The G5 Sahel Group - Clearly Just an Illusion

The vast Sahel region, stretching across Africa from Senegal to Sudan, has long been the continent’s powder keg. National governments have been able to secure peace here and as a result millions of citizens in Mali, Niger, Burkina-Faso and the other Sahel nations have been forced from their homes and flee en masse to Europe’s Mediterranean coast or risk being recruited by militants. The many extremist groups present in the region, each with their own agenda, have been joined by militants from Syria and Iran where terrorist organizations such as DAESH (a prohibited organization in Russia) have suffered significant losses.

Europe, and particularly France - a former colonial power and still a significant influence in the Sahel region, are concerned about the situation there, especially in terms of its impact on migration and terrorism. It is therefore no surprise that when, on February 16 2014, the heads of state of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina-Faso and Chad met together in Nouakchott to found the G5 Sahel group (or G5S), France was the real, if unofficial, initiator of the project. The stated goals of the new regional group were to coordinate their work on reducing poverty, developing infrastructure and agriculture and ensuring security. It was intended to supplement and support the existing regional bodies, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS). But in reality the main goal of the G5S was the formation of a military alliance, which was officially established at the G5 summit in February 2017. In accordance with an
agreement reached during that summit, the following year the members of the group established the G5 Sahel Joint Force, made up of 5,000 soldiers and police with a single command structure, tasked with preventing terrorist attacks. France later conducted two counter-terrorist operations, Serval and Barkhane, in partnership with the Joint Force.

The establishment of the G5S joint force was greeted positively in Europe, particularly in France, which took on the role of main mentor and supporter of the Sahel nations in order to boost the effectiveness of their counter-terrorism alliance. Concerned by the high levels of illegal migration from Africa - a problem experienced by many European countries - France lobbied for the adoption of the EU Sahel Strategy Regional Action Plan 2015–2020. The EU clearly shares France’s concerns: it has provided significant funding - 50 million euros - for the African nations’ “united army,” as well as humanitarian aid, launched the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger), and financed the Coordination Center in partnership with French law-enforcement bodies, as well as investing tens of millions of euros in infrastructure development.

But, besides migration and terrorism, France has other, very direct concerns in its former colonies. It has a number of economic interests there, and is particularly reliant on the region for uranium supplies. The former colonial power has traditionally depended on resources from the Sahel, and Niger supplies a third of its uranium needs - which are significant, since 80% of France’s electricity comes from nuclear power. That explains why the French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) and the French multinational nuclear power company Areva were so keen to persuade the French government to launch its Serval operation in Mali in 2013-2014, aimed at protecting France’s multi-million euro investments in the Sahel. But one should not forget that Paris has a number of other significant financial involvements in the region. To name just a few, the Orange Telecom holding has a presence in Niger, Bolloré logistics is involved in developing the rail network in Niger, as is Sitarail in Burkina-Faso and Camrail in Chad, and Veolia’s African subsidiary Société des Eaux du Niger operates a water treatment plant in Niger - all projects of significant economic and geo-strategic significance for France.

Paris’s determination to implement its security policy in the Sahel forms part of its soft power strategy: the French government uses the French media to promote its official position, namely that it is “helping the Sahel nations in their fight against terrorism,” and present the Barkhane operation as a counter-terrorist initiative. Paris considers that this helps to boost France’s “liberal” image within the international community. Thus, as reported by Le Figaro, Emmanuel Macron gained political capital from the presence of French troops in Niamey, capital of Niger, as part of a joint New Year celebration - a clear illustration of the close connection between France’s foreign policy initiatives and the reputation of the French political establishment back at home.

France’s security policy in the Sahel countries has been viewed as an attempt by the former colonial power to demonstrate its influence, and an expression of its quite rational wish to be seen as an important global power, a particularly pressing concern for France given the growing influence of other powers from outside the region, including China and Russia.

France’s leadership - under the banner of the G5S - of its largest military campaign since the Second World War led to an increase in demand for armaments and gave France the opportunity to develop and demonstrate its military hardware.

However, despite Paris’s attempts, at a local level the G5S has proved itself inadequate, largely as a result of its inaction in the face of the terrorist threat to the region. And that failure has been confirmed by various developments, notably the results of the meeting with the heads of state of the G5S countries, organized by Emmanuel Macron and held on February 16 - which two of the intended participants, the leaders of Mali and Burkina Faso, failed to attend.

As the Malian newspaper Malijet Actualite put it, “today the G5 Sahel Group faces a new challenge — the end of the Barkhane military operation in Mali and the reorganization of the French military presence in the Sahel. Another problem is the changes of regime in Mali and Burkina-Faso, as a result of which both countries have now left the G5S. The future, indeed the continued existence, of what remains of the G5S now looks increasingly doubtful.” Following the withdrawal of Mali and Burkina-Faso, which formed the core of the G5S, it is unclear whether the alliance is still viable.

And at the same time, France's policy in Africa is becoming increasingly unsustainable, especially in the eyes of the countries that used to live under French rule. Therefore, it is not surprising that the openly anti-French sentiments were voiced during the recent demonstrations, that gather thousands of people. Those sentiments were expressed in the burning of French flags, as well as in the destruction of portraits and even cardboard figures of President of the
Fifth Republic Emmanuel Macron.

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