



EUROPEAN ORGANISATION FOR STRATEGIC POLICY

STRATEGIC ANALYSIS · SA 04 / 2026

Beyond Strategic Absence: A Differentiated European Approach to the Sahel

Security, human resilience and political access in a region of fragmented
authority.

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Security, human resilience and political access in a region of fragmented authority.

EXECUTIVE JUDGEMENT

European policy in the Sahel should replace the false choice between unconditional engagement and strategic withdrawal with country-specific compacts that protect civilian interests, preserve access and tie security cooperation to verifiable conduct.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Sahel is not a single political theatre; security conditions and legitimate avenues for cooperation differ sharply by country.
- Withdrawal reduces visibility and influence while leaving civilian needs and European exposure unchanged.
- Military assistance without governance safeguards can strengthen coercive capacity without improving public security.
- Coastal West African resilience and Sahel policy must be planned together as insecurity moves across borders.

A differentiated map

A regional label can conceal distinct political economies, armed actors, community grievances and external partnerships. European institutions should maintain a country-by-country assessment of access, civilian risk, legitimate counterparts and realistic objectives. Cooperation can continue in health, local administration, food systems, border communities and education even where high-level political relations are constrained.

Security as public confidence

Security policy should be assessed by whether citizens can travel, trade, farm and access public services without coercion. Training and equipment must be tied to conduct, command responsibility and monitoring. Community information, justice and accountable local administration are not secondary development concerns; they are part of the security system that prevents armed groups from becoming alternative providers of order.

A regional protection strategy

Pressure increasingly affects coastal states, trade corridors and migration routes. Europe should support intelligence cooperation, customs integrity, local prevention and critical-infrastructure protection across the Sahel and Gulf of Guinea. Diplomatic channels should remain open to all authorities capable of reducing civilian harm, while sanctions and assistance are calibrated to observable behaviour.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 01 Adopt country-specific engagement compacts with public civilian-protection benchmarks.
- 02 Protect long-term support for health, education and accountable local administration.
- 03 Condition security assistance on command responsibility, monitoring and remedial action.
- 04 Create a Sahel-coastal states resilience programme for corridors and border regions.
- 05 Maintain diplomatic channels designed for de-escalation, access and crisis management.

DECISION AND MONITORING MATRIX

Priority	Decision horizon	Evidence of progress
Adopt country-specific engagement compacts with public civilian-protection benchmarks.	0-90 days	Civilian harm
Protect long-term support for health, education and accountable local administration.	3-12 months	Access to public services
Condition security assistance on command responsibility, monitoring and remedial action.	12-36 months	Cross-border armed activity
Create a Sahel-coastal states resilience programme for corridors and border regions.	Continuous	Continuity of diplomatic access
Maintain diplomatic channels designed for de-escalation, access and crisis management.	Annual review	Civilian harm

INDICATORS TO WATCH

- Civilian harm
- Access to public services
- Cross-border armed activity
- Continuity of diplomatic access

SOURCES AND METHOD

This publication distinguishes verified institutional evidence from CERAX interpretation and forward-looking judgement. Principal public sources are listed below; all recommendations are the institutional judgement of CERAX.

- Council of the EU, renewed EU approach to the Sahel



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Independent analysis. Diplomatic judgement. European perspective.