

# Intricacies of French engagement in Sahel with peace prospects: assessing the policy shifts and its implications

## Складнощі французької участі в Сахелі з перспективами миру: оцінка політичних змін та їх наслідків

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**Purpose:** This paper draws arguments from two important theories of international relations and recognizes their significance in the context of the topic of study. However, the utilization of these theories does not imply agreement with all tenets of the mentioned theories. Moreover, the explanation provided here is an incomplete description of the theories and is only meant for the conceptual ease and clarification of the reader.

**Method:** a historical analysis, statistical analysis, conceptual evaluation.

**Findings:** Recommendations are offered that focus on action and policy-oriented ways to ensure inclusive peace processes in the region. These recommendations address grassroots issues in international violent conflict situations and pave the way for constructive external action with limited direct engagement.

**Paper type:** theoretical.

**Мета роботи:** У цій статті наводяться аргументи з двох важливих теорій міжнародних відносин і визнається їхнє значення в контексті теми дослідження. Однак використання цих теорій не означає згоди з усіма положеннями згаданих теорій. Крім того, надане тут пояснення є неповним описом теорій і призначене лише для концептуальної легкості та роз'яснення читача.

**Метод:** історичний аналіз, статистичний аналіз, концептуальна оцінка.

**Результати дослідження:** Запропоновано рекомендації, які зосереджені на діях і орієнтованих на політику забезпечення інклюзивних мирних процесів у регіоні. Ці рекомендації стосуються низових проблем у ситуаціях міжнародних насильницьких конфліктів і прокладають шлях для конструктивних зовнішніх дій з обмеженим прямим залученням.

**Тип статті:** теоретичний.

**Key words:** France, Sahel, peace, security, policy, West Africa.

**Ключові слова:** Франція, Сахель, мир, безпека, політика, Західна Африка.

### Introduction

The Sahel, a vast and ecologically fragile region that stretches across the North-Central belt of Africa has emerged as a crucible of complex security challenges in the 21st century. Weak governance, porous borders, and failed attempts at disarming combatants have created a haven for extremist violent organizations. Fueled by poverty, lack of employment opportunity, and competition for access to resources on account of climate change, organized crime flourishes, undermining stability and creating an abyss of humanitarian crisis. Following the independence of West African Françafrique (which constitutes a large part of the Sahel), the challenges facing the region gained global attention as issues of newly sovereign states. UN reports on Human Development revealed patterns and trends across the Sahel, shedding light on root problems and key actors. Consequently, the presence of France in the region became increasingly apparent, underscoring its influence amidst these challenges through attempts at building peace and maintaining stability.

Once viewed as a sphere of significant French influence, the region is currently witnessing a dynamic recalibration in the Franco-Sahelian relations. The tumultuous realities are also byproducts of inefficient peace processes being led by multiple actors. This paper delves into the intricacies of this evolving landscape particularly France's engagement in the Sahel and the implications for lasting peace prospects. The perceived decline in French influence in West Africa underscores the shifting tides in this complex relationship. From the Cold War era with heavy dependencies and

more focus on unilateral action in the previously so-called "French Backyard" to President Emmanuel Macron's aspirations in revitalizing France's role in the Sahel, the relationship has witnessed significant changes and challenges. The prominence of French military deployments has cast a long shadow on broader diplomatic efforts. A more multilateral approach post Operation Barkhane has led to French joint efforts with international and regional bodies for activity in the Sahel. As for Sahel the move away from French influence and increased emphasis on sovereignty, policy Shifts are vivid. Furthermore, France's dealings with autocratic regimes within the region have yielded inconsistent results, raising questions about the efficacy of such partnerships. Decades of armed violence and entrenched socio-political flux have left the Sahel in a precarious position. Security conditions continue to deteriorate, with hotspots of unrest multiplying across the region. This pervasive insecurity has served as a potent magnet for the mobilization of destabilizing actors. While external support has been a mainstay in addressing these challenges, the outcomes have largely fallen short of expectations.

A critical evaluation of the peacebuilding, and humanitarian interventions in the Sahel is thus paramount. This necessitates a thorough examination of the rationale behind foreign involvement and the subsequent decisions regarding their exit. Efforts aimed at fostering democratic governance, bolstering development, and cultivating prosperous economies have yielded meagre results, often hampered by a lack of coherent and strategic vision. The inability to address these shortcomings has not only eluded regional discourse but has also inadvertently contributed to the recent rise in coups across the Sahel. Moving forward, a paradigm shift is imperative. A renewed focus on collaborative efforts that empower local actors and civil societies is crucial for achieving sustainable peace.

This research paper digs into the multifaceted relationship between France and the Sahel. It embarks on a historical exploration, tracing the colonial legacies that continue to impact contemporary realities. By deconstructing the complex conflict dynamics within the region, the paper sheds light on the root causes that fuel humanitarian crises and exacerbate tensions between displaced populations and host communities. Furthermore, the study meticulously analyses France's evolving role in the Sahel evaluating the collaborative efforts undertaken by France and Sahelian states to address the pressing security issues and promote sustainable development. Ultimately, the paper seeks to identify pathways for emboldening local actors and civil societies, fostering a sense of ownership over the peacebuilding process. This research is not merely an academic exercise; it is an endeavor to illuminate the pertinent present-day events unfolding in the Sahel through the prism of peace, security, and policy. It aims to serve as a catalyst for more effective and regionally led solutions that prioritize lasting peace and progress. Finally, the paper concludes by offering a forward-looking perspective, traversing what the year 2024 might hold for the Sahel along with policy and actionable recommendations in carrying out the peace processes, highlighting role of coherent local, national, regional, and international strategies, charting a course towards a more peaceful and prosperous future for the region.

**Literature review.** This paper draws arguments from two important theories of international relations and recognizes their significance in the context of the topic of study. However, the utilization of these theories does not imply agreement with all tenets of the mentioned theories. Moreover, the explanation provided here is an incomplete description of the theories and is only meant for the conceptual ease and clarification of the reader.

**Neocolonialism:** Kwame Nkrumah's usage of the term "neocolonialism" highlighted imperialism's evolving nature and continued exploitation of newly independent states in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Neocolonialism is the indirect control over and exploitation of less developed countries by former colonial powers or nations after independence (post WW II), with the purpose of maintaining economic, social, and cultural dominance. It achieves economic supremacy by favorable trade terms, foreign investment, and control over critical sectors such as banking and

resources, as well as political influence through puppet governments supporting external interests and cultural imposition of Western values through media and education. Neocolonialism stifles growth, encourages dependency, and exacerbates global imbalances. Scholars and activists have been debating and proposing measures to confront and dismantle neocolonial practices, including economic self-reliance, cultural revival, and regional cooperation to counter external intervention and promote indigenous knowledge systems. In this paper, you will be able to observe traces of neocolonialism in Sahel and the region's subsequent attempt to move away from such linkages. Under global public scrutiny it is also apparent how the colonial powers endeavor to mend ways through policy shifts.

**Liberal Peace theory:** Liberal peace theory is the prevailing approach taken by international organizations and liberal great power states engaged in peacebuilding initiatives. It is a framework that promotes peace and stability, particularly in conflict-affected areas. The core notion is that promoting liberal principles like democracy, the rule of law, and a market economy leads to long-term peace. The argument behind this is that when citizens have a say in governance (democracy) and fair rules apply to everybody (rule of law), they are less inclined to resort to violence. Furthermore, open markets increase wealth by reducing competition for resources, which otherwise causes conflict. Democratic peace theory, a crucial component of liberal peace, holds that democracies are less likely to go to war with one another. It discusses the theoretical basis, empirical evidence, and arguments surrounding this idea. Lederach's work focuses on practical peacebuilding approaches, emphasizing dialogue, reconciliation, and empowerment of local communities. It explains how liberal peace concepts might be implemented in conflict resolution processes. Mark Duffield's critical work questions traditional notions of liberal peace and investigates how Western interventions in conflict zones might perpetuate violence and insecurity while seemingly advancing peace and democracy. Some claim that it is a form of Western interference, imposing their ideals on other civilizations. Critics also wonder if this "one size fits all" approach effectively addresses the underlying reasons of conflict in various contexts.

### **Data and methods**

The research methodology in this paper is a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data includes a historical analysis of France's involvement in the Sahel, examining its colonial legacies and evolving contemporary engagements. This analysis is based on a review of existing literature and policy documents generated from both primary and secondary sources. The quantitative data includes the use of statistical analysis to assess the effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives and external interventions in the region. The study also incorporates graphical representations of conflict-related data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Thus, the research methodology in this paper involves a historical and critical analysis of France's involvement in the Sahel, a statistical assessment of peacebuilding initiatives and external interventions, and a conceptual evaluation of peacebuilding approaches.

### **FRANCE IN SAHEL AND THE ORIGINS OF THE ANTI-FRENCH SENTIMENTS**

In recent years, global conflicts have surged dramatically, with a 12% increase observed in 2023 compared to the previous year according to data from ACLED. It also indicates a staggering 40% rise in conflict compared to 2020, affecting one-sixth of the world's population. Particularly, the Sahel region has witnessed violent conflicts, leading to the emergence of the neologism 'coup belt' to describe the span of coup d'états across the breadth of Africa. The rise of military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has coincided with a growing anti-French sentiment in the region.

France's historical ties with its former colonies, dating back to the early 17th century, have shaped its influence in Africa. These connections, rooted in economic interests and strategic positioning,

have persisted through formal colonial rule to post-independence neo-colonial policies. Despite region's struggle for autonomy and independence, France has maintained its hold through military engagements and cooperation agreements leading to growing disillusionment with France's role in providing security and stability, and to rise in the question suggesting France's role in creation of the 'Coup Belt'. French involvement in Africa, documented in agreements such as those outlined by Maurice Ligot, has focused on retaining control over strategic areas, including economic, monetary, and defense policies. As conflicts intensify and popular discontent against French presence grows, the efficacy of France's approach to security in the region becomes increasingly questioned.

Trade between the colonies and Paris became decisive, as the colonies were required to import costly goods from France and export their own products to France at reduced prices. This unequal economic relationship led to significant trade imbalances resulting in interdependence that benefited Paris. Export of essential products to France, included gold from Mauritania, oil and natural gas from Algeria and Libya, and uranium from Niger, among other tropical and agricultural commodities. Additionally, French companies held dominant positions in key sectors and played a significant role in establishing crucial infrastructure such as ports, railways, aviation, telecommunications, and freight services, further solidifying French control over the region's finances. The Franc Zone, established in 1939, extended French influence in its colonies through a monetary system centered around the CFA Franc (Communauté Financière Africaine). The CFA Franc historically maintained fixed exchange rates with the Euro, safeguarding stability guaranteed by the Banque de France. According to the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debts (CADTM) data until 2019, African nations were required to hold half of their currency reserves in Paris, totaling approximately \$500 billion (fluctuating) with the remaining 20% as liabilities, consequently, they only had access to 30% of their own funds at any given time. During times of need, instead of accessing their reserves, African nations often received a line of credit from France at fixed interest rates using these reserves. In 1994, France devalued the CFA Franc by 50% to protect the Euro and maintain its credit ratings. This devaluation, coupled with a scandal involving the oil firm Elf in 1994 had adverse effects on the economies of the African CFA countries. The CFA Franc became emblematic of French influence, sparking ongoing discussions about its reform and abolition, reflecting broader conversations about economic sovereignty and post-colonial relationships.

- ***Polito-Economic factors***

In 2019, Luigi de Maio, Italy's Deputy Prime Minister, made a statement attributing France's role to the impoverishment of Africa and subsequently the refugee crisis in Europe. This forced the French government to reevaluate the CFA program. Alassane Ouattara, the President of Cote d'Ivoire, readily accepted the new 'Eco' plan considering upcoming election dates domestically. Since 1983, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has discussed the idea of a single currency. Initially proposed in 2003, inspired by the success of the Euro, the "Eco" was planned for launch in 2005. However, disagreements among member states and challenges in meeting economic convergence criteria have repeatedly delayed its introduction. In 2019, ECOWAS agreed on convergence criteria for a new "Eco" currency but, the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), also announced plans to adopt the name "Eco" for their reformed currency. This sparked tension between Anglophone and Francophone countries within ECOWAS. Concerns include the potential influence of France on the West African economy if the UEMOA's Eco remains tied to the Euro and the French central bank continue to play a significant role. On the other hand, some countries prioritize stability offered by the Euro due to strong trade ties with Europe. Previous launch dates for the Eco were missed due to various challenges and the current target date is set for 2027.

According to Siradağ (2014), approximately 240,000 French nationals lived in Africa, with around 6,000 residing in Bamako at any given time. Furthermore, France receives significant support

in the UNSC from its African supporters, enhancing its influence on the global stage. For example, the African and Malagasy Union (AMU) was founded in 1961 to strengthen political and economic collaboration between France and its former African colonial territories, later disbanded in 1985. Similarly, France established the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF) in 1970 for the same purpose. However, categorizing French involvement as solely neo-colonial may oversimplify the situation and fail to capture the complete dynamics of the relationship. With the anti-French sentiment on the rise, this African support to France has become conditional at best.

- **Premium over natural resources**

West African countries heavily rely on exporting raw materials, lacking diversified economies with value-added sectors. Previous agreements with France gave French firms priority access to the region's mineral resources, allowing Paris to control their sale in international markets. This dependence on raw material exports has led to consistently low GDPs for CFA states, undermining their economic autonomy and political sovereignty.

French military interventions in the region aimed to protect neighboring states from destabilizing influences, such as those from Mali and Libya, which in turn safeguarded French interests. For example, Niger, a significant source of uranium for France, is strategically important. French companies like Areva and EDF operate 56 nuclear reactors across France according to the World Nuclear Association, relying on uranium from Niger-controlled mines. This economic reliance highlights France's keen interest in maintaining stability in the region to secure access to vital natural resources.

- **Military Presence**

The continued presence of French military forces in West Africa exhibits the deep-seated dependency framework characterizing the relationship, furthered also by the ongoing defense consultations outlined in agreements with the Sahelian states. According to Siradağ (2014), since 1963, France has intervened militarily 31 times, exclusively in Francophone African states, and over 50 times since 1960 in Africa. This underlines the edifice of French-African security relations in shaping economic and political ties. Shaun Gregory (2000) listed that in 1990, French troops were stationed in 22 African countries, with strategic military bases established in Djibouti, Senegal, the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Gabon, and the Ivory Coast. French military presence in Africa primarily focused on protecting states with defense agreements against internal and external threats, aiming to safeguard "friendly governments" to uphold French interests and shield them from external aggression. France's military involvement in Africa often occurred at the request of African states, with numerous interventions and military defense treaties signed between 1960 and 1994. However, since the end of the Cold War, France has reduced its permanent military presence in Africa due to economic constraints and evolving geopolitical concerns. This downsizing included the closure of significant military bases, such as the one in Senegal in 2010, and recent 2023 troop withdrawals from Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, marking the conclusion of long-standing operations like Barkhane.

- **Counterterrorism**

Counterterrorism efforts have remained the French military's intent for their involvement in West Africa and particularly in the Sahel. Since 9/11, terrorism, chiefly associated with Salafist or Wahhabist doctrines, has challenged existing Islamic practices and customs in Africa. Amidst this, France has played a key role in regional security programs, such as the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), the Trans Saharan Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), and the African Peace Facility (APF). These efforts have been supported by the US and the UK, reflecting shared narratives on combating terrorism. France's intervention in Mali under Operation Serval, (which was later Operation Barkhane) aimed at combatting violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in the Sahel. However, despite international involvement, including support from the United States, the campaign against militants led to the spread of aggravated militancy across the region. France announced the end of Operation Barkhane in July 2021 and the subsequent withdrawal of French troops from Mali in February 2022 and Niger in 2023. The

situation has been further complicated by weakening state institutions, recurring coups, rising anti-French sentiment, and the involvement of external actors like Russia.

- **Cultural Influences**

Cultural cooperation agreements were established by France to promote its language and culture in African territories, leaving many countries with French as their official language. This reflects France's enduring influence and deliberate efforts towards linguistic and cultural expansion through the use of 'soft power', even before the term was coined. While media often portrays widespread dislike for France in urban areas and among specific groups, the reality is more nuanced. France's withdrawal from Mali and Paris' perceived double standards in supporting African authoritarian regimes contribute to tensions, while also indicating that not all links of the chain have been broken (a good example for this is the Franco-Chadian relationship). Pan-Africanism promotes African unity, but some exploit its rhetoric for anti-Western agendas, targeting France due to their historical traumas and socio-economic frustrations.

### **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE PEACEBUILDING DISCOURSE IN THE SAHELIAN CONTEXT**

The way to building and retaining peace is primarily understanding it. Circumstances vary but basic human needs remain the same all over the world. Peace providers often take differing routes to building, maintaining, and ensuring *pax per praxis*, but flawed approaches hinder possible recoveries. The Sahelian case in this context can be analyzed by reflecting upon the complexities of post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts. We must evaluate various approaches to rebuilding states and fostering peace in the region, examining their underlying ideas and effectiveness. The United Nations' definition of peacebuilding, aiming to strengthen peace structures to prevent relapse into conflict, serves as a starting point for analyzing contemporary efforts and their sustainability, questioning whether existing interventions oversimplify peacebuilding. Although post-war reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts predate 1990 and extend beyond West Africa, the focus here is on the numerous peacebuilding missions launched in the region in recent times. The argument highlights the challenges faced by these missions, citing their success rates and the increasing politicization and securitization of peacebuilding. West Africa, with its significant share of armed conflicts, exemplifies the intricate relationship between security and development, posing substantial challenges to conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding, and development efforts. We must also examine how peacebuilding initiatives aim to redefine or reinvent the state, reflecting on past experiences with state-building in Africa. The Sahelian case has proved helpful in exposing several paradoxes inherent in post-conflict settings, such as the tension between stability and change, the imposition of liberal peace paradigms, and the balance between humanitarianism and political realism.

In contemporary West Africa, post-conflict peacebuilding tends to prioritize stability over change and security over peace. External actors often opt for maintaining stability and security, aligning with their political and geopolitical objectives, rather than pursuing transformative change necessary for achieving lasting peace. This calls for the recognition of alternative narratives and approaches to peacebuilding, acknowledging the limitations and shortcomings of extant interventions.

Progress in peace negotiations, particularly in regions undergoing decolonization and other conflicts, prompted the UN to expand its peacekeeping mandates. Traditionally limited to interposing neutral forces in buffer zones, UN peacekeeping missions began taking on broader roles and tasks. These expanded mandates included organizing elections, facilitating institutional reforms, overseeing post-conflict reconstruction, protecting human rights, and facilitating the demilitarization and resettlement of refugees. The UN played a pivotal role in shaping the evolution of peacebuilding, particularly through key policy documents like the 1992 "An Agenda for Peace" report by Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Institutionally, the UN's approach to

peacebuilding has evolved towards more integrated missions, combining military and civilian efforts to address the multidimensional challenges of post-conflict reconstruction. The Sahel's security challenges are compounded by food and nutritional crises, leading to displacement, and exacerbating intercommunity tensions. Organizations like the FAO aim to address conflict drivers through multidimensional responses, focusing on livelihoods, natural resource management, and rural employment. FAO's projects in the region prioritize women's and youth inclusion, conflict prevention, and institutional strengthening, with a continuous improvement approach to programming. Challenges for the team include conducting thorough conflict analyses and ensuring stakeholder consultations within tight timeframes, but efforts do aim to address root causes of conflict and promote evidence-based practices for sustainable peacebuilding in West Africa and the Sahel. The evolution of the global peacebuilding regime reflects a growing recognition of the interconnectedness of peace, development, and security highlighting the need for comprehensive, holistic approaches that address the underlying structural, relational, and cultural factors driving conflicts.

The emergence of what Mary Kaldor termed "new wars" in the Third World further challenged conventional understandings of conflict dynamics. These new conflicts were characterized by their ability to blur the lines between war and large-scale human rights violations. They were deeply intertwined with processes of globalization, involving the erosion of state authority and the simultaneous influence of local and global factors in fueling violence. Johan Galtung's 'Structural Theory of Aggression', for instance, provided insights into the structural violence embedded in social relationships, which perpetuated marginalization and disempowerment. Peace, according to Galtung, went beyond the mere cessation of direct violence; it encompassed the transformation of societal structures to foster social justice and enable individuals to live fulfilling lives. Likewise, John Paul Lederach's 'Conflict Transformation approach' further expanded the conceptual framework of peacebuilding by emphasizing the importance of addressing the underlying causes of conflicts and transforming relationships. This approach recognized conflicts as opportunities for constructive change, aiming to reduce violence, increase justice, and foster reconciliation at both interpersonal and societal levels. Contemporary peacebuilding endeavors have undergone significant evolution in response to shifting global dynamics, especially in regions afflicted by the intricacies of these "new wars". These conflicts, characterized by the erosion of governmental structures, widespread violence, and severe humanitarian crises, have necessitated a departure from conventional peacekeeping approaches toward more braided strategies. For instance, the recognition of child protection as a vital aspect of peacekeeping missions since the early 2000s underscores the growing concerns surrounding the exploitation of children in armed conflicts. Additionally, the global security landscape following events like the September 11 attacks and subsequent actions such as the War on Terror has exerted considerable influence on peacebuilding efforts.

Despite widespread recognition of the critical importance of peacebuilding, there persists a degree of conceptual ambiguity and a lack of consensus regarding its precise definition and objectives. While terms like "peacekeepers" and "peacekeeping" have become commonplace, the concept of peacebuilding remains nebulous and encompasses a wide array of activities aimed at restoring conditions conducive to peace. Although, this broad understanding often overlooks the tangled multiplicity involved in achieving sustainable and positive peace. Moreover, the distinction between peacekeeping and peacebuilding is not always clear-cut, as contemporary peacekeeping missions frequently involve a range of peacebuilding tasks alongside traditional security measures. To navigate these conceptual challenges effectively, it is imperative to view peacebuilding as a multifaceted process that spans the entire conflict continuum, encompassing preventive diplomacy, peace-making during conflicts, and post-settlement activities focused on rebuilding societies. The "security-first" approach, frequently viewed in conflict-affected regions like those in the Sahel, may inadvertently perpetuate cycles of violence by incentivizing insurgent groups to continue fighting

for a stake in power. Furthermore, the prevailing emphasis on technical aspects of peacebuilding, such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), tends to overlook the crucial political and strategic dimensions necessary for sustainable peace and democratic consolidation. As such, there exists a pressing need for a more nuanced and holistic approach to peacebuilding that acknowledges the tensions between achieving negative peace and positive peace. This entails integrating political, social, and economic dimensions into peacebuilding strategies to address root causes of conflict comprehensively to prompt lasting results.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, state-building had emerged as a focal point of international peacebuilding, guided by the liberal peace concept, which emphasizes sustainable peace through effective political and economic institutions. Post-war reconstruction involves restoring infrastructure to pre-conflict conditions. Critics contrast "classical liberal" statehood with a "post-liberal" framework that requires ongoing external management. Reconstruction goals have over time however expanded to include legitimacy, security, and effectiveness. Good governance, human rights, the rule of law, a market economy, and democratic institutions under the liberal lens are also seen as crucial for building peace. Post-conflict reconstruction practices often face criticism for seeking quick results and reinforcing conflict dynamics. An alternative approach emphasizes community / civil/ local empowerment and challenges the assumption that peacebuilding must adhere to liberal frameworks. It focuses on local agencies and strategies for peacebuilding and development, which may resist or adapt dominant state-building frameworks.

#### EXTERNAL PEACE INITIATIVES IN SAHEL

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics in the Sahel region, it's crucial to examine the involvement of external actors. This section aims to highlight key initiatives undertaken by various external stakeholders and their impact in the region through peacebuilding efforts. By focusing on these initiatives, we can evaluate their effectiveness or shortcomings.

**Table 1 – External Peace Initiatives in Sahel**

Mission	Time Period	Key Tasks	Sponsor / External Actors
MINUSMA	2013-2023	Peacekeeping and Stabilization	UN
Operation Barkhane (formerly Op. Serval)	2013-2022	Counter-terrorism/ Anti-insurgent operation	France
EUTM Mali	2013- ongoing	Military training	EU
EUCAP Mali	2015- ongoing	Military capacity building	EU
EUCAP Niger	2012- ongoing	Civilian capacity building	EU
Alliance Sahel	2017- ongoing	Coordination of aid and development assistance	Germany, France, EU, African Dev. Bank, World Bank, UNDP, Italy, Spain, UK, Luxemburg, Denmark, Netherlands, European Investment Bank, Norway, USA, Canada, Ireland, Sweden,
Operation Takuba	2020- 2022	Special forces operations	Mali, Niger, EU, French-led
International Coalition for the Sahel	2020- ongoing	Coordination of response	G5 Sahel, France, UN, EU, AU, OIF
P3S	2019- ongoing	Identify security needs	France, Germany

**European Union Initiatives:** The European Union (EU) has provided aid to the Sahel region through missions like EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali, and the EU Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali. These initiatives focus on strengthening internal security sectors and combating security threats. Despite being a significant humanitarian donor to the Sahel, the EU's approach is increasingly centered on security and border management. This is evident in new security-related programs, reflecting a narrower security agenda. The EU's efforts aim to address challenges faced by fragile states such as poverty, displacement, transnational crime, and terror insurgencies. Despite these interventions and the signing of a Peace Agreement for Mali in 2015, the situation has deteriorated, with conflicts spreading to neighboring countries like Burkina Faso and Niger.

**United Nations' MINUSMA:** The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established to address structural issues and instability caused by terror and separatist groups in Mali. It aimed to stabilize population centers, rebuild the security sector, implement disarmament programs, facilitate national dialogue, and ensure fair elections. While positively perceived in Northern Mali, MINUSMA was considered absent in other areas. Its main task was to support the 2015 Peace and Reconciliation Agreement and facilitate a comprehensive strategy to protect civilians and re-establish state authority in Central Mali. Its effectiveness was hindered by challenges such as the dangerous operating environment, limitations on mobility, mistrust among parties, and a lack of engagement with communities. Yet, MINUSMA achieved some progress in implementing the peace agreement, facilitating disarmament processes, and supporting socioeconomic projects. In June 2023, Mali's military government requested MINUSMA's departure, leading to the end of the mission after a decade. Post departure, instability in Mali remains unresolved and violence growing. The government's alliance with Russia and the presence of the Wagner Group have drawn criticism from Western countries. It is a step away from implementing an alternative indigenous approach to peace.

**French Efforts:** It is evident from the table provided above that France has had the largest presence in Sahel, with involvement directly or indirectly in almost every single peace initiative led externally. France has held both military and non-military operations even if the results haven't been definite or as desired.

French military operations in the Sahel, such as Operation Serval, Operation Barkhane, and the European Task Force Takuba under French leadership, have played a crucial role in combating terrorism and in moving towards stabilizing the region. Operation Serval, launched in 2012, aimed to reclaim control of northern Mali from terror groups and restore government authority. Its success paved the way for Operation Barkhane, initiated in 2014, which focused on counterterrorism efforts across the Sahel. Additionally, the European Task Force Takuba, established in 2020, involved contributions from 25 European countries and targeted counterterrorism operations in the Liptako-Gourma region. Despite their initial successes, these operations have faced criticism for their singular focus on targeting violent extremist organizations (VEOs). Operation Barkhane, in particular, has been accused of neglecting civilian security concerns and failing to adapt its strategy to the evolving security landscape, resulting in a loss of popular support. The decision by France to withdraw its forces from Mali by 2022 marked a significant shift in its Sahel policy, driven in part by mounting domestic opposition to costly and protracted military engagements and the recent military takeovers.

This withdrawal has raised concerns about a potential security vacuum in the region and prompted the Malian junta to seek alternative security arrangements. This move has further strained relations between France and Mali, leading to the suspension of financial support from France and the imposition of EU sanctions against the coup leaders. Moreover, as France reevaluates its military presence in the Sahel, other international actors, such as Russia and China, are increasingly asserting their influence in the region. Russia's involvement, particularly through the private military company Wagner, has raised eyebrows and introduced new dynamics to the

security landscape of the Sahel. China's economic interests in the region, coupled with its growing diplomatic outreach, pose additional challenges to French and European efforts to stabilize the Sahel. The conflict has resulted in the loss of lives among French forces, as well as local civilian casualties, aggravating humanitarian concerns and adding complexity to the security situation. Despite these challenges, a comprehensive and sustainable approach involving collaboration with European partners and nuanced policy discussions remains essential for navigating the complex Sahelian landscape and promoting lasting peace and security.

### **REGIONAL ACTORS AND THEIR ATTEMPTS AT PEACE IN SAHEL**

Regional Peace Initiatives have been undertaken by regional organizations and by neighboring countries in mediation and negotiation efforts.

The AU has been actively involved in peacebuilding efforts in the Sahel region, emphasizing the importance of African leadership and institutions in resolving conflicts. Through programs like the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), the AU has deployed peacekeepers to support stability and security. However, resource constraints and competition between member states have posed challenges to the effectiveness of these efforts. The G5 Sahel, consisting of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, was established to address security threats in the Sahel region. Initially focusing on economic development, the G5 Sahel shifted its emphasis to security with the creation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force in 2017. Despite efforts to combat terrorism and organized crime, challenges such as funding shortages and internal political instability have limited its effectiveness. The recent exits of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have raised uncertainties about the future of the G5 Sahel. ECOWAS has played a crucial role in peacebuilding efforts in the Sahel, employing strategies such as mediation, deployment of military forces, and humanitarian assistance. However, internal divisions within ECOWAS and the potential dissolution of the G5 Sahel present challenges to regional security cooperation. To address these challenges, ECOWAS must strengthen regional cooperation, address internal issues, and shift focus to long-term development.

As for neighboring states, Algeria's role in Sahel mediation is deeply rooted in its foreign policy principles of non-alignment and non-interference. Instabilities in the Maghreb, like the Algerian civil war and the Arab Spring, had ripple effects in the Sahel, contributing to the emergence of armed groups like AQIM. Mali faced a crisis in 2012 when Islamist groups seized control of northern cities after a coup, inducing French intervention. Regional efforts in the Sahel, though fragmented, include military and peacebuilding interventions, with Algeria and Morocco competing for influence.

One significant development is the establishment of the Joint Operational Staff Committee in 2010. This initiative aimed to enhance collaboration with neighboring countries in the Sahel region, particularly in intelligence sharing and coordination of security efforts. While the committee represented a step towards regional cooperation, its effectiveness in achieving its objectives remains a subject of debate. Notably, the 2015 Peace and Reconciliation Agreement stands out for its inclusive approach, with Algeria leading a broader team of mediators representing various stakeholders. Additionally, Morocco's involvement, leveraging its religious and economic connections, can complement Algeria's efforts and contribute to a holistic approach to mediation in the region.

### **LOCAL PEACE PROCESSES**

In addition to national and regional mediation, local peace processes are indispensable for addressing grassroots grievances and preventing further escalation of violence. Local peace processes in the Sahel region play a crucial role in resolving intra- and inter-communal tensions, which often arise due to competition over resources and control of territory. These processes operate at both the national and regional levels, as well as within local communities themselves.

International actors like the United Nations (UN) can play a crucial role in facilitating local mediation efforts by providing logistical and security support, acting as neutral mediators, and promoting dialogue between conflicting parties. However, the effectiveness of peacekeeping efforts in Mali, for example, has been hindered by challenges such as a lack of coordination among various stakeholders and the absence of viable strategies to address underlying grievances. To overcome these obstacles, a comprehensive agreement on peacekeeping and peacebuilding is necessary to create an enabling environment for local mediation initiatives to thrive. Furthermore, external actors can contribute significantly to local peacebuilding efforts in the Sahel which focus on community-driven initiatives and in helping foster partnerships with other local actors. By investing in capacity-building programs, promoting dialogue, and addressing socio-economic inequalities, these international actors can help build sustainable peace from the ground up. Initiatives as previously mentioned like the FAO create opportunities for local action. Thus, local peace processes are integral to resolving conflicts in the Sahel region and preventing further violence. By complementing national and regional mediation efforts with grassroots initiatives, international actors can contribute to lasting peace and stability in the region.

### **ANALYZING FRENCH POLICY SHIFTS IN THE SAHEL**

French foreign policy towards Africa underwent significant changes in the post-Cold War era. Following the end of the Cold War, France, faced by a shifting global landscape, was prompted to reevaluate its approach to African affairs. While maintaining its historical ties with Francophone Africa, France recognized the importance of engaging with Anglophone and Lusophone regions, reflecting a broader commitment to Pan-Africanism and regional cooperation. France's security strategy in sub-Saharan Africa has undergone notable transformations over time, shaped by historical legacies, evolving international norms, and practical considerations. Initially characterized by unilateral efforts to maintain influence and stability, particularly during the Cold War era, France's approach gradually shifted towards multilateralism in the post-Cold War era. This shift was motivated by changing dynamics in African conflicts, increasing global scrutiny of neocolonial actions, and recognition of the limitations of unilateral interventions.

The Rwandan genocide in 1994 marked a turning point in French policy towards Africa. France began to collaborate with African military forces and integrate diverse contingents into joint peacekeeping missions, departing from past unilateral practices. The international community's criticism of France's perceived inaction in Rwanda prompted a shift towards a more multilateral approach. This new strategy emphasized "African solutions to African problems", prioritizing collaboration with regional organizations like the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This shift involved adhering to international mandates set by the UN Security Council, accepting limitations on the scope and duration of military interventions, and integrating African military contingents into peacekeeping missions. Despite the embrace of multilateralism, tensions arose between France's pursuit of national interests and its commitment to international cooperation. The withdrawal of French troops from Mali in 2022, for example, underscored the limitations of this approach. Recognizing the limitations of unilateral action and the growing transnational nature of security threats, France has actively pushed for a stronger European defense role in Africa. This is exemplified by the creation of the Sahel Alliance, a joint initiative involving France, Germany, and the European Union. The Alliance aims to integrate development, political, and security efforts in the Sahel. However, this initiative faces challenges, including inconsistencies in defining its role and structure, as well as difficulties in coordinating EU initiatives with the specific needs and priorities of the region. Efforts such as the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S) and the Coalition for the Sahel have struggled to align with the broader vision of African countries in the region. Furthermore, the effectiveness of French

development aid has been questioned, with accusations of limited resources and a lack of focus on tackling the underlying issues that fuel instability.

While there were instances of unilateral action, such as President Chirac’s response to the Ivorian crisis, France increasingly engaged with international organizations to mitigate accusations of neo-colonialism and enhance mission legitimacy. Subsequent presidents, including Chirac and Sarkozy, continued to pursue multilateralization, particularly through involvement with the EU in African peace and security efforts. France played a leading role in initiatives such as the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) peacekeeping missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

**Integration of Multinational Efforts** During the mid-2000s, France’s engagement in Africa became more integrated, involving collaborative efforts with other major global actors and regional partners. In the late 2000s, France’s Africa policy expanded to encompass a greater focus on development assistance, good governance, and sustainable economic growth.

Under President François Hollande, France intervened militarily in Mali to combat insurgent groups threatening regional stability. This intervention underscored France’s leadership role in Africa and its willingness to take decisive action to address security challenges. However, the intervention also highlighted the complexities and limitations of military solutions in achieving lasting peace and stability. Despite these efforts, challenges persist in France’s African policy, as seen in the recent crisis in Niger and criticisms of EU Sahel strategies. Concerns have been raised about France’s approach to authoritarian regimes, military tactics, and perceptions of paternalism, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to regional stability and governance dynamics.

The election of Emmanuel Macron marked a new chapter in French African relations, with Macron seeking to distance himself from the perceived excesses of “*Françafrique*” and redefine France’s role on the continent. Macron’s presidency witnessed efforts to diversify relations with Africa, engage with non-state actors, and address historical injustices. Despite these efforts, Macron’s administration faced challenges, particularly in the Sahel region, where French military interventions struggled to contain insecurity and violence. The decision to withdraw troops from Mali and other Sahelian countries underscored the limitations of military solutions and prompted calls for a more holistic approach to addressing the root causes of instability. In response to criticism and challenges, Macron’s administration pursued initiatives aimed at reforming French development cooperation, increasing aid expenditure, and prioritizing support for the least developed countries in Africa. The Macron administration has embarked on a modernization of its development cooperation efforts, aiming to increase the effectiveness and impact of its official development assistance (ODA). Data collected from the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency (AFD), OECD and DAC databases suggests that after nearly a decade of stagnant or decreasing aid spending, a multi-year financial plan announced in August 2021 outlined a gradual increase in ODA to 0.55% of GDP initially, rising to 0.7% by 2025. The government plans to shift its focus towards providing greater support to the least developed countries, particularly in Africa, starting from 2024. Additionally, there is a concerted effort to increase the proportion of grants in bilateral aid to 70% by 2025, with a focus on priority countries and low-income nations, predominantly in Africa. However, there are still disparities in aid distribution. Although 18 African countries (along with Haiti) are officially designated as priority countries by France, none of them rank among the top 10 recipients of French ODA.

To enhance strategic oversight of development cooperation, France is establishing the “National Council for Development and International Solidarity” (CNDSI) to provide political guidance. French ambassadors in partner countries will also play a role in steering development efforts. These centralization measures are accompanied by an increase in the share of bilateral aid and the integration of France’s technical cooperation agency, Expertise France, into the Agence

Française de Développement (AFD) to improve project implementation and coherence. These changes signify a positive shift in French aid policy, aiming to address concerns about political bias and effectiveness.

Additionally, Macron's engagement with the politics of memory, including efforts to address colonial legacies signaled a willingness to confront France's past and forge a new narrative of partnership and cooperation with Sahelian states. Therefore, French foreign policy towards Africa has evolved significantly since Macron's election. While facing criticism and challenges, France remains a key player in African affairs, navigating a delicate balance between maintaining its influence and embracing a more inclusive and forward-looking approach to partnership with the continent.

## Results and Discussion

The continued presence of military juntas in Sahel in 2024 seems to be shaping the security policies. The situation has deteriorated considerably in Chad, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Senegal. VEOs and communal ethnic violence remain a significant threat. The interceptions of mercenary groups like the Wagner, now operating as 'Africa Corps', alongside Russian forces, further complicate the situation. In the coming year, the Sahel region is expected to see such violence along with the solidification of military rule as juntas across Sahel join hands. The juntas in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso are likely to strengthen ties through the new Alliance of Sahel States, delaying democratic transitions and consolidating authoritarian rule as we witness the crumbling regional efforts of both the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS. This joint force aims to address security challenges under shared security conditions. The size of the force is not specified, but the three armies are expected to develop an operational concept to achieve their defense objectives. This could help unite citizens against perceived external threats. If the military popularity wanes and dissatisfaction grows, the juntas may face renewed unrest.

The graph indicates that the shift from support of one external power to another has not fared well as the instances of violence involving the Wagner group in Mali has seen a surge since 2022 from 2000 violent events to 2200 in 2023. The JNIM remained the most active violent group in 2023 in Mali.

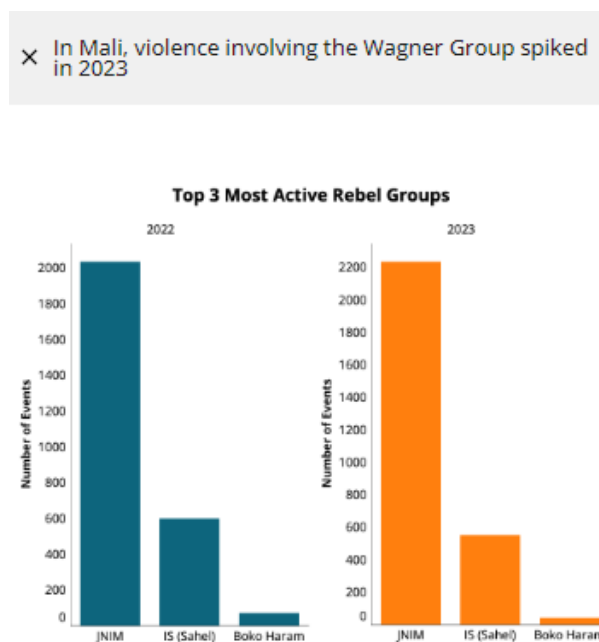


Figure 1 – Increased violent event from 2022-2023  
(Source: <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/sahel/>)

France may shift its regional policy towards coastal states in the Gulf of Guinea. Russia may increase its influence in Burkina Faso and Niger, providing opportunities for these countries to broaden security perceptions and resist extant international pressure. Coastal states in the Gulf of Guinea are experiencing a rise in jihadist violence, with Benin facing an emerging local insurgency. The crisis in the Sahel demands concrete and sustained assistance to eradicate terrorism and tackle the region's escalating humanitarian emergency. Of particular concern is the plight of the 6.3 million displaced individuals across the Sahel as counted by the UN Refugee Agency. Moreover, the multitude of initiatives aimed at addressing security, political, and humanitarian challenges pose difficulties in terms of coordination, coherence, and inclusivity.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Sahel region finds itself at a critical juncture, facing escalating challenges that threaten peace, stability, and fundamental human rights. The complex interplay of internal dynamics and external interventions underscores the pressing need for strategic and concerted action. This study has shed light on the pivotal role of France in the Sahel, tracing its historical legacies and evolving contemporary engagements. Moreover, the examination of peacebuilding discourse has underscored the multifaceted nature of challenges in the region and the diverse roles played by both local and external actors. Below are some recommendations which focus on action and policy-oriented paths to ensure inclusive peace processes in the region.

1. Negotiation and mediation exercises between parties involved in conflicts should be held on the sidelines of regional forums. This should lead participants to understand better the terms acceptable to both sides and which interests need most protection. It shall also convince the participants that negotiated peace settlements are possible and may work in their favor.

2. Leaders of ethnic groups must be part of wider diplomatic discussions to ensure proper representation of interests of the people.

3. The civilian government leaders must be brought to acknowledge that their positions on good governance and good practices must be clear, transparent, and immovable. Scope for dangling with malpractices should be nipped in the bud while reformulating governance structures.

4. Federal v/s decentralized governance option must be considered separately for different social groups placed in distinct geographical settings, with required quantitative and qualitative justifications. Special provisions must be made till deeply rooted conflictual pressures have been well dealt with.

5. Local actors must be empowered to pursue their respective rural and urban interests.

6. International funding records must be made more transparent and allocation details vividly clarified.

7. There is a need for coherence in actions directed at peace in the Sahel.

8. There is a requirement to employ Peace Studies as a tool for peacebuilding operations. Countries such as France and those in Scandinavian Europe could prove to be supportive in this respect. This can also be done through exercises within the EU Missions frameworks.

These recommendations address grassroot issues in international violent conflict situations and pave way for constructive external action with limited direct engagement. These steps are necessary to provide foundational strength to positive peace processes. Even though local actions set the groundwork for rebuilding societies, it is important that they are coherent at national, regional, and international levels as well. Amidst the uncertainties, it is crucial to evaluate the effectiveness of current efforts, both in statistical and value laden terms. Ultimately, achieving lasting peace in the Sahel using external actors like France and local initiatives requires collective action, unwavering commitment, and a steadfast dedication to addressing the root causes of conflict while considering alternative reconstruction strategies.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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