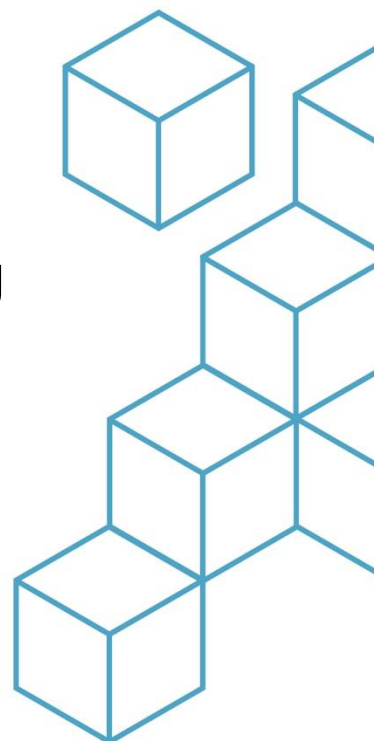


ANALYSES

The Sahel's Shifting Sands: How Security Landscape is Redrawing Regional Alliances



* Hakeem A. Najimdeen

27 March 2025

Tel: +974-44663454
jcforstudies@aljazeera.net
studies.aljazeera.net



Since their coups, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have drawn carefully closer to one another, as their military juntas realised the possibility of isolation. [Reuters]

Introduction

On 17 March 2025, Mali announced its withdrawal from the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), a group of French-speaking countries similar to the Commonwealth. Mali said the decision to leave was due to selective sanctions imposed by the organisations and a perceived disrespect for its sovereignty [\(1\)](#). This decision is consistent with similar actions taken by its neighbours, Burkina Faso and Niger, and the tense relationships between these three countries and their neighbours since the recent wave of military takeovers and continuous militant attacks in the Sahel amid emerging new international actors in the region.

The Sahel's security landscape and new regional alliances

National political issues and local security concerns are shaping the security landscape and new regional alliances in the Sahel. Many countries in the region have experienced internal crises, most notably in the central Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger), which suffer from recurrent Tuareg rebellions and extremist violence, resulting in massive losses, instability, mass displacement and humanitarian disasters. The security situation can be better understood in the Liptako-Gourma region, a vast area rich in natural resources, including gold, manganese and uranium, which has attracted numerous local and international actors. The area, which suffers from porous borders where the three countries meet, has become a hotbed of activity for extremist groups affiliated with the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) [\(2\)](#).

Militants from extremist and active violent groups in Central Sahel states exploit the states' weak presence and inter-ethnic tensions to expand their influence and escalate attacks on military and civilian populations. These groups also capitalise on local discontent with the governments due to increased competition for land and resources that has been exacerbated by climate change and mismanagement, resulting in violent clashes between communities, especially between farmers and pastoralists. The governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger struggled to maintain control, owing to underfunded armed forces and difficulty in coordinating cross-border operations. For instance, Burkina Faso had an extreme security crisis from 2015 to 2021, resulting in 7569 deaths and the displacement of 1.6 million people. In 2021 alone, there were 1337 reported episodes of violence, with 2294 victims. [\(3\)](#) In August 2023, it was estimated that about half of Burkina Faso's soil was outside the government's control. [\(4\)](#)

The boiling security, political and socio-economic situations in the three Sahel states reached a tipping point when they experienced their recent military coups. The first occurred in August 2020, when the Malian army, led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, overthrew President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta following mass protests against his administration. The Malian military consolidated its control over the country by carrying out another coup in May 2021, also led by Goïta. [\(5\)](#) In the case of Burkina Faso, two coups happened in a single year, with the first in January 2022, when the army ousted President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré due to his government's inability to effectively combat insurgency in the country. The second coup occurred on 30 September 2022 due to dissatisfaction within the military with the inability of the first coup leader, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, to effectively address extremist violence and restore security. [\(6\)](#) In Niger, a coup led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani took place in July 2023, leading to the removal of President Mohamed Bazoum due to a political power struggle and dissatisfaction within the military over the government's failure to effectively address the escalating insurgency as armed groups continued to expand their presence despite significant support from Western forces (particularly France and the United States). [\(7\)](#)

Since the series of coups, the three countries have drawn carefully closer to one another, as the military juntas realised the possibility of isolation, particularly after their undemocratic moves were faced by rejections from the international and regional communities, such as the OIF and the African Union (AU), each of which suspended the membership of the three countries and called for the restoration of constitutional order. The most severe response to the juntas was that of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which is due to the bloc's regional significance and closeness to these countries. In the case of the 2023 Niger coup, ECOWAS, which is widely considered one of the most integrated economic communities in Africa, issued, under the chairmanship of Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, unprecedented economic and financial sanctions, [\(8\)](#) and even threatened military intervention to return President Bazoum to office. [\(9\)](#) This threat eventually led to coordination and a show of force by Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The formation of the Alliance des États du Sahel (Alliance of the Sahel

States, or AES), initially as a security alliance (on 16 September 2023), [\(10\)](#) and later as a confederation (in July 2024) by these three countries, marking their exit from ECOWAS. [\(11\)](#)

The establishment of the AES indicates a breakdown in security cooperation efforts in the West African region and represents a significant shift in the Sahel security landscape, a direct response to the growing security challenges posed by insurgents and armed groups, as well as growing dissatisfaction with existing regional mechanisms, particularly the ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel initiative (a regional alliance consisting of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, with significant French support). The military rulers in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso reiterated that the AES aims to replace ECOWAS by improving regional security through military cooperation and economic integration, with a joint 5000-person force combating extremist groups across member states, [\(12\)](#) hence reducing their dependence on foreign military interventions and crafting a more locally driven and unified response to their security and developmental challenges. The remarks of military leaders in AES states have also shown that their decisions are politically motivated, with a notable desire to claim sovereignty and autonomy over regional matters. The AES states see ECOWAS as ineffective and unduly influenced by Western countries, particularly France, whose military presence in the region has been highly contested.

However, dealing with regional partners and neighbours has proven problematic for AES member states and their military leaders, as relationships between their countries and neighbours become increasingly strained. One example of this is the recent diplomatic tension between Mali and Algeria over differing approaches to regional security and counterterrorism strategies. Algeria pushes for political engagement to resolve the crises in northern Mali, criticising military measures as unproductive. In contrast, the Mali junta prefers military action against rebel groups, resulting in the suspension of the 2015 Algiers Agreement that Algeria negotiated between the Malian government and Tuareg insurgents. [\(13\)](#)

Chad is another important security player in the Sahel because of its pivotal role in regional counterterrorism initiatives, particularly in the G5 Sahel Joint Force (with Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) that combats Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Lake Chad (alongside Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Benin). Chad's position with regard to the AES has been cautious, with rhetoric geared toward the alliance for national political and geostrategic goals. For example, in early April 2024, after the contested Chadian presidential elections that were held in May of the same year, Malian officials indicated that Chad had expressed interest in joining the AES following a Chadian delegation's visit to Mali to discuss bilateral and regional cooperation, [\(14\)](#); but as of March 2025, Chad has not officially joined the AES.

Chad, formerly considered a historical Western ally due to its strategic alliances with the United States (including hosting US Special Forces personnel) and France (who primarily relied on Chad in Operation Barkhane), has experienced considerable shifts in its alliances, which could be seen since the 2021 coup that brought President Mahamat Idriss Déby to power. For example, in November 2024, Chad announced

the termination of its defence cooperation agreement with France, which had been in effect since 1966, resulting in the evacuation of around 1000 French troops stationed in the country. [\(15\)](#) Similarly, in April 2024, Chad formally requested that the United States cease operations at the Adji Kossei Air Base in N'Djamena, leading to the withdrawal of US troops. [\(16\)](#) A late October attack that resulted in the death of approximately 40 Chadian soldiers also led the country's president, Deby, to threaten withdrawal of his country from MNJTF. [\(17\)](#)

Divorcing France amid declining ECOWAS influence

France is the most affected foreign power by the overall trend of declining Western military influence in the Sahel, with local populations and political leaders viewing its presence as ineffective. Anti-French sentiment led to demonstrations and requests for troop withdrawals, with many Africans accusing France of neocolonialism, exploitation, hypocrisy, and prioritising French interests above African sovereignty. Since 2020, many of France's former colonies in the Sahel and West Africa have redefined their relations with Paris, resulting in the reduction of its troops in Africa to 4000 from 10000 just five years ago. The recent announcements by Chad and Senegal on their military cooperation with France are expected to reduce this number to less than 2000. [\(18\)](#)

Concurrently, ECOWAS, which was established in 1975 to foster economic integration and political stability among its member nations, is today experiencing serious challenges to its cohesiveness and influence. This is due not only to ongoing political fragmentation and regional realignment in the Sahel and West Africa, but also to the growing perception that it is heavily influenced by France and other Western powers, which undermines its neutrality. The regional bloc has also been accused of narrowing its focus on promoting democracy while failing to address underlying security and economic challenges that contribute to instability, as well as applying sanctions inconsistently, giving the impression that it is acting harshly against certain military takeovers and their rulers while tolerating others.

In addition, AES member states criticised ECOWAS's weak role in addressing regional insecurity, as evidenced by the challenges faced by ECOWAS with regards to interventions and peace initiatives in West Africa, where a lack of consensus and internal divisions among member states, as well as competition between the Anglophone and Francophone sub-blocs within ECOWAS, frequently limit the ability to present a unified front. This criticism and the formation of AES eventually led ECOWAS to announce in December 2023 its commitment to a standby force for terrorism. [\(19\)](#) The standby force was later activated in March 2025, with an expected number of 5000 troops. [\(20\)](#)

Another reflection of the shifting alliances and regional dynamics is the strained relationships between the AES member nations and their neighbours in ECOWAS—some of which still maintain their relationship with France. For instance, tensions between Niger and Nigeria recently escalated after Brigadier General Tchiani, the military ruler of Niger, accused Nigeria of working with France to

destabilise his country. He also alleged that Nigeria was providing support and refuge to Lakurawa, [\(21\)](#) a militia group implicated in sabotaging a major oil pipeline, [\(22\)](#) an allegation that has been refuted by Abuja and the Nigerian military.

In addition, there seems to be a rise in a sense of solidarity between Francophone West African countries and the AES member states. This could be seen in Chad and Senegal's soft position towards AES and the recent statement by Togolese Foreign Minister Robert Dussey, who signalled the possibility of joining the AES [\(23\)](#) so as to enhance regional cooperation and provide landlocked member countries with access to the sea, thereby strengthening economic ties and positioning Togo as a crucial logistics hub in West Africa. Some countries in the region are also hopeful of the possibility of luring the AES countries back to ECOWAS, as the case with Ghana, which officially recognised the AES [\(24\)](#) and called its member states to return to ECOWAS without leaving their confederation.

Shifts in international partnerships

Calls have been growing in Africa for some time for its countries to strengthen their partnerships with the Global South and reassess their foreign relations with the Global North. In the case of the Sahel, international military interventions and foreign counterterrorism operations, including those led by the West, have frequently failed to achieve long-term stability due to a lack of adequate understanding of local dynamics, failure to address the underlying causes of insecurity, weak coordination with regional actors, and casualties resulting from military operations that have sometimes exacerbated local grievances. Besides, the recent wave of coups in the region and its rejection by the historical international partners not only exacerbated the idea of looking for new partners and alliances but also revealed the traditional and historical partners biases.

For example, while France rejected the coups in Mali and Niger, it supported the coups in Chad and Guinea. Similarly, it took the United States, which bases most of its dealings with Africa on democratic principles, more than two months to declare the ousting of Niger's president a coup, which indicates some sort of support from Washington despite the Nigerien military junta being criticised by some US officials. This criticism, coupled with the fear of the US military base southeast of Agadez and the possibility of it supporting a countercoup, eventually led to the junta's call for the withdrawal of the US army from Niger. The growing discontent with the West and the need for a security partnership to curb the rising terrorism and insurgencies as France scales down its military presence all paved the way for Russia to fill the vacuum, starting with Mali after the 2020 coup. This situation offered Moscow the opportunity to position itself as a reliable security partner for regimes feeling threatened or abandoned by regional alliances and traditional Western allies.

Russia's role in the security shifts in the Sahel could be further seen in the Wagner Group presence, as Russia deployed the paramilitary organisation in Mali [\(25\)](#) and was reportedly expanding its operations

to Burkina Faso and Niger, providing security services, military training and combat support to local governments. It was also participating in the fight against insurgencies, protecting key government figures, and securing valuable mining sites. Moscow has signed military cooperation agreements with Mali and Burkina Faso, providing weaponry, training and intelligence support, while proposing stronger defence relations with Chad, including military aid and support. Moreover, Russian media outlets have been accused of amplifying anti-Western sentiment, [\(26\)](#) increasing its diplomatic presence in the region by hosting summits with African leaders, offering them favourable military and economic deals, and paying high-profile visits to AES member states and other strategic West African nations.

Another rising international actor in the Sahel is China, as it positioned itself as a neutral actor while developing its ties with both ECOWAS and AES countries. Beijing's non-interference stance and willingness to engage with both civil and military governments create opportunities to bridge gaps and strengthen regional ties. This approach facilitates investment in infrastructure projects—such as roads, railways, and bridges—under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), supports the development of mining and energy sectors, particularly uranium and oil in Niger and oil in Chad, and provides financial assistance and low-interest loans for development. Similarly, countries like Iran and Turkey are expanding their regional prominence by stressing political, commercial and security ties through several agreements with countries like Mali and Niger.

However, the new international partnerships and alliances, despite their relative successes, are facing several challenges. This is evident in the diplomatic tensions that ensued between the AES countries and Ukraine on the one hand, and between Mali and Senegal on the other hand, due to the ambush of a convoy of Russia's Wagner Group in July 2024, which resulted in Wagner's largest loss in Africa to date, with the Cadre Stratégique Permanent (CSP), a primarily Tuareg irredentist armed group, and al-Qaeda-linked militants claiming to have killed 84 Wagner soldiers and 47 Malian armed forces soldiers. The crisis escalated when Ukraine's military intelligence agency claimed to have provided Malian rebels with “necessary information”, [\(27\)](#) while Ukraine's ambassador to Senegal, Yurii Pyvovarov, expressed support for the Tuareg rebels' actions against Wagner forces, a move that forced the Senegalese government to summon Pyvovarov, disapproving of Ukraine's perceived interference in African affairs and using Senegal to destabilise other African countries. [\(28\)](#)

Niger's ongoing acute fuel crisis is another instance, which is mainly the result of rising tensions with Chinese oil corporations and internal governmental decisions. Reports revealed that the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in March 2024 provided Niger with a \$400 million advance backed by future crude oil deliveries. However, when repayments were due, Niger defaulted, leading to heightened tensions. In retaliation, the junta placed an \$80 billion tax on Société de Raffinage de Zinder, or SORAZ (the joint venture oil refinery, 60% of which is owned by CNPC and 40% by the Government of Niger), despite Soraz's pre-existing \$250 billion debt to the state-owned Société Nigérienne du Pétrole

(Sonidep). The situation worsened when Niger expelled three Chinese oil executives due to significant pay disparities between expatriate and local employees, resulting in the closure of SORAZ, a crucial facility for Niger's fuel supply. [\(29\)](#)

It is worth noting that the ties with a specific international partner are also becoming the bone of contention in the Sahel. This could be seen in the recent diplomatic tensions between Mali and Algeria, which have intensified, with the deployment of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali playing a significant role in the crisis. Algeria, despite its historical ties to Russia, has openly opposed the employment of mercenaries in the region. The Malian army, accompanied by Wagner operatives in October 2024, entered Tin Zaouatine, a village near the Algerian border. This action upset Algeria, prompting diplomatic pressure on Russia to stop the operation, reflecting Algeria's concerns over Wagner's proximity to its borders. [\(30\)](#)

Another instance occurred in April 2024, when diplomatic tensions between Mali and Mauritania grew following incidents in which Malian military troops, accompanied by Wagner operatives, pursued armed individuals across the border into Mauritanian villages, including Madallah and Fassala. Mauritania accused these forces of violating its sovereignty and causing civilian casualties. In response, Mauritania strengthened border controls, requiring Malian citizens to get permission before entering the country.

Conclusion

The Sahel's security landscape is redrawing regional alliances and relationships, reflecting a broader realignment of power that extends beyond the region's borders, as seen in the increasing involvement of global powers like China and Russia, as well as the declining influence of France and the increased pressure on ECOWAS. AES reflects a shift away from Western-backed frameworks and toward alternative alliances and security arrangements, particularly those that include Russian support. This new realignment has strained relations with neighbouring countries and sparked tensions between traditional and new international friends seeking power.

Hakeem Alade Najimdeen, is a Nigerian researcher specialising in social foundations, leadership and political developments in Africa.

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