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Elisa Lopez Lucia

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## Performing EU agency by experimenting the 'Comprehensive Approach': the European Union Sahel Strategy

Elisa Lopez Lucia

Department of Political Science, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, Belgium

### ABSTRACT

This article examines how the European Union (EU) Strategy for security and development in the Sahel has been used as a 'laboratory of experimentation' for the implementation of the Comprehensive Approach. In this context, it looks at how power struggles at the discursive and praxis levels are performing the international agency of the EU. These struggles are played out by EU officials based in different institutions who are seeking to assert their role in the EU foreign policy process and to promote their vision for the EU in the world. The attempt to re-define the EU as a strategic actor which lies at the heart of the Comprehensive Approach is also transforming the EU's relations with West Africa (WA) and raises some issues that concern the political agency of West African partners. The last section shows that the Sahel Strategy has undermined local ownership and has the potential to cripple the process of regional integration in WA.

### KEYWORDS

European Union foreign policy; Comprehensive Approach; Sahel; ECOWAS

The European Union (EU) Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel is an oddity compared to the EU's usual external actions in Africa. References to 'strategic priorities' and the 'EU's interests' are found in place of the traditional emphasis on partnership for the development of Africa. The so-called Sahel Strategy, as one of the first explicit foreign policy strategies of the EU, contributes to the redefinition of the international agency of the EU and its relations with its African partners. It is in the African continent that the EU is generally supposed to exercise its strongest political influence, backed by its development aid and its increasing security presence. The importance of the Sahel Strategy also lies in its role as a 'test case' for the Comprehensive Approach in the context of the reform of EU external relations mandated by the Lisbon Treaty. This approach is exemplified by the Strategy which aims to bring four lines of action (development, security, political and military) under the same framework.

The meaning of the Comprehensive Approach remains rather vague. Starting off as an operational concept aimed at improving coordination and cooperation between both EU military and civilian instruments and EU institutions and member states, it soon became a way to achieve the EU's 'strategic vision' (Council of the EU 2014) defined by its political and security interests. While the shift towards this Comprehensive Approach has been increasingly investigated, there has been a tendency among scholars to focus on the

operational dimension of the Comprehensive Approach and assess whether the EU has been up to the task of responding comprehensively to its international environment and, if so, how (e.g. Gross 2008; Drent 2011; Pirozzi 2013; Furness and Olsen 2015). So far, very few studies have engaged with the social and political dimension of the Comprehensive Approach (e.g. Germond, McEnery, and Marchi 2016; Lavallée and Poupponneau 2016).

This article augments these studies by examining how the struggles over the Comprehensive Approach within the EU are performing the international agency of the EU. It also examines the effects of these struggles on the EU's relations with West African states and organizations. I argue that the Sahel Strategy has been used as a 'laboratory of experimentation' for the implementation of this approach. EU officials, mainly located in the European External Action Service (EEAS), use the Strategy to 'speak' the Comprehensive Approach and put it into practice with the aim of promoting their own role within the EU foreign policy process and their vision of the EU as a strategic actor. However, these discursive and other practices have been resisted by other groups of officials, mostly located in the Commission, who 'speak' and put in practice EU foreign policy based on their own vision of the EU as a development and/or normative actor.

These struggles, informed by differing ideas of what the international agency of the EU should be; and by their position in the EU institutions, are also transforming the EU's relations with West Africa (WA). This leads to the second argument of this article, that the redefinition of the EU's agency as a strategic actor raises two important issues. First, the set of emerging practices performing this agency has undermined West African local ownership. Second, this change risks both negatively affecting the EU's interactions with West African actors and crippling the process of regional integration in WA. In contrast with previous EU–Africa policies, which consistently supported African regional organizations, the Sahel Strategy has undermined the political agency of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) by presenting it as an inefficient actor that must be side-lined in order to allow partnering with more flexible coalitions of states.

The first section of this article briefly reviews the literature on EU foreign policy and explains how the article draws on both discursive and sociological approaches to studying the EU. The second section analyses how the Sahel Strategy has been used as a 'laboratory of experimentation' by various actors to implement the Comprehensive Approach, and resistance to this change. Finally, the last section questions the effect of these reconfigurations on the EU's relations with WA.

## Performing the EU's international agency

Since the 1970s, an important academic debate concerning the foreign policy of the EU has focused on which kind of actor the EU is internationally. Commonly, the EU has been characterized as a civilian, normative, structural and global power (Duchêne 1972; Manners 2002; Lucarelli and Manners 2006; Keukeleire and MacNaughtan 2008; Del Sarto 2016). A separate line of enquiry has developed, examining the existence (or not) of an EU strategic culture, the processes driving its development, and its content (Cornish and Edwards 2005; Meyer 2005; Biava, Drent, and Herd 2011). These debates tend to articulate a desired goal for what the EU should be internationally, and what it needs to change to reach this sought-for model in terms of capacity, efficiency, coherency

or (norm) consistency. Recent discussions on the Lisbon Treaty reform and on the ability of the EU to implement the Comprehensive Approach since then neatly illustrate these debates (Whitman and Ana 2009; Borrajo and de Castro 2016; Mühlberger and Müller 2016). Lavallée and Pouponneau (2016), for instance, highlight how the Comprehensive Approach is on the one hand presented as the obvious answer to incoherency and inconsistency problems, as well as to the complex international environment that the EU faces; and, on the other hand, is mostly analysed in terms of the institutional challenges its implementation poses.

Lately, a growing number of scholars at the intersection of International Relations and EU Studies have started criticizing these analyses for not paying attention to the social conditions of the EU's international identity or role as defined through the practices, discourses, struggles and positions of those enacting the EU external relations (Diez 1999; Rogers 2009; Carta and Morin 2014; McDonagh 2015; Mérand and Rayroux 2016). This article builds on these approaches and examines, in one particular setting, how the EU's international agency is being performed: by whom, for which purpose, and with what effects on the EU's international interactions.

The conditions underpinning the agency of the EU – its ways of acting and capacity to act – are often analysed as the product either of practices (e.g. McDonagh 2015; Bueger 2016) or of discourses (e.g. Diez 1999, 2014; Rogers 2009). The frame of analysis chosen usually depends on whether the author uses a Bourdieusian approach or 'practice theory'; or whether they are a poststructuralist or draw on the 'linguistic turn'. This article chooses to overleap this dichotomy, and argues that investigating both discourses and practices is the most useful way of peering into the empirics, a move justified by Swidler (2001, 85) in these terms:

Practice theory moves the level of sociological attention 'down' from conscious ideas and values to the physical and the habitual. But this move is complemented by a move "up", from ideas located in individual consciousness to the impersonal arena of "discourse." [...] discourse is not the content of what anyone says, but the system of meanings that allows them to say anything meaningful at all.

This is supported by Neumann (2002, 627–628), for whom 'the analysis of discourse understood as the study of the preconditions for social action must include the analysis of practice understood as the study of social action itself'.

The Comprehensive Approach is thus approached as being part of a discursive context (i.e. preconditions for social action) where struggles over the meaning of the EU international agency take place (Diez 2014, 321). In the interviews conducted for this article, discursive categories such as identifying the EU as a 'strategic', 'normative' or 'development' actor were constantly used by the actors to assert their position.<sup>1</sup> One issue with practice-based approaches is that these struggles over meaning can easily be overlooked. For instance, in their special issue on the Comprehensive Approach, Lavallée and Pouponneau (2016) examine the institutionalization of the Comprehensive Approach within the EU. They look at how this context of institutional re-organization compels a multitude of actors with different interests and visions of the world to work together, and how this is shaped by bureaucratic turf wars, strategies, alliances and compromises. As their principal interest is in what actors do, struggles over meaning (e.g. the EU as a 'strategic' vs. 'normative'/'development' actor) and their effect are not taken as objects of analysis,

even though these struggles between various discursive categories should be examined, as they set up boundaries that draw what is acceptable and what is not (Diez 2014, 329). Indeed, we will see below that while the EU's support of regional integration has always been deemed essential to EU foreign policy, the Sahel Strategy, by referring to the Comprehensive Approach, has made its criticism and displacement acceptable.

Focusing on practices is equally crucial, as it draws attention to the actors and their actions. Practitioners engaged in the EU foreign policy process draw on the discursive context but also re-shape it through their practices. Practices are 'socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world' (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 4). Actors thus engage in practice based on their positions and the values, interests and habits that are intrinsic to their profession (Græger 2016, 480). Hence, Lavallée and Pouponneau (2016) and Egger (2016) show that the mobilization (or not) of the Comprehensive Approach is also linked to the position of actors trying to exist in this new configuration.

Power is thus at play in this reconfiguration, as, to become practices, actions have to establish themselves within a set of already established practices, disturbing how things work 'normally': 'Practices answer to a regularity and inertia which serves to maintain power relations. This means that actions to innovate will be met with counter-actions to resist change and hold intact the existing set of preconditions for practice [i.e. discourses]' (Neumann 2002, 641). The production of the EU's international agency can therefore be understood as an interplay between the levels of discourse and practice. In what follows, this interplay is traced through an analysis of EU discourse, mainly through official documents, and semi-structured interviews with EU and West African actors. When conducting these interview, the aim was to map the struggles as they were conceived by the practitioners interviewed. Three rounds of interviews took place: one in January–February 2012 in the EU institutions and member states' permanent representations in Brussels; one in June–July 2013 in Abuja at the ECOWAS Headquarters; and one in November–December 2014 in the EU institutions in Brussels. More than 60 interviews were conducted among which 27 specifically addressed the Sahel Strategy.

## Experimenting the comprehensive approach

### *The elaboration of the Sahel Strategy*

The drafting of the Strategy happened at a particularly fluid moment. Indeed, the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty on 1 December 2009, which led to the creation of new institutions such as the EEAS, provided a window of opportunity for many actors to negotiate new practices of working and coordination. As the Treaty reorganized the EU external relations, partly to implement this Comprehensive Approach (Lavallée and Pouponneau 2016), it created uncertainties, fuzzy situations and struggles between groups of actors and institutions taking up new roles and attempting to construct new hierarchies through this re-organization.

To briefly summarize the main changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, this re-organization formally ended the pillar structure that used to separate the EU external relations located in the first pillar (European Community (EC)) from the second pillar (inter-

governmental) which included the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The creation of the position of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) also confirmed the end of the pillar structure, as it merged the post of the HR for the CFSP with the post of Commissioner for External Relations.

The other major change introduced by the Lisbon Treaty was the creation of the EEAS in December 2010. The EEAS includes former European Commission services: the entire Directorate-General for External Relations (DG RELEX) and the geographical services of the DG Development (DG DEV).<sup>2</sup> It also includes various services that were located in the Council of the EU, such as crisis management structures (former second pillar). The delegations of the European Commission were also transferred to the EEAS and renamed as delegations of the EU with the added tasks of political reporting and diplomatic representation (Paul 2008, 28).<sup>3</sup> The ambition was to create a 'real' diplomatic service that can assist the HR/VP in their task of ensuring consistency between the different areas of the EU's external action (art.21-3 TEU).

The creation of the EEAS had an important impact on the Commission. Principally, a new Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) was set up. DG DEVCO brought together all the officials in charge of the implementation of the EU's external aid budget. Before the Lisbon Treaty, these officials were located in DG DEV (budget execution services) and in the Europe Aid Cooperation Office (AIDCO). Hence, the creation of DEVCO resulted in a division between the programming of aid, led by the EEAS, and its implementation, led by DEVCO. However, this division is not clear-cut, as the EEAS and DG DEVCO are supposed to cooperate on both programming and implementation. The situation has become even more complicated in relation to the European Development Fund (EDF), the main financial instrument that provides development assistance to African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states. Here, programming is supposed to be jointly prepared by the EEAS and the Commission. This has to be done under the leadership of the Commissioner for Development, who must jointly submit the proposal with the HR/VP for adoption by the Commission. We will see that the complexity of this procedure and the lack of clear guidelines opened a space for struggles between EEAS and DEVCO officials.

Hence, the Lisbon Treaty introduced new frameworks of cooperation in the EU policy structure, but without clearly defining practices of cooperation. Hence, actors were left with an important space for experimentation to define new practices. In this context, the Sahel Strategy became a resource for certain groups of actors to claim their role within the EU and their vision of how and what the EU should be internationally. 'Speaking' the Comprehensive Approach, in the framework of the Strategy, became either a strategy of legitimization or an obstacle to this role and vision depending on the group of actors concerned. Tellingly, many of the actors involved in the Sahel Strategy saw and intentionally used the Strategy as a 'laboratory of experimentation' driven by the desire to reconfigure EU external action along the lines of the Comprehensive Approach (EEAS official 2012b, 2014a, 2014b). For example, the report of the Inter-Services Working Group (*Groupe de Travail Interservices*) on security in the Sahel and the Maghreb<sup>4</sup> calls it 'a true "test case" for the effective implementation of the "Comprehensive Approach"' (GTI 2014, 34).

In the context, the birth of the Strategy came from a combination of member states' increasing worry about the security situation in the Sahel (Simon, Mattelaer, and Hadfield

2012, 10)<sup>5</sup> and the proactive action of DG DEV's geographical services (West and Central Africa), who were keen to seize the political opportunity to become part of a diplomatic service as they were transferred to the EEAS. The Sahel Strategy was officially 'welcomed' in March 2011 by the Foreign Affairs Council, and placed under the leadership of the West and Central Africa Director of the EEAS. The Strategy was designed with four strategic lines of action: (1)'Development, good governance and internal conflict resolution'; (2)'Political and diplomatic'; (3)'Security and the rule of law' and (4)'Fight against and prevention of violent extremism and radicalization' (EU 2011). The countries initially included were Niger, Mauritania, Mali and Algeria. In 2014, the Sahel Strategy was extended to Burkina Faso and Chad (Council of the EU 2014). The adoption of the Strategy was justified in this way:

An urgent and more recent priority is to protect European citizens and interests, preventing AQIM attacks and its potential to carry out attacks on EU territory, to reduce and contain drug and other criminal trafficking destined for Europe, to secure lawful trade and communication links (roads, pipelines) across the Sahel, North-South and East-West, and to protect existing economic interests and create the basis for trade and EU investment. Improving security and development in the Sahel has an obvious and direct impact on the EU internal security situation. (EU 2011, 4)

The emphasis found here on the EU's interests and the protection of EU citizens represents a significant difference with other EU policy documents about Africa, which usually emphasize partnership and the well-being and development of Africa countries and regions. Hence, the Africa–EU Strategic Partnership (2007) describes their relations as guided by 'the interdependence between Africa and Europe, ownership and joint responsibility, and respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law, as well as the right to development' (see also the Cotonou Agreement defining the relations between the EC and ACP countries [ACP-EC 2000]). The Sahel Strategy stands out amongst other documents by its wording and its rationale that EU civilian and military instruments need to be driven by a political strategy to pursue EU's interests (EEAS official 2012a, 2012g).

The EU instruments brought together by the Strategy are the EDF, the Instrument for Stability (IfS)<sup>6</sup> – now the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) – and the CSDP. They involve different groups of actors. In the EEAS, the Crisis Management and Planning Directorate (CMPD) is responsible for the planning of civilian-military missions (CSDP). Three of these missions have been deployed in the Sahel as part of the Strategy. Both the geographical services (West and Central Africa) programming the EDF and the actors programming the IfS/IcSP are located in the EEAS. In the Commission, the main actors involved can be found in DG DEVCO: they are based in the services jointly programming and implementing the EDF, and in the ones implementing the IfS/IcSP. DG Migration and Home Affairs (HOME) is also involved. The office of the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (CTC), in the Council of the EU, has played an important part in the drafting and in the implementation of the Strategy. Finally, some EU member states were very much involved in this process. The multiplicity of actors involved in the Strategy in a context of institutional reconfiguration opened the door for struggles between different groups, featuring attempts to establish new cooperation and working practices under the label of the Comprehensive Approach, and resistance to these attempts. Groups of actors 'speaking'



the Comprehensive Approach are mostly found in the EEAS and in the Council of the EU. Conversely, groups of actors resisting these practices are mostly found in DG DEVCO and often motivated by the fear that DEVCO will be reduced to the status of an implementing agency of the EEAS within this new institutional configuration. We will see why in the next two sections.

### *Enacting new practices: performing the EU as a strategic actor*

The launch of the Sahel Strategy has opened the way for the establishment of new practices with the explicit aim of improving coordination and information exchange between the EU actors and instruments involved in the Strategy. In this context, the Comprehensive Approach has been used by officials in the EEAS and in the Council to justify the cooperation of all these entities within a strategic framework and under their leadership. This is an important change for the EU institutions, in which groups of actors typically have their own financial instruments driven by their particular objectives. In particular, DG DEVCO manages the largest EU financial instrument (EDF) with a significant degree of autonomy and a clear rationale for its actions (i.e. sponsoring development). Many of the practices established through the Sahel Strategy aim to reduce this autonomy and re-orient DG DEVCO's development objectives within the wider strategic objectives of the EU in the Sahel. In this new framework, development is not an aim in itself but part of a larger policy that addresses EU interests in the Sahel, which are mainly linked to security.

One such practice is the launching of joint preparatory or fact-finding missions in the Sahel in order to gather evidence to draft the Sahel Strategy and its Action Plans, and prepare the CSDP missions. Before drafting the Strategy, fact-finding missions were sent to the four Sahel countries initially targeted by the framework to assess their situation. These missions included Commission and Council Secretariat Staff, and national experts (Simon, Mattelaer, and Hadfield 2012, 10). EEAS officials were not part of the missions as the Service was not yet set up but members of the geographical services that were later transferred to the EEAS were present. The same thing happened before EUCAP Sahel Niger was launched: officials from the EEAS and the Commission went to Niger to prepare the mission. Doing this preparatory work in common (and under the leadership of the geographical services) enabled the assessment of the countries to be done through the lens of the EU's strategic objectives, and constrained the instruments to work towards these aims.

Another practice is the regular meetings taking place within the Task Force Sahel. The Task Force is an inter-services coordination forum bringing together all the actors involved in the Strategy under the authority of the Coordinator (the EEAS Director for West and Central Africa) to give a strategic coherence to actions and programmes (EEAS official 2012a, 2012d, 2014d, 2014f). When it was created, the Task Force was an unusual entity, as bringing everyone to sit at the same table was normally considered a difficult task (Council official 2012a). As a Commission official (2012c) highlighted, the Task Force 'put pressure ... to bring everyone in a framework and force people to work together'.

The joint preparatory mission and the Task Force are considered examples of best practices of coordination within and between EU institutions (Council official 2012a; EEAS official 2012f): 'the most advanced institutional mechanism ever established' for coordinating



EU action (EEAS official 2014a). This is significant, for talk of ‘best practices’ and ‘coherence’ is part of a political process of change which progressively re-orientes EU instruments from their institutionally specific rationales and objectives towards an explicitly EU-wide strategic interest. Inasmuch as the idea that EU institutions should be more coherent and coordinate their action better is widely accepted, it becomes increasingly difficult for actors wanting to preserve their institutional objectives to resist these ‘best practices’.

In parallel to these coordination practices, new practices mainstreaming the prioritization of security imperatives emerged in the EEAS. As a first step, development money (EDF/IfS) that was already allocated was re-oriented to meet the Strategy’s security objectives. The Strategy’s security objectives were then integrated into the next EDF/IfS negotiations (Commission official 2012a; EEAS official 2012b, 2012e). CMPD actors were particularly proactive in this mainstreaming. As one said, ‘the aim is to coordinate all instruments through the CSDP’ (EEAS official 2012h) which is another way of saying that security objectives are the priority. CMPD and, more generally, EEAS officials have been arguing for ‘creative ways’ to use development money to fund security and even military actions such as buying equipment for the armed forces of the Sahel countries (EEAS official 2012g, 2012h). Whilst, at the time of my last interview, development money had not yet been used to fund Sahelian militaries, discursive practices around the topic had definitely changed. When the Strategy was launched in 2011 it was unthinkable to propose challenging the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria for development aid.<sup>7</sup> By the end of 2014, however, it was acceptable to talk about ways to revisit these criteria and use development money to fund military assistance (EEAS official 2012c, 2012g, 2014c). As highlighted by a CMPD officer, ‘many taboos have been broken already’ (EEAS official 2012h).<sup>8</sup>

Hence, the Comprehensive Approach category has been used strategically to further the prioritization of security needs and to establish new practices reconfiguring the use of financial instrument to pursue the ‘political’ and ‘strategic’ objectives of the EU in the Sahel.<sup>9</sup> Illustrating this use, this EEAS official argued that the Comprehensive Approach did not ‘transform development aid in security assistance but brings all the instruments in the same effort’ (EEAS official 2014c).

The establishment of these practices in Brussels have been paralleled by the establishment of new practices in the Sahel region to present the EU as a strategic actor. Firstly, after the Lisbon Treaty, delegations acquired a political and representational role strengthened by the arrival of political advisers representing the EEAS. The Heads of delegations (reporting to the EEAS) seized the opportunity – in the context of blurry guidelines – to take over the role of coordinator of member states embassies. Up until the Lisbon Treaty, this role was rotating among the embassies along with the rotation of the EU Presidency. As the Lisbon Treaty put an end to this rotation, it provided the opportunity for EU Delegations to claim this role for themselves (art. 32 TUE; Simon, Mattelaer, and Hadfield 2012, 25). Using the Strategy’s emphasis on improved coordination between EU institutions and member states as a resource, Heads of delegations argued they were the best placed to make this happen. They became pioneers in the establishment of this coordination practice: in all Sahelian countries, EU delegations are now hosting and chairing meetings of heads of mission (ambassador level) and meetings of political advisers.

Secondly, delegations in the region are increasingly hosting security expertise through temporarily seconded experts from member states or experts hired by the IfS, as planned

for in the Sahel Strategy (EU 2011, 16). Permanent security expertise is still lacking but it has become common among EEAS and Council officials to complain about this and request it (Council official 2012b; EEAS official 2012g, 2014f). The Comprehensive Approach is used as a justificatory device to argue that security expertise will enable the EU to be a legitimate political interlocutor for both West African governments and EU member states in WA (GTI 2014, 24).

### *Resisting the comprehensive approach*

These new practices have not been unopposed. Multiple actions and practices of resistance have been enacted by actors, in particular within DG DEVCO where officials feel marginalized and see their vision of the EU as a development and/or normative actor in Africa being challenged. In Brussels, officials in DG DEVCO are putting pressure on their colleagues in the EEAS to plan the EDF jointly, in order to not be relegated to an implementing agency with no political input. As mentioned, a joint procedure for the programming and allocation of EDF resources was planned by the Lisbon Treaty reform process. However, the terms of this joint programming were so vague that EEAS officials were able to seize the opportunity of the Sahel Strategy to take the lead and define the priorities of the Strategy without consulting DG DEVCO (Commission official 2012b; EEAS official 2012e). Justified through the need to implement the Comprehensive Approach, the aim was to establish a practice whereby the leadership for programming lies in the hands of the EEAS (GTI 2014, 24). In response, DEVCO officials demanded actual joint leadership for programming and started confronting EEAS officials in their everyday work (EEAS official 2012d, 2012e, 2014b). One method of establishing this challenge was to create strong geographical services within DG DEVCO to compete with EEAS services (EEAS official 2014b, 2014d). This was not evident initially as, when DEVCO was created, one of the arguments regarding its organizational structure was that it should promote coherency within EU structures by not creating geographical services that would duplicate those in the EEAS. However, the incentives to have expertise to be able to provide inputs in the programming of the EDF played a key role in the final decision to set up geographical services in DEVCO (EEAS official 2012c).

Additionally, DG DEVCO uses its role as the implementing agency and the co-programmer of the EDF to hamper the prioritization of security imperatives within development programming. DEVCO's power is significant inasmuch as most of the actions and projects of the Sahel Strategy are funded through the development-focused EDF. Practices of resistance from DEVCO officials are multiple: for instance, they do not let EEAS officials define specific projects, rather than general lines of action, to preserve the development focus of projects (EEAS official 2014d). Multiple appeals have been made to DEVCO officials to map their development projects. The aim was to understand exactly how DEVCO allocated the money in order to be able to re-orient it within the framework of the Strategy. However, according to EEAS (2012e), Council (2012a) and member states (2012a) officials, DEVCO actors have purposefully resisted these calls in order to preserve their development project from being contaminated by security objectives.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, no additional funding has yet been allocated to have permanent security experts in the delegations. Delegations are still mostly composed of Commission officials who remain focused on development and suspicious of their new political and security role (Drieskens 2012; Member

state official 2012a, 2012b; Member state detached security expert 2014). More generally, DEVCO officials refuse to change their own working practices, even though they are continuously challenged by the new practices established in the framework of the Strategy. The term ‘protectionist assemblage’ suggested by an interviewee (Member state detached expert 2014) nicely reflects the attempts by many DEVCO officials to keep working practices and EU instruments intact along the lines of the pre-Lisbon Treaty configuration.

Another set of actors is resisting attempts by EEAS officials to perform the EU as a strategic actor and bring together instruments and actors: the EU member states which, according to the Sahel Strategy, should place their action within the framework of the Strategy and, at least, share information on their policies and programmes in the Sahel (EU 2011, 13). Member states, for various reasons, have been resisting this pressure for change (EEAS official 2014f). EU officials in Brussels and in delegations report that member states, France in particular, remain purposefully vague when informing them about their military programmes in the Sahel (EEAS official 2012c, 2012f, 2012g, 2012h). In 2011, member states also hampered the deployment of an EU military mission in Mali. Officials in the EEAS (CMPD and the geographical service) and in the CTC office advocated for a mission to support the Malian security forces in re-deploying in the North of the country. Member states refused this proposal (Council official 2012b; EEAS official 2012a; see Simon, Mattelaer, and Hadfield 2012, 28).<sup>11</sup> This took place just before the outbreak of the crisis in January 2012, when independentist Tuareg groups in Northern Mali started a campaign against the Malian government, which was further destabilized by a military coup in March 2012. The rebellion in the North was soon taken over by Islamist groups which starting marching on Bamako. In response, France intervened militarily (*Opération Serval*) in January 2013. This mission was followed by *Opération Barkhane* in 2014. The EU was only authorized to launch a military training mission in Mali in 2013 (EUTM Mali), along with two civilian missions, EUCAP Sahel Niger (2012) and EUCAP Sahel Mali (2014). While the role of member states should be further analysed, they appear to be resisting EEAS officials’ attempt to establish their leadership and the strategic vision they have for the EU.

## **Re-politicization of the EU external action vs. de-politicization of West African actors?**

These struggles over the EU’s international agency are also transforming its relations with third parties, and bear some risks that are worth examining. While the previous section showed how the Comprehensive Approach discursive category has enabled new practices to emerge, this section analyses the effects of these practices on interactions with West African actors.

### ***Undermining local ownership***

The first risk concerns how the EU envisages ‘local ownership’ within the Strategy. Previously, interactions with Sahelian countries were exclusively situated under the Cotonou agreement<sup>12</sup> and managed through jointly negotiated documents such as the EC-WA Regional Indicative Programmes that emphasize ‘local ownership’ and ‘partnership’. The Sahel Strategy is the first EU document concerning the region that has not

been agreed upon jointly. The justification put forward during the interviews was that as a foreign policy strategy mixing instruments and driven by the EU's strategic interests, the Sahel Strategy should not be negotiated with local partners, who should only be consulted (EEAS official 2012d; EEAS official 2014e).<sup>13</sup> The emphasis was on the EU becoming, at last, a 'real' foreign policy actor whose aims are to increase its influence and protect its interests and values (EEAS official 2012c; Commission official 2012d).

This is a fundamental departure from previous discursive practices, which depicted the EU as selflessly promoting peace and development in Africa, driven by African interests defined through jointly negotiated documents. This is not to say that the EU was not promoting its interests in WA before; 'local ownership' under the Cotonou Agreement was already criticized. Scholar noted that the rules governing interactions were very much in favour of the EU and that 'local ownership' and 'partnership' also concealed the promotion of EU economic interests (e.g. Nunn and Price 2004). However, the EU's interests were framed in terms of the development and well-being of the region. The Strategy has changed this discursive practice, as it has clearly puts the EU's interests first – even though these are framed in terms of 'longstanding mutual interests' (EU 2011, 4).

This change in the discursive context has transformed the EU's practice of 'local ownership'. As was explained in the previous section, the drafting of the Strategy and its Action Plans was based on the evidence collected by EU fact-finding missions. These missions were supposed to assess the needs of Sahelian actors and the local situation, thereby ensuring 'local ownership' (EEAS official 2012b, 2012f). Nevertheless, the extent to which this has been achieved can be questioned as, on the one side, negotiations have been side-lined; and, on the other side, EU officials participating to these missions are driven less by what their partners want and need than by their institutional position and their vision for the EU (Commission official 2012a). An EEAS official (2012c) acknowledged that one of the results of this change of practice has been the lack of political leadership and appropriation of the Strategy by Sahelian governments. The consequences entailed by the Strategy should therefore be subject to more consideration than has been the case until now, particularly given that the Sahel Strategy has been envisaged as a precursor to other EU African strategies<sup>14</sup> and is contributing to establishing new practices in interacting with African states.

### ***A new way of 'thinking and working regionally'***

The other matter at stake is the new regional approach promoted by the Sahel Strategy as an alternative to the traditional EU promotion of regional integration. It is revealing that the Sahel Strategy only marginally takes ECOWAS into account as an interlocutor for its actions in the Sahel. ECOWAS was not involved or consulted during the elaboration of the Sahel Strategy. The Strategy was simply presented to the organization and, notably, does not give a particularly important role to ECOWAS. The Strategy states:

In pursuing these objectives, the EU will need to demonstrate focus, urgency, pragmatism and political engagement, along with flexibility and a requirement to coordinate with other players, particularly the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Arab League and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), as well as both other bilateral partners with an interest in the region ...

In this framework, ECOWAS becomes a 'player' among others, and loses its previously-held status as a privileged partner for the EU. According to officials in the EEAS, the reason behind this change is that ECOWAS did not fulfil their expectations in terms of efficiency and that, more generally, there is an increasing 'fatigue' about working with regional organizations in Brussels (EEAS official 2012a, 2012b, 2014b). Indeed, working with African regional organizations has always been challenging for many reasons. However, their support was a central element in EU policy, perceived as a key way of implementing 'local ownership' and 'partnership'. Regional integration has always been presented as the best means to achieve peace and development (e.g. European Commission 2001, 2003). Since it has not become more difficult to work with African regional organizations, reason for this change can be found in the broader discursive context: it is the Comprehensive Approach which is enabling EU officials to 'think and work regionally' in a different way.

The Sahel Strategy thus shifts the emphasis from the promotion of regional political integration to the promotion of a pragmatic regional approach which also now features in the new EU Global Strategy (2016). This aim of this new approach is to support any regional alliance or grouping that coincides with the political and security interests of the EU and is considered sufficiently flexible and efficient. The GTI (2014, 12), for example, proposes to support groupings such the C4<sup>15</sup> or the G5<sup>16</sup> that will supposedly enable the EU to provide more concrete and efficient support to the region. The second Plan of Action of the Strategy exemplifies this move: 'These initiatives should be supported according to the Union's interests and priorities' (Council of the EU 2015, 9). They are also considered a better way to 'think and work regionally' (Council of the EU 2015, 10). This pragmatic approach appears to favour 'whatever works', in contrast to supporting regional organizations where they are deemed too constraining and inefficient.

The ambition of the drafters of the Strategy was for the EU to behave like a 'real' (meaning more realist) foreign policy actor by supporting 'the regional/multilateral cooperation security apparatus to improve effectiveness with realism and in an evolving context' (GTI 2014, 12). For these officials, the Comprehensive Approach should help 're-politicizing' the EU's foreign policy by placing the EU's interests as the defining feature of its external action and by moving away from its 'normative' dimension (Commission official 2012b; EEAS official 2014c). Paradoxically, an adverse effect of this 're-politicization' is to 'de-politicize' West African actors by turning them into mere recipients of the Sahel Strategy. This has not only affected 'local ownership' but also the political agency of ECOWAS.

Indeed, the 'regional approach' embedded in the Comprehensive Approach has the potential to cripple the process of regional integration in WA. ECOWAS has developed the most advanced security dimension among Africa's Regional Economic Communities (Bah 2005; Jaye 2008; Bolaji 2011). It has an institutionalized political and security dialogue embedded in regular meetings of West African Heads of State, Chiefs of Defence Staff and of Police Chiefs and has defined a regional security agenda. Practices of security cooperation include, among others, early warning, attempt at intelligence sharing, countering terrorism and piracy and, the control of small arms and light weapons. The organization has now reached a legitimacy that enables it to consensually intervene in the region in case of breach of peace or democracy, as was recently witnessed in Gambia (*The Guardian*, January 15, 2017). However, this consensus is still fragile and regularly

challenged by ECOWAS member states. Establishing a practice of supporting *ad hoc* alliances and groupings both dismisses ECOWAS' centrality in West African security affairs and will put this fragile consensus in danger. As an illustration, the idea that Sahelian countries can implement actions such as

developing a common Sahel passport with a common database for these populations [ ... ]; enhancing trans-border cooperation of justice and law enforcement agencies inspired by best practices developed in the EU such as information exchange, the European Arrest Warrant [ ... ]; creating a law enforcement counter terrorism regional network in order to exchange information and coordinate actions ... (EU 2011)

without the backing, experience and leadership of the only organization in Africa that has clearly promoted supranational political integration is both illusory in fact and politically challenging for ECOWAS. Indeed, as membership would be overlapping, this initiative conflicts with the ECOWAS passport and the attempt by the organization to effectively implement the free circulation of persons in WA.

Moreover, the EU's longstanding support to ECOWAS has been crucial to furthering its political agency in WA. For example, EU-ECOWAS political dialogue and the joint negotiations for the allocation of the EDF are practices which have strengthened the agency of ECOWAS by fostering cooperation and coordination among ECOWAS member states (Lopez-Lucia 2016). Pulling away from a pillar of its foreign policy that has structured its relations with Africa might well be problematic. The EU may lose its legitimacy and the trust earned as the 'sister organization' of ECOWAS that has consistently supported the development of its security capacities (Faria 2004; Nivet 2006; Lopez-Lucia 2016), an aspect of EU foreign policy that is particularly appreciated by ECOWAS high level management and officials (ECOWAS political official 2013; ECOWAS military official 2013b). Moreover, the way the Sahel Strategy was elaborated by the EU was duly noted by ECOWAS officials who decided to launch their own Sahel Strategy to re-affirm their role in WA. As mentioned by an ECOWAS military official (2013a):

The EU has its own strategy. [ ... ]. So it is important that we have our own counter-terrorism strategy in the Sahel. Because they are people looking at it from the outside, we are specifically looking at it from our own perspective.

## Conclusion

Drawing on discursive and sociological approaches to EU foreign policy, this article has explored how the Sahel Strategy has been used as a 'laboratory of experimentation' for the implementation of the Comprehensive Approach. While many studies have sought to assess how the EU could better respond to its international environment and solve its coherency and consistency problems through this approach, few have analysed its social conditions and its effect on the international agency of the EU. This article has aimed to provide insight into this dimension. To do so, one particular setting has been examined, the Sahel Strategy, the drafting and implementation of which unfolded in a moment of institutional fluidity that provided a window of opportunity for many actors to negotiate new working and coordination practices.

In this 'laboratory', this analysis shows how power struggles at the discursive and praxis levels are performing the international agency of the EU. Through these struggles, actors

seek to take up new roles, and construct new hierarchies in this institutional re-organization, as well as to promote their vision of the EU in the world. Two groups of officials in particular have been studied. First, those working in the EEAS, who strategically 'speak' and put in practice the Comprehensive Approach in order to assert their leadership over the Commission and re-orient development money and objectives to fulfil the security priorities of the Strategy. In doing so, they perform their vision of the EU as a strategic actor, not so dissimilar to a state, which is guided by political and security interests. Second, those working in DG DEVCO who resist these new practices in their everyday work through non-cooperation and confrontation. They are driven by a refusal to become the implementing agency of the EEAS and by their vision of the EU as above all a development and/or normative actor. In addition, the governments of member states have also hampered the EU's use of military instruments to pursue the Strategy's objectives, and are resisting practices of coordination under the leadership of the EEAS.

This attempt to re-define the EU as a strategic actor is also transforming the EU's relations with WA, a fact which raises important questions. I argued that the attempt by EEAS and Council officials to 're-politicize' the EU external action also 'de-politicizes' West African actors by removing their agency in the definition and implementation of the Strategy. We saw that 'local ownership' has been undermined. Indeed, the practice of joint negotiations to ensure that West African needs and demands are at the core of EU documents and spending for the region has been displaced by the practice of sending EU fact-finding missions to assess these needs. This has led to the prioritization of the EU's security concerns and to the disengagement of West African partners. Moreover, in contrast with previous EU–Africa policies, which consistently supported African regional organizations, the Sahel Strategy has undermined the political agency of ECOWAS by presenting it as an inefficient actor that should be side-lined in order to allow partnering with more flexible and efficient grouping of states. 'Speaking' the Comprehensive Approach has enabled officials to criticize the support to regional integration and foster a more pragmatic regional approach. As the Sahel Strategy is the first of its kind for the African continent, these changes and adverse effects must be the focus of careful reflection going forwards.

## Notes

1. Our interest in this article lies in how and for which purpose the actors use these discursive categories more than in their emergence. See Rogers (2009) for an analysis of the evolution of conflicting and overlapping discourses shaping the EU foreign policy.
2. The geographical services of DG DEV included ACP countries while DG RELEX was in charge of the rest of the world.
3. Up until the Lisbon Treaty, the delegations dealt with economic cooperation and development aid.
4. In 2013, the GIT was created to carry out a reflection on possible security approaches towards the Sahel and the Maghreb. It includes officials from the EEAS, the Commission and the Council of the EU and is coordinated by the EEAS.
5. Multiple kidnappings of European citizens by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the killing of a French national led a group of eight member states to send a letter to the HR/VP requesting further European engagement in the region.
6. The IfS is a financial instrument which objectives are to respond to crisis situation (short term), to deal with nuclear proliferation, trans-borders threats and provide for capacity-building in the security field (long-term).



7. Military expenses are not considered Official Development Assistance by the DAC criteria.
8. In July 2016, this process of change led to a European Commission proposal for a Regulation amending the IcSP Regulation in order to enable the use of the IcSP to support military capacity-building in third countries (European Commission 2016).
9. Whereas the Comprehensive Approach was scarcely mentioned in the first round of interviews in 2012, all EEAS officials interviewed in 2014 mentioned it (e.g. EEAS official 2014b, 2014c, 2014f).
10. According to Simon, Mattelaer, and Hadfield (2012, 5) 'the interinstitutional lack of transparency over how EU funds are spent is disconcerting.'
11. The lack of interest of the Malian government also played a role as the EEAS services were not able to use Mali's proactivity as an argument.
12. With the exception of Algeria.
13. It should be noted that the funding provided to the Sahel Strategy through the EDF is still submitted to the Cotonou procedures.
14. The other African strategies are: The Strategic Framework for the Horn of Africa; and the Strategy for the Gulf of Guinea.
15. The C4 (or '*pays du champ*'), launched by Algeria together with Mauritania, Niger and Mali, has established the CEMOC (*Comité d'état-major opérationnel conjoint*) in 2010, an operational military structure to improve the fight against terrorism. So far the CEMOC has remained inactive.
16. The G5 is a forum launched in 2014 by the Heads of State of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger to address security and development challenges in the Sahel.

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