

# Policyweekly

## UNGA 79 and the Future of Stability in the Sahel



### Policy Recommendations

- 1 There is a need to review current global initiatives for the Sahel to make them more country-specific.
- 2 Global initiatives must address the scramble for Africa by superpowers searching for spheres of influence.
- 3 The UN should collaborate with regional and national actors to strengthen natural resource governance.
- 4 Initiatives for stability in the Sahel must also examine power-sharing issues among ethnic nationalities in Sahelian countries.
- 5 There is a need to strengthen control of cross-border movements and activities across the Sahel.
- 6 Strategic efforts should be championed by the United Nations and other global interests to curb the growing trend of disinformation and misinformation in the region.

### Introduction

The 79th session of the [United Nations General Assembly \(UNGA79\)](#), held in September 2024, is remarkable in many ways, two of which are important for Africa. The first remarkable significance of UNGA79 is the adoption of the [Pact for the Future](#) as an outcome document of the [Summit of the Future](#). The Pact aligns with the theme of this year's high-level General Debate, which is: "Leaving no one behind: acting together for the advancement of peace, sustainable development and human dignity for present and future generations." The Pact encapsulates negotiated international consensus for addressing contemporary challenges of the 21st century while preparing the international system for future challenges. A second remarkable significance of UNGA79 is that it amplified the call for reform of the UN Security Council to enable greater inclusion and representation of African countries. Earlier, the United States had [announced](#) that it would support the addition of two permanent seats on the UN Security Council for Africa.

Despite the laudable outputs and opportunities offered by UNGA79, as evidenced by the Pact for the Future and debate on the addition of two permanent seats on the UN Security Council for Africa, UNGA79 falls short of expected attention to the critical challenge of stability in Africa, particularly the Sahel region. The [Sahel region](#) faces increasingly complex challenges that continue to undermine its stability and threaten global security. The region is afflicted by insurgencies,

poverty, unconstitutional changes in government, refugee crises connected to climate change and civil wars. The ongoing war in Sudan has led to the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians, displaced an estimated 10 million people internally, and spilt about 2 million into neighbouring countries as refugees. Military coups have spread across the region in the past three years, thereby reversing the gains of democratic transitions and threatening the stability of the entire region.

One would expect that the intractable posture of the complex crisis in the Sahel would have ignited a region-specific debate leading to an international consensus/commitment on the Sahel in the just concluded UNGA79. But this did not happen. The Pact for the Future adopted at the UNGA79 only glossed over the crisis in the Sahel region. At the same time, the debate on adding two permanent seats on the UN Security Council for Africa took the attention of African leaders away from the more pressing apocalypse brewing in the Sahel. Although there are subsisting global initiatives for addressing the crisis in the region, such as the [United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel \(UNISS\)](#) developed in 2013, the increasing instability of the region suggests the need to rejig existing strategies to properly position them for current challenges of the region. This edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly foregrounds the crisis of instability in the Sahel and identifies the gap in existing global initiatives for addressing the crisis in the region.

## Sahel Region as Africa's Belt of Instability

Geographically, the Sahel region is a belt running from [Senegal on the Atlantic coast through parts of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Sudan to Eritrea on the Red Sea coast](#). The region holds great potential for economic development and cultural exchange within Africa, given its geographical and historical significance as a meeting point between Africa's fertile tropical regions to the south and its desert in the north. In fact, the United Nations recognises the Sahel as a [land of opportunities](#). Unfortunately, the geographical contiguity and cultural/religious affinity that connects the Sahel serve as a belt for easy transmission of instability across the region.

[Jong-A-Pin](#) identified [four dimensions](#) of political instability, which include politically motivated violence, mass civil protests, instability within the political regime, and instability of the political regime. [Buzan and Weaver](#) have shown that political instability spreads quickly from one country to other countries within the same geopolitical region. In line with the works of Buzan and Weaver, the Sahel is a regional security complex that manifests all four

dimensions of political instability, as identified by [Jong-A-Pin](#). In terms of politically motivated violence, the region has served as a belt for the incubation and escalation of politically motivated violence manifesting in the form of civil wars, terrorism and insurgencies. [ACLED Mid-year matrix](#) showed that within the first half of 2024, a total of 1,701 political violence events occurred in the Sahel. The Sudan civil war, which has claimed between [20,000 and 150,000 lives](#), has spread a refugee crisis in the region, with over [500,000](#) Sudanese people driven to Chad as refugees. Insurgency has continued to worsen across Sahelian as deadly insurgent groups such as the [Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin \(JNIM\)](#) and the [Islamic State Sahel Province \(IS Sahel\)](#) continued to operate and expand across Sahelian states. The [2024 Global Terrorism Index \(GTI\)](#) showed that four Sahelian countries are among the top 10 countries most impacted by terrorism. Again, [13 \(60%\)](#) of the 20 most fatal terrorist attacks in 2023 took place in the Sahel, as reported by the 2024 [GTI](#).

In terms of mass civil protests, the Sahel region has also been rocked by a series of mass civil protests in recent years. In Mali, [protests](#) broke out in 2020, calling for the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. The protest was connected to citizens' perceived corruption in government and the government's inability to address the country's rising insurgency. Aside from the 2020 protest against poor governance, Mali has experienced other mass protests. In 2022, there were [anti-French protests](#) in which the protesters waved Russian flags and celebrated the expulsion of the French envoy in Bamako. In January 2022, there was also a [protest](#) against ECOWAS for imposing sanctions on the military regime. Just like Mali, Burkina Faso also experienced a similar trend in protests, which moved from the [2021/2022 protests](#) calling out the government for its failure to address insecurity in the country to the more recent [anti-French protests](#). Even though the protests in Mali and Burkina Faso shifted from protests against poor governance to what may seem like pro-government protests targeted against France, it does not diminish the impact of the protests on the stability of the affected countries and the wider Sahel region. The culture of waving Russian flags by protesters was replicated during the recent [#EndBadGovernance protests](#) in Nigeria, where protesters in parts of the country [waved Russian flags](#) during the protests.

In terms of instability within the political regime and instability of the political regime, coups have become more frequent and contagious across the Sahel since 2021. In the last three years, at least seven successful coups have been witnessed in the Sahel region – two in Burkina Faso, two in Mali, and one each in Niger, Chad and Sudan. This has made some policymakers refer to the Sahel region and

parts of West Africa as the “Coups Belt” of Africa.

## Gaps in Current Global Efforts for Stability in the Sahel

For various reasons, existing global efforts to engender stability in the troubled Sahel region have not yielded the desired outcome. First, global initiatives tend to ignore how the conflicting interests among world powers scrambling for spheres of influence in the Sahel region undermine the effective operationalisation of global initiatives for regional stability. Most world powers pursue their strategic national interests in the region through bilateral ad hoc military alliances with Sahelian countries. Such bilateral ad hoc military alliances only reinforce the roots of instability because, in some cases, such bilateral ad hoc military alliances embolden authoritarian and undemocratic regimes which serve the interests of the world powers. The continuous support of authoritarian and unconstitutional governments in Chad by France and the United States provides a case in point. Similarly, the role of Russia’s [Wagner group](#) in emboldening the current unconstitutional governments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger is another example.

Secondly, global initiatives for stability in the Sahel are usually based on one-size-fits-all, top-down strategies designed by international bodies to address global insecurity. By so doing, such initiatives ignore region-specific solutions to the complex issues of identity politics and natural resource governance, which contribute to violent conflicts destabilising the Sahel region. For instance, a look at the Pact of the Future adopted at UNGA79 shows that no action point was addressed specifically for the Sahel; not even one mention was made in the document. Yet, Sahel remains the epicentre of instability threatening the whole African continent.

## Recommendations

To make global initiatives fit the purpose of addressing the crisis of stability in the Sahel, we put forward the following recommendations.

- i. **Review current global initiatives for the Sahel:** Global initiatives for stability in the Sahel should be country-specific and aimed at arresting violent conflicts in specific countries while preventing their spread to other parts of the region. Existing initiatives like the [UN Support Plan for the Sahel](#) should be reviewed in collaboration with regional actors like the AU and ECOWAS to mainstream emerging country-specific issues undermining regional stability in the Sahel.

- ii. **Address issues of power play by world powers:** Global initiatives must address the current scramble for Africa by superpowers searching for spheres of influence. This can be done by placing strong regulations and oversight on bilateral ad hoc military alliances between world powers and Sahelian countries. More so, African leaders and regional organisations must muster the courage to reject the superpowers’ use of African territories for power play.
- iii. **Support natural resource governance:** the UN should collaborate with regional and national actors to strengthen natural resource governance to reduce the rate at which terror groups exploit natural resources.
- iv. **Localised solution addressing power sharing:** initiatives for stability in the Sahel must also examine power-sharing issues among ethnic nationalities in Sahelian countries to ensure that identity.
- v. **Strengthen control of cross-border movements and activities across the Sahel:** While cross-border cooperation among Sahelian countries is needed, the international community must partner with regional and state actors to strengthen border control and regulate irregular migration to reduce cross-border activities by terror groups.
- vi. **Dealing with Disinformation and Misinformation:** The region has become a fertile ground for foreign interests’ disinformation and misinformation efforts, which have damaged the region’s stability. Strategic efforts should be championed by the United Nations and other global interests to curb this growing trend and its impact.

## Conclusion

The Sahel region offers opportunities for political cooperation and economic development in Africa due to its geographical and historical significance. However, the geographical contiguity and cultural/religious affinity that connects the Sahel now serve as a belt for easy transmission of instability within the region. Existing global strategies for addressing the complex challenges of the Sahel have not delivered the expected outcomes because of factors like national interests and power play by world powers, amongst others. The just concluded UNGA79 was another missed opportunity for foregrounding the crisis of instability in the Sahel and wringing Sahel-specific commitments from the global community. There is a need to retool current global initiatives on insecurity to address the peculiar challenges of Sahelian states.

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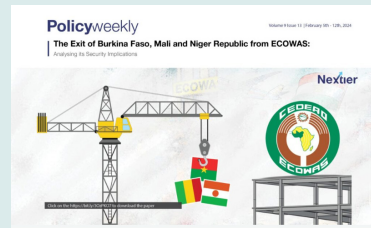
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