

EXTERNAL INTERVENTIONS IN MALI AND ITS BORDERLANDS – A CASE FOR STABILISATION

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Abstract

The article's main objective is to contribute to a better understanding of the concept of stabilisation, in both academic and policy terms, by analysing the outcomes of counterinsurgency and support to peace operations in the Sahel by regional, continental, and extra-continental actors. It addresses the problematic associated with the so-called 'intervention traffic jam' resulting from numerous external initiatives in the political process and conflict dynamics of Sahelian countries, with focus on central and northern Mali and its borderlands.

The external interventions entered a new phase of the so-called liberal peace project when, in the 2000s, peacekeeping modalities evolved into integrated or multidimensional missions, as well as into a normative framework for statebuilding. Furthermore, interventions in the Sahel reflect a return to stabilisation in the early 2010s – a concept that emerges as an alternative to the peacebuilding-statebuilding nexus which dominated the previous decade.

Despite the numerous stabilisation efforts, there are recurrent episodes of extreme violence in the ethnically diverse central Mali, along with increased insecurity in neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger. The insurgency phenomena in the border areas between Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso (Liptako-Gourma) is often not only directly linked to the association between the expansion of Salafi-Jihadist movements and the Malian political crisis of 2012, but also to the weak state presence in large regions in the Sahara-Sahel and the challenges posed by ethnic pluralism. The article concludes by emphasising the lack of integration of stabilisation responses into a political approach considering different governance strategies. It also stresses the need to prioritise the restoration of the state's legitimate authority despite the achievement of a *modus vivendi* in the country's northern region.

Keywords

Stabilisation, Peace Support, Intervention, Statebuilding, Sahel

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Introduction

The article addresses the problematic associated with the so-called 'intervention traffic jam'¹ resulting from numerous external initiatives, namely in the form of military and peace support interventions, being implemented in the Sahel since the 2012 Malian politico-military crisis. Its main objective is to understand and analyse the effect of those operations, or the "partnership peacekeeping"², in the political process and conflict dynamics of Sahelian countries, with focus on central and northern Mali and its borderlands. Furthermore, it aims to contribute to a better understanding of the concept of stabilisation in both academic and policy terms.

The cross-border nature of threats to state security in the Sahel hinders responses of an exclusively military nature led and/or supported by intervention actors (state, international organisations, ad-hoc coalitions). These actors are either regional (G5 Sahel, Economic Community of West African States - ECOWAS), continental (African Union - AU), or extra-continental (France, United Nations - UN, European Union - EU, United States of America - USA). The article explains how, despite the proliferation of external initiatives in support to security sector reform, the growing counterinsurgency logic, along with the long-term privatisation of public services such as security, further challenged the state's legitimate - rather than legal - authority.

The article concludes by emphasising the limits of the technocratic approach of the stabilisation responses, as well as the lack of their integration into a political approach considering different governance strategies. The prospect of a less linear systemic societal-based approach may be exemplified by recent international and national support to bottom-up approaches. They often materialise in the establishment of local peace deals led by non-state actors within the more polycentric and complex conflict dynamics in Mali's central region and southern borderlands.

The research is based on an analysis of the literature, as well as of remote semi-structured and open interviews and personal communications with both former and

¹ The expression 'intervention traffic jam' has previously been used, e.g., in the July 2020 issue of *International Affairs*, guest-edited by Jacobsen & Cold-Ravnkilde to characterise the proliferation of foreign assistance initiatives in the Sahel.

² Williams (2021: 24) refers to this "partnership peacekeeping" as the current norm in Africa, entailing "collaboration on operations between two or more multilateral institutions and/or various bilateral actors".



current UN and EU staff members, and independent experts in 2020 and 2021. All interviews were conducted under the Chatham House Rule, thus no direct references to individuals who took part in a personal capacity are provided in the text.

Conceptualising Stabilisation

Stabilisation efforts are meant to support states undergoing conflict - at different stages - and often consists of processes where military actors support civil-led processes, which can be translated into both peace-support and counterinsurgency³ operations (Curran & Holtom 2015: 3, Mac Ginty 2012). Contemporary external interventions, including in the Sahel, progressively constitute stabilisation and/or counterinsurgency combined with counterterrorism operations, posing a challenge to the classic and liberal paradigm of peacebuilding, and resulting in its retraction both as a concept and as a practice (Karlsrud 2019a).

The concept of stabilisation emerged in the late 2000s as a pragmatic alternative to the peacebuilding/statebuilding nexus which dominated the previous decade (Andersen 2018). The first UN stabilisation mission dates to 2014 (Haiti). In 2015, the report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) would confirm the absence of, and need for, a definition of stabilisation by the UN (UN 2015; Andersen 2018). HIPPO refers to UN 'crisis management' missions, which would include stabilisation. Similarly, the EU uses the concept of 'crisis management', and the AU (along with North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) 'peace support' operations. In the literature, stabilisation often corresponds to the definition developed by the British government. In this sense, it applies to situations where there is no political settlement and it would consist of a process aimed at establishing a political framework and agreement for a stable state, not necessarily a concrete final state (Aoi et al 2017: 4, 10-11).

Most interventions entail support to the Security Sector Reform (SSR) process, which constitutes a key component of statebuilding promoted by external actors, such as the EU, the UN, and the USA. SSR consists of "an entirely policy-driven concept" (Bleiker & Krupanski 2012: 37), in reference to processes requiring a civilian framework of democratic control that ensures accountability and transparency in the use of force. It promotes the legitimacy of the state in the monopoly of the use of force, ensuring that it has the capacity to escalate the use of force, but also that violence perpetrated by non-state political orders is eliminated. SSR processes focuses mainly on reforming military institutions, most often including demobilisation programs - although, in the last decade, the concept has been reshaped in order to respond to the human security⁴ agenda.

³ Contradicting the principles of peacekeeping, counterinsurgency operations seek to establish order by fighting the insurgency. Often based on British doctrine, 'insurgency' is understood as organised and violent subversion used to affect or prevent political control, thus challenging established authority. As counterinsurgency operations also aim at addressing root causes of the insurgency, they do require a multi-faced approach (Aoi et al 2017: 9).

⁴ The concept of human security reflects the paradigm shift, from war to law, in an international context where the law applies more to the individual than to the state (Kaldor 2014: 74).



Existing critiques and advancements towards a “local turn”

Aiming to address the so-called peacebuilding crisis from the late 1990s⁵, the institutionalist approach of ‘peacebuilding-as-statebuilding’ became the main objective of any international policy related to global security in the early 2000s. There was a new consensus towards a ‘partnership’ approach (between recipient countries and international institutions) to peacebuilding (Chandler 2017: 4). The global governance project or hegemony of liberal peace entered a new phase of external intervention with the development of peacekeeping modalities that evolved into integrated or multidimensional missions.

Yet the absence of peace in the context of conflicts within the state itself results in complex scenarios for the operationalisation of peacekeeping missions, which tend to implement robust mandates. Their mandates mirror the complexity inherent to intra-state conflicts, as opposed to so-called traditional peacekeeping missions operating in the context of inter-conflict, including monitoring demobilisation and ceasefire processes (Howard 2019a: 5). Several authors warn of the risks that such developments imply for the maintenance of peace as an instrument for peace, as well as for the need to reaffirm the political character of any UN stabilisation doctrine (Howard 2019b; Charbonneau 2019: 311; Karlsrud 2017: 1222-1225; Boutellis 2015: 4).

The identification of the flaws in the liberal peace project led to the emergence of new conceptualisations of peace (post-liberal). Existing criticisms of peacebuilding are essentially due to the inability of the liberal model to ensure the sustainability of peace, largely due to the imposition of technocratic state institutions. Chandler (2017: 4) refers to peacebuilding as ‘sovereignty-building’ and to ‘sovereignty’ as ‘responsibility’, in the sense that post-colonial, non-Western states become embedded in international institutional frameworks. In this context, there is a progressive shift from interventions which are end-based or goal-oriented focusing on formal state institutions to a less linear systemic societal-based approach, including hybrid forms of peace and everyday practices (Chandler 2017: 143-210; Mac Ginty 2010, 2011).

Despite the preeminent role given to the “local” in the strategy of most external interventions, national or regional actors who do not comply with international bureaucratic and technocratic standards are often marginalised from internationally-sponsored initiatives (Mac Ginty 2012b). Statebuilding is still seen as the “technocratic remedy” to e.g., “fragile” states (*Ibid.*). Therefore, the emphasis on the local does not automatically result in ownership and sustainability by the overall population of a recipient country or region.

The debate also reflects current views on foreign support to SSR. This concept tends towards a shift from a security foreign assistance paradigm - realistic and state-centred during the Cold War - to a liberal and more holistic approach. Thus, although applied to the security sector, SSR has been responding mainly to the agenda of

⁵ A reflection of that crisis, peace interventions often resulted in the establishment of international peace protectorates, e.g., in the Balkans and in Timor-Leste, which contested the UN Charter framework of state sovereignty and non-intervention (Chandler 2017: 4).



(good) governance (Chappuis&Hänggi 2013: 170). That said, it is currently at an impasse between two conflicting frameworks, i.e., between the commitment to rule of law as the main SSR principle - liberal approach - and its insertion into the current 'local turn' in peace and conflict studies as a condition for sustainable peace - post-liberal approach (Donais&Barbak 2021: 3-5). For instance, when adopting a hybrid model of liberal nature⁶, local non-state security providers also integrate the SSR process, given the ultimate objective of guaranteeing human security- Thus, despite the significant investment in the sector, from a hybrid school's perspective, the orthodox (liberal) approach is rather state-centric, ignoring local dynamics (Sedra 2013: 2019-222).

Evidence from Mali and its borderlands

The period of analysis begins with the Malian political-military crisis of 2012, in the context of a *post-coup d'état* and the Tuareg rebellion, and subsequent intervention by France (Operation Serval) in support of the Malian government against groups with links to the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI). Initiatives carried out by regional/continental entities, namely the AU and ECOWAS through the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), were quickly replaced by and/or integrated in the United Nations peacekeeping mission, *Mission multidimensionale Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Mali* (MINUSMA) in 2013. That same year, the EU established its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) military mission, EU Training Mission (EUTM) Mali, later followed by the civilian EU Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) Sahel Mali (2015). EUTM and EUCAP are both non-executive missions, mainly in support of the Malian security sector reform. Since 2017, the EU launched the regionalisation process of its CSDP in the Sahel, combining civil and military and establishing a network of security and defence experts in the EU delegations. At the same time, between 2013 and 2014, regional military missions with counterterrorism mandates were launched in the Sahel, including in Mali, such as Juniper Shield (USA) and Barkhane (France) operations. In 2017, the AU authorised the G5 Sahel Joint Force (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Mauritania). As from 2020, France leads the establishment of the Takuba task force with contributions from several EU Member States.⁷

External responses tend to be integrated into a policy approach or the security-development nexus. It is also at the core of the multi-donor 'Alliance Sahel' (2017) and subsequent initiatives, namely the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel - P3S (2019) and the Coalition for the Sahel (2020). However, these approaches prioritise state governance to the detriment of alternative forms of governance and informal social contract, whose understanding is gradually seen as essential to tackle the root causes of violent conflict. In fact, the region is still facing

⁶ Sedra (2013: 211-223) distinguishes between three schools to explain the deficiencies of the SSR model (monopoly, "good enough", hybrid), based on similarities and differences in relation to the role played by the state.

⁷ Takuba task force is currently focusing on the Liptako-Gourma region, the tri-border area (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) adjacent to the Niger river between the city of Gao in Mali and the capital of Niger, Niamey. It aimed at reinforcing Operation Barkhane, whose end was recently (June 2021) announced by French President Macron. The task force has two groups based in the Malian towns of Gao and Menaka.



challenges from the longer-term presence of elements from the different Salafi-jihadi movements⁸, together with the contested return of the state administration to central and northern Mali.

A key trend of the post-intervention period in Mali is the proliferation of both militias and political movements or very diversified political-military groups. Lecocq&Klute (2019: 49-53) place the Malian government amongst the numerous groups who “fight militarily and politically-often in fast-shifting alliances among them or with external power groups - for different objectives that likewise may change quickly as well”. The most notorious have been Salafi-jihadist movements. In fact, the Sahelian region in general, and Liptako-Gourma area in particular, suffered from the wide expansion - albeit under very fragmented processes - of local al-Qaeda and Daesh affiliates from the 2000s and 2010s, respectively. To a lesser extent, the border Mali-Burkina Faso-Côte d’Ivoire has also been the object of the expansion of Salafi-Jihadi movements. Cross border security programmes under the Accra Initiative (not recognised by the AU) intended to tackle the insurgency, particularly led by the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (*Jamā'atnuṣrat al-islāmwal-muslimīn* - JNIM), via operation Koudanlgou II in 2018.⁹

Despite initially having a role of mediation (monitoring of the peace process), the mandate of the MINUSMA has since been facing challenges in implementing a robust mandate in a context of intrastate conflict, insofar as the operationalisation of the mission has challenged the principles of peacekeeping operations, not falling within the spectrum of operations provided for in the Capstone Doctrine. Karlsrud (2019b) suggests placing the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA under a type of “chapter VII and a half” operation within the UN Charter – taking as an example former Secretary-General Hammarskjöld’s conceptualisation of peacekeeping as a ‘Chapter VI and half’ operation, i.e., between the ‘Pacific Settlement of Disputes’ (Chapter VI) and the use of force (Chapter VII). In this sense, “Chapter VII and half” are Chapter VII peace operations “deployed in close cooperation with regional or subregional actors, either operating as part of the UN peace operation, or in close cooperation with it”, namely African member states providing troops to missions with a peace enforcement, or at least a more robust, mandate (*Ibid.*: 496).

While the G5 Sahel Joint Force continues developing its own capacity, MINUSMA is mandated to provide it with operational and logistical support, in particular to carry out counterinsurgency operations across the Sahel.¹⁰ Facing a reputational risk, the UN mission collaborates, directly or indirectly, also with French-led regional Operation

⁸ The article adopts the expression ‘Salafi-Jihadi movement’ used by Maher (2016). Similarly, Dalacoura (2001: 235-248) and Dias (2010) adopt the concept of Islamist militant movement, which reflects the transnational character of what are commonly referred to as jihadist groups. Jihadism refers to the movements that emerged from the 1980s, characterized by a departure from the Sunni tradition in terms of how jihad should be conducted, for instance, by rejecting constitution-based political orders and committing violence against civilians (Thurston 2020:1-2).

⁹ The operation was undertaken by Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, with Mali as an observer. Most recently (March 2021), attacks have been perpetrated against gendarmerie and army positions in Côte d’Ivoire in the border area with Burkina Faso.

¹⁰ Based on interviews conducted remotely in 2021, the action of the Joint Force is barely perceptible given the lack of implementation of the operation.



Barkhane (which superseded Serval in 2014)¹¹ in its counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts (Boutellis 2021: 28-30, Charbonneau 2019). Nevertheless, this degree of participation of MINUSMA in counterinsurgency remains unclear. In fact, on the one hand, French-led Barkhane would collaborate with MINUSMA at a limited level, e.g., sharing information on security risks related to foreseen operations in areas where the UN mission also operates. On the other hand, cooperation between MINUSMA and the Malian government progressively focused on counterinsurgency mainly to neutralise armed groups.¹²

In relation to the Malian government, the mission is de facto partial, resulting in retaliatory attacks by insurgent groups and a growing counterinsurgency logic. It is also not governed by the principle of non-use of force. The use of force is permitted, albeit exclusively for the purpose of protecting peacekeepers and the civilian population, therefore, also not qualifying it as a peace enforcement mission (Kjeksrud&Vermeij 2017:227-245). In fact, since 2014, MINUSMA saw its mandate broadened to include e.g. protection of civilians and support to the reestablishment of authority by the central state. Since 2018, while the protection of civilians remained the focus, the geographical scope was extended to include central Mali. This aimed specifically at restoring the state's authority in the communal violence-inflicted areas of Mopti and Segou, where ethnic pluralism is more prominent compared with the northern region of Mali (van der Lijn et al 2019: 39-43).

The UN has showed reluctance in prepositioning resources for the protection of civilians for what would become the major crisis in Mali as result of the increase in the inter- and intracommunal violence in the country's central region. When put in a complex situation, e.g., set up to deal with one conflict (in the north) and later having another one to handle (in the centre), the UN proved to be unfit for a prompt re-focus. In the north, a modus vivendi has been achieved between the two rival coalitions following the signature of 2015 Peace and Reconciliation Accord and despite its slow implementation (Boutellis 2021: 18).¹³

The sustainability of the external interventions and their stabilisation goal is questioned especially given the intensification of violence in the centre of the country. For instance, conflict between two ethnic groups in the region - the Fulani pastoralists, and the Dogon herders - together with intra-community conflict, can be seen as a product of insurgency and counterinsurgency. The combination of the retaliation by state security forces with the violent acts of the different movements led to the proliferation of self-defence groups. This contributed to a continuous violence cycle inter and intra communities, including the establishment of a Dogon countermovement acting against Dogon militia and favouring dialogue with Fulani allied to Salafi-Jihadist movements, or disputes over access to pastures between Fulani-supporting al-Qaeda and those from the same ethnic group supporting the Daesh (Benjaminsen& Ba 2021; ICG: 2020-3-4; van der Lijn et al 2018: 42).

¹¹ According to Harmon (2015), the replacement of Serval by Barkhane occurred not only due to France's need to intervene in the Sahel beyond Mali, but also because of concerns regarding Malian political leadership and inadequacy of national security forces, especially for desert warfare.

¹² Interviews with current and former UN staff members, remote, February, April, May, and June 2021.

¹³ Phrasing one interviewee, "MINUSMA has settled for the "Darfur option"". Interview with current UN staff member, remote, April 2021.



Nevertheless, both international and national state actors have been paying attention to the central region. Whereas the 2018 *Plan de Sécurisation Intégrée des Régions du Centre* (PSIRC) of the Government of Mali emphasised security aspects (along with overall return of the state and development), the 2019 *Stratégie de Stabilisation pour le Centre du Mali* had a clearer focus on the political aspects as part of a crisis exit strategy (ICG 2020: 20-22). Bottom-up approaches, often supported by international actors, including MINUSMA, international non-governmental organisations, but also by national actors such as the *Haut Conseil Islamique du Mali*, resulted in the establishment of local peace deals in the central region. However, other peace deals were also led by elements of Salafi-jihadist movements, therefore enabling alternative forms of authority and governance (Boutellis 2021: 22-24, ICG 2020: 26-28).

Along with those movements, the formation of self-defence groups presented itself as a form of informal privatisation of a state/public service - security. For instance, Benjaminsen & Ba (2021: 5) affirm that Dogon militia consist mainly of traditional hunters trained and armed by the Malian state to de facto replace the national army in attempting to control the central region. Established in 2016, Dana Ambassagou is the main self-defence group implicated in scaling-up violence in the area, and essentially allied with the Malian state. Despite being formed mainly of *dozo* or local hunters, traditionally seen as community protectors, it also integrates other *dogon* militias and criminal elements originating from West African countries, namely Côte d'Ivoire. Furthermore, in recent years, a growing number of reports point to the fact that the increasing counterinsurgency logic has also driven national armies to commit violence action against civilians.¹⁴

Within the support to governmental security forces, assistance to SSR tend to follow the "technocratic turn" of internationally-sponsored peace interventions (Mac Ginty 2012b). Furthermore, there seems to be an imbalance between the normative and functional spheres, with emphasis on the functional aspects of the security sector (back to a 'train-and-equip' logic), at the expense of promoting standards and regulations, namely by the EU. In fact, assistance to state forces is driven by supply (of training, equipment, and advice), with experts and scholars reproaching the absence of due appropriation by national actors (Tull 2020, 2019; Jayasundara-Smits 2018; Ehrhart et al 2014). Moreover, external actors do not have access to existing power dynamics, many driven by neopatrimonialism with focus on personalities rather than institutions.¹⁵ The dynamics inherent to local agency, including "locally-owned SSR"¹⁶, are illustrated by military coups in Mali in August 2020 and May 2021.

Furthermore, rule of law-based SSR assistance is seen as too rigid to adjust to local contexts (Cravo 2016, Donais & Barbak 2021:5-6). Instead, one could advocate for a shift from legality to legitimacy within the existent hybrid security provision. In this context, one would privilege what Donais & Barbak (2021: 9-15) define as "polycentric

¹⁴ See, for instance, the following online resources made available by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project - ACLED (<https://acleddata.com/blog/2020/05/20/state-atrocities-in-the-sahel-the-impetus-for-counter-insurgency-results-is-fueling-government-attacks-on-civilians>), and Orient XXI (<https://orientxxi.info/magazine/au-sahel-les-massacres-s-amplifient-malgre-le-covid-19,3830>)

¹⁵ Interviews with former EUTM and current UN staff members, remote, April and May 2021

¹⁶ "Locally-owned SSR" is explained by Donais & Barbak (2021:2) as the appropriation of process by the host government's side, characterised by a compromise of SSR ideals in face of power struggles and resistance to accountability measures.



accountability networks” within a SSR strategy beyond the state. It would enable to promote co-governance between state and non-state security providers, including required links with justice provision.

The article further explains how the state-centric approach - which informs external interventions - did not result in a solution for the Malian state (partial) collapse, in particular in northern Mali and its borderlands.

From the Malian state recession to its partial collapse

Resulting from a limited selection of Weber's work, the institutionalist approach to statebuilding is criticised for the essentially technocratic perspective centred on the capacities and institutions, or apparatus, of the state underlying their monopoly of violence (Lottholz& Lemay-Hébert 2016). This neo-Weberian approach does not account for the more diverse and complex nature of the state, namely the relationship that is established between the state and society. On the contrary, the adoption of a post-Weberian line would allow the analysis of legitimacy in its historical and cultural dimensions, including alternative sources of legitimacy of social orders such as traditional ones, and how they overlap with, or are the object of, interference from global processes (namely intervention).

Most studies show that the Malian government has neglected the search for lasting solutions to the causes of the local insurrection which are related to a deficit in political governance in marginalised areas - and which are remotely related to the phenomenon of jihadism (Schmidt 2018: 294, 2013: 2017; Charbonneau 2019: 312). As Guichaoua (2020: 911) phrased, “post-colonial sovereignty in Mali was never in great shape”, and external intervention in the post-2012 crisis only precipitated the state's (partial) collapse.¹⁷ Prior to 2012, external actors, as well as national non-state actors, were already fulfilling the provision of public goods, including security in the northern region via loyal militias. Mali would fall into the “state disintegration” category as per Erdmann's typology: para-statehood or parasovereignty was exercised by non-state institutions “without completely supplanting the state or explicitly challenging it”, thus resulting in “informal decentralization or privatization” (Erdmann 2014: 2019). However, the article privileges the concept of “state recession”, which refers to a gradual process “by which the state has receded - in terms of political and territorial control, effective legal authority, and provision of security and services, including access to goods and markets - and the concomitant informalisation or privatisation of the economy and other state functions, including security” (Bøås& Jennings 2005: 390).

In this context, it is important to highlight the contribution of borders and peripheries of post-colonial states to the emergence of non-state forms of power whose vitality is not controlled by national or international regimes. Borderlands are often an example of spaces that “play an essential role in calibrating power relations between the state and its citizens”, and “generate important resources that have a decisive impact on

¹⁷ Erdmann (2014: 220) explains state partial collapse as the “loss of sovereignty within a limited territory, entailing a complete loss of the monopoly on the use of force and a simultaneous challenge to the integrity of the state”, which consists in a relevant characterisation of statehood in Mali in the post-2012 political-military crisis.



state- and peace-building outside their immediate surroundings” (Korf & Raeymaekers 2013:9). The absence of state control over its border is illustrated by the experience of MINUSMA’s border security programme. In the early years of its establishment in Mali, the UN peacekeeping mission conducted a mapping of all border posts in the country which, in fact, only existed in the southern borders; in the northern areas functional posts were inexistent and no border patrols were carried out between them. In sum, border management in Mali reflected its complex, and often uncoordinated, national security sector.¹⁸

At the same time, MINUSMA’s mandate remains strict to Mali, with limited information being shared by neighbouring countries, except for the support of troop contributing countries from the region, namely Burkina Faso.¹⁹ UN agencies would partner with local state actors in the southern border, notably the regional organisation *Autorité de développement intégré de la région du Liptako-Gourma* (ALG) for cross-border cooperation supported by the UN Development Programme. Created in 1970 with a development mandate for the border areas, ALG become active in the security sector as from 2017 and formalised its cooperation with the G5 Sahel in 2018.²⁰

In fact, border management only became a priority for most external actors, in particular the EU, in the aftermath of the so-called 2015 refugee crisis. The EU provided significant investment in the area, either through its Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa or the CSDP missions on the ground, including EUCAP. EUCAP Sahel Mali would also eventually start supporting border control as from 2017 as part of the overall EU strategy for tackling irregular migration and insurgent activity.²¹ EU’s integrated approach for border management and overall stabilisation is best exemplified by its *Programme d’appui au renforcement de la sécurité dans la région de Mopti et à la gestion des zones frontalières* (PARSEC) implemented since 2017. PARSEC combines resources from EUTF, EUCAP and EUTM for the restoration of state authority in Mopti (central Mali), with a focus on borderland stabilisation in the Liptako-Gourma area along the Malian borders with Niger and Burkina Faso.²²

The evolution of the stabilisation interventions in Mali since 2012 demonstrates that rather than promoting the restoration of the (legal) authority of the state, one would need to restore its *legitimate* authority. In this context, a critical perspective would entail the need to highlight aspects of post-colonialism or Eurocentrism, and local agency. This shift means combining an institutional dynamics top-bottom perspective with a bottom-top one, allowing a better account of the agency of the multiplicity of actors, state, and non-state.

¹⁸ Interview with current UN staff member, remote, April 2021.

¹⁹ Interview with former UN staff member, remote, June 2021.

²⁰ www.liptakogourma.org/signature-dun-accord-de-cooperation-entre-lalg-et-le-g5sahel

²¹ Interviews with former EUCAP staff member, independent analyst, and former and current UN officials, remote, May 2020, February - May 2021. In addition to the refugee crisis in Europe, the attacks in Bamako led by elements of Salafi-jihadists movement in 2015 also contributed to the decision to broaden EUCAP’s mandate.

²² https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/sahel-lake-chad/mali/programme-dappui-au-renforcement-de-la-securite-dans-les-regions-de_en



Conclusion

The Sahelian case illustrates an interventionist system or order where sovereignty is the dominant narrative. It constitutes a noteworthy case for the development of international and regional-led stabilisation doctrine and policies. There seems to have been an evolution from external interventions centred in both support to the political peace process, mainly in Mali, as part of any stabilisation process, and short-term counterinsurgency to full scale stabilisation efforts focusing on longer term counterinsurgency and support to the security sector along the lines of the security-development nexus.

Despite the significant investment in stabilisation initiatives in the region- rightly illustrated by the expression "intervention traffic jam"-, those initiatives were largely unable to move beyond the technocratic turn which characterises contemporary internationally-sponsored interventions. With some level of coordination, responses are implemented in the context of increased complexity resulting from the evolution of conflict and interventions from northern Mali to the central region and its border areas where ethnic pluralism tends to play a greater role.

The stabilisation efforts in Mali have proven effective if aimed especially at normalising the political relationship between Bamako and the northern political elites. Therefore, it corroborates the definition of stabilisation outlined earlier in the article as a provisional measure part of a process aimed at establishing a political framework and agreement for a stable - albeit not final- state. However, a political framework and agreement is nowadays also required to tackle the more complex, fragmented, and polycentric processes in the centre and southern borderlands, with subsequent spill-over of instability to the neighbouring countries.

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