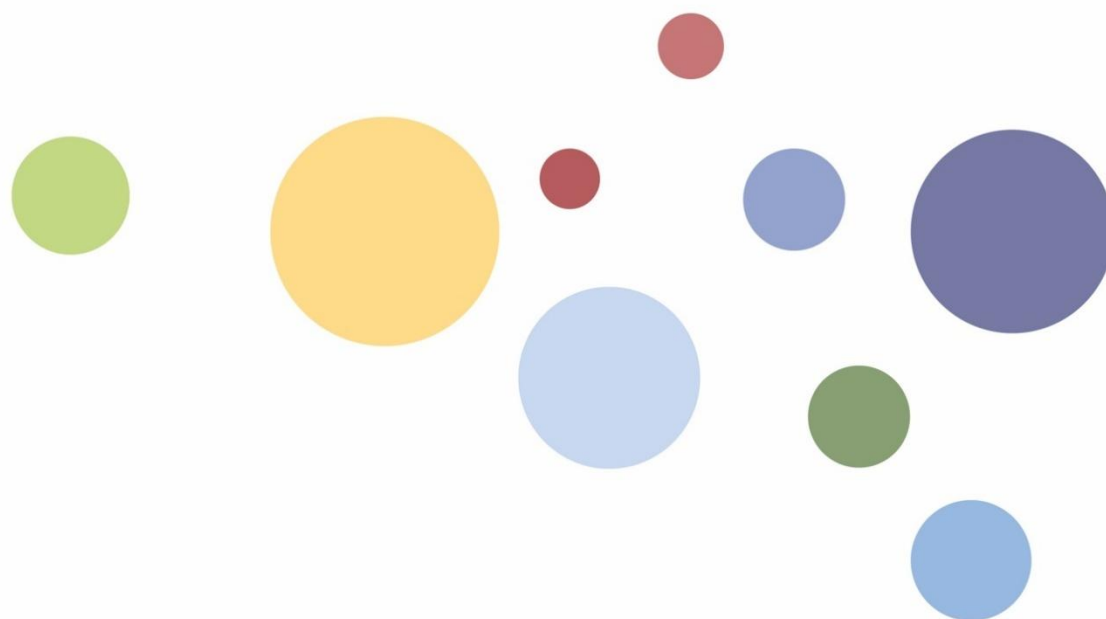


A Comparison of EU and AU Crisis Response Policy Frameworks

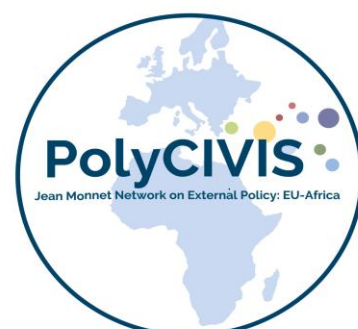
The Sahel as a polycrisis context

| *Policy brief no.15*
March 2026

By Faith Maberera



The Polycrisis & Policy Brief Series is coordinated by the *Policy Work Package* which is part of [the PolyCIVIS Network](#). The PolyCIVIS Policy brief series aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations for policymakers, at various levels and to foster dialogue among stakeholders on effective policy responses.



Executive Summary

The polycrisis phenomenon demands holistic and adaptive crisis response strategies in regions affected by intractable conflict. The Sahel typifies this challenge, where security, governance, ecological and socioeconomic issues converge, requiring enhanced coordination and pragmatism from local and international actors.

The entanglement of crises in the Sahel, as well as their cascading effects, have also been compounded by cuts in Western humanitarian and development budgets and intensifying geopolitical competition. This evolving landscape has impacted regional peace, security and governance frameworks and institutions, with far-reaching normative and policy implications.

This policy brief addresses the question: How do the EU's and AU's crisis response mechanisms address the complex and multifaceted challenges posed by polycrises in violent conflict settings, and what are the key differences and similarities in their approaches, as evidenced in practice?. By analysing the normative frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and practical modalities of the EU and AU in response to complex crisis, the brief seeks to highlight key strengths, identify gaps and limitations and provide relevant policy recommendations for both organisations and their partnership frameworks.

Key messages

- ❖ **Security-first approaches have largely failed to yield transformative outcomes:** The polycrisis nature of contemporary conflicts demands integrated responses addressing governance, development, climate, and security simultaneously rather than isolated sectoral interventions.
- ❖ **The imperative of adaptive strategies:** Both organizations face significant internal coordination challenges that undermine the effectiveness of crisis response mechanisms and cripple partnership initiatives. Evolving geopolitical realities and conflict trends highlight the need for more nuanced, context-specific and adaptive policy responses.
- ❖ **Local ownership and legitimacy as crucial success factors:** to ensure sustainability of peacebuilding efforts, both institutions should enhance engagement modalities with civil society organizations, traditional authorities, and local communities in strategy design and implementation

(1) Conceptualizing the Polycrisis in Fragile and Conflict Settings

The polycrisis refers to the interconnection of multiple crisis across various issue areas – ecological, economic, social, (geo)political, resulting in complex interactions that amplify overall impact.¹ Contemporary scholarship² has conceptualized a polycrisis as ‘the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems in ways that significantly degrade humanity’s prospects. Main features of polycrisis include trans-boundary effects, multiple causality, complex system properties,³ and non-linearity. This means that the impacts produced by multiple interacting crises are not only-greater than the sum of their parts, but also amplify each other through feedback loops.⁴

(2) Institutional Frameworks for Crisis Management - A comparison of the AU and EU approaches

2.1. An overview of the AU’s peace and security regime

The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), launched in 2002, comprises core norms, institutions and mechanisms that collectively constitute the AU’s peace and security regime, with a mandate that includes conflict prevention, management and resolution, as well as peace support operations and post conflict reconstruction and development.⁶

In fragile and conflict settings particularly, polycrisis manifests as a complex interplay of factors that include governance deficits and development challenges, enmeshed with security crises in the form of violent extremism and armed conflict, exacerbated by adverse effects of climate change on resource availability and livelihoods.⁵ As a result, the scale and interconnectedness of polycrisis can outpace and overwhelm traditional institutional responses, necessitating holistic and adaptive mechanisms - capable of coordinating across sectors and policy domains.

At its core, APSA is invigorated by the concept of *Pax Africana* - as articulated by renown African scholar Ali Mazrui in 1967 – who urged Africans to assume responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security on the continent. In addition to the commitment towards collective security and agency, APSA’s rationale was also informed by a broadened conception of security that focuses on human security and recognises interlinkages with governance, development and human rights.⁷ Within the framework of APSA, the AU’s crisis response mechanisms include: peace support operations, through the African Standby Force and regional mechanisms, mediation and preventive diplomacy, and post-conflict reconstruction and development, in addition to related tasks such as peacebuilding, capacity-building, and

¹ Swilling 2019

² See Lawrence *et al.*, 2022

³ Homer-Dixon *et al.*, 2022

⁴ Lawrence *et al.*, 2024

⁵ Tshuma *et al.*, 2025, p.4.

⁶ AU 2002

⁷ Dersso, 2012

Security Sector Reform (SSR), among others.⁸

Despite its prolific normative and institutional architecture, the AU's effectiveness has been hampered by institutional, financial and operational challenges. The AU's reliance on external funding from the EU and other partners, particularly for APSA, has undermined its strategic autonomy, and in turn affected the allocation and effectiveness of its crisis response interventions.⁹ In terms of coordination and operational effectiveness, the principle of subsidiarity that informs the relationship between the AU and regional economic communities is often undermined by overlapping mandates and lack of clarity of roles, leading to institutional fragmentation.¹⁰

2.2. An overview of the EU's Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises

The EU's approach to crisis management is premised on 'an integrated approach,' highlighted as a core priority in the 2016 Global Strategy for European Foreign and Security Policy.¹¹ Expanding on its previous 'comprehensive approach,' the EU's integrated approach entails the coordinated use of the full range of instruments available to the Union, including diplomatic, security, economic, development and humanitarian tools, across the conflict cycle.¹² It also recognises the multi-dimensional nature of conflicts through multi-phased, multi-level, and multi-lateral engagement.¹³

The operationalisation of the EU's integrated approach entails complex coordination across various bodies and institutions, primarily overseen by the Directorate Integrated Approach for Security and Peace

(ISP), which falls under the European External Action Service. Furthermore, in accordance with the EU's desire to project itself as a normative and geopolitical actor, crisis response interventions are guided by principles such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, as enshrined in the Treaty on European Union. Relatedly, the EU Global Strategy underscores 'principled pragmatism' as a guiding principle for external action, linking interests and values in foreign policy.¹⁴ The main operational modalities are the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) Missions and Operations, which can be civilian or military and complement other instruments in the EU's toolkit, including mediation, humanitarian and development assistance.¹⁵

With respect to financing, the EU leverages multiple instruments including: the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument-Global Europe (NDICI-GE; the EU's main external financing instrument comprising geographic, thematic, and rapid response pillars); the European Peace Facility (EPF; an off-budget instrument used for "hard security" cooperation and lethal military assistance); and flexible funding mechanisms such as the Rapid Response Mechanism and Emerging Challenges Cushion, which are complementary to the NDICI-GE pillars. Under the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027, the EU allocated €79.5 billion for the NDICI-GE, and a further € 17 billion for EPF funding.

While the EU has reaffirmed its prioritisation of peace and security as part of its foreign policy agenda, recent trends point to significant reductions in allocations for peace, security, and governance sectors in the 2025–2027 multiannual indicative programmes (MIPs) compared to 2021–2024. Per analysis

⁸ AU 2002

⁹ Goxho and Daugalies, 2022, p.14

¹⁰ ISS 2018

¹¹ EU Global Strategy (EUGS), 2016

¹² Pirozzi, 2014.

¹³ EUGS 2016, p.29.

¹⁴ EUGS, 2016, p.8

¹⁵ EEAS, 2024

by the GPPI,¹⁶ funding for Peace, Security and Governance decreased from 25.5% in 2021-2024 period to 19.5% in 2025-2027, as priorities under the €300 billion Global Gateway initiative take precedence. These funding shifts have sparked concerns that 'conflict-affected countries could risk falling through the cracks' as investments in infrastructure and green growth are elevated in tune with

'the geopolitical investment logic' of the EU's Global Gateway initiative.¹⁷ In addition, these shifts in funding could exacerbate 'the intention-implementation gap' between the EU's aspiration to play a key role as a peace and security actor, and resources allocated for security and peace-related projects, especially under rapid response and unforeseen threats categories.¹⁸

Table 1: A comparative overview of the AU and EU crisis response frameworks

Dimension	African Union (AU)	European Union (EU)
<i>Normative Foundation. Legal and policy frameworks</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constitutive Act (2000) enshrines principle of non-indifference - Peace & Security Council (PSC) Protocol (2002) establishes collective security system and subsidiarity with Regional Economic Communities - Pan-Africanism as core ideal underpinning the AU's peace and security regime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Treaty on European Union, Title V (CFSP/CSDP) - 2016 Global Strategy (EUGS) outlines integrated approach to conflicts and crises - Core ideals: 'Normative power Europe,' global player, security of the Union and its citizens, 'principled pragmatism.'
<i>Institutional frameworks</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and its pillars: The Peace and Security Council (PSC), the Panel of the Wise, Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), African Standby Force (ASF) and the Peace Fund. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Integrated approach for Security and Peace (ISP) Directorate - 'guardian' of the EU Integrated Approach - Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) mechanism: ensures coordinated political decision-making across EU institutions, member states, and agencies during major and complex crises. - Council of the European Union (Foreign Affairs Council and Political & Security Committee) - European External Action Service (EEAS) - European Commission (DG ECHO, DG INTPA)
<i>Operational modalities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preventive diplomacy, mediation, peacekeeping, peacebuilding - ASF rapid deployment, regional cooperation with RECs/RMs - Subsidiarity principle: RECs/RMs lead local responses, AU provides support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diplomatic engagement, CSDP missions, humanitarian aid, development cooperation - IPCR for rapid political coordination during crises - Multi-level coordination: local, national, regional, global
<i>Funding Mechanisms</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - AU Peace Fund (Article 21 PSC Protocol) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - European Peace Facility (EPF): €17 billion (2021-2027) for military and security assistance - Neighbourhood, Development and

¹⁶ Watson & Rotmann, 2025, p.10.

¹⁷ Watson & Friedrich, 2024, p.10

¹⁸ Ibid.

		International Cooperation Instrument Global Europe (NDICI-GE) - Flexible funding; Rapid Response Mechanism, Emerging Challenges Cushion
<i>Coordination approach</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - PSC: the main decision-making body for peace and security. - APSA provides the normative and operational framework. - Subsidiarity principle: regional economic communities (RECs) and regional mechanisms lead, supported by AU. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Crisis response coordinated through the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) and Political and Security Committee (PSC). - Integrated approach combining diplomatic, security (CSDP), development, and humanitarian instruments. - Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations provide military and civilian crisis management. - IPCR mechanism enhances cross-institutional coordination. - 'Team Europe' approach fosters cooperation between EU institutions and member states.
<i>Strengths</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regional legitimacy and political ownership. - Growing institutional frameworks (APSA, Peace Fund). - Closer understanding of local context and dynamics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Significant financial and technical resources. - Established rapid coordination mechanisms (IPCR). - Broad toolbox combining civilian, military, development, and humanitarian instruments. - Experience in diverse global crisis management operations.
<i>Challenges</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited operational readiness and funding. - Political divisions and lack of unity. - Dependence on external partners for logistics and funding. - Political will and capacity gaps affect coherence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Institutional fragmentation and member state divergences. - Limited rapid deployment capacity compared to NATO. - Challenges in translating financial leverage into political influence. - Complexity of coordinating multiple actors and instruments.

(Source: Author's compilation)

(3) Case Study and Analysis

3.1. The Sahel: a confluence of governance deficits, violent extremism and climate-related vulnerabilities

Recent trends in the Sahel region—particularly the spread of violent extremism, resurgence of military coups and worsening humanitarian and displacement crisis—highlight its relevance as an illustrative polycrisis context. The high levels of violence in the Sahel, considered 'the global epicentre

of terrorism,¹⁹ are the result of a convergence of multi-faceted political, socio-economic and environmental drivers that have given rise to a complex, multi-layered conflict landscape. The fallout from the Libyan civil war in 2011 opened up routes for arms smuggling and fostered conditions for the expansion of extremist groups such as Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, the Movement of Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Al-Mourabitoune, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) across the Sahel-Sahara region. Governance

¹⁹ IEP 2024

deficits and development challenges, coupled with weak state presence have created conditions for contested legitimacy and grievances, which have been exploited by non-state actors and militant armed groups.²⁰

In addition to marginalisation and poverty as main factors for radicalisation, extremist armed groups and other non-state actors have also exploited pre-existing rivalries between farmers and herdsman over access to land, water and grazing, adding inter-communal tensions to the deteriorating security situation.²¹ The security crisis is compounded by the impacts of climate change which has served as 'a threat multiplier' – aggravating resource scarcity, environmental degradation and livelihood insecurity.²²

Overlaying these systemic stressors is a cascading (geo)political crisis. Since 2020, a spate of coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has triggered governance crises that weaken already fragile institutions and undermine externally-supported security and development programmes. These regime changes have contributed to the collapse or hollowing out of regional collective security frameworks and fractured relations among members.

The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2023 by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger reflected these regional security and geopolitical shifts. The AES' formation was fuelled by growing anti-French sentiment, signalling a broader rejection of Western intervention in the region. Furthermore, the AES's formation and the withdrawal of its members from ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel Force arguably erodes ECOWAS' credibility as a regional security actor, further fragmenting security arrangements ideally

centred on a synergy between the continental and regional levels.

The AES also brings into sharp relief the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Sahel, which has historically been influenced by the activities and interests of a range of external actors, particularly France's entrenched colonial legacy and security role. The embrace of non-Western security partners, such as Russia by the military leaders in the Sahel signals 'a multi-alignment strategy, balancing external actors to enhance autonomy, bolster regime security and avoid overreliance on any single partner.'²³

These regional shifts unfold against a global backdrop of constrained multilateralism. Great-power rivalry in the UN Security Council has made it more difficult to authorise robust peace enforcement mandates, narrowing the menu of collective security tools available to address escalating violence in the Sahel.²⁴ In parallel, drastic cuts in the USAID budget in 2025 by the Trump administration, along with reduced budgetary allocations for humanitarian and development assistance by many Western countries have worsened food insecurity, degraded basic services and strained local governance structures.²⁵

Taken together, the polycrisis dimension becomes evident in how these elements interact – with each crisis amplifying others through multiple feedback loops with broader systemic effects. Weak and contested governance provides fertile ground for coups and chronic political instability, which in turn erode already fragile state institutions and regional mechanisms. As violence spreads and state presence recedes, mass displacement surges, increasing humanitarian needs just as international donors slash development and humanitarian budgets, forcing agencies to

²⁰ Tshuma *et al.*, p. 4

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² UNDP, 2020

²³ Meyer *et al.*, 2025, p. 5

²⁴ Nichols 2023

²⁵ Ward & Plant 2025

cut food assistance, protection services and basic service support. These gaps deepen local grievances and marginalisation, further undermining state legitimacy and making recruitment by armed and criminal groups more attractive, which feeds back into insecurity and displacement. At the same time, geopolitical competition and realpolitik complicate multilateral responses, shrink the space for robust peace operations and sanctions regimes.

3.2. AU approach to the Sahelian crisis

These transnational, multi-dimensional challenges have elevated the Sahel on the AU's peace and security agenda. In 2013, the AU initiated the Nouakchott process – involving 11 West and North African countries – with the objective of promoting regional security cooperation, information sharing in the fight against terrorism, and the operationalization of the APSA in the Sahel-Saharan states.²⁶ Despite initial enthusiasm, the process appears to have stalled, with limited recent progress reports. Complementary to the Nouakchott process, the 2014 Sahel strategy provided a framework for holistic and coordinated action across governance, security and development pillars and initially contributed to better alignment among continental and regional initiatives between 2014 and 2020.²⁷ However, these initiatives were outpaced by rapidly intensifying jihadist attacks, the

⚙️ Complementary to the Nouakchott process, the 2014 Sahel strategy provided a framework for holistic and coordinated action across governance, security and development pillars and initially contributed to better alignment among continental and regional initiatives between 2014 and 2020

southward spread of violence into coastal West African states and the region-wide political upheavals.²⁸

At the regional level, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger established the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S) in 2017 to counter terrorism and cross-border crime.²⁹ Although the central scope of the FC-G5S primarily focused on security operations in the Liptako Gourma area bordering Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, its concept of operations was reflective of the security-development nexus that also aimed to address developmental challenges. By 2022, the G5 Sahel force was in the throes of an institutional crisis following the withdrawal of Mali in May 2022, resulting in a substantial weakening of its operational capabilities and effectiveness. Following Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger also distanced themselves from the G5 Sahel, culminating in the effective dissolution of the force in 2024. While external assistance was critical for operational capacity, over-reliance on foreign actors – especially in command and control – undermined local ownership and political legitimacy.³⁰ Furthermore, the G5-Sahel has been criticised for its prioritization of the military-security component – underscoring the limitations of militarised approaches in addressing the structural drivers of armed conflict and instability.

3.3 EU security engagement in the Sahel

Geopolitical considerations, security imperatives, and foreign policy objectives have shaped the EU's engagement in the Sahel over the years. The EU's Sahel Strategy, first adopted in 2011 with revisions in 2014 and 2021, has been the core guiding framework. The 2021 Strategy outlines four inter-linked pillars, premised on its integrated approach: (i) the fight against terrorism, (ii) strengthening the capabilities of national defence and security forces and of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, (iii) deployment of the State,

²⁶AU 2014.

²⁷ AU PSC 2014.

²⁸ Koné, 2022

²⁹ PSC Report, 2018

³⁰ Koné, 2022

administrations and basic services in a context of stabilisation, (iv) development actions.³¹ A notable aspect of the 2021 strategy was greater emphasis on strengthening governance, including addressing human rights, rule of law and democratic governance issues in Sahel countries by ensuring greater transparency and accountability. The Strategy also espouses a stabilisation approach, focused on the restoration of state authority and capacity-building in support of provision of basic services. This involves the implementation of both short-term security responses and long-term approaches that promote sustainable economic, social and environmental development.

Despite its strong emphasis on governance and sustainable development, the new strategy also maintained the focus on migration control as a key priority.³² The primary instrument for addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa is the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF for Africa), created in 2015, with a focus on root causes of destabilisation, forced displacement and irregular migration in 27 countries, across three African regions: the Sahel and Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa, and the North of Africa. As of end-2023, the EUTF had paid out €4508 million of its €5 billion endowment, with €1952 million paid under the geographic “windows” for the Sahel and Lake Chad.³³

On the ground, the EU deployed three common security and defence policy (CSDP) missions in the Sahel, including the civilian capacity-building missions EUCAP Sahel Niger (2012-2024), EUCAP Sahel Mali, and the military training mission EUTM Mali (2013-2024). A fourth mission, the EU military partnership mission in Niger (EUMPM), was launched in December 2022, but the July 2023 coup in Niger prevented its deployment.

Of the four EU missions deployed in the Sahel until 2024, the only one left is the civilian capacity-building mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali), which continues to operate in a precarious and unstable political and diplomatic environment, against the backdrop of deepening local sentiment against prolonged Western security interventions across the region.³⁴

Partnerships between the EU and African actors have also been a core tenet of its decades-long engagement in the Sahel. This has entailed political, security and development assistance via the various frameworks and instruments pertinent to the Sahel strategy, as well as the revitalised Joint Africa-EU partnership. These partnership platforms include: The Sahel Alliance, launched in 2017, a coordination mechanism bringing together multiple international partners; the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S), launched by France and Germany in 2019 with the objective of widening the geographical scope of cross-border interventions against terrorism beyond the G5 countries; and later subsumed under the Coalition for the Sahel – an international partnership coordination framework established in 2020, bringing together regional and international partners across the political, security and development spheres, with a focus on four complementary pillars: fight against terrorism, defence capacity-building, strengthening state capacity, and scaling up development assistance.³⁵

Individual member states have also played a pivotal role in the Sahel. France has been at the fore-front of counterterror security operations since 2012 when it launched *Operation Serval* in Mali to counter the expansion of jihadist groups.³⁶ *Operation Barkhane* replaced *Operation Serval* in 2014, with French troops working alongside the G5

³¹ European Parliament, 2021.

³² Pichon, 2021. p.11.

³³ European Court of Auditors Report 2024

³⁴ Meyer et al., 2025, p. 5

³⁵ Coalition for the Sahel, 2025

³⁶ Montanaro, 2002. p.4

Sahel countries and other European countries (under the framework of French-led Takuba task force of EU special forces) in conducting counterterrorism operations. *Operation Barkhane* was terminated in November 2022, following the withdrawal of French troops from Mali stemming from a growing rift between Malian authorities and France. In retrospect, the failure of the French efforts in the Sahel can be attributed to structural dynamics, political blunders and operational errors, such as the prioritization of hard security approaches detached from underlying structural drivers of the Sahelian crisis, while also orienting strategy around partnerships with corrupt elites and regimes beset by crises of legitimacy.³⁷

Overall, the dominant view is that the military-centric strategy has failed to bring about the objectives of long-term security and conflict transformation. The emphasis on the 'train-and-equip approach,'³⁸ which has been central to European security assistance programs, has proven insufficient in addressing the transformation of factionalized and often exploitative security sectors, as well as in fostering constructive civil-military and state-society relations.³⁹ With the changing (geo)political tides and evolving security dynamics in the region, the EU finds itself at a critical juncture with regards to its modes of engagement, strategic priorities and the need to move beyond the logic of containment and militarism.

(4) Key insights and lessons

4.1. Failure of a Security-Focused Approach and Securitisation of Complex Issues

Despite decade-long engagement in the Sahel region, the EU's crisis response in the Sahel has failed to bring about the desired

outcomes of conflict transformation and long-term stability. One of the major limitations of the EU's strategy has been its prioritisation of a military-centric approach, privileging train and equip programmes, which have tended to overlook the underlying political, economic, and social drivers of conflict.⁴⁰ These securitized approaches have also been extended to other issues such as migration, marked by emphasis of strategies such as border control and curbing irregular migration.⁴¹ Overall, the prioritisation of quick-fix solutions often overlooks the structural factors of instability, such as weak states, socio-economic challenges, poverty and exclusion, compromising long-term approaches based on peace, rights and development.

In addition, the proliferation of security actors and myriad of initiatives in the Sahel has created a 'security traffic jam'⁴² which has limited coordination and coherence of efforts among the actors often with divergent intervention practices, mandates and

⚙️ Despite decade-long engagement in the Sahel region, the EU's crisis response in the Sahel has failed to bring about the desired outcomes of conflict transformation and long-term stability.

One of the major limitations of the EU's strategy has been its prioritisation of a military-centric approach, privileging train and equip programmes, which have tended to overlook the underlying political, economic, and social drivers of conflict.

agendas. These top-down, externally-imposed templates illustrate the limitations of a security-first stabilisation approach that is

³⁷ Powell, 2022.

³⁸ Bagayoko, 2024.

³⁹ Montanaro 2022, p.5.

⁴⁰ Caruso & Lenzi, 2023, p.23

⁴¹ Montanaro, 2022, p.3.

⁴² Cold-Ravnkilde & Jacobsen, 2020

disconnected from local realities and needs of the population.⁴³

For its part, the AU's engagement in the Sahel has been hampered by coordination challenges, a lack of a clear divide of labour between various stakeholders (local, national and regional) and financial and capacity constraints.⁴⁴

4.2. Geopolitical Realignments and Shifting Alliances

The Sahel is undergoing rapid geopolitical changes, marked by a dramatic cycle of regime change and alliance realignments. Growing engagement of an array of external actors has widened the playing field, potentially reducing the leverage and influence of traditional European partners. This dynamic has seen Sahelian states pivot towards alternative security providers and strategic partners, including Russia, China and Gulf states, dramatically reshaping the regional security and political landscape.⁴⁵

Despite its stated rhetorical commitment to the integrated approach - underpinned by a robust institutional framework - the EU's strategies are often ambitious but lack contextual understanding of local conflict dynamics and actors, reinforcing a 'implementation-local reception/perceptions gap,' that has resulted in undermining of local ownership and people-centred approaches.

4.3. Proliferation of *ad hoc* coalitions

The emergence of *ad hoc mechanisms* in the Sahel and similar contexts represents a pragmatic adaptation to the multidimensional and polycrisis nature of contemporary African security challenges. *Ad hoc* coalitions (AHCs) are commonly understood as 'autonomous arrangements with a task-specific mandate established at short notice for a limited period of time'.⁴⁶

Examples include the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), the Joint Force of the Group of Five Sahel (JF-G5S) and the Task Force Takuba. These *ad hoc* arrangements are seen as pragmatic and time-saving, enabling actors to circumvent lengthy bureaucratic and consensus-based authorization processes typically required for activating formal institutional response mechanisms. Additionally, the flexibility and cost-efficiency of *ad hoc* mechanisms has been a key element of their appeal, especially for task-specific goals.

While not formally embedded within APSA, these initiatives usually seek and receive authorization and political backing from the AUPSC, which grants them legitimacy and access to logistical and diplomatic support. Some also obtain recognition from the UN Security Council, facilitating international cooperation and funding.⁴⁷

Despite their operational utility, *ad hoc* coalitions tend to be heavily militarized, short-term, and lacking institutionalized civilian capacities such as governance support, human rights monitoring, and sustainable peacebuilding frameworks.⁴⁸ Their command-and-control structures, financial arrangements, and accountability mechanisms are often less formalized, raising concerns about compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law. Furthermore, the flexible nature of AHCs, while enabling rapid action, also makes them prone to defection due to political changes or unanticipated events.

Overall, While they fill critical operational gaps left by formal continental frameworks, their rise also poses institutional, political, and normative challenges for the AU and its partners like the EU. Both organisations must recalibrate their frameworks to harness the strengths of *ad hoc* initiatives while

⁴³ Bagayoko, 2024.

⁴⁴ ISS, 2018

⁴⁵ Meyer et al., 2025

⁴⁶ Reykers, et al, 2023, p. 728.

⁴⁷ Ismail and Ababu, 2021.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

addressing limitations and ensuring balanced integration of military and civilian efforts.

(5) Policy Recommendations

For AU policymakers:

- (i) *Strengthen internal capacities*, instruments, and financial independence for regional bodies and continental initiatives like APSA, reducing reliance on external funding and maintaining crisis responses in times of geopolitical flux.
- (ii) *Clarify subsidiarity* in fragmented contexts: Improve coordination between continental and regional frameworks to overcome fragmentation and present a more unified front in crisis response. This entails clear division of labour and decision-making between the AU, RECs/RMs and emerging formations to promote functional deployments.
- (iii) The AU should *recognise AHCs as a pragmatic and flexible modality* for rapid crisis response to fast-paced security threats, especially when formal mechanisms are slow. Building on their key advantages and operational experiences, the AU should create institutional platforms for AHCs and other peace operations to share experiences, coordinate strategies, and identify cross-cutting needs.

For EU policymakers:

- (i) *Shift from purely security-military approaches*, focusing on integration by prioritising conflict-sensitivity, human security and people-centred approaches, premised on dialogue and regular in-depth assessments of missions and projects.
- (ii) *Recognize multipolarity as part of enduring change*: compete on value rather than exclusivity, emphasizing EU comparative advantages in governance, rule of law, and sustainable development. Build frameworks for engaging partner countries, maintaining diverse international relationships, accepting that EU influence will be one among many.
- (iii) *Strengthen internal coordination and coherence* within EU institutions and among member states, overcoming turf battles and ensuring alignment between stated objectives and implementation strategies.
- (iv) *Enhance co-ordination and joint planning* within the EU and with Member States, drawing on strategic review processes such as the review processes for the CSDP missions in the Sahel and the NDICI 2024 mid-term review.

For partnership frameworks and inter-regional collaboration:

- (i) Based on the outcomes of the 7th AU-EU Summit held in Luanda, 24-25 November 2025, the EU and AU should establish standing coordination frameworks specifically designed for cascading, multi-system crises. These include joint assessment teams, shared crisis monitoring, and coordinated multi-sectoral interventions.
- (ii) Building on the summit's commitment to establish permanent follow-up mechanisms within the existing structures, including regular updates of the Joint Monitoring Report, the AU and

EU should hold regular dialogue and technical-level exchanges for mutual accountability and assessment of progress on declared commitments.

- (iii) Conduct regular joint exercises and scenario planning to identify institutional adaptation needs, develop response protocols, and stress-test partnership frameworks under polycrisis conditions.
-

(6) Conclusion

This analysis of AU and EU crisis management responses in the Sahel reveals both the potential and limitations of existing institutional frameworks in addressing contemporary security challenges. The polycrisis characteristics evident in the region highlight the need for integrated responses that address systemic interconnections rather than isolated symptoms. This demands institutional frameworks capable of operating across traditional sectoral boundaries while maintaining coherence and effectiveness.

To foster lasting peace and stability, both the EU and AU must embrace more

nuanced, context-specific, and adaptive strategies. For the EU, this means moving beyond a predominantly securitised lens, enhancing internal coherence, and genuinely partnering with local actors. For the AU, it entails strengthening its institutional and financial independence, improving regional coordination, and fostering greater inclusivity in its crisis response mechanisms.

In the main, the future of crisis management in Africa ultimately depends on institutions and partnerships that can navigate polycrisis complexity, adapt to evolving geopolitical realities and renew commitment to mutual accountability, transparency, and tailored engagement.

References

African Union (AU). 2002. Protocol relating to the establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union. Addis Ababa, African Union.

AU. 2014. 'Nouakchott process on the enhancement of security cooperation and the operationalization of the African Peace and Security Architecture in the Sahelo-Saharan Region,' 18 December, [Nouakchott Declaration](#)

Bagayoko, N. 2024. 'The International Interventions in the Sahel: A Collective Failure?' Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Blog Joint Futures 37, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/mta-joint-futures-37-the-international-interventions-in-the-sahel-a-collective-failure>

Dersso, S.A., 2012. 'The quest for *Pax Africana*: The case of the African Union's peace and security regime.' *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, 12 (2), pp.11-48.

Caruso, F. and Lenzi, F. 2023. 'The Sahel region: a litmus test for EU-Africa relations in a changing global order.' Policy study - Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), Belgium. <https://feps-europe.eu/publication/the-sahel-region/>

Coalition for the Sahel. 2025. <https://www.coalition-sahel.org/en/>

Cold-Ravnkilde, S.M. and Jacobsen, K.L., 2020. Disentangling the security traffic jam in the Sahel: constitutive effects of contemporary interventionism. *International Affairs*, 96 (4), pp.855-874.

Council of the European Union, 2025. 'EU military support for Ukraine,' <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/military-support-ukraine/> (accessed 16 June 2025).

European Commission. 'EU Aid Explorer - Recipients', https://team-europe-explorer.europa.eu/oda/explore-oda_en (accessed 14 April 2025)

European Court of Auditors. 2024. Special report 17/2024: The EU trust fund for Africa, <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?ref=SR-2024-17>

European Parliament. 2021. *EU Integrated Strategy in the Sahel*. Legislative train schedule,

European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-stronger-europe-in-the-world/file-eu-strategy-in-the-sahel>

European Union. 2016. *Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe. A global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy*, available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf (accessed 24 February 2025).

European External Action Service. 2024. 'Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises,' https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/integrated-approach-external-conflicts-and-crises_en (accessed 13 February 2025).

Goxho, D. and Daugalies, S. 2022. 'European aphasia in the Sahel: stabilising how?' Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) paper, available at <https://www.kas.de/en/web/mned-bruessel/single-title/-/content/european-aphasia-in-the-sahel-stabilising-how> (accessed 03 April 2025).

Homer-Dixon, T., Renn, O., Rockström, J., Donges, J.F. and Janzwood, S. (2022) 'A call for an international research program on the risk of a global polycrisis', Technical Paper, (2022-3 Version 2.1), pp. 1-14. Available at: <https://cascadeinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/A-call-for-an-international-research-program-on-the-risk-of-a-global-polycrisis-2.1.pdf>

IEP-Institute for Economics & Peace (2024). Global Terrorism Index, 11th edition. <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf>

Ismail, O. and Ababu, A. 2021. 'Ad-Hoc Regional Security Arrangements and APSA : A Case Study of ACL-GLR, MNJTF, and G5 Sahel Force,' FES Policy brief, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-ua/18182-20210805.pdf>

Koné, H. 2022. 'Options for reviving security cooperation in the Sahel,' ISS Today, 14 November, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/options-for-reviving-security-cooperation-in-the-sahel>

Lawrence, M., Janzwood, S., & Homer-Dixon, T. (2022). *What is a global polycrisis? And how is it different from a systemic risk?* (No. Discussion Paper 2022-4. Version 2.0). Cascade Institute. Retrieved from Cascade Institute website: <https://cascadeinstitute.org/technical-paper/what-is-a-global-polycrisis/Google Scholar>

Lawrence M, Homer-Dixon T, Janzwood S, Rockström J, Renn O, Donges J.F. 2024. 'Global polycrisis: the causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement. *Global Sustainability* 7, e6, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2024.1>

Montanaro, L. 2022. 'Insecurity in the Sahel: Rethinking Europe's response,' Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Analysis, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/19089.pdf>

Nichols, M. 2023. 'UN sanctions in Mali to end after Russia blocks renewal,' Reuters, 31 August, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-seeks-end-uns-mali-sanctions-monitoring-2023-08-30/>

Pichon, E. 2021. 'New EU strategic priorities for the Sahel,' European Parliamentary Research Service, Briefing July 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696161/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)696161_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696161/EPRS_BRI(2021)696161_EN.pdf)

PSC, AU. 2014. *The African Union Strategy For The Sahel Region*, PSC/PR/3(CDXLIX) <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/auc-psc-449.au-strategu-for-sahel-region-11-august-2014.pdf>

PSC Report , Institute for Security Studies (ISS). 2018. 'AU summit 31: What is the African Union's role in the Sahel?,' <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/au-summit-31-what-is-the-african-unions-role-in-the-sahel>

Pirozzi, N. 2014. 'EU Security Policies in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa after the Arab Uprisings: What Prospects for Transatlantic Cooperation?' Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep09866.7.pdf>

Powell, N. 2022 'Why France Failed in Mali' , *War on the Rocks*, 21 February. Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/why-france-failed-in-mali/>

Reykers, Y., Karlsrud, J., Brosig, M., Hofmann, S.C., Maglia, C. and Rieker, P., 2023. 'Ad hoc coalitions in global governance: short-notice, task-and time-specific cooperation.' *International Affairs*, 99 (2), pp.727-745.

Swilling, M. 2019. 'Long Waves and the Sustainability Transition'. In *Handbook of Green Economics*, 31–51. Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-816635-2.00003-1>

Tshuma, D., Driessen, M.N., Bakari, R.M., Tine, L., and Fantappie, L.M. et al. 2025. 'The Nexus between Security and Development in the Sahel: West African Perspectives on EU Interventions,' European Think tanks Group (ETTG) Policy Brief 3/2025, available at https://ettg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/250205_ETTG-Brief-3_2025.pdf (accessed 25 May 2025).

UNDP. 2020. The climate security nexus and the prevention of violent extremism. Policy Brief. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40641-018-0116-z> (accessed: 20 April 2025).

Watson, A. and Friedrich, J. (2024) 'EU Peace and Security Funding Beyond Ukraine'. GPPi Policy Brief. Available at: https://gppi.net/assets/Watson_Friedrich_A_Growing_Gap_GPPi_2024.pdf. (accessed: 20 June 2025).

Ward, C. and Plant, M. 2025. 'West Africa at a Crossroads: Fostering Stability After Aid Cuts,' Center for Global Development, 07 May, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/west-africa-crossroads-fostering-stability-after-aid-cuts> (accessed 17 August 2025).

Watson, A. and Rotmann, P. (2025) 'Peace in Numbers: What Do Shifts in Funding Tell Us About EU Priorities?', *Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi)* [Preprint]. Available at: <https://gppi.net/2025/06/12/peace-in-numbers-what-do-shifts-in-funding-tell-us-about-eu-priorities> (Accessed: 20 June 2025).

Wilén, N.2025. 'Stepping up Engagement in the Sahel: Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States,' Egmont Policy Brief 375, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/stepping-up-engagement-in-the-sahel-russia-china-turkey-and-the-gulf-states/>

Author

Faith Maberwa (PhD) - Post-Doctoral fellow at the University of the Witwatersrand ,Johannesburg,

Acknowledgements



The CIVIS network is a consortium of 21 universities in Europe and Africa. In October 2023, it initiated the PolyCIVIS project, focused on confronting the Polycrisis in Europe and Africa through Research, Policy and Education. The PolyCIVIS project is funded by the European Union, Erasmus+.

Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.