

Between Stabilization and Sovereignty

A Critical Analysis of EU Strategy in The Sahel

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Abstract

In one of the most fragile regions in the world, the European Union (EU) has increased its attempts to bring peace by exporting its own vision of stability. This study examines how the EU has managed the relationship between development and security in the Sahel region through its Regional Action Plans (RAPs) from 2011, 2015, and 2021. Through the application of Mark Duffield's (2014) theory, the study uses a qualitative content analysis (QCA) to explore how the EU strategy aligns with broader patterns of indirect governance and liberal peacebuilding. Five deductive codes, Liberal Norm Promotion, Institutional Transformation, Conditionality / Leverage, Depoliticised Governance Language, and Strategic Complexes, were developed to analyse how policy language reflects Duffield's (2014) core notions of liberal peace / governance. Our findings indicate that despite changes in emphasis and wording, the core logic remains consistent across the three RAPs. Namely, that development functions as a strategic tool to stabilise the region in line with EU interests. The thesis is not inherently critical of the EU's normative policies and strategies, but rather highlights how the applicability of Duffield's (2014) framework provides a lens through which their intent can be critically examined. It concludes that without addressing underlying power asymmetries, EU strategies risk undermining the very stability they aim to promote.

Key Words: EU Foreign Policy, Sahel, Securitized Development, Indirect Governance, Liberal Peace.

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1 Introduction

The Sahel region has become increasingly important to the European Union (EU) and its foreign policy, reflecting its perceived strategic importance, especially in areas of governance, migration control, and counter-terrorism. Over the past decade, the EU's objectives in the region have shifted from a primarily development-oriented approach towards a strategy that integrates security, governance, and migration management. This shift has taken place within the context of mounting conflict, state fragility, environmental pressures, and widespread poverty. These factors require long-term and context-sensitive development strategies. However, the region's geopolitical location as a key transit zone for irregular migration and cross-border threats has led to a dominant narrative that prioritises stabilisation.

Against this backdrop, the EU has aimed to integrate development and security objectives into an overarching development strategy. While this approach is often framed as pragmatic and necessary, it raises important questions about how development is being used in service of broader geopolitical goals. This thesis situates the EU's evolving Sahel strategy within the wider context of global liberal governance, asking whether the merger of development and security risks prioritizing EU interests over local needs. Through a critical reading of the EU's Regional Action Plans (RAPs), the study explores how policy language and strategic framing may contribute to indirect forms of governance rather than sustainable development.

1.1 Research Question

The research question that this thesis will answer is as follows:

“To what extent can the EU's Sahel strategy be understood through the merging of development and security as part of a broader system of global liberal governance?”

1.2 Outline

This study firstly outlines the regional context of the Sahel, particularly the G5 countries. This is followed by a brief overview of EU - Sahel relations through the Regional Action Plans (RAPs). This background is given further context by a review of existing literature on

EU-Sahel relations, highlighting the fragmented nature of EU policy implementation. Additional narratives on the securitization of development, and the general lack of academic discourse with regards to EU development in the Sahel are illustrated. The third chapter introduces the theoretical framework, drawing heavily on Mark Duffield's (2014) theory concerning liberal peace, indirect governance, and the general merging of development and security. These concepts influence the deductive coding scheme used in the analysis.

The fourth chapter outlines the methodological design of the study, detailing the rationale for using a qualitative content analysis as described by Halperin & Heath (2012). It details the sampling strategy used, as well as the coding procedures, and the interpretive strategies used in applying the theoretical framework to the RAPs. The chapter also highlights ethical considerations, as well as limitations of the chosen method. Chapter five presents the analysis, structured around the five codes. This is followed by a section of analytical reflections, addressing the implications of our findings. The final chapter summarises the key findings, discusses broader policy and theoretical implications, outlines the study's limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

2 Background

2.1 Sahel Context: The G5 in Focus

The Sahel is an widespread region in Africa that stretches across the west to the east, acting as a transition zone between the Sahara desert in the north and the savannas in the south. Combined, the Sahel covers more than 10 countries, however, this thesis focuses on the G5, namely: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The G5 countries share not only geographic and cultural similarities, but also share challenges related to poverty, conflict, political instability and climate change (Mahmood, 2025). The aim of this section is to provide an overview of the region as well as context on the challenges that the region faces.



Figure 1: Map of the G5 Sahel (MapChart, n.d.)

2.1.1 The G5 Sahel Framework

The G5 Sahel framework was created in 2014 to strengthen cooperation between the five states in areas of security and development. One of the most important tools of the group is the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which is a military initiative created in 2017 to fight organized crime and cross-border terrorism. However, the joint force has been experiencing problems from the start, including lack of funding, limited international support and poor coordination. As a result, Mali withdrew from the G5 in 2022, raising doubts about the group's ability to combat the region's challenges (European Council, 2021; ICG, 2023).

2.1.2 Environmental Pressures and Climate Change

Regarding the effects of climate change, the G5 Sahel countries are among the most affected areas in the world. On this note, temperatures in the Sahel are rising faster than the global average, resulting in irregular rainfalls, more frequent droughts and land degradation (World Bank, 2022). Consequently, this puts huge pressures on livestock and agriculture, which are the main sources of income for the populations in the region. According to the World Bank, disasters related to climate change could reduce the GDP of some G5 countries by up to 11,9 % and push millions of people further into poverty (World Bank, 2022).

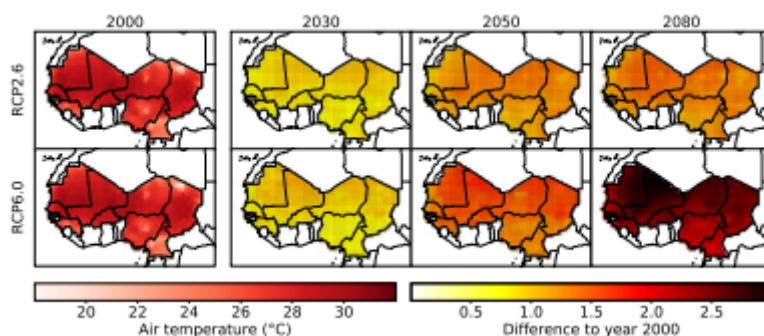


Figure 2: Projected Increase of Air temperature (UNHCR, 2021)

2.1.3 Poverty and Development Challenges

The G5 Sahel countries have some of the lowest development indicators in the world, with more than 30% of the population living below the international poverty line. This includes a very limited access to basic services like education, healthcare and clean water (UNDP, 2023;

WFP, 2024). Furthermore, literacy rates are low, especially among women, and youth unemployment is remarkably high. Additionally, growing food insecurity is a major developmental challenge, as more than 33 million people in the region are currently facing food insecurity (UNDP, 2023; WFP, 2024).

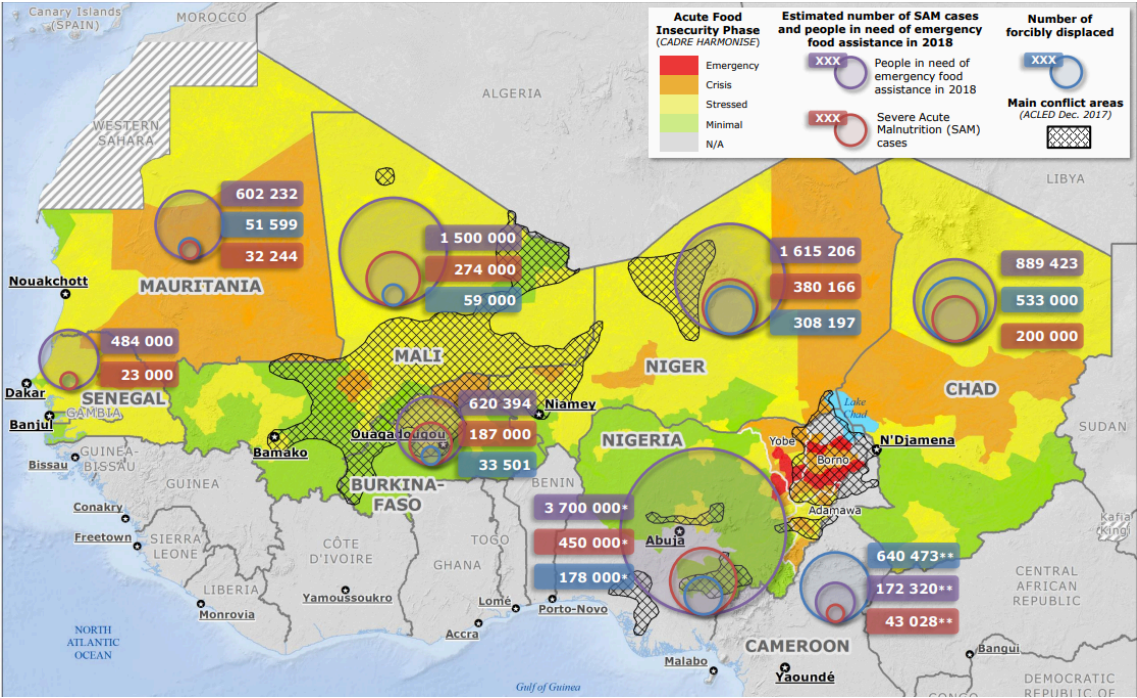


Figure 3: Malnutrition and Food Insecurity in the Sahel (European Commission, 2018)

2.1.4 Conflict and Political Instability

The issue of political instability has been a long standing challenge for the G5 countries. Since independence, the region has experienced more than 30 coups, with recent military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger indicating how fragile these political systems are (ACLED, 2024; UNHCR, 2024). Moreover, multiple extremist groups including affiliates of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State operate in the region and frequently carry out attacks on state forces and civilians. Consequently, millions of people have been displaced, and many areas in the region are no longer under government control (ACLED, 2024; UNHCR, 2024).

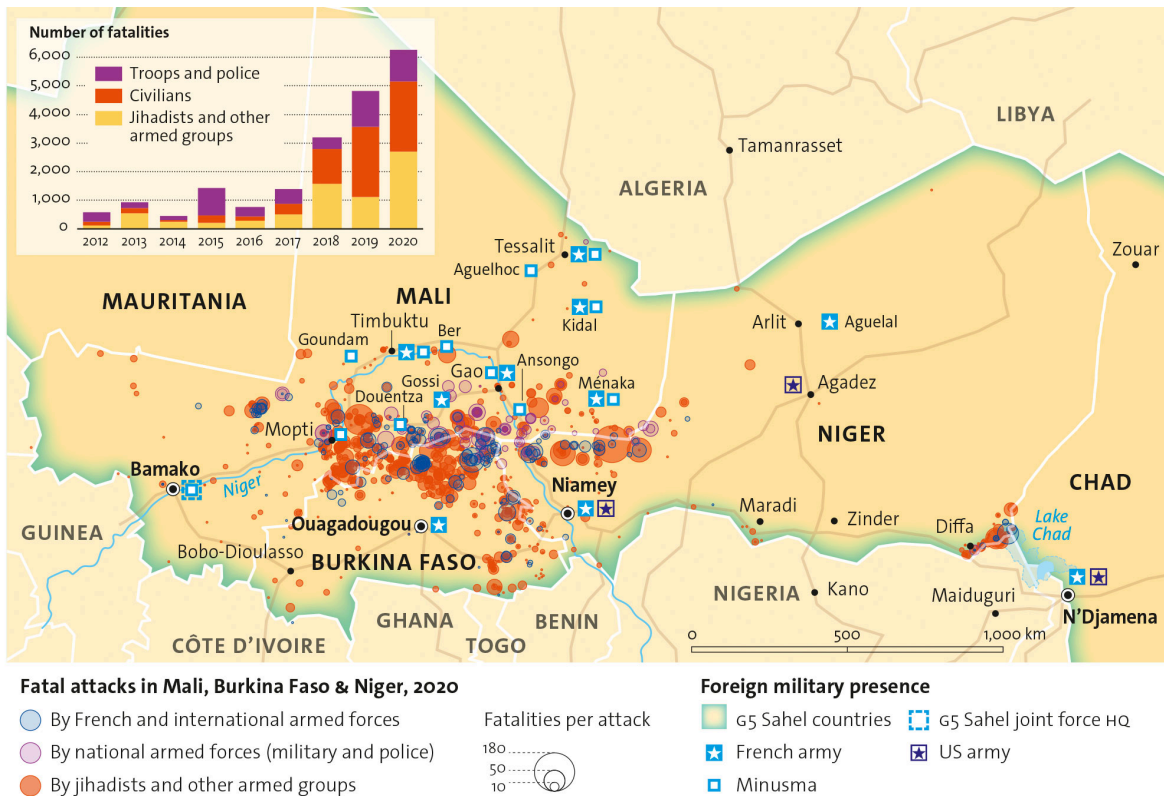


Figure 4: Number of Fatalities in the Sahel Region (Marin, 2021)

2.1.5 Changing Global Partnerships

A recent trend in the region, especially for Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have been a shift in foreign alliances. These states have reduced their cooperation with traditional partners like France and the EU, while strengthening collaboration with non-western actors such as Russia, Türkiye and China. In particular, Russia has been expanding its influence through media campaigns and military assistance that promote anti-western views (Egmont Institute, 2023; ISS, 2024). This change reflects a desire for some leaders in the region to assert more independence and challenge western influence, while there is a risk of further political fragmentation and weakening collective actions (Egmont Institute, 2023; ISS, 2024).

2.2 EU - Sahel Relations: The Regional Action Plans

The EU's strategic engagement in the Sahel has evolved over a decade through three successive Regional Action Plans (RAPs) adopted in 2011, 2015, and 2021. These documents outline the EU's shifting priorities in response to regional instability, irregular migration, and

broader geopolitical developments (Pichon and Betant-Rasmussen, 2021). While initially grounded in developmental objectives, the RAP's reflect a growing emphasis on security, institutional reform, and multilateral coordination. Each plan illustrates how the EU has increasingly framed the Sahel as both a site of opportunity and risk; a region requiring not only aid, but active governance support.

The first RAP, adopted in 2011, introduced the EU's comprehensive strategy for the region. It emphasized that "security and development are mutually reinforcing", and declared that "addressing the root causes of poverty and conflict is essential to achieving long-term stability" (European Commission & High Representative, 2011, p. 2). The plan prioritizes judicial reform, decentralization, and institutional resilience. Additionally, it aims to support counter terrorism and efforts against organised crime. It also promotes economic growth as a stabilizing force, with the goal to "re-establish an administrative presence of the state" (European Commission & High Representative, 2011, p. 12). The document framed the EU's role as a flexible actor that could mobilize diplomatic, development, and security instruments across sectors, seeking to "coordinate action at the national, regional, and international levels" (European Commission & High Representative, 2011, p. 3).

The second RAP, released in 2015, reaffirmed these goals but expanded the EU's engagement amid growing concerns of terrorism, migration, and state fragility. It introduced four new priorities: "preventing and countering radicalisation", "creating appropriate conditions for youth", "migration and mobility", and "border management, fight against illicit trafficking and transnational crime" (Council of the European Union, 2015, pp. 7-9). The document reiterates the EU's "comprehensive approach", which integrates its foreign policy tools (civilian, military, and developmental) to address complex regional threats. Notably, it strengthened cooperation with the G5 Sahel countries and emphasizes resilience, governance reform, and stabilization. The RAP describes the EU as an actor that "mobilizes a broad range of policies and instruments" to implement its objectives in a complex and fragile environment (Council of the European Union, 2015, p. 6).

The third and most recent RAP, published in 2021, reflects the institutionalization of this integrated logic. It responds to evolving regional dynamics, including COVID-19, legitimacy crises, and geopolitical fragmentation. The strategy frames the Sahel as a space of opportunity and risk, calling for a "civilian and political leap forward" (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 20). It introduces renewed commitments to gender equality, climate adaptation, and alignment with the SDGs, while reinforcing military and intelligence coordination to the G5 Sahel, the Coalition for the Sahel, and the partnership for Security and

Stability in the Sahel (P3S). The RAP positions the EU as “a political and operational actor” with a responsibility to promote regional stability through soft and hard instruments (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 3).

Altogether, the three RAPs trace a trajectory in which the EU evolves from a development donor to a governance actor deeply embedded in regional security architectures. Each iteration builds upon the previous one, weaving security objectives into developmental rhetoric. The result is a strategy that blurs the line between aid and intervention; a trend examined critically through the lens of Duffield's (2014) theory.

2.3 Previous Research on EU Policy in the Sahel

To situate this study within the broader academic discourse, a comprehensive research review was conducted, synthesizing insights from twelve peer-reviewed journal articles and two scholarly book chapters focused on the EU's engagement in the Sahel. The review identified four overarching thematic areas that structure the existing body of research: (1) institutional and bureaucratic dynamics within EU policymaking, (2) security-military engagement, (3) the role of external geopolitical actors, and (4) the agency of local actors and institutions.

A central finding across the reviewed literature is the fragmented nature of EU foreign policy implementation in the Sahel. Several studies attribute this fragmentation to internal tensions between key EU bodies, such as the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (formerly DG DEVCO), resulting in operational incoherence and overlapping mandates (Koenig, 2016; Mattelaer, 2014; Jayasundara-Smits, 2018). Furthermore, scholars have highlighted the EU's tendency to shift between bilateral and multilateral strategies, often producing strategic misalignment and limiting the Union's ability to formulate a unified and proactive regional approach (Brosig, Plank, & Reykers, 2023).

In parallel, a significant body of work underscores the increasing securitization of EU engagement in the region, particularly following the launch of the 2011 Sahel Strategy. Scholars consistently argue that security imperatives have gradually taken over development goals, as development funding and programming have become increasingly tied to counter-terrorism, migration control, and border security (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020; Lavallée & Völkel, 2015; Baldaro & Strazzari, 2023; Sempijja & Eyita-Okon, 2022). This shift has been described as a transition from development-led to security-led engagement,

with numerous studies critiquing the EU's approach for failing to address the root causes of instability such as poor governance, socio-economic marginalization, and state fragility (Lavallée & Völkel, 2015; Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020; Baldaro & Strazzari, 2023).

The literature further emphasizes the growing influence of external geopolitical actors, particularly Russia, Türkiye, and Gulf states, who have capitalized on the EU's fragmented and state-centric approach. These actors have expanded their presence through economic, religious, and security partnerships, thereby challenging the EU's position as a leading external actor in the region (Baldaro & Strazzari, 2023; Lopez Lucia, 2017; Korteweg, 2014; Mateos Martín et al., 2024). This geopolitical competition is compounded by the EU's limited engagement with civil society and non-state actors, which undermines the legitimacy and sustainability of its interventions (Lopez Lucia, 2017).

Lastly, and of particular relevance to this study, recent research has begun to highlight the strategic agency of local actors. Rather than being passive recipients of European engagement, Sahelian governments and elites are shown to selectively engage with EU frameworks to secure political and financial gains (Colomba-Petteng, 2024; Lopez Lucia, 2017; Brosig, Plank, & Reykers, 2023). This dynamic often results in a reinforcement of authoritarian practices, contradicting the EU's normative objectives around governance reform and democratization (Colomba-Petteng, 2024). However, the role of informal actors and civil society remains underexplored in much of the literature, indicating a persistent Eurocentric bias (Lopez Lucia, 2017).

An additional observation from the review process is the notable scarcity of academic literature on EU-Sahel development policy when compared to the abundance of grey literature, including policy briefs, strategy documents, and reports from think-tanks, NGOs, and international institutions. While grey literature provides valuable empirical insight, it is often shaped by institutional mandates, policy priorities, or donor agendas, which may limit its critical depth or theoretical engagement (Mateos Martín et al., 2024). The relative absence of peer-reviewed scholarship in this area may be attributed to several factors. First, the topic of EU development policy in the Sahel is highly dynamic and closely linked to ongoing geopolitical developments, making it a field dominated by timely analysis rather than long-term academic inquiry. Second, the complexity and fragmentation of EU policy making structures may pose methodological challenges for researchers. Finally, much of the relevant research is produced within European institutions themselves, potentially reinforcing policy-aligned narratives and discouraging critical, external perspectives (Lopez Lucia, 2017; Colomba-Petteng, 2024). This gap underscores the value of this thesis in offering a

theoretically grounded, critical analysis of the EU's development policy through the lens of securitized development.

While several studies reference the Security-Development Nexus (SDN), few engage with frameworks that conceptualize development as a tool of governance, such as the work of Mark Duffield (2014). This thesis seeks to address that gap by employing Duffield's (2014) theory of the merging of development and security to critically examine EU policy discourse in the Sahel. In doing so, it offers an understanding of how the EU's development strategy operates as a mechanism of remote governance and liberal peacebuilding, rather than solely a humanitarian effort.

3 Theoretical Framework

This section outlines and explains the theory developed by Mark Duffield in *Global Governance and the New Wars, the Merging of Development and Security* (2014). Due to the centrality of Duffield's (2014) theory for this study, a comprehensive overview of the key features of his theory will be outlined. Additionally, its relation and applicability to the Sahel, as well as a justification for why this theory is beneficial to the study is discussed.

3.1 Liberal World Order and “Liberal Peace”

The emergence of the liberal world order can be envisioned as a paradigmatic shift in global politics and governance since the 1970s. Significant for this shift is the merging between development and security, non-territorial networked governance systems and the decline of traditional state sovereignty (Duffield, 2014). Central to the liberal world order is the concept of “liberal peace”, which consists of a set of institutional as well as policy practices that aim to provide stability through transformation (Duffield, 2014, p. 11).

In earlier phases of global development policy, even under unequal and dependent conditions, many states in the global South were incorporated into international systems with the goal of fostering national development. Despite external constraints, these states retained a degree of autonomy and agency, managing economic planning, negotiating aid, and shaping domestic policy to fit local priorities. The dominant development model, while not necessarily equitable, still recognized the state as the primary vehicle for social and economic transformation. As Duffield (2014) notes, this era was marked by efforts to integrate the periphery into global systems through inclusion and expansion, a sharp contrast to the contemporary logic of selective engagement and indirect governance (Duffield, 2014, pp. 27–28).

This global restructuring does not only lead to the decline of the nation state but also a form of geographical exclusion, opposite of the previous system. The logic of inclusion and expansion of the capitalist market based on finding new markets and cheap raw materials is now very selective and stratified (Duffield, 2014, pp. 27–28). In the liberal world order, inclusion is substantially conditional, access to developmental aid, economic partnership and diplomatic support is determined by the ability to conform to liberal norms: democracy,

market economy, rule of law and human rights. The selective engagement of western states creates a stratified global system, where only some states and communities are incorporated into transnational networks, while others are subjected to external governance mechanisms, such as peace keeping, transitional administrations and externally designed reforms (Duffield, 2014, p. 28).

Lastly the emerging liberal world order reflects a shift from direct control to a mode of indirect governance through transformation. This system relies on networks of actors, NGOs, donors and international institutions which operate to influence and enforce norms beyond borders. Moreover, it selectively incorporates regions based on their compliance with liberal values, which differ from the previous capitalist system where interests in market expansion, raw materials and colonial patterns were shaping inclusion. In this way, the merging of development and security must be understood as a global structural tendency. Development and security become integrated tools of a global governance architecture that manages instability without relying on territorial sovereignty (Duffield, 2014, p. 279).

3.2 Merging of Development and Security

Duffield stresses that these developments have changed the nature of development, which is no longer viewed solely as a tool for poverty alleviation or capacity-building, but also one that can be used for managing perceived global risks such as instability, terrorism, migration, and underdevelopment (Duffield, 2014, p. 279). Conflict, in its broadest sense, is no longer treated as a break-down of development, but rather a central justification for its deployment.

This shift hinges on what Duffield terms the “reproblematization of underdevelopment”, where poverty and state fragility are framed not just as humanitarian issues, but as a threat to international stability (Duffield, 2014, pp. 27–28). This shift in perspective has led to development interventions adopting increasingly securitized approaches and legitimizing external involvement. These strategic complexes, a networked assemblage of NGOs, donors, governments, military, and private actors, become the backbone of this merged agenda (Duffield, 2014, p. 45).

As a result, the ambiguous and multifaceted policy landscape, with an array of diverse actors, are simultaneously pursuing peacebuilding, stabilization, migration-control, and counter-terrorism under the broad umbrella of ‘development’. This has produced hybrid interventions that combine military and civilian tools, particularly visible in Sahel (e.g.

EUCAP Mali). Here, developmental aid is increasingly conditional on security cooperation, political alignment, and especially migration deterrence.

This merging has not only changed the conceptual boundaries of development, but also its operational functions. Development can now be seen serving a dual purpose: promoting socio-economic change and mitigating perceived threats through securitized governance mechanisms. This shift becomes visible in the increasing entanglement of aid with migration management, counter-terrorism, and border security. As Duffield argues, this reorientation reflects a broader logic of remote governance, where external actors seek to transform societies from a distance rather than through direct control (Duffield, 2014, p. 279). Development, as a result, becomes a tool of preemptive security, containing instability by reshaping political and institutional landscapes to align with a normative order of the global North.

3.3 New Humanitarianism

The emergence of what Duffield (2014) calls “new humanitarianism” marks a significant normative shift in how aid is justified and deployed (Duffield, 2014, p. 259). He highlights that while traditionally anchored in principles of neutrality, and needs-based assistance, “humanitarianism” has become increasingly politicized and instrumentalized within broader security and governance agendas. Within this light, aid is not solely judged on its independence, but rather its alignment with peacebuilding, institutional strengthening and the reduction of conflict. This ethical repositioning aligns it with the goal of liberal peace, which as highlighted prior aims to not just manage conflict, but shape social and political institutions in fragile states in accordance with liberal norms (Duffield, 2014, p. 11). Within this context, humanitarianism becomes an integrated component of a strategic governance toolkit.

This shift aims to legitimize more coercive and conditional forms of aid. Duffield (2014) notes that humanitarian and development funding is increasingly tied to cooperation with donor priorities, including democratization, migration control, and counter-terrorism (Duffield, 2014, p. 233). The expansion of conditionality can therefore be seen to erode the autonomy of humanitarian actors, and further embed aid within mechanisms of long-term “remote governance” (Duffield, 2014, p. 234). As opposed to promoting local empowerment, aid becomes a tool for external norm enforcement, or what Duffield (2014) calls *strategic intervention*, rather than support. Ultimately, relief and development are reconfigured not

simply as assistance, but rather a tool for enforcing donor-aligned governance in aid-dependent regions (Duffield, 2014, p. 249).

3.4 Strategic complexes

The final component of Duffield's (2014) framework concerns the rise of strategic complexes, as have been briefly introduced prior, they concern systems of governance that include public, private, military, and humanitarian actors in the management of conflict and underdevelopment (Duffield, 2014, p. 44). These complexes remain central to Duffield's (2014) operational logic of global liberal governance. Also central to his claim is that these strategic complexes benefit from these conflicts, creating “strategic opportunities” (Duffield, 2014, p. 45). The nature of these conflicts are framed as a justification for the involvement of these complexes. Their nature differs from traditional institutional actors as they are non-hierarchical and have a shared agenda for stabilization. Within this system, the causes of conflict are often depoliticized and seen as governance failures rather than the product of long-term global inequalities or political contestation (Duffield, 2014, p. 46). Plank & Bergmann (2021) add significant nuance to this discussion in highlighting how path dependencies and lock-in effects have contributed significantly to underlying causes of conflict in Sahel. This process of depoliticization of conflict enables these strategic complexes to effectively justify the long-term intervention of aid and development. In the Sahel, the EUCAP Mali missions are a prime example of these strategic complexes at work, where different actors pair security and aid together in efforts to achieve European security objectives as outlined in the RAPs. These efforts exemplify how Duffield's (2014) notion of liberal peace is enacted through multi-actor systems where objectives are achieved through a significant level of regional governance without direct control.

3.5 Justification and Application to The Sahel & EU as an Actor

The work of Mark Duffield (2014) provides a critical framework well suited to interrogating the EU's engagement in the Sahel, particularly in how development is increasingly used as a tool for security objectives. Unlike mainstream approaches that envisions development and

security as separate or complementary, Duffield's (2014) critical lens reveals how these domains have become strategically entangled as part of a broader system of global liberal governance. Duffield (2014) highlights that a central aspect of the merging of development and security, where development is no longer aimed for humanitarian purposes, but rather as a strategic tool to manage threats like conflict, terrorism or migration may be relevant to the EU as an actor in the Sahel. Through Duffield's (2014) theory, this tendency can be found in EU discourse and programmes in the Sahel, where aid and security are interlinked within missions like the EUCAP Sahel and the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF).

This approach is closely tied to Duffield's (2014) concept of strategic complexes, a coordinated network of states, NGOs, private contractors, and military actors (Duffield, 2014, p. 45). The EU, as part of a multi-level governance system, operates within and through these networks to extend influence beyond its borders. Rather than exercising direct control, power is diffused through partnerships and strategic complexes which enable the EU to shape outcomes indirectly.

Moreover, Duffield's (2014) critique on how liberal peacebuilders frame their actions in terms of moral responsibility: to protect, stabilize and develop is highly relevant. The justification by the EU for intervening in Sahel echoes this. Consequently, interventions are portrayed as necessary to protect vulnerable people, promote human rights or prevent what the EU considers spillover effects such as terrorism or irregular migration. Yet Duffield's (2014) theory invites a more critical reading: How is sovereignty and political agency affected in the process?

Finally, Duffield (2014) draws attention to the risks associated with securitized development. These include the production of dependency, reinforcing authoritarian tendencies or legitimizing problematic actors. In the Sahel, EU partnerships with national armies and governments raise similar concerns, suggesting that even well-intentioned engagement may contribute to instability.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study applies a qualitative content analysis (QCA) to examine how the EU frames and merges security and development in its Sahel policy documents. This method is a systematic way for interpreting textual data through a process of identifying themes, patterns and meanings within texts (Halperin & Heath, 2012, p. 365). In contrast to a discourse analysis, which focuses on how language reflects broader socio-political or institutional context, a QCA is more concerned with the substance and content of the text itself. Consequently, it allows the researcher to uncover motives, intentions and conceptual logics embedded in the sampling material (Halperin & Heath, 2012, p. 365).

4.1.1 Qualitative Content Analysis

The suitability of a QCA for this study can be divided into three reasons. Firstly, it allows us to work deductively with the RAPs, tracing how language around development and security has evolved over time. Secondly, this method aligns well with the critical theory of Duffield (2014), covering how the development discourse operates as a remote form of governance. This will allow us to construct thematic codes, informed by Duffield's (2014) theory, allowing for a deeper exploration of how the RAPs reproduce or challenge the theoretical framework. Thirdly, regarding the nature of the research question, focusing on how and why development and security have been merged in EU policy, requires a method that prioritizes interpretation over quantification. QCA aligns well by making the normative and strategic intentions visible within the text. Consequently, a QCA is ideal for uncovering how meanings are constructed, legitimized, and possibly contested within the EU's strategic framing of the Sahel.

4.2 Sampling and Material

To justify the usage of the 2011, 2015, and 2021 RAP's as primary source material, it's important to note that these documents are formally adopted by the Council of the European

Union and are issued by the General Secretariat of the Council (European Commission & High Representative, 2011; Council of the European Union, 2015, 2021). As such, they represent the highest-level strategic framework for its external engagement in the Sahel. They articulate its priorities, and guide the coordination of instruments such as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), EU Trust Funds, and bilateral partnerships (European Commission & High Representative, 2011; Council of the European Union, 2015, 2021).

Positioned between high-level political direction and more specific operational planning, the RAP's represent an appropriate level for analysing EU development policy. As such, they are neither implementation manuals nor public-facing directives, rather, they define the EU's integrated objectives, priorities across domains of security, governance, and development.

The selected time frame, 2011-2021, encompasses the full sequence of EU Sahel RAP's and therefore a decade of policy evolution. This aligns well with the primary aim of investigating the applicability of Duffield's (2014) theory on EU-Sahel policy. While different RAPs allow for a longitudinal analysis, additional material is used to support and contextualise key findings drawn from the RAPs.

4.3 Data Analysis - Deductive Coding

The core of the analysis was conducted through a deductive coding process grounded in Duffield's (2014) theory. Rather than generating themes inductively from the RAPs, the study employed codes derived from Duffield's (2014) theory concerning global liberal governance, the merging of development and security, and the role of indirect governance. The codes were created to capture and represent Duffield's (2014) theory, thereby allowing us to interpret how the EU frames its engagement in the Sahel within the three RAPs.

Code	What it Reveals
Liberal Norm Promotion	Evidence of the EU imposing its governance model (e.g., democracy, rule of law)
Institutional Transformation	Attempts to reshape local institutions (justice, security, civil service, etc.)
Conditionality / Leverage	Tying aid to cooperation on EU-defined priorities (migration, counter-terrorism)
Depoliticized Governance Language	Technical, neutral terms masking political intent or control
Strategic Complexes / Multi-actor Framing	Partnership rhetoric that hides asymmetry or control

The selected references were drawn on their alignment with the stated theoretical categories. To ensure analytical clarity, this research prioritized references where the code's logic was clearly stated or operationalized in the policy language. Moreover, in cases where a quote could be associated with more than one code, the most explicit and thematically central interpretation was applied. This reduced the overlap between codes and helped us to preserve analytical distinction across categories.

To strengthen consistency, several interpretive strategies were used throughout the coding process. Firstly, all coding decisions were subject to internal peer review. This involved ongoing discussion between researchers to resolve uncertain cases, and refine each code's application. Secondly, the process of *memoing*, maintaining analytical notes/dialogue during coding, allowed us to reflect on the evolving interpretations and maintain a rigorous and transparent process for each addition to a code category. Thirdly, the analysis remained attentive to the distinction between explicit and implicit references to the codes. While many of the reference statements were explicitly tied to a code, implicit connections to the codes were also prevalent. This was particularly visible with references tied to Conditionality, as depoliticized or strategic language may mask its intent. In instances where a reference was explicitly tied to a code, it was admitted; in instances where overlap was prevalent and only implicitly so, its strongest tie to a code weighed heaviest.

Lastly, the codes were applied with sensitivity to the discursive and institutional context of the documents. This approach enabled the study to identify patterns across the three RAPs, critically assess the EU's strategic framing of the Sahel engagement as well as to track thematic evolutions over time.

4.4 Limitations

This study contains both conceptual and methodological limitations. First and foremost, by applying a QCA on the policy documents, the research focuses primarily on the institutional framing of the EU strategy rather than the practical outcomes or implementations. Consequently, this study can not make claims about the effectiveness or the ground impact of the EU's interventions in the Sahel. Moreover, a QCA involves a degree of subjectivity. While working with coding and interpretation of texts, there will always be a persistent risk of researcher bias. Even if efforts have been made to maintain transparency and consistency in the coding process, full objectivity is not possible in interpretive research. The last limitation concerns the issue of generalization, where the findings are highly limited. This study focuses on a specific set of EU Policy documents relating to the Sahel, which does not seek to represent neither all EU external action nor development-security strategies globally. The insights that are drawn are context specific and may not be applied in other regions in the world without significant adaptation.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a valuable lens for critically examining the strategic narratives that constitute EU engagement in the Sahel, as well as offer a foundation for further research into implementation and local impacts. This research is based exclusively on publicly available documents and involves no human participants, meaning there are no issues related to privacy, consent, or harm.

5 Analysis

5.1 Thematic coding

This section presents the findings of the QCA conducted on the EU's Sahel Regional Action Plans from 2011, 2015, and 2021. Using a deductive coding scheme derived from Duffield's theory, the analysis is structured around five key codes: Liberal Norm Promotion, Institutional Transformation, Conditionality / Leverage, Depoliticized Governance Language, and Strategic Complexes / Multi-actor Framing. Each subsection explores how these themes appear across the three RAPs, how they evolve over time, and how they align with Duffield's critique of liberal peace and global governance. The findings are supported by selected excerpts from the documents and are visualised through frequency graphs to illustrate discursive trends. A final analytical reflection is presented which situates the analysis within the broader scope of EU – Sahel relations.

5.1.1 Liberal Norm Promotion

The code *Liberal Norm Promotion* is based on Duffield's (2014) theoretical framework and captures the promotion of values such as human rights, democracy, gender equality, inclusive development, civil society engagement and rule of law, which all are central aspects of liberal democratic governance. As argued by Duffield (2014), these norms are not presented as neutral ideals but instead function as tools of global governance, aimed at reshaping conflict-prone societies in line with western political and economic models (Duffield, 2014, pp. 230–231). *Liberal Norm Promotion* differs from *Institutional Transformation* in that it does not necessarily involve changes in institutional structures directly. Rather, it focuses on embedding normative principles as the foundation for development and governance. Consequently, despite the thematic overlap around governance and reform, this code isolates content that explicitly promotes liberal values without necessarily indicating structural changes.

As highlighted by Duffield (2014), *Liberal Norm Promotion* serves two main purposes. Firstly, it is meant to support and improve fragile states. Secondly, it helps international actors manage and contain security risks such as terrorism, migration or

economic collapse that would affect the global north. Consequently, as argued by Duffield (2014), promoting these values with the aim to build stable societies that do not pose a threat, allows outside powers like the EU to maintain control without needing to intervene directly (Duffield, 2014).

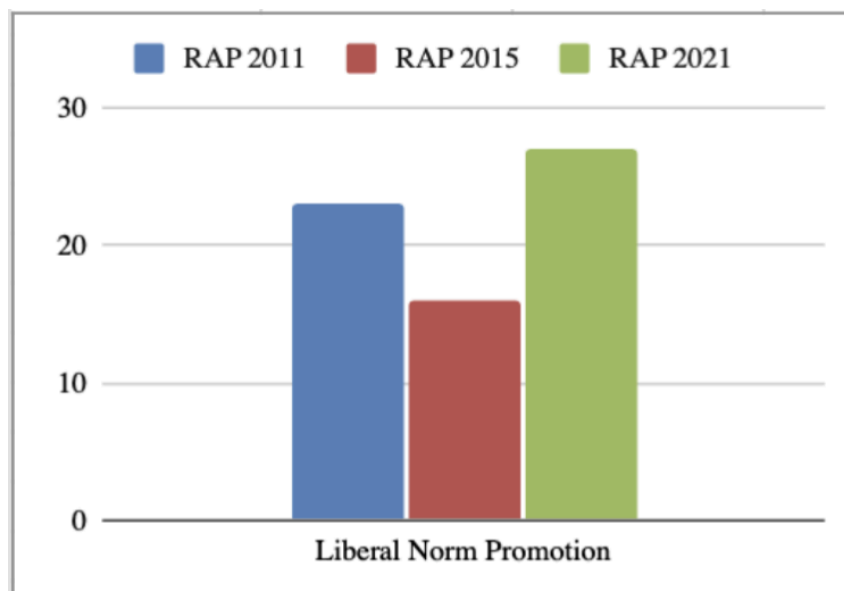


Figure 5: Liberal Norm Promotion Frequency Across RAPs

Figure 5 indicates that *Liberal Norm Promotion* appears 66 times across the RAPs, highlighting that it is a persistent and central component of EU policy in the Sahel. While its core elements remain consistent, there are shifts in emphasis and language between each iteration. The RAP of 2011 stresses rule of law, human rights, decentralised governance and the role of women in peace building. This is highlighted by “supporting consultation and dialogue between citizens and authorities on security issues...” as well as “promoting the political participation of marginalised social groups” (European Commission & High Representative, 2011, p. 9). Additionally, “The role of women in society as well as their access to higher education should be promoted as a priority...” (European Commission & High Representative, 2011, p. 11).

The 2015 RAP expands on this by incorporating youth engagement, freedom of expression, human rights due diligence, and preventing radicalisation. It does this by promoting “democracy and human rights, including support to elections, local governance and decentralisation, and civil society organisations... with gender-equal representation in all spheres of public life” (Council of the European Union, 2015, p. 21).

Lastly, the 2021 RAP further deepens the focus on democracy, gender equality,

civilian protection and sustainable development, reflecting evolving policy priorities but consistent normative aims. Notable language includes: “The EU will continue to support social cohesion, stabilisation, prevention of conflict... and peacebuilding by addressing the immediate and root causes of insecurity and instability” (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 12).

Despite these variations, all three RAPs clearly reflect the core logic of liberal norm promotion, reforming the international governance of fragile states through normative alignment with liberal democratic standards. This consistent emphasis across EUs regional action plans reflects Duffield's (2014) argument that development and security have been merged. In this context, reforms promoting democracy, rule of law and human rights are not goals themselves, but instruments in reducing instability, preventing migration and containing potential threats before they reach the global north. In line with Duffield's (2014) theory, liberal norm promotion functions as a tool of indirect governance, aiming at transforming Sahelian states into stable partners that aligns with European strategic and security interests (Duffield, 2014).

5.1.2 Institutional Transformation

Institutional Transformation is a code that relates to instances where the EU promotes reform and the strengthening of state institutions. This often is set within the framework of justice, security, and governance. Institutions, within this context, can be understood as “formal and informal rules, organizations, and practices that structure political, economic, and social interactions at various levels of governance” (Leftwich, 2005). In this sense, when the EU seeks to modify, alter or promote a formal or informal change; these apparatuses *transform*. This transformation is often within the scope of increased capacity or improved legitimacy, strengthening their ability to fulfill their core functions. The RAP's overall maintain a quite similar level of consistency in the amount of codes attributed to each category, with the exception of *Institutional Transformation*. As can be seen in Figure 6, while support for Institutional Transformation is prevalent in each RAP, its frequency is significantly higher in the 2011 RAP.

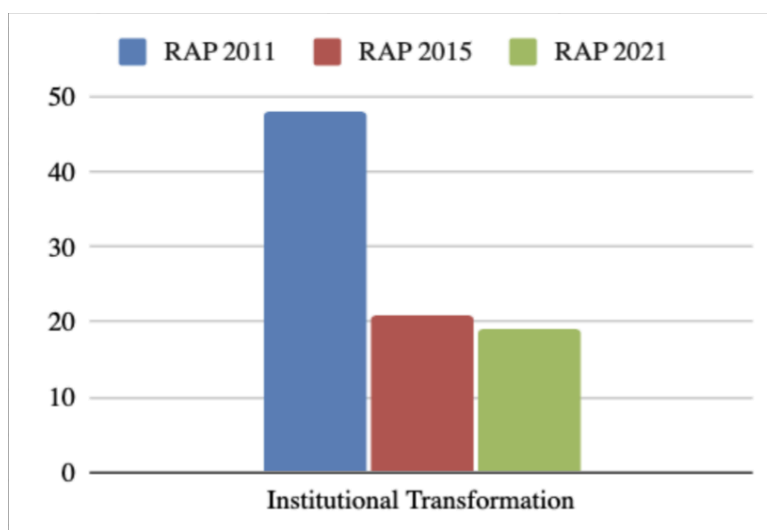


Figure 6: Institutional Transformation Frequency Across RAPs

While the three RAPs collectively reflect the EU’s overarching strategy in the Sahel, each iteration differs in how it frames and communicates specific priorities. Within the code Institutional Transformation, the 2011 RAP uses language that focuses increasingly on justice reform and decentralisation. Additionally, priorities of strengthening the security sector and the delivery of public service are central. The increased presence of references in the 2011 RAP may be attributed to it being the EU’s first formal, all-encompassing strategy for the Sahel, which “proposes a framework for the coordination of the EU’s current and future engagement in the region with the common objective of reinforcing security and development”, and “points to a number of specific actions that could be taken, drawing on all the instruments that the EU has at its disposal” (European Commission & High Representative, 2011, p. 4)

This early concentration on *Institutional transformation* is of particular note, as it likely reflects the EU’s strategic ambition at the outset to define the infrastructure through which all subsequent engagement would occur. Whereas other codes, such as conditionality or depoliticized governance language, can be attributed to the context in which they were written, institutional reform was framed as a foundational precondition for EU engagement. As is echoed in the 2011 RAP, the objective was to “strengthen the capacities of the security, law enforcement and the rule of law sectors to fight threats and handle terrorism and organised crime in a more efficient and specialised manner” and to “enhance transparent and locally accountable governance” particularly through decentralisation and public service delivery (European Commission & High Representative, 2011, p.11). This illustrates how state capacity like judicial systems, internal security, and administrative governance, was

positioned not merely as a policy area, but as the enabling mechanism for broader security, development, and diplomatic efforts. Therefore, the 2011 RAP effectively frontloads Institutional Transformation because it wants to “reestablish an administrative presence of the state” (European Commission & High Representative, 2011, p. 12).

While the 2015 and 2021 RAPs maintain a similar number of references, the expression of this priority evolves in line with shifting political and operational contexts. The 2015 strategy reflects a practical turn, emphasizing reinforcement through training, judicial reform, and support for decentralised administration. It not only serves as a continuation of the 2011 vision, but is more embedded in operational frameworks. In contrast, the 2021 RAP introduces more ambitious and symbolic language, calling for a “civilian and political leap forwards” (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 20). This signals a deeper integration of institutional transformation into the EU’s Sahel strategy, particularly through capacity-building efforts targeted at fragile regions. While the core focus on institutional capacity exists, the evolution of priorities in the way it is expressed; from state restoration (2011), to reinforcement (2015), to transformation and leaps forwards (2021), reflects how institutional reform is seen as the main delivery vehicle for the EU’s broader security and development goals.

This evolving emphasis on Institutional transformation aligns closely with Duffield's (2014) framework on the merging of development and security. In Duffield's (2014) analysis, peacebuilding and development strategies increasingly operate through what he calls “indirect governance”, where the goal is not just the provision of aid, but the restructuring of political and social institutions to make them more governable and resilient under conditions of perceived global risk. Institutional transformation therefore becomes a central mechanism of hierarchical management, allowing the EU to shape Sahelian institutions from a distance. The prioritization of judicial reform, decentralized administrations, and public service delivery reflects this logic, as they enable stabilisation without deep political engagement. As Duffield (2014) argues, these tools embed liberal norms within the infrastructure of governance itself. The high frequency of language compliant with Institutional Transformation (i.e. indirect governance) frames Sahelian institutions as a clear channel for intervention. Therefore, this transformation is not just a policy objective, but rather the medium by which the EU’s development-security strategy is focused. While the broader rationality behind this approach is discussed in the conclusion, it is clear that the appearance of institutional reform across the RAPs substantiates Duffield's (2014) view of indirect governance as a defining feature of contemporary liberal peacebuilding.

5.1.3 Conditionality / Leverage

The code *Conditionality / Leverage* captures the idea of aid conditionality “[which] refers to the practice of donors attaching conditions to enhance the effectiveness of aid” (Morrissey, 2016). However, the code also incorporates instances within the RAPs where the EU seeks to influence Sahelian partners through the use of political support or cooperation frameworks that are conditional with certain expectations. The research highlighted that conditionality can be explicit, in the form of tied funding, or implicit and embedded within performance-based or partnership-oriented rhetoric. In the Sahel RAPs, terms such as “mutual accountability”, “responsibility”, or “joint commitment” often reflect the implicit conditionality found. *Conditionality / Leverage* reflects the EU’s broader engagement with Duffield’s (2014) liberal peace, in which Sahelian sovereign autonomy is partially based on alignment with donor-defined norms and priorities.

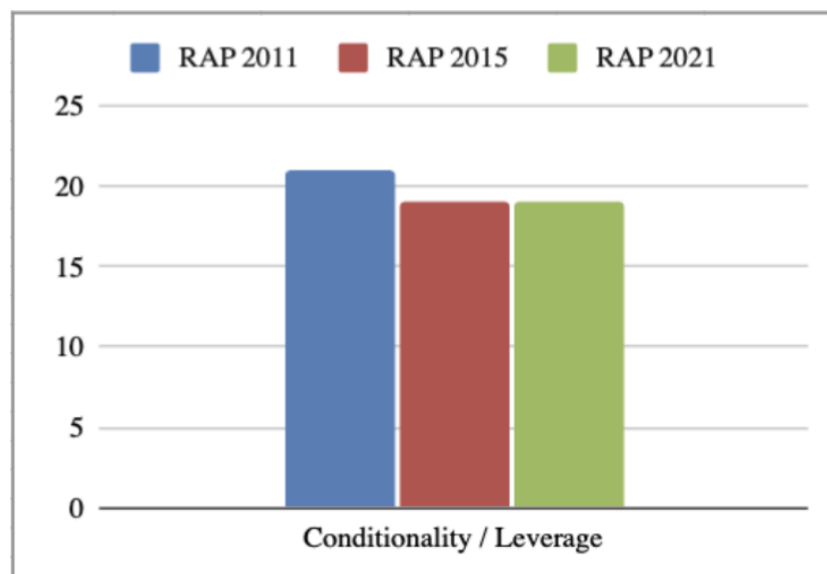


Figure 7: Conditionality / Leverage Frequency Across RAPs

As shown in Figure 7, references to conditionality are relatively consistent across the three RAPs, with only minor variations in frequency. This shows that, while not as dominant as Institutional Transformation, conditionality is a structurally embedded feature visible throughout the RAPs. This is often expressed implicitly, operating beneath more technical or normative language. *Conditionality / Leverage* was often expressed through language such as “monitoring”, “mutual accountability”, “in accordance with the objectives”, or “the EU

reserves the right” (European Commission & High Representative, 2011; Council of the European Union, 2015, 2021).

In the 2011 RAP, conditionality is often implied through references to partnerships based on shared responsibility, especially in relation to migration control, counterterrorism, and regional stability. For instance, it notes that “progress will depend on the commitment of the authorities concerned”, and “that they continue to welcome EU involvement in tackling the problems they face” (European Commission & High Representative, 2011, p. 7, 11). The 2015 strategy adopts a similar logic and furthers it by connecting funding mechanisms to specific policy goals, stating “The country financial envelopes were revised... to find the necessary resources for new activities” (Council of the European Union, 2015, p. 9). This indicates a redirection of aid to align with shifting EU priorities, notably in areas like migration management, radicalisation, and cross-border trafficking. The 2021 RAP introduces more formalized conditionality language by often referring to “mutual accountability” (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 7). It explicitly warns that “This support... cannot be fully effective unless there is strong ownership on the part of the Sahel authorities”, and that, “Where appropriate, the EU reserves the right to review its support” (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 16, 22). This framing positions the EU not only as a partner in development, but also as a regulatory actor that retains the right to recalibrate support based on performance and political alignment.

The evolution between the RAPs highlights that conditionality may not always appear explicitly, but underpins much of the EU’s Sahel strategy. The emphasis on ownership, monitoring, and accountability over time reflects how conditionality is embedded in the EU’s Sahelian frameworks, which may otherwise appear to be neutral and cooperative. From a theoretical perspective, this closely aligns with Duffield’s (2014) reading of liberal peace as a form of indirect control, echoed in previous codes. He argues that contemporary development frameworks may threaten sovereignty as a consequence of external actor control, where conditional compliance is rewarded. Of particular note within the RAPs is how this logic becomes increasingly internalized by framing conditionality as mutual; a co-produced framework of responsibility rather than top-down imposition. Yet, as the 2021 RAP reveals, the EU’s ability to “review [its] support” remains a unilateral decision, highlighting an imbalance in the partnership’s dynamic. This serves to reinforce Duffield’s (2014) argument that an important component of liberal peace is maintained through conditionality and its often implicit usage.

5.1.4 Depoliticized Governance Language

The code of depoliticized governance language refers to the usage of neutral or technical terminology to describe interventions that are highly political. Drawing from the work of Duffield (2014), this code captures how security and development often hides underlying power dimensions and governance agendas under logics of objectivity and problem-solving (Duffield, 2014, pp. 232–234). Through references of vague nature, like “resilience”, or “capacity-building” and “stabilisation”, the language reduces structural causes of insecurity to apolitical issues (European Commission & High Representative, 2011; Council of the European Union, 2015, 2021). Consequently, governance and development are stripped from their political context and are presented as universally applicable and non-political.

In the context of Sahel, The EU frequently uses depoliticized language in describing themselves as a technical partner that offers solutions to complex and multidimensional crises. Furthermore, by framing instability as a product of “weak capacity” or “underdeveloped institutions” instead of contested state legitimacy, neo-colonial dynamics or extractive governance, the interventions and solutions become rather apolitical. As a consequence, the focus shifts from negotiating political situations to implementing superficial fixes that leave structural power imbalances unchallenged.

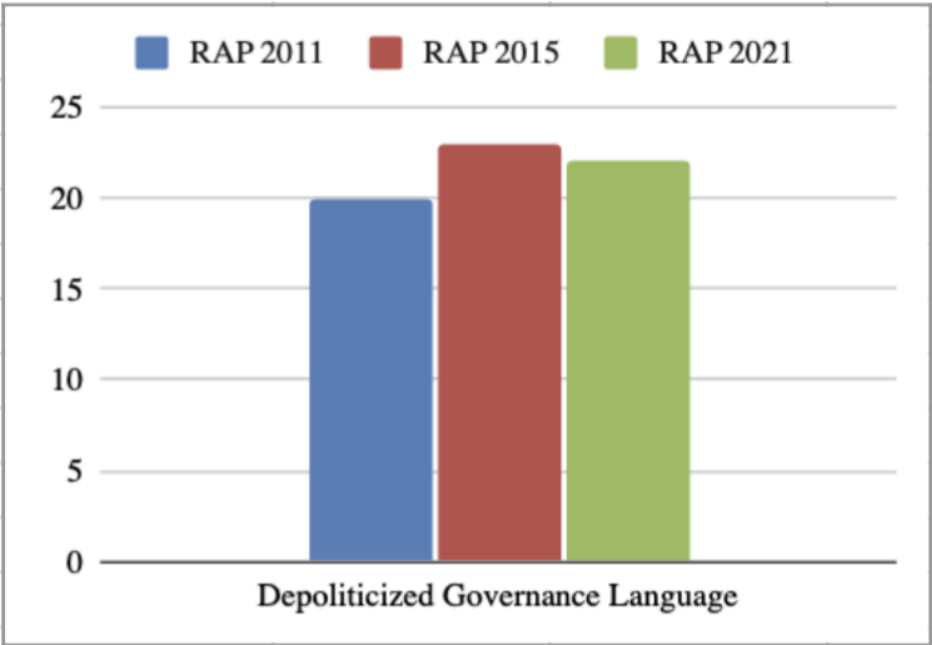


Figure 8: Depoliticized Governance Language Frequency Across RAPs

As illustrated in Figure 8, depoliticized governance language appears in total 65 times across all three RAPs. Moreover, there are no significant changes across the different RAPs, meaning that the usage of depoliticised governance language remains stable across the years. However, there are some differences in formulations and focus between all RAPs. First off, the RAP of 2011 adopts a bureaucratic tone, positioning the EUs involvement as an external support to “regional development and security strategies” (European Commission & High Representative, 2011, p. 3). Furthermore, political complexities, including past rebellions, or inter-community conflicts, are given less attention in favour of phrases like *capacity building* or *supporting delivery of basic services*. Moreover, while there is acknowledgement in challenges like fragile governance or corruption, the language still revolves around technical solutions. This takes place while also offering no criticism of how power is distributed within Sahelian states, nor how EU involvement might change domestic politics. The RAP of 2015 intensifies this trend through the adaptation of resilience discourse. The strategy is framed as a “flexible and dynamic tool for implementation”, and policies are described as fostering *resilience* or *capacity building* in areas that are vulnerable to radicalisation or shocks (Council of the European Union, 2015, p. 6). Furthermore, structural causes of marginalisation such as resource extraction, and radicalisation, are rarely addressed.

Lastly, the RAP of 2021 builds on to the established language of integration and coherence offering an even more technocratic framing of the action by the EU. Terms such as “coherence,” “inclusivity,” “context-specific needs,” and “effective coordination” dominate the narrative (Council of the European Union, 2021, pp. 5–9). “To ensure effective, rapid action with lasting results” the political implications of border management, statebuilding and migration control are blurred by an emphasis on “delivery”, “impact”, and “efficiency” (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 10). Consequently, the language hides how policies affect local sovereignty or power relations, or how the EU’s strategic interests shape the priorities on the ground.

Returning to Duffield (2014), this language rephrases political crises as solvable through expert knowledge, resilience-building and technocratic oversight. By doing that, it legitimizes remote management and prevents a critical overview of the external governance framework. Furthermore, through the general avoidance of political vocabulary, actors like the EU can present their engagements as neutral (Duffield, 2014, p. 279).

To conclude, across all three RAPs the depoliticization of language hides the strategic and political dimensions of EU involvement in the Sahel. This supports Duffield's (2014) theory that the merging of security and development has created a new mode of indirect

governance, where technocratic language serves to hide the power dynamics. Moreover, the Sahel strategies exemplify how the development discourse can shape and manage unstable regions without seeming forceful or controlling.

5.1.5 Strategic Complexes / Multi-actor Framing

The code *Strategic Complexes / Multi-Actor Framing* refers to how the EU presents challenges and solutions in the Sahel as inherently interconnected across borders, sectors, and institutions. Notably, this framing often involves a broad coalition of actors, ranging from EU member states and African regional bodies (e.g. ECOWAS, AU), to multilateral initiatives like the G5 Sahel, the Sahel Alliance, and the Coalition for the Sahel (European Commission & High Representative, 2011; Council of the European Union, 2015, 2021). It reflects a governance narrative in which no single actor can solve the region's challenges in isolation, thereby justifying a multilayered and networked governance approach.

As shown in Figure 9, the framing for this code is highest in the 2011 RAP, with 32 references, followed by a sharp drop in 2015 (13), and a resurgence in 2021 (24). This pattern suggests that while strategic complexes remain a prominent factor, its emphasis shifts in line with evolving EU priorities. The 2011 strategy, as the EU's foundational Sahel policy, lays considerable groundwork for institutional partnerships, whereas the 2015 RAP shifts towards operational implementation. By 2021, however, regional complexity and growing international involvement renew emphasis on broad-based multilateral cooperation.

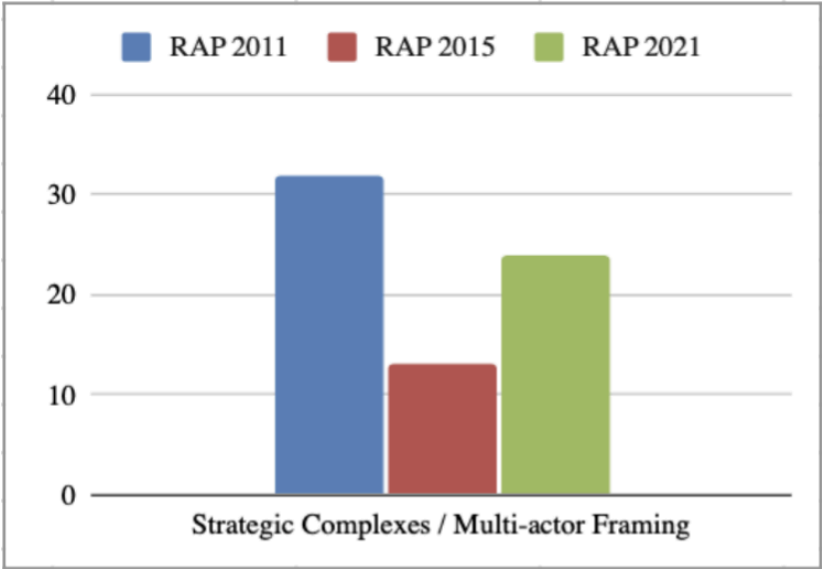


Figure 9: Strategic Complexes / Multi-Actor Framing Frequency Across RAPs

A shared commonality between the three RAPs is how the framing of *Strategic Complexes* is closely tied to the EU's attempts to formalise and steer coordination within the Sahel. In the 2011 RAP, it is introduced through the call for "better coordination with other donors and partners", and an integrated regional strategy anchored in "coherent and systematic action linking political, security and development aspects" (European Commission & High Representative, 2011, pp. 5-7). Coordination is described as being conducted "under the guidance of the Managing Director for Africa" via the EEAS, highlighting early ambitions to systematise the EU's role in a crowded strategic landscape.

The 2015 RAP retains this logic but in a more implementation-focused framing, pointing to "consultations with inputs from stakeholders including Delegations in the Sahel, as well as Member States" (Council of the European Union, 2015, p. 6). While still multi-actor in scope, this language suggests a shift toward managing complexity through embedded EU structures rather than new or expanded regional frameworks. In contrast, the 2021 RAP changes this framing significantly. It formalises the EU's role within "the coalition for the Sahel and its pillars", which it describes as "the preferred framework for the EU's action", explicitly elevating the EU as a strategic coordinator within the region (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 10). The addition of the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S) and continued support to the G5 Sahel further demonstrates how the EU leverages institutional networks to consolidate influence while spreading operational responsibility.

This shift towards strategic complexity aligns closely with Duffield's (2014) concept of *networked governance*, where intervention operates not through direct control but through spreading coordination, risk-sharing, and interdependence. As Duffield (2014) argues, such governance seeks to manage unstable regions through "subcontracted sovereignty" and multiple actors who share responsibility but not necessarily power. In this framing, the EU positions itself not as a single dominant actor, but as part of a broader network facilitating coordination between states, institutions, and donors. By embedding itself in these frameworks, the EU is able to influence the direction of regional engagement while spreading operational responsibility. Multi-actor framing, then, serves both to justify involvement, and to enable continued presence without relying on direct or unilateral intervention.

5.2 Analytical Reflections

While this study has applied Duffield's (2014) theory to critically examine the EU's strategic engagement in the Sahel, it is important to clarify that the analysis does not inherently set itself against the normative goals promoted in the RAPs. Many of the policy areas touched upon by the codes, including gender equality, youth empowerment, judicial reform, democratic governance - are all principles we support. However, our goal has been to examine these concepts and how they operate within broader power asymmetries that shape EU-Sahel relations.

The high appearance of codes deductively derived from Duffield's (2014) theory indicates that his framework is applicable to the EU as an external actor. In this context, our reflections show the need for greater transparency in how the EU presents and implements its development-security agenda. As emphasized by Duffield (2014), there is a danger in the promotion of liberal norms under the umbrella of liberal peace, as it may contribute to forms of indirect governance. As a result, it may lead to constrained sovereignty and development initiatives that risk becoming either incomplete or misaligned with local priorities.

While the Sahel faces real security challenges, and security-based development is not inherently problematic, the blending of migration management, counter-terrorism, and institutional reform raises questions about *whose* interests these priorities ultimately serve. Conditionality, for instance, seems justified in the name of partnership, but often reflects the EU's strategic interests more than those of Sahelian populations or governments. Similarly, depoliticized governance language risks hiding the contested nature of state authority and power in the region. When political questions are reduced to administrative solutions, the space for more transformative or democratic engagement narrows.

The framing of the EU's engagement through strategic complexes can also be called into question. While the EU is certainly not the only actor in Sahel, transparency about the role of power and influence remains important. Without acknowledging how governance frameworks are shaped, implemented, and justified, there is a risk that these interventions perpetuate unequal power dynamics.

Finally, this study does not necessarily critique the normative content of EU engagement, but rather the framing through which these norms are deployed. By applying a critical lens, our aim is to contribute to ongoing discussions around how development, security, and partnership can be advanced in ways that are more transparent, locally grounded

and accountable. Moreover, as the EU continues to frame its involvement in the Sahel through the language of liberal peace, it needs to remain cautious to the unintended consequences this might create, and ask whether the current approach ultimately serves the Sahel or primarily stabilises the EU's own strategic concerns.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

By applying the theoretical framework of Mark Duffield (2014) on the merging of development and security this study has explored the European Union's Sahel Regional Action Plans (RAPs) from 2011, 2015, and 2021. Through conducting a qualitative content analysis, the research explored whether Duffield's (2014) critique of liberal peace could be meaningfully applied to the European Union's engagement in the Sahel.

The analysis revealed that across all three RAPs, there is a consistent merging of security and development, framed through a discourse of stabilisation, regional coordination and capacity-building. The five codes developed from Duffield's (2014) framework — *Liberal Norm Promotion*, *Institutional Transformation*, *Conditionality / Leverage*, *Depoliticised Governance Language*, and *Strategic Complexes / Multi-actor Framing*, were found to be deeply embedded in the different RAPs. Despite varieties in language and emphasis of these codes, the underlying logic remained consistent. Namely that development policy operates not only as humanitarian support but as a tool of indirect governance.

Furthermore, these findings show that Duffield's (2014) framework contains strong relevance to the case of the EU as an actor in The Sahel. As discussed and emphasised in our analytical reflections, this critical reading is not inherently opposed to the normative goals formulated by the RAPs. Instead, the study offers a perspective that highlights how strategic discourse can hide power asymmetries and complicate long-term developmental outcomes. Ultimately, this study illustrates that when development is used more as a tool for control than support, EU strategies risk doing the opposite of what they promise, fueling the instability it aims to fix.

6.2 Broader Implications

From a policy perspective, the analysis raises concerns about how the EU frames and legitimizes its role in the Sahel. While presented as neutral and cooperative, the EU's emphasis on stabilization, technical assistance, and conditional support risks reinforcing

authoritarian governance structures and limiting local agency. By relying on normative frameworks and performance-based aid, the EU may inadvertently contribute to top-down governance structures which lack legitimacy and fail in its response to local priorities.

Moreover, the persistent use of depoliticized language, particularly surrounding migration and governance, can obscure political realities within the region. Without a more transparent engagement with context-specific challenges and power dynamics, EU strategies may reproduce the very fragility it aims to mitigate. The findings suggest that if the EU is to pursue sustainable and equitable development in the Sahel, greater attention must be paid to the nature of its policies, and voices of those who are most affected by its policies. Consequently, in order to promote real stability, the EU must rethink its top-down approach and treat local voices not as passive recipients but as partners in shaping the future of the Sahel.

6.3 Suggestions for Future Research

This study has primarily examined the EU's strategic framing of development and security through official policy documents. While this provides insight into the discursive and institutional logic guiding EU engagement, future research would benefit from a stronger focus on implementation and local perception. Empirical studies based on fieldwork, and interviews could help clarify how these strategies materialize in practice, and whether they align with or diverge from the stated objectives. Additionally, further work could explore the agency of local actors, including governments, CSOs, and other non-state groups in shaping or resisting EU influence. Gaining a better understanding of how EU initiatives are interpreted, negotiated, or adapted at the local level would contribute to a more grounded analysis of external intervention.

Comparative studies would also enrich this research area. Examining similar development-security frameworks from other regions may help determine whether the dynamics identified in the Sahel are part of a broader trend within EU foreign policy. Finally, greater inclusion of Sahelian academic and policy voices is a must, and would help balance the Eurocentric focus that characterises much of the existing literature on this topic. Without giving more space to Sahelian perspectives, future research risks reproducing the same blind spot that for over a decade have shaped and limited EU engagement in the region.

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