**Mercenary Geopolitics:**

**Russo-African Security Cooperation and Alliance Reconfiguration In the Sahel**

May 2024

GUID: 2684954P

DCU ID: 21109095

CU ID: 39312151

Presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of:

International Master in Security, Intelligence and Strategic Studies (IMSISS)

Word Count: 22 933

Supervisor: Ammon Cheskin

Date of Submission: 7th May 2024

# Mercenary Geopolitics:

## Russo-African Security Cooperation and Alliance Reconfiguration In the Sahel

## Abstract

The Sahel region is currently experiencing a strategic shift driven by the convulsive military and political dynamics of the Coup Belt. This shift entails a broad realignment of regional security alliances in response to escalating regional threats; altering the strategic balance and calculus of both regional and extra-regional actors operating in the tri-border area. Against the geopolitical backdrop of returning great power competition, renewed interest in Sub-Saharan Africa has introduced Russian Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) to the Sahel. Most notably, the Wagner Group has emerged and positioned itself as a security partner offering Sahelian states an alternative to retain their sovereignty on national security matters over perceived neocolonial paternalism associated to the western liberal model. There is a strong correlation between Wagner Group engagement and soon after prompting Western troop withdrawal from the Sahel.

The following research focuses on alliance reconfiguration processes within the context of Russian power projection into the African theatre. This is accomplished through the study of security interdependence and intraregional alignment patterns in the Sahel over the 2018-2023 time period. Based on structural determinants of regional insecurity and the theoretical neorealist framework provided by Neorealism, Balance of Threat (BoT), Regional Security Complex (RSC), alignment and alliance theories; this research sets out to determine the drivers of regional alliance reconfiguration in the Sahel region and examine Russian subversion as a potential source of realignment. To this end, a comparative analysis on threat perception and balancing behavior across the cases of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Chad was conducted to identify Sahelian alignment patterns; then used to contrast individual and collective threat assessments against associated trigger events, outcome events and confirmed sources of Russian information manipulation and interference.

# Contents

## Introduction

The Sahel region's strategic importance is accentuated by its proximity to Europe and the Middle East; the possibility of bad-faith actors exerting control over migration flows, as well as over the propagation of extremist ideology, exposes inherent human security and national security risks which neither Southern European nor Maghrebi states are willing to absorb – consolidating it as a recurring item at the top of the global counter-terrorism agenda.

Sahelian alliance formation processes and security privatization stem from shared security challenges – namely the threat of violent extremism, transnational crime, and political instability – which drive states toward high alignment behaviors and collective security mechanisms. In the case of the central Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) there is a significant reliance on both regional formations (formerly, the G5 Sahel; recently, the Alliance of Sahel States) as well as on bilateral engagements with international partners (formerly, France; recently, Russia). This reliance on regional formations and external security partners has been exacerbated in the context of recent political upheaval leading to national regime change throughout the region.

The recent increase in alignment and alliance behavior by the Sahel states reflects an adaptive response to complex and evolving strategic and security environments at all levels of analysis – global, interregional, regional and domestic – by which states have been forced to navigate a dynamic interplay of national sovereignty, regional and international cooperation. This drive towards alignment and alliance choices is undeniably influenced by external powers offering military support, training, and resources; which carry the potential to both supplement and undermine regional security efforts.

To frame this research, the following subsections will provide the necessary global, interregional and regional contexts and colliding strategic interests, security agendas and security (and threat) actors. As will be further explored in later sections, these will come to shape Sahelian threat construction, alignment and alliance calculations, as well as drive Russian Private Military and Security Company (PMSC) in the region.

## The Global Context: Strategic Competition and Russo-African Security Cooperation

Russia's return to Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has been motivated by key geo-economic and geo-political strategic interests embedded at the core of 2015-2023 Russian foreign policy and national security strategies. Russo-African cooperation has thus exponentially increased; centered around securing rare natural resources, expanding Russia's arms trade and security export capabilities; and yielded over 21 new military-technical cooperation agreements during that period. Russian Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) feature prominently in these efforts with a coordinated use of active measures[1] aimed at shifting the current regional governance and security landscape.

In strategic terms, there are wide-ranging implications of increasing Russo-African security cooperation as it acts as a collider for global strategic and geopolitical interests. Firstly, there is the concern of heightening security interdependence with NATO's southern flank **Invalid source specified.**, best exemplified by the insurgent terrorist threat in the Sahel and its subsequent threats to South European Member States.

Secondly, there is the securitization of global capitalist operations. African resources (such as lithium, uranium, cobalt, gold, petroleum, timber, etc.), extractive industries and strategic enclaves play a crucial role in the global supply chain. Strategic balance, however, is increasingly threatened as Russia and China further their interests in the region through elite cooption strategies and gain access to natural resources**Invalid source specified.**. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative will successfully consolidate East Africa and the West Indian Ocean as a strategic corridor for global commercial trade, and the Red Sea[2] will be further consolidated as the key to securing crucial maritime routes in oil and trade supply chains. Within this context, NATO will be forced to reexamine its theater strategy – past (Operation Ocean Shield, 2008-2016) and future – to address Member States and adversaries engaging in extra-regional power projection and

---

[1] Despite literature (2018-2022) repeatedly identifies Libya, Sudan, Madagascar, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali and Central African Republic (CAR) as main targets; recent activity (2023-2024) displays a new stream directed towards Burkina Faso, Niger, Ivory Coast, South Africa, Nigeria, Senegal, Cameroon, and Chad.

[2] A strategic enclave on its own right; with the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal constituting 2 out of 7 global chokepoints for oil and natural gas trade.

competition[3] into Africa, since its regional security will likely dictate the state of global maritime, energy and economic security.

Thirdly, there is the strategic challenge of Russia partially overcoming political isolation and outmaneuvering international sanctions through the convergence of Russo-African cooperation and African security privatization – thus undermining NATO strategic interests and European security in the eastern flank. This possibility has been exemplified by Russia's long-term pursuit of the A3's votes in the UNSC and of the 54 African votes in the UNGA, which culminated with 17 abstentions and 1 vote (long-time ally Eritrea) against UNGA Resolution ES-11/1UN on the Russo-Ukrainian war. That is, against the 143 votes in favor of the resolution, African states accounted for almost 50% (18/40) of remaining states receptive to Russian aggression despite a long history of anti-colonialism. Further, reemerging Russo-African relations currently foster security-for-resource exchanges under which state-sponsored Russian Private Military and Security Companies (most notably, the Wagner Group[4]) secure an open avenue for engagement in illicit markets to circumvent Western sanctions, finance the war in Ukraine and further compromise NATO's eastern flank (Owen, 2022).

Therefore, determining who utilizes, occupies, and exercises control over African resources and strategic enclaves will be a paramount strategic challenge for the coming years of heightened strategic competition in a multipolar system. As Russia and China continue to expand their influence over the continent, NATO allies will be forced to reformulate their strategic partnerships and increase regional engagement – leaving African states to increasingly engage in balancing behavior (as will be later explored).

**The Interregional Context: VNSAs, Counterterrorism, and the Sahelian Security Crisis**

As alluded above, the Sahel's strategic importance is accentuated by its proximity to Europe, the Middle East and, therefore, their interregional security interaction – which acts as the driver of extra-regional penetration. This is because the possibility of bad-faith actors exerting control over migration flows, as well as over the propagation of extremist ideology, exposes inherent human security and national security risks which

---

[3] Such as militarization in Djibuti and port-capture in Sudan and Somalia.
[4] After the 2023 Wagener Group Rebellion and Yevgeny Prigozhin's death, there have been efforts to rebrand it as the Africa Corps. Whether this rebrand will be successful remains to be seen.

neither Southern European nor Maghrebi states are willing to absorb – consolidating the Sahel as a recurring item at the top of the global counter-terrorism agenda. The region's economic, humanitarian and security dependency on external actors further complicates this situation.

The current security crisis in the Sahel is exacerbated by multiple socio-economic development challenges – mostly driven by environmental degradation and its subsequent strain on local livelihoods. The region's deterioration, combined with failing national infrastructures and rapid population growth, has radically increased displacement and resource-based conflict (Badewa, 2022); perpetuating poverty and deprivation cycles which in turn fuel political unrest and insurgency.

As an added complexity layer, the Sahel suffers from a resource curse (predominantly, oil and uranium) – characterized by national elite corruption, foreign interests and foreign exploitation of natural resources – which has historically failed to benefit local populations by exacerbating economic inequality, accelerating environmental degradation and sparking ethnic conflict. This historical exploitation has effectively fueled resentment and distrust among the Sahelian peoples against the national political elites, resulting in higher rates of youth disenfranchisement, radicalization, and militancy. More recently, the gold boom in the central Sahel states has attracted over $5 billion in investments (Badewa, 2022) and a surge in artisanal mining on which violent non-state actors (VNSAs) are actively capitalizing on (illicit financing, mining taxes, "security" services provision, smuggling, ransom, etc.), contributing to the broader regional socio-economic and security crisis.

The Sahel has become a terrorist strong hold hampering global security efforts; geographic dimensions and insufficient regional security capabilities compound counter-terrorism challenges, making the Sahel a persistent hotspot for global insurgency and terrorist groups– such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Boko Haram, and Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), among others. One must note, however, that cataloging the full spectrum of VNSAs currently active in the Sahel remains a significant challenge due to complex inter-group dynamics and fluid group identities, often displaying overlapping operations and motivations, which shift in response to the changing dynamics.

7

As Badewa (2022) puts it, the "instability in the Sahel acts as a force multiplier for the violent campaigns waged by these groups whose multiple identities, alliances and allegiance make the region's security milieu highly complex and fluid". Initially, it was the Tuareg rebellions and the rise of AQIM in Mali during the mid-2000s that fueled the emergence of VNSAs in the central Sahel's tri-border region. Regime changes following the Arab Spring in North Africa, particularly the fall of Gaddafi in Libya (2011), created a power vacuum that facilitated the spread of violent extremism in the Sahel. The spillover effect from heightened border porosity – together with the historical combination of political impasse, rebellions, and state failure that plagued Sahelian states – significantly contributed to the proliferation of military-grade weapons – originally supplied by global powers to Libyan rebels– among insurgents in the Central Sahel.

Ungoverned spaces provide sanctuary for VNSAs, who notably capitalize on local grievances and state weaknesses to expand their influence and create transnational organized networks which terrorize local populations and destabilize the Sahel's greater neighborhood. These groups actively exploit the unstable environment and border porosity (unrestricted freedom of movement) to transition between militant and civilian locales – further complicating counterterrorism efforts. Additionally, unrestricted transborder movement has led to violent clashes between nomadic peoples and sedentary farmers, exacerbating socio-political tensions and contributing to the wider regional instability.

Counterterrorism efforts have been continuous and increasingly complex, operating under an ambiguous regional security architecture in which local, regional, and global actors have been at constant tension. Out of all of these (see Table 1 below), Operation Barkhane (France) and MINUSMA (UN) have been the most significant form of external intervention; involving the deployment of thousands working alongside G5 Sahel and European forces. The United States has also played a crucial role – under AFRICOM, the Pan-Sahel Initiative and the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative – in providing logistical support, intelligence, and training to Sahelian and coalition forces operating in the region.

*Table 1 Main multinational security initiatives in the Sahel (2013-2023, original)*

| Multinational initiative | Lead | Dates | Location |
|---|---|---|---|
| MINUSMA | UN | 2013-2023 | Mali |
| FC-G5S | G5S | 22017-2023 | G5 Sahel |
| Operation Barkhane | France | 2014-2022 | G5 Sahel |
| JTF Takuba | EU | 2021-2022 | tri-border (Mali, Burkina, Niger) |
| LGA JTF | LGA | 2017 | Sahel |
| MNJTF | AU | 1994-X | Chad, Niger |
| EU-TM Mali | EU | 2013-X | Mali |
| EU-CAP Mali | EU | 2014-X | Mali |
| EU-CAP Niger | EU | 2012-X | Niger |
| EUMPM Niger | EU | 2023-X | Niger |

Yet, despite significant multinational investments, the crisis persists. The multinational security operations have been undermined by limited political will, inadequate funding and personnel, disjointed planning, and vested interests – both by national and western elites. Under the pressure of intervention fatigue and the complex interplay of local and external dynamics, these operations have faced severe criticism and challenges concerning their operational effectiveness.

Strategic misalignments in multinational counterinsurgency efforts have failed against more population-centered groups, like the ISWAP. This is because external securitization efforts have not addressed the socio-economic root causes of regional insecurity. Neither hard nor soft security measures (military operations, joint military and civilian task forces, information campaigns, reinforcement of CIMIC functions, etc.) have effectively addressed the concerns of the local populations affected by insecurity and have crumbled under public scrutiny – particularly, over controversial Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) efforts and human rights abuses associated with national and foreign security forces.

The involvement of Russian PMSCs has recently introduced further complexity, as they position themselves as a cost-effective, alternative option to the liberal intervention model – which African states find particularly attractive as they do not carry obligations to comply with liberal reforms, contrary to traditional Western aid. However, their presence and operations have sparked debates over sovereignty, accountability, and the long-term implications for regional stability.

In short, the complex interplay of roles between local and external actors, along with their conflicting interests, further perpetuates insecurity in the Sahel.

## The Regional Context: The African Coup Belt, ECOWAS and Niger Crisis

Over the 2020-2023 period, the African Coup Belt[5] has seen an uprise in political instability through a total of 15 coup events – with 9 successful and 5 (confirmed[6]) attempts. Out of those coup events, 11 have originated from 5 out of 15 total ECOWAS member states (Table 1). There are multiple underlying factors behind this regional trend, ranging from corruption accusations to national security degradation. International reactions to this phenomenon have widely varied, often rooted in overarching strategic interests and regional competition between global powers. The Western coalition (whose regional presence is headed by France, the EU and the US) has mostly supported the deposed democratically elected governments; albeit composed of unpopular, isolated leaders with a history of supporting liberal interventionism. China and Russia, however, have capitalized on this trend to expand their influence on the African continent by supporting the new military regimes and exploiting the associated wave of anti-western sentiment.

---

[5] Highly localized around West Africa and the Sahel regions. Country inclusion varies between authors – with Sierra Leone, Mali, Guinea, Chad, Sudan, Burkina Faso and Niger being frequently cited. While some authors consider Gabon to be part of the Coup Belt due to its 2019 and 2023 coups, this research excludes it based on low recurrence and relative geopolitical distance.

[6] African leaders facing domestic backlash are often times willing to report fabricated coups to justify the implementation of extraordinary security or repressive measures; distinguishing legitimate events from illegitimate ones is rather difficult without conducting field research – reason why unconfirmed cases have been discounted. Note that these numbers come from the author's data collection and do not rely on a particular authoritative source.

*Table 2 2020-2023 ECOWAS coups (original)*

| ECOWAS members | Successful Coup | Attempted Coup |
|---|---:|---:|
| Benin | 0 | 0 |
| Burkina Faso | **2** | **1** |
| Cabo Verde | 0 | 0 |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 0 | 0 |
| The Gambia | 0 | 0 |
| Ghana | 0 | 0 |
| Guinea | **1** | 0 |
| Guinea-Bissau | 0 | **1** |
| Liberia | 0 | 0 |
| Mali | **2** | 0 |
| Niger | **1** | **1** |
| Nigeria | 0 | 0 |
| Senegal | 0 | 0 |
| Sierra Leone | 0 | **2** |
| Togo | 0 | 0 |
| **Total** | **6** | **5** |

Since its founding in 1975, ECOWAS has been an integral pillar of West African integration, liberalism, and security cooperation – gaining international recognition and notoriety across the continent. The organization had previously remained united throughout the decades and, despite a history of significant regional turmoil and civil wars, consolidated itself as a respected international player preventing wider fractures and conflict escalation among members. This is no longer the case. The political upheaval of the past three years has put ECOWAS under significant strain, with:

- Mali demarking itself from the French and witnessing Colonel Assimi Goïta overthrow two administrations within the span of nine months (2020-2021);

- Alpha Conde being ousted from Guinea following widespread public protests and repression over his attempt to secure an unconstitutional third term (2021);

- Burkina Faso experiencing such a crippling escalation of insecurity and public frustration that ended up resulting in three military coups over the government's inability to de-escalate the crisis (2022-2023);

- Political tensions from President Bio's heavily contested reelection culminated in two failed coup attempts in Sierra Leone  (2023);

- Niger's military overthrowing (pro-Western, pro-France) President Bazoum in response to insufficient counterterrorism measures and entering into a tense

political standoff with ECOWAS over the possibility of military intervention (2023);

- Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger submitting their formal withdrawal from the organization (2023) – which will be formally ratified in the coming year (2024).

The central Sahelian states – Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – are at the core of this trend. Each of them suffered abrupt regime changes prompted by military putschists amidst the rapidly deteriorating security crisis from the jihadist insurgency in the tri-border region. The new military juntas, facing severe international pressure but widespread internal popular support, quickly signaled a strategic realignment in the Sahelian geopolitical landscape. Soon after the respective coups, all resisted external liberal influence, adopted anti-Western rhetoric, displayed mutual solidarity, broke traditional security partnerships with France, withdrew from longstanding regional formations (G5 Sahel, ECOWAS) and turned to Russia as an alternative security partner. The stated motivation is to restore their sovereignty over national security matters to intensify counterterrorism operations. The resulting expenditure increase towards national defense and security privatization has come at the cost of aggressive foreign extractivism, as well as of significant human right infringements to the detriment of local populations.

As will be later explored, it is the Niger crisis (July 2023-present) that acted as the final detonator in the consolidation of this regional realignment, leading to the block withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the G5 Sahel (G5S), ECOWAS and, ultimately, the counter-reactionary formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS). The resulting 2022-2023 French and UN withdrawals from the central Sahel, followed by the 2024 US withdrawal from Chad, further consolidated the regional political shift – intensifying geopolitical competition, power projection and a security vacuum exploited by opportunistic illiberal actors, such as the Russian Wagner Group.

Facing the challenges in the Sahel, regional unity among the West African liberal block will be tested through the individual responses from coastal West African states in the coming year. Nigeria, a continental and regional hegemon, is currently the one setting the (faltering) pace, as it has not only been the seat of ECOWAS since its formation, but also assumed the chairmanship of ECOWAS at the beginning of the second quarter of

2023. After hard lining against military coups during its acceptance speech in the July 2023 ECOWAS Summit, the Nigerien crisis challenged Nigeria´s stance in the weeks following its ascension. Its response to the coup was an immediately escalatory miscalculation which diverted from ECOWAS' traditional post-coup playbook (suspension of membership, economic sanctions, call for a democratic transition plan, calling for early elections, etc.); going as far as to extend the threat of an ECOWAS intervention in Niger. It´s strength as chair, however, has since been affected its own internal security crises and decreasing support – its credibility further eroded by a half-hearted response to Senegal's announcement postponing its presidential election.  In the meantime, other ECOWAS members do not seem to reconcile on the way forward, lacking both the will and the military capability to launch any short-term military intervention in Niger without western military backing and the possibility of entering in full-scale conflict with the AoSS.

As a result, mistrust and resentment over ECOWAS' collective inability to face the current West African political crisis has begun to appear, while the situation quickly fuels previous conspiratorial accusations of the organization's agenda pushing the enforcement of French interests in the region. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso's withdrawal and subsequent regional alienation significantly diminish the prospects of a democratic settlement and has put ECOWAS at a political stalemate. It is unclear how the organization would react in the event of another member state succumbing to military regime change – and how that might further affect the current regional dynamics.

Once again, these geopolitical tensions reinforce discourse and consideration of hard security solutions (such as military responses) over that of necessary governance, institutional and security sector reform – as well as over the (partially contested) security-development nexus approach which other state (famously, China) and non-state actors often champion. This is likely to further undermine human security factors, reinforce radicalization cycles and extremist recruitment, and ultimately continue to escalate the regional security crisis at an exponential rate.

Despite the local nature of the Sahel (security) crisis and the Niger (political) crisis, reflected in the contestation between political and military African elites, it is evident that the Sahel is becoming an arena of global competition in the forming multipolar

system. The evolving foreign engagements, particularly by Russia, underscore this strategic pivot highlighting the complex interplay of local aspirations and global interests colliding regionally. The liberal bloc (US, France and EU led) is caving under the significant advances of the illiberal bloc (Russia, China), while Middle Eastern powers (Turkey, Iran, UAE, Qatar) venture further into extra-regional power projection – which had been previously concentrating in their immediate neighborhood (Red Sea and Horn of Africa) – and signal the emergence of a third bloc. The multiplicity of competing strategic global agendas will likely add to regional instability (as was the case in Sudan and Somalia). That said, there is still a possibility that central Sahel states will be able to exploit this to their advantage by obtaining more strategic alternatives and reclaiming greater agency against global powers (as was the case of Sudan before the 2023 civil conflict).

## Methodology

The following subsections proceed to outline, in detail, the underpinning research design process undertaken during this dissertation by addressing the following:

1. Research aims and objectives;

2. Case selection and research scope;

3. Research questions;

4. Research methods;

5. Research challenges and limitations.

### Aims and Objectives:

Within the greater context of African agency, regional security and power competition, the specific research objectives (RO) of this dissertation are to:

RO 1. Identify the patterns of security cooperation across the Sahel and the drivers of Russian selective targeting.

RO 2. Critically evaluate and apply those frameworks relevant to Russo-African security cooperation and decision-making processes, such as power projection, balance of threat, strategic alignment and alliance formation processes.

RO 3. Assess the impact of Russian power projection on the reconfiguration of African strategic alliances.

RO 4. Highlight the implications of Russo-African security cooperation as an emergent strategic challenge by determining the influence of Russian private military and security companies (PMSCs) on regional stability and alliance configurations.

**Case selection and scope**

This research does not aim to generalize the status of Russo-African relations but, instead, seeks to achieve an understanding of the drivers, determinants, and outcomes (i.e. extent of effectiveness) of Russian influence over African alliance formation processes. This logically requires an in-depth analysis of the drivers, determinants, and outcomes of African alliance formation processes themselves; as well as an understanding of the Russian power projection strategy in the region.

Although, as part of preliminary research, the author has extensively delved into the history of Russian strategic culture (from tzarist active measures to soviet reflexive control theory); the origins, networks and modus operandi of Russian Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs); strategic and foreign policy documents concerning cooperation with African partners; and Russian strategic behavior within multilateral security cooperation frameworks; this dissertation refrains from adopting the Russian perspective as its primary focus and instead chooses to explain African strategic decision making within this context – this was done in a conscious attempt to fill an identified gap in both neorealist literature and western discourse (which, admittedly, often overlap). While establishing the underpinning characteristics of Russian strategy is required to accomplish this approach, it is understanding the behavior of African states within structural constraints and external penetration which is of primary interest.

Similarly, as part of the re-scoping effort, it was further decided that – while undoubtedly needed in academia[7] and crucial to the global strategic environment – dedicated consideration to NATO strategic interests[8] and regional strategy was to be excluded from

---

[7] There is a clear literature gap addressing NATO's Southern Flank and security interdependence with Sub-Saharan Africa; as well as Russia's pragmatic use of the African theater to outmaneuver western international sanctions and isolation, among others.
[8] That is, outside of the preliminary contextualization to illustrate the extent of the strategic threat.

the research. This was done to mitigate the risk of any possible ethical concerns derived from the author's employment at the time of writing.

Despite a wealth of Russo-African security cooperation throughout the continent, further refining the scope of the dissertation was required in order to effectively accomplish the research aims and objectives within reasonable limitations. With Mali – and, to a lesser extent, Burkina Faso – being focal points of research since the inception and initial submission of the research design proposal, the Nigerien crisis (July 2023) evidenced the need to re-evaluate and re-scope.  It was then decided to exclude initially selected Central African states (CAR, DRC) for the greater benefit of analyzing the (projected, at the time) collapse of the G5 Sahel (G5S). This proved to be judicious when a wider regional strategic shift unraveled with the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS), the tri-border states' (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and, ultimately, the formal dissolution of the G5S. Albeit foreseeable to Africanists and strategists alike, it is the most rapid African strategic shift to unravel in decades; and it perfectly fulfilled the author's initial research interest and objectives.

Admittedly, there is very limited multidisciplinary research directly observing the effects of Russian power projection and influence over African alliance reconfiguration processes – which will be addressed under the subsection "Research challenges and limitations". This likely due to (i) the opaque nature of the Russian covert engagement approach (Private Military and Security Companies, subversion, illicit crime flows in Africa), (ii) the recently renewed and rapidly escalating tensions in the global and regional theaters and, with them, (iii) the emergence of new strategic challenges and necessity for broader strategic foresight. There is, however, significant relevance to this research topic within the academic field; in strategic terms, there are wide-ranging implications. Increasing Russo-African security cooperation altering the continent's strategic and political balance is just one of them.

**Research questions:**

Thus, to address the initial aims and objectives within the refined scope, this research will aim to answer the question: *To what extent is Russian power projection driving regional alliance reconfiguration in the Sahel?*

The answer will be guided through the following sub-questions:

(1) How is security cooperation in the Sahel regionally patterned?
(2) What are the characteristics of Russian power projection in the Sahel?
(3) To what extent is Russian PMSC engagement driving alliance reconfiguration through subversive behavior?

**Research methods:**

This dissertation will employ a qualitative research methodology to explore the extent, nature, and implications of Russian power projection in the Sahel region. A qualitative approach was chosen for its strength in understanding complex social phenomena through detailed contextual analysis. Due to several limitations encountered at the time of writing – which will be later discussed – the research relies on secondary data sources to construct a comprehensive view of the geopolitical shift currently affecting the Sahel, while exploring the role of Russian influence into autonomous decision processes driving strategic realignment and alliance reconfiguration.

It was ultimately concluded that the combination of an extensive literature review and a rigorous secondary data collection process would sufficiently allow for theory and practice to be analyzed, and to directly observe the intersection between the fields of Russian power projection, Russo-African cooperation, African security privatization and alliance formation processes.

A comparative case study was conducted to identify and analyze potential sources of Sahelian alignment patterns – towards an ultimate assessment on the feasibility and extent of Russian subversion as a source of realignment. Specifically, the research goes on to compare threat perception and balancing behavior across the cases of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Chad; and contrast the resulting individual and collective threat assessments against associated trigger events, outcome events and sources of Russian information manipulation and interference (i.e. disinformation).

*__Data collection:__*

The author embarked on an exhaustive literature review and secondary data collection of open-source intelligence available on the topics of Russian power projection, Russo-African cooperation, African security privatization and alliance formation processes. Sources of data included:

- Academic journals and books: entailing a thorough review of existing literature on international relations and security theory, Russian foreign policy, African geopolitics, etc. to provide the necessary theoretical frameworks and context to underpin the empirical analysis. Access to reputable academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, Taylor and Francis, and other university and online libraries were leveraged during this process.

- Reports from international think tanks and NGOs: publications from organizations like the International Crisis Group, Chatham House, Brookings Institution, the Institute for Security Studies, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace offered further insights into both Russian activities and local responses, as well as emerging western narratives surrounding developments as they evolved.

- Official documents and speeches: statements, policies, and reports from the Russian government (mainly, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Sahelian governments, regional and international organizations (ECOWAS, African Union, EU, UN, etc.) offered official perspectives, overt engagement approaches, and formal state policies.

- News articles and investigative reports: reputable global and regional news sources were used to track recent events and commentary on Russian activities in the Sahel, as well as Sahelian public opinions.

- Secondary data from research institutes: quantitative and qualitative data on military expenditures, trade figures, Africa coup recurrence, political violence and Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) activities was sourced from reputable databases like SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), the Institute for Security Studies, the World Bank, etc. However, due to the reduced scope of this research, only the data extracted from the African

Centre for Strategic Studies was featured and appropriately cited during the analytical phase.

### *Data analysis:*

Textual content from the above sources was consequently analyzed to extract information relevant to the research topic and key themes (Russian power projection, Russo-African security cooperation, Private Military and Security Companies and regional alliances). Parallel to this process, the author developed a coding scheme based on an initial literature review phase, which was iteratively refined throughout the reminder of the data collection process.

Themes relevant to Russian strategies, the utilization of Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) and regional alliance dynamics, were identified and analyzed across different sources; requiring contextual interpretation of the identified patterns and their relation to the applicable theoretical frameworks. Systematic identification, coding, and categorizing of collected data was therefore key to the structured comparative analysis later conducted to identify alignment and engagement patterns across the different Sahel countries.

### Research challenges and limitations:

#### *The challenges and limitations of performing secondary research*

While deemed sufficient to address the research aims and objectives, secondary research does carry inherent limitations which must be addressed. Within the context of the present dissertation, this includes: (1) overdependence on limited available sources (i.e. partial access or lack of up-to-date information on recent developments); (2) overreliance on dominant academic and media narratives which may be subject to bias (i.e. intersubjective construction of covert action qualified/programmatic success; narratives and counter-narratives surrounding the Russian Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) programmatic success; amplification by Western and, possibly, disinformation by Russian actors); and (3) underrepresentation of Sahelian perspectives.

These limitations were carefully considered throughout all stages of the research process (data selection, analysis, and interpretation) to ensure that the conclusions drawn are reflective of the phenomenon's complexity.

Still, one must note that the decision to proceed without conducting primary research was not taken lightly. Firstly, conducting field research in the Sahel was not feasible due to an overall lack of security, resource and research capabilities. Secondly, and most importantly, the relative sensitivity of the research topic (Russian strategy; subversion; France; Sahel's realignment) posed concerns over potential risks to informational security from the conduction of interviews. Thirdly, the time constraints experienced during the writing of this dissertation were extreme, which impaired the primary data collection process and execution of interviews with academia and non-NATO personnel. Operating within such constraints and, considering that none of the feasible interview subjects would be in a position to mitigate any of the secondary research limitations outlined above (western bias, access to more updated or reliable data), the conduction of primary research was therefore discontinued.

### *The challenges and limitations of a state-centric approach to African security: considerations on neorealism, the Westphalian state system, and VNSAs as primary threat actors*

One must acknowledge that, even if the theory encompasses all of the units inhabiting the international system, neorealism mainly focuses on the study of great powers – which by default became the key units of analysis in literature. As Waltz (1979) observes, this is because "in international politics, as in any self-help system, the units of greatest capability set the scene of action for others as well as for themselves. In systems theory, structure is a generative notion; and the structure is generated by the interactions of its principal part". Bendel (1994) reinforces this notion: "If structure is in part defined by the distribution of power, and the bulk of that power in concentrated in a few units, it makes sense to focus on those units in developing theory".  This is not to say that lesser powers are excluded from the theory due to their limited role in its development, but that their impact is limited in comparison – even when they interact amongst each other. This seems to be a prevalent assumption in neorealist literature, which overwhelmingly focuses on great and rising powers. Even those studies focusing on the Global North, predominantly choose the Middle East (composed of middle powers) as their theater of application. Despite this literature gap, smaller powers exhibit balancing behavior which will, in fact, be a predominant pillar of this research.

That said, it is important to recognize that the dominance of domestic insecurity is likely the underlying reason for most authors to stay away from neorealist, state-centric and regional security analyses of Sub-Saharan Africa. Some might go as far as to argue that African regional security complexes are unstructured security regions. Such a perception would stem from a lack of specialized Africanist knowledge to transition into the application of the theoretical frameworks; as it is well known within the regionalist field that African states do incur in interstate conflict but manifest it through asymmetric and proxy warfare – reason why it often gets mischaracterized in Western literature as intrastate conflict.

The level of complexity and lack of specialist consensus has resulted in (1) an absence of neorealist research focusing on African state behavior and alliance formation; (2) an absence of a multidimensional approach on what little literature is available on the topic – producing siloed state-centric or human-centric analyses; and (3) an overwhelming tendency to focus on certain extraverted, more powerful states (Rwanda, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, etc.) as the predominant units of observation. Overall, this often results in analysists and researchers operating with partial situational awareness on the realities of African security dynamics.

Even the most mature of the few in-depth applications available in literature, Buzan and Wæver´s (2003), notably struggles to reconciliate the African security landscape with their system level and their comparative interregional observations. As it notes: "there is a lot of spillover from and meddling in the domestic level, and quite a lot of transnational interaction arising from the post-traditional networks and the interplay between regimes and insurgency movements. Substate rather than interstate security issues dominate the agenda" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 240).

To illustrate this challenge, even Buzan and Wæver (2003:247) proceed to affirm that interstate alliances in Africa are scarce, with transnational interaction often arising from post-traditional networks and the interplay between regimes and insurgency movements – as well as the formation of alliances between insurgent movements, which can move up to the state level upon success. This assertion shows one of the prevalent misconceptions at the time (and, unfortunately, 20 years after its time of publication) which remains demonstrably false; postindependence, African states have always shown

high engagement in intestate alliance formation (often intertwining security, political and socio-economic levels) as encouraged by the underlying Pan-Africanist sentiments. For reference, the below figure presents a non-exhaustive illustration (just in the central Sahel, it is missing the G5S and AoSS) of some of these regional formations:

*Figure 1 Supranational African bodies **Invalid source specified.***



In sum: while it is undeniable that African security is predominantly patterned at the substate level due to the construction of the African state under colonization and decolonization processes, there are still distinctive security patterns of (varying) strength at the interregional and regional levels – which will be later explored in the literature review of RSCT applications to Africa and the subsequent definition of the West African and Sahelian complexes. Still, a purely state-centric view to analyze African (and by extension, Sahelian) regional security dynamics would be rather limited because of its reliance on the imprint of the Westphalian state system. An overreliance on a state-centric approach would neglect to reflect the dominant networks of violent nonstate actors (VNSAs) displaying systems of security interaction in the continent. At the same time, an overreliance on a human-centric, VNSA focused approach would neglect to accurately reflect structural constraints and system level calculations affecting state behavior and alliance formation.

To achieve a balanced assessment, there is a need to reconcile the state-centric and human-centric approaches to the study of African regional security interdependence – as the human-centric security complex **Invalid source specified.** does influence state behavior. As will be explored in later sections (illustrated by the interaction between the central Sahel states), this is because the security interdependence patterns are based on amity and enmity – predominantly shaped by common ethnicity, shared ideology and/or common cause. Balancing that reconciliation will remain a challenge throughout the remainder of this research, due to both time and space constraints.

## Theoretical framework

The following section will proceed to outline the research's underpinning theoretical framework, which decomposes into: (1) the overarching neorealist theory; (2) the distinction between balance of power and balance of threat theories; (3) neorealist perspectives on alignment and alliance formation; and (4) regional security complex theory. When aggregated, these provide a comprehensive toolbox which will support the research's analytical process.

### Neorealist Theory

The overarching theoretical framework underpinning this research is provided by realism. The foundational assumptions of realist theory are that states: "(1) are the key units of action; (2) seek power, either as an end in itself or as a means to other ends; and (3) behave in ways that are, by and large, rational, and therefore comprehensible to outsiders in rational terms"**Invalid source specified.**. While Hans Morgenthau is considered the main proponent of classical realism, Kenneth Waltz further developed upon this framework with structural realism, otherwise referred to as neorealism.

Neorealism suggests that the international system is devoid of a central governing authority (principle of international anarchy), compelling states to prioritize their own security and survival (principle of self-help) over the pursuit of collective goods. As a theory, it is based on the competitive, anarchic nature of the international system rather than on the individual behavior of the actors operating within it. Its central argument is based on the structure of the system, the constraints which it imposes on those actors,

and the subsequent effect of their interactions on that structure **Invalid source specified.**.

The system's structure is defined by (1) its ordering principle (anarchical), (2) the functional differentiation or non-differentiation of the units, and (3) by the distribution of capabilities across those units  (Bendel, 1994; Waltz, 1979). A comprehensive understanding of the system's nature provides greater insight into unit behavior; while structure is not the sole determinant[9] of state action, "its constraints provide limits on the actions which can be taken" (Bendel, 1994).

The consideration of order within an anarchic system renders a conceptual challenge which is resolved contemplating the basic motivation of the units within the structure. While under classical realism state motivation would entail a quest for power in an absolute sense, neorealism holds state survival underlying as the ultimate state motivation (Grieco, 1988). As a basic motive, survival provides a prerequisite for state interest and state action as constrained in the anarchic system. This results in two main organizational effects; the concept of self-help and the preference for relative over absolute gains (Bendel, 1994).

### Anarchy and Self-help

Neorealism's ordering principle is anarchical; meaning the system is formally unorganized in the absence of central rule, as "no sovereign power ensures compliance and punishes deviations" (Jervis & Art, 1973).  With anarchism as an intrinsic structural constraint, states assume defensive postures. Therefore, the principle of action in an anarchic system is necessarily that of self-help.

In Waltz's (1979) view, these key structural constraints limit state cooperation in two ways: (1) through the incentivization of sacrificing the state´s absolute gains in deference to relative gains by its potential opponents; and (2) through the creation of greater vulnerability derived from increased dependencies through cooperation (Bendel, 1994).

---

[9] Additional literature – such as Cooper (2003) and Gause (2003) – emphasizes the primacy of domestic political structures, institutional frameworks and strategic interests as equal-part security drivers.

To achieve their objectives and maintain their security in the absence of central authority, "units in a condition of anarchy (…) must rely on the means they can generate and the arrangements they can make for themselves" (Waltz, 1979). If "in a situation entailing strategic interdependence, (…) an actor's optimal strategy depends on the other actors' strategies" (Powell, 1994). That is, as the condition of insecurity interacts with calculations of future behavior, the system rewards self-help and discourages cooperation between units.

### Absolute and Relative Gains

Relative capabilities are "the ultimate basis for security and independence in an anarchical, self-help international context" (Grieco, 1988). The neorealist proposition positing survival as the underlying state motivation – with power only being a means to that end – makes states sensitive to relative over absolute gains. This can be demonstrated negatively as, by being capable of producing more power through mobilization, states do not de facto maximize power under regular circumstances; as well as positively, by showing how a state´s relative gains relate to its security. That is, state security is based on power relative to the rest of the system and not the absolute value of that power **Invalid source specified.**.

### The Security Dilemma

The anarchic nature of the international system, backed by the principle of self-help and calculations of relative gain, makes it so "the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others" (Jervis, 1978). This phenomenon is known as the "security dilemma"; which not only remains applicable in the context of alliance politics[10], but accounts for the scarcity of security within the system itself.

Any logic derived from this entails that efforts to increase state security either produce a neutral result or the opposite of the intended effect. From a structural perspective, these actions collectively lead to systemic competition in the form of arms races and alliance formation (Waltz, 1979). Consequently, states must either compete or face the

---

[10] This is because an ally´s intent may fluctuate under heightened threat perception derived from changing variables (regime change, policy change, cultural change, opportunistic attitudes, etc.) exerting pressure onto the system (Jervis, 1978; Snyder G. H., 1984).

danger of elimination. This dilemma results in a cycle of power accumulation and strategic balancing.

## Balance of Power (BoP) and Balance of Threat (BoT) Theories

The following main tenets can be derived from the previous neorealist logic:

- the international system is ordered around anarchic, competitive, self-help principles;
- international political outcomes are not determined by the unit (state) but rather by the constraining systemic force exerted on it;
- the use of force is warranted in the pursuit of survival as a primary state goal;
- security supersedes the acquisition of absolute power, prioritizing relative over absolute gains; and,
- in response to systemic factors and calculations of relative power, state action promotes balancing as the dominant state behavior (Waltz, 1979; Zakaria, 1992; Bendel, 1994).

Balancing is driven by the structure of the international system, rather than by state interests. As Waltz explains: "It is not the will of the states or the leaders that creates a balance of power, but the system structure that leaves them no alternative but to contribute to forming one" (Waltz, 1979, p. 121). This systemic imperative explains why even isolationist states are often drawn into strategic alignments.

Since power is perceived as a means instead of an end, "states prefer to join the weaker of two coalitions", as "the excessive accumulation of power by one state or coalition elicits the opposition of others" (Waltz, 1979). While bandwagoning is posited to be a viable strategy for revisionist powers yielding short-term benefits, it entails adverse long-term effects; "by contributing to the increasing power of its ally, the bandwagoner has only worsened his own security position" (Bendel, 1994). States joining the bandwagon of a rising power exacerbate an increase in the system´s perceived insecurity, bound to provoke a countercoalition (Bendel, 1994).

According to Schweller (1994, pág. 74): "the aim of balancing is self-preservation and the protection of values already possessed, while the goal of bandwagoning is usually

self-extension: to obtain values coveted. Simply put, balancing is driven by the desire to avoid losses; bandwagoning by the opportunity for gain."

**Balance of Power (BoP) Theory**

Through the neorealist framework, Balance of Power (BoP) theory (Waltz, 1979) explores "how changing power configurations affect patterns of alignments and conflict in world politics" (Bendel, 1994). While BoP literature proposes many definitions (Claude, 1962; Morgenthau, 1973), it is herein understood as a condition where a given state is unable to dominate the system sufficiently enough to enforce its sole will onto others (Waltz, 1979).

Waltz explains that states will either increase their own capabilities or form alliances based on the system's distribution of power, aiming to maintain a stable power structure that prevents dominance by any single state (Waltz, 1979). This equilibrium motivates state behavior and strategy, particularly through power balancing.

States use balancing to both prevent overwhelming power and preserve their own position, since another state developing power preponderance is inherently threatening to the system's equilibrium and therefore to their individual security (Bendel, 1994). There are two primary strategies for balancing power: internal and external balancing. Internal balancing involves "the development of one's own economic or military power" (Bendel, 1994), while external balancing requires forming alliances (or weakening those of an opponent) to counter a potential threat. The choice between them often depends on perceived cost-effectiveness, as well as the availability of potential allies. That said, powers tend to primarily lean toward internal balancing under conditions of bipolarity; while opportunities for external balancing increase under multipolarity (Bendel, 1994).

"The proposition that states will join alliances in order to avoid domination by stronger powers lies at the heart of traditional balance of power theory" (Walt, 1985:5). Still, as we will go on to explain, alliance formation involves costs – mainly in the form of concessions of sovereignty and constraints on the actions of its members – while the security gains sought are not guaranteed.

**Balance of Threat (BoT) Theory**

While BoP exclusively focuses on power and capability distribution among states to preserve system equilibrium, BoT further proposes threat perception as a determining factor shaping state behavior and alliance formation.

According to Walt, the threat a state poses "is a function of its aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions" (Walt, 1987:21). Power alone is not a reliable predictor of state behavior. By factoring in threat perception, Walt broadens the neorealist perspective of why states engage in certain strategic alignments previously unexplained by BoP. That is; states align against the most significant threats, not necessarily against the most powerful states.

BoT offers a more dynamic and context-sensitive tool for analyzing amity and enmity patterns; recognizing that states may align with a stronger state if it helps to balance against a more immediate or menacing threat. To this effect, alignment is mostly driven according to a perceived primary threat to individual security, as opposed to perceived secondary threats at the system level. Calculations of offensive intent and subjective threat perception can thus outweigh systemic aggregations of power capabilities.

### Omnibalancing

Building on the previous frameworks, Steven David (1991) introduced the concept of "omnibalancing" as a subordinate BoT reformulation – focusing on states in the Global South and expanding on the particularities shaping their own strategic contexts and subsequent alliance choices. As Gause (2003:279) explains, "the nature of state-building and state-society relations in many Third World states make regimes extremely vulnerable to challenges to their hold on power".

Faced by multiple concurrent threats, states operating in the system´s "periphery" perform a rational calculation to prioritize (internal and external) threats that most critically impact regime stability – often leading to aligning with secondary adversaries to increase their efficiency in refocusing resources towards primary threats. The core of this behavior is a calculated decision-making process aimed at maintaining power; hence, the prioritization of regime stability and survival. Therefore: "the most powerful determinant of Third World alignment behavior (...) [is] the rational calculation of Third World leaders as to which outside power is most likely to do what is necessary to keep

them in power" (David, 1991: 235). Weak state leaders thus identify the least threatening (secondary) actor and realign combined resources accordingly towards the source of their primary threat.

## **Alignment and Alliance Theory**

An alliance is herein conceived as "a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states. This definition assumes some level of commitment and an exchange of benefits for both parties; severing the relationship or failing to honor the agreement would presumably cost something, even if it were compensated in other ways" (Walt, 1987:1).

Some neorealist (Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1987) perspectives underscore the reactive[11] (defensive) nature of alliance formation; while others (Mearsheimer, 2001) highlight them as (offensive) opportunities for expansionism and power projection[12]. Similarly, authors seem to disagree on the degree to which domestic factors influence alliance formation[13] (Snyder, 1997; Cooper, 2003).

Regardless of these discrepancies, it is undeniable that: "States enter into such agreements from different relative power standings, which implies unequal costs and benefits, and with no guarantee that an alliance partner will live up to its bargain" (Bendel, 1994:49).

The main factors in determining alliance formation are:

1. Shared threat construction and/or perception: states must identify a common threat to justify alliance formation and ensure coherent threat responses.

2. (Hard/Soft) Power capabilities and calculations of reliability: where potential allies assess each other's capabilities and historical reliability in honoring alliance commitments and mutual defense agreements.

---

[11] "States form alliances to protect themselves from states that are both powerful and threatening" (Walt, 1987, p. 22).

[12] "States form alliances to bolster their relative power position over rivals, either by deterring potential opponents from attacking or by defeating them" (Mearsheimer, 2001:156).

[13] Snyder notes that: "Alliances are partly shaped by the internal needs of states, including domestic political interests and military strategies, which can lead to alliances that are more about restraining the ally than balancing against a foe" (Snyder, 1997:145)

3. Strategic flexibility: offering states options to leverage additional resources in response to changing security dynamics.

4. Geopolitical Proximity: while not required, it affects the immediacy and intensity of potential threats and therefore increases the likelihood of strategic alignment between potential allies.

Alignment becomes an available option under conditions of system multipolarity, providing a higher degree flexibility in choosing potential alliance partners. However, it is worth noting that "flexibility of alignment narrows one's choice of policies. A state's strategy must please a potential or satisfy a present partner" (Bendel, 1994). Otherwise, it will alienate it and potentially isolate smaller powers.

The formation and sustainability of alliances carries significant implications for international stability. Alliances tend to increase uncertainty in the international system, as "states are less likely to misjudge their relative strengths than they are to misjudge the strength and reliability of opposing coalitions" (Waltz, 1979:168).

While alliances can provide security benefits (such as deterring aggression and limiting the scope of potential conflict), they can provoke collective security dilemmas[14] (Jervis, 1978) and reactionary counterbalancing – potentially leading to arms races and geopolitical tensions. This is particularly evident in regions where rival blocs emerge; each perceiving the other alliance as a potential threat, even when the original intentions were defensive.

**Potential costs: loss of sovereignty, abandonment and entrapment**

As with the principle of self-help, reliance on potential and/or existing allies will determine a state's commitment, as well as expected benefits and costs from any incurred alliance. As lkenberry (1986:65) notes: "the preference function predicts what states will seek to achieve; structural constraints will determine what is possible".

Jervis (1978) indicates that a state's bargaining power mostly depends on its availability of alternatives, rather than its aggregated capabilities or its contributions to the alliance. When lacking alternatives, a state's negotiation power is diminished; resulting in greater

---

[14] where the increased security for one group of states leads to increased insecurity for others.

concessions which ultimately restrict its policy choices. In contrast, states with a wider range of alternatives (albeit oftentimes correlated to their size and resources) possess greater bargaining power to leverage in alliance decisions. Either way, alliances can directly impact state sovereignty and limit autonomous decision-making capabilities.

The possibility of abandonment is also a significant concern. This can manifest either as defecting or as failing to honor mutual defense commitments in the face of conflict. The fear of abandonment is amplified in multipolar systems, where ambiguity increases the possibility of miscalculation on the strategic interests of allies and confidence in mutual support consequently decreases.

Additionally, the fear of entrapment represents another state security dilemma; as an alliance may result in painful commitments against a state's individual interests. This concern particularly affects smaller powers, as they only share partial interests with hegemonic partners and have limited influence over their strategic range.

Mutual dependence can therefore increase a state's vulnerability. Still, alliances offer a mechanism to achieve enhanced defense capabilities at a lower cost, presenting a strategic choice for states facing economic constraints against security needs. Some states may perceive these costs as preferable to the economic burden of self-defense; others, facing imminent danger or lacking self-defense capabilities, might have no choice but to enter an alliance over the alternative of extinction.

**Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)**

Regional Security Complex theory (RSCT; Buzan, 1983; Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, 1998; Buzan and Wæver, 2003) examines the relative power and interplay between globalizing (system level) and regionalizing (subsystem level) trends. It distinguishes "between the system level interplay of the global powers, whose capabilities enable them to transcend distance, and the subsystem level interplay of lesser powers whose main security environment is their local region" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003:4).

It relies on two fundamental propositions: (1) states in the international system necessarily exist within a global web of security interdependence; and (2) threats travel most effectively within geographical proximity (Walt, 1987:276–7; Buzan and Wæver, 2003).

As the level of that security interdependence can greatly vary throughout the system, RSCT offers a structured approach to comprehensively analyze security dynamics through global, interregional, regional, and local levels of security interaction:

- The global level concerns the overarching power structures and international norms that influence[15] regional security configurations;
- The interregional level, which concerns the interplay between different security regions;
- The regional level focuses on the distinct security interdependencies that characterize the sub-system and create unique regional security dynamics, semi-autonomous from global influence;
- The local level considers individual state security and how "internal dynamics can often spill over into regional security concerns" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 47).

**RSC Definition**

As Buzan and Wæver (2003:46) explain: "Anarchy plus the distance effect plus geographical diversity yields a pattern of regionally based clusters, where security interdependence is markedly more intense". While clusters may be penetrated by global powers, regional dynamics still display a substantial degree of autonomy from global patterns due to proximity generating stronger security interaction. Thus, a Regional Security Complex (RSC) is herein defined as "a group of states [unit level] whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely so that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another" (Buzan, 1983:106; Buzan & Wæver, 2003:44).

RSCT further proposes that, while patterns must be sufficiently intense to clearly establish and differentiate a fully formed RSC, clusters can be observed displaying lower levels of maturity in the form of proto-complexes[16] (proto-RSCs) and pre-complexes[17]

---

[15] Phenomena such as great power rivalry and economic globalization; "the exact nature of their influence can vary dramatically" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 45).

[16] "When there is sufficient manifest security interdependence to delineate a region and differentiate it from its neighbours, but when the regional dynamics are still too thin and weak to think of the region as a fully-fledged RSC"(Buzan and Wæver, 2003:64).

[17] "When a set of bilateral security relations seems to have the potential to bind together into an RSC, but has not yet achieved sufficient cross-linkage among the units to do so" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003:64).

(pre-RSCs). They can also form at the sub-regional level, with subcomplexes (sub-RSCs) presenting distinctive patterns of security interdependence while firmly embedded within the larger pattern of an RSC[18].

## RSC formation and characteristics

As established above, the formation of an RSC typically occurs when a group of states find their security perceptions and concerns closely intertwined.

Key factors in RSC formation include: (1) geopolitical proximity (security threats or policies in one state directly impact its neighbors); (2) shared threat perceptions (common challenges drive interlinked national securities); (3) strong collective identity (shared histories and cultures). This means that not every regional formation constitutes an RSC. An RSC is characterized by patterns of amity and enmity, mutual dependencies, and shared security concerns among states. Although geography is an important factor in RSC definition due to threat proximity, it is not a requirement for RSC configuration. This is because RSCs are primarily bound by security practices – reflected as patterns of relative security interdependence and indifference – and therefore socially constructed[19].

As Buzan and Wæver explain: "within the structure of anarchy, the essential structure and character of RSCs are defined by two kinds of relations, power relations and patterns of amity and enmity" (2003:49). Durable patterns of amity and enmity take the form of "sub-global, geographically coherent patterns of security interdependence" (2003:45) – making "regional systems dependent on the actions and interpretations of actors" and "not just a mechanical reflection of the distribution of power" (2003:40).

As Balance-of-Power logic mixes with local amity-enmity patterns, the effects of penetrating external powers may also need to be accounted for. Penetration links the overarching global pattern of power distribution to regional dynamics. Conditions for

---

[18] A clear example of this phenomenon can be found observing in the Middle Eastern Regional Security Complex (MERSC); with the Levant (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria), the Gulf (Iran, Iraq, GCC), and the Maghreb (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia) subcomplexes displaying distinct patterns of overlap and interplay at the subregional level while collectively conforming the larger regional system (MERSC).
[19] To clarify; this "social construction" does not refer to discursive construction, but to an RSC's contingency on the security practice of its actors.

penetration necessarily require specific, justifiable strategic interests by the outside powers and the possession of greater relative power than local actors (Taliaferro, 2012).

**Types of Regional Security Complexes (RSCs)**

RSCT recognizes different types of RSCs, each characterized by specific patterns of security relationships among states:

*Table 3 Types of security complexes (Buzan and Wæver, 2003)*

Table 1 *Summary of types of security complex*

| Type | Key features | Example(s) |
|---|---|---|
| **Standard** | Polarity determined by regional powers | Middle East, South America, Southeast Asia, Horn, Southern Africa |
| **Centred** | | |
| Superpower | Unipolar centred on a superpower | North America |
| Great power | Unipolar centred on a great power | CIS, potentially South Asia |
| [Regional power] | Unipolar centred on a regional power | none |
| Institutional | Region acquires actor quality through institutions | EU |
| **Great power** | Bi- or multipolar with great powers as the regional poles | Pre-1945 Europe, East Asia |
| **Supercomplexes** | Strong interregional level of security dynamics arising from great power spillover into adjacent regions | East and South Asia |

The above can be further refined:

1. **Polarized RSCs**: characterized by the presence of two or more major powers competing for regional dominance. The competition often leads to a clearly defined bipolar or multipolar structure within the region. As Buzan and Wæver note, "Polarized complexes are marked by sharp competitive dynamics, where major regional powers vie for influence and control" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 70). These dynamics can significantly heighten regional tensions and lead to frequent conflicts or prolonged standoffs.

2. **Homogeneous RSCs**: states share similar security perceptions and often cultural or ideological similarities, which lead to a more cooperative security regime. Such

complexes are less likely to experience intra-regional conflicts and often present united fronts in broader international forums.

3. **Centered RSCs**: characterized by a single hegemon dictating the regional security agenda. The central power can enforce peace and stability within the region, often at the cost of suppressing smaller states' security and policy preferences. "Such complexes are stable but potentially brittle, as the hegemonic state's power is both the main source of order and the principal threat to it," (Buzan & Wæver, 2003:75).

4. **Subcomplexes**: These occur within larger RSCs when distinct security dynamics evolve in a part of the region, often due to geographical, cultural, or historical differences. These can be considered 'complexes within complexes', where localized security interactions are semi-autonomous but still influenced by the broader regional dynamics. As Buzan and Wæver acknowledge, "Subcomplexes add layers of complexity to an RSC, reflecting the non-uniform distribution of power and threat perceptions within a region" (2003: 78).

Note that understanding the type of RSC can help predict the stability of a region and the effectiveness of collective security measures. For instance, polarized RSCs may require careful management and external mediation to prevent conflict, while homogeneous RSCs might more effectively manage regional disputes through internal mechanisms. Centered RSCs might see challenges to the hegemon's authority as potential threats.

### Reconfiguration Processes

Buzan and Wæver (2003) established precedent by performing an exhaustive RSCT application and analysis of the post-Soviet African security system, as depicted below:
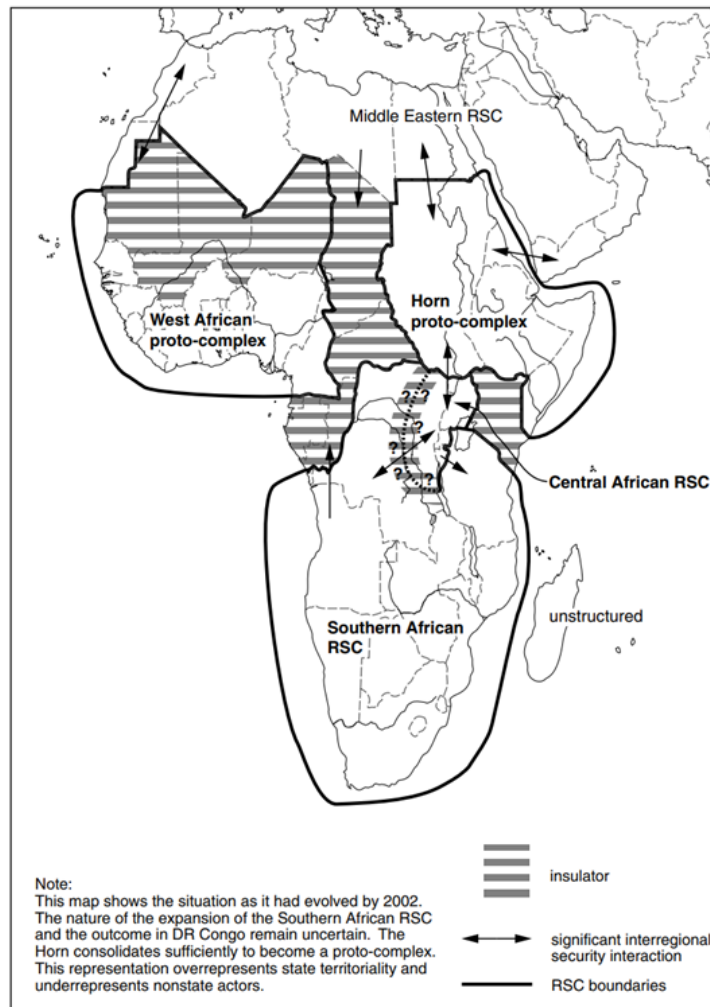
*Figure 2 Map of African Regional security Post Cold War (Buzan and Wæver, 2003)*

RSCs are not static; unlike the international (global) system, the regional (sub)system's social construction makes it subject to reconfiguration (Buzan, Wæver & De Wilde, 1998; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). These reconfiguration processes consist of: (1) internal transformation (through structural changes within the complex boundary triggering changes to its anarchic structure, polarity and amity/enmity patterns); (2) external transformation (through contraction or expansion of its external boundary, leading to a change in membership); and (3) overlay (through penetration shifting internal RSC security dynamics). Buzan and Wæver note, "Reconfigurations in a regional security complex can be triggered by internal revolutions, wars, coups, economic development or collapse, and changes in the external environment" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003: 55). As will be later explored, this is may be the case in the Sahel region.

In short:

1. RSC formation emerges from the interplay between the anarchic structure, its balance-of-power consequences, and the pressures exerted by geographical proximity (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: PAGE).
2. RSC structure is dependent on four variables: (1) boundary, (2) anarchic structure, (3) polarity, and (4) social construction; and
3. [Besides maintenance of status quo,] RSC reconfiguration processes occur by means of internal transformation, external transformation, and overlay.

RSCT further formulates the concept of insulator states; locations "occupied by one or more units where larger regional security dynamics stand back-to-back" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003:41). This term will be helpful in examining African security complexes.

## Literature review

The present literature review will briefly focus on: (1) RSCT application challenges to the African continent; (2) establishing the subregional context and historical instability of the central Sahel; (3) the nature of Russian PMSC politization. These will collectively provide a contextual basis to undertake the analytical process.

### RSCT: Complexities of African regional security analysis

As may be deduced from Figure 2 above, Buzan and Wæver notably struggled to apply RSCT to the African continent. At the root of their struggle is the complexity of the African security landscape, which in their view stems from rapid decolonization leading to the failure of the postcolonial state and pervasive insecurity in the region.

In essence, Buzan and Wæver (2003:219) view the African state as weak: "both as a state (i.e., low levels of sociopolitical cohesion) and as a power (i.e., commanding small economic, political, and military resources, both in absolute terms and relative to non-African states)". Alluding to the security-development nexus, they go on to assert that economic underdevelopment – fostered by state weakness – defines "the nature, extent, and intensity of Africa's insecurity" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003:220).

However, as already noted under the research´s methodology, a purely state-centric view to analyze African regional security dynamics is considered limited because of its

reliance on the imprint of the Westphalian state system. This reliance neglects to reflect the dominant networks of nonstate actors displaying systems of security interaction in the continent, which necessitates examination.

Domestic level security dynamics predominate in the region. However, one might challenge the perception of African security dynamics as "domestic". While intra-state conflict remains the dominant perception of African crises, African conflict is rarely bound by territorial state limit and often transcends national borders (Buzan & Wæver, Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security, 2003)

### Colonization and Decolonization Impacts on Security Dynamics Processes

The colonization and decolonization of Africa have had profound effects on the continent's regional security dynamics. These historical processes have shaped the political and security landscapes of African states, influencing their interactions within the region and with the global community.

During the period of colonial overlay, global powers established arbitrary geographical boundaries, overrode traditional political frameworks and imposed their own administration systems. Logically, these impositions defined the political framework for the postcolonial regional order; "transplanting European-style states, modes of economic development, and forms of Westphalian international relations" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003:219).

A recurring assertion in literature is that "African states were for the most part created by international society, and supported by it" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003:221). To this regard, Jackson and Rosberg (1984; 1985; 1982) attribute the uniqueness of African post-independence statehood to a sequence anomaly its formation process, by which African states attained juridical sovereignty[20] long before empirical sovereignty[21]. The framework of juridical sovereignty would have shielded African states post-independence; removing, in neorealist terms, the pressures of competition which normally shape states under the systemic condition of anarchy. This phenomenon would

---

[20] "the recognition of a state's legitimacy by other states in the system" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003:221)
[21] "the Weberian understanding of the state as an organisation having the real capacity to govern a territory and people" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003:221)

have helped Africa retain the "superficial diplomatic appearance of a Westphalian-style state system"; while displaying "little of the political, social, or economic reality of functioning states" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003:219).

The literature (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Bach, 1995; Bayart et al.1999) attributes the weakening of the African state to traditional non-state actors and structures persisting as sources of social, political and economic authority; forming post-traditional regimes, and undermining the transplant of the Westphalian-style state system into Africa.

The pattern of decolonization in Africa was protracted and divided into two independence waves: the first and largest spanning from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s; and the second, spanning throughout the mid-1970s. Contrary to common belief, this decolonization process did not result in immediate conflict formation at the regional level. As Buzan and Wæver (2003:222) observe:

> The African state system mostly did not follow the Westphalian model into military rivalry and interstate war. Instead, it developed three almost postmodern features: (1) a loose ideology of Pan-Africanism; (2) a continental institution, the OAU[22], which at a nearly stage pre-empted what could have been a drift towards rival territorial claims (…); and (3) a willingness to experiment with a variety of regional institutions. This combination of weak states and a quite strong regional international society, supported in many ways from outside by the UN, produced relative stability in interstate security relations.

After precolonial patron–client relationships were selectively reinforced by colonial practice, instead of leading towards empirical sovereignty, the juridical sovereignty framework – created through the decolonization process and reinforced by the OAU – reinforced and sustained most post-traditional regimes over the benefit of the collective good (civil society or the state); thus enabling inherently personalized, kleptocratic, and neo-patrimonial regimes a record of widespread violence at the national level (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Clapham, 1998; Jackson and Rosberg, 1984; 1985). The transition from colonial to post-traditional is said to have eroded the position of the African state,

---

[22] Organization of African Unity (1963-2002), later succeeded by the African Union (AU).

poising a return to "stateless configurations articulated on the basis of primordial and patronage attachments" (Bach, 1995:16).

The process of decolonization during the mid-20th century, while ending direct European control, did not resolve the underlying tensions created by colonial rule. Instead, it often exacerbated them as newly independent states struggled with state-building, national identity, and regional coherence. As Herbst (2000:35) notes: "states with artificial borders that lack legitimacy and do not correspond to actual political and social territories, leading to endemic conflict". The abrupt transition to independence left many states with weak institutions, which Buzan and Wæver describe as "inherently unstable and prone to conflict" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003: 142).

Several arguments go as far as to defend the collapse of the African state system (Clapham, 1998; Reno, 1998) throughout the 1990s, after significant erosion to the 'neo-patrimonial' state (sustained through juridical sovereignty) and Western-led reform. External economic engagement, which reinforced the privatization of local economies by kleptocratic neo-patrimonial leaders and warlords, further weakened the African state (Reno, 1998).

### Associated challenges to the Westphalian State System in Africa

An RSC is based on significant levels of security interdependence among its group of units, requiring substantial interaction. In Africa, this interaction manifests within or across state borders and is mostly driven by nonstate actors. Therefore, literature mainly portrays the African interstate security interaction as a spillover of domestic dynamics; "generated more by weakness than by strength" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003:229)

As Buzan and Wæver (2003:222) observe: "Westphalian-style security interaction between states has been constrained not only by the quasi-security regime of postcolonial juridical sovereignty, but also by the weakness of African states as both states and powers".

The main challenge lies in identifying clearly defined patterns of African regional security. This is due to a localist tendency with rarely contested borders. While intervention by neighbors is commonplace, state-to-state rivalry, war, and alliances are relatively limited as opposed to those displayed in other regional systems. Instead, the predominant

conflict and alliance patterns seem to be between neighboring regimes and insurgency movements. Other than regional hegemons (such as South Africa or Nigeria), African states rarely engage in substantial security interactions with actors outside of their immediate neighborhood. That is, the observed patterns are mostly chains of bilateral security interactions; showing limited interplay between the overall collective. As Buzan and Wæver (2003:232) observe:

> "Spillover interactions between neighbors can create what might look like regional patterns, but these patterns have no obvious boundaries, and they are more often chains of discrete events rather than coordinated patterns of alliance and rivalry. (…) The general pattern is that each country sits at the centre of a set of security interactions connecting it to its immediate neighbours, but with limits of power meaning that these individual patterns have not as a rule linked significantly into wider patterns of security interdependence. "

In Africa, substate and transnational insurgency movements are prominent security actors. The presence and power of these actors (militias, tribal groups, and insurgent movements) further complicates the application of the Westphalian model in Africa., as they often command significant loyalty and control over territories – challenging the state's ability to exercise its sovereignty effectively.

Possession of the state is not a necessary condition for the creation and maintenance of successful political, military, and economic actors. However, juridical sovereignty offers access to international recognition and support, making the state a target for non-state rivals with strong ties to post-traditional structures trying to obtain legitimacy at the global level. Similarly to neo-patrimonial regimes, insurgencies often aim at establishing control over local resources and maintaining links to the global market.

**The Subregional Context: The Central Sahel States and The Tri-Border Security Crisis**

The alliance formation process, as informed by the literature, tends to stem from shared security challenges – in this case, the threat of violent extremism, transnational crime, and political instability – driving states toward collective security mechanisms. While there is no academic or practitioner consensus on the Sahel's geographical or geopolitical boundaries – which will be later defined in the context of this research –

one thing is certain: both the insecurity crisis and the alliance reconfiguration process originate in the central Sahel. Therefore, in order to proceed with the research, it becomes essential to closer examine the instability drivers of political instability and national insecurity across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

### *Niger´s national history and political context*

As most of Western Africa, Niger was originally a French colony which offered the strategic potential of exploiting the Niger River as a source of trade and transportation routes. Over the course of 15 years (1946-1960), Niger underwent a three-part political transition: from French colony (1946), to being declared a French overseas territory (1956), to finally declaring full independence from France (1960). Soon after, Hamani Diori became its first president and established a single-party dictatorship.

Since then, Niger's political landscape has been historically characterized by a series of military coups; starting from 1974, when Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountche overthrew Diori and established a 20-year military dictatorship. While Niger held its first multiparty elections in 1993, they were quickly followed by two subsequent coups (1996 and 1999) and alternations of military rule. President Mamadou Tandja (1999-2010) was elected soon after the second coup, successfully maintaining a period of relative domestic stability until trying to prolong his presidency through a third term and provoking a constitutional crisis. Tandja was then deposed via a third military coup (2010) and followed by a military junta, which successfully held elections in 2011 and peacefully transitioned back to civilian rule under President Mahamadou Issoufou – against the backdrop of the incipient jihadist insurgency.

Issoufou faced intense opposition in the 2016 elections and several accusations of election irregularities. As the jihadist crisis grew, Niger continued to invest in its strategic partnership with France and G5 Sahel framework, participating in the creation of the G5S Joint Force (FC-G5S) in 2017. Despite the growing security deterioration, Issoufou managed to make some economic progress and until the 2020 COVID-19 epidemic disrupted the Nigerien (and global) economy.

The Nigerien elections were held at the end of 2020, with Issoufou stepping down after reaching the constitutional limit of 2 presidential terms. Overall, his administration was

defined by intensive international cooperation with France and the United States, which helped bolster Niger's defense capabilities and stabilization efforts in the face of the Sahel´s growing regional fragility.

Despite an immediate attempted military coup against President-elect Mohamed Bazoum, 2021 witnessed the first peaceful transfer of power between elected leaders – which many regarded as step towards solidifying democratic governance in Niger. However, Bazoum was soon deposed by military coup during the 2023 Nigerien crisis under claims of severe national security deterioration. At present, Niger remains under military rule and – after the escalation with ECOWAS and regional isolation – faces an uncertain political future, unlikely to transition back to civilian rule in the near-term.

### *Mali´s national history and political context*

Mali has a rich precolonial history and cultural tradition, being one of the most powerful and long-lasting of the African empires. It came under French colonial control through a lengthy process of military encirclement during the XIXth century and, similar to its West African neighbors, underwent the tri-part political transition (from colony to overseas territory, to independence) until gaining independence from France in 1960, following a failed integration attempt with neighboring Senegal.

Mali´s first President, Modibo Keita, rapidly broke ties with France and politically supported the Cold War communist-bloc, despite officially claiming to be nonaligned. In 1968, Keita was deposed by a military coup due to his radical socialist views. Moussa Traoré came into power and consolidated military rule from 1969 to 1979, when a civilian government was restored. However, much like Niger, Mali initially transitioned into a one-party state and did not embrace multi-party democracy until the 1991.

Under Traoré´s leadership (1979-1991), Mali remained a pragmatic actor and cultivated relations with both the French, the US and the Communist bloc to cultivate foreign investment. He was ultimately deposed in 1991, also by military coup led by Amadou Toumani Touré. This time, however, the military junta organized a swift democratic transition and, in 1992, held the first Malian multi-party elections– which resulted in President Alpha Konaré´s democratic administration (1992-2002).

Konaré faced a period of severe national instability due to economic recession, environmental degradation, insufficient foreign aid, several civil protests and reoccurring Tuareg insurgency – his unpopularity brought electoral fraud accusations to his 1997 but quieted down as the Tuaregs resettled. In 2002, Touré (coup lead, 1991) was elected as his successor. Mali´s deteriorating national instability continued to persist, largely due to its failing economy, renewed conflicts with the Tuareg and minor border incidents with Guinea. National security kept progressively deteriorating over the next 10 years until in 2011-2012 spill over from the Libyan civil war saw the escalation of Tuareg violence and surge of jihadi terrorist groups across Northern Mali.

In 2012, Touré was forced to step down by another military coup over its failure to face the building security crisis in Northern Mali. ECOWAS successfully mediated presidential transition plan, led in the interim by Dioncounda Traoré; however, the transitional government faced severe challenges due to extreme unpopularity and jihadist violence escalation – which ultimately led to the invitation of international (UN, France, African froces) intervention and a call for premature national elections in 2013. Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta thus assumed the Malian presidency by the end of 2013.

Although Keïta´s administration achieved some economic progress, violence spread further south amidst reports of Malian troop abuses and growing ethnic-based violence. His reelection in 2018 was severely contested due to electoral violence repressing voter turnout, corruption allegations and the building national security crisis in the background. When Keïta´s party overturned 30 lost seats in the 2020 National Assembly elections, months-long popular protests took over Mali to demonstrate the administration´s loss of national support until the military coup led by Colonel Assimi Goïta – who controversially assumed the interim vice-presidency under former Colonel Bah N'Daw, following ECOWAS-led negotiations. Goïta later overthrew N'Daw, assumed the interim presidency himself during the 2021 Malian coup and consolidated the path towards anti-Western intervention, anti-ECOWAS liberalism, Malian security privatization and Russian realignment. It is worth noting that the Malian military rule (2021-2023) reportedly saw a 97% increase in violent events over 2020 (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023).

## *Burkina Faso´s national and political context*

Briefly, Burkina Faso has experienced 18 coup events in its post-independence history, divided in distinct onset cycles: independence troubles (1966-1974), the Sankara years (1980-1987), the Compaoré years (1989-2014), the democratization efforts (2014-2016). Since 2016, the escalating terrorist threat in the Sahel's tri-border region (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) has been a great source of tension between the Burkinabe national authorities, armed forces and civilian society due to severe crisis mismanagement – resulting in the erosion of state authority and capacity, rampant corruption, and the inadequacy of the armed forces in numbers and equipment.

As its neighbors, Burkina Faso gained independence in 1960 and established a single-party system under President Maurice Yaméogo – whose administration immediately faced rapid economic degradation and allegations of severe corruption. Following a popular uprising in 1966, Yaméogo was ousted by Burkina's first military coup – led by Lieutenant Colonel Sangoulé Lamizana, who remained in power until 1980.

Between 1980-1983, Burkina saw 3 coups followed by military rule – the last being in 1983, when Captain Thomas Sankara, revered Burkinabe and Pan-Africanist leader, seized the position of head of state and embarked on unprecedented radical reforms (mostly on nation-building and extremely progressive social policies). However, Sankara was assassinated during a 1987 coup led by Captain Blaise Compaoré – allegedly over foreign policy grievances (alienation from France, Ivory Coast) and plots of repression against political opponents.

Compaoré remained in power over the 1987-2014 period, during which his government was the subject of multiple political controversies, opposition and widespread popular protests spanning across the decades. Growing civil unrest against Compaoré's authoritarian rule culminated in 2014 with violent, nation-wide protests leading to his resignation and the interim military transitional governments of General Honoré Traoré and Lieutenant Colonel Isaac Zida – who successfully navigated an attempted coup in the build-up to the 2015 democratic elections.

Following his 2015 election, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré embarked on several efforts to simultaneously stabilize the country and address the escalating security

challenges derived from the Malian crisis spillover – as the jihadist insurgency started spreading over to Burkina Faso and progressively turned into a national security crisis. Despite joining international efforts and embarking on several counterterrorism initiatives, his efforts were wildly unsuccessful, and his government started losing popular support. Kaboré was barely reelected in 2020 – with significant areas of the country being unable to participate in the election due to security concerns – and faced popular protests calling for his resignation in late 2021, which were immediately followed by a successful military coup in 2022 by Lt Col Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba.

Within the span of 9-months, following a steep decline in public and military support due to the overall loss of 40% of Burkinabe territory to VNSA control and continued alignment with France, Lt Col Damiba was removed in second 2022 coup by Captain Ibrahim Traoré – who followed the Malian route by suspending the constitution and the transitional legislative assembly, alienating international liberal support and realigning with Russia. In 2023, as the security situation continued degrading and Burkina engaged in the AoSS formation, Traoré himself faced an attempted coup which consolidated the privatization of security by Russian PMSCs in Burkina Faso.

### *Considering ideology in Sahelian alliance formation*

Within the context of BoT and omnibalancing, ideological factors and their role in forming a collective identity must not be underestimated in strategic calculations, as they are amplified by the "difficulties states there have had in developing affective linkages with and administrative control over their societies. (…) They can help explain alliance choices (…) where state consolidation is still unfinished business, and where political identities cross existing borders" (Gause, 2003:278) – as is the case in the Sahel. The different experiences between the Global North and the Global South emphasize the differentiation in state formation and state-society relations, leading to substantial differences in the consolidation of security agendas due to:

> weakly integrated polities, with multiple centers of opposition challenging the authority of the state or the validity of its borders (…) Given these facts, security challenges to Third World states are as likely, if not more likely, to originate within their borders, even if these internal threats are supported and encouraged by

other states or international actors. For that reason, internal threats to regime, as opposed to state, security become much more salient to decision-makers as they calculate their security policy, including alliance decisions. Balancing against immediate or potential internal threats, particularly if those internal threats are believed to be linked to parties outside the state's borders, is as likely to dictate international alliance decisions as are more conventional factors like regional distributions of power (Gause, 2003:279).

The above considerations on ideological factors will be explored during the empirical analysis.

**The Russian link: Russian power projection, PMSCs and state subversion**

There is an overwhelming consensus associating the use of Russian PSMCs in hybrid warfare and the exploitation of ambiguity though implausible deniability**Invalid source specified.**, which often translates into dominant narratives of qualified programmatic success following active measures (*активные мероприятия*) **Invalid source specified.**.

Framed within this context, Russian PMSCs are widely considered to be informal by design. Despite recent legislative efforts to regulate PMSCs, Russia *de jure* does not recognize the existence of such entities and formally outlaws (Article 359 of Russia's 1996 Criminal Code) their formation and recruitment through anti-mercenary laws. The reason behind this, however, seems to be partially contested: while some authors **Invalid source specified.** exclusively attribute this fact to the aforementioned hybrid nature of Russian strategic culture; others **Invalid source specified.** argue resistance to PMSC legalization to be a legacy of post-Soviet coup-proofing strategies, still meant to ensure regime survival by stifling the possibility of armed opposition. The Asymmetric Warfare Group (2020) combines both arguments, maintaining that this irregularity may be the product of the later, but it is also a manifestation of the former. In this view, the legal ban on PMSCs is not necessarily meant to prevent their operations, but to exercise state control over PMSCs under the constant threat of selective arrest – as was the case of Slavonic Corps and E.N.O.T. Corp members. Considering their place in the current geopolitical context, this is deemed to be the most plausible reasoning.

Regardless, all authors concur in the assessment of widespread use of Russian PMSCs as a foreign policy tool to advance Russian strategic interests abroad. The most cited arguments to substantiate Russian PMSC politization include: (i) the existence of a substantial nexus between the Russian state and PMSCs through an interconnected web of oligarchs, partners, brokers, and employees; (ii) documented contracts with Russian state companies; (iii) fluid recruitment processes from Russian military special force units; (iv) participation in covert operations backed by the Russian military (MoD) and intelligence community (GRU, FSB); etc.

Among these, the Wagner Group is repeatedly brought forth as the prime example of Russian PMSC politization, with Reynolds **Invalid source specified.** portraying Wagner as a state-sponsored group utilized by the Kremlin "to launch a limited-objective incursion into a neighboring country, to train proxy forces to destabilize a pro-Western government, or to hide a secret Russian military presence". Galeotti **Invalid source specified.** even goes as far as to note that the Wagner Group "could in itself be characterized as an active measure" from the Russian government. However, post-2023 uprising, Wagner's future progression as it gets re-absorbed into the Russian military and rebranded as the Africa Corps remains uncertain.

So far, the literature remains consistent in identifying Wagner Group presence in SSA, coincide in their assessment that the Group is following the Syrian model and point towards a trend of increased engagement **Invalid source specified.** which, starting in 2015, has specifically targeted "beleaguered leader[s] facing a security challenge[s] in a geographically strategic country with mineral or hydrocarbon assets" **Invalid source specified.**. This elite cooption strategy has yielded close affiliation with several African leaders, among which are Faustin-Archange Touadéra (CAR), Denis Sassou-Nguesso (Congo), Ali Bongo (Gabon), Filipe Nyusi (Mozambique), Andry Rajoelina (Madagascar), Emmerson Mnangagwa (Zimbabwe), Salva Kiir (South Sudan), Alpha Condé (Guinea), etc.

While authors coincide in the naming of major Wagner Group operations – Libya, Sudan, Madagascar, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali and Central African Republic (CAR) – a consensus has not been yet reached regarding its regional

extent, as the cited number of countries displaying this phenomenon seems to vary (10-20) from source to source.

## Empirical Analysis

This section aims to conduct an empirical analysis of the geopolitical shift currently affecting the Sahel, while exploring the role of Russian influence into autonomous decision processes driving strategic realignment and alliance reconfiguration. As detailed during the Methodology section, it is structured around answering the overarching question: *To what extent is Russian power projection driving regional alliance reconfiguration in the Sahel?*

To do this, the analysis will be guided through the following sub-questions:

Q1: How is security cooperation in the Sahel regionally patterned?

Q2: What are the characteristics of Russian power projection in the Sahel?

Q3: To what extent is Russian PMSC engagement driving alliance reconfiguration through subversive behavior?

### Q1: How is security cooperation in the Sahel regionally patterned?

#### *Defining Sahelian security regionalism: RSCT analysis, Sahelian security cooperation architecture*

In order to proceed answering the research question one must first establish a clear definition of the Sahel region. However, as we have previously mentioned, there is no academic or practitioner consensus on the Sahel's geographical or geopolitical boundaries.

From a geographical standpoint, the Sahel is described as a semi-arid region stretching from Senegal in the west to Sudan in the east, forming a territorial belt south of the Sahara Desert. This geographical approach is broadly supported by the UN (UNDP, 2023; United Nations, 2018), which describes the Sahel as a 5,000-kilometer territory extending from Africa's Atlantic coast to the Red Sea; spanning from Mauritania to Eritrea, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sudan. This differs from politically constructed definitions of the Sahel, which at first commonly recognized Mali, Mauritania, and Niger; and later expanded to include Burkina Faso and

Chad under the framework of the G5 Sahel. The determination of regional boundaries significantly influences the strategic approaches and security frameworks developed by both regional actors and international stakeholders. Evidently, Strategic documents have further adjusted this definition, expanding[23] or focusing on a subset of states, depending on the strategic interests and objectives of the defining entity.

This range of definitions reflect the complexity of the region – both in theory and practice – raising questions about the Sahel as the unit of observation in this research. A RSCT analysis is therefore required to establish clear definition and scope.

**Defining the Sahel: RSCT application**

As previously established, RSCT offers a framework to determine regional clusters based on security interdependence and social construction (security practices) as key determinants or RSC formation. It further provides a flexible framework which accounts for nuanced maturity (pre-RSC, proto-RSC) and hierarchy (RSC, Sub-RSC) levels within the regional system. Africa's unique geopolitical context poses several applicability challenges (Buzan and Wæver, 2003) to the conventional RSCT framework, primarily due to the diverse security regimes and the heterogeneity of states coexisting within the continent.

Consequently, the application of RSCT to define the Sahel necessarily requires broader examination of security interplay across West Africa into the Mahgreb (Varga, 2020), as displayed on the following assessment:

---

[23] Some go as far as to include Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Nigeria and Cameroon; based on shared characteristics with the Sahel region.

*Table 4 RSCT application: West African threat perception assessment by state (generated by the author)*

| Country | Geographic region | Post-Cold War RSC (Buzan&Waever, 2003) | Primary threat | Secondary threat | RSC | RSC Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Benin | Coastal West Africa | West Africa Proto-RSC | External: Spillover (Burkina, Niger, Nigeria) Internal: Organized Crime Networks | Internal: Ethnic tensions (Peul/Fulani/Fulbe); Organized Crime Networks | West Africa RSC | Small power |
| Burkina Faso | Sahel | West Africa Proto-RSC (insulator) | External/Internal: Transnational VNSA networks (JNIM, ISGS) operating in the Sahel Tri-border | External: International interference: Western (France) and Regional (ECOWAS) | West Africa RSC (Sahel sub-RSC) | Small power |
| Cabo Verde | Coastal West Africa | N/A | N/A | N/A | West Africa RSC | N/A (microstate) |
| Cameroon | Central Africa | West Africa Proto-RSC | N/A | N/A | Central Africa proto-RSC West Africa RSC | N/A (insulator) |
| Chad | Central Africa | Unstructured security region (insulator); regional interaction with Middle Eastern RSC (Magreb Sub-RSC) | Internal: Insurgent groups (FACT, UFDD); External/Internal: Transnational VNSA networks (Boko Haram, JNIM, AQIM, ISWAP) | External: Libya, Sudan, CAR, Sahel crisis spillover (non-state); International interference (Russia); | Central Africa proto-RSC West Africa RSC Middle Eastern RSC (Magreb Sub-RSC) | Insulator |
| Côte d'Ivoire | Coastal West Africa | West Africa Proto-RSC | External: Sahel crisis spillover Internal: Organized crime networks | External: Liberia | West Africa RSC | Middle power (potential regional power bid) |
| The Gambia | Coastal West Africa | West Africa Proto-RSC | Internal: Constitutional Crisis; Regional intervention (ECOWAS/ECOMIG) | Internal: Organized crime networks External: Senegal (Casamance) | West Africa RSC | Small power |
| Ghana | Coastal West Africa | West Africa Proto-RSC | Internal: Organized crime networks (Gulf of Guinea Piracy, trafficking) | External; Nigeria | West Africa RSC | Regional power |
| Guinea | Coastal West Africa | West Africa Proto-RSC | Internal: Political transition | External: Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone (Border conflict) | West Africa RSC | Small power |
| Guinea-Bissau | Coastal West Africa | West Africa Proto-RSC | Internal: Political crisis (Coup) | N/A | West Africa RSC | Small power |
| Liberia | Coastal West Africa | West Africa Proto-RSC | Internal: Organized crime networks | External: Ivory Coast, Guinea | West Africa RSC | Small power |
| Mali | Sahel | West Africa Proto-RSC (insulator) | External/Internal: Transnational VNSA networks (AQIM, ISGS) operating in the Sahel Tri-border | External: International interference: Western (France) and Regional (ECOWAS) | West Africa RSC (Sahel sub-RSC) | Small power |
| Mauritania | Sahel | West Africa Proto-RSC (insulator); regional interaction with Middle Eastern RSC (Magreb Sub-RSC) | External: Mali | External: Morocco | West Africa RSC (Sahel sub-RSC) Middle Eastern RSC (Magreb Sub-RSC) | Insulator |
| Niger | Sahel | West Africa Proto-RSC (insulator) | External/Internal: Transnational VNSA networks (Boko Haram, JNIM, AQIM, ISWAP) operating in the Sahel Tri-border and the Lake Chad Basin External: Libya conflict spillover | External: International interference: Western (France) and Regional (ECOWAS) | West Africa RSC (Sahel sub-RSC) | Small power |
| Nigeria | Coastal West Africa | West Africa Proto-RSC (regional power) | External/Internal: Transnational VNSA networks (Boko Haram, ISWAP) and border spillover (Niger, Chad, Burkina) | External: Cameroon (Bakaasi, Ambazonia); Ghana | West Africa RSC | Regional power |
| Senegal | Coastal West Africa | West Africa Proto-RSC | Internal: Casamance Conflict | External: Guinea-Bissau, Gambia; Sahel crisis spillover (Mali) | West Africa RSC | Regional power |
| Sierra Leone | Coastal West Africa | West Africa Proto-RSC | Internal: Political instability | Internal: Organized crime networks | West Africa RSC | Small power |
| Togo | Coastal West Africa | West Africa Proto-RSC | Internal: Political instability | Internal: Organized crime networks | West Africa RSC | Small power |

As may be observed:

- An examination of primary security concerns– as key tenets of RSC configuration (Buzan, 1983) – in West Africa was conducted through a threat perception assessment to determine security interdependencies and, therefore, security interaction between any potential regional clusters.

- Threat perceptions show sufficient manifest security interdependence between states to observe a consolidation of the West African complex, transitioning from proto-RSC (2003) to fully-fledged RSC (2023).

- There are no observed conditions of West African RSC (WA RSC) reconfiguration: (1) there is no evidence of boundary transformation; and (2) Russian or Western RSC penetration is so far insufficient to constitute overlay. The possibility of RSC formation around the Sahel region is therefore discarded.

- As expected, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger present distinctive patterns of security interdependence.

- Mauritania and Chad present similar patterns of interdependence through proximity, security practice and insulator status (albeit significantly more tenuous). These states, while firmly embedded within the larger pattern of the WA RSC, clearly display the characteristics to justify a sub-RSC formation in the Sahel.

From an RSCT perspective, there is insufficient evidence of RSC formation or RSC reconfiguration requirements; meaning the Sahel region cannot be considered as an independent RSC. However, the previous RSCT classification of Sahelian states as insulators is no longer applicable; the region has undergone significant security challenges which have transformed security dynamics to be distinctly patterned at the sub-regional level, justifying the formation of a new entity embedded within the regional level. The following states thus emerge as a sub-complex within the broader WA RSC:

*Table 5 RSCT application: Sahel sub-RSCT threat perception assessment (generated by the author)*

| Country | Geographic region | RSCT Assessment | RSC Status | Internal threats | External threat (Contiguity Spillover) | External threat (Contiguity Spillover) Assessment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Burkina Faso | Sahel | West Africa RSC (Sahel sub-RSC) | Small power | Violent jihadi groups (JNIM, ISGS); Armed militias (Koglweogo, VDPs); Burkinabe Military (Coups, CMR crisis, Ansaroul Islam) | Tri-border | Very High |
| Chad | Central Africa | Central Africa proto-RSC West Africa RSC Middle Eastern RSC (Magreb Sub-RSC) | Insulator | Violent jihadi groups (Boko Haram, JNIM, AQIM, ISWAP); Insurgent groups (FACT, UFDD) | Niger, Sudan ,CAR | High |
| Mali | Sahel | West Africa RSC (Sahel sub-RSC) | Small power | Violent jihadi groups (JNIM, AQIM, Ansar Dine, etc.); Insurgent groups (CMA, MSA, Plateforme); Armed ethnic militias (GATIA) | Tri-border | Very High |
| Mauritania | Sahel | West Africa RSC (Sahel sub-RSC) Middle Eastern RSC (Magreb Sub-RSC) | Insulator | N/A | Mali | Moderate |
| Niger | Sahel | West Africa RSC (Sahel sub-RSC) | Small power | Violent jihadi groups (Boko Haram, JNIM, AQIM, ISWAP); Armed ethnic militias (GAITA) | Tri-border, Chad, Nigeri | Very High |

These states further exhibit similarities in their historical trajectory, socio-economic foundations, and security concerns. Their mutual experiences as former French colonies and shared socioeconomic challenges underpin the convergence of their respective security interests into a distinctive sub-RSC.

**Defining regional security pattens: The Sahel's (sub)regional security architecture, securitization processes**

The Sahel sub-complex is characterized by the convergence of units that share a common landscape of threats and collective defense mechanisms; primary threats, although linked to internal instability, often manifest through the impacts of transnational terrorist networks and the cross-border implications of neighboring conflicts. These threats are not isolated within state borders but transfer sub-regionally (proximity factor), necessitating a collaborative security response.

The Sahel sub-RSC therefore maintains a distinct security cooperation from the overarching WA RSC. Over the past decade (2013-2023), the Sahel states engaged in five regional alliances with security cooperation mandates:

*Table 6 Regional alliances and security cooperation in the Sahel (generated by the author)*

| Regional formations | Description | Origin | Security cooperation |
|---|---|---|---|
| AoSS | Alliance of Sahel States (2023-X); mutual defense pact | LGA | N/A |
| G5S | G5 Sahel (2014 -2024); security alliance | Western (France/UN) | G5S Joint Force (FC-G5S, 2017-2023); Operation Barkhane (France, 2014-2022) and Task Force Takuba (EU, 2021-2022) |
| LGA | Autorité du Liptako-Gourma (1970-X); development organization | Sahel states | LGA Joint military task force (2017); absorbed by FC-G5S |
| ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States (1975-X); political and economic union | West-African (Perception: French controlled; CFA link) | ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF); Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) |
| AU | Organisation of African Unity (OAU, 1963-2002); African Union (2002-X); continental union | Trans-African | African Standby Force (ASF); Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF, 1994-X) |

Three out of these alliances appear at the subregional level (AoSS, G5S, LGA), while the other two are at the regional (ECOWAS) and the continental (AU) level. These bodies (mainly ECOWAS and the AU) play an instrumental role in fostering regional integration, supporting developmental agendas, and promoting a collective security framework.

The Sahel's regional security architecture – supported by external actors such as the UN, the US and the EU – has notably harbored over 10 main multinational security cooperation initiatives:

*Table 7 Multinational security initiatives in the Sahel (generated by the author)*

| Multinational initiative | Lead | Dates | Location |
|---|---|---|---|
| MINUSMA | UN | 2013-2023 | Mali |
| FC-G5S | G5S | 22017-2023 | G5 Sahel |
| Operation Barkhane | France | 2014-2022 | G5 Sahel |
| JTF Takuba | EU | 2021-2022 | tri-border (Mali, Burkina, Niger) |
| LGA JTF | LGA | 2017 | Sahel |
| MNJTF | AU | 1994-X | Chad, Niger |
| EU-TM Mali | EU | 2013-X | Mali |
| EU-CAP Mali | EU | 2014-X | Mali |
| EU-CAP Niger | EU | 2012-X | Niger |
| EUMPM Niger | EU | 2023-X | Niger |

Security cooperation in the Sahel over the 2013-2023 period thus revolved around four thematic pillars:

1. Counter-terrorism operations: primarily led by the G5S (FC-G5S) and France (Seval, Barkhane). This pillar was notably supported by the UN (MINUSMA) and

the EU (Takuba) and heavily targeted the tri-border region (Mali; Burkina Faso, Niger).

2. Military capacity building: led by the EU within the framework of the P3S[24], capacity building efforts (EU-CAPs and EU-TMs) revolved around the provision of training and equipment to national armed forces and the FC-G5S.

3. Institutional resilience and security sector reform: led by the EU in collaboration with the G5S to bolster the state control over its territory as well as internal security and justice capabilities ("Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2020").

4. Acceleration of Development Assistance: co-led by the G5S and the Sahel Alliance[25], accelerates the mobilization of official development assistance to address subregional socio-economic challenges.

While out of the scope of this research, capacity building and development initiatives (ECOWAS, AU, EU, UN, etc.) have been pivotal elements to strengthen the regional security fabric, enhancing cohesion and building necessary cross-border links for unified responses.

Until 2023, security cooperation in the Sahel was facilitated through the G5S framework, which forged a decade-long collective identity against the threat of transnational terrorism amongst the concerned states and provided the organizational underpinnings for collective regional security management. This, however, is no longer the case – as will be explored in later sections.

**Q2: What are the characteristics of Russian power projection in the Sahel?**

**Developing a common framework of Russian power projection in the Sahel**

An examination of available data on Russian activities in the Sahel reveals that Russian power projection and penetration into the Sahel sub-RSC is based on a dual approach characterized by a complex combination of overt and covert strategies:

---

[24] Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel.
[25] Franco-german development initiative; not to be confused with the AoSS (Sahelian mutual defense pact).

*Table 8 Pillars of Russian power projection in the Sahel (generated by the author)*

## Russian power projection in the Sahel

### Power projection strategy

| Principles of enagement | Engagement approach | Characteristics | Actors | Sector |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **International law, independence and non-interference:** Formal narrative emphasis on 'universal' principles of multilateralism, security indivisibility, equality, mutual respect and cooperation, non-use of force or threat of force, peaceful settlement of international disputes, sovereignty and territorial integrity, self-determination | formal | overt | State actors | Political relations |
| | | state-centric | | Economic relations |
| | | elite-oriented | | Military-security relations |
| **Pragmatism:** Strategic culture change; from soviet ideology to illiberal conservatism, asymetric tactics, exploitation of ambiguity, active measures; transition from plausible deniability to impleausible deniability | informal | covert | Parastatal actors | Grey zone |
| | | network-centric | | |
| | | elite-oriented | | |
| | | population-oriented | | |

### Power projection capabilities

| Objective | Power | Sector | Instruments | Actors |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Soft Diplomacy | **Soft-power tools** | International newsmedia, social media and content production | Rossiya Segodnya (RT, Sputnik, RIA Novosti, inoSMI) | INGOs, Civil society, media, academia |
| | | International education cooperation | Vaccinations (Covid, Ebola) | |
| Soft Coercion | | International health cooperation | Education exchanges, grants, African student quotas in Russian universities | State actors |
| | | Food security | Grain diplomacy | |
| State capture and subversion (Strategic culture shift from plausible to **implausible** deniability) | **Sharp-power tools** | Disinformation campaigns | Channels of mass communication (News, social media) Local media | "Political technologists" (Wagner Group Network) |
| | | Elections-meddling | | |
| | | Political consulting | Cooption and elite capture | |
| | | Commercial, grey market and illicit activities | Security-for-resources agreements Resource extraction Organized crimminal networks | PMSCs (Wagner Group network) |
| | | Security privatization | Protection of facilities or personnel Operations support | |
| Strategic signaling | **Hard-power tools** | Military cooperation | Military capability building Arms exports | State actors |
| | | Nuclear cooperation | Nuclear energy infrastructure and capability building | |

### PMSC engagement

| PMSC | Strategic* | Combat* | Non-Combat* | Dissinformation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wagner Group Network Africa Corps (TBC 2024) | Political insulation | Infantry | Security advisors | Anti-colonialism; |
| | Regime stability/protection | Forward advisers | Armed security | historical ties |
| | Deterrence | Coord. Fire and movement | Transport convoys | Anti-western actors; anti-liberal values; anti-democracy |
| | Control Grey zones | Forward air controlers | Training | Pro-military rule; pro- Pan-Africanism; african sovereignity; |
| | Zones of artifitial stability | reconnaissance | Personal protection | Ukraine damage control |
| | High influence w/ low confli | Armored troops | Subversion | Pro-Russia; Russia as a peace broker; Russia as a development actor; Russia empowers African states |
| | Deception | Information | Criminal activities | Recruitment for PMSCs |

### Subversion**

| Sector | State | Proxies | Foreign Partners | Challenges to target |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Military | GRU-Spetsnaz; VDV | PMSCs (Wagner Group) | Separatists, ethnic militias | Relatively highly capable light forces Difficult to distinguish from armed civilians at the beginning; a law enforcement response might be insufficient, while a military response bears political costs and may contribute to Russian propaganda |
| Political | Intelligence agencies (GRU, | State-linked patriotic groups | Juntas | Political influence in target countries Attribution to Russian government Grounded in preexisting political divisions |
| Economic | State-owned enterprises | Private, state-linked companies | Trade partners with Russia | Extensive arms trade links with Russia Difficulty distinguishing legitimate activity |
| Information | RT, Rossiya Segodnya, Sputn | content farms | Users unknowingly enaging in the amplification of Russian narratives | Deceptive or false content Difficult to regulate Attribution Global reach |
| Cyber | GRU, FSB, SVR | Co-opted independent hackers | Patriotic hacking group | Highly capable Attribution Global reach |

\* Asymmetric Warfare Group (2020);     \*\* Radin, Demus, & Marcinek (2020)

Any examination of Russian power projection in the Sahel must consider its strategic drivers. Russia's regional engagement is entrenched within broader foreign policy aspirations, primarily focused on self-positioning as a global hegemon in the international system; that is, as an alternative to Western hegemony. Tying back to neorealist theory, Russia's strategy mirrors classical balance of power tactics, seeking to overcome international insulation and counterbalance the influence of the western block by creating a multipolar order wherein it not only maintains strategic autonomy but is able to challenge the liberal model.

This aspiration is operationalized through strategic partnerships that offer mutual benefits[26], thereby allowing Russia to exert its geopolitical influence while seemingly addressing the historical grievances and security challenges of Sahelian states. This involves not only showcasing Russia as a reliable partner capable of providing tangible security solutions, but also as framing itself as a diplomatic force respecting the sovereignty and decision-making autonomy of African states[27]. This opportunistic approach notably includes its ability to leverage its great power status to exploit multilateral frameworks and use veto power within the UNSC to advocate in favor of Sahelian partners. Russia has been observed to leverage its position on the UNSC to block initiatives it perceives as antithetical to the sovereignty and autonomy of its Sahelian allies (notably, Mali 2020-2023). By doing so, Russia not only reinforces its image as a defender of state sovereignty but also positions itself as a counterbalance to Western influence within international decision-making fora.

Within the diplomatic arena, Russia further navigates the official dimensions of engagement, utilizing existing mandates or official frameworks as a shell cover for its broader objectives, which may include the establishment of a more dominant security presence or the pursuit of economic interests within the region. While this has been more in Central Africa (CAR, DRC), it was nonetheless noticeable in Mali (MINUSMA) and

---

[26] Although outside of the scope of this research, note relativity in benefit management from a security standpoint and African decision-making. National security, human security and regime security starkly conflict in Africa. In the context of national and human security, the claims of benefits of Russian engagements are heavily challenged by preceding cases (Mozambique, Libya, CAR, Sudan). In terms of regime security, CAR has been a success (albeit at the cost of Russian state capture and resource extraction) since 2016; while Sudan has been a resounding failure since 2019.

[27] A claim easily dispelled by its gray zone (informal/covert) tactics. This will be explored later in the context of Burkina Faso's 2022 coup.

may extend as a future practice depending on the Sahel's security degradation in the coming years.

Hence, Russia not only benefits economically[28] from its military ties with Sahelian states but also gains leverage over regional security matters that could potentially align with its strategic objectives[29]. The agility of Russian policy is further evidenced in its ability to adapt to changing security landscapes[30], offering a range of cooperation opportunities from the provision of military equipment to the engagement of PMSCs, providing greater flexibility to authoritarian governments.

Acknowledging the dual nature of Russian power projection in the Sahel is key to understanding the regional security interplay  shaping alliance reconfiguration processes. The overt dimension of Russia's involvement is primarily manifested through bilateral engagements and the provision of military aid, including arms supplies and training to the national armed forces. This element aligns with the Military Capacity Building thematic pillar of Sahelian regional security cooperation. Here, Russia assumes a role independent to Western actors; thereby crafting an alternative avenue of influence that often runs parallel to, and is aims at intersecting with, capability building efforts from the EU and other external partners.

While overt actions such as arms deals and military training programs are well documented, Russia's soft (cultural and diplomatic) and sharp (disinformation, political consulting, election meddling, etc.) power capabilities are critical in shaping public perception and constructing favorable conditions for elite and state capture. This strategic positioning is reinforced by augmented by narratives of Russia's historical ties to the region, predicated on Soviet-era relationships leveraged to reassert a viable strategic partnership. Engagement further extends to the covert realm through the use of PMSCs, most notably Wagner, which further isolate the targeted regime to establish Russia as an indispensable security partner within the Sahel under the ambit of offering tactical support against terrorism.

---

[28] Arms trade and security-for-resources agreements.
[29] UNSC, UNGA votes; control over migration routes into NATO's Southern flank; access to key resources to the global economy, etc.
[30] Exemplified by the turn of events in the Niger crisis; transpiring in close parallel to the 2nd Russia-Africa Summit and the Wagner rebellion.

**Determinants of Russian engagement**

Drawing from the previous section, a comparative analysis was conducted to establish the determinants of Russian engagement in the Sahel states:

*Table 9 Determinants of Russian engagement in the Sahel (generated by author)*

| Determinants of Russian engagement | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Structural factors | | Mali | Burkina | Mauritania | Niger | Chad |
| Political | Weak state institutions | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| | Anti-French sentiment | yes | yes | less | yes | yes, growing |
| | High coup recurrence | yes | yes | no | yes | less, at risk |
| | International isolation | yes | yes | no | yes | no |
| Socio-economic | Resource abundance | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| | Poverty and Underdevelopment | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| | Demographic Pressures | yes | yes | less | yes | yes |
| | Ethnic tensions | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| Security | Internal security crisis | yes | yes | no | yes | yes |
| | Environmental Degradation | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| | Porous Borders | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| | Multinational missions | yes | yes | no | yes | yes |
| Approach | | | | | | |
| Political | Use of formal (foreign policy/diplomacy) and informal approaches (PMSCs, parastatal actors) | yes | yes | N/A | yes | N/A |
| | Using anti-French sentiment | yes | yes | N/A | yes | At risk |
| Economic | Mining concessions | yes | yes | N/A | no, TBC | N/A |
| Subversion | Dissinformation* (2018-2023) | 15 | 11 | 1 | 16 | 3 |
| | | 14 Trans-African Campaigns | | | | |
| Security | Filling of security vacuum | yes | yes | N/A | yes | At risk |
| | Strong Russian ties to the military | yes | yes | N/A | no, TBC | At risk |
| | Export of Russian arms | yes | yes | N/A | yes | N/A |
| * Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024) | | | | | | |

The above outlines the framework used to assess structural factors as determinants of Russian engagement, as well as commonalities in the Russian targeting approach across Sahelian states. These include the presence of attributes within each nation which likely drive assessments of suitability for successful Russian targeting. Major determinants appear to be the target's political climate (coup recurrence, weak state institutions, anti-French international isolation), national security (internal crisis, multinational missions) and natural resources wealth (economic incentive for engagement in the form of mining concessions as part of security-for-resource exchanges).

As will be explored in the next section, all targeted states (Mali, Burkina, Niger) experienced coups immediately before formalization of security cooperation agreements and PMSC deployment. These were followed by regional and international sanctions, often resulting in isolation. It is evident that regime changes from democratically elected (albeit weak and unpopular) governments to autocratic military juntas create both greater opportunity for external actors and domestic vulnerability to external influence. This vulnerability is further compounded by Russia's increased media presence and public support for military governments, effectively combining hard, sharp and soft power in its African foreign policy playbook. Wagner's pattern of engagement into the Malian, Burkinabe and Nigerien security scenes post-coup and the subsequent increase in high-level Russia-Sahel diplomatic visits exemplify such an integrated approach to forging bilateral relations.
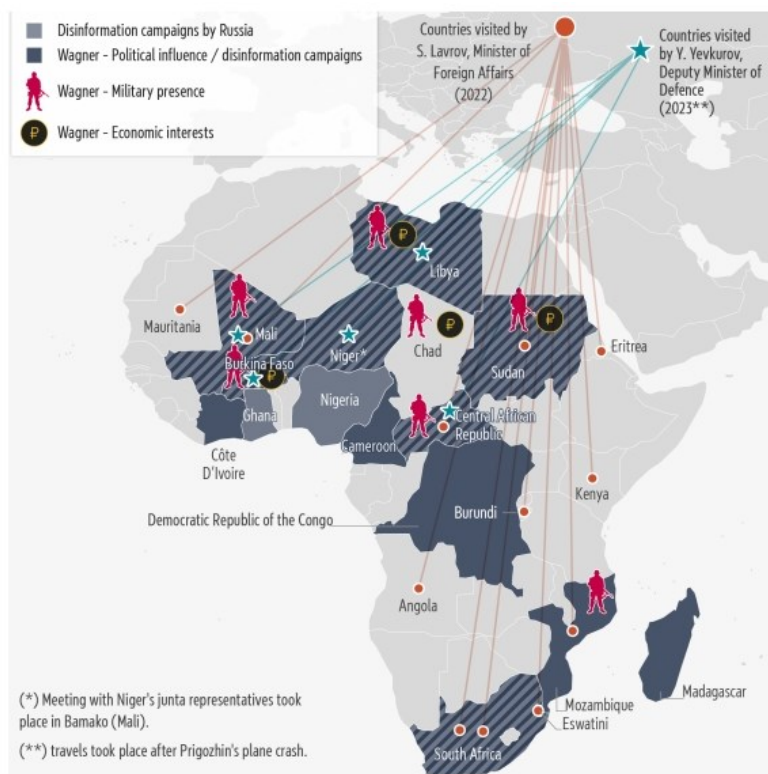


*Figure 3 Wagner activity (unofficial) followed by an increase in Russian MOFA and MOD (official) visits (Caprile & Pichon, 2024)*

Building upon the overarching strategy previously outlined, the analysis thus illustrated the materialization of all recurring themes across targeted states, as well as identified

risk areas in vulnerable states (Chad, Mauritania). This further consolidated the dual approach framework derived from the observation of Russian power projection activities. As expected, the analysis confirmed politically fluid environments, utilization of economic leverage points, and strategic military and diplomatic positioning across all targeted cases. This is observed to a lesser extent in the cases of Mauritania and Chad; with Chad displaying several risk factors[31]. In the end, despite each state displaying unique structural and socio-political contexts there is an undeniable commonality which, when combined with Russia's hybrid tactics, do indicate regional vulnerability to Russian influence amidst shifting global power dynamics – which serves as an early indicator towards its transferability to alliance reconfiguration processes.

## Q3: To what extent is Russian PMSC engagement driving alliance reconfiguration through subversive behavior?

To determine the extent of Russian influence into alliance reconfiguration processes in the Sahel it is necessary to first establish the history and membership of regional alliances.

As may be observed on Table 7, there are 5 main regional formations that fall within the scope of this research; the Alliance of Sahel States (2023-X), the G5 Sahel, the Autorité du Liptako-Gourma (1970-X), the Economic Community of West African States (1975-X), and the African Union (2002-X).

---

[31] In consistence with declarations from government officials noting perceptions of Russian subversion as a primary external threat.

*Table 10 Regional formations and security cooperation in the Sahel (generated by the author)*

| Regional formations | Description | Origin | Security cooperation | Membership | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Mali | Burkina | Mauritania | Niger | Chad |
| AoSS | Alliance of Sahel States (2023-X); mutual defense pact | LGA | N/A | 2023-present (Founding member) | 2023-present (Founding member) | N/A | 2023-present (Founding member) | N/A |
| G5S | G5 Sahel (2014-2024); security alliance | Western (France/UN) | G5S Joint Force (FC-G5S, 2017-2023); Operation Barkhane (France, 2014-2022) and Task Force Takuba (EU, 2021-2022) | 2014-2022 | 2014-2023 | 2014-2024 (dissolution) | 2014-2023 | 2014-2024 (dissolution) |
| LGA | Autorité du Liptako-Gourma (1970-X); development organization | Sahel states | LGA Joint military task force (2017); absorbed by FC-G5S | 1970-X (Founding member) | 1970-X (Founding member) | N/A | 1970-X (Founding member) | N/A |
| ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States (1975-X); political and economic union | West-African (Perception: French controlled; CFA link) | ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF); Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) | 1975-2024 (Founding Member) Suspension: 2021-2024 | 1975-2024 (Founding Member) Suspension: 2022-2024 | N/A | 1975-2024 (Founding Member) Suspension: 2023-2024 | 2011-X Observer Status 2023 Niger crisis mediator |
| AU | Organisation of African Unity (OAU, 1963-2002); African Union (2002-X); continental union | Trans-African | African Standby Force (ASF); Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF, 1994-X) | 1963(OAU)-X (Founding member) Suspensions: 2020-20 2021-X | 1963(OAU)-X (Founding member) Suspension: 2022-X | 1963(OAU)-X (Founding member) | 1963(OAU)-X (Founding member) Suspension: 2023-X | 1963(OAU)-X (Founding member) |

The context and membership of each formation illustrates a complex process, heavily influenced by both national and transnational threats within a history of political instability, violent extremism, and conflict spill-over.

From historic membership data, it is evident that the tri-border region is a key source of amity patterns driving alliance formation between Mali, Burkina, and Niger; find themselves at a strategic nexus where collective action becomes imperative for regime stability and survival. This is not the case of Mauritania and Chad – albeit Chad shows greater engagement in the Sahelian and West African (sub)/complexes than Mauritania – which is reflected on their respective memberships.

The pattern division between the two subregional blocks (Mali, Burkina, Niger vs Mauritania, Chad) is a common thread throughout our analysis which is explained through RSCT, as both Mauritania and Chad boast insulator status and display security interdependencies in multiple regional theaters. In short, Mauritania's low engagement is largely due to both relative national stability (low internal security threat perception) and greater engagement the Maghreb sub-RSC[32]; from its behavior, its interest in the Sahel sub-RSC (and by association, the West African RSC[33]) is clearly driven by and

---

[32] As previously noted, the greater sociocultural proximity, the stronger the amity/enmity patterns and therefore social construction of RSC belonging through security practice.

[33] Although it also displays a certain degree of interdependence with neighboring Senegal, its absence from ECOWAS and low engagement with coastal West African states consolidate this claim.

limited to pragmatic concerns (rather than regional identity) over border porosity and the spillover threat perception from Mali. Chad, on the other hand, exemplifies the opposite; its high engagement is driven by a regional power status bid in which, despite its own internal instability, it aims to position itself as a regional military power[34]. This is reflected by its interest in West African security matters and ambitions to join ECOWAS, not out of necessity (as its immediate security interests are already addressed through cooperation frameworks in the Sahel) but out of ambition to engage in a dedicated forum alongside coastal West African states.

As explored under the theoretical framework, it can be abstracted that the alignment and alliance formation process begin with the shared recognition of common security threats among Sahelian states, often grappling with the implications of internal instability and external pressures. It is worth reiterating, however, that alliances and security cooperation in the Sahel are not always forged through formal means but also through the gradual alignment of strategic interests and cooperation frameworks (as was notably the case with the G5S).

By mapping out the security collaboration efforts across the states, the table allows for the visualization of evaluation of the historical (1963-2024) convergence or divergence of strategies within the region and identifies turning points in alignment patterns; such as the disruptions experienced over the 2020-2024 period.

The next logical step is to perform a threat perception assessment in the lead up to that period to locate the source of alignment patterns and identify determinants of realignment:

---

[34] While counter intuitive, it is not uncommon for weak African states to make similar power status bids; Rwanda and Uganda are examples of this, although relatively stronger. In the West African complex, Ivory Coast appears to be making a similar bid through diplomatic (instead of military) channels.

*Table 11 Sources of alignment patterns (generated by the author)*

| Period | Country | Internal threat perception | External threat perception | External alignment | Regional Security partner(s) | Global Security partner(s) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2018-2019 | Mali | High | High | Very high | Burkina, Niger, ECOWAS | US; France; EU; UN |
| | Burkina | Moderate | Moderate | Moderate to high | Mali, Niger, Ghana, ECOWAS | France; EU; UN |
| | Mauritania | Low | Low | Low | Senegal, Algeria, Mali | US; EU |
| | Niger | Moderate to low | Moderate | Moderate | Nigeria, Burkina, Mali, ECOWAS | US; France; EU; UN |
| | Chad | High | High | Very high | Nigeria, CAR, Mali, AU | US; France; EU; UN |
| 2020-2021 | Mali | Very high to Extreme | Very high | Very high | Burkina, Niger | Russia; EU; UN |
| | Burkina | High to very high | High | High | Mali, Niger, Ghana, ECOWAS | France; EU; UN |
| | Mauritania | Low | Moderate to low | Low | Senegal, Algeria, Mali | US; EU; NATO |
| | Niger | High | Moderate to high | Moderate to high | Nigeria, Burkina, Mali, ECOWAS | US; France; EU; UN |
| | Chad | High | High | Very high | Nigeria, CAR, Mali, AU | US; France; EU; UN |
| 2022-2023 | Mali | Extreme | Very high | Very high | Burkina, Niger, Senegal | Russia; China; Turkey |
| | Burkina | Very high to Extreme | Very high | Very high | Mali, Niger | Russia (China; Turkey*) |
| | Mauritania | Moderate to low | Moderate to low | Moderate | Senegal, Algeria, Mali | US; NATO; EU |
| | Niger | High | Very high | Very high | Burkina, Mali | Russia (China; Turkey*) |
| | Chad | High | High | Very high | Nigeria, CAR, Mali, AU | US; France; EU; UN |

As observed in Table 8, threat perception progressively escalates in the tri-border region throughout the 2018-2023 period; directly correlated to the exponential expansion of the terrorist threat (Figure 2).

*Figure 4 Heatmap: Terrorism expansion by tri-border district (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024)*
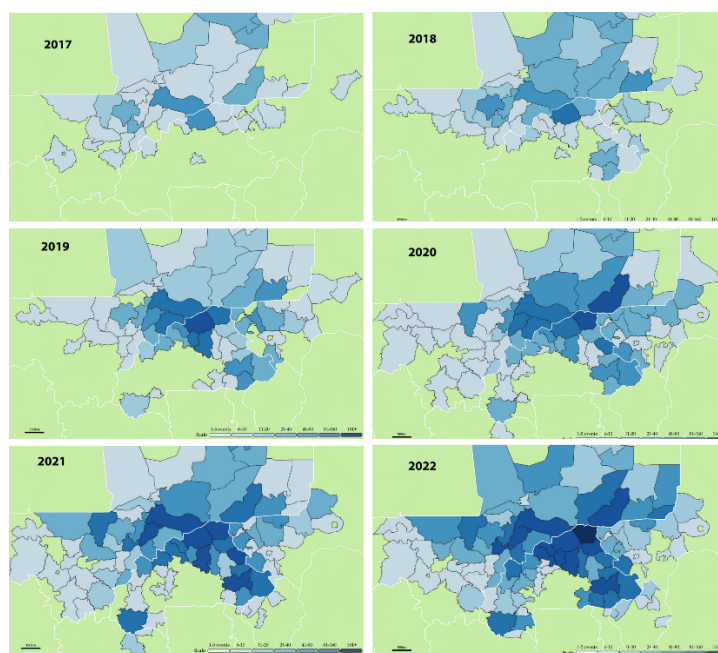


The trend starts in Mali in 2020, with a radical increase in both internal and external threat perception. This is explained by critical primary internal threat (terrorism) perception triggering regime change (2020 coup) and consequently driving an increase in external threat (regional/international sanctions, isolation, interference) perception;

which (under the impossibility of internal balancing) translates into higher calculations of external alignment (external balancing) for regime survival. This translates into the loss of traditional regional and global security partners (France/ECOWAS) over the 2020-2021 period, in favor of realignment with Russia. In BoT terms:

- Regime change occurs as a political reaction against the most immediate threat (internal, primary, non-state); not the most powerful one (external, secondary, liberal state coalitions) in terms of power capability.
- The Malian regime change threatens the geostrategic interests of liberal states and coalitions (France, UN, EU, ECOWAS, etc.), which leads to multilateral coercive measures against Mali's military junta.
- Upon external threat perception (liberal state coalitions with military forces within national territory); Mali then balances externally against the most powerful threat and realigns with Russia based on historic amity/enmity patterns and common threat perception (liberal model; western interventionism).

Taking the Malian Coup as a trigger event, the subjective perceptions of offensive intent, combined with the credibility and proximity of the threat perception thus outweighed systemic aggregations of power capabilities; driving the reconfiguration of Malian international alignment.

Now, examining the collective sequence of trigger events at the regional level:

*Table 12 Regional drivers of realignment patterns (generated by the author)*

| Trigger event | | | Outcome event(s) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Date | State | Event description | Date | Type | Event description |
| 5-Jun-20 | Mali | Malian civil protests | 18-Aug-20 | Coup | Mali coup d'état |
| Feb-21 | Niger | Niger general election | 23-Feb-21 | Popular demonstration | Niger election result protests |
| | | | 31-Mar-21 | Coup attempt | Niger Coup d'état attempt |
| 24-May-21 | Mali | Coup d'état | 24-May-21 | Popular demonstration | Pro-Russian demonstration in Mali |
| | | | 10-Jun-21 | International withdrawal | France announces the end of Operation Barkhane |
| | | | 13-Sep-21 | Wagner Deal | Mali-Wagner deal reported |
| | | | Nov-21 | Wagner Deployment | Wagner deployment to Mali |
| Dec-21 | Burkina | (Alleged) Burkina Military request to hire Wagner Group; Burkina Govt refusal | 22-Jan | Wagner engagement | Pro-Coup info-Ops |
| 23-Jan-22 | Burkina | Coup d'état; removal of Kabore; appointment of Damiba | 24-Jan-22 | Popular Demonstration; Wagner engagement | Protesters call for Russian intervention; Wagner Group re-engages Burkina Faso |
| 17-Feb-22 | Mali | Mali demands full withdrawal of Operation Barkhane; Task Force Takuba | Feb-22 | Realignment | Niger becomes France's primary security partner in the Sahel |
| | | | 2-May-22 | Realignment | Mali cuts defense agreement with France |
| | | | 15-May-22 | International withdrawal | Mali announces G5 withdrawal |
| | | | 30-Jun-22 | International withdrawal | Takuba withdraws from Mali |
| | | | 15-Aug-22 | International withdrawal | France withdraws Barkhane forces from Mali |
| 30-Sep-22 | Burkina | Coup d'état; removal of Damiba; appointment of Traore | Dec-22 | Wagner engagement | (Alleged, Ghana) Wagner presence in Burkina Faso; No formal agreement; Burkina Faso denies allegations. |
| | | | 19-Feb-23 | International withdrawal | French troop withdrawal from Burkina Faso |
| 16-Jun-23 | Mali | Mali demands MINUSMA withdrawal | 31-Dec-23 | International withdrawal | MINUSMA withdraws from Mali |
| 26-Jul-23 | Niger | Coup d'état | Jul-23 | Popular demonstration | Pro-coup, pro-Russian, anti-French demonstrations in Niger |
| | | | 27-Jul-23 | Wagner engagement | Wagner praises coup in Niger |
| | | | 28-Jul-23 | Secondary (External) Threat | AU condemns Niger coup, signals possible use of force |
| 30-Jul-23 | Niger | ECOWAS threatens intervention in Niger | 6-Aug-23 | Primary (External) Threat | Mali, Burkina Faso pledge military support to Niger against ECOWAS intervention |
| 10-Aug-23 | Niger | Activation of ECOWAS standby force | 16-Sep-23 | Alliance formation | Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso form Alliance of Sahel States |
| | | | 24-Sep-23 | International withdrawal | France announces withdrawal from Niger |
| | | | 28-Jan-24 | International withdrawal | Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger jointly announce ECOWAS withdrawal |
| 26-Sep-23 | Burkina | Coup d'état attempt against Traore; indefinite postponement of July 2024 general election | 24-Jan-24 | Wagner Deployment | Africa Corps (Wagner) deployment to Burkina Faso |
| 3-Dec-23 | Niger Burkina | Niger and Burkina Faso announce G5 Sahel withdrawal | 6-Dec-23 | International withdrawal | Chad and Mauritania announce G5 Sahel dissolution |
| Jan-24 | Niger | Niger announces security cooperation agreement with Russia | 10-Apr-24 | Wagner Deployment | Africa Corps (Wagner) deploys to Niger |

As in the case of Mali, Burkina Faso (2022-2023) and Niger (2023) similarly experience regime change as trigger events, driving realignment from liberal partners (France, ECOWAS, EU, etc.) towards Russia at the individual level. Upon closer examination, however, the alignment patterns shows the Niger crisis as a collective trigger for alliance reconfiguration:

Table 13 Regional BoT analysis of the Niger crisis (generated by the author)

| Trigger event | | Balance of Threat | | | | | Outcome event(s) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Date | Event description | Threat | ECOWAS | Mali / Burkina | Niger | Mauritania / Chad | Type/Assessment | Event description |
| 9-Jul-23 | ECOWAS Summit; New Chairman (Nigeria) hardlines against coups in the region | External | Low | Moderate | Low | Low | N/A | |
| | | Internal | High | Low | Moderate to high | Low | | |
| | | Alignment calculations | Low | Low | Low | Low | | |
| 26-Jul-23 | Niger Coup d'état | External | Moderate | Low | Moderate | Low | Threat signal | AU condemns Niger coup, signals possible use of force |
| | | Internal | Very high | Low | Very High | Low | | |
| | | Alignment calculations | Moderate | Moderate | Moderate | Low | | |
| 28-Jul-23 | AU condemns Niger coup, signals possible use of force | External | Moderate | Low | Moderate to high | Low | Primary (External) Threat | ECOWAS threatens intervention in Niger |
| | | Internal | Very high | Low | Very High | Moderate to high | | |
| | | Calculations | Moderate | Moderate | High | Low | | |
| 30-Jul-23 | ECOWAS threatens intervention in Niger | External | Moderate | Moderate to high | Very High | Low | Realignment | Mali, Burkina Faso pledge military support to Niger against ECOWAS intervention |
| | | Internal | Very high | Low | Very High | Low | | |
| | | Calculations | Moderate to high | High | Very High | Moderate to high | | |
| 6-Aug-23 | Mali, Burkina Faso pledge military support to Niger against ECOWAS intervention | External | High | High | High | Low to moderate | Primary (External) Threat | Activation of ECOWAS standby force |
| | | Internal | Very high | Moderate to | High | Low | | |
| | | Calculations | High | High | Very High | Moderate to high | | |
| 10-Aug-23 | Activation of ECOWAS standby force | External | High | High | Very High | Moderate | Mediation | Chad attempts mediation Niger and ECOWAS |
| | | Internal | Very high | Moderate to high | Very High | Low | Alliance formation | Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso form Alliance of Sahel States |
| | | Calculations | Very High | Very High | Very High | Very High | | |
| 16-Sep-23 | Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso form Alliance of Sahel States | External | High | High | High | Moderate to high | Alliance dissolution | France announces withdrawal from Niger |
| | | Internal | Very high | Moderate | High | Low | | Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger jointly announce ECOWAS withdrawal |
| | | Calculations | Very High | Very High | Very High | High | | Niger and Burkina Faso announce G5 Sahel withdrawal; Chad and Mauritania announce G5 Sahel dissolution |
| 26-Sep-23 | Coup d'état attempt against Traore; indefinite postponement of July 2024 general election | External | High | High | High | Moderate to high | Realignment | Africa Corps (Wagner) deployment to Burkina Faso |
| | | Internal | Very high | Very High | Very High | Low | | Niger announces security cooperation agreement with Russia |
| | | Calculations | Very High | Very High | Very High | Moderate to high | | Africa Corps (Wagner) deploys to Niger |

While individual threat perception seems to be the pattern for strategic realignment (Table 13), alliance reconfiguration is clearly driven by the collective[35] threat perception against their common (sub)regional interest. According to BoT analysis and to initial expectations, the threat of ECOWAS intervention is confirmed to be the collective trigger for regional alliance reconfiguration (AoSS), withdrawal (ECOWAS) and subsequent dissolution (G5S). External realignment (Russia, China, Turkey) occurs at the national level; while alliance formation and reconfiguration processes (AoSS, G5S, ECOWAS) are supranational.

---

[35] Even in the context of Mali's withdrawal from the G5S in 2022, remaining partners declared their hopes for reconciliation and perceived it as a move against French influence; not as a break in Sahelian relations. This is illustrated by the continuity of the LGA (Table 7). Albeit sometimes contentious, the tri-border area at the state level does share a strong collective identity shaped by historic ties, proximity, common threat perception and values (hence, the importance of social construction as per RSCT amity/enmity patterns).

In contrast, examining the patterns of Mauritania and Chad reveals consistently low threat perceptions while displaying higher international engagement (strategic calculations) during and in the direct aftermath of collective (regional) and individual (national) trigger events. Once again, this is consistent with their insulator status. During the 2022-2023 period, Mauritania not only disengages from the pattern set by the tri-border states and distances itself from Russia but rekindles its strategic partnership with NATO – likely a counterbalance to the perceived threat of Russian interference. Consistent with strategic ambitions, Chad goes as far as to mediate between parties during the Nigerien crisis – even despite its lack of ECOWAS membership. Still, as outlined on Table 9, Chad remains vulnerable to Russian interference; the death of President Deby during the 2021 Northern Chad offensive leaves it vulnerable to interference and regime change; 2021 rumors of Russian support of Chadian FACT insurgents were confirmed in 2023 by shared US intelligence reports (Chanson, 2023; Faucon, 2023). As Russian disinformation campaigns (Tables 9, 14) targeting Chad and anti-French sentiment grows, risk of Russian subversion increases. Most recently, Chadian military authorities have requested the withdrawal of US troops from the country (Smitch, 2024) – an event which may signal future realignment.

However, the question of Russian influence over these processes remains to be answered. Table 10 and Table 9 both reveal a common pattern of Russian engagement and PMSC deployment immediately following regime change – certain indicators of Russia's pragmatic and opportunistic strategy. Whether they are merely correlated, or indicative of a possible causal relation is less certain.

The only feasible method of clarifying this method within research limitations is to conduct an analysis on confirmed Russian disinformation campaigns[36] and contrast them against regional trigger events, national recurrence, and amity/enmity realignment patterns – both at the collective and individual level.

---

[36] Dataset with sources facilitated by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), corroborated by the author using OSINT analysis techniques.

*Table 14 Russian disinformation against realignment trigger events (generated by the author)*

| Associated Russian disinformation campaign(s) | | | Trigger event | | | Outcome event(s) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Date | Target | Narrative streams | Date | State | Event description | Date | Type | Event description |
| 2020 | Burkina Mali | Anti-democracy; Pro-military juntas; pro-delaying elections; call for revolution in the Sahel | 5-Jun-20 | Mali | Malian civil protests | 18-Aug-20 | Coup | Mali coup d'état |
| N/A | | | Feb-21 | Niger | Niger general election | 23-Feb-21 | Popular demonstration | Niger election result protests |
| | | | | | | 31-Mar-21 | Coup attempt | Niger Coup d'état attempt |
| 2021 | Mali | Anti-French, anti-UN; pro-Russian messages; pro-Wagner | 24-May-21 | Mali | Coup d'état | 24-May-21 | Popular demonstration | Pro-Russian demonstration in Mali |
| | | | | | | 10-Jun-21 | International withdrawal | France announces the end of Operation Barkhane |
| | | | | | | 13-Sep-21 | Wagner Deal | Mali-Wagner deal reported |
| | | | | | | Nov-21 | Wagner Deployment | Wagner deployment to Mali |
| 2020 | Burkina Mali | Anti-democracy; Pro-military juntas; pro-delaying elections; call for revolution in the Sahel | Dec-21 | Burkina | (Alleged) Burkina Military request to hire Wagner Group; Burkina Govt refusal | 22-Jan | Wagner engagement | Pro-Coup info-Ops |
| Jan-22 | Burkina | Pro-Wagner, anti-France, pro-Russian intervention in the Sahel | 23-Jan-22 | Burkina | Coup d'état; removal of Kabore; appointment of Damiba | 24-Jan-22 | Popular Demonstration; Wagner engagement | Protesters call for Russian intervention; Wagner Group re-engages Burkina Faso |
| 2022 | Mali | Wagner propaganda; pro-junta propaganda; supression of dissent; Anti-French; targeting Operation Barkhane, France, ECOWAS, MINUSMA | 17-Feb-22 | Mali | Mali demands full withdrawal of Operation Barkhane; Task Force Takuba | Feb-22 | Realignment | Niger becomes France's primary security partner in the Sahel |
| | | | | | | 2-May-22 | Realignment | Mali cuts defense agreement with France |
| | | | | | | 15-May-22 | International withdrawal | Mali announces G5 withdrawal |
| | | | | | | 30-Jun-22 | International withdrawal | Takuba withdraws from Mali |
| | | | | | | 15-Aug-22 | International withdrawal | France withdraws Barkhane forces from Mali |
| 2022 | Burkina | anti-Damiba military junta; pro-coup in Burkina Faso; pro-Russian military support. | 30-Sep-22 | Burkina | Coup d'état; removal of Damiba; appointment of Traore | Dec-22 | Wagner engagement | (Alleged, Ghana) Wagner presence in Burkina Faso; No formal agreement; Burkina Faso denies allegations. |
| | | | | | | 19-Feb-23 | International withdrawal | French troop withdrawal from Burkina Faso |
| 2019 | Mali | antidemocratic, anti-EU, anti-UN narratives through African voices; Russian propaganda, invasion of Ukraine. | 16-Jun-23 | Mali | Mali demands MINUSMA withdrawal | 31-Dec-23 | International withdrawal | MINUSMA withdraws from Mali |
| 2021 | Mali | Anti-French, anti-UN; pro-Russian messages; pro-Wagner | | | | | | |
| 2022-23 | Mali | anti-MINUSMA conspiracies | | | | | | |
| 2023 | Niger | Anti-democracy (Western tool); Pro-coups; Russia-China partnership in Africa; pro-Russian African alliance. | 26-Jul-23 | Niger | Coup d'état | Jul-23 | Popular demonstration | Pro-coup, pro-Russian, anti-French demonstrations in Niger |
| | | | | | | 27-Jul-23 | Wagner engagement | Wagner praises coup in Niger |
| 2023 | Niger | instability in Niger; anti-President Bazoum; pro-coup | | | | 28-Jul-23 | Secondary (External) Threat | AU condemns Niger coup, signals possible use of force |
| Jul-23 | Niger | Pro-coup; Pro-Russia; anti-ECOWAS; anti-France and President Bazoum. Sabotage negotiations to restore democracy. Create perceptions of a connection between the coup leaders and Wagner. | 30-Jul-23 | Niger | ECOWAS threatens intervention in Niger | 6-Aug-23 | Primary (External) Threat | Mali, Burkina Faso pledge military support to Niger against ECOWAS intervention |
| | | | 10-Aug-23 | Niger | Activation of ECOWAS standby force | 16-Sep-23 | Alliance formation | Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso form Alliance of Sahel States |
| | | | | | | 24-Sep-23 | International withdrawal | France announces withdrawal from Niger |
| | | | | | | 28-Jan-24 | International withdrawal | Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger jointly announce ECOWAS withdrawal |
| 2023 | Burkina | Anti-French; Anti-West; Pro-Russia; Pro-Military Juntas in the Sahel | 26-Sep-23 | Burkina | Coup d'état attempt against Traore; indefinite postponement of July 2024 general election | 24-Jan-24 | Wagner Deployment | Africa Corps (Wagner) deployment to Burkina Faso |
| 2023 | Burkina | Pro-Military Junta; counter political opposition | | | | | | |
| 2023 | Niger | Anti-French, pro Russo-african cooperation | 3-Dec-23 | Niger Burkina | Niger and Burkina Faso announce G5 Sahel withdrawal | 6-Dec-23 | International withdrawal | Chad and Mauritania announce G5 Sahel dissolution |
| | | | Jan-24 | Niger | Niger announces security cooperation agreement with Russia | 10-Apr-24 | Wagner Deployment | Africa Corps (Wagner) deploys to Niger |

Note that the above neglects to visually display 14 Russian disinformation campaigns which targeted the wider continent over the 2018-2023 period.

Combined with prior analysis, this contrast presents a practical application of the dual approach of Russian strategic power projection exerting external influence over alignment and alliance reconfiguration patterns in the Sahel. This assertion is best exemplified by the case of Burkina Faso, where Russian pro-coup disinformation campaign data is consistently available throughout:

- preliminary Wagner engagement (November-December 2021) and first regime change through military coup (January 2022);
- lack of Wagner deal formalization leading to a pro-coup disinformation campaign prior to second regime change through military coup (September 2022);
- instauration of a pro-Russian Burkinabe military leader;
- pro-junta disinformation campaign through an (attempted) third coup event (September 2023).

This not only culminated in the individual and collective patterns previously described, but in the formalization of a cooperation agreement and official deployment of Russian military and paramilitary[37].

While it may be insufficient data to justify a causal relationship, it does show a strong correlation over the five cases and confirms Russian PMSC subversive behavior, as well as one plausible primary driver of regional alliance reconfiguration (AoSS, G5S, ECOWAS) in the Sahel during the 2018-2023 period.

## Reflective Analysis

### Considerations on African state agency

Within this context, the liberal intervention models, which emphasize democracy and human rights, are being challenged by the more pragmatic, 'hard' security-focused approaches offered by illiberal actors (in this case, Russia). This crisis of the liberal model is due to the conflict between ideologically-driven narratives of disinterested solidarity and liberal objectives; and, on the other, the pragmatically-driven pursuit of national and western strategic interests – which are ultimately prioritized. In contrast, the illiberal model offers African partners a hardline security alternative, untethered from any human security considerations, which (in theory) allows them to retain a greater degree of sovereignty over national policy since it is not conditional to the adherence of externally imposed values. In practice, this is demonstrably untrue as the partly covert nature of Russian engagements in Africa consistently goes from collaborative to disruptive, subversive tactics. Still, some African states value the illiberal alternative precisely for its operational value against insurgency and utility in suppressing

---

[37] At the time of writing, it is unclear how the Wagner transition into the Africa Corps will progressively materialize.

internal dissent without external criticism; and they are met with Russia's readiness to cooperate without having to face demands of internal reforms.

In between the West-Russia binary, African states display complex interactions within regional and international alliances. These are not necessarily characterized by a clear 'pro-Russia' stance, as much as they are shaped by a pronounced 'anti-Western' sentiment. This provides Russian actors with an opportunity to leverage and capitalize on pre-existing, domestic anti-Western narratives to embed disinformation within the local information environment.

Anti-Western sentiments serve Russia to position itself as the leading alternative to the liberal model in the field of security cooperation, exert influence across the continent and foster illicit financial flows and privileged access to natural resources to overcome international sanctions. This is underscored by the emergence of a new African 'non-aligned movement' reminiscent of Cold War era dynamics. A reevaluation of Western engagement in the Sahel and the wider African security theater is therefore necessary.

From the Western perspective, Russo-African cooperation is often portrayed as elite-driven, purely based on regime security calculations and lacking in popular support. This Western view disregards legitimate support for Russia amongst disgruntled African populations which have been failed by the liberal intervention model and, in the face of severe national insecurity, favor the perceived increased agency provided by the Russian illiberal intervention model (which partly operates covertly, if under the implausible deniability[38]). This Global North-South dynamic underscores the importance of recognizing African agency in the context of external power projection and discussions on subversion, as African states are mostly extraverted, pragmatic actors actively choosing their international partners based on their own strategic interests, rather than passively being victims of global power plays. While the choices of some states may be curtailed due systemic constraints, lack of national capabilities and/or international isolation, observing the international extraverted behaviors of states such as Chad, Sudan[39] or Rwanda quickly dispel paternal narratives which lead to strategic miscalculations of collective state behavior. As demonstrated by the 2023 realignment of the Sahel, these miscalculations can quickly shift regional and global dynamics.

When it comes to evaluating African or Sahelian state agency, another associated concern is the western tendency to decontextualize and monitor the actions of non/liberal actors in isolation, which often detracts from the full consideration of domestic factors under the 'weak' or ´failed´ state labels. The two Russia-Africa Summits (2019-2023) have widely captured and highlighted the African sentiment (discontent at best, resentment at worst) towards traditional Western partners, consolidating this strategic alignment trend shift both at the individual and at the collective level throughout the continent. The concept of "intervention by invitation", as were the case of Barkhane and Takuba in Mali, and the recent calls for withdrawal merely exemplify how African states are exercising greater agency and seeking alternative securtiy partners that better align with their regimes´ values and objectives. This scenario underlines the importance of recognizing African states as sovereign entities with the autonomy to select their security partners.

Outside of the Sahel, Russia's appeal as security partner seems to be oftentimes positioned as a supplementary, rather than a substitutive force in the region (Lindskov Jacobsen, 2020). This is well received by more powerful, extraverted African states (such as African hegemon Nigeria), which have greater negotiation leverage over Western partners and currently signal their receptiveness to engage Russian PMSCs not just as an alternative, but as a complement to Western efforts which do not currently meet their security needs on their own. This

---

[38] Cormac, Walton, & Van Puyvelde (2021).

[39] Prior to intensification of internal conflict in 2023.

diversification strategy exemplifies a higher degree of national agency, as it both reduces dependency on the West and broadens their future geopolitical options. It is only logical for the African state to ensure that their strategic partnerships are responsive to the realities on the ground and respectful of their sovereignty.

## Overall critical reflection

Consistently, central Sahel states identified regional ideological and political threats (ECOWAS, VNSAs) as inherently more threatening to their domestic stability and the survival of their military regimes than those emanating from threat actors with the most aggregate power (Russia, AU, Western allies). This consolidates the theoretical juxtaposition between balance of power and balance of threat theory, reaffirming the applicability of balance of threat calculations in the Sahel based on offensive intention, as opposed to offensive capabilities.  As expected, geographic proximity remains a weighted factor, as reflected in calculations favoring ECOWAS threat credibility over the AU´s. In a similar fashion, coastal West African states clearly prioritized the perceived ideological threat coming from the Central Sahel (in the form of returning military regimes) than national challenges pertaining to their own internal and political stability.

Similarly, it is clear that military regimes in central Sahel states overwhelmingly choose to confront external powers with no evidenced offensive intentions (overt or covert), but inherently threatening power capabilities and colonial histories (EU, France, UN, US); whereas they chose to realign with Russia, a state with lower power capabilities, demonstrable offensive intent (system level) and known for using subversive tactics against its targeted regimes – partners and otherwise.

Therefore, it is evident that Central Sahel states find themselves in a strategic environment in which they have to face multiple conundrums at the same time – as per our case selection, having to carefully calculate and subsequently balance:

-   whether the immediate (internal) threat of the jihadist insurgency (greater offensive intention) outweighs that of potential threat to domestic regime security by national armed forces (greater offensive capability);
-   whether the immediate (internal) threat of the jihadist insurgency (greater offensive intention) outweighs that of external influence (greater offensive capability);
-   whether the potential threat of overt (external) western influence outweighs that of covert (external) Russian influence;
-   whether the potential threat of ECOWAS intervention (external, threat in proximity) outweighs that of immediate (internal) Russian influence; and so on.

These findings corroborate the weight of domestic and transnational identity factors (Gause, 2003) in threat perception, strategic calculations and, therefore, alliance and alignment behavior. While there might be room to contest that these fall outside of the (neo)realist theoretical framework, this reflection argues that such factors are in fact complementary – and are indeed underlying any formation or reconfiguration of historical amity and enmity patterns at the regional level, as accounted by RSCT. In line with Gause (2003:275), this research maintains that their consideration:

> "does not, however, challenge basic realist premises about the reality of anarchy, the centrality of states, and the primacy of security concerns in understanding state behavior in the international system. Rather, it looks to cultural factors to help explain state choices in an indeterminate structural environment. In its emphasis on domestic regime security to explain alliance decisions, it follows the recent trend among scholars in the

realist tradition to introduce unit-level and perceptual variables into theoretical accounts of state behavior in the security realm".

Still, it must be explicitly noted that the strong ties that bind the Sahel, and their proclivity to prioritize aggressive intention over aggregate power in their alliance and alignment calculations, stem not only from the tri-border region and their shared security interdependency but also from their particular cultural context and shared collective identity. Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Mauritania and Chad find themselves at a geopolitical juncture, straddling the cultural lines between Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism and Islam – a position which, historically, has never been perceived as fully embraced by their counterparts in Sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East. While at the domestic level there is a lack of cohesive national identity due to different ethnic groupings and grievances, they do exhibit very strong and distinct transnational political identities – as previously discussed, alluding to one of the challenges to the Westphalian, state-centric model. Both the state-centric and the human-centric Sahelian security complexes distinctly transcend national borders and provide powerful ideological proximity – as illustrated by their historical alliance behavior and willingness to participate in mutual defense when one is threatened.

The fact that the central Sahel states chose to counterbalance by committing to a mutual defense pact (AoSS) against potential West African aggression, instead of relying on extra-regional actors, demonstrates the pragmatic character of Russo-African security cooperation. It indicates a low level of confidence in Russia (and, to a lesser extent, China) as a primary security partner beyond the provided privatization and institutional fora protection (UNSC); confirming their perception of Russia as a self-interested external actor, unwilling to extend itself as a security guarantor – as well as reaffirms their threat perception confirming a need for regional ideological fraternity and self-reliance (self-help principle). When Russia did not offer itself as a mediator between the central Sahel and ECOWAS states during the second Russia-Africa Summit (occurring immediately after the Niger coup), it confirmed that these calculations were in fact correct; while Russia apparently aims to power project into the continent, gain control of natural resources and exert its political influence, it does not wish to venture into matters of regional stability when it does not serve its own national interest.

While there is substantial evidence confirming that the Sahel's relation to and interaction with the global (liberal and illiberal) powers factored into their alliance and alignment behavior (popular anti-West, anti-French sentiments), their choices were not solely dictated by the affinity, fear of or hostility toward them. External influence was not their only potential threat, let alone their most dangerous one. The analysis merely determines the extent of that influence as a contributing factor – especially, on its magnifying power through the exploitation of historical grievances – and does not consider the extent of such external influence an indicator of direct causality in the alliance outcome. However, there is basis for an argument to be made in favor of Russian subversion having an accelerating effect over it – which should be explored in future research.

As a general rule, central Sahel states chose to balance against democratic Coastal West African states (with weaker military capabilities) expressing greater hostile intent towards their putschist regimes and allied themselves with states (Russia, China) that (potentially) presented greater threats from a national security standpoint in the long-term (in the form of demonstrable subversive intent). On the other hand, ECOWAS leaders chose to confront the central Sahel for undergoing regime change (towards military authoritarianism) and developing ideological distance from that of the regional formation, despite the lack of evidence showing either substantial offensive capabilities nor aggressive intent against ECOWAS or their national governments – what would be later revealed a grandstanding miscalculation on the part of Nigeria, which dramatically consolidated enmity out of otherwise shifting regional patterns.

Within this context, the Sahel´s alliance choices were perceived as central to their national security – having to balance multiple threats emerging at different system levels; global (Russia, West), interregional (AU), regional (ECOWAS) and (trans)national (terrorist insurgency). Any balancing would ultimately have to carry the decision of whether the potential threat of future military intervention from their neighbors would be less damaging than the immediate threat to domestic security by transnational VNSAs, or that of regime insecurity as presented by an external actor with a track record of delegitimizing and destabilizing national ruling elites whose policies diverged from its strategic interests. Thus, when Niger´s military junta came under explicit threat, the other central Sahel states counterbalanced against ECOWAS.

If external actors – be it Russian subversion or Western influence – had been the dominant threat concern for Sahelian states, it would have been reflected in their alliance choices; however, these remained focused on mutual dependence at the (sub)regional level. This is explained by the combination of state weakness and the severe internal threat facing these regimes. Given their incapability to balance internally, balancing against all external global actors – although rational in terms of calculations of aggregated power and subversive intent – would not be possible without compromising national security as they would be unable to meet the transnational insurgency in conditions of global isolation. Therefore, given the limitation of their strategic alternatives and ideological distance from the liberal actors, the military juntas´ only logical balancing choices were to collectively counterbalance against ECOWAS to preserve regime security and – considering the failure of western counterterrorism operations – externally balance and realign with Russia against the internal threat (transnational terrorism) to preserve national security.

## Conclusion

In short: the present research contributes to the understanding over the extent of extra-regional power projection influencing regional alliance formation, providing insights into the complex interplay between colliding ideologies and strategic interests in the Sahel. Findings underscore the threat construction and strategic calculations of Sahelian states, driven by a need to navigate regional security and national autonomy amidst growing global interference.

The Sahel sub-complex was characterized by the convergence of 5 units – Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania and Chad – that share a common landscape of threats and collective defense mechanisms; primary threats, although linked to internal instability, often manifested through the impacts of transnational terrorist networks and the cross-border implications of neighboring conflicts. These threats were not isolated within state borders but transferred sub-regionally (proximity factor).

Until 2023, security cooperation in the Sahel was facilitated through the G5S framework, which forged a decade-long collective identity against the threat of transnational terrorism amongst the concerned states and provided the organizational underpinnings for collective regional security management. This, however, was terminated when the

Niger crisis (July 2023) acted as the final detonator in the consolidation of regional realignment, leading to the block withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the G5S, ECOWAS and, ultimately, the counter-reactionary formation of the AoSS.

Despite the local nature of the Sahelian (security) crisis and the Nigerien (political) crisis, reflected in the contestation between political and military African elites, it is evident that the Sahel is becoming an arena of global competition in the forming multipolar system. The evolving foreign engagements, particularly by Russia, underscore this strategic pivot highlighting the complex interplay of local aspirations and global interests colliding regionally. The liberal bloc (US, France and EU led) is caving under the significant advances of the illiberal bloc (Russia, China), while Middle Eastern powers (Turkey, Iran, UAE, Qatar) venture further into extra-regional power projection – which had been previously concentrating in their immediate neighborhood (Red Sea and Horn of Africa) – and signal the emergence of a third bloc. The multiplicity of competing strategic global agendas will likely add to regional instability (as in the cases of Sudan and Somalia) – intensifying geopolitical competition, power projection and a security vacuum exploited by opportunistic illiberal actors, such as the Russian Wagner Group.

The Sahel´s alliance choices were central to their national security – having to balance multiple threats emerging at different system levels; global (Russia, West), interregional (AU), regional (ECOWAS) and (trans)national (terrorist insurgency). According to BoT analysis, the threat of ECOWAS' military intervention is confirmed to be the collective trigger for regional alliance reconfiguration (AoSS), withdrawal (ECOWAS) and subsequent dissolution (G5S). Consistently, ideological and political primary threat perception triggered regional strategic realignment. Central Sahel states identified regional ideological and political threats (ECOWAS, VNSAs) as inherently more threatening to their domestic stability and the survival of their military regimes than those emanating from threat actors with the most aggregate power (Russia, AU, Western allies); while coastal West African states clearly acted on the perceived ideological threat coming from the Central Sahel (in the form of returning military regimes). Thus, when Niger´s military junta came under explicit threat, the other central Sahel states counterbalanced against ECOWAS.

Overall, there was insufficient data to justify a causal relationship between Russian subversion and alliance reconfiguration in the Sahel; however, the empirical analysis did confirm Russian PMSC subversive behavior and produced a strong correlation over the five states. When combined with the identified determinants of engagement, Russian subversion was indeed confirmed to be an underlying driver of realignment (AoSS, G5S, ECOWAS) behavior in the Sahel during the 2020-2023 period. Within this context, Chad was identified as a vulnerable target of future Russian subversion and regime change.

There is a possibility that central Sahel states will be able to exploit this competition to their strategic advantage by obtaining more strategic alternatives and reclaiming greater agency against global powers. The concept of "intervention by invitation" (like Barkhane, MINUSMA and Takuba) and the recent calls for withdrawal exemplify how African states are exercising greater agency and seeking alternative security partners that better align with their regimes´ values and objectives. This scenario underlines the importance of recognizing African states as sovereign entities with the autonomy to select their security partners.

## **Bibliography**

Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2023). *Malian Military Junta Scuttles Security Partnerships while Militant Violence Surges.* Obtenido de https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mali-military-junta-scuttles-security-partnerships-while-militant-violence-surges/

Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2024). *Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa.* Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Obtenido de https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/

All Eyes On Wagner. (2023). *Burkina Faso under influence .*

Asymmetric Warfare Group. (2020). *Russian Private Military Companies: Their Use and How to Consider Them in Operations, Competition, and Conflict.* Washington: Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory. Obtenido de https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo153830/202004%20AWG_Russian%20PMCs%20Report.pdf?__cf_chl_tk=dMOfQydenv.ZKv4CHKs94plhJR89R8E3xVO8sSTiEQc-1669738733-0-gaNycGzNCJE

Bach, D. (1995). *Frontiers Versus Boundary-Lines: Changing Patterns of State–Society Interaction in Sub-Saharan Africa.* Paris: Pan-European Conference of the ECPR Standing Group on International Relations.

Badewa, A. S. (2022). Regional security complex: The Boko Haram menace and socio-economic development crises in the Sahel. *Conflict, Security and Development, 22*(4), 321–343.

Barnett, M. N. (1996). Identity and Alliances in the Middle East. En P. Kanzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (pág. 446). New York.

Barnett, M. N., & Levy, J. S. (1991). Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignments: The Case of Egypt, 1962-73. *International Organization, 45*(3), 369-395.

Bayart, J.-F., Ellis, S., & Hibou, B. (1999). *The Criminalization of the State in Africa,.* London: James Currey.

Bendel, T. R. (1994). *On the Types of Balancing Behavior.* Monterrey: United States Naval Postgraduate School.

Bonnier, E., & Hedenskog, J. (2020). *The United States and Russia in Africa.* Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI).

Buzan, B. (1983). *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Caprile, A., & Pichon, E. (2024). *Russia in Africa: An atlas.* European Parliamentary Research Service.

Chanson, R. (2023). As Russians plot against Chad, concerns mount over important US ally. Obtenido de https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/23/chad-wagner-russia-leaked-documents/

Christensen, T. J., & Snyder, J. (1990). Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity. *International Organization*, 137-168 .

Clapham, C. (1996). *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival.* Cambridge University Press.

Clapham, C. (1998). Degrees of Statehood. *Review of International Studies, 24*(2), 143-57.

Clarke, C. P., Faulkner, C., Parens, R., & Wolf, K. (2023). *The Wagner Group's Expanding Global Footprint.* Foreign Policy Research Institute.

Claude, I. (1962). *Power and International Relations.* New York: Random House.

Cooper, S. (2003). State-Centric Balance-of-Threat Theory: Explaning the Misunderstood Gulf Cooperation Council. *Security Studies, 13*(2), 306-349.

Cormac, R., Walton, C., & Van Puyvelde, D. (2021). What Constitutes Successful Covert Action? Evaluating Unacknowledged Interventionism in Foreign Affairs. *Review of International Studies*, 1–18.

David, S. R. (1991). Explaining Third World Alignment. *Johns Hopkins University Press*, 233-256 .

Duursma, A., & Masuhr, N. (2022). Russia's return to Africa in a historical and global context: Anti-imperialism, patronage, and opportunism. *South African Journal of International Affairs, 29*(4), 407–423.

Eguegu, O. (2022). Russia's private military diplomacy in Africa: High risk, low reward, limited impact. *South African Journal of International Affairs, 29*(4), 445–462.

Faucon, B. (2023). U.S. Intelligence Points to Wagner Plot Against Key Western Ally in Africa. *The Wallstreet Journal*. Obtenido de https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-intelligence-points-to-wagner-plot-against-key-western-ally-in-africa-29867547

Gause, F. (2003). Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice In The Gulf. *Security Studies, 13*(2), 273-305.

Gräns, C. M. (2023). *Russia's growing influence in Mali: Is Burkina Faso next?* FOI Studies in African Security.

Grieco, J. M. (1988). Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism. *International Organizations, 42*(3).

Grossman, S., Bush, D., & DiResta, R. (2019). *Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa.* Stanford Internet Observatory.

Herbst, J. (2000). *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control.* Princeton University Press.

Ikenberry, G. J. (1986). The State and Strategies of International Adjustment. *World Politics, 39*(1), 53-77.

Jackson, R. H., & Rosberg, C. G. (1982). Why Africa's Weak States Persist: The Empirical and the Juridical in Statehood. *World Politics, 35*(1), 1–24.

Jackson, R. H., & Rosberg, C. G. (1984). Pax Africana and Its Problems. En R. Bissell, & M. Radu, *Africa in the Post-Decolonization Era* (págs. 187–209). Rutgers: Transaction Books.

Jackson, R. H., & Rosberg, C. G. (1985). The Marginality of African States. En G. M. Carter, & P. O'Meara, *Twenty-Five Years of African Independence* (págs. 45–70). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Jervis, R. (1978). Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma. *World Politics, 30*(2), 169.

Kachur, D. (2022). Manifestations of Russian formal and informal strategies in Southern and Eastern Africa, 2000–2022. *South African Journal of International Affairs, 29*(4), 509-534.

Lindén, K. (2023). *Russia's relations with Africa: Small, military-oriented and with destabilising effects .* FOI Studies in African Security.

Lindskov Jacobsen, K. (2020). *Russia's Showy and Shadowy Engagements In Sub-Saharan Africa.* Djøf Publishing.

Ikenberry, J. (1986). The State and Strategies of International Adjustment. *World Politics, 39*(1), 66.

Marsai, E. N., & Rózsa, V. (2022). From A Fragmented Cooperation To An Integrated Approach – The Emergence Of The Maghreb And Sahel Region And Its Consequences For The European Union. *European Institute of the Mediterranean*.

Marten, K. (2019). Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group. *Post-Soviet Affairs, 35*(3), 181-204.

Mastanduno, M., Lake, D. A., & Ikenberry, G. J. (1989). Toward a Realist Theory of State Action. *International Studies Quarterly, 33*(4), 457-474.

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Morgenthau, H. J. (1973). *Politics Among Nations.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf,.

Owen, C. (2022). *Mapping Russian Illicit Finance in Africa: The Cases of Sudan and Madagascar.* University of Exeter.

Powell, R. (1994). Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist-Neoliberal Debate. *International Organization, 48*(2), 31.

Radin, A., Demus, A., & Marcinek, K. (2020). *Understanding Russian Subversion.* Rand Corporation.

Reno, W. (1998). *Warlord Politics and African States.* Boulder, CO: Lynne.

Schweller, R. L. (1994). Bandwagoning for Profit. *International Security, 19*(1), 74.

Smitch, E. (2024). U.S. to Withdraw Troops From Chad, Dealing Another Blow to Africa Policy. *The New York Times*. Obtenido de https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/25/us/politics/chad-us-troop-withdrawal.html

Snyder, G. H. (1984). *Alliance Politics.* Cornell University Press.

Snyder, G. H. (1984). The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics. *World Politics, 36*(4), 461.

Snyder, J. (1997). *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Stanyard, J., Vircoulon, T., & Rademeyer, J. (2023). *The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa.* Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

Stronski, P., & Sokolsky, R. (2019). *The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework.* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Tsafack Nanfosso, R. A. (2022). Russafrique. *Revue Internationale des Economistes de Langue Française, 7*(22).

UNDP. (2023). *Sahel – A region of opportunities.* Obtenido de https://feature.undp.org/sahel/

United Nations. (2018). *UN Support Plan for the Sahel.* Obtenido de www.un.org/africarenewal/

VARGA, M. (2020). The Place of the Sahel Region in the Theory of Regional Security Complex. *AARMS*, 49-63.

Walt, S. M. (1985). Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power. *International Security, 9*(4), 3-43.

Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics.* New York: Random House.

Weinbaum, C., Shostak, M., Sachs, C., & Parachini, J. (2022). *Mapping Russian and Chinese Military and Security Exports to Africa.* RAND Corporation.

Weiss, M., & Vaux, P. (2020). *The Company You Keep: Yevgeny Prigozhin's Influence Operations in Africa.* Washington DC: Free Russia Foundation.

Whitaker, B. E. (2010). Soft balancing among weak states? Evidence from Africa. *Royal Institute of International Affairs, 86*(5), 1109-1127.

Zakaria, F. (1992). Is Realism Finished? *The National Interest*(30), 23.