Great Power Competition in the Central Sahel and the Multipolar Order

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The Central Sahel is a highly volatile arena for multipolar competition between the US, China, and Russia. While traditional narratives view the region as a passive victim, this study examines how contemporary foreign relations are actively managed by local political structures. Through qualitative document analysis of US aid, Chinese infrastructure investment, and Russian security apparatuses, results show foreign influences are more nuanced than conventional dependency models. Transitional military regimes actively leverage geopolitical frictions to bypass Western conditionalities, secure non-normative capital, and ensure regime survival. However, this strategic shift in external sponsors perpetuates structural dependency and exacerbates instability. The study concludes these countries must prioritize consolidating state capacities, ensuring regional integration, and strategically engaging middle powers to establish favorable cooperation conditions.

Keywords: Central Sahel, United States, China, Russia, multipolar competition, state sovereignty

A concorrência entre grandes potências no Sahel Central e a ordem multipolar

O Sahel Central é uma arena altamente volátil para a concorrência multipolar entre os EUA, a China e a Rússia. Embora as narrativas tradicionais considerem a região uma vítima passiva, este estudo examina como as relações externas contemporâneas são ativamente geridas pelas estruturas políticas locais. Através de uma análise qualitativa documental da ajuda dos EUA, do investimento chinês em infraestruturas e dos aparatos de segurança russos, os resultados mostram que as influências externas são mais matizadas do que os modelos convencionais de dependência. Os regimes militares de transição exploram ativamente as frições geopolíticas para contornar as condicionalidades ocidentais, garantir capital não normativo e assegurar a sobrevivência do regime. No entanto, esta mudança estratégica nos patrocinadores externos perpetua a dependência estrutural e agrava a instabilidade. O estudo conclui que estes países devem priorizar a consolidação das capacidades estatais, garantindo a integração regional e envolvendo estrategicamente as potências médias para estabelecer condições favoráveis à cooperação.

Palavras-chave: Sahel Central, Estados Unidos, China, Rússia, concorrência multipolar, soberania estatal

The Sahel region's strategic importance has grown significantly over the past decades, driven by its abundant natural resources, youthful demographics, and pivotal position between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. In this overall setting, a newer kind of geopolitical back-and-forth has surfaced where major powers, like China, the United States, and the Russian Federation, are competing for regional leverage. They are competing for regional influence, fueled by vast oil, gas, mineral, and agricultural reserves, particularly gold and uranium, which are drawing in significant foreign direct investment and military involvement. However, China is dominating this competition regarding other players (Olakulehin, 2026). This multipolar rivalry is reshaping the political landscape and rebalancing global power in the twenty-first century (Anku, 2021).

Great power engagement in the Central Sahel manifests through various mechanisms, described as competing strategic patterns, dubbed "elephant" and "pitbull" styles (Wilén, 2025b). China pursues a slow-burn economic approach, expanding its presence through the Belt and Road Initiative, resource-backed credit, and investments in regional oil and mining (Calabrese, 2025). Beijing also emphasizes non-interference and has recalibrated loan conditionalities, offering local decision-makers a straightforward alternative to Western "attachments" (Lammich, 2025).

Russia, in contrast, has adopted a more reactive stance focused on security, seeking to expand its influence by capitalizing on existing tensions and openings (Bamidele & Erameh, 2025). Moscow benefits from anti-Western sentiments and Western forces' withdrawal from Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Reynolds et al., 2026). With this backdrop, it uses military ties and political linkages to establish a more durable and institutionalized presence (Jemlak & Momoh, 2025). The United States centers its strategy on governance, private investment, and counterterrorism, requiring alignment with local threat perceptions. To understand the Central Sahel's complex security environment, the United States should enforce a suitable policy to align its interest with what is really required for stabilizing the Central Sahel. The United States has no vital security or economic interests in the Sahel, which is not a major destination for the US products or investments (Thurston, 2022). Recent shifts in US policy alongside reduced counterterrorism support have raised concerns about the possibility of regional extremist factions regaining strength (Korkor, 2025).

External interventions are based on fragile state structures, and host countries are caught between rival external programs. The newly formed Sahel State Alliance is particularly exposed and vulnerable to strong geopolitical pressure as various foreign actors seek military agreements, access to trade routes, and re-

source concessions. Meanwhile, domestic political structures adapt in real time, reorganize regional security arrangements, and quietly adjust diplomatic loyalty (Lenshie et al., 2025).

Despite macro-level analysis of this multipolar rivalry, there is a witnessing textbook of what Bayart (1993) called the theory of extraversion. If you look at the post-coup governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, they are actively playing major powers against each other – bouncing between the conditional US aid, the Chinese state capital (Gain, 2021), and Russia's no-strings-attached security. By intentionally burning bridges with France and other Western forces (Arkhangelskaya, 2014), these regimes have brought in actors like Russia's Africa Corps. For the juntas, it's a pure survival tactic: they get the military muscle they need to stay in power, they get to dodge Western lectures on democracy, and in exchange, they hand over access to their natural resources (Robertson, 2024).

However, there are still significant empirical gaps regarding the operational reality, the limitations, and the subsequent local impacts of these foreign engagements. People tend to give these foreign powers too much credit, assuming they pull all the strings while completely ignoring the real, messy friction they face on the ground. The missing piece in the current literature is the actual, localized outcome of these alliances.

Consequently, this study addresses these gaps by raising three questions:

How do the competing views of the multipolar influence in the Central Sahel reflect China's state-led capital, the United States' conditional assistance, and Russia's asymmetric security apparatus, in contrast to the competing views of the state-led capital in China?

To what extent do the Central Sahel regimes exploit geopolitical competition between US aid, Chinese investment, and Russian security to protect and expand their survival?

Under what conditions can the Central Sahel region use this competition to promote domestic development and to maintain sovereignty?

The article argues that external influences on the Central Sahel are more restricted and nuanced (Wilén, 2025a). A central finding is that the effectiveness of foreign intervention is determined not only by the material capabilities of the intervening power but is greatly mediated by the internal political structures of the target country and the dynamics of countries' internal turmoil. Consequently, state fragility, elite political survival strategies, and local community grievances often dictate the ultimate trajectory of external engagements. Rather than acting as passive recipients of aid or military support, domestic actors in the Sahel frequently instrumentalize foreign security partnerships to serve local power

consolidation, effectively reshaping, dampening, or redirecting the intended outcomes of external interventions.

Literature review

A growing number of theories attempt to explain China's, the United States', and Russia's economic, political, and strategic influence in the Central Sahel. Historically, studies on foreign engagement have anchored themselves in dependency theory, which argues that global economic disparities stem from patterns of exploitation where core countries maintain dominance over peripheral nations by extracting resources and dictating economic terms (Smith, 1979). Building on this, world-systems theory explains exactly how this hierarchy operates: the global capitalist economy essentially relies on keeping peripheral states underdeveloped (Wallerstein, 1974). If we look through this traditional lens, foreign interventions in the Sahel are about genuine partnerships or development at all. They are just tools for major powers to lock down monopolies on local resources.

However, while these big-picture frameworks are great for understanding the region's long history of exploitation, they have a major blind spot. They completely strip away the agency of the host nations themselves. By focusing only on the macro level, these theories miss the hard data on how these modern interventions actually play out on the ground today.

To assess these perspectives, it is necessary to define what it means for a country to have influence over another. The influence is described as a relation where the wants, preferences, or intentions of one actor affect the actions of another in a direction consistent with the intentions of the influence-wielder (Stinebrickner, 2015). Viewed strictly through a dependency lens, the varied strategies of China, the United States, and Russia reinforce the region's economic and political subordination.

Through infrastructure investments and resource extraction, China strengthens reliance on Chinese funding, technology, and expertise (Taylor & Zajontz, 2020). Critics argue this results in neocolonialism, where nations incur unsustainable debts that reinforce their subordinate role in the global economy (Esposti, 2024), aligning with dependency paradigms (Zajontz, 2021).

It is noted that Beijing's mercantilist policy often proves detrimental to its reputation, while China uses that scale of financial activities to guarantee leverage, as host governments heavily resist aggressive debt-trap diplomacy (Carmody et al., 2021). In the Sahel, Chinese infrastructure investment functions as a critical

tool, offering incumbent regimes much-needed capital without Western institutions' political conditionalities (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2026).

Regarding the United States, literature focuses on regulatory aid, governance, and investment in the private sector. However, dependency theorists argue that these strategies simply continue to rely on Western financial institutions and conditional assistance programs (Mollaeva, 2025). IMF structural adjustment programs are often supported by the United States, forcing fragile economies to liberalize markets, promoting foreign investors more than local industries (Emeagwali, 2011). The transition from humanitarian operations to the United States AFRICOM's counterterrorism operations reflects broader strategic changes (Telci & Sefkatli, 2024). Academic analysis reveals a deep tension in US foreign policy between the normative promotion of democracy and the pragmatic reliance on non-democratic allies, a dynamic that often leads to the "securitization" of development where immediate counterterrorism objectives overshadow long-term governance reforms (Brown & Fisher, 2020; Watts et al., 2018).

Russia prioritizes military and security engagements, trading support for access to natural resources (Allison, 2023). Russian security apparatuses deployed in Mali and Burkina Faso create a deep security dependency, with transitional governments relying heavily on mercenaries and arms supplies (Weir, 2022). Russia's military support is its most effective means of gaining influence. Prized for being reliable and affordable, Russian military equipment establishes long-term relationships with political leaders (Kramer, 2006). Moreover, this kind of support comes with fewer strings attached than Chinese and US agreements. By exploiting Western pressures, Russia aligns with the Central Sahel regimes with its anti-Western position, achieving focused influence despite a smaller financial scale (Horak et al., 2024).

China's infrastructure projects, American normative aid, and Russian security apparatus imposed strong external pressure (Effah & Adu Amoah, 2026; Marten, 2021). Literature often exaggerates foreign control while underestimating how local leaders use these mechanisms. To grasp this landscape, the international relations community must evaluate how Central Sahel countries use multipolar competition to ensure regime survival (Keita, 2025). The region's future will depend on whether these states can pass structural dependencies to advance domestic development and safeguard sovereignty.

Methodology

This qualitative study uses a contrasting case study design that explicitly examines the geopolitical competition between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, known as the Central Sahel. These three countries were selected due to their strategic importance, the recent political transitions marked by military coups (2020-2023), the footprint of multiple powers and collective institutional reforms through the withdrawal of ECOWAS and the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The rationale for focusing on these specific countries rests on three distinct factors. First, their shared political trajectory of anti-establishment military takeovers within a narrow timeframe creates a unified context to examine post-coup regime survival strategies. Second, their external power realignment provides a clear view of shifting global influences, as each nation systematically terminated long-standing Western defense partnerships, notably with France and the United States, in favor of expanding security ties with non-Western actors like Russia. Finally, their institutional realignment through the creation of the AES transformed these nations from isolated actors into a cohesive geopolitical bloc, offering an ideal framework to analyze how domestic political shifts drive collective foreign policy reorientations.

To analyze how these global powers engage with the region, the study adopts dependency theory alongside Robert Dahl's relational definition of influence. Concurrently, Dahl's conceptualization of power and influence allows the study to evaluate micro-level state interactions, agency, and behavioral leverage, testing the central argument that the efficacy of foreign intervention is heavily mediated by the target state's domestic political architecture and local institutional dynamics.

Data collection relies on a qualitative document analysis combining primary and secondary sources spanning a 2015-2026 time horizon. Primary sources, including official governmental documents, United States policy frameworks, Chinese infrastructure and loan agreements, Russian security pacts, and AES communiqués, provide empirical evidence regarding foreign objectives and domestic legislative shifts. Secondary sources, composed of peer-reviewed academic journals, historical monographs, and policy institute reports, deliver the necessary analytical context. This analytical approach ties the empirical data directly to the study's central research questions. By measuring China's infrastructure investments alongside Russia's security apparatus and the United States' normative aid models, the methodology clarifies how major powers establish influence, shows how local regimes leverage this multipolar rivalry to stay in power, and

outlines what Central Sahelian states actually need to safeguard their sovereignty.

However, a clear disconnect remains between intent and reality. While Central Sahelian countries frequently frame their actions around national sovereignty, external powers routinely capitalize on local governance vacuums, elite rivalries, and ongoing instability to deepen their own footprints. Instead of fostering genuine self-determination, domestic unrest opens doors for foreign actors. Whether through security guarantees, infrastructure financing, or conditional aid, external support often becomes a tool to extract strategic concessions, gain access to critical mineral resources, and project regional influence.

The strategic importance of the Central Sahel region

The evolution of the major powers of the Central Sahel region is centered on the expansion of their influence and presence. The United States has historically focused on development aid, emphasizing governance and transparency, but China and Russia are regarded as competitors with different approaches. Russia expanded its reactionary stance, taking a much more interventionist stance and focusing on the immediate impact of the armed conflicts in the countries, especially after its 2008, 2014 and 2022 attacks (Klein, 2019). On the other hand, China has developed a deliberate, gradual, and powerful presence – an "electronic strategy" – that shifts from the main economic goals to the political ones.

Chronologically, this strategy began in the 1950s, when newly independent countries formed a complex system combining economic and international power relations. By the 1980s, Chinese policy focused on significant investments in Central Sahel manufacturing, such as Mali's SUKALA, which generated more than 35 million dollars for the state (Cheick, 2022). The China-Africa Cooperation Forum, established in 2000, provided developing countries an alternative to Western models, pairing industrial knowledge with resource protection (Haug & Kamwengo, 2023).

This economic foundation facilitated strategic security expansion. Thanks to globalization and the 2015 law allowing the Chinese military and police to intervene abroad, Beijing gained significant political clout. Introducing "mutual assistance for security" in the 2015 white paper, China began improving operational capabilities (Blasko, 2015). Exercises conducted at its military base in Djibouti, inaugurated in 2017, provided one of the least threatening ways for the Chinese military to practice in real theaters of armed conflict (Panda, 2017). By early 2019, Beijing leveraged this to pledge more than $45 million to the G5-Sahel joint force

and contribute to UN peacekeeping while allying with Russia to block some resolutions initiated by other UN Security Council members (Cheick, 2022).

This growing influence intersected with severe regional instability. While Niger maintained a "relative stability" with a successful democratic alternation on February 21, 2021, the region quickly fractured (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). Burkina Faso's government succumbed to a soldier's mutiny on January 23, 2022, and Mali continues floundering in a transition that is the result of two military putsches (Taruvinga, 2023).

Consequently, 2024 marked a critical moment of resource friction and shifting dynamics as military governments revised codes to boost state benefits. Following the collapse of artisanal gold mines that killed over 50 people, Mali demanded an immediate halt to Chinese nationals' illegal mining activities, though it concurrently signed a lithium agreement with Ganfeng allowing the government a greater share of ownership (Reporter, 2025).

In Niger, the $6 billion oil pipeline faced challenges due to border closures, and authorities revoked the license for the Chinese-owned Soluxe hotel in August 2024 to level the playing field for Nigerien staff (Sakr, 2025). By October 2024, Captain Traoré's speech announcing potential license withdrawals sent Burkina Faso's declining mining sector into turmoil (Tangui & Tenkoul, 2026).

Despite these on-the-ground challenges, China leveraged shared narratives of underdevelopment to offer comprehensive support without Western conditionalities, highlighted by Xi declaring a $50.7 billion financial package at the 2024 Summit (Pant & Bhattacharya, 2024).

Historically, the United States remains a key partner in development aid, security assistance, and democratic governance (Whitaker, 2020). Since its inception in 2000, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) has facilitated over $60 billion in the United States-Africa trade (Patey, 2022), alongside more than $9 billion provided annually in foreign aid and counterterrorism support (Ramani, 2021). However, empirical reviews and institutional reports indicate that US companies have been reluctant to engage in high-risk markets within the Central Sahel due to political instability, inadequate infrastructure, and ongoing security threats (US Department of State, 2024). This has led to significantly lower foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows from the United States compared to China's state-driven economic investments, which utilize state-backed capital to absorb these risks (Nnajiofor, 2020).

This has led to lower foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows compared to China's state-driven economic investments, triggering criticisms that American businesses are not engaging sufficiently (Obadare, 2023).

Militarily, the United States' involvement was largely limited to intelligence and logistical support for French Barkhane forces, suggesting Washington was unwilling to take on a more active role unless vital American interests were threatened (Tankel, 2020). These United States-backed counterterrorism operations caused numerous civilian casualties and widespread human rights abuses without achieving their goals. Instead of stabilizing the region, US-backed counterterrorism operations frequently handed more power to the very local security forces that were actively terrorizing their own citizens with severe human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings. Rather than anchoring democracy, the strategy largely backfired (Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, 2026; US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2023). This fragile situation was then pushed closer to the breaking point by Washington's broader policy pivots during the Trump administration. By gutting diplomatic and humanitarian aid to double down on a heavily militarized, purely transactional approach, the US alienated vital regional players and essentially hit the fast-forward button on the Sahel's democratic backsliding (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2025). This period was further compounded by Donald Trump's policy missteps, which had acute repercussions across the Sahel (Kandel, 2020).

Recognizing the multifaceted challenges of extreme poverty, vulnerable populations, separatist movements, and illicit transnational networks, the United States shifted its approach in 2020 by creating a special envoy role for the Sahel (US Department of State, 2024) This envoy was designed to engage actively in support of governance, political liberalization, and economic growth. Constructive initiatives accompanied this, such as $150 million in aid provided for food, water, shelter, healthcare, and jobs (Blinken, 2023).

Following this, the Biden administration aimed to repair relations and reassert the United States global leadership by prioritizing strategic repositioning in a landscape of fierce great power competition. This recent emphasis on countering China's and Russia's influence resulted in new strategies, such as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), aimed at providing alternatives to Chinese financing (Patey, 2022). Nevertheless, empirical research highlights that the United States investment has still declined relative to China's expansion (Chin, 2024).

Looking forward, viewing the Central Sahel's significance solely through rivalry with Beijing or Moscow is misguided and a fundamental flaw of Washington's diplomatic engagement. To achieve long-term peace and stability, the special envoy should consider a paradigm shift that departs from paternalistic stances and the rhetoric of rivalry. Washington must understand how existing connec-

tions between North Africa and the Sahel nurture the ambitions of Russia and China; for instance, mounting tensions between Algeria and Morocco might allow Russia to advance, with Algiers possibly serving as Moscow's proxy in Mali in return for support in the Western Sahara conflict.

Russia's great power status is an all-consuming obsession for the Kremlin, shared by the Russian people, with the number of those believing their country is a great power rising fivefold since 2013. To build this great power identity, Moscow's diplomatic, military, and economic presence serves to erode Western influence and undermine Western interests (Reynolds et al., 2026). It has strategically focused on the Sahel, where dissatisfaction with Western peacekeeping missions and the conditionality of Western assistance can be leveraged.

Historically, due to its lack of colonial history in Africa and memories of Soviet support for liberation movements, Moscow enjoyed a reservoir of goodwill among many governments (Bespalova, 2026). While Russia's engagement in the Central Sahel predates 2021, the deployment of Wagner forces in Mali that year marked the starting point of the AES states' strategic realignment and catalyzed Russia's broader involvement (Terren et al., 2025).

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia's interests centered on limiting diplomatic and reputational damage. Simultaneously, Russia demonstrated an instrumental attitude, utilizing Africa Corps deployments to cover operational costs and dislodge Western companies. Between 2022 and 2024, Russia extracted gold from the Wagner Group for $2.5 billion. To strengthen this growing influence, Russia reorganized the Wagner Group into an African Army in early 2024 and moved towards a more institutional and visible presence. During the winter and spring of 2024, a few hundred Russian troops, under the banner of the African Corps, arrived in Niger and Burkina Faso (Bartosiewicz & Żochowski, 2024). However, these regimes were not prepared to allow foreign assault units and instead decided to manage Russian personnel who controlled and restructured the intelligence service, revised the surveillance system, and conducted strategic disinformation campaigns. In Burkina Faso, Russian troops focused on regime protection, deploying around a hundred Bear Brigade troops between May and August 2024 during a coup risk period (Africa Defense Forum, 2024).

In Mali, where a transition from Wagner to the Africa Corps was underway, Russia experienced severe setbacks in mid-2024 (Roger, 2026). Despite being touted as a flagship for Russia's strategy, Mali proved inhospitable ground. Russian mercenaries failed to prevent a JNIM affiliate from moving toward the capital and suffered a total military defeat at the Tinzaouaten ambush in July

2024, where 80 troops were killed by Tuareg separatist and jihadist groups (Kane & Bashi, 2024).

Despite these setbacks and the speculation of overextension caused by the fall of the Syrian regime, Russian troops remain in the Sahel to achieve broader foreign policy objectives. Throughout 2024, Russia signed more than $3 billion in arms sales, energy projects, and mining agreements (Ahmed, 2021). By 2025, Moscow had doubled its military commitments. In January 2025, Russia delivered unprecedented military vehicles to Mali and again delivered them at the end of March. In April 2025, the Russian Foreign Minister described Russia as a "sincere ally" and promised to support the acquisition and training of weapons for the AES coalition (Reuters, 2025).

From an analytical point of view, this articulation between culture, economy, and security is an important part of Moscow's global repositioning. Moscow promoted diplomatic alliances, focusing on the defense of sovereignty and the multipolar international order, providing an alternative to traditional alliances by avoiding conditions in exchange for access. Internal sources, however, show tensions between the narrative of this non-interventionist and direct influence tools, such as extractive contracts and military presence. By integrating private contractors into recognized state structures such as the African Corps, Russia gained direct control but lost plausible deniability and increased its political and legal responsibility. This hybrid framework of multilateral relations, state-institutional military projections, and strategic disinformation signals a long-term bet on the Sahel, while Russia seeks to turn short-term opportunities into a sustainable strategic presence.

In areas where there is deep insecurity and inequalities are evident, conflicts of agendas are more likely to increase tensions. When blaming the Sahel region for underdevelopment and security, great powers cannot exempt themselves from their responsibility for redressing these injustices, especially when extracting natural resources from the region. The Sahel countries are increasingly burdened with debts to repay foreign loans, while great powers are hesitant to cooperate in infrastructure and development projects. Multilateral cooperation between Western countries and the Sahel countries is necessary to ensure development and security; otherwise, all initiatives are likely to be futile.

The tripartite strategy: leveraging US, Chinese, and Russian influence for regime preservation

The contemporary resurgence of great power competition in Africa follows a protracted period of international marginalization in the post-Cold War era.

During the 1990s, the continent experienced acute economic crises, state fragility, and a marked contraction in official development assistance (Blair et al., 2021). Consequently, most African nations were embedded in asymmetrical dependency architectures governed by Western states and Bretton Woods institutions (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023). However, as the Sahel's strategic resource endowments and geographic positioning transformed the region into a central theater of multipolar rivalry, Sahelian regimes began analyzing these external relationships not merely to advance national development, but primarily to consolidate domestic power and ensure regime survival (Alden & Large, 2019).

Historically, Sahelian reliance on Western security partnerships (especially French Operation Barkhane and the expansion of the United States military facilities) was closely linked to Western standard agendas, including democratic benchmarks and government conditions (Ojewale, 2024). When Western-backed security architectures were unable to neutralize the asymmetric threats of groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam Wal Muslimin and Islamic State in the Great Sahara, the military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger seized power (Zhu & Gao, 2024).

In order to ensure their political survival in the midst of Western sanctions and demands for democratic restoration, these emerging regimes have actively exploited multipolar friction. By swapping Western conditional alignments for flexible non-normative alternatives provided by Moscow and Beijing, these elites effectively isolated themselves from external political pressures (Antil & Vircoulon, 2024).

In executing this geopolitical pivot, Sahelian leadership operationalizes a tripartite strategy, explicitly leveraging external competition for political preservation:

First, in relation to United States normative aid, ruling juntas have systematically bypassed demands for democratic transitions and human rights compliance (Gavin, 2021). Recognizing Washington's strategic anxieties over the expanding Sino-Russian footprint, Sahelian elites effectively weaponized this geopolitical vulnerability.

By threatening to strengthen their cooperation with Moscow and Beijing, these regimes forced American policymakers to reduce rhetoric against the coup and maintain diplomatic engagement despite the abolition of democratic conditions (Whitaker, 2020). By using the potential of alternative security and political alliances with Russia and China as direct leverage, these military regimes successfully altered the strategic calculations of Western actors. Rather than enforcing strict democratic compliance or cutting off diplomatic channels, American

decision-makers were effectively pushed to accept the new status quo to avoid completely losing strategic access to the region. In doing so, these regimes proved that they could navigate international pressure and sustain vital diplomatic relations without restoring democratic processes or compromising their internal political control.

Secondly, through the investment of Chinese infrastructure, these regimes obtain important financial lines without the political mandates traditionally imposed by Western creditors (Brautigam, 2020). Unlike traditional Western loans and aid frameworks that require democratic reform, governance conditions, or institutional oversight, Beijing's developmental model offers a critical economic alternative. Through mechanisms such as the Global Security Initiative (GSI) and resource-based capital agreements, including vital lithium and oil pipeline concessions, Beijing provides unconditional economic support. This influx of capital enables the incumbent junta to avoid the blockade of Western financial institutions, stabilize local economies, and maintain internal legitimacy without compromising central political control (Patey, 2022; Zeng, 2021). By securing alternative funding streams through sovereign resource deals and Chinese infrastructure development, these military authorities successfully bypass international financial isolation, secure essential revenue, and protect their domestic political authority from foreign interference.

Third, Sahelian regimes have integrated Russian security apparatuses primarily as mechanisms for internal regime protection rather than comprehensive national defense (Allison, 2023). The deployment of the Wagner Group and its successor, the Africa Corps, serves to safeguard palace security, restructure domestic intelligence networks, and coup-proof the incumbent military leadership (Marten, 2021). While these paramilitary forces have demonstrated significant operational deficiencies in halting widespread insurgencies – as evidenced by the JNIM fuel blockades in late 2025 and the Niamey airport attack in January 2026 – they successfully fulfill their primary strategic mandate of shielding transitional leaders from domestic overthrow and opposition elements (Nantulya, 2022; Weir, 2022).

By leveraging this triad of American strategic flexibility, Chinese non-conditional capital, and Russian paramilitary protection, Sahelian regimes successfully prolong their political tenure (Centre for Democracy & Development, 2026). However, this strategy is operationalized at the direct expense of long-term state capacity. By rotating external patrons rather than addressing structural governance deficits, these regimes perpetuate historical cycles of dependence. This maneuvering demonstrates that while exploiting multipolar competition effec-

tively insulates authoritarian elites from immediate political collapse, it critically fails to resolve the underlying systemic and developmental crises afflicting the Sahel region (Nwankpa, 2026).

Conditions for sovereign agency: leveraging multipolarity for domestic development

The Sahel region has undergone a decade of transformation, shifting from a contested Western influence to a volatile multipolar competition. The region has been the focus of European and American military interventions, led by France through Operation Serval and Barkhane, along with counterterrorism logistics from the United States. These interventions have historically prioritized short-term security over socioeconomic imbalances, marginalizing local development (Charbonneau, 2017).

This is also the case for traditional Western forces that have been withdrawn or expelled from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger by popular and military rejections of perceived neocolonial dominance. Russian paramilitaries supported by the state and Chinese infrastructure investment entered the region at the same time, reorganizing regional hegemony (Deych, 2019). This changing paradigm creates the risk of proxy conflicts but also provides the Sahelian state with a rare opportunity to negotiate more favorable terms. However, in order to exploit the competition of great powers, these governments must move beyond substituting external patrons. The replacement of the French forces by the Russian African Army was likely to perpetuate dependency rather than autonomy (Benjamin, 2026). The academic consensus emphasizes the "illusion of the geopolitical solution" in which military juntas give priority to the survival of the regime through external guarantees, while neglecting institutional decay (Tull, 2021; Cold-Ravnkilde & Jacobsen, 2020).

A true sovereign agency requires four conditions: to consolidate internal national capacity, to form a robust regional coalition, to reorganize the security-development link, and to involve middle-class powers. The basic prerequisite for multipolarization is the strengthening of endogenous state institutions (Kelly, 2025). The Central Sahelian states must give priority to domestic governance, equitable public services, and internal security.

When the capacity of the state is exhausted, foreign interventions are aimed at exogenous interests and often at the expense of local citizens. The ability of the Sahel governments to negotiate concessions depends on their ability to negotiate stability rather than despair. The Sahel is a fractured region, vulnerable to exter-

nal force, and regional integration has become a key safeguard of sovereignty (Ateku, 2026). The Alliance of Sahel States, founded by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, represents a significant attempt to implement post-colonial sovereignty (Adjei, 2025). After the withdrawal of ECOWAS, the AES began as a mutual defense agreement, which included the distribution of resources, the establishment of common markets, and the construction of transnational infrastructure (Grütjen, 2024).

By negotiating in a consolidated bloc, these countries can increase their geopolitical influence, mitigate power imbalances, and determine the terms of foreign investment and security cooperation. The success of the AES depends on its ability to move from a reactive and militarized alliance to an effective economic and political union that promotes long-term development. In parallel with regional integration, the governments of the Sahel must enforce a paradigm shift in the way international partnerships define the relationship between security and development (Raineri & Rossi, 2017). In order to benefit from global competition, these countries must require foreign partners to address the root causes of regional instability: poverty, ecological degradation, and infrastructure deficits. By leveraging great-power competition, these states compel external partners to combine security assistance with tangible development commitments, linking military support directly to foreign investment in human capital, agricultural resilience, and industrial capacity. International narratives often present the geopolitics of the Sahel as a binary competition between the West and Russia-China, but the strategic engagement of the middle powers is increasingly crucial to the development of the region. States such as Turkey, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates provide alternatives to other alliances with lower political conditions and more reliable civilian infrastructures than Russian paramilitary actors (Mehta, 2023).

The involvement of these middle powers is an important strategy of geopolitical hedging. Turkey has established an important presence, avoiding historical colonial problems, while Morocco's recent diplomatic contacts provide crucial economic services by allowing landlocked Sahel nations access to the Atlantic ports and integrating them into transcontinental energy infrastructure projects (Ghoulidi & Lyammouri, 2026). The Sahel states can promote competitive tenders for essential infrastructure projects through diversification of diplomatic portfolios and inclusion of these capable medium-sized powers, accelerate domestic economic development, and avoid submission to a single major power. Under this multipolar landscape, the Sahelian countries should transform their geopolitical vulnerability into a basis for sustainable sovereign development through

strong diplomatic agility, institutional strengthening, and unrelenting collective bargaining (Okoli & Alhassan, 2025).

Conclusion

The current political situation in the Sahel acts as a complex laboratory for actively analyzing and implementing 21st-century geopolitical tensions. This article showed how the United States, China, and Russia compete in this highly volatile theater, demonstrating that modern foreign engagement differed essentially from historical colonial extraction. Rather than relying on direct territorial annexation, this contemporary multipolar competition operates through complex systems of influence, the deployment of security apparatuses, and the alignment of institutional and infrastructural frameworks.

The research demonstrates that the United States, China, and Russia perceive each other's regional efforts through the lens of a zero-sum strategic rivalry. The primary motivations for external engagement have shifted toward securing resource supply chains, expanding technological footprints, and projecting military power (Jackson & Brenes, 2025). China uses its non-conditional economic weight to integrate Sahelian markets into its Belt and Road Initiative, demonstrating to incumbent regimes that capital investment and modernization can occur without Western political mandates (A. L. Zhu et al., 2026). Conversely, Russia has institutionalized a highly reactive, security-centric posture through the deployment of the Africa Corps to extract resources and dislodge Western influence. Concurrently, the United States struggles to balance its normative governance demands with the pragmatic necessity of maintaining a regional counterterrorism presence.

Crucially, this study tests and dismantles the "passive-victim" narrative that has historically dominated regional studies. For too long, scholarship has portrayed fragile states as entities that merely react to the whims of external global powers. The research demonstrates that Sahelian governments, specifically the military juntas comprising the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), exercise profound strategic agency. Addressing the second research question, the analysis concludes that these regimes actively manipulate the geopolitical friction between the United States' flexibility, Chinese capital, and Russian security apparatuses to ensure their own regime survival. By executing a calculated rotation of external patrons, local elites acquire the capital and military protection necessary to insulate themselves from domestic overthrow and Western sanctions.

However, the study introduces a critical caveat regarding the securitization of this multipolar engagement. When outside nations utilize the Sahel as a battleground to achieve their strategic objectives, their interventions frequently lead to the deterioration of regional security and domestic governance. The delivery of unconditional security support from Moscow, combined with high-tech surveillance equipment and non-normative capital from Beijing (Polyakova & Meserole, 2019), results in two negative outcomes: the decline of accountable domestic institutions and the exacerbation of localized conflicts. Foreign powers supplying military hardware and financial lifelines to transitional regimes without monitoring their internal usage create a continuous cycle of instability, demanding yet more foreign military operations for its resolution (Boutton, 2019).

The research shows that sustainable stability in the Sahel depends on transcending this self-reinforcing cycle of structural dependence. Neither the Chinese infrastructure model, the Russian security apparatus, nor the Western normative system can unilaterally deliver authentic security solutions, as these external actors inherently prioritize their own geopolitical and extractive interests over the sovereign needs of the Sahel countries.

Answering the final research question, the establishment of genuine autonomy requires the Central Sahelian states to extract substantive developmental concessions by negotiating from a position of institutional strength. Meaningful sovereign agency demands that these governments consolidate endogenous state capacity and leverage the AES to enforce unyielding collective bargaining. The Central Sahel countries can circumvent traditional dual powers by requiring foreign countries to combine security access with mandatory developmental commitments, and by diversifying diplomatic portfolios to include emerging middle powers such as Turkey and Morocco. The future of the region depends on whether its institutions can transform its acute geopolitical vulnerabilities into a foundation for sustainable and sovereign development.

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