FROM HYBRID SECURITIZATION TO REPRODUCED FRAGILITY: RUSSIA'S ASYMMETRIC INTERVENTIONS IN THE SAHEL AND THEIR REGIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS (2014–2024)

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Abstract: This study examines the expansion of Russia's role in the African Sahel and investigates the extent to which Moscow, as an "alternative security provider," can address jihadist threats and foster sustainable stability. It draws on national role theory, a comparative case-study design, and policy and document analysis to examine Russia's military, political, economic, and diplomatic

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instruments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2014 and 2024, while accounting for the effects of weak legitimacy, social cleavages, and local conflicts on security outcomes. The findings show that Russia has expanded its influence through arms transfers, military training, security partnerships involving the Wagner Group and the Africa Corps, diplomatic support for military authorities, sovereignty- and non-interference-based narratives, and economic arrangements linked to natural resources. However, this engagement has not been accompanied by a documented reduction in jihadist activity or sustained security improvements; rather, in the cases examined, it has coincided with increased violence against civilians, allegations of serious abuses, and deepened institutional fragility. The study concludes that unconditional Russian support for military regimes, when interacting with local divisions and weak governance, may reproduce insecurity rather than contain it. It recommends directing external cooperation toward accountable national security institutions, conditioning assistance on civilian protection and accountability, and addressing the roots of local conflicts and institutional deficiencies.

Keywords: Russia, the Sahel, national role theory, military interventions, regional security.

Introduction

Since 2014, the Sahel has witnessed escalating international competition, alongside worsening state fragility, the spread of armed groups, and the declining capacity of national and regional institutions to manage security and political crises. The Sahel is no longer merely a geographic region suffering from poverty, drought, and underdevelopment; it has become a complex space where local conflicts, competition over resources, armed insurgencies, military coups, and

external interventions intersect. This interconnection has transformed the region into one of the most influential hotspots of instability affecting African and international security.

In this context, Russia has expanded its presence in Africa, particularly in the Sahel. This expansion combines strategic objectives -such as reshaping the geopolitical balance, challenging Western influence, and strengthening Russia's position in a multipolar order- with tactical, flexible, and sometimes opportunistic practices, including arms transfers, military training, diplomatic support for military authorities, resource-related arrangements, and the use of private military and security companies.

The significance of this topic stems from the fact that Russia presents itself as a security partner that does not impose direct political conditions on the governments cooperating with it, unlike what is locally perceived as political conditionality in some Western partnerships. However, the absence of conditions related to democracy, human rights, and accountability may become a factor that reinforces the survival of unstable regimes, weakens oversight of security institutions, and increases the risk of impunity. Moreover, external support directed toward central governments does not operate in a social vacuum; rather, it interacts with ethnic and economic divisions, conflicts between herders and farmers, historical tensions between the center and the periphery, as well as the ability of jihadist groups to exploit local grievances.

Accordingly, the study's problem is formulated in the following question: How was Russia's role, as an

alternative security provider, associated with the trajectory of security and political fragility in the African Sahel states during the period 2014–2024?

The following questions arise from this issue:

- What is the nature of Russia's vision of its role in the African Sahel, and what geopolitical, political, and economic factors shape this vision?
- How is this vision translated into military, economic, and diplomatic tools?
- Have Russian tools contributed to reducing armed violence, or have they led to its redistribution and expansion?
- What are the limits of Russia's ability to transform geopolitical gains into long-term security stability?

To analyze the growing influence of Russia in the African Sahel and its impact on the region's security, a set of hypotheses can be formulated to guide the research and assist in understanding the relationship between international interventions and the security situation in the region. The hypotheses that can be adopted are:

First Hypothesis: Russia's assumption of the role of an alternative security provider in the African Sahel is associated with higher levels of security and political fragility in host countries during the period 2014–2024.

Second Hypothesis: The expansion of Russian military support, including arms supplies, training, and the deployment of private military company personnel, is associated with increased violence against civilians,

without a sustained and documented decline in jihadist group activity.

Third Hypothesis: Unconditional Russian political and diplomatic support for military or transitional authorities is associated with weaker political accountability and reduced incentives to restore civilian rule and electoral legitimacy.

Fourth Hypothesis: The relationship between Russia's role and security and political fragility intensifies when external support interacts with social and ethnic divisions, local conflicts over land and resources, weak state institutions, and inadequate community mediation mechanisms.

The study is based on national role analysis as a principal theoretical framework, distinguishing between:

- Role conception: the image Russia constructs of its function and position in the Sahel, particularly as an alternative security partner and defender of national sovereignty.
- Role performance: the policies and instruments that embody this conception, such as military support, training, arms supplies, diplomatic backing, economic cooperation, and the use of private military and security companies.
- Role prescriptions: the expectations imposed by the international, regional, and domestic environment on Russia's behavior, including the positions of African governments, the African Union, regional organizations, international law, and great-power competition.

The study also employs policy analysis to examine the gap between official Russian discourse and actual practice by analyzing government statements, officials' speeches, and documents related to military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation. The study relies on primary and secondary sources, including official Russian and African documents, United Nations reports, human rights organization reports, conflict-monitoring data, academic studies, and reports from specialized research centers. The study does not argue that Russian sources are absent from the literature. Rather, it recognises that Russian-language and official Russian sources remain under-represented in much of the English- and French-language scholarship on Russia's Sahel policy. Russian official documents are treated both as empirical evidence and as instruments of political discourse, while independent United Nations, African, human-rights, conflict-monitoring, and academic sources are used for verification and critical evaluation. This triangulation reduces the risk of reproducing either Russian justificatory narratives or an exclusively Western interpretation. Chronologically, the study covers the period from 2014 to 2024. The year 2014 represents a turning point in the redirection of Russian foreign policy toward Africa following the escalation of the international isolation imposed on Moscow, while 2024 enables an assessment of the transformations associated with the transfer of Wagner operations to the framework of the Africa Corps and the expansion of cooperation with military authorities in the Sahel.

The study acknowledges several methodological limitations. First, it is difficult to isolate the impact of Russian intervention from the effects of coups, the withdrawal of foreign forces, weak national institutions,

the activities of armed groups, and economic and climate crises. Second, access to primary Russian data and detailed information concerning private military companies remains limited. Third, some Western reports may contain interpretive biases, while local or Russian governments may employ justificatory rhetoric that conceals the nature of certain security and economic arrangements. Accordingly, the study relies on methodological triangulation—that is, comparing official documents with field reports, conflict data, and academic sources—and avoids treating temporal coincidence as a definitive causal relationship.

To address this issue, we will divide the study into the following sections:

1. The African Sahel Region: Geography and Strategic Importance

1.1.The African Sahel Region:

What is noticeable about the African coastal region is the lack of precise definition regarding its boundaries; this varies from one area to another. Sometimes, the definition overlaps with a framework that includes the countries of the Sahel and Sahara. At the same time, at other times, it pertains to the group of West African countries known as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Some define it as extending from Nigeria and Burkina Faso to Eritrea and Djibouti, but most studies refer to the region extending from Mauritania to Sudan, excluding the countries located south of the Sahel.

Geographical delineation varies among researchers (Lounici, 2015). The term "African Sahel" refers to the

countries designated by the "Inter-State Committee for Drought Control" in specific references and studies, which include Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, and Cape Verde (Bouboush, 2017). Established in 1971, this group included Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya. The African Sahel region is also known as the "arc of crises" due to the many crises affecting this area.

The Sahel is a geographical strip extending from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Red Sea in the east, covering an area of three million square kilometers (Bouboush, 2017). Its climate ranges from semi-arid in the south to arid in the north, characterized by fragility and poverty. The region receives seasonal rainfall and is experiencing significant demographic growth alongside important economic and agricultural activities, leading to more densely populated cities. According to the same study, the Sahel includes parts of 12 countries: southern Mauritania, its central region, northern Senegal, Gambia, southern Mali, Niger, Chad, northernmost Ethiopia, and Djibouti. In research related to the Sahel region of Africa concerning challenges and definitions, some studies include numerous countries within this concept, such as Algeria and regions like northern Mali and Niger. However, it is crucial to be aware of the geopolitical use of the concept of the Sahel and its precise geographical meaning within the standard terms "desert Sahel" or "Sahel of the desert," which often refer to countries that geographically share both the Sahel and the desert. However, it is what has been defined for the Sahel and Sahara Observatory treaty (Maslouh, 2004).

Despite the Sahel’s vast geographical expanse from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, and the inclusion of

multiple countries covering approximately 30% of the continent's area (Mourad, 2015), the political concept of this region has expanded to encompass neighboring countries that share certain characteristics (such as Central Africa), in accordance with the 2013 N'Djamena Agreement. This undermines the practical precision of the classical geographical definition and renders it variable (Maslouh, 2004). Accordingly, since geographical delimitation is procedural and variable in political studies, this study adopts the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) as a well-defined unit of analysis, thereby overcoming border ambiguity and conceptual expansion and focusing on the specific political and security bloc that practically represents the core of the issue under study.

1.2. Reasons for the Attraction of Major Powers to the Sahel Region

Unlike the regional conflict zone that emerged in the Mano River Basin in the late 1990s, there is no regional arrangement in the Sahel comparable to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or a clear regional dominance like Nigeria's. The few existing regional arrangements are either dysfunctional or face significant obstacles in their ability to implement policies, primarily due to the longstanding rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, and this situation is unlikely to change anytime soon. This is why France, Germany, and the European Union have focused on establishing a new regional framework for the G5 Sahel. This new regional body, created by the leaders of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso, will officially promote regional cooperation in security and development, aiming to identify joint projects centered

around infrastructure, food security, agriculture, pastoralism, and overall security. One of the main concerns for Europe and the European Union in the Sahel region is irregular migration northward, and the goal of EU policies is to prevent this as much as possible. Niger has been particularly highlighted as the city of Agadez has become a significant migration hub; in early 2010, around 40,000 to 60,000 migrants passed through it annually; and in 2016, the figure exceeded 250,000. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), more than half of the migrants who arrived in Lampedusa passed through Agadez, which prompted the EU to undertake several political initiatives to address migration(Bøås, 2021).

The situation is exacerbated by the increased focus of the United States on Agadez as a hotspot in the "war on terror." Southeast of Agadez lies what is officially known as Air Base 201 in Niger, which locals call the "American" base. As the United States is less concerned about migration northward, European Union countries and other European nations operating on the ground in Niger utilize the Agadez base to surveil and conduct strikes against Salafist armed groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, and others(Bøås, 2021).

On the security front, it is collaborating with African partners to restrict and defeat violent extremist organizations across the continent, starting with Al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and branches of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda throughout the Sahel (Gavin, May 2021). In the background, Paris emerges as a key actor, securing its influence in the Sahel through concessions for Nigerien

uranium—supplying a third of its military program and civilian needs—and its role in directing European aid to the G5 Sahel countries (Nadzharov and Entina, 2023).

In 2011, the European Union adopted its first "Sahel Strategy," based on the premise that a renewed focus on enhancing security should complement the EU's decades-long regional development efforts. EU missions were launched in the region, including a civilian capacity-building mission in Niger in 2012 (EUCAP Sahel Niger), followed by a military training mission in Mali in 2013 (EUTM Mali), and in 2014, another civilian capacity-building mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali). Initially, these missions focused on the long-term reform of the security sector. In 2015, a new EU security strategy for the region marked a shift in the EU's overall security approach. The declared "refugee crisis" in the same year significantly accelerated this sharp change in the EU's security strategy, which began to emphasize pursuing internal security objectives through an external security policy. In 2020, the EU decided to finance a new foreign and security instrument, the "European Peace Facility (EPF)," to support African partners and neighboring regions. The Emergency Trust Fund simultaneously replaced the previously used African Peace Facility, enabling the EU to provide support directly to the armed forces of third countries. In contrast, assistance was previously offered only through the African Union or African regional organizations.

Since the beginning of the Ukraine war, Putin has doubled his efforts in the Sahel region. In contrast to the European approach, Russia has embraced the Mali and Burkina Faso coups, sending military advisors after the

second coup in Mali. This aligns with Russia's official policy of addressing the injustices caused by "European colonialism" in Africa. This message resonates with some residents of the Sahel region and aligns with the political priorities of the new military governments. Like Russia, China positions itself as an alternative to its traditional ally (France) for Sahel countries. By emphasizing "non-interference" and a commitment to "respecting sovereignty," China is expanding its presence in the Sahel region through economic and diplomatic engagements. China's presence can be observed in various sectors, including infrastructure development, natural resource extraction, and diplomatic relations (Nissen, 2024).

Russia is strengthening its military and economic support for African countries by exporting military equipment and training. Meanwhile, China aims to maintain good relations with Russia while safeguarding its African interests. Moscow, on the other hand, seeks to leverage the Soviet legacy by sending weapons and military advisors to regions in need of assistance, raising concerns about Chinese arms supplies. China is apprehensive about Russia's gains from instability in the Sahel region, which could impact the regional situation and worsen relations with China in areas associated with the Wagner Group. Nevertheless, we can observe China and Russia cooperating in Africa through similar votes at the United Nations, focusing on peacekeeping missions and stabilization efforts. China's pragmatic approach to Russian influence in Africa aims to protect its interests, maintain positive relations, and ensure continued dominance (Goumidi, 2023).

If we adopt the realism theory, the concept of power and national interest defines the level of competition among major powers in the Sahel, focusing on their pursuit of national interests and the increase of influence in the African Sahel region. From a realist perspective, the competition for natural resources and this region's strategic location are part of the struggle for power and influence in the international system.

However, reading the Sahel region of Africa as a "geopolitical vacuum" that great powers compete to fill obscures a crucial dimension in explaining patterns of instability: the fragile and fragmented internal social structure of these states (Benjaminsen & BA, 2021). In Sahelian countries -chiefly Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger- historical ethnic and socio-economic cleavages intersect between nomadic pastoralist groups (primarily the Fulani/Fulbe) and sedentary farming communities (the Dogon and Bambara in Mali, the Mossi in Burkina Faso), centering on competition over land, water, and grazing resources, and exacerbated by the erosion of traditional customary mediation mechanisms and the proliferation of small arms (OECD, 2021).

These cleavages further intersect with historical tensions between the Tuareg (who have pursued separatist or autonomous demands in northern Mali and Niger) and the central state, manifesting in recurrent rebellions since independence (Lecocq & Klute., 2013). These divisions are not a static backdrop but a social infrastructure instrumentalized by both armed actors and external states; some governments have supported the formation of ethnically based self-defense militias (such as the Dogon Dan Na Ambassagou militia in Mali),

thereby fueling cycles of retaliatory violence between communities (Benjaminsen & BA, 2021)

.Insofar as these cleavages enable armed organizations to recruit fighters on the basis of local grievances (particularly among the Fulani), they necessitate that any analysis of the growing Russian (via the Wagner Group/Africa Corps) and French/European influence in the region examine not only each state's tools toward central governments, but also how these tools interact with the internal structure of societal division, since direct military support to a weak and legitimacy-deficient central government may deepen the ethnic bias of the national army rather than neutralize the conflict (McGregor, 2017).

1.3. The Roots of the Terrorist Threat in the Sahel and Local Populations' Attitudes Toward It

1.3.1. Local Roots of the Threat:

Jihadi groups in the Sahel emerged from the interaction of transnational ideology with local conflicts, social divisions, and state weakness. Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) was established in 2017 through the merger of four groups, including the Macina Katiba, which used land issues and the defense of the Fulani in its recruitment rhetoric, without representing all Fulani (Thompson, 2021a, July 15). The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), meanwhile, emerged from a split within al-Mourabitoun and then expanded in the Liptako–Gourma region, exploiting porous borders and state weakness (Thompson, 2021b, July 21).

1.3.2. Local Populations' Attitudes:

The available sources do not establish a unified position among local populations. However, JNIM imposed religious and social rules and collected taxes in some areas under its influence, while ISGS in Mali sought to strengthen its local acceptance in order to expand its influence, financing, and recruitment. In central Mali and southwestern Burkina Faso, a local de-escalation between the two organizations enabled integration into communities and facilitated cross-border operations, without demonstrating broad popular support (Thompson, 2021a, July 15), (United Nations Secretary-General, 2024, January 31).

Armed groups affiliated with Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) do not enjoy broad popular support. The increasing attacks by the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) against civilians, as it expanded from central Mali into northern Burkina Faso, have led to continued popular resistance to it in these areas. In several villages in central Mali, the FLM has imposed a strict interpretation of sharia, established a zakat system, and enforced stringent behavioral rules. This has enabled its fighters to subjugate local communities through coercion rather than free popular acceptance. The source also indicates that local populations in contested areas reject and fear groups associated with JNIM and wish to receive assistance and support from security forces (Eizenga & Williams, 2020). Accordingly, the continued interaction of some residents with these groups should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of support, as it may reflect fear, coercion, or adaptation to a security reality imposed by the group.

1.3.3. Distinctions between the groups:

JNIM is a coalition affiliated with al-Qaeda, while ISGS is affiliated with the Islamic State; they cooperated before clashes broke out between them in 2019. Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province differ from these groups in terms of geographical scope, as their activities are concentrated mainly in the Lake Chad Basin (Thompson, 2021a, July 15), (United Nations Secretary-General, 2024, January 31).

The cases of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) reveal that military operations, even when successful in killing or capturing some field commanders, are insufficient on their own to halt the escalation of violence or transform tactical gains into a sustainable path toward peace and stability. Abuses committed against civilians, including extrajudicial killings, have weakened relations between state institutions and local communities, while also providing jihadist groups with tools for mobilization and recruitment by allowing them to present themselves as an alternative to the state in terms of security and governance. Therefore, reducing this threat requires, alongside a security response, reforming security institutions and civil administration, strengthening accountable governance, protecting civilians, addressing local conflicts, supporting development, and rebuilding public trust (Thompson, 2021a, July 15), (Thompson, 2021b, July 21).

2. The Russian Role in the African Sahel Region

2.1. The Resumption of Russian Relations with Sahel Countries Flowing Putin's Rise

Russian foreign policy towards Africa has gone through several stages, the first of which was the reliable relations during the period of the Soviet Union when the Soviet Union provided significant political, ideological, and military support to many African countries. With the collapse of the Union, Russian-African relations deteriorated, most notably marked by Boris Yeltsin's announcement at the end of 1991 that Russian foreign aid policy would cease and that Russia would request African countries to repay their debts. By 2000, with President Vladimir Putin's rise to power, Russian-African relations began to return to their previous state(Elbassoussy, 2022).

After it invaded the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, Russia was expelled from the Group of Eight (G8). It faced sanctions from the United States, the European Union, Canada, and other countries, which increased Moscow's diplomatic isolation and exerted pressure on its economy. In its search for new diplomatic allies to expand its global economic influence and bolster its ambitions as a superpower, Russia turned to Africa, a region it had neglected after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This return was facilitated by a reduction in American engagement in Africa during President Trump's administration. African leaders, concerned about China's growing dominance, were eager to diversify their trade and investment partners, receptive to Russian initiatives, and keen to secure support for the African Union's Agenda 2063(Paczyńska, 2020).

Russia's geopolitical resurgence in Africa aims to challenge Western dominance. The tensions between Russia and the United States and its allies have strengthened its relationship with Africa, where senior leaders emphasize the continent's importance to Russia's foreign policy. Lavrov stated, "We see the support of Africans for Russia in terms of sovereignty, peace, and security, and we affirm its position at the crossroads of global development trends during times of upheaval." Therefore, Russia must prioritize its relations with Africa, enhance international cooperation, and transform its approach to Russian-African relations to benefit Russians and Africans. By establishing bilateral diplomatic relations and reinforcing the belief that Russia has never been a colony, it aims to uphold its political credibility and resist American global dominance rooted in Western-style democratic values (Goumidi, 2023).

Conversely, following the weakening of French positions in Libya, Russian influence began to extend into the Sahel countries. In 2021, Mali's transitional government demonstrated military cooperation with Russia, leading to the operation of Russian private military companies in the country(Nadzharov and Entina, 2023). Russia's expanding political role in Africa is not solely focused on its interests; it also aims to diminish the influence of other international powers. Notably, this strategy aligns with Russia's ambition to establish itself as a "major balancing power" in Africa and Asia, leveraging its diplomatic skills to resolve regional conflicts. The Sochi Summit, held in October 2019, marked a significant milestone in diplomatic cooperation between Russia and African nations,

serving as a venue for politicians and business leaders. Representatives from 54 African countries attended, including 40 heads of state and government, signing around 50 contracts, agreements, and memorandums of understanding across various economic, military, environmental, and nuclear sectors, with an estimated value of $12.2 billion (Elbassoussy, 2022).

Russia's return evokes memories of the Cold War, albeit this time within a new multipolar world order; this return is less about promoting ideologies and more about seeking reliable partners for resource extraction and consumer markets. Russia's resurgence in Africa adheres to a tested exploitation approach characterized by a desire to keep investments low while ensuring high returns. This is evident in Russia's deliberate targeting and interest in African mining rights and natural resources(Mensah and Kwesi Aning, 2022).

Siegle believes that Russia has vigorously sought to achieve its strategic objectives in Africa in recent years to secure a foothold in the eastern Mediterranean, gain access to maritime ports in the Red Sea, expand opportunities for extracting natural resources, displace Western influence, and promote alternatives to democracy as a regional norm. Thus, Africa constitutes an "arena" for Russian geostrategic interests—not merely a destination—whose perspective is reflected in the means employed by Russia. In contrast to most major external partners, Russia relies on a series of asymmetric measures (often operating outside the law) for influence (mercenaries—arms deals) in exchange for resources, obscure contracts, election interference, and disinformation(Siegle, 2022).

The disturbances in the Sahel region benefit Russia; the primary exports that Russia offers to Africa - mercenaries, weapons, and disinformation - are inherently destabilizing. Alongside this economic incentive, exploiting the chaotic conditions in the Sahel provides Russia with leverage on NATO's southern flank. According to Siegel[1], Russian influence in Libya and the Sahel grants Russia access to the main hubs of African migration routes and human trafficking. Russia can create humanitarian and political crises for Europe while challenging Africa's historically European (primarily French) spheres of influence(Rajosefa, 2023). Since 2010, Russia has not derived its status as a superpower solely from claims of superiority in its immediate neighborhood; instead, its position increasingly depends on the ability to manage a global foreign policy. In this context, a Russian expert recently asserted that "Russia's policy in Africa demonstrates that our geostrategic interests are broader than commonly believed." With relations strained following the annexation of Crimea and rising costs related to sanctions for the war in Donbas, Moscow has intensified its efforts to enhance the non-European dimensions of its foreign policy. Characterized as a "complementary strategy," it aims to illustrate that Russia cannot be diplomatically isolated and possesses viable economic alternatives while acquiring new tools of influence, enabling it to extend its reach beyond the European continent (Faleg and Stanislav, 2020).

[1] For more information on the subject, see: Siegle, J. (2021). Russia's strategic goals in Africa. *African Center for Strategic Studies*, *6,* https://africacenter.org/experts/joseph-siegle/russia-strategic-goals-africa/

The geopolitical approach confirms, through geopolitical analysis, how countries' geographical location and strategic interests influence their foreign policies. Russia considers the Sahel region of Africa important and seeks to increase its influence in this area for geopolitical reasons, such as access to natural resources and trade routes. Another essential point is the competition among major powers, as the approach emphasizes how Russia seeks to build new spheres of influence and compete for resources and strategic locations in the Sahel region of Africa. Russian engagement in the Sahel should therefore be analysed as a combination of strategic objectives and tactical instruments. Strategically, Moscow seeks to alter the regional and international balance of power, weaken Western influence, and preserve diplomatic room for manoeuvre. Tactically, it relies on flexible and selective practices, including arms transfers, military training, bilateral agreements with military authorities, Wagner/Africa Corps deployments, resource concessions, and diplomatic support in multilateral forums. Russian policy is therefore neither wholly improvised nor a fully coherent grand strategy.

2.2. Economic, Political, and Military Motivations Behind the Russian Role

As for the economic strategy, Russia’s political return to Africa is driven by economic prospects, favorable prices, and African markets. Africa is a region rich in natural resources such as oil, gas, and coal, all essential energy sources for Russian industry. Russia aims to participate in nuclear energy projects in Africa, focusing also on renewable energy sources. With its expertise in nuclear power facilities and modern technologies, Russia's

transition from fossil fuels could have a substantial economic impact. Close commercial and economic cooperation may provide Russia with low-cost raw materials. Russia's political re-engagement in Africa centers on developing infrastructure, transport, energy, and communications. It seeks to establish long-term partnerships to enhance transport and energy infrastructure, capitalizing on its competitive advantage in energy programs and networks. Moscow's financial goals in Africa stem from the need for security and power; the African continent presents valuable financial opportunities, including natural resources, speculative projects, and an untapped market for specialized equipment and products. Russian trade with Africa, valued at $20 billion, primarily revolves around arms and food exports, with state-owned companies like Rosneft and Lukoil competing in the minerals, gemstones, and oil sectors. The terms of these agreements are often obscured, making it challenging to assess their value or the fees imposed by African nations (Goumidi, 2023).

From a political perspective, Russia's political connections in Africa have expanded significantly. The emergence of concerns, particularly in both Europe and the United States, serves as evidence of Russia's increasing attempts to interfere in elections on the continent. Investigative reports indicate that the Russian elite and Putin's close ally, Yevgeny Prigozhin, have broadened their involvement in Africa. Prigozhin has been developing a strategy that combines arms sales, electoral support, and security cooperation in exchange for mining rights, job opportunities, and diplomatic backing at the United Nations (Paczyńska, 2020).

Russia's re-engagement is driven by political cooperation, alliances, and agreements to enhance regional and international influence, humanitarian aid, and prestige. Russia has over 100 agreements in Sub-Saharan Africa, including six in 2018. Additionally, twelve African presidents visited Russia between 2015 and 2019 (Goumidi, 2023).Many regard Russia as a resilient partner for authoritarian regimes; the country has frequently positioned itself as a protector of governments facing sanctions or accusations of human rights violations. This strategic objective was evident in Russia's operations in Mali and the Central African Republic, where the Wagner Group emerged as the leading security partner. Russia is forging crucial relationships with African nations that have few alternatives, as many are subject to sanctions from the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), or other multilateral sanctions due to war crimes and other violations of international law (Mohamedou, 2024).

Militarily, Russia aims to strengthen economic growth and open new markets by providing African countries with weapons and training in exchange for access to natural resources (such as uranium and strategic minerals like cobalt and copper, as well as diamonds through Alrosa, and energy through Gazprom, Lukoil, Rostec, and Rosatom)(Goumidi, 2023). It has emerged as the continent’s largest arms supplier, accounting for nearly half of Africa’s imports (49% during 2015–2019, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute)—more than twice the shares of the United States (14%) and China (13%) (Elbassoussy, 2022). Russia seeks to restore its global influence,

particularly in the Sahel, by supplying affordable weapons to Mali(Goumidi, 2023).

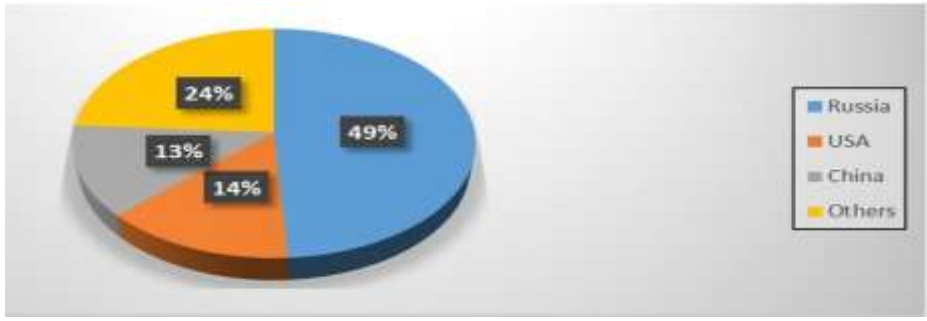


Figure 1: Arms exports to Africa 2015–2019 (Elbassoussy, Ahmed, 2022).

In 2020, Rosoboronexport signed contracts worth $1.5 billion with ten African countries, followed by additional deals worth $1.7 billion at the 2021 Côte d'Ivoire summit involving Nigeria, Tanzania, Cameroon, Angola, and the Central African Republic. Algeria, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Uganda are the largest regular buyers. The institute estimates that Africa accounted for 18% of Russian arms exports between 2016 and 2020, with the number of recipient countries expanding from 16 African states in the early 2000s to 21 between 2010 and 2019. This supports the Russian economy and defense industry but potentially increases the risks of armed conflicts in an already volatile region (Mensah and Kwesi, 2022).

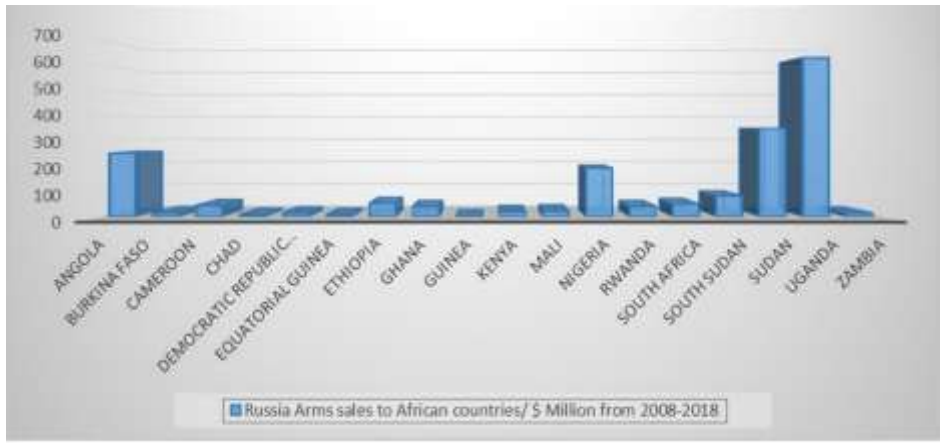


Figure 2: Russian arms sales to African countries/million dollars from 2008 to 2018 (Elbassoussy, Ahmed, 2022).

2.3. Tools of Russian Influence in the Sahel

The goal of foreign policy, aimed at affirming a multipolar international system, will encourage efforts to confront the unrestricted influence of global powers in Africa. Russia's primary influence in international affairs is expected to be its veto power in the Security Council. Russia requires support from African countries, which constitute nearly a quarter of the United Nations, for initiatives led by Moscow to avoid appearing isolated on the international stage. The political appeal of specific initiatives developed by Russia in the field of cybersecurity should not be underestimated; for instance, the Russian and Chinese proposals for regulating the internet, which are prominently discussed by the Euro-Atlantic community, receive a level of support that is often overlooked in Africa and beyond (Giles, 2013).

Compared to other countries and/or some traditional nations like France, which sees the African Sahel region as a geopolitical extension of itself, Russia's role has been delayed in entering the region for several reasons, the most significant of which are:

- The lack of Russian interest in the African Sahel region previously.
- The French dominance over the African Sahel region.

The situation regarding the African Sahel region has changed in recent years. Vladimir Putin made a preliminary African tour in 2006, followed by Medvedev's visit in 2009, accompanied by over 400 Russian businessmen. During this visit, 20 billion dollars were forgiven from the 25 billion in inherited African debts from the Soviet era. Russia is also expanding its regional influence by focusing on energy projects, arms deals, military training, and participation in significant initiatives (Bouhidel, 2020). Russia is working to establish a presence in Africa by enhancing its military role through the Wagner security company, founded in 2014 to fight in Ukraine. Wagner began its operations in Africa through the Central African Republic in 2017 when President Faustin-Archange Touadéra turned to Moscow to confront rebels after French and international forces failed to do so (Ibrahim, 2022).

Wagner represents one of the most sophisticated methods of exerting Russian influence on the continent and is also strategically linked to the Russian state. Leaked internal documents from 2019 revealed Wagner's plan to exert influence in Africa. The group's

strategy consists of services designed to attract authoritarian leaders. This includes mercenary forces that can help ensure territorial control and political strategists who can manipulate and shape public discourse through social media and misinformation. In return, Wagner seeks to achieve commercial gains, not only in financial terms but also through access to natural resources, particularly in the mining sector (Mohamedou, 2024).

Mali is regarded as the latest operational theater for the Russian entity and the new battleground in the Russian-Western conflict within the Sahel region. Relations between Bamako and Paris have deteriorated since the military coup in 2020, which was marked by protests against France. This tension later escalated into the cessation of Operation "Barkhane," initiated by Paris in 2014 to combat terrorism (Ibrahim, 2022).

Russia signed a military cooperation agreement with Mali in 2019; however, genuine collaboration did not commence until after the second coup, which solidified the military's hold on power. Russian military advisors and personnel and donated military equipment began to appear in the country despite their assertions that their role was protective rather than instructive. The Malian army expressed significant dissatisfaction with European training, and the overall capabilities of the Malian forces remained low, as evidenced by the brutal Islamic attacks on Malian army bases in Gao and Indelimane in 2017 and 2019, respectively (Nadzharov and Entina, 2023).

Human rights evidence and field-monitoring reports indicate that the deployment of Wagner Group personnel in Mali since late 2021 has not led to improved security. Instead, it has coincided with a marked escalation in violations against civilians and a widening scope of unlawful killings. Citing ACLED data, Human Rights Watch reported that Mali experienced more than 1,740 incidents of violence and over 5,750 deaths between January 2022 and March 2023, reflecting an escalating pattern of violence rather than a series of isolated incidents (Human Rights Watch. a, 2023). Human Rights Watch documented that the Malian armed forces, alongside foreign personnel described in the report as linked to Wagner, have conducted counterinsurgency operations in central and northern Mali since December 2023 involving summary killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, and the looting of civilian property. These operations affected villages including Ouro Fero, Atara, Daka Sebi, Nienanbla, Diewara, and Jati Lumo. The report also relied on survivor testimonies and local victim lists reviewed by researchers, concluding that these violations have occurred amid declining oversight and accountability mechanisms following MINUSMA's withdrawal and Mali's departure from ECOWAS, while calling for the renewal of the Human Rights Council's Independent Expert mandate and the strengthening of its resources (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

The report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights concluded that there were strong indications that Malian forces and foreign military personnel killed more than 500 people, most of them in summary executions, during a five-day military operation in the village of Moura in central Mali in March 2022. The report also documented cases of rape,

torture, and arbitrary detention, basing its findings on interviews with victims and witnesses, as well as forensic evidence and satellite imagery, after the Malian authorities prevented the investigation team from accessing the village itself. The report is particularly significant because it does not merely recount the violations; it also provides a clear legal characterization of them, indicating that summary executions, rape, and torture during the conflict may amount to war crimes and, depending on the circumstances, may amount to crimes against humanity (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human rights , 2023).

Russia now gives countries in the Sahel leverage over the European Union and its member states. The EU's new missions will collapse without cooperation from governments like those in Burkina Faso, which will be able to reliably threaten to turn to Russia in disputes regarding their democratic standards. Russia's ambitions in Africa extend beyond the Sahel; the EU is increasingly aware that its competition with Russia, ignited by President Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine, is spreading to various fronts, including those in Africa. The EU's strategy in the Sahel needs to consider Russia; it must adopt a flexible approach to its values when relations with a government crucial for supporting a military or training mission are at risk (Lebovich and Theodore, 2022).



Figure 3: Russian Active Military Deployments in Africa (Liam Karr, Africa File Special Edition: Russian Diplomatic Blitz Highlights The Kremlin's Strategic Aims In Africa, Jun 6, 2024, ISW Press, seen in 14/07/2024, available at : https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/africa-file-special-edition-russian-diplomatic-blitz-highlights-kremlin's-strategic)

Russian support for Sahelian countries is evolving, and the agreement also includes the exchange of views on military issues and international and regional politics to enhance international security. It encompasses cooperation in combating terrorism and developing relationships in mutual military training, as well as the exchange of expertise and cooperation in peacekeeping operations under the auspices of the United Nations, maritime search and rescue operations, and combating maritime piracy. Russia has also signed similar military

agreements with Mali in 2015 and Niger in 2017 (Middle East, 2021).

Moscow is attempting to leverage the increasing hostility towards the French military presence in certain countries in the region by positioning itself as an effective alternative in the fight against terrorist organizations, particularly given the failure of the French strategy to achieve tangible results. This could provide Moscow with a strategic advantage by controlling waves of illegal immigration to Europe and overseeing counter-terrorism operations in the region. This perspective is bolstered by the welcome extended by some countries, such as Burkina Faso and Niger, to Russian involvement in combating terrorism, alongside Moscow's recognition that Paris has become isolated amid the region's crises following the recent American withdrawal, which reduced military presence by 10%, and the hesitance of European powers to assist. Meanwhile, France is grappling with material and logistical challenges in progressing counter-terrorism efforts, prompting the Sahel region to shift towards Russia (Ahmed, 2023).

Russian intervention in Africa has significantly increased since 2014. Moscow's strategy has centered on arms sales, political support—particularly to authoritarian regimes—and security cooperation in exchange for mining rights, access to markets, and diplomatic backing for its foreign policy, establishing Russia as the largest arms supplier to Africa (Dirk, 2022).

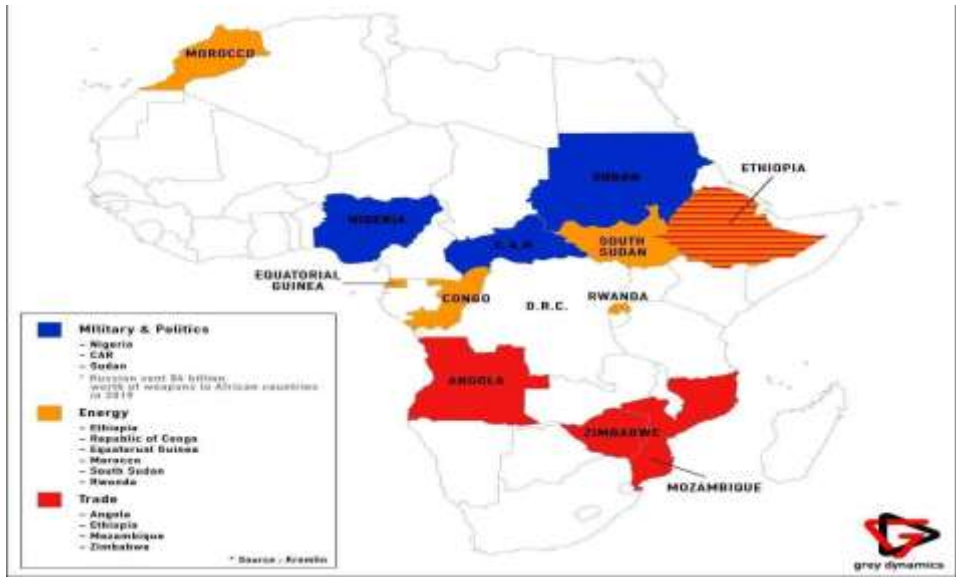


Figure 4: Russia's New Deals in Africa (Kohnert, Dirk. "The impact of Russian presence in Africa")

Since 2014, Russia has signed numerous agreements for joint security cooperation with 19 African countries, with military exercises being the latest Russian initiative to enhance counter-terrorism training. On November 25, 2011, the first joint naval exercise involving Russia, China, and South Africa was launched. Instead of establishing military bases in African nations, Russia has expanded the role of certain private security firms that undertake various security tasks, primarily providing technical support and training to military forces and national security agencies to prepare them to confront extremist armed terrorist organizations. Russian support for Nigeria gained a financial aspect in August 2017, following the signing of a cooperation agreement that allowed Moscow to provide training for military missions against terrorism and piracy and train Nigerian personnel for peacekeeping operations. In October 2019,

a security agreement was also signed between Russia and Nigeria. Russia committed to supplying weapons, equipment, and training to Nigerian security forces to combat the ongoing activities of Boko Haram within Nigeria. Some reports suggested that Wagner might serve as a private security group involved in this training (Elbassoussy, 2022).

By providing military training and support to the Malian government, the Wagner Group aids Russia in expanding its influence in Africa. This involvement allows Russia to establish itself as a valuable security partner in a region facing numerous security challenges and political instability. As the situation grew more volatile, Wagner intervened to offer its services, filling the void left by Western powers and further solidifying Russia's status as a key player in the region's politics (Mohamedou, 2024).

Russian aides to Nigeria prompted several high-ranking officials, led by Defense Minister Mansur Dan Ali, to express their gratitude to Russia. He expressed his appreciation for the Russian government at the eighth international security conference held in the Russian capital in April 2019, acknowledging the training and grants that benefited Nigeria over the years and the provision of weapons and equipment that aided in combating terrorist groups, particularly Boko Haram. Russian support against Boko Haram extended to neighboring countries experiencing similar challenges, especially Niger, where the Russian strategy relied on two main pillars: the first was supplying Niger with 12 MI-35 attack helicopters in October 2019 for use against extremist activities. The second was offering training

grants for Nigerien army personnel at Russian academies on the latest methods for combating armed groups (Elbassoussy, 2022).

Russian educational cooperation also constitutes a potential long-term instrument of influence in the Sahel. The Russia–Africa Partnership Forum Action Plan explicitly supports capacity-building in Africa through Russian scholarship programmes and calls for increasing the number of scholarships for African students (kremlin, 2023, p. para.149). Such programmes may enable Moscow to build professional networks and future elite-level connections with African states, particularly through former Soviet-educated graduates and contemporary Russian university alumni. However, these networks should not be interpreted as evidence of automatic political alignment with Russia; their influence depends on the quality and relevance of education, the autonomy of African graduates, employment opportunities, and the ability of Sahelian states to transform external training into accountable and locally legitimate institutions.

Russia employs diplomatic means as a strategic tool across Africa. Enhancing its diplomatic relations aims to address the growing frustration with French and American counter-terrorism strategies in the Sahel and West African region. This diplomatic strategy includes Russia's role as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to prevent sanctions from being imposed on its allies and to garner support against the West from the three rotating non-permanent African seats. In January 2022, Russia defended Mali and obstructed the imposition of new sanctions on the

military leaders who seized power from a corrupt regime (Mensah and Kwesi, 2022).

2018, Russia was the seventh most significant financial contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations, following the United States, China, Japan, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. However, Russia believes peacekeeping operations should only take place with the consent of host countries and should have narrow mandates. Consequently, it sought to limit the promotion of human rights, women's empowerment, and environmental protection in the mandates of UN missions, including those in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and Mali during budget allocation negotiations. Russia supports African solutions to African problems and advocates for strengthening the African Union's peacekeeping capabilities, arguing that the African Union should primarily be responsible for addressing conflicts on the continent. This stance reinforces Russia's position of respecting state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs (Paczyńska, 2020).

Russia also benefits from the political space created by divisions within the United Nations Security Council. As a permanent member of the Security Council, Moscow can block sanctions against its allies and mobilise support among African members against Western positions. In January 2022, for example, Russia defended Mali and blocked the imposition of new sanctions on its military leaders, framing its position around the principle of “African solutions to African problems” (Mensah & Aning, 2022, p. 55). More broadly, the limitations of international enforcement in

fragile contexts create opportunities for external actors to protect their partners and pursue influence with limited accountability.The results of the voting in the United Nations General Assembly on the resolution condemning the Russian military operation in Ukraine in March 2022 illustrated the extent of Russian influence in Africa. Seventeen African countries abstained from voting on the resolution, one country, Eritrea, voted against it, and eight countries were absent from the session, meaning that 26 out of 54 countries on the continent did not support the resolution (Ibrahim, 2022).

Lavrov's statement concluded by confirming close Russian coordination with Mali, Chad, and the Central African Republic to mobilize joint efforts to combat terrorist organizations active in the region, such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram. Russian support takes the form of supplying these countries with weapons, training their military and security personnel in Russia, and supporting the formation of joint forces among Sahel countries. However, Lavrov noted differences in international positions, as Western partners on the Security Council remain reluctant to provide material support to those forces, despite the Council's discussion of the issue (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Nadzharov et al. argue that Russia is not interested in building a Russafrique. Instead, it wants to build mutually beneficial economic partnerships and use the Sahel as a showcase for the efficiency of its security apparatus. Russia's presence in the region has transformed the regional order from a Western-dominated structure to a more flexible and competitive one, providing opportunities for both regional (Algeria) and non-regional (Turkey) actors (Nadzharov and

Entina, 2023). Instead, many see it as working by helping often illegitimate leaders retain power and entrenching Africa's indebtedness. This strategy works with Russia and its leaders, gaining international diplomatic cover, resources to consolidate domestic power, a mercenary force, weapons, and revenue from resource deals. However, Russia's opaque engagements inherently destabilize the citizens of the targeted countries, leading to stunted economic development, human rights abuses, disenfranchisement of African citizens, and the perpetuation of illegitimate governments (Siegle, 2022).

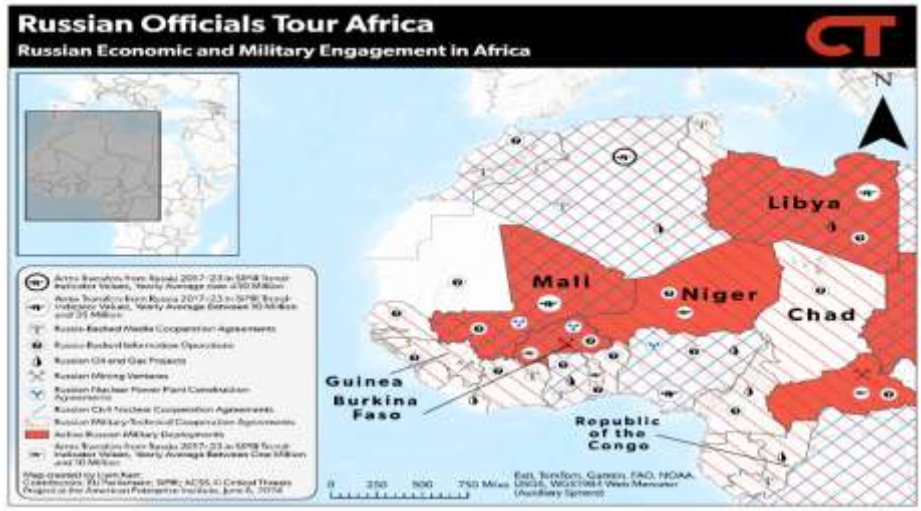


Figure 5: Russian Economic and Military Engagement in Africa (Liam Karr, 2024).

The most significant implications of the Russian presence in the African Sahel region can be outlined as follows:

1. The increasing number of private military and security companies in Africa creates

a conflict of interest between these international and African firms, potentially leading to wars, especially in certain African countries.

2. The risk of involvement in military coups: These companies may orchestrate military coups against the ruling African governments.

3. The escalation of African conflicts and disputes: Given the Wagner forces' involvement in ongoing conflicts, internal and external parties have the potential for intervention to exacerbate these disputes.

4. Erosion of trust between the ruling authority and the military establishment: This stems from confident African leaders relying on these companies for personal security and depending on them to combat terrorism and insurgency, which can lead to disagreements that foster internal unrest and possibly military coups.

5. The undermining of democratic systems in Africa: These companies, notably Wagner, intervene in some African elections to support leaders favored by Moscow, disregarding the interests of the African populace.

6. Intensification of international competition: The activities of Russian private military and security companies may raise concerns among international powers regarding the growing Russian influence on the continent, potentially leading to counteractions to address the Russian role in African nations and the risk

of confrontations between major powers (Ahmed, 2023).

Russian disinformation campaigns have undermined the role of the United Nations, France, and other European Union countries, and Russia quickly became a supporter of military coups by undermining the rule of law. It exports its governance principles to Africa, backing disinformation campaigns and electoral interventions that allow African leaders to benefit politically and financially from Russian support, thus making them elite beneficiaries at the expense of their people. Furthermore, Russia exploits wealth and strategic resources under the guise of combating terrorism and extremism through military interventions while also destabilizing the European Union by stimulating migration, which threatens the EU's stability. All these factors facilitate the formation of new alliances in the African Sahel, capitalizing on these conflicts, as seen in Niger after the coup on July 26, 2023, to draw Niger as a strategic ally. Russia's alliances with coup regimes have emerged to help consolidate authoritarian rule and engage with transitional military regimes, as happened in Burkina Faso following two coups in January and late September 2022.

The African Sahel region has recently witnessed a notable increase in military interventions and a shift in international power dynamics, leading to new antagonistic alliances toward Western powers. Among the most prominent of these developments is the growing influence of the Russian "Wagner" group, which has expanded its operations in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic. "Wagner" has provided military support to local

governments in exchange for economic privileges, particularly in mining and natural resource exploitation. This Russian expansion has raised concerns among Western powers, especially France, which has traditionally considered the region within its sphere of influence. The decline of the French role and the rise of anti-French sentiments led to the withdrawal of French forces from Mali, paving the way for "Wagner" to strengthen its presence.

In contrast, the war in Ukraine has extended Russian–Ukrainian strategic competition into the Sahel. On 27 July 2024, fighters from the Permanent Strategic Framework for the Defence of the People of Azawad (CSP-DPA) and militants affiliated with Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) ambushed a joint Wagner and Malian military convoy near Tin Zaouatene, in Mali's north-eastern Kidal region close to the Algerian border. The attack resulted in the highest reported number of Russian private military company fatalities in Africa in a single event since 2017 (ACLED, 2024). A spokesperson for Ukraine's military intelligence stated that the attackers had received "necessary information" to conduct the operation Andrii Yusov, spokesman for Ukraine's GUR military intelligence agency, said on Monday that "the rebels received necessary information, and not just information, which enabled a successful military operation against Russian war criminals". (Guardian, 2024). The available evidence therefore indicates a contested Ukrainian dimension in the confrontation with Russian-linked forces in Mali, rather than a fully documented and systematic Ukrainian support programme for Sahelian armed groups.

Reviewing the Russian influence tools outlined above reveals an initial causal mechanism linking the nature of Russian support to the trajectory of instability in recipient Sahel countries: unlike the model of conditional security assistance traditionally provided by Western powers (despite its major shortcomings), the Russian model offers politically unconditional military support to ruling regimes that have often risen through military coups (Mali in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso twice in 2022, and Niger in 2023), in exchange for extractive and diplomatic concessions. This pattern of relations produces what may be termed a "mutually reinforcing fragility loop": lacking full electoral or popular legitimacy, the military coup regime needs an external ally that does not demand democratic reforms in exchange for security assistance; conversely, Russia provides this unconditional support precisely because it gives it deeper and more enduring influence than conditional partnerships, as demonstrated by the absence of any effective international accountability for documented abuses in joint operations between local armies and Wagner forces (as in the case of the Moura massacre). The documented outcome of this dynamic, as indicated by the cross-sectional conflict-monitoring data above, is an increase in indicators of violence against civilians and a decline in public trust in the military in areas where these forces operate, rather than a documented reduction in the activities of the jihadist groups originally targeted.

3. Russia in the African Sahel: Testing Asymmetric Interventions

Although Russia cannot be held primarily responsible for the deterioration of European relations, notably

regarding Germany, it, along with countries like China, Iran, and Turkey, is the geopolitical beneficiary. It fills the power vacuum left by Western powers and presents itself as an alternative partner. This is evident on various levels: foreign (military) aid is increasing, economic relations are intensifying, and the Wagner paramilitary group is expanding its presence in the region. Russia is not among Africa's top ten sources of foreign direct investment, nor is it a significant player in major development initiatives. It has faced criticism for its self-serving approach to its limited humanitarian aid efforts. For competitive purposes, the key opportunities that Moscow seeks in Africa are conditions that enable Russia to act as a disruptor or to undermine Western objectives in multilateral forums (Gavin, 2021).

Three potential scenarios for Russia and European countries in the Sahel region will likely escalate, including ongoing competition, diplomacy and dialogue, and the intensification of Russian influence. The first scenario involves continued competition for influence, which could lead to instability. The second scenario focuses on diplomacy and dialogue, while the third suggests Russia gaining territory and altering the regional balance of power (Goumidi, 2023).

So, what drives the Sahel countries to strengthen and expand partnerships with Russia? Times have changed since the Soviet Union attempted to combat "Western imperialism" in Africa through Marxist ideology. Modern Russian foreign policy lacks such ideological ambitions; however, its narrative emphasizes opposition to Western intervention in domestic politics, whether through promoting democracy and human rights or

military interventions. For instance, Russia highlights cooperation in humanitarian aid, which appeals to African leaders who perceive Western engagement as patronage. The geopolitical potential of such an alignment is significant: for example, Russia has used its veto power in the UN Security Council to protect African states from human rights sanctions (Zimbabwe in 2008), while in 2014, 24 African states abstained from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea (two states opposed it) (Faleg and Stanislav, 2020).

Expanding Russian military influence in West Africa and the Sahel region may lead to setbacks for other global actors. The visible resentment towards France in countries such as Mali, Chad, and Burkina Faso, expressed through mass protests calling for France's withdrawal, will impact not only France's influence in these nations but also the overall standing of the European Union, the United States, and other global powers. While the United States engagements have not kept pace with the evolving landscape in Africa, Russia's renewed interest in the continent could play a significant role in its political ambition to establish strategic control over energy networks and resources. Furthermore, Russia's return to Africa creates the potential for the continent to become a battleground for great power competition. As Russia expands its reach in Africa, other global actors are observing, and a new era of Cold War dynamics may emerge (Mensah and Kwesi, 2022).

Faleg, G., & Secrieru, S. point out that Russia in Africa faces several challenges:

Firstly, Russia's "great return" to sub-Saharan Africa is more modest than the press suggests. It is not part of a dominant grand strategy but rather opportunistic, driven by geopolitical necessities, and seeks to establish selective patron-client relationships with authoritarian leaders.

Secondly, Russia lacks the resources and diplomatic infrastructure to engage effectively with local communities and political and ethnic groups across Africa, significantly undermining its agents' effectiveness. While Moscow aspires to become a key player in electoral processes and offers support to African leaders at competitive rates, achieving this will take several years.

Thirdly, even if one assumes an increasing trend in Russian military and political influence in the coming years, Russia's return on investment could face geopolitical shocks, posing a risk to the country's global strategy. Therefore, Russia may opt for a pragmatic foreign policy approach, keeping costs low while maximizing economic opportunities as much as possible (Faleg and Stanislav, 2020).

A further limitation concerns Russia’s shortage of specialists with deep knowledge of Sahelian societies. Faleg and Secrieru note that Russia lacks the capacities and diplomatic infrastructure to engage effectively with local communities and politico-ethnic groups across Africa (Faleg and Stanislav, 2020). In the Sahel, this limitation may restrict Moscow’s ability to design socially informed and locally legitimate security policies, particularly in contexts shaped by land and water disputes, pastoral mobility, ethnic marginalisation, and the erosion of customary mediation mechanisms.

This limitation is particularly significant because effective engagement requires knowledge of local languages, customary authority, pastoral economies, centre–periphery relations, and community-based conflict-mediation mechanisms.

Russia's growing presence in Africa challenges comprehensive Western interests and the regional balance of power and threatens French influence. Russia is attempting to challenge the norms and principles of the current rules-based international order, including respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the independence of member states. Russia's interest in Africa presents an opportunity to promote President Putin's vision for a post-liberal international order. Russia aims to undermine the notion that democracy is a more efficient, just, and inclusive form of governance. This worldview aligns with Moscow's interests, as it favors its elite-centric model. Through its dealings with African countries, Russia has demonstrated its ability to create humanitarian and political disruptions for EU countries and challenge European spheres of influence in Africa (Mohamedou, 2024).

Russia has strategically capitalized on the failures of peacekeeping missions and military withdrawals by Western powers, intervening to provide diplomatic support, security assistance, and counter-terrorism aid to countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and now Niger. The new alliances and access to resources have proven beneficial.

The shift from Western alliances to Eastern ones in the Sahel region raises important questions about the future of regional security and the management of local

resources. Moreover, it remains uncertain whether this transition will alleviate the severity of the extremist violence that has destabilized the region for years. As the West declines and adopts a more passive role, it observes that the Sahel navigates this new geopolitical reality, which may lead to ongoing turmoil and strategic reorganization (Aja, 2024). The Nigerien forces announced their intention to replace American troops in northern Niger and entered a base housing American military personnel in May 2024. The United States plans to withdraw all troops from Niger by September 15, 2024. Major Yevkurov signed a "multisectoral cooperation" agreement with Nigerien officials, and Foreign Minister Lavrov also announced that Russia would send more military supplies and trainers to Burkina Faso, fulfilling claims by Africa Corps media in January that Russia plans to increase the number of Africa Corps personnel in the country to 300.

The increasing Russian military presence in Africa enables the Kremlin to utilize its limited resources to threaten NATO's southern flank and weaken Western influence. The establishment of a Russian naval base in Libya would pose a threat to Europe and NATO's southern flank by supporting Russian activities in the Mediterranean and potentially creating a permanent Russian force capable of threatening NATO's critical infrastructure. Russia's occupation of the American drone base in northern Niger would provide an opportunity for Russia to threaten NATO operations in the Mediterranean with versions of the mass-produced Shahed-136 attack drone.

Russia is working to establish a pro-Russian bloc to advance all its military, economic, and political objectives in Africa within the Sahel Alliance. This alliance consists of the three pro-Russian military councils in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The military councils announced the alliance shortly after meeting with Yevkurov in September 2023, and it is presumed they received the Kremlin's endorsement. Russia is leveraging this partnership to create export markets for arms sales and has enhanced cooperation in other economic sectors to further its broader economic goals. Finally, its "system security package" safeguards the autocrats and ensures their continued alignment with the Russian political orbit (Liam, 2024).

It seems that the military and civilian tools established at the international and regional levels to address the complexities of the African Sahel have failed for a variety of reasons:

> Most military initiatives taken by the Sahel countries, with the support of their international partners, have not achieved their primary objective of preventing the entrenchment and spread of extremist Islamic groups. The political foundations behind the conflicts involving some groups have been denied or ignored, making it challenging to identify the political goals that military interventions should aim to achieve.

These constraints explain why the French military operation Barkhane and the advisory and training missions under the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy have failed. Decades of defense and security cooperation have undoubtedly helped develop and enhance the operational capabilities of the Sahel armies,

but without sufficiently supporting reforms aimed at democratic control of the armed forces.

Standardized approaches have also failed, including the reform of the security system, which has led not only to six coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between August 2020 and July 2023 but also to widespread embezzlement of defense budgets and human rights violations by the armed forces in each of these countries. The combination of numerous initiatives adopted by various summits held to resolve the Sahel crisis - the G5 Sahel, the Coalition for the Sahel, the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S), and the European Takuba Task Force - has also made it impossible to coordinate and ensure the coherence of the heavy institutional mechanism entrusted to the International Coalition for the Sahel, which was agreed to be established in Nouakchott in June 2020.

Conclusion:

The study concluded that Russia's growing role in the African Sahel during 2014–2024 cannot be reduced to a mere security response to the escalation of jihadist threats. Rather, it falls within a broader strategy to rebuild Russia's presence in Africa, compete with Western influence, expand Moscow's geopolitical room for maneuver, and secure economic and diplomatic interests tied to natural resources, markets, and political support in international forums.

However, Russia’s growing presence should not be interpreted as evidence of an integrated and all-encompassing grand strategy. It combines strategic geopolitical objectives with tactical, selective, and

resource-sensitive instruments. Education and alumni networks may offer Russia a potential long-term channel of influence by building familiarity and professional connections with future African elites; nevertheless, their effects are neither automatic nor uniform, and their future impact remains uncertain because it falls beyond the article's empirical period of 2014–2024.

The findings confirm the central hypothesis that unconditional Russian support for military regimes, when it interacts with weak institutions, low political legitimacy, and social and local divisions, may reproduce fragility rather than contain it. The problem lies not in external intervention itself or in the nationality of the security partner, but in a cooperation model based on protecting central authority and equipping it with coercive means without linking that assistance to security-sector reform, civilian protection, respect for international law, restoration of the constitutional process, and the expansion of local mediation channels. This produces what may be called a "cycle of mutual fragility": military authorities, due to their limited legitimacy, need an external partner that does not impose political reforms; Russia benefits from this relationship by entrenching its influence and expanding its privileges; while local communities bear the cost of continued repression, declining accountability, and eroding trust in the state.

The study also showed that the jihadist threat in the Sahel cannot be explained or confronted through a purely military lens, since groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara exploit the interplay between state weakness and disputes over land, water, and grazing

land, the historical marginalization of peripheral regions, the erosion of traditional mediation mechanisms, and abuses committed by government forces, militias, and foreign powers. Military operations not accompanied by fair management of local conflicts and reform of justice and security institutions therefore remain incapable of severing the sources of recruitment and funding.

From the perspective of national role theory, the study reveals a gap between Russia's "role conception" as a partner that respects sovereignty and its actual "role performance," which is based on elite and security relations and the political protection of military authorities. It concludes that the future of security in the Sahel will not be determined by swapping partnerships between the West and Russia, but by the ability of regional states and their partners to move beyond an approach that separates counterterrorism from political legitimacy, development, and social justice — by subjecting security institutions to civilian oversight and legal accountability. The most important conclusion remains that sustainable stability cannot be imported through arms deals or the deployment of mercenaries, but must instead be built through legitimate institutions, responsible governance, fair local settlements, and transparent external partnerships subject to the rule of law.

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أحمد عسكر، دوافع التنافس الروسي الأوروبي في الساحل والصحراء: مجالاته ومآلاته، مركز الأهرام للدراسات السياسية والاستراتيجية، تاريخ الاطلاع 2023/04/28 على 14:00، مأخوذ من موقع:
https://epc.ae/ar/details/brief/altanafus-alruwsiu-aluwrubiyu-fi-alsaahil-walsahrai-majalatuh-wamalatuh
ميدل ايست، روسيا تعزز نفوذها في الساحل الإفريقي مع تراجع الدور الفرنسي، بتاريخ 2021/07/15 و تاريخ الاطلاع 2023/04/12 11.00، أنظر:

https://middle-east-online.com/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B2%D8%B2-%D9%86%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B0%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A

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