

A New EU Strategy for the Sahel Region

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Recognising:

- The Sahel region in Sub-Saharan Africa consists of Senegal, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Sudan, Eritrea, and Mauritania.¹
- The political instability and rampant poverty characterize the European perception of the Sahel. Military coups, increasing external influence, and new migration routes are current worrying developments. The security environment is changing rapidly.²
- The military, humanitarian, and developmental European interventions in the Sahelian states of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have failed due to struggle of balancing its strategic interests with its commitment to democratic values.³
- The closure of the last US military base in Niger highlights a shifting geopolitical landscape in which countries in the Sahel are focusing on strategic deals with new global players.⁴
- While the USA has not traditionally been a strong player in this part of the world, France's long-standing post-colonial influence is diminishing, and the country is increasingly unpopular in the region.⁵
- Russia has been stepping into the power vacuum initially with PR measures, now with its own Russia House, media initiatives, and targeted disinformation campaigns. Added to this are arms deliveries and operations by the Wagner Group (now known as Africa Corps)⁶.⁷
- Other powers such as China, Turkey, the Gulf States and Hungary⁸ have been increasing their influence in the region.⁹

Acknowledging:

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sahel>

² <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2024/09/the-sahels-intertwined-challenges-yabi>

³ <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/sahel-reset-time-reshape-eus-engagement>

⁴ <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/shifting-alliances-sahels-geostrategic-evolution-multipolar-era>

⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/ivory-coast-withdrawal-frances-waning-influence-in-africa/a-71210349>

⁶ <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-kremlin-wagner-group-influence-in-central-african-republic-sudan-mali/a-70599853>

⁷ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/07/the-wests-loss-of-the-sahel-not-only-russias-doing/>

⁸ <https://defence24.com/geopolitics/hungary-sends-troops-to-africa>

⁹ <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/shifting-alliances-sahels-geostrategic-evolution-multipolar-era>

- Given the historical complexities of France’s engagement in the region, the EU’s credibility and effectiveness are strengthened when its presence on the ground—through diplomats, military personnel, and EU representatives—reflects broader European involvement beyond any single member state.
- The EU's integrated strategy for the Sahel was adopted in April 2021, before the recent series of military coups in the region.
- The EU's response to the recent wave of coups in the Sahel has been fragmented and lacks a cohesive strategy.¹⁰
- Germany’s response was slow and did not have a coherent approach, the anti-France sentiment has been fuelled through President Macron’s statements, and Hungary deployed troops to Chad.¹¹
- Sanctions and boycotts often fail because rival states, such as Russia and China, step in to fill the void left by Western disengagement.¹²
- The abrupt end of relations and development aid has often punished local populations rather than the elite, fostering anti-Western resentment.¹³
- Following the military coup, the new government in Niger repealed a 2015 law that was a cornerstone of EU efforts to curb migration. This has led to a significant increase in migration through Niger, with Russia stepping in as a security cooperation partner.¹⁴
- Mauritania has become a new main route for migration to Europe, particularly to the Canary Islands.¹⁵
- Following the fall of Assad, Russia is expected to face challenges in maintaining its military and mercenary operations in Africa. However, its disinformation campaigns and “soft power” initiatives are likely to persist as part of its broader strategy on the continent.¹⁶

¹⁰ <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/crafting-an-eu-strategy-for-coups/>

¹¹ <https://ecfr.eu/article/deserted-europes-dilemma-in-the-sahel/>

¹² https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/a-succession-of-coups-leaves-the-sahel-prey-to-international-rivalries/

¹³ <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/crafting-an-eu-strategy-for-coups/>

¹⁴ <https://www.kas.de/de/web/sahel/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/die-eu-und-niger>

¹⁵ <https://www.kas.de/de/web/sahel/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/mauretaniens-wird-zur-neuen-hauptroute-fuer-migration-nach-europa>

¹⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/12/01/russia-africa-initiative-burkina-faso/>

YEPP calls on:

- The EU to update its Sahel strategy.
- The European Commission to tackle illegal migration and push for deals with Mauritania.¹⁷
- EU member states to play a more active role in shaping EU-Africa policy to ensure a balanced and inclusive approach.
- EU countries to avoid acting independently and instead use the “Team Europe” approach and brand.
- The EPP to organize a Trans-Mediterranean Youth Summit, like the successful Transatlantic Youth Summit, to strengthen cooperation with African partners.
- The EU to focus more on interests in its foreign policy, considering the effects of its policies on migration, regional stability, security, economy and resources.
- The EU to promote economic development through increased investment in sustainable agricultural projects and infrastructure to strengthen the economic base of Sahel states.
- The EU to enhance security by supporting actors within civil society contributing to stability and advocating for human rights. Where possible, collaboration with and training of local security forces should take place, aimed at peacekeeping or peacemaking conform Art 21 TEU.
- The EU to combat disinformation by supporting programs that counter disinformation and promote independent media to better inform the population and build trust in state institutions.
- The EU to continue providing humanitarian aid while also promoting long-term resilience projects to better prepare the population for future crises.
- The EU to improve coordination and collaboration among its member states and international partners to increase the effectiveness of measures and avoid duplication of efforts.

¹⁷ <https://www.kas.de/de/web/sahel/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/mauretaniien-wird-zur-neuen-hauptroute-fuer-migration-nach-europa>