

THE CONFEDERATION OF SAHEL STATES' "PURSUIT OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY": A Break From Dependence or Dependence Changing Its Color?

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Owing to its rich underground resources, its strategic location, and the influence of the intellectual and political currents of the period, the African continent has, for centuries, been the target of expansionist policies shaped in line with the economic and political interests of European states. The European presence spread from the coastal regions toward the interior of the continent and turned into a colonial structure based on territorial domination. England, Spain, Portugal, and France were among the principal European countries that established domination over the continent at that time. Among these states, France, which established dominance over a vast geography particularly in West and North Africa, stood out as one of the main actors of colonial activities on the continent. Its expansion into West Africa accelerated particularly in the 19th century, and toward the final period of the century it took on an institutional structure that instrumentalized the local people as a labor force or as soldiers and that was based on exploiting the people of the region and natural resources in line with its own interests. However, in the mid-20th century, under the pressure of the anti-colonial movements that flared up in the international arena and of local independence movements, France was forced to withdraw from the majority of its colonies in Africa. Thus, countries that had remained under colonial rule for many years gained their independence and stepped into the process of nation-state building.

In the post-independence period, however, along with freedom, African states faced various new political, social, and economic problems. In addition to the administrative and economic structures inherited from the colonial period, the insufficient development of state institutions, power struggles, and socioeconomic problems made it difficult for the newly established states to ensure political stability. One of the regions where this instability was intensely observed was the Sahel countries in West Africa. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, which were located within *Françafrique*¹, attained their formal sovereignty in 1960; however, France maintained its influence in the region after independence as well, through the defense

agreements it signed with these countries, military bases, the common currency (the CFA Franc), raw material transfers, and economic privileges. The historical background of the subject is quite important for making sense of the Sahel's relationship of tutelage and for understanding the present. For the fact that the wave of coups that broke out in the 2020s and the discourses of "sovereignty" have resonated to such an extent actually stems from a search for shaping the future in a more independent manner by breaking free from the traces left by the past.

The consecutive military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2020 and

¹ Fransafrika, in its French original *Françafrique*, was first used by the President of Côte d'Ivoire, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, in the 1950s to describe the close relations between France and African

countries. Over time, it turned into a concept expressing the networks of relations that enabled France to maintain its political, economic, and military influence over its former colonies.

2023 were the most distinct political manifestation of the desire to distance themselves from structures centered on foreign intervention. Claiming that radical armed groups in the region could not be contained despite over a decade of French military presence and security partnership and had instead spread the junta governments that came to power systematically severed ties with Paris. Instead, they turned to seeking alternative partnerships, primarily with Russia. The institutional equivalent of this break became the Alliance of Sahel States, established through the Liptako-Gourma Charter signed in September 2023, and subsequently the Confederation of Sahel States (AES), which emerged when this alliance was transformed into a confederation in July 2024.

The establishment of the AES is generally presented, both within the region and in international public opinion, with the discourse of a “break from the West” or “strategic autonomy.” However, the extent to which this discourse has been realized on the ground is open to debate: Has the Sahel states’ ending of the security relationship they had established with France completely removed them from an externally dependent security order, or has it merely changed the address and the form of the dependency? In order to be able to answer this question in a meaningful way, it is first necessary to clarify how the concept of “strategic autonomy” is operationalized in this analysis. Strategic autonomy can be addressed, in a way reduced to a minimum, under three main headings. First, **decision-making independence** refers to a state’s ability to determine its security policy without subjecting it to the approval or interest of an external actor. Second, **operational**

capacity is the ability to respond to security threats directly with its own resources or at least through alternative and replaceable partnerships.

Finally, **resource diversity** defines the state of not being dependent on a single supplier in terms of weapons, training, intelligence, or finance. Unless these three headings are strengthened at the same time, the claim of “autonomy” is doomed to remain at the discursive level.

The aim of this study is to question the on-the-ground counterpart of the AES's “strategic autonomy” discourse. In this direction, the study proceeds around the question of whether the Sahel states’ ending of their security relations with France has completely removed them from an externally dependent security order, or has merely changed the address and the form of the dependency. In the first section, the transformation that the security structures in the Sahel have undergone along the axis of the coups and the deterioration of relations with ECOWAS will be addressed; in the second section, by also touching upon the security threat posed by the armed organizations operating in the region, the externally dependent security order that was formed before the AES will be examined. In the third section, the AES's common defense understanding and capacity-building initiatives, and in the fourth section, the extent to which the new partnership has differed in quality from the old one in the process of the transition from France to Russia, will be evaluated. In the fifth and final section, the limitations faced by the claim of strategic autonomy and the possible scenarios regarding the future of the AES will be discussed.

The Transformation of Security Structures in the Sahel

To understand the radical transformation experienced by the security structure in the Sahel in the 2020s, it is first necessary to look at how the Arab Spring acted as a trigger. The instability that broke out in the country with the overthrow of Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 spilled beyond Libya's borders. The Gaddafi regime had developed close relations, particularly with Malian Tuaregs for many years, employing a large number of Tuaregs as mercenaries under the Libyan Armed Forces. With the overthrow of the regime, the Tuaregs returned to northern Mali with munitions and weapons from Libya, and the previously known Azawad issue re-emerged on the agenda. The relations of the Tuareg communities living in the Azawad region, which covers northern Mali, with the central government followed a tense course in various periods starting from the country's independence. These tensions, shaped around demands for the administration of northern regions, political representation, and regional autonomy, led to various Tuareg rebellions from the 1960s onward. Despite previous agreements and reconciliation attempts, the failure to permanently resolve the issue was carried into a new phase with the participation of armed Tuaregs returning from Libya.

With the coming together of different Tuareg movements, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) was established, and the movement went beyond previous demands for autonomy, aiming for Azawad to secede from Mali and become an independent state. Strengthened by the military experience and firepower provided by fighters returning from Libya, the MNLA

launched an armed rebellion against the Malian army in January 2012. Within a short time, large areas in the north, particularly Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, fell out of the central government's control, turning the security crisis in Mali into a political crisis. In the subsequent period, the involvement of armed groups such as Ansar Dine, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) alongside these rebels significantly weakened the central government's control in the north, further complicating the conflict environment. The crisis, which initially formed around Azawad, transformed into an environment where militia forces ran rampant, and security became a major problem.

When the Malian administration proved incapable of halting the advance in the north through its own means, France launched Operation Serval in January 2013. Although the advance of armed groups toward the south of the country was largely stopped through the operation, the security problem could not be permanently eliminated. While France created a successful impression during this operation by serving as a buffer in the region, it caused radical groups to spread over a broader area. Following Serval, Operation Barkhane, which encompassed a wider geography, was put into effect in 2014; nevertheless, armed groups restructured over time and expanded their operational domains into the central regions of Mali and the border regions of Burkina Faso and Niger. Thus, the crisis that began centered in Mali in 2012 transformed in subsequent years into a regional security problem that spread across the Sahel as a whole.

Despite the presence of France's Operation Barkhane and multinational missions such

as MINUSMA under the UN, the gradual worsening of security conditions eroded confidence in Western-centric security support among both the regional population and the military bureaucracy. The inability to break the cycle of violence despite years of foreign military presence reinforced the perception among military personnel serving on the ground that “France’s presence in the region served to maintain its own influence rather than to provide security.” This situation prepared the most fundamental social and institutional groundwork for the chain of military coups that gradually matured in the Sahel geography and erupted after 2020.

The military unrest initially manifested itself in Mali through the August 2020 coup led by Colonel Assimi Goïta against the government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, fueled by years of growing anti-French sentiment. However, the political fracture in Mali was not limited to this; in May 2021, the military wing led by Colonel Goïta carried out a second intervention against the civilian transition government, termed a “coup within a coup” (Al Jazeera, 2022). The attempts by Transitional President Bah Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane to dismiss key junta-origin military figures in a cabinet reshuffle, along with their reluctance to completely sever traditional security ties with France, led the army to take full control of the administration. While the second coup transformed the anti-French political discourse in Mali into an uncompromising state policy, it also paved the way for the military bureaucracy to position itself as the sole savior against civilian politicians who failed to solve the security crisis. This coup-induced fracture in Mali set a precedent for other states in the region.

In Burkina Faso, facing similar security dilemmas and the threat of terrorism, unrest within the army likewise led to a change of power in a short time. The inability of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré’s administration to curb the escalating violence of radical groups in the northern and eastern regions of the country, the perception that army units were left inadequate in terms of equipment and logistics, and institutional weaknesses in state governance escalated military discontent (ISS Africa, 2022). This process resulted in January 2022 when the junta group led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba overthrew Kaboré and seized power (ISS Africa, 2022).

Similar to the Mali example, the first coup in Burkina Faso was not enough to ensure security stability, and the power struggle deepened. Upon Damiba’s administration failing to bring the security crisis under control and not meeting the expectations of young officers within the junta, merely eight months later, in September 2022, a group led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré carried out a second coup. With Traoré coming to power, Burkina Faso terminated its military agreements with France and expelled French troops from the country, elevating anti-colonial and sovereignist discourse to the level of Mali.

The coup that took place in Niger in July 2023 constituted another critical stage of the transformation in the region. The Presidential Guard, led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani, overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum who maintained close relations with France and seized power. As justification, the coup administration cited worsening security conditions, failure in the fight against terrorism, and the French military presence

damaging national sovereignty. The National Council for the Safeguarding of the Homeland (CNSP), which came to power, unilaterally terminated defense agreements with Paris and ensured the departure of French troops from the country. Thus, an unbroken “Coups Belt” severing military ties with France emerged along the Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger line.

This series of coups occurring in these three countries was met with harsh reactions on the part of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). ECOWAS not only applied economic sanctions to these three countries, but also implemented border closures and financial sanctions. Particularly following the coup in Niger, ECOWAS’s rhetoric of military intervention came to the fore, dragging the junta administrations into a compulsory association regarding cooperation against a possible intervention. Facing these threats, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso created a joint defense line, accusing ECOWAS of serving the French. In September 2023, they established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by signing the Liptako-Gourma Charter. The birth of the alliance, therefore, stemmed from a defense reflex developed against a concrete and imminent military threat rather than an abstract quest for “autonomy.” Following these developments, their relations with ECOWAS deteriorated day by day. In January 2024, the three countries officially announced their intention to withdraw from ECOWAS, and following a one-year transition process, the withdrawal was officially completed on January 29, 2025.

The mode of involvement of extra-regional actors in the crisis has also affected the

course of this transformation. The United States possessed a significant military footprint in the region albeit not as extensive as France’s particularly through its airbase presence in Niger. However, the Tchiani administration’s termination of the military cooperation agreement with Washington in March 2024 and its demand for the withdrawal of US forces from the country by the end of the same year demonstrated that not only France’s, but the entirety of the Western military presence in the region was being liquidated. This reveals that the concept of a “break from the West” was expanded not just against the former patron, but against all Western security partners, including the US.

The role of public support also served a critical function during this process. The burning of French flags and the unfurling of Russian flags in demonstrations organized after the coups provided significant political legitimacy to the junta administrations regarding the changing of security partnerships. However, this social support simultaneously created a strong expectation on the administrations to rapidly produce the concrete security outcomes of the new era.

Parallel to the military dimension of the AES, diplomatic isolation has also deepened. The suspension of their memberships by the African Union on the grounds of the interruption of the constitutional order created a multi-layered isolation at the levels of ECOWAS, the continental organization, and Western allies. This environment of isolation drove the AES states to search for alternative partnerships, turning the orientation toward Russia into an imperative choice. The junta administrations, on the other hand, legitimized these pressures through

an anti-imperialist discourse and reinforced mutual solidarity against external isolation. As a natural consequence of this process, the three states initiated a military, political, and institutional integration by converting the alliance into the Confederation of Sahel States (AES) through the signatures they affixed in Niamey on July 6, 2024.

The Externally Dependent Security Order of the Sahel

As of 2017, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), formed by the merger of four distinct al-Qaeda-linked groups in the Sahel region Ansar Dine, the Sahara Branch of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Macina Liberation Front, and al-Mourabitoun became the region's most violence-proliferating armed organization under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghali. JNIM's rival, the ISIS-affiliated Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS, later ISIS-Sahel Province), created a narrower but steadily expanding sphere of influence along the tri-border area of the three countries. The escalating hostility between the two organizations brought a spiral of violence that directly targeted the civilian population as well. Nourished by village raids, kidnappings, explosive-trapped attacks, and extortion practices, this environment of violence effectively shrank the state's domain of sovereignty.

The response developed against this threat relied on a structure largely based on the initiative and resources of external actors. Established in 2014, the G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) gained a joint military force (FC-G5S) in 2017; Operation Serval, launched by France in 2013, followed by Operation Barkhane, which came into effect in 2014,

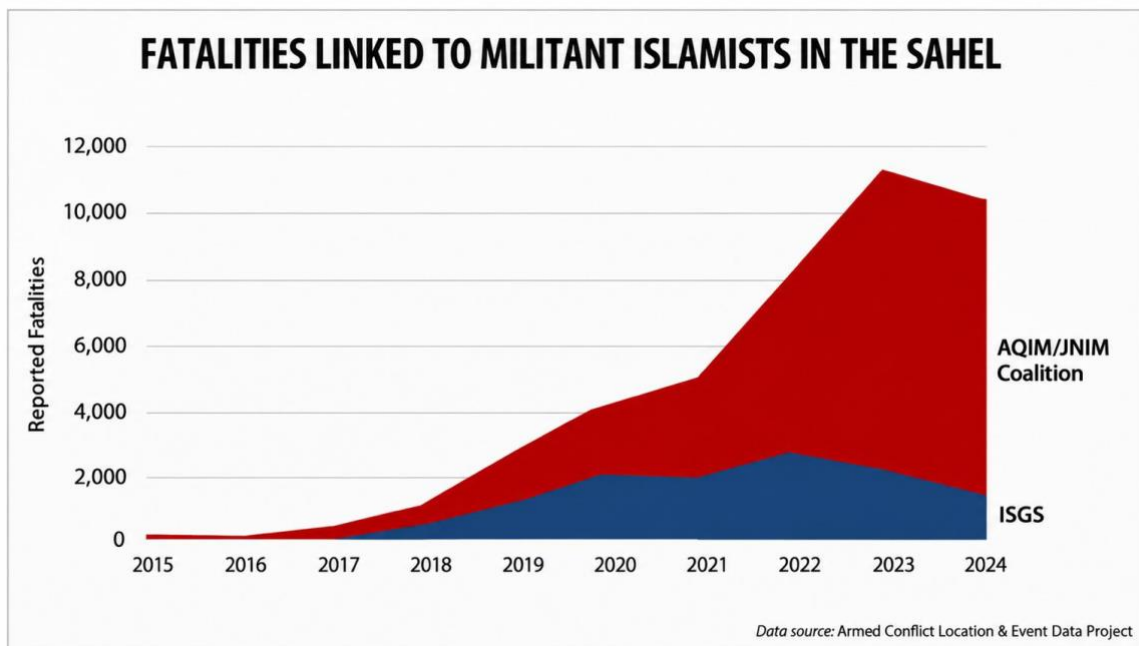
provided air support, intelligence, and logistics to this structure. During the same period, the MINUSMA mission, supported by successive UN Security Council resolutions, was deployed in Mali, while in 2020, Task Force Takuba bringing together special forces from European countries became operational in the Liptako-Gourma region under Barkhane command (Security Council Report, 2020). The US contribution must also be added to this: Air Base 201, constructed in Agadez, Niger at a cost of \$110 million, constituted the largest US military presence outside Djibouti, serving as the hub for regional intelligence and unmanned aerial vehicle operations.

The external dependence of this structure is evident not only at the operational level, but also in its financing and equipment dimensions. The major portion of the FC-G5S budget was covered by funds provided by external donors, primarily France, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. A significant share of the commitments gathered for financing the targeted 5,000-strong force following its establishment came from Saudi Arabia alone. This dependent financing structure made the force's equipment, training, and operational continuity subject to the political will of donor states (Tchie et al., 2022). When external support did not flow regularly, the FC-G5S's effectiveness on the ground directly weakened, rendering once again visible that the Sahel countries lacked an autonomous capacity in security production.

The most striking test of this externally dependent security structure emerges in the course of violence levels on the ground. The following graphic displays the distribution of fatalities associated with the JNIM/AQIM coalition and ISIS over the

years in the Sahel during the 2015–2024 period (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025).

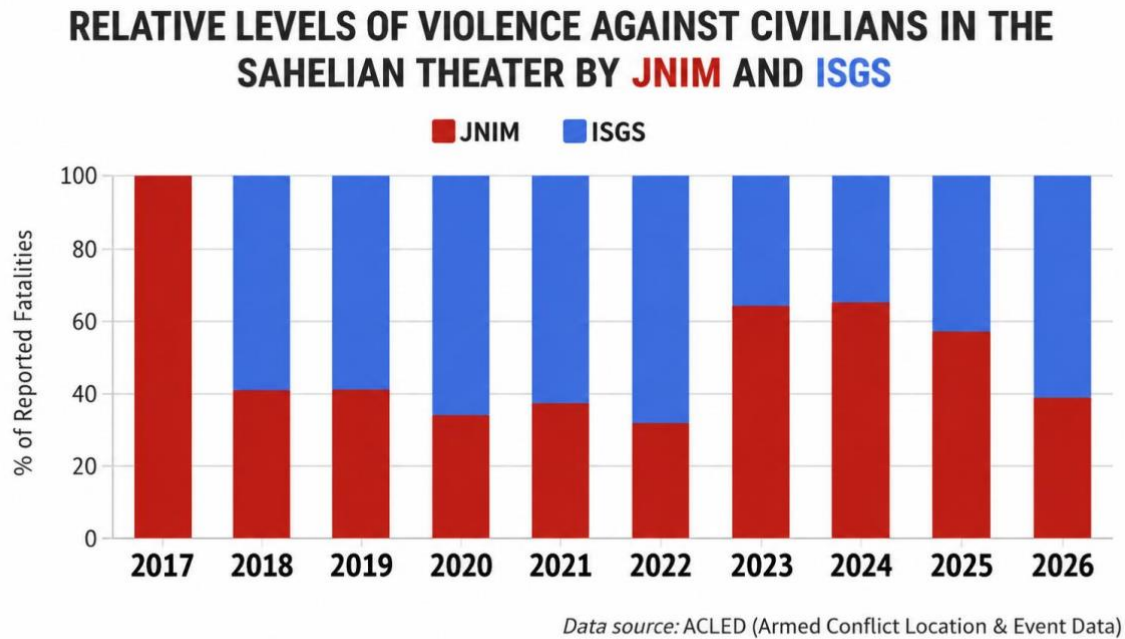
French military presence. Second, the fact that the number of fatalities increased rather than decreased during the 2022–



As can be seen from the graph, the number of fatalities, which remained relatively limited between 2015 and 2018, entered an uninterrupted upward trend even during the 2019–2021 period when Operation Barkhane was deployed in the field at full capacity. The increase in question accelerated from 2022 onward the period when French troops began gradually withdrawing from the region and the junta administrations turned toward security cooperation with Russia reaching a peak that exceeded the ten-thousand threshold in 2023. This picture carries two implications for the study. First, it is observed that the externally supported security structure failed to prevent the structural escalation of violence despite the simultaneous presence of Barkhane, MINUSMA, Takuba, and the FC-G5S. This situation provided a grounded basis in the field for the junta administrations' discourse questioning the

2023 period when the withdrawal process of Western powers began indicates that the indigenous and Russia-backed security order established in the new era exhibited a similar incapacity to curb violence, at least in its initial stage. The slight decline observed in the 2024 data, rather than signaling a permanent shift in trend, can be read as an indicator that the initial effects of joint military initiatives within the framework of the AES are beginning to be felt at a limited level.

The course of the balance of power between the two organizations over time also carries particular importance for the debate on strategic autonomy. The following graph compares the relative shares of JNIM and ISIS in lethal violence



against civilians in the Sahel region over the 2017–2026 period (ACLED).

The graph² reveals that during the 2018–2022 period, lethal violence targeted at civilians was predominantly driven by ISIS-Sahel Province, with JNIM's share remaining at approximately one-third during this timeframe. However, in 2023 and 2024 -coinciding precisely with the period when the AES became institutionalized and Russia-affiliated forces gained weight on the ground- the picture reversed, with JNIM's share in civilian fatalities rising above 65 percent and becoming the dominant actor. This shift indicates that the operational priority of the AES armies and Russia-backed units was largely directed toward ISIS-Sahel, particularly in Niger's "tri-border area," whereas JNIM found room to expand in a vast portion of Mali and Burkina Faso with relatively less opposition. The decline in

JNIM's share once again in the 2025–2026 data alongside the increase in ISIS's share demonstrates that the balance on the ground could not be permanently established; on the contrary, the competition between the two organizations and the limited capacity of the state split across different fronts have produced a dynamic structure that continuously alters the locus of violence. Evaluating this dataset as a whole, there is no strong evidence indicating that security production has been qualitatively transformed in the post-AES era. Only which actor becomes the dominant threat changes depending on the identity and operational priorities of the external partner.

² Figure 2. Relative levels of violence targeted at civilians by JNIM and ISIS in the Sahel region, 2017–2026 (Source: ACLED)

From Security Dependency to the Quest for Autonomy

With the AES, the three countries established the cross-border coordination of their armies on a formal basis. Joint operations against armed groups have been conducted by the AES from time to time, neutralizing numerous group members. In January 2025, Nigerien Minister of Defense Salifou Mody announced that a joint force comprising a total of 5,000 troops from the three countries would take to the field shortly, stating that this force would possess its own air assets, equipment, and intelligence capacity, and would be capable of operating across the territory of all three nations. According to Mody, certain joint operations had already been carried out prior to this date (Reuters, 2025). This implies that the AES is identified with a more institutionalized and independent structure that enables its member states to develop operational capacity.

In parallel with this, as of January 2025, the AES began using a joint AES passport, mobile roaming charges among the three countries were eliminated, and a joint external tariff of 0.5 percent was introduced on imports originating from outside the AES. The legislative dimension of the AES was completed with the AES Confederation Parliament, which officially assumed office in Niamey in August 2026 and comprises a total of forty-five parliamentarians, with fifteen members from each member state (World Atlas, 2026; Rio Times, 2026). In the economic sphere, the Confederation Bank for Investment and Development (BCID-AES), established with an initial capital of 500 billion CFA francs, aims to finance infrastructure projects and support domestic industrialization. In the words of

international economist Magaye Gaye, this initiative is not merely a financial endeavor, but also a political act regarding claims of sovereignty (Yoka, 2025). Although the creation of a common currency to replace the CFA franc and a central bank to manage it remain on the agenda, as of today, all three countries continue to use the CFA franc and remain bound to the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA).

Alongside political and economic integration steps, the AES Joint Force was officially launched with a ceremony held in Bamako, where Malian Transitional State President Assimi Goïta, who presided over the ceremony, characterized the establishment of the force as an important step for the region (Institute of Strategic Thinking, 2025). Nigerien Chief of General Staff Moussa Salaoua Barmou summarized the objective of the force as synchronizing the movements of ground troops with joint intelligence flows to prevent armed groups from utilizing national borders as sanctuaries. This discourse reflects a conscious break from the French-led Operation Barkhane and the G5 Sahel.

Regional observers, on the other hand, draw attention to the fact that a distance still remains between the declared goals of the force and its execution capacity on the ground. The three armies' equipment - procured from different sources - makes establishing joint maintenance and logistics chains difficult, while the real-time integration of command systems has not yet been tested against a large-scale attack. Indeed, the size of this 5,000-strong force is at the exact same level as the FC-G5S, which was established in 2017 and virtually abandoned due to inadequacy. Eight years ago, a force of similar size was deployed in the same region against the

same organizations, yet failed to stop the violence. Consequently, the main question is how the AES addresses its security deficit through its new partner Russia, which has replaced France, and to what extent this partnership qualitatively differs from the former one.

This divergence between institutional construction and military construction should also be evaluated from different angles. While steps such as the joint passport, customs regime, parliament, and investment bank progress rapidly in the sphere of political sovereignty, a capacity enhancement of the same pace is not observed in the field of security. This suggests that the AES's autonomy project proceeds at varying speeds across different domains, with institutional construction outpacing military construction.

From France to Russia: The Distinctiveness of New External Security Partners

Russia's military presence in the Sahel began in December 2021 with the deployment of Wagner Group mercenary fighters to Mali. This presence, which reached a few thousand personnel in a short time, participated in numerous counter-terrorism operations alongside the Malian army as of 2022. In February 2024, it was reported that Wagner's presence in Mali declined from its peak level of approximately 2,000 personnel to around 1,000; nevertheless, satellite imagery conveyed that the base area expanded even following Prigozhin's death. Payments made to Wagner are reported to run at approximately 10.8 million dollars per month, with a portion of this cost covered directly in gold (Africa Defense Forum, 2025). It was reported that

in early 2023, Wagner elements seized gold sites south of Bamako, and in January 2024, Russian soldiers took control of the Intahaka mine, the largest artisanal gold site in northern Mali (Morton, 2024).

This reveals a qualitative difference when compared to the French model. Operation Barkhane was conducted at an official level within a multilateral alliance structure, seeking legitimacy before the UN and the European Union, and referencing criteria of human rights and democratic governance at least at the discursive level. Russia's model, on the other hand, relies largely on a bilateral logic: relationships are established directly with the junta administrations in power on the basis of a security-resource swap, without regard for political legitimacy, election timetables, or human rights records. The agreement signed with Mali in November 2023, foreseeing the construction of a new refinery that would triple the country's gold refining capacity, serves as an example of this (Plichta, 2024). The construction of the refinery in question commenced in June 2025. In a partnership between the Russia-based Yadrin Group and a Swiss investment firm, the 200-ton capacity facility was established with the Malian state as the majority shareholder. At the inauguration ceremony, Assimi Goïta expressed that Mali had long lost revenue by exporting its raw gold to countries such as the United Arab Emirates, South Africa, and Switzerland (North Africa Post, 2025).

The political and military assurance provided by the Russian partnership has also formed the ground for AES governments to pursue a far more assertive resource nationalism against Western mining companies. In August 2023, Mali amended its mining code,

increasing the state's minimum share in mining projects from 20 percent to 35 percent and revoking previously granted tax exemptions. Within this framework, the Loulo-Gounkoto complex operated by Canada-based Barrick Gold and recognized as one of the world's leading gold complexes was temporarily transferred to state administration by a decision of the Bamako Commercial Court in June 2025 on grounds of a tax dispute; in January 2025, the government seized gold stocks valued at approximately \$245 million extracted from the complex and transported them via helicopter. The Fekola mine belonging to B2Gold, as well as the previously abandoned Yatela and Morila mines, were nationalized in a similar fashion (Stropasolas, 2025). These developments demonstrate that the military-political backdrop provided by Russia granted the AES states a bargaining power in their relations with Western capital that was previously unattainable. In this respect, a partially positive development can be noted regarding the criterion of resource diversification. However, this gain remains limited by the fact that a Western monopoly has largely been replaced by another monopoly with Russian partnership. Indeed, the fact that the new refinery project itself is being constructed with Russian capital indicates that diversification has occurred not in the identity of the provider, but merely at the level of contractual terms.

The institutional status of Russia's military presence in the Sahel underwent a radical transformation following the death of Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023. Wagner's dispersed structure was reorganized under the direct control of the Russian Ministry of Defense and redeployed in the field under the name of Africa Corps. As a result of campaigns

launched on Telegram in November–December 2023 and supported by a Russia-based, Africa-focused media outlet, an estimated 20,000 individuals reportedly registered as volunteers for the Africa mission between December 2023 and February 2024. Nevertheless, the targeted strength of 40,000 personnel was not reached, and the number of actually deployed troops did not exceed the 5,000–7,000 peak level of the Wagner era. In Burkina Faso, it was announced in mid-2024 that the Africa Corps would replace Wagner, with plans to establish a 100-person base in Loumbila and expand it to 300 personnel; however, this expansion plan largely stalled within a short time, and a portion of the troops was recalled to Russia (Tutor, 2026). In Niger, a 100-person Africa Corps instructor contingent was deployed to Air Base 101 in Niamey in April 2024. In Mali, the process of the Africa Corps effectively taking over Wagner's networks, personnel, and contracts was completed in mid-2025.

According to the 2025 Global Terrorism Index, Mali was the fourth most impacted country by terrorism in 2024, recording 604 fatalities across 201 attacks, with JNIM being the primary perpetrator behind the majority of these incidents (Africa Defense Forum, 2025). The September 2024 attack launched by JNIM in Bamako targeting the international airport and a military school where Russian mercenaries themselves were deployed, resulting in at least 77 fatalities served as a symbolic turning point as the first attack directed at the capital since 2016 (Africa Defense Forum, 2025). The fact that the attack was executed despite Russian military personnel being stationed at the directly targeted facilities demonstrates that the new partnership offers no qualitative superiority in terms of deterrence compared to the former one.

The nature of the partnership also reveals a distinct difference regarding the dimension of human cost. The operation conducted between March 27 and 31, 2022, by the Malian army and Wagner elements in the town of Moura in central Mali was recorded as the heaviest single civilian massacre in the country's decade-plus history of conflict. Human Rights Watch reported that approximately 300 people were killed, while reports cited by United Nations human rights experts placed the figure at over 500 (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Similarly, in another incident for which Malian and Russian elements were held responsible, more than 50 civilians were reported to have lost their lives. These events present a strong pattern indicating that the Russian partnership has generated a heavier human cost compared to the French period, at least in terms of documented mass civilian casualties.

One of the situations that clearly exposes the operational limits of the new partnership was the fuel blockade declared by JNIM on September 3, 2025, covering the southern regions of Mali. Under the blockade, launched in retaliation for the government's decision to ban the sale of fuel in jerrycans in rural areas, JNIM militants targeted fuel tankers arriving from Senegal and Ivory Coast, abducted drivers, and set fire to hundreds of tankers. As a result, fuel prices in Bamako surged from approximately \$25 per liter to \$130 representing an increase of 500 percent schools and universities were closed for weeks, the US Embassy called on its citizens to leave the country immediately, and the Malian administration banned two French television channels from broadcasting on the grounds of "misinformation" regarding

the blockade (Al Jazeera Staff, 2025; Africa Defense Forum, 2025). The blockade eased somewhat at the beginning of 2026, but with a new wave of attacks by JNIM, a full-scale blockade against Bamako was declared once again on April 28, 2026. As Mali relies on road transport for approximately 95 percent of its fuel imports, the capital became vulnerable once more. Some organizations evaluated these developments as indicating that the Malian state is on the verge of collapse, that the risk of radical groups taking over the country has increased, and that this situation carries the potential to spill over into Burkina Faso and Niger. The fact that the capital's most basic need, fuel supply, was severely compromised for months despite the direct military presence of the Africa Corps in Bamako and the joint operations it conducts with the Malian army demonstrates that the new partnership remains inadequate in guaranteeing even the most minimal function of the state.

Towards the end of 2026, Russia's role in this partnership extended beyond counter-terrorism directly into regime security. On the night of August 28–29, 2026, during a coup attempt in Niamey initiated by a group of young officers calling themselves the Armed Forces for the Salvation of the Fatherland, rebel troops targeted the Presidential Palace, the state television station, and Air Base 101, where the Africa Corps was also deployed. The Russian Ministry of Defense confirmed that Africa Corps elements assisted the Presidential Guard with armored vehicles and drone support to suppress the coup attempt, while Algeria also supported the government by dispatching six military aircraft, including four fighter jets. Nigerian President Tiani's ability to remain in office

following three days of clashes is largely attributed to this external intervention. This event demonstrates that Russia's role in the Sahel has become a guarantee not only against radical groups, but also directly against threats originating from within the ruling regimes' own militaries, thereby advancing dependency to encompass the very survival of the regimes themselves alongside the production of security.

In this context, the UAE must not be overlooked. Although the unconditional financial and military support provided by the UAE to the junta regimes in the Sahel seemingly increases these countries' decision-making autonomy, it fundamentally relies on the gold resources that are the UAE's primary focus. Consequently, the relationship established with the UAE also leads Sahel states escaping Western dependency to enter a different cycle of dependency, shifting away from a single patron and becoming dispersed among new actors.

When all these developments are brought together, it becomes evident that the transition from France to Russia yields varying results across the three criteria of autonomy. In terms of decision-making autonomy, the new partnership offers AES administrations a formally broader maneuverability due to its lack of demands for political legitimacy or human rights conditionality. Regarding operational capacity, the available data the ongoing escalation of violence, the attacks in the heart of Bamako, and the months-long fuel blockade provides no strong evidence that the new partnership has brought about a measurable improvement in security compared to the previous one. In terms of resource diversification, the shift has occurred in the form of a transition from a

single Western patron to a single Russian patron, with a structure reliant on truly multiple and independent suppliers yet to emerge.

Limitations of Strategic Autonomy and What the AES May Promise for the Future

The AES's attempt at autonomy, despite institutional steps, faces an increasingly deepening isolation at the international level. The memberships suspended by the African Union on the grounds of coups remain in effect. Mali withdrew from the International Organisation of La Francophonie in March 2025, and the United States' imposition of a travel ban on AES countries in December 2025 demonstrates that isolation is not limited merely to the former colonial power. This narrows alternative partnership options, transforming alignment with Russia from a preference into a necessity.

A new actor has also recently been added to the AES picture in terms of security. Since 2022, all three of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have purchased Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial vehicles from Türkiye. In 2024, Mali and Burkina Faso added the more advanced Akıncı model to their fleets. Niger, on the other hand, acquired Karayel-SU and Aksungur type platforms alongside TB2s (Ozen & Nelson, 2025). Unlike Russia, Türkiye's sales are conducted on a directly commercial basis, without imposing political conditions. This provides the AES states with the opportunity to avoid relying on a single source, at least in equipment procurement. However, this developing relationship with Türkiye is not of a scale to replace Russia in fields such as military training and intelligence. Rather, it is seen as an element that complements existing security partnerships and diversifies

procurement channels. For this reason, Türkiye's presence in the region has not yet brought the AES's security architecture to a truly multipolar structure.

Türkiye's position in the region gained a new dimension in September 2026. FLA spokesperson Mohamed Elmaouloud Ramadane requested mediation from Ankara for a political solution to the crisis, while also announcing that direct contact had been established with Russia's Africa Corps forces. Although Turkish officials emphasized that this request would not make Türkiye a party to Mali's internal conflict, the fact that Ankara is seen in a position capable of maintaining contact simultaneously with both the government and an armed group fighting against it indicates that Türkiye's role in the region could expand from merely an equipment supplier into a diplomatic actor. Although this development has not yet been established on a concrete footing, it is important to view it as a new variable that could influence the AES's future maneuverability, whether positively or negatively.

As set forth in previous sections, it is possible to evaluate the AES's capacity to generate true strategic autonomy through three components (decision-making autonomy, operational capacity, and resource diversification).

In terms of decision-making autonomy, the AES has made marked progress. The three military administrations are able to select their security partners (such as Russia, Türkiye, and the UAE) by their own preference and are not subject to a decision-making process dependent on the approval of a single external actor as was the case during the French era. Steps such

as withdrawing from the ICC and renegotiating mining contracts also indicate that this autonomous decision-making will extend beyond the realm of security.

In terms of operational capacity, the situation is far more uncertain. Repeated reports that radical violence particularly JNIM in Mali and Burkina Faso, and IS-Sahel in the border regions of Niger is gaining territory demonstrate that the AES's capacity to resolve its own security problems independently has not yet materialized. The deterioration of the security environment during the period in which the AES strengthened its relations with Russia indicates that the new partnership does not automatically translate into "better security" or "greater autonomy."

In terms of resource diversification, the AES has achieved a degree of risk distribution by avoiding reliance on a single external actor. However, each partnership brings its own asymmetries. On the security dimension, the AES remains trapped in a virtually singular spiral of dependence. In terms of military personnel, equipment, intelligence support, and even the direct survival of the regimes (as evidenced by the August 2026 coup attempt in Niger), Russia has filled the vacuum left by France almost on a one-to-one basis. It is clear that the unfolding process is not an indicator of liberation from external dependence. It merely represents a transfer among patrons.

In areas outside of security, the AES continues to pursue diversification aimed at balancing this dependence. While Türkiye provides an alternative to Russian equipment through defense technologies,

the FLA's request for mediation indicates that this relationship could also expand into the diplomatic domain. The UAE through investment and the gold trade, China in mining, and Morocco via access to Atlantic ports offer distinct opportunities for cooperation. Consequently, the current posture of the AES presents a structure that remains largely dependent on Russia in the field of security while actively pursuing diversification across multiple partners in other domains such as the economy, equipment, and logistics. In this form, the position of the AES is neither fully "autonomy" nor merely a "shift in the direction of dependency." Rather, despite the partial diversification achieved in non-security domains, it represents a state of "diversified dependency" where reliance on Russia remains at the core of security.

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