Committee: NATO
Topic: Addressing Sahel instability, mercenary proliferation, and irregular migration
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Overview of the problem

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) faces an unstable, unpredictable and dangerous security environment along its southern flank, driven primarily by a cascade of interconnected political and humanitarian crises throughout the Sahel region. The fundamental issue undermining stability in this critical zone lies in a massive and expanding vacuum of governance and authority, which has spread across sub-Saharan territories. Between 2020 and 2023 six successful military coups toppled civilian administrations across the Sahel, displacing over three million civilians. Chiefly fundamentalist rebel groups and transnational terrorist cells linked to Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates, have seized control of vast territories to extend their operational reach. This highly unstable scenario is further intensified by the rapid and systematic proliferation of state-backed Russian mercenaries operating under the name “Africa Corps”, an entity previously known internationally as the Wagner Group. These foreign paramilitary actors exploit the lack of local state control to strengthen their military and logistical presence. Consequently, the total collapse of border controls and regional security networks has reactivated old, unsupervised irregular migration routes that flow heavily toward maritime corridors, applying constant, intense and asymmetric pressure on Europe's southern borders

The resolution or even the management of this intense multidimensional crisis involves a highly diverse group of international, regional and national actors, each with deeply conflicting geopolitical agendas, strategic mandates, and operational objectives. Key institutional actors driving the western and regional response include NATO, the European Union, the African Union and the economic community of West African States (ECOWAS). Standing in direct and stark opposition to these traditional Western and regional institutions are the Russian Federation and the newly formed Alliance of Sahel States, a defensive pact established by the hostile military juntas currently governing the sovereign territories of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. In this divided environment the primary challenge for international policymakers and military strategists is managing severely fractured diplomatic relations with these military regimes, which actively reject cooperation with the West and have systematically expelled international observers. Furthermore, security focus must contend with highly adaptable, asymmetric insurgencies that infiltrate local communities, while simultaneously seeking ways to encounter the sophisticated hybrid warfare tactics employed by Russian mercenaries. These state-proxy actors systematically exploit local natural resources to fund their permanent presence and deliberately weaponize migration flows to generate political friction. Given these significant structural constraints,

delegates in this committee will focus their discussions on how NATO can promote long-term stability and rebuild local security frameworks within its “southern neighborhood” all without resorting to direct territorial governance or military intervention on African soil. Deliberations should focus on reforming maritime surveillance operations within existing frameworks, strengthening electronic intelligence sharing networks among allies, establishing clear strategic “red lines” regarding the deployment of Russian mercenaries near NATO borders, and forging strategic security partnerships with cooperating coastal nations, with the goal of effectively dismantling transitional human trafficking networks

NATO faces growing security threats along its southern flank due to political instability, military coups, terrorism and foreign inference across the Sahel region. The expansion of extremist groups, Russian paramilitary forces, and irregular migration networks has further weakened regional security and increased pressure on Europe´s southern borders. Addressing this crisis requires coordinated international cooperation, stronger intelligence sharing mechanisms, improved maritime surveillance and strategic partnership with regional coastal nations. The committee must identify sustainable solutions that strengthen regional stability and protect NATO’s security interests without resorting to direct military intervention or territorial governance in Africa

Introduction

The Sahel, the semi-arid transition zone between the Sahara Desert and the African savannas has become the global epicenter of irregular conflict. This makes it a fundamental element of the security for NATO’s southern flank, as the absence of a legal order in the region poses a direct threat to Euro- Atlantic borders. To understand the crisis, delegates must control four key concepts: strategic foresight: NATO’s capacity to anticipate and mitigate multidimensional threats along its borders; private military companies and mercenaries non-state corporate entities that provide combat services outside the framework of international humanitarian law; irregular migration the unauthorized movement of people across borders and hybrid warfare a strategy that combines conventional military pressure with cyberattacks, disinformation and the deliberate manipulation of migration crises to weaken adversaries from within. This situation is a matter of global concern, as instability in the Sahel acts as a direct catalyst for international terrorism, illegal arms trafficking and the existence of systematic criminal networks that affect global stability far beyond Africa's borders. While NATO lacks the mandate to exercise direct territorial governance, perform internal policing, or conduct combat deployments in Africa, this committee can intervene through indirect mechanisms: by providing satellite- based geospatial intelligence, implementing defense capacity building programs, offering tactical training to regional partners, and coordinating maritime security operations through initiatives such as Operational Sea Guardian. By reading this paper, delegates will learn how local governance failures in sub-Saharan Africa directly manifest as complex hybrid security threats inside the Euro-Atlantic area, challenging traditional collective defense mechanisms.

Historical Background

The contemporary security crisis in the Sahel has a recent origin, linked directly to the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011. The subsequent death of Muammar Gaddafi led to the return of a large number of highly experienced and heavily armed Tuareg mercenaries to northern Mali; they brought modern weaponry with them and ignited a violent separatist rebellion in 2012. These Tuareg revolts were quickly co-opted by fundamentalist factions linked to Al-Qaeda, which destabilized the authority of the central government. Half of the extremists advanced toward Bamako, France launched Operation Serval which later became Operation Barkhane in coordination with the United Nations mission, MINUSMA, between 2013 and 2014. However, the situation deteriorated drastically between 2020 and 2023, when a wave of military coups toppled the democratic governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, a trend fueled by deep social frustration over worsening security conditions. This resulted in the complete expulsion of western forces including the French military, UN peacekeepers, and U.S. counterterrorism units between 2023 and 2024, paving the way for the formal creation of the pro-Russian Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Previous international efforts yielded mixed results: while they achieved notable tactical successes, such as the neutralization of key insurgent commanders, they failed to stabilize the region in the long term. Ultimately, these Western strategies failed because they relied too heavily on kinetic military solutions, while ignoring issues such as structural poverty, deeply entrenched local corruption, and lack of a state infrastructure, the inability to develop legitimate institutional capacity created a serious security vacuum, which local military juntas quickly filled by aligning themselves with other geopolitical actors.

The Situation Today

The current reality in the Sahel is characterized by a complete reconfiguration of regional security architectures: the military regimes of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have formally withdrawn from ECOWAS to establish the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) shifting their defense reliance entirely toward Moscow. Today, this region has become the global epicenter of terrorism related mortality, accounting for nearly half of all such deaths worldwide. This severe deterioration in security has triggered a humanitarian catastrophe, leading to the internal displacement of millions of people across the region. Concurrently, the repeal of Niger’s Law 2015-36, a key piece of legislation aimed at combating illicit trafficking, has fully reopened historical transit routes through Agadez, resulting in an exponential increase in irregular migration flows toward the maritime routes of the Central Mediterranean. This crisis uses a direct pressure on the European Union’s border systems and manipulates democratic electoral cycles by manipulating human-smuggling networks as a tool of coercion. A critical contemporary threat that delegates may observe primarily in the systematic entrenchment of the Russian-backed “Africa Corps”. Its mercenary forces have secured profitable concessions for the extraction of gold and lithium in Mali and Burkina Faso, utilizing these natural resources to avoid Western financial sanctions and fund their hybrid warfare operations

The various groups involved in this conflict have diverse motivations, rooted in security, resource control and survival. Within NATO, the primary objective is to protect the southern flank against hybrid threats, contain violent extremist organizations and counter Russia’s asymmetric isolation; however , internal divisions persist. While southern European allies such as Italy and Spain advocate for rigorous maritime border security and strict migration management, eastern European members maintain a firm focus on conventional dictation against Russia along the eastern flank. For their part, the military juntas governing the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) prioritize, above all else, the absolute survival of their regimes and the elimination of internal insurgencies. They view the West emphasis on democratic transitions and human rights as hypocritical neocolonial interference; consequently, they demand the total withdrawal of western troops while granting operational access to Russian paramilitary units in exchange for direct tactical protection. The Russian federation perceives the Sahel as a highly advantageous theater for projecting its power, exploiting mineral wealth and diverting the West's strategic attention away from eastern Europe. Its deliberate goal is to destabilize the European Union's southern borders through the deployment of state linked mercenaries, thereby gaining influence over critical migration corridors and natural resources. Meanwhile various international groups and non-profit organizations including several United Nations agencies focus primarily on mitigating the severe humanitarian crisis, protecting displaced populations, and documenting widespread human rights violations committed by both insurgent factions and mercenary forces. The european union operates on a comprehensive humanitarian development security chain combining targeted development aid with strict border management strategies via Frontex to curb irregular migration, while ECOWAS seeks to preserve regional institutional stability and uphold democratic governance rules, through its political influence has been severely weakened by the formal withdrawal of the AES states. Finally regular people and local vulnerable communities remain the primary victims of this multi-sided conflict. Caught between the brutal asymmetric tactics of jihadist insurgencies and the indiscriminate, heavy handed counter offensives launched by state forces and foreign mercenaries, local communities suffer from systematic violence and climate induced resource scarcity; their primary objective is the restoration of human security, legitimate local judicial systems and sustainable economic business opportunities

Past Attempts and Existing Frameworks

Previous international and regional frameworks addressing the Sahel crisis have largely failed due to a hyper militarized approach that neglected local governance, rule of law, and socioeconomic realities, ultimately creating a security and geopolitical vacuum. Over the past decade, past UN resolutions and agreements sought to stabilize the region through massive peacekeeping deployments, chief among this was the **UN MINUSMA mission** in Mali, established under the Resolution 2100 to protect civilians and support political transitions, which became one of the deadliest operations in UN history before being

completely dismantled under Resolution 2690 at the explicit demand of the Malian military junta. Concurrently, international programs and projects led by Western powers focused heavily on unilateral and multilateral counterterrorism operations.
France's Operation Barkhane and the Europeans special forces coalition known as the Takuba Task Force temporarily contained jihadist expansions and neutralized high-profile insurgent leaders, but the failed to secure long term stability and ultimately collapsed following a wave of military coups and a surge in anti western sentiment that led to the total expulsion of europeans forces.

Different regions have tried contrasting strategies to manage the interconnected issues of irregular migration and political instability, yielding highly mixed results. The European Union heavily relied on the externalization of its borders, turning Sahelian countries into buffer zones. A prime example was Niger's anti smuggling law (Law 2015-36), which curbed irregular passage and reduced the visible flow of migrants through the transit hub of Agadez toward Europe but simultaneously destroyed the local economy that depended on trade and transit. Following the 2023 coup in Niger, the military junta repealed the migration laws in retaliation against Western sanctions, immediately reviving irregular migration routes. On a regional level the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) attempted to enforce democratic norms through severe economic blockades and border closures. Instead of forcing a return to constitutional rule, this aggressive approach triggered a severe backfire; Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger fractured the regional bloc entirely to found the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), forcing ECOWAS to abandon its hardline stance and enter into a complex, pragmatic dialogue to prevent absolute regional isolation.

What worked well in these previous attempts was the short term containment of military groups and tactical coordination among international intelligence units. However, what failed completely was the "train and equip" model, which lured weapons and tactical knowledge into local armies without addressing systemic corruption, human rights abuses by state soldiers, and the lack of basic government services in rural areas. According to comprehensive analyses by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP Berlin Foundation), the current international architecture is still missing an integrated approach that prioritizes judicial and institutional reform over mere military strength. Furthermore, effective multilateral mechanisms to mitigate climate driven displacement, poverty alleviations projects, and the establishment of legal migration pathways remain completely unaddressed. These structural gaps and the failure of Western led frameworks have directly driven Sahelian juntas to reject traditional partnerships and rely heavily on the proliferation of Russian mercenary forces such as the Africa Corps (formerly the Wagner Group), further complicating global security frameworks.

The implementation of any cohesive framework to address the triple crisis of Sahelian instability, mercenary proliferation, and irregular migration faces profound operational and structural obstacles.

Primarily, severe geopolitical disagreements among key state actors paralyze coordinated action. While European powers and traditional regional bodies demand an immediate return to constitutional democracy and the expulsion of foreign mercenaries, the military juntas of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, reject what they perceive as western neocolonial interference. This diplomatic deadlock is worsened by a critical lack of financial resources and material funding. Local Sahelian States lack the budget to sustain basic public services, judicial infrastructure, or border management forces without external aid. Paradoxically, international funding has dried up or been frozen as Western donors refuse to directly finance military regimes that are openly aligned with Russian security structures.

Beyond politics and funding, severe technical and technological deficits cripple the enforcement of security and migration policies. The Sahel covers millions of square kilometers of vast, porous desert terrain, and local security forces lack the necessary surveillance technology, such as drone networks, advanced satellite imagery and secure cross border communication systems to effectively monitor illicit flows. This technological gap leaves borders open to both heavily armed jihadist factions and complex human trafficking networks. Furthermore, the region is entangled in intricate legal complications. The legal status of foreign private military companies, like the Russian Africa Corps, remains highly ambiguous, shielding them from local accountability and complicating international prosecution for documented human rights violations. Concurrently, the breakdown of regional cooperation has left international maritime and land border agreements unenforceable, as states refuse to extradite criminals or share intelligence across hostile jurisdictions.

Deep seated cultural and religious differences continue to undermine top-down international interventions. For centuries, the pastoralist and nomadic communities of the Sahel, such as the Tuareg and Fulani, have relied on seasonal cross border mobility for survival, a cultural practice completely at odds with rigid, western style border enforcement and state centric migration controls. Furthermore, radical jihadist groups have successfully exploited local socioreligious dynamics, presenting themselves as purer alternatives to corrupt secular governments and tapping into historical ethnic grievances. When international operations treat these deeply rooted local conflicts purely as technical security threats or law enforcement problems, they alienate the civilian population, driving local communities closer to rebel factions or transnational smuggling networks as their only means of economic survival.

NATO holds a distinct and specialized mandate to address the compounding threats on its Southern Flank. Though its operational authority is bound by strict institutional limits. This committee possesses the power to authorize collective security measures, deploy specialized defense advisory missions, mandate maritime and aerial surveillance operations, and orchestrate comprehensive intelligence sharing networks among member states. However, its primary role in this specific context is not to act as a global police force, but rather to formulate strategic security policies, defense capacity building initiative and counter

hybrid warfare frameworks that protect Allied security interests from the spillover effects of Sahelian instability, such as mercenary expansion and weaponized migration flows.

The committee must recognize that NATO's effectiveness depends on its ability to operate within international law and respect the sovereignty of non member states. The Alliance cannot independently impose political transitions, enforce migration policies, or conduct military operations inside Sahelian countries without the necessary legal authorization and political consent. Instead, it can strengthen partnerships with the African Union, the United Nations, the European Union, and regional organizations to improve security coordination, intelligence exchange, and institutional resilience. Furthermore, NATO can provide technical assistance, training, and strategic planning support to help partner countries address threats while avoiding the mistakes of previous foreign led interventions.

Ultimately, the committee must balance the immediate need to protect Allied security with the long term necessity of addressing the structural causes of instability. Delegates are expected to develop comprehensive and realistic resolutions that strengthen regional security cooperation, prevent the expansion of mercenary networks, and establish safer and more effective approaches to irregular migration. Any proposed solution must prioritize sustainable partnerships, civilian protection, and respect for international law rather than relying exclusively on military forces.

- How can NATO address the security threats emerging from the Sahel without violating the sovereignty of non member states or repeating the failures of previous foreign military interventions?
- How can NATO prevent the expansion of Russian mercenary networks, such as the Africa Corps, without escalating geopolitical tensions or creating further instability in the region?
- Should NATO prioritize military and intelligence cooperation with regional governments, or focus on strengthening civilian institutions, judicial systems, and local governance to address the root causes of instability?
- What mechanisms could NATO establish to improve intelligence sharing and border surveillance while protecting civilian populations and preventing human rights violations?
- How can NATO cooperate with the African Union, ECOWAS, and the United Nations to create a coordinated response to Sahelian instability despite the fragmentation of regional organizations?
- To what extent should irregular migration be treated as a security concern, and how can NATO address the risks of human trafficking and smuggling without criminalizing migrants or undermining their fundamental rights?

- How can the international community develop safer and more effective migration pathways while reducing the influence of human trafficking networks and preventing the exploitation of vulnerable populations?
- What role should NATO play in addressing the economic and environmental factors, such as poverty, food insecurity, and climate related displacement, that contribute to instability and irregular migration?
- How can NATO ensure that security assistance and military training do not contribute to human rights abuses, corruption, or the strengthening of authoritarian military regimes?
- Should NATO develop a long term strategy focused on strengthening the resilience of its Southern Flank, and how could this strategy balance counterterrorism, migration management, and regional cooperation?
- What specific measures can NATO implement to prevent the Sahel crisis from expanding into a broader international security threat while ensuring that regional countries remain the primary actors in determining their own future?

The instability of the Sahel represents one of the most complex and interconnected security challenges facing the international community. The proliferation of mercenary forces, the expansion of extremist organizations, the breakdown of regional cooperation, and the increasing pressure of irregular migration demonstrate that the crisis cannot be resolved through military intervention alone. Previous international efforts have shown that short term security gains are insufficient when they fail to address the underlying political, economic, and institutional weaknesses that allow instability to persist.

For NATO, this challenge demands a strategic and coordinated response that protects Allied security interests while respecting the sovereignty and political realities of Sahelian countries. The alliance must recognize that lasting stability cannot be imposed externally, but must instead be built through sustainable partnerships, effective regional cooperation, and the strengthening of local institutions. Addressing mercenary proliferation requires improved intelligence sharing, stronger international accountability mechanisms and cooperation with regional and international organizations. Similarly irregular migration must be approached through a comprehensive framework that distinguishes between security threats, humanitarian needs, and the legitimate movement of people.

Delegates must therefore move beyond traditional military approaches and develop practical solutions that address both the immediate threats and their underlying causes. The objective is not simply to contain instability within the Sahel, but to prevent its further expansion while creating the conditions for long term regional resilience. Through responsible cooperation, strategic diplomacy, and a commitment to

international law, NATO and its partners can contribute to a more secure and stable future for both the Sahel and the international community.

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