discourse and action, the EU has created a status quo bias that "reinforces the already considerable difficulties of moving off an established path."<sup>87</sup> The change in narrative towards a strong emphasis on the security-development nexus is clearly visible in the Sahel Strategy:

"In few areas is the inter-dependence of security and development more clear [...] Deteriorating security conditions pose a challenge to development cooperation and restrict the delivery of humanitarian assistance and development aid, which in turn exacerbates the vulnerability of the region and its population."<sup>88</sup>

86 Council of the European Union, 'Sahel: EU takes further steps to better support the security of the region'.

87 Pierson, 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics', p. 262.

88 EEAS, 'Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel', pp. 1–2; see also Lopez Lucia, 'The European Union integrated and regionalised approach towards the Sahel. Stabilizing Mali Project Report'.

Alongside this emphasis in the Sahel Strategy, various other official documents and speeches resulted in an approach that has produced an imbalance in favour of security measures vis-à-vis development aid and governance support activities.<sup>89</sup> The path dependency inherent in this approach is clearly visible in terms of EU discourse and action, as the EU over time moved towards a security-development-migration nexus narrative. For instance, security sector reform indicators have increasingly been linked to EU budget support and the EU has focused on advancing the G5 Sahel countries' capacities to fight security threats.<sup>90</sup> Most recently, a stronger focus on 'hard security' measures has developed, which both solidifies and expands the initial security-development nexus narrative. Most prominently, the emphasis on hard security as expressed by HR/VP Josep Borrell through war analogies for the Sahel further promotes this narrative. For example, he expressed this focus on hard security during his first visit to the AU by proposing a robust EU approach: "Let's be less angelical and put your foot on the ground [...]. We are facing a war. And when you face a war, you need to do war."<sup>91</sup> The extension of the mandate of EUTM Mali in March 2020, together with the establishment of the European Peace Facility (EPF), has shown that the EU has increasingly put this extended narrative into action, thus reinforcing the pressure to move away from the established security path.

Another path dependency inherent in the EU's approach is a "troubled regionalisation strategy,"<sup>92</sup> created by the EU's decision to nurture and support the G5 Sahel as a regional organisation. By betting on the G5 Sahel to fill the regional security vacuum that ECOWAS' failure to provide a regional response to the 2012 Mali crisis had left, the EU has, de facto, precluded ECOWAS from playing a significant role in promoting peace and stability in the region.<sup>93</sup> As clearly outlined in the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015–2020, the EU highlights the G5 Sahel as the main partner in the region and attributes only a

89 Lebovich, 'G5 Sahel: Much done, more to do. European Council on Foreign Relations Commentary'; Davitti and Ursu 2018, 'Why securitising the Sahel will not stop migration'.

90 Lopez Lucia, 'The European Union integrated and regionalised approach towards the Sahel. Stabilizing Mali Project Report', p. 24.

91 Herszenhorn *et al.*, 'To be top gun on foreign affairs, Borrell says EU must buy weapons'.

92 Lebovich, 'G5 Sahel: Much done, more to do. European Council on Foreign Relations Commentary', p. 4.

93 Bagayoko, *Le multilatéralisme sécuritaire africain à l'épreuve de la crise sahélienne*; Lopez Lucia, 'A tale of regional transformation: From political community to security regions the politics of security and regionalism in West Africa'; Plank, 'An unintended consequence of West Africa-EU relations: effects of regional security cooperation beyond the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)'.

potential role to the AU or ECOWAS “beyond the five Sahel countries.”<sup>94</sup> In other words, the EU has tied the prospects of the success of its engagement to the performance of a newly established regional organisation that had to develop its capacities for promoting regional security and development from scratch when it was founded in 2014.<sup>95</sup> As one interviewee put it: “[...] we do create structures that need a lot of time instead of using existing ones.”<sup>96</sup> The EU’s strong financial and operational support of the G5 Sahel was decisive for its evolution, in particular with regard to the organisation’s two flagship initiatives – the Joint Force and the PIP – but it has created a strong dependency on the EU’s assistance, making the G5 Sahel a cooperation project at the mercy of international donors.<sup>97</sup>

These established patterns make it difficult to change institutional configurations and policies. Sunk costs reinforce the EU’s approach in the Sahel. The evidence clearly indicates that decision-makers referred to the costs of withdrawing from existing arrangements as conceptualised by the notion of path dependencies.<sup>98</sup> The EU’s three CSDP missions deployed to the region nicely illustrate this point. In the context of the taken path, the mandates, responsibilities and regional scope of these missions have been continuously widened in an attempt to adjust existing instruments to a changing external environment. For instance, both EUCAP Niger and EUCAP Mali incorporated actions against illegal migration into their objectives, whereas the EU expanded the mandate of the EUTM beyond Mali and included monitoring exercises in the base activities of the G5 Sahel armed forces. Finally, HR Borrell repeated the EU’s commitment to the path taken: “These activities are crucial. We have invested a lot, the European Union has invested a lot in Mali and we do not want to waste this effort.”<sup>99</sup>

Second, we find lock-in effects contributing to the continuous widening and deepening of the EU’s Sahel engagement. Lock-in effects accelerate and solidify the general policy direction and render possible alternatives implausible. Both EU-internal and external drivers have shaped these lock-in effects in the case of the EU’s Sahel policy. Internally, France has been a key driver behind the EU’s engagement in the region since 2012, pushing for a widened and deepened engagement of the EU and attempting to ‘Europeanise’ its own

94 Council of the European Union, ‘Council conclusions on the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015–2020’, p. 15.

95 Interviews 5, 6, 12.

96 Interview 9.

97 Desgrais, *Cinq ans après, une radioscopie du G5 Sahel*, p. 77.

98 Pierson, ‘The Path to European Integration: A Historical Institutional Perspective’, p. 146.

99 Borrell, cited by *Deutsche Welle*, ‘EU freezes Mali training missions after military coup’.

efforts in the Sahel centred on its military action in Mali.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, France has been a major driver behind the creation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, as well as through military cooperation between the French Operation Barkhane and Sahelian militaries.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, together with Germany and the European Commission, France pushed for the establishment of the Sahel Alliance as a main donor coordination platform for countries engaged in the region and has been the main architect behind the Coalition for the Sahel.<sup>102</sup>

A second internal driver emanates from the inter-institutional competition within EU bodies that accelerated lock-in effects. After the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty that introduced new frameworks of cooperation to the EU without clearly defining practices of cooperation, EU actors within the newly created EEAS, the EU Delegations and the Commission were left with a crucial leeway to define new practices.<sup>103</sup> Hence, “many of the actors involved in the Sahel Strategy saw and intentionally used the Strategy as a ‘laboratory of experimentation’ driven by the desire to reconfigure EU external action along the lines of the Comprehensive Approach.”<sup>104</sup> Internal competition for financial means has specifically unfolded between the EEAS as political actor and the DG DEVCO as implementing actor. Whereas the former has been keen to follow the security-related narrative constructed in the Sahel Strategy and the role of the EU as an actor which is guided by strategic interest, the latter opposes taking on an implementing role for EEAS policies and is guided by a vision of the EU as a normative and development actor. Moreover, some member states have also been quite sceptical about the increased role of the EEAS as a main coordinating body.<sup>105</sup> The internal competition has locked in the EU’s approach to the Sahel. First, the strategic approach of the EEAS has accelerated the security-related narrative as expressed in the Sahel Strategy and solidified it since 2011. Second, this competition has led to the emphasis on the G5 Sahel. Initially regarded as a more efficient approach compared to ECOWAS in terms of interest to the region,<sup>106</sup> actors within the EEAS have

100 Bergmann, ‘Neofunctionalism and EU external policy integration: the case of capacity building in support of security and development (CBSD)’, pp. 1266–1267.

101 Desgrais, ‘La force conjointe Du G5 Sahel ou l’émergence d’une architecture de défense collective propre au Sahel’; Tardy, ‘France’s military operations in Africa: Between institutional pragmatism and agnosticism’.

102 Interviews 9, 13.

103 Lopez Lucia, ‘Performing EU agency by experimenting the ‘Comprehensive Approach’: the European Union Sahel Strategy’.

104 *Ibid.*, p. 456.

105 *Ibid.*

106 Interviews 4, 5.

developed several initiatives to amplify the capacities of the group.<sup>107</sup> It has been argued that the G5 Sahel has become an “obsession” in Brussels.<sup>108</sup> Third, these internally competing processes have accelerated the regionalisation of the approach,<sup>109</sup> with the Regional Coordination Cell as a striking example<sup>110</sup> and referred to by an EEAS official as the “most important mission of the EU.”<sup>111</sup> Finally, the scepticism among some member states about the increased political role in the Sahel has restricted the mandate and actions of the CSDP missions of the EU in the region.<sup>112</sup>

Moreover, external factors reinforced lock-in effects that accelerated the path taken and rendered alternative solutions implausible. Ample evidence suggests that the (perceived) failure of ECOWAS in its 2012 Mali engagement constituted an external factor for a discursive shift towards ‘Sahelian solutions for Sahelian problems.’<sup>113</sup> Therefore, it has been argued that the EU follows a “logic of necessary continuity” in the Sahel,<sup>114</sup> in which its engagement may be constitutive of new-found security partnerships, most notably with the G5 Sahel.

With these (perceived) failures, the lock-in effect of engagement with the G5 Sahel has been accelerated by the deteriorating security situation in the region. Despite the gradual increase in the EU’s engagement, the security situation – particularly in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso – has not significantly stabilised, and in some parts even deteriorated during the past few years.<sup>115</sup> Responding to these developments, EU decision-makers such as Federica Mogherini or Josep Borrell have repeatedly called for a widening and deepening of the engagement.<sup>116</sup>

107 Interview 9; Lopez Lucia, ‘The European Union integrated and regionalised approach towards the Sahel. Stabilizing Mali Project Report’.

108 Interview 7.

109 Interviews 5, 7.

110 Lopez Lucia, ‘The European Union integrated and regionalised approach towards the Sahel. Stabilizing Mali Project Report’.

111 Interview 8.

112 Ziedler, ‘EU-Militärhilfe für Mali. Eingriff ohne Kampf’; Interviews 1, 2.

113 Lopez Lucia, ‘A tale of regional transformation: From political community to security regions the politics of security and regionalism in West Africa’; Plank, ‘An unintended consequence of West Africa-EU relations: effects of regional security cooperation beyond the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)’.

114 Cold-Ravnkilde and Lindskov Jacobsen, ‘Disentangling the security traffic jam in the Sahel: constitutive effects of contemporary interventionism’, p. 868.

115 ACLED, ‘Political violence skyrockets in the Sahel according to latest ACLED data’.

116 BBC Monitoring Africa, ‘EU announces increase in aid for G5 Sahel joint force’; Remy, ‘Josep Borrell: La frontière de l’Europe n’est pas en Méditerranée, mais au sud du Sahel’.



“To give you a date, last year [2019], the Sahel countries lost 1,500 soldiers [...] On our side the European countries we are the first donors, and the main political partners of these countries. We are a key player in the security field. We have 3 missions of Security and Common Defence Policy. The Council agreed today to increase this strategic cooperation. We must absolutely do more.”<sup>117</sup>

Finally, the security-related agenda as put forward by the EU and regionalisation dynamics in the Sahel more generally are inter-linked in terms of lock-in effects. As previously outlined, processes of the spatialisation of security, as furthered by the emphasis on the G5 Sahel as main regional body but with limited influence of the G5 actors on the definition of regional security, are a key dynamic in the EU's policies towards the Sahel.<sup>118</sup> As such, the framing of the Sahel as a space of insecurity and the emphasis on dealing with these challenges through the G5 Sahel, accelerate and solidify the general direction of the EU's policy approach. As emphasised by previous research, the processes of regionalisation and a fostered security-agenda are closely connected and mutually reinforcing in terms of solidifying the approach taken by the EU towards the Sahel.<sup>119</sup> As such, the EU seems unable to change its course of action, while being limited in the capacity to control the results of its approach.<sup>120</sup>

Taken together these path dependencies, created by initial decisions to craft the EU's Sahel policy, in conjunction with EU-internal and external drivers that have locked the EU into its policy course, explain how the EU's engagement in the region has evolved since 2011. Hence, the evolution of the EU's Sahel policy can be understood in terms of a ‘foreign policy entrapment cycle’, in which path dependencies and lock-in effects have amplified existing narratives about the dominance of security in the EU's approach and a focus on the G5 Sahel as the primary cooperation partner for the EU in the region. Moreover, while these narratives have been turned into concrete EU action, EU-internal and external dynamics have resulted in a perception that these efforts have still

117 Borrell cited by TendersInfo, ‘Belgium: Foreign Affairs Council: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the press conference’.

118 Lopez Lucia, ‘A tale of regional transformation: From political community to security regions the politics of security and regionalism in West Africa’; see also Charbonneau 2017.

119 Baldaro, Rashomon in the Sahel: Conflict dynamics of security regionalism. Security Dialogue; Bagayoko, *Le multilatéralisme sécuritaire africain à l'épreuve de la crise sahélienne*; Lopez Lucia, ‘A tale of regional transformation: From political community to security regions the politics of security and regionalism in West Africa’.

120 Baldaro, ‘The Sahel as an unintended region: Competing regionalisms and insecurity dynamics’, p. 157.

been insufficient to address the security and development challenges of the five Sahel states. In turn, this has led the EU to move further down the taken path and to reinforce its course of action, rendering the adoption of an alternative approach to the Sahel – for example, one that focuses more strongly on development policy solutions or integrates ECOWAS more strongly into EU efforts – less likely.

### Conclusions: Policy Entrapment in the EU's Sahel Approach

This article set out to trace the EU's approach to the Sahel and to provide an explanation for why the EU has taken this policy course and how internal and external factors have shaped it. To do so, we have drawn on historical institutionalism in a heuristic manner as a basis for developing the concept of 'foreign policy entrapment' and provided a comprehensive analysis of both the EU's foreign policy discourse and action vis-à-vis the region. Based on our analysis, we argue that the EU's adoption of two predominant narratives has created path dependencies concerning the EU's engagement that have in turn been further amplified by lock-in effects and resulted in what we have termed 'foreign policy entrapment'.

Concerning the EU's foreign policy discourse, we find a narrative that strongly focuses on the provision of security as a precondition for development. This narrative has been further amplified and widened over time as migration strongly fed into the EU's foreign policy discourse. More recently, it also included a call for stronger EU military engagement that would involve the provision of military equipment to the G5 Sahel and its member states. A second narrative predominant in the EU's foreign policy discourse vis-à-vis the Sahel is one that focuses on regional solutions for the prevailing security challenges. While this narrative first focused on 'African solutions to African problems', it shifted in 2014 towards an emphasis on 'Sahelian solutions for Sahelian problems', emphasising the EU's strong support to the G5 Sahel as the main regional body, both in discourse and action. This narrative created a strong interdependency between the EU and the G5 Sahel.

EU foreign policy action to put deeds to these two narratives has so far failed to produce the desired outcomes. Hence, the EU has found itself in a 'spiral' of continuous intensification of its engagement in the region. This trend has been further accelerated by lock-in effects, which are driven both by EU-internal and external dynamics. Internally, a strong push by France to further 'Europeanise' its own efforts in the Sahel together with inter-institutional competition

among EU institutions that led to a perception of the Sahel as a laboratory of experimentation, have accelerated the EU's tendency to strive for a widening and deepening of its engagement. Externally, the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel intensified the pressure on the EU to step up its engagement and produced a perception among EU policymakers that all efforts so far had not been sufficient. Those dynamics have resulted in a situation of foreign policy entrapment in which the EU finds itself on a policy course that is perceived by most policymakers in Brussels as being without alternatives and is likely to lead to further stepping up of EU activities in the Sahel in the near future.

At the same time, it is important to point out that the argument about foreign policy entrapment is not to be understood as a deterministic one, in the sense that once a certain policy path has been chosen, no alternative policy action is possible. Rather, the concept of foreign policy entrapment that we have derived from historical institutionalism should mostly be understood as an analytical tool to understand how path dependencies created by initial decisions and accompanying lock-in effects shape the longer-term evolution of EU foreign policies. These path dependencies and lock-in effects can generate an implicit understanding that the foreign policy course taken is inevitable and needs to be further pursued. However, the extent to which these path dependencies actually play out in reality depends on the strength of EU-internal and external drivers of lock-in effects. In the case of the Sahel, the internal lock-in effects are quite strong because of strong interest in the region from institutions and member states. Paradoxically, the ineffectiveness of EU activities measured against the deteriorating security situation further accelerates this effect.

From a theoretical perspective, we have shown that the concept of foreign policy entrapment can indeed be useful for the analysis of the EU's approach in the Sahel. Future research would need to investigate whether the foreign policy entrapment model is also applicable to and possesses explanatory power in other cases of EU foreign policy. A comparison of different regional policies of the EU, in particular among regions that also face major challenges to security and stability, could further probe the plausibility of the explanatory approach embarked upon in this paper.

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## Annex

List of interviews conducted for this study (all interviewees were guaranteed full anonymity):

- Interview 1. Interview with EU Official conducted in March 2017 in Addis Ababa.
- Interview 2. Interview with EU Member State Representative conducted in March 2017 in Addis Ababa.
- Interview 3. Interview with ECOWAS Official conducted in June 2017 in Abuja.
- Interview 4. Interview with EU Official conducted in November 2018 in Brussels.
- Interview 5. Interview with EU Official conducted in November 2018 in Brussels.
- Interview 6. Interview with EU Official conducted in November 2018 in Brussels.
- Interview 7. Interview with EU Official conducted in November 2018 in Brussels.
- Interview 8. Interview with EU Official conducted in November 2018 in Brussels.
- Interview 9. Interview with EU Official conducted in May 2019 in Addis Ababa.
- Interview 10. Interview with EU Official conducted in May 2019 in Addis Ababa.
- Interview 11. Interview with AU Official conducted in May 2019 in Addis Ababa.
- Interview 12. Interview with AU Official conducted in May 2019 in Addis Ababa.
- Interview 13. Interview with AU Official conducted in May 2019 in Addis Ababa.
- Interview 14. Interview with EU Official conducted in June 2017 in Brussels.