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The relationship between the G5 Sahel Joint Force and external actors: a discursive interpretation

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ABSTRACT

Drawing and expanding on the literature on discourses and intervention, this article investigates how the relationship between the G5 Sahel Joint Force (G5S-JF) and external actors (the UN, EU and France) came about. To understand the dynamics between the joint force and these external actors, I critically analyse the external actors' discourse on the security situation in the Sahel and examine how G5 member states have related to this discourse. The relationship has manifested in various ways, including military capacity building and resource distribution, where external actors hold significant influence over the joint force. Although the G5S-JF and the G5 member states exert agency through managing and to some extent controlling their dependency on external actors, such a dynamic has implications for the G5S-JF's sub-regional ownership and sustainability.

RÉSUMÉ

En s'inspirant de la littérature sur les discours et l'intervention, et en l'approfondissant, cet article examine comment la relation entre la Force conjointe du G5 Sahel (FCG5S) et les acteurs extérieurs (l'ONU, l'UE et la France) a pris forme. Pour comprendre la dynamique entre la Force conjointe et ces acteurs extérieurs, j'analyse de manière critique le discours des acteurs extérieurs sur la situation sécuritaire au Sahel, et j'examine comment les États membres du G5 se sont reliés à ce discours. Cette relation s'est manifestée de diverses manières, notamment par le renforcement des capacités militaires et la distribution des ressources, où les acteurs extérieurs exercent une influence importante sur la Force conjointe. Bien que la FCG5S et les États-membres du G5 exercent une influence en gérant et en contrôlant quelque peu leur dépendance à l'égard des acteurs extérieurs, cette dynamique a des répercussions sur l'appropriation et la durabilité de la FCG5S au niveau sous régional.

KEYWORDS



Sahel; security; power relations; critical discourse analysis; military cooperation

MOTS-CLÉS

Sahel; sécurité; relations de pouvoir; analyse critique du discours; coopération militaire

Introduction

The literature on discourse and interventions shows that the actions of intervening military actors are impacted by how foreign policy discourse conceptualises the conflict

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situation, frames identities and justifies external involvement in a conflict (Boucher 2009; Holland 2012; Alkopher 2016). In this article, I build on this literature and study how discourse not only provides discursive grounds for military intervention but also justifies and shapes cooperation between different military actors. Specifically, I examine how discourse has mattered for the relationship between the G5 Sahel Joint Force (G5S-JF) and external military actors in the Sahel region.

Many studies on the turbulent security situation in the Sahel revolve around the involvement of external actors, such as the UN and its Multidimensional Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) (Lyammouri 2018), the European Union and its Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) (Tull 2020), or the former colonial power France and its military operation Barkhane in the Sahel region (Guichaoua 2020). Limited attention has thus far been given to the relationship between these external actors and the emerging sub-regional level of the G5S-JF.¹ With this paper, I seek to generate a clearer understanding of this relationship through a discursive interpretation.

The G5 Sahel organisation was established in 2014 as a platform for political coordination among Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Chad. In 2017, this organisation established a joint military coalition, the G5S-JF. The 5000-troop-strong force was mandated to “combat terrorism, drug trafficking and human trafficking” (AU Peace and Security Council 2017, 3). The G5S-JF was pointed to early on as an African solution to an African problem (Campbell 2017), and presented as having a home-grown and sub-regional identity. However, since its establishment, the G5S-JF has received criticism for being fragile (Cold-Ravnkilde 2018) and for not having a peaceful effect on the security situation in the Sahel (International Crisis Group 2017). Despite these critiques, the joint force appears to constitute an important cooperation partner for many external actors.

The G5S-JF receives substantial support from MINUSMA, the EUTM and Barkhane, such as military capacity building, logistical support, financial assistance and resources, and in 2020 the joint force and Barkhane entered into a shared command. This paper examines the discursive foundation of the relationship between the G5S-JF and these external actors. I focus on the external actors’ discourse on the Sahel prior to the G5S-JF’s establishment, and discuss how this relates to the power relations between the G5S-JF and external actors through also analysing the discourse of G5 member states. I ask: *How has external actors’ discourse towards the Sahel justified and shaped military cooperation between the G5S-JF and external actors?*

The external actors whose discourse I examine have been narrowed down to those engaged militarily in the Sahel: France through Operation Barkhane, the EU through EUTM Mali and the UN through MINUSMA. The discourse of the G5 refers to that of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and the G5 organisation. The discourse analysis is split into three sections. In the first section, I analyse the *knowledge creation* of the security situation of the Sahel through the lens of the discourses on terrorism and fragile states, prior to the G5S-JF’s establishment. In the second, I examine the resulting *power dynamics* created between the different military actors engaged in the Sahel. In the final part of the analysis, I deliberate on the *manifestations* of the first two analytical points in the Sahel. Following this, I discuss the discourse in relation to the current relationships between the G5S-JF and external actors through a focus on finances, resources and military capacity building.

Drawing and expanding on the literature on discourse and interventions, I argue that changes in the conceptualisation of the security threat in the Sahel resulted in corresponding changes in defining the actor(s) responsible for responding to this insecurity. This shaped the identity of the transnational and sub-regional G5S-JF when it was established. I further argue that the discourse not only legitimises external actors' presence in the region but also frames external support as essential for the existence of the G5S-JF. Whilst this puts the G5S-JF in a position of dependency, such a position is also navigated by the G5 member states and thus the G5S-JF. Support from external actors may indeed be vital for the joint force to continue, but this has implications for the joint force's independence and thus also its sustainability. Such a reliance suggests a lack of local ownership, calling the joint force's alleged "home-grownness" into question. Taken to its conclusion, the analysis suggests that the G5S-JF may continue to exist only so long as there is external interest in sustaining it.

Theoretical and analytical framework

There is a broad literature on discourses and military interventions that treats discourse as important because knowledge, or perceived knowledge, constitutes the basis for decision-making. Part of the discourse and intervention literature points to how conceptualisation of threats affords responsibility to various actors (Alkopher 2016). If a threat is conceptualised as national, the responsible actor will most often be the state; if it is conceptualised as transnational, then the responsibility is often assumed to be multinational. For instance, terrorism is often portrayed as a global threat, and this has resulted in global responses to this threat, predominantly seen as part of the global war on terror (Jackson 2005).

Further, the discourse and intervention literature highlights how discourses often create identities through contrast, such as "good" and "evil," "strong" and "fragile," or "us" and "them" (Boucher 2009). A discourse's shaping of identity is therefore often presented through opposites. In the discourse on fragile states, we see that there is a separation between the "fragile" and the "strong." This creates a normative distinction between actors, thereby producing a narrative that can further justify and to some extent legitimise certain policies and actions (Ahmed 2005).

The literature on discourse and interventions points to the causal pathway between a discourse and military interventions. The shaping of identities through contrasts puts one side in the "right" and the other in the "wrong" (Cap 2010). In the fragile state discourse, we see that the manner in which certain states are classified as fragile and others as strong provides justification for the allegedly strong states to assist the allegedly fragile ones. In this way, discourses are constitutive, and determining, of assumed fixed categories. The discourses on terrorism and fragile states are clear examples of this phenomenon, where the label of terrorism presents a global threat, and so-called fragile states are framed as in need of assistance. This also relates to the increasingly common form of external interventions in allegedly fragile contests: security force assistance (SFA). SFA "consists of training and equipping military and civilian security forces to enhance professionalism and operational capacity" (Marsh et al. 2020, 6). The concepts of terrorism and fragile states thus hold political power, as various definitions may serve a range of political purposes, such as legitimising and de-legitimising actions and actors (Jackson 2005).

Studying conceptualisations and identities in a discourse therefore implies the study of the discursive process of empowering certain people, values and knowledge and marginalising others (Van Dijk 2006). Such studies can thus provide valuable insights for understanding military interventions.

This article expands on this literature and critically examines how these aspects of a discourse impact military cooperation and military relations, a perspective not previously given much space in the literature on discourse and intervention. In particular, I study the power dynamics between external actors and the G5S-JF. To do so, the host states' perspectives must also be included.

Host states of external interventions are not passive players in the relationships that form during an external intervention. On the contrary, Soares de Oliveira and Verhoeven (2018, 8) argue that African elites "have been taming intervention: they have adopted interventionist tropes and practices so as to put them at the service of the (re-)enforcement of political order." In fact, many African elites seek out external intervention, because it could stabilise a relatively fragile context, strengthen the state and, not least, result in financial flows to the country. Cold-Ravnkilde (2021), for instance, demonstrates how Mali as a host state performs sovereignty through manoeuvring within its partnership with the intervening actor, the EU, and Frowd (2021) uncovers similar patterns in Niger. This logic builds on the rationale of extraversion: that many African states express their own sovereignty through managing their dependence on external actors (Bayart and Ellis 2000). This may, however, place political elites in Africa in a squeeze between responding to domestic audiences and pleasing external interveners when it comes to national sovereignty (Guichaoua 2020, 911). This implies that there are complex power dynamics at stake in military interventions, where external actors may indeed exert power, but where the host (here, the G5S-JF) manages and to some extent controls the influence of external actors. This would not diminish external influence on the joint force, but it places interesting power dynamics at stake.

I apply critical discourse analysis to the case presented here because it emphasises the relationship between power and discourse. Critical discourse analysis allows me to examine and demonstrate the causal pathway between the discourse's conceptualisation of security threats, attribution of responsibility and framing of identities, and the power relations between the G5S-JF and external actors. I connect the power of influence to discursive knowledge, in the sense that language produces knowledge, knowledge produces power through influence, and this results in actions (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 3).

However, discourse does not appear on its own. Regarding the security context in the Sahel, Cold-Ravnkilde and Jacobsen (2020, 859) state that

intervention continuity and escalation cannot be explained simply with reference to frameworks of "success" or "failure," but require a broader conceptualization of effects, including how specific threat perceptions, rationales and problematization get constituted and consolidated through and during ongoing intervention practices.

Further, as Weber (2013) demonstrates, it is not only states that construct what the international system looks like. In other words, a state is not the sole "author of a discourse." Rather, the actions and discourses of states also stem from society: from the practices that construct the state itself, or the reality that is presented through media and public debate. While discourse emerges from and reflects a reality, this article focuses on how discourse

matters for that reality. Hence, I do not intend to study the motivations behind a discourse. Not only are such intentions difficult to verify (Erforth 2020, 562), but decisions of language use may boil down to the banality of everyday life. Rather, this is a study of how language and discourse, intentional or not, created a space for the establishment of the G5S-JF, framed its identity and shaped the power relations between the joint force and external actors. I therefore view power as relational (Guzzini 2013); it must be examined within relationships, in terms of both influence and management of that influence.

The discourse analysed in this article is collected from over 130 official documents, resolutions, reports and statements from the UN, EU and France. While there are a variety of (often divergent) visions of the Sahel region, as displayed through the many Sahel strategies from state and multilateral actors, a discussion of the differences in these actors' conceptualisations of the region is outside the scope of this paper. I focus instead on the similarities found in these actors' discourses. The Sahelian discourse, which complements the analysis, is gathered from over 50 official documents, communiqués and other statements from the G5 member states and organisation. Although there are internal dynamics of disagreements and varying national interests of the G5, a thorough analysis of these is also outside the article's scope.

Two of the external actors are multinational organisations, and one is a state. I have intentionally narrowed the scope of the analysed discourse to fit that of key external military actors in the Sahel. It must also be mentioned that France plays an important role in the UN and the EU. France is one of the economically and militarily strongest – and thus also one of the most influential – states within the EU. Being a permanent member of the UN Security Council, France is also the penholder for all resolutions on Mali, many of which are analysed here. In other words, the EU and UN are also impacted by French policies and discourses, which in the context of the Sahel have been criticised for having neo-imperialist connotations (see for instance Charbonneau 2008). France continues to play an important role in its former colonies, financially, politically and through security policies. It is thus critical to keep France's colonial legacy in mind for this analysis.

The analysed documents date mostly from 2012 to 2017, meaning from when the rebellion broke out in Mali² – which intensified perceptions of insecurity with the potential to spread to neighbouring countries – to when the G5S-JF was established. When working with subjective documentary data, it is useful to also engage with other sources to verify one's work and ensure its credibility. Therefore, I also draw on the academic literature and 30 semi-structured interviews³ with personnel active within political or military circles in the Sahel.⁴ As the interviews were conducted in 2019 and 2020, they fall outside the time frame of the discourses I analyse (from 2012 to 2017). The interviews and academic literature therefore contribute to the discussion and analysis of the discourse, but do not themselves constitute the discourse. The following discourse analysis is divided into three parts: knowledge creation, power dynamics and manifestations of the discourse.

Knowledge creation

Fragile state discourse

The external discourse on the Sahel is often mobilised through tropes about fragile statehood. According to the EU, "[t]he Sahel region faces a number of pressing challenges such

as extreme poverty, frequent food crises, high population growth rates, institutional weaknesses, irregular migration and related crimes such as trafficking in human beings and migrant smuggling" (European External Action Services 2016, 1). Using words such as "pressing," "extreme" and "frequent" brings out the urgency of action. Further, by stating that some of the main factors of the Sahelian crisis are "poverty and underdevelopment that feed the informal economy [and] corruption and weaken local institutions," which allows violent extremist groups to "take advantage of the instability to thrive from a shadow economy" (Jacques 2018, translated by the author), French ministers also assume a lack of structure on the part of the Sahelian states to respond to security threats alone.

Pointing to Mali, the UN News webpage stated on 14 August 2020 that the country's security situation "stems from long-standing structural conditions such as weak state institutions." The EU has expressed that "Chad remains a fragile country" (EU External Action Service 2016); similarly, according to the European Commission's website as of October 2021, "Burkina Faso remain[s] fragile."⁵ Furthermore, the UN has expressed that Chad and Niger "offer the clearest examples showing that urgent action is required to meet basic needs and shore up stability to prevent these fragile countries from tipping into crisis" (UN 2015). Mauritania stands out as a possible exception, as the European Commission claimed on their website as of October 2021 that it "has in more recent years managed to maintain internal stability."⁶ This language reveals that the G5 Sahel states, except perhaps Mauritania, are characterised by the UN, France and the EU as having weak institutions and a large set of subsequent challenges.

By labelling challenges in the Sahel as structural, the external actors' discourse suggests that these states are not capable of overcoming the challenges without assistance. This can be demonstrated by the EU stating that "regional and international coordination is key to ensure the effectiveness of international efforts in support to local and regional endeavours" in the Sahel (European Council 2014, 3). Regarding the Malian security situation, the UN has emphasised the importance of "close coordination with other bilateral partners, donors and international organizations engaged in these fields" (UN Security Council 2013, 7). In Chad, the UN also encouraged "the donor community to sustain its efforts to address the humanitarian, reconstruction and development needs of Chad" (UN Security Council 2009, 6). Furthermore, the fragile state discourse suggests that the security challenges constitute a threat beyond the states' borders. The EU noted in 2015 that the above-mentioned security challenges "have potential spill-over effects outside the region, including the EU" (European Council 2015, 4). Thus, this discourse frames and is constitutive of the UN, EU and France's knowledge about the region, which – accurately or not – creates an underlying need and justification for external support to the region.

The G5 member states are not particularly vocal about the fragility of their state structures. However, they do call for external support, such as when the late Chadian president Idriss Déby expressed in 2016 that "the situation deserves a deep assessment of the international community, in order to put an end to this conflict" (Déby 2016, 6). In 2013, after the French intervention Serval had regained control over several cities in northern Mali, the late president Dioncounda Traoré thanked the French forces for "responding positively and without delay to our request for military assistance" (Traoré 2013, 2). Thus, adhering to such external discourse calling for external involvement in the region has become a way for political elites to strengthen their positions through acquisition of

military and financial assistance. In the words of Soares de Oliveira and Verhoeven (2018, 8): “African states have displayed remarkable agency in turning their fragility into a discursive and material resource in an evolving transnational context.”

Not only is the situation in the Sahel framed by external actors and the G5 member states as one in need of support from external actors, but the framing justifies such support through identifying the threat as directly impacting these external actors if not dealt with in the Sahel. Therefore, the fragile state discourse established a consensus that external actors were to play a critical role in the Sahel security domain before the G5S-JF was launched.

Discourse on terrorism and organised crime

The threat of terrorism has increasingly been part of the discourse on the Sahel in recent years. In 2012, the UN reiterated its serious concern about “the increasing entrenchment of terrorist elements including Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), affiliated groups and other extremist groups, and its consequences for the countries of the Sahel and beyond” (UN Security Council 2012b, 1). In 2013, the foreign minister of France stated that “we need to stop the terrorists, or else Mali will fall into their hands” (Fabius 2013; cf. Erforth 2020, 569), and the EU has expressed its “deep concern at the continued extension of terrorist activities in the Sahel region” (European Council 2018). The terrorism discourse therefore also shapes our knowledge about the Sahel.

This discourse has also been adopted by Sahelian states. Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso are particularly subject to violence from al Qaeda and Islamic State-affiliated groups, and Sahelian states thus echo the external discourse on terrorism as a significant threat. In 2016, the late Chadian president Déby expressed that “Africa is today under attack of the full force by terrorism,” stating that it is “the threat of the century” (Déby 2016). Whilst praising his own country for having “cleared all terrorist pockets” domestically, the Mauritanian president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz specifically stated that “terrorists have found a favourable home in northern Mali” (G5 Sahel 2016a). The G5 member states thus differ in how they use the discourse on terrorism – but it is actively used nevertheless.

In 2015, the UN identified with “growing concern the transnational dimension of the terrorist threat in the Sahel region” (UN Security Council 2015, 3). Terrorism is here identified as a transnational threat, which means that it exists within and between several states, but has also moved beyond its territory of origin, thereby posing a threat to external regions. This suggests that “terrorism can only be defeated by a sustained and comprehensive approach involving the active participation and collaboration of all States, and regional and international organizations[,] to impede, impair, and isolate the terrorist threat” (UN Security Council 2013, 1). Hence, with the use of the label “terrorism,” the Sahel security situation is framed as a threat to external actors and regions. This is another justification for an external presence in the Sahel.

What stands out in the discourse on terrorism in the Sahel is its links with organised crime. This has changed since 2012, when the UN expressed its concern for “criminal groups activities in the north of Mali” (UN Security Council 2012b, 1). In the following years, the UN, EU and France began to consistently associate terrorism and crime, implying that they come as a pair, using language such as “fight against terrorism and

organized crime” (Gillier 2015, 3), “combat terrorism and organised crime” (European External Action Services 2016, 2) and “the impact of terrorism and transnational organised crime” (UN Security Council 2017b, 1). This idea of a crime–terror nexus is largely rhetorical and is supported by only tenuous evidence. Furthermore, this nexus poses challenges not only for the exercise of labelling, but even more for what the response to such associated threats ought to be, and whose responsibility it is to act.⁷

The G5 Sahel member states’ discourse on the threat picture mimicked that of external actors. Nigerien president Issoufou Mahamadou linked terrorism with organised crime in 2014 (Mahamadou 2014, 6), and a couple of years later the G5 Sahel organisation stated that “drug trafficking, especially in cross-border areas, fuels this terrorist threat” (G5 Sahel 2016b). Through using language similar to that of external actors, and by viewing these threats as common, the G5 member states emphasise the importance of the Sahel region to European and Western security. Thus, it appears that the G5 member states attempt to pull external actors into the mix as a way of managing and encouraging external investments to the region, as proposed by the extraversion theory.

Hence, the fragile state and terrorism discourses frame security threats in the Sahel as constituting a danger to external actors, and render external involvement in the Sahel not only justified but also indispensable. In light of this creation of discursive knowledge about the Sahelian security situation, the following section will highlight what the discourse’s conceptualisation of the security threat means for the specific power dynamics that have occurred between various actors, through identifying the presented solutions to this threat and the associated division of responsibility in the discourse.

Power dynamics

Identifying the solution

The knowledge creation section of this article demonstrated how insecurity is framed through the fragile state and terrorism discourses and, further, how this creates consensus for external involvement in the region. As a military-focused solution, the UN stated that training of the *forces armées Maliennes* (FAMa) “is vital to ensure Mali’s long-term security and stability” (UN Security Council 2013, 9). The very existence of EUTM Mali is based on this logic: they support and train FAMa “to meet their operational needs by providing expertise and advice, in particular as regards command and control, logistical chains, human resources and international humanitarian law” (European External Action Services 2016, 2). Operation Barkhane – deployed in 2014 when it took over for the French operations Serval in Mali and Épervier in Chad – was mandated to operate in Mali, Niger and Chad through the lenses of counter-terrorism and cooperation with the national armies (France Ministère des Armées 2020). Épervier had previously been deployed in Chad since 1986, signifying Barkhane as a continuation of France’s presence in the region. France’s role in the Sahel today is thus a legacy of France’s colonial footprint. In 2015, the UN encouraged Barkhane in its effort “to support G5 Member States to increase regional counter-terrorism cooperation” (UN Security Council 2015, 3). This implies that it is the training of G5 national armies justified through the fragile state discourse, and not the national armies *per se*, that constitutes the solution to the security situation. The solution thus falls to the trainers, or the external actors.

In 2017, the UN welcomed “the continued action by the French forces,” but this time in the capacity of “deter[ring] the terrorist threat in the North of Mali” (UN Security Council 2017b, 3). This speaks to France’s identity as a significant military actor in the Sahel as the previous colonial power, not only through military training and assistance but essentially also as a security provider in the face of the threat labelled terrorism, which then removes some of the responsibility of national armies. This is in line with France’s colonial legacy, where, for instance, it has retained its presence, such as through providing military capacity building to its former colonies’ armies, to maintain its influence.

The discursive prominence of capacity building mimics the tendencies we see from Western militaries in the past couple of decades: more willingness to engage in military capacity building than in combat missions. The continual call for support of national forces of the G5 – such as when the EU called for “renewed support for the political efforts of the G5 Sahel countries,” including for “the capacity of these countries to combat terrorism and trafficking” (European Commission 2018) – is therefore interesting if viewed through the literature on SFA. This literature suggests that SFA’s impact is less significant than when engaging own combat forces (Biddle et al. 2018). It is also considered cheaper and less risky for the intervening state’s own soldiers, which can explain why this type of assistance has been prioritised, at least from the European side.⁸ As such, the EU has indeed demonstrated that it is doing something through SFA, but without engaging troops on the battleground until 2020.⁹

The G5 member states do not refer to their own militaries as weak, but still encourage external actors to provide support through training and resources for these militaries. In 2015, Malian president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita thanked the EUTM for helping to build the aim of “a republican army, perfectly trained and equipped” (Studio Tamani 2014), and the Nigerien president stated in 2017 that, with external support, the government will “continue to implement programs to build up the defense and security forces” (Mahamadou 2017). Such language encourages the international community to pay greater attention to the Sahel region, not least to mobilise for support. At the end of the day, this external involvement will benefit the political elites of the G5 states through providing resources, shoring up the legitimacy of the regime, and supplying means to manage and stabilise the security situation.

Hence, the discursive notion of training the G5 militaries as the solution to the security situation feeds the narrative of external actors as strong and competent, and G5 national actors as in need of capacity. The states of the Sahelian region do not explicitly characterise their own militaries as fragile, but they do mimic the external discourse that posits training and support to their militaries as desirable and necessary. This raises questions about the division of responsibilities in addressing the threat established by the discourse.

Division of responsibilities

As the discourse on the Sahel is characterised by a threat of national, regional and international relevance, it is vital to understand how the responsibility for addressing this threat is divided across these levels. In terms of providing security on the ground, the UN has stressed the importance of, for instance, FAMA taking “full responsibility for providing security throughout the Malian territory” (UN Security Council 2013, 9). This expectation of full responsibility for security provision appears contradictory in light of the UN’s

simultaneous claims that Sahelian armies are in need of training to achieve the capacity to do so. The responsibility for providing these armies with this capacity thus lies essentially with their trainers, the EUTM and Barkhane. Hence, despite the SFA objective of empowering national armies, this discourse in fact also empowers external actors by providing them with influence over national militaries.

However, as demonstrated in the knowledge creation section, the security situation in the Sahel is constructed both as a transnational threat and as one in which terrorism and crime come as a pair. Framing the threat as the twinned concepts of terrorism and organised crime complicates considerations of who is responsible for providing a solution. Although there are international agencies addressing “international crime,” such as Interpol, crime is often considered the responsibility of a state and its internal security apparatus. As organised crime has been framed by the discourse as “transnational,” spilling over state borders, this also implies a sub-regional responsibility in addressing it.

On the other hand, the label of terrorism carries with it global responsibility, due to the widespread threat this allegedly poses. The conceptualisation of the terrorism threat as global and the threat of crime as national, when combined with the discursive framing of terrorism and crime as a pair, implies a need for collaboration between these levels. Although this could be viewed as external actors justifying their own presence in the Sahel, this blurring of responsibility can also be beneficial for host states. This was demonstrated by Frowd (2021) when he showed how Niger intentionally expanded its border management along EU lines because of support received and training for various ministries and roles that benefit the state. Cold-Ravnkilde (2021) demonstrated similar processes in Mali. The blurring of threats is thus a way for external actors to enhance and justify their presence in the Sahel – and is convenient for bringing together development and security contexts in light of limited budgets – but also is a way for the G5 member states to benefit internally from external actors’ presence. Moreover, the picture of the threat not only allows for but to some extent encourages a larger space for the sub-region of the G5 Sahel, which finds itself situated between the national and the international levels. Between 2012 and 2017, this sub-regional level was increasingly emphasised in the external actors’ discourse.

In 2012, the UN urged “Sahel and Maghreb States to enhance interregional cooperation and coordination in order to take all necessary measures to develop strategies to combat AQIM activities” (UN Security Council 2012a, 5). Following this, the G5 Sahel organisation was established in 2014. The UN welcomed “the establishment of the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5),” and particularly underscored “the importance of achieving regional ownership and response” to the security threats (UN Security Council 2015, 3). Simultaneously, there was a shift in the EU Sahel strategy, which in 2011 included only Mali, Mauritania and Niger (European External Action Service 2011), but which in 2014 expanded to also include Burkina Faso and Chad (European Council 2014). Therefore, we see that a better framed and (re)defined sub-regional level was given increasing attention in the discourse, at the same time as the discourse started to emphasise the transnational elements of the threat.

Despite the establishment of the G5 Sahel organisation, the UN continued to encourage “the Member States of the Sahel region to *improve* coordination to combat recurrent threats in the Sahel” (UN Security Council 2015, 10, italics added), thereby suggesting the coordination was not adequate. Later, more pressure was put on the region when the UN

underscored “the *responsibility* of the countries in the region in addressing these threats and challenges” (UN Security Council 2016, 3, italics added). This shows that the UN shifted from *encouraging* regional actors and states to improve their response to the security threat, in 2015, to assigning the Sahel region the *responsibility* to do so, in 2016.

In some ways this works against the G5 member states’ attempt to draw external actors to intervene in the region. However, at the same time, Operation Barkhane, MINUSMA and the EUTM had already intervened and become active in the Sahel region, thus also benefiting the elites of the G5 member states. Assuming the regional responsibility as the UN urged could thus bring further external support and attention to the G5 member states.

We see that the external discourse places the responsibility to respond to the security situation on the national actors, but at the same time frames external support as indispensable. As the discourse increasingly emphasised the transnationality of the security challenges, there was a simultaneous call for the sub-region to cooperate. Intentional or not, the discourse created and facilitated a space for a sub-regional military response to the security threat. If we understand power in the sense of persuasion and influence, we can see that the subsequent establishment of the G5S-JF in 2017 responded to the external actors’ discursive push for more cooperation on security issues. However, G5 member states have also exerted power in this development, as they aligned their discourse and action with external actors, and thus performed agency within these processes.

Manifestations of the discourse

Identity of the G5S-JF

When the G5S-JF was established in 2017 as the military cooperation branch of the G5 Sahel organisation, it was specifically mandated to “combat terrorism, drug trafficking and human trafficking” (AU Peace and Security Council 2017, 3). This appears to respond directly to the criminal challenges in the Sahel, whose responsibility belongs with the states in the region, as well as the labelled terrorist threat, which, as demonstrated, constitutes a more global threat. Hence, the establishment of the joint force signifies that the states directly affected by the labelled threats in the Sahel assumed the responsibility they were assigned through the discourse as used by external partners.

Responding to the transnationality of the threats, the G5S-JF focuses on border areas, particularly in three sectors: (a) Sector West on the border between Mali and Mauritania; (b) Sector Centre on the tri-border area between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso; and (c) Sector East on the border between Niger and Chad. The joint force’s focus on border areas goes hand in hand with the discourse’s focus on transnational threats. An informant expressed that the “G5 mission is all about labelling the threat transnational, and their obvious reply has been to focus on borders, but this is barely covering anything.”¹⁰ In other words, the delimitation of the G5S-JF’s area of operations could be seen as a direct response to the transnational elements that were drawn out in the external actors’ discourse, but the subsequent border focus demonstrates the geographical limitations of the joint force, as violent extremist groups of course also operate and move within the states.

The G5S-JF was created in the wake of the discourse presented through framing of threats, solutions and responsibilities. We see that the G5S-JF’s mandate reflected the

threats displayed in the discourse on terrorism and crime, and its area of operations reflected the labelled transnational threats through focusing on border areas. Its establishment can thus be seen as a direct response to the call for the region to cooperate and to better respond to these threats, but also as a way for G5 member states to elicit increased international attention to the Sahel region.

The legacy of external support

When the G5S-JF was established, it entered a theatre already flourishing with a variety of military actors. The essential division of labour between the EUTM and Barkhane has meant that the EUTM trains national militaries in a pre-deployment capacity, whereas Barkhane trains and mentors the troops deployed in the field whilst conducting joint operations. The G5S-JF was incorporated into this structure to some extent. Directly to the G5S-JF, the EUTM is providing “political and institutional support and [is] supporting the development of the military capabilities of the G5S Joint Force” (EUTM Mali 2019). This means that the EUTM is advising and assisting at the G5S-JF headquarters on organisational, structural and planning matters,¹¹ and in 2020, the EUTM was mandated to also train the joint force’s troops (European Council 2020). Indirectly, the EU earmarked €10 million for MINUSMA to provide logistical support to the G5S-JF (EU Commission 2017, 3, 7; UN Security Council 2019, 11). The premises in the discourse that suggested Sahelian states and militaries are in need of external capacity and assistance are hence mimicked in EUTM–G5S-JF relations.

Existing dynamics between Barkhane and Sahelian militaries have also been incorporated into the current relationship between Barkhane and the G5S-JF. Barkhane is based on a partnership with the Sahel, with the aim to “support the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) partner countries in taking over the fight against armed terrorist groups” through joint operations and SFA (France Ministère des Armées 2020, 4). A large share of the G5S-JF’s operations so far have been either joint with, or with support from, Barkhane,¹² which reflects the discourse’s construction of Barkhane’s identity as capable,¹³ and the identity of the national forces – or the G5S-JF – as in need of assistance. A French official stated that “if we go out from Mali today, Mali will collapse in a few weeks,” which illustrates this perspective. This would also be in line with France framing themselves as indispensable for the region, consistent with external discourses on weak state capacity in the Sahel. Further, at the G5 Summit in Pau, in January 2020, the G5S-JF and Barkhane entered into an agreement regarding a shared command structure (Kelly 2020). Hence, the current relations build on existing dynamics between Barkhane and G5 national armies, but have been intensified by the establishment of the G5S-JF.

The existing dynamics between national, regional, and international or external actors lay the foundation for the joint force’s partnerships with the EUTM, Barkhane and MINUSMA, reflecting the power dynamics exercised in the fragile state and terrorism discourses. In addition, the establishment of the G5S-JF has attracted a great deal of attention from external actors, which has resulted in increased financial assistance and provision of resources to the region. This demonstrates the G5 member states’ agency, because such support ultimately strengthens the political elites of the states. What these pre-set dynamics mean for the current relationship between external actors and the G5S-JF, and further the joint force’s sustainability, will be discussed in the next section.

The dynamic between G5S-JF and external actors

Financing the G5S-JF

When the G5S-JF was launched, the UN stated that “the G5 Sahel States have the responsibility to provide the G5S-JF with adequate resources” (UN Security Council 2017a, 3). However, whilst acknowledging this inherent regional responsibility, the UN encouraged “bilateral and multilateral partners to expeditiously convene a planning conference to ensure coordination of donor assistance efforts” (UN Security Council 2017a, 3), parallel to the responsibility division emerging from the fragile state discourse.

The G5 member states and the African Union (AU) have echoed the call to external actors for support to the joint force. Whilst acknowledging the establishment of the G5S-JF, the AU called on

Member States and the other members of the international community to provide all the necessary support to the efforts of the Member States of the G5 Sahel, including financial and logistical assistance, equipment, as well as an enhanced support in the area of timely shared intelligence, in order to facilitate the speedy and full operationalisation of the Joint Force. (AU Peace and Security 2017, 4)

The relevance of the security situation in the Sahel for external actors, as demonstrated in the knowledge creation section, has thus also been used by the region and sub-region to receive support.

In response, France and the EU initiated donor conferences in 2017 and 2018 that resulted in €414 million being pledged for training and equipment for the G5S-JF (France Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères 2019).¹⁴ That these donor conferences were run by the EU and France suggests that these actors were essentially taking the lead in getting the joint force on its feet in terms of resources. An informant explained that the Sahel has become “a popular place to be engaged because they have created [...] a new environment for external intervention and use it to draw funders.”¹⁵ It is not only external actors that have created this environment; many African states appeal to the international community “through the deployment of ideological tropes” (Soares de Oliveira and Verhoeven 2018, 12) to generate external interest and investments. In this way, momentum was created for external support to the region, as the establishment of the G5S-JF not only increased but streamlined support to the Sahel, thus strengthening the G5 member states, at least in material terms. The system of donations is thus worth a review.

While the G5S-JF falls under the G5 Sahel organisation, the majority of donations and resources provided to its battalions go bilaterally to the G5 member states, and not the G5 organisation itself.¹⁶ This means that the member states are responsible for transferring any donations earmarked for the joint force to its battalions. Although the G5S-JF and the G5 organisation are given the responsibility for the security situation in the Sahel, they do not appear to hold the responsibility for their own resources, or for their implementation. From this point of view, it seems that external actors hold significant power over the G5S-JF's resource levels and the earmarked distribution.

However, because many G5 states do not have sophisticated overview systems of their military, donations are somewhat difficult to trace once they reach the G5 states.¹⁷ This means that there is a general lack of oversight regarding what has actually been

donated to the joint force's battalions. This keeps the donors in the dark to some extent, but is also a way for G5 member states to manage the G5S-JF's dependency on external support by being in control of received weaponry, finances and other resources. Ultimately, although external actors exercise power over the G5S-JF, the joint force and its member states perform agency through managing this material dependency.

Dependency on military cooperation

According to Gorman and Chauzal (2018), the G5S-JF is "walking a fine line between local ownership by its member states and access to international expertise of external partners." This relates particularly to the EUTM's advice and assistance to the joint force and, as of 2020, its training of the G5S-JF troops, as well as Barkhane's mentoring of – and joint operations with – the joint force's troops.

The impact of EUTM training has previously been criticised for being insufficient (Tull 2020)¹⁸ and ineffective (Cold-Ravnkilde and Nissen 2020). This calls into question not only the purpose of conducting training, but also the manner in which it is conducted. The seeming lack of impact of this military training could, for instance, originate from diverging perceptions on the role of the military, as the training is based on "our Western presumption of what military is and does."¹⁹ An informant said, "if there is no recognition of the fact that African states run on different fuel than Western states, you will inevitably end up repeating the inflow of money for things that will not make a difference."²⁰ This suggests that the training currently conducted does not make a significant difference due to diverging military traditions.

On the other hand, assuming that the training does have an impact, this training by external actors has implications for the G5S-JF's sub-regional ownership. Because it uses external actors, the type of military training conducted resembles the type that the EUTM sees as important. In other words, the assistance provided may often diverge from what the recipient views as the assistance needed, or equipment may be donated that the recipient does not know how to either use or maintain.²¹ This raises questions about the extent to which the joint force is empowered through training: such training may indeed increase military capacity, but it does so on the premises of external militaries. On the other side, strengthening the military of the G5S-JF is also about strengthening state structures for the G5 member states. In this sense, receiving training – whether or not it is conducted on the premises of external actors – is a way for the G5S-JF and its member states to benefit from external involvement. Although political elites of the G5 member states might benefit from this involvement, it is the external trainers who are placed in a position of power in their relationships with the G5S-JF.

Because of the new shared command between Barkhane and the G5S-JF, they have established a joint headquarters in Niamey, Niger, in addition to having liaisons from Barkhane at the G5S-JF's headquarters in Bamako and G5 liaisons at the Barkhane headquarters in N'Djamena, Chad.²² This has thus far resulted in an increase in joint operations, as well as increased intelligence sharing through the intelligence fusion cell.²³ Working with Barkhane in the field has allegedly improved skills, bravery and discipline within the G5S-JF's battalions, as they appear to be more efficient, disciplined and motivated during joint operations than when operating alone.²⁴ From this viewpoint, the shared command structure might therefore be seen as a step towards more efficient operations. However, the

shared command raises questions about the power dynamics between France and the G5S-JF. On one hand, it is beneficial for the G5S-JF to improve its efficiency, not only because an enhanced military capacity is an end in itself but also because having a more efficient G5S-JF augments the region's leverage to request more external support. An assumption from external actors, however, is that the more the G5S-JF improves, the less help they may require in the future. This would eventually require that the G5S-JF can stand on its own. On the other hand, the shared command could mean an increasing French influence and power over the G5S-JF's operations. This entrenchment of assistance or cooperation may thus mean that the G5S-JF will have less autonomy, and therefore less regional ownership over operations. This again weakens the very identity of the joint force as a sub-regional and home-grown initiative.

Both the G5S-JF's existence and its operational capacity are highly dependent on, and characterised by, external actors' roles in the region. Such strong ties may well be necessary for the joint force to become more effective in its operations, as the G5S-JF is still young. Nevertheless, the joint force's dependency on external actors, which mimics the discursive presentation of Sahelian security actors as being in need of external assistance to succeed, means that external actors hold power over the G5S-JF. This dependency may well be managed by the G5 member states, as has been suggested earlier. After all, the G5S-JF benefits substantially from the financial inflows, international recognition and backing, military training, and, not least, resources such as weapons that external assistance supplies. Despite these benefits, the dependency on external actors stands in contrast to the inherent assumptions that the G5S-JF is a sub-regional entity with sub-regional ownership and responsibility. Further, the joint force's sustainability is challenged if its very existence depends on external actors' support.

Conclusion

This article has focused on how the relationship between the G5S-JF and external actors in the Sahel has come about, and what it looks like today. The analysis shows how discursive conceptualisations of the threats, identities and responsibilities concerning the security situation in the Sahel not only advocated for a sub-regional military response but also laid the foundation for the G5S-JF's focus and mandate. Through the discourse's justifications for external responses to the threat and its framing of these actors' presence in the region as essential, we see today that the relationship between external actors and the G5S-JF has been manifested through military training, resources distribution, administration of the headquarters and during operations, where external actors hold significant influence and power over the joint force. The discourse reveals the belief that external actors ought to play a critical part in combatting the global threat of terrorism, and that external actors are needed in the Sahel due to their allegedly superior strength, capacity and resources. This is in line with the literature on discourse and intervention.

Furthermore, the analysis demonstrated not only how these discourses about terrorism and the need for external assistance have been used by external actors, but also how they have been welcomed, or strategically mimicked, by G5 member states. Indeed, the G5 member states have called for greater international attention to the Sahel region, and (not least) support. Increased external attention and presence benefit G5 member states through financial support, political legitimacy and overall stability. The analysis

demonstrates that the G5 member states' mimicry of external actors' discourse has indeed increased the external actors' justification for involvement in the G5S-JF, but it has also shown how this involvement benefits and is managed to some extent by the G5 member states. Indeed, the leverage and agency of Sahelian states have recently become eminent, especially with regard to Mali. Due to Mali's recent engagement with the Russian private security company Wagner Group, the power relations between the Sahel and European actors have shifted to some extent to Mali's advantage, which confirms Mali's management of external involvement and ability to tame intervention. Further research into how this may have shifted the power and asymmetry of these relations is encouraged.

By expanding on the discourse and intervention literature through examining how discourse shapes military cooperation between intervening and host actors, this article gives more dimension to the understanding of military intervention. Increasingly, military intervention revolves around the logic of training local forces through SFA. The article demonstrates how we can use the knowledge found in the literature on discourse and intervention to specifically understand military cooperation in current conflict situations. The article also contributes novel insights into the dynamics of power as it is displayed through the relationships between external actors and the G5S-JF, and not solely through the material possession of the agents involved. In sum, research on discourse and intervention can benefit from taking a more relational or cooperational approach through engaging with theoretical aspects of extraversion, as this will reveal a more comprehensive dynamic of interventions overall.

This article encourages more research on military relationships through discursive examinations. It also raises empirical questions about how the relations between the G5S-JF and external actors play out, for instance during military operations, and not least what happens when other external actors, such as Russia, potentially challenge European involvement in the Sahel. Furthermore, the article challenges notions of sub-regional security cooperation in general, and what a potential dependency on external actors – managed by the host or not – means for the sustainability and efficiency of such cooperation.

Notes

1. For research conducted on the G5S-JF, see for instance Dieng (2019) and Degrais (2018).
2. The Tuareg secessionist movement in 2012 led to a coup d'état in Mali. This coup, alongside an influx of soldiers, formerly under Ghaddafi in Libya, to Mali, caused the conflict in Mali to break out, and further enabled violent extremist groups to spread. External actors were politically and militarily engaged in the Sahel before 2012, but their engagement has increased since 2012.
3. Ethics approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, case number 877186.
4. The anonymous interviews have been divided into five categories: (1) external security personnel (in the Sahel, but outside the G5 structure), (2) external political personnel (in the Sahel, but outside the G5 structure), (3) internal security personnel (within the G5 structure), (4) internal political personnel (within the G5 structure), and (5) observers (organisational, academic or others operating in the Sahel).
5. See https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/burkina-faso_en.
6. See https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/mauritania_en.
7. The EU has placed itself as an important actor on the African continent through the migration discourse also, claiming that migration from Africa constitutes a threat to Europe. The

migration discourse is important to keep in mind for this research, but will not constitute a focal point in the analysis.

8. Interview 11 with observer, 4 February 2020, Mali.
9. In summer 2020, the EU alongside France launched Task Force Takuba: special operation forces from European states deployed to fight violent extremist groups in the Sahel.
10. Interview 8 with external political personnel, 14 January 2020, France.
11. Interview 28 with internal security personnel, 22 February 2020, Mali; Interview 29 with internal security personnel, 23 February 2020, Mali.
12. Interview 11; Interview 27 with external security personnel, 22 February 2020, Mali; Interview 29.
13. Interview 6 with external political personnel, 10 January 2020, France; Interview 27.
14. In addition to the G5 Sahel states contributing \$10 million each, the EU pledged a total of \$143 million, France and Germany contributed \$21.7 million collectively, Saudi Arabia pledged \$100 million, the United Arab Emirates pledged \$30 million, and the US pledged \$60 million, with additional contributions from Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, Japan, Denmark, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Czech Republic and Slovenia (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies 2018).
15. Interview 1 with external security personnel, 30 September 2019, Nigeria.
16. Interview 11; Interview 13; Interview 22 with external political personnel, 15 February 2020, Mali; Interview 23 with external political personnel, 18 February 2020, Mali.
17. Interview 11; Interview 20 with external political personnel, 13 February 2020, Mali; Interview 23.
18. Interview 2 with external political personnel, 2 October 2020, Nigeria; Interview 11; Interview 13; Interview 26.
19. Interview 26 with observer, 19 February 2020, Mali.
20. Ibid.
21. Interview 11; Interview 15 with observer, 9 February 2020, Mali; Interview 26.
22. As part of the joint command, the G5S-JF's area of operation was extended to 100 km on each side of the border instead of 50 km.
23. Interview 27.
24. Interview 11; Interview 19; Interview 20.

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