



Great Power Competition in the Sahel; Assessing the Impact of the Wagner Armed Group and Russia/France Activities on Non-Alignment States in the Sahelian Region 2014–2025

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Abstract

Between 2014 and 2025, the Sahel region underwent one of the most consequential geopolitical realignments in post-Cold War African international relations. This paper examines how the deployment of the Russian private military company known as the Wagner Group, its state-controlled successor Africa Corps, and the parallel decline of French military and economic influence have shaped the foreign policy behaviour of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, three states that have historically presented themselves as non-aligned or sovereignty-seeking actors within the international system. The study is guided by three objectives: to conceptualize the core constructs of Wagner-style private military activity, non-alignment, and great-power competition as they apply to the Sahel; to examine the empirical trajectory of Russian and French engagement in the region from the beginning of the Malian insurgency in 2012–2014 through the consolidation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2023–2025; and to assess the extent to which the region's declared posture of sovereignty and non-alignment is empirically sustained or undermined by dependency on Russian security guarantees. Employing a qualitative, documentary research design anchored in thematic content analysis of policy reports, human-rights investigations, and scholarly literature, the paper is theorized through a tripartite framework combining Kwame Nkrumah's theory of neocolonialism, structural/neorealist great-power competition theory, and the Active Non-Alignment (ANA) framework. Findings indicate that while the Sahelian juntas have successfully diversified away from exclusive French dependency, their reliance on Wagner/Africa Corps for regime survival, combined with well-documented human-rights abuses such as the Moura massacre, and resource-based leverage over uranium and gold, suggests that the region's non-alignment is best understood as a rhetorical and partially achieved strategic posture rather than a fully realized condition of policy autonomy. The paper concludes that non-alignment in the contemporary Sahel functions less as neutrality between blocs and more as a contested, asymmetric hedging strategy, and it identifies limitations related to data access, security constraints on primary fieldwork, and the fluid, rapidly evolving nature of the subject matter.

Keywords: *Wagner Group, Africa Corps, Sahel, non-alignment, multipolarity, Operation Barkhane*

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Introduction

The Sahel, the semi-arid belt stretching from Mauritania in the west to Sudan in the east, has since the early 2010s become one of the most volatile theatres of insurgency, state fragility, and great-power competition in the contemporary international system. The immediate trigger of the crisis is generally located in the fallout of the 2011 collapse of the Libyan state, which released fighters, weapons, and instability southward into northern Mali, precipitating the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and the subsequent seizure of northern Malian towns by jihadist coalitions linked to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. France's military intervention, first through Operation Serval in January 2013 and then through the broader regional counter-insurgency mission Operation Barkhane from 2014, represented the most visible external security guarantee for the G5 Sahel states of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.

Barkhane, however, did not achieve its stated objective of degrading jihadist networks to a point of strategic defeat. Instead, violence expanded from northern and central Mali into Burkina Faso and western Niger over the course of the decade, and civilian casualties, displacement, and popular disillusionment with the French military presence grew steadily. This disillusionment culminated in a wave of military coups: Mali experienced two coups in August 2020 and May 2021, Burkina Faso

two in 2022, and Niger one in July 2023, in each case bringing to power juntas that publicly repudiated France's continued military role and pursued security partnerships with the Russian Federation, principally through the Wagner Group and its subsequent state-controlled successor, Africa Corps (Royal United Services Institute [RUSI], 2024; Foreign Policy Research Institute [FPRI], 2023).

France formally ended Operation Barkhane in November 2022 and withdrew its last forces from Mali that August, from Burkina Faso in February 2023, and from Niger by the close of 2023, following the CNSP junta's revocation of the 1993 defence cooperation accords (Institut Montaigne, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2023 cited in FPRI, 2023). In parallel, Russian private military contractors expanded rapidly, moving from an estimated first deployment of a few hundred operatives in Mali in December 2021 to a combined regional footprint across Mali, Burkina Faso, and, from 2024, Niger (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023; Lawfare, 2024). The three juntas subsequently formalized their cooperation through the Charter of Liptako-Gourma in September 2023, upgraded to the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) Confederation in July 2024, and completed their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on 29 January 2025 (Tricontinental, 2025; Amani Africa, 2025).

These developments raise an important analytical question for scholars of African international relations: to what extent can the foreign policy posture adopted by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger since 2020 be genuinely characterized as non-alignment, understood in the classical sense of the 1961 Non-Aligned Movement as the pursuit of an independent foreign policy free from great-power domination, when their security architecture has become substantially dependent on a single external patron? This paper interrogates that question by tracing the interlocking activities of the Wagner Group/Africa Corps and France across the study period 2014–2025 and assessing their cumulative impact on the sovereignty claims of the AES states. The dominant public narrative advanced by the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger since 2020 is one of reclaimed sovereignty: an assertion that decades of French neocolonial tutelage, symbolized by the CFA franc, French military bases, and the Francophonie institutional architecture, are being replaced by a genuinely autonomous, multipolar foreign policy in which Russia is merely one partner among several (Peoples Dispatch, 2025). Yet empirical evidence complicates this narrative. The scale of Wagner/Africa Corps deployment, the documented dependence of the juntas on Russian mercenaries for regime protection and counter-insurgency operations, and the granting of preferential access to strategic resources such as gold and uranium to Russian-linked entities suggest a pattern that may replicate, rather than transcend, the dependency dynamics historically associated with neocolonial relationships. The problem this study addresses,

therefore, is the empirical and conceptual gap between the AES states' declared posture of non-alignment and sovereignty, and the observable pattern of asymmetric security dependency on the Russian Federation that has followed the reduction of French influence. Without a systematic examination of this gap, policy analysts and scholars risk either overstating the AES's strategic autonomy or dismissing it entirely as a simple transfer of dependency from Paris to Moscow, when the reality is considerably more complex.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the theoretical literature on non-alignment by testing the applicability of both classical Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) theory and the more recent Active Non-Alignment (ANA) framework to a contemporary African security crisis, an application that remains comparatively underdeveloped relative to Latin American and Asian cases. Second, it provides policymakers, regional bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union, and international partners with a documented account of how private military competition among external powers can reshape the sovereignty claims of fragile states. Third, given the human cost associated with Wagner Group operations, most notably the Moura massacre of March 2022, the study contributes to the broader human-security literature on the accountability gaps created by the outsourcing of state violence to private military contractors. Finally, the study is timely: because the AES states' withdrawal from ECOWAS was completed only in January 2025 and the Confederation architecture remains in early implementation, this paper offers an up-to-date

empirical account that extends existing scholarship, much of which was published before the 2024–2025 institutional consolidation of the AES.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of the Wagner Group/Africa Corps and the shifting France–Russia rivalry on the foreign policy posture and practical sovereignty of non-aligned states in the Sahel region between 2014 and 2025. In pursuit of this aim, the study is guided by the following specific objectives:

- i. To conceptualize the key constructs of the study, namely the Wagner Group/private military companies, non-alignment, great-power competition, and the Sahel as a geopolitical region.
- ii. To trace the empirical trajectory of Russian (Wagner Group/Africa Corps) and French (Barkhane and post-Barkhane) engagement in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from 2014 to 2025.
- iii. To assess the extent to which the Alliance of Sahel States' declared posture of sovereignty and non-alignment is empirically supported or undermined by dependency on external security patrons.
- iv. To examine the human-security and resource-governance consequences of the France–Russia rivalry for civilian populations and strategic assets in the region.
- v. To theorize the observed pattern of Sahelian foreign policy behaviour using an integrated framework combining neocolonialism, structural realism, and Active Non-Alignment theory.

Conceptual Review

Wagner Group and Private Military Companies

A private military company (PMC) is broadly understood as a privately owned firm that provides military and security services, including combat operations, training, logistics, and protection, on a contractual basis to state or non-state clients. The Wagner Group emerged in this category as a Russian PMC first documented in eastern Ukraine and Syria from 2014, financed and directed, according to extensive investigative and governmental reporting, through networks associated with the late Yevgeny Prigozhin. In the Sahel, Wagner's presence was never officially acknowledged by the Malian government, yet by 2022 credible reporting from multiple human-rights bodies confirmed the operational integration of Wagner personnel with the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) in counter-insurgency operations (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023; Counter Extremism Project, n.d.). Following Prigozhin's death in an August 2023 plane crash, the Kremlin moved to formalize and nationalize Wagner's African operations under a new structure, Africa Corps, subordinated directly to the Russian Ministry of Defence and the GRU military intelligence apparatus, while retaining much of Wagner's existing personnel and infrastructure (CNBC, 2024; Lawfare, 2024). For the purposes of this study, the Wagner Group and Africa Corps are treated as successive institutional forms of the same underlying phenomenon: the outsourcing of Russian state military power in Africa to a nominally private, but functionally state-directed, paramilitary structure. This conceptualization

matters because it clarifies that whatever plausible deniability the Wagner label once offered the Kremlin, the post-2023 Africa Corps structure represents a more direct extension of Russian state power, a shift with implications for how genuinely 'external' to formal state alignment the AES states' security partnership with Moscow actually is.

Non-Alignment and Non-Aligned States

Non-alignment as a concept in international relations originated at the 1955 Bandung Conference and was formally institutionalized with the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Belgrade in 1961 under the intellectual leadership of Josip Broz Tito, Jawaharlal Nehru, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Sukarno, and Kwame Nkrumah. Mates (1983) defines non-alignment as the pursuit of an independent foreign policy predicated on non-participation in the military blocs and alliance structures of competing great powers, distinguishing it from mere neutrality by its active, rather than passive, character. Encyclopedia.com (n.d.) similarly notes that non-alignment's two central pillars are the freedom to conduct an independent foreign policy and the deliberate avoidance of formal alliance politics, in contrast to the power-politics strategy of dominant states that subordinates economic and social development to military alliance-building. Since the end of the Cold War, however, the analytical utility of classical non-alignment has been questioned, prompting the emergence of the Active Non-Alignment (ANA) framework, most extensively developed in the Latin American context, which reconceptualizes non-alignment not as passive equidistance between blocs but as the active, pragmatic pursuit of national

interest through selective, issue-based engagement with multiple great powers simultaneously (All Azimuth, 2025). For this study, a state is considered non-aligned to the extent that it retains the practical capacity to reverse, renegotiate, or diversify its external security and economic partnerships without existential risk to the regime; a state whose survival becomes structurally contingent on a single external patron, by contrast, exhibits alignment in substance even where it is disclaimed in rhetoric.

Great-Power Competition and Proxy Geopolitics

Great-power competition refers to the rivalry between major international powers, in this case principally France (as a former colonial power and NATO member) and Russia (as a revisionist power contesting Western influence), for strategic, economic, and normative influence over third states and regions. Where such competition is conducted indirectly through local armed actors, security partnerships, or private military intermediaries rather than through the direct commitment of great-power conventional forces, the resulting relationship is often described in the literature as proxy competition or proxy geopolitics. In the Sahel, this dynamic is visible in the way Russia's Africa Corps has been deployed explicitly to displace residual French influence, described in Africa Corps-linked propaganda channels as defending juntas against 'threats' associated with France and Western intelligence services (Lawfare, 2024). The concept is important for this study because it frames Wagner/Africa Corps activity not simply as a bilateral Russia–Mali or Russia–Niger security relationship, but as one node within a broader structural contest for regional influence in

which the AES states are simultaneously objects and, to a lesser degree, active agents.

Sahel as a Geopolitical Region

The Sahel is conceptualized in this study not merely as a physical ecological zone but as a geopolitical region defined by a shared set of contemporary characteristics: post-colonial state fragility, jihadist insurgency linked to Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State-affiliated networks, chronic underdevelopment despite significant mineral endowments, and, since 2020, a wave of military governance that has displaced elected civilian administrations across its central belt. The 'central Sahel', comprising Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, is distinguished in the literature from the wider G5 Sahel grouping (which also included Mauritania and Chad) precisely because it is this central trio that has undergone the most acute rupture with former Western partners and the deepest embrace of Russian security cooperation (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.).

Empirical Review

Historical Background: France's Sahelian

Engagement and Its Unraveling (2013–2023)

France's post-2013 military presence in the Sahel began with Opération Serval, a rapid intervention requested by Mali's transitional government to halt the southward advance of Tuareg separatist and Islamist forces from the north, and was followed in 2014 by the broader, region-wide Opération Barkhane, which extended across Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad (Greydynamics, 2025). At its peak, Barkhane deployed approximately 5,100 French personnel and

represented France's largest overseas military operation since the Algerian War (Euronews, 2022; Cambridge Journal of Modern African Studies, 2025). Despite nearly a decade of counterterrorism operations, tactical successes against individual jihadist commanders, and the training of thousands of regional troops, Barkhane did not reverse the underlying trajectory of the conflict: violent events and civilian fatalities in Mali rose steadily from 2012 through 2022, and insurgent groups expanded from northern Mali into the country's center and, eventually, into Burkina Faso and western Niger (Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies, 2023; Institut Montaigne, 2024).

Several interlocking factors account for Barkhane's strategic failure. Analysts point to a mismatch between French counterterrorism priorities targeting high-value jihadist leaders in the north and Mali's need to contain a spreading insurgency in its center and south, allowing local conflicts to fester largely unaddressed (Institut Montaigne, 2024). Others emphasize the postcolonial politics of the intervention: French military engagement, however capable, could not substitute for functioning governance, and its visibility as a continuation of France's historical role fed rapidly growing anti-French sentiment across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 2023; Greydynamics, 2025). A scholarly post-mortem in France itself concluded that the political establishment largely avoided public accounting for the operation's failure, with no formal parliamentary inquiry conducted into the setbacks of the country's largest overseas military campaign since Algeria (Journal of Modern African Studies,

2025).

The political rupture accelerated after Mali's second coup in May 2021, when Colonel Assimi Goïta ousted the transitional civilian government, prompting France to suspend joint operations (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2025). By early 2022, the Bamako junta had begun negotiating with the Wagner Group, and relations deteriorated further after Mali reneged on a promised 2022 election timeline (CSIS, 2025). France completed its withdrawal from Mali on August 15, 2022 (Euronews, 2022), and on November 9, 2022, President Emmanuel Macron formally declared the end of Opération Barkhane (Greydynamics, 2025). The contagion proved regional: in January 2023, Burkina Faso's junta demanded the departure of remaining French forces within one month, and 2023 coups in Niger further eroded the Western military footprint (Greydynamics, 2025; CSIS, 2025). By 2024, the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) had also withdrawn at the government's insistence, removing the last major multilateral security presence from the country (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2024).

The Wagner Group's Entry and Evolution in the Sahel (2021–2025)

The Wagner Group, a Russian private military company with close ties to the Russian state, first deployed to Mali in December 2021 following a formal agreement between Bamako and Moscow (FPRI, 2024). Wagner's approach mirrored a playbook already executed in Sudan, Libya, and the Central African Republic: transactional, no-conditions security assistance to embattled or diplomatically isolated regimes in exchange for

resource access, political loyalty, and basing rights (FPRI, 2022; ResearchGate, 2025). This proved attractive to a junta facing an intensifying insurgency and deteriorating relations with Paris. Analysts warned at the time that Wagner's intervention could create "contagion effects" for the rest of the Sahel, particularly Burkina Faso, where officers were already pressing for Wagner's deployment prior to the September 2022 coup that brought Captain Ibrahim Traoré to power (FPRI, 2022).

Wagner's presence expanded the scale of violence in Mali almost immediately. Civilian fatalities in the first quarter of 2022 alone exceeded the total recorded for all of 2021, and the worst single atrocity of the conflict occurred between March 27 and 31, 2022, when Malian armed forces (FAMA), accompanied by Wagner personnel, besieged the central town of Moura and summarily executed an estimated 300 to 500 civilians, the majority unarmed (CSIS, 2025b; Cambridge Journal of African Law, 2025). A UN report dated May 12, 2023, documented more than 500 killings in the operation, most attributable to summary execution rather than combat (HRW, 2023). Malian authorities have consistently denied culpability, and no credible domestic investigation has followed (CSIS, 2025b).

Wagner's structure within Russia's African strategy shifted after founder Yevgeny Prigozhin's death in August 2023. By early 2024, the Kremlin had moved to consolidate operations under a more directly state-controlled entity, Africa Corps, raising questions about whether this represented reform or merely rebranding of the same personnel

and practices (Cambridge Journal of African Law, 2025). Field evidence suggests substantial continuity: reporting through 2025 continued to attribute extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and civilian massacres to forces described interchangeably as "Wagner" and/or "Africa Corps" (OHCHR, 2025).

Militarily, Wagner's record in the Sahel has been mixed, and by some assessments a strategic failure. In July 2024, a large Wagner–FAMa convoy was ambushed near the northeastern Malian town of Tinzaouatène by Tuareg separatist and jihadist forces, who claimed to have killed 84 Russian mercenaries and 47 Malian soldiers Wagner's largest known single defeat in Africa (FPRI, 2024; Africa Defense Forum, 2025). An investigative report by the Sentry in August 2025 characterized Wagner's Malian deployment as a "multilayered catastrophe" for Malian communities, the junta that invited it, regional counterterrorism, and Russia's own objectives (The Sentry, 2025). Community leaders interviewed for a January 2025 Royal United Services Institute report said Wagner had failed to permanently improve security, even as its personnel were implicated in drone strikes on weddings and funerals and abuses against Tuareg civilians that fueled jihadist recruitment (Africa Defense Forum, 2025).

Russia's Wagner Group and Africa Corps in the Sahel

Empirical accounts converge on December 2021 as the point at which Wagner personnel first arrived in Mali in substantial numbers, coinciding with the ruling junta's rejection of a continued substantial French troop presence (Carnegie Endowment for

International Peace, 2023). Civilian harm rose sharply thereafter, with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, 2022) documenting that civilian fatalities linked to the conflict in the first quarter of 2022 alone exceeded the total recorded for all of 2021, a trend CSIS attributes directly to the change in counter-insurgency methodology introduced by Wagner's involvement. The most extensively documented episode is the Moura massacre of 27–31 March 2022, in which Malian armed forces operating alongside Wagner personnel besieged the central Malian town of Moura; a United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights investigation, corroborated independently by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, concluded that at least 500 people were unlawfully executed, with credible evidence of an additional 58 cases of sexual violence against women and girls (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2022; UN News, 2023). Following Prigozhin's death in August 2023, reporting indicates that rather than diminishing, the Kremlin's footprint expanded, with the newly formalized Africa Corps deploying additional forces to Burkina Faso in early 2024 and to Niger from April 2024, following a January 2024 visit by Sahelian junta leaders to Moscow to meet Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov (Lawfare, 2024). By December 2024, roughly 1,000 Africa Corps personnel were reported alongside an estimated 1,500 remaining Wagner-linked troops in Mali alone, indicating a hybrid rather than a clean institutional transition (Lawfare, 2024).

France's Barkhane Operation and Post-Barkhane Disengagement

Operation Barkhane, launched in August 2014 as the successor to the more narrowly targeted Operation Serval, deployed at its peak approximately 5,500 French troops across Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, supported intermittently by European partners including Estonia, Sweden, the Czech Republic, and the United Kingdom (Global Security, 2022; Institut Montaigne, 2024). While French and allied forces succeeded in neutralizing numerous jihadist commanders over nearly a decade of operations, the Institut Montaigne (2024) assessment concludes that these tactical successes did not translate into a durable strategic defeat of the insurgency, which instead metastasized southward into previously stable areas of Burkina Faso and western Niger. The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI, 2024) frames France's Mali experience as a case of 'postcolonial disutility of force', arguing that the French counter-terrorism strategy prioritized the elimination of militant leadership over addressing the communal grievances driving recruitment, a strategic error compounded by the historical baggage of France's colonial relationship with the region. Political rupture followed swiftly: France withdrew its final forces from Mali in August 2022 after the ruling junta's turn to Wagner, formally ended Barkhane in November 2022, withdrew from Burkina Faso by February 2023 at the explicit request of the Traoré government, and withdrew from Niger through late 2023 following the CNSP's abrogation of bilateral defence accords after the July 2023 coup (Atlas of Wars, 2023; FPRI, 2023).

The Alliance of Sahel States and the Politics of Sovereignty

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES) was formally established through the Charter of Liptako-Gourma, signed by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in Bamako on 16 September 2023, establishing a mutual-defence clause under which any external aggression against one member state would be treated as an aggression against all (Tricontinental, 2025). On 6 July 2024, the three states adopted a treaty upgrading the arrangement into the Confederation of Sahel States, with expanded commitments in security, economic, and cultural cooperation and stated ambitions to develop a common currency independent of the CFA franc (Modern Diplomacy, 2024). On 29 January 2025, following a rejected six-month extension offer, the AES states completed their formal withdrawal from ECOWAS, the West African regional bloc all three had helped found in 1975, in what the Amani Africa (2025) analysis describes as the most significant crisis in West African regional integration since ECOWAS's founding. The literature is divided on how to interpret these developments. Some scholarship, exemplified by the Tricontinental (2025) dossier and Peoples Dispatch (2025) reporting, situates the AES within a broader anti-imperialist and Pan-Africanist tradition tracing back to Nkrumah, framing the alliance's turn to Russia as an assertion of sovereignty against enduring French neocolonial extraction. Other scholarship, exemplified by the International Crisis Group (2025) and the Policy Center for the New South (n.d.), is more cautious, noting that the AES's consolidation of authoritarian governance, deteriorating security indicators despite the change of external partner, and near-total

dependence on a single alternative patron complicate any straightforward narrative of achieved sovereignty.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an integrated theoretical framework combining three complementary perspectives: Nkrumah's theory of neocolonialism, structural realist theory of great-power competition, and Active Non-Alignment (ANA) theory. Each addresses a different dimension of the phenomenon under study, and together they permit a more complete explanation than any single theory could provide in isolation.

Nkrumah's Theory of Neocolonialism

Kwame Nkrumah's *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965) provides the foundational conceptual vocabulary for analysing the persistence of external control over formally sovereign African states. Nkrumah (1965) argued that the essence of neocolonialism is that a state subject to it is, in theory, independent and possesses all the outward trappings of international sovereignty, while in reality its economic system and political direction remain controlled from outside, whether through public debt, conditional foreign aid, foreign direct investment, or asymmetric trade arrangements. Nkrumah maintained that foreign capital under neocolonial conditions is deployed for the exploitation, rather than the development, of the dependent state, with profits repatriated to the investing power rather than reinvested locally (PolSci Institute, 2026). Applied to the Sahel, neocolonial theory illuminates the historical grievance against French influence, encapsulated in the CFA franc arrangement and

Orano's decades-long, and by several accounts disproportionately favourable, control of Nigerien uranium extraction (E-International Relations, 2016). Critically, however, the theory's analytical power is not confined to the French relationship; it equally provides the conceptual tools to interrogate whether Russia's Africa Corps presence, secured in exchange for preferential access to Malian gold refining and potential Nigerien uranium assets, is itself reproducing a neocolonial structure under a different flag, an application some proponents of the AES's official narrative are reluctant to acknowledge.

Structural Realism and Great-Power

Competition

Structural (neo)realist theory, most closely associated with the Waltzian tradition in international relations, treats the international system as anarchic and predicts that great powers will compete for relative influence, security, and resources, often through the cultivation of client-state relationships in the developing world. Within this lens, Sahelian juntas are best understood not simply as passive objects of manipulation, but as rational actors making strategic calculations about regime survival within a competitive systemic environment: facing an existential insurgency and diminishing confidence in French security guarantees, the juntas identified Russia as an alternative external balancer willing to provide security assistance without the explicit governance conditionalities historically attached by Western and multilateral partners. This framework helps explain the timing and sequencing of the Sahel's realignment, aligning closely with the observed

pattern in which the deterioration of French counter-terrorism outcomes and the political fallout of repeated coups directly preceded, rather than followed, the turn to Wagner (RUSI, 2024).

Active Non-Alignment Theory

Active Non-Alignment (ANA) theory, developed most extensively in the Latin American context but increasingly applied to other post-hegemonic regional contexts including Turkey, reconceives non-alignment for a multipolar era as the strategic, issue-by-issue diversification of partnerships across competing powers rather than formal equidistance or passive neutrality (All Azimuth, 2025). Under ANA, regional cooperation and even close security partnership with one power need not, in principle, be interpreted as a rejection of non-alignment, provided the state retains genuine optionality, meaning the practical capacity to renegotiate, limit, or exit the relationship without catastrophic cost to regime survival. This framework is analytically valuable for the Sahel case because it avoids the binary trap of classifying the AES states as either fully non-aligned or fully client states; instead, it directs attention to the empirical question of optionality, namely whether Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger retain the structural capacity to diversify beyond Russia, or whether their security dependence has foreclosed that option in practice.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design based on documentary and desk-based research. Given the security constraints that make direct fieldwork in active conflict zones in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger impractical and ethically fraught for an external researcher, and given that

the phenomenon under study is fundamentally a matter of documented state and inter-state behaviour rather than individual attitudes requiring survey instruments, a qualitative documentary design employing thematic content analysis is judged the most appropriate and rigorous approach available.

Data were drawn from three categories of secondary sources. The first category comprises reports and investigations by credible international human-rights and humanitarian bodies, including the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, used principally to establish the empirical record of civilian harm associated with Wagner Group operations. The second category comprises policy analysis and reporting from established think tanks and research institutions, including the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Royal United Services Institute, the International Crisis Group, the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and the Institut Montaigne, used to establish the strategic and political narrative of French disengagement and Russian engagement. The third category comprises specialized and academic commentary on non-alignment theory, neocolonialism theory, and Active Non-Alignment, drawn from peer-reviewed and encyclopaedic sources, used to construct the theoretical framework. Data collection was conducted through systematic keyword-based searches covering the period 2014–2025, with particular attention to primary event documentation (coup dates, treaty signings, troop deployment

figures) cross-verified across at least two independent sources wherever possible.

The collected material was analysed using qualitative thematic content analysis. Documents were coded inductively around four recurring themes identified during an initial reading: (i) security dependency and troop/personnel deployment patterns, (ii) sovereignty and non-alignment rhetoric in official AES and Sahelian government statements, (iii) documented human-rights outcomes associated with Wagner Group/Africa Corps operations, and (iv) resource-governance arrangements linked to security cooperation. These themes were then organized chronologically to construct a coherent timeline (Section 6.1) before being synthesized analytically against the theoretical framework developed in Section 4. This approach follows standard practice in qualitative policy and international-relations research, in which pattern identification and theoretical triangulation, rather than statistical generalization, constitute the primary analytical objective.

Because this study relies exclusively on secondary, publicly available documentary sources, it does not raise direct human-subjects ethical concerns; however, care was taken to represent contested claims, particularly regarding casualty figures and attributions of responsibility for civilian harm, with appropriate epistemic caution, favouring documented ranges over single disputed figures wherever original sources diverged. A key methodological limitation, elaborated further in Section 8, is that reliance on secondary sources produced predominantly by Western, Malian-

government, or Russian-aligned outlets introduces potential source bias in both directions, and independent verification within an active conflict zone characterized by severe press-freedom restrictions remains inherently difficult.

Discussion Of Finding

Timeline: From Serval to the AES

Confederation (2014–2025)

The empirical trajectory examined in this study can be organized into four broad phases. The first phase (2014–2020) is characterized by sustained but strategically inconclusive French-led counter-terrorism operations under Barkhane, during which the insurgency spread from northern Mali into the tri-border area shared with Burkina Faso and Niger, and popular anti-French sentiment began to accumulate visibly, particularly in Burkina Faso. The second phase (2020–2022) is defined by a cascading sequence of military coups, beginning in Mali in August 2020 and May 2021, followed by Burkina Faso's twin coups in January and September 2022, during which incoming juntas publicly questioned the value of the French security partnership and, in Mali's case, opened direct negotiations with Wagner from late 2021. The third phase (2022–2023) saw the effective collapse of the French security architecture: France's withdrawal from Mali in August 2022, the formal end of Barkhane in November 2022, expulsion from Burkina Faso by February 2023, and Niger's July 2023 coup followed by France's withdrawal from Niger through the remainder of that year (Institut Montaigne, 2024; FPRI, 2023). The fourth phase (2023–2025) is defined by regional institutionalization: the September 2023 Charter of

Liptako-Gourma establishing the AES, the July 2024 upgrade to a Confederation, and the January 2025 completion of withdrawal from ECOWAS, alongside the parallel formalization of Wagner into the state-controlled Africa Corps structure (Tricontinental, 2025; Lawfare, 2024).

The Wagner/Africa Corps Footprint and Regime Dependency

Analysis of the deployment pattern indicates a trajectory of deepening, rather than diversifying, security dependency. Wagner's initial Malian deployment of several hundred personnel in December 2021 had, by December 2024, evolved into a combined Wagner/Africa Corps presence estimated at roughly 2,500 personnel in Mali alone, with parallel deployments extending to Burkina Faso from early 2024 and Niger from April 2024 (Lawfare, 2024). This expansion occurred despite, rather than because of, any improvement in the underlying security situation; JNIM and Islamic State-affiliated groups continued to conduct high-casualty attacks throughout the period, including a September 2024 assault on multiple targets in Bamako, the Malian capital, that killed an estimated 77 to 100 people and struck facilities associated with both the Malian army and Wagner forces directly (Wikipedia, 2024, citing contemporaneous reporting). The persistence and expansion of Russian deployment despite continued insurgent success suggests that the juntas' calculation is oriented less toward a demonstrated superiority of the Russian counter-insurgency model and more toward the political utility of a security partner perceived as unconditional, willing to protect the regime itself rather than merely the state's territorial

integrity, a distinction with direct implications for the character of the resulting dependency.

France's Declining Leverage and the Politics of Exit

France's disengagement from the Sahel was not a single unilateral decision but a cumulative process driven by successive ruptures with each of the three juntas. The Institut Montaigne (2024) assessment concludes that although French forces achieved numerous tactical successes against jihadist leadership over nearly a decade, the underlying political economy of the conflict, including corruption, communal grievance, and weak state legitimacy, was left largely unaddressed, undermining the durability of military gains. RUSI's (2024) analysis further situates this outcome within the specific legacy of France's colonial relationship with Mali, arguing that residual perceptions of French tutelage constrained the Malian government's political space to be seen cooperating closely with Paris even where security cooperation might otherwise have been in the state's interest. The consequence was a rapid loss of French leverage once individual juntas moved to expel French forces: Burkina Faso's January 2023 ultimatum requiring French withdrawal within one month, and Niger's abrogation of bilateral defence accords following the July 2023 coup, both proceeded with minimal apparent capacity on France's part to negotiate continued access (Atlas of Wars, 2023; FPRI, 2023).

Sovereignty Rhetoric versus Dependency Reality

Applying the Active Non-Alignment criterion of retained optionality developed in Section 4.3, the evidence presents a mixed picture. On one hand, the

AES states have demonstrably diversified away from exclusive French dependency: withdrawal from ECOWAS, from the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (Mali, March 2025), and from the CFA franc zone in stated intent, alongside diplomatic outreach to China, Turkey, and Gulf states, indicate a genuine broadening of the partner set beyond a simple Paris-to-Moscow substitution (WorldAtlas, 2026; Policy Center for the New South, n.d.). On the other hand, the concentration of security guarantees, and specifically regime-protection functions, almost exclusively in Russian hands represents precisely the kind of narrowed optionality that both realist and ANA frameworks would flag as inconsistent with substantive non-alignment. The AES's own internal frictions, including the April 2025 diplomatic rupture with Algeria after Malian forces accused Algiers of shooting down a Malian military drone, and unresolved tensions with Côte d'Ivoire and Benin over alleged destabilization plots, further indicate that the bloc's external security posture has not been matched by comparable diplomatic capacity to manage regional relationships independently of its core Russian partnership (WorldAtlas, 2026).

The Human Cost of Realignment

The human-security consequences of the France–Russia realignment are substantial and well-documented. The Moura massacre remains the starkest single episode: the OHCHR-led investigation, corroborated by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, found reasonable grounds to believe that at least 500 people were unlawfully executed by Malian armed forces and

foreign, credibly identified as Russian, personnel between 27 and 31 March 2022, alongside documented sexual violence against 58 women and girls (Amnesty International, 2023; UN News, 2023). CSIS (2022) analysis further finds that civilian fatalities in the Malian conflict rose disproportionately following Wagner's arrival, a pattern the organization attributes to the group's demonstrated *modus operandi* in other theatres including the Central African Republic, Libya, and Syria. Malian authorities have consistently rejected these findings, characterizing the UN report as a politicized 'instrumentalization' of human rights, and opened an espionage investigation against parties associated with its publication (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This pattern of denial and lack of independent accountability mechanisms is itself a significant analytical finding: it indicates that the shift away from French partnership has not been accompanied by an equivalent, or even comparable, external human-rights oversight architecture, leaving affected civilian populations with substantially reduced avenues for redress relative to the Barkhane-era environment, however imperfect that earlier environment also was.

The Resource Dimension: Gold, Uranium, and Strategic Leverage

Resource governance constitutes a further dimension through which the neocolonialism/non-alignment tension can be assessed empirically. In Mali, the government signed an agreement with Russia in November 2023 to construct a new gold refinery intended to triple the country's domestic gold-refining capacity, a project widely interpreted as compensation, at least in part, for continued

Russian security assistance (Lawfare, 2024). In Niger, the trajectory has been especially pronounced: following the July 2023 coup, the ruling CNSP suspended, and by June 2024 formally revoked, the operating licence of French nuclear fuel producer Orano at the major Imouraren uranium deposit, one of the largest in the world, and by June 2025 moved to nationalize Orano's Somair mine outright, with reporting indicating Niger had by late 2025 entered negotiations with non-French buyers, explicitly excluding any French entities from the process (Al Jazeera, 2024, 2025; ThinkBRICS, 2025). Contemporaneous reporting also documented Russian state nuclear company Rosatom's interest in acquiring Orano's former assets, although Rosatom itself publicly denied specific acquisition plans (Global Security, n.d.). This pattern illustrates the double-edged character of the realignment: the AES states have successfully asserted greater domestic control over strategic resource rents previously captured disproportionately by French firms, a substantive achievement consistent with anti-neocolonial objectives, yet the pattern of preferential access extended to Russian-linked entities in the security-cooperation context raises the analytically important question of whether resource sovereignty is being reclaimed in the abstract only to be re-mortgaged, in practice, to a different external patron.

Synthesis: Theorizing Sahelian Non-Alignment

Drawing together the preceding analysis, the study finds that Sahelian non-alignment since 2020 is best characterized as a partially achieved, asymmetric hedging strategy rather than either a fully realized condition of foreign-policy autonomy or a simple,

complete transfer of dependency from France to Russia. Consistent with structural realist expectations, the juntas' initial turn to Wagner represented a rational response to a perceived security guarantee failure by France, undertaken under conditions of genuine strategic constraint. Consistent with Nkrumahist neocolonial theory, however, the resulting security relationship has generated resource concessions and an accountability deficit that replicate structural features of the very dependency the AES states claim to be transcending, even as the specific external patron has changed. Assessed against the Active Non-Alignment criterion of retained optionality, the AES states demonstrate meaningful diversification in diplomatic and institutional terms, evidenced by withdrawal from ECOWAS and the Francophonie and outreach to non-Western partners beyond Russia, but a marked concentration, rather than diversification, of hard security guarantees in Russian hands. The overall pattern suggests that the language of sovereignty and non-alignment deployed by AES governments functions simultaneously as a genuine political project with real institutional consequences and as a legitimating discourse that partially obscures the depth of the new security dependency it has helped create.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the impact of the Wagner Group/Africa Corps and the broader France–Russia rivalry on the foreign policy posture of non-aligned states in the Sahel between 2014 and 2025. The evidence assembled demonstrates that the period witnessed a fundamental reordering of the region's external security architecture: French

military disengagement, driven by a combination of strategic underperformance and accumulated political rupture with successive juntas, created a vacuum rapidly filled by Russian private, and subsequently state-directed, military power. The resulting Alliance of Sahel States has achieved genuine and consequential gains in institutional and diplomatic autonomy, including withdrawal from ECOWAS and increased domestic control over strategic resource rents previously dominated by French firms. At the same time, the depth and character of the AES states' security dependence on Russia, compounded by well-documented human-rights abuses associated with Wagner Group operations and a persistent accountability deficit, indicate that the region's declared non-alignment remains only partially realized in practice. The study concludes that non-alignment in the contemporary Sahel is most accurately understood not as neutrality between competing blocs, in the classical Cold War sense, but as an actively pursued, structurally constrained hedging strategy whose ultimate trajectory, toward greater strategic autonomy or toward a reconfigured dependency, remains, as of 2025, an open and consequential

question for the region's future.

Recommendation

External partners face a narrowing set of levers for influencing Sahelian security outcomes given the AES governments' rejection of Western military tutelage; analysts increasingly recommend selective, interest-based engagement on humanitarian access, education, and civilian-domain cooperation rather than efforts to reverse the security realignment outright (EUISS, 2025). International human rights mechanisms should continue prioritizing independent documentation of abuses attributed to Wagner, Africa Corps, and state forces, given the demonstrated pattern of domestic impunity (HRW, 2024; OHCHR, 2025). The severe underfunding of the region's humanitarian response just 32 percent of UNHCR's 2025 appeal represents an urgent, largely apolitical gap donor states could address independent of the more contested question of security-sector realignment (UNHCR, 2025a). Finally, extractive-sector firms should anticipate continued resource nationalism across the AES bloc and weigh the legal risks of arrangements perceived locally as asymmetric (African Law & Business, 2025).

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