EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The increasing influence of ISIL/DAESH and Al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Africa’s Sahel region and the complex web of transnational criminal networks and militant groups who thrive in an environment of weak states pose a serious threat for both regional and international stability. As a joint effort against the raised levels of insecurity in the region, the G5 Sahel’s State members (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger), backed by France, the African Union’s Peace and Security Council and the UN Security Council, announced officially on 02nd July 2017 the formation of GS Sahel force (“Force Conjointe” du GS Sahel – FC-GSS). This initiative can be also considered as an invitation for third parties to “invest” in the regional security. The FC-GSS is supposed to be at the forefront of transnational security efforts in the Sahel region for the near future.

KEY WORDS: G5 Sahel region, FC-GSS, combat terrorism, humanitarian operations, challenges and opportunities.

HIGHLIGHTS:
- With an average mission strength of 4,000/5,000 troops, the FC-GSS is composed of security units from the G5 Sahel organization’s member states.
- The FC-GSS concept of operations has four pillars: combating terrorism and drug trafficking; contributing to the restoration of state authority and the return of displaced persons and refugees; facilitation of humanitarian operations and the delivery of aid to the affected local population and contribution to the implementation of development strategies in the GS Sahel region.
- The most immediate challenge for the newly formed FC-GSS is the lack of sufficient financial resources for effective execution of its activities.
- Other important challenges for FC-GSS are to properly define its structure, avoid redundancy and operational conflict with the other international actors in the region in order to achieve effective coordination and interoperability between the forces on the ground.

Overview of the current Security Architecture in the Sahel Region
(Sources: Center for Strategic International Studies & Africa Center for Strategic Studies)
BACKGROUND

Launched in February 2017, the G5 Sahel Joint Force - also known as “Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel” (FC-G5S) forms part of the regional G5 Sahel organization.

The idea for this new regional body – comprising Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad – was conceived in February 2014. Designed to respond to the security and development challenges facing the Sahel region, it has been supported by France, so far the most military active European country in this part of the world. At the time of its creation in 2014, the G5 described itself as a multidimensional grouping with a strong development component. However, the growing virulence of militant radical groups, taking advantage of sparsely populated border areas, has posed a serious challenge to the initial G5 vision.

As a matter of fact, eight major militant radical groups - mainly operating from Northern and Central Mali - have been linked to over 1,100 fatalities since 2014, including nearly 400 in 2017. The most active of these groups is Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliates (operating collectively under the banner Jama’at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin - JNIM- created in March 2017), as well as the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.

Their activities have included attacks on civilians in remote villages, ambushes on military bases and personnel, and high-profile bombings of popular hotels and restaurants of capital cities in the region (especially in Ouagadougou - the Burkina Faso’s capital city - which was hurt by deadly terrorist attacks in January 2016 and August 2017).

The scattered nature of these attacks, porous borders, and the limited security presence in remote and sparsely populated areas allow militant terrorist groups to extend their activities across the region. As they gain control of trade routes, they also engage in illicit activities such as drug, weapons and human trafficking. This has hindered travel and legal commerce, further harming economic conditions for communities throughout the Sahel.

Between 2013 and 2017, these armed groups have not only taken advantage of the divisions between countries in the region, but they have also shown an organizational ability superior to the states under attack.

Consequently, the launching of the FC-G5S is intended to reverse the instability in the region caused by militant groups that is having a chilling effect on travel, trade, and economic activity, and is triggering large-scale population displacements.

The Force was subsequently endorsed by the African Union’s Peace and Security Council and the UN Security Council and has the support of a variety of international partners. The FC-G5S is now expected to be at the forefront of transnational security efforts in the Sahel for the near future.

G5 SAHEL DEPLOYMENT AND CONCEPT OF OPERATION

The G5 Sahel concept of operations has four pillars:

- Combat terrorism and drug trafficking.
- Contribute to the restoration of state authority and the return of displaced persons and refugees.
- Facilitate humanitarian operations and the delivery of aid to affected populations.
- Contribute to the implementation of development strategies in the G5 Sahel region.
The Force consists of 4,000/5,000 predominantly military troops from its five member states. The FC-G5S separates the Sahel into three sectors:

- **An Eastern sector** covering borders between Niger and Chad with two battalions
- **A Central sector** covering the three borders area: Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger with three battalions
- **A Western sector** covering borders between Mali and Mauritania with two battalions

Each battalion consists of 650 men: 550-soldier battalions, plus 100 policemen and/or gendarmes.

On Sept 2017, a Force headquarters was set up in Sévaré (Central Mali). Secondary command posts will be set up in each sector: one in the Liptako-Gourma transborder area (between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), one along the Mali-Mauritania border, and a third along the Niger-Chad border. In addition, a 50-kilometer zone along each border has been set up to allow national contingents to conduct joint operations or pursue targets beyond their own borders.

The force is led by a commander appointed by the president chairing the G5. Since the Niamey Summit, on 6th of February, President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger was chosen by his peers to take over for the next 12 months the G5 Sahel Presidency from Mali’s Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Selected from among the G5 member countries’ five heads of state, the FC-G5S commander has also a one-year duration mandate. Currently, the FC-G5S is headed by General Didier DACKO, the former chief of staff of the Malian Armed Forces.

As another positive step, symbolically, the FC-G5S conducted two joint anti-terrorist operations, in close cooperation with the French BARKHANE Force:

- Between the 27th of October and the 11th of November 2017, the first FC-G5S anti-terrorist operation (called HAWBI – “Black Cow”), involved Malien, Nigerien and Burkinabe troops in the Central sector;
- Between the 15th and 29th January 2018, a second operation (PAGNALI – “Thunder”) took place along the common border between Burkina Faso and Mali.

Despite some logistical problems and lack of key equipment, both operations aimed to send a clear message to terrorist groups that the joint force is becoming a reality. Furthermore, according to General DACKO, operation PAGNALI strengthened the capacity of the officers of the joint headquarter in Sévaré to work together and provided the opportunity to test the efficiency of the network of the military communications.

In summary, the FC-G5S is another example of recent attempts made by African countries to take on responsibility for their own security. The FC-G5 is part of a current shift toward the creation of ad-hoc forces that go beyond peacekeeping and have a mandate for direct military
intervention. The implementation of this new type of force now lies at the heart of the strategy adopted by the AU, whose Peace and Security Council showed the way by creating the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in 2007. Most recently, the regional Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) - consisting of troops from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria - was established and began operations to tackle the Boko Haram uprising in the Lake Chad basin.

CHALLENGES FOR A FULL OPERATIONAL CAPABILITY.

These challenges can be divided into four main categories:

- **Lack of funding**

  While this French-sponsored initiative is progressively gaining support from the International Community (IC) - this force is now backed by two UN Security Council resolutions (adopted in June and December 2017) and has its own headquarters - funding to secure long-term operations, provide training and acquire modern equipment is still a major subject of concern. The initial intention was the funding for FC-G5S to be provided with resources from UN. In this regard, the Peace and Security Centre (PSC) asked the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to identify the frames of financial and logistical support. France wanted the UNSC’s endorsement under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which would have allowed such UN’s direct financial support to the FC-G5S. The UNSC only ‘welcomed’ the deployment of the FC-G5S instead of explicitly approving it. Moreover, the council also recalled that it was the responsibility of the G5 Sahel states to provide the force with the adequate resources, while encouraging further support from bilateral and multilateral partners. Each G5S member country has pledged $10 million, while the European Union (EU) offered $61 million. France[1] and Germany contributed a combined $21.7 million and launched a mobilization effort to meet the rest of the G5’s financial needs through bilateral contributions. This effort has raised contributions from Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, Luxemburg, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia, with further commitments expected, especially from Sweden and Japan. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have pledged $100 million and $30 million respectively, with an additional $60 million coming from the United States. More than $100 million is still missing from the initial budget which raises the question about future funding and durability.

- **Unequal military capabilities among the FC-G5S partners**

  Three of the G5’s armies (from Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali) have significant challenges. Burkina Faso’s army and intelligence services have been immersed in a restructuring process since President Compaoré’s downfall in October 2014. Niger’s army operates with a budget that has a chronic deficit and the obligation to have a permanent presence along three sensitive borders (with Mali, Libya and Nigeria). Finally, the Malian army’s reorganization process is progressing very slowly. This creates a paradox where the cornerstones of the FC-G5S (in the central sector, around the Liptako-Gourma region near the borders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) - its weakest links - must initially be the ones that take on most of the work.

- **Interconnection of the FC-G5S with other regional security initiatives**

  The G5 Sahel Joint Force must clearly define its institutional focus in consideration of other ongoing regional security initiatives. MINUSMA is mandated to support political processes in Mali and carry out security-related tasks to stabilize the country and implement the government’s transitional roadmap[2]. The 10,000-strong Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), consisting of troops from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria mandated to end the Boko Haram terrorist insurgency, is another focus of operations and cooperation. Given that some of the same security partners are involved in each of these missions, efforts in

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1 France, moreover, has pledged a further $245 million in development assistance to the Sahel over the next five years.

2 However, on 07th of December 2017, the UN Security Council approved a resolution that will enable the MINUSMA peacekeeping force in Mali to provide logistical support to the new FC-G5S force.
clarifying their respective roles and reconciling mandates is central to the overall counterterrorism and stabilization effort (see table).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total Armed Forces</th>
<th>Deployed to UN/Other Multinational Operations</th>
<th>Commitment to the FC-G5S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BURKINA FASO</td>
<td>9,100 (including 3,500 gendarmes)</td>
<td>2,900 to UN</td>
<td>550 soldiers + 100 police/gendarmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAD</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>1,250 to UN + 2,000 in MNJTF</td>
<td>550 soldiers + 100 police/gendarmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MALI</td>
<td>14,700</td>
<td>40 to UN</td>
<td>1,100 soldiers + 200 police/gendarmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAURITANIA</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>900 to UN</td>
<td>550 soldiers + 100 police/gendarmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIGER</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>1,200 to UN + 1,000 in MNJTF</td>
<td>1,100 soldiers + 200 police/gendarmes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The G5 will also have to deal with another major player in the Sahel-Saharan region - Algeria - with which the G5 nations share a collective border roughly 2,500 km (1,500 miles) long. Armed groups emerged in Algeria in the early 1990s and spread beyond its borders. The country’s constitution prohibits foreign military intervention, but Algeria’s collaboration is essential because of its intelligence networks’ intimate knowledge of regional armed factions.

- **Unclear definition of the “common enemy”**

While the MNJTF operating in the Lake Chad Region has a clear and common enemy (i.e. Boko Haram), the FC-G5S will have to tackle a nebulous group of armed actors. Beside the terrorist groups with radical agenda - such as AQIM and JNIM or ISIL/DAESH - some other armed groups are only motivated by criminal profits. As a matter of fact, since the fall of Qaddafi in Libya, the Sahel has emerged as a haven and transit point for arms dealers, drug traffickers and human smugglers. Consequently some of these groups have peaceful intentions on one side of the border and hostile ones at the other side. To break these illicit channels - especially those of migrants - without providing an alternative income stream is to take the risk of turning a large segment of the local population against the G5 Sahel governments. And the G5 needs the support of its own populations to succeed. In addition, local populations (especially in Northern Mali) are organized into many different self-defense militias who sometimes (and sometimes not) pledge allegiance to G5 Sahel governments. It is uncertain whether or not all of the G5 member countries consider these militias as their allies.

**THE FC-G5S AND THE NATO’S STRATEGIC DIRECTION SOUTH**

In that context, what could be the NATO contribution to the FC-G5S (in particular) and for the Sahel region’s stabilization (in general), as the region is posing a potential threat to the alliance’s southern flank (migration and terrorism)?

First of all, it has to be said that the Alliance is already and indirectly contributing to the FC-G5S through an Individual Partnership Cooperation Plan signed with Mauritania.

In November 2016, a national crisis management center, supported by NATO’s Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Program, has been inaugurated in Nouakchott. Furthermore, the Allied Joint Force Command Naples (JFCNP) is supervising and conducting regular training activities in support to the Mauritanian armed forces.
Illustratively, A Mobile Training Team (MTT) from JFCNP conducted Counter-Improvised Explosive Device (C-IED) training in the Mauritanian Capital city (17-22 December 2017).

More broadly, since 2016, the Alliance is developing a new Framework for the South, in an effort to deepen understanding and to explore practical ways to address the challenges and threats from the South. In a consensual approach, it has been recognized that threats posed by state and non-state actors (especially in the Sahel region but not only) require a comprehensive approach that goes beyond the military and is enabled by NATO-EU cooperation. The recent creation of the NSD-S-Hub is part of the new NATO’s Strategic Direction South.

**FINAL REMARKS**

The international support for the FC-G5S follows the well-known maxim “African solutions to African problems”. But, to be effective, G5 coordination must also extend beyond military agencies.

As expressed in the G5 Sahel Joint Force concept of operations, economic development in marginalized areas is crucial, as it can help inhibit recruitment of violent extremist groups and stabilize these areas. Ensuring that coalition forces uphold standards of military professionalism and human rights will also be imperative so as not to alienate local communities. Effectively implementing these development initiatives in coordination with military action will require a high level of integration across various lines of effort.

It remains too soon to say how effective the G5’s elevated security efforts will be. FC-G5S creation, however, reflects the recognition of the need for a regional security structure in the Sahel that can combat the cross-border security threat posed by violent extremist groups while contributing to viable economic and governance alternatives in these long-neglected border regions.

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**REFERENCES**


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3 As a matter of fact, since the creation of the G5-Sahel in 2014, the EU has stepped up cooperation with this African-led initiative to build a strong partnership on many fronts: from political dialogue, to development and humanitarian support, to strengthening security and tackling irregular migration. The EU with its Member States is already the biggest provider of development assistance to the Sahel Region with 08 billion Euros over 2014-2020.


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