Policy Perspective

Only an African Solution Can Ensure Security in the Sahel

María del Pilar Rangel Rojas iD
University of Málaga, Department of Political Science, Public International Law, and Procedural Law, Spain

Abstract – The Sahel region faces a deepening security crisis, driven by the convergence of terrorism, organised crime, and political instability. Despite extensive external military interventions, these efforts have largely failed to address the underlying causes of insecurity, resulting in rising disillusionment among local populations. This policy perspective argues that only African-led solutions, grounded in local realities, can effectively tackle the region's complex challenges. The involvement of African institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), alongside locally driven initiatives, is crucial. Western interventions have been criticised for their military-focused approach, neglecting socio-political dimensions and local needs, while non-Western powers like China and Russia are increasingly shaping the region's geopolitical landscape. To achieve sustainable peace, security strategies must prioritise community-based governance, engage civil society—especially women—and ensure that solutions align with the unique political, cultural, and economic contexts of the Sahel. Ultimately, this commentary calls for a shift towards African ownership of the security agenda, supported by international partners in a non-intrusive manner, to foster stability and long-term peace in the Sahel.

Keywords: Sahel; Security Crisis; African Union

Introduction

The Sahel region is currently experiencing an unprecedented security crisis, driven by a complex intersection of terrorism, organised crime, and political instability. Over the past decade, the region has been caught in a vicious cycle of violence, where external military interventions have repeatedly failed to address the root causes of insecurity. This has resulted in widespread disillusionment among local populations, further exacerbating the instability. As external actors struggle to contain the rising threats, a critical reassessment of the security approach in the Sahel is needed. This policy perspective argues that only African-led, locally contextualised solutions can effectively tackle the region's challenges. The involvement of African institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic

Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is crucial, alongside grassroots initiatives that address the socio-political dimensions of the crisis. It is time for African actors to assume ownership of the security agenda, with international support that respects local priorities, in order to invigorate sustainable peace and stability in the Sahel.

The Sahel crisis: An escalating security threat

The security landscape of the Sahel has dramatically deteriorated in recent years, particularly in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. The region is plagued by a convergence of factors: extremist terrorism, violent separatist movements, human trafficking, drug smuggling, and weak governance. Various jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), continue to expand their reach, destabilising vast areas of the Sahel and threatening neighbouring regions.

Despite numerous interventions, security remains elusive. French-led Operation Barkhane and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) have struggled to contain violence. In 2021, reports estimated that jihadist activity in Mali alone increased by over 30%, while human rights violations related to military interventions surged by 44% across the Sahel (Human Rights Watch, 2019). This failure has been compounded by political instability, as seen in Mali's repeated coups, which undermine regional governance and further weaken the capacity to manage security challenges (Vélez, 2023).

The limits of external interventions

A key factor in the Sahel's continued instability is the limited effectiveness of external interventions. Western-led military initiatives, such as Operation Barkhane, initially succeeded in containing the spread of jihadist movements but have failed to secure lasting peace. While these operations have been valuable in disrupting the activities of extremist groups, they have been widely criticised for not addressing the underlying issues of poverty, political marginalisation, and weak state institutions.

One of the core criticisms of external interventions is their failure to align with the local context. Western actors often approach the Sahel as a purely military challenge, neglecting the social, political, and economic dimensions of the conflict. Additionally, local populations have become increasingly resistant to foreign involvement, perceiving it as intrusive and disconnected from their needs. This sentiment has fuelled anti-Western rhetoric and contributed to growing support for alternative actors, such as Russia and China, who have been expanding their influence in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso (Kotajoki, 2024).

China and Russia's growing influence

The presence of China and Russia in the Sahel has shifted the geopolitical dynamics of the region. Both countries have capitalised on the growing disillusionment with Western interventions, presenting themselves as more neutral partners with fewer political conditions attached to their aid and military support. In Mali, the 2021 military coup government quickly sought to strengthen ties with Russia, even as Western countries condemned the coup and threatened sanctions. Russia has supplied military equipment and mercenaries, increasing its influence in the region. Similarly, China's economic investments, including infrastructure projects, have further entrenched its role as a key player in the Sahel.

This increasing involvement of non-Western powers introduces a new layer of complexity to the Sahel's security landscape. While Russia and China offer alternatives to Western intervention, their growing influence raises concerns about their long-term intentions. Moreover, the introduction of new actors does not necessarily translate into more sustainable solutions. Both Russia and China have

limited experience in addressing the region's multifaceted challenges, and their interventions may prioritise strategic interests over genuine peacebuilding.

The need for African-led solutions

Given the limitations of external actors, the future of security in the Sahel must be rooted in African-led solutions. The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) must play a central role in coordinating security efforts, drawing on their knowledge of local dynamics and regional relationships. Regional initiatives, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, represent a step in the right direction but need more robust support and coordination from African leaders.

The most promising approach to addressing the Sahel's security challenges is to move beyond national and regional frameworks and focus on hyper-local solutions. African security strategies must be tailored to the unique political, social, and cultural contexts of each country and locality within the Sahel. For example, in areas where government institutions are weak or absent, local governance structures, such as village councils or religious authorities, must be empowered to play a central role in maintaining peace and security. Successful models of community policing and grassroots dialogue with religious leaders have already shown promising results in fostering stability at the local level.

However, local solutions cannot succeed in isolation. They must be coordinated with national governments and regional bodies to ensure that they are scalable and sustainable. African states must also strengthen their institutions, particularly in terms of governance and rule of law, to ensure that security gains at the local level are not undermined by corruption or political instability at the national level.

The role of civil society and societal engagement

One of the key aspects of an African-led approach to Sahel security is societal engagement. Too often, security strategies have been top-down, excluding the voices of local communities. To be effective, security interventions must be participatory and inclusive, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of civil society organisations, youth groups, and women's associations.

Women, in particular, have a critical role to play in peacebuilding efforts. Research has shown that peace agreements that include women are more likely to last, as women tend to focus on long-term community development and reconciliation (UNOWAS, 2024; Mari Tripp et al., 2025). In the Sahel, women's organisations have been at the forefront of initiatives aimed at addressing the root causes of violence, such as poverty, education, and healthcare. Empowering women and ensuring their inclusion in security planning and decision-making processes will be essential for creating lasting peace in the region.

Conclusion: A call for African ownership

The security crisis in the Sahel is one of the most pressing challenges facing the African continent today. While external interventions have played a role in containing some of the violence, they have not addressed the root causes of instability and have often exacerbated tensions. Only through coordinated, African-led initiatives that are grounded in local realities can the Sahel overcome its security challenges. African leaders, supported by international partners in a non-intrusive manner, must prioritise local solutions, societal engagement, and regional cooperation. These strategies, rooted in the lived experiences and aspirations of Sahelian communities, hold the key to ensuring sustainable peace and stability in the region.

In conclusion, the Sahel requires a security approach that is led by Africans for Africans. The future of the region depends on the ability of African states and regional bodies to take ownership of the security agenda and work with local communities to build solutions that are both context-specific and

inclusive. With the right support, these initiatives have the potential to create lasting peace and stability in one of the most volatile regions of the world.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

María del Pilar Rangel Rojas is an Associate Professor of Public International Law and International Relations at the University of Málaga. She is also a practising lawyer and has participated in counter-radicalisation programmes. She has led various national and international security seminars and serves as the Director of Training at ACK3 Institute. Additionally, she presides over the International Women's Forum on Security, Defence, and Emergencies. She has received the Spanish National Police Merit Medal and frequently writes on security and international relations, particularly in the African context.

ORCID

María del Pilar Rangel Rojas https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3620-2598

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