

RIVALRIES IN THE SAHEL REGION OF AFRICA: DOMINANT POWERS AND MATTERS ARISING

Frank N. ENOR

*Department of History and International Studies
University of Calabar*

&

OBOT, Ifiok Martin

*Department of History and International Studies
University of Calabar
oboteman2005@yahoo.co.uk*

Abstract

Rivalries among dominant powers in the Sahel region of Africa can be linked to renewed imperialism. Understanding how these powers maintain their influence can help identify the extent to which that influence drives fundamental foreign policy decisions. The implications of this renewed interest in the Sahel region are far-reaching but a concern for the Continent's stability and independence. The activities of China, France, Russia, Turkey and the United States in the Sahel risk militarization of the region with wider implications. Data for this paper were generated through an in-depth analysis of related work on the subject, with realism as the theoretical basis. Findings, inter alia, reveal shared characteristics amongst dominant powers; development assistance in states of influence and militarization of the Continent reminiscent of Cold War proxy conflict.

Keywords: *Dominant Powers, New Imperialism, Sahel Region, Rivalries, Cold War*

Introduction

Dominant powers have continued to jostle for influence around the world. This influence is largely in their quest to further their national interest. Such projection and protection of national interests often overlap and interlock, resulting in rivalry. Such rivalry has the trappings of new imperialism. Imperialism is a policy or ideology where a country extends its power and influence over other territories through colonization, military force, or other means of domination.¹ It often involves the control of one nation by another, politically, economically, or culturally. The Cold War was a period of geopolitical tension between the United States and its allies (the Western bloc) and the Soviet Union and its allies (the Eastern bloc) that lasted roughly from the end of World War II in 1945 to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.² The key features of the Cold War are ideological conflict, the nuclear arms race, the space race,

¹ Gertrude S. Millin, *Rhodes* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), 138.

² Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "Rethinking Geopolitics" (London: Routledge, 2002), 67.

and proxy wars. The contemporary rivalry among dominant powers in the Sahel is therefore a new imperialism and, if pushed further, could degenerate into a cold war between the contending nations. These countries include France, Russia, the USA, China, and Turkey. However, the pressure resulting from the rivalry could lead to a cold war between the contending powers. This paper will discuss the competing influence of the dominant powers in the Sahel. It will cover geolocation and geopolitical realities in the Sahel, the Sahel's strategic significance, the countries jostling for influence in the Sahel, the implications of France's withdrawal from the Sahel, and the implications of the struggle for the Sahel.

Geolocation and Geopolitical Realities of the Sahel

The Sahel region is a semi-arid transition zone between the Sahara Desert to the north and the more fertile Savannas to the south in Africa. It stretches for about 3,800 km across the continent from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. Across the continent from west to east, forming a belt-like shape. It acts as a transitional zone between the Sahara Desert to the north and the more tropical savannas to the south. The Sahel is located between approximately 13°N and 17°N latitude.³ The Sahel spans across several countries in Africa, including Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, Cameroon, the Central African Republic and Eritrea. The region is characterized by flat topography, with elevations generally between 200 and 400 meters. Rainfall varies from around 100–200 mm in the north to 700–1,000 mm in the south, with most precipitation occurring during the June-August rainy season.⁴ The low rainfall has resulted in drought at various times, straining the socioeconomic well-being of the people of the Sahel and thereby increasing strife.

Furthermore, the absence of democratic institutions, authoritarian and ineffective governance, a lack of development, and inadequate infrastructure have increased ethnic strife.⁵ As a result, the Sahel faces a slew of major difficulties for global policymakers, including unstable nations, poverty, refugees and migrants, transnational organized crime and jihadist insurgencies.⁶ This complexity of regionalized insecurity is exacerbated by the fact that, while

³ Peter Haggett, ed., *Encyclopedia of World Geography*, vol. 17 (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2002), 245.

⁴ James C. Dobson, John M. Sander, and Judith Woodfield, *Living Geography: Homework and Assessment*, Book 3 (Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes, 2001), 29.

⁵ Ernest T. Aniche, Inocent Moyo, and Christopher C. Nshimbi, "Interrogating the Nexus between Irregular Migration and Insecurity along 'Ungoverned' Border Spaces in West Africa," *African Security Review* 30, no. 3 (2021): 304–18, 310.

⁶ E. B. Onyekachi, "Trans-Border Migration and Network of Insurgency/Crime: Explaining the Spread of Boko Haram Insurgency in North East Nigeria, 2009–2015," *IDOSR Journal of Scientific Research* 3, no. 2 (2018): 56–76.

the Sahel nation-states constitute some of the poorest states in the world, they have an abundance of natural resources, including vast deposits of iron ore in Mauritania and uranium in Niger, as well as oil potential in Chad, Mauritania, and Niger.⁷ Revenue from natural resources is used for militarism and rent transfer among power clans, exacerbating marginalized communities' grievances and claims.⁸ Furthermore, the Sahel states' incapacity to effectively battle terrorism and drug trafficking justifies international intervention in the name of security, particularly from powers seeking to dominate the region's mineral resources.⁹ Due to these geopolitical realities, the issue of state stability and the desire to exploit resources in the Sahel has piqued the interest of several foreign entities, with France, a former colonial power, as one of the Sahel's most prominent protagonists.

In recent times, superpowers have exerted massive influence in the Sahel, bearing the semblance of imperialism. Imperialism involves colonialism, economic exploitation, cultural domination, and military and political control.¹⁰ Historical examples include the British Empire, the French Empire, the Spanish and Portuguese Empires, US expansionism and the Japanese Empire. The motivations behind imperialism are economic gains, political power, strategic advantage, cultural and racial superiority and religious missions. Imperialism comes with huge consequences, which include loss of sovereignty, cultural erasure, economic dependency, social inequality, resistance movements and long-term political and ethnic conflicts. The Sahel region of Africa is experiencing increasing geopolitical competition among global powers. This rivalry is fueled by the region's strategic location, abundant natural resources, and the presence of extremist groups.¹¹ The shift in alliances, with some Sahelian countries turning to Russia and China after perceived failures of Western counter-terrorism efforts, has further complicated the situation. The countries involved in the rivalry in the Sahel are China, France, Russia, Turkey, and the USA.

Strategic Significance of the Sahel

The Sahel's importance extends beyond regional boundaries. It is home to some of the

⁷ A. Itumo, H. Nwobashi, J. Nweke, and J. Igwe, "Cross-Border Migration and the Rising Waves of Terrorism in West Africa: The Example of Boko Haram in Nigeria," *South East Journal of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (2018): 299–317.; *the example of boko haram in Nigeria*". *South East J Polit Sci*. 2018;4(1):299–317.

⁸ G. L. Philemon, J. Manasseh, and M. Godiya, "Illegal Trans-Border Migration: Implication for Nigerian National Security," *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* 6, no. 4 (2019): 58–71.

⁹ Thomas Faist, "Cross-Border Migration and Social Inequalities," *Annual Review of Sociology* 42 (2016): 323–46.

¹⁰ Gary Wilson, "Five Key Features of Imperialism," *Struggle for Socialism*, August 16, 2023.

¹¹ Mohammed Ahmed Gain, "Conflicting agendas and strategic rivalry in the Sahel". *Middle East Institute*. November 16, 2021.

most active jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and ISIS, making it a hotspot in the global fight against terrorism. The region is also a key migration corridor for people seeking to reach Europe, raising concerns among European states about border security and humanitarian crises. Moreover, the Sahel holds significant reserves of gold, uranium, and other minerals, notably in countries like Niger and Mali. Its geostrategic location as a buffer between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa further heightens its geopolitical value.

Dominant powers in the Sahel

The dominant powers in the Sahel are China, France, Russia, Turkey and the USA.

China

China seems to dwell on economic and strategic engagement. China is less involved militarily but has a strong economic footprint. Unlike Russia and the U.S., China's engagement in the Sahel is primarily economic. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has invested heavily in infrastructure, mining, and trade across Africa, including in the Sahel. While it maintains a low military profile, China has contributed to peacekeeping missions and increasingly supplies arms to local militaries. Its policy of non-interference in domestic affairs has won favour with many governments, offering an attractive alternative to Western conditional aid.¹² As such, China is consolidating long-term influence through development rather than direct intervention. China is, however, growing security ties by increasing arms sales and bilateral security cooperation. China is keen on securing access to uranium, oil, and minerals.¹³

Significant economic investments in the manufacturing industries of the Sahel countries. To this end, the creation, two decades ago, of a mixed company between the Government of Mali and the Chinese Light Industry Company for Techno-Economic Cooperation with Abroad (SUKALAs) was set up, which is today one of the largest industrial companies in Mali and has generated more than 35 million dollars for the Malian State in taxes and duties. During the 1980s, China was strongly involved in the Sugar Complex of the Upper Kala (SUKALA), the Malian Textile Company (COMATEX), the Mali Tannery Company

¹² Cheick Diéna, "China's Foreign Policy in the Sahel: Challenges and Prospects," *Organization for Research on China and Asia*, 2022.

¹³ Cheick Diéna, "China's Foreign Policy in the Sahel: Challenges and Prospects," *Organization for Research on China and Asia*, 2022.

(TAMALI), the Malian Pharmaceutical Factory (UMPP), and the Popular Pharmacy of Mali (PPM), which were subject to this type of intervention. In Niger, the main areas of investment are energy (\$5.12 million), mining (\$620 million) and real estate (\$140 million). Other aspects of cooperation include the construction of stadiums and schools, medical missions, military cooperation, and infrastructure, including roads, bridges, rolling stock, and thermal power plants. On the military and security front, China generally contributes to UN peacekeeping operations, for example, in Mali as part of MINUSMA, where it deployed 403 peacekeepers. China pledged more than \$45 million to the G5-Sahel joint force in early 2019 and \$1.5 million for the operation of the permanent secretariat, in other cases, it allied with Russia to block some resolutions initiated by other UN Security Council members on Mali, in addition to the supply of several military equipment respectively to the countries of the G5-Sahel and more generally to those of the African Union.

France

France is the former colonial ruler of many Sahelian nations, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Senegal and has historically maintained significant influence in the region.¹⁴ Several socioeconomic and political issues have plagued the Sahel during the last three decades. These include widespread poverty, illiteracy, infrastructure, unemployment and drought.¹⁵ Furthermore, Salafi-jihadist organizations in the Sahel have matured into resilient geopolitical actors capable of projecting influence beyond geographic zones where violent extremism has become institutionalized. Militant groups have also learned to act as go-betweens between rival local communal factions, offering services such as public goods distribution, arbitration, and dispute resolution that central and/or local state actors do not provide. In Mali's Macina region, for example, numerous herder clans rely on terrorist organizations to restrict access to pasture.¹⁶ This has paved the way for the growth of illegal trafficking, including drugs, human trafficking, counterfeit goods, small arms and light weapons, and, more recently, the recruitment of young men by Salafi-jihadi extremist groups.

¹⁴ Ali Ahsan, "French Influence in the Sahel Region". *The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)*. September 14, 2023. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/al-ahsan/in-retreat-french-influence-in-the-sahel-region/s>

¹⁵ Christophe Châtelot, "How France Was Driven Out of the Sahel," *Le Monde*, September 5, 2023, <http://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article>.

¹⁶ A. B. Çonkar, "Development and Security Challenges in the Sahel Region," draft report, Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group (GSM), NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2020, 6.

The Sahel's post-colonial state compounds this.¹⁷

France acted militarily in response to Salafi-Jihadist extremist groups seeking to destabilize the Sahelian states' systems. To this end, Operation Barkhane was established in Mali. Operation Barkhane, however, failed due to the withdrawal of French soldiers following the 2021 Malian coup d'état.¹⁸ Similarly, a 2018 military accord between France and Burkina Faso led to the deployment of 400 French special forces soldiers for counter-terrorism operations aimed at combating armed groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.¹⁹ Also, in Niger, in the wake of the 2023 coup d'état, thousands of Nigeriens stormed the French embassy calling for an immediate intervention by the Wagner Group. On 25 August, the junta ordered French ambassador Sylvian Itté to leave the country within 48 hours. Paris adopted a policy of internationalizing the intervention from the start, claiming both global cooperation and French leadership. This helped share the burden and legitimize French involvement, as evidenced by the mobilization of the UN (MINUSMA) and the European Union (EUTM, EUCAP Sahel), alongside other bilateral European partners, most notably Germany.²⁰

Regrettably, France's political agenda remained uncertain until the end, giving the impression of a military thrust with no strategic purpose. Paris took a more measured and reluctant approach. Despite Paris declaring the Sahel a foreign policy priority, the five Sahel governments received only 10 per cent of total French development funding for Africa in 2018, with Mali receiving a paltry 2.5 per cent. This figure has remained consistent since 2013, highlighting the gap between declared political goals and the actual distribution of budgets.²¹ Toimi noted that France's Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane in Mali were more about revisiting colonial sentiment and reframing the sub-regional lands as micro-states. Nonetheless, the majority of the Malians were in favour of these interventions. Unfortunately, growing anti-French sentiment, fuelled by perceptions of neocolonialism and ineffective military strategies, has led to the expulsion of French troops from several countries. In Mali, French troops

¹⁷ Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*, vol. 13 (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012).

¹⁸ Paul Lorgetie, "Thousand take to the streets of Bamako in anti-French protest". 2022-02-05.

¹⁹ Boureima Balima and Felix Onuah, "West Africa Threatens Force on Niger Coup Leaders, French Embassy Attacked," July 31, 2023.

²⁰ Benedikt Erforth and Denis M. Tull, "The Failure of French Sahel Policy: An Opportunity for European Cooperation?," *Deutsch Megatrends Spotlight*, The German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), September 5, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/>

²¹ Benedikt Erforth and Denis M. Tull, "The Failure of French Sahel Policy: An Opportunity for European Cooperation?," *Deutsch Megatrends Spotlight*, The German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), September 5, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/>

completed their withdrawal on 15 August 2022; in Burkina Faso, in February 2023; in Niger, in December 2023; and in Chad, on 21 January 2025. Similarly, Senegal announced plans to end the French military presence of 350 troops on its territory in November 2024, making it the first democratically governed nation in the region to request French withdrawal. As France's influence diminishes, it faces increasing competition from non-Western powers eager to fill the void. The shift of Francophone African nations towards pursuing partnerships with non-Western powers, such as China, India, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, reflected the emergence of a multipolar world order in which military treaties and historical ties were becoming less significant in shaping international relations.²²

Russia

Russia has rapidly increased its presence in the Sahel primarily through security partnerships. Russia has also established strong ties with regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.²³ Russia has leveraged private military contractors like the Wagner Group, which has transitioned into more formal military engagements. In the process, Russia has taken advantage of political instability to exploit resources and support authoritarian regimes in consolidating their power. Russia utilizes propaganda campaigns that promote the narrative that Russia is supporting Africa's liberation from Western imperialism. Russia seeks to establish a Russian military base in the Red Sea and extract Sudan's gold. Russian engagement in Sudan has grown since the 1960s, with a hiatus in the 1970s during former President Jaafar Nimeiry's rule (1971–1985), when Moscow backed a failed military coup attempt against Nimeiry's regime.

The relationship between the two countries resumed in the 1990s. It tightened during the al-Bashir regime (1989–2019), with frequent diplomatic visits and the signing of bilateral agreements across various fields, including key military collaboration agreements in 2020.²⁴ Since 2012, the two countries have engaged in talks on Russia's support for the SAF's rehabilitation.²⁵ In addition, Russia has continuously supported the Government of Sudan in international forums. In 2008 and 2016, Russia rejected and withdrew its ratification to indict al-Bashir by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide in Darfur since 2005. The Khartoum–Moscow relationship reached its peak in 2017,

²² Catherine Nzuki, "The Cost of Paternalism: Sahelian Countries Push Back on the West," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, March 21, 2024.

²³ Salma Abdalla, "Emerging Stage for Great Power Competition: Russia's Influence in Sudan amid Political Turmoil," *Security in Context*, <https://www.securityincontext.org/posts/emerging->

²⁴ Mohamed Torshin, *Aljazeera Studies Center*. July 2023.
<https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/5409?>

²⁵ Esam Abd Al-Shafi, "Sudan: The Russian Base and the Limits of the Military Maneuver," *Al Jazeera Mubasher*, February 19, 2023, <https://www.aljazeeramubasher.net/opinion/2023/2/19/>.

when former President al-Bashir visited Russia, requesting Putin's protection from U.S. hostility and, in return, offering to make Sudan Russia's gateway to Africa (Associated Press). In return, al-Bashir rewarded the Wagner Group with an exceptional concession: mining rights in Sudan and permission for their planes to land and take off in the country without monitoring or inspection by Sudanese authorities. This privilege proved instrumental when the group's activities expanded into gold mining.²⁶ Following the ouster of al-Bashir in 2019, Russia backed the military generals against the civilians who were hostile towards Russia's influence in Sudan and aligned with the military component of the transitional government, including SAF and RSF. The generals on their side needed Russia's political, economic, and security support, which strengthened their control.²⁷ As a result, Russia joined China in blocking a draft of a UN Security Council resolution condemning the killing of civilians by the Sudanese military and calling on the international community for an immediate end to the violence against civilians in Sudan.

Russia established diplomatic relations with Mali on 14 October 1960 following Mali's independence on 7 July 1960. Following the collapse of the Mali Federation and in light of French support for Senegal, Modibo Kéita, Mali's first President, sought closer ties with the Soviet Union.²⁸ In 1961, the two countries signed trade and cultural pacts, and the Soviet Union granted Mali loans and other aid, including the acquisition of two Ilyushin Il-18 passenger aircraft for Air Mali.²⁹ Under the cultural agreement, Russia sent circus performers, sports coaches and a soccer team to Mali. When Moussa Traoré overthrew Kéita in a coup d'état in 1968, Traoré improved relations with France and other Western countries. Still, Mali remained dependent on the Soviet Union for the arming and training of its military. Approximately 50 Soviet military advisors provided armour, artillery and parachute training to Mali's military, and trained all of Mali's pilots.³⁰ The Soviets also improved the Malian Air Force base in Mopti and occasionally used Malian airfields to stage supply flights for groups it supported in Angola. In 2020, a coup d'état in Mali deposed President Ibrahim Boubacar

²⁶Ismail Mohamed Ali, "The Russian Wagner and the Gold of Sudan: A Mining Concession or Plundering," June 10, 2022, <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/340286/>.

²⁷ Declan Walsh, "From Russia with Love: A Putin Ally Mines Gold and Plays Favorites in Sudan," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/05/world/africa/wagner-russia-sudan-gold-putin.html>.

²⁸ R. James Bingen, David Robinson, and John M. Staatz, "From Military Dictatorship to Democracy," in *Democracy and Development in Mali*, ed. Andrew F. Clark (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000), 255–56.

²⁹ Ben R. Guttery, "Mali". *Encyclopedia of African airlines*. Ben Guttery. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1998), 120.

³⁰ U.S. Department of State, *National Intelligence Estimate: Soviet Military Policy in the Third World*, May 4, 2006.

Kéïta and replaced his government with a junta led by Colonel Assimi Goïta. Russian involvement in the coup has been speculated.³¹ The Malian government has increasingly allied with Russia since Goïta assumed direct control in 2021.³²

Mercenaries from the Russian private military company Wagner Group began arriving in Mali in late 2021, followed by donations of Russian military equipment and advisors throughout 2022 and 2023.³³ In November 2022, Minister of Economy and Finance Alousséni Sanou said Russia was committed to sending 60,000 tons of petroleum products, 30,000 tons of fertilizer and 25,000 tons of wheat, for a total worth of around \$100 million.³⁴ In February 2023, Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, met with Malian military junta leaders to ensure Russia's support for Mali against the Islamist insurgency in the Sahel (Le Cam). Russia has an embassy in Bamako, and Mali has an embassy in Moscow. The current Russian ambassador to Mali has been Igor Gromyko since 17 June 2019. The current Malian ambassador to Russia is Seydou Kamissoko, who was nominated on 24 May 2023. Russia's approach appeals to governments disillusioned with the West. Russia is therefore pursuing strategic expansion in the Sahel. Russia has adopted information warfare and has launched disinformation campaigns to undermine Western presence and gain public support. Its geopolitical goal is to counter Western dominance and expand its sphere of influence in a resource-rich, strategically located region.

The military government of Niger has strengthened security ties with Russia. Including support with Russian military instructors and an air defence system. The NGO "Ensemble Main dans la Main Niger-Russie" (Together Hand in Hand Niger-Russia) has made a large grant to the National Reference Centre for Obstetric Fistula in Niamey. The contribution, which includes drugs, food supplies, blankets, and vaccinations, is intended to improve care for women suffering from obstetric fistulas. This medical ailment disproportionately affects women in impoverished and neglected communities. These women frequently endure social exclusion and physical anguish as a result of insufficient prenatal care and a lack of access to urgent surgical interventions.³⁵

³¹Philip Obaji Jr., "How These Coup Plotters Staged a False Flag Pro-Russia March," *The Daily Beast*, June 2, 2021.

³² Siobhán O'Grady and Rachel Chason, "Mali cuts ties with Ukraine, claiming Kyiv's involvement in rebel attacks". *Washington Post*. 5 August 2024.

³³ Jason Burke and Emmanuel Akinwotu, "Russian Mercenaries Linked to Civilian Massacres in Mali," *The Guardian*, May 4, 2022.

³⁴Flore Monteau, "Russia-Africa Summit: Goïta and Traoré Show Support for Putin," *The Africa Report*, July 28, 2023.

³⁵ Chinedu Okafor, "Russia's friendship with Niger spurs aid to women with an abnormal reproductive disorder".

Russia's influence in Burkina Faso's relationship has increased, particularly since a 2022 coup that brought Captain Ibrahim Traoré to power. The country has increasingly turned to Russia for military support and cooperation, shifting away from its former ties with France. This shift is evident in the deployment of Russian military advisors and instructors, as well as increased engagement in the mining sector, particularly gold and uranium. Russian military advisors and personnel, some linked to the Wagner Group (now rebranded as Africa Corps), have been deployed to Burkina Faso to assist in training and fighting against jihadist groups. Burkina Faso is also reportedly receiving military equipment from Russia as part of this deepening cooperation. Burkina Faso's leadership has expressed a desire to learn from Russia's experience in combating terrorism and to acquire the technology and know-how necessary for developing its own defence capabilities. Russia has expanded its presence in Burkina Faso's mining sector, with agreements signed for cooperation in gold and uranium extraction. Burkina Faso has also signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with Russia, aiming to address its energy shortages by developing an electronuclear program. Burkina Faso and Russia have been actively strengthening their diplomatic ties, with the reopening of the Russian embassy in Ouagadougou after a long period of closure. The increasing Russian influence in the region raises concerns about potential regional instability and the exacerbation of existing conflicts. While Burkina Faso hopes to benefit from Russia's support in various sectors, there are also concerns that Russia could exploit the country's resources and further destabilize the region.

Turkey

Turkey's involvement in the Sahel region is multifaceted, encompassing development, trade, security cooperation, and humanitarian efforts. While Turkey emphasizes its role as a supportive partner in addressing regional challenges like terrorism and poverty, concerns exist regarding its potential military presence and alignment with certain political agendas. Turkey focuses on rising Muslim power, adopting a soft-power strategy through religious, educational, and humanitarian outreach. Turkey has also emerged as a growing player in the Sahel, pursuing a blend of soft and hard power. Through its development agency TİKA, Turkey has invested in education, healthcare, and religious infrastructure. Culturally and religiously aligned with many Sahelian societies, Ankara leverages shared Islamic identity to build trust. At the same time, it has expanded military cooperation by providing arms and training to several states. This dual strategy has allowed Turkey to steadily gain influence in a region where ideological affinity often intersects with strategic interest. The strategic goal of Turkey

is to position itself as a major Muslim power and counter Western and Gulf influence.

Turkey has deployed private military contractors to Niger, escalating its involvement in the Sahel region amid the fragile security dynamics in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Turkey also has opportunities to increase economic and military cooperation with Burkina Faso and Mali. Still, Russia's larger presence in both countries will pose a greater obstacle," wrote Liam Karr, an analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, earlier this year. Similarly, Sadat International Defence Consultancy, a Turkish private military company with close ties to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has reportedly sent 1,100 fighters, mainly recruited from Syrian refugee camps. They are stationed in the Liptako-Gourma region, a hotspot for extremist violence. Turkish officials claim the deployment aims to safeguard economic interests, including mining operations, though reports suggest mercenaries are also engaging in combat. Turkey's deepening involvement in Niger follows its strengthened post-coup ties with the country, which included the delivery of Bayraktar TB2 drones in 2022. However, Ankara's ambitions to extend its influence to Burkina Faso and Mali face substantial hurdles due to Moscow's entrenched position in these countries.

United States

The US influence in the Sahel is more prominent in Niger. The US deployed special operations forces and unmanned aerial vehicles at Agadez in 2014 in support of the Nigerian government and French military in counter-terrorism operations against militant groups in Niger as part of Operation Juniper Shield. The U.S. deployed drones from the Air Force and CIA to assist American and Nigerien forces in counter-terrorism operations, monitor routes used by militants in Niger into neighbouring nations, and assist operations in Libya.³⁶ The air base has a 6,800-foot runway and cost approximately \$110 million to complete. The base allowed U.S. drones to fly missions over the region and maintained the ability to accommodate large transport aircraft such as the C-17 Globemaster. The deployment of US troops in Niger had been largely unreported until the 2017 Tongo Tongo ambush by Islamic State in the Greater Sahara militants, which left four American and four Nigerien soldiers dead.³⁷ The ambush created controversy in the public and media, with many people

³⁶ Declan Walsh, "From Russia with Love: A Putin Ally Mines Gold and Plays Favorites in Sudan," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/05/world/africa/wagner-russia-sudan-gold-putin.html>.

³⁷ Sisk Richard, "How They Fell: Army Team 'Fought to the End' in Niger Ambush," *Military.com*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.military.com/>.

asking why the US had so many troops across Africa and specifically Niger, which at the time had more than 800 US personnel in the country. In July 2023, the Nigerian coup d'état occurred, and the US pulled out all 1,000 US troops from the country on 5 August 2024. After 11 years of US military presence, Jihadi groups linked to Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State group and Boko Haram remained active with numerous attacks and dozens killed in Niger in 2023 and 2024.³⁸ U.S. efforts are challenged not only by strategic setbacks but also by competition from Russia and China, which are offering alternative partnerships. The US intends to shift strategy by recalibrating its approach in response to growing instability, coups, and increasing hostility from transitional governments. On the diplomatic front, the US focuses on promoting stability, governance, and humanitarian aid.

Implications of the French withdrawal in the Sahel

The French retreat from the Sahel has far-reaching consequences. The French withdrawal from the Sahel has created a security vacuum, leading to increased instability and opportunities for extremist groups, while also prompting a re-evaluation of regional partnerships and a shift in foreign influence. This withdrawal has exposed governance issues in Sahelian countries, including corruption and weak institutions, which the departure of French forces has exacerbated. The withdrawal marks a significant decline in French influence in the Sahel, challenging the traditional dependency model and prompting a re-evaluation of partnerships with other nations. Some Sahelian nations are using the withdrawal as an opportunity to assert greater sovereignty and redefine their relationships with France and other international actors. The withdrawal has also raised questions about the future of French economic interests in the region and the potential for new economic partnerships with other global actors. Overall, the French withdrawal from the Sahel has created a complex and fluid situation with significant implications for regional security, political dynamics, and humanitarian conditions. The long-term consequences of this withdrawal remain uncertain, but it is clear that the region is undergoing significant transformation and realignment. The military leadership in Mali, Niger and Chad lack legitimacy and a solid structure and may not stand the test of time. The situation has also led to a rise in Russian influence, with Wagner mercenaries and other actors stepping in to fill the void, thus raising concerns about a shift in regional

³⁸ Annika Lichtenbaum, "US Military Operational Activity in the Sahel". *Terrorism and Extremism*. January 25 2019, URL

dynamics and potential human rights abuses.

The withdrawal has created a security vacuum, emboldening extremist groups like JNIM and ISGS to expand their operations and attack civilians, government officials, and security forces, thereby increasing instability. While some governments in the Sahel have sought Russian support for counter-insurgency operations, the effectiveness of these efforts remains debated, as Russia's interests are skewed toward resource exploitation and there are concerns that the situation may be further destabilized. The instability in the Sahel has the potential to spill over into neighbouring countries, impacting migration patterns and potentially exacerbating existing security concerns in West Africa and beyond. The ongoing conflict and instability have led to a worsening humanitarian crisis, with increased displacement and food insecurity in the region.

Salafi-Jihadist extremist organizations have discovered new leeway for manoeuvre and more armaments, fomenting and exploiting sectarian and ethnic conflicts in countries that are multi-ethnic and multi-faith due to their often artificial colonial origins. The political earthquake that struck the Mediterranean's southern coasts is certain to have repercussions in another critical region, particularly the Horn of Africa.³⁹ Insecurity and instability in East Africa, both on land and at sea, have the potential to spill over into the Red Sea, where Egypt, preoccupied with the enormous challenges of its political transition, may be unable to handle them.⁴⁰

Another geostrategic result will be increased geopolitical tensions between Great Powers and countries such as Algeria. Algeria's influence in the Sahel region is expected to rise in the coming years. This is because Algeria believes that the Sahel is not only necessary for national security but also that Algeria is the natural leader in the region.⁴¹ Algeria, unwilling to allow foreign meddling in the region, has taken several actions to limit the influence of outside parties (Pinto). However, because Algeria does not oppose international collaboration, close ties between Algiers and other actors such as the United States are likely.

³⁹ Riccardo Alcaro and Nicoletta Pirozzi, eds., *Transatlantic Security from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa*, vol. 12 (Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2014).

⁴⁰ Ismail Mohamed Ali, "The Russian Wagner and the Gold of Sudan: A Mining Concession or Plundering," June 10, 2022, <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/340286/>.

⁴¹ Marc Pellerin, "Geopolitical Disruptions in the Sahel: An Opportunity for Global Cooperation," in *Transatlantic Security from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa*, ed. Riccardo Alcaro and Nicoletta Pirozzi, vol. 12 (Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2014), 71.

Beijing will increase its strategic footprint in the region. China's 'Going Out' and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) programs will most likely engage the Sahel. As a result, China is likely to increase its economic and political presence in the Sahel.⁴² China will coordinate its state-financed financing and construction activities with the African Union's flagship Program Infrastructure Development for Africa (PIDA) to achieve this. Transportation advancements will aid in the extraction of oil, uranium, and lithium. Beijing will gradually boost its military presence in the region to protect its citizens, project the image of a responsible Great Power, and gain combat experience in the Sahel environment.

France's withdrawal from the Sahel would negatively impact counter-terrorism operations in the region. France funds the G5 Sahel and contributes to the Multi-National Task Force. France is involved in training Nigerien soldiers and flying reconnaissance and attack drones in the region, actively attacking militants.⁴³ France's decision to withdraw from the Sahel would therefore deal a devastating blow to counterterrorism efforts in the region.

Implications of the Geopolitical Struggle

The growing involvement of external powers in the Sahel risks turning the region into a new theatre of global rivalry, reminiscent of Cold War proxy conflicts. Shifting alliances, such as the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, reflect a desire for self-determination but also highlight political fragmentation. Furthermore, the dominance of militarized approaches often promoted by external powers over political solutions and economic development perpetuates cycles of instability. If the needs of local populations are not addressed, foreign interventions may ultimately exacerbate, rather than resolve, the region's challenges.

The shift towards Russia and China has led to the departure of Western military forces and a decrease in Western-led development initiatives. The rivalry among external powers can exacerbate existing conflicts and hinder regional cooperation in addressing the root causes of instability, such as poverty, climate change, and extremism. The situation is capable of redrawing the geopolitical map of the Sahel, as it becomes a battleground for competing

⁴² Kari M. Osland and Håvard Urdal Erstad, "The Fragility Dilemma and Divergent Security Complexes in the Sahel," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (2020): 18–36. *International Spectator*, 2020. 55(4), 18-36.

⁴³ A. B. Çonkar, *Development and Security Challenges in the Sahel Region*, draft report, Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group (GSM), NATO Parliamentary Assembly (Brussels: NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2020), 6.

geopolitical agendas, with regional powers and global actors reshaping the region's political and economic landscape. The competition for natural resources, including minerals and energy, is intensifying, potentially leading to further exploitation and environmental degradation.

Conclusion

The rivalry between dominant powers in the Sahel has the trappings of new imperialism that could degenerate into a cold war. The geolocation of the Sahel, which is the southern fringes of the Sahara Desert with little rainfall, is a recipe for drought, a situation which exacerbates the fragile sociopolitical landscape. The characteristic absence of strong democratic institutions, authoritarian and ineffective governance, a lack of development, and inadequate infrastructure have increased ethnic strife. Nevertheless, although the Sahel states are among the poorest in the world, they have abundant natural resources. The Sahel states' incapacity to effectively battle terrorism and drug trafficking justifies international intervention in the name of security, particularly from powers seeking to dominate the region's mineral resources. In recent times, superpowers have exerted massive influence in the Sahel that has the semblance of imperialism. The Sahel region of Africa is experiencing increasing geopolitical competition among global powers. Some of the reasons for the increased interest by foreign powers in the Sahel are that it is a hotspot for terrorism and a key migration corridor.

The dominant players in the Sahel are China, France, Russia, Turkey and the USA. These countries have just led in influence through various means. While China exerts its influence through economic and strategic engagement, France, a former colonial ruler in most Sahelian countries, is losing influence due to being expelled by emerging military leadership in Mali, Niger and Chad. The French withdrawal from the Sahel has created a security vacuum, leading to increased instability and opportunities for extremist groups, while also prompting a re-evaluation of regional partnerships and a shift in foreign influence. France's withdrawal from the Sahel would negatively impact counter-terrorism operations in the region. Furthermore, the situation has led to a rise in Russian influence, with Wagner mercenaries and other actors stepping in to fill the void, thus raising concerns about a shift in regional dynamics and potential human rights abuses. Russia, which adopts military support by deploying military contractors, also eyes mineral resources.

While Turkey emphasizes its role as a supportive partner in addressing regional challenges like terrorism and poverty, concerns exist regarding its potential military presence and alignment with certain political agendas. Turkey focuses on rising Muslim power, adopting a soft-power strategy through religious, educational, and humanitarian outreach. The

US has at various times offered military support to Niger. The rivalry among external powers can exacerbate existing conflicts and hinder regional cooperation in addressing the root causes of instability, such as poverty, climate change, and extremism. The growing involvement of external powers in the Sahel risks turning the region into a new theatre of global rivalry, reminiscent of Cold War proxy conflicts.

From the foregoing, this paper recommends that the international community should adopt a comprehensive approach that addresses security, economic development, governance, and community resilience needed to foster long-term stability in the Sahel. Sahel countries must empower local and national institutions to promote good governance and ensure the effective delivery of services. Revitalized regional cooperation among Sahelian countries is vital to addressing the challenges they face.

Bibliography

- Abd Al-Shafi, Esam. "Sudan: The Russian Base and the Limits of the Military Maneuver." *Al Jazeera Mubasher*. February 19, 2023. <https://www.aljazeeramubasher.net/opinion/2023/2/19/>.
- Abdalla, Salma. "Emerging Stage for Great Power Competition: Russia's Influence in Sudan amid Political Turmoil." *Security in Context*. Accessed July 5, 2026. <https://www.securityincontext.org/posts/emerging->.
- Ahsan, Ali. "French Influence in the Sahel Region." *Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)*. September 14, 2023. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/al-ahsan/in-retreat-french-influence-in-the-sahel-region/>.
- Alcaro, Riccardo, and Nicoletta Pirozzi, eds. *Transatlantic Security from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa*. Vol. 12. Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2014.
- Ali, Ismail Mohamed. "The Russian Wagner and the Gold of Sudan: A Mining Concession or Plundering." June 10, 2022. <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/340286/>.
- Aniche, Ernest T., Innocent Moyo, and Christopher C. Nshimbi. "Interrogating the Nexus between Irregular Migration and Insecurity along 'Ungoverned' Border Spaces in West Africa." *African Security Review* 30, no. 3 (2021): 304–318.
- Associated Press. "Sudan's President Visits Russia, Asks for Protection from US." *Voice of America*. November 23, 2017. <https://www.voanews.com/a/sudan-president-visits-russia-asks-for-prote>
- Balima, Boureima, and Felix Onuah. "West Africa Threatens Force on Niger Coup Leaders, French Embassy Attacked." July 31, 2023.
- Bingen, R. James, David Robinson, and John M. Staatz. "From Military Dictatorship to Democracy." In *Democracy and Development in Mali*, edited by Andrew F. Clark, 255–56. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000.
- bne IntelliNews*. "Turkey Expands Sahel Presence with Mercenaries in Niger." December 18, 2024.
- Burke, Jason, and Emmanuel Akinwotu. "Russian Mercenaries Linked to Civilian Massacres in Mali." *The Guardian*. May 4, 2022.
- Châtelot, Christophe. "How France Was Driven Out of the Sahel." *Le Monde*. September 5, 2023. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article>.

Cheick, Diéna. "China's Foreign Policy in the Sahel: Challenges and Prospects." *Organization for Research on China and Asia*, 2022.

Çonkar, A. B. *Development and Security Challenges in the Sahel Region*. Draft report. Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group (GSM). Brussels: NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2020.

Dalby, Simon, and Gearóid Ó Tuathail. *Rethinking Geopolitics*. London: Routledge, 2002.
U.S. Department of State. *National Intelligence Estimate: Soviet Military Policy in the Third World*. May 4, 2006.

Dobson, James C., John M. Sander, and Judith Woodfield. *Living Geography: Homework and Assessment*. Book 3. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes, 2001.

Erforth, Benedikt, and Denis M. Tull. "The Failure of French Sahel Policy: An Opportunity for European Cooperation?" *Deutsch Megatrends Spotlight*. The German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). September 5, 2022. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/>.

Faist, Thomas. "Cross-Border Migration and Social Inequalities." *Annual Review of Sociology* 42 (2016): 323–46.

Gain, Mohammed Ahmed. "Conflicting Agendas and Strategic Rivalry in the Sahel." *Middle East Institute*. November 16, 2021. <https://www.mei.edu/topic/israel>.

Itumo, A., H. Nwobashi, J. Nweke, and J. Igwe. "Cross-Border Migration and the Rising Waves of Terrorism in West Africa: The Example of Boko Haram in Nigeria." *South East Journal of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (2018): 299–317.

Lacher, Wolfram. *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*. Vol. 13. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012.

Le Cam, Morgane. "US Says Russia's Wagner Tried to Use Mali to Arm Itself in Ukraine." *Le Monde*. May 27, 2023.

Lichtenbaum, Annika. "US Military Operational Activity in the Sahel." *Terrorism and Extremism*. January 25, 2019.

Lorgerie, Paul. "Thousands Take to the Streets of Bamako in Anti-French Protest." February 5, 2022.

Millin, Gertrude S. *Rhodes*. London: Faber & Faber, 1933.

Guttery, Ben R. "Mali." In *Encyclopedia of African Airlines*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1998.

Haggett, Peter, ed. *Encyclopedia of World Geography*. Vol. 17. New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2000.

Monteau, Flore. "Russia-Africa summit: Goita and Traore show support for Putin". *The Africa Report*. 28 July 2023.

Nzuki, Catherine. "The Cost of Paternalism: Sahelian Countries Push Back on the West." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. March 21, 2024.

Obaji, Philip Jr. "Russia Trained the Militants Who Just Seized Power in Mali." *The Daily Beast*. August 21, 2020.

Obaji, Philip Jr. "How These Coup Plotters Staged a False Flag Pro-Russia March." *The Daily Beast*. June 2, 2021.

O'Grady, Siobhán, and Rachel Chason. "Mali Cuts Ties with Ukraine, Claiming Kyiv's Involvement in Rebel Attacks." *The Washington Post*. August 5, 2024.

Okafor, Chinedu. "Russia's Friendship with Niger Spurs Aid to Women with an Abnormal Reproductive Disorder." April 17, 2025.

Onyekachi, E. B. "Trans-Border Migration and Network of Insurgency/Crime: Explaining the Spread of Boko Haram Insurgency in North East Nigeria, 2009–2015." *IDOSR Journal of Scientific Research* 3, no. 2 (2018): 56–76.

Osland, Kari M., and Håvard U. Erstad. "The Fragility Dilemma and Divergent Security Complexes in the Sahel." *The International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (2020): 18–36.

Pellerin, Marc. "Geopolitical Disruptions in the Sahel: An Opportunity for Global Cooperation." In *Transatlantic Security from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa*, edited by Riccardo Alcaro and Nicoletta Pirozzi, 71. Vol. 12. Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2014.

Philemon, G. L., J. Manasseh, and M. Godiya. "Illegal Trans-Border Migration: Implications for Nigerian National Security." *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* 6, no. 4 (2019): 58–71.

Pinto, Teresa Nogueira. "The Sahel Trilemma," *GIS Reports Online*. April 28, 2022.
<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/sahel-trilemma/>.

Schmitt, Eric. "Pentagon Hands Over Last Base in Niger as Extremism Spreads in the Sahel." *The New York Times*. August 5, 2024.

Sisk, Richard. "How They Fell: Army Team 'Fought to the End' in Niger Ambush." *Military.com*. May 11, 2018.

Torshin, Mohamed. "Russia's Role in Sudan." *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*. July 2023.
<https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/5409>.

Torshin, Mohamed. "Russia's Role in Sudan." *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*. July 3, 2022.

Toumi, Abdennour. "France's Struggle for Influence in the African Sahel." *Daily Sabah*. August 28, 2023.

Walsh, Declan. "From Russia with Love: A Putin Ally Mines Gold and Plays Favorites in Sudan." *The New York Times*. June 5, 2022.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/05/world/africa/wagner-russia-sudan-gold-putin.html>.

Wilson, Gary. "Five Key Features of Imperialism." *Struggle for Socialism*. August 16, 2023.