

## Simple Solutions for Complex Problems:

Are Europe's contemporary national strategies suited to tackle future challenges in the Sahel?

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## Are Europe's contemporary national strategies suited to tackle future challenges in the Sahel?

### ABSTRACT

The crisis in the Sahel region has been identified as one of Europe's core security concerns for the next decade. To assess whether contemporary European strategies for the Sahel are fit to tackle anticipated problems, we conducted an integrative literature review of eleven published scenarios and compared a compiled trend scenario to the current security and development approaches of five national actors and the European Union. Our analysis indicates an apparent disconnect between the European strategies, which strongly focus on migration and military approaches to security, and the highly complex and interconnected trend scenario.

### KEY WORDS

Sahel, Protracted crisis, Complexity, Future scenarios, Security Strategy, Peacebuilding

### THE SAHEL: A REGION ON THE BRINK

The crisis in the Sahel region constitutes one of Europe's core security concerns in 2021. Increasing instability due to a variety of factors ranging from high levels of violence exacerbated by weak governance and climate change, rapid population growth, and widespread poverty to intercommunal conflicts, pose a direct threat to the security of Europe (Pichon 2020: 1). In response to this, many European<sup>1</sup> governments have published strategies outlining their plans and ambitions for dealing with the Sahel crisis.

However, over the past decade, the complexity of the conflict environment in the Sahel has increased significantly, with the current crisis being the result of an abundance of underlying, highly interconnected issues across the region. At the same time, recent analyses and forecasts have repeatedly highlighted the region's enormous potential for change, for the better as well as for the worse (Kwasi et al. 2019; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Mali 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which contemporary strategies by European governments are suited to tackle future challenges in the Sahel region. To do so, this paper is divided into three parts. The first section will elaborate the background on the complexity of conflicts and outline the use of scenarios for forecasting future developments. Subsequently, strategies are considered as documents, which, among other

aspects, serve to describe the (conflict) environment. Scenarios, on the other hand, examine the consequence of potential changes in the different variables that constitute the complex system, thereby providing points of reference also for strategic planners.

The following second section will therefore provide an overview of both future scenarios as well as current strategies in order to lay the foundations for a subsequent discussion and analysis. As scenarios frequently provide a variety of different possible futures, we have summarised the main trends into what we will refer to as our "trend scenario". This will serve as the common ground against which the strategies will be assessed.

Finally, the discussion is centred on three main observations: firstly, the strategies differ from the scenarios with regard to the main key drivers of the crisis identified. Secondly, the proposed solutions are hardly sufficient for dealing with the situation and thirdly, the complexity as well as the related second-order-effects are addressed only very sparsely. Our analysis indicates that contemporary Sahel strategies by European actors tend to overemphasise the issue of migration, whilst the increasing impacts of climate change and interconnectivity are either omitted entirely or addressed in a way that is different from the scenarios. Other strategies are found to be excessively focused on security aspects, neglecting the role of other domains. Similarly, the strategies we examined tend to exhibit a problematic distinction between security and development-related issues and solutions, which

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<sup>1</sup>In this paper, we refer to European governments including EU member states as well as Norway and the United Kingdom.

stand in sharp contradiction to the interdependencies that characterise a complex conflict environment.

To summarise our argument, we therefore conclude that contemporary Sahel strategies by European governments fall short of accounting for the complexity of the conflict situation as it is identified in various future scenarios for the region. They are therefore only to a limited extent suited for addressing future challenges in the Sahel region.

### **A BLURRED PICTURE: DEALING WITH COMPLEXITY IN STRATEGIC PLANNING**

Actors in conflict environments have goals, which they pursue through strategies. A strategy links goals with actions, based on perceived internal and environmental conditions as well as anticipated actions of other actors within the same environment (Frieden 1999: 45). Nations and international organisations often publish their strategies on development cooperation or security to provide guidance for the management of future challenges (DuMont 2019: 1). As such, strategies are an integral part of planning in conflict environments. For the situation in the Sahel, we find both a common strategy by the European Union (EU) as a whole as well as strategies from individual member states.

Conflict environments, in turn, can be viewed as complex systems. These complex systems are characterised by a multitude of interconnected elements exhibiting nonlinear cause-and-effect-relationships and inherent system dynamics (Luhmann 1987; Dörner 2012; Snowden/Boone, 2007) which lead to difficulties in understanding the present and future conditions. National strategies face the challenge of having to capture this complexity within a single and succinct document, which inevitably poses the risk of abstraction (Dörner 2012: 79) and oversimplification.

Nevertheless, the interests and perspectives of different actors within a given conflict environment are often characterised by diverging intentions and possibilities to intervene (Luhmann 2019: 23). This translates into challenges with regard to anticipating the behaviour and actions of others', including individuals, organisations and nation states. However, not only the anticipation of other actors' incentives and actions is a pivotal challenge in complex systems, but also acknowledging one's own role and influence. David P. Stroh states that "for any complex problem to be solved, the individual players all need to recognise how they unwittingly contribute to it." (Stroh 2015: 32) This understanding is not easily captured due to unintended second-order effects that appear as a consequence of the networked character of complex systems. Influencing a single variable can cause effects among other elements far beyond the intended outcome, resulting in non-linear cause-and-effect relationships. Actors in conflict environments thus frequently fail to capture and recognise the whole of such effects as they

usually appear among multiple elements often distant from the action itself (Dörner 2012: 61). Accordingly, the development of strategies takes place under conditions of significant uncertainty, defined as a situation in which neither all conditions are known nor can they be determined through probabilities (Knight 1921: 15; Apelt/Senge 2015: 3). This circumstance has a significant impact on the formulation of strategies.

On the other hand, future scenarios - whilst also limited in their scope - are built on precisely this uncertainty, which is inherent to complex conflict environments. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), scenarios are "plausible and often simplified description[s] of how the future may develop, based on a coherent and internally consistent set of assumptions about driving forces and key relationships." (IPCC 2007: 86) Usually, they are not solely derived from linear extrapolation and projections of the current conditions, but enriched with further information about the environment's inherent dynamics (IPCC 2007: 86). Scenarios therefore adopt a systems approach in the anticipation and description of environments and their conditions, recognising that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

In the realm of uncertainty, actors in conflict environments are challenged with what-happens-if-questions in the formulation of their strategies (Coleman et al. 2006: 61). Scenarios can outline possible answers to such questions, thereby providing a framework for strategic planning (Goodwin/Wright 2001: 2; Wiebe et al. 2018: 546). The anticipation of possible futures is a common tool in dealing with uncertainty as it allows to imagine the effects of certain actions and select the best course of action (Dörner 2012: 67-71). Actors in conflict environments can thus use scenarios to either determine features that need to be built into a strategy or to evaluate and consequently select the most appropriate strategy to achieve a certain goal (Goodwin/Wright 2001: 3).

### **Mapping Strategies against Future Scenarios**

In order to determine how well contemporary European national strategies are suited to tackle future challenges in the Sahel region, we first conducted an integrative literature review of eleven future scenarios for Mali, the Sahel region, and Africa published by European think tanks between 2015 and 2021 (see table 1 below for an overview of the selected scenarios). Our main criteria for selecting the scenarios were: a clear focus on either Mali or the Sahel, an emphasis on the future (up to 2040) and a clearly stated method and choice of variables. In our own analysis, we then concentrated on the key drivers of the crisis identified in the scenarios and on how cause-effect relationships between the individual drivers were presented. Next, we summarised the most common denominators of these scenarios in what we refer to as a "trend scenario" for the Sahel region in order to have a

	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Time Horizon</b>	<b>Publishing Institution</b>
1	<i>L'Accès Humanitaire Au Sahel Central: Scénarios. Les évolutions possibles de l'accès humanitaire au Mali, au Burkina Faso et au Niger au cours de l'année 2021</i>	ACAPS, Norwegian Refugee Council	2021	2021	ACAPS, Norwegian Refugee Council
2	<i>The Central Sahel: Scene of New Climate Wars?</i>	International Crisis Group	2020	2020 - unspecified	International Crisis Group
3	<i>Regional Perspectives Report on North Africa and the Sahel</i>	NATO	2020	2020 - 2040	
4	<i>Long term trends across Security and Development in the Sahel</i>	Daniel Eizenga	2019	1980 - 2021	Sahel and West African Club - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
5	<i>Prospects for the G5 Sahel countries to 2040</i>	Stellah Kwasi, Jakkie Cilliers, Zachary Donnenfeld, Lily Welborn and Ibrahim Maïga	2019	2019 - 2040	Institute for Security Studies
6	<i>Prospective des Realites Saheliennes 2030</i>	Thierry Hommel	2017	2017 - 2030	Thierry Hommel Conseil
7	<i>Islamic State 2021: Possible Futures in North and West Africa</i>	Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Jacob Zenn and Nathaniel Barr	2017	2017 - 2021	Foundation for Defence of Democracies
8	<i>Wege der Zukunft: Szenarien Mali 2030</i>	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung	2017	2017 - 2030	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
9	<i>African futures: Key trends to 2035</i>	Julia Bello-Schünemann, Jakkie Cilliers, Zachary Donnenfeld, Ciara Aucoin and Alex Porte	2017	2017 - 2035	Institute for Security Studies
10	<i>Review of Current and Planned Adaptation Action in Mali</i>	Alicia Natalia Zamudio	2016	unspecified	Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia
11	<i>What will Sub-Saharan Africa look like in 2030?</i>	Christian Hellwig	2015	2015 - 2030	Global Risk Insights

Table 1: Overview of Examined Scenarios, own figure

common baseline for the subsequent comparison. In a second step, we examined the strategies by various European governments on the Sahel<sup>2</sup> with regard to which key

drivers were considered in these documents and how their cause-effect relationships were presented. The following section will begin by outlining our “trend scenar-

<sup>2</sup> Some of the strategies focused exclusively on Mali or on (Sub-Saharan) Africa on a wider scale.

io” and subsequently provide an overview of the examined strategies.

## UNDERSTANDING THE SAHEL CRISIS

### Future Challenges for a Volatile Region

The fragility of the Sahel is driven by the “nexus of population growth, weak governance, scarcity of resources and economic competition” (NATO Strategic Foresight Branch 2020: 40). Intra- and inter-communal tensions and conflicts over land use and water access will continue to destabilise the region (International Crisis Group 2020: 4, 6; ACAPS 2021: 2). Weak governance and lack of justice, resulting in the inability to mediate conflict and corruption, are exacerbated by the lack of legitimacy and the failure to provide basic services. Ever-growing effects of climate change put increasing pressure on distribution mechanisms, amplifying the tensions which are further exploited by terrorist groups (Gartenstein-Ross/Zenn/Barr 2017: 32-36; International Crisis Group 2020: 1).

With limited abilities to provide basic services, especially in regards to social security, access to basic infrastructures, health care, and food security, inequalities manifest. Generally, health and well-being are highly dependent on external factors, such as the climate (Zamudio 2016: 22), technological improvements (NATO Strategic Foresight Branch 2020: 33) or security (Kwasi et al. 2019: 25). While the conditions will improve for some, the number of people lacking good health and general well-being will increase and the middle-class will diminish (Eizenga 2019: 8). However, a growing middle-class is regarded as a key in fighting poverty as individual empowerment can provide positive spillover effects (Hellwig 2015).

Poverty has reached extreme levels and has become a structural problem and contextualising factor in the Sahelian crisis. The fast-growing population leads to an unbalanced ratio between working-age population and dependent individuals (Eizenga 2019: 8), which cannot be accommodated by the job market, leaving especially youth with very limited job perspectives (NATO Strategic Foresight Branch 2020: 27). The young population can be the region's potential for economic growth but is at immense risk of being deprived of opportunities as education and equality is endangered (Bello-Schünemann et al. 2017: 3-4). The lack of economic opportunities further triggers migration and a brain drain on the region (NATO Strategic Foresight Branch 2020: 27). Stronger secured borders, in the attempt to manage migration, and by conflict and climate change affected transport routes are threatening the flow of people and goods on which many local economies rely. This disruption, in addition to the

lack of economic opportunities, is indirectly promoting organised crime (Eizenga 2019: 15).

The economy records a volatile growth, is vulnerable to global developments and dependent on external funding (Eizenga 2019: 9-11). Missing diversification creates a dependency on very few sectors and resources (Hellwig 2015), most of which are standing at high risk of being affected by climate change. Other resources, like oil, do not signify a sustainable development (Eizenga 2019: 11). The region relies on private or state investments in order to achieve economic growth (Hellwig 2015). Agriculture is considered the sector with the most potential to reduce poverty and trigger such growth (Eizenga 2019: 15; Kwasi et al. 2019: 20). The sector is depending on external investments, and technological advances and applications to provide for sustainable development. Climate change is posing an immediate threat to the sector, reducing the production yields and ultimately the export rates of the region (Zamudio 2016: 10). “A comprehensive agricultural risk management system including mitigation, transfer, and coping solutions” will be needed for this sector to provide the needed economic opportunities (Kwasi et al. 2019: 26). Current scenarios also link economic growth to a reduced stream towards terrorist and jihadist groups (Gartenstein-Ross/Zenn/Barr 2017: 40). Yet, it is still most likely for the informal sector to continue to represent a vital part of the economy with the modern sector not providing enough jobs and little innovation happening (Hommel 2017: 5). However, while innovations are essential for the region to fight poverty, technological developments will only benefit a selected few and the majority of the population experiences growing inequalities (Eizenga 2019: 11).

The Sahel will continue to be influenced by its partnerships for financial, military (and technical) support and development (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Mali 2017: 6; International Crisis Group 2020: 2-3, 7; NATO Strategic Foresight Branch 2020: 53). While there are several international interventions and initiatives for the Sahel and specifically for Mali, most do not manage to address the root problems of terrorism and insecurity. (Eizenga 2019: 21) Furthermore, interventions should refrain from imposing the “Western-style” (Kwasi et al. 2019: 2).

The discussed scenarios highlight the great complexity of the Sahelian crisis. Most of the identified key drivers are interconnected and cannot be addressed individually. This complexity and volatility of the conflict impairs the ability to predict the outcome of interventions and to effectively intervene (Coleman et al. 2006: 61).

### Navigating the Maze: European Efforts

In order to provide a basis for further discussion, the following section will summarise the main aspects of the selected<sup>5</sup> European national strategies on the Sahel.

<sup>5</sup> including the strategies of France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the EU as a whole

France as the most prominent single-state actor in the Sahel lays a strong strategic focus on security matters to stabilise the situation. The necessity of a comprehensive approach that couples counter-terrorism and strengthening regional security actors as well as administrative authority with enhancing development aid and addressing root causes like poverty is acknowledged (Permanent Mission of France 2019). However, France itself focuses its efforts on the security aspects, relying on international cooperation partners to cover the remaining developmental aspects (Embassy of France 2021).

As a supranational framework, the European Union has developed common strategies both for the African continent as a whole and specifically for the Sahel region. The former reaffirms the strong partnership with Africa for sustainable trade, economic and infrastructural development. The focus lies on the Green Deal as well as the governance of migration as top priorities (European Commission 2020: 2). Illegal activities shall be stopped, for example by practicing effective border management. (European Commission 2020: 14) The Sahel-specific European strategy incorporates action in four areas, namely "1. development, good governance and internal conflict resolution, 2. politics and diplomacy, 3. security and the rule of law, and 4. the fight against extremist violence and radicalisation" (Pichon 2020: 4), thereby reaffirming the EEAS' security/development nexus (Pichon 2020: 4). Currently, Germany has not published an own Sahel-specific foreign policy strategy, but carries out their actions under the umbrella of multinational initiatives. Their action plan focuses strongly on the cooperation with host states and accounts for the wide spectrum of security aspects, strengthening economies and fighting organised crime (German Federal Government 2019: 7-17, 22-28). Migration takes a central role in all German documents, as a strong connection is drawn between foreign aid in the Sahel and reduced migration from Africa to Europe (German Federal Government 2019: 18-21). Concurrently, the Norwegian strategy for the Sahel takes the complexity of the situation into account, as "the combination of poverty, organised crime, violent extremism and weak institutions is making the region increasingly insecure, unstable and conflict-ridden" (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017: 3). Decreased illegal migration to Europe is named as a main focus and priority for action, while fragile stability in the Sahel is directly linked to increased terrorist action (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017: 5, 10). Conflict prevention and resolution, political stabilisation, enhanced security and building resilience stand in the centre of Norwegian strategic planning (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017: 6-8).

Sweden takes a similar strategic approach to Mali as Norway. The main focus lies on human security rather than overarching systems (Ministry for Foreign Affairs Sweden 2016: 4). Both Sweden and Norway strongly incorporate the UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security

into their strategic planning (Ministry for Foreign Affairs Sweden 2016: 10).

In a different approach, the United Kingdom positions itself as a soft power in Africa, focusing on investment and partnerships to support regional development, national protection systems and enhancing their diplomatic presence. As one of five priority areas, climate action plays a vital role in the British strategy (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2019: 4). However, British troop support is also granted to security efforts, among them the French counter-insurgency missions (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2019: 8). With the overview of the trend scenario and national strategies as given above, the next section will discuss how the expected key issues in the Sahel and proposed actions converge.

### EUROPEAN STRATEGIES : SELFLESS SAMARITANS OR SELFISH SOVEREIGNS?

In accumulating the trend scenario, it became evident that the eleven examined scenarios mention a wide array of key drivers from different domains and prioritise them in different ways. While some are more focused on specific factors (Gartenstein-Ross/Zenn/Barr 2017; International Crisis Group 2020), many of them take a holistic view or make efforts to frame future developments from different perspectives (Kwasi et al. 2019; NATO Strategic Foresight Branch 2020). Furthermore, the scenarios highlight interactions between different factors as well as possibilities for intervention. An aspect not explored by either scenarios or strategies is the role of information and connectivity. Given that this has been a major focus in forecasts of global developments and has been identified as a major factor in the Arab Spring uprisings in Northern Africa and the Middle East (Smidi/Shahin 2017), its omission in Sahel scenarios and strategies is particularly noteworthy.

We detected three ways in which current strategies fall short of the challenges displayed by future scenarios for the Sahel: Strategies 1) focus their attention on different key drivers of the crisis, 2) do not propose sufficient solutions to problems they identify, and 3) do not consider complexity and side effects.

The examined strategies differ from the scenarios most notably in two dimensions: Firstly, European strategies place a much higher emphasis on migration than the scenarios. Only two of eleven scenarios mention migration as an integral driver of the Sahelian crisis. Instead, they identify migration as a structural quality of regional cross-border freedom of movement and economic growth. European Strategies, however, frame migration, especially illegal migration, as a security problem and a central pillar guiding their actions in the Sahel and Africa (European Commission 2020: 2). This perception of migration as a key driver rather than a contextualising factor of instability in the Sahel and resulting actions focusing on the reduction of migration may serve their nation-

al interests in the short term but risks leaving key drivers of instability unaddressed in the long term.

Secondly, the high prominence of traditional national security aspects with a focus on military measures (Baldwin 2020: 5), especially in the strategy of France (Embassy of France 2021), stands out. On the one hand, this continued focus in the case of France may be due to France's strong long-term involvement in counter-terrorism operations in Mali. On the other hand, we observed a strong general consensus in the strategies that, initially, a secure and stable environment must be created through military actions (Deutscher Bundestag 2020: 5). According to this view, which we will call "military-first", development actors can only subsequently enter the region to improve living conditions. While scenarios also identify security as a major concern, military-first approaches are much less in focus or even explicitly discarded as a long-term remedy.

While the trend scenario identifies climate change as a central present and future factor in the dynamics of the crisis in the Sahel, its adverse effects on local livelihoods are not addressed in some of the examined strategies. Although the majority highlights the importance of resilience against climate shocks, this goal often remains disconnected from specific actions. In addition, the European Union strategies frame climate change as a development issue relevant in the long term, highlighting the need for "green energy" (EEAS 2019: 2) and a "green transition" (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2020: 4). These views indicate a tendency to misrepresent the already pressing challenges climate change poses to Sahelian communities and insufficiently address them.

Many of the solutions proposed by the strategies are linear in their view of envisioned actions and their impact, not highlighting possible second-order or side effects of the proposed actions. A particularly relevant example are civilian deaths resulting from military intervention which may lead to a perception of international military organisations as no better than the non-state armed groups, which undermines the credibility - and often the safety - of foreign personnel (Wheeldon 2019). Thus, the view of a direct and positive relationship between counter-terrorism operations and improved security proposed by many strategies is generally not shared by scenarios. Another example is the precedent that improved living conditions initially lead to an increase in emigration in other societies (Castelli 2018: 3). This contradicts European nations' stated preferences and yet, a possible connection is not acknowledged by their publications advocating for both improved living conditions and reduced migration. This neglect of unintended second-order effects appears to be a weakness of current strategies and, as the scenarios highlight, risks undermining efforts undertaken in such a fashion (International Crisis Group 2020: 7).

Similarly, strategies often view problems separately and within the traditional domains of security on one hand, and development on the other. While the EU acknowledges the importance of the "security-development nexus" (European Parliamentary Research Service 2020: 4), it still assigns traditional means of intervention to both and follows the military-first logic laid out above: Military action provides security, development (supported through financing) provides long-term stability. This neglects the positive effects of development and improved service provision on security, especially in rural areas, where armed groups derive their legitimacy from provision of basic services and are thus deeply embedded in the population (NATO Strategic Foresight Branch 2020: 20).

The disconnection of security and development goals as outlined above suggests a decomposition of the complex goal of creating stability, security, and peace in the Sahel. This approach is commonly observable in handling complex problems as it is necessary for organisations and governments to maintain operability (Dörner 2012: 79-84). However, for many of the analysed strategies we speculate that such decomposition further results in an isolated treatment of single issues and consequently a disregard of the effects they might have on other issues. This phenomenon becomes particularly apparent in the military-first approach that aims to improve the security situation through counter-terrorism measures before initiating development support (Deutscher Bundestag 2020: 5; Embassy of France 2021).

As the observed scenarios anticipate, the complexity of the Malian crisis will not decrease in the foreseeable future (NATO Strategic Foresight Branch 2020; International Crisis Group 2020; Eizenga 2019, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Mali 2017). Pursuing a strategy that focuses solely on security today bears the risk of not accounting for unintentional effects these actions might have on other grievances and, following this, the actions of tomorrow. It is thus advisable that, in order to adopt an adequate systematic response, the interconnectedness of the crises' drivers is translated into an interconnectedness of the goals, which the actors pursue through their strategies.

### **NOBODY KNOWS, EVERYBODY ACTS**

Summing up the above, in this paper we have argued that contemporary strategy documents for the Sahel region by European governments do not adequately address the complexity of the conflict environment that characterises the region in the way in which it has been depicted by various future scenarios. Most significantly, the strategies fall short of three aspects: firstly, they focus on different key drivers for the crisis, whilst secondly failing to identify appropriate solutions in response to the outlined issues. Thirdly, the strategies do not adequately consider



the impact of second-order effects, which again limits their ability to represent a sufficient level of complexity. In order to carry out our analysis, we examined a range of European national strategies against our “trend scenario”, which we derived by comparing and combining the essence of eleven future scenarios for the Sahel region. This was preceded by a brief background on the topics of complexity, uncertainty and forecasting future challenges by means of scenario planning. As strategic documents require an outline of the operating environment, actors are confronted with the challenge of having to reduce high levels of complexity at the risk of oversimplifying the situation.

In 2021, the growing instability of the Sahel region constitutes one of Europe's core security problems. We have compared contemporary European national strategies to future scenarios for the Sahel in order to determine whether these efforts are still apt to address the region's looming crises of the coming years. Through our analysis, we discovered that the fundamental issue is the strategies' inability to account for the growing complexity of the conflict environment. This manifested in different ways, as it has been outlined above. What stands out are particularly those strategies that focus on a rather narrow definition of security, whilst attempting to strictly differentiate between the domains of development on the one hand and security on the other. Such an approach is a sharp contradiction to the increasing complexity on the ground, which hardly permits the separation of the highly interconnected drivers of the conflict. Nevertheless, there are still aspects which we were not able to cover sufficiently given the scope of this paper, and which therefore ought to be the subject of further research. Firstly, a subsequent study could apply a longer-term timeframe and analyse how both future scenarios and national strategies for the Sahel have developed since the onset of this crisis in 2012. Whilst our analysis is limited in its scope to examine only recently published documents, a larger study could thus examine and take into account the dynamics between the two kinds of documents. Strategies and scenarios are never published at the same time but continuously. Therefore, each of these documents always influences the content of those documents that are published at a later point. Put differently, the 2015 EU strategy for the Sahel will have influenced how analysts judged the role of the EU in future scenarios.

Secondly, in addition to expanding the timeframe under examination, further research could also include strategies published by non-state actors (such as non-government and international organisations) or scenarios from non-western institutions (especially think tanks) in their analysis. A comparative study could examine whether there are differences between the different types of actors with regard to accounting for complexity. In order to confirm or reject the findings from our analysis,

further research analysing the continuous development of both Sahel future scenarios as well as comparing national and organisational strategy documents would thus be highly desirable.

All in all, this paper has examined the suitability of contemporary European strategies for the future challenges in the Sahel. It has identified the complexity of the crisis to constitute an overarching factor which is becoming increasingly difficult to grasp by strategic documents. This is not to say that European strategies are completely unsuited or misguided. Rather, it shows that the problems of the future will continue to require carefully crafted and deliberated solutions. Future scenarios can provide guidance on how trajectories are likely to unfold. Governments are best advised to analyse them carefully and incorporate their findings into their strategies.

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