



Why Europe should broaden its horizons in the Sahel

by Rem Korteweg

The Sahel stretches from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, touching on 13 countries from Senegal to Eritrea. Turmoil is spreading across the region, putting European security interests at risk, yet Brussels is scrambling to respond. As the EU prepares for a new military mission to the Central African Republic (CAR), it should review its Sahel policy. The EU needs a more integrated approach to the broader Sahel if it is to deal with the humanitarian and security crises emanating from the region.

In 2013, the chaos in Mali revealed to Europeans that the Sahel, in spite of its geographic distance, was connected with the EU's neighbourhood. France's robust military intervention was followed by an EU training mission to help Mali's armed forces, and eight member-states are contributing to a UN mission there. In spite of a successful presidential election, Mali's problems remain: reconciliation between the northern Tuareg groups and the government in Bamako is moving slowly, and as UN troops replace the French, militant groups threaten to return.

But Mali's troubles are part of a broader pattern of volatility afflicting the Sahara and the Sahel. From the Mediterranean to the equator, states in northern and central Africa face lawlessness and conflict. The Sahel acts as the region's transmission belt for instability, affecting the countries in and around it. Trafficking in arms, drugs, contraband and people is rife. In the north, the collapse of post-Gadhafi Libya has created a de facto division of the country; east

Libya's self-proclaimed 'government of Cyrenaica' is blocking oil exports, starving Libya's treasury and driving up oil prices. Its ungoverned south forms a refuge for militant Islamist groups. Northern Nigeria faces increasing sectarian tensions, triggered by the terrorist group Boko Haram. In January, they killed 30 people in a bomb-attack in the country's north-east. Nigeria's violence regularly spills into Cameroon. Towards the east, the CAR is a new flashpoint. As the crisis in South Sudan remains, it may affect its neighbours.

In the wake of Libya's collapse and the chaos in Mali, Chad is emerging as one of the Sahel's kingmakers. In 2013, its government gave crucial military support to France in northern Mali. But in the CAR, Chad backed the (Muslim) Seleka rebels who pushed out President François Bozizé, precipitating a conflict that now threatens to spin out of control. The UN has warned of genocide. At the crossroads between the Sahel, the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa – and rich

in natural resources – the country could draw in other actors including militant Islamists or the Lord’s Resistance Army, a cult-like terrorist group.

France has a large military presence in the region, including 1,600 troops in the CAR. Paris, however, says its forces are insufficient and is increasingly frustrated, perceiving itself as Europe’s only fireman. In December, other leaders dismissed France’s proposal that they should support its intervention with EU funds. Despite initial reluctance, a humanitarian emergency has forced the EU to act. It is planning to send up to 600 troops to the capital Bangui. Deployed for six months, they will protect the city and its airport (where tens of thousands have sought refuge) and support humanitarian relief operations. France will provide the majority of the forces, along with Belgium, Greece, Estonia, Poland and possibly Sweden.

This limited mission alone will not solve the CAR’s problems, but it will make the EU somewhat responsible for the country’s fate. It may also convince policy-makers that they should update the EU’s approach to northern and central Africa.

Despite having four other missions in northern Africa – in Mali, Niger, South Sudan and Libya – the EU does not have a coherent approach to promoting security in the broader Sahel-Sahara region. The EU’s ‘Sahel strategy’ focuses on only five countries; Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Chad. It does not take sufficient account of the importance of interaction between coastal Arab states of the Maghreb, the arid, landlocked

interior and the borderlands of central Africa; and the way in which instability in one of these regions can destabilise the others.

A forthcoming update of the EU’s strategic framework will include Algeria and Morocco; two states that are crucial to the region’s politics but whose mutual distrust is a complicating factor. But Brussels must do more. Libya should be an integral part of the strategy, along with central African countries. Nigeria should also feature: the EU agreed on a security dialogue with Abuja in 2012, but no meetings have taken place.

A central problem is fragmentation in EU external policy structures. The broader Sahel-Sahara region is covered by multiple senior EU officials. The EU special representative for the Sahel focuses mostly on Mali and its neighbours; the Maghreb falls under the EU special representative for the southern Mediterranean; while Sudan, South Sudan and the CAR are covered by yet another EU special representative and a senior official for the Great Lakes. Besides, most of the resources the EU could use in the region are controlled by the Commissioner for Development, not the External Action Service. The High Representative, Catherine Ashton, should take the lead to ensure efforts in the broader Sahel are better co-ordinated. The Sahel will produce more strategic surprises, so the EU should be prepared.

Rem Korteweg
Senior research fellow, CER

CER in the press

The New York Times

21st January 2014
 “The sheer scale of the violence [in the Central African Republic] and the chaos of the last couple of weeks has astonished a lot of Europeans and forced them to pay attention,” said Rem Korteweg of the CER.

Reuters

20th January 2014
 John Springford of the CER said, “Any decision about leaving the EU must be based on an appraisal of what Britain would be leaving: the EU has successfully reduced trade barriers with the many rich economies on Britain’s

doorstep. An exit would imperil those gains.”

The Irish Times

19th January 2014
 “We are likely to see strong showings in the European elections for eurosceptic or far-right parties in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland and Italy,” says Hugo Brady of the CER in London.

The Financial Times

18th December 2013
 “Instead of diversifying Ukraine’s gas supplies and increasing its energy efficiency, this agreement is likely to ensure that Ukraine continues to be tied to Russia,

subject to the threat of gas supplies being turned off for political or economic reasons,” says Ian Bond, director of foreign policy at the CER.

The Financial Times

18th December 2013
 Clara Marina O’Donnell at the CER, notes the “startling level of panic” unleashed across nations this summer when the European Commission revealed it wanted to extend its influence over European military co-ordination and procurement.

The Daily Telegraph

17th December 2013
 “Merkel might decide that

fighting Britain’s corner is not worth undermining relations with the SPD, who are very much opposed to making anything that could smack of a concession to Britain,” said Simon Tilford, deputy director of the CER.

The New York Times

5th December 2013
 “The EU shouldn’t feel too responsible for what’s going on in Ukraine,” said Charles Grant, the director of the CER. Mr Yanukovich was bluntly telling European and American diplomats that he needed \$20 billion to seal the deal in the face of Russian opposition.