



Can the UN Security Council Enhance the Effectiveness of the G5 Sahel Force?

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At the United Nations Security Council, and in other forums in Africa and Europe, diplomats are debating different options for increasing international support to the Group of Five Sahel (G5 Sahel) Force. The aim is to enhance its operational capacity and effectiveness in an effort to restore stability in the Sahel. Despite the presence of the UN Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the G5 Sahel Force, and French and European Union missions, the security situation in the Sahel has significantly deteriorated over the last few years.

The UN has provided support to the G5 Sahel Force via MINUSMA since December 2017. This includes fuel, rations, medical evacuation and engineering support, such as building camps. The support is aimed at filling critical gaps that have hindered the mobility and operational tempo of the force.

In a June 2020 report, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that although MINUSMA's support to the G5 Sahel Force has been essential and critical, a number of challenges have prevented the force from fully benefitting from the support provided by the UN, and that the current arrangements are not sustainable. In order to overcome these challenges the secretary-general has presented three options to the Security Council.

The first option is to create a dedicated UN support office funded by assessed contributions. The second is to create a dedicated UN support office funded by voluntary contributions via a trust fund. And the third is for a continuation of the current MINUSMA arrangement, but with an expansion of its mandate that would allow it to operate in all the G5 Sahel countries.

Drawing on lessons identified from the support provided by the UN via its support offices in Somalia (UNSOA and UNSOS) to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and a wide number of experiences with voluntary funded trust funds in other mission support settings, we discuss a few political, financial, doctrinal, human rights, and operational considerations.

Political Considerations

The need for a comprehensive and holistic response in the Sahel has been recognized. Violent extremism is a symptom of much deeper structural inequalities and there are more immediate grievances related to political and economic exclusion and marginalization. Although there are no shortages of Sahel strategies aimed at addressing these challenges, one major shortcoming is that there is no overall strategic vision and framework for cooperation among the various parallel missions and across the security-development-humanitarian nexus.

The effort to negotiate and design a UN support package for the G5 Sahel Force may create a political opportunity for the Security Council to get the key stakeholders in the Sahel to align behind one overall shared vision and a set of shared objectives. If the aim is to enhance the operational effectiveness of the G5 Sahel Force, then the Council needs to look beyond the technical questions of how the support can be provided, and focus also on ensuring that the support provided is directed, monitored, and assessed using a comprehensive and coherent strategy.

Such an initiative will be key to ensure political primacy and help to shift the focus away from a short-term, hard security preoccupation with combating terrorism, to a more medium- to long-term holistic strategy aimed at sustaining peace, enhancing development, and managing climate-related peace, security, and development risks.

Doctrinal and Operational Considerations

MINUSMA is a peacekeeping operation, but it has been mandated to support the G5 Sahel Force since 2017 and has worked closely with the French-led *Barkhane* operation since its deployment. This makes the distinction between peacekeeping and counterterrorism operations difficult to discern for policymakers and practitioners, and almost impossible for local populations.

Although building on the experiences from the UN Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS), a dedicated support office for the G5 Sahel Force would be a first for the UN, as it would have to operate across several countries. This creates a number of legal challenges, and one of the issues that has hampered MINUSMA's support to the G5 Sahel Force is the lack of an agreement over who should shoulder risks and financial liability when it comes to providing support in the other G5 countries via contractors. It would also be the first time that a UN peacekeeping mission is deployed alongside a UN support office to a counterterror operation.

One of the clearest recommendations from studies of UNSOA/UNSOS has been the need to create a separate set of rules, procedures and frameworks for UN support to peace enforcement operations like AMISOM and the G5 Sahel Force. The UN's operational support capability is the most advanced of

any international or regional organization, but it is designed for peace operations. This limits the kind of support the UN can provide to combat operations. The wear and tear of combat operations like the G5 Sahel Force on equipment and other material supplies, the pace of resupply required, and the need for casualty evacuation support is significantly higher than in UN peacekeeping operations.

While it could be argued that the support provided by the UN Support Office for AMISOM and UNSOS were exceptions, the creation of a second support office in the Sahel will signal that the UN has developed a new type of operation, led by the Department of Operational Support. This type of operation requires the UN to provide technical and operational support to a peace enforcement operation carried out by a regional organization or an ad hoc coalition of the willing.

Establishing a new support office for the G5 Sahel Force funded from assessed contributions will also signal that the use of assessed contributions to support African Union (AU) or African-led operations has progressed from an exception (AMISOM) to a practice. The AU and African members of the Security Council (A3) have sought in-principle approval for this practice since 2015, and considerable joint AU-UN work has gone into developing a range of options. But the United States, with the quiet support of some of the other permanent members of the Security Council, has not been willing to take that step to date. The US has even gone as far as threatening to veto a resolution in 2018. The new US administration has not yet given an indication of its position on this issue.

Financial Considerations

The UN secretary-general has provided two options for funding a support office for the G5 Sahel Force —assessed contributions or voluntary contributions via a UN trust fund. The UN has a long history of using voluntary funded trust funds to support African-led operations. The African mission in Sudan (AMIS) that preceded the UN-AU Mission in Darfur received support through such funds, as did the AU missions in Somalia (AMISOM), Mali (AFISMA), and the Central African Republic (MISCA). In all these cases voluntary support fell far short of operational needs and the AU concluded in 2015 that trust funds are neither reliable, predictable, nor easily accessible, especially for the type of high-tempo operations that the G5 Sahel Force is called on to undertake. Trust funds can be a useful mechanism to support specific programmatic elements, such a quick impact projects, but past experience shows that voluntary funding is not a viable option for supporting the core logistical needs of a mission of this nature.

In the Central African Republic, Darfur, and Mali the solution was to re-hat the AU forces into UN missions, so that they could be funded instead via the UN's assessed contributions system. In Somalia, where several joint assessments found that it was not feasible for the UN to take over the mission, the first assessed contribution support office (UNSOA) was established.

The 2015 High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, the Brahimi Report in 2000, and the UN peacekeeping capstone doctrine of 2008 all stress that UN peacekeeping operations are not fit for peace enforcement and counterterror operations. Overcoming the financial dilemma by re-hatting the G5 Sahel Force into a UN mission, as was done with UNAMID, MINUSMA, and the UN Mission in Central African Republic (MINUSCA), or embedding the G5 Sahel force into a UN mission, as was done with the Force Intervention Brigade in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, are thus not options for supporting the G5 Sahel Force.

Establishing a dedicated UN support office, financed through assessed contributions is thus realistically the only viable option for generating reliable and predictable funding for the G5 Sahel Force.

Human Rights Considerations

The Mali armed forces (FAMA) has “repeatedly been implicated in perpetrating extrajudicial killings and other human rights violations against civilians.” In fact, according to MINUSMA’s civilian casualty tracking unit, a third of the civilian casualties can be attributed to government forces, slightly more than what can be attributed to jihadist groups. Government forces in Burkina Faso have committed similar abuses, according to Human Rights Watch.

AMISOM has established a dedicated Civilian Casualty Tracking Analysis and Response Cell (CCTARC) that tracks harm to civilians caused by AMISOM operations including death, injury, sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), and damage to property, including livestock. A UN support package can be used as leverage to establish a similar mechanism in the G5 Sahel Force, and coupled with continued and strengthened independent monitoring and reporting from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, such a mechanism could help to reduce civilian casualties and enhance compliance with the UN’s human rights due diligence policy.

Weighing all the options, a UN support office funded from assessed contributions, complimented with voluntary contributions, appears to be the only reliable and predictable solution for supporting the core needs of the G5 Sahel Force that cannot be met by the Sahel countries themselves, or via bilateral support to those countries.

Cedric de Coning and John Karlsrud are both research professors at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs’ (NUPI) Center for UN and Global Governance.

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by Cedric de Coning

by John Karlsrud
