

Franco-Russian Great Power Rivalry in the Sahara-Sahel Region

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Abstract

The Franco-Russian great power rivalry is a powerful security dynamic shaping the Sahara-Sahel region that was formed in the last decade due to

transnational (in)security processes, namely, the transnational terrorism-migration-crime nexus. The confrontation between Paris and Moscow, which commenced at the end of last decade, is largely a consequence of the weaknesses and inefficiency of the French foreign policy in the region, which Russia strives to exploit to its political and economic benefit. The hotspots of this confrontation are Libya and Mali, where the Franco-Russian rivalry has led to the global securitization of the conflict (in both countries), transformation of the regional balance of power (in Libya), and the aggravation of existing security problems (in Mali). Overall, the Franco-Russian rivalry in the Sahara-Sahel region is a phenomenon of the upcoming age of multipolarity and a new Scramble for Africa.

Keywords: great power rivalry, Sahara-Sahel region, Libya, Mali, Russia, France.

The relationship between Russia and France is long and complicated. Since its inception in the 18th century, it has been characterized by great power rivalry with short periods of collaboration against a common enemy. After the collapse of the USSR, Paris and Moscow actively enhanced political and economic ties and discursively advocated the idea of a multipolar world during the presidencies of François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac. Relations between Paris and Moscow took a turn for the worse during the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy. Although Sarkozy is traditionally regarded as an efficient mediator in the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, it was during his term that France led the Western regime-change operation in Libya in direct violation of UN Security Council Resolution #1973 and tried to achieve the same in Syria, directly challenging Russian interests in those countries. The relations continued to deteriorate after the reincorporation of Crimea and the outbreak of the war in Donbass, which marked the beginning of the confrontation between Russia and the West. Although France was one of the parties to the Minsk process, Paris failed to persuade the Ukrainians to implement the accords. Nevertheless, the spirit of cooperation lingered: in Syria in 2015, Moscow and Paris discussed the issue of joint anti-terrorist

actions, and at some point “Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his warships deployed in the Mediterranean Sea to enter into ‘direct contact’ with the aircraft carrier Charles-de-Gaulle and to ‘cooperate with the French allies’” (Le Point, 2015).

The bilateral relations were hit in 2017 by the arrival of Russian military instructors in the Central African Republic. The efforts of the UN and the African Union in the MINUSCA peacekeeping mission to ensure the stability of the country had proved futile. Nor had the French Sangaris mission, supported by the EU’s EUTM-RCA training mission, been able to cope with the growing violence. The ineffectiveness of international organizations and Western actors compelled the CAR government to turn to Russia for help. Russian military instructors trained Central African security forces and military personnel in combat weapons operation (unlike the EU mission), and Russian special task forces participated in anti-terrorist operations of the Central African army (Hayrapetyan and Kučera, 2022). The Russian military presence played a crucial role in stabilizing the country, significantly reducing the level of violence in the CAR by 2020 (France24, 2022). However, it was the first irritant for Russian-French relations on the African continent, where Paris and Moscow had cooperated previously, with Russia providing logistical support for French-led peacekeeping missions such as EUFOR Tchad/RCA.

However, the arrival of Russian troops in the CAR did not lead to a full-fledged Franco-Russian confrontation in Africa, and the Sahara-Sahel region in particular. After decolonization, the CAR, although considered the crown jewel of the French colonial empire in Africa, was an extremely problematic country for the Fifth Republic. Jean-Bedel Bokassa, who proclaimed himself emperor of Central Africa, developed relations with the USSR (up until the opening of the Soviet military training center in Bangui). After the overthrow by French paratroopers in 1979, the CAR plunged into a long period of ethno-religious confrontation that continues to this day. Therefore, the arrival of Russian military instructors in the country, although arousing concern in Paris, was not perceived as a serious threat but rather as an instance of Russian foreign policy adventurism.

The true crisis in the bilateral relations between Moscow and Paris began in 2020 as Russia's position in the Libyan conflict kept growing stronger. Before the failed offensive of Marshal Haftar's Libyan National Army, which resulted in the latter's defeat, Paris had been a key ally of the Libyan National Army (LNA) (Harchaoui, 2019). Meanwhile, Russian private military formations have been present on the Libyan territory since 2018 (Libyan Express, 2018a). They did not play a significant role until 2019, but they were able to stop the offensive of the Tripoli-Misrata coalition against LNA's positions near Sirte in 2020 (Al Jazeera, 2020). Paris was out of the political game. Following the weakening of French positions in Libya, Russian influence began to penetrate the Sahel countries (Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad). In 2021, the transitional government of Mali started cooperation with Russia on military matters (Siegle and Eizenga, 2021). Russian private military companies began to operate in the country. In response, Paris launched a large-scale information campaign against Russia (Radio France, 2021). Media reports about Russia's possible rapprochement with the transitional government of Burkina Faso and accusations of Russia supporting the coup make it possible to speak about Franco-Russian great power rivalry in the Sahara-Sahel region.

It is important to note that the Franco-Russian confrontation in the Sahara-Sahel region is not only a new security dynamic in the region, but also an extremely important factor in relations between the two great powers. Moreover, the direct clash of interests of the two great powers—Western and non-Western—is interesting as an international phenomenon of the coming era of multipolarity.

FRANCE AND RUSSIA IN THE SAHARA-SAHEL REGION

The Sahel region in its current geopolitical understanding is comprised of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad. However, the Trans-Saharan security dynamics connect the Sahel region to the Maghreb, thus forming the Sahara-Sahel region. A vivid example of this Maghreb-Sahel convergence was the Libyan conflict, after which the Sahel was flooded with weapons from the Jamahiriya army warehouses, which contributed to the intensification of the conflict in Mali, Niger,

Chad, and other countries. However, during the past decade, a reverse process—Sahel’s influence on the Maghreb—started, mainly due to migratory flows from the Sahel and the activities of transnational terrorist groups (Rózsa and Marsai, 2022). Since the beginning of the current decade, another unifying process has been underway in the security sphere—the great power confrontation, especially the Franco-Russian one.

The formation of the Sahara-Sahel security region was instigated by transnational terrorism in the Sahel. At the start of the millennium, international and transnational Islamic terrorist groups started operating in the region. The proliferation of Islamist terrorism stemmed from the civil war in Algeria and “Afghan returnees”—the mujahideen that fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and returned to establish an Islamic state in their home countries (Wojtanik, 2015). From the southern regions of Libya and Algeria, Islamists began operating in the northern regions of Sahel states, establishing contacts and recruiting the local populace. Radical Islamism had a certain appeal for the poor and oppressed people of the Sahelian states; moreover, the Islamists offered resources and protection. Using the porous and, sometimes non-existent, Sahara borders, Islamic radicals set a foothold in Mali, Chad, and Niger; Burkina Faso was not particularly welcoming to the Salafist ideology, while Mauritania cracked down on the radicals (Ilardo, 2020). However, Islamists’ presence kept growing: extremist organizations multiplied in size and number. The figural dam, holding back regional Islamist-inspired chaos, broke with the resumption of the Mali conflict in 2012. What started as an ethnic separatist uprising of the Tuaregs was soon hijacked by radicals and engulfed the whole Sahel region (Harmon, 2014). Throughout the 2010s, Islamic extremism grew and metastasized across the Sahara-Sahel region, reaching the Lake Chad basin. One of its key features was its transnational, franchise-like character: the organizations started as small independent extremist groups pledged allegiance one by one to either AQIM or ISIS (Hansen, 2019).

Another security process that has united the Sahara-Sahel region is the growth of trans-Saharan illegal migration and commodity flows (Rizk, 2021). The Sahel countries have become both a source and a

transit point for illegal migration to the Maghreb and often to the EU. Trans-Saharan trade in weapons, drugs, fuel, and cigarette smuggling has become equally significant. As early as the 2000s, Latin American drug cartels used trans-Saharan routes to smuggle cocaine into Europe (Yahia et al., 2019). With the emergence of Islamist guerrilla groups in the Sahel in the 2010s, transnational crime merged with transnational terrorism. Smugglers were given protection by the Islamists in return for the financial gain from smuggling and human trafficking across the Sahara. Facilitation of illegal trans-Saharan migration, closely intertwined with human trafficking, became especially lucrative (Lounnas, 2018).

Russia and France, despite being great powers, are demonstrably different with regards to their position in the Sahara-Sahel region. France is a dominant power in the region, especially in political and military terms. It has a wide array of military bases across the Sahel: in Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania (France abandoned its bases in Mali in 2022) (Senat.fr, 2023). France is a major arms supplier for Morocco and cooperates extensively with Tunis and Rabat on security matters (SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, 2023). Paris is also a key player in the ongoing second Libyan civil war.

The Fifth Republic tries to maintain two different postures regarding the Maghreb and the Sahel. In the Maghreb, France positions itself as a key partner in several strategic areas—arms sales, energy, and infrastructure projects—and a key interlocutor between the Maghreb and the EU, and the West in general. In the Sahel, France presents itself and acts as the key security provider, as a country with the exclusive right to apply military power. Thus, while in Maghreb, Paris is content with its “great power” status, in the Sahel, it strives to preserve its primacy.

Paris is interested in ensuring its dominance in the Sahel due to its strategic importance and its influence on the littoral states of Western Africa. Sahel is strategically important for France because of its uranium deposits. One-third of French uranium for peaceful uses (electricity generation) and 100 percent of uranium for military purposes comes from Niger, where the French company Orano

owns uranium fields through its subsidiaries and ships it to France significantly below the market price (Filippov, 2017). Tuareg-fueled instability directly threatens French interests in Niger, where Tuaregs make up about 10 percent of the population. Furthermore, insecurity in the Sahel may spill over into countries with significant economic importance for France, such as Cote-d'Ivoire and Senegal. Rare-earth metals from Western Africa are critically important for the European Green Deal as well (Usman et al., 2021). Thus, by ensuring primacy in the Sahel, France guarantees not only its own strategic depth but that of the EU.

It should be noted that the very term 'Sahara-Sahel region' (*la bande saharo-sahelienne* in French) was somewhat of a discursive revelation, an acknowledgement on the French part of the ongoing geopolitical merger of the Maghreb and the Sahel, which was later reflected in French political discourse. Moreover, the term '*la bande saharo-sahelienne*' itself is heavily securitized (Pérouse de Montclos, 2019). Its usage is accompanied by geopolitical images of uncontrolled vast swaths of land, infiltrated by terrorists and criminals, thriving on illegal trafficking in people and goods. The growing prevalence of this term in French discourse also demonstrates the continuous militarization of its foreign policy in the Sahara-Sahel region. While foreign policy in the Sahel was historically driven by the defense ministry, foreign and military security services (DGSE&DRM), French foreign policy in the Maghreb (especially with regards to Libya) has become more militarized since Jean-Yves Le Drian, former minister of defense during the presidency of François Hollande who subsequently served as minister of foreign affairs (Chesnot and Malbrunot, 2022).

France also has a versatile foreign policy toolkit with regards to the Sahara-Sahel region. Apart from its significant military presence, France is a key economic player in the Sahel and Maghreb, ranking first and third in terms of FDI in the regions, respectively. Leading French companies, such as Total, Bolloré, Vinci, and Orano are present throughout the region. Paris is an important international aid donor and plays a significant role in allocating European developmental aid, which is especially crucial for the five Sahel states. The Fifth Republic

is also dominant culturally due to the Francophone character of the Maghreb and Sahel regions. Finally, France is closely connected with the regional elites, specifically those of the Sahel states that are the main beneficiaries of the so-called *Françafrique* system of relations (Borrel et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, France faces numerous challenges in the Sahara-Sahel region, caused mainly by its dwindling military and economic capabilities and failed approaches to relationship-building with regional actors. Militarily, Paris is strained to operate independently in the region, having to rely on U.S. logistical support during Operations Serval and Barkhane (Mahshie, 2021). Economically, France has already been surpassed by China in terms of trade and FDI (Stein and Uddhammar, 2021). Finally, the oftentimes neocolonial attitude of France, especially towards countries of the Sahel, has caused widespread resentment (Guiffard, 2023).

For its part, Russia, as an emerging (in fact, returning) power in the Sahara-Sahel, presents itself differently. Firstly, in Russian geopolitical discourse the term ‘Sahara-Sahel’ region is not prevalent. Russian geopolitical discourse employs the term ‘North Africa’ to denote the countries of the Maghreb and Western Africa for the Sahel states. It is noteworthy that the overall formation and implementation of Russian foreign policy at the MFA level in the Maghreb and the Sahel is conducted by the “Middle Eastern team” led by Mikhail Bogdanov who oversees both Middle Eastern and African affairs. However, the security block (the Ministry of Defense, foreign and military security services and PMCs affiliated with them) has been gaining an increasingly significant role in shaping Russia’s foreign policy in the region.

Russian foreign policy instruments are less versatile. Moscow is an important arms dealer in the region and a supplier of several critical commodities (grain and fertilizers), but it lags in other areas. The main Russian trading partner is Algeria, largely thanks to the decades-long cooperation between the USSR and the PDRA. However, in terms of FDI and trade, Russia lags behind France: French trade turnover with Algeria is twice that of Russia, and with Morocco, three times that of Russia (OEC, 2023). However, Moscow is the most acute threat

to the French interest in the region and regarded as such by French policymakers because Moscow seeks to capitalize on the failures and inefficiencies of French foreign policy by actively engaging in the security affairs of the region. This gives Moscow an opportunity to occupy French-held economic niches.

Firstly, Russia directly challenges the French system of military presence in the region. Russian fighters and fighter bombers (Su-35, Su-34, Su-30) compete with French Dassault Rafale; the main battle tank T-90, with the Leclerc; its small and light arms, anti-tank missile systems, and air defense systems, with those of France. However, the most painful threat is Russia's increased military presence in the territory of Sahara-Sahel states as private security providers, military trainers, and supporting personnel that are able to change the reality on the ground. No other great power is able or willing to commit itself to such activities in the region. Thus, the Russian military return to the Sahara-Sahel region is a direct threat to the French primacy in security affairs.

Secondly, Russia, though not a significant trade partner, donor, or investor, can present alternatives to French companies in several key areas: oil and gas, mining, water and land management, nuclear energy, space satellites, and infrastructure. Several Russian companies are already active in the region: Gazprom, Rosneft, Stroytransgaz, Tekhnopromeksport in Algeria, Tatneft in Libya, Glavkosmos and Spuntiks in Tunisia, and NordGold in Burkina Faso (Kherbachi and Belhamiti, 2021). Russian infrastructure companies, such as RZhD and Inter RAO are also eyeing the regional market.

Finally, Russia is active in trying to break the French monopoly on media resources by presenting alternative objective sources of information, especially after RT France and Sputnik France (now known as Sputnik Afrique) have been reoriented towards the African market. Russia is also active in social media, especially in the G5 Sahel states, capitalizing on the anti-French sentiment that has become widespread throughout the region in recent years (Le Point, 2022). This hits French interests even more and irritates French policymakers, making them engage in anti-Russian information campaigns on Facebook and in the mainstream media.

Overall, the Franco-Russian great power rivalry has a direct impact on the region, creating a powerful security dynamic. This rivalry is a direct consequence of Russia's efforts to capitalize on French weaknesses, which, in turn, makes Moscow the primary threat to French foreign policy in the region. The main examples of this development are Libya and Mali.

FRANCO-RUSSIAN GREAT POWER RIVALRY IN LIBYA AND THE SWITCHING OF ALLIANCES

French foreign policy towards Libya has been ambiguous since the beginning of the Second Libyan Civil War in 2014. Despite its official support of the Tripoli government, in 2014, France began to draw closer to Haftar amid the virtual disappearance of Libya's borders with Niger and Chad as a consequence of the French-led NATO intervention of 2011, which led to an implosion of the Libyan state and the emergence of dozens of militias connected with trans-Saharan crime (Jeune Afrique, 2020). Arms flowed from Libya to rebel Tuareg clans, while radical organizations used former Jamahiriya as a springboard. In addition, Libya began to be used as a stronghold by the Chadian opposition. Given that France was fighting in the Sahel relying heavily on the Chadian Armed Forces, destabilization of the Debi regime was unacceptable to Paris (Pérouse de Montclos, 2020). Moreover, the emergence of the ISIS terrorists in Libya in 2014 formed the northern part of the Sahara-Sahel transnational terrorist axis. Thus, Libya became intertwined with the rest of the Sahel countries by the same insecurity factors: Islamist extremism, smuggling, and human trafficking. Furthermore, France itself started to consider Libya part of the wider "Sahara-Sahel region," securitizing Libyan territory in its geopolitical imagination.

Consequently, in 2014, France began to establish contacts with various Libyan actors, from the Misrata Brigades to Haftar. In 2015, France began to support Haftar by providing intelligence in the hope that he would be able to control the southern border. In 2016, during Operation Barkhane, France, supporting Haftar, sent a DGSE special task force, thereby getting involved in the battle for Benghazi, in which three French officers perished in a helicopter crash (Le Monde, 2016).

Other French interests are also at play in Libya. The first among them are French economic interests. Back in 2011, the National Transitional Council promised France a lion's share of the oil fields, which Paris did not receive (The Guardian, 2011). By supporting Haftar in his battle for Libya's oil crescent, Paris sought a significant share of Libya's oil production. That is not to say that the French have not succeeded in this respect: Total currently operates two fields (Jufra and Al Sharara) and is negotiating with Tripoli to unfreeze Mabrouk and start production in the Waha field after acquiring a share from the U.S. company Marathon Oil (Libya Observer, 2021). In addition to oil, the French infrastructure giant Bolloré seeks to acquire the Misrata port, and pharmaceutical and medical companies (for which purpose it created the French-Libyan Health Society) (Africa Intelligence, 2020; 2021). France also sought to increase arms exports. The second group of interests involves Paris' relations with Egypt and the UAE, its key Middle Eastern partners supporting Haftar. In the context of rapprochement with Egypt and the UAE, above all in military cooperation, the Elysée Palace gained an additional incentive to support the LNA.

President Emmanuel Macron has boosted support for Haftar, both politically and militarily. Macron gave Haftar international legitimacy by inviting him to a meeting in La Celle-Saint-Cloud in 2017 together with Fayeza Sarraj. Military support, from Javelins to military reconnaissance boats, has also been stepped up. Despite France's attempts to bring Haftar to power politically (by co-opting Misrata leaders, which Le Drian unsuccessfully sought to achieve in 2017-2018), in 2019, Paris agreed to a military solution to the conflict. Le Drian directly stated that France was waiting for his victories (Le Monde, 2022a). Those victories did not materialize: the offensive was repelled, largely due to Turkey's direct military involvement in the air and on the ground.

Russia's involvement in the Second Libyan Civil War was less straightforward. Moscow sees Libya as a springboard for its presence in the Sahara-Sahel region, as a platform for negotiations with regional and global powers alike, and as an economic opportunity. During the

late period of al-Qaddafi's rule, several major contracts were signed with leading Russian companies, namely Russian Railways, Rosneft, and Tatneft (Krylova, 2017). Those contracts were lost, but with the start of the civil war Moscow hoped to regain its foothold in Libyan oil production.

Moscow established contacts with Haftar in 2015. Several meetings between the LNA Command and the Russian Ministry of Defense were held, although Moscow maintained relations with all sides in the Libyan conflict, including the Islamist Misrata brigades (Barmin, 2017). In 2016, several containers of light arms were shipped to Libya from Russia via Egypt. RSB, a Russian private military company, also began demining operations in Eastern Libya (Sputniknews, 2017). Moscow's military footprint became significant in 2018 when Russian private military formations began protecting oil fields in Libya's Oil Crescent (Libyan Express, 2018a). Simultaneously, Russian oil companies signed agreements with the Tobruk government for oil production in the Oil Crescent fields (Libyan Express, 2018b).

Thus, in 2018-2020, a strange Franco-Russian cohabitation in the region took shape. France led the pro-Haftar coalition, capitalizing on its relations with Cairo and Abu Dhabi. However, reluctant to commit actual troops to the fight, Paris had to acquiesce to the presence of Russian private military formations. Yet it was France that provided international legitimacy to the coalition, while Russia played an instrumental role.

The situation changed dramatically in 2019-2020. The LNA, after an impressive start of an offensive at Gharyan, failed to capture Tripoli and started to falter. In turn, Moscow supported the LNA militarily with qualified personnel, including snipers and fighter jet pilots, while simultaneously maintaining dialogue with Tripoli and attempting to broker a ceasefire jointly with Turkey, thus establishing itself as a power broker in the Libyan conflict (Mardasov, 2020). The first mediation attempt in January 2020 in Moscow failed. However, when the Government of National Accord launched its offensive on Sirte and Jufra, Russian military formations turned the tide of the battle, using their own air power (Al Jazeera, 2020). Simultaneously, Russia

and Turkey pushed their respective partners on the ground towards a ceasefire. At the same time, Russian military formations entered the Fezzan oil fields (Africa Intelligence, 2020).

Major fighting in Libya ceased in September 2020, but political allegiances continued to shift. France reoriented its stance in Libya from propping up the LNA to containing Russian and, to a lesser extent, Turkish influence, as Moscow and Ankara were the actors capable of influencing the situation directly on the ground. The prospect of a Russo-Turkish Syria-like accord on Libya, carving it up into zones of influence, was unacceptable to Paris. However, France needed to rely on other partners: the Paris-Cairo-Abu-Dhabi axis was no more. While Egypt stuck with Haftar, the UAE established close ties with the new Dbeibeh government in Tripoli (The Arab Weekly, 2021). Thus, in 2020, France started looking for other options in Libya. After a series of meeting and statements, the French choice fell on Fathi Bashagha, a former minister of the interior and an authoritative figure in Misrata (Libya Update, 2021). On February 10, 2022, the Parliament in Tobruk elected him Prime Minister of Libya, claiming that Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh's government, which was meant to be interim and last until parliamentary elections, was no longer legitimate.

On the international level Paris tried to mobilize Western support against Russian PMC's presence in the country by actively lobbying Washington and rallying Brussels. Simultaneously, France reached an understanding with Turkey in June of 2021 as a result of Macron-Erdoğan meeting. The joint communiqué called for the removal of all foreign troops from Libyan soil (Reuters, 2021). With the start of Russian's special military operation in Ukraine French efforts to form a Western coalition against the Russian military presence in Libya seem to bear fruit, as indicated by frequent meetings of American officials with Haftar, including the head of the CIA (Reuters, 2023). The main topic of such meetings is the withdrawal of Russia's Wagner PMC personnel from Libya. However, without concrete guarantees for Haftar this seems unacceptable due to the centralizing part of Russian forces in the LNA structure. However, an increased U.S. and EU engagement in the Libyan conflict, with France as the center of

this coalition, demonstrates a profound change in the region, as more global actors get involved and the Russian military presence in Libya becomes securitized on the intraregional and global scale. Russia has tried to diversify its relations in Libya, nurturing ties with Dbeibeh, the Misratans, Tobruk, and the Qaddhafists.

Regional actors are losing the freedom of maneuver in Libya due to the globalizing effect of the Franco-Russian rivalry. Paris, capitalizing on Wagner's purported infamy due to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, makes the matter of Russia's presence in Libya a security threat to Europe, which forces regional actors to adapt and find a new role in the new point of contention between Russia and the West.

MALI: FRANCO-RUSSIAN RIVALRY AMID AN ETHNO-CONFESSIONAL CONFLICT

Since the start of French Operation Serval in 2013, Mali has been the focal point of French anti-terrorist efforts in the Sahara-Sahel region. Mali, especially its northern and central regions, has become an extremist hotbed. It is noteworthy that Mali per se is not of great interest to Paris, but its regional standing makes it important. France is interested in securing its position as an indispensable security actor in the region. The French intervention in 2013 was in many ways dictated by the "If we won't do it, who will?" approach (Erforth, 2020a). Thus, France's special relationship with its former colonies, even after decolonization, compelled it to act in Mali.

After routing the insurgents in 2013, France started regionalizing its anti-terrorist efforts by launching Operation Barkhane that involved the G5 Sahel countries and co-sponsored the creation of the G5 Sahel organization to establish a capable local auxiliary force (Erforth, 2020b). Simultaneously, France launched an international campaign aimed at mobilizing financial and military resources for the Sahel. From 2014 to 2022, eight billion euros worth of aid was allocated to the Sahel countries and additional funds were mobilized within the framework of the Sahel Alliance and the Coalition for the Sahel (European Commission, 2020). Following French lobbying, three EU CSDP missions in the Sahel were launched (EUTM Mali, EUCAP

Sahel Mali, and EUCAP Sahel Niger) together with Frontex-sponsored border security activities in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali (EEAS, 2023). The pinnacle of French Europeanization of military activities in the Sahara-Sahel region was the launch of the Takuba Task Force involving special operations forces of seven European countries (The Defense Post, 2019).

However, those efforts failed to reduce violence in the region. Islamist extremism spread from the north of Mali, Azawad, into the central regions of Mali and Niger, and the northern part of Burkina Faso, and became increasingly Fulani-based (Cline, 2021). Furthermore, although non-Islamist Tuareg groups (primarily, MNLA) had concluded an agreement with the central government in Algiers in 2015, the accords were not implemented. Combat capabilities of the Malian and other Sahelian armies with the notable exception of Chad remained poor (Abamako, 2017). It was at that moment in 2020 that the Malian military staged a coup d'état and deposed President Ibrahim Keita. Under pressure from France and African partners alike, the military junta agreed to appoint a civilian president, Bah Ndaw. However, nine months later he was also deposed by the military under the command of Colonel Assimi Goita, who proclaimed himself Interim President, called for the removal of French and European troops from Malian soil and started intense military cooperation with Russia, which paved the way for Russia's military presence in Mali.

By increasing its military presence and helping the Malian government fight the terrorists, Russia gets an opportunity to bolster its influence in the region and convert it into economic gains. After first successes in Libya and the CAR, Russia started to look towards the Sahel countries, signing a military cooperation agreement with Mali in 2019 (Publication-Pravo, 2019). However, genuine cooperation started only after the second Malian coup d'état that solidified the military's grip on power in the country. Russian military advisors and personnel appeared in the country along with donated military hardware. However, in Mali, the main task of the Russian military personnel was not to protect, but to train. The Malian army was highly dissatisfied with European training, and the overall competences of

Malian forces remained low (Finabel, 2021), which became evident during the bloody Islamist attacks on Malian army bases in Gao and Indelimane in 2017 and 2019, respectively.

French policymakers responded with fury to Russia's advance in Mali. The French foreign minister warned Russia not to intervene in the Sahel, simultaneously threatening the Malian government to cut off both military and economic aid if Bamako did not comply. Those threats fell on deaf ears, and in December 2021, the first regiments of the Wagner PMC appeared in Bamako. In turn, France terminated Operation Barkhane and pulled out forces from its bases in Mali. Certain bases were consequently occupied by the Russian military (20minutes, 2022).

The consequences of France's withdrawal from Mali and Russia's enhanced footprint there are multifold and relate to several security processes in the Sahara-Sahel region. **Firstly**, the Franco-Russian rivalry has the potential to exacerbate existing ethnic cleavages in Mali and its neighborhood. While France was intent on forcing the Bamako government to comply with the 2015 Algiers agreement, this is not on Russia's agenda. At the same time, CSP-PSD (*Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement*), the main political-military body of Azawad, a short-lived unrecognized state, suspended its participation in monitoring structures set up by the agreement (Journal du Mali, 2022). Demonstrations calling for Azawad's secession have become more frequent in recent months (Al-Nahda Media Foundation, 2023). Considering close ties between the MNLA and the French, as well as the bellicose rhetoric coming from Bamako, a potential proxy war might be at play at the North. On the other hand, Russian formations are starting to rely not only on the Malian armed forces, but also on Dogon militias, specifically, on Dan Na Ambassagou, in their fight against the Fulani-centered Katiba Macina group (ACLED, 2022). The Fulani-Dogon ethnic conflict can also be exploited by foreign actors. Overall, the French reaction to Russia's military presence in Mali may exacerbate existing ethnic tensions.

Secondly, the Franco-Russian rivalry is starting to carve the region into two opposing blocs. Niger and Cote-d'Ivoire condemned the

second military coup in Mali and practically broke off their relations with Mali. Bamako was also suspended from the African Union, ECOWAS, and UEMOA. On the other hand, in view of Burkina Faso's breaking off its military cooperation with France, there have been media allegations about a potential military agreement between Moscow and Ouagadougou (Le Monde, 2022b). There has also been a series of anti-French/pro-Russian demonstrations across the Sahel states, including Chad and Niger, the bastions of French influence in the region.

Thirdly, because of the Wagner label attached to all Russian military activities in the region, Paris has been mobilizing Western support against Russian PMCs, resulting in even more sanctions against the Wagner PMC. Furthermore, Wagner's most active involvement in Russia's special military operation in Ukraine gives the West more incentive to act, especially as the U.S. fields about 600 military personnel in Niger and flies reconnaissance and attack drones in the region (Voanews, 2019).

It should be noted, though, that only the French view this rivalry as existential. Russia is not interested in constructing "Russafrique"; it wants to build mutually beneficial economic partnerships and uses the Sahel as a showcase for the efficiency of its security services. Russia's presence in the region triggered a transformation of the regional order from a Western-dominated structure to a more flexible, competitive one, opening opportunities for both regional (Algeria) and non-regional (Turkey) actors alike (Ammour, 2022; Armstrong, 2021). After the French withdrawal, Algeria is increasingly regarded as a potential mediator between Bamako and Azawad, as well as a possible anti-terrorist actor. Turkey has established close cooperation with Niger in military education. Nevertheless, Russian presence in Mali is once again being securitized by the West and is likely to become yet another point of confrontation between Moscow and Western capitals.

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The Sahara-Sahel region is a relatively new geopolitical phenomenon. This region is characterized by weak states and powerful transnational

non-state actors: terrorist organizations and criminal networks, which are often closely intertwined. However, the regional order was in many ways unipolar. France acted as the dominant power in the Sahara-Sahel: it was the single non-regional actor able and willing to influence regional security processes, which is what Paris aimed to do since 2013. France was the prime power in the Sahel for decades and an important player in the Maghreb; however, when the Sahel and the Maghreb merged into one Sahara-Sahel region, it started positioning itself as the primary security actor by employing various political and military means. This effort was in many ways foiled by Russian activity in the region.

Russia's presence in the Sahara-Sahel region started with Libya, where Russian forces gradually accumulated more power and sway over local affairs, serving as a backbone for the Libyan National Army. The success of private military formations in Libya and in the Central African Republic allowed Moscow to establish itself as an alternative security provider, and subsequently enter Mali, and likely Burkina Faso.

Overall, the Franco-Russian great power rivalry in the Sahara-Sahel region is, in many ways, a consequence of the French foreign policy in the region over the last eleven years. The region itself appeared as a geopolitical reality largely in the aftermath of the French-led NATO intervention in Libya, which caused a surge in trans-Saharan terrorism and crime, forging security processes in the Saharo-Sahel region. French approaches to battling insecurity appeared ineffective; the vacuum was partly filled by Russia.

The Franco-Russian rivalry in the Sahara-Sahel is a security dynamic and a factor that influences other security processes and leads to the transformation of the entire region. One major consequence of this rivalry is the merger of the Maghreb and the Sahel in the face of non-state security threats and the Franco-Russian great power rivalry, as both Paris and Moscow, regarding the Sahara-Sahel region as an area of operation, are capitalizing on the linkages of the two formerly separate regions.

Another consequence of the Paris-Moscow confrontation is the opening up of the Sahara-Sahel regional order and, simultaneously, its globalization. Regional and non-Western actors have more opportunities

to act; on the other hand, Russian military presence is securitized by France and its allies as a global threat, dragging the U.S. and the EU into the confrontation with Russia in the region. Global securitization of the Russian threat also had a direct impact on the structure of alliances in the region, as has been shown in the case of Libya.

Finally, the existing security threats—transnational terrorism coupled with transnational crime, illegal migration and commodities flows—are exacerbated by the Franco-Russian tensions, as the local actors have even less incentive to look for a peaceful solution, while malevolent actors benefit from the rising instability. This is especially acute for Mali, a country on the verge of breaking up. It is too soon to say how this regional “great game” will end, however, its very existence signals a return of long-forgotten great power competition and might well be the first shot fired in the upcoming second Scramble for Africa.

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