Article

Governance Through Regime Complexity: What Role for the EU in the African Security Regime Complex?

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Abstract

The international response to armed conflict in Africa often takes the form of a regime complex characterized by institutional proliferation, overlap, unclear hierarchies, and multiple interconnections. At the same time, the course of conflict is hardly predictable. In such an environment, how can component units (institutional fora) of a regime complex effectively govern through complexity? We explore this question by focusing on the EU as an important actor within regime complexes. Building on the regime complexity literature and complexity theory, we identify four conditions. We argue that actors who operate as resource hubs, create complementarity, support system self-organization, and practice adaptive forms of peacebuilding are best placed to manage regime complexity. Empirically we probe these assumptions in the context of the Sahelian security regime complex and the role the EU is playing in it.

Issue

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1. Introduction

The European Union's position and role in global and regional governance is undergoing substantial change (Barbé et al., 2016; Santander & Vlassis, 2020). For a long time, the key to a more influential EU was seen to rest primarily in the EU's ability to create stronger "actorness." Internal coherency and strategic planning leading to specific policy programs supported by Commission funding are usually considered essential for foreign policy influence (Börzel & van Hüllen, 2014; Thomas, 2012). While these conditions are sine qua non requirements to succeed, they are not sufficient in isolation from further context conditions which are placed outside the EU's ambit. As part of this thematic issue on the EU and regime complexity, this article explores the wider institutional environment in which EU foreign and security policy is taking place. The contextual framework is the conflict-specific security regime complex in the Sahel. It emerged around Mali's political and security crises of 2012, which triggered a comprehensive international response involving a high number of international institutions, among them the EU, the African Union (AU), the United Nations, and African regional organizations.

The conceptual framework of the thematic issue distinguishes between three levels of analysis. Placed at the macro level is the issue-specific regime complex. It consists at the mid-level of overlapping institutional arenas, referred to as fora. These are the constitutive or component units of the regime complex. At the micro level, these institutional fora themselves consist of a range of actors (Delreux & Earsom, 2023). In this contribution, we are concentrating on the mid-level by exploring how a forum and component unit like

the EU operates within the macrostructure offered by the issue-specific security regime complex in the Sahel. We treat the EU as an important forum operating within regime complexity.

Our core interest is exploring conditions relevant to managing regime complexity. We start with the proposition that governing through regime complexity is an essential instrument of power that is transforming conventional understandings of influence. Traditionally (realist school), power and influence have been associated with actor-centrism and material capacities, especially in the field of peace and security. However, conflicts in an environment of regime complexity require a different perspective that recognizes the system-conditioned and complexity-informed context.

Analytically we will use elements from the regime complexity literature and complexity theory. We argue that four conditions are particularly relevant for mastering regime complexity. First, institutions within a regime complex are best placed to steer it if they can operate as a resource hub, supplying resources for the functioning of the regime complex instead of consuming them. Second, regime complexity is argued to work best when there is functional differentiation of its component fora, which complement rather than duplicate each other. Third, as regime complexes operate in a decentred manner without clear hierarchies, they operate under the condition of self-organization. As self-organization is a system prerequisite, we argue that supporting it is essential for maintaining regime complexity. Fourth, armed conflicts often display a high degree of non-linearity and complexity, which limits the predictability of international peace efforts. This prevents the application of simple cause-effect solutions and requires adaptive policies that accept non-linearity.

We presume that these four conditions are relevant for all fora operating within the context of regime complexity and with the ambition to actively steer it. However, only a few might actually be able to do so, and thus, the selection towards which we can apply our argument is relatively small. We find that the EU is the most likely candidate to explore these four conditions given its resource endowment, willingness to take action, and deep involvement in conflict resolution. Empirically, we examine these propositions against the EU's role within the security regime complex that emerged around the armed conflict in the Sahel. The Sahel has been selected because it is arguably the area in which we can best observe institutional complexity in the field of security and in which the EU is an active player. The focus on the Sahel is warranted for the EU because it is a strategically important area from the European perspective, given that it is home to jihadist groups, a source of mass migration, and suffers from poverty.

The nature of a regime complex with its multiple interconnected fora significantly complicates its exploration. We do not intend to mirror all possible actors with all their relations fully; such depth would over-

stretch the space available within a single article. What we are doing is probing into the plausibility of our four conditions for selecting the EU as the most fitting institution within the Sahelian security regime complex. We particularly zoom in on the role and activities of the Regional Advisory Coordination Cell (RACC), the EU's on-the-ground coordination hub. If (effective) EU governance through complexity is to be expected in the Sahel region, traces thereof should at least be observable in the RACC's activities.

2. Conceptual Framework

We use regime complexity and complexity theory in an eclectic manner, helping us to explore what steering opportunities actors have when confronted with regime complexes. We do not aim to provide a comprehensive discussion or application of both theories but combine selected elements and probe their plausibility in the empirical section. By doing so, we address several gaps in the literature.

The regime complexity literature tends to explore complexity primarily at the international level and among international institutions (Alter & Raustiala, 2018; Orsini et al., 2013; Raustiala & Victor, 2004). However, complexity extends into other levels of analysis, for example, the implementation side of what these international institutional aim to achieve. Furthermore, while the regime complexity literature uses the term complexity frequently, it does not substantially engage with complexity theory (Hollway, 2020). If complexity is recognized, it is mostly within the context of inter-institutional relations. Lastly, the literature has so far mostly explored what consequences regime complexity produces for international institutions (Gehring & Oberthür, 2009). Little effort has been made to explore how component fora can be influential by using regime complexity to achieve their policy goals. We are addressing these gaps in the literature first by drawing conceptual inspiration from both regime complexity and complexity theory demonstrating how both can profit from one another; second, by extending the focus of complexity analysis from only inter-institutional relations to also exploring how policies are practiced; and third, by focusing on the question of how component fora can best position themselves within a regime complex to achieve their policy goals. More recently, regime complexity and complexity theory have been related more strongly to global governance research (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Westerwinter, 2022; Haas & Western, 2020; Orsini et al., 2020). This trend relates to our main research endeavor, examining how best to govern through regime complexity. We develop four facilitating conditions.

First, we develop a baseline argument. For any international institution to take action, it requires resources for its operation. These can be both material or immaterial goods, such as access to funds or having certain competencies or institutional capacities in a particular

policy area. Naturally, the resource question extends into the external relations of international institutions. Institutions can acquire resources through exchange if they cannot generate them internally (Biermann & Harsch, 2017). Most explicitly, resource exchange theory addresses the issue, which has also been applied in the context of the African security regime complex and for conceptualizing interaction among international organizations (Brosig, 2015; Galaskiewicz, 1985; Gest & Grigorescu, 2010). Accordingly, the centrality of a component forum within a regime complex depends on its ability to supply resources for its functioning rather than relying on such resources. Those who supply more resources to the regime complex but demand few from others are in a more advantageous position. They can be assumed to have greater steering capabilities over how the regime complex develops than those who are reliant on these resources. Component fora that manifest themselves as a resource hub can strategically use and shape the functions of the regime complex. Following the flow of resources such as international funds easily reveals the resource supply or dependency of individual units.

Second, one stream within the regime complexity literature emphasizes that overlap will likely lead to greater cooperation and system creation. The argument is built on the assumption that dense institutional spaces exert adaptation pressure, forcing individual institutions to select functional niches (Gehring & Faude, 2013). The theoretical roots of this approach are based on population ecology (Caroll, 1984; Ries, 2017). The central assumption is that institutions move from high- to low-competition areas. Ultimately, the spaces they occupy are characterized by functional differentiation, which allows them to avoid open confrontation. Specialization in an interconnected environment of regime complexity leads to complementarity. The sum of functional niches creates a wider system, the regime complex. The literature assumes two methods through which complementarity emerges: deliberate design by involved component units or spontaneous emergence as a consequence of reiterative interactions (avoiding competition or as a consequence of it) within a regime complex (Faude & Gehring, 2017, pp. 191–192).

In this context, we propose to direct attention to component fora and their ability to actively create complementarity. While it is true that within regime complexes, no single unit dominates the system as it is primarily decentred and not formally organized, component units are not all equal or simply passive receivers (Raustiala & Victor, 2004). How well a regime complex operates can reasonably be assumed to depend on the degree of institutional "fitness." This refers to how well component fora fit together and complement each other. Accordingly, effective system management depends on how well component units interact based on their functional specialization. This creates incentives to develop complementarity. Consequently, we argue that those units which are able

and willing to initiate complementarity have a greater chance of steering the regime complex and being more central to it than those that are not.

Third, although the literature on regime complexity refers to complexity directly, it hardly engages with its substance. Thus, we borrow from complexity theory for formulating the last two conditions. Complexity theory is classically based on four principles: non-linearity, an open-system character, emergent system properties, and self-organization (Cilliers, 1998). This means that no simple cause-effect relationship can be identified that assigns agents or systems uni-directional or ever coherent (stable) influence over outcomes. It also means that regime complexes are open systems without a predetermined number of component units as well as forms of self-organization with emergent properties (Kavalski, 2007, p. 437).

Because the full application of complexity theory is well beyond the scope of this study, we concentrate on one essential feature, self-organization, and transfer it to the study of regime complexes. Within complex systems, component units are primarily meaningful, as they respond to external environments collectively without a vertical hierarchy initiating or imposing such action. Because component fora are interconnected, they have emergent properties. Seen from the complexity theory perspective, regime complexes are political ecosystems that provide order in the form of self-regulation but do not operate according to principal-agent or purely rational/functional logic. While complexity theory has a strong emphasis on system properties and post-positivist orientation, it stands in opposition to mainstream IR with its mostly positivist and actor-centered approaches. However, a section within complexity theory has argued for a more moderate understanding of complexity. The concept of restricted complexity understands systems as operating in a semi-open manner, acknowledges that causality can take multiple directions, and that authority is not fully non-hierarchical but decentred and dispersed among various actors (Brosig, 2020; Morin, 2007). Likewise, Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2022) argues that governance complexes are a product of both strategic actions intending to refashion them and a result from emergent/system processes.

To answer our main research question, assuming a middle-ground position is important. If we assume that component units are more than components of a larger system but can also have agent qualities, it is not far-fetched to argue that they can have an individual influence on how self-organization emerges and operates. Thus, we argue that those actors within a regime complex that can support and shape self-organization have an advantage over others. Applying the logic of restricted complexity, we understand self-organization as being based on dispersed forms of authority in contrast to being completely non-hierarchical, as complexity theory would suggest. A component forum supporting self-organization would sustain a system with flexible

autonomy that can act mostly independently but is supported to some degree by a patron.

Fourth, the literature on regime complexes almost exclusively applies complexity thinking to the operation of component fora within the complex. In this sense, the literature is inward-looking and tends to omit the implementation environment. However, regime complexes are not self-referential entities; they are supposed to implement certain rules, programs, or policies. Leaving aside the application environment bears the risk of ignoring important conditions impacting the operation of a regime complex. Therefore, we enhance the application of complexity theory to our targeted policy field, security in the Sahel. In armed conflict, international organizations operate under great uncertainty over outcomes. Conflicts are often protracted, with limited predictability of how they proceed or when violence might dissipate (de Coning, 2016). Ending violent conflicts is not just a question of strategic planning and implementing policy programs in a top-down manner with enough resources (Day & Hunt, 2022). Because creating peace does not follow linear models of change and is marred with uncertainties, complexity approaches have gained ground. De Coning (2018) identified a number of framing conditions for complex adaptive peacebuilding that, in its essence, "embraces uncertainty, focuses on process, not end-states, and opts to invest in the resilience of local and national institutions and thereby their ability to promote change" (p. 317). Accordingly, adaptive knowledge over outcomes is inherently incomplete, policy planning is an incremental and experimental process, multiple options need to be pursued to allow learning from best-practice, and participatory and collaborative elements are needed. Naturally, these conditions are demanding and long-term oriented. Based on this logic, we argue that component fora within a regime complex and operating in an environment of complexity occupy an advantageous position if they apply adaptive practices. In other words, programs are designed in a process-oriented manner, facilitating inductive (ground-up) input leading to iterative learning, unlike a top-down means-to-end approach which mechanically implements programs.

Table 1 summarises our four conditions. We argue that component fora of a regime complex are best placed to (a) govern through complexity if they supply more resources to the complex than they need from it, (b) actively create system complementarity by focusing on niche functionality, (c) stimulate self-organization, which manifests itself in the support for a shared authority, and (d) apply adaptive policy instruments to a complex implementation environment. After providing a short overview of the Sahelian security regime complex in the next section, we apply these four conditions to the EU in the Sahel.
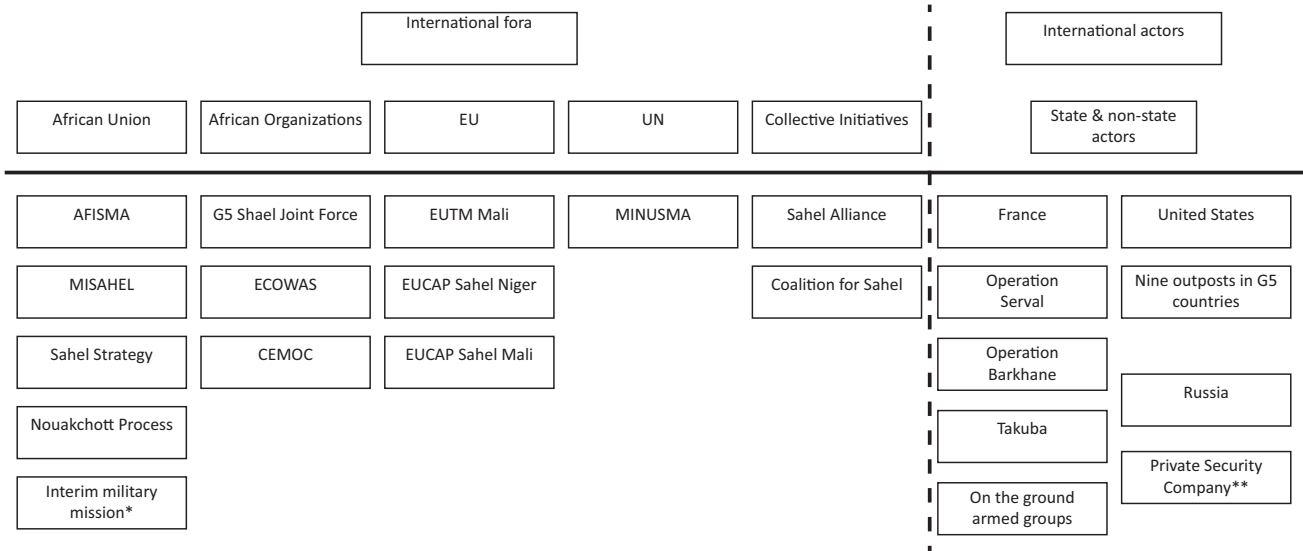
3. Security in Africa and Regime Complexity

The international response to armed conflicts is regularly shaped by multilateral institutions. There is hardly a conflict in which no institution is involved. Conflicts in Africa are usually characterized by the engagement of many regional and international organizations. The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) is a unique synthesis of regional organizations and the pan-African AU (Engel & Porto, 2010). Today, the APSA is enhanced through extensive cooperation with the UN, EU, military ad hoc coalitions, and various bilateral agreements. In effect, each security crisis creates its own specific actor constellation. Due to the high number of institutions involved, the literature refers to African conflicts as security regime complexes (Brosig, 2013). The EU's policies towards the Sahel are a case in point since they take place within the structures of a conflict-specific regime complex.

Figure 1 maps the international institutional regime complex which has emerged in the Sahel. This encompasses institutional fora such as the EU, the UN, the AU, regional economic communities, and powerful individual actors, such as France, in addition to a multitude of armed groups on the ground. Ongoing civilian capacity-building missions, such as EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali, operating alongside military training missions, such as EUTM Mali, are the most visible exponents of the EU's activities in the region. Each of these missions, however, also contributes to what has been labeled as the "security traffic jam" of the Sahel (Cold-Ravnkilde & Lindskov Jacobsen, 2020; Karlsrud et al., 2019). The bulk of the activities is (or has been) implemented either by international forces under the aegis of the UN (e.g., MINUSMA, 2013–ongoing), the AU or ECOWAS (e.g.,

Table 1. Governance through regime complexity.

Properties	Manifestations of complexity
Resource supply to the system	Act as a resource hub
Create system complementarity	Create niche functions Focus on system functionality
Stimulate self-organization	Support shared authority Empower other actors
Facilitate adaptive learning	Apply iterative learning Trial and error

International fora					International actors	
African Union	African Organizations	EU	UN	Collective Initiatives	State & non-state actors	
AFISMA	G5 Shael Joint Force	EUTM Mali	MINUSMA	Sahel Alliance	France	United States
MISAHEL	ECOWAS	EUCAP Sahel Niger		Coalition for Sahel	Operation Serval	Nine outposts in G5 countries
Sahel Strategy	CEMOC	EUCAP Sahel Mali			Operation Barkhane	Russia
Nouakchott Process					Takuba	Private Security Company**
Interim military mission*					On the ground armed groups	

Figure 1. The Sahel security regime complex: International institutions and actors. Notes: * In planning; ** In 2021, the Wagner Group started operating in the region.

AFISMA, 2012–2013), or by ad hoc coalitions, such as the French-led operations Serval, Barkhane, or the Takuba Task Force (de Coning et al., 2022). Particularly when it comes to stabilization or counter-terrorism activities, there is a European tendency to rather opt for providing financial or material support to third-party operations, for example, the Joint Force of the Group of Five Sahel, launched in June 2017 by the governments of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to fight terrorism and organized crime in the region, or the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) fighting Boko Haram. Lopez Lucia (2020) described this more pragmatic approach to supporting regional ad hoc initiatives as a "very unfamiliar situation."

In sum, the Sahel security regime complex consists of the entirety of (often overlapping) institutional responses, of which the EU is only one among many, without having a single steering body at its top. It has been argued elsewhere that this comes with a clear risk of getting entrapped in lock-in effects and unintended consequences (Plank, 2020; Plank & Bergmann, 2021). This hence raises the question of how to effectively navigate this complexity.

4. EU Coordination and Cooperation in the Sahel

4.1. Data and Approach

Empirical analyses of governance in security regime complexes are inherently prone to the risk of merely scraping the surface due to the many initiatives, institutions, and relationships which characterize these complex environments and which should ideally all be considered. To overcome this empirical challenge, we recommend complementing a general assessment of governance activities in security regime complexes with a more nar-row focus, studying one central hub of the regime complex, and later snowballing outwards. We, therefore, add a (traditional) broad focus on the EU's governance activities in the Sahel region with a specific focus on the EU's RACC and explore the extent to which recognition of this complexity is visible in its mandate and on-the-ground practices.

The RACC, established as the Regional Coordination Cell (RCC) in June 2017 and later, in May 2019, renamed and moved from Bamako to Nouakchott, is the EU's central on-the-ground hub of coordination and cooperation in the Sahel with a focus on regionalizing security and defense-related activities. It is mandated "to support G5 Sahel structures and countries to enhance regional cooperation and operational capabilities in the field of defense and security," "to reinforce international cooperation and transparency in support of the G5 Sahel structures and countries capacities," as well as "to facilitate internal EU coordination on security and defense" (EEAS, 2022). In doing so, the cell can rely on a network of Internal Security and Defense Experts deployed to the RACC's command structure in Nouakchott and to EU delegations in the G5 Sahel countries (Council of the European Union, 2019, Art. 1, para. 3). If EU governance through complexity is to be expected in the Sahel, traces thereof should at least be observable in the RACC's activities.

Empirically, we, therefore, not only rely on insights from an analysis of strategic documents and Council decisions; we also build on interviews with involved officials based both in the RACC, EU delegations, and at the EEAS in Brussels (see Table 2). We will explore if traces of effective governance through complexity can be found in the EU's governance in the Sahel as a whole since 2013, and in the mandate evolution and activities of the RACC specifically. We will do this against the background of

Table 2. List of interviews.

Interview	Interview information
Interview 1	Interview with EU member state official, 17 March 2017, Addis Ababa
Interview 2	Interview with ECOWAS official, 24 June 2017, Abuja
Interview 3	Interview with EU official, 12 November 2018, Brussels
Interview 4	Interview with EU official, 13 November 2018, Brussels
Interview 5	Interview with EU official, 15 November 2018, Brussels
Interview 6	Interview with EU official, 16 November 2018, Brussels
Interview 7	Interview with EU official, 17 May 2019, Addis Ababa
Interview 8	Interview with AU official, 21 May 2019, Addis Ababa
Interview 9	Interview with EU official, 4 May 2022, digital

the four aforementioned facilitating conditions for how to govern through regime complexity.

4.2. Exploring EU Governance Through Complexity in the Sahel

First, and with reference to the first condition referring to resource exchange, there is considerable evidence that the EU acts as a central resource hub within the regime complex. Actors such as ECOWAS and the G5 countries have been highly dependent on external resources since the 2012 crises in Mali, large parts of which are provided by the EU. A clear indication of this is the security-related priorities in the financial envelope for the Sahel within the framework of the 11th European Development Fund for 2014–2020, through which the EU has allocated more than EUR 2.6 billion to the five Sahelian states and regional initiatives (Lopez Lucia, 2019, p. 24). Moreover, the EU supports the G5 Sahel's Priority Investment Programme, the organization's main vehicle for implementing its 2016 development and security strategy in defense and security, governance, resilience, human development, and infrastructure (G5 Sahel, 2018).

Overall, this resource supply materializes most prominently through the financing of deployed troops and their equipment (interviews 2, 3, 8). For instance, the EU has already supported the G5 Sahel Joint Force with EUR 235 million through the African Peace Facility and EUR 35 million through the European Peace Facility. In total, the EU has invested more than EUR 750 million in building military capacities in the countries of the G5 (Montanaro, 2022). Moreover, the introduction of the European Peace Facility increased the EU's capacity to act as a central resource hub. This program not only created room to also provide funding to peace and security operations that operate outside the institutional frameworks of regional arrangements such as the AU or ECOWAS; it also offered a framework to supply third-country armies with arms and ammunition (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Interestingly, the role of the EU as a resource hub is generally described as adapted to the needs of the part-

ners within security complexes rather than to EU-internal dynamics (interviews 5, 6). It is argued that the RACC plays a central role in matching these needs with resources. As noted elsewhere (Goxho, 2021, p. 104), the RACC "is a mechanism which…provides an overview of the needs of the military G5 Joint Force together with the potential offers of military support from EU member states and from other donors." Also, the EU's reliance on Expertise France, the French public international cooperation agency, seems to be geared towards that end. The EU has cooperated with the agency as a contractor for the G5 Sahel countries after positive experiences in the Central African Republic in which the supply of food rations for the AU-led MISCA was implemented by Expertise France (Plank, 2022).

At the same time, one should be careful not to present the EU as a mere provider of resources. It is in itself also dependent on the support of several of its partners in the regime complex to implement its strategic agenda. This is most clear in the deployment of EU missions and operations, which are often heavily dependent on the logistical support of the Sahelian countries (see Plank, 2022). The resource exchange is thus clearly not a one-sided affair.

Second, zooming in on the mandate and evolution of the RACC offers some evidence of an EU ambition to contribute to complementarity and system functionality, in line with the second condition. Concretely, since 2019 we have observed a change in the RACC's mandate towards greater recognition of its role as a facilitator of interaction between the multiple actors in the regime complex and as a strategic advisor to foster self-organization of Sahelian actors.

As one interviewee summarised: "The RACC was initially just a coordination cell to which then a strategic advisory role was added" (interview 9). On 19 June 2017, the Council adopted the decision to establish an RCC within EUCAP Sahel in Bamako (Mali) as part of the EU's "first phase of the regionalization of CSDP missions in the Sahel" (Council of the European Union, 2017). This regionalization as a more general development of the EU's policies in the region mirrored an extension

of the EU's mission's mandates, such as EUTM and EUCAP, beyond specific countries to the whole Sahelian region as adaptive EU policy towards the region (Plank & Bergmann, 2021). It reflects the EU's attempts to learn from the perceived failure of ECOWAS in Mali and the severe challenges of EUTM Mali, which experienced setbacks due to an inadequate provision of military hardware and insufficient adaption to local needs (see Tull, 2019; interview 1). Against this backdrop, the RCC was tasked to, amongst others, "contribute to the Union's situational awareness of G5 Sahel countries' security and defence needs and gaps" that would "facilitate the organisation of training courses by Union CSDP missions" (Council of the European Union, 2017). In other words, from these provisions, one can conclude that it was another attempt to strengthen the EU's missions deployed in the region. On 13 May 2019, however, the Council decided to rename the RCC into the RACC and relocate it to Nouakchott (Mauritania) as part of the so-called "second phase" of the regionalization of CSDP efforts in the Sahel (Council of the European Union, 2019). In doing so, it also expanded the RCC mandate to "support the G5 Sahel structures and countries to enhance regional cooperation and operational capabilities in the field of defence and security" (Council of the European Union, 2019). This relocation and reorientation of the RACC testify to greater awareness of the need to create system complementarity. Later, in its Decision of 7 January 2021, the Council decided to replace the aforementioned RACC objectives. The RACC is now set to serve objectives to "improve the cooperation and coordination between G5 Sahel structures and G5 Sahel countries in order to enhance regional cooperation and operational capabilities," "reinforcing the national capacities of G5 Sahel countries," and "facilitate and support the organisation of information-gathering and sharing with all partners of the G5 Sahel" (Council of the European Union, 2021a). Around the same time, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy highlighted in a report to the Council that this regionalization process has "stepped up cooperation and coordination with international actors such as the UN, the AU, ECOWAS." At the same time, the RACC "continued to support Sahelian security forces in the development of their capacities" (Council of the European Union, 2021b, p. 121). In other words, what we see here is a gradual evolution of what used to be a focus on strengthening the EU's own activities in the Sahel, towards now seemingly embracing a coordination role and stimulating the self-organization of regional initiatives. Especially the extension of the RACC's mandate towards the needs of regional and international actors in the regime complex reflects aspirations to facilitate the ability of the regime complex to organize itself, at least at the declaratory level.

We can also find some traces of an evolution towards governance through complexity when looking beyond the RACC's mandate evolution, focusing instead on its activities on the ground. Interviewees described the RACC's approach as a coordination role in which the EU is a "secretary" within the regime complex that manages funds or coordinates projects (interview 6). What is essential here is the emphasis of interviewees that the RACC has no operational mandate, only a coordination and strategic advisory role to actors within the regime complex as a "contribution to their thinking" (interview 9). Essential to the functioning of the RACC is, therefore, its central networked position, which allows it to act as an important coordination hub in the Sahel regime complex. Most of its activities are geared towards offering a bridge between the activities of EU delegations and missions in the region (i.e., EUCAP Sahel, Mali EUCAP Sahel Niger, and EU civilian missions in Libya), on the one hand, and the departments of security and defense of the G5 Sahel countries as well as the Coordinational National Committee on the other hand (interview 9). The deployment of RACC staff to EU delegations in the G5 states also illustrates this position. In doing so, the RACC seems to act not only as an important interlocutor for the provision of EU material resources to the G5 Sahel countries, for instance, through coordinating funding programs within the EU missions; it also actively presents itself as a source of advice and expertise for (state) actors in the regime complex, for instance through providing a database on projects of other actors (Venturi, 2019, p. 7). As one interviewee said: "We always say to them 'just pick our brain' " (interview 9). However, how much this is also wanted and used by the G5 Sahel governments should be more systematically investigated in future research.

Interestingly, we could not find convincing evidence beyond the anecdotal level for an EU willingness to stimulate the self-organization of its partners in the regime complex, and neither could we find systematic evidence of an adaptive approach that embraces trial-and-error and non-linearity.

For instance, the RACC intends to play a proactive role in identifying gaps and needs in the capabilities of the G5 Sahel countries' security structures, as well as in the coordination of activities toward filling these gaps (interview 6). This can be read as an effort to support self-organization. Here, the example was given by one interviewee about the need for establishing a forensic capacity in the police sector of the G5 Sahel countries. As a first step, RACC officials sit with national authorities, provide advice, and create awareness of the need for such capacity. Once these authorities are convinced, the RACC reaches out to EU missions (here: EUCAP Sahel) and partners on the ground and requests that they make human and material resources available (here: forensic specialists) and provide such training. Although the RACC's role is limited to coordination and advice, it seemingly plays an important role in creating synergies between actors on the ground and empowering national authorities. Moreover, in exploring the RACC's activities, we observe an awareness of a need for an adaptive and

context-sensitive approach, which often includes ad hoc actions and a trial-and-error approach. One interviewee here referred to lessons learned from previous EU missions in East Africa, indicating that the regionalization of activities in the Sahel region should go hand in hand with tailoring priorities and actions to each of the countries individually (interview 9).

Yet, we cannot draw strong conclusions about the actual effectiveness of the ambition to support self-organization, as this is heavily determined by the receptiveness of the G5 Sahel countries' governments and their willingness to use this advice. For instance, the success of the RACC's activities is difficult to measure given that its mandate is limited to providing advice and coordination; it does not have operational authority (interview 9). Referring to interaction with the departments of defense of the G5 Sahel countries, the same interviewee, therefore, highlighted how this requires long-term engagement to get their respect and trust (interview 9). Referring to the aforementioned example of developing forensic capacity, the decision by the government of Mauritania to establish a forensic laboratory was seen as a success of the RACC's advisory action, even though it took the government two years to take this decision.

Although interviews with RACC and EEAS officials indicated an awareness of the need for an adaptive and non-linear approach, we could not trace if this has also affected its capacity to meaningfully contribute to regional stability. Rather, the most explicit example of adaptation by the EU suggests counterproductive outcomes. It seems that the adaptation of the EU's resource provision has given the G5 Sahel governments more steering capacity. The creation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force is a the EU has already supported the is a case in point. By supporting the new institution considerably, the EU engaged in a trial-and-error approach giving substantial leeway to the G5 countries. Although the initial creation of the G5 followed a top-down approach initiated primarily by the EU and its member states, with some demand also expressed by the Sahelian countries themselves (Bergmann, 2022, p. 144), it later adapted its approach to the expressed needs of the regional group. The conditionality applied by the EU in its funding of the G5 Sahel countries has decreased significantly, for instance, in Mali, where the government received so many funding opportunities that it was able to engage in extraversion strategies (Plank, 2020). However, as argued elsewhere, this has also reinforced the clientelist and predatory system of governance in Mali (D'Amato & Baldaro, 2022). As another example, the presence of Barkhane and MINUSMA in northern Mali enabled the Malian government to lower the pressure to act in those regions on its own while similarly creating a point of criticism of the failure of those missions (Lacher, 2021). Recent coups in the region, some of which were enforced by soldiers that the EU had trained, provide significant evidence for the limited success of this approach. The Malian government even reinforced local security

forces in Mali, whose abuses and lack of accountability have delegitimized civilian rule and paved the way for the coup government "that is intercepting and exploiting the diffused mistrust of the population vis-à-vis the international community" (D'Amato & Baldaro, 2022). While the security situation has deteriorated in many areas, the Malian government has furthermore increased its reliance on the Russian mercenary Wagner Group, with severe consequences for civilians.

On a final note, interviewees highlighted several additional challenges to the implementation of EU actions on the ground, including the activities of the RACC, because of growing complexity and actor proliferation. One major challenge in the region following actor proliferation is the risk of duplicating support by the various actors involved and the need to speed up delivery processes, such as that of military equipment (interviews 5, 7). Here, the RACC can act as an important information hub for other donors, including individual countries (interview 4) but also for other international actors, including UN agencies and ECOWAS (EEAS, 2017). Given that the RACC is restricted to providing strategic advice and coordination, translating this advice into concrete action is, however, far from simple. As a result, the RACC is confronted with both supply and demand obstacles. Translation into action depends very much on the support that the EU Missions can provide. For instance, EUTM or EUCAP do not always have sufficient human resources to organize training. Also, the willingness and capacities of the G5 countries, for instance, in terms of staff, to collaborate is critical for partners such as the EU to effectively govern through complexity (interview 4).

More fundamentally, the worsening security and political situation in the region, illustrated by recent coups in Mali or Burkina Faso, have hampered the RACC's capacity to organize coordination meetings and get access to national authorities. It not only led to growing insecurity on the ground, but it also led to a situation in which there is hardly any coordination among the G5 countries themselves. In fact, the existence of the G5 as a key actor in the regime complex and the main recipient of potential adaptive practices by the EU is under threat following Mali's withdrawal from the group ("Niger President says," 2022; Edu-Afful et al., 2022). What makes this even more worrying is that this takes place against a background of a complete rupture of military cooperation between Mali and France, subsequent tensions between MINUSMA and the Malian government culminating in severe operational limitations for the force, and the gradual withdrawal of troops from the region by France and other key troop-contributing countries.

5. Conclusion

Starting from the observation that the Sahelian security regime complex consists of its own unique combination of local, regional, and international fora and actors (see Figure 1) in which the EU is integrated, this article sets

out to analyze conditions relevant for managing regime complexity. Based on the literature on regime complexity and complexity theory, we have put forward four conditions relevant to mastering regime complexity: the supply rather than consumption of resources, functional differentiation, self-organization, and adaptive policies that accept non-linearity. The main theoretical novelty of our approach is that we analyzed EU foreign policy in a context located outside the EU's ambit, one shaped by the policy preferences of other actors, thus exemplifying the increased complexity in which the EU must navigate. By examining the security regime complex in the Sahel and focusing specifically on the EU's RACC, we have analyzed the EU's policies in the Sahel. Specifically, regarding the RACC, we find it constitutes a striking example of adjustments on the part of the EU. Organized as a cell that coordinates the various EU missions and provides strategic advice to other actors in the regime complex, most notably the G5 Sahel and its countries, the RACC's role as a secretary gives it the considerable ability to enable resource exchange and system complementarity. However, we could not convincingly trace that the cell enables self-organization and adaptive policies. These findings are mirrored in the EU's embeddedness in the regime complex more generally, with funding schemes adjusted, missions regionalized, and coordination and resource hubs established in Brussels. In contrast, we do not find significant evidence for self-organization and adaptive policies. While the former strongly depends on the receptiveness of partners in the regime complex, the latter has led to counterproductive results with unintended effects and severe challenges. Dependent on other actors and embedded in the complex environment of the regime complex in the Sahel, the EU's policies have been, just as those of its partners, challenged by coups, the deteriorating security situation, and the politicized setting of the engagement.

Finally, to what extent are our findings relevant and replicable for other security regime complexes? Issue and region-specific regime complexes certainly have a high degree of uniqueness in terms of actor constellations, conflict trajectories, and levels of international engagement. Despite this, we argue that the largest limitation of our study is not the question of empirical uniqueness. For the EU, the question is whether it can and is willing to leverage those conditions we explored. Being a resource hub is not a guaranteed position. Increasingly actors such as the Russian-sponsored Wagner Group, funding from oil-rich Gulf countries, or extensive Chinese investment at least has the potential to pressure the EU's position as a central resource provider. Other constraints might come from inside the EU. Despite growing awareness of the complexities of peacebuilding, the EU has not internalized complex thinking and integrated it into its standard repertoire for peacebuilding. The key constraining condition might very well be the (un)ability and (un)willingness to engage with new concepts and practices.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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