

From Partnership to Hostility: The Erosion of France's Influence in the Sahel States of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger

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Abstract

The decline of French supremacy in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger constitutes a marked deviation from the post-colonial state it established. By employing the framework of Kwame Nkrumah's Neocolonialism Theory (1965) alongside the qualitative methodology through documentary research design utilizing data gathered from governments, policy documents, speeches, press releases, journal articles, and international organizations, this paper will examine concepts like colonial legacy, cooperation in the area of security, regime transition, and nationalism. Findings reveal that strategic cooperation through counter-terrorism cooperation, the use of the CFA Franc, and military presence by France has not been effective because of the refusal of neocolonialism systems by the Sahel countries as they seek to reclaim their natural resources, disband French security structures, and align with Russia, China, and Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

The erosion of France's influence in its former colonies in Africa, particularly in the Sahel states of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has emerged as one of the most significant geopolitical developments in contemporary Africa. Historically, France's dominance in the region was built on the legacies of colonial exploitation, where artificial borders, resource extraction, and assimilation policies were designed to consolidate French power at the expense of African sovereignty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2024; Chansa et al., 2024). Though independence was formally achieved in the mid-twentieth century, the structures of *Françafrique* ensured continued economic, political, and military dependency, blurring the lines between decolonisation and neocolonialism. This legacy has become increasingly contested in the Sahel, where France's presence is no longer viewed as stabilising but as a barrier to sovereignty and development.

In the present post-independence era, French influence persisted most visibly through economic and financial mechanisms such as the CFA franc, which symbolised structural dependency on Paris. As Chitondo and Chansa (2023) argue, the colonial model of extraction was reconfigured into economic dependency, reinforced by French multinationals and restrictive monetary arrangements. Scholars such as Hallen (2002) and Jing (2019) further contend that these economic structures stunted industrialisation and entrenched underdevelopment in African states. In the Sahel, where human development indicators remain among the lowest globally and poverty affects more than 80% of the population, these neo-colonial economic arrangements have become central to grassroots and elite critiques of France's presence (Chukwuma, 2025; Bavier & Balima, 2024). The result is a widening gulf between France's claims of partnership and the lived realities of exploitation and stagnation.

Military interventions of France in the security crisis of its former colonies in the Sahel further compound the erosion of trust between France and the Sahel states. Initially welcomed during crises such as Operation Serval in Mali (2013), France's subsequent counterterrorism campaigns under Operation Barkhane came to be perceived as failure, foreign imposition, and neo-colonial arrogance (Doukhan,

2024; Granvaud, 2024). It has been argued that these operations not only failed to curb jihadist insurgencies but also reinforced authoritarian regimes and deepened community divisions through controversial alliances and the exclusion of local negotiation strategies (Ousmane, 2024). The persistence of violence, internal displacement, and insecurity despite over a decade of French-led interventions led to public dissatisfaction over the effectiveness of France-led military cooperation (Shoukri, 2024; Vo, 2025). Consequently, the collapse of the French security model under the weight of its own contradictions seemed inevitable.

This collapse coincided with the rise of military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where juntas framed their coups as corrective measures against both domestic elites and failed foreign partnerships. By establishing the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2023, these governments signaled a decisive break with France, exiting Western-backed institutions like ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel, while embracing new security and economic partnerships with Russia and China (Yabi, 2023; Faulkner & Parens, 2025). Alongside these geopolitical shifts, the juntas sought to nationalise extractive industries, pursue monetary independence from the CFA franc, and assert resource sovereignty (Signé, 2019; Chukwuma, 2025). These developments not only marked the decline of French dominance but also repositioned the Sahel as a frontline in broader global power realignments. Against this backdrop, there is need to critically examine how the convergence of colonial legacies, military failures, economic grievances, and geopolitical realignments has transformed France from a longstanding partner to a resented outsider in the Sahel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the erosion of France's influence in Africa consistently situates its origins in the long-term colonial exploitation and the enduring structures of dependency that France created. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2024) traces this influence back to the transatlantic slave trade, colonial dispossession, and the imposition of artificial borders, which not only devastated African societies but also laid the foundations for *Françafrique*. Similarly, Chansa et al. (2024) observe that colonial policies of assimilation and economic extraction were designed to consolidate a "Greater France," prioritising French prosperity over African autonomy. What emerges in both accounts is the recognition that the colonial period did not end with independence but evolved into neocolonial structures that kept African states dependent on French military, economic, and political support.

The persistence of neocolonialism in the post-independence era has been widely studied. Chitondo and Chansa (2023) identify the CFA franc and the dominance of French multinationals as symbols of Africa's continued economic dependency. They argue that the colonial model of extraction was reconfigured into structural dependency where African economies remained subordinate to France. Hallen (2002) and Jing (2019) agree with this position, emphasising that the neocolonial framework deprived African states of industrialisation and limited their development trajectories. However, while Hallen (2002) foregrounds the structural barriers, Jing (2019) stresses the continuity between colonial infrastructure development

and postcolonial economic exploitation. This shows that economic dependence lies at the heart of France's contested presence in Africa, providing fertile ground for anti-French sentiments in the Sahel.

Military intervention is another area where scholars converge on France's declining legitimacy. Doukhan (2024) details the trajectory of French counterterrorism missions in the Sahel, from Operation Serval to Operation Barkhane, noting that while initially welcomed, these interventions became a source of frustration and resentment due to their failure to restore stability. Granvaud (2024) similarly critiques Operation Barkhane, highlighting France's refusal to allow local governments to negotiate with insurgents and its reliance on Tuareg militias, which deepened community divisions. Both scholars agree that military intervention worsened rather than alleviated insecurity, yet Doukhan (2024) emphasises France's denial of failure while Granvaud (2024) stresses the lack of democratic accountability in France's decisions. These differences reveal how the erosion of trust between France and the Sahel states was driven as much by local dynamics of exclusion as by French intransigence.

Chitondo and Chanda (2023) offer a nuanced perspective on France's military and diplomatic strategies, noting that while French bases and security agreements are justified as stabilising measures, they are increasingly perceived as neo-colonial. Ousmane (2024) strengthens this argument by showing how military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger instrumentalised anti-French sentiment to mobilise popular support, diverting attention from structural issues such as poverty and inequality. Whereas Chitondo and Chanda (2023) stress continuity in France's geopolitical posture, Ousmane (2024) demonstrates that anti-French nationalism has become a rallying point for legitimacy in contexts of poor governance. These perspectives differ in emphasis, one focusing on France's persistence, the other on Africa's agency, but converge in explaining the breakdown of the France-Africa partnership.

The issue of currency sovereignty is a particularly contentious domain. Bior (2024) and Kohnert (2023) both highlight the CFA franc as a lightning rod for anti-French mobilisation, with critics denouncing it as economic slavery while defenders stress its stabilising effects. Bior (2024) underscores the generational and political divides around the CFA, noting that while elites and technocrats defend its peg to the euro, youth and activists demand alternatives. Kohnert (2023), however, frames the CFA as one of several triggers for populist exploitation by military leaders, who use anti-French rhetoric to legitimise their rule. The difference in their approaches lies in agency: Bior highlights grassroots activism, while Kohnert warns against elite manipulation of anti-French sentiment. Both accounts nonetheless show how monetary dependency has become emblematic of France's eroding influence.

Energy politics further exemplifies the asymmetry of France-Africa relations. Akrimi (2023) points to Niger's uranium industry as a case study of neocolonial exploitation, where decades of French control enriched France while leaving Niger impoverished. The study draws attention to the paradox of Niger fuelling French nuclear power yet lacking electricity infrastructure for its own people. This resonates with the broader critiques of *Françafrique* offered by Pigeaud and Sylla (2024), who argue that neo-colonial arrogance and resource extraction underpin hostility towards France. Yet, Akrimi (2023) emphasises the environmental and developmental consequences of exploitation, while Pigeaud and Sylla (2024) stress

the political mobilisation of a new generation of activists. Together, they highlight the multifaceted nature of resentment against France, spanning economic injustice, environmental degradation, and generational consciousness.

Another dimension in the literature is the interplay between anti-French sentiment and global power competition. Doukhan (2024) and Adams (2023) note how Russia, through Wagner, has filled the vacuum created by France's retreat, offering military support to Sahel juntas. Gritsenko and Mozard (2023) extend this by analysing anti-French discourses on social media, where resistance is framed in emotional, metaphorical, and mobilising terms. While Doukhan (2024) and Adams (2023) highlight state-level shifts towards Russia and China, Gritsenko and Mozard (2023) demonstrate how grassroots digital activism has amplified hostility toward France. These perspectives show that the erosion of France's influence is not simply about power substitution but about changing modes of political communication and legitimacy in African societies.

The literature also engages with the symbolic dimensions of hostility. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2024) and Pigeaud and Sylla (2024) both emphasise the unresolved question of cultural restitution, noting that looted African heritage remains locked in French museums under restrictive international laws. While the Ministry frames this as evidence of colonial arrogance, Pigeaud and Sylla (2024) situate it within a broader narrative of generational activism seeking "second independence." This shared critique shows that hostility towards France is not only material but also cultural, involving struggles over identity, memory, and dignity.

While some scholars stress the failures of France's policies, others caution against simplistic readings of anti-French sentiment. Kohnert (2023) distinguishes between hostility toward France and opposition to foreign military presence more broadly, suggesting that anti-French rhetoric can serve as a populist tool rather than a substantive critique. Adams (2023) also warns that military juntas in former French colonies take advantage of anti-French slogans to pursue authoritarian consolidation. These perspectives highlight the risk of conflating genuine grievances with opportunistic political manipulation, suggesting that hostility towards France must be analysed alongside domestic power struggles.

Despite these differences, there is consensus that France's military approach has failed. Doukhan (2024), Granvaud (2024), and Ousmane (2024) all point out that counterterrorism operations not only failed to curb insurgencies but also exacerbated recruitment into jihadist groups. Akrimi (2023) reinforces this by showing how military interventions reinforced authoritarian regimes while alienating African youth. The convergence of these perspectives demonstrates that France's erosion of influence is inseparable from the collapse of its security model in the Sahel.

Another significant theme in literature is the role of youth and social media in amplifying anti-French sentiment. Pigeaud and Sylla (2024) argue that social media platforms have broken communication monopolies, allowing young activists to articulate demands for sovereignty and independence. Gritsenko and Mozard (2023) confirm this by showing how online discourse portrays Africa as an active agent capable of resisting French oppression. These perspectives differ in focus, one emphasising

mobilisation, the other discourse analysis, but converge in recognising that the hostility toward France is increasingly generational and digitally mediated.

It has also been argued that France's decline in Africa cannot be understood without situating it in global multipolarity. Bior (2024) and Adams (2023) point to the growing role of Russia and China as alternative partners, while Chitondo and Chanda (2023) stress the continuity of France's soft power through language, culture, and diplomacy. These perspectives suggest that while France's military and economic influence is waning, cultural and institutional ties still provide it with leverage. The tension between decline and persistence is therefore central to understanding the current phase of hostility.

In summary, there is strong consensus among scholars that France's influence in Africa, particularly in the Sahel, has eroded due to the failures of its neo-colonial economic model, its military interventions, and its inability to adapt to generational demands for sovereignty. However, there are concerns if the recent anti-French sentiment spreading across former French colonies in can be interpreted as grassroots resistance or elite manipulation. Therefore, while structural legacies of colonialism explain the persistence of resentment, the current hostility is less about France alone and more about Africa's search for genuine sovereignty in a multipolar world. Unless France shifts from paternalistic strategies to partnerships based on equality, transparency, and respect for sovereignty, its role in Africa will continue to diminish, leaving space for new but equally fraught forms of external influence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Kwame Nkrumah's Neocolonialism Theory was adopted for this study. The theory propounded in 1965 in his influential work *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. As one of Africa's foremost independence leaders and the first president of Ghana, Nkrumah developed this theory against the backdrop of Africa's post-independence struggles, particularly the persistence of foreign control over the political economy of newly sovereign states. According to Nkrumah, political independence in many African countries did not translate into true sovereignty because former colonial powers and international institutions continued to dominate through economic dependence, aid, and structural manipulation (Nkrumah, 1965). The theory was heavily influenced by earlier Marxist-Leninist critiques of imperialism, particularly Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), which argued that economic exploitation was central to global power dynamics. Nkrumah advanced this framework by situating it within Africa's decolonisation experience, contending that while colonialism had formally ended, a new and subtler form of domination had emerged, one sustained through unequal trade, aid conditionalities, and the influence of multinational corporations (Adi, 2018). In this sense, the development of the theory reflects both Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist ideals and his critique of the international capitalist order.

The tenets and principles of Neocolonialism Theory revolve around the assertion that former colonial powers and global capitalist institutions exercise indirect control over the economies and politics of supposedly independent states. At its core, the theory argues that neocolonialism operates through

economic mechanisms, such as unfair trade practices, external debt, foreign aid, and multinational corporations, which undermine national sovereignty and perpetuate underdevelopment (Nkrumah, 1965). Nkrumah posited that neocolonialism is more dangerous than classical colonialism because it operates covertly, disguising domination under the rhetoric of partnership and development assistance (Adi & Sherwood, 2021). Furthermore, the theory holds that neocolonialism sustains dependency by tying African economies to Western powers, thereby preventing genuine self-reliance and industrialisation. Its principles emphasise the need for Pan-African unity, regional integration, and socialist-oriented development strategies as countermeasures against external domination. By exposing the hidden structures of economic control and advocating for structural transformation, the Neocolonialism Theory provides a critical lens through which to understand the enduring challenges of postcolonial African states in achieving authentic independence and development.

Applying the relevance of this theory to the present study, the erosion of France's influence in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger can be critically explained through Kwame Nkrumah's Neocolonialism Theory (1965), which posits that former colonial powers often maintain control over newly independent states through economic, political, and military instruments disguised as cooperation. France's longstanding presence in the Sahel, manifested through military interventions such as Operation Barkhane, economic dependence via the CFA franc, and political influence over governance, reflects the dynamics of neocolonialism, where sovereignty is undermined by external dominance (Nkrumah, 1965). However, the growing hostility toward France in these states, evidenced by mass protests, the expulsion of French troops, and new partnerships with non-Western actors like Russia, highlights a rejection of neocolonial structures and a push for genuine autonomy. This aligns with Nkrumah's argument that neocolonialism perpetuates instability and underdevelopment by prioritising the strategic interests of the metropole over the developmental aspirations of the periphery. The Sahelian states' shift from partnership to hostility can thus be understood as a resistance to continued neocolonial control, underscoring the relevance of Nkrumah's theory in explaining the contemporary geopolitical reconfigurations in Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach and documentary method of data collection, relying on secondary sources such as government reports, policy documents, speeches, media publications, scholarly articles, and reports from international organisations to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. These materials were purposively selected to capture diverse perspectives on France's shifting relationship with the Sahel States of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, ranging from initial partnerships to the current atmosphere of hostility and disengagement. To systematically interpret the data, the study employs content analysis, enabling the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and narratives related to colonial legacies, security cooperation, political upheavals, and nationalist resistance. This offers an interpretive explanation consistent with the study's research objectives.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From once-strategic partners bound by economic dependence and security pacts, France and its former colonies in the Sahel, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, now stand locked in growing hostility. The collapse of shared counterterrorism efforts and disillusionment with asymmetric trade relations have deepened fractures once masked by rhetoric of cooperation. Rising anti-French sentiment, coupled with the emergence of alternative international allies, signals a rupture of postcolonial ties once thought immutable.

Economy

The Sahel region, long considered France's sphere of influence, has witnessed a dramatic erosion of this dominance following the recent rise of military juntas in Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). What once resembled a strategic partnership, deeply rooted in France's post-colonial networks, has now transformed into hostility fuelled by demands for economic sovereignty. This rupture is particularly evident in two interconnected areas: the rejection of the CFA franc system and the reclamation of ownership over natural resources. Against the backdrop of extreme poverty, with over 80 per cent of the Sahel's population surviving on less than \$1.90 per day (Diagana, 2020; Shoukri, 2024), and dismal human development rankings (Mali 188th, Niger 189th, Burkina Faso 185th globally) (Vo, 2025), the juntas' reorientation signals a broader shift in economic governance away from dependence on France.

At the centre of this shift in economic governance among former French colonies (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger), is the CFA franc, a colonial-era monetary regime created in December 1945 that bound fourteen African countries to the French Treasury through three pillars: a fixed peg to the French franc (and later the euro), guaranteed convertibility, and the compulsory deposit of 50 per cent of foreign reserves with the French central bank (Signé, 2019). This economic relationship has been criticized by some African leaders for being a neocolonial tool undermining sovereignty of African States that are former French colonies. For instance, the former and late Chadian President Idriss Déby in 2015 agreed that the CFA franc "pulls African economies down" (Signé, 2019). Despite some monetary reforms in 2019 signed to address the concerns expressed over the use of CFA franc, France's grip over its former colonies' economic policy persist.

For Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, rejection of this system has been presented not as mere fiscal adjustment but as an existential political act of decolonisation. The juntas' stance became evident in November 2023, when the finance ministers of the three states announced their intention to establish a new monetary union, shortly after collectively withdrawing from ECOWAS (Reuters, 2023). Burkina Faso's leader Ibrahim Traoré and Niger's General Abdourahamane Tchiani explicitly linked this rejection of the CFA franc to the broader struggle for sovereignty, with Tchiani asserting that abandoning the CFA franc was "a necessary step in moving away from French colonisation" (Bavier & Balima, 2024). The symbolism of monetary sovereignty resonates deeply in states where dependence on French-controlled

systems has been equated with underdevelopment. Yet, this ambition faces structural obstacles: Burkina Faso owes 1.2 trillion CFA francs (\$1.99 billion), Mali over 1 trillion CFA francs, and Niger nearly 498 billion CFA francs in debt (Bavier & Balima, 2024). Breaking away from the CFA franc risks financial instability, particularly for regimes lacking international recognition and already targeted by sanctions. However, some personalities such as the Côte d'Ivoire's President Alassane Ouattara, have argued that the CFA franc secured macroeconomic stability and low inflation (Signé, 2019).

Parallel to monetary sovereignty is the reassertion of national ownership over natural resources, which the juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, have presented as both an economic imperative and a political weapon against French influence. Historically, these states' extractive economies were dominated by foreign firms, with revenues disproportionately benefiting external actors. However, since 2023, military leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, have adopted a resource nationalism agenda that challenges decades of unequal contracts. In Burkina Faso, Captain Ibrahim Traoré exemplified this shift when he declared that the country's gold wealth would no longer be mined "for France, not for the US or any other country from the European Union" (Chukwuma, 2025). Part of this bold public decision was evident in his government confiscation of the Boungou and Wahgnion gold mines in August 2024, both previously operated by British-owned Endeavour Mining Plc (Cascais, 2025).

The Burkinabé junta's bold measures went further, detaining seven CEOs of multinational firms including Orezone Gold (Canada), Fortuna Silver Mines, Barrick Gold, and Resolute Mining (Australia) (Chukwuma, 2025). These companies were accused of having extracted over US\$500 billion in gold over five decades, with only US\$10 billion reaching state coffers (Chukwuma, 2025). Endeavour Mining's agreement to sell its assets for US\$60 million, reduced from a prior valuation of US\$300 million, alongside commitments from foreign firms to pay US\$650 million in back taxes, confirmed the junta's bargaining power (Chukwuma, 2025). This confrontation illustrates not only the material stakes but also the symbolic rejection of France/European extractive economic model, and situates Burkina Faso within a broader Sahelian trajectory towards reclaiming resource sovereignty as an antidote to underdevelopment.

Mali followed a similar path under Colonel Assimi Goïta. In 2024, the government stripped permits from a French-run uranium site, recovering US\$635 million in the process (Chukwuma, 2025). The detention of executives also produced tangible fiscal gains; notably, Resolute Mining agreed to pay US\$100 million after its CEO's arrest (Chukwuma, 2025). Simultaneously, Mali introduced a new mining code in 2023 mandating greater transparency and state participation. Under the deal, Mali holds 30 per cent of shares and local investors 5 per cent, with Ganfeng controlling 65 per cent (Cascais, 2025). This redistribution of ownership contrasts sharply with opaque contracts historically dominated by French firms.

Also, Niger's trajectory under General Abdourahamane Tchiani further consolidated this regional pattern. Long dominated by France's nuclear company Orano, Niger was the world's seventh-largest uranium producer and second-largest supplier to the EU in 2022. Yet, only 18.6 per cent of its population had access to electricity in 2021 (Yabi, 2023). This glaring contradiction, alongside Orano's environmental record, 20 million tonnes of radioactive tailings contaminating local environments, provided the junta

with grounds to expel the company in 2024 (Bhattacharya, 2025; RFI, 2024). In addition to uranium, Niger has advanced oil sector expansion, raising output from 20,000 barrels per day in 2011 to a projected 110,000 bpd with a 2,000 km pipeline to Benin, and potentially 200,000 bpd by 2026. Oil revenues are forecast to constitute 25 per cent of GDP and 50 per cent of tax revenue (Yabi, 2023). These structural shifts underscore the potential of resource nationalism to transform Niger's economy while simultaneously curtailing French leverage.

The cumulative effect of these measures across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger is the emergence of a postcolonial economic order rooted in hostility towards France. As Ulf Laessing of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation argued, for decades Western countries fixed raw material prices unilaterally, perpetuating disadvantageous structures (Cascais, 2024). Importantly, this shift is not inward-looking; rather, it pivots towards alternative partners including Russia, China, Turkey, and North Korea (Cascais, 2024). By confronting these inequalities through nationalisation and diversification of partners, the juntas assert economic decolonisation as a corrective measure. France's diminishing role in the Sahel has forced it to recalibrate, notably strengthening ties with Nigeria, West Africa's resource-diverse giant, in the aftermath of losing its former dominance in the Sahel (Chukwuma, 2025). The economic dimension of the rupture between France and its former colonies (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) highlights a contested history of monetary dependency and extractive industries politics, both of which lie at the heart of France's waning influence.

Security

At the heart of the declining influence of France in Africa, particularly its former colonies in the Sahel, is the escalating security crisis that has ravaged the region and the human casualties associated with. The collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 opened a security vacuum that facilitated the proliferation of Islamist insurgencies across the Sahel region, with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger experiencing the most severe destabilization effect (Vo, 2025). By 2019, over 4,000 people had been killed in terrorist attacks, and more than half a million displaced (Dieng, 2022). The conflict intensified further, with casualties surpassing 4,660 in the first half of 2020 (Dieng, 2022). Between February 2021 and February 2022, some 2,000 civilians were killed, while the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) rose to 2.6 million, a tenfold increase over a decade (Dieng, 2022). Education systems collapsed under the pressure of violence, with 6,000 schools closing, leaving 7 million children without access to learning (Dieng, 2022). The age-long security crisis in the Sahel has redefined the contours of international engagement in Africa, particularly between France and its former colonies (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger), transforming erstwhile partnerships into hostility and rejection.

France positioned itself as the primary external actor in response to the insurgencies in the Sahel, initiating Operation Serval in 2013 at Mali's civilian government request, which later evolved into Operation Barkhane. The latter saw 3,000 French troops stationed in Chad's capital, N'Djamena, supported by wider multinational commitments including 15,000 UN peacekeepers and Task Force Takuba, an EU initiative (Centre for Preventive Action, 2024; Vo, 2025). By 2020, French troop presence

had expanded to 5,100 (Centre for Preventive Action, 2024). The United States also became an important security stakeholder, contributing 1,500 troops and constructing a drone base in Niger to support operations across North and West Africa (Centre for Preventive Action, 2024). However, what began as a partnership quickly generated resentment. Protests erupted across Mali and Burkina Faso, where demonstrators accused France of neo-colonial ambitions and targeted French embassies and military bases (Vo, 2025). The erosion of legitimacy signalled a deeper ideological rupture between Sahelian states and France, as military intervention came to be framed less as liberation and more as domination.

Mali was the first theatre in which this rupture crystallised into a political break. On 18 August 2020, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was deposed in a coup, fuelled by dissatisfaction over corruption and his inability to contain insurgent violence (Centre for Preventive Action, 2024; Vo, 2025). France's influence weakened further when President Emmanuel Macron announced on 13 July 2021 the phased withdrawal of Operation Barkhane, to be completed by early 2022 (Centre for Preventive Action, 2024). In May 2022, Mali terminated its defence and status of forces agreements with both France and the EU, ousting foreign military presence (Centre for Preventive Action, 2024; Vo, 2025). The departure of French forces not only severed military ties but symbolised Mali's rejection of Western interventionist models in favour of new security paradigms more aligned with sovereignty and self-determination.

Burkina Faso followed with an equally dramatic political realignment. On 24 January 2022, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba led a coup that removed President Roch Kaboré, citing the latter's failures against growing insurgency (Al Jazeera, 2022). However, Damiba himself was ousted on 30 September 2022 by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, who accused him of similar failings (Al Jazeera, 2022; Vo, 2025). These successive coups reflected the persistence of insecurity as the defining factor in governance legitimacy. In January 2023, Burkina Faso's military junta ordered France to withdraw within one month, officially ending military cooperation (Ndiaga, 2023; Vo, 2025). This trajectory highlighted a rejection of perceived dependency on France, while legitimising military rule as a vehicle for reclaiming autonomy in security matters.

Niger represented the final pivot point. On 26 July 2023, President Mohamed Bazoum was overthrown by the military, despite Niger previously being regarded as a reliable Western ally (Tharoor, 2023; Vo, 2025). Jihadist violence, although persistent since 2018, had been partially curtailed by 2023, with Nigerien-led operations increasing by 32% in early 2023 (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, 2023; Yabi, 2023). Yet, public sentiment was overwhelmingly hostile towards foreign troops: 64% of Nigeriens opposed external presence, and only 6.1% favoured French support (Afrobarometer, 2022; Bako, 2023; Yabi, 2023). This hostility manifested in violent protests, notably in November 2021 when two were killed during clashes with a French convoy (Agence France-Presse, 2021; Yabi, 2023), and in August 2023 with demands for the withdrawal of all foreign forces (Nova News, 2023). France completed its withdrawal by December 2023 (Reuters, 2023), followed by the United States and Germany in August 2024 (Banchereau, 2024; Deutsche Welle, 2024; Vo, 2025). The ouster of Western forces marked the collapse of France's decades-long influence in Niger and the broader Sahel.

The vacuum left by France and its Western allies catalysed the creation of a new geopolitical formation. In September 2023, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger launched the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), which in early 2024 evolved into a confederation (Bhattacharya, 2025). Russia, already entrenched in Mali through the Wagner Group since December 2021, emerged as the principal partner, offering arms, training, and recognition of the confederation (Vo, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Russia pledged support for a 5,000-strong AES joint force, reinforcing the strategic shift from West to East (Faulkner & Parens, 2025). The AES states also withdrew from African Union and UN-backed security initiatives such as the G5 Sahel and Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which they increasingly regarded as ineffective and externally driven. This redirection of alliances signified a structural break from Western-led frameworks to one grounded in sovereign military consolidation and alternative partnerships.

The ideological implications of this transformation are profound. France's former status as the dominant security guarantor in the Sahel has been dismantled not only through military withdrawals but through the popular and political rejection of what is labelled as "neo-colonialism." Russia's entry, via the Wagner Group and broader state ties, has been framed less as foreign tutelage and more as a partnership of mutual necessity (Yabi, 2023). Thus, the erosion of France's influence reflects a broader post-colonial rejection of Western security paradigms.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate that the rupture between France and its former colonies in the Sahel, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, represents a decisive break from the postcolonial order that had long structured economic and security relations. What began as strategic cooperation rooted in shared counterterrorism frameworks and monetary ties through the CFA franc has unraveled into a landscape defined by hostility, sovereignty claims, and realignments toward alternative partners such as Russia, China, and Turkey. Economic sovereignty, embodied in the rejection of the CFA franc and the reclamation of natural resource ownership, is central to this new trajectory. Likewise, the dissolution of French military influence and the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States reflect a profound rejection of Western-led security arrangements, reframed as neo-colonial impositions. Together, these shifts mark not only the erosion of France's dominance in the Sahel but also the construction of an alternative regional order premised on decolonisation, autonomy, and geopolitical diversification.

Based on these findings, some recommendations emerge. First, France and Western actors must reassess their approach to African partnerships, moving from hierarchical and dependency-based frameworks toward equitable, mutually beneficial arrangements that respect sovereignty and local priorities. This requires renegotiating economic agreements to ensure fairer distribution of resource revenues and supporting African-led monetary reforms rather than resisting them. Second, Sahelian states should complement their pursuit of sovereignty with robust institutional reforms that guard against the risks of financial instability, corruption, and elite capture of resource rents, particularly as they expand relations with non-Western powers. Strengthening governance capacity, transparency, and social investment is crucial to translating resource nationalism into tangible development outcomes.

Third, regional and continental bodies such as the African Union and ECOWAS, despite recent tensions, should prioritize inclusive dialogue with the AES states to prevent geopolitical fragmentation, while supporting cooperative security mechanisms rooted in African leadership. These steps are vital to stabilizing the Sahel, reducing dependency cycles, and fostering sustainable, sovereignty-driven development.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Emeka Vincent Ezeanya conceived the paper, and he wrote the introduction. The methodology and literature review were done by Ndubuisi Isaac; Perpetua Anierobi Ogomegbunam and Chukwuemeka Enyiazu handled the discussion and conclusion. To ensure coherence and quality discussion, all the authors reviewed the manuscript. After the reviews, Chukwuemeka Enyiazu revised the paper.

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