NOVEMBER 2026

RKK ICDS
RAHVUSVAHELINE KAITSEUURINGUTE KESKUS
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
EESTI · ESTONIA

BRIEF

THE NEW EU APPROACH TO THE SAHEL

STRATEGIC VALUE FOR ESTONIA

SIIM VAHER

Four years after the departure of the last Estonian troops from the Sahel, fighting between national armed forces, jihadists, and insurgent groups continues, while non-western extra-regional actors have solidified their foothold. To re-engage the region, the EU has formulated a new strategy, to which Estonia cannot afford to be indifferent.

Estonia was present in the Sahel for nearly a decade. From 2013 to 2022, it participated in three military missions in Mali under EU, UN, and French frameworks. About 100 Estonian troops trained the Malian army and helped restore state control and rebuild services across the country.[1] Between 2020 and 2023, juntas gained power in the Central Sahel states of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Advocating for more autonomy and sovereignty, the juntas have sought out new alliances, while curtailing security relations with former western partners, especially France and the US.[2] The last Estonian troops left Mali in July 2022.[3]

THE NEW SAHEL

Now, non-western actors are the preferred security partners for the regimes in power. Reportedly, up to 2 000 Africa Corps troops under the command of Russia's Ministry of Defence have been training and fighting alongside the Malian military since late 2021; hundreds have been stationed in Burkina Faso and Niger since 2024.[4] Meanwhile, Chinese company NORINCO has been shipping military equipment, from light armaments to armoured vehicles,[5] and Türkiye has provided the regimes with TB2 and Akinci drones.[6] As a result, the EU and Estonia have seen their room for engagement shrink significantly.

In 2025, in response to these changing trends, the EU Foreign Affairs Council agreed on "A Renewed EU Approach to the Sahel."[7] The document functions as a compass, setting out the Union's priorities without specifying concrete budgets or action plans. It emphasises flexibility and country-specific adaptation while linking longer-term development goals to the EU's Global Gateway strategy.[8] In October 2025, Mauritania received a €269 mn investment package from the Global Gateway to upgrade healthcare infrastructure and strengthen migration management capabilities.[9] On security, the focus has been on protecting civilians through future capacity-building missions, material aid, and European Peace Facility (EPF) contributions, while also tackling organised crime and human trafficking.[10] In November 2025, Chad received €14.5 mn in assistance from the EPF to strengthen its national armed forces.[11]

Estonia was present in the Sahel for nearly a decade

The EU's new strategy also stresses dialogue and cooperation with local civil society actors, as well as investment in education, culture, food security, and critical infrastructure.[12] Women and youth are defined as the target groups for the people-centric approach. In diplomatic relations, the strategy prioritises open dialogue on governance and human rights; it seeks areas for pragmatic cooperation, contributes to

multilateralism, and promotes the EU's positive image while countering disinformation.[13] The strategy will be implemented through the Team Europe approach—coordinated action by member states and EU institutions.[14] Implementation, however, has reportedly stalled because of internal disagreements.[15] For example, an envelope of €195 mn in development aid meant for Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger remains frozen over disputes between the member states and the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA). Amid reports of human rights abuses in the Sahel, the EU's human-rights-centric approach also clashes with the juntas' state-centric agenda, as the juntas are mostly interested in regaining control over lost territories.[16] Hence, putting the EU's new strategy into practice in the Central Sahel may be difficult, if not impossible.

Mauritania and Chad are more receptive to the EU's liberal values

Security Implications and Liberal Conflict Management

Despite Türkiye, Russia, and China becoming the security partners of choice for the juntas, instability persists in the Central Sahel. In April 2026, Islamist and Tuareg-separatist militias launched a coordinated attack on all major Malian cities, including the capital Bamako; in Burkina Faso, the government has effective control over only a third of the country's territory.[17] Instability in the Sahel region fuels European fears over irregular migration and the risk of terrorism, further undermining the EU's cohesion as southern member states define these as their main security concerns.[18] Moreover, the Sahel is where Russia—the principal threat to Estonia's security—has managed to gain rather than lose ground, despite facing isolation elsewhere due to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Looking forward, there are serious risks of violence spreading into Mauritania and Chad.[19] More than 300 000 Malian refugees are currently in south-eastern Mauritania, where they lack access to healthcare services, nutrition, and education.[20] In Chad, the influx of war refugees from Sudan, as well as mounting pressure on natural resources, has made violent clashes ever more common.[21] In addition, a new rebel group called Movement for Peace, Reconstruction, and Progress has emerged in Chad's southern Moyen-Chari province, while Boko Haram continues to operate in the Lake Chad region.[22]

These two states, however, are also more receptive to the EU's liberal values. Chad became the first coup-affected country in the Sahel to hold presidential elections in 2024.[23] Current Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani has launched a national dialogue to address issues of democratic governance.[24] The EU's new approach to 'human security' could apply to the two Sahelian countries bordering the junta-led states.

Estonia's Role

Estonia has a role to play in the EU's new framework because engagement beyond the Baltic Sea region strengthens partnerships with other EU and NATO members. For instance, its engagement in the Sahel has already improved Tallinn's standing as a net security exporter in the eyes of Paris.[25] It was during Estonia's participation in the mission in Mali that France decided to deploy its troops and military equipment to Estonia under NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence on the eastern flank.[26] As Spain and Italy have shown growing interest and expanded their activities in the Sahel in recent years, an opportunity has opened for Estonia to foster closer ties with southern European NATO and EU member states.[27]

Putting the EU's new strategy into practice in the Central Sahel may be difficult, if not impossible

The EU's new strategy provides Tallinn with several pathways for deeper involvement. First, the Estonian Armed Forces have gained experience in EU capacity-building missions in the region. More specifically, Estonia has

contributed to training the Malian army in base-defence operations.[28] This expertise could also support future Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in Chad, where various non-state armed groups operate.

Second, Estonia, having been subjugated by Russia for much of its history, is free from a western European colonial legacy on the African continent. This positions Estonia, together with other central and eastern European states, as allies in formulating and promoting the EU's counternarratives and combating disinformation in a region where some larger EU member states carry the image of colonisers. Through cooperation between the Estonian Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs, on the one hand, and EU institutions, on the other, Tallinn could assist Brussels and advance its goals of countering malign information influence in the Sahel—an area of expertise where Estonia excels, having been a target of Russian campaigns since 2007.[29]

Instability in the Sahel and the EU's new approach offer Tallinn options to contribute to security missions, diplomatic efforts, and development cooperation

Third, Estonia has both the capacity and experience necessary to engage youth and other disadvantaged groups in the region, having focused on access to and the quality of education, and on empowering women in its development aid.[30] For example, since 2009, the Estonian NGO Mondo has been active in Kongo village in northern Ghana, less than 20 kilometres from Burkina Faso.[31] Instability in the Sahel and the EU's new approach offer Tallinn options to contribute to security missions, diplomatic efforts, and development cooperation—all listed in Estonia's Strategy for Africa 2020–30.[32]

Endnotes

[1] Kaitsevägi [Estonian Defence Forces], "Operatsioonid" [Operations], last updated 16 July 2024.; Kaitsevägi, "Lõppes Eesti osalus Malis välisoperatsioonil Barkhane ja sihtüksuses Takuba" [Estonia's Participation in Foreign Military Operation Barkhane and in Task Force Takuba in Mali Has Come to an End], 11 July2022.
[2] Jack Watling and Nina Wilén, "Assessing the Causes of Strategic Realignment in Sahelian States," *RUSI Journal* 169, no. 4 (2024): 66–71.
[3] Kaitsevägi, "Lõppes Eesti osalus."
[4] Nina Wilén, "From engagement to rupture to re-engagement: Analysing the path to the EU's renewed approach to the Sahel," European Parliament, 29 June 2026, 20. For Africa Corps, see Charles Bouëssel, "Wagner-Africa Corps Transition in the Central African Republic: A Three-Body Problem," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 30 March 2026.
[5] Paul Nantulya, "Les limites de la diplomatie transactionnelle de la Chine en Afrique [The Limits of China's Transactional Diplomacy in Africa]," *Centre d'Études Strategiques de l'Afrique* [Africa Center for Strategic Studies], 7 July 2025.
[6] Nate Allen, "Military Drone Proliferation Marks Destabilizing Shift in Africa's Armed Conflicts," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 21 April 2025.
[7] Wilén, "From engagement to rupture," 26.
[8] Council of the European Union, "Discussion paper on a Renewed EU Approach to the Sahel," 10 November 2025.
[9] European Commission, "EU and Mauritania advance partnership through Global Gateway," 8 October 2025.
[10] Council of the European Union, "Cover Note of the Joint EEAS-Commission paper "A renewed EU Approach to the Sahel"," 21 October 2025, 4.
[11] European Council, Council of the European Union, "European Peace Facility: Council adopts assistance measures in support of the armed forces of Jordan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Chad," 24 November 2025.
[12] Council of the European Union, "Discussion paper."
[13] Council of the European Union, "Cover note."
[14] European Union External Action Service, "Team Europe - Standing Stronger Together," 17 March 2022.
[15] Wilén, "From engagement to rupture," 26–28.
[16] "Defining a New Approach to the Sahel's Military-led States," *International Crisis Group,* 22 May 2025; "West Africa: Further Crackdowns by Military Juntas," *Human Rights Watch*, 4 February 2026.
[17] "Attacks in Mali Mark Long Trajectory of Worsening Security," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 27 April 2026; David Doukhan, "Chaos in the Sahel: After Mali, is it Burkina Faso and Niger's turn?" *The Nancy and Stephen Grand International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, 19 May 2026.
[18] See, for example: MED-5, *Joint Declaration MED-5 Countries* (Naples, 11–12 April 2025), 2*;* Gobierno de España [Government of Spain], "España y África 2025–2028. Trabajando juntos a través de una relación estratégica" [Spain and Africa 2025–2028: Working together through a strategic relationship], November 2024, 7; Luca Guglielminotti, "The evolution of Italian presence in Africa: towards an innovative policy approach?" *Fondation pour la Maîtrise des Enjeux Stratégiques* [Foundation for the Control of Strategic Issues], 8 November 2024.
[19] "The Central Sahel," Africa Security Analysis, 6 August 2026.
[20] "Impact of the deteriorating security situation in Mali on border areas: Mauritania - Senegal – Guinea," GRANIT, 10 December 2025, 1, 11.
[21] Muna Turki, "Clashes over water resources in Chad kill over 40 people," *DW News*, 27 April 2026.
[22] Remadji Hoinathy, "Chad's quiet return to French military support," *Institute for Security Studies*, 19 August 2026.
[23] "Chad's President Deby wins election against prime minister in heated race," *Al Jazeera*, 9 May 2024.
[24] Hassane Koné, "Can Mauritania avoid another fruitless dialogue?" *Institute for Security Studies*, 30 May2025.
[25] Vytautas Isoda, "Choosing the Flag in the Name of Peace: Why Have the Baltic States (Re)turned to the United Nations?" *International Peacekeeping* 29 (2022): 51–52; Matthew Crandall and Mari-Liis Sulg, "Small states and new status opportunities: Estonia's foreign policy towards Africa," *European Politics and Society* 29 (2023): 257.
[26] Aili Vahtla, "Gallery: French tanks arrive in Tapa," *ERR*, 29 March 2017.
[27] See: Eric Hall, "Europe's Forthcoming Sahel Strategy: A Limited Role in a Multipolar Region," *International Centre for Defence and Security*, October 2025.
[28] Kaitsevägi, "Kaitseväe instruktorid õpetavad Mali väljaõppemissioonil kohalikke sõdureid" [Instructors of the Estonian Defence Forces Are Teaching Local Soldiers as Part of a Training Mission in Mali], 19 October 2021.
[29] Kaili Malts and Maia Klaassen, "Disinformation Landscape in Estonia," *EU Disinfo Lab*, January 2025.
[30] "Ghana," Mondo, last consulted 9 September 2026.
[31] For distances, see: "Google Maps," data retrieved 9 September 2026.
[32] Välisministeerium [Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs], "Eesti Aafrika regioonistrateegia 2020–2030. Põhijäreldused" [Estonia's Africa Regional Strategy 2020–2030: Key Conclusions], 7 May 2021.

About the Author

Siim Vaher

Siim Vaher is completing his master's degree in international relations and regional studies at the University of Tartu, specialising in European Studies, and holds a bachelor's degree in Contemporary History. He interned at the ICDS in 2026.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions contained in this paper are solely of its author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the International Centre for Defence and Security or any other organisation.

ICDS.Tallinn
@ICDS-Tallinn.bsky.social
@ICDS_Tallinn
ICDS-Tallinn
www.icds.ee

International Centre for Defence and Security
63/4 Narva Rd., 10120 Tallinn, Estonia
info@icds.ee

ISSN 2228-2076