

Sahel: The Quest for the Hinterland (Part II)

Strategic Competition in the Heart of Africa Intensifies

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The [first part](#) of this IDD Analytical Policy Brief discussed some of the basic root causes precipitating the distressing condition of the Sahel region. The second part addresses the issues related to the interests, capabilities, opportunities, and weaknesses of external actors competing for influence in the region.

The African Corps: Russia Enters the “Belt of Coups”

The sequential coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in 2022-2023 supplanted the previous authorities with military juntas, headed by anti-Western-oriented officers who were determined to put an end to the regional presence and influence of France and the U.S. That prompt transformation created a permissive environment for Russia to step in.

The post-Soviet comeback of Russia on the African continent has hastened since the late 2010s. A business enterprise (in fact, a state-private partnership) run by the late Yevgeny Prigozhin piloted this effort. Prigozhin’s activity involved the delivery of a compound package of security assistance and civil services to the client states in exchange for the extracted natural resources. His team consisted of mercenaries, political consultants, anthropologists, public relations specialists, and businesspersons. However, the jewel in Prigozhin’s crown was his private military company (PMC), commonly known as the “Wagner Group.” This entity, with an estimated strength of up to 10,000 mercenaries,

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surpassed the conventional notion of a PMC. Beyond being engaged in tasks to protect vital facilities and train local security personnel, the group was directly engaged in kinetic operations against armed non-state actors opposing its client African regimes, unlike Western or Chinese PMCs. The rules of engagement pertinent to those operations also differed from Western standards, resulting in substantial collateral damage. In a short time, the Wagner Group was able to establish a presence in Libya, the Central African Republic, and Sudan, and tried (but failed) to do the same in Mozambique.

The foiled Wagner Group's mutiny in Russia in June 2023 followed the mysterious death of Yevgeny Prigozhin two months later, which left his African assets ownerless. Coincidentally, the [Russia-Africa summit](#) that took place in Saint Petersburg between those two events in July 2023 manifested the clear strategic course on determined Russian engagement in the continent.

Reportedly, Russia's Defense Ministry [took over control](#) of Wagner's legacy resources, capabilities, and infrastructure in an almost raiding manner. The plan envisages the creation of an "[African Corps](#)"—a contracted expeditionary force under the aegis of Moscow (a similarity of its name with Rommel's Africa Corps of World War Two is striking). More details on that formation are still to emerge; however, it likely incorporates the vestiges of a rebranded Wagner Group, other military companies like Redoubt and Convoy, and newly-recruited personnel. The generation of forces and recruitment for the African mission is underway: Wagner-linked [Telegram channels are inviting](#) interested "musicians" (a widespread euphemism referring to the Wagner Group) to join an African "tour." The reported [supervisors of the African projects](#) are Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, Deputy Minister of Defense, and Lieutenant General Andrey Averyanov, head of the Special Activities Service of the G(R)U (the Russian Main Directorate of Military Intelligence). Both generals have been spotted frequently shuttling between different African capitals since the summer of 2023. Reportedly, some Russian oligarchs from the Forbes list [are co-sponsoring the project](#), counting on its future profit.

The target goal is ambitious: the Corps eventually should have 20,000 boots on the ground. However, this is still an unrealized goal. At present, there are only several hundred "bayonets" deployed to Mali and Burkina Faso, most of them former members of Wagner's assault detachments. Yet, its presence expands steadily. The personal security detail of the top Malian military ruler at present consists of Russian personnel. Other fellow mercenaries provide training and technical assistance and support the combat operations of the Malian and Burkinabe government troops, sometimes spearheading them. A Russian encroachment further into Niger is most likely just a matter of time.

Russia's methods applied in the context of its African mission are evident. Politically, Moscow tries to operationalize anti-Western resentments in the segments of elites and broader societies of the Sahel states. For those ends, it broadcasts anti-neocolonialist and anti-imperialist discourse, poses itself as an effective provider of security (as opposed

to France), and offers those African states a mutually beneficial model of cooperation as an alternative to Western “exploitation.” On the practical side, the Russian Ministry of Defense attempts to adopt a proven Prigozhin model based on the synchronized application of commercialized hard power, hearts-and-minds techniques, confidential connections, and incentive mechanisms vis-à-vis the ruling elites and population of host countries. Since autumn 2023, the Russian side has increased its humanitarian aid to the Sahel states, delivering food, grain, fertilizers, and medical supplies. For instance, in the first quarter of 2024, it granted 25,000 tons of grain to Burkina Faso and started to ship [20 million liters](#) of diesel fuel to Mali to upkeep its electricity power supply during the month of Ramadan. Furthermore, a group of specialists from the Russian CBRN Defense Academy [was deployed to Burkina Faso](#) to assist the local medics in fighting dengue fever. All those benevolent actions are accompanied by intensive media coverage. Beyond that, the development of various infrastructural projects, including road construction and irrigation, is planned. On a parallel track, Russia has intensified its “charm offensive,” offering free language courses and holding cultural and sporting events in the host countries. It is necessary to note that Russia’s onset so far has enjoyed the support of large sections of the local population.

In Moscow’s view, the establishment of the Russian expeditionary presence in Africa is a win-win strategy that opens a variety of opportunities. First, to upset the Western antagonists by creating another security headache for them and to divert their focus away from Ukraine, in particular. Second, to expand political outreach in the Global South. Third, to extract natural resources. Finally, yet importantly, to channel the most passionate and potentially destabilizing domestic elements (i.e., war veterans) away from Russia by keeping them busy with overseas deployments. In addition, the emergent foothold in the Sahel creates a strategic advantage by connecting Russian overseas operational bases (these stretch from Syria and Libya to the Central African Republic) into a single north-south chain.

That being said, Russia’s *Tour d’Afrique* is unlikely to become a cakewalk. It faces a variety of challenges. The armies and paramilitary forces of the Sahel Troika are weak, poorly trained, and underequipped. This implies that the African Corps will probably have to bear a considerable part of the burden of the war against jihadists before local stakeholders become fully combat-ready. So far, the Russian intervention has brought few tangible results. Public rhetorical pronouncements aside, the reality is that the jihadists and the Tuareg insurgents remain well and alive, the operational environment in the war zones is uncertain, and many towns and garrisons of the government forces remain besieged. The mission of defeating insurgencies without addressing their root causes is all but impossible. Achieving that end requires immense resources, calculated long-term strategies, time, and patience. Russia is short of all those fundamentals. The aptitude of the Russian uniformed bureaucracy for effective hearts-and-minds policies appears doubtful. Generals, who inherently rely on standard operating procedures and budgetary financing, lack initiative, informality, thorough cultural intelligence, and

self-sufficiency, which was natural for Prigozhin's *modus operandi*. Then come operational and logistical challenges: controlling and sustaining expeditionary operations in disparate locations across a distant continental theatre is not an easy mission (especially in times when the primary focus and most of the non-endless resources are diverted to Ukraine). In fact, airlifting supplies remains the only (and costly) logistical option. Furthermore, all members of the African Corps are bound by the contract with the MOD, which would de facto imply the *official involvement* of the Russian state in these African wars. The extracted mineral resources can benefit certain Russian oligarchic groups, but not Russia as a state with a Western-sanctioned economy. Finally, the potential response from Western actors, who may feel threatened by the Russian encroachment into Africa, could take place with surprising methods and in unexpected locations.

Overall, Moscow attained a foothold in a depressive landlocked region gripped by war. The situation is reminiscent of the late USSR, which supplied its Third World “fellow travelers” who claimed their devotion to Marxist-Leninist ideology and “socialist orientation” in exchange for material aid. Probably, Russia replicates a similar pattern, approaching the Global South actors on anti-Western premises.

Meanwhile, at the present stage, the Sahel Troika performs in a way that definitely gratifies Moscow. At a glance, the *Afrorossia* project looks triumphant over the *Fransafrique* concept. By August 2022, French and other European military contingents wrapped up and left Mali, relocating to neighboring Chad, which remains now the only base of the Western presence in the area (internally unstable, though). The inept UN stabilization mission (MINUSMA) also had to vacate Mali in June 2023. Those actions reduced the Western military presence in that country to two minor EU training missions. Likewise, in March 2024, the military-led government of Niger demanded the U.S. evacuate its bases from their territory. At the same time, Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey collectively quit the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) and the “Sahel 5” security format, leaving the latter disabled—with only Chad and Mauritania remaining. Instead, the trio created their own regional apparatus: the Sahel Conference, an ambitious project aiming at the establishment of a common foreign and defense policy, unified armed forces, and a single currency. The first practical step in that direction was the induction of the joint military command in March 2024. All those events, in fact, signify the advent of a regional anti-Western mini-block that leans towards Russia.

Other Contestants: The “Great Game” in the African Interior

Beyond Russia, there is a pool of old and new competitors for regional influence and resources. France, at the current stage, is on the defensive in its former African colonies: agreements are broken, ambassadors are expelled, military bases are evacuated, relations are frozen, and distrust and hostility from local actors increase. Paris's sphere of influence is shrinking. There is an array of factors behind such a phenomenon, including the collateral damage caused by [policies applied](#) by President Emmanuel Macron. Among

the immediate effects of the French letdown on the continent are a damaged political image, weakened levers of influence, and a potential risk to an energy supply chain. Over 70 percent of France's electricity output (part of which is exported to other EU member states) depends on nuclear power stations. One-fourth of the uranium ore supplies consumed by French and EU energy systems come from Niger.

Yet, it is premature to overdramatize France's impediments and treat them as constituting an end to the influence and outreach of Paris on the continent. France continues to retain most instruments of hard and soft power, as well as access to elites and resources. A considerable share of the foreign exchange of many African states remains deposited in the French Treasury, while two regional currencies (West African and Central African CFA francs) remain tied to the euro, thus providing France with a tool of control over local monetary policies. Paris continues to retain its military presence in five countries: Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Gabon, and Senegal, all of which are in close proximity to the Sahel. The potential shortages of uranium supplies from Niger can be compensated by multi-billion-dollar deals signed with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Furthermore, French remains the *lingua franca* in the multi-linguistic tribal environment, and the heirs of the members of the local elite continue to go to France for education and career opportunities. Given the emerging global realities, the Elysée Palace redistributes priorities and optimizes resources due to a shifting of its focus to Eastern Europe (and the South Caucasus) and the Indo-Pacific for the containment of Russia and China, respectively. Nonetheless, France will endure staying in Africa for many reasons, including the need to mitigate the effects of illegal migration and violent extremism (in its dual capacity as a Western nation-state that can project power abroad and as the informal driver of EU policy towards Africa).

The United States, as a global player, has to manage multi-tasking and multi-theatre engagements, of which Africa is just one of many priorities. Among the top U.S. primacies in relation to the continent is the prevention of the proliferation of extremist ideologies and "grey zones" controlled by violent non-state actors. For such an end, Washington provides material assistance and training to defense and security forces in West Africa. However, unlike France, the U.S. has no noteworthy permanent military presence in that part of the continent, save for two bases in Niger, whose construction cost \$110 million, and whose future status is very uncertain. Even the headquarters of the U.S. Africa Command—responsible for operations on the continent—is based outside it, in Stuttgart, Germany. However, the recent ejection of French forces and the abandonment of their military bases, the emerging Western power vacuum in the region, and the need to contain Russia, China, and Iran, could compel Washington to enter the theater more actively. The recent accusations concerning an [alleged uranium deal](#) with Tehran, addressed to Niger, could be an indicator of U.S. galvanization.

While Western engagements and commitments in the Sahel Belt are in partial decline, non-Western actors are accelerating their penetration and infiltration into it. The energetic Chinese expansion focuses primarily on the extraction of resources, trade,

and the advancement of the African segment of the strategic Belt and Road Initiative mega-venture. Beijing entangles its partner states with loans to build much-needed infrastructural projects (it is mostly Chinese companies that construct these, and, [in some cases](#) they take them into their own possession upon completion, in compensation for issued credits). China-built infrastructure clusters represent encapsulated ecosystems, protected by Chinese private military contractors. Although the main emphasis of China's efforts naturally falls on the coastal areas, the interior part of the Sahel is not avoided. China is a top trade and investment partner for all the states of that region; in particular, in Mali and Niger, it is developing digital infrastructure as well as solar and wind energy power projects. Special attention is paid to Sudan, to which China supplies weapons and modernizes ports in exchange for oil and, potentially, military bases on the Red Sea.

Türkiye is a relatively new player in the Sahel and in Africa as a whole. Just a few facts: the number of Turkish embassies in African countries grew from 14 to 44 in just two decades (from 2002 to 2022); President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited 27 African countries between 2003 and 2021; Turkish Airlines now flies to more African airports from its global hub in Istanbul than any other airline in the world; and the volume of bilateral Turkish-African trade rose from \$1 to \$8 billion between 2002 and 2020. An approach applied by Ankara relies on soft power architecture, such as trade and economic investments, the export of consumer goods, infrastructural projects on a turnkey basis, the execution of training, educational, and cultural programs, the provision of humanitarian assistance, and mediation in the resolution of armed conflicts. Beyond that, Türkiye has emerged as an arms supplier recently: four countries in the Sahel Belt actively use Turkish-built UAVs and light armored vehicles in their counterinsurgency campaigns. The [SADAT private military company](#), present in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, assures Ankara's interests in the region, protecting mining operations submitted to its concession, in particular. Türkiye vigorously tries to fill the void created by France's setbacks, applying anti-colonialist rhetoric targeting the local audiences, in particular.

Other players in the new African "great game," including in the Sahel, are the UK (implementing its "Global Britain" concept), India, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, and most recently and unexpectedly, Ukraine. Some of them may be less visible, but they are still relevant. For instance, the UAE is expanding its geostrategic outreach on both ends of the Sahel Belt by improving port facilities in Sudan and Senegal and forming an [expeditionary private military company](#) built on the French Foreign Legion model template, which is already present in the African theatre.

An appropriate example of the unfolding geopolitical competition in and around the Sahel Belt is Sudan. Since 2023, this strategically placed country on the Sahel's eastern flank has become an arena of bloody intrastate conflict between the government and the rebelled paramilitary forces. The Sudanese civil war absorbs the echo of wars and frictions between different external actors. Ukraine has [sent a contingent of special forces](#) armed with strike drones to Sudan to back the government, which fights rebels who

receive weapon supplies from the Wagner outfits based in the Central African Republic. That episode illustrates an apparent horizontal spillover of the war between Russia and Ukraine, although of a limited nature. Iran and Saudi Arabia are also supporting Sudan's government in this conflict, while the UAE backs the rebel forces. That creates an odd situation: the Iranians ally themselves with Russia in the war in Ukraine and have uneasy relations with the Saudis; however, in the case of Sudan, Tehran, Kiev, and Riyadh support the same side. Another instance of the same *Realpolitik* series is the support provided by Algeria to the Tuareg rebels in their fight against the Malian government. Algeria regards that particular group as a counterbalance to jihadist actors. Such support produces tensions with Mali and two other members of the Sahel Trio. Algeria's stakes are high, for the projected Trans-Sahara gas pipeline connecting Nigerian gas fields with the Algerian transshipment node (connected to the EU gas pipeline system) passes quite nearby. In its turn, Morocco—which has been in an uninterrupted confrontation with Algeria since both states attained independence from France in the early 1960s—offers the landlocked Sahel Trio a maritime gateway through its ports. In the spirit of chain reaction, that move causes complaints on behalf of the leaders of the unrecognized quasi-statelet of Western Sahara (which is an Algerian satellite), whose Moroccan-controlled part of territory should enable that imaginable access. This is a persuasive example of how initial preconditions for regional conflicts start forming.

Synopsis

- The Sahel represents a stage of lingering, interrelated, and multidimensional crises, caused by a combination of socio-cultural, economic, political, and environmental factors.
- The unfolding contest between foreign powers over that strategically placed geopolitical theatre further amplifies the impact of the mentioned factors.
- The driving imperatives behind this competition are geopolitical and geocultural influence, geoeconomic capitalization, geostrategic connectivity, and access to in-demand natural resources located in the region sought by all external competing players.
- The security environment in the Sahel is characterized by strategic uncertainty, shifting alliances, proxy conflicts, and a materialized vacuum of power that is exploited by alternative competitors, run by the logic of geopolitical antagonism.
- A key current element of the ongoing regional reconfiguration is the emergence of Russia as a resolute player, taking advantage of an emerging window of opportunity to challenge and spoil Western interests.
- Violent non-state actors, which establish control over “grey zones” and are associated with a leaderless spatially distributed global jihad network, pose the foremost danger in the regional security context.
- Private security actors deployed to the Sahel (and Africa in general) and applied as tools of geopolitics by their parent states represent a unique feature with few analogous examples in other parts of the world.

- The enduring violent conflicts in the Sahel are interrelated to similar calamities in its surrounding perimeter (West Africa, the Sahara, and the Horn of Africa); these can produce spillover effects in the previously stable contiguous areas.

In 2021, the South Africa-based think-tank ACCORD [aptly defined](#) the Sahel as “a crowded place with few solutions.” Truly, that region is a “black hole” where indigenous structural and systemic troubles intersect with the strategic ambitions of external players. No realistic and feasible ways of overcoming such an impasse are indeed available from a long-term perspective—even if in part. The Sahel has now emerged as a persistent strategic problem firmly embedded in the broader context of the escalating global competition between status quo and revisionist powers.