



# Towards a Sahel Confederation: Challenges and Prospects for Regional Unity

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## Abstract

The Sahel region faces persistent challenges including political instability, economic underdevelopment, security threats, and environmental crises. In response to these challenges, regional cooperation has emerged as a crucial strategy for fostering stability and development. This paper explores the feasibility of establishing a Sahel Confederation, analysing both the challenges and potential benefits of deeper regional integration. Key obstacles such as governance instability, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and external geopolitical pressures are examined. The study assesses the economic and security advantages of a confederation, mainly in enhancing trade, counterterrorism efforts, and climate resilience. Drawing on comparative regional models and existing frameworks such as the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS, this paper highlights strategic pathways toward greater unity. Finally, the paper argues that while significant barriers exist, a confederation could provide a viable solution for fostering long-term stability and prosperity in the Sahel.

**Keywords:** Sahel Confederation, regional integration, security cooperation, economic development, political stability, ECOWAS, G5 Sahel, counterterrorism, governance, climate resilience.

## Introduction

The Sahel region, a vast semi-arid belt stretching across Africa from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, has long been a focal point of political, economic, and security challenges. Comprising countries such as Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Sudan, and Eritrea the region faces persistent instability fueled by terrorism, military coups, economic underdevelopment, and environmental degradation. Despite various national and international efforts to address these issues, the lack of a unified regional governance framework continues to hinder sustainable development and long-term stability.

Regional cooperation has emerged as a key strategy for addressing these shared challenges. Existing organisations such as the G5 Sahel<sup>1</sup>, Economic Community of West African States<sup>2</sup> (ECOWAS), and the African Union (AU) have played crucial roles in security coordination, economic policies, and political mediation. However, their effectiveness has been limited due to political fragmentation, external dependencies, and inadequate institutional frameworks. Considering these challenges, the idea of a Sahel Confederation formalised political and economic alliance has gained increasing relevance as a potential solution to foster stability, collective security, and economic integration.

This research paper, *'Towards a Sahel Confederation: Challenges and Prospects for Regional Unity'* examines the feasibility of establishing a Sahel Confederation, focusing on both the obstacles and opportunities associated with such an initiative. The study explores key challenges, including governance instability, ethnic

and linguistic diversity, and the geopolitical interests of external actors. Further, it assesses the potential benefits of deeper regional integration, particularly in areas such as counterterrorism, economic development, and climate resilience. By analysing historical precedents and comparative regional models, this paper aims to provide insights into whether a confederation could serve as a viable mechanism for promoting long-term peace and prosperity in the Sahel.



## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilising a combination of comparative analysis, case study evaluation, and policy review to assess the feasibility of a Sahel Confederation. Data is gathered from secondary sources, including academic publications, policy reports, government documents, and official statements from regional organisations such as G5 Sahel, ECOWAS, and the African Union (AU). A comparative analysis is conducted to examine historical examples of regional integration, such as the European Union (EU) and the East African Community (EAC), to identify key lessons applicable to the Sahel. In addition, case studies of existing regional frameworks within the Sahel provide insights into the effectiveness and limitations of cooperative efforts. The study also considers geopolitical dynamics, analysing the role of external actors such as the United Nations (UN), France, the United States, China, and Russia in shaping regional policies. The research findings are synthesised to highlight both the challenges and prospects of forming a Sahel Confederation, offering a balanced perspective on its potential impact on security, economic development, and governance in the region.

## Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to assess the feasibility of establishing a Sahel Confederation as a mechanism for enhancing regional stability, economic integration, and governance. Specifically, the research aims to analyse the key political, security, economic, and social challenges that could hinder such an initiative while also identifying potential opportunities for deeper cooperation among Sahelian nations. It seeks to examine the effectiveness of existing regional frameworks, such as G5 Sahel and ECOWAS, and evaluate

how a confederation could address their limitations. The study explores comparative regional models, drawing lessons from other confederations and economic unions to determine the best practices for implementation. By investigating the geopolitical influence of external actors and the role of international organisations, the research paper also aims to provide insights into the global implications of a Sahel Confederation. In the end, this paper aspires to contribute to the ongoing discourse on regionalism in Africa by offering strategic recommendations for fostering long-term peace, economic development, and political unity in the Sahel.

### **Importance**

This research is significant as it explores a potential solution to the persistent challenges faced by the Sahel region, including political instability, security threats, economic underdevelopment, and environmental degradation. By examining the feasibility of a Sahel Confederation, the study provides valuable insights into regional integration as a strategy for fostering long-term stability and development. Given the increasing geopolitical interest in the Sahel and the limitations of existing regional organizations such as the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS, this research offers a fresh perspective on how deeper cooperation could address governance failures and economic disparities. By drawing comparisons with successful regional models, the study highlights the best practices and lessons that can inform policy decisions. Policymakers, academics, and international stakeholders can use this research to develop more effective strategies for strengthening regional governance, enhancing security cooperation, and promoting economic resilience in the Sahel. Eventually, this study contributes to the broader discourse on regionalism in Africa, emphasising the need for institutional reforms and strategic collaboration to achieve sustainable development and peace in one of the world's most fragile regions.

### **Background**

Before colonial rule, the Sahel region was home to powerful empires and trade networks that fostered regional connections. Empires such as the Ghana Empire, Mali Empire, Songhai Empire, and Kanem-Bornu Empire facilitated cross-border trade, political alliances, and cultural exchanges across vast territories.<sup>3</sup> These historical ties created a shared economic and social identity, strengthening the idea of unity in the region. The Trans-Saharan trade routes deepened regional integration, linking West Africa to North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> The movement of goods, scholars, and religious leaders across these routes helped spread Islamic education, governance systems, and legal traditions, laying a foundation for common cultural values that persist today. These historical connections could serve as a basis for regional cooperation in a future Sahel Confederation.

Despite the historical unity of the Sahel, European colonial rule disrupted regional cohesion.<sup>5</sup> The partitioning of Africa by French, British, and Portuguese colonial powers in the 19th and 20th centuries resulted in the arbitrary drawing of borders that divided ethnic groups, trade routes, and cultural ties.<sup>6</sup> Colonial policies also favoured certain ethnic groups over others creating divisions that continue to fuel political instability and conflict today. These artificial national borders remain a major obstacle to regional unity as they prioritise national sovereignty over historical cultural ties.

Islam has historically been a strong cultural and religious bond across the Sahel, serving as a common spiritual, legal, and educational foundation.<sup>7</sup> The spread of Islamic scholarship through centers of learning in Timbuktu, Kano, and Agadez contributed to a shared intellectual tradition that connected people across modern national borders.<sup>8</sup> Islamic governance structures influenced legal and political systems in many Sahelian societies, promoting principles of justice, trade regulation, and conflict resolution. This religious commonality could help facilitate political and economic cooperation in a regional confederation. However, religious diversity within Islam can also create tensions. The rise of extremist groups that exploit religious identities for political purposes poses a challenge to regional unity. A future confederation would need to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue to maintain stability.

The Sahel is home to a vast array of ethnic and linguistic groups, including the Hausa, Fulani, Tuareg, Songhai, Kanuri, Bambara, and Wolof, among others.<sup>9</sup> This diversity has historically contributed to rich cultural exchanges and economic cooperation as different groups specialise in trade, agriculture, and livestock herding. However, ethnic divisions have also been a source of conflict and political fragmentation. Disputes over land, resources, and political representation have fueled ethnic tensions, and these conflicts weaken efforts at regional integration, as local grievances often take precedence over broader unity. Language barriers also pose a challenge. The legacy of colonial languages like French, English, and Portuguese alongside indigenous languages has created divisions in education, governance, and diplomacy. Establishing a common working language for a Sahel Confederation would require careful consideration of linguistic inclusivity to avoid marginalising any group.

Many Sahelian societies have long relied on traditional governance and conflict resolution systems.<sup>10</sup> These mechanisms often emphasise negotiation, communal decision-making, and reconciliation, which could be leveraged to strengthen political dialogue within a Sahel Confederation. Such traditions could be incorporated into regional governance frameworks to promote social cohesion and trust among diverse populations.

External powers have played a significant role in shaping Sahel's political landscape. The legacy of colonial rule, followed by post-independence political interference from France, the United States, China, and regional powers, has complicated efforts toward self-determined regional integration.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, international security interventions such as French military operations, U.S. drone campaigns, and Russian influence through Wagner group<sup>12</sup> have created complex alliances that sometimes undermine regional autonomy. A Sahel Confederation would need to reduce reliance on external powers while fostering cultural and political self-sufficiency through regional economic policies, local governance models, and intra-African trade agreements.

One of the biggest obstacles to forming a Sahel Confederation is the region's chronic political instability, characterised by frequent military coups, weak governance, and fragile democratic institutions. Countries in this region have experienced multiple unconstitutional changes in government, making long-term planning and regional agreements difficult to sustain. The lack of stable leadership and political continuity prevents trust-building among member states and hinders meaningful progress toward integration. To overcome this, it is essential to strengthen democratic institutions, ensure peaceful political transitions, and foster regional dialogue among Sahelian leaders. ECOWAS and the African Union can play a critical role in promoting political stability by enforcing democratic norms, supporting electoral processes, and facilitating mediation efforts between conflicting parties.<sup>13</sup> This will help create a stable political environment necessary for long-term regional cooperation.

Many Sahelian states are hesitant to cede sovereignty to a higher regional authority due to concerns about losing political control over national policies. Given the fragile nature of governance in many of these countries, governments often prioritise domestic political survival over regional cooperation. Disparities in political ideologies and governance models make it difficult to agree on a unified political framework. A gradual integration approach could help build confidence among member states. Instead of immediate political unification, the process should begin with economic and security cooperation before advancing toward deeper political integration. Establishing clear governance structures that respect national autonomy while promoting collective decision-making could also ease sovereignty concerns.

Existing regional organisations like G5 Sahel and ECOWAS have struggled with enforcing policies and coordinating among member states due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of funding, and weak institutional capacity.<sup>14</sup> The absence of a strong regional governance structure makes it difficult to implement and sustain large-scale cooperative initiatives. To address this, institutional reforms are needed to strengthen regional bodies by increasing funding, enhancing policy implementation mechanisms, and improving coordination among member states. Lessons can be learned from organisations like the East African Community<sup>15</sup> (EAC),

which has developed a more structured integration process. Creating an independent regional administrative body to oversee confederation-related policies could help ensure better governance and accountability.

The Sahel region is heavily influenced by foreign powers, including France, the United States, Russia, China, and regional actors like Algeria and Morocco.<sup>16</sup> These external actors often support different political factions and influence decision-making in ways that may not align with the region's collective interests. Many Sahelian states rely on foreign military and financial aid which limits their ability to make independent regional decisions.<sup>17</sup> To reduce reliance on external interventions, Sahelian states must work toward self-sufficiency in security, governance, and economic policies. By strengthening regional alliances and negotiating as a unified bloc in international affairs they can counterbalance foreign influence. A Sahel-led diplomatic and security framework would allow countries to take more control over their political future and limit external interference.

The Sahel is home to diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups and tensions and competition over resources have fueled ethnic conflicts and separatist movements making regional unity more difficult.<sup>18</sup> The absence of inclusive governance structures that represent all ethnic groups often leads to marginalisation and grievance, which can further destabilise the region. To meet this, promoting inclusive governance, ensuring fair political representation for all ethnic and linguistic groups, and fostering intercultural dialogue are essential steps. The adoption of multilingual policies and culturally sensitive governance models could help address diversity-related challenges. Further, regional efforts to resolve local conflicts through peacebuilding initiatives would contribute to long-term stability and create a stronger foundation for regional unity.

### **Collective Security and Counterterrorism**

One of the key benefits of a Sahel Confederation would be the establishment of a unified military strategy to combat terrorism and insurgencies.<sup>19</sup> The national security forces operate independently, often lacking coordination in intelligence sharing, military operations, and border control. This fragmented approach weakens counterterrorism efforts and allows extremist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) to exploit security gaps across borders.<sup>20</sup> A Sahel Confederation could facilitate joint military operations by creating a regional security force that operates under a single command structure. This would ensure better coordination, faster response times, and improved resource allocation, allowing member states to respond more effectively to cross-border threats. By establishing joint military bases, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and rapid deployment units they can strengthen regional security and reduce reliance on external military assistance.

Intelligence-sharing among Sahelian nations is limited and inconsistent, which allows terrorist groups to move freely across porous borders.<sup>21</sup> A confederation would enable the creation of a centralised intelligence agency dedicated to tracking terrorist activities, monitoring extremist networks, and preventing attacks. With advanced surveillance technologies, drone monitoring, and cyber intelligence units, the confederation could establish a real-time threat detection system that enhances situational awareness across the region. Through coordinated intelligence-sharing they can prevent radicalisation, identify recruitment patterns, and dismantle terrorist financing networks more efficiently and effectively.

Weak border controls in the Sahel region have allowed the free movement of terrorists, weapons, and illicit goods, intensifying security challenges.<sup>22</sup> A confederation could implement an integrated border management system, deploying a joint border security force to monitor high-risk areas, conduct inspections, and prevent arms trafficking. A regional security framework would also strengthen law enforcement cooperation, enabling faster extradition processes, joint investigations, and coordinated anti-terrorism legislation. Countries within the confederation could adopt unified counterterrorism laws, making it easier to prosecute extremists and dismantle insurgent networks operating across multiple jurisdictions.

Many Sahelian states rely on foreign military assistance from countries like France, the United States, and Russia, as well as regional missions such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization

Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)<sup>23</sup>. However, external interventions have often been met with local resistance, political tensions, and inconsistent strategic priorities. A Sahel Confederation could gradually reduce dependence on foreign forces by investing in regional military training programs, local defense industries, and independent funding for security operations. This would enhance sovereignty over security matters while fostering a sense of ownership and accountability among member states. A confederation would also allow the Sahel region to negotiate with international partners as a unified bloc, securing better terms for military aid, equipment, and counterterrorism cooperation.

Beyond military action, a Sahel Confederation could address the root causes of extremism, like poverty, unemployment, and political marginalisation. Many terrorist organisations recruit from economically vulnerable communities where youth lack access to education, jobs, and basic services.<sup>24</sup> A regional confederation could implement development-focused counterterrorism strategies, prioritising job creation, education reform, and infrastructure development in high-risk areas. By promoting economic integration and regional investment, the confederation could provide alternative livelihoods for vulnerable populations, reducing the appeal of extremist groups. Moreover, fostering intercommunal dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives would help prevent local conflicts from escalating into broader security crises.

A Sahel Confederation could create a permanent regional counterterrorism task force, on the lines of African Union's African Standby Force<sup>25</sup> (ASF) or the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram<sup>26</sup>. Unlike temporary coalitions, this force would have a fixed structure, dedicated funding, and clear operational guidelines. The task force would focus on joint military training, coordinated counterterrorism operations, and rapid response to security threats. It could also develop specialised counter-insurgency units, trained in desert warfare and asymmetric combat tactics, to tackle extremist groups operating in remote and inaccessible areas. This approach would help counter the guerrilla warfare tactics used by terrorist organisations in the Sahel's vast, sparsely populated regions.

Terrorist groups in the Sahel are increasingly using digital platforms for recruitment, propaganda, and financing. Social media, encrypted messaging apps, and dark web transactions have made it easier for extremists to organise across borders.<sup>27</sup> A Sahel Confederation could invest in cybersecurity infrastructure, establishing a regional cyber-intelligence unit tasked with monitoring online radicalisation, tracking extremist networks, and countering digital disinformation campaigns. In addition, a joint regional database for tracking suspected terrorists, missing persons, and criminal organisations could be developed. Such a system would enhance real-time information sharing and help security forces anticipate and prevent attacks before they occur.

While reducing reliance on external actors is crucial, a Sahel Confederation would still benefit from strategic partnerships with global counterterrorism organisations. Through a unified security approach, the confederation could negotiate better terms for military assistance, intelligence cooperation, and capacity-building programs with institutions such as the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, and the United States Africa Command<sup>28</sup> (AFRICOM). A confederation would allow Sahelian states to engage with international partners from a position of strength, ensuring that external assistance aligns with regional priorities rather than the strategic interests of foreign powers. By presenting a cohesive regional security strategy, the confederation could attract funding and technical support for peacekeeping missions, counterterrorism training, and defense infrastructure development.

Terrorist organisations in the Sahel sustain their operations through illicit economies, including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, kidnapping for ransom, and illegal mining.<sup>29</sup> Weak financial oversight and porous borders allow extremist groups to generate significant revenue while avoiding detection. A Sahel Confederation could introduce financial regulations and anti-money laundering measures to track and disrupt terrorist funding channels. Establishing a regional financial crimes agency could help monitor suspicious transactions, strengthen banking security, and enhance cross-border cooperation in seizing terrorist assets. Moreover, joint border patrols and intelligence-led operations could disrupt illicit trafficking routes, depriving

extremist groups of vital resources. By integrating customs enforcement with military intelligence, security forces could better monitor high-risk areas and prevent arms and drug shipments from reaching militant networks.

A critical weakness in counterterrorism efforts across the Sahel has been the distrust between local communities and security forces. Reports of human rights abuses, arbitrary arrests, and ethnic profiling have led to resentment and, in some cases, increased local support for insurgent groups.<sup>30</sup> A Sahel Confederation could introduce community-based security initiatives, encouraging dialogue between security forces, local leaders, and civil society organisations. Programs such as joint patrols with community representatives, local conflict resolution mechanisms, and trust-building exercises would help security forces gain public cooperation in counterterrorism efforts. Training security personnel in human rights and cultural sensitivity would reduce incidents of abuse. Promoting de-radicalisation and re-integration programs for former militants would also help weaken terrorist recruitment efforts and reintegrate ex-combatants into society.

### **Impact of diversity on regional unity**

The Sahel is home to a highly diverse ethnic landscape, with groups such as the Tuareg, Fulani, Hausa, Songhai, Kanuri, Bambara, and Zaghawa, among many others. These groups have historically coexisted, but tensions over land rights, political representation, and resource control have occasionally led to conflict.<sup>31</sup> Ethnic divisions could hinder efforts toward regional unity by fueling mistrust and local grievances that weaken collective identity. However, ethnic diversity can also be an asset if inclusive governance structures ensure fair representation and equal opportunities for all groups. The Sahel Confederation could promote power-sharing agreements, decentralised governance, and inclusive policies to ensure that no ethnic group feels marginalised in the regional integration process.

The Sahel is a multilingual region with hundreds of indigenous languages and several major colonial languages, including French, Arabic, English, and Portuguese. This linguistic diversity poses a challenge for effective governance, diplomacy, and regional cooperation.<sup>32</sup> In some cases, linguistic divisions align with historical colonial boundaries, making cross-border collaboration more difficult. To overcome this, the Sahel Confederation would need to adopt multilingual policies, promote language education, and encourage the use of a common working language for official communication. The development of translation services, multilingual education systems, and regional media platforms could also help bridge linguistic gaps and foster greater unity.

Islam is the dominant religion in the Sahel, but there are significant variations in religious practices, sects, and influences. Sunni Islam, Sufi traditions, and local religious customs coexist with Christian and indigenous belief systems.<sup>33</sup> While religion has historically played a unifying role in the region, extremist ideologies and sectarian divisions have increasingly been exploited by terrorist groups to create instability. To ensure religious diversity strengthens rather than weakens regional unity, a confederation could promote interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and inclusive policymaking. Establishing regional forums for religious leaders, scholars, and policymakers to address sectarian tensions and counter extremism would help create a shared cultural and moral foundation for integration.

Despite ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences, the Sahel shares strong cultural ties in music, food, clothing, and traditional practices. Many ethnic groups have cross-border familial and trade connections that predate colonial borders. These cultural linkages can serve as a foundation for building a shared regional identity that transcends national boundaries. A confederation could leverage cultural diplomacy, promote regional festivals, heritage programs, and education initiatives that celebrate shared traditions and historical connections. This would help reinforce a sense of unity while respecting diversity.

Ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity often influences political affiliations, voting patterns, and access to economic opportunities in the Sahel. Governments should not show favouritism towards certain ethnic or linguistic groups which will lead to exclusionary politics and social divisions. A Sahel Confederation would

need to adopt inclusive governance mechanisms, equitable resource distribution, and representation for minority groups to prevent tensions from undermining regional integration. Ensuring local autonomy within a broader federal structure could also help balance national and regional interests.

### Challenges and Economic Benefits

- ⇒ One of the biggest challenges of deeper economic integration is the variation in economic development among Sahelian nations. This disparity could create imbalances in trade benefits, where more developed economies gain more from integration while weaker economies struggle to compete. To address this, a regional economic framework would need to include redistributive policies, such as development funds for poorer regions and capacity-building programs to ensure that all member states benefit from integration.
- ⇒ Regional integration requires political commitment and policy consistency, but many governments may resist ceding economic sovereignty to a higher regional authority. Differences in tax policies, trade regulations, and government priorities could slow down the integration process.
- ⇒ Corruption and inefficient bureaucratic systems could hinder the implementation of regional economic agreements. To overcome this, the confederation would need strong governance mechanisms, transparency measures, and independent oversight bodies to ensure that economic policies are fair, effective, and beneficial to all members.
- ⇒ A significant portion of the Sahel's economy operates in the informal sector, where small-scale traders, artisans, and local businesses rely on unregulated cross-border trade. While economic integration would benefit large industries and formal businesses, it could disrupt informal trade networks if regulations become too strict or if smaller businesses struggle to comply with new trade laws. To mitigate this, policy measures should focus on gradually integrating informal businesses into the formal economy, offering incentives such as tax breaks, access to microfinance, and simplified trade regulations to help small entrepreneurs transition smoothly.
- ⇒ Persistent security threats and political instability pose major risks to regional economic integration. Terrorist attacks, armed conflicts, and political unrest discourage foreign investment, disrupt supply chains, and damage key economic infrastructure.
- ⇒ For regional economic integration to succeed, security and stability must be prioritised. The Sahel Confederation should link economic policies with security measures, ensuring that investments in infrastructure, agriculture, and industry are protected from threats like terrorism and organised crime.
- ⇒ The Sahel region is highly vulnerable to climate change, with increasing desertification, erratic rainfall, and water scarcity threatening agricultural production and livelihoods.<sup>34</sup> Regional economic integration must include joint environmental policies to mitigate climate risks, promote sustainable agriculture, and develop resilient infrastructure. A confederation could facilitate regional water management agreements, large-scale reforestation projects, and investments in climate-resilient farming techniques to protect food security and rural economies.
- ⇒ One of the most significant economic benefits of a Sahel Confederation would be the creation of a larger, unified market, allowing for greater intra-regional trade. Trade barriers like tariffs, border controls, and differing regulatory standards limit commerce between Sahelian nations.<sup>35</sup> A deeper economic integration would enable the free movement of goods, services, and labour, encouraging cross-border investment and expanding business opportunities.
- ⇒ By blending trade policies and reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies, the Sahel region could boost agricultural exports, improve supply chain efficiency, and enhance industrial production.<sup>36</sup> This would make the Sahel more attractive to foreign investors and encourage the development of regional value chains, particularly in key sectors such as agriculture, livestock, and mining.
- ⇒ Many Sahelian economies are heavily dependent on agriculture and raw material exports, making them vulnerable to climate shocks and global commodity price fluctuations.<sup>37</sup> Regional integration could help diversify economies by promoting industrialisation, manufacturing, and service-based sectors.

Through joint economic policies and shared infrastructure projects, countries could develop regional industrial hubs, reducing reliance on imports and creating more value-added industries.

- ⇒ A major challenge in the Sahel is the lack of adequate infrastructure, particularly in transport, energy, and digital connectivity. Poor road networks, limited railways, and unreliable energy supply hinder economic growth and increase the cost of doing business.<sup>38</sup> A Sahel Confederation could pool resources for large-scale infrastructure projects, such as transnational highways, cross-border railway networks, and regional energy grids. Improved connectivity would reduce transportation costs, facilitate faster trade, and increase investment in remote areas.
- ⇒ Regional investments in renewable energy projects, such as solar and wind farms, could help tackle the region's chronic electricity shortages and support industrialisation.
- ⇒ Deeper regional integration would facilitate the free movement of labour, allowing workers to find better job opportunities across borders. Many Sahelian countries face high unemployment rates, particularly among youth.<sup>39</sup> A regional labour market would help distribute skilled and unskilled workers more efficiently, addressing labor shortages in certain industries while reducing unemployment in others.
- ⇒ By standardised education and vocational training programs across the region this region can help create a more skilled workforce, making the Sahel more competitive in the global economy.
- ⇒ By promoting entrepreneurship and cross-border business collaboration, regional integration could also stimulate job creation in key sectors like tourism, technology, and agribusiness.
- ⇒ A unified financial system, including a common currency or balanced monetary policies, could facilitate easier trade transactions, attract foreign direct investment (FDI), and stabilise inflation rates. Countries that use different currencies and bank regulations face obstacles in conducting cross-border business, leading to higher transaction costs and economic inefficiencies. A regional central bank and integrated financial institutions could regulate trade, manage currency fluctuations, and provide funding for regional development projects.
- ⇒ The creation of a Sahelian Development Fund could support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), helping local businesses expand and thrive in a larger economic space.

### **Role of International Organisations**

- International organisations like the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) can play a crucial role in facilitating dialogue, mediating disputes, and providing diplomatic backing for the creation of the Sahel Confederation.
- By offering technical expertise, legal frameworks, and policy guidance, these organisations can help governance structures and ensure that integrational efforts align with international norms. Also, bilateral and multilateral partnerships with global powers can provide political legitimacy and encourage international recognition of a Sahel Confederation.
- External actors can significantly influence the economic viability of the Sahel Confederation by providing financial aid, infrastructure investment, and trade incentives. Institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and African Development Bank<sup>40</sup> (AfDB) can offer grants, low-interest loans, and technical assistance to support regional infrastructure, industrialisation, and agricultural development.
- Global investment in renewable energy projects, transport networks, and digital connectivity can boost economic integration and reduce dependency on external markets.
- Given the ongoing security challenges in the Sahel, international actors, including the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the African Union Peace and Security Council<sup>41</sup>, and the French-led Operation Barkhane<sup>42</sup>, play a key role in counterterrorism operations, military training, and intelligence-sharing. A Sahel Confederation could benefit from security partnerships with NATO, the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), and the EU's

Common Security and Defense Policy<sup>43</sup> (CSDP). These alliances could enhance regional counterterrorism capabilities, border security, and anti-insurgency efforts. To ensure that international partnerships benefit rather than hinder the establishment of a Sahel Confederation, the region must adopt a strategic approach to foreign relations.

## Results

The findings of this study indicate that while a Sahel Confederation presents a promising framework for regional integration, significant political, security, and economic barriers must be addressed for its successful implementation. Politically, ongoing instability, frequent military coups, and weak governance structures pose major challenges to collective decision-making and institutional cohesion. Security-wise, the presence of extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) highlights the urgent need for a unified military strategy, which a confederation could facilitate. However, the divisions among Sahelian states and reliance on external security assistance weaken regional autonomy. Economically, the study finds that a confederation could foster trade, investment, and infrastructure development, in sectors like agriculture and energy, yet disparities in economic capacity and resource management among member states remain a concern. Socially, the research highlights that ethnic and linguistic diversity, while a source of cultural richness, could also be a challenge for political unity if not managed effectively. Comparative analysis with other regional organisations suggests that while confederations offer economic and security benefits, their success depends on strong institutional mechanisms, political will, and public support. Overall, the results suggest that while a Sahel Confederation is a viable long-term solution, it requires significant institutional reforms, regional trust-building, and reduced dependence on external actors to become a sustainable and effective entity.

## Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the potential and challenges of establishing a Sahel Confederation, emphasising the need for strategic institutional and policy reforms. The persistent political instability, marked by military coups and weak governance, raises concerns about the feasibility of a unified political framework, suggesting that gradual integration rather than immediate confederation may be a more pragmatic approach. Security threats from extremist groups like AQIM, Boko Haram, and ISGS demonstrate the urgent necessity of joint military cooperation. However, past efforts through the G5 Sahel have been hindered by resource constraints and external dependencies, underscoring the need for greater regional autonomy in security operations. Economically, a Sahel Confederation could boost intra-regional trade and investment, but disparities in economic capacity among member states require mechanisms for equitable resource distribution. Social cohesion remains another critical factor, as ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity could also pose challenges if not properly managed through inclusive policies. Comparisons with other regional blocs indicate that successful confederations require strong governance structures, economic incentives, and sustained political will. Therefore, while the Sahel Confederation presents a promising long-term strategy, its realisation depends on incremental integration, institutional strengthening, and enhanced regional cooperation. Future efforts should focus on building trust among member states, reducing reliance on external actors, and fostering economic interdependence to ensure a stable and sustainable confederation.

## Conclusion

The concept of a Sahel Confederation presents both opportunities and challenges for regional stability, economic integration, and security cooperation. This study finds that while a confederation could enhance collective governance, counterterrorism efforts, and economic development, significant political instability, security threats, and economic disparities remain key barriers to its implementation. The analysis suggests that gradual regional integration, beginning with strengthened institutional frameworks, coordinated security policies, and economic collaboration, is essential before a full confederation can be realised. Lessons from other regional blocs underscore the importance of strong leadership, political commitment, and inclusive governance in achieving successful regional integration. Sahelian nations must focus on building trust,

enhancing intra-regional trade, and reducing reliance on external actors to create a foundation for a sustainable and effective confederation. While the vision of a Sahel Confederation remains ambitious, with strategic planning and phased implementation, it has the potential to transform the region into a more stable, prosperous, and self-sufficient geopolitical entity.

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