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Productive failure, African agency, and security cooperation in West Africa: The case of the G5 Sahel

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Abstract

This paper examines South–South security cooperation and regional organisations (ROs) in Africa. Much of the literature on peace and conflict in Africa has focused on ROs and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). Guided by the mantra 'African solutions to African problems', these organisations have facilitated several instances of African-led security cooperation. Yet ROs have limited agency and capacity, are institutionally rigid, and are often donor-dependent. As a result, ad hoc security initiatives such as the G5 Sahel and Accra Initiative – our case studies – are on the rise. While such initiatives are better adapted to local context and feature higher levels of autonomy (relative to APSA), we critique this view by showing how donors pressure and trap African governments facing transnational security threats into ad hoc initiatives. These initiatives transform into 'zombified' security institutions that rarely live up to the elevated expectations of African and Western stakeholders. This creates a paradox for debates around African agency in security affairs: ad hoc initiatives lock African states into security frameworks that do not respond to their needs but also facilitate the pursuit of donor funding, reassert the national scale of sovereignty, and incentivise new forms of bilateral security cooperation.

Keywords: ad hoc coalitions; African agency; African Peace & Security Architecture; G5 Sahel; South–South security cooperation

Introduction

Recently emerged literature on South–South cooperation and connected security initiatives often highlights transnational and trans-scalar characteristics.[1] It is certainly the case that a novel and apparently growing trend in international affairs reflects transnationalised, trans-scalar logics, processes of knowledge production, and associated practices that result in co-constituted security arrangements linking diverse actors and organisations across the Global South. Many such arrangements span and connect trans-continental spaces, linking political action in ways that challenge existing power relations between governments and international organisations representing 'the West' and actors from the Global South.[2] While we acknowledge the veracity of these

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[1]For overviews of the literature on South–South security cooperation and its relation to South-South cooperation more broadly, please see Tobias Berger and Markus-Michael Müller, 'South–South cooperation and the (re)making of global security governance', *European Journal of International Security* (this issue) and Peter Kragelund 'South–South cooperation: What can we learn from South–South security cooperation?', *European Journal of International Security* (this issue).

[2]See Adam Sandor, 'Border security and drug trafficking in Senegal: AIRCOP and global security assemblages', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 10:4 (2016), pp. 490–512; Jana Hönke and Markus-Michael Müller, *The Global Making of Policing: Postcolonial Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2016); Louise Wiuff-Moe and Markus-Michael Müller,

developments, the contribution we make in this article is twofold: first, we demonstrate that security cooperation among African countries within regional organisations and ad hoc initiatives is especially pertinent. Regional organisations like the African Union or African regional economic communities such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have been prominent loci of security cooperation, adopting increasingly robust initiatives and strategic partnerships for the continent to address its multiple security crises.[3] Such regional security cooperation platforms and their attendant forms of knowledge production extend and diversify transnational spatial and political connections.[4] These are joined by a growing array of more specialist security initiatives with limited membership – such as the G5 Sahel – which contribute to this broader institutional ecosystem. In this article we emphasise intra-African security cooperation as a form of South–South security cooperation that is more routinised and quotidian than other novel and trans-continental arrangements, but which arguably involves denser connections and interactions across particular regions. Second, we show that hierarchies embedded in traditional donor relations between Western governments and their African counterparts are often consolidated through the adoption of ad hoc, intra-African regional security initiatives. This form of security cooperation on the continent remains stubbornly tied to hierarchical relationships with Western actors and results in a high level of what we term *productive failure*. Ad hoc security initiatives consistently fail to produce the security gains that both African and Western governments hope they will. However, as sites of security governance experimentation, the success of such initiatives is never guaranteed and can nevertheless result in new avenues for African partners to modify dynamics of security cooperation among themselves, even through failure. In such instances, African governments and security forces often come to challenge the hierarchical relationships which beset them.

In advancing this argument, this article examines South–South security arrangements and the question of African agency through the lens of the development and (partial) implementation of the G5 Sahel and ad hoc subregional initiatives like the Accra Initiative within broader discussions of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). Since the 2000s, the Sahel region of West Africa has been teeming with diverse security cooperation initiatives, some authors comparing it to a 'traffic jam' of interventionism.[5] Nevertheless, despite nearly two decades of intervention and associated regional initiatives, insecurity in the Sahel has multiplied and spread towards neighbouring countries, leading Sahelian governments to search for new and diversified security partnerships and the adoption of authoritarian and militarist practices to curb various security issues. Similarly, research demonstrates that some of the most important mechanisms within APSA remain incapable of managing African-wide responses to armed conflict. This is especially the case when transnational armed groups like those operating across the Sahel are involved. Mounting intra-African security cooperation through the APSA is often not only a significant financial and logistical challenge, but also a political one involving disputes over the nature and characteristics of the threat in question, who should be involved in thwarting it, and which government or international organisation is the most appropriate to lead the effort.[6] As a result, both African and Western actors have advanced ad hoc security initiatives as a solution to these challenges, arguing that they

'Counterinsurgency, knowledge production, and the traveling of coercive Realpolitik between Colombia and Somalia', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:3 (2018), pp. 193–215; Lina Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China–Africa Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

[3]Linda Darkwa, 'The strategic relationship between the African Union and its partners', in Cedric de Coning, Linnéa Gelot, and John Karlsrud (eds), *The Future of African Peace Operations* (London: Zed Books, 2016), pp. 65–75.

[4]Jens Herpolsheimer, 'Studying practices of interregional security governance and space-making between ECOWAS and the European Union', *Territory, Politics, Governance* 12:4 (2023), 554–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2023.2235411.

[5]Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, 'Disentangling the security traffic jam in the Sahel: Constitutive effects of contemporary interventionsim', *International Affairs*, 96:4 (2020), pp. 855–74.

[6]Paul D. Williams and Arthur Boutellis, 'Partnership peacekeeping: Challenges and opportunities in the United Nations–African Union relationship', *African Affairs*, 113:541 (2014), pp. 254–78.

are more flexible and speedier solutions than what APSA can provide. Theoretically, these initiatives are better adapted to local context and feature higher levels of autonomy regardless of the significant material and symbolic support they receive from international actors. But in pursuing ad hoc security initiatives, African governments can become tied to initiatives that often push them to shift their strategic priorities, in several cases resulting in a preference towards adopting bilateral security relationships between African governments while simultaneously leaving Western-backed ad hoc initiatives intact but in atrophied form. These initiatives mostly fail to solve the immediate security problems for which they are designed: in the Sahel, the G5 has little to show in terms of reduction of armed violence (in fact, most statistics are going in the other direction). Yet ad hoc initiatives are also generative, and the G5 has produced linkages across militaries in terms of cross-border cooperation and training.

This research draws on the authors' long-time engagement with the Sahel as well as other open access sources and research. In addition to this, interviews were conducted in several Sahelian and European cities over the course of the past several years.[7] This multiple-year data-collection strategy has allowed for the research to scrutinise the development of patterns of behaviour and the emergence of new trends and practices which were either consolidated over time or abandoned. When possible, the authors conducted these interviews jointly, but most were conducted individually but often consecutively with the same interlocutors. This multi-sited, long-term approach incorporates the rigour of triangulating multiple sources of data with an analytical awareness of the positionality of our interlocutors over the course of our relationships with them.

The article proceeds as follows. We first provide context on intra-African security cooperation by discussing elements of the African Peace and Security Architecture, outlining some of its associated challenges, and examining the move towards ad hoc security initiatives. The following section discusses how ad hoc security initiatives on the continent often take on characteristics of security laboratories: sites of open-ended experimentation in security matters to tackle threats that Western actors and their African counterparts share in common. Such experimentation is built on the assumption that limited state capacity combined with the scale of threat (e.g. from jihadism) are such that untested modes of collaboration become worthwhile. Yet, while such initiatives are framed in terms of mutually beneficial partnerships where participants share common goals and interests, this does not mean that these security laboratories are free of contestation. Indeed, through the process of experimentation, ad hoc security initiatives often result in productive failures in that they do not achieve intended outcomes in matters of security cooperation, and in so doing their partners come to contest the very terms of the experiment. This makes security laboratories ideal sites to examine different types of African agency given the significant hierarchical relationships that characterise most Western actor-supported ad hoc security initiatives in Africa. Finally, the last section examines the politics of productive failure by examining the stunted life cycle of the G5 Sahel, the current international move to support the Accra Initiative as a response to the organisation's lumbering decline, and the development of the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES). The article then concludes by discussing the implications of these trends in security cooperation in West Africa and its consequences on global hierarchies embedded within these types of South–South security initiatives.

The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the turn to ad hoc security initiatives

As a long-standing form of South–South security cooperation, the APSA has advanced significantly since the African Union's creation in 2002. Guided by the mantra of 'African solutions to

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[7]Interviews were conducted in Dakar (summer and autumn 2016; autumn 2018), Nouakchott (spring 2023), Niamey (summer 2016, autumn 2018, autumn 2022, spring 2023), Bamako (spring and autumn 2018, autumn 2020, spring 2021, spring 2022), Ouagadougou (spring 2023), Brussels (spring 2017, spring and summer 2022), and Paris (summer 2022).

African problems', the APSA and its associated institutions have demonstrated the continent's willingness to lead on questions of conflict management, notably in regard to mediation efforts, and the deployment of thousands of African soldiers to peace-support operations.[8] Nevertheless, research has demonstrated significant limits (especially in terms of implementation) and inefficiencies faced by the AU and the APSA. It is commonplace to hear that the AU struggles with important deficits in the capacity required to meet its ambitious objectives.[9] Even less expensive APSA interventions (such as its mediation efforts) are criticised as being over-reliant on financial support from the donor community, remain inadequately planned, and lack strategic direction.[10] Combined with its inability to overcome political wrangling with member states, the AU's failure to mobilise sufficient financial and human resources to deploy brigades of the African Standby Force in response to any number of armed conflicts on the continent remains a constant reminder of the organisation's shortcomings.[11]

APSA's weaknesses, however, are not solely driven from financial or capacity shortcomings. The nature of threats that different regions in Africa face has evolved over the past two decades. This is notably the case with the rise of armed Islamist insurgencies.[12] These changes have rendered APSA and related initiatives like the African Standby Force ill suited as a security cooperation framework since 'the AU's spatial imagining of statehood was shaped by the Westphalian ideal', but the dynamics now underpinning armed conflict in places like the Sahel or the Lake Chad Basin are inherently transnational and transregional.[13] In their attempts to respond to these new armed conflict geographies, the AU, Africa's regional economic communities, governments, and international partners have experimented with new formats of regional security cooperation. Ad hoc security initiatives like the Global Coalition against Daech, the AU-supported Regional Task Force against the Lord's Resistance Army, or the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) have been enthusiastically promoted as a solution to address armed violence extremism, both in Africa and elsewhere.[14]

The rise in ad hoc initiatives has been explained as an outgrowth of the proliferation of international and regional organisations which allow governments 'to select from an increasingly broad palette of options in global governance, ranging from traditional multilateral strategies by working through formalized international (governmental) organizations (IGOs), in so-called "governance clubs", or pure informal governance, of which loose ad hoc coalitions are a part'.[15] Most existing studies advance rationalist arguments to explain why states would join ad hoc security initiatives. For example, Henke argues that military coalitions are often driven by leading states that promote participating in such ventures through the payment of 'deployment subsidies' and/or 'political side

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[8]See Thomas K. Tieku, 'Exercising African agency in Burundi via multilateral channels: Opportunities and challenges', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 13:5 (2013), pp. 513–35; Alex Vines, 'A decade of African Peace and Security Architecture', *International Affairs*, 89:1 (2013), pp. 89–109; Paul D. Williams, 'Reflections on the evolving African Peace and Security Architecture', *African Security*, 7:3 (2014), pp. 147–62.

[9]Vines, 'A decade of African Peace and Security Architecture'.

[10]Williams, 'Reflections on the evolving African Peace and Security Architecture'; Ulf Engel, 'The finances of the African Union (AU)', in Ulf Engel and Frank Mattheis (eds), *The Finances of Regional Prganisations in the Global South: Follow the Money* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 19–34.

[11]Vines, 'A decade of African Peace and Security Architecture', p. 109; Linda Darkwa, 'The African Standby Force: The African Union's tool for the maintenance of peace and security', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 38:3 (2017), pp. 471–82; Gino Vlavonou, 'The APSA and (complex) international security regime theory: A critique', *African Security*, 12:1 (2019), pp. 87–110.

[12]Scott Straus, 'Wars do end! Changing patterns of political violence in Sub-Saharan Africa', *African Affairs*, 111:443 (2012), pp. 179–201; Linnéa Gelot and Adam Sandor, 'African security and global militarism: Introduction', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 19:6 (2019), pp. 521–42.

[13]Katharina Döring, 'The changing ASF geography: From the intervention experience in Mali to the African capacity for immediate response to crises and the Nouakchott Process', *African Security*, 11:1 (2018), pp. 32–58 (p. 44).

[14]Matthew Brubacher, Erin Kimball Damman, and Christopher Day, 'The AU Task Forces: An African response to transnational armed groups', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 55:2 (2017), pp. 275–99.

[15]John Karlsrud and Yf Reykers, 'Ad hoc coalitions and institutional exploitation in international security: Towards a typology', *Third World Quarterly*, 41:9 (2020), pp. 1518–36.

deals' in order to coax partners that are less capable of deploying military resources to join the cause, or to incentivise them through quid pro quo logics.[16] Other enthusiasts explain that such arrangements are more cost-effective and can circumvent burdensome international legal and bureaucratic measures, for example seeking authorisations from the United Nations (UN) or regional organisations before launching an intervention. As such, several researchers posit that ad hoc security initiatives constitute 'a more agile solution for states' than UN peacekeeping, or regional organisation peace-support operations.[17] In other words, ad hoc security initiatives are argued to be nimble and flexible enough to solve problems that more formal organisations have been unable to overcome, while simultaneously allowing the states involved to pragmatically pick and choose which parts of an institutional mechanism are most useful to them.[18] Moreover, even when states circumvent more formal international multilateral mechanisms in favour of involvement in ad hoc security initiatives, they can still retain international legitimacy and the perception they are good international partners; but this may come at the expense of weakened legitimacy for more formal mechanisms that operate through international or regional organisations meant to lead in peace and security matters.

While ad hoc-ism is on the rise and several 'task forces' have been created and framed as nimble and novel solutions in African conflict management, these functionalist readings neglect a broader problematisation of the hierarchies and types of political competition among participants and other stakeholders that take place within and beyond ad hoc security initiatives. Moreover, many ad hoc security initiatives currently operating in African spaces do not rise to the occasion in either resolving or tackling different Islamist insurgencies and are therefore not yet proven to be solutions at all. If anything, the insurgencies many ad hoc initiatives are meant to quell are becoming more resilient, expanding geographically, and transforming into increasingly violent towards local communities, or conversely, into locally legitimate governance actors.[19] In this sense, it is more analytically fruitful to examine ad hoc security initiatives not from a functional perspective of the problems they are argued to solve but what effects they produce, even if those effects are the unintended consequences of an initiative's failure. We therefore conceive of such ad hoc security initiatives as laboratories of security governance that yield new types of political relationships among associated actors, yet which may still fail to meet stated objectives to produce security gains in the theatres in which they are implemented. In this sense, and as the following sections outline, the experimentation that occurs within new ad hoc security initiatives produces new forms of security politics and can spur new political relationships enabled by bouts of productive failure. These security laboratories also serve as spaces of contestation where international hierarchies can be re-examined, consolidated, or resisted through diverse forms of African agency.

Laboratories of governance, productive failure, and African agency in security governance

Transboundary security challenges like regionalised armed Islamist insurgencies in Africa generate 'demands for novel, border-spanning forms of governance that cannot be explained through

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[16]Marina Henke, 'Buying allies: Payment practices in multilateral military coalition-building', *International Security*, 43:4 (2019), pp. 128–62.

[17]Cedric de Coning, Andrew E. Yaw Tchie, and Anab Ovidie Grand, 'Ad-hoc security initiatives, an African response to insecurity', *African Security Review*, 31:4 (2022), pp. 383–98.

[18]Karlsrud and Reykers, 'Ad hoc coalitions and institutional exploitation in international security'.

[19]See Adam Sandor and Aurélie Campana, 'Les groupes djihadistes maliens, acteurs de la gouvernance local', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 53:3 (2018), pp. 415–30; Jason Warner with Ryan O'Farrell, Héni Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings, *The Islamic State in Africa: The Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefront* (London: Hurst & Co., 2021); Yvan Guichaoua and Ferdaous Bouhlel, *Interactions between Civilians and Jihadists in Mali and Niger* (Brussels: University of Kent, 2023).

traditional, statist models of security politics'.[20] Almost by definition, responding governance initiatives, whether conceived by African governments, regional organisations, or intervening actors, require a certain degree of experimentation and design. This makes spaces targeted for these initiatives metaphorical laboratories in which designed interventions test out more or less reasoned security hypotheses and methodologies.

Post-colonial spaces have often been used as laboratory settings for development and security interventions.[21] Research on the global making of policing uses the concept of the laboratory to point to how imperial and colonising powers experimented with policing, social control, and surveillance-related practices, knowledge, and technologies in diverse (post-)colonies. These often exclusionary and violent practices, developed and tested with (post-)colonial subjects deemed in need of being policed differently, were then reimported or travelled more globally.[22] McCoy, for instance, has demonstrated how the US colonial administration in the Philippines, freed from legal and constitutional constraints, experimented with policing strategies and surveillance technologies that were later reimported back home, thereby 'making the Philippines a social laboratory for the perfection of American state power'.[23]

The above-mentioned literature conceives of laboratories as sites in which (more often than not) external actors refine or invent exceptional and mostly repressive security practices. However, the notion does not need to be restricted to such cases. The laboratory has proven a fruitful lens to understand a broad range of phenomena ranging from the fabrication of global knowledge and technology[24] to the new practices arising from the frontier zones of Global South capital expansion.[25] In this article, we use it to highlight experimentation with security practices in institutions like the G5 and Accra Initiatives but also, perhaps more notably, around these initiatives and in response to their constraints and failures. Failures as we know are hugely productive.[26] Therefore we analyse the practices and effects of these failing ad hoc security initiatives in West Africa, zooming in on how African actors work with and around them, and experiment with alternative practices of South–South security cooperation.

Examining ad hoc security initiatives as laboratories of intra-African (and therefore South–South) security governance and productive failure raises important questions regarding 'African agency' and the hierarchical relationships within which it is embedded. A growing literature has established that, in the face of stark power asymmetries, African actors create political space to assert their influence over matters that affect continental politics. Since the turn of the century, African actors have increasingly staked their claims, asserted their political positions, and had their preferences met over diverse issues in the global arena, including armed conflict and

[20]Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, *Governing Borderless Threats: Non-Traditional Security and the Politics of State Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 205.

[21]See Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Philippe M. Frowd, *Security at the Borders: Transnational Practices and Technologies in West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Alexander D. Barder, *Empire Within: International Hierarchy and Its Imperial Laboratories of Governance* (London: Routledge, 2015); Tania Murray Li, 'Governing rural Indonesia: Convergence on the project system', *Critical Policy Studies*, 10:1 (2016), pp. 79–94.

[22]See Alfred W. McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009); Hönke and Müller, *The Global Making of Policing*.

[23]McCoy, *Policing America's Empire*, p. 106.

[24]See Debora Gerstenberger and Joël Glasman (eds), *Techniken der Globalisierung: Globalgeschichte meets Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie*, 78 (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016).

[25]Jana Hönke, 'Beyond the gatekeeper state: African infrastructure hubs as sites of experimentation', *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, 3 (2018), pp. 347–63; Jana Hönke, Eric Cezne, and Yifan Yang (eds), *Africa's Global Infrastructures: South–South Transformations in Practice* (London: Hurst & Co., 2024).

[26]See e.g. Jacqueline Best, *Governing Failure: Provisional Expertise and the Transformation of Global Development Finance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). We understand the 'productive' nature of failure in broadly Foucauldian terms, that is to say, as constantly generative of new objects of political action, new subject positions, and the power relations that go with them.

security.[27] Indeed, one of the strengths of this literature is its demonstration of how African actors take advantage of their positions of relative weakness and subjugation in global politics to shape the content and scope of international interventions, craft their foreign policies, and address their security concerns.

This is not to say that African governments and regional organisations do not face significant constraints or have completely overcome the starkly unequal distributions of power in which they are embedded in global affairs, including in the implementation of ad hoc initiatives like the G5 Sahel. As one critic has recently argued, African agency and influence only seems to grow proportionately to the willingness of globally dominant non-African actors to abandon their clutch on certain issues 'without necessarily changing the material benefits' the latter control.[28] It is indeed the case that simply being able to pay for security initiatives can present significant constraints, since African peace and security measures remain nearly entirely dependent on external financial support.[29] This leaves some authors positing that Africa 'appears to be positioned as a weakling and serial dependent',[30] remaining 'peripheral and relatively powerless in international affairs' and hardly capable 'of stacking up to international competition and maintaining the internal order necessary for effectively pursuing long-term national interests'.[31]

Yet the fact that most African actors (governments, regional organisations, or otherwise) face major constraints in global politics is not in question. Like AU peace support operations, ad hoc security initiatives in Africa are indeed shaped by financial dependence on the international donor community. Sponsorship of security initiatives from diverse geopolitical actors can give the impression that African actors are not the only ones driving the initiatives, or defining their priorities and objectives. However, if the agency of African actors is only acknowledged in circumstances where their actions are unrestrained, their interests are universally met, and their stated policy objectives are unequivocally accomplished without need for negotiation or compromise, then any situation in which they fail to do so, or experience unforeseen and unintended results or reactions in their political relationships can be mistakenly interpreted as a lack of agency and marginalisation. This is why we view these to be assertive South–South (rather than 'South–South–North') cooperation, which we consider to be perfectly compatible with external support. After all, these initiatives operate within a broader context of global political hierarchies. In an increasingly complex and interconnected global environment, all agents (no matter the position they occupy in hierarchical relationships) implement practices in the pursuit of their interests, but they cannot choose the consequences or outcomes of those performances.

Examining ad hoc security initiatives as laboratories of security governance and productive failure helps to move beyond the debate regarding 'how much agency' African actors exercise for at least two reasons. First, in the face of globalised structures that constrain African agencies, novel forms of action and political strategies continue to be produced by those same constrained actors, which can complicate or render the dominating endeavours of more powerful global actors ambiguous or unfulfilled. In their position of subalternity, African actors 'might not just accept or reject the definition' that global actors attempt to dictate, 'but also misread, misunderstand,

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[27]Jonathan Fisher, 'When it pays to be a "fragile state": Uganda's use and abuse of a dubious concept', *Third World Quarterly*, 35:2 (2014), pp. 316–32; Stephanie Jaensch, 'Understanding African agency in peace and security: Tanzania's implementation of "non-indifference" in Somalia', *Africa Spectrum*, 56:3 (2021) pp. 274–92.

[28]Tshepo Gwatiwa, *The African Union and African Agency in International Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 6.

[29]Williams, 'Reflections on the evolving African Peace and Security Architecture', p. 158; Engel, 'The finances of the African Union (AU)'.

[30]Gwatiwa, *The African Union and African Agency in International Politics*, p. 41.

[31]Steffan Andreasson, 'Elusive agency: Africa's persistently peripheral role in international relations', in William Brown and Sophie Harman (eds), *African Agency in International Politics* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 143–57 (pp. 143, 150).

appropriate, or rearticulate the carefully defined scope of their putative responsibilities' in security affairs.[32] As Carrozza and Marsh have recently argued, 'African governments have agency in terms of whether they accept an offer to provide assistance, negotiating the form of assistance, and if they use that aid in ways not intended by the provider'.[33] Second, the interplay between globalised constraints maintained by more powerful actors and the novel practices and strategies of African actors produces new types of security politics, including new forms of South–South cooperation which are increasingly African-led, which also encompasses forms of cooperation that result from purportedly Western-led ad hoc security initiatives in Africa. Most importantly for our case, the failures of regionalised ad hoc initiatives like the G5 Sahel to successfully tackle transborder violence committed by armed Islamist insurgents produce shifts in G5 Sahel members' strategic orientations, which can either resist or renegotiate their asymmetrical international relationships. As we will see below, the creation of the AES by the military-led transitional governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger exemplifies this very response. In other words, we show how the productive failure of the G5 Sahel enables African agencies as they utilise the ideological, discursive, and material resources at their disposal to navigate the complexities and challenges associated with their assumed position of inferiority.

What was the G5 Sahel? Productive failure and hierarchies in ad hoc security initiatives

This section asks 'what was the G5 Sahel?' in order to parse out how the ad hoc initiative constitutes a site of political competition and exhibits significant forms of productive failure, shaped by deeply hierarchical global relationships. To do so, we highlight how the members of the G5 Sahel attempted to corner intervention funds and political support by defining the initiative as encompassing the space of its five member states, and by branding and attempting to monopolise responses to security threats present in the Sahel. The section then analyses how Sahelian actors' vision of what the G5 Sahel ought to be and how it should be structured – for them, a lightweight administrative organisation guided by locally defined security–development nexus imperatives – lost out to a more operational and military-cooperation-led initiative supported by donor and Sahelian military actor understandings of how to achieve salient security outcomes. The shift towards a more straightforwardly military approach meant less attention paid to the social bases of the Sahelian conflict. The section then discusses how the question of donor funding, and the need to shift priorities towards this moving target, has reduced the G5 Sahel's ambitions and what this context implies for security praxis and intervention in the Sahel. The following section then analyses how these failures have produced new types of security relationships and arrangements in the Sahel in the form of new ad hoc initiatives like the Accra Initiative, the rise of bilateral forms of military cooperation, and the creation of the AES, stemming from more resistant and assertive forms of agency on the part of (former) G5 Sahel members.

The Group of 5 for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) was created in February 2014 (with its convention formally signed in December) as a mechanism for ensuring security and development in this region. Bringing together Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, it became one of the main interlocutors for international intervention initiatives in the west and central Sahel. In addition to a permanent Secretariat based in Nouakchott, the G5 Sahel has a number of national coordination offices in each member state, as well as other security-related components (the G5 Sahel Defence College; the Sahel Security College; the Centre for Early Warning and Threat Analysis; the G5 Sahel Regional Police Academy; the Security Cooperation Platform; a newly created Intelligence Fusion Centre; etc.). Thus, while the organisation has a security and development vocation, as expressed in the motto on its logo, its most prominent aspirations have been in the domain of

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[32]Himadeep Muppidi, 'Colonial and postcolonial governance', in Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (eds), *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 273–93 (p. 283).

[33]Illaria Carrozza and Nicholas J. Marsh, 'Great power competition and China's security assistance to Africa: Arms, training, and influence', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 7:4 (2022), pp. 1–22 (p. 5).

regional military and security cooperation. The G5 Sahel Joint Force, created in July 2017, is its most notable commitment in this area, but this built on a pre-existing cooperation structure connected to cross-border military operations with French forces and its Defence and Security Committee (Comité de Défense et de Sécurité, CDS). This specific emphasis on military cooperation has been a response by both the G5 and its members, and its political backers – notably France – to remedy the perceived lack of security cooperation across the Sahel, since other instances such as the Algeria-based CEMOC (which includes Mali, Niger, and Mauritania) remained largely inoperative. The development approach of the G5 Sahel was broadly downplayed by Western partners, who prioritised it as, at best, a lower priority and, at worst, fanciful. Sahelian security actors tended to agree, leaving a small set of civilian actors championing the more holistic approach the security–development nexus would suggest. The G5 emerged as the newest and most central military cooperation interlocutor for the Sahel, especially for Western aid.

The G5 Sahel sought to position itself, with the help of considerable financial resources mostly from the European Union (EU) and several of its member states, as a coordination forum for security issues in the Sahel as well as an incubator of new forms of cross-border cooperation between its members. Despite this, it is considered a failure by many observers of the region, with many policymakers working in and around it having cooled their assessments of its achievements and future. This is especially the case since the withdrawal of Burkina Faso and Niger on 29 November 2023,[34] which followed Mali's exit in May 2022. Even though the remaining two members (Chad and Mauritania) acknowledged these latest withdrawals and announced they would implement all of the measures required for the dissolution of the G5, the organisation remains: it has a secretariat, an institutional footprint, and until the withdrawal announcement by Burkina Faso and Niger it still had some joint military operations. Asking what the G5 Sahel was is an entry point into reflecting on the organisation's loss of position regionally, the shifting priorities of its foreign backers, and its position at the mercy of rapidly changing development fashions and priorities: in other words, its failure to live up to the initial hype and associated internationalised support received at its creation. Examining the initiative's diminished fortunes and loss of position is also an entry point into how the organisation was a receptacle for the aspirations and pronouncements of hierarchically dominant actors outside it – notably France and the EU.

In what sense do we speak of productive failure? First, it is important to emphasise the real political and security impacts of the G5 throughout much of the last decade, which in some cases have been somewhat durable, whilst acknowledging struggles connected to its evolving membership and perceived relevance. The G5's initial ardour facilitated its impressive integration to the African security institutional landscape, leading many analysts to argue that the G5 Sahel made itself 'de facto unavoidable'.[35] Yet less than 10 years since its creation, the G5 faced a considerable challenge to its position and status within the broader intervention economy in the Sahel. This is despite it being a product of failure in African conflict management, having emerged as an institutional response to the challenges and failures of African continental security arrangements mentioned above.[36] The relative failure of the G5 has been productive in that it has co-articulated a vision of the Sahel as a security concern with other geopolitical actors and has produced new forms of security cooperation among its members that appear to be durable, despite its ad hoc nature and concerns over funding and political commitments. For most of its existence, the G5 Sahel was kept afloat through targeted technical and financial assistance, particularly from the EU, which has had its own regional strategic approach to the Sahel since 2011 and provided financial assistance to the G5 Sahel since 2016. Constituting a new and distinct institutional space enabling Sahelian security cooperation is something of a silver lining for the G5 according to many EU officials, who for

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[34]The Government of Mali withdrew from the G5 Sahel on 15 May 2022.

[35]Nicolas Desgrais, *Le G5 Sahel, en réaction à la mutation de l'environnement stratégique sahélien Politiques régionales de coopération et niveaux d'engagement des Etats membres* (Paris: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégiques, 2018), p. 56.

[36]Martin Welz, 'Institutional choice, risk, and control: The G5 Sahel and conflict management in the Sahel', *International Peacekeeping*, 29:2 (2022), pp. 235–57.

example point to the G5's defence college (Collège de Défense) as one of the more effective and efficient parts of the institution.[37] Yet, as a new ad hoc security initiative, the G5 Sahel also reflects the fragmentation of security arrangements on the continent, as well as donor dissatisfaction over these continental conflict management mechanisms and organisations, and the generative role of failure in producing spaces of innovation and cooperation.[38]

The G5 has also been productive as a catalyst for increased cooperation initiated by Sahelian state actors, as a means of producing the 'Sahel' itself as an intervention space. This is most evident in the political and military sectors, with heads of state and military commanders using it as a collaboration space, but also to a lesser extent between economic planning ministries, who have been national focal points for the G5's increasingly sidelined development efforts. We speak of political and military actors in the same breath to emphasise that the focus on the G5 as a security-first club is one that emerged in both head of state priorities (high politics) and in military exchanges (at a technical level). The G5's creation had the benefit of providing a political structure and outward-facing identity for the states in question on security issues to more geopolitically dominant actors.[39] This aspect of the G5 reflects its role as a 'branding' mechanism around which a specific vision of the Sahel itself has been defined and adopted politically in most diplomatic and funding relationships at the expense of other regional institutions like the AU and ECOWAS.

The Sahel's multiple geographies reflect diverse and intersecting perceptions of territorial, cultural, and policy space.[40] First, we have what could be called a 'hydrological' Sahel, defined as a semi-arid band south of the Sahara Desert stretching from Senegal to Chad – or further to the Central African Republic and on to Sudan and even to the coast of Djibouti. This vision intersects with some political considerations, as many donors (like the EU) in the region are focused on questions of food insecurity, transhumance dynamics, and desertification. Second, we can speak of a 'cultural' Sahel, one that is more delimited in scope but which is inclusive of the primarily Muslim societies of West Africa that generally (but not always) share a common mainly francophone colonial experience. This broad space is tied much more particularly to the states of the former French colonial space in West and Central Africa, and should therefore encompass eastern Guinea, northern Cameroon, and Chad. In its cultural ties to the Islamic tradition and associated spaces of exchange, the cultural Sahel could also include northern Nigeria, southern Algeria, and southern Libya. But the third understanding, closest to that underpinning the G5, is the 'political' Sahel, around which contemporary security interventions are typically articulated. The EU's definition of the Sahel in its 2011 regional strategy focused only on Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, though its Regional Action Plan in 2015 added Burkina Faso and Chad. Most strategies of European governments and funding organisations follow this schema, defining the Sahel in a rather circular way as the countries making up the G5. Moreover, the efforts of the G5 Sahel members capitalised on this latter vision to best corner and monopolise policy attention and funding in an exclusive way, leaving other likely members, for example Senegal, out of the equation.[41] In generating a restricted vision of the Sahel in political and security terms, the G5 produced a coherent intervention space but one that eventually did not keep up with the security threats it was designed to counter.

Despite having limited success in meeting its objectives and slow-going institutionalisation, a second and connected area in which the G5 can be described as 'productive' is as a clearing house, of sorts, for setting priority responses to security issues in the region. In this sense, as an ad hoc cross-border cooperation initiative, the G5 Sahel's form prior to the withdrawal of three of its members was the result of substantial definitional competition between its member states and

[37]Interview, EU diplomat, 4 May 2022. See Edoardo Baldaro and Elisa Lopez Lucia, 'Spaces of (in)security and intervention: Spatial competition and the politics of regional organizations in the Sahel', *Territory, Politics, Governance* (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2022.2097303, p. 7–8.

[38]Baldaro and Lopez Lucia, 'Spaces of (in)security', *Territory, Politics, Governance* 12:8 (2024), 1095–113.

[39]Interview, French foreign ministry diplomat, 19 May 2022.

[40]See Rahmane Idrissa, 'The Sahel: A cognitive mapping', *New Left Review*, 132 (2021), pp. 5–39.

[41]Interview, 2 EU Delegation officials, Dakar, 19 August 2016; Interview, 2 UNODC officials, Dakar, 15 October 2018.

different actors within the donor community that fund and provide operational and administrative support to the initiative. Nowhere is this clearer than the competition and gradual overriding of the G5's original development focus towards its more military-oriented priorities through the establishment of the Joint Force. Broadly speaking, Sahel state politicians and development bureaucrats involved in the G5's conceptualisation wanted the initiative to be guided by the mantra of the security–development nexus. Two connected policy proposals significantly shaped this focus. First, the organisation's development ambitions built out from the Nigerien security doctrine of the early 2010s, which emphasised tight links between security and development that echoed assumptions and policy priorities of Western partners at the time.[42] Niger's specific articulation of the security–development nexus, the Stratégie pour le Développement et la Sécurité des Zones Sahélo-sahariennes (SDS Sahel Niger) was formed in 2012 as part of the country's multidimensional approach to insecurity in the Sahel. The SDS Sahel Niger's executive secretary went on to become the G5's first Permanent Secretary and argued that 'the G5 Sahel is not just an international defense and security organization, but also an instrument for development, whose originality lies in the coupling, in both upstream thinking and downstream action, between defense and security on the one hand, and development on the other'.[43] Second, the initial discussions regarding the need to create the G5 Sahel also emphasised the need to coordinate development aid in the Sahel through its own Priority Investment Plan (PIP), which sought to mutualise development efforts among Sahelian member states and to better align with donor strategies, for example the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel, and the EU's Security and Development Strategy.[44]

Over time, however, these developmental visions waned, particularly in the face of lacklustre enthusiasm from foreign donors, especially the EU, who provided much of the funding for the organisation. Objectives in the G5's PIP often brushed up against many external institutions' wishes for the organisation to be a more operational force that could supplement political and developmental decisions made elsewhere or at the national level of each G5 member state.[45] From our interviews, we also note that the security–development nexus emphasis may have been a politically expedient response to specific issues in several G5 states (Mali and Niger in particular), such as reconciling the economic impacts of migration controls,[46] rather than constituting a long-term strategic choice. Tensions between military-oriented versus developmental responses have been at the core of relations between the G5 and its external partners since early in its existence. An EU interlocutor mentioned that actions of the G5 outside of the area of security would constitute a distraction or a duplication of other organisations' efforts in the Sahel.[47] The initiative's military turn began to take shape following the G5 Sahel Heads of State summit on 20 November 2015 in N'Djamena in which the Joint Force was announced, to the surprise of many Western governments, but which was at the time still hardly defined.[48] Since the announcement, the Joint Force became one of the G5 Sahel's major contributions to security aspirations in the region, and the component of the organisation that benefited from the most external buy-in given the urgency, spread, and cross-border nature of insurgent violence in the region. Over time, the very idea of a 'security–development nexus' in the Sahel became increasingly contested and set aside, since for many donors it became a relic of a different era of security cooperation.[49]

Another factor that complicated the G5 Sahel's attempts to couple security and development in a context where 'the nexus' had fallen out of vogue in Western capitals relates to the organisation's

[42]Interview, Counsellor to the Prime Minister of Niger, Niamey, 15 November 2018.

[43]Najim Elhadj Mohamed, 'La coopération transfrontalière', *Revue Défense Nationale*, 792 (2016/17), pp. 34–7 (p. 34).

[44]Interview, former Senior G5 Sahel official, 18 October 2018.

[45]Interview, UNOWAS officials, Dakar, 7 December 2016.

[46]Interview, senior EU diplomat, Niamey, 7 December 2017.

[47]Interview, EU Delegation Official, Niamey, 8 September 2016.

[48]Desgrais, *Le G5 Sahel*, p. 62.

[49]For a discussion of the relationship between security and development in the context of China's South–South security cooperation, also see Xue Gong, 'Ponder the path of thy feet: How China's security–development nexus works in the Mekong region', *European Journal of International Security* (this issue).

lightweight administrative structure, which donors argued hamstrung its intended operationali-
sation. Similar to other international organisation (IO) contexts in which IO secretariats struggle
to manage with the weight of their administrative position and recruitment abilities, Julia Gray
emphasises the development of a zombie status for many organisations in a way that aptly
describes donor understandings of the G5's purported capacity deficits.[50] While some observers
have advanced that the 'lightweight' structure of the G5 Sahel's secretariat perhaps makes it less of
an IO than an interstate coordination mechanism,[51] this is also something that many officials con-
sider to be a roadblock to the G5 effectively deploying and implementing the organisation's vision
of the security–development nexus. EU officials we interviewed frequently returned to questions
of capacity, questioning the secretariat's ability to administer the kinds of financial commitments
made in the PIP. Recent research likewise demonstrates that EU actors feel the need to shoulder
much of the organisation's administrative burdens as a result, including within the Joint Force.[52]

Thus, while the idea of a security–development nexus was central to the formation of the G5
Sahel, divergences in how it should operate in a relatively lightweight institution led to its rela-
tive atrophy and a renewed focus on military cooperation and security. One EU official pointed
to the fact that the EU's role in the region was mostly as a development actor until the 2011 Sahel
strategy sought an alignment between security and development, over-reliant on a vision of devel-
opment as a technical – read apolitical – way to achieve security.[53] Similar views were echoed by
French diplomats, one of whom pointed to a quick shift towards defence/security issues in the G5
as the development angle began to lose out.[54] This is not to say that the focus on the G5's role
as a security institution did not cast aside development concerns. Those concerns continue to be
at the core of how many *Sahelian* policymakers and elites envision how the organisation should
operate. In many ways, the tension between donors and members of the organisation is over the
purpose of such a nexus with security, which according to one Mauritanian official is perceived
by Europeans as a containment strategy rather than as the pursuit of development for its own
sake.[55] What these tensions demonstrate is that functional accounts of the G5 Sahel and other
similar ad hoc security initiatives understate the levels of disagreement and competition over the
intended nature, purpose, and resultant design of these initiatives. In the case of the G5 Sahel, mil-
itary approaches to Sahelian security issues favoured by the donor community over time sidelined
more development-oriented responses initially espoused by Sahelian political actors.

The French government was arguably the most ardent supporter of consolidating the G5's
military orientation, viewing the establishment of the Joint Force as the logical extension of cross-
border military cooperation with Sahelian armed forces since its 2013 Serval intervention in
Mali.[56] By late 2017, French short- and medium-term military objectives for the Joint Force were
to help Sahelian forces secure the Mali–Niger–Burkina Faso tri-border area and help maintain
their interoperability, as well as serving as 'a kind of laboratory for a peacekeeping operation (in
support of MINUSMA, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission
in Mali)'.[57] Nevertheless, French officials were at pains to remind international partners that 'the

[50]Julia Gray, 'Life, death, or zombie? The vitality of international organizations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:1 (2018), pp. 1–13.

[51]Nicolas Desgrais, *Cinq ans après, une radioscopie du G5 Sahel: Des réformes nécessaires de l'architecture et du processus décisionnel* (Paris: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, 2019), pp. 1–140.

[52]See Marie Sandnes, 'The impact of external support on coalition efficiency: The case of the G5 Sahel Joint Force', *Defence Studies* 23:3 (2023), 477–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2023.2213637.

[53]Interview, EU diplomat, Brussels, 5 May 2022.

[54]Interview, French foreign ministry diplomat, 12 May 2022.

[55]Interview, Mauritanian policy official, 18 May 2023.

[56]Cyril Robinet, 'Genèse de la Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel', in Peer de Jong (ed.), *G5 Sahel, une initiative régionale pour une nouvelle architecture de paix* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2018), pp. 133–44.

[57]Permanent mission of France to the United Nations in New York, 'Ministerial Meeting on the G5 Sahel/Security Council – Speech by M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs – New York, 30 October 2017'; 'G5 Sahel: Joint Force does in fact exist' (2017), available at: {https://onu.delegfrance.org/G5-Sahel-Joint-Force-does-in-fact-exist}.

future rests with African armies, with the support of European partners that will have to be created and established over the long term'.[58] High-ranking military leaders from Sahelian countries likewise supported this stance, given that this would translate into increased defence spending and the purchase of much-needed military equipment and recruitment.[59] Indeed, until the deterioration of both Franco-Malian, and Franco-Burkinabè *diplomatic* relations in May 2021 and November–December 2022 respectively, actual military cooperation between French counterterrorism intervention Opération Barkhane[60] and the Malian and Burkina Faso armed forces officers was positively viewed, and Franco-Sahelian governmental positions and communications were remarkably in sync.[61] For a time, therefore, and at the expense of renewing historically constituted asymmetries, Sahelian governmental and military officials supported France's involvement in support of military cooperation through the Joint Force.

It is fair to state that many of the constraints on the G5 Sahel typically have some financial basis. Interlocutors from the region and Western capitals have tended to evoke such issues in divergent ways. The G5's fate has been dictated in part by its heavy reliance on external support, which was being reassessed from 2021. As noted earlier in this paper, African states often become trapped into ad hoc arrangements which respond to real security concerns yet face financial and political challenges in their establishment. Since its inception, the G5 Sahel was heavily driven by the politics and personalities of its presidents, as well as their own idiosyncratic relationships with France, the EU, and other donors. As such, not only was the G5 reliant on donors' funding, but it was also exposed to shifts in their political and military strategies. During times when the pursuit of funding, notably from the United States, was unsuccessful, the G5's ambitions were limited by what external partners were willing to fund. For instance, from 2020 there was regular debate around how to fund the Joint Force, with Security Council members diverging on the topic of UN funding for a regional force. Given that the G5 Sahel emerged as a clearing house for Sahel security issues at a time at which international efforts were focused on coordination of aid and the heightened importance of ensuring 'local ownership', the initiative should be seen as both a response to the failure of 'African solutions' but, paradoxically, an African solution itself. The question of funding the G5 rested at the heart of this paradox, highlighted by one EU official: 'on one hand, the EU wants a more robust institution to deal with, which can administer external funding effectively, but on the other hand, is reluctant to allocate funds to a secretariat whose capacities it has not sufficiently reinforced'. Being beholden to donor funding trends and politics, however, does not mean that the G5's member governments are subservient to the will of its primary donors, as they have been willing to expend portions of their budgets to fund the G5 initiative. Despite considerable external resources, some financing of the Joint Force has been borne by the member states themselves, albeit supported by bilateral funding relationships. In this respect, Desgrais notes that the Joint Force differs from other continental or UN efforts, since supply chains and training for the Force's first deployed units were initially funded directly by

[58]François-Xavier de Woillemont, 'L'opération Barkhane et le G5', in Peer de Jong (ed.), *G5 Sahel, une initiative régionale pour une nouvelle architecture de paix* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2018), pp. 151–58 (pp. 153, 157).

[59]Interview, Malian Armed Forces Colonel, Bamako, 7 May 2018; interview, Nigerien Armed Forces General, 21 February 2023.

[60]Opération Barkhane was a French military intervention across five countries in the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Chad) from 2014 to 2022. Barkhane grew out of Opération Serval (2013–14) which sought to beat back armed Islamist groups threatening the Malian state. Unlike Serval, Barkhane was intended as a more permanent, regional counterterrorism force. As France's role in the Sahel became increasingly politically contested, the mission was formally ended in November 2022. See Michel Goya, *Barkhane: Une analyse de l'engagement militaire français au Sahel* (Paris: Institut Montaigne, 2022).

[61]Interview, French security official, Bamako, 2 October 2021; interview, General of Burkina Faso Armed Forces, Ouagadougou, 2 February 2023. The clearest example of this mutual political support and subsequent communication occurred following the French air strike at Bounty in central Mali in which dozens of civilians were killed while participating in a marriage ceremony, but which both French and Malian military officials denied, categorically stating that the airstrike hit a group of terrorists gathering in the area.

member states.[62] Our interlocutors within the organisation also highlight how much of the operational budget of the G5 more broadly comes from members' own contributions rather than foreign funding.[63]

The relative fall from grace of the G5 Sahel also reflects the evolving attitudes towards security and insurgency in Western capitals. The organisation exists in the face of an increasingly explicit turn to what Charbonneau calls 'counterinsurgency governance' – founded in part on containing security threats to the region as opposed to providing some sense of empowerment or autonomisation to Sahel states.[64] In some ways, the G5 Sahel was a container for many of these aspirations, for example, mirroring in the three 'zones' of operation for the Joint Force an emerging French mapping of the Sahel that also saw the region as composed of specific zones (most importantly, the Liptako–Gourma tri-border area between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) of intensive focus.[65] The military-led approach regarding Sahel security issues, or at the very least a strong belief in stabilisation above all, came at the expense of a longer-term approach based on building state capacity. It also coexisted with a bilateral approach to military aid which the EU used to maintain flows of military funding to G5 states despite Mali's 2022 withdrawal.[66] Such a bilateral approach emerges from a realisation on the part of Western policymakers that the Sahel 'problem' first exceeds the geographical boundaries of the G5 states, with spaces such as northern Ghana or Bénin considered 'Sahelien' in their cultural and political life,[67] and secondly that bilateral approaches were to be favoured due to the top-heavy nature of security cooperation in the region, which is viewed by donors to hang on the whims of heads of state and national bureaucrats articulating requests in national, rather than regional, terms. These trends lead inexorably towards a growing realisation that security cooperation must be developed at the micro and operational level – such as ensuring interoperability of military radios[68] – but also through the development of ever more ad hoc arrangements to complement the perceived failures of existing institutions.

Even though the G5 Sahel has failed to produce the type of security outcomes that accompanied the first few years of its creation, the overall policy positions for both donors (notably the EU) and G5 member states seems to be that despite being present for the birth of the G5, there is little desire to sign its death certificate.[69] The G5 hobbled on, in the absence of a clear signal about its future, until the joint decisions from the government of Burkina Faso and Niger to leave the initiative in favour of the AES. One element central to this, echoed by many of our interlocutors, is that much about the G5 came down to branding and visibility: one EU interlocutor envisioned it as a 'useful framework for [Sahel states'] interactions with the European Union',[70] emphasising the need for the EU to make the G5 Sahel visible, while a French diplomat described it almost identically as a 'platform for interacting with international funders'.[71] The G5's position as a product of, and interlocutor for, Western support, one could argue, limited the degree of agency its own states were able to exercise through it. As the next section will show, the issues explained above relating to competition over the design, objectives, and focus of the G5 Sahel, while failing to meet the region's security challenges, nevertheless helped produce new forms of security politics, and increased Sahelian government resistance to their limited agency within hierarchical donor relationships.

[62]Desgrais, *Le G5 Sahel*, p. 106.
[63]Interview, G5 Sahel official, 19 May 2023.
[64]Bruno Charbonneau, 'Counter-insurgency governance in the Sahel', *International Affairs*, 97:6 (2021), pp. 1805–23.
[65]Interview, European External Action Service officer, Brussels, 27 April 2017.
[66]Interview, EU diplomat, Brussels, 4 May 2022.
[67]Interview, EU diplomat, Brussels, 6 July 2022.
[68]Interview, EU diplomat, Brussels, 5 May 2022.
[69]Interview, EU diplomat, Brussels, 5 May 2022; Interview, Nigerien Gendarmerie General, Niamey, 16 February 2023.
[70]Interview, EU diplomat, Brussels, 5 May 2022.
[71]Interview, French foreign ministry diplomat, Paris, 12 May 2022.

The Accra Initiative, bilateral partnerships, and the AES

The G5 Sahel's shortcomings have been a catalyst for the development of other ad hoc security initiatives in the region. For example, the Task Force Takuba was a short-lived ad hoc deployment through which a few hundred European special forces would train and assist the Malian army. While it only lasted from 2020 to 2022, the deployment came towards the end of the peak of recent Western military influence in the Sahel. Working closely with the French Opération Barkhane, Takuba was intended as one more 'light footprint' operation which could additionally reinforce a G5 Sahel seen as lacking impetus.

Another regional security initiative, the Accra Initiative, was also born, seeking to reinforce collaboration between coastal countries of West Africa faced with the potential spillover of insurgent violence from the Sahel. While having either experienced few or no attacks by armed Islamist groups at the time of its creation, the governments of Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Bénin, and Burkina Faso, created the Accra Initiative in September 2017, later giving Mali and Niger observer status in 2019. The initiative aims to increase intelligence-sharing, joint military operations across regional borders, and capacity-building efforts for the militaries and security agencies involved. In other words, the initiative takes on nearly identical security activities as those envisioned by the G5 Sahel. It is also similarly supported by several international partners, notably the United Kingdom, France, and the EU.[72] Despite the G5 Sahel's failure to contain the spread of the insurgencies, even though it was supported in significant ways by these same donors and others, the Accra Initiative began capitalising on the marketplace of stabilisation efforts to quell armed Islamist groups in West Africa, all the while replicating the modalities of its Sahelian predecessor.

These developments reinforce the view that, while the G5 Sahel emerged as one part of an effort to endogenise some of the solutions to the Sahel's security crisis, its failures to overcome struggles over the initiative's designs and objectives, and failures to solve the region's deteriorating security situation, generated intense scepticism in donors. As such, the latter felt forced to pursue alternative interlocutors and to support security initiatives in new spaces.[73] One interview noted, 'what we try is to put [the G5's initiatives] to the forefront; and hopefully that one day they will realise they will have to do it on their own'.[74] It should be noted that scepticism of 'African solutions' does not mean scepticism of solutions made in Africa. Rather, the G5's loss of status within a world of security cooperation reflects the will to multiply new security arrangements while still drawing on dense and durable regional institutions such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union, or more specialised fora such as the Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community (AFIC) on border security issues. What we do stress, however, is that in the face of this multiplication of efforts, the G5 Sahel increasingly lost relevance and was slowly crowded out, taking up a smaller slice of the mental 'pie' in the region, which emphasises new iterations of security ad hoc-ism. In this context, Sahelian ambitions regarding the G5's lofty objectives dwindled, remaining in place, but in a more pragmatic, if anaemic form. As stated by a senior Nigerien military official prior to his government's withdrawal from the institution, 'so long as no one has signed its death certificate, the G5 Sahel remains, and serves as a framework that facilitates some cooperation with its remaining partners'.[75] Thus, the story of the G5's rise and fall that this article presents is also the story of shifting power formations in West Africa's security politics.

Having learned from the G5's political challenges and mitigated success, however, Sahelian government and military officials remain sceptical of 'new' experiments like the Accra Initiative and insist upon pursuing alternative security relationships and arrangements. One such includes a return to bilateral military partnerships. For example, in lieu of pivoting Nigerien support for

[72]Telephone interview, UK Office for Conflict, Stabilisation & Mediation Officials, 1 March 2022.
[73]Interview, EU diplomat, Brussels, 5 May 2022.
[74]Interview, EU diplomat, Brussels, 4 May 2022.
[75]Interview, Nigerien Armed Forces General, Niamey, 16 February 2023.

ad hoc security initiatives in general, and the Accra Initiative specifically, prior to his ouster in a military coup on 26 July 2023, President Bazoum reiterated the need to focus on bilateral military cooperation. In meetings in Niger in February 2023 with Andrew Mitchell, UK Minister of Development and Africa, Bazoum argued that direct military-to-military cooperation is the quickest, most pragmatic way to quell the region's transnational insurgencies.[76] In July 2022, the governments of Niger and Bénin also signed a bilateral military cooperation accord to facilitate joint military operations and the sharing of intelligence. On a visit to Cotonou, in which he articulated a critique of the G5 Sahel, Bazoum reiterated that 'we need to give priority to things that are easier to carry out', such as the military operations Bénin and Niger had been conducting in previous months.[77] A Nigerien general similarly argued that:

> if the G5 Sahel has been helpful in any way, it has been in support of equipping our battalions. Two Nigerien battalions were equipped much faster than our others because of the G5 Sahel framework and donor funding. But working with other states in joint-military operations involves a political level of coordination that is difficult to overcome with so many partners: state to state solutions are the only way forward.[78]

These examples demonstrate that some Sahelian and West African governments have pursued assertive forms of agency in the face of the G5's failures, even if that could have resulted in a further weakening of the ad hoc security initiative and relationships with its traditional Western partners. The militaries of the AES states in particular have managed to expand their arsenals and access external support regardless of the geopolitical orientation of their respective states.

Perhaps most dramatically, the G5 Sahel's failures to stem the region's security challenges also contributed to the development of resistant forms of agency in some Sahelian governments towards the initiative's main military backer, France. Mali's military-led transitional government demonstrated its dissatisfaction with the G5 Sahel, pulling out on 15 May 2022, arguing that the initiative was too heavily influenced by French priorities.[79] Since that time, Malian military officials have pursued alternative security objectives and strategies through primarily bilateral measures. For example, Mali's authorities met with Burkina Faso's military transitional government authorities to facilitate joint military operations against insurgents in northern Burkina Faso, resulting in several Malian airstrikes in Burkinabè territory over the next months. Likewise, given the lack of military cooperation between Mali and Niger despite the framework of the G5 Sahel, Nigerien government officials visited Bamako on 10 March 2023, at which time the Malian authorities authorised Nigerien military operations in Mali's Ménaka region against Islamic State in the Sahel (IS-Sahel) militants.[80] The Nigerien government and military's assertiveness of the need to cooperate with the Malian government bilaterally occurred despite the fact that it could have frustrated French military partners that had recently deployed to Niger after having announced the end of their efforts in Mali, and the Malian government's subsequent rejection of military cooperation accords with France.[81] Similarly, the Malian authorities' acquiescence to Niger's official request reflects their resistance to French military leadership over Sahelian security issues and emphasises Mali's preference for direct bilateral military coordination in the face of the failed experiment of the G5 Sahel.

[76]Interview, United Kingdom government officials, Niamey, 14 February 2023.
[77]APA, 'Le Niger va déployer des troupes à sa frontière avec le Bénin' (14 March 2023).
[78]Interview, 2-Star General, Nigerien Armed Forces, Niamey, 20 February 2023.
[79]Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale et de la Décentralisation, 'Communiqué No. 030 du Gouvernement de la Transition' (15 May 2022), on file with the authors.
[80]Telephone interview, Malian Armed Forces Officer, 24 March 2023.
[81]See Aoife McCullough and Adam Sandor, 'Briefing: How a mutiny became a(nother) coup: The politics of counterinsurgency and international military partnerships in Niger,' *African Affairs* 122:489 (2024), 587–601, https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adad034.

The creation of the mutual defence pact, the AES, between the Malian, Burkinabè, and Nigerien military-led governments arguably represents the pinnacle of resistant agency in which the three Sahelian governments contest their asymmetrical relationships with Western actors. While it is too early to evaluate the impact that the AES will have on security dynamics in the Central Sahel, Sahelian government elites argue that the arrangement will be an important tool for military and economic cooperation across the three states. We speak of 'elites' in this way to capture both government and military actors, as the business of politics in the three AES states is, today, shared between them,[82] with the latter drawing populist political strategies to graft new political institutions into the AES's mainly security-focused core tasks. While the AES states have named governments headed by civilian prime ministers, such an approach does not translate into the installation of a competing power centre within the state, particularly in these already heavily presidential systems. Rather, the military leaders of the AES states have sought to maintain a degree of administrative continuity and, in cases like Mali, co-opt opposition figures (in this case Prime Minister Choguel Maïga, who was sacked and replaced by a senior junta member in November 2024). The AES therefore consolidates Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's three military governments' common strategic posture involving 'a repudiation of French political and military positions in the region, drawing on real popular frustration with the failures of international intervention and France's broader colonial legacies'.[83] In this vein, both Malian and Burkina Faso's military authorities have intensified their military and security cooperation with Russian military actors, and discussions are likewise being held among Niger's military authorities at the time of writing. Neither the development of the AES military pact, nor these Sahelian government's diversification of military partnerships with anti-Western actors, however, can be grasped without an acknowledgement of their perceptions of the G5 Sahel's failures, and their view of the need to extricate themselves from the hierarchies in which they are positioned through initiatives like it.

Conclusion

This article has argued that ad hoc security initiatives like the G5 Sahel should be understood not only through functional measures of the problems they could solve or their effectiveness (or lack thereof) but primarily through the political relations and conflicts they generate. Such conflicts are far more instructive to understand the complex and fluid nature of contemporary security and counter-insurgency governance in Africa. Viewed through the lens of productive failure, it has argued that while these organisations may fail on their own terms to achieve the security outcomes they seek, they are nonetheless productive even if only as experimental spaces. This is what we describe as 'security laboratories' throughout, to point to the largely on-the-fly nature of such arrangements, but also the unpredictable relations they give rise to. The G5 Sahel and the Accra Initiative demonstrate how African states may at times become locked into institutional arrangements that often reflect the shifting security priorities of Western backers. Nevertheless, such initiatives provide institutional spaces in which security priorities, such as if and how to combine security and development, are put forward, negotiated, or resisted. As such, they are pre-eminent sites of diverse forms of African agency and contestation.

This article contributes to our understanding of African security cooperation in the context of international intervention, as well as the forms of international inequalities that structure it. First, the article showed the density of intra-African security cooperation as a form of routinised South–South security cooperation with increasingly complex connections across

[82]Beatrice Bianchi and Bokar Sangaré, 'Le coup d'État au Niger, entre réformisme civil et conservatisme militaire,' *Politique africaine*, 171–2:3 (2024), pp. 241–60. https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.171.0241

[83]Philippe M. Frowd, 'What the Alliance des États du Sahel Means for security politics in West Africa,' *Centre for International Policy Studies* (4 October 2023), available at: {https://www.cips-cepi.ca/2023/10/04/what-the-alliance-des-etats-du-sahel-means-for-security-politics-in-west-africa/}.

regions such as the Sahel. Second, the article showed how ad hoc regional security initiatives lock in the hierarchical characteristics marking relations between Western and African states. Ad hoc forms of security cooperation on the continent remain stubbornly tied to hierarchical relationships with Western actors, and the article has turned to a concept of 'productive failure' to grasp this. Despite these hierarchical relationships, instances of failure to achieve security objectives within ad hoc initiatives nonetheless shape the politics of security cooperation and make durable impacts on practice, thereby stoking agency for African states to modify dynamics of security cooperation among themselves and subvert hierarchical relationships.

Our empirical analysis of the G5 Sahel and Accra Initiative, two ad hoc multinational security arrangements emerging in response to the Sahel crisis from 2012 onwards, and a return to bilateral military cooperation between several West African states demonstrates these trends. While the G5 Sahel was formed to provide a regional solution to insecurity in the Sahel, articulated by an attachment to the nexus of security and development, it became increasingly hamstrung by shifts in its doctrine and relation to external partners. Shifting interpretations of the ways of conjugating security and development, a growing military-first understanding of its role, and a lightweight administrative structure that began as an asset quickly gave way to a resurgent bilateralism. The G5's relative decline, in part due to the expansion of insurgency dynamics beyond the borders of the main Sahel states, provided the impetus for another ad hoc security arrangement in the form of the Accra Initiative. The multiplication of such initiatives, the article shows, risks the increased fragmentation of security governance in the region all while locking in new patterns of cooperation.

This article intervenes in a political moment in which the G5 Sahel appears to be on life support. As of late 2023, three states – Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger – are led by military governments which either hold ambivalent or hostile relationships to it. Chad and Mauritania are on the margins of the insurgent dynamics of the central Sahel, but the latter is using its presidency to try to convert what remains of the initiative following the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. As insurgency dynamics move into the northern regions of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Bénin, the Accra Initiative's political and security attractiveness continues to grow, with Western partners like the United States offering much needed financial and political support.[84] ECOWAS, for its part, remains relatively overlooked as a security actor in the face of these challenges, and the persistent draw of ad hoc-ism in West African security politics.

This article reinforces the importance of highlighting the agency of African states within regional, ad hoc security initiatives. While much funding and normative support come from outside, the G5 Sahel and Accra Initiative are made-in-Africa initiatives which provide fora for debate and disagreement over the meaning of security, development, and stabilisation. They emerge in a context of fragmented security governance across Africa in the Sahel context and contribute to this breakdown themselves, yet they are also worthy of greater study for the productive, experimental spaces they are.

Adam Sandor's research examines the transnational governance of violence in the Global South with a focus on African security dynamics. His current project asks to what extent do Africa-led security initiatives aiming to tackle armed Islamist groups challenge post-colonial security relationships and security practices.

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[84]Reuters, 'Blinken pledges $45 million to boost coastal West Africa security' (23 January 2024), available at: {https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/blinken-pledges-45-mln-boost-coastal-west-africa-security-2024-01-23/}.

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