

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of grey dots of varying sizes, with several dots highlighted in red. The dots are arranged in a pattern that roughly outlines the shape of the Sahel region.

# Focus on Geopolitical Transformations and Crises in the Sahel: Redefining Sub-Regional and International Cooperation to Promote and Guarantee Peace and Stability in the Region

**SOUMAILA LAH**  
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## SUMMARY

The war of influence waged by the major powers has been surreptitiously shifted to the Sahel following the Arab Spring and NATO's military intervention in Libya. This war of influence, with its underlying security and governance challenges, has recently taken on a new dimension, since the logic of alliances in part of the Sahel has been called into question. Although the Sahel is a coveted zone of influence for traditional international players such as France, the United States, the EU, China and certain Gulf states such as Qatar, it is also witnessing a strong comeback by former players such as Russia, as well as the appearance of new countries such as Türkiye and Iran, intent on extending their influence. Alongside these protagonists, regional and continental players such as ECOWAS and the AU are positioning themselves – as best they can and with varying degrees of success – in the global game of influence gripping the region.

This situation has led some countries in the Sahel region, namely Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, to reject traditional

partnerships in favour of new, ad hoc alliances essentially focused on security issues with countries such as Russia, Türkiye, and Iran. This new dynamic has facilitated the acquisition of military equipment (which they had been unable to obtain from traditional partners, officially for human rights reasons) and allowed them to regain access to parts of their territory that had become no man's lands. It has also helped to increase the presence of the region's armies, even though the sheer size of the territories, extreme poverty, the effects of climate change, and issues relating to governance and the distribution and redistribution of wealth mean that the fight against insecurity is still far from won. Thus, this new dynamic, which calls into question the alliances that prevailed until now, is to some extent the result of a geopolitical and geostrategic reorganisation following the contestation of Westernist ideology and the logic of power in the form of a series of coups in these three countries. Regional power dynamics have been significantly altered with the manifestation and notification of the exit of the aforementioned three countries from ECOWAS.



## INTRODUCTION

For some years now, the Sahel has been experiencing a series of interlinked crises, and the re-articulation of its geopolitical and security realities. The change in the historical logic that prevailed until recently has paved the way for the return of certain players (including Russia, which is making a major comeback) and the arrival of new ones (Türkiye, and Iran to a certain extent).

Although the causes of the various interlocking crises are different, they are all evolving in ways that are re-defining the geostrategic landscape. Given the interplay of interests, coupled with slipshod governance and security constraints marked by the involvement of multi-faceted groups (rebels, terrorists, armed bandits, militias, etc.), alliances that are still viewed as traditional have evolved in response to changes in the power dynamics. The new dynamics in the region, with their martial overtones, are steeped in sovereignty, pan-Africanism, and challenges to democracy. However, while the new currents seem to have been well received by a significant segment of public opinion in the Sahel, it has been difficult to translate them into action on the ground in terms of state-building, national cohesion, and economic recovery.

This policy paper aims to analyse and understand the geopolitical changes and shifting partnerships that have taken place in the Sahel. It will examine the impact of these changes on political, economic, and security dynamics at national, regional, and international levels. Finally, practical recommendations will be put forward with a view to building a framework for peace, stability, and sustainable development throughout the sub-region in the light of the recent geopolitical changes.

## 1. THE COMPLEXITY OF CRISES AND THE DYNAMICS OF GEOPOLITICAL CHANGE IN THE SAHEL

Since 2020, West Africa has experienced several un-constitutional government changes, five of which have been made in the Sahel area. The repetition of coups, the duration of the current transitions and the resistance of their leaders to regional, continental and international pressures remain issues and raise many questions related to the management of these phenomenes.

The Sahel has also become a playground for various regional and international players, all pursuing their own interests. The Gulf States, the European Union, the United States, Russia, and China, as well as continental and regional organisations such as the African Union and ECOWAS, are all involved in the region in one way or another.

- **In terms of security dynamics,** terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have exacerbated regional instability by carrying out attacks on local government, security forces, and civilian populations, making the Sahel a major corridor for trafficking of arms, drugs, and human beings. These illicit activities fuel armed groups and undermine government institutions. In addition, conflict and insecurity in the region have led to massive movements of refugees and displaced persons, putting additional pressure on the resources of neighbouring countries and complicating development and stabilisation efforts.
- **In terms of political dynamics and governance,** geopolitical changes have had an adverse impact on governance and political stability in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where public freedoms and democracy have been called into question. The current authorities in those countries, who came to power through coups, have, for reasons of their own, been quick to commit to open-ended transition periods. In addition, their rationale of staying in power despite and beyond the commitments they made to their citizens and the international community is reflected in the curtailing of individual and collective freedoms. Politicians, academics, lawyers,

human rights advocates, journalists, activists and government critics in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad are subjected to pressures, abduction by the intelligence services, arbitrary arrest, imprisonment or even violence, or forced into exile. Similarly, critical media are suspended or banned from broadcasting. The activities of political parties are suspended, and civil society organisations are dissolved outright, sometimes in violation of the legislation in force. Demonstrations and public gatherings are authorised only when they support the military regimes in power. Protest demonstrations and gatherings are prohibited and may even be repressed. Furthermore, the regimes in power in the AES countries have made sovereigntist and anti-French rhetoric their leitmotif in a bid to garner popular support for certain major decisions in the name of their new partnerships.

This sovereigntist rhetoric has been accompanied by an attitude of blaming political parties and politicians for any setbacks, as well as by the questioning of democracy. In practice, these combined attitudes translate into a reluctance on the part of the regimes in power to embrace the logic of democracy, even though in Mali the transitional authorities have voted in a new constitution that provides for a democratic political system.

Politicians' fall from grace has paved the way for a reshuffling of the political landscape, with the emergence of unexpected players such as platforms supporting the transitional regimes, the military, activists and others.

- **In terms of socio-economic dynamics**, the weakness of government institutions in many Sahelian countries makes it difficult to provide basic services and guarantee security, creating an environment conducive to instability and extremism. This is compounded by a strong sense of injustice and huge disparities. Most of the crises in the Sahel stem from these disparities and the resulting sense of injustice, which undermine community life and fuel tensions. While these inequalities are many and varied, they are generally reflected in wide disparities in income and access to basic social services. They also contribute to increased competition for control of natural resources such as water, farmland, and minerals,

against a backdrop of climate change and population growth that exacerbates local conflicts.

- **The drawing power of the Sahel's natural resources:** attempts to corner the Sahel's mineral resources are setting the region on a geopolitical and geostrategic collision course. The new partnership framework has prompted a review of the dynamics of natural resource exploitation. Niger has recently withdrawn the operating licence for a highly strategic site from the French uranium giant ORANO (formerly Areva). Memorandums of understanding have also been signed between Mali and Russia for resource exploration and mining by Russian firms. France and its partners also accuse Mali's transitional authorities of having concluded a secret agreement with the Wagner group (now Africa Corp) to mine gold.

All these factors combined can be seen as forces of geopolitical change that influence the dynamics of the crises in the Sahel, leading, in turn, to changes in alliances and rivalries.

## 2. CHANGES IN ALLIANCES AND RIVALRIES

### A. Missed Opportunities against a Backdrop of Paternalism

From 2013 onwards, relations between certain Sahel countries – especially Mali, Niger, and Chad – and international partners became increasingly focused on the fight against terrorism and the return to stability. This period, which was meant to lead to a return to stability in the region through these different partnerships, saw the signing in Mali of a peace and reconciliation agreement that emerged from the Algiers negotiations between the government of Mali and former rebels. It also saw the development and implementation of a number of major reforms aimed at restoring stability and establishing democratic institutions. In the case of Mali, these reforms included security sector reform, a military policy and programming act (LOPM), an internal security policy and programming act (LOPSI), and a justice sector policy and programming act (LOPJ). However, these reforms, as well as the military interventions aimed at strengthening government institutions and tackling the root causes of instability, have failed to produce the desired results. In



fact, despite all these initiatives, and despite the massive presence of the international community and the wide range of programmes targeting Mali, which was up until then considered to be the epicentre for terrorist presence in the Sahel, particularly in the tri-border or Liptako Gourma area, the region has remained a hotbed of destabilisation for a number of terrorist and militant groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). These groups have continued to use local grievances and security gaps to recruit new members and extend their influence. In addition to terrorism, the region continues to suffer from the proliferation of criminal activities such as drug trafficking, trafficking in human beings, arms smuggling, and cattle rustling, which continue to fuel insecurity and undermine state authority in Mali, Burkina, Niger, and to some extent Chad. These issues were still a reality despite the presence in the region of international actors such as France (through Operation Barkhane and the TAKUBA Force), the United States (with multiple bases in Niger) and other countries conducting military and intelligence-gathering operations and providing security assistance in the region to combat and eradicate terrorist groups and organised banditry.

Security issues were compounded by weak governance and corruption against a backdrop of political instability and social discontent. These factors combined to produce recurrent coups and political transitions, as in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These coups, which can be described as opportunities seized by armed men in quest of legitimacy and unprepared to exercise power, have been poorly handled by the international community, led by France. While the first coup in Mali was more or less accepted, the second was quickly followed by diplomatic shouting matches designed to pressure them to hand over power to civilians. The pressure on the part of the international community, coupled with that of ECOWAS, which wanted a rapid timetable for the organisation of elections and a return to a constitutional regime, left the military leaders in power with no other option than to turn to partners and allies less prone to paternalism and interference in their internal affairs. The ensuing series of sanctions and multiple withdrawals of support radicalised the position of the military leaders in power, creating an opportunity for Russia. This opportunity, which was missed by France and its allies and seized by Russia in its quest for expansion against

the backdrop of the escalating war in Ukraine, marked a new chapter in the rivalry between Russia and the West. Thanks to this opportunity, Russia has been able to extend its diplomatic, economic, and political influence.

In September 2023, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger announced the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in response to the threat of intervention by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) following the military coup in Niger on 26 July. The three states announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS at the end of January 2024, triggering a geopolitical earthquake in the region that the organisation is still trying to deal with using requests for the three countries to come back on board. By announcing their intention to exit the regional organisation, they have been able to silence pressures from ECOWAS for the organisation of elections and a return to constitutional order. This situation is also clearly a missed opportunity for ECOWAS, along with France and its allies.

### **B. Seizing Opportunities Against a Backdrop of Strategic Repositioning and Hegemony**

Through its unsuccessful handling of the coups, ECOWAS, with the support of the international community, gave the military in Mali, Guinea Conakry, Burkina Faso, and Niger an opportunity to respond to the pressures placed on them and created a series of opportunities that were seized using differing, completely inconsistent approaches.

The opportunities seized by the military combined with Moscow's growing interest in filling the vacuum left by France and its allies. While Russia's relations with Africa are strongly influenced by its interest in African resources and security markets, as evidenced by the country's foreign policy update, it has signalled Russia's return to prominence, initially through the 'Wagner' private military group, which has since become 'Africa Corps', and subsequently through its increasingly active diplomatic and economic presence (signing of several memorandums of understanding). Moreover, the new partners (Russia, China, Türkiye, and the Gulf States) are not picky about the rule of law and democracy, which fits in well with the trajectories of the regimes in the AES countries, which seem to want to postpone the organisation of elections and the return of civilians to the head of state indefinitely.



However, as Jabir Touré points out, Russia's return on the scene is not synonymous with the eradication of the terrorist threat: despite a year and a half of Russian presence in Mali and its growing influence in Burkina Faso, terrorists continue to inflict heavy losses on the regular armies of both countries. With the failure of the G5 Sahel and given the new geopolitical and geostrategic circumstances, Burkina, Mali, and Niger, aware that pooling their efforts could create a bulwark against sub-regional and international pressures for a return to constitutional order, announced and notified their withdrawal from ECOWAS, having a few months earlier set in motion what they agreed to call the Alliance of Sahel States. Although this alliance was founded on purely security-related cooperation between the three countries, it has since taken on political and economic dimensions. The AES allows member states to pursue terrorists who take refuge in any of the Alliance's member states. The right of hot pursuit is a major step forward in this new collective security dynamic. The AES also allows its members to organise joint operations in the tri-border area. A similar initiative existed under the G5 Sahel but was not operational. The aim is to apply a grid strategy to prevent terrorists from taking refuge in any of the three countries, thereby curtailing their freedom of manoeuvre across porous borders. Yet security challenges cannot be dissociated from economic challenges, as military operations cannot produce their expected results if they are not accompanied by a sustainable development policy<sup>1</sup>. It is this delicate balance that the various transitional regimes in the Sahel are struggling to achieve. A substantial proportion of their increasingly scarce resources are being channelled into the army, to the detriment of other essential sectors such as health and education, a situation that is likely to exacerbate inequalities even further.

However, given the continuing instability in the Sahel and the sidelining of ECOWAS, Russia is likely to become an attractive security ally. While the 'Africa Corps' appears to be at the heart of Russia's security strategy in the troubled Sahel region, its long-term objective will likely be to extend its influence across the African continent through military, diplomatic, and economic channels, as well as manipulation of information. Russia does not appear to be the only country positioning itself to take advantage of this opportunity. Countries such as Türkiye, China, and Iran will also play key roles in

the future. This situation and this interplay of influence could provide an opportunity for the Sahel countries to design and implement mechanisms to build a sustainable framework for peace, security, and development.

### 3. PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE FRAMEWORK FOR SECURITY, PEACE, AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE REGION

Given its complexity, its geography and the multifaceted nature of the challenges it faces, the Sahel needs integrated, multidimensional approaches to promote security, peace, and development. These approaches should transcend alliances and focus on endogenous resources. They could include:

#### For the Sahel states:

- Adopting an integrated approach that gives practical expression to the interdependence between security, economic development, governance and community resilience. This type of integrated approach could create a balance that would allow states to use their budgets efficiently so that their efforts to improve security do not come at the expense of other essential sectors that ensure the well-being of their citizens, especially health, education, employment, energy, and so on.
- Setting up an efficient framework to strengthen the capacities of local, national, and regional institutions to ensure effective, transparent, and inclusive governance. This type of framework is essential for building solid, democratic institutions led by people of conviction.
- Investing in the resilience of local communities to shocks and crises is essential to ensure long-term stability. This can be done by building local capacities, promoting social cohesion, and encouraging the participation of women and young people.

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<sup>1</sup> Jabir Touré, *Alliance des États du Sahel : une nouvelle dynamique de sécurité collective ?*, Institut d'études de géopolitique appliquée, Paris, 26 March 2024.



- Encouraging inter-community, inter-ethnic, and inter-religious dialogue is a vital step to prevent conflict and promote reconciliation in the region. It will involve supporting mediation and dialogue initiatives, as well as promoting respect for human rights and transitional justice.
- Promoting sustainable management of natural resources, including water and land, to reduce resource-related conflicts and build community resilience.
- Guaranteeing access to justice for all and promoting respect for human rights and the rule of law to combat impunity and prevent conflict.
- Investing in economic and social development, including education, health, sustainable agriculture, basic infrastructure, and job creation for young people.
- Implementing programmes to prevent violent extremism that address the root causes of radicalisation, including marginalisation, poverty, social injustice, and poor governance.

**For partners:**

- Increasing mediation: regional and continental organisations (in particular ECOWAS and the AU) and international organisations should frame their actions using a constructive and non-paternalistic approach. Their activities should also include the promotion of local and regional peace initiatives, the rule of law, and inter-community dialogue.
- Maintaining dialogue: dialogue between international actors and the Sahel countries, especially the AES countries, must be encouraged and promoted to dispel the diplomatic tensions that have persisted in recent years. This dialogue must be sincere and under no circumstances should it take the form of – or give the impression that it is – an order or a dictate.
- Supporting infrastructure projects to improve living conditions for local people as well as the regional and local economy. Such support could help forge a positive image of the organisations in the eyes of local people.

**CONCLUSION**

The events of recent years in the Sahel have arisen from the interweaving of a multitude of factors that have come to a head to varying degrees and with varying dynamics, according to the context. Initially fuelled by security issues, the troubles soon revealed the hidden spectres of failed or slipshod governance, glaring inequalities, poor administration of justice, and extreme poverty. If the pressure cooker was already whistling, now the lid was blown right off. While the immediate reaction was to call on traditional partners to put out the fire, they were soon accused of being part of the problem and behaving like firefighter arsonists. After a decade or so of presence with the aim of restoring peace and combating armed terrorist groups, traditional partners and their armies were asked to pack up and leave Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in succession by the countries' new leaders, some of whom came to power against a backdrop of dissent and the inability of governments to overcome security crises and institute sound governance. Because nature abhors a vacuum, Russia has naturally taken advantage of the tensions between the aforementioned Sahel states and their traditional partners, in its bid to redefine and reorient its foreign policy and secure greater influence since the war with Ukraine. A new geopolitical and geostrategic order has taken hold, turning the region into an arena for political and diplomatic confrontation. Integrated, multidimensional approaches are therefore needed to promote and guarantee peace, security, and development in the Sahel. These approaches should transcend alliances and focus on endogenous resources.



### About the author

Soumaila Lah is a teacher-researcher and National Coordinator of the Alliance citoyenne pour la réforme du secteur de la sécurité (citizens' alliance for security sector reform). He has been working for a number of years on development issues, with a particular focus on governance, corruption, security, and extractive industries.

### Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Peace and Security  
Competence Centre Sub-Saharan Africa  
Point E, Rue de Fatick x Blvd. de l'Est  
Residence Bity Lokho, 6<sup>th</sup> floor  
P.O. Box 15 416 Dakar-Fann, Senegal

Tel.: +221 33 859 20 02 | Fax: +221 33 864 49 31

Email: [info@fes-pscc.org](mailto:info@fes-pscc.org) | [www.fes-pscc.org](http://www.fes-pscc.org)

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