



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 21 October 2025
(OR. en)

14296/25

LIMITE

**COPS 522
CFSP/PESC 1507
COAFR 279
CSDP/PSDC 629
RELEX 1330**

COVER NOTE

From: European External Action Service (EEAS)
To: Political and Security Committee (PSC)

Subject: Joint EEAS-Commission paper "A renewed EU Approach to the Sahel"

A renewed EU approach to the Sahel

1. Introduction: remaining engaged in changing times, in a volatile Sahel context

The European Union and the Sahel have longstanding ties. Yet, as both sides undergo significant transformations and geopolitical challenges abound, the context and nature of our relations have fundamentally changed. The militarisation of politics, the pervasiveness of security challenges, the dramatic humanitarian situation, increased fragility and climate change impacts, the reshaping of regional and multilateral architecture, the persistence of Russia's presence and the rise of other foreign actors in the region, fuelled by a narrative of anti-Western and anti-European sentiment and sovereignty, have led to a critical reflection on the EU's engagement in the Sahel.

Promoting peace, security, stability and socio-economic development remains the core objective, in order to prevent direct negative consequences for the EU's interests. Promotion of human rights, including social, economic, and political and civil rights should remain central to the new approach, with the aim of a more stable and resilient Sahel region, less reliant on support from other authoritarian players such as Russia and China. In the medium and longer term, the EU envisages a role as a partner of choice for the Sahel and the broader region, as an anchor for stability and mutual, reciprocal interest.

2. What is new in the approach?

Disengaging is not an option. To pragmatically address issues of collective concern, tackle root causes of instability and seize emerging opportunities, the renewed approach should be based on a clear expression of EU interests and a better understanding of the interests of Sahelian countries. It will also turn to the Sahelian countries to express their readiness to engage with the EU. It will also address areas of divergence and seek to identify domains that are of mutual or shared and reciprocal benefit, aligned with universal values and principles.

The quality of dialogue between the EU and the Sahel should be improved, underlining listening and mutual respect. Ongoing dialogue anchored on a shared assessment of the situation and way forward will be the basis for adapting to the evolving regional context.

In this strategic region, the EU should not only aim for short-term leverage but also to sustain efforts for long-term investment and presence, aligned with the Global Gateway strategy, countering geopolitical rivals and scaling up constructive relations to re-establish the EU as a partner of choice for the Sahel, especially amongst the youth who represent a vast majority of the population.

The renewed approach should be based on renewed consensus and coordinated 'Team Europe' action, allowing for rapid, incremental, flexible and focused action, geographically targeted and centred on our joint interests and priorities.

Having taken stock of past EU policies and lessons learned, EU action and instruments will be adapted further to reach these objectives both with a regional view (including developing trilateral engagement) and with a tailored country-by-country approach.

3. The EU's strategic interests in the Sahel

Supporting peace and security, protecting and promoting multilateralism, defending universal values, preventing irregular migration and managing forced displacement, fighting against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, strengthening of frameworks for migration management and returns,

containing insecurity, terrorism and radicalisation, fighting organised crime, supporting development and prosperity, as well as responding to geopolitical competition, are key EU priority interests for the region. With a shared history, diaspora population, cultural links, and a commonality of interests, the Sahel is a region of strategic importance for the EU. Its stability and development have a direct impact on the EU – an impact amplified by the proximity of the Sahelian countries to our immediate Southern Neighbourhood through the Maghreb, and by the spillover of insecurity and instability to the coastal states and the Gulf of Guinea.

The high level of fragility that characterises the countries of the Sahel, combined with current megatrends (demographic, geopolitical, economic, climate, energy, urbanisation), makes it clear that medium- and long-term considerations are as vital as short-term responses. In consultations, actors in the Sahel also stressed security concerns as their highest priority, including elements of human security and stability beyond military aspects.

For the EU, fruitful cooperation in the area of migration with a whole-of-route, comprehensive and rights-based approach is essential.

While the EU does have an interest in contributing to local development, the deteriorating security context, the long-term instability and the need for inclusive, reliable governance and rule-of-law complicate the access to private investment. The new EU integrated approach to the Sahel will take into account the Sahelian countries' call for investment, including by foreign private actors, to complement their national resources in sectors such as energy and infrastructure where massive needs exist.

4. A renewed approach anchoring EU-Sahel relations

The renewed approach should be anchored on common priorities to strengthen trust and promote EU interests, including in the longer term. Identified priority actions are (1) political and diplomatic engagement, (2) human security, and (3) social cohesion, economic opportunities and people-to-people ties.

This is not a static framework or an exhaustive list of all areas and forms of possible cooperation. Instead, the approach is a compass, guiding a differentiated engagement which must be adapted to each country-specific reality and adjusting to evolving regional and international dynamics with a view to ensure a comprehensive and 'Team Europe' approach.

At a time where the Sahel diversifies its international partnerships, the EU must affirm itself as a reliable and central partner to the region, fully leveraging its comparative advantages and securing its interests. This will mean countering hostile actors, competing with external rivals, cooperating with likeminded partners and seeking to identify actors with overlapping interests for collaboration. In a context of global competition, the EU's commitment to the strengthening of a rules-based international order, democracy and universal values is an essential element that sets us apart.

4.1 Political and diplomatic engagement

Fostering dialogue on governance, fundamental freedoms, human rights and humanitarian principles

There is consensus to improve dialogue, guided by principles of mutual respect and candid exchange. An agreement to disagree should not be an impediment to a pragmatic focus on areas of converging interests. Challenges of governance, rule of law, human rights, humanitarian access and delivery, and political matters will be discussed through renewed political dialogue and other forms of national,

regional and international engagement. This renewed dialogue should reconfirm the mutual commitment to facilitate humanitarian access and delivery, and to respect international humanitarian law. All countries of the Sahel are signatories to the Samoa Agreement, which includes provisions for a regular partnership dialogue. Values and principles will be advanced through open dialogue and through support to like-minded actors, including civil society.

Adapting to national priorities

EU action will be considered on a country-by-country basis, taking into consideration regional dynamics, and recognising priorities articulated by stakeholders from each of the countries of the Sahel. Tailored approaches that respond to national priorities, where these align with EU objectives and interests, will be developed to ensure mutual appropriation and accompany regional programmes that address broader cross-border and cross-regional challenges. An emphasis will be placed on flexibility and responsiveness in priority areas.

Improving strategic communication and public diplomacy

The spread of misinformation, disinformation, inflammatory language, and other forms of harmful rhetoric in online and offline channels is particularly acute in the Sahel, eroding mutual trust and prospects for peace and stability, as well as spreading to neighbouring countries.

Building on the work of the EU Sub-Saharan Africa STRATCOM Task Force and the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), as well as other instruments, mechanisms and networks, EU communication and public diplomacy toolbox must be reinforced in both scale and substance, tailored to the public. This includes shifting from a mainly reactive to proactive messaging, adapting our communication to local realities, and strengthening our ability to fight against disinformation and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), while supporting and bolstering efforts of local media and independent sources. Beyond proactive messaging, EU actions that deliver tangible results remain the most powerful counter-narrative, and must be given appropriate visibility.

Revitalising regional cooperation, international coordination, and multilateralism

Both the challenges and the opportunities facing the Sahel and the EU require collective action. The EU will build on its convening power while supporting efforts for constructive cooperation and coordination, including those with the participation of coastal states. Regional and international bodies, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the African Union and the United Nations, have been important platforms for dialogue, cooperation, and integration.

Yet, with the effective end of the G5 Sahel and the emergence of the *Alliance des États du Sahel* (AES), the role of these institutions and other existing international cooperation mechanisms, such as the Coalition for the Sahel and the Sahel Alliance, must be rethought, adjusted and/or rationalised. The Pact for Mediterranean can also be a useful tool to facilitate further engagement of the EU's Southern Neighbourhood, especially from the Maghreb, with Sahel counterparts. Exploring concerted approaches or possible partnerships with other international actors in the region needs to be part of EU engagement, including support for regional cooperation to complement international efforts.

4.2 Human security: an integrated approach

Integrated approach to conflicts and crisis/Respect for IHL and Protection of Civilians

The EU integrated approach remains a relevant framework for engagement in situations of conflict and crisis. This approach includes investments in actions to promote human security and conflict prevention (with particular attention to protecting civilians, including from gender-based violence, and ensuring women's participation), and to ensure the respect for International Humanitarian Law and the protection of civilians, in line with the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. In order to encourage stabilisation, improve law and order, justice and community-level peace and security, both capacity-building – including on international humanitarian law and security sector governance – and material support may be needed. Forms of security and defence cooperation should continue to be explored on a case-by-case basis through all relevant EU instruments, for instance through tailored CSDP actions and European Peace Facility support. Furthermore, regardless of the possibility of deeper military cooperation, security cooperation that increases stability in conflict-affected areas is beneficial and can contribute to resilience. EU actions will be in line with the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

Tackling irregular migration, forced displacement and mobility

The free movement of people, goods, and services within the broader Sahel region can generate economic development and deepen regional integration, both of which have clear peace and stability dividends. However, the prevalent trend of irregular migration and forced displacement of civilians, mostly motivated by insecurity, weak rule of law, climate change, lack of economic opportunities and competition over resources, creates instability and puts development prospects under pressure.

The prevention of irregular migration, as well as addressing the root causes of forced displacement, are shared domestic, regional, and international concerns. The size of irregular arrivals to the EU and the significant number of displaced persons and refugees in the region highlight the extent of the mutual challenge. It requires targeted support on roots causes of migration in areas of greatest need to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the population and access to basic services. This support can be provided, among other areas, alongside investments in local and cross-border cooperation in countering migrant smuggling, in line with the Global Alliance, and trafficking in human beings, border management, strengthening cooperation with, and the capacities of, law enforcement and judicial authorities, particularly on anti-smuggling/trafficking (including through joint investigations) both in the Sahel and in neighbouring countries. The return, readmission and reintegration of irregular migrants and the identification of durable solutions for displaced persons remain central also requiring joint approaches, including neighbouring countries.

Engaging on counter-terrorism and organised crime

Containing and addressing the spread of terrorism, insecurity and violent extremism that undermine state capacity and legitimacy is of mutual and global interest. As the countries of the Sahel confront terrorists and armed groups, it is key for the EU to have awareness and understanding of counter-terrorism challenges and their root causes. In parallel, reinforcement of information and of capacities for better governance of legal migration and mobility, including via the provision of information to the public and countering misinformation, will be a part of the comprehensive approach to migration.

Dialogue based on an inclusive and multi-stakeholder approach should be pursued, aiming at getting to know respective perspectives and exploring opportunities for cooperation, including an integrated, human-focused approach to tackling conflict and insecurity. This approach should also include, when

and where possible, support for multilateral initiatives by the United Nations, African Union and other relevant fora. The EU should also systematise a preventive approach in regions that have been less affected by insecurity so far, with continuous analysis and action to address the drivers of radicalisation. In addition, enhancing support for civilian-based networks and dialogue initiatives working on preventing and countering violent extremism, early warning, and community resilience across the Sahel and broader region can be highly effective. The fight against Transnational Organised Crime, in particular cybercrime, drug trafficking and trafficking in human beings, as well as the related fight against money laundering, should be pursued in collaboration with specialised entities and relevant actors, addressing as well its broader destabilising effects on governance.

4.3 Social cohesion, economic opportunities and people-to-people ties

Engaging civil society and strengthening people-to-people ties

Civil Society actors, including local organisations, in the Sahel engage various communities, represent different segments of society and advocate for a wide range of issues, including human rights and the rule of law. They have the capacity to strengthen inclusive governance and promote democratic values. The EU will continue to support and work with civil society organisations, including those with a focus on women's empowerment that contribute to peaceful community relations, an active and open civic space, a more cohesive society, and can help deliver basic services to the populations.

The people of the Sahel must remain central to our relations, including the diaspora who provide important social and economic links between the two regions. Investment in education and culture should be bolstered, with a medium to long-term perspective, to reinforce mutual understanding. The EU must engage with local communities to understand their concerns, build trust, and develop context-specific solutions to their challenges. Youth and women as agents of change should be at the core of our action, mindful of their positive contribution to the region's demographic transition and inclusive, sustainable development. Promoting and supporting inclusive dialogue and mediation processes at all levels of society can serve mutual interests and contribute to sustainable peaceful relations in each country and the wider region.

Investing, creating jobs, and cooperating

The provision of basic services, such as clean water, education, health, and energy, and improved critical infrastructure, as well as the creation of prospects for the youth have been identified as essential development catalysts, requiring further investment. Resilience to climate change as a driver of further insecurity and conflict, as well as improved food security and livelihoods are areas in which dialogue, cooperation trade and investment can be strengthened. The growing engagement of international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the African Development Bank, in the Sahel provides opportunities for enhanced cooperation and synergies.

5. Conclusion: renewing our engagement is a process, not a one-off outcome

The European Union and its Member States are committed to working together with the countries of the Sahel based on the respective mutually recognised interests and a set of enabling conditions that are expected to allow for greater engagement and closer people-to-people relations, in the spirit of mutually beneficial cooperation.

To uphold such commitment, it is indispensable to maintain the EU's diplomatic presence in the region, through adequately staffed EU Delegations in each country, and allocate sufficient resources across the EU toolbox, in both the current and future Multiannual Financial Frameworks. Financial

tools and all instruments should be tailored to allow for greater flexibility and quick action, taking into account fragility, complex settings and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, thereby allowing the EU to deliver concrete results, in the context of the renewed approach based on mutually recognized interests.

The renewed approach should be understood as an iterative and dynamic process that remains responsive to the changing national, regional and international realities and should be regularly updated as the context and interests evolve.