

# Shifting Alliances: The role of non-regional powers in sahel security after ECOWAS departures

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## Abstract

The security landscape of the Sahel region is undergoing a profound transformation following the withdrawal of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) from several member states. This shift has created a power vacuum, prompting non-regional actors—most notably Russia, France, and China—to redefine their roles in regional stability and governance. These external powers leverage military, economic, and diplomatic strategies to secure influence, often pursuing competing agendas that reshape security dynamics and political alignments in the region. Russia has expanded its footprint through military cooperation and security agreements, capitalizing on rising anti-Western sentiments and disillusionment with traditional partners. The Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary force, has played an increasing role in counterterrorism operations and regime protection, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso. Meanwhile, France, historically entrenched in the Sahel through Operation Barkhane and bilateral security agreements, faces diminishing influence as local governments pivot toward alternative partnerships. French disengagement has sparked new geopolitical realignments, with some states actively seeking security support beyond their former colonial ties. China's involvement, while less overtly military, focuses on economic statecraft and infrastructure investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through financial aid, arms sales, and economic diplomacy, China seeks to maintain strategic relationships while avoiding direct military entanglement. As competition among these actors intensifies, the Sahel's security trajectory remains uncertain, with implications for regional stability, counterterrorism efforts, and governance. This study examines the evolving role of non-regional powers in Sahel security post-ECOWAS, analyzing their strategic interests, engagement tactics, and the broader geopolitical consequences of their involvement.

**Keywords:** Sahel security; ECOWAS withdrawal; Russia in Africa; France-Africa relations; China's influence; Geopolitical realignment

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Overview of the Sahel's Security Landscape

The Sahel region, stretching from Senegal to Chad, has emerged as one of the most volatile regions globally due to a combination of political instability, terrorism, and climate change. The rise of extremist groups such as Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has exacerbated regional insecurity, leading to large-scale displacement and humanitarian crises (International Crisis Group, 2022). Additionally, weak governance, economic fragility, and ethnic conflicts have fueled instability, creating a security vacuum that non-state armed groups have exploited (Thurston, 2020).

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Climate change further compounds the Sahel's instability by intensifying resource competition among communities. Desertification and erratic rainfall patterns have led to conflicts between farmers and pastoralists, particularly in countries such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (UNDP, 2021). The proliferation of small arms and porous borders also contribute to the ease with which militant groups operate, undermining state authority and law enforcement capabilities (Okeke, 2018).

## 1.2. The Historical Role of ECOWAS in Regional Stability

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has played a crucial role in stabilizing the Sahel and West Africa since its formation in 1975. Through diplomatic mediation, economic integration, and military interventions, ECOWAS has sought to promote peace and security in the region. One of its landmark interventions was the establishment of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), which played a critical role in resolving civil conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s (Adebajo, 2002).

More recently, ECOWAS has been instrumental in countering military coups and unconstitutional changes of government in countries like Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. It has imposed sanctions, facilitated diplomatic dialogues, and coordinated military responses to prevent the collapse of democratic governance (Sanda, 2023). However, challenges such as financial constraints, political divisions among member states, and the growing influence of external actors like Russia and China have limited its effectiveness. The withdrawal of ECOWAS from the Sahel would significantly alter the region's security architecture, leaving a power vacuum that could be exploited by militant groups and non-Western geopolitical players.

## 1.3. Rationale and Research Significance

### 1.3.1. *Why the Sahel Matters in Global Security*

The Sahel is strategically significant due to its geographic position, acting as a buffer between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. The region is a key transit point for illicit trafficking, including arms, drugs, and human smuggling, which has global security implications (Kemp & Shaw, 2022). Terrorist networks operating in the Sahel have transnational links, with groups such as AQIM and ISGS collaborating with jihadist organizations in the Middle East and North Africa, raising concerns about the global spread of terrorism (Mahmoud, 2021).

Additionally, migration flows from the Sahel to Europe have been a major policy concern. Unstable conditions in Mali, Niger, and Chad have driven thousands of people to embark on perilous journeys through Libya and the Mediterranean, exacerbating Europe's migration crisis (Idrissa, 2019). As such, maintaining stability in the Sahel is a priority for international actors, including the European Union, the African Union, and the United Nations.

### 1.3.2. *The Consequences of ECOWAS's Withdrawal*

ECOWAS's withdrawal from the Sahel would have profound security, economic, and geopolitical consequences. Firstly, it would embolden extremist groups, leading to a surge in terrorist activities and further destabilizing already fragile states. The absence of ECOWAS-led mediation efforts could result in prolonged political crises, making conflict resolution more difficult (Sanda, 2023).

Economically, the withdrawal of ECOWAS could weaken regional trade and economic cooperation, particularly through the disruption of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS). Countries that rely on ECOWAS-backed financial and security assistance may struggle to cope with economic downturns, potentially exacerbating poverty and inequality (Onuoha, 2020).

Geopolitically, ECOWAS's withdrawal could create opportunities for external actors to increase their influence in the region. Russia, through the Wagner Group, has already established a presence in Mali, while China's Belt and Road Initiative has strengthened its economic foothold in the region (Zoubir, 2022). The diminishing role of ECOWAS could lead to a shift in alliances, with Sahelian states turning to non-Western partners for security and economic support.

## 1.4. Objectives and Scope

### 1.4.1. *Key Questions and Research Focus*

This study aims to analyze the impact of ECOWAS's withdrawal on the security, economic, and geopolitical dynamics of the Sahel. The key research questions include:

- How has ECOWAS contributed to stability in the Sahel?
- What are the security consequences of ECOWAS's withdrawal for the region?
- How will the economic landscape of the Sahel be affected by ECOWAS's disengagement?
- What are the geopolitical implications of ECOWAS's withdrawal for international actors?

By addressing these questions, the research will provide an in-depth understanding of the evolving security landscape in the Sahel and offer policy recommendations for mitigating the risks associated with ECOWAS's withdrawal.

#### *1.4.2. Scope of the Study*

The study will focus on the security, economic, and geopolitical dimensions of ECOWAS's withdrawal from the Sahel. The security aspect will examine the rise of terrorism, border security challenges, and the role of international security partnerships. The economic dimension will analyze trade disruptions, financial stability, and the impact on regional development programs. The geopolitical aspect will assess the role of global powers such as the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union in shaping the Sahel's future.

By providing a comprehensive analysis, this research aims to contribute to scholarly discourse on regional security in West Africa and inform policymakers on strategies to maintain stability in the Sahel.

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## **2. The Sahel security crisis and the Ecowas withdrawal**

### **2.1. Security Challenges in the Sahel**

#### *2.1.1. Rising Insurgency and Extremist Threats*

The Sahel region has become a focal point for extremist groups, with organizations such as Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) exploiting governance vacuums and weak state institutions to expand their influence. Since 2012, jihadist violence has escalated, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, leading to thousands of civilian and military casualties (Thurston, 2020). The spread of violent extremism is fueled by ideological radicalization, economic deprivation, and intercommunal tensions (International Crisis Group, 2022). Many terrorist factions have successfully recruited disenfranchised youths who perceive the state as corrupt or incapable of addressing their socio-economic grievances (Mahmoud, 2021).

The operational strategies of these insurgent groups include ambushes, targeted assassinations, and large-scale attacks on security forces. Their ability to operate across porous borders makes counterterrorism efforts difficult, necessitating regional cooperation (Okeke, 2018). The rise of private military contractors, such as the Wagner Group in Mali, suggests that local governments are increasingly turning to alternative security providers in the absence of effective regional mechanisms (Zoubir, 2022).

#### *2.1.2. Political Instability and Governance Failures*

Political instability has been a persistent challenge in the Sahel, characterized by frequent coups, contested elections, and weak democratic institutions. Since 2020, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea have all experienced military takeovers, leading to the suspension of democratic governance and raising concerns over the region's long-term stability (Sanda, 2023). These power shifts have further complicated security cooperation, as transitional governments often face legitimacy crises and international sanctions.

Weak governance structures have also facilitated corruption and the misallocation of security funds, undermining efforts to combat insurgency (Onuoha, 2020). Local security forces are often underfunded, poorly trained, and ill-equipped to deal with the growing insurgent threat. The lack of coordinated counterterrorism efforts has led to a situation where security vacuums persist, allowing extremist groups to gain territorial control (UNDP, 2021).

#### *2.1.3. Economic and Humanitarian Crises*

The security challenges in the Sahel are exacerbated by economic underdevelopment and humanitarian crises. The region has some of the highest poverty rates in the world, with limited access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and clean water (Kemp & Shaw, 2022). Persistent food insecurity, driven by climate change and desertification, has intensified competition for scarce resources, leading to violent conflicts between farmers and pastoralists (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Displacement is another major issue, with millions of people forced to flee their homes due to violence. The United Nations estimates that over 4.8 million people are internally displaced in the Sahel, with many seeking refuge in overcrowded camps with inadequate humanitarian assistance (UNDP, 2021). The inability of regional governments to address these economic and humanitarian crises has contributed to widespread dissatisfaction and facilitated insurgent recruitment.

## **2.2. The Role of ECOWAS in Sahel Security Before Departure**

### *2.2.1. Military and Diplomatic Interventions*

ECOWAS has historically played a critical role in stabilizing West Africa through both military and diplomatic interventions. One of its most notable security initiatives was the establishment of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in the 1990s, which successfully intervened in civil conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone (Adebajo, 2002). More recently, ECOWAS deployed troops to Mali following the 2012 coup, working alongside international partners such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the French-led Operation Barkhane (Mahmoud, 2021).

In addition to military operations, ECOWAS has acted as a mediator in political crises, facilitating dialogue between governments and opposition groups to prevent conflicts from escalating (Sanda, 2023). The organization has imposed sanctions on juntas that have seized power through unconstitutional means, demonstrating its commitment to upholding democratic governance.

### *2.2.2. Effectiveness of ECOWAS-Led Stabilization Efforts*

While ECOWAS interventions have contributed to short-term stability in some cases, their long-term effectiveness remains debatable. In Mali, for instance, ECOWAS's initial deployment helped restore constitutional order, but insurgent activities have continued to escalate (International Crisis Group, 2022). In Burkina Faso and Niger, political instability has weakened security cooperation, making it difficult for ECOWAS-led initiatives to yield sustainable results (Thurston, 2020).

ECOWAS has also struggled with financial and logistical constraints, limiting its ability to deploy and sustain peacekeeping missions. The reliance on external funding from partners such as the European Union and the United Nations has often delayed response times and reduced the scope of interventions (Zoubir, 2022).

### *2.2.3. Challenges Leading to ECOWAS's Diminishing Influence*

Several factors have contributed to the diminishing influence of ECOWAS in the Sahel. One major challenge is the growing disillusionment among member states regarding the organization's effectiveness. Countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso have accused ECOWAS of being biased and ineffective in addressing security challenges, leading to strained relations (Sanda, 2023).

The rise of alternative security arrangements, including partnerships with Russia and China, has also weakened ECOWAS's position. The withdrawal of French and international forces from Mali, coupled with the increased reliance on Russian mercenaries, signals a shift in security alliances (Zoubir, 2022). Additionally, domestic political instability within ECOWAS member states has made it difficult for the organization to maintain a unified approach to regional security.

## **2.3. Consequences of ECOWAS Withdrawal**

### *2.3.1. Immediate Security Vacuum*

ECOWAS's withdrawal from the Sahel is expected to create a significant security vacuum, further emboldening extremist groups. Without coordinated regional security efforts, insurgents are likely to expand their territorial control, posing a direct threat to state sovereignty and civilian populations (Okeke, 2018). The weakening of joint counterterrorism initiatives could also lead to an increase in cross-border attacks and the proliferation of small arms, exacerbating instability (Mahmoud, 2021).

### *2.3.2. Political Realignments in Affected States*

In the absence of ECOWAS's influence, affected states may seek alternative security partnerships. The increasing engagement of Russia in Mali, through the Wagner Group, indicates a shift away from Western-backed security

arrangements (Zoubir, 2022). Similarly, China's economic interests in the region may lead to deeper security cooperation, reshaping the geopolitical landscape of the Sahel (Kemp & Shaw, 2022).

Furthermore, the withdrawal of ECOWAS could reduce the leverage of democratic institutions in the region. Military juntas in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso may feel less pressure to transition back to civilian rule, prolonging political instability and undermining democratic governance (Sanda, 2023).

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### **3. Russia's strategic influence in the Sahel**

#### **3.1. Russia's Security Engagement and Military Cooperation**

##### *3.1.1. Deployment of Wagner Group Mercenaries*

Russia has significantly increased its security footprint in the Sahel, primarily through the deployment of Wagner Group mercenaries. Wagner, a private military company with close ties to the Kremlin, has been active in Mali since 2021, providing security services to the Malian junta in exchange for access to natural resources (Zoubir, 2022). The group has been accused of committing human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings and torture, particularly in central Mali (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Despite these allegations, the Malian government has continued to rely on Wagner forces, citing their effectiveness in countering insurgents and reducing reliance on Western military support (Mahmoud, 2022).

The influence of Wagner is also growing in Burkina Faso and Niger, where leaders have expressed interest in deepening security cooperation with Russia following ECOWAS's declining role (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). These mercenaries are not only engaged in direct combat operations but also in intelligence gathering, military advisory roles, and disinformation campaigns aimed at weakening pro-Western sentiments in the region (International Crisis Group, 2023).

##### *3.1.2. Arms Deals and Military Training Programs*

Beyond mercenary deployments, Russia has expanded its arms sales and military training programs in the Sahel. Moscow has signed defense agreements with several Sahelian states, supplying small arms, armored vehicles, and advanced weaponry (Sanda, 2023). Mali, in particular, has received Russian Mi-35 attack helicopters, drones, and air defense systems as part of a broader effort to modernize its armed forces (Thurston, 2022).

Training programs for Sahelian military personnel have also increased, with hundreds of officers from Mali and Burkina Faso undergoing instruction in Russia. These training sessions focus on counterterrorism, cyber warfare, and intelligence operations, aimed at strengthening local military capabilities (Okeke, 2022). This shift signals a growing dependence on Russia for military logistics and expertise, further reducing the influence of Western-backed training programs previously led by France and the United States (Zoubir, 2022).

##### *3.1.3. Expansion of Russian Military Bases*

Russia has been negotiating the establishment of military bases in the Sahel, a move that aligns with its broader strategic interests in Africa. Reports suggest that discussions are underway to construct bases in Mali and Burkina Faso, providing Russia with a permanent security presence in West Africa (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). These bases would enable Moscow to project power, protect its economic interests, and counterbalance Western influence in the region (International Crisis Group, 2023).

#### **3.2. Political and Diplomatic Maneuvering**

##### *3.2.1. Support for Military-Led Governments*

Russia's engagement in the Sahel extends beyond military cooperation; it has also provided diplomatic backing to military-led governments. Following the coups in Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), Russia has offered political support to the ruling juntas, advocating for their legitimacy on the international stage (Sanda, 2023). Unlike ECOWAS and Western nations, which imposed sanctions on these regimes, Moscow has positioned itself as an ally willing to engage without demanding democratic transitions (Zoubir, 2022).

Russian diplomats have actively lobbied at the United Nations against punitive measures targeting these military governments, arguing that Western interventions have failed to stabilize the region (Mahmoud, 2022). This diplomatic

maneuvering has allowed Russia to strengthen ties with Sahelian leaders, further diminishing the influence of traditional Western partners (Thurston, 2022).

### *3.2.2. Anti-Western Rhetoric and Strategic Partnerships*

Moscow has capitalized on anti-Western sentiments in the Sahel, promoting narratives that portray France, the U.S., and the EU as neocolonial actors exploiting African resources (International Crisis Group, 2023). Russian state-sponsored media, such as RT and Sputnik, have played a significant role in shaping public opinion, often blaming Western countries for the region's insecurity and underdevelopment (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).

This rhetoric has found fertile ground in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where mass protests have erupted against French military presence. As a result, several Sahelian governments have severed defense agreements with France while strengthening security ties with Russia (Okeke, 2022). This shift is evident in the expulsion of French troops from Mali and Burkina Faso, replaced by Russian security contractors and military advisors (Zoubir, 2022).

### *3.2.3. Influence in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger*

Russia's influence in the Sahel has been particularly pronounced in Mali, where it has become the government's primary security partner following the withdrawal of French and UN peacekeeping forces (Thurston, 2022). In Burkina Faso, the government has also signaled its willingness to deepen ties with Moscow, as demonstrated by recent high-level visits by Burkinabé officials to Russia (Sanda, 2023).

Niger, while historically aligned with Western security initiatives, has experienced growing pro-Russian sentiment, particularly following the coup in 2023 (Mahmoud, 2022). The junta has expressed interest in diversifying its security partnerships, creating an opportunity for Russia to expand its presence (International Crisis Group, 2023).

## **3.3. Economic Interests and Resource Extraction**

### *3.3.1. Russian Investments in Mining (Gold, Uranium, and Rare Earth Minerals)*

Russia has leveraged its growing influence in the Sahel to secure access to critical mineral resources, including gold, uranium, and rare earth elements. Mali, one of Africa's top gold producers, has signed multiple agreements with Russian mining companies, allowing them to operate in previously Western-controlled territories (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).

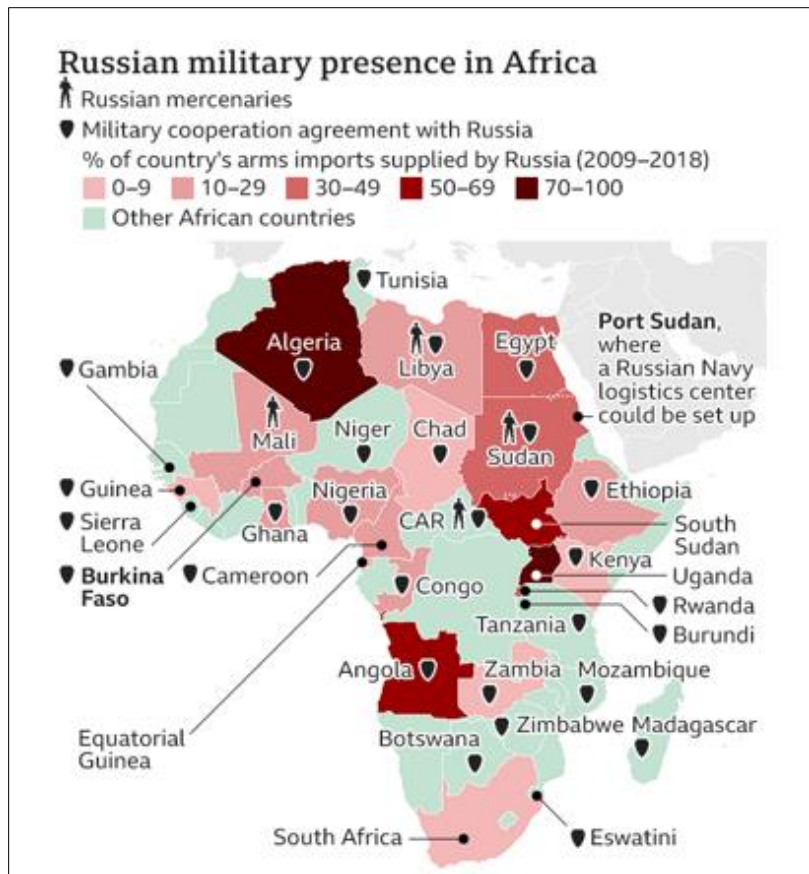
Uranium deposits in Niger are of strategic importance to Russia's nuclear energy ambitions. With France historically reliant on Nigerien uranium for its nuclear power industry, Russia's increasing presence in Niger could disrupt traditional supply chains and strengthen Moscow's leverage over global energy markets (Sanda, 2023).

### *3.3.2. Energy Security and Resource Agreements*

In addition to minerals, Russia has pursued energy agreements with Sahelian states. Moscow has expressed interest in investing in natural gas projects in Mauritania and Chad, recognizing the potential for long-term energy exports (Thurston, 2022). These agreements align with Russia's broader strategy of diversifying its global energy partnerships following Western sanctions over its invasion of Ukraine (Mahmoud, 2022).

### *3.3.3. Trade Dynamics Between Russia and Sahelian States*

Trade between Russia and the Sahel has expanded significantly, particularly in the areas of arms exports, agricultural products, and construction services. Moscow has positioned itself as a reliable supplier of wheat and fertilizers, filling the gap left by Western agricultural restrictions following the Ukraine conflict (International Crisis Group, 2023). This economic engagement strengthens Russia's geopolitical influence, ensuring long-term ties with Sahelian governments.



**Figure 1** Russia's Expanding Security Footprint in the Sahel [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (2023, February 28)]

A map illustrating Russia's growing military presence, security agreements, and economic interests in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, highlighting the deployment of Wagner Group forces, military bases, and mining operations.

## 4. France's waning influence and strategic adjustments

### 4.1. Historical Role of France in the Sahel

#### 4.1.1. Colonial Legacy and Continued Military Presence

France's historical role in the Sahel is deeply rooted in its colonial past. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, France established colonial rule over vast territories in West Africa, including present-day Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The dissolution of French West Africa in the 1960s led to formal independence for these nations, but Paris maintained significant political, economic, and military influence through post-colonial agreements (Thurston, 2022). France's continued presence in the Sahel was largely driven by its strategic interests, including resource access and geopolitical stability (Boeke, 2016).

After independence, France established defense agreements with Sahelian states, allowing for military interventions under the pretext of maintaining regional stability. The legacy of these agreements persists, as France has remained one of the primary security actors in the region, intervening in political and security crises (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).

#### 4.1.2. Operation Barkhane and Counterterrorism Efforts

France launched Operation Barkhane in 2014 as part of its broader counterterrorism strategy in the Sahel. The operation, which followed Operation Serval (2013) in Mali, aimed to combat jihadist insurgencies linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (Mahmoud, 2022). With approximately 5,100 French troops deployed at its peak, Operation Barkhane sought to neutralize extremist groups and support local military forces in counterterrorism operations (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Despite some initial successes, the operation faced mounting criticism due to its prolonged engagement, high financial costs, and perceived failure to significantly reduce terrorist threats. Local populations began to view French troops as occupiers rather than protectors, leading to rising anti-French sentiments (Sanda, 2023).

#### *4.1.3. Franco-Sahelian Diplomatic Relations*

Diplomatic relations between France and Sahelian states have historically been shaped by military cooperation and economic assistance. France provided significant financial aid and security training programs to regional governments, aiming to reinforce its influence (Zoubir, 2022). However, France's close association with ruling elites and its reluctance to support radical governance changes have contributed to its declining favor among the general population and emerging political movements (Boeke, 2016).

### **4.2. Challenges to France's Influence**

#### *4.2.1. Rising Anti-French Sentiments*

Over the past decade, anti-French sentiments have surged across the Sahel, driven by frustrations over France's perceived neocolonial control and ineffective military interventions (Mahmoud, 2022). Many Sahelian citizens blame France for the region's security deterioration, accusing Paris of failing to curb jihadist violence despite its prolonged military presence (International Crisis Group, 2023). Protests demanding France's withdrawal have become common in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, with demonstrators calling for alternative security partnerships, including cooperation with Russia (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).

The widespread belief that France prioritizes its economic and strategic interests over the well-being of Sahelian populations has fueled further resentment. This perception has been reinforced by the increasing role of Russian disinformation campaigns, which have portrayed France as an imperialist power seeking to exploit the region's resources (Ajayi, Olumide, 2022).

#### *4.2.2. Military Coups and Diplomatic Rifts*

France's influence has also been challenged by the wave of military coups in the Sahel. Since 2020, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have experienced military takeovers, with new juntas expressing hostility toward France and seeking to redefine their foreign policy alignments (Thurston, 2022). These coups have led to strained diplomatic relations, as France has historically supported civilian-led governments and opposed unconstitutional changes in leadership (Boeke, 2016).

In Mali, tensions escalated significantly after the 2021 coup, leading to the expulsion of the French ambassador and the severing of military ties between Bamako and Paris (International Crisis Group, 2023). Similar diplomatic rifts emerged in Burkina Faso, where the government demanded the departure of French troops in 2023 (Mahmoud, 2022).

#### *4.2.3. Withdrawal of French Troops and Embassies*

France's military disengagement from the Sahel marks a major shift in its foreign policy. Following increasing political tensions and the lack of tangible military successes, President Emmanuel Macron announced in 2022 the gradual withdrawal of French forces from Mali, with similar moves occurring in Burkina Faso and Niger (Zoubir, 2022). By 2023, France had closed several military bases and significantly reduced its troop deployments, effectively ending Operation Barkhane (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).

Alongside military withdrawals, French diplomatic missions have faced growing pressure, with embassies in Bamako and Ouagadougou experiencing significant downsizing. The closure of diplomatic channels further signals France's declining ability to shape political and security developments in the Sahel (Sanda, 2023).

### **4.3. France's New Strategic Approach**

#### *4.3.1. Redefining Military Presence Through Regional Alliances*

Following its withdrawal from Mali and Burkina Faso, France has sought to redefine its security strategy by shifting its focus toward regional partnerships. Paris has strengthened ties with coastal West African nations such as Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Benin, which are increasingly concerned about the southward expansion of jihadist threats (International Crisis Group, 2023).



Rather than deploying large-scale troops, France has opted for a more indirect approach, providing intelligence-sharing, counterterrorism training, and logistical support to regional military forces (Mahmoud, 2022). This strategy aligns with broader efforts to empower African-led security initiatives, such as the Accra Initiative, which seeks to enhance cooperation among West African states in countering extremism (Thurston, 2022).

#### *4.3.2. Increased Engagement in West Africa Beyond the Sahel*

France's recalibrated strategy also includes a stronger focus on economic and diplomatic engagements beyond the Sahel. In response to waning influence in Mali and Burkina Faso, France has intensified partnerships with stable West African nations, emphasizing trade, development assistance, and cultural cooperation (Zoubir, 2022).

Paris has launched initiatives to enhance economic cooperation in sectors such as agriculture, infrastructure, and renewable energy, aiming to counter Chinese and Russian economic expansion in Africa (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). Additionally, France has sought to reposition itself as a key advocate for African interests within the European Union, promoting policies that support economic development and climate adaptation efforts in West Africa (Sanda, 2023).

#### *4.3.3. Potential Partnerships With Non-State Actors*

Recognizing the limitations of state-to-state cooperation, France has explored engagement with non-state actors, including local militias, civil society organizations, and regional economic blocs (International Crisis Group, 2023). This approach is intended to improve intelligence-sharing, foster community resilience against extremist threats, and support localized peacebuilding efforts (Boeke, 2016).

By diversifying its partnerships, France aims to maintain a degree of influence in the region while mitigating the political risks associated with unstable governments (Mahmoud, 2022). The use of flexible security cooperation models, such as deploying specialized military units for targeted counterterrorism missions, is expected to shape France's long-term engagement in the Sahel and broader West Africa (Thurston, 2022).

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## **5. China's economic and strategic interests in the Sahel**

### **5.1. China's Non-Military Approach to Influence**

#### *5.1.1. Infrastructure Projects Under the Belt and Road Initiative*

China's influence in the Sahel has expanded significantly through infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, launched in 2013, aims to enhance global connectivity through investments in roads, railways, energy facilities, and telecommunications infrastructure (Zoubir, 2022). In the Sahel, China has focused on large-scale projects such as highways linking major cities, modernization of ports, and the construction of railway networks that facilitate trade between landlocked countries and coastal West Africa (Mahmoud, 2022).

One of the most significant projects is the Trans-Saharan Highway, which connects countries such as Mali, Niger, and Chad, improving transportation networks critical for economic development (International Crisis Group, 2023). Chinese state-owned enterprises have also built hydroelectric dams, solar power plants, and oil refineries in Niger and Chad to address energy deficits in the region (Sanda, 2023). These projects serve both economic and strategic interests, positioning China as a key development partner while increasing the dependence of Sahelian states on Chinese investments.

#### *5.1.2. Development Aid and Debt Diplomacy*

In addition to infrastructure, China has provided substantial development aid to Sahelian states, focusing on education, healthcare, and agricultural modernization (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). Through concessional loans and grants, China has funded university construction, medical facilities, and vocational training programs aimed at strengthening local workforces (Thurston, 2022).

However, China's economic engagement in the Sahel has been criticized for fostering **debt diplomacy**—a strategy in which countries become financially dependent on Chinese loans, potentially compromising their sovereignty (Mahmoud, 2022). Some analysts argue that China's debt-driven approach allows Beijing to exert political leverage over Sahelian governments, influencing their foreign policy decisions (Zoubir, 2022).

### *5.1.3. Trade Partnerships and Economic Incentives*

Trade between China and Sahelian countries has grown exponentially over the past two decades, with China becoming one of the region's largest trading partners (International Crisis Group, 2023). Exports from the Sahel to China primarily consist of raw materials such as gold, uranium, and agricultural commodities, while imports include manufactured goods, consumer electronics, and construction equipment (Sanda, 2023).

China has also employed **economic incentives** to deepen its engagement in the region. These include tax breaks for Sahelian exporters, trade agreements that favor local businesses, and special economic zones designed to attract Chinese investors (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). By promoting economic interdependence, China has solidified its role as a dominant actor in the Sahel's economic landscape.

## **5.2. Arms Sales and Security Cooperation**

### *5.2.1. China's Low-Profile Security Assistance*

Unlike Russia or Western nations, China has adopted a low-profile approach to security in the Sahel, focusing on discreet military engagements rather than direct intervention (Mahmoud, 2022). China has supplied non-lethal security equipment, such as armored personnel carriers, communication systems, and riot control gear, to Sahelian governments seeking to strengthen internal stability (Thurston, 2022).

Despite its avoidance of large-scale troop deployments, China has increased its security footprint through counterterrorism collaboration and intelligence-sharing agreements with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Sanda, 2023). These partnerships align with China's broader goal of securing its investments and ensuring the safety of Chinese nationals working on infrastructure projects in conflict-prone areas (Zoubir, 2022).

### *5.2.2. Sale of Military Equipment and Surveillance Technology*

China has emerged as a significant arms supplier to Sahelian states, offering affordable, no-strings-attached military equipment that competes with Western arms deals (International Crisis Group, 2023). Chinese-manufactured drones, assault rifles, and light armored vehicles have been purchased by Mali and Niger to enhance their counterterrorism capabilities (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).

Additionally, China has provided advanced surveillance technology, including facial recognition systems, cybersecurity infrastructure, and digital monitoring tools, which have been integrated into national security operations (Chukwunweike JN et al, 2024). Critics argue that these technologies could be used by authoritarian governments to suppress dissent and tighten political control (Mahmoud, 2022).

### *5.2.3. Soft Power Strategies Through Peacekeeping Efforts*

China has complemented its security cooperation with peacekeeping efforts in the Sahel. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, China has supported multilateral peacekeeping missions, such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) (Chukwunweike JN et al, 2024).

Chinese peacekeepers have been deployed in Mali and other conflict zones, engaging in humanitarian operations, infrastructure rebuilding, and capacity-building programs for local security forces (Zoubir, 2022). By actively participating in UN-led initiatives, China projects itself as a responsible global actor while avoiding direct military entanglement (International Crisis Group, 2023).

## **5.3. Risks and Challenges for China**

### *5.3.1. Security Threats to Chinese Investments*

China's increasing economic presence in the Sahel has exposed its investments and personnel to security risks, including terrorist attacks, political instability, and criminal activities (Mahmoud, 2022). Chinese construction projects and mining operations have become targets for jihadist groups, which view foreign investments as symbols of external influence (Thurston, 2022).

For instance, in 2021, armed militants attacked a Chinese mining site in Niger, prompting Beijing to enhance security measures for its nationals in the region (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). The threat of kidnappings and ransom demands has also led Chinese firms to work closely with local security forces to mitigate risks (International Crisis Group, 2023).

### 5.3.2. Criticism of Debt-Driven Economic Influence

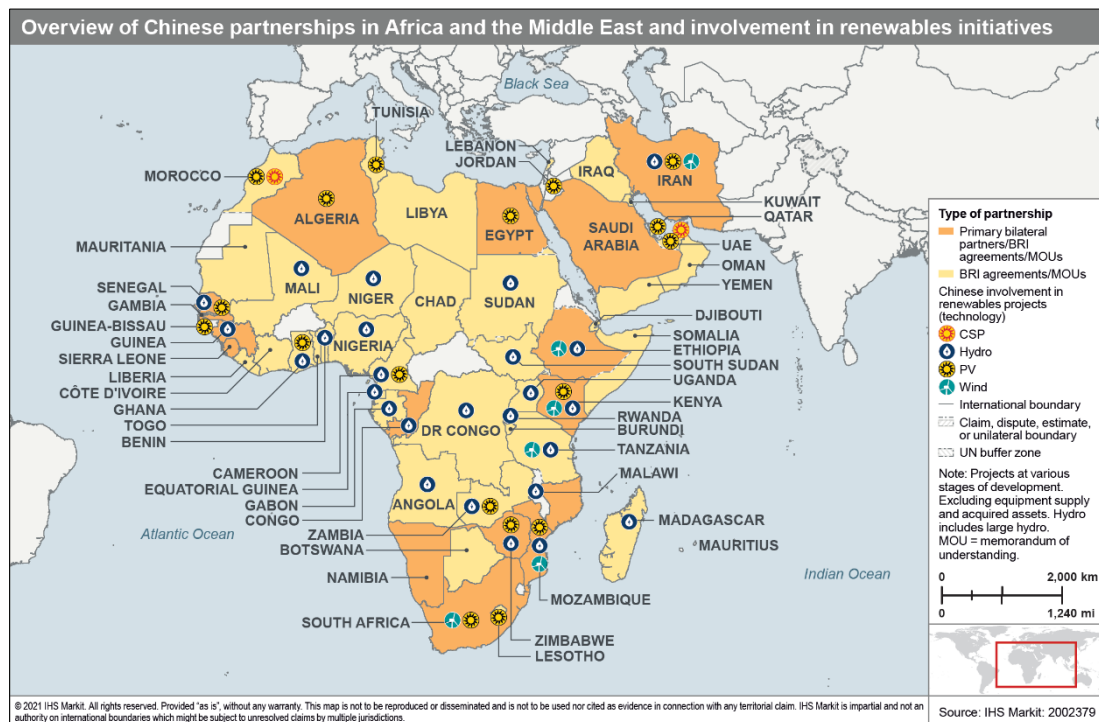
China's debt-financed investments have raised concerns about economic sustainability and sovereignty in the Sahel. Critics argue that excessive borrowing from China could lead to a debt trap, where governments struggle to repay loans, potentially forcing them to grant China greater control over strategic assets (Sanda, 2023).

For example, some analysts fear that China's influence over uranium mines in Niger could increase if the government defaults on its loan obligations (Zoubir, 2022). These concerns have fueled skepticism among Sahelian policymakers, leading to calls for greater transparency in financial agreements with China (Mahmoud, 2022).

### 5.3.3. Navigating Relationships with Competing Actors

China faces the challenge of balancing its engagements in the Sahel amid competition from other global powers, including Russia, France, and the United States (International Crisis Group, 2023). While China maintains a neutral stance in regional conflicts, its growing economic and security presence has put it at odds with Western nations seeking to counter Beijing's influence (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).

Additionally, the increasing militarization of the region, fueled by Russian mercenaries and Western-backed counterterrorism efforts, complicates China's non-military approach (Sanda, 2023). Navigating these geopolitical rivalries requires Beijing to adopt a delicate balancing act, ensuring that its economic interests do not become entangled in conflicts between competing security actors (Mahmoud, 2022).



**Figure 2** China's Infrastructure and Economic Projects in the Sahel and Middle East. [S&P Global Commodity Insights. (2023, October 12)]

A visual representation of China's major infrastructure investments, including BRI-funded projects, mining operations, and energy agreements in Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso.

## 6. The interplay of external powers: competing and complementary agendas

### 6.1. Russia-France Rivalry in Sahel Security

#### 6.1.1. Competing Narratives and Geopolitical Interests

The Sahel has become a battleground for competing geopolitical narratives, with Russia and France advancing contrasting strategies to secure influence. France, historically entrenched in the region due to its colonial legacy, has framed its military engagements as part of a broader counterterrorism strategy, citing the need to combat jihadist insurgencies (Thurston, 2022). However, Russia has positioned itself as an alternative security provider, portraying France's presence as a form of neocolonial interference and offering military assistance to regimes that have distanced themselves from Paris (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Russia's growing influence has been facilitated by its emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference, which resonates with Sahelian governments that view Western engagement as conditional and interventionist (Mahmoud, 2022). This geopolitical contest has further complicated the security dynamics of the region, fostering distrust among local actors and fueling instability.

#### 6.1.2. Proxy Conflicts Through Military Partnerships

Both Russia and France have engaged in **proxy security conflicts** by strengthening military partnerships with opposing factions. France has traditionally supported national armies and pro-Western governments, while Russia, through the Wagner Group, has provided security assistance to military juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). The result has been a fragmented security environment where conflicting allegiances among Sahelian states have prevented coordinated regional action against terrorism (Zoubir, 2022).

In Mali, for instance, the expulsion of French forces in favor of Russian security contractors has intensified tensions between regional security stakeholders. Similar dynamics have played out in Burkina Faso and Niger, where shifting alliances have disrupted established counterterrorism initiatives (Sanda, 2023).

#### 6.1.3. The Decline of French Dominance in Favor of Russian Influence

France's withdrawal from Mali and Burkina Faso in 2022–2023 marked a turning point in its influence over Sahel security. Public demonstrations against French military presence, coupled with increasing security agreements between Sahelian juntas and Russia, signaled a decline in French dominance (Mahmoud, 2022).

Russia's unconditional security assistance—which contrasts with France's policy of linking aid to governance reforms—has made Moscow a more attractive partner for regimes seeking international legitimacy and military support without political constraints (International Crisis Group, 2023). The long-term implications of this shift remain uncertain, but the weakening of French influence suggests a realignment of security partnerships in favor of non-Western actors (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).

### 6.2. China's Position as a Neutral Economic Power

#### 6.2.1. China's Avoidance of Direct Security Confrontations

Unlike Russia and France, China has deliberately avoided direct military engagements in the Sahel, instead positioning itself as a neutral economic power (Zoubir, 2022). Beijing has focused on diplomacy and economic cooperation, preferring not to be entangled in regional conflicts. While it has supplied arms and surveillance technology, China has refrained from deploying troops or engaging in counterterrorism operations (Thurston, 2022).

This non-military approach allows China to maintain diplomatic relations with all Sahelian governments, regardless of political instability. Unlike France and Russia, which have been drawn into security disputes, China's neutrality provides a stable foundation for long-term economic partnerships (Sanda, 2023).

#### 6.2.2. Economic Stability as an Alternative to Militarization

China has emphasized economic stability as a means of fostering security, arguing that development and investment are more effective long-term solutions than military intervention (Mahmoud, 2022). Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has invested heavily in transportation infrastructure, energy projects, and trade corridors, viewing economic growth as the key to regional stability (International Crisis Group, 2023).

By contrast, the militarized approaches of France and Russia have failed to curb extremist violence. Chinese officials have promoted infrastructure-led security, arguing that economic prosperity will reduce the appeal of insurgent movements and extremist ideologies (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).

#### *6.2.3. Collaboration vs. Competition with Russia and France*

China has largely avoided direct competition with Russia and France, preferring collaborative engagement when possible. While it does not provide extensive military assistance, Beijing has supported UN peacekeeping missions and security initiatives through multilateral frameworks (Thurston, 2022).

China's cooperation with Russia has been particularly notable in economic projects, as both countries share an interest in countering Western dominance in African markets. However, China has also maintained trade relations with France, ensuring that its economic presence in the Sahel does not become overly dependent on any single geopolitical alliance (Zoubir, 2022).

### **6.3. Impact on Regional Stability**

#### *6.3.1. The Risks of Foreign Interference in Governance*

The growing involvement of external actors has undermined local governance structures, as Sahelian governments increasingly rely on foreign security assistance instead of strengthening domestic institutions (International Crisis Group, 2023). Russia's support for military juntas has eroded democratic governance, while France's historical backing of elite political networks has alienated populations that demand political reform (Mahmoud, 2022).

China's economic presence, while less directly tied to governance, has raised concerns about debt dependency and the risk of Sahelian states losing economic sovereignty due to excessive borrowing (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). The cumulative effect of these dynamics is a region where foreign powers, rather than local leaders, play a decisive role in shaping political and security policies (Sanda, 2023).

#### *6.3.2. The Potential for Increased Militarization and Conflict*

The Sahel's security landscape is becoming increasingly militarized, with the presence of Russian mercenaries, Western-backed counterterrorism forces, and growing local militias (Zoubir, 2022). This fragmentation of security threatens to prolong conflicts rather than resolve them, as foreign military actors pursue competing agendas.

The shift from Western-led counterterrorism efforts to Russian security partnerships may not lead to improved stability, as it does not address the root causes of extremism, such as poverty, lack of governance, and intercommunal tensions (Mahmoud, 2022). Unless a more unified regional approach is adopted, foreign military interventions could continue to fuel cycles of violence (International Crisis Group, 2023).

#### *6.3.3. The Role of African-Led Initiatives in Counterbalancing External Actors*

Amid growing foreign influence, there is increasing advocacy for African-led security initiatives that prioritize regional interests over external agendas. The G5 Sahel Joint Force, despite its limitations, represents an attempt to establish local security mechanisms independent of foreign intervention (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).

Organizations such as the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS have sought to mediate conflicts and promote stability through diplomatic engagement. However, their efforts have been hindered by funding constraints and competing national interests (Thurston, 2022). Strengthening regional cooperation mechanisms will be crucial in reducing dependency on external powers and ensuring sustainable peace (Sanda, 2023).

**Table 1** Comparative Analysis of Russia, France, and China's Strategies in the Sahel

Strategy	Russia	France	China
Security Approach	Military intervention through Wagner Group	Counterterrorism operations (Operation Barkhane)	Limited military involvement, UN peacekeeping
Economic Role	Resource extraction, arms sales	Development aid, private sector investments	Infrastructure projects, trade expansion
Political Influence	Supports military juntas, anti-Western stance	Historical ties with governments, democratic promotion	Neutral engagement with all actors
Public Perception	Seen as a reliable but ruthless partner	Increasingly viewed as neocolonial	Viewed as a pragmatic economic partner
Long-Term Strategy	Expanding security role, countering Western influence	Reducing military footprint, focusing on diplomacy	Strengthening trade and investment networks

## 7. POLICY RESPONSES AND REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

### 7.1. Sahelian Governments' Strategic Alliances

#### 7.1.1. How Different States Are Responding to External Influences

Sahelian governments are navigating a complex geopolitical landscape shaped by competing external influences. As traditional Western allies like France and the United States recalibrate their security strategies, regional leaders have sought new partnerships with alternative powers such as Russia and China (Mahmoud, 2022). Countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have turned to Russia for military assistance, replacing French troops with Wagner Group mercenaries following diplomatic rifts with Paris (International Crisis Group, 2023). In contrast, Chad and Senegal continue to maintain close ties with Western nations, favoring European and U.S.-led security collaborations (Thurston, 2022).

China, on the other hand, has solidified its influence through economic diplomacy, investing in large-scale infrastructure projects without directly engaging in regional security conflicts (Zoubir, 2022). This approach has appealed to governments seeking financial support without the political conditions often attached to Western aid. However, China's increasing economic footprint has raised concerns about debt dependency, particularly in Mali and Niger, where infrastructure projects have been financed through high-interest loans (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).

#### 7.1.2. Balancing Military Aid, Trade Agreements, and Diplomatic Ties

Sahelian states are increasingly adopting multi-aligned foreign policies to balance security needs, economic development, and diplomatic partnerships. For instance, Burkina Faso and Mali have welcomed Russian security aid while maintaining trade agreements with China and seeking development assistance from the African Union and the United Nations (Sanda, 2023). This balancing act reflects a broader trend of non-alignment, where governments prioritize short-term strategic benefits over long-term ideological commitments.

However, reliance on multiple foreign actors has created governance challenges, as shifting alliances have led to conflicting security strategies (International Crisis Group, 2023). The departure of French troops from Mali, coupled with the influx of Russian mercenaries, has strained counterterrorism coordination, with Western nations hesitant to share intelligence with Russian-backed regimes (Mahmoud, 2022). Meanwhile, Niger has sought to maintain Western partnerships while engaging in trade negotiations with China, positioning itself as a potential bridge between competing global actors (Zoubir, 2022).

### 7.2. The Role of the African Union and Regional Blocs

#### 7.2.1. Alternative Security Arrangements Post-ECOWAS Withdrawal

Following ECOWAS's diminishing role in Sahel security, African-led initiatives have gained prominence as potential alternatives for regional stability. The African Union (AU) has attempted to fill the security vacuum by promoting the African Standby Force (ASF), a peacekeeping initiative aimed at fostering local military responses to terrorism and

political instability (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). However, funding and logistical constraints have hindered its full operationalization, limiting its effectiveness in countering extremist threats (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The G5 Sahel Joint Force, a military coalition comprising Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania, has been another key regional security mechanism. Initially backed by France and the European Union, the force has faced setbacks following Mali's withdrawal in 2022 and internal disputes over funding and command structures (Thurston, 2022). Without strong financial and logistical support, the ability of the G5 Sahel to provide a coordinated response to terrorism remains uncertain (Mahmoud, 2022).

### *7.2.2. Challenges in Forming a Unified Regional Strategy*

One of the main obstacles to forming a unified African security strategy is the divergence in national interests among Sahelian states. While some countries, such as Chad and Niger, advocate for continued cooperation with Western security forces, others, such as Mali and Burkina Faso, have pivoted towards Russia, leading to a fragmented regional security landscape (Sanda, 2023).

Another major challenge is the lack of sustainable funding for African-led security initiatives. The reliance on external donors, including the EU and the United Nations, has created financial instability in regional security projects, as funding commitments often shift due to geopolitical considerations (Zoubir, 2022). Furthermore, weak institutional coordination between the AU, ECOWAS, and individual governments has slowed progress toward a comprehensive Sahel security framework (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Despite these challenges, there is growing momentum for African-led solutions. The AU has called for increased investment in regional peacekeeping operations and greater involvement of local actors in conflict resolution (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). Additionally, new partnerships with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and East African Community (EAC) are being explored to diversify security cooperation beyond traditional West African structures (Thurston, 2022).

## **7.3. The U.S. and European Response**

### *7.3.1. Evolving U.S. Security and Economic Policies in the Sahel*

The United States has reassessed its security commitments in the Sahel, shifting from direct military intervention to intelligence-sharing, training programs, and diplomatic engagements (Mahmoud, 2022). The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) remains a cornerstone of U.S. engagement, focusing on building the capacity of local security forces to combat jihadist movements (International Crisis Group, 2023). However, recent political upheavals and the growing influence of Russian mercenaries have led the U.S. to scale back military operations in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso (Zoubir, 2022).

On the economic front, Washington has emphasized development aid and governance reforms, increasing investments in humanitarian programs, education, and climate resilience initiatives (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). Unlike China's infrastructure-led approach, U.S. assistance is often tied to democratic governance and human rights benchmarks, which has created tensions with military-led governments in the Sahel (Sanda, 2023).

### *7.3.2. The EU's Involvement and Shifting Focus*

The European Union has also recalibrated its Sahel strategy, reducing military engagement while increasing economic and diplomatic initiatives. France's withdrawal from Mali and Burkina Faso has forced the EU to rethink its security cooperation framework, with a greater focus on supporting regional actors such as the G5 Sahel and AU-led initiatives (Thurston, 2022).

In addition to security assistance, the EU has prioritized economic development projects, funding renewable energy programs, agricultural initiatives, and trade partnerships aimed at reducing migration pressures to Europe (International Crisis Group, 2023). However, European policymakers remain concerned about Russia's growing presence in the region, fearing that increased engagement with military juntas could undermine EU-backed governance reforms (Mahmoud, 2022).

As the U.S. and EU adjust their strategies, their ability to counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence in the Sahel will depend on their willingness to adapt to the region's shifting political and security dynamics (Zoubir, 2022).

## 8. Future outlook: scenarios for Sahel security

### 8.1. Continued Fragmentation and Proxy Conflict

#### 8.1.1. Risks of Prolonged Instability Due to Competing External Interests

The Sahel is increasingly becoming a battleground for geopolitical rivalries, with competing external actors fueling instability rather than fostering long-term solutions (Mahmoud, 2022). The involvement of Russia, France, China, the United States, and regional powers has created a fragmented security landscape, where each actor supports different factions and governments based on their strategic interests (International Crisis Group, 2023). The presence of Russian Wagner Group mercenaries, continued French security operations in select areas, and the economic penetration of China have led to overlapping and conflicting strategies among Sahelian governments (Thurston, 2022).

This fragmentation has undermined coordinated counterterrorism efforts, making it easier for extremist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) to expand their influence (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). With different security coalitions pursuing divergent goals, the likelihood of a unified response to insurgency is increasingly low.

#### 8.1.2. Potential Consequences of Reliance on Non-State Actors

The reliance on non-state security actors, such as private military contractors, local militias, and paramilitary groups, has further complicated the security environment in the Sahel (Olumide Ajayi, 2024). While Russian mercenaries have strengthened military juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso, their lack of accountability and human rights violations have exacerbated grievances among local populations (Sanda, 2023).

Additionally, the rise of self-defense militias in Niger and Chad has created concerns about militarization beyond state control, raising the risk of future intra-state conflicts (International Crisis Group, 2023). If current trends persist, the proliferation of non-state actors may lead to a cycle of continuous violence, making long-term stabilization efforts increasingly difficult (Mahmoud, 2022).

### 8.2. Regional-Led Security and Development Initiatives

#### 8.2.1. The Potential for ECOWAS Reintegration or Alternative Frameworks

Despite the current disengagement of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS, discussions about reintegration or alternative security frameworks have gained momentum. The withdrawal of these countries from ECOWAS in early 2024 has weakened regional economic and security cooperation, but diplomatic engagements are ongoing to restore coordination (Thurston, 2022). Some analysts suggest that a revised ECOWAS security mandate, focusing on non-military crisis management, economic stability, and conflict mediation, could facilitate the return of Sahelian states to the bloc (Olalekan Kehinde, 2024).

Another potential framework is the expansion of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which—despite challenges—remains one of the most structured security initiatives in the region (Zoubir, 2022). If properly funded and restructured, the G5 Sahel could serve as an alternative to traditional Western-backed military interventions (International Crisis Group, 2023).

#### 8.2.2. Strengthening African-Led Security Coalitions

The African Union (AU) and ECOWAS are exploring new security models, which prioritize African-led counterterrorism strategies over foreign interventions (Mahmoud, 2022). The AU has proposed greater financial autonomy for African-led missions, aiming to reduce dependence on Western funding and military support (Sanda, 2023).

One proposed initiative is the Sahel Security Compact, which seeks to combine regional military coordination with economic development programs (Thurston, 2022). This strategy recognizes that security challenges cannot be solved through military means alone—they require socioeconomic investment, governance reforms, and sustainable development programs (International Crisis Group, 2023).

While African-led security initiatives face challenges—including limited funding, political divisions, and logistical constraints—there is growing support for long-term, regionally-driven solutions to instability in the Sahel (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).



### 8.3. Global Policy Shifts and Their Implications

#### 8.3.1. Future of Foreign Interventions in the Sahel

The shifting global security landscape is reshaping foreign intervention policies in the Sahel. Following the failures of Operation Barkhane and the MINUSMA peacekeeping mission, Western nations—particularly France, the United States, and the European Union—are redefining their engagement strategies (Zoubir, 2022).

Instead of large-scale military deployments, future interventions are likely to prioritize intelligence-sharing, drone surveillance, and localized security partnerships (Mahmoud, 2022). The U.S. has already scaled back direct counterterrorism operations, opting instead to train and equip regional forces under the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) (International Crisis Group, 2023).

At the same time, Russia and China have increased their involvement in the region, with Russia providing mercenary support and China focusing on economic expansion through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Kemp & Shaw, 2023). The growing divergence in foreign policies suggests that Sahelian states will continue to play a key role in shaping external engagements, deciding which partners align best with their security and economic priorities (Sanda, 2023).

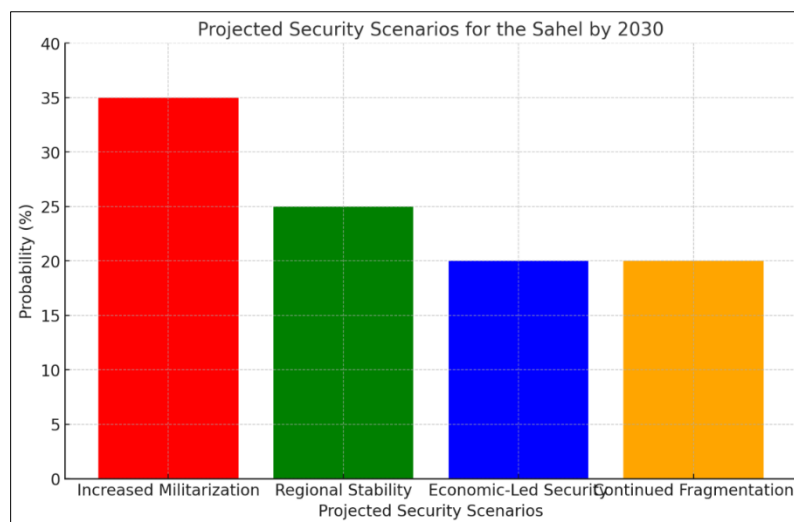
#### 8.3.2. The Impact of Shifting Global Alliances on Regional Security

The reconfiguration of global alliances is influencing the dynamics of regional security, as Sahelian states recalibrate their relationships with external actors. The rise of multipolarity in global politics—where power is distributed across multiple competing states rather than dominated by a single superpower—has led to more fragmented foreign interventions in the Sahel (Thurston, 2022).

The key global realignments shaping the region include:

- Russia's expanding military presence, which has weakened traditional Western influence and introduced a more authoritarian security model (Zoubir, 2022).
- China's deepening economic footprint, which has created alternative pathways for infrastructure development but has also raised concerns over economic dependency (Mahmoud, 2022).
- Europe's shift toward regional capacity-building, as the EU moves from direct military operations to supporting African-led security mechanisms (International Crisis Group, 2023).
- The U.S.'s reduced direct military role, focusing instead on counterterrorism partnerships and diplomatic engagement (Kemp & Shaw, 2023).

As these global shifts unfold, the future of Sahelian security will depend on how effectively regional states manage foreign partnerships, ensuring that external actors complement rather than dictate local security strategies (Sanda, 2023).



**Figure 3** Projected Security Scenarios for the Sahel by 2030

A graphic representation of different possible security outcomes, including continued foreign military competition, regional security autonomy, and hybrid stabilization efforts integrating economic and military strategies.

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## **9. Conclusion**

### **9.1. Summary of Key Findings**

The security landscape in the Sahel is increasingly shaped by the competing interests of external actors, each pursuing distinct geopolitical and economic objectives. France, which historically played a dominant role in Sahelian security through military interventions such as Operation Barkhane, has seen its influence wane following the withdrawal of its troops from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In contrast, Russia has expanded its footprint, primarily through the deployment of Wagner Group mercenaries, offering military assistance to regimes that have distanced themselves from Western-backed security initiatives. China, while avoiding direct military engagement, has leveraged economic diplomacy, investing in infrastructure projects and trade partnerships under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to strengthen its influence in the region.

The withdrawal of ECOWAS from the Sahel has significantly altered regional security alignments. Countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, now outside of ECOWAS, have sought alternative security arrangements, turning to bilateral and multilateral partnerships with Russia, China, and other global actors. This shift has led to fragmentation in regional security coordination, making counterterrorism efforts more challenging. Without ECOWAS serving as a unifying force, Sahelian states face increased risks of military coups, extremist expansion, and economic instability.

Moreover, the growing reliance on non-state security actors, such as private military contractors and local militias, has further complicated the situation. While some governments see these forces as effective alternatives to conventional military aid, their lack of accountability and potential for human rights abuses could deepen instability. African-led security initiatives, including the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the African Union's peacekeeping efforts, face challenges due to funding limitations and internal divisions. However, they remain critical to reducing foreign dependency and fostering long-term stability in the Sahel.

### **9.2. Policy Recommendations**

To address the security and economic challenges in the Sahel, a balanced approach to foreign involvement is essential. Instead of allowing a single global power to dominate, Sahelian states should diversify their security and economic partnerships, ensuring that foreign engagement aligns with long-term regional interests rather than short-term political gains. Governments should demand greater transparency and accountability in foreign military agreements, particularly when engaging with non-state security actors such as the Wagner Group. Western nations, including France and the United States, must also reassess their engagement strategies, shifting from direct military interventions to capacity-building programs that empower local security forces.

The strengthening of African-led security and economic frameworks is crucial. ECOWAS, despite recent withdrawals, should explore mechanisms to reintegrate Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, recognizing their strategic importance in regional stability. The African Union should prioritize funding for indigenous security coalitions such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, ensuring that local forces have the resources needed to effectively counter extremism and political instability. Additionally, regional organizations must expand economic cooperation, investing in development projects that address the root causes of insecurity, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of education.

Further, Sahelian governments must take ownership of their security strategies by promoting good governance, accountability, and institutional reforms. Strengthening civil-military relations and enhancing regional diplomatic efforts will be essential to reducing dependency on external actors. If African nations work collectively to develop sustainable security and economic policies, the Sahel can transition from a region of crisis to one of stability and self-reliance.

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## **Compliance with ethical standards**

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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