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# Sahel sentry

Morocco is emerging as a key security partner in the crisis-ridden Sahel. As such, the kingdom is also becoming increasingly important for Europe

In the crisis-hit Arab world, the Kingdom of Morocco is a beacon of stability and dependability. Or at least that's how it would like to be seen. Apart from a long-running dispute with neighbouring Algeria, this north-west African country tends to steer clear of major conflicts. In the shadow of its neighbour, however, Morocco is currently emerging as the number one security partner in the Sahel.

In a display of great strategic patience, Rabat has for some time been increasingly gaining religious influence in West Africa, training imams and promoting a moderate form of Islam. In addition, it has concluded various security pacts and military partnerships, while also pursuing a strategy of economic diplomacy that has seen it make numerous direct investments in its southern neighbours. Given the regional tensions caused by jihadism, the trafficking of people, drugs and weapons and, above all, the military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, Morocco is now more important than ever to economic development in the Sahel. The kingdom's growing influence in this sphere has been bolstered by four geopolitical factors.

## Regional charm offensive

Firstly, the withdrawal of French troops from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, hastened by potent anti-French popular movements, left a security vacuum in the Sahel. For its part, Morocco has expertise in combatting terrorism, a powerful military and reputable military academies that have increasingly also been training military personnel from sub-Saharan Africa. Its growing military influence in the Sahel thus has an almost post-colonial flavour that contrasts with feelings towards the region's former European colonist.

Secondly, the new military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are seeking to strengthen their positions by gaining dependable regional

allies. Following the 2021 coup, the Moroccan ambassador to Mali, Hassan Naciri, was the first diplomat to establish direct contact with the new regime, and Niger's new prime minister made Rabat one of his first ports of call abroad, taking with him various officers who had come through Moroccan military academies. While the international community was still eyeing these new rulers apprehensively, Morocco was welcoming them with open arms.

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Thirdly, the economic and political sanctions imposed by ECOWAS on Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have isolated the three economically. As a reaction to the sanctions, their transition governments decided to withdraw from ECOWAS. Morocco, whose own application to join ECOWAS has been on hold since 2017, used the opportunity to launch its 'Atlantic Initiative' promising the countries access to Morocco's road, port and rail infrastructure.

Just recently, the three Sahel countries formed a new security pact known as the 'Alliance of the Sahel States'. On the face of it, the aim is to strengthen regional cooperation in military matters and security policy, but the new alliance also has ambitious plans for the future, envisaging nothing less than an economic and currency union between the three states. From Morocco's point of view, developing the port of Dakhla into the industrial heart of a new regional economic centre could then provide West Africa with a gateway to the world. This would enable it to further cement its hegemonic claim to Western Sahara and create facts on the ground. That would be a real coup for Morocco's established strategy of south-south cooperation.

Fourthly, in January 2024, Mali withdrew from the Algiers Accords, a 2015 agreement between the Malian government and the Azawad rebels to end the conflict that had been ongoing since 2012. Mali's withdrawal came in the context of accusations that Algeria, which had acted as mediator, was supporting separatist movements in the Sahel region and interfering in the country's internal affairs. Whether these accusations are justified or not, this discord is a gift to Morocco and yet another reason for it to intensify its charm offensive in the region.

## A long-term ally

Although Morocco was never a formal member of the G5 Sahel, a regional development group comprising Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad, it has, thanks to security pacts and military

agreements, been a favoured ally. The joint fight against terrorism, joint training of military officers and joint military exercises were thus already a feature of Morocco's relations with member states. That fact will stand the kingdom in good stead if the G5 Sahel is disbanded as planned following the withdrawals of Mali in 2022 and Niger and Burkina Faso in 2023.

Various agreements between Mali and Morocco have been in place for years, primarily relating to the training of Malian officers and NCOs, the exchange of intelligence and the supply of military equipment. Morocco also has close military ties with Burkina Faso. Both the current president, Ibrahim Traoré, and Lieutenant General Daniel Sidiki Traoré, who led the UN's MINUSCA force until 2023 and is now military adviser to the chief of staff at Burkina Faso's defence ministry, received military training in Morocco.

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An illustration of how valuable Morocco's links with security services in the Sahel could be to Germany was demonstrated by the release of kidnapped German development worker Jörg Lange after years of captivity in Mali. Of course, we shouldn't be blind to the fact that Morocco's altruism in this matter was in part motivated by self-interest with regard to its dispute with Algeria, which has at times descended into violence. But while Rabat may be pursuing its own long-term objectives, that's not to say it doesn't have common interests with Europe. Morocco has, for example, long worried that Russia's Wagner Group could expand its activities in the area. In that regard, it is very much in the Western camp, but it also benefits from more privileged access to the region's new regimes and, via its security apparatus, has genuine influence.

Europe has, to date, primarily viewed Morocco in terms of energy partnerships and its potential to curb migration. While EU countries seem almost to be going on bended knee in such matters, a promise to support Morocco in its efforts to develop these southern security partnerships would be something Europe could offer in return. On the one hand, this could be a watershed moment in the region's history. On the other hand, this could be an insurance policy against a critical dependence on Morocco, for example in migration issues, where the tolerance of European societies currently seems to be shrinking.



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