

French Troop Withdrawal and Counter-Terrorism In The Sahel: The Cases Of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, And Senegal

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ABSTRACT

The Sahel has experienced persistent terrorist threats, which have led to significant foreign military involvement, most notably by France through operations like Serval and Barkhane. The recent decision to withdraw French forces from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal represents a major shift in the region's security landscape. This study examined the implications of this development on counter-terrorism strategies in these countries. Specifically, it evaluated the impact of the French military exit on the ability of national and regional actors to combat terrorism and uphold stability. Using the historical method, the study traced the timeline of French intervention in the Sahel and analyzed the security consequences following their departure. The Dependency Theory served as the guiding framework, shedding light on how reliance on foreign military assistance has shaped regional security and the difficulties associated with building independent defense capacities. The study revealed that while some terrorist groups have gained confidence in the absence of French troops, the situation has also triggered renewed interest in regional collaboration, empowerment of domestic security agencies, and a stronger emphasis on self-reliant defense mechanisms. Nonetheless, limitations in resources, training, and operational synergy remain significant obstacles. The study concluded that enduring peace in the Sahel requires a shift toward African-led security solutions. It recommended, among others, that Sahelian states should strengthen regional security frameworks by leveraging ECOWAS and the African Union to coordinate intelligence-sharing, joint military training, and integrated counter-terrorism operations. This will reduce dependence on foreign powers and foster collective ownership of regional stability.

Keywords: Counterterrorism, Sahel, Regional security, French troop withdrawal, Dependency theory

INTRODUCTION

The Sahel region, stretching across parts of West and Central Africa and including countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal, has for decades contended with entrenched security crises, notably violent extremism, armed insurgencies, and transnational terrorism. These challenges have been compounded by weak state institutions, porous borders, and chronic socio-economic deprivation, all of which have provided fertile ground for extremist recruitment and insurgent activities.

In response to the rising insecurity, particularly after the destabilizing aftermath of the 2012 Mali crisis, France, drawing upon its colonial legacy and geopolitical interests in the region, launched a series of military interventions aimed at curbing terrorism and restoring stability.

Foremost among these was Operation Barkhane, initiated in 2014 as a successor to the earlier Operation Serval. With a deployment peaking at around 5,100 troops, the operation extended across five Sahelian countries. It was conceived as a regional counter-terrorism effort targeting jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and other militant networks. The mission involved close coordination with local militaries and multilateral entities such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2025).

Despite some tactical achievements, including the neutralization of several high-ranking Jihadist figures, Operation Barkhane struggled to deliver lasting security gains. The persistence and geographical expansion of terrorist violence, the emergence of new insurgent factions, and the continued targeting of civilians and military personnel exposed the limitations of a strategy heavily reliant on kinetic military force. Analysts and observers increasingly criticized the approach as reactive and insufficiently rooted in long-term stabilization, governance reform, and community engagement (Vision of Humanity, 2024).

Compounding the operational difficulties was a surge in local resistance to the French presence. Over time, foreign military involvement became increasingly unpopular, with segments of the Sahelian populace perceiving it as an extension of France's neocolonial influence. This disaffection was expressed through widespread protests, anti-French demonstrations, and growing political opposition to external military assistance. In Mali, two successive coups in 2020 and 2021 brought military regimes to power that openly questioned the motivations and benefits of continued French engagement. A similar development unfolded in Burkina Faso, where a 2022 coup brought to power leaders who demanded a reevaluation of foreign defense partnerships (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2024).

Niger, once a key regional ally of France, experienced its political upheaval in 2023. The coup that overthrew the civilian government also disrupted existing security collaborations with France. The new junta signaled its intent to recalibrate foreign military partnerships, further accelerating the French troop drawdown. Meanwhile, Senegal, traditionally one of the more stable democracies in the region, also underwent significant political change. The election of President Bassirou Diomaye Faye in 2024 introduced a government with a strong emphasis on sovereignty and national self-determination. According to AP News (2025), the new administration announced that it would end the French military presence on its soil by September 2025, echoing broader regional sentiments advocating for a redefinition of post-colonial power relations.

In the wake of France's declining regional presence, Sahelian governments began to seek alternative defense partnerships. One of the most notable developments was the entry of the Russian private military contractor Wagner Group, which has established a visible footprint in Mali and the Central African Republic. These arrangements often involve the exchange of military support for access to natural resources (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2025). However, while these new partnerships may provide short-term military capacity, they have raised serious concerns regarding operational transparency, human rights violations, and accountability.

The timing of the French troop withdrawal has coincided with an alarming escalation in terrorist activity across the region. According to the 2024 Global Terrorism Index, the Sahel has become the epicenter of global terrorism, accounting for nearly half of terrorism-related fatalities worldwide. Burkina Faso has emerged as the country most affected, with a significant rise in attacks on civilians and state infrastructure. The absence of a cohesive and well-resourced regional security framework has exposed deep vulnerabilities (AP News, 2025). Consequently, the affected countries are now facing worsening humanitarian conditions, including massive internal displacement, economic dislocation, and eroding state legitimacy. Given these developments, this study critically examined the implications of French troop withdrawal on counter-terrorism dynamics in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal.

Statement of the Problem

The shifting security landscape in the Sahel, particularly following the withdrawal of French military forces, has generated a complex array of challenges that have significantly reshaped counter-terrorism dynamics in the region. One of the most pressing consequences of this development is the emergence of a security vacuum. With the departure of French troops, who had provided critical support in intelligence, logistics, and combat operations, national security forces have found themselves overwhelmed. Many local militaries across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and even relatively stable Senegal are ill-equipped, underfunded, and lack the sophisticated capabilities necessary to counter the growing threat of terrorism effectively. This deficiency has created fertile ground for extremist groups to expand their influence, seize territory, and escalate attacks on both military targets and civilian populations.

Simultaneously, the region is grappling with profound political instability. A wave of military coups and fragile transitional governments has disrupted institutional continuity and weakened state authority. In countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, abrupt leadership changes have hindered the formulation and execution of consistent security policies. The absence of strong, legitimate, and cohesive governance structures makes it exceedingly difficult to mobilize long-term national strategies that can address both the symptoms and root causes of violent extremism. This political fragility also limits the ability of these states to coordinate effectively with regional and international actors, thereby weakening collective responses to shared security threats.

Efforts to replace French support with alternative security arrangements have so far yielded mixed results. Some Sahelian states have turned to new partners, including non-traditional actors such as the Russian private military company, Wagner Group. While these partnerships offer immediate tactical benefits, such as direct combat support and regime protection, they often come at a high cost. Concerns have been raised about their lack of accountability, opaque operations, and frequent allegations of human rights abuses. Moreover, the sustainability and reliability of such alliances are questionable, as they are frequently driven by geopolitical interests rather than a genuine commitment to long-term regional stability.

The current security crisis has also highlighted the inadequacy of relying solely on military solutions. The failure of foreign-led interventions and conventional warfare

strategies underscores the need for a broader, more integrated approach. Addressing the deep-seated socioeconomic challenges that fuel extremism, such as poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, and poor governance, is essential for achieving lasting peace. Effective counter-terrorism in the Sahel must therefore include inclusive development strategies, investment in education and public services, empowerment of local communities, and the promotion of democratic governance and human rights. Regional cooperation among Sahelian nations is equally crucial to share intelligence, coordinate border security, and build collective resilience against transnational threats. Against this backdrop, the study analyzes the far-reaching implications of the French military withdrawal for counter-terrorism efforts in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the historical method to explore the underlying causes, consequences, and shifting dynamics of French military engagement and subsequent withdrawal from the Sahel, with specific attention to Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal. The historical approach is well-suited to this research as it provides a chronological and contextual framework for analyzing past events, policies, and interactions that have influenced the region's current security landscape. It entails the systematic gathering, assessment, and interpretation of data from both primary and secondary sources to trace the development of Franco-African relations, counter-terrorism efforts, and regional defense strategies.

In this study, however, the focus was on secondary data collection methods. Relevant information was sourced from public archives, academic textbooks, scholarly journals, magazines, and other documentary materials. Additionally, an exploratory research design was employed, as it aligns with the researchers' intent to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the topic. This approach facilitates the acquisition of contextual insights that enrich the interpretation of the findings and support a nuanced analysis of the security realities in the Sahel region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

France's military engagement in the Sahel has been a defining feature of international counterterrorism efforts in West Africa over the past decade. The centerpiece of this involvement was Operation Barkhane, launched in August 2014,

which replaced previous French military operations, namely Operation Serval in Mali and Operation Épervier in Chad. Operation Barkhane deployed approximately 5,100 French troops across five Sahelian countries: Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania. These forces operated in partnership with local militaries and international stakeholders, notably through the G5 Sahel Joint Force, a coalition of the aforementioned countries established in 2014 to promote security and development (International Crisis Group, 2021). French troops were tasked with carrying out counterterrorism operations, intelligence gathering, and providing training and logistical support to local security forces.

The operation was strategically headquartered in N'Djamena, Chad, and utilized various forward operating bases across the Sahel. It also benefited from close cooperation with Operation Sabre, a special forces unit based in Burkina Faso, and international initiatives such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the European Union Training Mission (EUTM). Operation Barkhane achieved several tactical successes over the years. French forces were responsible for the neutralization of high-profile jihadist leaders, including Abdelmalek Droukdel, the head of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, the leader of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) (Le Monde, 2021; Reuters, 2021). These successes disrupted terrorist command structures and temporarily weakened jihadist capabilities in certain regions. Furthermore, the operation improved intelligence sharing and interoperability among regional armies and fostered closer collaboration with international actors. France also played a pivotal role in the coordination of donor support and capacity-building programs, positioning itself as a key factor in the Sahel's security architecture (Heisbourg, 2020).

Despite these tactical gains, Operation Barkhane struggled to achieve its broader strategic goals. Terrorist attacks in the Sahel not only persisted but escalated in frequency and lethality. Between 2015 and 2023, violent events linked to Jihadist insurgencies increased dramatically, with thousands of civilian and military casualties reported annually (ACLED, 2023). Critics argue that the operation's military-centric approach overlooked critical non-military dimensions of the conflict. Underlying drivers of extremism, such as poverty, corruption, ethnic marginalization, and weak

governance, remained largely unaddressed. This created a fertile ground for terrorist recruitment and allowed insurgent groups to adapt and spread, particularly in Burkina Faso and western Niger (Cold-Ravnkilde & Albrecht, 2021). Moreover, France's continued military presence generated resentment among local populations, some of whom perceived it as a form of neocolonialism. Anti-French protests in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey underscored the growing disenchantment with foreign intervention and the failure to bring lasting peace. The withdrawal of French troops from Mali in 2022, following a deterioration in diplomatic relations with the Malian junta, marked a significant turning point in France's Sahel policy (Thurston, 2022).

France's difficulties in the Sahel had broader implications for its foreign policy and global posture. The growing perception of strategic overreach, coupled with increasing domestic opposition to prolonged military engagements, forced Paris to reconsider its commitments. By 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the end of Operation Barkhane, signaling a shift toward a more multilateral and locally led approach to security in the region (France 24, 2023). This recalibration also opened the door for other actors to expand their influence, most notably Russia, through the Wagner Group, which began supporting Sahelian regimes with paramilitary assistance. The vacuum left by the French withdrawal contributed to the reconfiguration of security alliances, as countries like Mali and Burkina Faso turned away from Western partners.

Factors Leading to French Troop Withdrawal

Several factors contributed to France's decision to withdraw its troops from the Sahel:

1. Rising Anti-French Sentiment

One of the foremost factors that catalyzed France's decision to scale back its military involvement in the Sahel was the increasing wave of anti-French sentiment across the region. This hostility was deeply rooted in the perception that France's military operations were a modern extension of its colonial legacy. Many citizens in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger viewed the prolonged French presence as a form of neocolonial domination rather than a genuine effort to promote regional security and stability (Charbonneau, 2021).

Public dissatisfaction manifested in large-scale protests, vandalism of French symbols, and inflammatory rhetoric from local political and military leaders. These

movements were not isolated incidents but part of a broader populist push to reclaim sovereignty and reject foreign interference. For instance, mass protests in Bamako in 2021 and Ouagadougou in 2022 prominently featured anti-French slogans and demands for the expulsion of French troops (Cold-Ravnkilde & Albrecht, 2022). Moreover, this sentiment was exacerbated by the dissemination of anti-French narratives, often fueled by external actors. Disinformation campaigns, reportedly supported by Russian interests and mercenary networks such as the Wagner Group, sought to undermine France's credibility by portraying it as a destabilizing force in the region (Voice of America, 2023). These efforts further eroded public trust in France and contributed to calls for alternative security partnerships.

2. Political Instability and Regime Change

The wave of political instability that swept across the Sahel between 2020 and 2023 significantly undermined France's operational environment. Military coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) resulted in the ascension of nationalist and military-dominated governments that were openly skeptical of Western influence. These new regimes questioned the effectiveness of French military interventions and often accused France of failing to curb the insurgency despite years of engagement (Thurston, 2023).

In Mali, for example, the junta under Assimi Goïta suspended defense agreements with France and expelled French troops and diplomats. Similar sentiments were echoed in Burkina Faso under Captain Ibrahim Traoré and in Niger following the 2023 coup. These governments sought to realign their foreign policies away from traditional Western alliances and, in some cases, toward non-Western actors, including Russia and Turkey (Boeke & Schuurman, 2023). The political realignment reflected a broader desire to assert sovereignty and pursue security solutions perceived as more aligned with national interests. As these regimes consolidated power, cooperation with France became politically untenable, further motivating Paris to reassess its role in the region.

3. Strategic Reassessment of Military Engagement

France's withdrawal also resulted from an internal reevaluation of the cost-effectiveness and strategic coherence of its military interventions in the Sahel. Although Operation Barkhane, launched in 2014, achieved certain operational

objectives such as the neutralization of high-profile jihadist leaders, it failed to deliver lasting peace or prevent the spread of violent extremism across the region (Heisbourg, 2020). Despite the investment of over 5,000 troops and substantial financial and logistical support, jihadist activity persisted and even expanded in Burkina Faso and Niger. The continued fragmentation of terrorist groups and the emergence of hybrid militant-criminal networks illustrated the limitations of a military-centric counterterrorism strategy (Cold-Ravnkilde et al., 2021). The growing domestic unpopularity of the operation in France itself, driven by casualties, unclear outcomes, and fiscal pressures, also contributed to a reassessment. French President Emmanuel Macron officially declared the end of Operation Barkhane in 2022, indicating a shift toward a more multilateral, partnership-based model of engagement focused on diplomacy, development, and African-led solutions (France 24, 2022).

Thus, France's military disengagement from the Sahel was precipitated by a confluence of socio-political, geopolitical, and strategic factors. Local opposition rooted in anti-colonial narratives, political volatility following multiple coups, and the perceived ineffectiveness of prolonged military deployments collectively made France's presence unsustainable. As the Sahel continues to navigate a turbulent security environment, France is recalibrating its policies to prioritize regional cooperation, multilateral diplomacy, and a reduced military footprint. The evolving dynamics underscore the need for a more holistic approach that addresses governance, development, and local capacity-building in addition to counterterrorism.

Emergence of Alternative Security Partnerships

In the wake of France's withdrawal, Sahelian nations have sought alternative security partnerships to fill the resulting vacuum:

1. Russia's Wagner Group and Its Role in the Sahel

In recent years, the Russian paramilitary outfit known as the Wagner Group has deepened its involvement in several African nations, particularly Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR). This development represents a significant shift in regional alliances as Sahelian governments seek alternatives to Western military partnerships. After deteriorating relations with France and other Western allies,

Mali's transitional government formally invited the Wagner Group in 2021 to provide military training and counterinsurgency support (Al Jazeera, 2022). In exchange for these services, Wagner has reportedly secured lucrative contracts involving mining and natural resource concessions, particularly in the gold sector. This quid pro quo model underscores Russia's strategic use of private military companies (PMCs) to expand its geopolitical influence without direct state involvement, aligning with broader goals of contesting Western dominance in Africa (Stronski, 2023).

However, the presence of the Wagner Group has sparked significant controversy and concern, especially regarding human rights violations. Reports from Human Rights Watch (2022) and the United Nations (2023) have linked Wagner operatives in Mali to indiscriminate killings, disappearances, and abuses against civilians, most notably during operations in towns like Moura in 2022. Despite denials from the Malian authorities, international observers have warned that such incidents not only worsen local grievances but may also fuel jihadist recruitment and further destabilize the region (International Crisis Group, 2023). Furthermore, while Wagner claims to offer short-term tactical gains, analysts argue that their long-term effectiveness in establishing security is questionable. The focus on coercion over community engagement undermines state legitimacy and contributes to a cycle of violence and repression (Weigand, 2022).

2. Turkey's Expanding Military Engagement in the Sahel

Parallel to Russia's growing presence, Turkey has steadily increased its military and diplomatic footprint in the Sahel, seeking to position itself as a reliable alternative security and development partner. Leveraging its expanding defense industry, Turkey has supplied drones, armored vehicles, and small arms to various Sahelian countries, particularly Niger and Burkina Faso, as part of broader bilateral cooperation agreements (Erdoğan & Gündoğdu, 2023). In addition to equipment sales, Turkey has implemented military training programs, officer exchanges, and intelligence-sharing initiatives. Ankara's involvement is often framed through its "Africa Partnership Policy," which emphasizes mutual development, cultural exchange, and security cooperation. Unlike traditional Western actors, Turkey markets itself as a non-colonial partner, a message that resonates in a region where

resentment toward former colonial powers like France is growing (Yukleyen, 2023).

Furthermore, Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), notably the Bayraktar TB2 drones, have proven popular for their cost-effectiveness and battlefield success, previously demonstrated in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Their deployment in the Sahel provides Sahelian armies with greater surveillance and precision-strike capabilities, especially in remote, insurgent-prone zones (Kirişci, 2022). Despite these contributions, some observers caution that Turkey's growing involvement must be monitored carefully. While Ankara avoids the overtly aggressive tactics associated with the Wagner Group, the increased militarization of foreign policy and opaque arms deals raise concerns about accountability, sustainability, and alignment with democratic norms (Crisis Group Africa Report No. 312, 2023). Therefore, the shifting security landscape in the Sahel illustrates the growing multipolarity of international engagement in Africa. As Russia's Wagner Group and Turkey deepen their military and political ties with Sahelian states, the region is moving beyond traditional Western-led interventions. While these new alliances offer governments short-term alternatives to France and the U.S., they come with divergent risks, from human rights violations and weak governance to militarization without institutional reform. Understanding and navigating these complex dynamics is crucial for shaping a more stable and inclusive future for the Sahel.

Impact on Counter-Terrorism Efforts

The withdrawal of French troops has had significant implications for counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel:

1. *Emergence of a Security Vacuum*

The withdrawal of French military forces, particularly following the termination of Operation Barkhane in 2022, has created a significant security vacuum across large swaths of the Sahel. France's departure removed a critical counter-terrorism pillar that had long provided aerial surveillance, intelligence support, and operational firepower to local forces in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Charbonneau, 2022). With French troops gone, national armies, often underfunded, poorly trained, and lacking advanced military technology, have struggled to contain

the resurgence of jihadist groups, such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) (Thurston, 2023). This vacuum has emboldened extremist factions, allowing them to expand territorial control, particularly in rural and border regions, where state presence is weak. Analysts have reported a marked increase in attacks against both military personnel and civilians, alongside the establishment of quasi-governance structures by insurgents in ungoverned spaces (International Crisis Group, 2023). For example, in Burkina Faso alone, over 40% of national territory is now considered outside government control (ReliefWeb, 2024).

2. Intensified Regional Instability and Humanitarian Fallout

The absence of a cohesive and robust regional security apparatus has exacerbated instability across the Sahel. The power vacuum has not only accelerated the tempo of terrorist attacks but has also triggered a surge in civilian casualties, population displacement, and humanitarian emergencies (ACLED, 2023). According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than 3 million people have been internally displaced across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, with entire communities fleeing violence and abandoning agricultural livelihoods (OCHA, 2024). The collapse of centralized security in many areas has also undermined development efforts and governance structures, creating a vicious cycle of poverty, insecurity, and radicalization. Border regions have become hotbeds of cross-border insurgency, arms trafficking, and criminal activities, threatening the stability of neighboring coastal states such as Benin, Togo, and Ghana (Kévin & Bøås, 2023).

3. Fragility and Uncertainty in New Security Partnerships

In the wake of France's exit, several Sahelian states have sought to forge new military alliances, notably with actors like Russia's Wagner Group, Turkey, and other non-Western powers. While these relationships are often presented as alternatives to perceived Western neo-colonialism, their long-term sustainability and effectiveness remain deeply uncertain (Boeke & Schuurman, 2023). Many of these partnerships are transactional, emphasizing immediate tactical support, such as training, drone technology, and logistics, without a broader framework for institutional reform or human rights accountability. The Wagner Group, for instance,

has been implicated in widespread atrocities in Mali, raising concerns about the erosion of humanitarian norms and civilian protections (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Similarly, the proliferation of new defense arrangements, often lacking coordination, risks fragmenting regional security efforts and fostering competition rather than cooperation among stakeholders.

Moreover, the absence of an inclusive, multilateral strategy, as previously attempted through frameworks like the G5 Sahel, means that these new security paradigms often operate in isolation, with little alignment on long-term stabilization goals. Experts warn that unless these partnerships are embedded within broader state-building and governance reforms, they may offer only short-term gains at the expense of enduring peace (Cold-Ravnkilde & Albrecht, 2022). Thus, the withdrawal of French forces has left a complex and volatile legacy in the Sahel. The ensuing security vacuum has empowered Jihadist groups, contributed to rising violence and humanitarian crises, and revealed the limitations of under-resourced national armies. While new partnerships are being explored with countries like Russia and Turkey, their long-term efficacy is uncertain and raises critical concerns regarding accountability and regional cohesion. As the region navigates this transition, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive and multilateral security approach that balances tactical support with institution-building, good governance, and respect for human rights.

Political Transitions and Security Realignments in the Sahel and West Africa

Mali: Mali has undergone profound political turmoil in recent years, marked by two successive military coups in August 2020 and May 2021. These events ushered in a military-led transitional government, which quickly grew disillusioned with the perceived ineffectiveness of France's Operation Barkhane and broader Western interventions. In response, Mali's authorities pivoted toward non-traditional security partners, most notably Russia's Wagner Group, seeking a more assertive counterterrorism strategy (Charbonneau, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023). While Wagner personnel have engaged in direct military operations and advisory roles, their presence has sparked serious human rights concerns, including accusations of extrajudicial killings and civilian abuses. Moreover, despite initial expectations, the security situation in central and northern Mali continues to deteriorate, with jihadist

groups expanding their influence and mobility (International Crisis Group, 2023). This has cast doubt on the effectiveness of these new alliances in delivering sustainable security outcomes.

Burkina Faso: Following its military coup in January 2022, Burkina Faso's junta undertook a strategic reorientation in its foreign and security policies, mirroring Mali's skepticism toward French involvement. The transitional government expelled French troops *and* explored alternative security arrangements, including closer ties with Russia and regional coordination with Mali and Niger under the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) (Boeke & Schuurman, 2023). However, the country has emerged as one of the most terrorism-affected nations in the world. The 2024 Global Terrorism Index ranked Burkina Faso as experiencing the highest global impact of terrorism, surpassing Afghanistan and Somalia. Attacks by Islamist insurgents, including ISGS and JNIM, have increased in frequency and lethality, especially in the eastern and northern regions, displacing over 2 million people and creating severe humanitarian challenges (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024; OCHA, 2024).

Niger: Niger, once seen as a linchpin of Western counterterrorism strategy in the Sahel, also underwent a dramatic shift following the July 2023 military coup that ousted President Mohamed Bazoum. The junta suspended military cooperation with France and expelled French forces in late 2023, despite Niger's previous role as a key base for French and U.S. operations against regional jihadist threats (Thurston, 2023). In the wake of the coup, Niger has sought to redefine its security alignments, engaging in talks with Russia and Turkey, and strengthening ties with neighboring AES countries. However, as with Mali and Burkina Faso, questions remain about the capacity of these new partnerships to provide sustainable counterterrorism solutions, especially given the rise in violence in the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions, where state control remains contested (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Senegal: In contrast to its Sahelian neighbors, Senegal has maintained a stable democratic system. The election of President Bassirou Diomaye Faye in March 2024 signaled a generational political change and a growing emphasis on national sovereignty and Pan-Africanism. Reflecting a broader regional sentiment, Faye's administration announced plans to terminate the French military presence by September 2025, positioning Senegal as part of a continental movement reassessing foreign

military dependencies (Jeune Afrique, 2024). While Senegal has not faced the same scale of jihadist threats as Mali or Burkina Faso, authorities remain concerned about cross-border insecurity, particularly spillover effects from the Sahel and potential jihadist infiltration into Senegal's eastern regions. Consequently, Senegal is diversifying its international security cooperation, engaging with partners such as Turkey, China, and the African Union while strengthening its domestic security architecture (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Although multiple theoretical frameworks could apply to a discussion of this nature, Dependency Theory offers a valuable analytical lens for examining the core issue explored in this study. One of the foundational figures in the development of Dependency Theory is Raúl Prebisch, an influential Argentine economist who served as the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). In the 1950s, Prebisch, alongside economist Hans Singer, formulated what became known as the Prebisch-Singer Hypothesis (1950). This hypothesis posited that over time, the terms of trade tend to deteriorate for countries exporting primary commodities, relative to those exporting manufactured goods. According to Prebisch, this imbalance disadvantages developing countries, locking them into a cycle of underdevelopment and economic dependence on industrialized nations (Prebisch, 1950; Singer, 1950). His findings laid the intellectual groundwork for what would evolve into dependency theory.

Another seminal contributor to this body of thought was Andre Gunder Frank, a German-American sociologist and economist. In his landmark publication, *"The Development of Underdevelopment"* (1966), Frank introduced a more radical interpretation of the theory. He argued that the structural inequalities of the global capitalist system were not accidental but historically entrenched and deliberately maintained through colonial and neocolonial relationships. Frank maintained that the integration of Latin American and other peripheral economies into the world capitalist system was a primary cause of their persistent underdevelopment, rather than a path to progress (Frank, 1966).

Dependency Theory emerged during the late 1950s and 1960s as a critical response to modernization theory, which assumed that all nations would eventually

follow the same linear path of development from traditional to modern societies. In contrast, dependency theorists contended that such progress was not universally achievable due to deeply embedded global inequalities. They argued that the international economic system is structurally biased, ensuring the continued prosperity of developed (core) nations while impeding the progress of less developed (peripheral) countries (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). The tenets of dependency theory include:

1. Underdevelopment is not a preliminary stage in the linear progression of development. Instead, it is a deliberate and systemic outcome of historical and ongoing integration into a global capitalist economy skewed in favor of industrialized nations.
2. Economic relationships between developed and developing nations are inherently unequal and exploitative, sustaining a global hierarchy of wealth and power.
3. The development of the core (industrialized) countries is intrinsically linked to the exploitation of peripheral countries, which serve primarily as providers of raw materials, cheap labor, and markets for finished products.
4. External dependence undermines domestic industrialization efforts, distorts economic priorities, and leaves peripheral nations vulnerable to price shocks, debt crises, and foreign manipulation (Wallerstein, 1974; Dos Santos, 1970).

This theoretical approach gained traction in Latin America during a period of intense social and political upheaval when many nations were grappling with poverty, inequality, and the limitations of externally prescribed development strategies. Dependent theorists such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto added nuance to the theory by introducing the concept of "dependent development", a situation where some economic growth could occur within a dependent framework but would still be constrained by structural limitations (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). Moreover, Immanuel Wallerstein's World-Systems Theory (1974) expanded on dependency concepts by proposing a tripartite division of the world into core, semi-periphery, and periphery. Wallerstein argued that these global divisions are maintained through a world economic system that perpetuates inequalities and that development and underdevelopment are interdependent processes occurring simultaneously across different zones.

Relevance of Dependency Theory to the Study

Dependency Theory posits that the persistent underdevelopment of countries in the Global South is not solely due to internal policy failures or lack of resources, but rather a consequence of historical patterns of colonial domination and continued external control. The Sahelian nations, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal, were once part of France's colonial empire, and the legacy of this relationship continues to influence their political and security landscapes. France's long-standing military presence, especially under Operation Barkhane, is often perceived not as neutral support but as a form of neocolonial influence, whereby decisions related to national security and governance remain under the shadow of former colonial power (Adebajo, 2021). Within the framework of Dependency Theory, countries in the periphery are systematically made reliant on core nations for essential services such as military technology, financial aid, and defense capabilities. In the Sahel, France positioned itself as the primary guarantor of regional security against terrorist threats. However, this arrangement fostered a reliance on external intervention rather than encouraging the growth of indigenous security mechanisms. Over time, this military dependence undermined national institutions and limited the ability of Sahelian governments to independently manage counter-insurgency operations (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020).

The withdrawal of French forces from the Sahel marks a major turning point in these historically entrenched dependencies. Nonetheless, the exit has uncovered the structural fragility of local security systems, which had been heavily reliant on foreign military backing. Without adequate internal preparation or institutional capacity-building, this abrupt change has created a security vacuum, contributing to the resurgence of extremist violence and greater regional instability, particularly evident in Mali and Burkina Faso. The departure of foreign forces without a corresponding enhancement of local capacities exemplifies the hazards of long-term dependency (Aning & Abdallah, 2023). Moreover, Dependency Theory provides insight into the reconfiguration of dependency, rather than its eradication. In the wake of France's disengagement, countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso have turned to new international actors, most notably Russia's Wagner Group and Turkey, to fill the security void. While these shifts may appear to represent a move toward sovereignty, they often reproduce the same exploitative patterns, offering short-term military

assistance in exchange for access to natural resources or political leverage. Thus, changing international patrons does not dismantle dependency structures; it simply reshapes them (Dos Santos, 1970; International Crisis Group, 2023).

Fundamentally, Dependency Theory advocates for a radical transformation of development strategies, centered on self-sufficiency and internal capacity enhancement. For the Sahel, this would entail a shift from externally imposed security frameworks to homegrown solutions, including regional collaboration, civic engagement, and significant investment in national institutions. Entities such as the African Union and ECOWAS can play pivotal roles in supporting Africa-led security architectures, thereby reducing reliance on non-African powers. According to scholars like Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021), this means rejecting neocolonial paradigms and embracing development paths rooted in the continent's own political, cultural, and economic contexts. Therefore, Dependency Theory provides a critical analytical framework for understanding the entrenched and evolving nature of foreign military engagement in the Sahel. France's troop withdrawal from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal is not merely a tactical or strategic maneuver; it signifies a broader crisis of dependency. This juncture highlights the inherent risks of prolonged reliance on external powers and underscores the urgent need for self-determined, sustainable, and regionally anchored security solutions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The withdrawal of French military forces from the Sahel represents a pivotal moment in the evolving security landscape of West Africa, especially for countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal. For over ten years, France played a dominant security role in the region through Operation Barkhane, a mission aimed at countering the rise of jihadist insurgencies and stabilizing states riddled with political volatility and terrorism. While the operation achieved limited military successes, such as eliminating key terrorist figures, it failed to deliver long-term peace or strengthen institutional resilience. The persistent activity of violent extremist groups, the growing number of civilian casualties, and the overall decline in state control across vast territories underscore the shortcomings of externally driven, militarized counter-terrorism strategies. Several interrelated factors contributed to France's decision to withdraw. A surge in anti-French sentiment, rooted in colonial legacies, perceptions of

neocolonial influence, and amplified by misinformation, undermined the legitimacy of France's presence. Additionally, the series of military coups that reshaped the political order in Mali (2020 and 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) led to strained diplomatic ties and the emergence of regimes that increasingly rejected French intervention, viewing it as counterproductive and domineering. These shifts compelled French policymakers to reevaluate their engagement and ultimately to draw down their forces.

The exit of French troops has left a significant security void in an already unstable region. In the absence of robust national forces, countries like Mali and Burkina Faso have experienced a sharp rise in militant activity and loss of territory to armed groups. In seeking to fill this gap, some governments have turned to alternative global powers such as Russia, through the Wagner Group, and Turkey. However, these new security arrangements raise serious concerns about their durability, transparency, and respect for human rights. While they may provide immediate tactical support, they often lack the institutional grounding necessary for sustainable peace and may reproduce the same forms of dependency that characterized earlier foreign engagements. In contrast, Senegal has charted a different course. With a more stable democratic framework, it has opted for a gradual but deliberate move to end its security partnership with France. Under the leadership of President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, the government announced its intention to terminate the French military presence by 2025. This policy shift reflects a growing regional desire to reclaim sovereignty and reconfigure foreign security relationships. It also aligns with key insights from Dependency Theory, which argues that underdevelopment and foreign control are closely linked. Thus, France's departure presents not only a tactical adjustment but also a chance for Sahelian nations to pursue homegrown solutions rooted in regional solidarity and institutional development.

The post-Operation Barkhane period offers a dual reality: heightened vulnerability to extremist violence alongside an unprecedented opportunity for renewal. The current vacuum exposes the fragility of security systems overly reliant on foreign powers. However, it also opens the door for Sahelian nations to rethink their security frameworks, reduce external dependence, and build cooperative, African-led initiatives for peace and development. While the path forward remains complex and fraught with

risks, the moment offers a critical juncture to shift from externally dictated crisis management to sovereign, sustainable security and governance. Given the multifaceted security, political, and socio-economic challenges arising from the withdrawal of French troops in the Sahel, especially in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal, there is a pressing need for well-coordinated, long-term, and locally driven solutions. The recommendations below propose practical measures that national governments and regional institutions can adopt to build internal capacity, foster enduring peace, and lessen reliance on external military assistance:

- i. Sahelian states should strengthen regional security frameworks by leveraging ECOWAS and the African Union to coordinate intelligence-sharing, joint military training, and integrated counter-terrorism operations. This will reduce dependence on foreign powers and foster collective ownership of regional stability.
- ii. Governments should invest in professionalizing their armed forces, upgrading military equipment, and expanding operational readiness. They should also reinforce governance structures and civilian oversight to ensure transparency, accountability, and adherence to human rights standards.
- iii. States should implement inclusive development programs that address poverty, youth unemployment, marginalization, and inadequate public services. Expanding access to education, healthcare, and infrastructure, especially in vulnerable communities, will help weaken the appeal of extremist ideologies and support long-term peace.

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