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Article

Making Sense of the European Side of the Transatlantic Security Relations in Africa

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate the character of transatlantic security relations in Africa: How can it be characterized? Have they become weaker or stronger over the past decade? How can this development be explained? As NATO has not yet been heavily engaged on the African continent, it is prudent to study the relations between the EU and the US. Africa has been of concern to the EU (and its member states) for decades due to its geographical closeness and historic bonds. Since 2001, for both Europe and the US, Africa has become a region of increasing security concern due to the threat of international terrorism—for Europe, we can also add the migration concern. The European side of this relationship has also been largely dominated by France, making the transatlantic security cooperation in Africa essentially about French-American relations. But as France has taken the lead regarding Europe's security and defense engagement in Africa, increasingly with the support of other EU member states and associated non-members, this bilateral relationship is more than simply cooperation between two states. By applying a framework that understands EU security and defense policy as a process increasingly characterized as a differentiated and flexible integration under French leadership, the development of the Franco-US security relations in Africa must be understood as an expression of the transatlantic security relations in this region.

Keywords

Africa; differentiated integration; EU; France; Sahel; security; transatlantic relations

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Out With the Old, In With the New? Explaining Changing EU–US Relations,” edited by Marianne Riddervold (Inland Norway University / University of California – Berkeley) and Akasemi Newsome (University of California – Berkeley / Inland Norway University).

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1. Introduction

As Riddervold and Newsome (2022) point out in their introduction to this thematic issue, most theories in international relations indicate that a more insecure geopolitical context leads to a strengthening, rather than a weakening, of transatlantic relations. However, such a causal relationship assumes the continuing existence of a transatlantic security community that either has common interests (Webber & Hyde-Price, 2015), an institutionalized cooperation dynamic (Ikenberry, 2018), a common set of values (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Deutsch, 1957), or a common set of practices (Pouliot, 2006). While the presence of such a community of interests, values, and practices was taken for granted for many years and linked

to the cooperation within the institutional framework of NATO, this assumption has been challenged by the rise of China and the “US pivot to Asia,” initiated during the Obama presidency. Though Obama attempted to compensate for this shift by making an explicit commitment to NATO, Trump made a point of not following this line. As a result, there were frequent transatlantic diplomatic tensions between 2016 and 2020. Even so, Trump's threats of leaving NATO never materialized, and American military engagement in Europe continued (Olsen, 2022). With the election of Joe Biden, there were high hopes of a deeper and more convincing transatlantic commitment. Such expectation appeared to be confirmed during the early days of Biden's presidency, amid clear signs of a return to “normal”: At the Munich

security conference, Biden declared that “America is back,” an assertion backed up with renewed US support for various multilateral initiatives. This has also been confirmed after the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Before the invasion, however, Biden would not shy away from transatlantic tensions if needed. The AUKUS alliance between the US, Australia, and the UK, is an example. It came as a major surprise to the French political leadership. First, it was a breach of a very important contract for the French defense industry—one referred to as “the contract of the century” in France. More importantly, it was perceived as a breach of trust among close allies, fuelling sentiments in France that the US could no longer be trusted. However, this dispute cannot be reduced to a purely Franco-US conflict, though, with the EU and its member states also expressing support for France in this matter. Ultimately, the deal reaffirms the key difference in strategic interests that exists across the Atlantic: While the US views China as its number one challenger and prefers to pursue a hard-line towards Beijing (and Australia and UK were willing to support this hard line), most European states (EU members and non-EU allies) favor multilateral engagement with China, and so are mindful of becoming mere instruments in the US’ competition with the People’s Republic.

In the end, it is potential instability close to their borders (East and South) that continues to be the key concern for both EU members and non-EU NATO members, with the threat of China downplayed. As Smith (2022) argues, structural changes in the world order impact transatlantic relations through a series of different mechanisms. The result is, in many ways, a weakening of common interests across the Atlantic compared to earlier times when the perception of a common threat was at the core of the relationship. Thus, a key question is whether common values and practices of institutionalized transatlantic cooperation can compensate for this weakening of common interests and help maintain strong transatlantic relations. The Biden administration’s policy since the Russian invasion of Ukraine indicates that this is the case. Still, it remains to be seen if it will last, also beyond Biden’s presidency.

With this article, we will not be able to answer this overarching question in full. However, taking a closer look at the recent development in the transatlantic security relations in Africa—a region where instability and conflicts potentially represent a greater concern to Europe than the US—can provide us with a better idea of the strength of the transatlantic relationship. If the security community is strong and based on more than common interests, it might be maintained and perhaps also strengthened.

A study of the strength and the character of the transatlantic relationship needs to start with a clarification of what is meant by the EU in this context: Is it so that the EU side of this bilateral relationship must be characterized by a unified approach—either in terms of a common EU policy or an approach where certain mem-

ber states can be said to act on behalf of the EU? Or is there no common EU security approach to Africa with the European part of the relationship being weak and fragmented? How we interpret the European side of this relationship is important for how we, in turn, interpret the transatlantic relations.

With regard to the transatlantic security cooperation in Africa, the question is whether we are seeing a move towards greater unity on the European side and, if so, in what form, or whether we instead see a tendency toward increased fragmentation. As the two sides of this relationship are very different—with a federal state on the one hand (the US) and a hybrid on the other (the EU), the analysis needs to be conducted in two steps, first by (a) clarifying what we mean by the EU in this context and then (b) moving on to discuss the character of the EU–US security relationship.

Africa is a continent that has long been a key concern for both parties, but it has risen up the agenda over the past two decades due to the threat of international terrorism, and for Europe, the (real or perceived) threat of mass migration. While both parties are heavily engaged on the African continent through development aid, humanitarian aid, conflict prevention, and civil-military crisis management, transatlantic security cooperation on the continent has largely been dominated by Franco-US cooperation. Therefore, the question is whether and to what extent this bilateral cooperation can be understood as an expression of EU–US relations. This article argues that this is the case as France has taken the lead in European security and defense policy for decades, increasingly with the support of most member states.

Explaining how such an interpretation is possible, the article will start by showing how a very particular interpretation of differentiated (and flexible) security integration helps us understand the European side of this relationship. In the third section of the article, an overview of transatlantic security cooperation in Africa since 2001 will be provided, demonstrating how this cooperation has been dominated by Franco-American collaboration. In the fourth section, the EU’s engagement in the region is put under the spotlight to show how it complements French military engagement, but also how limited the bilateral cooperation between the EU (as such) and the US is in this region. Based on this, the article ends with a concluding section that discusses what this should imply for our understanding of transatlantic security relations in Africa.

2. Differentiated European Security Integration as a Way of Boosting European Actorness

It has been suggested that Europe’s most prominent challenge is not a lack of resources but rather a lack of defense integration (Howorth, 2019, p. 264). While some have argued in favor of filling this gap by strengthening European defense integration in NATO, others have

argued for the need to strengthen the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Today this division is becoming increasingly artificial, and we see more support for the need to strengthen European defense through a combination of these two alternatives. The objective has rather become to find ways to create positive synergies between all the bi-, mini-, and multilateral initiatives and processes that already take place in Europe—regardless of the institutional framework (Knutsen, 2022). The main critique against such a differentiated or flexible defense integration has long been that it could lead to higher levels of unnecessary duplication and fragmentation. But now, it is increasingly seen as the only realistic way to make Europe stronger and more capable of handling the different types of security threats it faces (Knutsen, 2022). This is also clearly emphasized in the newly adopted Strategic Compass (Council of the EU, 2022).

While differentiated integration is not a new phenomenon in the literature on European integration, the concept is mostly used to describe a process of differentiation within the EU, referring exclusively to processes where certain member states decide to move forward with more integration, implying a certain degree of transfer of competencies (Schimmelfennig et al., 2015). In the area of defense, PESCO is an example of this kind of differentiation. However, defense initiatives that are taken outside the EU institutions should also be included. In the end, institutions might be less important than common achievements through various integrative processes.

Applying a concept of integration that takes various processes and initiatives at different levels of government into account is therefore helpful to understand the mechanisms of differentiated integration in European defense. And the distinction between vertical and horizontal integration (Leuffen et al., 2021; Schimmelfennig et al., 2015) is useful, but these terms will be applied here with a slightly different meaning (Rieker, 2021b). While vertical integration is traditionally understood as the transfer of competencies from the member state to the EU level, it will be used here by referring to a move towards a higher level of interconnectedness among European states (March, 1999). Such interconnectedness could then include (a) the degrees of (political and economic) interdependencies; (b) the level of common norms, rules, and objectives; and (c) the degree of contact points through common institutions and resources, which could potentially, but not necessarily, also include the transfer of competencies.

Similarly, horizontal integration, which traditionally is reduced to the level of participation in the EU defense cooperation (via the CSDP, with Denmark's opt-out, or Norway's opt-in), will in this article also include various European defense cooperation initiatives (within and outside the EU structures) that all aim at strengthening European defense capacity. This implies including multiple forms of bilateral and multilateral agreements and cooperation frameworks between member states, and

between member states and associated non-members. Adopting such a broad understanding of vertical and horizontal security and defense integration creates a framework that considers the full extent of Europe's combined capabilities that the EU may have at its disposal.

Still, the very existence of this type of differentiated defense integration is an added value only if there is the political will to make use of it. This means that we need to know whether and how different levels of government relate to these different types of European defense capacities. Introducing agency in the analysis, we may distinguish between four different roles the various European actors may take: leaders, followers, laggards, and disruptors. While the first two are characterized by attempts to drive differentiated defense integration forward, the last two are distinguished by attempts to slow down or reverse the process. In these processes, both states and the multilateral institutions themselves take on different roles.

With regards to Europe's security engagement in Africa, there are two obvious leaders: (a) EU institutions, such as the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS), when it comes to addressing the root causes and long-term security concerns; and (b) France when it comes to handling the more acute security concerns that require military engagement. The rest of the European states (EU members and associated non-members) must, in this case, be perceived as followers as they have actively supported the French leadership role.

3. Making Sense of Transatlantic Security Cooperation in Africa

Being a federal state, the US policy towards Africa is somewhat easier to grasp. Like most Western countries, the US has been providing development aid to many African countries for a long time. Even so, prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the US, security and military engagement in Africa was traditionally rather limited. As part of the Bush administration's counter-terrorism strategy that arose in response to the attacks, the US increased its engagement in the Sahel (Alcaro & Pirozzi, 2014). This engagement manifested itself in the establishment of a permanent base in Djibouti in 2002, the launch of the Trans-Sahel Counter-Terrorism Partnership anti-terror initiative aimed at training African forces, and Operation Flintlock, which involved joint exercises between US troops and African forces.

This engagement also continued under the Obama administration with the launch of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2008 and the US Strategy Towards Sub-Saharan Africa in 2012, pointing towards an American willingness to strengthen its presence in the region. However, one important adjustment to the US' engagement occurred during this period: Rather than taking the leading role, the US decided to focus more on support, or "leading from behind," thereby allowing

the Europeans to assume primary responsibility. Thus, when the Arab Spring “turned to winter,” and a Western response was called for, the US took a back seat in the 2011 NATO operation in Libya (led by France). This supporting role was repeated during the situation that arose in Mali two years later, in 2013, when France decided to act on a UN Security Council Resolution to fight Islamist terrorism.

In 2014, President Hollande and President Obama published a co-authored article in the *Washington Post* emphasizing the importance of their bilateral cooperation (Obama & Hollande, 2014). Following the 2012 (Montauban) and 2015 (Paris) terrorist attacks, many French decision-makers began arguing in favor of strengthening cooperation with the US as a supplement to their cooperation with other EU member states (Lequesne, 2016). Despite a certain reticence between the two at a diplomatic level, France and the US enjoy long traditions of military cooperation (Rieker, 2005), and even more so after many years of cooperation in Afghanistan. This has resulted in mutual respect and close collaboration that was further facilitated by France’s reintegration into NATO’s integrated military structures in 2009 (Rieker, 2013) and French willingness to take a leading role in Libya in 2011.

With the election of Trump, the US interest in Africa changed again, this time more fundamentally. The very idea of becoming engaged in countries that were not seen as a direct threat to US security was now questioned. Thus, the launch of the Trump administration’s African Strategy in December 2018 signaled a change away from fighting terrorism towards countering Chinese and Russian influence on the continent (Wyatt, 2019). The Pentagon also stated that, by the end of 2020, it planned to reduce the number of US troops in Africa by 10% (Olsen, 2019). This was particularly concerning for France, as its engagement in the Sahel region had become largely dependent on US support. While the US contingent deployed in the French-led Barkhane operation (mostly in Niger) consisted of less than 1,000 men, the French operation had been dependent on the US for the following three core capabilities: (a) intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; (b) air-to-air refueling; and (c) strategic lift—capabilities that neither France nor the other European countries adequately possess. Such cooperation, whereby the US provides financial and military assistance and France provides human intelligence, local knowledge, and “boots on the ground,” had functioned well, being perceived as a win-win for both parties (Olsen, 2018).

According to French Air Force Brigadier General Cyril Carcy, who until August 2020 was based in N’Djamena as deputy commander of the Barkhane operation, the US went on to reduce its assistance in the Sahel by roughly half. In May 2020, he argued that while some of this had been replaced by assistance from other European allies, it had been necessary to change tactics. In his view, although the US contribution is limited—costing around

\$60 million—it is nevertheless a key factor in French operations (as cited in Delaporte, 2020).

Beyond direct assistance to the French-led operation, Washington also has a 4,000-strong military base in Djibouti—historically, a French strategic military haven. Furthermore, since its inception in 2008, AFRICOM has operated in almost every African country, making the US’ presence on the continent increasingly visible. While Trump and his Secretary of Defense Mark Esper pushed for cuts to US forces on the African continent (AFRICOM forces), Biden removed this prospect from the agenda when he took over. Following the meeting of US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly at the Pentagon on July 9, 2021, it was announced that the two countries would be enhancing the cooperation between their special operations forces after the signing of a new roadmap with a particular focus on Africa (“US, France boosting special ops,” 2021).

Despite this reconfirmed engagement from the American side since Biden took office, the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the announcement of the AUKUS have led to a certain degree of uncertainty regarding the long-term motives of US engagement alongside Europeans and in areas that may be of more direct importance to them. To reassure the French, the US announced a stronger, rather than weaker, commitment to the Sahel in the wake of AUKUS (Ricard & Smolar, 2021). Together with the increased US commitment to European security after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this must be understood as a way of emphasizing the continued importance of the transatlantic security community.

The election of Biden was not the only reason why the cuts undertaken by the US to their presence in Africa have been less dramatic than announced by the Trump administration. There was also a certain opposition to such a reduction in Congress. However, the main reason underlying this position is not concern over the continued threat of terrorism but rather an apprehension over increased great power competition in Africa from China, which opened its first African military base in Djibouti in 2017. Thus, rather than shrinking, the US military’s footprint in Africa has continued to grow (Campbell, 2020). However, the rationale for engagement has changed: while previously it was motivated by counter-terrorism, it is now driven by a need to balance China’s increased engagement in the region. Such a change is unsurprising and in line with more fundamental changes in wider US foreign policy priorities. But it means that the continued US engagement in Africa is not necessarily for the same reasons as the French or the Europeans. This indicates that this cooperation might be less a result of a community of common interests.

As we have shown, transatlantic military cooperation in Africa mostly revolves around Franco-US cooperation. This does not mean that the rest of Europe is unconcerned with Africa—in fact, Africa is of key importance to many European countries, as well as for the EU. While

this has always been true to a degree, it has become increasingly significant considering the threat posed by international terrorism, and even more so following the migration crisis of 2015. France has assumed a key role (leader) with most EU members as followers in the fight against international terrorism, and the EU remains—through its continued focus on development, civil protection, and humanitarian aid—a key actor (leader) in combatting the root causes of both terrorism and migration.

4. Making Sense of the Differentiated European Engagement in Africa

4.1. The EU Institutions Engaged in Long Term Stability Promotion

The EU's activities in Africa have been, and remain, largely concentrated around various forms of development and humanitarian aid. Given that the EU is the world's largest donor, this inevitably means that it plays a crucial role on the continent. Interestingly, while the African people generally have little knowledge about the EU or what it is doing, its European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) agency is well known (Bøås & Rieker, 2019). Still, there is no deep transatlantic cooperation in this area.

Since the turn of the millennium, and because of the 9/11 attacks, several initiatives were undertaken by the EU to move beyond purely development cooperation and aid, opening Africa–EU relations to issues of joint political concern, including counter-terrorism. In the initial years following 9/11, however, the EU's focus on counter-terrorism led to a period of inward-looking capacity building. However, when the “foreign fighter syndrome” came to the fore, this became a key issue in the EU's foreign and security policymaking, and the borders between internal and external counter-terrorism became less clear. Thus, during the second half of 2014, this issue dominated the agendas of both the Foreign Affairs Council and the Justice and Home Affairs Council. Having adopted a “counter-terrorism strategy for Syria and Iraq with particular focus on foreign fighters” (Council of the EU, 2015a), the Council of the EU decided to step up external action to counter-terrorism, in particular in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and the Sahel (Council of the EU, 2015b). Even though a gradual securitization of the EU–African relationship can be observed over the past 20 years, there are few signs of a transatlantic dimension to this work.

The Africa–EU strategy adopted in 2007 aimed to take the relationship between the two parties to a new strategic level, with strengthened political partnership and enhanced cooperation at all levels, including counter-terrorism (Council of the EU, 2007). Despite a sincere willingness to improve the relationship on both sides, the impact of the global financial crisis in 2007–2008 prompted the EU to shift its focus back toward internal challenges. It was not until the aftermath

of the (failed) Arab Spring in 2011 that Africa once again made its way to the top of the EU's agenda. The war in Libya and the fall of the Gaddafi regime also led to increased instability across the whole of the Sahel region. With the strengthening of jihadi groups that could potentially threaten Europe, the need for greater engagement in counter-terrorism on the African continent became pressing. As the EU tends not to react quickly to such crises, it was France that acted on Europe's behalf—first, by taking the lead in the NATO military operation in Libya and then, a few years later, by sending troops to Mali to assist the Malian government in its fight against jihadist groups through the Serval operation. This crisis response operation was replaced by the Barkhane operation in 2014, which has been a more long-term engagement.

France has been eager to get other European states more engaged from the start. While this did take some time, the EU has become involved through the CSDP European Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali, as well as two civilian capacity missions (EUCAP Sahel) in Mali and Niger. Beyond this, the EU supports the G5 Sahel, an institutional framework for coordinating regional cooperation in development policies and security matters in the region. Funding covers necessary infrastructure and equipment, integrating a police component, and providing a framework for compliance with human rights. In April 2015, the European Commission highlighted that EU action against terrorism should address the root causes of extremism through preventive measures (European Commission, 2015). Building on this, the 2016 Global Strategy highlights the EU's commitment to broadening partnerships and deepening dialogue with a multitude of actors, reiterating the EU's aim of strengthening internal–external security links and addressing the security–development nexus (EEAS, 2016).

In addition to combatting the terrorist threat in the Sahel region, which could threaten Europe should Mali turn into a jihadist-led “Malistan,” the issue of migration has become another—if not the key—concern shaping EU–African relations since 2015. A series of missions to assist various African countries with border controls and other security measures have been deployed. The EU has also continued its focus on more long-term, preventive measures. For instance, at the 2017 summit between the EU and the African Union, an agreement was made to invest in African youth, prompted by the fact that 60% of the African population is under the age of 25. Both parties also (finally) condemned the inhuman treatment of migrants and refugees in Libya, adopting a joint statement on the issue. The European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) issued a joint communication to the European Parliament and the European Council that proposed enhanced cooperation in the green transition and energy access, digital transformation, sustainable growth and jobs, peace and governance, and migration and mobility (European Commission & High Representative, 2020). Thus, despite

a tendency towards securitization, the dominant part of EU engagement remains linked to its development and humanitarian aid programs.

In Mali, the EU's engagement is coordinated by the EEAS delegation in Bamako. However, there is also a division of labor whereby France takes the lead on military engagement, supported by the EU (CSDP missions) and the US, and the EU leads on the more long-term policies. However, due to the challenging situation on the ground, a security perspective has also been increasingly applied to long-term programs. The 2015 Valetta EU Migration Summit established the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), which is managed by the European Commission and aims to address the root causes of migration.

It has been argued that the basis of the EU's strategy towards Africa in general, and the Sahel region in particular, has changed from being a "security–development nexus" to a "security–migration–development nexus," indicating a move towards a foreign and security policy driven by the interests of European member states rather than a contextualized analysis of the needs of the African countries in question (Molenaar & El Kamouni-Janssen, 2017). This has been the case regarding the EU's relations in the Sahel region ever since the Sahel strategy was adopted in 2011 and various CSDP missions were deployed between 2012 and 2014 (EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali), but it has increasingly become the dominant narrative in the EU's relations with Africa in general. In short, it has made the EU's foreign policy more instrumental and security-driven (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020, p. 940).

Despite this challenging context, the overall EU–US cooperation in Africa has not increased. Sifting through the speeches given by EU officials on transatlantic relations over the past two years, we find that Africa is absent from the agenda. In a speech on transatlantic relations given by Federica Mogherini (then HR/VP and vice president of the European Commission) in the plenary session of the European Parliament in September 2018, Africa is not even mentioned (Mogherini, 2018a). The same goes for speeches given by EU officials during visits to the US. For instance, in the remarks of Julian King (the then British European Commissioner) at the Wilson Center in 2019 regarding the EU's response to asymmetric threats, Africa does not feature on the agenda at all (Wilson Center, 2019). Meanwhile, in the 2018 speech Mogherini gave at Harvard Kennedy School, Africa is mentioned just once, in the context of a region where the EU is heavily engaged rather than as an area of transatlantic cooperation (Mogherini, 2018b). Similarly, current HR/VP Josep Borrell's speeches emphasize Africa's importance to the EU without mentioning any kind of transatlantic cooperation (Borrell, 2020). A joint declaration followed the EU–US summit in June 2021 and noted the need to strengthen EU–US cooperation in Africa briefly, but in very general terms (European Council, 2021).

While there is little concrete EU–US cooperation on Africa, Franco-US cooperation remains crucial (Olsen,

2019). The question is whether this can be considered as something more than bilateral cooperation—that is, as part of a broader transatlantic cooperation. This may be the case if the EU has directly or indirectly "delegated" leadership/authority to France (through NATO or ad hoc coalitions) regarding taking primary responsibility for the European military crisis response in Africa, including France's interventions in Libya and Mali. This is what we refer to here as differentiated integration in the field of external security (Rieker, 2021a). The following section considers whether the French engagement in Africa can be regarded as such.

5. The French Military Actions Understood in a European Context

While Africa is crucial to Europe generally, the continent is particularly important to France. This is related to France's colonial past and a perception of having particular responsibility to contribute to the African continent's positive development. Though France still has some national economic interests in Africa (for example, the state-owned energy company, Orano, sources a large proportion of its uranium from Niger, and Total has oil fields in Mali), these are far less important today and are no longer the key motivation for French engagement (Rieker, 2017, 2021b). If France's current engagement can be linked to national interests, it mainly relates to national security concerns. From 2012 onwards, terrorism in France was increasingly linked to the rise of Daesh internationally. Thus, since 2013, a key concern has been preventing jihadists from taking over Mali, thereby turning it into a potential haven for terrorists. Given that this represents a threat to Western nations more generally, France has endeavored to Europeanize its engagement and seek support from the US. French political leaders have a long history of trying to convince other EU member states of the importance of stability in Africa, which explains why French political leaders have been pushing the importance of the southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The French 2013 White Paper on defense and national security explicitly emphasizes that political instability in the Sahel region should not only be seen as a threat to France but as a threat to Europe at large (Ministère des Armées, 2013, p. 54).

This message has been easier to convey in the wake of the migration crisis in 2015 and the resultant change in threat perception across Europe. While instability in the Sahel region may not be on the top of the EU's priorities in EU–US relations, it is a priority in its external relations more generally, as evidenced by the ongoing process towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa (European Commission & High Representative, 2020). France continues to take a leading role in this initiative, with President Macron working hard to convince other EU member states of the need for a new partnership with Africa, arguing in 2020 that "if Europe is to succeed, Africa must succeed" (Macron, 2020). While some

European states have until recently remained reluctant to send troops to the Sahel region, they have gradually become more committed to doing so. Ultimately, French engagement in the Sahel is perceived as being done on behalf of Europe as a whole—at least until the EU becomes capable and willing to take charge of such military operations. With the French decision to withdraw all its troops involved in Barkhane, due to increased tension between France and the Military Junta in power since it seized power in August 2020, this is now becoming increasingly urgent.

Over time, the French troops have become increasingly unpopular with the local population (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020). Speaking after the NATO summit in London in December 2019, Macron asked: “Do they want us to be there? Do they need us?” To get an answer, he called a summit in early January 2020 in the small town of Pau in France. While the president of Burkina Faso, Roch Marc Kaboré, criticized Macron’s provocative question, he later joined the presidents of Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Chad in releasing a joint statement confirming they all wanted France to stay. More generally, though the leaders of these countries may have been critical of the French engagement, their comments generally related to the character and size of the French presence rather than the presence itself. Most countries want increased military engagement to fight jihadism rather than a decrease (Le Cam, 2021). This is also why France’s July 2021 announcement that it intended to reduce its military presence was not well-received. Despite having been planned for some time, it provoked a negative reaction from the Malian head of state, who accused France of abandoning Mali at a critical time (“Le Mali reproche à la France,” 2021). However, as the French president and government emphasized, this should not be seen as France leaving but as part of the French ambition to speed up the Europeanization of the engagement beyond the deployment of CSDP missions.

A first step in this direction was taken by Macron at the beginning of his presidency when, together with German chancellor Angela Merkel at a G5 meeting in Nouakchott in Mauritania in July 2017, he called for a “Sahel alliance.” The goal of this alliance was for France and Germany, alongside other international partners, to play a more effective role in improving stability in the Sahel through addressing development concerns, together with security and governance work. The alliance was established by France, Germany, the EU, the African Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, and the World Bank, and has since expanded its membership to include Italy, Spain, the UK, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Denmark (Lebovich, 2020). Though France had already attempted a comprehensive approach along these lines, the idea behind the alliance was to make it more of an international, or at least a better coordinated, European effort.

More recently, however, the focus has been on increasing the importance of the European dimension

of military engagement in the region, thereby facilitating a potential reduction in the French presence (“France said to plan cuts,” 2020). The Takuba task force, initiated on March 26, 2020, by the governments of Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Mali, Niger, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, and the UK, must therefore be understood in such a perspective. The task force was initially integrated into the command of the French Barkhane operation. It is tasked with advising, assisting, and accompanying the Malian armed forces in coordination with G5 Sahel partners and other international actors on the ground, including the UN mission MINUSMA, as well as the EU missions EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali, and EUCAP Sahel Niger. So far, contributions have been pledged by Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, and Sweden. In many ways, this task force represents a success for France, which has long sought European partners in its fight against Islamist militants in the Sahel region to share the costs of such an engagement. However, the Malian authorities saw the French announced a reduction in forces as a betrayal and led them to reach out to the Wagner group (with close ties to Russian authorities). Concerns have been raised by France and the EU with regards to this engagement, as the Wagner Group has caused controversy through its involvement in Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. However, how it will impact the European engagement in Mali is still to be seen.

5.1. European Engagement in Africa as an Example of Differentiated Integration

In terms of foreign security and defense policy, the EU is clearly a hybrid. Still, rather than talking about the EU as a unified or fragmented actor in this field, it makes more sense to refer to it as *a differentiated actor* with policy implementation taking place at various levels of government: at the level of the European Commission, the EEAS, as well as by certain member states. However, the key question is this: Can these various actors and their different approaches be viewed as a whole—that is, as a common European engagement working towards shared long-term goals based on a joint world view and values?

Clearly, this is not always the case. Sometimes member states have different positions, making it difficult to reach a common position/decision. There are also times when a lack of willingness to commit resources limits the decisions that can be made. In such cases, it may be easier to outsource the required action to a member state with the resources and political will to intervene. The unanimous support given by the EU and its member states both for France’s intervention in Mali in 2013 and its continued—although reduced—engagement may be seen in such a context and offers a concrete example of the move towards a more differentiated European approach to Africa.

For France, increased security and defense integration through differentiation is also increasingly seen as the most efficient way of building up a strong and independent European defense capacity. The current French political leadership has stressed the need for greater European strategic sovereignty given the rapidly changing geopolitical context and transatlantic alliance (Macron, 2020). However, building a European defense capacity capable of tackling future crises and conflicts takes time. Given that France alone cannot handle all the potential crises that may arise, a process of differentiated integration in this area seems to have become the country's preferred strategy. As Clément Beaune, the French minister for European affairs, states in a recent key article in *Politique Etrangère* (Beaune, 2020, p. 14), this approach builds on three core aspects: independence, power, and identity. Accordingly, Europe must develop its capacity to act independently, with such capacity constructed on an existing European identity that, despite its diversity, reflects a greater cultural unity within Europe than exists between certain European countries and China, Russia, and even with the US (Beaune, 2020, p. 16). According to Beaune, this more unified European role can only be achieved through differentiated European integration, or what he calls "a unique framework, differentiated formats" (p. 23, translation by the author). In the area of defense, the European Intervention Initiative is viewed as being just as important as internal EU processes for building "a European defence and security" (Beaune, 2020, pp. 23–24, translation by the author) and a way of sharing the costs of a potential common intervention under French leadership. Interestingly, this approach is now confirmed in the newly adopted Strategic Compass, which emphasizes that the need to be better at acting rapidly and robustly whenever a crisis erupts requires increased flexibility, including close cooperation with European-led ad hoc missions and operations (Council of the EU, 2022, p. 3).

6. Concluding Remarks

This article shows that transatlantic security cooperation in Africa is essentially about French-American cooperation. NATO is absent, and while the EU is heavily engaged, there is little cooperation between the EU and the US in this region. However, the French security engagement in the Sahel must be understood as something more than simply a French national endeavor. Rather it must be interpreted as a European military engagement under French leadership. As explained in this article, such a perspective is possible if we understand the ongoing European defense integration as a form of differentiated or flexible integration where different actors take on different roles (in this case, France as a leader and the rest of the EU as followers). Following on from this, the French-American security cooperation in Africa must then be understood as an expression of transatlantic (or EU–US) security relations.

By applying such a perspective, do we then see a weakening or a strengthening of the transatlantic security cooperation in Africa? As argued in the introduction to this article, most theories in international relations anticipate a more insecure geopolitical context will lead to a strengthening, rather than a weakening, of transatlantic relations. However, this assumption will depend on the prevalence of some form of transatlantic community. So far, structural changes have led to a somewhat weaker transatlantic community of security interests, with the US more oriented towards China and Europe towards its borders (Russia in the east and Africa in the south). Despite this development, we see that the US (under Biden) continues to be engaged in the Sahel and supports Europe against increased Russian aggression. While a continued engagement in the Sahel could simply be a result of the US interest in keeping a certain level of control over an increased Chinese engagement in the region, the American willingness to continue to support the French and the European engagement in both the Sahel and on the Eastern flank must be based on different reasoning. It must be explained by the existence of something other than common security interests and rather by the continued existence of some form of institutionalized cooperation dynamic, a common set of values, and a common set of practices. Whether this will endure under a different US administration, however, is another question, and remains to be seen.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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