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The Sahel Crisis: The Emergence of Moscow Influence and the Decline of Paris Sphere of control

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to uncover recent political developments in relation to the extraordinary and unprecedented rupture between important States in the Sahel region of West Africa and France. This work also highlights the circumstances surrounding the most disturbing features of the turn of events, which stem from the fact that not only did these West African countries share cultural, political, and historical backgrounds with France as former colonies, but their social economic development was tightly and practically subservient to the French government. Many

were surprised by the remarkable face-off between the Sahel States, as well as how they took turns in their abrupt shift in policies and massive breakaway from France to Russia, which was viewed as a more stable partner. To this purpose, the article attempts to look into and investigate the rate of development in terms of the different bilateral agreements that have emerged between Russia and these countries. More crucially, these articles examine the extent to which these partnerships impair the sovereignty of these States.

Keywords: Sahel Crisis, Moscow Influence, France Sphere of Control, West African Crisis, Colonies

Introduction

It is a common knowledge that since independence, one of the pronounced features of African geopolitics over the years has always been the subject of incessant crisis which is a direct consequence of political instability. In connection to this backdrop, most African States to a large extent still retain and maintain close ties and relationship with their former European colonial masters. Some of these ties come in the form of trade and investment as well as defence pact. As a matter of facts some of these deals and arrangements are structured through political puppet who only serve the interest of these Europeans powers. This reality is not far fetch and likely traceable to some West African states particularly in the Sahel states such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger Republic. In effect to the subjugation, imbalance and lopsided relationship with the Europeans, the Sahel states has greatly suffered from the stronghold of France policies which only amount to economic exploitation. It is worth to mention that these master servant arrangements also comes with condition of defence and security guarantee on the part of France and by extension the European Union. Following the turn of events, the inability of France to provided and ensure absolute security in the regions from the chains and grip of serial terrorist groups was cited as a complete failure ^[1, 2].

The failure of France and its puppet governments in the region opened up the way for the military coup that swept through Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger Republic. These military interventions did not escape huge criticism from both regional and international communities. Regardless of the critical comments and condemnation from various States and Non-State actors, one cannot deny the fact that the military junta witnessed in the Sahel regions is a direct result of not only bad governance and undue influence of the European power but also, the huge failure of France to secure the regions from the wimp and crimp of the serial terrorist groups that were in operation in the regions for years. These terrorist activities were in no doubt at the expense of the people who solely depend on the government to provide them with the necessary protection. On the contrary, the civilian governments had completely cast their dependence on French authority. They were alleged to be corrupt and have practically lost control of securing the region for its people. Hence, the military seizure of power in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger Republic respectively ^[1, 3].

In clear terms, it is safe to highlight despite the various outcry by external actors against the military leaders of these various states, two major achievements can be ascribed to these leaders. First is the fact that, it has the overwhelming support of the population. This is what defies all condemnation, criticism and sanctions particularly from ECOWAS and the international community. Another significant dimension to their achievement is marked in their decision to shift their policy direction away from west specifically France and by extension the European Union. The military leadership of Ibrahim Traore, Assimi Goita and Abdourahamane Tiani respectively turns to Russia where they signed a more robust and comprehensive security arrangement. This also came at a time when Russia is confronted with unilaterally imposed sanctions from the United States and the collective west. This is a big win for Moscow in the sense that it marks the unprecedented decline of France's sphere of control in the region of its former colony. A unique and swift emergence of Russia's influence in the African and in the Sahel in particular ^[1, 4].

This birth the dawn of a new era and the rising influence of Russia's economic and socio-political prowess among the Sahel states which were highly "francophone" by their lingua status. Russia is viewed as a reliable partner on the basis of transparency and **mutual respect in its relations to other countries of the world**. This was one of the key underlying factors that edged in Moscow's position in western and central African countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger Republic and Central Africa Republic ^[5]. Hence, the paper work looks at the Sahel states in turn.

Research Methodology

The source of data for this paperwork is based on major secondary methods of data collection. This includes published articles, newspapers, journals and other related sources.

The study also makes use of descriptive and analytical methods in building up the structure of its arguments.

Theoretical Framework

In this work, conflict theory is adopted as the most suitable paradigm within which to situate analysis. Incompatible goals result into conflicts. Such conflicts come as a result

of contradictions within the society concerned. The conflict also plays the functions of bringing such contradiction into sharp focus. Relations within and between nations are characterised by conflicts. In the most general sense, it arises when two individuals, social group or political unit struggle over the same properties or incompatible goals.

Conflicts among international actors has numerous dimensions. The attempt by a nation to reproduce its political ideology. In other nations, psychological differences such as hate, fear, hatred, minor.

Definitions of Terms

Sahel: A region in the Western part of Africa

Multipolar: The concentration of power among more than two states

Hegemony: Dominance of a political power by one state

Francophone: French speaking

Lingua franca: Commonly adopted language

Sanction: Official penalty for violating a rule or law

Subjugation: To be in dominance.

The Crisis in Mali and the Rise of Military Junta

The civil crisis in Mali from the West African geopolitical lens, it is safe to say that the crisis is not unconnected to the ethno-religious differences between the northern and southern axis of the country. This is no doubt one of the attributes that characterised the geopolitics within the region. This springs of ethno-religious chords gave the ground for the emergence of several insurgent groups in the country. In wake of January 2012, factions of these groups seek the narrative to fight for the autonomy of the northern Azawad region to be recognised as separate independent entity ^[6, 7].

The height of the crisis was magnified following the influx of some terrorist groups who had taken advantage of the situation to assert a strong network presence and control of the vulnerability of the states. According to the report from the US Department of State Country Annual Reports on Terrorism it was revealed that *"terrorist groups active in Mali included ISIS-Sahel (formerly ISIS-GS), and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). ISIS-Sahel's actions over the reporting period demonstrated its intention to establish territorial control in the Sahel"* ^[8].

The long time presence and incessant activities of the serial terrorist groups seem to be an intense difficult knot for the Malian government to crack. Following the growing influence and the stronghold of terrorism within and around this sphere of the region, the general notion then became clear in the minds of the citizenry that the civilian government in power was extremely weak and overwhelmed to take on these groups. Hence, the intervention of military coup led by Vice President Assimi Goita that saw the overthrow of Bah N'daw government along with some of his ministers out of power in 2021. Afterward, the country had witnessed series of military coup on the ground of countering terrorism and extremism in the states and along its borders.

The in-out succession of several military governments in Mali turns out to be some sort of a regional concern and also to a greater degree attracted world attention. In light of this view, the military junta came under strong criticism before other African leaders as well the international community. To this end, several transition plans to civil rule on multiple occasions had come under absolute fruition.

Against this backdrop, Mali was suspended from regional and other intergovernmental organization such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), African Union, (AU) and was also suspended from the European Union capacity building mission and the European Union training mission. All of which were build-up attempts to force the military hand over power to a democratic government. The military regime also came under immense pressure from the Europeans and France inclusive; former colonial master^[9].

It is imperative to mention that France has a military base in Mali with significant amount of its troops in the country. However, the French military presence did not achieve any meaningful gains and as a matter of fact it technically failed to reassert itself to provide the much needed support to bring about peace and stability in the country against the onslaught of terrorism ravaging the country. As a result of this unconvincing success of France with regards to defeat ISIS-GS and JNIM terrorist group, the military power in Bamako then decides to shift its policies and political ties away from France; its former colonial master to a more strategic military power Russia which it considered more reliable in terms of its foreign policy approach.

Russia's foreign policy is anchored on the principle of mutual respect with all its foreign partners and couple with its drive to push and create a multi-polar world system which provides alternative to countries especially from the global south. Moscow concepts and approach towards Africa's development strongly align with the Malian government in terms of economic growth and political stability. This bilateral relation also comes in addition to the facts that it provides a safe haven for the military leader in the face of threats and sanctions from the Europeans, ECOWAS and AU. Between April and September 2021, Mali had received a total of 6 Russian helicopters and weapons; a move that birthed a new era in Russian influence in Africa among the Sahel countries. The North African Post has it that.

“The Malian government reportedly entered into discussions with the Russian Wagner Group late last year and, in December 2021, its military instructors began deploying in the landlocked West African country. Meanwhile, the French army is in the final stages of withdrawing from Mali, announced by French President Emmanuel Macron in February, following increasing tensions with Mali's military government and concerns over Mali working with Russian mercenaries”.

Jihadist Insurgency and Military Coup in Burkina Faso

The dawn of 30th September 2022, saw the outbreak of another military coup d'etat in Burkina Faso which is one of the Sahel countries; located in the northwest border of Mali. The interim government of President Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damimba was ousted on the ground of its inability to effectively square up with the Islamist insurgency which has massively gained ground and successfully launching its deadly activities in the country. Some of the profound records traceable to the Jihadist insurgency revealed that the Jihadist activities had led to the death of over 10,000 civilians and over 2 million people displaced from their homes^[10].

In a similar trend just as in the case of Mali, the weakness and corruption that characterised the civilian government

resulted to the emergence of Captain Ibrahim Traore; a military leader to the seat of power as the new interim leader in Burkina Faso. This reality is preceded by the inability of two successive governments to curb the violence associated with the Islamic States and Al-Qaeda. His political declaration came with the aim to navigate the course of the country to counter terrorism that has long bedevilled the country and the region by extension. In similar vein with that of his Malian counterpart, the interim government of Captain Traore was pressured to map the transitional plan to civil rule in July 2024; however, this was an endeavour which prospect is uncertain as far as the political and socio-security situation in the country is concerned^[11].

Subsequently, Captain Ibrahim Traore made a public statement against the background that French policies are the problems of Africa. He was of the opinion that French policies had been ineffective in helping its army in the fight against terrorism and militant insurgency in the country. He expelled France's ambassador, terminated the existing bilateral defence agreement on the premise that the French troops had not supported regional hostage-rescue mission, and rescue counterterrorism operation mission and security operation. In effect to this, after several political moves and calculations, the French government finally decides to withdraw its troops from its former colony^[12].

The anti-French sentiment gathered a massive momentum in the country. This does not only give a boost to the chief military leader but also goes a long way to defy the various condemnations and criticisms from the various state actors from the international community. The overwhelming support of the population further strengthened and legitimized the power of military chief among his people. In effect to this, the leadership of Captain Ibrahim Traore freely formulates policies which followed a similar path of his counterpart in Bamako. This was a political move that was born out of the convincing and strategic achievements that were evident between Mali and Russia in terms of security stability^[13].

Nine months after French operations in the West African country, the military cooperation between Ouagadougou and Moscow has accelerated rapidly into a practical reality. This was evident during the 2023 Russia – African summit at St Petersburg when Captain Ibrahim Traore made an open support to President Vladimir Putin amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine. On the flip side, President Putin reciprocated with plans to reopen the Russian embassy in Burkina Faso. This marks the birth of a vital bilateral relationship between the two countries. By and large, this marked another outstanding record win for Russia's growing influence in the former French colony^[14].

Military Coup in Niger Republic

The wave of military coup in West Africa spread like a wild fire within the space of five years. Niger Republic was added to the list of Sahel francophone countries in the sub-region whose civilian government was hijacked and toppled in a military junta led by General Abdourahmane Tchiani who was the presidential guard commander. He made a public self-proclamation as the new leader of the country following the successful coup d'etat which detained President Mohamed Bazoum and ousted him from power. This announcement which came from the country's administrative seats on 26 July 2023 was premised on a similar notion of government highhandedness and corruption,

inability to combat the jihadist influx and more importantly, France heavy exploitation of the country's mineral resources with no corresponding returns to ensure growth and development of the country. This consequently leaves the country's economy way too poor that it attracted massive resentment from the people of Niger Republic against the presence of Paris's picketing in the state's affairs. This is also tied to the fact that France; former colonial master has long decades of military base with well over 1500 troops in the country did not demonstrates strong policies and action to show it solidarity in the fight against the extremist jihadists group^[15-17].

In turn of events, General Abdourahamane Tchiani took an exact policy direction which was in tune with that of his counterparts in Mali and Burkina Faso. His leadership came under intense fire and brimstone of criticism from regional intergovernmental organisation such as the African Union and ECOWAS in which Niger Republic forms part of it member states. Ample of several threats ranging from economic sanctions to down its membership status. Besides, issuing sanctions, economic and political threats, ECOWAS under the chairmanship of President Bola Tinubu of Nigeria in Collaboration with it Ghanaian counterpart took further steps to declare military intervention against General Abdourahamane Tchiani leadership. These idea was strongly flaws given the potential escalation of the crisis into a full fledge war in the region. The possibility of war was high considering the facts that other "Sahelian" military government in Mali and Burkina Faso had declared their unreserved military support to General Abdourahamane Tchiani should ECOWAS proceeds with it intended military intervention^[18].

More importantly, one of the defining features just like that of the Burkina Faso, is the reality that western criticism, pressure and threats from regional and sub-regional organisation came to a total fruition. This is also based on the glaring fact that military leadership had the massive support of the people who in their millions were willing to resist every threats and element of France in their polity. This was the prevailing notion among the populace that, the ousted President Mohamed Bazoum was seen as puppet of France's government. To this end, the overwhelming support of the Nigerien people encouraged General Abdourahamane Tchiani to issued a public statements which demands the dismissal of French Ambassador Sylvain Itte and also gave an ultimatum ordering the total withdrawal of French troops from its territory. This order met push back from the French government. In consequence, this attracted frequent attack of French military base in the country. However, the continuous solidarity of the people who demonstrates their resistance against Paris took to the street displaying and waving the Russian flag to depict their common shift of alliance towards Moscow. This was perceive as a massive blow to the French government. On 22 December 2023, France completed the evacuation of its last set of troops from the country ending the long decades of military ties in Niger.

Not so long before the complete evacuation of French troops, the chief military leader; General Abdourahamane Tchiani received the Russian deputy defence minister, Colonel General Yunus-bek Yevkurov to the country. The visit revealed the strengthening of defence cooperation with Moscow. Russia further announced the commencement of

other deals in energy, humanitarian aid, and other trade relations with Niger republic. This is obviously another major score points to the hats to Russia in the face of France's fall out in the Sahel^[18].

The Russian Factor in Central African Republic

The situation in Bangui did not follow the exact immediate trends with regards to military coup de etat in Mali and Burkina Faso. However, let it be mentioned that Central African Republic had its own share of military intervention in it politic system. The last military coup was on March 2003 which saw the emergence of General Francios Bozize on the seat of power in Bangui. A move that ousted the then President Ange-Felix Pattase out of power. Ten years after, following the failure of political transition, on 24 March 2013, the Seleka rebel group which comprises the Muslim minority and the Christian Anti Balaka coalition took the Capital, with the self -acclaimed leadership of Michel Djotodia. The President; General Francios Bozize fled to Cameroon. Shortly after the seizure of power by the rebel leader; Michel Djotodia. The country was wrecked in intense crisis. This call for the intervention of Economic Community of Central African States (CEEAC) and MPs of several countries, Michel Djotodia resigned on 10 January 2014 and this gave the ground for the transition council to choose Mayor Catherine Samba as the interim president on 20 January 2014. This does not stop the Anti Balaka attack against the Muslims civilian^[19].

The interim leadership of samba on March 2016, birth the process which saw the ascension of Faustin-Archange Toudera as the newly elected President of Central African Republic. In December 2017 barely a year into his administration, he led Bangui into a strategic ties and partnership with Moscow in the area of supply of light weaponry as a way to step it advantage and control against rebel groups in the middle of a protracted conflict. Since then the world have witnessed the growing influence of Russia in Central African Republic^[19].

The failure of the west with regards to their actions or inaction to solidify long standing solutions to the conflicts bedevilling country opened the opportunity to Bangui to seek 'military or security solution" from Moscow. As a result Russia's first arms deliveries arrived the Bangui in 2018 along with military mercenaries such as the Wagner Group and other military advisers. They were charge with the responsibility as national security advisors, military trainers of personal bodyguards to the president. This approach to a great extent and by several indices of assessment provided the premise that to say that it paid off for both countries. Several bilateral agreement was reach with respect to brewery and gold mining in the country. Both countries also extend their cooperation in the area of socio-political ties. This moves also found massive reception among the population who demonstrated their support for Russia's role as a new international partner to provide stability in the country. This also signified as a dawn of a new era for the country particularly in terms of economic growth and socio security. Subsequently, during the 2023 Russo-African submit, the Russian President Vladimir Putin had a close door session with President Faustin Archange Toudera as they discussed further bilateral ties.

Conclusion

The rise of Russia's influence among the Sahel Francophone states, is an affirmation to the fact that Russia has successfully re-assert itself as one of the world's superpower to be reckoned with especially among countries from the global south. Africa inclusive. This is also affirm Moscow leading role in the creation of a multipolar world order. This is significant in the 21st century international trade system in the sense that Russia's economy is emerging so strongly in even in the phase of Western Sanction imposed by the US led collective west. This resilience gave credence to it standing in world politics. This position is evident in the 2023 Russo-Africa Summit where 47 African countries were in attendance. The summit opens platforms for key issues that borders on security and humanitarian aid to form part of the talking points of discussion. There also, President Vladimir Putin announced the cancellation of \$20 billion worth of debt from African countries. This further proof and demonstrates Moscow's solidarity and concern for African countries. Russia had also consistently echoed the need for the reform of the United Nations Security Council to accommodate Africa in its composition. This is yet another indication of Russia's quest for the contemporary world security architecture order to challenge existing UNSC structure.

Hence, Russia's diplomatic moves to secure military and defence agreement with the Sahel countries further proves its foreign policy with countries of the world is mainly based on the principle of mutual respects. This is unlike the France's whose approach is rooted in its colonial policy of assimilation which principle aim was not only to subjugate the African people but also to exploit and deny them of their resources which will guarantee growth and development.

Limitation of the study

The major limitation encountered is the method used in gathering data and inadequate availability of necessary data for the advancement of this study. Information of most data were not revealed as they were regarded as top secret.

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