# shifting alliances and contested influence in africa’s sahel region



In recent years, the Sahel region of Africa has witnessed a complex and shifting geopolitical landscape marked by the decline of traditional French influence and the increasing presence of Russian actors. The changes have unfolded across ten countries in central and west Africa, eight of which were former French colonies, home to about 400 million people. These nations, many of which attained independence in the 1960s, share the French language and historical ties to Paris, factors that have contributed to the regional dynamics influencing both politics and public opinion.

Historically, France maintained strong political and economic relations with its former colonies through a network informally known as “Françafrique,” which included thousands of troops stationed in several countries to support stability and combat extremist insurgencies. The French military presence expanded significantly in 2013 when France and other European countries intervened to counter violent extremism across the Sahel. For decades, these partnerships were considered generally positive, with many governments in the region opting to maintain close ties with Europe.

However, this long-standing relationship deteriorated in recent years following a string of military coups that installed pro-Russian juntas. France withdrew its forces from Mali in August 2022 amid worsening relations and was subsequently expelled from Burkina Faso and Niger by the end of 2023. Diplomatic tensions climaxed in late 2024 when French President Emmanuel Macron criticised the region for never “thanking” France for its military deployments, prompting Chad’s government to demand a French withdrawal as well. This marked a significant rupture in the legacy of Françafrique.

Amid this geopolitical shift, the Kremlin has rapidly expanded its influence, capitalising on anti-colonial sentiments and presenting itself as the new strategic partner. Russian involvement has often manifested through private military companies (PMCs), most notably the Wagner Group led by the late Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose forces have bolstered presidential guards in several Sahelian countries. Although Russia initially maintained some distance via PMCs to retain plausible deniability, overt involvement has increased, especially after Prigozhin’s death in a 2023 plane crash. This incident led to the curtailing of PMC autonomy and a more direct Russian military presence.

Experts such as Dr Joseph Siegle, director of research at the US Defence Department’s Africa Centre, highlight that disinformation and social media campaigns have played a crucial role in amplifying Moscow’s influence. Siegle noted that “in environments where there isn’t an established set of trusted media outlets you get an explosion of unregulated, unfiltered social media.” This media landscape is particularly pronounced in francophone Sahel countries, where anti-European rhetoric is often amplified by influencers spreading narratives that bolster Russian standing.

Among these narratives is the false claim that Russian President Vladimir Putin fought against Western imperialism in Africa during the mid-20th century, despite evidence to the contrary. Influencers such as Cameroon’s Franklin Nyamsi and Swiss-Cameroonian Nathalie Yamb have safeguarded and promoted such myths to position Russia as an anti-colonial power, thereby undermining France’s historical legitimacy.

Chadian human rights lawyer and activist Delphine Djiraibe, speaking from N’Djamena despite intermittent power and communications outages, characterised France’s ongoing influence as a form of neo-colonialism. She observed that “colonisation may have changed form, but we have remained under the yoke of France until practically today.” Djiraibe criticised France for supporting authoritarian governments and failing to uphold human rights standards, citing French President Macron’s 2021 eulogy of Chad’s late authoritarian leader Idriss Déby and the subsequent praise of Déby’s son as examples of this trend. She stated, “France is always presented as the country of human rights... but when extrajudicial executions are commonplace… France does not stand up."

Despite Russia’s growing prominence, voices like Siegle and Djiraibe remain sceptical about its intentions, viewing the Kremlin’s engagement as transactional rather than supportive of genuine stability or development. Siegle remarked, “The Russian forces are not there to fight the jihadists, they’re protecting the regime and various mining sites.” This sentiment is echoed by former Georgian Ambassador Natalie Sabanadze, who pointed to Russia’s preference for low-cost operations that benefit its own interests primarily.

Nevertheless, popular support for Russia, at least superficially, persists in parts of the Sahel. Sabanadze explained that Russians are often “not seen as horrible mercenaries that come to exploit the resources, kill people,” a perception that contrasts with criticism directed at Western powers. Still, opposition remains, as demonstrated by anti-Russian protests in the Central African Republic in early 2025, where Wagner forces have been heavily involved.

The challenges facing the region’s future extend beyond foreign influence. Both Siegle and Djiraibe emphasise that stability will remain elusive unless the root causes of insecurity—financial hardship, weak governance, and lack of support for civil society—are addressed. Djiraibe expressed hope that democratic processes and local agency might eventually prevail: “If we were left to manage itself, we would be capable of electing leaders and sanctioning them when necessary. The mechanism is there.”

As geopolitical rivalries evolve in the Sahel, the complex interplay of historical legacies, contemporary power struggles, and the aspirations of local populations continue to shape the trajectory of these nations. The region remains a critical site where global and local forces converge, each influencing the prospects for peace, security, and development.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/democracy-vs-security-the-sahels-geopolitical-realignment/> - This URL supports the claim about the decline of French influence and the rise of Russian involvement in the Sahel region, particularly in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It highlights the geopolitical shifts and security alignments in the region.
* <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/shifting-alliances-sahels-geostrategic-evolution-multipolar-era> - This source corroborates the shift in alliances in the Sahel, with Russia and other nations like China and Turkey increasing their influence while Western powers' presence diminishes. It also touches upon the diversified partnerships strategy adopted by Sahelian states.
* <https://africasacountry.com/2025/03/redefining-sahelian-diplomacy> - This article supports the notion of a new diplomatic direction in Sahelian countries, with a focus on alliances like the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and the growing influence of Russia. It also discusses the historical and current challenges facing the region.
* <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pscc/21557.pdf> - This policy paper provides insights into the geopolitical transformations and crises in the Sahel, discussing the changing alliances and challenges in the region. It highlights the role of new and returning players like Russia and Turkey.
* <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2024/09/the-sahels-intertwined-challenges-yabi> - This IMF publication discusses the intertwined challenges facing the Sahel region, including political instability, terrorism, and economic issues. It provides context to the recent coups and their impact on regional dynamics.