

# MEDITERRANEAN POWERS AND THE SAHEL'S ENVIRONMENT AND SECURITY

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I write this short comment at a time when the United States' return to the world scene opens a tiny window of hope to a world overcome by fear and insecurity not only for the future but for everyday life. As regards Africa, the prevalent view sees it as a continent of illegal migration, terrorist movements and environmental degradation. In Greece, in particular, African threat takes the form as strong heat waves carrying "sandy dust from the Sahara" or Turkish deals with Libya and military bases in Somalia. Incidentally, since 2009 Ankara has increased its Embassies in Africa from 12 to 42.

Also, Turkish regional activity and alliances draw Greek attention to one of the most important state/environmental disputes of our time, the ongoing dispute between Egypt (and Sudan) on one side and Ethiopia on the other for the flow of the Nile waters. Turkey has invested in

Ethiopia \$US 2.5 billion out of a total of \$6 billion in the whole Sub Saharan Africa. 85% of the water flowing into the Blue Nile originates from the Ethiopian highlands. Construction of the dam, officially started in 2011, escalated the country's dispute with Egypt, a country totally dependant on the river. After periods of great tension Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia entered into negotiations that eventually focused on the rate of filling of the colossal -145 meters high- dam, especially during dry periods. The last round of talks concluded on January 3, 2021 without concrete results.

Nevertheless, these differences represent a tiny fraction of the vast mosaic of problems in Africa, a continent plagued by advancing soil degradation, loss of 65% of cultivated land, 30% of pastures and 20% of its forests: Losses equivalent to 3% of the continent's GDP. Already 25% of Africa is desert. The Sahel, name given to the part of Sub Saharan Africa extending from Senegal in the Atlantic and nine other states to Ethiopia and Djibouti in the Red Sea, demonstrates the severity of the effects of Climate Change. The latter equates with famine brought about by persistently hot temperatures, shorter rain seasons and more frequent rainstorms that destroy cultivations and erode the soil. Last year 22% of Sahel's population suffered from famine, 50 million more compared to 2010. Religious fanaticism, ethnic and political conflict and forced migration are the inevitable side-effects. These side-effects have drawn the attention of the European Union and certainly that of France the dominant colonial power of West Africa. In the context of international and European military action against secessionist movements in Mali by the UN (MANESMA) and the EU (EUCAP Sahel and Mali) the French Minister of Defence, Florence Parly, made a major step towards bringing Greece closer to Sub-Saharan security and environmental issues. During her visit to Athens on January 25, 2021 in the context of the announcement of the deal for the purchase by Greece of the Rafale fighter jets, she openly asked the Greek Government for the participation of Greek armed forces in the operations in the area.

The Great Green Wall of Africa (Great Green Wall-GGW) is an African initiative by 11 Sahel states that began in 2007. Its objective is to create a "Green Wall" of 8,000 kilometres that would set a barrier to desertification through the retention and administration of water resources and the restoration, whenever possible, of cultivable lands, pastures, and forests. When completed it will be the largest living ecosystem of the planet three times larger than the Great Coral Reef.

On January 11<sup>th</sup>, President Macron announced that France will finance with an amount exceeding \$14 billion its Initiative to Accelerate GW. The ambition of the latter is to attain most of its objectives by 2030, the year when, according to Sustainable Development Goals, the Ecosystems Restoration Decade comes to its conclusion. Perhaps this is an overly optimistic target considering that during the first decade it had attained only 15% of its set objectives. Nevertheless, this is a continuing effort still attracting resources and moral support from around the world and projecting a much-needed positive outlook for the future of the planet.