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The Forgotten Strategic Region: The Security Situation in the Western Sahel, Russian Influence, and European Security

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RESEARCH REPORT

Introduction

After various European and Western forces were forced to retreat from the Western Sahel following a wave of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the security situation of this crucial strategic region has developed into nothing less than a nightmarish downward spiral. Across the three countries, military regimes supported by Russian forces are increasingly entrenched in their national capitals as nominal centres of power, while jihadists and other rebel groups have taken control of substantial swathes of territory. Moreso, civilian death tolls have risen sharply, and surrounding states are increasingly at the threat of a conflictual spillover (Wilén, 2025a; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025b). Given this situation, Europe needs to find new and realistic ways to engage with the region in order to respond to various security threats that arise from the ever-worsening security situation in the region. However, the path forward is difficult, following the legacy of the ignominious departure of European missions and French forces in recent years.

The security situation in the Western Sahel, specifically within Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, who have recently confederated as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), affects not just Western Africa but also has far-reaching implications for European security and stability. The centre of global terrorist and jihadist activity has shifted from the Middle East to this region, which now accounts for over 50% of global deaths caused by terrorist acts (Center for Preventive Action, 2025). With both Al-Qaeda and IS affiliates prominent among the involved groups, the threat of these groups once again targeting European states in the future is apparent. Furthermore, Europe and NATO are also threatened by the expansion of Russian influence in the region. Invited by the military regimes, Russia has established itself as the most important foreign power in the region for the time being, and its presence there has the potential to threaten Europe through the weaponisation of irregular migration flows northwards (Brown, 2024).

Finally, the jihadist and militant activity has been moving closer to adjacent West African states, including the coastal states that the European countries have generally been able to maintain better relations with, thus threatening to embroil even more states in the conflict (Africa Center, 2025b). Europe is therefore threatened by the continued instability and risk of state collapse in the Western Sahel through the potential terrorist threat, the potential of large-scale migration and refugee flows northwards, and the presence of hostile actors, most notably Russia.

This paper aims to analyse the current security situation in the Western Sahel, in view of past European involvement and the current security situation of the region. It furthermore outlines the current influence of Russia, and suggests ways in which European countries should continue to engage with security in the Sahel and West Africa for the benefit of European security.

2. Development of the Security Situation in the Sahel and the Current Performance of the New Military Regimes

In view of their expulsion by the AES regimes, and the lack of any improvement in the conflict with the jihadists at the time, the European efforts of the past decade can only be described as a complete failure.

When the Europeans decided to involve themselves in the Western Sahel, EU officials quickly came to see the area as the perfect testing ground for an unprecedented exercise for a common foreign and security policy. However, in practice, they were not ready and willing to adapt to the complex situation they actually encountered, instead of the straightforward fight against jihadists that they expected (Brown, 2024). Beyond interorganisational disagreement within the EU, the Europeans also disappointed their Sahelian partners by failing to commit to the military support those partners viewed as necessary (Baldaro & Strazzari, 2025). Despite spending over one billion euros in building the capacity of local military and security forces between 2012 and 2023, the EU missions did not affect change on the ground in the conflict situation (Meyer et al., 2025).

France was the foremost European power engaged in the region, contributing significant military and financial resources during its long-term military operations. France clashed with its European allies, which criticized French strategy, while France lamented the perceived lack of commitment by its partners. France's engagement was shaped by her perception of the Sahel as part of Françafrique, the traditional sphere of French influence in post-colonial Africa (Brown, 2024). The European and French failure in the Sahel culminated in a series of military coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso between 2020 and 2023, which have overthrown old elites and ousted France as these countries' main security guarantor (Brown, 2024). European and French prestige now lies in shatters in the region, and their material presence is minimal.

The new military regimes in the Sahel rose to power with the promise of expelling European neo-colonial influence and fighting the insurgencies plaguing their countries. However, these regimes have failed in their efforts, with the security situation in all three countries now much worse than when they took power. Jihadist groups have expanded their area of activity and mounted more and deadlier attacks, especially against civilians (Wilén, 2025a). The regimes have effectively abandoned the rural areas and are encircled in their capitals, where they can hold on to nominal political power (Brown, 2024). The situation can be qualified as the worst in Burkina Faso, with insurgent groups now in control of as much as seventy per cent of the country's territory. The Burkinabe military is decidedly on the defensive, being frequently directly attacked by the advancing Islamist forces (Africa Center, 2025a). The death toll for civilians has risen sharply because of the regime's strategy to arm and recruit vast swathes of the civilian population to fight against the insurgents. As an example of the consequences of this strategy, in August 2024, JNIM forces killed up to six hundred civilians who had been forced by the Burkinabe military to dig defensive trenches (Wilén, 2025a). The death toll for civilians has risen sharply because of the regime's strategy to arm and recruit vast swathes of the civilian population to fight against the insurgents. As an example of the consequences of this strategy, in August 2024, JNIM forces killed up to six hundred civilians who had been forced by the Burkinabe military to dig defensive trenches (Wilén, 2025a).

Whereas Burkina Faso is on the brink of collapse, Mali and Niger have not fared much better either. Niger's capital is sporadically attacked by insurgents and effectively encircled (Brown, 2024). Mali is, by comparison, the most stable country out of the three, and still more accessible to European political overtures (Brown, 2024). Nonetheless, Mali is still also in a dire military situation, and has experienced humiliating defeats and

direct attacks on military areas even in the capital (Wilén, 2025a). In terms of military performance, civilian suffering, and economic decline, the situation has turned extremely volatile. Having lost faith and expelled the Europeans, the Sahelian regimes have naturally turned to other powers as security guarantors and strategic partners, turning the area into an arena of power competition.

3. Russian Influence and Power Competition in the New Geopolitical Arena of the Western Sahel

Russia possesses a chief position among the powers who have moved in to uphold the survival of the military regimes despite their atrocious performances. For Russia, however, this development did not just come about opportunistically, but because of a prolonged strategy to displace Western powers in the region. Preceding the military coups and the departure of the Europeans, Russia had already been running a social media disinformation campaign of anti-French conspiracies in the region that came to be widely believed both by common soldiery, but also by higher officials of the Sahel countries (Brown, 2024). Russia's new presence in the region, however, takes various shapes. In Niger, and especially in Burkina Faso, Russian military and security presence is concentrated on immediate regime protection in the capitals, rather than active military confrontation with insurgents. In Mali, Russia has been engaged militarily most heavily, with a longer-standing presence of Wagner PMC there, which is currently being phased out for the new Russian Africa Corps. Despite suffering military defeats, such as the loss of over 80 Wagner combatants in an ambush in 2024, Russia is further investing in its relationship with Mali through an unprecedentedly large delivery of military vehicles (Wilén, 2025b). It is therefore clear that Russia intends to stay, and sees the upholding of the Sahel regimes and its own influence in the region as a strategic interest. Russia has, so far, also shown herself as willing to incur significant casualties and financial costs, raising the question of what it hopes to gain there. The increasingly proactive involvement of Russia in Africa in general, and in the Sahel in particular, is likely based on strategic considerations and ideological factors, rather than material gain. Demanding mining concessions and access to natural resources in exchange for its services can play a role in sustaining Russia's war economy, in spite of Western sanctions (Meyer et al., 2025). However, it is doubtful that Russia can make significant profits in the Western Sahel, given the deteriorating security conditions and the continued presence of other actors. For example, in Niger, gold mining currently appears unfeasible due to the militant presence in the Tillaberi region, while Russia's access to Nigerien uranium remains unclear, due to the significant presence of other countries' companies.

In Burkina Faso, Russia also has an interest in protecting and reopening gold mines owned by a Russian company. However, in practice, just like in Niger, there is no clear evidence for the link between mining activities and Russian troop deployments (Faulkner et al., 2024). Additionally, gold production in Burkina Faso has dropped dramatically, with no signs of abatement, as insurgents gain more ground (Africa Center, 2025a). While resource extraction appears to be a Russian interest, and may even be a key part of its strategy in other parts of Africa, like the Central African Republic, it is therefore doubtful that the current Russian involvement in the Western Sahel has economic motives.

Therefore, to understand Russia's presence, one must look at strategic considerations and Russia's ideational

motivations. There appear to be three principal elements. The first element has both strategic and ideational value for Russia, which seeks influence in Africa both in terms of its physical presence, as well as the acknowledgement of its desired status as a great, global power (Ingman, 2024). Displacing Western powers and asserting its own power status thereby becomes a goal, despite the possibility of military and economic investments not paying off materially. Furthermore, it is unclear if Russia has a clear long-term strategy for the Sahel at all, beyond the basic idea of asserting dominance and influence in this power competition (Faulkner et al, 2024). As for the second element, Russia's positioning in the Sahel can be seen as a strategic threat toward its Western adversaries. For Europe, and the EU specifically, this could come in the form of a Russian strategy to control and utilize migration and refugee movements from the Southern Sahel northwards, weaponizing these flows as a destabilizing and pressuring tool against European governments (Meyer et al., 2025). This position also ties in with Russia's alliance with the Haftar faction in Libya and acquisition of a naval base on the Southern flank of NATO there, further increasing its influence over migration flows to Southern Europe (Faulkner et al. 2024).

Finally, the alliances with the Sahel states, as with other African states, are useful for Russia to receive diplomatic and voting support in international environments such as the UN, where Russia demands diplomatic support from the Sahel regimes to help break diplomatic isolation by the West (Meyer et al., 2025). Russia's presence in the Sahel is therefore ultimately related to its own aspirations within global power competition, as well as anti-Western posturing, not material benefits. However, Russia's newfound dominance in the Sahel is neither uncontested nor certain to last. Russia has not been able to ameliorate the security situation. Furthermore, other powers also seek to fill the void left behind by the European and French departure. The Sahel regimes have been seeking additional connections with other actors more recently. Moscow's strategy is one that is fundamentally dependent on continued disorder and chaos, the condition under which Russian protection remains attractive to the Sahel regimes (Wilén, 2025b). Furthermore, these regimes rely on Russia because Russia aids them in prolonging short-term survival strategies that are self-defeating and unsustainable in the long term (Faulkner et al., 2024). The current situation already demonstrates the consequences of these policies. Additionally, with the transition away from Wagner to the Africa Corps directly under the Russian Ministry of Defence's control, the Russian regime becomes more vulnerable to negative domestic reactions, as well as to the financial cost and deaths of Russian soldiers, which cannot be concealed, potentially making Russia more casualty-averse and less effective in supporting the Sahel regimes (Karr & Tyson, 2025).

Without doubt, the main priority for Russia is the war against Ukraine, further limiting the resources it can spend in Africa. The Sahel regimes themselves are hedging their bets on engaging with more international partners at once for different needs (Marangio, 2025,. Turkey, especially, is taking on a more prominent role, with reports about Turkish PMC presence in both Niger and Burkina Faso. It only seems natural for the Sahel regimes to desire more security partners after Russia's failure to save the Assad regime in Syria (Faulkner et al., 2024). However, this competition also comes in the form of more decidedly anti-Western powers, such as Iran and North Korea (Brown, 2024). Overall, Russia risks overextending itself, becoming involved in a

costly, perpetual war in the Sahel, and its Sahelian allies are aware of their exposure to danger by over-relying on Russia. Nevertheless, the new dynamics of geopolitical competition in the Sahel also offer new inroads to try and ameliorate the situation in the region.

4. Europe and the Need for Renewed Engagement in the Western Sahel

In terms of European security, the question is how can Europe improve the situation in the Sahel, despite the significant limitations that have come with the new regional realignment, as the need to stave off total local state collapse and the need to ensure Europe will not suffer the second-order effects remains crucial. Imperfect engagement is necessary for the strategic need of a stable Sahel (Brown, 2024) There are three main areas in which Europe can act effectively: by choosing pragmatic and realist engagement over hardline rejection of interacting with the local regimes, supporting the threatened remaining partners in West Africa effectively and massively stepping up efforts to counter disinformation campaigns. Because of the complete rejection of French influence, France and other hardliners must accept their failures and step back, leaving the field to more moderate and realist European governments to engage with the region (Brown, 2024). Countries with less colonial footprint and moderate or hard-realist stances in foreign policy like Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Italy should take on the leadership roles in these efforts (Brown, 2024).

Italy is a successful example of a European state maintaining a beneficial presence to deal with the security situation, as the Italian government has managed to keep up engagement in Niger by maintaining a realist security-based approach, instead of rejecting cooperation on an ideological basis (Meyer et al., 2025). In general, a refusal to engage with the Sahel regimes on the grounds of an ideological or moral divide is only likely to lead to far greater suffering and further deterioration of the current situation than cautious and realistic engagement. Past experience and current developments both show that a morally prescriptive stance is unfeasible, with both governments and local populations being hostile to the idea of having their disappointing, former European partners lecture them using what they perceive as a neo-colonial attitude (Meyer et al., 2025). Like in other areas of global politics, Europe and, specifically, the member states of the EU with the potential for fruitful engagement, must adjust to current realities and not drive themselves into further helplessness by clinging onto value-based approaches that, in the end, achieve nothing.

Europe must also not repeat the same mistakes with the remaining allies in the region. In the wake of the withdrawals from the Sahel, African partners in the Gulf of Guinea have become a new focal point of European attention. These partners, however, are vulnerable to the expansion of jihadist activities from the Sahel. Especially Ghana, an important and Western-friendly partner and the only regional country who has, to its own surprise, been spared attacks so far, is a country that needs to be provided with sufficient military support in preparation (Brown, 2024). Europe needs to ensure that the friendly West African states receive what they need and ask for, instead of disappointing them before it is too late, like it happened with the Sahel regimes. Currently, Europe is demonstrating a continued lack of proper commitment to the efforts and systems already in place (Meyer et al., 2025). Part of ensuring the stability and cooperation of these states, as well as a necessity for renewed engagement in the Sahel, is the need to effectively counter Russia's and other

countries' disinformation campaigns. In these regions, Europe has had no credible answer to a sophisticated and extensive Russian anti-Western propaganda campaign. A credible answer here will require far larger and more sophisticated counterinformation efforts, aligning with local sentiments and languages, as the Russians have done, rather than the lacklustre messages European and EU institutions have transmitted previously (Brown, 2024,).

Finally, Europe could try to reach out to the states it has better relations with and which seek influence in the region. For example, Morocco has been attempting to build greater influence in view of the new power landscape (Zarhloule, 2025). Turkey, as a relevant security actor as well, could represent a very flawed but, being partially Western-aligned, preferable security guarantor to Russia (Wilén, 2025b). Overall, to ensure that the Sahelian violence does not continue to spill outwards and destabilise more countries in the region, Europe must learn the right lessons from all that went wrong in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and apply them now before becoming threatened by a complete collapse in the region, the effects of which will ripple northwards and destabilise Europe in unpredictable ways.

5. Conclusion

The Western Sahel regimes and their security situation are in a severe crisis, with no sign of abatement, and the region is gradually coming closer to the risk of a complete collapse. Foreign powers hostile to Europe, especially Russia, have asserted a new position in the region. The Russian presence adds an additional threat to the already existing implications for European security derived from the Western Sahel. European countries must find a way to step up their engagement effectively with their remaining partners and continue to try and improve the situation in the Western Sahel. Even though other crises closer to home, like the Ukraine War, are naturally at the forefront, it would be foolish for Europe to lose sight of this important strategic region. Time is of the essence, as the potential fallout of a worsened situation in West Africa could become far more costly than the current difficult task of managing the newly-emerged geopolitical landscape of the Western Sahel.

Renewed European involvement cannot come in the same shape as before, and must be adapted to the new conditions in the region: anti-European and especially anti-French popular sentiments, military regimes with little interest in value-based cooperation, and the presence of a multitude of new actors. Most importantly, this will have to involve effective and intensive efforts to rebuild the image of Europe and counter foreign propaganda. To do that, Europe must self-evaluate, acknowledge its own failures, and set aside the naivety that it can afford to overly stress a value-based approach to the region. Refusing to work with the Sahel regimes in any shape will, in the end, be more detrimental to human suffering in the region, and to European security in the long term. The region is also too important to leave the hands of actors such as Russia, who operate without any care for the values European states emphasize. Therefore, in the Sahel, as in other areas, Europe must contend with the reality of an increasingly multipolar world shaped by hard power competition.

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