CONFLICT, PEACE AND SECURITY CHALLENGES

Sahel: from “liberal peace” to “military peace”

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Peacebuilding and security in Africa continues to be one of the continent’s key challenges. Since the early 2010s, the optimism generated by the downward trend in situations of violence has given way to disillusionment in view of the consequences of the so-called Arab Spring and, in particular, the foreign intervention in Libya in late 2011, the effects of which sparked a geopolitical tsunami that set the Sahel ablaze, prompting a new wave of violence in the region. It was in this context that, in May 2013, the African Union (AU) launched the Silencing the Guns by 2020 programme, part of its ‘Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want’, the aim of which was to make Africa peaceful and safe through actions taken within the framework of peace, security, defence and stability. The AU adopted a roadmap under the premise that peace, security and socioeconomic development should be simultaneous goals, understanding that there can be no peace without development, nor development without first halting violence.

From that point forth, the peacebuilding operations in Africa have been characterised by increasingly more robust mandates on the use of force, prioritising the creation of security

structures in African States immersed in armed conflict situations. Both the AU and other internal and external actors (ECOWAS, EU, UN, France, US and Spain) [1] have chosen military responses as a means of addressing the instability, particularly in situations of violence involving self-proclaimed "jihadi" groups. These securitarian approaches have prioritised militarisation strategies, in the form of *ad hoc* counterterrorism missions, and security sector reform (SSR), at the expense of other more comprehensive political strategies aimed at addressing social and political problems, reforming local governance, implementing development programmes and increasing basic services, all the while pursuing dialogue and reconciliation. Similarly, while the promotion of gender equity is becoming increasingly mainstream in peacebuilding and SSR, in practice, there remains a considerable gap between words and action [2].

In recent years, the western Sahel region has become the prime testing ground for this security strategy in Africa. All official approaches are observed to contain a multidimensional strategy founded on the binomial security-development, which explicitly acknowledges that military responses must go hand in hand with development actions, political reform, gender equity and humanitarian aid. Nonetheless, in reality, priorities have focused on military containment and on strengthening the State apparatus, yielding questionable results.

Attempts at containing violence in the Sahel

Since the beginning of the armed conflict in northern Mali in 2012, the violence has gradually acquired an increasingly transnational character, spreading across much of Mali and into neighbouring States (primarily Burkina Faso and Niger). This has resulted in a constant deployment of military operations involving various actors. In 2012, in addition to the already established EU Capacity Building Mission in Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger) and the US-led Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) launched the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), which was replaced in April 2013 by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). That same year, France deployed its counterterrorism mission Operation Serval in Mali —which, in August 2014, became the present-day Operation Barkhane, expanding to Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger—, while the EU commenced its Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), in which Spain is the leading contributor of troops. The following year, 2014, saw the creation of the EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali) and the G5 Sahel Joint Force, by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, which in 2017 launched a joint counterterrorism task force.

This trend of strengthening the existing security architecture by intensifying military operations has continued in recent years. In January 2020, the French Government undertook to expand its military presence in the Sahel from 4,500 to 5,100 soldiers, while the Government of Mali announced its intention to increase the size of its armed forces by 50%. Meanwhile, the AU announced the temporary deployment of an additional 3,000 troops; the EUTM divulged a plan to extend its efforts to neighbouring countries; the

EUCAP Sahel Mali broadened its mandate to January 2023; and the UN Security Council further extended the MINUSMA's mandate, maintaining the number of deployed troops at 13,289 soldiers and 1,920 police officers. In addition to this, in mid-2020, there came word of the deployment of the European Takouba Task Force, the most recent counterterrorism operation to disembark in the region and which is comprised of special forces from 11 European countries (Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Holland, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, United Kingdom), as well as Mali and Niger, and will operate under the command of France's Operation Barkhane. However, in July 2021, France took an abrupt change of course and announced its intentions to withdraw 40% of its troops in early 2022, a tactic which will give more prominence to the European force and G5 Sahel, which will take on greater responsibility. Furthermore, following the announcement of France's withdrawal from the region, the Malian Government revealed its plan to hire the Russian private military company Wagner Group to combat insurgencies in the country.

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In parallel to the military deployment, Mali also decided to employ other multidimensional strategies involving exploring and initiating political negotiation processes with certain armed actors, leading to the signing of the Algiers Peace Agreement in 2015 between the Government of Mali and the Tuareg and Arab rebel groups in the north of the country (Coordination of Azawad Movements). Nevertheless, while the signing of the peace agreement resulted in the cessation of hostilities and the start of a transitional process –based largely on SSR–, the exclusion of jihadi groups from the negotiating table has prevented stability from being achieved in the country and is hindering the implementation of the agreement's clauses.

Violence containment and peacebuilding results

The joint efforts undertaken in the operations involving numerous actors that we have already discussed have been characterised by a disconnect between their objectives, practices, discourses and capacities, creating overlapping (and often conflicting) initiatives and negatively impacting the violence containment results [3]. According to data from the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2002 saw a 43% rise in Islamist group violence in Africa, much of which corresponds to settings where the deployment of military strategies was the priority: Western Sahel, Lake Chad and the Horn of Africa, primarily [4]. More specifically, the security situation in the Sahel region has continued to deteriorate year after year. Proof lies in the data for 2020 from the Liptako-Gourma border area –eastern Mali, northern Burkina Faso and southeastern Niger–, which point to the most dramatic escalation of violence recorded since mid-2017. Data supported by the ACLED research

hub, according to which 2020 was the deadliest year on record in Mali since the outbreak of the armed conflict [5]. Furthermore, the statistics on forced displacements placed the region at the top of the list of the world's hardest hit areas in 2020, with just under two million forcibly displaced people, an increase of 43% over year-end 2019 [6].

These are not the only effects of the military strategies. On multiple occasions they have contributed to human rights violations and abuses by members of the State security forces. While this reality is far from new, the EU's current involvement in a series of missions to train and build the capacities of armed forces from several countries that have been involved in episodes which could constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity is particularly problematic. Looking at just 2020, the number of reports of human rights violations and abuses by State security forces in the region within the framework of the so-called "war on terror" reflect the magnitude of the problem. For instance, the MINUSMA accused the Malian and Nigerien armies of perpetrating 135 extrajudicial executions in Mopti, one of Mali's central regions [7]; Niger's National Human Rights Commission attributed the forced disappearance of over 100 people in the Tillabéri Region to Nigerien soldiers; Burkina Faso's Democracy and Human Rights Observatory identified the armed forces as responsible for the death of 588 civilians during counterterrorism operations, while Human Rights Watch reported the discovery of a mass grave containing 180 bodies in the north of the country, pointing to extrajudicial executions by members of the army [8]; Amnesty International also accused the armies of all three countries of committing war crimes during their operations, particularly against civilians, including 57 extrajudicial executions and 142 forced disappearances [9].

In this regard, it is highly significant (and worrying) that the Malian army is accused of killing more civilians last year than the jihadi insurgents it is supposedly fighting. And it is even more so considering the EU's apparent lack, as reported by The New Humanitarian, of a systematic investigation mechanism to confirm whether the Malian military units it is training have committed human rights violations [10]. Likewise, another of the major shortfalls of the EU's military assistance programmes relates to the EUCAP's handling of the mandate to promote gender equity. By prioritising securitarian measures and aligning them with the strategy of the "war on terror", this mandate has been pushed into the background [11].

It should also be noted that the prioritisation of military approaches has contributed to the formation of self-defence militias and paramilitary groups to combat the insurgencies. This has yielded different outcomes: reports of human rights violations, greater inter-community friction and conflict, increased recruitment into armed groups and the expansion of the war and its impact on the civilian population, now accused of collusion [12]. This and other human rights violations not only add to the population's mistrust of the security forces and military operations, but also contribute to fuelling the radicalisation and extremism against which they are supposedly fighting, generating the ideal breeding ground for recruitment into armed groups and the expansion of control areas.

On the other hand, with regards to the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement (2015), the prioritisation of political and securitarian reform agendas –the former by

providing armed groups greater access to the transitional government and legislative chambers, and the latter by concentrating efforts into SSR programmes– is also proving counterproductive. Firstly, the inability of SSR to consolidate the legitimacy of State security institutions, at present a source of insecurity for the population not only as a result of human rights violations, but also in terms of the defence of democratic values –as evidenced by the two coups d'état in Mali in under nine months–, raises doubts about its effectiveness. They also draw attention to the security model and approach, including the EU's role as provider of military training, advice and assistance to the country [13]. Secondly, as a result of this agenda, more structural measures centred around development, justice and gender equity, for instance, are being pushed into the background, a situation which may lead to further instability. In this regard, the Carter Center, which acts as an independent observer for the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement, cautioned against the enormous imbalance in the implementation of SSR compared with other political, social and economic aspects; aspects which triggered the 2012 uprising.

> The security crisis in the Sahel has laid bare the need to re-focus: military operations, while relevant, must contribute to more comprehensive approaches

Five years later, little headway has been made in terms of commitments to political decentralisation, implementation of the economic development projects set out in Chapter IV or the application of transitional justice with a view to improving national reconciliation, all of which poses a threat to achieving a durable peace in the country [14]. The prioritisation of military expenditure at the expense of investments in development and social benefits has had particularly adverse consequences for the more vulnerable sections of the population, with women being disproportionately affected. In this regard, we need only look at the Human Development Index for 2020 to understand the challenges facing the region, with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger among the ten lowest ranked countries, and Niger last in the list [15].

Towards an approach based on multidimensional responses

Much of the responsibility for the downward trend in situations of violence in the Sahel lies in the failure of the counterterrorism policies and securitarian approach, which have prioritised military responses at the expense of other broader political and social responses. Feminist literature has long cautioned against the risks of both these approaches and a peacebuilding model driven by liberal peace, which fail to question the logic of power, profoundly militarised and patriarchal in the construction of the State's hegemonic structures and institutions, prioritising aspects of military security, inter alia, which have systematically excluded women [16]. This logic of power, argues Cynthia Cockburn, constitutes one of the main causes of armed conflicts. Therefore, the construction of a

lasting peace must start by redefining the notions of “security” and “peace”, placing the satisfaction of all human needs, including the safety of women, at the centre [17]. While UN resolution 1325 on women, peace and security represented a significant step in the peacebuilding agenda, greater commitments to promoting gender equity are still required. One of the main challenges lies in reforming the SSR agenda, which must include women by not only scaling up gender balance, but mainstreaming it, transforming the logic underpinning security sector institutions and structures [18].

The security crisis in the Sahel has laid bare the need to re-focus its securitarian approach and address it as a crisis of governance, in which military operations, while relevant, must contribute to more comprehensive approaches. The feasibility of these multidimensional approaches depends of prioritising measures aimed at fostering development; providing social services; adopting reforms not only in the field of security, but also in the promotion of gender equity; providing spaces for dialogue with armed groups; and investing in a local ownership-based approach that genuinely incorporates the initiatives of the populations. In this regard, the People’s Coalition for the Sahel, an umbrella coalition for over 30 regional and international organisations, has provided several clues that must be taken into serious consideration. Among them, the Coalition demands that the securitarian strategy be reprioritised around the following four pillars: 1) place the protection of the civilian population, and not simply the struggle against terrorism, at the centre of the response; 2) support political strategies aimed at mitigating the governance crisis, including political dialogue with all disputing parties and civil society and a commitment to existing local mediation and reconciliation initiatives; 3) respond to humanitarian emergencies, guaranteeing funding and access; and 4) implement a policy of zero tolerance for crimes committed by the armed forces against the civilian population, putting an end to their impunity [19]. The construction of a stable and durable peace will only be possible if the approach to security receives a structural overhaul that involves incorporating multidimensional responses (social, economic, gender-based, etc.), taking local actors into consideration and acting on the structural causes of the violence.

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