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Investigating the One Thousand and One Directions of the EU-Sahel Interregional Partnership

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Abstract

Working within the broader field of studies on Africa–EU relations, this paper aims to analyze the case study of the EU–Sahel partnership from a new perspective often overlooked in the existing literature, namely, that of interregional studies. The paper seeks to address two key questions: (1) How to investigate the political dynamics among the actors involved in the Sahelian context in light of different types of interregionalism developed? (2) Are those conceptual categories adequate to describe the EU-Sahel relations? The paper approaches these questions through the theoretical lens of interregionalism, building on what the literature defines as the “theoretical functions” of interregional relations. Indeed, this paper seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the actors involved and the mechanisms through which these actors have built their political partnership. This paper juggles between international and local actors at national, regional, and supranational levels and seeks to decolonize the approach by adopting a bi-directional analysis of the dialogue. Within the analytically complex environment of the EU-Sahel relations, interregionalism appears as an interesting framework that sheds new light on the methods used to understand the Sahelian context. By applying this framework, the paper shows the need to move towards new epistemological paths, introducing one such path that brings the discourse around coloniality into the conventional ways of studying interregional relations.

Keywords

Africa-EU relations, Interregionalism, Sahel, Postcoloniality.

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1. Introduction

Blinded by the misogynistic rage provoked by his former wife's betrayal, Sultan Shahriyar resolves to execute each of his brides at the conclusion of their first wedding night. To put an end to this cycle of tragedy, Shahrazad, the daughter of the Grand Vizier, devises a clever strategy. Volunteering to become the Sultan's wife, Shahrazad proceeds over the course of one thousand and one nights to captivate the sovereign with an enthralling tale each evening, systematically postponing the story's conclusion until the following night. In this way, her life is spared night after night, and eventually, after a thousand nights together, the Sultan's misogynistic fury is quelled by love for his wife. This is the compelling and evocative plot of *One Thousand and One Nights*, a work of enduring renown which--perhaps more than any other story--seeks to demonstrate the power of storytelling in generating, as implied by the Arabic interpretation of the number one thousand, an infinite multitude of narratives.

In this sense, albeit without the same literary charm, the title of this work humbly cites the famous novel, translating the conceptual focus to the countless narratives and stories which are also constantly produced, debated, and propagated within what we define as global political relations. International relations are, in essence, the synthesis of these narratives and of the multiple interpretations that each actor attributes to its role in the world and to its interactions with others. For this reason, the Arabic notion of "one thousand" as a synonym for "countless" seems especially fitting to describe the multitude of relationships, trajectories, and political narratives that this paper wants to explore. Grounding its analysis in the academic framework of interregionalism and its theoretical features and nuances, this study seeks to examine the nature and specificities of the "one thousand" interregional relationships through a case study that has consistently drawn scholarly attention: the relations between the Sahel and the European Union.

Following a brief contextual overview of how relations between the two actors have developed over recent decades, the second section introduces the theoretical framework underpinning the entire paper: interregionalism. Indeed, EU-Sahel relations, in which the Sahel is understood broadly as encompassing both regional and state actors within the geographical area, are analyzed through the analytical lenses provided by interregionalism and its theorized functions as discussed in existing literature. Each section, from the third to the fifth, explores the dialogue between the various actors active in the Sahel from different theoretical standpoints, rooted in the principal schools of thought within international relations, as interpreted through the interregionalist approach. In other words, this study endeavors to analyze interregional dialogues and their development from multiple theoretical perspectives, focusing on the region's main actors: the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union, the G5 Sahel, and the individual states of the Liptako-Gourma area. The paper asks: How have interregional dialogues between the actors involved in the Sahel developed in the last years? Grounding the analysis on the different interregional theoretical approaches, have the Sahelian dialogue performed one of the theoretical functions associated with the development of an interregional partnership?

These are the core questions this paper seeks to address, used to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of the one thousand and one directions of the interregional relations in the Sahel in recent years.

2. Contextualizing Africa-EU Relations in the Central Sahel

The relationship between the European Union and the region of Africa commonly referred to as the "Sahel" presents a long and complex history, one that cannot be fully addressed within the scope of this analysis but which merits at least brief mention. Before delving into the spatial and temporal parameters that define the core of this paper, it is essential to acknowledge that EU-Sahel relations ought to be considered, at least briefly, from the historical context of the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 (Treaty of the European Economic Community, 1957). At that time, the entirety of Sahelian countries still belonged to the sphere of French colonial imperialism. This historical connection is evidenced by the fact that the first instance of a "relationship" between the European supranational organization and the Sahel region appears in the Treaty of Rome (Art. 131) wherein the unilateral incorporation of the colonial territories of the treaty's signatory states, including France, is codified.

The necessity of emphasizing the origins of EU-Sahel relations is intended to challenge the notion of a so-called "virgin birth" of the European Union, which attempts to dissociate the Union from its colonial past. Indeed, even though the earlier Eurafrica project has already been the subject of scholarly investigation and critical analysis (Hansen & Jonsson, 2017), this

abovementioned narrative continues to persist in public and political discourse mainly outside of academic circles. It is therefore important to underline that the political relationship between these regions, at least during the first five decades, was profoundly shaped by a colonial and neo-colonial legacy, generating asymmetries in dialogue and power that have deeply influenced political and economic interactions with African states in the region (Kotsopoulos & Mattheis, 2018; Staeger, 2016). This observation, however, is not intended to minimize the agency of Sahelian states or the political trajectories they have pursued in recent decades. Rather, it seeks to underscore the enduring postcolonial influence of countries such as France, a nation that continues to occupy a central role within the balance of power in the European Union, even in the most recent political engagements.

It is within this historical and structural context that the EU's contemporary relationship with the Sahel region has evolved over the past two decades. General interregional dialogue, namely, that between the two continental organizations, the European Union and the African Union, often categorized as "old" or "pure" interregionalism according to established analytical categories (De Lombaerde et al., 2015), has largely focused on the relationship that emerged following the establishment of the African Union. Nevertheless, the Sahel has remained relatively peripheral to the formal interregional framework, with its political dialogue primarily developed through EU strategies implemented via bilateral relations with individual states in the region. Although overarching legislative frameworks, such as the 2007 Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), have been publicly presented as the outcome of a balanced and equal partnership, the EU's political engagement in the Sahel has predominantly been guided by its own strategic documents. These include the EU Strategy for the Sahel (2011) (European External Action Service, 2011), the Sahel Regional Action Plan (2015–2020) (Council of the European Union, 2015), and the most recent EU Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (2021). These documents have provided the theoretical and policy foundations for the EU's major interventions in the region, particularly in the area under examination in this paper: the Liptako-Gourma region.

These strategies have emphasized security, both through the allocation of funds for projects in that domain and, more significantly, through the deployment of the well-known Common Security Defence Policy (CSDP) missions: EUCAP Sahel Mali (Council Decision 2014/219/CFSP of 15 April 2014 on the European Union CSDP Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali), 2014), EUCAP Sahel Niger (Council Decision 2012/392/CFSP, 2012), and EUTM Mali (Council Decision 2013/34/CFSP, 2013). Alongside initiatives in rural development and humanitarian cooperation, these missions have constituted the core of EU engagement with Central Sahelian states, particularly in the period following the 2012 Malian crisis and preceding the widespread wave of coups d'état that has occurred over the past four years. In the specific phase that may be temporally defined as spanning from 2013 to 2022, the Sahel was frequently identified as a priority area within European foreign policy, often described as one of the EU's key regions of external action. In this sense, EU-Sahel relations, understood both as interactions between individual states and between the EU and regional organizations active in the area (notably the African Union, ECOWAS, and the G5 Sahel), can be seen as a context of interregional dialogue in which the EU has invested considerable political and financial capital. The creation of the political role of the EU Special Representative for the Sahel, the substantial funding allocated to security and cooperation initiatives, and the formulation of multiple targeted policy strategies have all contributed to elevating the EU-Sahel political dialogue, making it a symbolic theatre of the EU's emerging supranational foreign policy.

However, the rise of what is often referred to as the new wave of African military coups has dramatically altered the landscape of this relationship, revealing that the foundations of the dialogue may not have been as robust as initially assumed. A significant turning point occurred with the second Malian coup in August 2021, followed by two successive coups in Burkina Faso in early and late 2022, and culminating in the Nigerien coup of July 2023. The rise of anti-Western (primarily anti-French) rhetoric, the emergence of nationalist discourses, the authoritarian nature of the new regimes, and the desire to diversify international partnerships have all called into question the EU's role in the region, thereby complicating a partnership in which the Union had long invested considerable attention and resources. These developments, together with the Sahelian states' calls for the withdrawal of both French Operation Barkhane forces and UN MINUSMA troops, have led to the suspension of the majority of the EU's activities in the region. These efforts, which were largely focused on governance and security issues, could no longer be sustained in the absence of shared political will. As a result, although a degree of cooperation persists, particularly in technical domains and in projects outside the political, security, and governance spheres, the overall state of relations is significantly deteriorated and shows little sign of recovery. This reflects a deep crisis in the interregional dialogue that had been central to the EU's external strategy over the past decades.

In light of these developments, the following sections aim to provide a theoretical and conceptual, yet also detailed, analysis of the nature of the EU-Sahel interregional dialogue, examining the limitations and vulnerabilities that have contributed to the recent crisis in the partnership.

3. Still Interregionalism as a framework?

Clearly delineating the theoretical framework of this paper is of utmost importance, as it constitutes an integral part of the object of analysis in the following sections. Employing interregionalism as a theoretical lens through which to examine political relations between two or more actors provides insightful and unconventional perspectives within the field of international relations (Baert et al., 2014; Hettne, 2014). When the analysis focuses on supranational entities, albeit with varying levels of integration, and their mutual relations, it becomes conceptually useful and interesting to adopt interregionalism as the prevailing theoretical framework (Santini et al., 2014). That's why the decision to use interregionalism as a framework comes from the necessity of addressing a research gap in the way politics and policies in the Sahel have been studied. Indeed, within the field of international relations, scholarly work on the Sahel, despite a period of heightened interest, has addressed a variety of issues yet predominantly through similar theoretical lenses. Many analyses have aimed to examine French and broader Western involvement in the region to highlight the limitations of international military intervention, expose the weaknesses of European policies, shed light on the externalisation of European borders, and offer strong critiques of migration policies. However, while acknowledging the high quality and indispensability of these contributions, much of the existing literature remains grounded in similar theoretical frameworks. These studies tend to interpret regional dynamics through neorealist or neoliberal perspectives, focusing primarily on the actions of individual actors and devoting limited attention to the relational dimension among them. This paper, therefore, aims to position itself within the aforementioned body of international relations literature on the Sahel, but does so by adopting interregionalism as a lens through which to analyse the relationships between actors, rather than merely their individual actions or intentions.

The primary aim of this paper is thus to examine the nature and characteristics of interregional dialogue between the European Union and the Sahel, the latter being conceived as both a container of regional and continental actors active in the area and as an agglomeration of states sharing similar social, historical, political, and geographical structures. Accordingly, this study deliberately narrows its focus to the countries within the Liptako-Gourma area, namely Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This choice is justified not only by the manageability of the analytical scope but, more importantly, by the heightened political affinity among these states, as evidenced by the recent creation of the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES), a regional organization established in 2023 through the initiative of the three aforementioned countries (Festus B. Aboagye, 2025). Hence, the main subjects of analysis will consist of the most relevant actors active in the Sahelian area that are capable of generating a structured interregional partnership: the European Union, the African Union and ECOWAS, the G5 Sahel and the single Sahelian countries aforementioned. Considering that the subject of analysis varies between continental organizations, regional ones, group of countries and single states, this study builds on the concept of “complex interregionalism” (Santini et al., 2014) in order to consider various degrees of interregional dialogue, taking into account relations of “pure,” “trans,” and “hybrid” interregionalism at the same time (Hardacre & Smith, 2014).

Furthermore, interregional dialogue, understood here as a bidirectional analytical perspective (EU-SAHEL/SAHEL-EU), is examined over a period of approximately two decades, with the formation of the African Union in 2002 (Constitutive Act of the African Union, 2000) serving as the key turning point in the evolution of these relations. To carry out the aforementioned analysis, this paper draws on the theoretical approaches developed in the academic literature on interregionalism, contextualising these within the specific case of EU-Sahel relations. The analysis is grounded in literature that attributes certain theoretical and conceptual functions to interregionalism. These functions seek to elucidate the nature and underlying motivations of interregional relations within the international system (Baert et al., 2014; Heiner Hänggi et al., 2006; Mattheis Frank & Lopez Lucia, 2021; Rüländ, 2014).

In line with widely accepted interpretations in the literature, this paper recognizes that different forms of interregional dialogue develop in parallel with principal theoretical functions. Three theoretical functions are particularly relevant to this study: interregionalism studied as balancing of power, as institutional building/norm diffusion, and as a constructive element (Doidge, 2014). The first function conceptualises interregional dialogue as emerging or strengthening due to pressures aimed at creating equilibrium among actors, either between them, within them, or in relation to the broader international system. In other words, the balancing of power perspective views interregional cooperation as a strategic means through which actors seek to balance or redistribute power within regional or global contexts in which they operate (Rüländ, 2014). This interpretation aligns with a (neo)realist understanding of international relations (Waltz, 1979), emphasizing the role of power balancing and influence as the ultimate objectives in the interactions between distinct political entities, such as regions or regional groupings.

The second function portrays interregionalism as a potential catalyst for the creation of institutional mechanisms or, more broadly, practices that serve to reinforce relations between the two parties. Here, interregional dialogue is perceived as a vehicle for the emergence of new governance spaces, either directly within the interregional framework or indirectly as a result of cooperative practices, which contribute to the development of more structured relations aimed at deepening ties between the actors involved (Rüland, 2014). This process is further associated with the bidirectional diffusion of norms, ultimately fostering a governance and dialogue environment conducive to shared objectives and international cooperation. This perspective is firmly situated within the tradition of liberal institutionalism in international relations (Keohane, 2005), which emphasizes governance, institutionalization, and cooperation as sources of balance in inter-state and inter-regional relations. Finally, the third function explored in this study concerns interregionalism as a driver for identity reinforcement processes, a dynamic that Hänggi has elsewhere described as “regionalism through interregionalism” (Hänggi, 2000). This notion is rooted in a constructivist approach to international relations (Wendt, 1992), where the dialectical process of interaction is seen as a mechanism for strengthening identity positions at both the intra- and inter-regional levels.

These three functions collectively form the theoretical framework of the present study and are developed in detail in the subsequent sections, which provide the conceptual foundation for analyzing the specific case study under consideration. Clearly, the theoretical approach adopted herein is not intended as a rigid or overly schematic interpretation of the categories previously described. On the contrary, this paper places emphasis on the interregionalist theoretical framework, drawing upon classical theories of international relations to identify patterns within the development of EU-Sahel interregional dialogue that may or may not correspond with such theoretical worldviews. In this way, the paper seeks to investigate the motivations and characteristics underlying specific developments in interregional dialogue within the Sahel region, employing theory as a tool to enhance understanding of the nature of these relations. The real challenge, therefore, lies in identifying which of these interregional functions, present as an intentional objective of the relationship or simply developed by chance during the activities, has prevailed in the EU-Sahel dialogue, and in exploring how these functions have ultimately shaped the political and relational outcomes observed in recent years.

4. Interregionalism in the Sahel as a Lost Opportunity

The following paragraphs will adhere to the theoretical framework previously outlined, namely that of the functions of interregionalism. However, it is necessary to introduce an additional layer of analysis. Specifically, the relationships between actors are conceptually and arbitrarily divided into three partnerships, which will be examined in a bi-directional manner. These partnerships are the European Union–African Union/ECOWAS, the European Union–G5 Sahel, and the European Union–Sahelian countries. The table at the end of this section illustrates the intersection of the analytical categories employed in this study and serves as a summary of the content that will be developed in the following paragraphs. However, it is extremely important to keep in mind that all the analysis will be developed studying the actors inside their relationship paradigm and not providing a specific inquiry of their singular engagement in the region.

4.1 Interregionalism as Balance of Power

Viewing the creation and development of interregional dialogue as a cause or consequence of a balance of power is among the most prevalent theoretical frameworks used within the field of International Relations. The underlying concept of balance of power aligns with the neorealist tendency to interpret relations among international actors as oriented toward the containment, distribution, or redistribution of power and prevailing equilibriums (Griffiths, 2007). From this perspective, interregional dynamics represent a good subject of analysis for such an interpretation. Interregional dialogue, manifested in its various forms (as discussed in the previous paragraph) is thus analyzed primarily in terms of its functionality in establishing balance on the international or regional stage, both between the two counterpart regions involved and across the broader global system of powers (Rüland, 2014). In other words, the function of interregional partnership is conceived as one of balancing the influence of actors engaged in such relations, counterbalancing or limiting the influence of competing actors excluded from the partnership, and fostering more structured and productive political and economic relations.

However, discourse surrounding this interregional function often remains at the interregional level, wherein partnerships and their effects are analyzed in relation to the supranational international arena. In contrast, this paper also considers how interregional dialogue serves as a mechanism for balancing power at the intraregional level, seeking to understand how certain

interregional decisions may stem from or have repercussions on power dynamics within regional blocs themselves (Hettne, 2014).

When contextualized within the EU-Sahel case study, interesting considerations emerge concerning the three categories of dialogue previously outlined. Starting with the analysis of interregional dialogue between the European Union and its main regional counterparts, the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, the limitations of the “balance of power” function in the Sahelian context become immediately apparent. On the European side, efforts to implement policies, particularly those concerning security and governance, have consistently been accompanied by explicit support for and cooperation with the AU and ECOWAS, which have been always recognized as key partners (European External Action Service, 2011). While this reflects a clear general intention to act as a principal partner to these organizations, especially to the detriment of other global geopolitical actors, some decisions taken in the Sahelian context have paradoxically moved in the opposite direction. Indeed, substantial political and financial support for the G5 Sahel organization (Lopez Lucia, 2019) (and subsequently its military task force) arguably diminished the relevance and agency of the AU and ECOWAS in the Sahel, undermining prospects for a continental response to security challenges. Consequently, while the EU’s broader strategic objective, as evidenced by AU-EU summits, has been to remain the AU and REC’s key partner, several decisions made in the Sahel contradict this ambition, fostering ad hoc solutions which are built outside the traditional regional and continental framework.

Hence, from the African perspective as well, the interregional dialogue in the Sahel between the AU, ECOWAS, and the EU has had a destabilizing rather than stabilizing effect on power balances. Being so closely tied, both politically and financially, to the so-called Western bloc (which may be used in reference to a range of actors from the United Nations and the EU to individual European states active in the region) has led to a deep crisis in the AU’s and ECOWAS’s perceived independence and relevance in the region. Paradoxically, the decision made by European actors to engage in bilateral dialogues with states or with ad hoc organizations such as the G5 Sahel is itself a factor that has negatively impacted the agency of the AU and ECOWAS in the region (Sandor et al., 2025). Ultimately, the partnership between African organizations and the EU in the Sahel has not resulted in the increased influence and relevance that the former might have expected, because the organizations have never truly occupied a central role in the regional chessboard. This has had particular repercussions on what has previously been termed intraregional balance. Indeed, the interregional partnership between the AU/ECOWAS and the EU has generated imbalances to the detriment of the African organizations, especially in the political and diplomatic dynamics within the region. The rise of authoritarian regimes following coups d’état in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, fueled by strong nationalist and anti-Western sentiments, has triggered a profound political crisis within traditional regional blocs, which have been accused of servility and dependence on Western powers precisely due to their close interregional ties. Consequently, for the African Union and ECOWAS, the very existence of the interregional partnership has led to a crisis of legitimacy in the eyes of the central Sahelian countries, one that appears far from resolved.

Turning to the second category of analysis, namely the dialogue between the EU and the G5 Sahel, there is little to add in terms of the neorealist functions of such dialogue. However, it is worth emphasizing what was already mentioned above: the European decision to decisively support and finance the creation and development of this organization was intended, from a power-balancing perspective, to stabilize the region by “Africanizing” the security issue and strengthening cooperation among states by positioning the EU as the primary interested partner. Nevertheless, this vision never moved beyond conception. Despite the now widely acknowledged failure of the G5 Sahel experiment, critiques, both in public and academic discourse, emerged from the outset. These arguments highlighted the weak political will of G5 member states, the potential for negative “forum shopping” dynamics, and the risk of undermining the relevance of other regional actors that might otherwise serve as stabilizers. In retrospect, most of these critiques have proven accurate, as evidenced by the G5 Sahel becoming a new source of political destabilization in the region.

More nuanced reflections on these dynamics have emerged from dialogue that can be defined as “hybrid interregionalism” (De Lombaerde et al., 2015) between the European Union and the individual states of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. From the European perspective, particularly in light of recent geopolitical changes, the balance of power function of this partnership has assumed central political importance. Indeed, establishing more structured relations with these countries has been perceived as a means of reinforcing both external and internal EU equilibriums. Over the past two decades, the EU has consistently placed strong emphasis on the Sahel, and it is precisely within the framework of bilateral dialogues with individual Sahelian states (rather than through the weaker dialogue with the AU and ECOWAS) that this partnership has evolved in line with the policies

and activities described in the paper's first paragraph. The stabilization and balancing of power in the region have always been EU priorities, perceived as crucial for the Union's own security, particularly in relation to terrorism and migration. Nonetheless, even within the hybrid dialogue between the EU and individual states, recent diplomatic and political developments indicate a sharp reversal in the power-balancing function to the detriment of the European interests. The ongoing crisis in the partnership caused by the strong anti-Western stance of the (new) Sahelian military juntas has drastically reduced European influence in the region, delivering a serious blow to Brussels' objective of remaining a key geopolitical partner in the Sahel. This loss of EU political power in the region in favor of international competitors such as Russia and Turkey. These states, particularly Russia, have taken advantage of Europe's declining relevance to build structured political and economic relations with the Sahelian military juntas. Moreover, not only has the EU's interregional "balance of power" function failed to yield the desired results, even creating room for other international actors, but intraregional European equilibriums on the Sahel issue have also suffered. The partnership between Brussels and the Liptako-Gourma states has long been shaped by the political agendas and pressures of certain EU member states, most notably former colonial power in the region, France. However, following the request for French troop withdrawals (Operation Barkhane) from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in 2022, and the ensuing diplomatic crises, intra-European dynamics have shifted significantly. On one side stands Brussels, intent on maintaining a high level of cooperation and engagement with the Sahel despite strained political relations. On the other, France advocates for a decisive break with the new authoritarian regimes and a significant reduction in overall engagement in the region. Adding to this are positions from other member states, for instance, Spain, which has pushed to renew ties with Sahelian countries due to concerns over potential consequences for migration flows on the route towards Ceuta and Melilla. This scenario illustrates how, even at the intraregional level, the balance of power is far less stable than the EU might have thought just a few years ago. This situation leads to an overall negative assessment of the interregional partnership in terms of its influence and power stability.

Conversely, from the perspective of the Sahelian states, the stabilizing function of the partnership has, in some respects, improved. Setting aside normative or moral evaluations of the new role assumed by the military juntas, a purely political analysis of power balances presents an intriguing picture of the Sahelian context. Indeed, it must be acknowledged that in terms of stabilizing their external relations and power positions, the new nature of interregional dialogue between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso and the EU has yielded politically favorable outcomes for the African states. The crisis of interregional dialogue with Europe and, more broadly with all "Western" actors, alongside the opening of new partnership opportunities with powerful global actors, has helped these African countries achieve a more balanced position within the international arena by diversifying their political relationships. This is possible because, in sharp contrast to the messaging disseminated by the three countries and the increasingly prominent role of Russia in trade and security, cooperation with the EU remains active, especially in more technical and less political projects. Consequently--at least for the time being--from a neorealist theoretical standpoint, the outcome of the dialogue for Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso could be considered positive in terms of power balancing in the international system.

4.2 Interregionalism as Norm Diffusion and Institutional Enhancer

One of the primary theoretical functions often associated with interregionalism is its role in fostering greater balance in relations among actors through more structured and developed cooperation. This cooperation can be achieved in various ways, including the establishment of institutions or bodies that promote interregional dialogue, the development of new levels of interregional governance, or the creation of both theoretical and practical instruments through which actors can pursue their cooperation in a more structured and efficient manner (Doidge, 2014). In other words, this vision of interregionalism assigns to dialogue the function of generating a higher level of cooperation and interdependence among actors. The aim of this dialogue is making the interregional context a source of balance, brought about by increasing shared governance responsibilities between dialogue participants.

This understanding of interregional relations within the sphere of international politics is rooted in one of the most prominent and widely accepted approaches in international relations theory, namely, liberal institutionalism (Keohane, 2005) (Rüland, 2014). Indeed, when interregionalism is analyzed through this theoretical lens, emphasis is placed on what interregional dialogue can create in terms of institutions, bodies, new governance tools, or cooperation fora, thereby increasing the level of interdependence and stability among actors. In contrast to understanding interregionalism as a balancing of power (as described in the previous paragraph), the focus here is not on the pursuit (or limitation) of power and stability at the inter- or intraregional levels, but rather on the new levels of cooperation that may emerge from a dialogue that is aimed at progressively binding

actors together through political, economic, and social choices. The objective of this paragraph is therefore to analyse how the functions of institution building or norm diffusion have (or have not) been expressed within the dialogue between the EU and the Sahel, following the three categories previously examined.

Beginning with the category that most closely reflects the notion of “pure” interregionalism, namely the dialogue between the African Union/ECOWAS and the European Union, there are only a few noteworthy aspects to highlight. At a general level, the function of institutional building materializes quite effectively within the interregional dialogue between the AU and the EU, particularly through the organization of regular discussion fora, namely the AU-EU Summits (European Union, 2025), which bring together various political levels of both institutions in a comprehensive manner. However, despite representing a good example of institutional building, these summits typically address political, economic, and social issues of general interest to the two continents, thereby laying the theoretical groundwork for African-EU cooperation more broadly. Consequently, when focusing specifically on the Sahel, the relevance of these intercontinental summits becomes rather marginal. Indeed, within the Sahelian region, there has been a lack of impetus to create genuinely interregional bodies between the AU and the EU that are capable of responding to the transnational challenges straining.

the region. The political and security crises in the Sahel have not prompted a coordinated interregional response among the major continental partners involved, but rather a succession of disjointed and erratic interventions by various local, regional, and international actors (Baldaro, 2021).

Initially, however, this did not seem to be the case following the much-celebrated establishment of the G5 Sahel, which is perhaps the most significant example to be addressed in this section. The G5 Sahel, whose dialogue with the European Union falls within the analytical categories of this paper, is a transnational organization created in February 2014 through the accession of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, with the intent of strengthening their security cooperation in response to the regional terrorist threat (Dieng, 2019). Therefore, considering that we are dealing with a standard process of regionalisation, why should the case of the G5 Sahel be regarded as particularly relevant for the interregional analysis proposed in this paper? There are principally two reasons. The first lies in the fact that, upon its creation, the organization immediately identified both France and the European Union as its primary interlocutors, thereby initiating an additional interregional dialogue in the Sahelian context, which merits thorough examination. The second reason is that, without downplaying the founding agency of the Sahelian states, the very creation of the organization can be seen as a result of strong European pressures (from both France and the EU collectively) aimed at establishing an African institution of this kind, with political and financial support already assured prior to its founding (Sandnes, 2024). In other words, this perspective views the G5 Sahel’s creation as a product of interregional dialogue between Europe and the Sahelian states, initiating an institutional building process considered crucial from multiple standpoints. In this sense, the European, especially French, desire to establish a transnational partner for collaboration and for channelling funds toward an “Africanisation” of regional security management was instrumental in the organization’s formation, whose functioning would have been virtually impossible without the massive European financial packages (Lopez Lucia, 2019). Consequently, this study puts forward the proposition that the G5 Sahel can also be regarded as a product of institutional building emerging from an interregional dialogue between the African founding countries and their European partners. Moreover, delving into the interregional dialogue between the G5 Sahel and the European Union, a clear example of institutional building aimed at enhancing coordination between the two actors is the establishment of the G5 Joint Task Force, the military arm of the Sahelian organization. The creation of this task force in 2017 was closely linked to the objective of enabling military cooperation with the French-led Operation Barkhane and with the EU’s CSDP missions active in several of the G5 member states, with the aim of shifting the management of the security crisis increasingly into the hands of local armed forces (Montanaro, 2022). As such, the task force represents an almost textbook example of an interregional institutional building process.

Nonetheless, the extent to which the establishment of the G5 Sahel and its task force created imbalances at the regional level, particularly in terms of intraregional and continental African relations, has already been discussed in the previous paragraph. At the time of writing, the G5 Sahel is, for all intents and purposes, a defunct organization. The support of key Sahelian states such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso has progressively diminished in recent years, ultimately resulting in their withdrawal from the organization (Festus B. Aboagye, 2025), which they deemed overly dependent on the funding and political agendas of Western actors. Consequently, the G5 Sahel has ceased to function as a dialogue framework, giving rise to two main considerations that merit emphasis.

First, the near-total weakening of the organization reflects the profound crisis affecting its principal political and financial supporters, namely, the Western actors, which includes the European Union. The EU's decision to channel much of its support for the Sahel through the G5 Sahel has consistently attracted considerable academic and public criticism for the reasons previously outlined. In light of this context, the virtual disappearance of the organization invites even harsher and more negative assessments of the EU's decision to prioritize the G5 as a privileged partner, suggesting a certain level of short-sightedness in gauging the political climate surrounding local actors.

Second, from the perspective of the Liptako-Gourma states, the downward trajectory of the G5 Sahel including the withdrawal of Sahelian states from the organization, accompanied by the political opposition of the new military juntas to an organization that they perceived as an African extension of Western powers, laid the groundwork for a new regionalisation process. The weight of this criticism culminated in the creation by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso of the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES), initially launched in the summer of 2023 and later transformed into a confederation in January 2024 (Abdoul Sogodogo, 2024). In this regard, it would be worthwhile to analyse how the deterioration of dialogue EU-Sahel countries can perform theoretical functions akin to those expected from its strengthening, and through this generating the so-called "unintended consequences" of interregionalism (Mattheis Frank & Lopez Lucia, 2021). In this sense, the regionalist drive of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger that resulted in the creation of the AES confederation serves as an illustrative case. Indeed, the political rupture of the dialogue, the desire to distance themselves from the criticized regional organizations operating in the area, and the ambition to centralize decision-making power led to the institutional building process of the AES, albeit in a direction conceptually opposite to that of interregional reinforcement. In other words, the very existence of dialogue (and the political necessity for Sahelian states to firmly oppose it) laid the foundation for a reactive institutional building process, politically antithetical to what might otherwise have been anticipated.

4.3 Interregionalism as a Constructivist Element

The third and final interregional function analysed in this paper concerns the role of interregional dialogue as an identity-enhancing mechanism or, in other words, as a vehicle for the dissemination of shared (or divergent) narratives and visions among the actors involved (Doidge, 2014). This interpretation of interregional dialogues is theoretically grounded in what is commonly referred to as the "constructivist" approach to international relations, which historically originates from critical theory and gained increasing prominence toward the end of the previous century (Acharya & Buzan, 2019). Constructivism places identity, discourse, and interests at the core of international relations analysis, conceptualizing them not as static and methodologically quantifiable entities, as in the neorealist conception of the state, but rather as outcomes of the continuous transformation of identity, perception, and discourse concerning a given actor or its interactions within the international system (Carlsnaes et al., 2012). Within this theoretical framework, interregionalism can be reinterpreted to reflect on dimensions that are largely overlooked by other analytical paradigms. Interregionalism, when viewed through this constructivist lens, is understood to fulfil functions more closely tied to intra- and interregional identity dynamics, acting as a promoter of collective identities, a channel for the dissemination of shared discourses and ideas, and a catalyst for regional cohesion. These dynamics emerge from interregional encounters among groups with the identity-building processes they engender stemming either from the synthesis of intergroup differences or the reaffirmation of intra-group similarities (Gilson, 2006). The objective of the following section is thus to examine how constructivist elements have manifested within the analytical categories addressed so far, highlighting only a selection of the most salient aspects.

In considering the dialogue between the African Union/ECOWAS and the European Union, several general reflections on identity-building can be made. However, the focus here is on a different and equally compelling aspect: the phenomenon of "discourse diffusion" within the interregional dialogue between these two groups. From a constructivist perspective, it is particularly interesting to observe how political, security-related, and humanitarian discourses have been transmitted, developed, and shared across the two regions, potentially as a result of interregional interactions.

In the Sahelian context, this is particularly evident in the discourse surrounding democracy, broadly defined as a set of democratic principles and norms, and the way in which this vision is shared by the AU, ECOWAS, and the EU (AU-EU, 2022). Following the severe democratic crisis that has affected the Sahel in recent years, the responses to unconstitutional changes of government have often been similar, with additional joint articulations by the AU, ECOWAS, and the EU, thereby revealing a significant convergence in expressed normative perspectives (European Council, 2018). This alignment is also reflected in the

political and diplomatic demands issued by institutions on both sides, such as those by the AU Peace and Security Council (Amani Africa, 2022, 2024) directed at Sahelian states. These demands commonly emphasize the urgency of initiating democratic transitions and organizing free elections to ensure representative governance. This shared perspective and the collective commitment to the democratic agenda could not be taken for granted from the outset, especially given the considerable legitimacy costs that both the AU and ECOWAS have incurred in the eyes of local actors diplomatically insisting on these aspects (PSC Report, 2018).

This analysis does not claim that the positions adopted by the two groups on the Sahel's democratic crisis are solely the product of interregional idea-sharing, as they are also the outcome of autonomous decisions made in accordance with their respective normative principles. Nonetheless, the possibility that interregional dialogue has played a non-negligible role in aligning their political visions cannot be dismissed, even though quantifying this influence remains a complex methodological challenge (Rüland, 2014).

A different trend emerges when examining another prominent issue in the Sahelian context: the management of migration flows and the political approaches associated with them. In this area, the positions of the African Union and ECOWAS diverge considerably from the policies and initiatives implemented by the EU in recent years. Whereas in the domain of democratic governance, there has been a certain degree of convergence largely shaped by European normative frameworks developed over the past decades, on migration the discourses and perspectives are nearly antithetical. In their official documents and public declarations, both the AU and ECOWAS articulate a supportive stance towards internal migratory flows, consistent with a longstanding African conceptualisation of mobility as a valuable resource. This view is prominently featured in Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2013), which designates intra-African mobility as a key priority, as well as in ECOWAS's Vision 2050 (ECOWAS, 2022), which reaffirms the organization's historical identity as a community in motion—a tradition dating back to its pioneering documents from the late 1970s (Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, 1979).

In contrast, EU initiatives in the Sahel have predominantly focused on migration with the objective of controlling, reducing, or redirecting migratory flows, in line with broader policies of externalized border management pursued in other world regions (Pacciardi, 2024; Raineri & Strazzari, 2019). In this regard, the 2016 case of EU pressure on Niger to crackdown on migration that flows through the Agadez region stands out as one of the most frequently cited and criticized examples in the academic literature (Raineri, 2018). Consequently, the interregional function of synthesizing and sharing ideas has evidently failed in this domain, particularly from an African perspective. Despite the fact that migration and support for mobility constitute fundamental elements of regional and continental African political narratives, the EU has shown little willingness to engage with or integrate this perspective. By not engaging, the EU undermines the potential for interregional “discourse diffusion” on this issue to occur flowing from Africa to Europe. The two reflections presented here concerning the AU/ECOWAS–EU dialogue reveal patterns already described in the literature, particularly by Hettne, who characterized identity-building processes and constructivist dynamics more broadly as closely tied to asymmetric power relations, wherein the more structurally established actor tends to exert greater influence over the other (Hettne, 2014). These theoretical insights find empirical resonance in the present study, where institutional isomorphism (Rüland, 2014) and the adoption of political principles appear to be more evident on the African side's alignment with the EU, while the EU appears resistant to reciprocal influence, as demonstrated in the migration case.

Turning now to the EU–G5 Sahel dialogue, it is important to note that despite its potential to serve as a textbook case, the process of identity-building has been virtually absent and has not followed the path of institutional development previously discussed. While this paper does not aim to explore all the reasons behind this, it is nevertheless worth highlighting the lack of any significant identity formation in the G5 Sahel's institutional trajectory.

By contrast, identity-building processes among Sahelian states have, in recent years, emerged along alternative lines, such as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Although only two years have passed since its formation, and notwithstanding ongoing uncertainties regarding the organization's future, it is important to underscore the strong identity-building impetus promoted by its authoritarian member state governments, an impetus that surpasses that of previous regional initiatives. One plausible interpretation of this phenomenon is consistent with the logic developed in the preceding sections: namely, that the deterioration of relations between the bloc composed of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and their Western and African partners generated a powerful identity-building drive that underpinned the AES's creation. This identity momentum has been sustained

over time, lasting beyond the initial reactionary unity spurred by ECOWAS’s threats of military intervention following the 2023 coup in Niger (Abdoul Sogodogo, 2024). A symbolic, albeit potentially propagandistic, manifestation of this development is the decision to adopt a common AES passport, that is intended to replace existing national passports upon their expiry (Mwangi, 2025). In a context as complex and fluid as the Sahel, the boundary between genuine identity-building and state-led propaganda is arguably more blurred than in other world regions. Nonetheless, for the analytical purposes of this paper, such developments merit attention. In other words, as with the other interregional functions analysed, even from a constructivist perspective, it appears that the “unintended consequences” (Mattheis Frank & Lopez Lucia, 2021) of interregional dialogue between the EU and Sahelian states have played a more decisive role in identity building than the original objectives envisioned by the EU in a dialogue it had long championed.

Functions of Interregionalism: Interregional Dialogues	Interregionalism as Balancing of Power	Interregionalism as Norm Diffusion and Institutional Enhancer	Interregionalism, as a Constructivist Element
African Union/ECOWAS and EU	Reduction of the balance of power for both sides. Reduction in the relevance and influence of the AU in the region. Decision to invest in other actors for the EU, marginalization of AU and ECOWAS	Absence of a strong institutional building push in the Sahel. Nothing more than a loose coordination.	Shared vision between the AU and the EU to push for the return of a democratic institutional environment after the Sahelian coups. However, opposite positions of other crucial themes for the Sahel, such as migration
EU and the G5 Sahel	Failure of the G5 Sahel as an organization. Creation of further imbalance and instability given the huge support of the EU to the G5.	Creation of the Joint Task Force of the G5 Sahel. Very little results.	Lack of an identity building process since the creation of the Organization.
EU and the Sahelian countries	Diversification of the partners and increase in the balance of power for the SC’s regimes, coming from the worsening of their dialogue with the EU. Loss of power and influence for Brussels, leaving a vacuum for international competitors	The G5 Sahel could be seen under also as a product of the EU-SC dialogue. Given the worsening of the dialogue, creation of the AES as evidence of cooperation and cohesion between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.	Discourse diffusion process witnessing a deep crisis between the EU and the SC. Strong identity response to the worsening of the dialogue. AES as a new symbol for the Sahelian regimes.

Table 1: Interconnections of Dialogues and Functions

5. Are Those Theoretical Functions Still Useful for Understanding EU-Sahel Relations?

The above question is closely linked to the central research question of this work: how can the concept of interregionalism, in light of its theoretical functions, be interpreted within the Sahelian context? The analysis presented in the previous paragraphs allow for a broader reflection on these questions, especially in terms of emphasizing crucial aspects of the issue.

First and foremost, it is necessary to clarify the analytical perspective from which the context is examined, in order to avoid confusion among the various interpretative levels of the issue. Up to this point, the interregionalist analysis developed in the preceding sections has deliberately combined through its three analytical dimensions both an external and systemic perspective of the object of study. It has also developed an internal perspective related to the individual dynamics of the actors involved. In other words, the functions of interregionalism in the Sahel have been presented from both a systemic standpoint, which involves evaluating the relationships among actors and interpreting the entire political framework through different theoretical lenses, as well as an internal standpoint that considers the intentions and interests of individual actors. One issue with the internal standpoint is that it may have consciously or unconsciously influenced the interregional relationship in ways that can be interpreted differently depending on the chosen theoretical framework. However, this paragraph focuses exclusively on the first of these two perspectives, setting aside the actions or intentions (whether deliberate or not) of individual actors, and instead assesses at a systemic and comprehensive level whether interregionalism, viewed through the aforementioned theoretical lenses, can provide a complete understanding of Sahelian dynamics.

Interregionalism seen through a neorealist approach was the first analytical category considered in this paper. The concept of influence and of (un)balance of power is undoubtedly a key element in relations between the African side (understood as involving all its constituent actors) and the European Union. The latter has never concealed that it views the Sahel primarily through a strategic lens, regarding it, at least prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza, as one of its main foreign policy priorities (Council of the European Union, 2015). However, interpreting the development (or rather the lack thereof) of the EU-Sahel interregional relationship solely through a neorealist approach overlooks crucial aspects that significantly limit the usefulness of neorealism in this context. Indeed, several political dynamics would be extremely reductive if interpreted exclusively from a neorealist perspective. One such example is the destabilizing role that France plays within the group generally described as the "Western actors," particularly in its relationship with Brussels. The crisis of French influence in the region, which has, whether intentionally or not, also drawn in the European Union, must be interpreted through neocolonial and postcolonial lenses rather than a neorealist one. The weakening of the EU's system of relations in the Sahel stems primarily from the effects and legacies of postcolonial and neocolonial dynamics characteristic of the Sahelian context, rather than from strategic national or regional issues that would fall under a neorealist interpretation of spheres of influence. The aforementioned postcolonial and neocolonial legacies have, in fact, facilitated the rise of nationalist and authoritarian narratives advanced by the new Sahelian military regimes, which have found a key interlocutor in contemporary Russia, an actor positioning itself as the "other" that is in opposition to the former European colonial powers (Peccini, 2025). For this reason, the Sahel's relationship with Europe cannot be adequately described as merely the outcome of a balancing game between powers and interregional spheres of influence. Such an analysis would suffer from significant incompleteness, neglecting many aspects embedded within the postcolonial and neocolonial nature of the context—factors that are necessary to understand several political positions and decisions taken by the actors involved, which often diverge from what one might expect when adopting a strictly neorealist approach.

The other interpretative approach key to understanding the Europe-Sahel interregional relationship is derived from liberal institutionalism. What becomes clear from the analysis in this paper is that this framework appears to be an even weaker and less useful lens than neorealism to describe the Sahelian context. On the one hand, the G5 Sahel project can be interpreted, as suggested in this work, through a vision of interregional relations where its purpose is to create common or cooperative institutions that promote norm diffusion and a more integrated governance system. However, the brief and rather ineffective lifespan of the G5 Sahel cannot, in any meaningful way, justify analysing EU-Sahel interregional relations through the institutionalist paradigm. Moreover, this institutionalist impetus has been almost entirely absent precisely in the bilateral relationship where it would have been most expected, namely, that between the regional blocs of the African Union and the European Union.

Nevertheless, the approach that ultimately appears the most fragile is undoubtedly constructivism. Interregionalism viewed from a constructivist standpoint emphasizes concepts such as identity and the diffusion of discourses, topics that have not been central to the political dynamics of the Sahel. It is precisely within this framework that it becomes important to recall once again the postcolonial and neocolonial conditions characterizing the Sahelian region, which clearly conflict with the notion of an

interregionalism capable of fostering identity-based exchanges or even producing a shared and convergent discourse. On the contrary, it is precisely around discursive constructions that the line of conflict between the so-called Western actors and the Sahelian states has become more pronounced. Discourses centered on anti-colonial sentiment and on the rejection of Western political and economic interference have, whether sincerely or propagandistically, replaced the earlier narratives of development and democratization upon which Europe once relied, that invoke, for instance, the supposed democratic progress of countries such as Mali in the early 2000s. Consequently, the constructivist approach becomes paradoxically interesting in the Sahelian context only when analysed in a negative sense, or, more precisely, when the direction of the reasoning is conceptually inverted. In other words, by focusing on identity formation and discourse diffusion (thus adopting a constructivist lens), one may observe that these very factors act as forces pushing against the possibility of interregional cooperation, whose crisis manifests precisely on the discursive level.

This last consideration, as well as all the interpretative limitations of the theoretical approaches discussed above, stems from the fact that these interregionalist frameworks all overlook a crucial element of the issue, both in the Sahel and elsewhere, namely, that of postcoloniality. Just as the three approaches to interregionalism analysed in this study are rooted in three fundamental theories of international relations, the same should and could be done through a renewed epistemological effort: conceiving a connection between postcolonial international relations (Darby & Paolini, 1994; Wilkens, 2017) and interregionalism. The necessity of such an epistemological effort lies in the fact that many world regions, and the relationships between external and internal actors operating within them, must also be interpreted through conceptual frameworks that place at the centre the historical condition of subalternity experienced by certain actors, the colonial legacies embedded in political, social, and economic dynamics, as well as contemporary neocolonial practices. All these considerations constitute the core of what is referred to as postcolonial international relations theory, which represents at least a necessary complement for achieving analytical completeness in contexts such as that of the Sahel. Consequently, the absence of these dimensions within the existing literature on interregionalism generates a conceptual void that renders the classical theoretical functions insufficient for the study of political scenarios especially those involving the Sahel. It is precisely from this conceptual gap that the idea of a new interpretative framework might emerge that could be termed “postcolonial interregionalism.” Such an approach represents an innovative lens for the study of relations between regional blocs, capable of integrating into interregional analysis the historical sensibility of coloniality. Adequate space for this concept will undoubtedly be reserved for future work, rather than in the few concluding lines of this study; nonetheless, a potential research trajectory appears to have been tentatively traced in this paper.

6. Conclusion

Untangling the political dynamics of the Sahel region is a challenging task that several books and articles have attempted to pursue in recent years from various perspectives and analytical angles. This work moves precisely in that direction, adding a different perspective to the analysis of the political balances and relationships among the main actors operating in the Sahel. Employing interregionalism as the theoretical framework to apply to this context has allowed certain events to be interpreted in a new light, while simultaneously revealing a clear state of crisis in relations between the EU and the Sahel.

If we are to regard interregionalism as a process that, whether intentionally or not on the part of the actors involved, should evolve toward greater integration and a more structured partnership, then one can only acknowledge the evident crisis of Sahelian interregionalism. All the categories progressively examined in this paper, the AU-EU relations, the EU-G5 interactions, and above all the hybrid interregionalism between the EU and the individual Sahelian states, collectively portray a scenario in which, regardless of the theoretical function adopted for interpretation, the crisis appears profound.

However, as emphasized particularly in the final section of this work, there is also an epistemological issue in the study of Sahelian dynamics, arising from the inadequacy of traditional interpretative frameworks of interregionalism, which tend to overlook crucial aspects necessary to understand a context as historically, socially, and politically complex as that of the Sahel. On one hand, studying and understanding the Sahel through a perspective less explored in the literature, namely by adopting an approach connected to regionalism and interregionalism, opens new and potentially valuable interpretative pathways, while deliberately highlighting the transnational and global nature of Sahelian challenges. On the other hand, the study of interregional relations should also succeed in capturing certain elements that this body of literature has sometimes neglected, particularly concerning the postcolonial and neocolonial dynamics of regions such as the one examined in this paper. In this sense, integrating these dimensions with the more classical views of interregionalism--those strongly linked to the mainstream theories of international relations--remains the next academic challenge. It requires bringing the weight of postcolonial and neocolonial legacies even into the study of relations among regional blocs.

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