

GENERAL Didier CASTRES REMARKS

“2024 – Wake Up Call for the Sahel”

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Without excessive paranoia, we are witnessing a major upheaval in the Sahel region, whether it be political (8 coups d'état in 3 years), diplomatic (expulsion of diplomats, alliance reversals, ambassador recalls, cessation of relations with ECOWAS, exclusion from international organizations), demographic (with 84 million inhabitants today and an estimated 196 million by 2050), security-related (not only terrorism but also the looming confrontation between populations in the North and South of the Sahel), or climatic (in a century, the Sahara's surface has doubled that of California, and the phenomenon is increasing and accelerating), all against a backdrop of endemic poverty.

In the absence of vigorous and coordinated action, and faced with the impotence of Sahelian states, it is probable that the following scenario will materialize: a 3 million km² area abandoned to a violent and institutionalized chaos in which warlords, armed groups, states, jihadists, and traffickers of all kinds (drugs, migrants, gold, etc.) will share/dispute spaces, routes, and revenues in a low-intensity conflict.

From a military and French perspective, we have four good reasons not to let the situation worsen and to promptly work on finding a solution:

1. Ensure that a new caliphate in the Sahel does not enjoy the same freedom of action as DAESH in Raqqa to plan attacks against the West;
2. Maintain an ability to understand, gather intelligence, and anticipate migratory flows and all kinds of trafficking that will intensify in the Sahelian space due to the weakness of neighboring states and the intervention of foreign powers;
3. Refuse to leave the door wide open to our main strategic competitors, as the Russians have done in the Central African Republic, Libya, Sudan, Mali, and soon in Niger and Burkina, but also the Chinese although more discreetly;
4. In reality, and from a general perspective, the challenge reaches far beyond security, economic, development, or migration flow issues. The most significant risk is the possibility that Africa and its 55 states (out of 193) become the lever used by authoritarian regimes to impose their societal model at the expense of the Western model. We are indeed witnessing a new 'scramble for Africa' with Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, or Qatar vying for the favor of African states, often the most failed.

Until now, the solutions that we the French, but more broadly that the West has provided, have failed. I attribute this to five main causes that I have called the 'Capital Sins' of crisis management.

The first of these Capital Sins is the 'off-the-shelf' syndrome meaning the imposition of ready-made solutions to crises, whatever they may be and whoever they concern, often transposing Western models and logic. However, each crisis has a different genetic code, each draws its roots from a unique biotope, culture, and history. Therefore, we must ban ready-made solutions and opt for 'tailor-made'. This requires taking the time to understand the crisis and learn about its historical, political, and societal complexity.

Our second mistake is the military-security fascination that leads us to observe a crisis and measure its trend of evolution with our eyes fixed solely through the microscope of military action. However, military action alone is never the solution. Outbursts of violence are never the cause of crises but their consequences. Therefore, we must focus on the causes, not just the consequences.

The third Capital Sin is the non recognition, in the grammar of crises, of a fundamental rule: the rule of the discrepancy in timing. We must understand that the timing of military action differs from the timing of media, politics, diplomacy, development, mediation and reconstruction. And conversely, we need to understand that the presence of foreign forces in a country can, at a certain point, become an obstacle to the solution. When we engage in the resolution of a crisis, we must develop a stable and resilient strategy. We need to be sure that we have the moral, political and financial engagement to see the strategy through to the end.

The fourth Critical Error lies in viewing the various crises taking place in the world , particularly those linked to the Sahel, as dissociated events according to their nature and geographically constrained by national borders. In fact, terrorism, trafficking, and criminal activities coexist in a symbiotic relationship. Rather than treating these phenomena as separate crises, we must recognize them as components of a larger crisis system. Consequently, our response should not be fragmented but rather comprehensive and inclusive, addressing the interconnected nature of these challenges.

The fifth and ultimate Grave Error involves responding to situations under the sway of emotions, media pressure, and public opinion, often hastily.. This tendency favors delivering a response tailored for media consumption over achieving a real impact. Consequently, there is a pressing need to overhaul our crisis resolution approach and adopt a new strategy.