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DECLINING FRENCH INFLUENCE IN THE SAHEL: STRATEGIES AND REPERCUSSIONS

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Abstract

This study examines the factors and consequences of declining French influence in the Sahel region following the military coups in countries such as Chad, Mali and Niger, and the adoption by new military elites of a policy of disengagement from Paris. The significance of this study stems from examining the fundamental shifts affecting France's interests and historical influence in the region in light of a rising wave of hostility among both the public and the new military elites toward Paris, as well as regional transformations and crises impacting the stability of these states, alongside the growing presence of international actors seeking to expand their influence as alternatives to France. The study concludes that internal and external shifts in the Sahel region are the primary drivers of France's declining influence, with strategic and geopolitical implications for France's role not only in the Sahel but also in the global arena.

Keywords: Sahel, France, coups, influence, geopolitics, Chad, Mali, Niger

Introduction

Military coups across Mali, Chad, Niger and Burkina Faso have triggered geopolitical realignment in the Sahel. These upheavals coincide with intensifying international competition challenging French dominance. Rising powers compete for African investment opportunities whilst internal regional crises persist from post-independence legacies. New military leaders have seized this moment to distance themselves from previous elites, leveraging domestic pressure and international dynamics to build alternative alliances. Chad's Military Council expelled French diplomatic missions and demanded the dismantling of French military bases. The Sahel states are actively cultivating new partnerships aligned with their development interests. These developments represent a calculated shift away from French influence. The transitions significantly strain France's political performance domestically and weaken its international standing, reflecting a broader erosion of French power in Africa.

Based on the foregoing, the study poses the following question: To what extent can France adapt to the variables of the local and international environments in order to restore its influence in the African Sahel region? To answer this question, the study hypothesizes that the growing degree of political instability in the Sahel countries constitutes a decisive factor in the turnover of ruling elites, serving as a significant indicator of the extent of French influence in the region. It further hypothesizes that international powers have contributed to structural changes in the dynamics of influence and dependency, thereby curtailing French influence in the African Sahel. The analytical framework comprises three dimensions. First, historical analysis traces the origins of French dependency relationships and mechanisms sustaining the French presence. Second, an examination of recent military coups explores the motivating factors and the consequences for French influence. Third, assessment of French strategic responses addresses efforts to recover regional influence whilst managing internal economic pressures and domestic political fractures.

France's Relations With the Sahel Nations — Underlying Contexts

The African Sahel region occupies a vital geographical location and holds considerable strategic importance. This region has maintained special significance for France throughout both the colonial period and beyond. The region's nature and strategic value to France can be understood through the following factors:

The African Sahel and Colonial Legacy

The African Sahel region⁽¹⁾ derives its name from the coastal strip bordering the Sahara Desert, positioned between North African countries and the equator. This strip functions as a geographical divide separating North Africa from sub-Saharan Africa. The Sahel's geographical boundaries remain contested among researchers, with varying definitions depending on disciplinary perspectives.

Geographers, anthropologists and sociologists employ different criteria in defining the region. If climate-based classifications predominate, large portions of Algeria, Libya and Egypt fall within the Sahel designation. Conversely, if ethnic and racial distribution frameworks guide analysis, the region extends to include areas from sub-Saharan countries such as Nigeria, Guinea and Senegal. This definitional ambiguity reflects the region's transitional character and the analytical complexity of studying the Sahel's diverse geographical, climatic and demographic characteristics.

However, geopolitical consensus identifies the Sahel region's core countries as the five nations that established the G5 Sahel group in 2014: Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso.⁽²⁾ This study focuses on four of these countries, excluding Mauritania, as the decline of French influence is not directly linked to Mauritania's trajectory as it is with the other countries examined.

The region is rich in natural resources including gold, phosphate, oil, uranium and rare minerals. However, the Sahel has endured decades of chronic political, social, economic and security crises. These crises stem from structural factors rooted in post-independence state formation. Sahel countries, like other African nations, confront fundamental challenges regarding borders drawn by France and colonial powers according to strategic interests, disregarding social dimensions. This legacy has generated persistent conflicts between states and ethnic groups distributed across multiple territories, complicating relationships with central authorities. Additionally, disputes over land and water rights, particularly along border regions, have fueled intertribal and interethnic tensions. These overlapping conflicts reflect the region's complex demographic composition and the institutional fragility inherited from the colonial period, which continues to undermine state capacity and regional stability.⁽³⁾

These conflicts undermined political stability, compounded by governments' inability to formulate development policies prioritizing state-building, civil coexistence, national integration and crisis management addressing desertification, famine and population stabilization. Harsh climatic conditions and recurring droughts intensified the crisis, creating geographical population imbalances linked to ethnic affiliations and regional identities, which generated identity crises within these states.

Development policies were formulated according to political elites' affiliations, establishing preferential and unequal regional arrangements. Elites favored their ethnic groups over others, as exemplified in northern and southern Mali and across Africa generally. This deepened social and political tensions, driving migration toward major cities where populations sought improved living conditions. In the absence of equitable social policies and robust industrial-economic structures capable of absorbing labor, these cities became centers of acute social disparities and sectarian, tribal and ethnic divisions, intensifying existing tensions and creating new vulnerabilities within the urban social fabric.

The structural weakness of the state bureaucratic apparatus in the Sahel region impeded the achievement of distributive justice among different societal segments. Statistics reveal that 80% of Chad's population lives on less than a dollar daily, while 60% of Mali's and Niger's populations live below the poverty line.⁽⁴⁾ This endemic poverty eroded local communities' confidence in political authorities, many of which assumed power through military coups. Concurrent environmental threats — desertification, drought, widespread poverty and high illiteracy rates — compounded institutional fragility.⁽⁵⁾

This situation spawned numerous security risks through the proliferation of terrorist groups and separatist movements fueling organized crime, particularly drug trafficking originating from South America. Narcotics transited through West African ports before reaching Europe, establishing the Sahel as a critical trafficking corridor. The region simultaneously became a conduit for illegal immigration toward Europe via North African countries. Consequently, the Sahel emerged as a primary security concern for European and North African governments, perceived as a source of regional instability and transnational threats.⁽⁶⁾

Subordination-driven French Clout

France categorized African countries into four distinct groups based on economic utility and strategic value. The first group comprises resource-rich nations, including Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon and Cameroon, which are valuable for their natural and energy resources. The second group encompasses countries with vital geostrategic locations but limited wealth, possessing resources such as gold and uranium, with Niger as a primary example. The third group includes resource-poor nations geographically distant from France, such as Benin and Madagascar. The fourth group comprises African countries within the spheres of competing international powers, including the UK and Spain.⁽⁷⁾

According to this classification, Sahel countries ranked among France's African priorities, as the Sahel region and North Africa constituted France's vital sphere of influence. Following the colonial period, Paris maintained regional control through economic agreements and military cooperation treaties established with Sahel countries during the independence phase.⁽⁸⁾

France institutionalized the French language and culture as mechanisms ensuring elite loyalty to Paris. French language and culture functioned as the primary instruments guaranteeing the allegiance of Sahel elites. This cultural connection facilitated economic and military agreements, which consistently took precedence in policy implementation. France managed local administrative structures and governance through these cultural-institutional frameworks. Consequently, Sahel countries reliably supported France within the Francophone League and voted alongside France in UN forums. This cultural-linguistic infrastructure created institutional dependencies subordinating Sahel state interests to French strategic objectives, establishing enduring asymmetries in postcolonial Fran-

co-Sahel relations and embedding French influence within governmental, educational and diplomatic structures throughout the region.⁽⁹⁾

France leveraged language and culture to penetrate post-independence political systems, maintaining regional influence. Post-independence elites safeguarded French interests and influence, yet periodic political and military leaders challenged this imposed relationship. These leaders recognized that interdependence⁽¹⁰⁾ based on formal agreements disproportionately benefited France at the expense of African interests. Tensions and disagreements periodically surfaced regarding Franco-African arrangements, though such conflicts typically resolved quickly through negotiation. This pattern reflected the enduring structural imbalances in Franco-Sahel relations, in which French institutional and cultural dominance constrained Sahel governments' strategic autonomy. While resistance movements emerged sporadically, they remained contained within existing frameworks of dependency, preventing the fundamental restructuring of Franco-African relationships until military coups fundamentally altered the regional balance of power and elite calculations regarding French engagement. France's hegemonic relationship with Sahel ruling elites generated tensions between populations and political systems. Citizens blamed the prioritization of French interests over national interests for persistent social problems. Elites dependent on external legitimacy lacked internal legitimacy, constraining their capacity to respond to popular demands contradicting French interests. During periods of unrest and protest, governments employed violence against populations while relying on French diplomatic protection in international forums.

Military Coups and Declining French Clout

Military cooperation between Sahel countries and France declined precipitously, marking a transition toward estrangement. France maintained 10 military bases regionally before military leaders ordered French force withdrawals from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The French military presence faces complete erasure upon the withdrawal of the remaining French personnel from Chad, who had participated in Operation Barkhane, designed to counter Sahel regional insurgencies. This military disengagement produces significant repercussions and strategic challenges for France that merit examination across multiple dimensions.

The Deterioration of Economic Relations With the Sahel Nations

Following Captain Assimi Goïta's military coup in Mali on August 18, 2020, Franco-Malian trade entered a period of decline. According to French Customs Directorate statistics, bilateral trade decreased 6.7% compared to 2023, totaling 340 million euros. French exports to Mali followed a gradual descending trajectory, declining to 327 million euros. Mali's imports from France decreased by 23%, declining from 20 million euros in 2023 to 12.4 million euros in 2024. French Ministry of Finance estimates indicate that Mali's imports of French

goods and equipment contracted significantly in 2024. Agricultural material imports declined by 17%, while mechanical and electrical equipment imports decreased by 9%.⁽¹¹⁾

France's imports from Mali declined by 39%, with natural resources accounting for the bulk of the decline. Gold imports fell 65%, declining from 20 million euros in 2023 to 12.4 million euros in 2024. Agricultural and fishing product exports decreased approximately 18%. Development cooperation, traditionally structured through loans benefiting French companies, experienced a significant contraction. France suspended its development cooperation program with Mali due to diplomatic tensions with the military junta. Estimated development aid for 2021 totaled 40 million euros before suspension. France implemented this aid suspension as a retaliatory response to the Malian military leadership's decision to reduce bilateral trade and restrict Mali's imports of French goods and services to historically unprecedented low levels.⁽¹²⁾

Since its independence in 1958, Chad has experienced recurrent military coups and security crises, generating persistent political instability throughout successive governing periods. Clashes between the regular army and opposition movements — the Front for Change and Accord in Chad (FACT) and the Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic (CCMSR) — resulted in President Idriss Déby's death. Déby had assumed power in 1990 through a military coup with substantial French support. Following the May 2021 security events, Déby assumed the presidency, established a Military Council and announced an inclusive national dialogue with opposition forces. The ruling military elite subsequently terminated French military cooperation agreements following intensifying terrorist attacks and expanding regional instability.⁽¹³⁾

Bilateral trade between Chad and France declined significantly. Chad's imports of French goods decreased from 131 million euros in 2015 to 79 million euros in 2022. Conversely, French imports from Chad increased despite political turmoil and diplomatic tensions, rising from 40 million euros in 2015 to 397 million euros in 2022. Oil accounted for 95% of total French imports from Chad, supplemented by forest products, cotton and other minor commodities. This asymmetrical trade pattern — where France substantially increased resource extraction from Chad while Chad reduced French goods imports — reflects resource dependency dynamics. France's strategic interest in Chadian oil remained compelling despite deteriorating diplomatic relations, whereas Chad's reduced imports of French goods signaled deliberate economic reorientation.⁽¹⁴⁾

Niger's bilateral trade patterns mirror those of Mali and Chad. French exports to Niger have declined substantially in recent years. According to the French Ministry of Finance reports, French exports decreased from 127.2 million euros in 2019 to 78 million euros in 2023. Conversely, French imports from Niger increased from 51.3 million euros in 2019 to 170.6 million euros in 2023. Extracted mineral resources — uranium and gold — accounted for 98.4% of total French imports from Niger. This pronounced trade asymmetry reflects France's intensified re-

source extraction from Niger despite deteriorating diplomatic relations. Niger's reduced imports of French goods signaled deliberate economic diversification away from French commercial dependence, whereas France's continued prioritization of Nigerien uranium and gold acquisition demonstrates persistent resource extraction interests irrespective of political realignment.⁽¹⁵⁾

Franco-Nigerien cooperation agreements through the French Cooperation Agency (AFD) totaled 590 million euros, within public procurement frameworks benefiting French companies as direct investments. 46% of these funds were allocated to the Nigerien general budget subsidies. In 2023, financial aid disbursed as loans to French companies conducting economic operations in Niger reached 800 million euros, benefiting 60 French firms engaged in Niger. This development assistance structure functioned as a mechanism of French influence, enabling the French Ministry of Finance to influence Nigerien public policy formulation. These arrangements constituted direct intervention in Niger's sovereign affairs, leveraging financial dependence to shape governance outcomes.⁽¹⁶⁾

Following Niger's military coup and subsequent diplomatic tensions, Franco-Nigerien cooperation ceased and French companies suspended operations. The Military Council mandated that French company reentry be subject to individualized arbitration and scrutiny, signaling recognition of systemic political and financial corruption. This requirement prompted comprehensive investigations into financial allocations, project management procedures and fund disbursement methodologies. The military leadership utilized this investigative process to expose how development assistance had functioned as a vehicle for corruption benefiting French and Nigerien elites, thereby delegitimizing the entire Franco-Nigerien cooperation framework. Bilateral relations deteriorated substantially. The French embassy suspended operations in Niger. France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued travel warnings to its citizens and Western nationals, cautioning against traveling to Niger due to kidnapping risks.⁽¹⁷⁾

France's increased imports of Chadian oil and mineral resources reflect price renegotiations rather than an expansion in quantities. France continues importing from Sahel countries despite unprecedented diplomatic tensions due to forward-contracted oil sales agreements concluded for medium-term periods. Both parties maintain commercial engagement despite political deterioration: France requires energy resources amid global supply constraints, while Sahel countries preserve export revenues essential for economic functioning and political stability.

The decline in bilateral trade produces asymmetrical consequences for both actors. Chinese and Russian regional expansion has enabled Sahel countries to offset French withdrawal, reducing dependency pressures and diversifying external partnerships. This geopolitical vacuum-filling by alternative powers simultaneously strengthens Sahel negotiating positions and diminishes French regional leverage. Conversely, France confronts urgent strategic imperatives to

counteract withdrawal repercussions and stop influence erosion amid intensifying competition from rising powers.

Negative Repercussions for the French Home Front

France, already hit hard by the economic disruptions of the coronavirus pandemic, faced a further downturn in its key macroeconomic indicators. Just as it sought to recover from the global crisis, the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war intensified these difficulties. Pressured to join Western sanctions spearheaded by the European Union and the United States, France was subsequently cut off from Russian gas supplies. At the same time, a series of military coups in the Sahel forced France to withdraw its forces, weakening its diplomatic foothold in the region.

For several reasons, France's position on the Sahel coups and its plans for military intervention became key factors behind the deterioration of its relations with the region and the sharp drop in French exports there. This worsened France's domestic economic troubles, as lower exports forced a number of French companies to close and put their employees on technical unemployment. The resulting strain on the trade balance increased the country's debt burden, pushing the French government to seek alternative measures to restore economic and financial stability.

At the same time, France's dependence on energy imports has become more problematic as its influence in the Sahel wanes and Russian gas supplies remain cut off, adding to its domestic pressures. While France continues to import gas, uranium and other vital minerals from the Sahel, the military authorities there have revoked the preferential pricing previously granted to France and ordered the arrest of numerous French companies accused of financial misconduct. These developments have further deepened France's financial and political troubles.

In response to Russia's suspension of gas exports, France began importing shale gas from the United States but faced higher shipping costs than pipeline deliveries from Russia. The increased energy costs put additional strain on the national budget, leading to higher service prices and a growing domestic deficit. To offset these financial pressures, the French government raised the value-added tax on energy services from 0.55% to 20% starting in October 2025.⁽¹⁸⁾ Meanwhile, experts warn that France's public debt has now passed the three trillion euro mark and continues to rise by 5,000 euros every second, as stated by Prime Minister François Bayrou. Economically, this situation suggests a substantial risk of a major payments deficit unless urgent corrective actions are implemented.

France's public appears unwilling to accept reforms that would intensify hardship, instead blaming successive governments' mismanagement — a charge the political opposition has seized on as it threatens to unseat those in power, risking a fresh domestic crisis. On one side, the authorities face pressure to enact swift, far-reaching economic and social measures to curb soaring debt and avert potential insolvency; on the other, the public aligns with the opposition in resisting

any encroachment on core rights, raising the prospect of renewed unrest reminiscent of the Yellow Vests movement.⁽¹⁹⁾ Within governing circles, a prevailing view holds that decisions by Sahel military elites — and the erosion of France's leverage and interests there — are central to today's predicament, prompting a push to reopen channels with the region to help contain domestic strains, even as officials acknowledge the path will be fraught.

The Challenges Facing France in Reclaiming Clout in the Sahel Region

French influence in the Sahel now confronts overlapping hurdles tied to France's domestic strains, the region's volatile politics, rotating military-led leaderships and the assertive moves of competing powers. These dynamics intersect amid broader geopolitical rivalry and its spillover into sub-regions, turning the Sahel into a focal battleground for major players such as France, the United States, China and Russia, alongside regional actors like Türkiye.

France's Internal Political Crisis

Foreign policy, long treated in political science as an outgrowth of domestic politics, relates the primary obstacle to any French resurgence in the Sahel to France's own continuing internal turmoil. Strains on the state budget and mounting public debt have hampered the performance of successive governments, undermining political stability and weakening their capacity to confront surging living costs and eroding purchasing power. The recent legislative elections, which delivered a victory for the New Popular Front, did not yield a coalition or a shared program with other winning forces. Breaking with French political convention, President Emmanuel Macron formed a government drawn from outside the victorious parties; rather than bridging divides, this move consolidated the winners' cohesion, mobilizing a unified opposition to his allies in the National Assembly.⁽²⁰⁾

Political frictions in the National Assembly intensified after the president continued to sideline party stalwarts, appointing Michel Barnier to form a government in September 2024. Many of the chamber's leading parties treated the move as an unprecedented provocation, and fissures in domestic unity widened as inter-party disputes deepened inside the legislature. Opposition forces then mobilized public and political opinion around the gravity of the situation, casting it as a breach of democratic norms in France.

The Barnier cabinet proved short-lived, toppled in a historic no-confidence vote led by left-wing forces from France Unbowed and the New Popular Front,⁽²¹⁾ alongside the far-right National Rally—the first such ouster since 1962. Macron then tapped Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu to form a government, but his effort collapsed within days amid the same political gridlock. These upheavals unfolded against a backdrop of budgetary strain and attempted austerity, with fiscal pressures spilling into domestic politics and constraining foreign policy,

particularly in Africa where France's influence has waned in the face of intensifying competition in the Sahel and hostile public sentiment toward its presence.

Popular Rejection Within the Sahel Nations

Mounting public opposition to a military footprint in the Sahel has become a central obstacle to any French comeback, reflecting a broader backlash against French influence. Many now regard French bases as props for corrupt regimes and as vestiges of historical dominance, blaming France's presence for stalled development and worsening socioeconomic conditions. Protests in the capitals of Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso amplified this sentiment, pushing the ruling military councils to adopt the street's demands to safeguard their legitimacy and stability. As public and governmental views converged, leaders began recalibrating their political courses and strategic partnerships, accelerating a new phase of regional competition with both local and international dimensions. The Alliance of Sahel States reflects leaders' heightened recognition of shared threats — from armed groups to the perceived weight of French influence — amid a turbulent post-uprising landscape marked by regime collapses in Libya and Sudan, widening security vacuums, rampant arms flows and outside interventions. This shift signals a new outlook among the region's ruling elites, who openly bristle at France's political, economic and security footprint and its legacies, recasting partnerships and priorities through a sovereignty-first lens. Against this backdrop, the rise of right-wing and far-right forces in France, with their anti-immigration rhetoric, reverberates across Sahel societies closely tied to France through migration and history, amplifying public hostility and complicating any French return. The result is a tightening alignment between Sahel street sentiment and state policy under the Alliance of Sahel States, accelerating new regional competition with both local and international dimensions that curb Paris' room for maneuver.

France's Rivals Entering the Region

Regional military and political elites in the Sahel have leveraged great-power rivalry to advance their own agendas, fully aware of France's urgency to regain influence and the fluid geopolitical terrain. Rather than relying on Paris, they have diversified ties toward China, Russia and Türkiye — actors that present fewer political conditions and emphasize sovereignty, making their offers more attractive to juntas and new elites.. What sets some of these powers (especially China and Türkiye) apart is their adoption of approaches fundamentally different from the French model. Both countries position themselves in the Sahel primarily through soft power, emphasizing economic cooperation, highly competitive access to African markets and the establishment of economic and commercial investments with African governments. They do so by offering long-term loans on attractive interest terms or by implementing mutually beneficial projects. This strategy has enabled them to secure major infrastructure contracts,

military procurement deals, and broader understandings, all while scrupulously respecting the national sovereignty of local governments and refraining from imposing political conditionality — in stark contrast to France.

The Sahel states have also pursued hard-power options as they diversify partnerships, responding to acute security threats by deepening military ties with Russia — first via the Wagner Group and later the Africa Corps — while securing equipment and arms to bolster their forces. These arrangements aim to support operations against terrorist factions, including the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad in Northern Mali (MNLA), as well as to counter incursions by armed groups active between southern Libya and northern Chad.

Russia, facing what it views as France's openly adversarial posture, has adopted a forward-leaning strategy that projects competition into Paris' traditional spheres of influence, aiming to disrupt French and broader Western interests wherever possible. In tandem with a broad alignment with China on international issues, Moscow has pushed deeper into the Sahel, cultivating economic and military ties with ruling elites and pursuing a course designed to constrict access to energy resources for France and its partners. Initiatives like the Russia-Africa summitry have underpinned this outreach, prompting regular visits by African leaders — including from the Sahel — to expand trade and defense cooperation.

French influence suffered a profound blow when the President of Chad demanded the departure of French forces from its territory, followed shortly thereafter by the complete severance of diplomatic relations with France. Meanwhile, Russian Wagner Group units have been deploying across the region with the explicit authorization of the military governments. The Chadian junta leader's decisions coincided with similar measures in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso.⁽²²⁾ These steps were taken against the backdrop of France's stance on the military coups: Paris called on ECOWAS to intervene militarily to restore civilian rule in Niger, categorically rejected the legitimacy of the Sahelian military coups and refused to recognize the resulting military councils. In response, the military leaders of these countries decided to withdraw from ECOWAS—an organization that had become plainly evident as operating under direct French influence.⁽²³⁾ They subsequently formed a new alliance named the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). These developments have severely weakened the French presence in the region and led to the closure of numerous channels of communication and cooperation.⁽²⁴⁾

France's once-dominant edge in Sahel infrastructure, defense sales and market access has eroded amid intensifying competition from Russia and China, squeezing commercial opportunities and, by extension, narrowing France's diplomatic reach. This shift aligns with a broader realignment in which Sahel governments pivot toward alternative partners and financing, accelerating Paris' military drawdown and diminishing its leverage in regional forums.

Seen through a wider geopolitical lens, developments in the Sahel mirror global power contests that increasingly shape France's foreign policy choices, with resource access, security provision and supply routes becoming levers in a multi-

polar struggle. As Russia and China entrench via security assistance, mining and infrastructure deals and political outreach, they redraw competitive boundaries in ways likely to influence the contours of an emerging international order.

France and Russia have taken sharply divergent positions on numerous issues. Whereas France has moved decisively to provide material and diplomatic support to the United States and the Ukrainian president, aligning itself closely with Washington – particularly in imposing sanctions on Russian interests and citizens – Paris has done so in the expectation of reciprocal backing. Specifically, France has sought support within the European Union for measures designed to constrain its adversaries in Africa, beginning with a market that remains vital for French goods and a strategic supplier of natural gas. At the same time, France has hoped to secure US assistance in tightening the screws on the Sahel states, with the explicit aim of curbing the expanding presence and influence of China, Russia and Türkiye in the region.

France's Strategies to Reclaim Clout in the Sahel

France, seeking to reclaim waning influence over African markets and resources following the political and economic fallout across the Sahel region, is pursuing a dual-track strategy. Internationally, it is aligning with Washington in backing Ukraine against Russia, pushing commercial pressure on China and joining efforts to weaken the tacit Russia-China alignment that challenges its position in the Sahel. Regionally, Paris is working to consolidate EU unity against Russia while drawing remaining European states closer to NATO, aiming to tighten geographical and security constraints on Moscow.

The Strategy of Interdependence and Joint Interests With the United States

At the international level, France persists in urging European Union member states to extend both diplomatic and military support to Ukraine in its confrontation with Russia, notwithstanding Paris's clear recognition that—given Ukraine's limited military capabilities—Kyiv stands little realistic chance of defeating the Russian armed forces or even regaining the territories Moscow has occupied, including the Donbas region, Donetsk, Kherson and other provinces and cities now under firm Russian control. The French stance on the Russia-Ukraine war thus remains closely aligned with the official US policy, the central objective of which is the sustained strategic weakening of Russia.

France's close alignment with the US position can be theoretically understood as following the US' strategic vision, which remains deeply inspired by Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory.⁽²⁵⁾ Through NATO, Washington seeks to bring the remaining European states into an expanding orbit that ultimately feeds into the EU—a bloc effectively co-directed by Germany and France, which together define its broad policy lines. From the other side, sustained pressure is applied to ensure that existing EU member states adhere to a unified Euro-Atlantic line. In essence, this means a deliberate eastward enlargement of Europe aimed at incor-

porating Eastern European countries, particularly those along Russia's borders, under the banner of the liberal-capitalist model of freedom and rights.

The Strategy of Applying Pressure via the EU

France is pressing for tighter EU sanctions on Russia — freezing state and oligarch assets and closing financial and energy loopholes — in order to weaken Moscow's capabilities in Europe and globally, while also constraining China's momentum by undercutting a key partner and supply chain link. By backing measures on energy, finance and shipping, Paris calculates a knock-on effect that blunts Russian and Chinese economic and diplomatic reach in Africa, including the Sahel.

Accepting that a rapid restoration of its Sahel sway is unlikely, Paris is shifting the pressure theater to Eastern Europe, where alignment with Washington over Ukraine serves a broader aim of straining the Russia-China axis that underpins Sahel juntas' new partnerships. The expectation is that sustained transatlantic pressure on Moscow — and, indirectly, on Beijing — will heighten internal and external pressures on Sahel military regimes, erode their patronage networks and eventually reopen space for French influence.

France's alignment with Washington on Russia and China dovetails with EU sanctions that freeze Russian state and oligarch assets and tighten energy and finance channels, even as this shift has driven Europe — and France — toward costlier US LNG to replace lost pipeline gas. The result bolsters US interests in the medium term, with record US LNG exports to Europe and elevated import costs for EU buyers, while France's strategic flexibility narrows amid tariff frictions and trade-war risks.

The protracted conflict in Europe has granted the United States additional strategic latitude in its confrontation with China, enabling it to advance its interests under all available circumstances. Chief among these has been the ability to export shale gas to Europe—and to France in particular—at record prices. The same dynamic does not apply to France, whose electricity generation relies predominantly on nuclear power. Although France has experienced fluctuations in uranium supplies, its procurement from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan has remained uninterrupted. Nevertheless, a significant portion of its uranium continues to come—on highly favorable terms—from mines operated by the French company Orano in northern Chad, near the Malian border. These operations now face mounting difficulties, as the prospect of their suspension has emerged following the decision by Chad's Transitional Military Council President, Mahamat Idriss Déby, to review and recalibrate the export prices of uranium destined for France in full alignment with his country's national interests.

Conclusion

France's desperate efforts to recover its influence in the African Sahel are encountering formidable and deeply intertwined internal and external obstacles,

which have collectively led to a marked erosion of its presence and sway in the region. The rapid succession of military coups that swept through the region in a short timeframe serves as yet another indicator of the French decision-making elite's profound misreading of the broader shifts occurring across Africa. Chief among these shifts has been the rising collective awareness among the region's populations, who have grown increasingly conscious of the harm inflicted by French military and political engagement, as well as by Paris's longstanding relationships with traditional ruling elites. The grave consequences of these dynamics have transformed the Sahel into an arena of conflict for diverse armed groups, further accelerating the decline of French influence.

Internationally, Paris has knitted its stance to US priorities — on Ukraine and toward China — seeking reciprocal backing on sanctions and legal pressure against Sahel military leaders, but the alignment has carried economic and diplomatic costs and narrowed strategic room for maneuver. France's choices against the coup pathway and its association with traditional elites undercut its local standing while contributing to turbulence at home — where repeated government crises and fractious parliamentary politics signal deeper strain in the state's decision-making core.

On another level, France has effectively adhered its own interests to the vagaries of international politics, reducing its role on the global stage to that of a functional ally of the United States, particularly in matters concerning Washington's rivalries with Russia and China. Its unwavering alignment in the Russia-Ukraine war has carried significant economic and diplomatic costs for France itself. The underlying rationale for this French approach lies in a tacit *quid pro quo*: Paris stands firmly with Ukraine against Russia in exchange for US backing in imposing economic and judicial sanctions on the military leaders of the African Sahel states.

France's strategic choices in confronting the wave of coups in Africa proved ill-fated, particularly its decision to stand resolutely by the traditional elites. These elites, despite commanding abundant resources and potential, had consistently failed to deliver adequate development to their people. Far from stabilizing the situation, Paris's posture triggered domestic repercussions that profoundly unsettled the French political landscape and strained its internal front. Since foreign policy is ultimately a reflection of domestic realities, the current state of France's home front (marked by the rapid succession of governments in a short period, coupled with sharp ideological clashes among parties within the National Assembly) points unmistakably to a deep political crisis at the very apex of the French power structure.

The intensifying international and regional competition in the Sahel, together with its direct repercussions on the French economy, has significantly aggravated France's domestic political crisis. French diplomacy has proven incapable of countering these mounting challenges; on the contrary, its interests have been seriously damaged and its influence steadily eroded. In the current context,

France appears unable to fundamentally alter its policy toward the region's military elites, as any such reversal would amount to a public admission of strategic retreat on multiple fronts — a retreat that has, in fact, already begun with several African states demanding the suspension of military cooperation with Paris. This leaves France facing a high-stakes dilemma with only two viable, albeit highly risky, paths: The first consists of leveraging European and especially US aid packages as political leverage to pressure Sahel military governments into reversing their decisions; or attempting to re-infiltrate the region by covertly supporting insurgencies against the current juntas and installing new leaders more compliant with French interests — a course that both Russia and China (each seeking alternative markets and resource shares, the latter at least under a formally win-win economic logic) would resolutely block. The second, more overtly militarized and intelligence-driven option would involve backing counter-coups to overthrow the existing military elites. Any such intervention, however, would encounter fierce opposition from local populations already deeply resentful of French military presence and political influence.

Endnotes

- (1) The name “Sahel” in Africa is not tied to a seacoast, as common usage might suggest, so much as to the “shore” of the Great Sahara in its northern expanse — that is, to its boundary and the end of its reach. This description may also imply that the area was once a sea in the distant past, especially given the scattered remains of aquatic creatures’ skeletons across the region’s vast deserts. Associated with this geographical designation are cultures, ethnicities and even languages — such as Swahili — which took its name from the term for “coast.” Notably, this label does not appear among Arab historians and travelers or other African inhabitants; most manuscripts refer instead to “Bilād al-Sūdān” (the Lands of the Blacks) and “Bilād al-Mūr,” from which “Mor-italia” arose to denote North Africa before the name came to apply to the modern state of Mauritania, for example. It appears that the term “Sahel countries” emerged with the Western colonization of the region. For more details, see: JeanLoup Amselle, “D’où Vient le Terme ‘Sahel,’” *Afrique XXI*, (February 26, 2025), accessed March 12, 2025.
- (2) Jean-Marc Chataignier, “Sahel et France, Enjeux d’une Relation Particulière” (The Sahel and France: Stakes in a Special Relationship), *Hérodote*, no. 172 (1st quarter 2019): 123. [French]
- (3) The complexities of this issue prompted the Organization of African Unity in 1964 to unanimously adopt a resolution recognizing the borders inherited from the colonial era, in order to avoid conflicts over redrawing boundaries. Nevertheless, problems persisted related to disparities in development among different regions within a single state, whether due to tribal affiliations, the weakness of the bureaucratic apparatus that took over governance after independence or limited resources. This produced a sense of lacking national belonging among certain population groups — what is known as a crisis of national integration — as occurred with the Tuareg in northern Mali after independence. For more details, see: Chataignier, “Sahel et France,” 128.
- (4) Mouloud Amoura, “French Intervention in the Sahel: A Study of Dimensions and Strategies,” *Journal of Legal and Political Sciences* 12, no. (September 2021): 834. [Arabic].
- (5) Bouyebia Nabil, “French Intervention in Mali and the Future Scenarios of the Tuareg Crisis: Between Securitization and Afghanization,” *Journal of African and Nile Basin Studies, Arab Democratic Center* 1, no. 1 (March 2018): 148, <https://www.democraticac.de/?p=52985>. [Arabic].
- (6) “The End of Paris’s Lights: Why Did the Sahel Countries Decide to Expel France?” *Al Jazeera*, October 1, 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/v74AF>. [Arabic].
- (7) Mouloud Amoura, “French Intervention in the Sahel: A Study of Dimensions and Strategies,” *Journal of Legal and Political Sciences* 1, no. 2 (September 2021): 839, <https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/166967>. [Arabic].
- (8) Chataignier, 128.
- (9) Although some thinkers view the legacy of language and culture as a kind of war booty, the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF) is undoubtedly one of the instruments that entrenches the dependency of African states and elites on France. It counts 93 member governments and states across Africa, the Atlantic and Asia; French speakers number over 321 million; French is the fourth most-used language on the internet; and nearly 144 million people worldwide either study the language or are educated using French.
- (10) One early form of resisting French influence was the adoption of the socialist model by several countries, but implementing this model also carried contradictions and complexities at various levels. In addition to natural conditions and the legacies of colonialism — such as high rates of underdevelopment, the spread of disease and the absence of infrastructure — there was a shortage of national cadres needed to run the state and confront complex crises.
- (11) “Mali,” *Direction générale du Trésor, Ministère de l’Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique*, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Pays/ML>. [French].
- (12) “Direction de la Diplomatie Économique, Mali,” *economie.gouv.fr*, April 2024, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/23jzokfk>. [French].
- (13) Mariam Ali Abdelhay Farag, “The Future of France’s Role in Africa,” *Global Views*, no. 40 (August 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/2c77rgyh>. [Arabic].
- (14) “Direction Générale du Trésor, TCHAD,” *economie.gouv.fr*, August 4, 2023, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/28b89dvx>. [French].
- (15) “Direction de la Diplomatie Économique, Niger,” *economie.gouv.fr*, April 2024, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/26aa7dsd>. [French].
- (16) “Direction Générale du Trésor, Niger,” *economie.gouv.fr*, August 1, 2025, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2xt6p93f>. [French].
- (17) “Ministère de l’Economie et des Finances, Niger,” *France Diplomatie*, September 16, 2025, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/295n3fn9>. [French].
- (18) In the same vein, France’s imports of Algerian gas have contracted sharply after Italy secured the largest share of Algeria’s gas exports — this followed a turn in French diplomacy toward escalation with Algeria under right-wing pressure in France and against the backdrop of France’s recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, which Algeria views as a provocation. Algeria responded by reducing its imports of French wheat, fruit and various equipment. Algeria imports between 2 million and 6 million tons of French wheat each year, making it one of France’s biggest customers; however, imported quantities have fallen markedly in recent years, to about 1.8 million tons in the 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 seasons and then to 1.6 million tons in the 2023–2024 season. For more details, see: “Algérie, Les Importations Françaises en Chute Libre” (Algeria: French Imports in Free Fall), *Echorouk Online*, February 12, 2025, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/23ndx5ml>. [French].

- (19) The Yellow Vest movement was a manifestation of popular protests that France experienced in November 2018 over a bill put forward by the French president to raise the age and years of work required to qualify for a pension, which angered broad segments of French society and drove them into weeks of large-scale demonstrations wearing yellow vests like those used by workshop and factory workers. This compelled the government to resort to forms of physical force, violence, arrests and legal prosecutions after clashes with police intensified in Paris and other major French cities, resulting in injuries on both sides. For more details, see: Alain Joxe, "Les Gilets Jaunes, un Mouvement Social Inédit" (The Yellow Vests, an Unprecedented Social Movement), *Hérodote*, no. 117 (April 2019), accessed September 10, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/28ph3oet>. [French].
- Ludivine Bantigny et al., "Les Gilets jaunes une histoire de classe?" *Mouvements*, no. 100 (April 2019): 12–23, <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-mouvements-2019-4?lang=fr>. [Arabic].
- (20) Al-Mahdi al-Zaydaoui, "Has France Ended the Macron Era?" *Al Jazeera*, September 10, 2025, accessed October 2, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/NJGWY>. [Arabic].
- (21) Xavier Le Roux, "La chute du gouvernement Michel Barnier" (The Fall of the Michel Barnier Government), *La Nouvelle République*, December 5, 2024, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/24vcwscw>. [French].
- (22) "The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)," *Al Jazeera.net*, January 29, 2024, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/t6Rhq>. [Arabic].
- (23) "France Backs ECOWAS Intervention as the Deadline Nears and the Military in Niamey Threaten Without Budgeting," *Euronews*, August 6, 2024, accessed September 29, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/Cobw5>. [Arabic].
- (24) Osama al-Saeed, "ECOWAS Bleeding: A New Blow to France's Influence in West Africa," *Asharq Al Awsat*, February 2, 2024, accessed September 30, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/MrOK9>. [Arabic].
- (25) Giuseppe Gagliano, "GÉOPOLITIQUE – Les origines de la Pensée Géopolitique et la Contribution de Mackinder" (Geopolitics: The Origins of Geopolitical Thought and Mackinder's Contribution), *Le Diplomate Media*, February 5, 2025, <https://lediplomate.media/2025/02/origines-pensee-geopolitique-mackinder/giuseppe-gagliano/monde/europe/>. [French].