EUROPEAN ORGANISATION FOR STRATEGIC POLICY
STRATEGIC ANALYSIS



STRATEGIC ANALYSIS · EOSP-2026-159

Beyond Strategic Absence: A Differentiated European Approach to the Sahel

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

Rome · August 2026
PUBLIC RELEASE · Prepared for policymakers and diplomatic audiences
Issued by the European Organisation for Strategic Policy

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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.

Country pathways and regional safeguards

Differentiation should change the instrument and pace of engagement without abandoning regional public goods or civilian protection.

Country pathways should be based on access, institutional conduct, civilian risk and realistic local partnerships. Where formal political engagement is constrained, Europe may still support health, food systems, local services, cross-border livelihoods and independent information through channels that can be monitored. Security cooperation should be bounded by clear civilian-protection standards, traceable assistance and suspension procedures.

Regional organisations and neighbouring coastal states remain essential for trade, displacement, climate adaptation and the movement of armed groups. European policy should protect these cross-border functions from the volatility of individual bilateral relationships. Flexible finance and multi-year local partnerships can preserve capacity during diplomatic interruption, but they require stronger monitoring and protection against diversion.

- Adopt a separate engagement pathway and risk register for each country.
- Preserve regional programmes for food, climate, trade and civilian protection.
- Apply human-rights monitoring and suspension clauses to security support.

Evidence and review

Success should be assessed through civilian security and institutional access, not the volume of activity.

A quarterly review should combine conflict data, local-service continuity, displacement, market access and partner feedback. Public reporting should acknowledge uncertainty and avoid using regional averages that conceal divergent local conditions. Decisions to expand, adapt or suspend cooperation should record the evidence and the authority responsible.

- Use local and regional indicators with explicit confidence levels.
- Document the rationale and review date for every major change in engagement.

Policy recommendations

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

Indicators to watch

- Civilian harm

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

Scope and analytical method

Security, human resilience and political access in a region of fragmented authority. The paper tests the issue against institutional authority, delivery capacity, political sustainability and the interests of affected partners. It separates confirmed developments from interpretation and identifies the conditions under which recommendations would need to change.

The analysis is based on a structured review of official institutional material and current primary sources. It distinguishes formal decisions and verified facts from institutional assessment and forward-looking judgement. Recommendations are tested against authority, delivery capacity, timing, political sustainability and the interests of external partners.

Public sources cannot capture classified readiness data, commercially sensitive contracting information or confidential diplomatic exchanges. Time-sensitive figures and legal developments should therefore be refreshed by responsible authorities before an operational decision is taken.

Sources and method

The sources below establish the public evidentiary basis for this paper. Interpretation and recommendations remain the responsibility of the Research Directorate. Principal public sources:

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

First published: August 2026. Revised edition: 4 September 2026. The English and Arabic editions share this institutional reference.

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