



The G20's Engagement with Coups and Security in the Sahel: External Intervention and its Limits in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger¹

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Abstract:

In recent years, military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have seen the Sahel plunged into deeper political instability. At the same time, the region remains a hotspot for global counterterrorism efforts, with G20 members like France and the European Union (EU) having been involved through military operations and security partnerships. These overlapping crises raise the questions of how G20 countries have responded to these coups and whether the push for stability is coming at the cost of democratic values. Through a descriptive analytical approach, this paper takes a closer look at how the G20, not as a single voice, but through the actions of key members, has managed its security relationships with the region's new military governments. It reflects on France's military withdrawal from its former sphere of influence, how EU training missions have shifted or stalled, how Western powers have adjusted their security roles in Niger after the 2023 coup and competing intra-G20 interests. While many G20 actors claim to support democratic governance, their continued security engagement suggests a more complicated reality. The paper argues that the G20's security approach in the Sahel often prioritises short-term stability and counterterrorism over long-term democratic accountability. It calls for a more consistent and coherent multilateral strategy that takes regional dynamics into consideration and puts greater emphasis on supporting African-led efforts for peace and security.

Keywords:

G20; Coups; Sahel; External Intervention; Mali; Burkina Faso; Niger.

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Introduction

Africa continues to record the highest number of coups worldwide, with the Sahel region experiencing the greatest concentration. McGowan & Johnson (1984:634-635) define coups as “events in which existing regimes are suddenly and illegally displaced by the action of relatively small groups, in which members of the military, police, or security forces of the state play a key role, either on their own or in conjunction with a number of civil servants or politicians.” In the aftermath of independence, many African states inherited sizeable, well-trained armed forces and powerful traditional authorities, both of which had been used under colonial rule to suppress internal dissent (Wilén, 2024). The legacies of this period included the politicisation of the military and the militarisation of politics, creating a profound civil–military imbalance at the point of independence. Since then, the military has remained central in many post-colonial African states, either through leaders who emerged from liberation struggles with military backing, or through regimes that have maintained power by securing the loyalty of the armed forces (Wilén, 2024).

The Sahel has become a hub of global insecurity plagued by insurgencies, jihadist groups, extreme poverty, food insecurity and a resurgence of military coups. The region has long grappled with deep-rooted social, political, and economic challenges. Between 2018 and 2022, the return of military coups highlighted a leadership crisis in dealing with issues such as poverty, terrorism, and violent extremism (Akinola & Makombe, 2024). Since 2020, a fresh wave of coups has swept across six countries—Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, Sudan and Chad. These upheavals share several underlying drivers: fragile political and institutional structures, persistent security threats and insurgencies, economic strain and competition over resources, the role of external actors, and rivalries within the armed forces. The frequency of military coups in the Sahel has seen the region being plunged into deeper political instability. Furthermore, the recurrence of coups has increasingly made unconstitutional changes of government appear acceptable to the public, particularly against the backdrop of declining trust in state institutions. (Tshuma, Driessen, Bakari, Tine & Fantappie, 2025) At the same time, the Sahel remains a hotspot for global counterterrorism efforts, with G20 members like France and the EU having been involved through military operations and security partnerships.

This article examines the most recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, showing how they pose challenges not only for African institutions but also for external actors such as the G20. It asks how the G20, particularly through the actions of France and the EU, and to a lesser extent the United States (US) (the inclusion of the US is warranted given its significant counterterrorism footprint in the region, particularly in Niger, where it operated a military base prior to the 2023 coup) has responded to these coups via its security agenda. This question is significant given the evident tension between G20 members' security priorities and their stated commitment to democratic governance. The article reflects on the fallout from France's military withdrawal from Mali, how EU training missions have shifted or stalled, how Western powers have adjusted their security roles in Niger after the 2023 coup and competing intra-G20 interests. It argues

that, in practice, the G20's security engagement in the Sahel tends to favour short-term stability and counterterrorism over longer-term democratic accountability, exposing important gaps in its Africa agenda.

Methodologically, the article uses a descriptive analytical approach, drawing on secondary academic literature, policy documents from the G20, the EU and African Union (AU) as well as institutional reports from organisations such as the International Crisis Group (ICG) and media sources. The analysis traces the evolution of G20-aligned security engagement in the Sahel before and after the recent wave of coups identifying patterns, contradictions and implications for the group's Africa agenda. The article has five sections: 1. a contextual overview of the Sahel coups; 2. the G20's security engagement in Africa; 3. the shift in security posture in response to the coups; 4. an analysis of the G20's security posture in the region and implications for its Africa agenda; and 5. recommendations with concluding reflections.

The Sahel Coups

Since the attainment of independence in the mid-twentieth century, military coups have constituted a defining and enduring element of Africa's political trajectory, with armed interventions recurrently disrupting constitutional rule. Empirical evidence underscores the prevalence of coups across both temporal and regional contexts. In West Africa, for example, the period between 1955 and 2004 witnessed 44 successful coups, 43 failed attempts, and 82 plots (McGowan, 2006). Likewise, sub-Saharan Africa recorded 80 successful coups, 108 failed attempts and 139 plots between 1956 and 2001 (McGowan, 2003). More broadly, Powell & Thyne (2011) observe that Africa has historically exhibited a coup success rate approaching 50 percent, with over 215 recorded attempts since independence.

While the Sahel region has long been characterized and perceived through the nexus of intersecting crises: transnational crime, food insecurity, migration pressures, climate vulnerability, underdevelopment and poverty (Africa Renewal, 2018; Tony Blaire Institute Global, 2024), the past two decades has seen it become the epicenter of political instability in Africa, particularly through a dramatic resurgence of military coups. Military takeovers in the Sahel have become both frequent and widespread, cementing the Sahel's reputation as the epicentre of Africa's democratic backsliding (Washington Post, 2025). Since 2010, every Sahelian country (with the exception of Senegal) has experienced at least one coup or attempted coup, in some cases multiple times. This recurring pattern has prompted Western media to describe the area as Africa's 'coup belt' (LaFranchi, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023). Notwithstanding, the resurgence of military coups in 2020 have significantly reshaped the political landscape of the Sahel.

Mali

In August 2020, Colonel Assimi Goïta led a military coup in Mali that ousted the democratically elected government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. The takeover

followed months of mass protests, with Malians calling for Keita's resignation over unfulfilled campaign promises, his inability to address terrorism and insurgency, persistent instability in the north and pervasive corruption, among other grievances (Adetuyi, 2021). In September 2020, former defence minister Colonel Bah Ndaw was appointed head of state. Yet tensions soon arose between him and the military, which retained considerable influence. A cabinet reshuffle that dismissed two senior officers sparked a crisis, prompting Assimi Goïta to launch a second coup in May 2021 that ousted Ndaw from power (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023).

Colonel Goïta has served as Mali's transitional president since 2021. Nearly four years after the coup, what was intended as a "transition period" has instead hardened into a prolonged stalemate, with a democratic resolution appearing increasingly unlikely (Le Cam, 2024). Although the junta initially pledged to hand power to a civilian government by the end of 2022, it has repeatedly postponed this commitment. Presidential elections were first rescheduled to February 2024 only to be postponed indefinitely in September 2023, citing technical reasons. In April 2025, a junta organised national conference recommended Goïta remain as president until 2030 and that all political parties be dissolved (Allegrozzi, 2025), effectively foreclosing any near-term prospect of a democratic transfer of power. This follows the trajectory set in motion after the 2020 coup, entrenching authoritarian rule. It is important to note, however, that Mali's democratisation since 1992 had already been fragile, with successive civilian governments struggling to consolidate democratic practices. This shallow democratic base created fertile ground for insecurity, corruption, and economic fragility, leaving the state exposed to repeated coups. In Mali, military takeovers have become a cyclical feature of politics, since gaining independence from France, and the persistent involvement of the armed forces in governance has undermined institutional continuity and stunted the maturation of democratic structures (Adetuyi, 2021).

Burkina Faso

In January 2022, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba overthrew President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and established a junta under the banner of the Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (MPSR), in Burkina Faso. Damiba's rule, however, was short-lived, as his inability to deliver meaningful progress on security fuelled frustration among both the military and civilians (Reuters, 2022). By September 2022, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, a relatively unknown officer who had initially backed the January coup, led another takeover that removed Damiba from power. Traoré justified his move by pointing to Damiba's failure to contain worsening jihadist violence, notably highlighted by the deadly Gaskindé ambush, as well as Damiba's reluctance to broaden international security partnerships (Aikins, 2025).

Since gaining independence in 1960, Burkina Faso has experienced seven successful coups, occurring in 1966, 1980, 1983, 1987, and twice in 2022. This excludes the failed attempt of September 2015 and the popular uprising of October 2014. In the current regional context, the most recent coup highlights the challenges created by ineffective

governance, particularly administrations that fail to meet public demands for transparency and security (Obinna & Semudara, 2024). In September 2023, elections that were to take place in July 2024, with the intention of restoring democratic civilian government rule were deemed not a priority and postponed indefinitely by the military junta led by Traoré (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

Niger

On 26 July 2023, Niger experienced a military coup when factions of the armed forces declared they had seized power and suspended the constitution. The crisis began with the presidential guard, an elite unit tasked with preventing coups, placing President Mohamed Bazoum, perceived as an ally of the West against jihadist militants (Suleiman, 2023), under house arrest. His attempt to reshuffle military leadership, including plans to dismiss the guard's commander, General Abdourahmane Tchiani, appears to have provoked the move. By the following day, the wider army announced its support for the junta, framing its decision as an effort to "avoid a deadly confrontation between the various forces that could ... lead to a bloodbath." (IISS, 2023) The junta's cited poor economic management and the deteriorating security situation under Bazoum as a justification for the coup (Yabi, 2023).

Since gaining independence from France in 1960, Niger's political trajectory has been heavily shaped by the military, with domestic political crises frequently serving as triggers for intervention. Yet, the coup d'état of 26 July 2023 took many observers by surprise, as it was not preceded by widespread public protests, unlike Mali's 2020 takeover. Growing anti-French sentiment within the Nigerien armed forces further strained the military cooperation that President Bazoum had sought to deepen with France, ultimately fuelling his declining support among military ranks. (Tschörner, 2023) This mirrors developments in Burkina Faso, where frustrations over ineffective governance and resentment towards foreign security partnerships also created conditions for repeated coups, underscoring the shared structural vulnerabilities across the Sahel. A year following the 2023 coup, the junta in Niger dismantled the most vital democratic institutions by doing away with the constitution, removing elected representatives and suspending political parties. An authoritarian regime was established, under the pretence of a transitional process aimed at renewing the political system, with no apparent end in sight (Tschörner, 2024).

Some of the common patterns across these countries is escalating insecurity and insurgency, weak governance and public discontent, an anti-French sentiment and escalating violence amid political upheaval. For example, fatalities from extremist violence in the region has increased between 2020 and 2024, reaching a record high in the first half of 2024 (Adeoye, 2024). Even so, the Sahel demonstrates a convergence of deep-rooted structural vulnerabilities that have created fertile conditions for repeated coups. Chief among these is the persistent insecurity linked to the spread of jihadist insurgencies, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (Washington Post, 2025). Groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the

Greater Sahara (ISGS) not only undermine state authority in peripheral regions but also expose the military's inability to contain violence, a failure that has eroded public trust in elected governments (ICG, 2025). This insecurity is further compounded by chronic state fragility, where legitimacy and service delivery are weakened by fragile institutions, pervasive corruption, and limited governance capacity (ICG, 2021).

The G20 and Security Engagement in Africa

The Group of Twenty (G20) brings together 19 countries (G7 countries included)³ namely: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Türkiye, the United Kingdom and the United States—plus the AU⁴ and the EU. Collectively, G20 members account for around 85% of global GDP, more than 75% of world trade, and roughly two-thirds of the global population. As the leading forum for international economic cooperation, the G20 plays a central role in shaping and reinforcing the global architecture of governance on key international economic challenges. (G20 India, 2023) This economic weight also gives the group significant influence in the field of security, particularly in regions like Africa where instability directly affects global markets, migration and counter-terrorism efforts. The G20 and G7 have acknowledged that insecurity in the Sahel drives irregular migration to Europe and beyond, prompting calls for coordinated responses with regional bodies like the AU and United Nations (UN). (G7G20, 2024) The G20 itself is not a collective security actor, instead its influence on African security stems from the actions of individual member states, mainly France, the EU, and, to a lesser extent, the US, who shape security policy through financial and military engagement. The G20's leadership operates on an annual rotation system, with each member in turn hosting the yearly summit, where decisions of shared concern are reached through consensus. Through its summits and declarations, the G20 serves as a key forum for dialogue and cooperation, enabling collective responses to global challenges and contributing to the shaping of the international order (SALLA, nd).

For nearly a decade, up until the first in the recent wave of coups in 2020, the EU and its member states cooperated closely with democratically elected governments in the central Sahel as they grappled with escalating insecurity, driven largely by jihadist insurgencies (ICG, 2025). This cooperation was underpinned by the EU Sahel Security and Development Strategy, adopted in 2011, which was renewed and renamed The European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel in 2021 (Martín, Cornejo & Llauger, 2024). The previous strategy had invested heavily in security, humanitarian and

³ The G7 (Group of Seven) consists of France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, Italy, and Canada. The EU is also represented at summits.

⁴ Joined the G20 in 2023. In 2014 the AU formulated a plan for the Sahel, the *Strategy of the African Union for the Sahel Region*, founded on three core pillars, namely: governance; security; and development. The African Union Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHÉL) serves as the AU's foremost mechanism for ensuring the effective implementation of its strategy for the Sahel region. See: <https://peaceau.org/uploads/auc-psc-449.au-strategu-for-sahel-region-11-august-2014.pdf>

development areas in the Sahel against the backdrop of wanting to control migration flows from Africa and counter terrorist activity in the region. The integrated strategy, meanwhile, attempted to increase the focus on state governance through the promotion of state legitimacy (European Parliament, 2021). Nevertheless, European authorities provided training and support to national armed forces, while also pursuing a more comprehensive approach that included funding for economic development and community-based initiatives. Security assistance, military training missions, and development aid formed part of a broader European strategy, spearheaded by France but also involving partners such as the US and the UN. Collectively, these actors sought to stabilise the central Sahel and promote good governance (ICG, 2025).

In the Sahel the G20's security footprint shows up through the choices of key members, and also through the AU (as a new member) with G20 support. Historically France has been the backbone of the G20-aligned security operations in the Sahel. For example, following the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali, quickly overshadowed by jihadist insurgencies, and a military coup that severely undermined the government's ability to respond, France initiated Operation Serval. The counterterrorism mission, which had previously seen some success in neighbouring Mauritania, was launched to stop the insurgents' push towards central Mali (Tuma, 2022).

While Serval made significant gains in recapturing territory, insecurity quickly spread across the broader Sahel. In 2014, France transformed Operation Serval into Operation Barkhane, broadening its mandate to cover the entire Sahel region and basing its headquarters in N'Djamena, Chad. Unlike Serval, Barkhane pursued wider ambitions, both geographically and strategically, moving beyond counterterrorism to also engage in aspects of state-building. At the same time, European partners began to play a larger role. Their involvement grew significantly with the launch of the Takuba Task Force in 2020, which brought together European special forces to support and accompany Malian troops on operations (Tuma, 2022). It is worth mentioning that the United Kingdom (UK), though not an EU member, also contributed to the multilateralization of security efforts in the Sahel. In December 2020 the UK government deployed about 300 troops to the United Nations' Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) where they were set to provide a highly specialised reconnaissance capability, conduct patrols to gather intelligence and engage with the local population to help the UN respond to threats from violent extremism, and weak governance. Furthermore, the UK maintained 3 Chinook helicopters and 100 personnel in a logistics role supporting France's Operation Barkhane (UK Government, 2020). However, following the 2021 coup and the Malian junta's partnership with the Wagner Group, the UK announced in November 2022 that it would withdraw its MINUSMA contingent earlier than planned, citing the junta's restrictions on multinational forces and the deterioration of the operating environment (Brooke-Holland, 2022). European contributions also expanded through participation in MINUSMA and the EU Training Mission, reflecting a broader multilateralization of security efforts in the Sahel (Tuma, 2022).

Furthermore, the EU has complemented these efforts through strategic frameworks and security cooperation. A 2020 resolution from the European Parliament recommended a comprehensive mid- to long-term Sahel policy, urging support for development, resilience, and security sector reform alongside soft power avenues like non-lethal training and governance strengthening (European Parliament, 2020). Moreover, the Alliance for the Sahel, driven by France, Germany, the EU, and multilateral banks, pursued projects linking security with development (e.g., rural development, youth inclusion, governance) to reinforce the broader stability agenda in the region (Gorman & Chauzal, 2018). The Sahel Partnership Action Plan (2019), endorsed by G7 (aligning with G20 priorities), affirmed the need to work with the G5 Sahel alliance⁵ and regional institutions to concurrently enhance security and developmental outcomes within a humanitarian–peace–development nexus (G7G20, 2019).

More recently, as political shifts and coups wrecked civilian governance in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, France has increasingly withdrawn its presence. The collapse of the G5 Sahel and the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States⁶ (AES) marked a major turning point in the region's security architecture (Gouvy & Ellis, 2024). Despite years of large-scale military interventions, there was a prevailing perception that France had failed to decisively curb the jihadist threat, as attacks on communities and security forces persisted. In Mali, France was expelled by the junta in 2022, followed by the removal of MINUSMA in 2023; while in December 2023 Niger's junta suspended two EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations in the country and deepened its security cooperation with Russia, following the path already taken by its neighbours (Wilén, 2024). While the French and EU missions in the Sahel reflect the operational arm of the G20 aligned security policy, it is also worth mentioning the G20 Compact with Africa (CwA), co-chaired by Germany and South Africa, which was established within the G20 finance track to promote private sector-led development and improve the investment environment (G20 CwA, 2025). Although mainly economic, indirectly the initiative supports stabilisation by promoting resilient state structures that underpin security.

However, despite more than a decade of counterterrorism engagement in the Sahel, Western involvement has often been driven by national self-interest, even when portrayed within a broader security narrative. The US, for example, continues operations against groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State in the Sahel Province, strategies that largely bypass the root causes of local instability. Similarly, Germany's deployment in Mali and Italy's presence in Niger reflect European

⁵ A regional organisation created in 2014 by Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad to promote development and security among its members. However, Mali withdrew in 2022, followed by Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023. As a result, Chad and Mauritania subsequently announced the dissolution of the alliance.

⁶ In 2023 the military governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States, a mutual defence pact and confederation.

concerns over irregular migration routes to Europe, while France remains strategically tied to Nigerien uranium to fuel its domestic nuclear power plants. (Sabbe & Reyniers, 2023) These security interventions, framed as stabilisation efforts, often reveal the security-first pragmatism underpinning Western engagement.

The G20's Security Posture Shift in Response to the Sahel Coups

Following the 2020 and 2021 coups in Mali and the junta's turn to Russia's security support, France withdrew its troops from Mali, ending a nine-year operation in the country (like the UK exit, this reflected the pattern of Western disengagement triggered by the coups and the entry of Russian private military actors). In recent years, the French military presence in Mali has grown increasingly unpopular, with many Malians expressing resentment towards the continued involvement of their former colonial power (Al Jazeera, 2022). The decision to withdraw, by France, pointed to a major shift away from counterterrorism basing in a junta state. Subsequently, the EU decided to suspend parts of its training mission in Mali due to concerns over insufficient security guarantees from the authorities in Mali over the non-interference of the Wagner Group (Reuters, 2022). This culminated in the end of the EU Training Mission Mali in May 2024 (European Union External Action, 2024), signalling a deterioration in relations between the EU and Mali's military junta (VOA Africa, 2024). Like Mali, following the 2022 coups in Burkina Faso, France's withdrawal from the country coincided with Burkina Faso's pivot away from Western military cooperation, towards Russia. This pivot signalled a broader post-coup alignment in which the Sahel military leaders sought new partners while the Western G20 members reduced their footprint.

The 2023 Niger coup triggered immediate EU suspension of financial and security cooperation. The EU's announcement coincided with the AU's decision to issue a 15-day ultimatum to the coup leaders, demanding that they return to their barracks and reinstate the democratic constitution along with the suspended institutions (Beaumont, 2023). After the coup in July, in October the EU created a framework for restrictive measures with the aim of targeting those who undermine the stability, democracy, rule of law in the country, and constituted a threat to peace and security in the region. In December 2023, the junta in Niger announced that it was terminating the agreement that established the legal basis for the deployment of the EUCAP Sahel Niger mission and the EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger (EUMPM Niger). Consequently, the EU decided not to renew the EUMPM (Council of the European Union, 2024). In April 2024, the junta in Niger ordered the US to withdraw its military personnel from the country. The US agreed and withdrew its personnel from Niger's Air Base 101 near the airport in the capital Niamey (Reuters, 2024). Niger had long been a key partner for the US and French strategy to combat Jihadists in West Africa (France 24, 2024), as such the end of this partnership reinforced how coups can rupture even deep security relationships.

Analysis of the G20's Security Posture

Although the G20 is primarily an economic forum, the bloc increasingly intersects with security in Africa. The Sahel has become a key testing ground, where repeated coups, rising jihadist insurgencies, and international disengagement reveal the limits of external intervention. What can be observed is a set of patterns and dilemmas that highlight the contradictions in G20 engagement, as well as the implications for the group's Africa agenda.

Patterns and Dilemmas

1. Security-First Posture

While some members of the G20 have withdrawn from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, with counterterrorism operations terminated, the EU still maintains relations with central Sahelian states, particularly because countries such as Niger (under Bazoum) were an important partner in curbing migration to Europe. However, the EU does find itself in a bind in that the juntas are far from ideal partners but will likely still have to engage them in the future (ICG, 2024). France's last major military base in West Africa was handed over in 2025, with French officials stating that regional insecurity is no longer their responsibility, a clear signal of strategic disengagement (Cocks, 2025). Abandoning military cooperation suggests that security imperatives for the G20 members override democratic governance concerns, that is, while actors voice strong support for democratic transitions, in practice they prioritise counterterrorism cooperation to prevent instability and migration spillovers.

The case of the US Air Base 201 in Agadez, Niger, illustrates this dynamic. Built at a cost of \$110 million and operational from 2019, the base served as the centrepiece of US drone surveillance and counterterrorism operations across West Africa. Following the July 2023 coup, Niger's junta revoked the bilateral military cooperation agreement in March 2024 and ordered all US military personnel to leave the country. By August 2024, the withdrawal of approximately 1,000 US troops was complete, ending over a decade of American military presence in the country (VOA, 2024). The loss of Air Base 201 demonstrated how even deeply embedded security partnerships, underpinned by significant financial investment, can be abruptly severed when coups reconfigure a country's political orientation.

2. G20 Members Individual Agenda's

The G20 does not act as a collective security provider in Africa. Instead, responses are shaped by individual member-state interests and historical ties. For example, France has historically acted as the lead security actor in the Sahel, but its withdrawal has left a vacuum not easily filled by others. Germany's participation in MINUSMA in Mali came to an end in 2023 (Tull, 2024), while Italy maintained closer engagement with Niger, partly driven by concerns over terrorism and irregular migration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation-Italy, 2025). While the US had maintained a base

in Niger (essentially as a counterterrorism measure-as with most US bases in Africa), US presence was primarily framed through global anti-terror operations (Sabbe & Reyniers, 2023). These divergent motivations meant that when the coups triggered a cascade of expulsions, there was no unified G20 response; each member recalibrated its posture according to its own strategic calculus. There is no clear unified stance on coup-related crises, as such France, the EU and US's security posture is informed by their individual agenda's rather than any collective framework.

3. Intra-G20 Rivalries and the Impossibility of a Common Strategy

Beyond the fragmented responses of Western G20 members, a deeper structural impediment to a unified G20 strategy lies in the competing interests and geopolitical rivalries among G20 members themselves. Russia, China, and Turkey are not merely passive observers of the Sahel's post-coup realignment; they are active participants, pursuing security and economic agendas that directly compete with those of France, the EU, and the US. Russia's role is the most overt. Through the deployment of the Wagner Group (now reorganised under the Africa Corps), Moscow has positioned itself as the preferred security partner of the Sahel juntas, offering military support without governance conditions. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have all deepened their security ties with Russia following the expulsion of Western forces, receiving military equipment, training and personnel in exchange for access to natural resources and geopolitical alignment (Wilén, 2024).

China's engagement, while less militarised, is no less consequential. Beijing has pursued a strategy centred on economic investment, particularly in extractive industries, positioning itself as a partner that respects sovereignty and imposes no political conditions. In Niger, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has invested billions in the Agadem oil field and the 2,000-kilometre pipeline to the Benin coast, while in Mali, Chinese firms hold significant stakes in lithium mining at Goulamina (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). China has also expanded its arms exports to the Sahel, with at least ten shipments of military equipment delivered to Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in 2023 and 2024 through the state-owned manufacturer NORINCO (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). These economic and military engagements give China a stake in the stability of the juntas, placing it at odds with Western G20 members who advocate for democratic transitions.

Türkiye has emerged as another significant actor, filling gaps left by France's withdrawal. Since 2022, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger have received multiple shipments of Turkish defence articles, including TB2 combat drones that have become integral to the juntas' counterinsurgency operations (Atlantic Council, 2025). Türkiye's private military company, SADAT, has reportedly taken contracts in Burkina Faso and Niger, operating alongside Russian contractors rather than in competition with them (FPRI, 2025). Ankara's willingness to supply advanced military technology without the political conditionality attached to Western arms transfers has made it an attractive partner for the Sahel's military governments.

These competing engagements mean that the G20, as a forum, is structurally incapable of producing a unified security strategy for the Sahel. While Western members advocate for democratic restoration and conditional engagement, Russia, China, and Turkey benefit from the status quo and have no incentive to align with governance demands that could jeopardise their access to resources, markets and strategic influence. This intra-G20 rivalry does not merely complicate coordination; it fundamentally undermines the premise that the G20 can serve as a coherent platform for addressing the Sahel's security challenges.

4. Legitimacy Dilemma

Engagement with junta's risks undermining the G20's democracy rhetoric. Although the AU and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) condemned coups and imposed sanctions, some G20 actors were open to continued cooperation with transitional regimes to safeguard security interests i.e. Niger (Reuters, 2023). The contrast between ECOWAS and individual G20 members was particularly stark following the July 2023 Niger coup. Within days, ECOWAS imposed sweeping economic sanctions, including the closure of land and air borders, suspension of commercial and financial transactions, and the freezing of Niger's assets in regional banks. The bloc also issued a one-week ultimatum to the junta to reinstate President Bazoum, explicitly threatening military intervention, the strictest response ECOWAS had ever mounted against a member state (ICG, 2023). By contrast, while France condemned the coup and the EU suspended financial and security cooperation, no individual G20 member endorsed or materially supported the ECOWAS threat of military intervention. France, despite maintaining troops in Niger at the time, stopped short of backing a forceful restoration of constitutional order.

This gap between the regional body's willingness to confront coup leaders and the more cautious posture of G20 members, fuels perceptions that the G20 tolerates unconstitutional changes when convenient, which may erode local perception of external actors' commitment to democracy. However, with the AU now a permanent member of the G20, there is a strategic opening for Africa to influence the group's approach, especially regarding responses to coups which may help to address this legitimacy dilemma.

Implications for the G20 Agenda

The Sahel coups expose the structural weaknesses of the G20's Africa agenda. Firstly, the group is limited as a collective actor in that it is a consensus driven structure which prevents unified positions on security crises. This limitation is compounded by the fact that G20 members are not merely disengaged or indifferent, but in several cases are actively competing for influence in the Sahel. Russia, China, and Türkiye pursue security and economic partnerships with the very juntas that Western G20 members seek to pressure towards democratic transitions, making consensus on the Sahel structurally

unattainable. Instead, African engagement is led by a few members, undermining its credibility as a collective governance forum. Secondly, security responsibilities in the Sahel fall disproportionately on France, the EU, and the US. Their retrenchment from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger revealed the G20's over-reliance on Western powers. Thirdly, although the G20 regularly stresses governance and democracy in its rhetoric, in practice, members privilege short-term security imperatives over long-term democratic accountability. This contradiction undermines the group's legitimacy and erodes local confidence. Lastly, The AU and the ECOWAS often take firmer stances than individual G20 members. ECOWAS suspended Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger following their respective coups and imposed targeted sanctions, while the AU invoked its normative framework against unconstitutional changes of government. Yet G20 actions have not always aligned with these regional approaches. For example, while ECOWAS imposed comprehensive economic sanctions on Niger in 2023, including border closures and the suspension of financial transactions, the EU's response was limited to suspending cooperation agreements, and France's condemnation was not accompanied by material support for the regional bloc's enforcement measures. The AU's recent admission as a permanent G20 member offers both an opportunity and a test, that is whether its principles on democratic transitions can shape clearer engagement guidelines.

These dynamics highlight the need for frameworks that can balance security imperatives with governance commitments, while also amplifying African agency within the G20's security agenda. The following recommendations outline potential pathways for strengthening the G20's approach in Africa, with a focus on aligning rhetoric with practice, supporting legitimate institutions, and ensuring that security cooperation is both sustainable and politically credible.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Between 2020 and 2023, the Sahel became a flashpoint of democratic collapse, insurgent violence and geopolitical rivalry. The wave of coups was not isolated; it stemmed from a myriad of interconnecting issues such as deteriorating security, institutional failings and anti-Western sentiments, among others. The Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger cases reveal how military takeovers are framed as responses to insecurity and governance failures, even as they deepen democratic regression in the Sahel.

The Sahel coups underscore the tensions and shortcomings in how the G20 engages with African Security challenges. Fragmented responses, competing priorities, and the absence of a unified framework have exposed the limits of the G20's collective role, while security-first strategies have often undermined its own commitments to democracy and governance. At the same time, the AU's new seat at the G20 offers a historic opportunity to embed African perspectives more deeply into global security governance. To translate this opportunity into practice, the following recommendations are structured around three connected priorities: fostering coherence among G20

members, integrating African agency, and striking a more credible balance between security imperatives and governance commitments.

Firstly, better coherence is needed among G20 members through a stronger joint G20-AU cooperation on security in the Sahel. Through this platform, the AU's strategy for the Sahel can be strengthened, and information-sharing can be done to better coordinate counterterrorism measures in the region. Secondly, the integration of African agency through the institutionalisation of the AU and the ECOWAS Sahel approaches within the G20 security dialogues. The G20 would provide financial and technical support to African-led stabilisation missions instead of defaulting to member led military operations. Lastly, conditioning G20 support on any parallel commitments to governance reforms, which includes institution building and decentralisation, is key, as well as ensuring that democracy support programmes remain imperative even when there are security crises. However, there is a caveat in that conditionality-based approaches carry inherent risks in the current geopolitical environment. As the cases of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have demonstrated, military juntas have readily turned to Russia and, to a lesser extent, China as alternative partners who impose no governance conditions on their security and economic cooperation. The deployment of Russian military personnel in Mali and Burkina Faso, and Niger's deepening ties with Moscow following the expulsion of Western forces, illustrate how strict conditionality, if applied unilaterally by Western G20 members, may accelerate the juntas' pivot eastward rather than incentivise democratic reform. For this reason, conditionality should not be conceived as a punitive mechanism wielded by individual G20 members, but rather embedded within a broader multilateral framework, coordinated with the AU and ECOWAS. Such an approach would need to combine governance benchmarks with positive incentives, including increased development financing, trade facilitation and support for local service delivery, that make democratic transitions materially attractive to both political elites and populations. This would help to mitigate the risk that conditionality simply drives Sahelian states further into the orbit of actors who offer unconditional support.

The G20, alongside the AU, will have to be steadfast in tackling the cycle of coups in the Sahel and the stalled democratic transitions. Rather than defaulting to a binary choice between engagement and isolation, the G20 should pursue a calibrated strategy that maintains diplomatic channels with transitional regimes while upholding clear governance expectations, leveraging the AU's legitimacy and normative authority to ensure that the cost of democratic backsliding remains high, even in a multipolar environment where Russia and China offer alternative pathways.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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