



Hannah Rae Armstrong

The EU's renewed approach to the Sahel: putting principled pragmatism into action

Reflections from the Sahel and West Africa

Introduction

In November 2025, the European Union adopted a renewed approach in the Sahel to preserve its engagement with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso¹. The collapse of this partnership followed nearly a decade of EU-led security and development cooperation that was marred by a sharp increase of insecurity and obstacles to development². The countries now joined together in the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) lifted military rulers into power who withdrew from the regional bloc ECOWAS and turned towards other foreign backers, especially Russia.

In late April 2026, insurgents' critical offensive in Mali made it clear that Russian support had not shifted the balance of power in Mali's favour. The security forces that seized power in the central Sahel are still struggling to defend territory against the jihadist insurgencies now rapidly seeping across borders into the littoral states. Meanwhile,

other metrics have dramatically deteriorated: democracy is disappearing; institutional and geopolitical borders are shakily being redrawn; civil society, civic freedoms, and rights are experiencing new lows.

Europe, not prepared to walk away from a region it deems strategic to its interests, is wise to adapt its approach. An intentional resetting could produce a relationship more in line with the interests and values of both parties. This policy briefing, informed by a series of dialogue sessions hosted by the FES Peace and Security Competence Centre in 2025-2026 uniting civil society leaders, policymakers, and diplomats in Lomé, Cotonou, Dakar, and Abuja, formulates recommendations to concretize the principles of renewed European engagement with the three central Sahelian states and the coastal states of the surrounding subregion that are either affected by spillover, or at risk of it.

¹ Validated in November 2025 by the EU Foreign Affairs Council. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14296-2025-INIT/en/pdf>

² In recent years, institutions aiming to address the need for improved security cooperation have multiplied, including the Accra Initiative, G5 Sahel, Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), Nouakchott Process, Comité d'État-Major Opérationnel Conjoint (CEMOC), Unité de Fusion et Liaison (UFL), Centre Africain d'Etudes et de Recherche sur le Terrorisme (CAERT), ECOWAS stand-by force, AES joint military force. They have yielded few dividends: beyond the sheer oversupply of often-overlapping initiatives, political antagonisms and financial shortcomings or dependencies largely curbed their potential.

Key Takeaways:

Security cooperation – especially between the central Sahelian and coastal states - is urgently needed for containing the expansion of jihadist groups across borders. However, significant obstacles stand in the way of this cooperation, including the AES states' breakaway from ECOWAS, bilateral disputes between neighbours, and the sheer multiplicity of overlapping institutions aiming to boost cooperation. In response, pooling of regional states' resources for procurement and operational capacities could help bridge the divides forged by political antagonisms while also increasing capabilities at more competitive rates. Beyond containment, efforts to resolve the conflict via political dialogue with insurgents may have fallen out of favour with military regimes yet merit renewed attention from the EU, especially given support from domestic religious, civil society, and rural coalitions. The Women, Peace, and Security agenda has also experienced significant decline since relations with Europe soured: the EU should consider continuing work to promote women's participation that was abruptly terminated. One theme that does not belong in security conversations is migration.

The EU correctly perceives its commitment to strengthening a rules-based global order, democracy and universal values as its competitive advantage. However, its own recent policies have undermined these values, and multiple external actors are presenting competitive offers. To put its best foot forward, the EU should clarify and strengthen its diplomatic approach. Beyond that, the bloc might encourage rapprochement between AES members and ECOWAS states indirectly by supporting cross-border infrastructure projects. Rare examples of democratic, stable countries deserve recognition and support, insofar as they exert positive pressure on AES countries to transition away from military rule. To that effect, the EU should petition the IMF for debt forgiveness for Senegal.

The EU should continue working to promote democratic values and strengthen inclusive governance via civil society organizations throughout the region. In particular, it could strengthen African institutions by supporting the dissemination of legal and normative frameworks that, while little-known, have much to offer. Support for CSOs should recognize rural organizations as priorities, and consider softening bureaucratic requirements that might facilitate engaging with them. Finally, the EU should reflect on data sovereignty as a key need that aligns with AES ambitions, and offer trainings and capacity-building to civil society and institutions.

Security

Pragmatic security cooperation in a divided environment

The security field faces the conundrum of having too many institutions and too little cooperation. One way around this would be a flexible cooperation mechanism for resource pooling – an incentive for security cooperation lowers expenses and enhances operational capacities and collaboration between partners³. Examples might include joint purchases of equipment like surveillance drones or 4x4s, and arrangements to share capacities for operations like medical and casualty evacuation. Operations could include two or multiple partner countries, potentially but not necessarily sharing a border.

The EU, which possesses strong relevant experience in the domain of resource pooling, could back a meeting – perhaps hosted by the AU - inviting regional states as well as security institutions to share its own experience and discuss potential collaborations. The bloc could go on to make funding available to cover 10 – 20 percent of budgets for bilateral or multilateral initiatives. This would create pathways for better cooperation between AES and ECOWAS states while also strengthening border management capacities within ECOWAS members. Cross-bloc bilateral security cooperation is already taking place along areas like the Senegal-Mali border and the Ghana-Burkina Faso border. Boosting their efforts would have the added advantage of incentivizing others to follow suit.

Political dialogue with insurgents

The EU's stated aim to 'enhance support for dialogue initiatives across the Sahel and the broader region'⁴ could be strengthened with a clearer vision of the forms of dialogue that are necessary for conflict resolution. Overly militarized counter-terrorist models must sooner or later yield to political dialogue with insurgents. The EU should work to keep this on the agenda.

In the AES countries, authorities' official refusal to engage in dialogue with insurgents is at odds with consistent calls from civil society organizations, religious and traditional authorities, and national dialogue processes like the *As-sises Nationales* in Mali to do just that⁵. An actor mapping could help identify actors worth supporting and identify pathways for advancing their agenda at a delicate time when states are working to co-opt or silence these efforts. International NGOs like the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue or International Crisis Group that have consistently advocated for dialogue additionally merit continued or enhanced support.

³ African countries' mutualization of COVID-19 purchases to confront the pandemic, primarily driven by the AU, is a useful precedent.

⁴ Joint EEAS-Commission paper "A renewed EU Approach to the Sahel". <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14296-2025-INIT/en/pdf>

⁵ Despite the official stance, authorities at times are reported to be negotiating with insurgent groups, as with Mali's March 2026 release of more than 100 prisoners in a deal to halt attacks on fuel convoys. "Jihadist prisoner release secures fuel convoy truce in Mali", Africa News, 23 March 2026.

Women, peace and security

Up until 2021, the EU and member states were at the forefront of supporting the women, peace, and security agenda in the central Sahel. Thanks to a multitude of initiatives, especially from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, women were able to advance within the security forces and mediation projects⁶. These projects came to an abrupt end with the central Sahel's turn towards Russia and the AES⁷. As a result, women partners faced sudden abandon. Since then, the WPS agenda has largely fallen off the radar in the central Sahel. Indeed, the narrowing of civic space under Sahelian military regimes is “inherently gendered” – the strong-man politics of these regimes seal off any avenues by which women and youth might play meaningful roles in the public sphere⁸.

The EU's ‘renewed approach’ seeks to retain a relevant framework with particular attention to ensuring women's participation. It should support, in particular, efforts to integrate women into more and higher spheres of strategy and execution in political and security affairs. This might begin, for instance, with identifying and restarting projects that were yielding promising results up until just a few years ago.

Stop securitizing migration

For more than a decade, Europe has approached migration in West Africa as a security issue, running counter to regional laws and norms, which focus more on the economic and humanitarian benefits of cross-border mobility⁹. Moreover, European policies securitizing migration across Africa have undermined stability and made migration more deadly. In Niger, European pressure to curb migration destabilized the northern economy at a vulnerable time and undercut ECOWAS laws protecting cross-border mobility; in Senegal, security forces trained by the EU for border management were deployed to crack down on domestic protests; the EU's push to curb crossings via the Mediterranean “supercharged” Libya's extortion economy; meanwhile, migrants forced to take longer, more perilous routes as a consequence of these policies face higher risks of mortality¹⁰. Migration conversations should not be taking place under the banner of security. A new discourse on migration is needed in Europe, grounded in the recognition of its need for labor, in alignment with recent Spanish declarations and policies to regularize 500,000 migrants.

6 DANEDA, PNUD, Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, Folke Bernadotte, Norway and MINUSMA all ran projects that stopped abruptly.

7 The fall of feminist foreign policy in those countries was happening simultaneously.

8 Ornella Moderan, Virility politics in the Sahel, ISPI, 12 February 2026, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/virility-politics-in-the-sahel-230031>

9 Language in the ‘renewed approach’ document clearly collapses two utterly different dynamics: ‘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’.

10 See for instance Managing Trafficking in Northern Niger, International Crisis Group, 6 Jan 2020., Andrei Popoviciu and José Bautista, “How an EU-funded security force helped Senegal crush democracy protests”, AJ English, 29 Feb 2024., Wolfram Lacher and Jerome Tubiana, “The extortion state: how the EU helps Libya to turn migrants into cash”, Le Monde diplomatique, September 2025.

11 Interviews, December 2025.

12 Infographic: How did African countries vote on Russia and Ukraine at the UN? (updated Feb 2023) <https://developmentreimagined.com/africanvotesonukraine/>

Politics

Strengthening the EU's approach in a time of multi-polarity

First, the EU should position one or several European member states to replace France in leading Sahel policy. Throughout recent upheaval in the region and despite the sharp decline of French influence in the region, the EU has retained credibility and value as a desirable partner. However, the souring of relations between France and the AES countries, as well as its violent colonial past in most of the region, weighs on relations between the bloc and those countries. Indeed, French non-cooperation was reportedly responsible for a months-long delay in releasing the EU's ‘renewed approach’¹¹. Germany and the Netherlands are good options: both have a sophisticated grasp of key local issues, have developed strong bilateral relations with Sahelian countries in recent years, and have established peer-to-peer patterns of engagement that align better with the AES' emphasis on sovereignty.

Second, the EU should strive to be more transparent about its objectives – which are naturally interests-based – and less didactic. Forcing actors in the Sahel and West Africa to choose one partner over another has proven counter-productive, as is demonstrated by most African states not supporting United Nations (UN) General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's war in Ukraine¹². Lecturing them about Russian malice is widely perceived as infantilizing, and Africans are well aware that European influence can be malicious too.

Fragmentation and regional reconciliation

The breakaway of the AES from ECOWAS presents new challenges for European diplomacy. Cross-border closures and tensions between AES and ECOWAS countries are adding pressure to already vulnerable communities in battleground border zones at a time when extremists are looking to expand and recruit in precisely these areas. The EU does not have a direct role to play as an *acteur de rapprochement* in terms of inter-institution or inter-state dialogue – this is for the states and blocs to work out themselves. However, the EU may support this process indirectly by opening channels of dialogue.

This engagement might take the form of supporting cross-border infrastructure promoting mobility and connectivity between AES and ECOWAS states. Infrastructure projects, badly needed especially in rural border zones, have the particular advantage of bringing actors together and encouraging them to listen to one another. The Cotonou-Niamey corridor is one example of where infrastructure is urgently needed. Project funding could be made available via the EU's Global Gateway initiative.

Save Senegal

Senegal, a rare positive example in the region of democratic stability, also serves as a valuable bridge – in terms of both diplomacy and security alliances – between ECOWAS and AES member states¹³. But the country is barely staving off crisis due to overwhelming debt¹⁴. The EU should petition the IMF for debt forgiveness in Senegal. China's debt negotiations with Ethiopia could be an example to follow. Beyond immediately stabilizing a key partner, this move has larger significance: helping democratic countries like Senegal succeed applies positive pressure on AES countries to transition towards democracy.

Civil society and development

Strengthening African institutions

ECOWAS and the AU furnish a range of legislative frameworks and norms with high relevance for some of the most urgent challenges the region faces. However, these resources are often overlooked and ill-understood, especially among younger generations. For example, the Niamey convention on cross-border cooperation offers resources for migration management but still has low ratification levels¹⁵. In addition, the Gambia-based African Commission on Human and Peoples' rights is an underutilized institutional resource for monitoring and protecting human rights. Meanwhile, the ECOWAS Protocol on Transhumance has useful tools for avoiding conflict at a time when the pastoralist crisis is a significant driver of jihadist insurgency.

Supporting dissemination and implementation of these resources would have several advantages. It would strengthen regional and continental institutions while helpfully grounding norms and rights in Africa-based bodies, undermining authoritarians' efforts to cast human rights as an imposed foreign values. It would also spark a positive feedback loop, inviting engagement from younger citizens whose interest is vital in carrying these institutions forward

and refining their work.

This might involve hiring an African PR firm to design a social media campaign geared towards the youth to raise awareness of existing legal frameworks. Another method would be to make funds available to NGOs, especially in the AES countries, for dissemination activities, to be disbursed by the national level EU delegation. To ensure positive impact, it would be best to avoid requirements of visible EU logo on any communications.

Civil society and development

Amid the rise in coups, violent conflict, and more authoritarian leadership models, democratic spaces and inclusion keep shrinking. In the AES countries, civil society organizations operate under intense pressure, while journalists, activists, and human rights defenders experience restricted freedoms and intimidation. Meanwhile, even in littoral countries like Ivory Coast, which is not facing conflict and is ruled by elected authorities, civil society leaders say they are less implicated in national decision-making and subject to greater suspicion than in previous years, as focus shifts towards threat containment and security preparedness¹⁶.

Support for civil society can be politically sensitive; EU officials privately cite this as a reason for not delivering it¹⁷. However, West African civil society leaders urge the EU to be bolder in leveraging development cooperation as a strategic soft power instrument. One way of doing so would be to make provision of development aid conditional, for instance by offering the kinds of development aid that countries are asking for – infrastructure, energy, water, health and jobs – as a package which also includes support for civil society and media. As the Malian government reviews a bill that would tax 10% of all development funding, donors imposing their own conditionalities could enter into these negotiations¹⁸.

The EU renewed approach rightly recognizes the provision of basic services – especially education, health, and infrastructure – as essential development catalysts needing further investment. Development cooperation should prioritize working to deliver healthcare and education, especially in rural areas. With millions of children out of school due to conflict, emergency schooling should take special priority. Local CSOs are doing their best to provide emergency education – for instance, by recruiting teachers who work in local languages to reintegrate students into the formal education system; they urgently need support. Support for

¹³ In February 2025, Mali and Senegal officially launched joint military patrols to secure the border area.

¹⁴ In 2025, Senegal estimated its debt had reached 120% of GDP. "Senegal's crisis: why debt restructuring may be the least bad option", The Conversation, 16 March 2026, <https://theconversation.com/senegals-crisis-why-debt-restructuring-may-be-the-least-bad-option-276663>

¹⁵ African Union Convention on Cross-Border Cooperation (Niamey Convention). https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36416-treaty-0044_niamey_convention_african_union_convention_on_cross-border_cooperation_e.pdf

¹⁶ Interviews, 2026.

¹⁷ Interviews, 2025.

¹⁸ Communiqué du conseil des ministres, Republic of Mali, 4 March 2026.

school meal programs and UNICEF could also help address this need.

In particular, there is an urgent need to connect with rural communities and amplify the voices of actors who are fighting alone on the ground. Yet, many rural CSOs experience the EU's institutional requirements for partnership, especially registration and strong financial accounting systems, as obstacles. The EU might consider lightening some of the bureaucratic load for them.

Data sovereignty

Data collection, integration and management stand to play a defining role in key sectors, including cross-border traceability, early warning systems, healthcare provision, taxation, and biometric ID cards and passports. Yet, institutions and civil society lack knowledge and capacity, fueling dependency on foreign actors. Both Mali and Burkina Faso, for example, relied on the French company Idemia to manage biometric data centers for modernizing identity cards. In 2023, Malian authorities accused the company of refusing to transfer data from the national passport system af-

ter disputes arose¹⁹. The Chinese company EMPTECH has since been contracted with designing and supplying the new AES e-passport²⁰.

The EU could help build skills and foster technology transfer by offering institutional capacity-building and civil society trainings focused on data sovereignty. This would help prepare countries for the global shift in data management that is taking place; it would also meaningfully support the AES countries' determination to pursue strategic autonomy.

To conclude, the EU seeks new footing in the central Sahel during a period of profound turbulence. Authorities and civil society alike continue to perceive EU engagement as beneficial, but seek to renegotiate some of the terms of this engagement. The recommendations laid out in this briefing, informed by a series of high-level policy debates bringing together leaders from the AES as well as ECOWAS states, propose ways for doing so that serve regional as well as European policy goals.

¹⁹ "Mali shifts passport production from France to China's EMPTECH", APA News, 17 October 2025.

²⁰ Ibid.

About the author

Hannah Rae Armstrong is a policy advisor on peace and security in the Sahel and West Africa.

Imprint

Peace and Security Competence Centre Africa department

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Avenue des Ambassadeurs
Fann Résidence
25516 Dakar-Fann
Senegal

Internationale Zusammenarbeit (iz)

Anna Reuss

Author:

Hannah Rae Armstrong

Design/Layout:

Abdoul Malick Almaimoune

All rights reserved. No part of this publication should be reproduced without written permission from the publisher except for brief quotation in books and critical reviews. For information and permission write to Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. "Opinions expressed" are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

First published April 2026 by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

© Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Peace and Security Competence Centre, 2026

ISBN 978-2-490093-56-4

Contact us : [info\(at\)fes-pscc.org](mailto:info(at)fes-pscc.org)



Peace and Security Competence Centre
Africa department