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The Sahel as a New Theatre of Geopolitical Competition: Russia, China, the United States and Europe in an Emerging Multipolar Order

Oluyemi, Opeoluwa Adisa (PhD)^{1*}, Dada, Oluwamodupe²

^{1,2} Department of Political Science and International Relations, Achievers University, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria.

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***Corresponding author:** Oluyemi, Opeoluwa Adisa (PhD)

Abstract

The Sahel has emerged as an important arena of geopolitical competition as the decline of Western-led security arrangements intersects with military rule, persistent insecurity, sovereigntist politics and the growing influence of non-Western powers. This article examines how competition among Russia, China, the United States and Europe is reshaping security partnerships, external relations and the exercise of sovereignty in the region. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative comparative research design based on documentary analysis and a structured review of recent scholarly literature, policy documents and relevant secondary sources. It compares the interests, instruments and patterns of engagement of the four external actors while examining the responses of Sahelian governments, particularly Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The article introduces the concept of competitive sovereignty brokerage to explain how comparatively weaker states exploit competition among external powers to diversify partnerships, resist political conditionality and increase their diplomatic bargaining space. The analysis finds that the emerging regional order is better understood as competitive pluralisation than as a simple replacement of Western influence by Russia or China. Although multipolarity provides Sahelian governments with greater foreign-policy choice and relational autonomy, diversification does not automatically produce substantive sovereignty. New security, economic and diplomatic partnerships may reproduce external dependence when they fail to strengthen accountable institutions, productive capacity and regional cooperation. The article concludes that the long-term significance of geopolitical competition will depend on whether Sahelian states can convert expanded external choice into durable state capacity, developmental resilience and accountable security governance.

Keywords: Sahel; geopolitical competition; multipolarity; competitive sovereignty brokerage; African agency; strategic autonomy

Introduction

The contemporary Sahel has become one of the clearest sites through which the changing distribution of power in the international system can be observed. For much of the decade following the collapse of state authority in northern Mali in 2012, security governance in the region was organised around a predominantly Western-led architecture. France played the most visible military role through Operation Serval and, later, Operation Barkhane, while the European Union, the United States, the United Nations and regional initiatives such as the G5 Sahel contributed training, peacekeeping, intelligence support, development assistance and counterterrorism cooperation. The underlying assumption was that a combination of external military assistance, institution-building and development programmes could contain violent extremism while strengthening the authority of internationally recognised civilian governments. By the mid-2020s, however, the political and strategic foundations of that model had weakened considerably. The deterioration did not result from a single event. Rather, it reflected the accumulation of unresolved security, political and socioeconomic pressures. Jihadist organisations expanded across parts of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger despite years of external military involvement, while many communities continued to experience displacement, weak state presence and insecurity. These failures damaged the legitimacy of both national governments and their international partners. The resurgence of military coups further transformed the political environment. Mali experienced military takeovers in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso underwent two coups in 2022, and Niger's elected government was overthrown in 2023. These developments were not simply domestic interruptions to democratisation. They increasingly became connected to a wider political narrative in which sovereignty, security failure and resistance to foreign influence were presented as mutually reinforcing concerns. Habtom and Waller (2025), for example, interpret the recent coup wave partly through a renewed form of praetorianism in which military actors portray themselves as guardians of national survival amid both domestic insecurity and resentment of external influence.

Furthermore, popular attitudes have also played an important role in this transformation. The foreign-policy reorientation of several Sahelian governments cannot adequately be understood as an elite project imposed upon politically passive societies. Sandor and Berlingozzi (2025) demonstrate that civil-society actors in Burkina Faso and Niger have participated actively in constructing geopolitical narratives centred on sovereignty, Pan-Africanism and opposition to perceived neocolonial interference. In such narratives, reducing dependence on France and other Western actors has increasingly been associated with political emancipation and the recovery of national dignity. Yetimoğlu and Dağ (2025) similarly show how Mali's military authorities incorporated terrorism, sovereignty and neocolonialism into an increasingly formalised anti-Western discourse. The significance of these narratives is that they provide domestic political legitimacy for foreign-policy diversification while simultaneously redefining what external partnership means. This changing political environment has created new opportunities for non-Western actors. Russia has expanded its security and political presence by presenting itself as a partner willing to cooperate with military-led governments without making democratic transition a prerequisite for assistance. Its involvement has evolved from relationships

involving the Wagner Group toward more institutionalised state-linked arrangements, including the Africa Corps, military training and direct defence cooperation. Russian engagement in Africa is increasingly connected to a wider strategy involving military partnerships, diplomatic support, resource interests and the projection of great-power status (Bamidele, 2025; Bamidele & Erameh, 2025). In the Sahel specifically, Moscow's attraction lies partly in its ability to combine security assistance with a political discourse that emphasises sovereign equality and resistance to Western interference.

China has followed a markedly different path. Beijing has not generally sought to replicate the expeditionary counterterrorism model associated with France. Its influence has been built more gradually through infrastructure, natural-resource investment, trade, state-backed financing, diplomacy and defence cooperation. China's economic presence consequently gives it a form of structural influence that differs from Russia's more visible security role. Its emphasis on non-interference and continuity of economic relations also makes Beijing an attractive partner for governments seeking to diversify international relationships without accepting extensive political conditionality. The broader significance of Chinese engagement is therefore not simply that it offers an alternative to the West, but that it increases the number of external relationships through which Sahelian governments can pursue security, economic and diplomatic objectives. The United States has had to adjust to this changing landscape from a different starting point. American engagement in the Sahel was long shaped primarily by counterterrorism, intelligence cooperation and security assistance. Niger became particularly important because of its geographic location and its role in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations. The breakdown in relations following the 2023 coup, followed by the withdrawal of American forces in 2024, exposed the vulnerability of security strategies that depend heavily on stable bilateral relationships with individual governments. More broadly, recent scholarship suggests that Western sanctions and political conditionality have become less effective where military regimes can draw on alternative Russian military support or Chinese economic relationships (Lendzoumbou, 2025). The United States therefore confronts not only a problem of lost access but a wider challenge concerning how to remain strategically relevant without reducing African policy to competition with Moscow and Beijing.

Europe faces an even more profound reassessment. France's dramatic loss of influence in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has weakened a security architecture that had shaped wider European engagement for years. The European Union's approach linked counterterrorism, development, migration management and security-sector assistance, yet these policies increasingly appeared disconnected from local political expectations. Peccini (2025) argues that the EU's security-development approach often prioritised short-term concerns related to migration and counterterrorism while giving insufficient attention to deeper socioeconomic inequalities and political grievances. More recent analysis of France's security disengagement likewise points to strong preferences in parts of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso for greater diplomatic autonomy and more diversified external relationships (Fasinu et al., 2025). France's retreat should therefore be understood not simply as the withdrawal of military forces but as evidence of a broader crisis in the political assumptions that sustained European influence.

The resulting transformation is often described through the language of a renewed “scramble for Africa.” The metaphor captures the fact that external powers increasingly compete for diplomatic access, security partnerships, resources and political influence. Yet it also presents a serious analytical problem. Like its historical predecessor, the language of a scramble can implicitly reduce African states to territories over which stronger actors compete. Such a representation overlooks the strategic calculations of African governments and the ways in which changing international conditions can expand the bargaining options available to them. Recent scholarship on African sovereignty in a multipolar order therefore stresses that African states may either benefit from or become further subordinated by geopolitical competition depending on their ability to engage external powers strategically (Okoli, 2024). This article approaches the Sahel from that perspective. It argues that the region is not merely a passive arena of renewed great-power rivalry. Geopolitical competition also constitutes a political resource that Sahelian governments can use to renegotiate the terms of external engagement. Governments can change security partners, resist sanctions, obtain alternative diplomatic support and mobilise sovereignty narratives domestically. The growth of alternative partnerships therefore changes not only the distribution of external influence but also the bargaining relationship between comparatively weaker states and their traditional partners.

To conceptualise this process, this article introduces the notion of competitive sovereignty brokerage. Competitive sovereignty brokerage refers to the strategic use of rivalry among external powers by comparatively weaker governments to diversify foreign relationships, resist unwanted political conditions, secure material assistance and improve their bargaining position vis-à-vis existing patrons. Under these conditions, multipolarity becomes more than a structural description of the international system. It creates a market of geopolitical alternatives from which local governments can selectively draw. The concept, however, should not be interpreted as evidence that Sahelian states have achieved unrestricted strategic autonomy. Dependence remains deeply embedded in the political economy and security structures of the region. Arms, military training, intelligence capabilities, infrastructure finance, development resources and diplomatic backing continue to be supplied by external actors pursuing their own interests. Kapoor and Vasishta (2026) similarly caution that contemporary African multipolarity can widen policy options while leaving underlying structures of aid dependence, economic inequality and elite capture intact. The central paradox is therefore that diversification can expand a government's room for manoeuvre while simultaneously generating new forms of dependence.

This distinction is particularly important in the Sahel. A government that terminates a French military partnership and subsequently becomes heavily dependent on Russian security assistance may have increased its autonomy from Paris without necessarily strengthening its underlying sovereign capacity. Likewise, replacing Western finance with Chinese investment does not automatically create developmental autonomy if the domestic economy remains structurally dependent on externally financed infrastructure or commodity exports. Sovereignty must therefore be distinguished from simple freedom to change patrons. Against this background, this article asks: How has intensifying competition among Russia, China, the United States and Europe transformed external relations, security governance and the exercise of sovereignty in the Sahel? Three related questions structure the

analysis. It examines how the strategic interests and instruments of these external actors differ; how Sahelian governments exploit geopolitical competition to expand foreign-policy agency; and whether greater external choice strengthens substantive sovereignty and regional security or merely produces more diversified patterns of dependency.

This article advances two related arguments. First, the contemporary Sahel is not undergoing a straightforward geopolitical transition in which Russia or China simply replaces Western influence. Instead, the region is moving toward a more fragmented and plural external order in which different powers exercise influence across different domains. Russia has gained particular importance in security partnerships and regime protection; China retains substantial economic and infrastructural influence; the United States is reconsidering how to sustain security relationships after the loss of important operational access; and Europe is attempting to reconstruct its regional role following the decline of the earlier France-centred model. Second, the article argues that the resulting order is better understood as competitive pluralisation rather than geopolitical substitution. Competitive pluralisation describes an environment in which several external powers coexist and compete without any one actor necessarily achieving comprehensive dominance. Such an environment creates greater diplomatic choice for Sahelian governments, but the consequences of that choice remain conditional. Whether multipolarity contributes to genuine sovereignty depends ultimately on whether governments can convert diversified external relationships into stronger domestic institutions, territorial authority, accountable security governance and sustainable economic capacity.

The Sahel in the Literature: From Intervention to Geopolitical Competition

The scholarly literature on the contemporary Sahel has evolved considerably over the past decade. Earlier research was dominated by concerns about terrorism, weak state capacity, underdevelopment, border insecurity and external intervention. The 2012 crisis in Mali reinforced an interpretation of regional insecurity that placed considerable emphasis on jihadist expansion and the inability of fragile states to govern peripheral territories effectively. From this perspective, instability appeared to require stronger security institutions supported by external military and development assistance. France's Operation Serval and later Operation Barkhane, together with UN peacekeeping, European Union security missions, American counterterrorism assistance and the G5 Sahel framework, reflected this interpretation in practice. This policy architecture generated an extraordinary concentration of international security initiatives. Yet the persistence and subsequent geographical expansion of violent extremism revealed the limitations of an approach heavily focused on coercive capacity. Insurgent organisations adapted to military pressure, expanded into previously less affected areas and exploited local grievances relating to governance, marginalisation and state violence. Meanwhile, large sections of the population continued to experience poverty, weak public services, displacement and insecurity. Juvan (2024) argues that conflict across the Sahel emerges from the cumulative interaction of political, socioeconomic and security drivers rather than from a single deficit that can be resolved through military capacity alone. This helps explain why tactical improvements in counterterrorism did not

necessarily generate corresponding improvements in political legitimacy or state authority.

The failure of external intervention to produce sustainable security also altered domestic perceptions of foreign presence. Over time, frustration increasingly shifted from insurgent groups and national governments toward external actors themselves. In countries where thousands of foreign troops had been deployed for years without decisive improvements in security, the continued presence of external militaries became politically difficult to justify. The contradiction between extensive foreign engagement and persistent insecurity created fertile ground for claims that existing partnerships were ineffective, self-interested or fundamentally incompatible with genuine sovereignty. The return of military rule intensified this transformation. Contemporary scholarship increasingly treats the coup wave as part of a broader restructuring of political legitimacy rather than merely a sequence of interruptions to democratic rule. Habtom and Waller (2025) describe the resurgence of military governments as a renewed form of praetorianism in which officers claim guardianship over states facing severe security and governance crises. Their argument is particularly relevant to the Sahel because military elites have frequently justified their interventions not only by citing civilian governmental failure but by presenting existing international partnerships as part of the problem. Recent work on the Alliance of Sahel States extends this argument by linking military rule to attempts to construct alternative regional forms of sovereignty. Geröcs (2025) situates the emerging Sahel Confederation within a longer history of developmentalism and anti-imperialist politics, while Ojewale (2026) argues that the AES's effort to establish a unified security force represents a genuine departure from earlier externally driven security arrangements. At the same time, Ojewale cautions that assertions of militarised sovereignty remain constrained by fiscal fragility, insurgent mobility, civilian harm and regional isolation. These findings highlight a recurring tension between the symbolic politics of sovereignty and the institutional capacity required to exercise it. A related strand of scholarship examines the role of discourse and popular mobilisation in foreign-policy realignment. Yetimoğlu and Dağ (2025) show that Mali's anti-Western discourse is structured around terrorism, state sovereignty and neocolonialism. Importantly, such narratives should not be dismissed as simple propaganda. Sandor and Berlingozzi's (2025) field-based research in Burkina Faso and Niger demonstrates that civil-society actors actively contribute to the construction of geopolitical imaginaries centred on radical sovereignty and resistance to external domination. Their findings complicate explanations that attribute the decline of Western influence almost entirely to Russian disinformation. Russian narratives may reinforce anti-Western sentiment, but they operate within social and political contexts in which criticism of established foreign relationships already possesses substantial local foundations.

A second major literature examines Russia's return to Africa. Early analysis often emphasised arms sales, private military companies, political consultancy, natural resources and influence operations. More recent scholarship increasingly places these activities within the broader transition toward multipolarity. Bamidele (2025), for instance, argues that Russia's engagement in Africa connects military cooperation, sovereignty discourse and great-power competition. Bøås and Strazzari (2025) similarly caution against interpreting Moscow's African activities as evidence of a coherent territorial sphere of influence. Instead, they characterise Russian

engagement as a more opportunistic effort to construct a flexible sphere of interests through agreements with local partners. This interpretation is particularly useful in the Sahel, where Moscow often advances through openings created by deteriorating relationships between governments and Western actors. Research on China has generally developed along a different trajectory. Beijing's role has traditionally been analysed through economic statecraft, infrastructure, trade, resource investment and development finance. Unlike Russia, China has generally avoided positioning itself primarily as a guarantor of military regimes. Yet the growing strategic significance of infrastructure, arms transfers, digital systems and resource supply chains means that the economic and security dimensions of Chinese engagement can no longer be treated as entirely separate. China's emphasis on non-interference also has important political consequences in an environment where military governments seek partnerships free from democratisation conditions.

A third literature focuses on the erosion of Western influence. France has attracted particular attention because the scale and speed of its decline in the central Sahel have been remarkable. The breakdown of French relations with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger reflects not simply changing governmental preferences but a deeper crisis of legitimacy rooted in the history of postcolonial relations. Studies of French security disengagement increasingly highlight both anti-French sentiment and the desire for greater diplomatic diversification (Fasinu et al., 2025). Peccini (2025) similarly identifies important limitations in the European Union's security-development approach, particularly its concentration on short-term migration and security priorities. Western political conditionality has also become more difficult to enforce in a multipolar setting. Lendzoumbou's (2025) comparative study of military coups demonstrates that sanctions are most effective when regional and Western actors remain aligned and when coup regimes lack alternative sources of support. Their effectiveness declines when military governments can secure Russian security assistance or Chinese economic partnerships. This is analytically significant because it shows that great-power competition changes the domestic calculations of military regimes rather than merely altering foreign alignments.

Despite the rapid growth of this scholarship, two important gaps remain. First, studies often examine external powers in isolation. Separate literatures on Russia, China, France, the European Union and the United States provide valuable insights into individual strategies but can obscure how the presence of one actor changes the leverage and behaviour of others. Russian expansion, for example, cannot be understood fully without considering the decline of French legitimacy, while the effectiveness of Western sanctions cannot be evaluated independently of the availability of Chinese or Russian alternatives. Second, much of the language of great-power competition still risks positioning African states primarily as objects of external strategy. Recent scholarship is increasingly correcting this problem by foregrounding African agency, but the implications of that agency for bargaining under multipolarity remain underdeveloped. Okoli (2024) argues that African sovereignty in a changing world order will depend substantially on the capacity of African states to engage external powers strategically rather than merely becoming arenas of competition. This insight suggests that external rivalry should be analysed not only as a source of pressure but also as a potential resource available to local governments. This article therefore treats the Sahelian geopolitical environment relationally. Russia's

influence derives partly from the political spaces opened by Western retreat; China's economic importance affects the ability of governments to resist Western financial pressure; and Western attempts to promote constitutional governance take place in an international setting where alternative partners reduce the costs of diplomatic isolation. These relationships are interconnected. The literature thus points toward a broader analytical conclusion: geopolitical competition in the Sahel is not simply the coexistence of several foreign policies. It creates a bargaining environment in which external powers and Sahelian governments continuously adjust their behaviour in response to the availability of alternative partners. Understanding this environment requires moving beyond the question of which foreign actor is "winning" the Sahel and asking instead how competition itself restructures sovereignty, dependence and political agency.

Theoretical Framework: Competitive Sovereignty Brokerage in a Multipolar Order

The theoretical framework combines insights from neorealism, dependency approaches and scholarship on African agency. Each contributes a different element to explaining why the Sahel has become an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment and why the consequences of that competition are not determined solely by the preferences of major powers. Neorealism provides the systemic point of departure. International politics operates without a central authority capable of guaranteeing the security of states, and changes in the distribution of power therefore influence strategic choices and patterns of alignment. A movement away from concentrated Western power toward a more plural international order increases the number of actors capable of providing security assistance, economic resources and diplomatic support. Russia's renewed international activism, China's economic and technological rise and the increasing significance of other non-Western actors have consequently widened the strategic options available to African governments. For comparatively weaker states, this structural change can be politically consequential. Dependence on one dominant external partner limits bargaining capacity because rejecting that partner may impose prohibitively high costs. The presence of credible alternatives changes this calculation. Governments may renegotiate agreements, resist sanctions or threaten to shift partnerships because the political and material consequences of doing so are lower than in a more hierarchical international system. Lendzoumbou's (2025) analysis of sanctions following African military coups demonstrates this logic empirically: political pressure becomes less effective where regimes can access alternative external support. Neorealism nevertheless offers only a partial explanation. A framework centred exclusively on major-power competition risks reproducing the assumption that developments in the Sahel are local reflections of decisions taken in Moscow, Beijing, Washington or European capitals. It cannot fully explain why governments respond differently to similar international opportunities or how domestic political actors construct foreign-policy choices as expressions of sovereignty.

African agency scholarship provides an important corrective. States with relatively limited material capabilities are not necessarily passive. They can exploit rivalries among stronger powers, combine partnerships, resist unwanted conditions and use diplomatic positioning to increase their international relevance. Okoli (2024) argues that Africa's prospects in a multipolar system depend on how effectively states can convert global competition

into practical advantages while avoiding renewed objectification. This perspective shifts analytical attention away from asking what external powers are doing "to" the Sahel and toward examining how Sahelian actors themselves navigate and reshape geopolitical competition. The relevance of agency is particularly visible in the foreign-policy behaviour of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Their governments have not merely accepted the external partnerships available to them. They have terminated agreements, expelled troops, rejected sanctions, developed alternative regional institutions and actively constructed sovereignty narratives to justify foreign-policy change. The emergence of the AES similarly illustrates attempts to translate political dissatisfaction with existing regional and international arrangements into a new institutional project. Recent research nevertheless suggests that these initiatives remain constrained by insecurity, limited fiscal resources and weakened links with broader regional institutions (Aina et al., 2025; Ojewale, 2026). Agency, however, should not be equated automatically with autonomy. This is where dependency approaches become essential. The economies and security systems of many Sahelian states remain embedded in unequal global relationships. Governments depend upon external military hardware, training, investment, commodity markets, infrastructure finance and development resources. Changing external partners may therefore alter the political form of dependence without transforming its structural foundations. Kapoor and Vasishta (2026) capture this tension in their discussion of African developmental sovereignty. They argue that contemporary multipolarity may create opportunities for diversified partnerships while aid dependence, global economic asymmetries and weak domestic institutions continue to constrain policy autonomy. The theoretical implication is that a state can exercise greater diplomatic choice while remaining economically or militarily dependent.

This article develops the concept of competitive sovereignty brokerage to capture this combination of structural opportunity, local agency and continued dependency. Competitive sovereignty brokerage refers to the strategic use of rivalry among external powers by comparatively weaker governments to renegotiate the political and material conditions of their external relationships. It occurs where governments take advantage of competing offers of military assistance, investment, finance or diplomatic support to reduce the leverage of any single external actor. Such brokerage may operate in several ways. A government may shift security cooperation from one partner to another when political conditions become unacceptable. It may use access to alternative finance to withstand sanctions or development-aid suspensions. It may obtain diplomatic support from one external power to reduce the costs of confrontation with another. It may also deploy the symbolic value of a new partnership domestically, presenting foreign-policy diversification as evidence of recovered sovereignty. The recent politics of the Sahel provide particularly favourable conditions for this strategy because sovereignty and regime survival have become closely intertwined. Military governments face significant international pressure concerning democratic transition and constitutional rule. Western governments and regional organisations have historically used sanctions, aid suspensions and diplomatic isolation to influence such regimes. Russia's willingness to provide security assistance without comparable political conditionality, together with China's established preference for non-interference, reduces the costs of rejecting Western demands. Lendzoumbou (2025) shows that this availability of geopolitical

alternatives materially affects the effectiveness of anti-coup sanctions. Sovereignty narratives also increase the domestic political value of external diversification. Sandor and Berlingozzi (2025) demonstrate that foreign-policy change in Burkina Faso and Niger is connected to locally produced geopolitical imaginaries in which security and sovereignty are understood through opposition to perceived neocolonial domination. Governments can therefore derive legitimacy not only from the material assistance obtained through new partnerships but from the political act of demonstrating that established Western actors no longer possess privileged influence.

This is why competitive sovereignty brokerage differs from simple balancing. Classical balancing generally describes how states align against concentrations of power or perceived threats. Competitive sovereignty brokerage is more flexible. A state does not necessarily align permanently with one geopolitical bloc against another. Instead, it can maintain different external partners across different domains, using competition among them to preserve manoeuvrability. Such behaviour is particularly suited to an emerging multipolar order in which Russia may provide security assistance, China may provide infrastructure and investment, while Western or regional institutions remain important in trade, humanitarian assistance and development. The framework also differs from conventional non-alignment. Non-alignment historically sought to preserve distance from competing great-power blocs. Competitive sovereignty brokerage instead accepts extensive engagement with multiple powers but attempts to prevent any single relationship from becoming politically exclusive. The relevant form of agency therefore lies not in avoiding external involvement but in negotiating among competing sources of support. Nevertheless, the concept contains a fundamental contradiction. Competitive sovereignty brokerage can strengthen what this article terms relational autonomy without necessarily producing substantive sovereignty. Relational autonomy refers to the ability of a government to reduce dependence on, or resist pressure from, a particular external actor. Substantive sovereignty involves deeper capacities: effective territorial governance, fiscal autonomy, accountable institutions, domestic economic resilience and the ability to provide security without excessive reliance on external coercive resources. A military government that can compel French forces to leave its territory has clearly demonstrated a degree of relational autonomy. Yet if the same government remains dependent on another foreign security partner to confront domestic insurgencies, its substantive sovereign capacity may remain weak. Similarly, the ability to obtain Chinese or other external financing may provide leverage against Western donors while doing little to transform a narrow extractive economic structure.

Recent research on the AES illustrates the same tension at the regional level. Its emergence represents a genuine effort to reconstruct security governance around ideas of sovereign ownership, but Ojewale (2026) finds that its effectiveness remains limited by cross-border insurgency, fiscal fragility and the loss of broader regional cooperation. Hassan (2026) likewise argues that the AES withdrawal from ECOWAS represents a profound challenge to established West African regionalism while raising questions about whether regime-centred security cooperation can substitute for deeper economic and institutional integration. The distinction between relational autonomy and substantive sovereignty therefore provides an important analytical test. Foreign-policy diversification should not be evaluated simply by

counting the number of partners available to a government. Its significance depends on whether competition among external actors is converted into durable domestic and regional capacity.

The central theoretical proposition of this article follows from this argument: multipolar competition expands the external bargaining autonomy of Sahelian governments, but it strengthens substantive sovereignty only when diversified partnerships contribute to domestic state capacity, accountable security governance, economic resilience and effective regional cooperation. Where diversification primarily reinforces regime survival while leaving structural dependencies intact, multipolarity produces diversified dependence rather than strategic autonomy. This proposition allows the article to move beyond two competing but equally incomplete interpretations of contemporary Sahelian politics. The first portrays the region as a passive object of renewed great-power competition. The second treats the departure of Western powers and expansion of non-Western partnerships as evidence of straightforward sovereign emancipation. Competitive sovereignty brokerage occupies the analytical space between these positions. It recognises that Sahelian governments possess meaningful agency while insisting that agency operates within persistent material constraints. The framework therefore redirects attention from the question of which external power will dominate the Sahel toward a more consequential question: whether Sahelian states can transform geopolitical competition into institutional capacity rather than merely exchanging one form of external dependence for another. This provides the conceptual basis for the comparative examination of Russian, Chinese, American and European strategies in the sections that follow.

The Transformation of the Sahelian Geopolitical Order

The contemporary geopolitical competition in the Sahel cannot be understood without first examining the erosion of the security architecture that dominated the region after the 2012 crisis in Mali. France's military intervention through Operation Serval in January 2013 was initially welcomed by significant sections of the Malian political establishment and population because it halted the southward advance of armed groups and helped the government recover major northern cities. What began as a relatively focused intervention, however, evolved into a much broader regional counterterrorism strategy. Operation Barkhane, launched in 2014, extended French military activity across several Sahelian states and became embedded within a wider network of European training missions, United Nations peacekeeping, American intelligence and counterterrorism assistance, and the G5 Sahel security framework. The result was one of the densest externally supported security architectures in contemporary Africa. Despite the scale of this international presence, military activity did not translate into durable political stabilisation. Jihadist organisations adapted to counterterrorism pressure and expanded into areas where state institutions were weak, contested or regarded with suspicion by local populations. Violence spread from northern Mali into the country's central regions and subsequently became increasingly severe in Burkina Faso and western Niger. The problem was not simply that national armed forces lacked sufficient military capability. State authority in many peripheral communities remained thin, while grievances relating to political exclusion, poverty, intercommunal conflict and abuses by security forces created environments in which insurgent organisations could recruit and operate. Recent research continues to emphasise that

military strategies alone are unlikely to resolve these interconnected sources of insecurity (Asikabulu, 2026).

This produced a growing contradiction at the heart of the externally supported security order. Foreign military resources increased, yet the everyday experience of security for many communities did not improve proportionately. The political significance of this gap was considerable. Counterterrorism partnerships were ultimately judged not according to the sophistication of their military capabilities but according to whether they produced meaningful improvements in security. As the conflict expanded geographically, external actors particularly France became increasingly associated with the persistence rather than the resolution of insecurity. The deterioration of France's position was therefore more profound than a conventional military setback. Ricard et al. (2025) argue that France's retreat from the central Sahel reflected a collision between competing geopolitical imaginaries. French policy continued to operate partly through assumptions about the country's exceptional strategic role in its former African colonies, while emerging Sahelian political movements increasingly interpreted that role through the language of dependency and neocolonialism. The legitimacy crisis surrounding French engagement consequently concerned not only whether French counterterrorism worked but whether France should continue to exercise such a privileged position in determining the region's security priorities. This distinction is important because anti-French sentiment did not suddenly emerge with the military coups. Atabongwoung and Nkoka (2025) argue that public criticism of French influence in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger predated the most recent military takeovers. The coups instead created political openings through which longstanding grievances could become more directly translated into foreign policy. Military governments and sections of civil society found common ground in demands for the removal of French troops and the diversification of security relationships. Sandor and Berlingozzi (2025) similarly demonstrate that sovereigntist narratives in Burkina Faso and Niger have been co-produced through interaction between military authorities and civil-society actors rather than imposed exclusively from above.

The coups therefore accelerated rather than independently created the geopolitical transformation. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, sovereignty became simultaneously a principle of foreign policy and a source of domestic political legitimacy. Rejecting demands for rapid democratic transition could be represented as resistance to external interference, while terminating military agreements with France or the United States could be framed as evidence that the state was recovering control over its strategic choices. The symbolic act of changing partners became almost as politically important as the material benefits offered by the new relationship. This environment created favourable conditions for the practice of competitive sovereignty brokerage. Once Sahelian governments could credibly obtain military assistance, diplomatic support or investment from alternative external actors, traditional partners lost part of their ability to dictate the terms of cooperation. Russian security assistance, Chinese economic engagement and relationships with other emerging actors widened the menu of available partnerships. The central transformation was therefore not merely a shift in alignment from "West" to "East." It was a weakening of the assumption that Western states possessed privileged or indispensable access to Sahelian governments.

The emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) has given this transformation an institutional expression. Initially established

by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger around collective defence, the AES developed into a wider political project built around sovereignty, mutual support and resistance to external political conditionality. Its significance increased further with the three countries' departure from ECOWAS. Aina et al. (2025) interpret these developments as a major challenge to established patterns of West African integration, while Hassan (2026) argues that the withdrawal represents a deeper crisis in the postcolonial regional order rather than a temporary institutional disagreement. The establishment of an AES Unified Force further demonstrates the ambition to translate sovereigntist discourse into an alternative security architecture. Ojewale (2026) describes the initiative as a genuine departure from externally driven frameworks such as the G5 Sahel. Yet the same study identifies serious constraints: cross-border insurgent mobility remains high, civilian harm continues to generate political costs, fiscal capacity is limited, and withdrawal from ECOWAS has created additional regional isolation. The paradox is therefore striking. The AES may strengthen political ownership of security while simultaneously weakening some of the wider regional relationships required to confront transnational threats.

This exposes a central tension between relational autonomy and substantive sovereignty. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have unquestionably demonstrated an enhanced capacity to resist former external partners. They have terminated agreements, expelled foreign forces, rejected sanctions and constructed new institutions. These actions constitute meaningful exercises of relational autonomy. Yet the ability to reject external influence does not necessarily mean that governments possess greater capacity to secure territory, finance defence sustainably or provide accountable governance. The transformation of the Sahelian geopolitical order consequently operates along two interconnected dimensions. The first is geopolitical diversification, as governments reduce dependence on traditional Western partners and develop relationships with Russia, China and other actors. The second is regional institutional fragmentation, as the AES challenges the political and security authority previously exercised through ECOWAS and externally supported frameworks. Together, these developments have produced a regional order that is simultaneously more autonomous in its political aspirations, more plural in its external partnerships and potentially more fragmented in its capacity for collective security. This is the geopolitical environment within which Russia, China and the United States now pursue their respective strategies.

Russia: Security Partnerships, Regime Survival and Sovereigntist Politics

Among the external powers seeking greater influence in the contemporary Sahel, Russia has benefited most visibly from the collapse of the previous security architecture. Moscow has not attempted to reproduce the full range of economic, development and institutional relationships historically maintained by European states. Its comparative advantage lies instead in a narrower but politically powerful combination of military assistance, arms transfers, security cooperation, diplomatic support and relatively weak political conditionality. These characteristics have made Russia particularly attractive to military governments confronting insurgencies while simultaneously facing diplomatic isolation from Western states and regional institutions. The timing of Russian engagement has been critical. Military governments established through coups face a particular vulnerability: they often require

immediate security assistance while relations with traditional Western partners deteriorate. Western governments may suspend military cooperation, impose sanctions or condition normalisation on a return to constitutional government. Russia can operate with considerably fewer political restrictions. It can therefore enter precisely where the bargaining relationship between military regimes and Western partners has broken down. This dynamic illustrates competitive sovereignty brokerage particularly clearly. The existence of Russian military alternatives reduces the cost of rejecting Western political demands. A government considering the termination of a French security agreement, for example, faces a very different calculation if another external actor is willing to provide training, equipment and military personnel. Russian involvement consequently matters not only because of the resources Moscow supplies but because its availability changes the bargaining power of Sahelian governments in relation to other partners.

Russia's initial expansion was closely associated with the Wagner Group. In Mali, Wagner personnel became involved in supporting government forces while Russia expanded military deliveries and diplomatic cooperation. The arrangement represented a broader model of Russian engagement that combined military services with political access, influence operations and, in some African cases, commercial interests. Firmian (2024) characterises this model as a form of state capture in which Russian-linked armed networks sought privileged relationships with vulnerable political elites and influence over state institutions. Although the outcomes have varied considerably across African cases, the model demonstrates how security assistance can become a gateway to wider political influence. The restructuring of Wagner following its 2023 mutiny and the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin did not end this pattern of engagement. Rather, the transition toward the Africa Corps brought significant parts of Russia's African military activity under more direct state control. Spearin (2024) argues that Wagner and its successor can be understood through the framework of authoritarian conflict management, in which security assistance prioritises regime survival and coercive stabilisation over liberal peacebuilding. In Mali, this approach has supported authoritarian entrenchment while also generating concerns over civilian harm and the limitations of relatively small Russian deployments.

The movement from Wagner to the Africa Corps therefore represents more than organisational rebranding. It signals the institutionalisation of Russian security engagement. Greater control by the Russian Ministry of Defence reduces some of the ambiguity that previously characterised the relationship between Wagner and the Russian state. Moscow's Sahelian partnerships are increasingly difficult to treat as peripheral activities undertaken by formally private actors; they form part of Russia's wider geopolitical strategy in Africa. Russia's attractiveness nevertheless cannot be explained by military supply alone. Its political discourse is equally important. Moscow consistently presents itself as a defender of sovereignty and non-interference and contrasts this position with what it depicts as Western paternalism and neocolonialism. This message resonates strongly in a region where the legitimacy of French and wider Western involvement has deteriorated. Recent research on Burkina Faso, for example, connects Russian rapprochement to the interaction among declining confidence in Western intervention, anti-French sentiment, security pressures and the broader restructuring of international power relationships (John et al., 2026). The political reception of Russia should not, however, be reduced to the success of Russian propaganda. Sandor and

Berlingozzi (2025) demonstrate that sovereigntist geopolitical imaginaries have substantial domestic foundations in Burkina Faso and Niger. Similarly, Yetimoğlu and Dağ (2025) show how Mali's official discourse connects sovereignty, terrorism and neocolonialism. Russian messaging is effective partly because it aligns with political grievances and historical memories already present within Sahelian societies. External information operations can amplify these sentiments, but they did not create them from nothing.

At the same time, Russia has actively attempted to influence information environments. Duarte (2024) documents Russian-linked social-media campaigns in Mali and Burkina Faso and argues that information disorder has contributed to political polarisation and anti-Western mobilisation. This introduces an important qualification into discussions of African agency. Local grievances are real, but external actors also seek to shape how those grievances are interpreted. Sahelian geopolitical realignment therefore emerges from an interaction between domestic political dissatisfaction and foreign influence rather than exclusively from either one. The Russian model also creates important sovereignty dilemmas. Security assistance offered in the name of non-interference can strengthen executive and military authority while weakening other dimensions of sovereign governance. Yasmin and Qayyum (2024) warn that relationships between military regimes and private or quasi-private security actors may operate beyond robust legal oversight, exacerbate state-society distrust and indirectly create conditions that armed groups can exploit. Spearin (2024) similarly finds that the Wagner model has been associated with authoritarian entrenchment and civilian grievances. These findings point to the importance of distinguishing regime security from state security and human security. Regime security concerns the survival and coercive capacity of the incumbent political leadership. State security involves the capacity to protect territory and institutions. Human security concerns the safety and welfare of populations. Although these objectives can overlap, they are not identical. A foreign security partnership may improve the ability of a military government to resist internal challengers while doing considerably less to reduce civilian vulnerability or strengthen legitimate state institutions.

The distinction has direct implications for the article's concept of substantive sovereignty. Russian partnership may strengthen relational autonomy by enabling governments to reduce dependence on France, the United States or European institutions. Yet if the new relationship creates heavy dependence on Russian personnel, equipment or political support, the underlying structure of external reliance may persist. Firmian's (2024) analysis is particularly relevant here because it suggests that Russian security relationships can themselves create avenues for external influence over fragile state institutions. Russia's rise in the Sahel should therefore neither be dismissed as an artificial product of disinformation nor celebrated uncritically as evidence of sovereign emancipation. It reflects genuine dissatisfaction with previous security arrangements and meaningful Sahelian agency in seeking alternatives. But the long-term test is more demanding. The relevant question is whether Russian cooperation contributes to professional national security institutions capable of operating under domestic legal and political authority, or whether it primarily strengthens incumbent regimes while reproducing external dependence in a new geopolitical form.

China: Economic Statecraft and Selective Security Engagement

China occupies a different position within the emerging Sahelian geopolitical order. Unlike Russia, Beijing has not built its regional influence primarily through highly visible security partnerships with military governments. Nor has it historically attempted to reproduce the interventionist counterterrorism model associated with France and other Western actors. China's influence has developed more gradually and is rooted primarily in trade, infrastructure, natural-resource investment, state-owned enterprises, diplomatic relationships and a political commitment to non-interference. This difference is analytically significant because geopolitical influence is often measured too narrowly through military presence. Foreign bases, troop deployments and security contractors are highly visible, but they represent only one form of power. Infrastructure finance, access to energy resources, commercial networks and technological dependence can generate forms of structural influence that are less immediately visible but potentially more durable. China's position in the Sahel is best understood in these terms. Niger provides an important example. Chinese engagement there developed well before the contemporary geopolitical crisis and included substantial involvement in petroleum, infrastructure and other sectors. The relationship illustrates a wider feature of Beijing's African strategy: Chinese state-backed firms have frequently demonstrated willingness to operate in environments where political instability, weak infrastructure and high commercial risk discourage many conventional Western investors. This creates opportunities for governments that require capital but possess limited access to international private finance.

China's diplomatic language further increases its attractiveness. Beijing's longstanding emphasis on sovereignty, non-interference and political equality allows it to maintain relations across regime types. In the context of post-coup Sahelian politics, this has particular value. Whereas Western governments may suspend programmes or attach democratic conditions to normalisation, China can maintain economic engagement without requiring substantial political reform. The result is not necessarily explicit Chinese support for military rule. Rather, political continuity itself becomes strategically valuable to governments seeking to reduce the leverage associated with Western conditionality. China therefore contributes to competitive sovereignty brokerage in a different way from Russia. Moscow provides a security alternative at moments when relations with Western military partners deteriorate; Beijing provides economic and diplomatic alternatives that can reduce dependence on Western finance and political recognition. A Sahelian government does not need to choose between the two. It can simultaneously pursue Russian security cooperation, Chinese investment and relationships with other partners. This capacity to combine external relationships is one of the defining features of the region's emerging competitive pluralisation.

The boundary between China's economic and security roles is nevertheless becoming less distinct. Tietze's (2026) analysis of Chinese arms exports to Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso between 2010 and 2024 shows that Beijing has become an increasingly important supplier of military equipment. The study finds that Chinese arms transfers have contributed to the material capabilities of Sahelian militaries but do not independently explain variations in conflict intensity once other relevant factors are considered. This

is an important corrective to deterministic accounts that assume greater Chinese military involvement necessarily produces greater instability. Chinese arms and security engagement also provide Sahelian governments with additional procurement options. Diversifying weapons suppliers can reduce dependence on former colonial powers and may allow governments to obtain systems without equivalent governance conditions. From the perspective of competitive sovereignty brokerage, this enhances relational autonomy. Yet the availability of additional weapons does not necessarily address the political and institutional causes of insecurity. Asikabulu (2026) emphasises that the Sahel's insurgencies remain connected to poverty, ineffective governance, marginalisation and porous borders, making purely military solutions inadequate. Beijing also faces an increasingly difficult tension between non-interference and the protection of its overseas interests. As Chinese investment expands, so does exposure to insecurity. Chinese citizens, construction projects, extractive industries and transport infrastructure can become vulnerable to insurgency, kidnapping and political instability. Economic expansion therefore creates pressure for greater security engagement even where Beijing would prefer to avoid direct involvement in domestic conflicts.

This creates a gradual securitisation of Chinese economic interests. Beijing need not reproduce Western expeditionary intervention to become a significant security actor. Arms transfers, police cooperation, training, intelligence relationships, private security arrangements and diplomatic engagement can all expand as commercial exposure increases. China's future security presence in the Sahel is therefore likely to remain selective, pragmatic and closely connected to the protection of economic interests rather than organised around an ambitious project of regional counterinsurgency. China's principal geopolitical advantage consequently remains structural economic relevance. Governments may change security partners relatively quickly, but infrastructure, energy projects, extractive industries and commercial relationships generate longer-term forms of interdependence. In a region where governments face severe fiscal constraints and substantial development needs, access to capital and infrastructure can be as strategically consequential as access to weapons. Yet Chinese engagement also raises the dependency problem at the heart of this article. Diversification away from Western economic partners does not automatically generate developmental sovereignty. Infrastructure financed externally may improve productive capacity, but extractive relationships can also reproduce economies dependent on commodity exports and foreign capital. If external investment primarily facilitates the export of oil, uranium, gold or other resources without generating domestic industrialisation, technological transfer or fiscal resilience, then the identity of the external partner may change while the underlying political economy remains largely intact.

The strategic consequences of Chinese engagement therefore depend substantially on Sahelian agency. Governments that negotiate investment effectively, develop local-content requirements, strengthen regulatory institutions and use infrastructure to diversify their economies may convert Chinese engagement into greater substantive sovereignty. Governments that use external investment mainly to sustain elite networks or extractive structures may gain short-term bargaining power without significantly reducing structural dependency. China thus represents perhaps the clearest illustration of the distinction between geopolitical diversification and developmental transformation. Its

presence expands the choices available to Sahelian governments and reduces Western exclusivity. Whether that choice ultimately strengthens sovereignty, however, depends less on Beijing's rhetoric of non-interference than on the capacity of African states to determine how external capital is incorporated into national development.

The United States: From Counterterrorism Hub to Strategic Recalibration

The United States entered the contemporary Sahelian security environment from a position quite different from either Russia or China. Washington did not possess France's colonial history in the region, nor did it develop China's extensive infrastructure-centred economic presence. Its engagement became increasingly organised around counterterrorism following the expansion of transnational jihadist networks across North and West Africa. Training programmes, intelligence cooperation, surveillance, logistics and partnerships with national security forces became central components of American regional strategy. Niger eventually occupied a particularly important position within this architecture. Its geographic location provided access to areas affected by jihadist activity across the central Sahel and southern Libya, while comparatively close relations with successive Nigerien governments facilitated American intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations. Niger consequently became more than a bilateral partner. It functioned as an operational hub within a wider American and allied counterterrorism network.

The July 2023 military coup disrupted this relationship fundamentally. The overthrow of President Mohamed Bazoum placed Washington in a difficult position between its security interests and its stated commitment to constitutional government. The subsequent deterioration of relations culminated in the withdrawal of American military forces in 2024. Noor et al. (2024) interpret the withdrawal as part of a wider geopolitical shift in which declining American access creates opportunities for China and other competitors. Although such claims of straightforward U.S. decline should be treated cautiously, the Niger episode clearly demonstrated the vulnerability of a strategy heavily dependent on political access granted by a single host government. The withdrawal also illustrates the changing bargaining power of Sahelian states. Earlier assumptions that American security assistance would make host governments reluctant to jeopardise strategic partnerships became less reliable once alternative external relationships expanded. The Nigerien authorities could demand changes to the relationship while exploring closer ties with Russia and maintaining economic connections with China. The resulting outcome is another example of competitive sovereignty brokerage: the availability of alternatives increased the government's ability to absorb the costs associated with rejecting an established partner.

The episode has wider implications for American policy. First, security partnerships cannot be separated indefinitely from domestic political legitimacy. Counterterrorism cooperation may provide governments with military resources, but foreign deployments become vulnerable when they are perceived domestically as inconsistent with sovereignty or when the government that originally authorised them loses power. The broader Sahelian experience demonstrates that technically sophisticated security partnerships remain politically fragile when populations perceive little improvement in everyday security. Second, the United States faces a dilemma in responding to Russian expansion. Viewing every Sahelian partnership primarily

through the lens of great-power competition may prove counterproductive. Governments that already frame Western pressure as a threat to sovereignty can use overtly competitive American rhetoric to reinforce claims that Washington is concerned less with African security than with preventing African states from choosing their own partners. This can strengthen precisely the sovereigntist narratives that facilitate Russian influence. A more sustainable strategy therefore requires distinguishing between legitimate geopolitical concerns and the foreign-policy agency of African states. Washington has clear reasons to scrutinise Russian military activities, particularly where they may contribute to authoritarian entrenchment or human-rights violations. Yet demanding exclusive alignment would conflict with the increasingly plural character of African international relations. The central policy challenge is to make American partnership attractive on its own terms rather than valuable principally because it excludes competitors.

The geographic foundations of American engagement are also changing. As relations with central Sahelian military governments have deteriorated, coastal West African states have become more strategically important. This shift coincides with growing concern that jihadist violence could expand further south from Burkina Faso and other parts of the Sahel. Research on countering nascent insurgencies in coastal West Africa stresses the importance of professional security forces, inter-agency coordination and stronger community relationships rather than relying solely on militarised counterterrorism. Such findings provide important lessons for any American effort to relocate or redesign regional security cooperation. This recalibration should not simply reproduce the previous model farther south. Moving intelligence assets or military partnerships from Niger to coastal states without addressing the weaknesses of the earlier approach would amount to geographical displacement rather than strategic learning. The expansion of insurgency has repeatedly demonstrated that weak governance, socioeconomic exclusion, abusive security practices and limited state legitimacy cannot be resolved through surveillance and kinetic operations alone. Washington nevertheless retains considerable sources of influence. Military access represents only one component of American engagement. Development assistance, diplomatic relationships, education, commercial investment, public-health cooperation and support for regional institutions provide broader foundations for partnership. The United States also remains capable of cooperating with democratic and civilian institutions in ways that distinguish its model from external actors whose engagement is centred more directly on regime security.

The loss of Niger should therefore be understood as a strategic setback rather than evidence that the United States has ceased to matter in the Sahel or West Africa. The more consequential question is whether Washington learns from the political conditions that produced that setback. A return to a narrowly counterterrorism-centred strategy would risk reproducing the same weaknesses: strong relationships with security elites but insufficient attention to the legitimacy and resilience of the states within which those relationships operate. The regional consequences of American retrenchment also need to be considered alongside European decline. Horák (2026) argues that the displacement of Western actors and expansion of Russian influence have generated a form of "strategic blindness" for Europe by reducing intelligence access and situational awareness. Similar challenges confront Washington when the loss of operational

access reduces direct knowledge of rapidly changing security environments. The consequences extend beyond symbolic geopolitical influence; they affect the ability to monitor armed groups, anticipate regional spillovers and understand evolving political networks. At the same time, the solution cannot simply be to restore lost military access at any political cost. The history of the previous Sahelian security architecture suggests that tactical access without legitimate and capable political partners produces fragile gains. American strategy therefore needs to become more distributed geographically and more integrated politically, linking counterterrorism to governance, economic opportunity, civilian protection and regional cooperation.

From the perspective of competitive sovereignty brokerage, the United States also needs to adjust to a fundamental change in the diplomatic environment: Sahelian and other African governments increasingly possess alternatives. Partnership can no longer rest on an implicit expectation of Western indispensability. Governments may cooperate with Washington in one sector, China in another and Russia or other emerging powers in a third. American influence will consequently depend increasingly on the quality and credibility of the relationships it offers rather than on its ability to prevent diversification. The transformation from counterterrorism hub to strategic recalibration thus reflects a wider change in the politics of external engagement. The United States remains an important actor, but it operates in a regional environment where exclusivity is increasingly difficult to sustain. A successful strategy would therefore treat African foreign-policy agency not as an obstacle to American interests but as a structural reality of an increasingly multipolar order. The question is no longer whether Washington can restore the geopolitical position it once enjoyed in Niger. It is whether it can develop a model of engagement capable of remaining influential in a region where African governments have more partners, greater bargaining leverage and stronger expectations of strategic autonomy.

Europe after the Decline of the French Security Model

Of all the external actors involved in the Sahel, Europe confronts perhaps the most difficult process of strategic adaptation. This is partly because the crisis of European influence is inseparable from the much deeper decline of France's historically privileged position in Francophone Africa. For decades after independence, France maintained an unusually dense network of military agreements, political relationships, economic interests and diplomatic connections across its former colonies. These relationships became associated with *Françafrique*, a system in which formal African sovereignty coexisted with extensive French access to political elites, markets and security institutions. Although this system changed considerably over time, its historical legacy continued to influence perceptions of French engagement long after the formal colonial period had ended. The emergence of jihadist insurgencies initially seemed to offer France an opportunity to recast this relationship around a shared security threat. Operation Serval's intervention in Mali in 2013 was widely regarded as militarily effective in its immediate objective of preventing armed groups from advancing further south. Operation Barkhane subsequently transformed this intervention into a broader regional counterterrorism mission. Yet the longer the intervention continued, the more difficult it became to reconcile France's substantial military presence with deteriorating security conditions. Tactical victories against individual commanders and armed groups did not produce an equivalent improvement in territorial

governance or civilian security. The contradiction gradually became politically damaging: France was simultaneously one of the region's most powerful security actors and increasingly blamed for the failure of the security order it had helped construct.

The decline of French influence should consequently be understood as a crisis of political legitimacy rather than simply a military withdrawal. Ricard et al. (2025) describe France's retreat from the central Sahel as the erosion of a geopolitical imaginary through which French policymakers had historically understood the region as an area of exceptional strategic responsibility. The problem was that this self-understanding increasingly collided with alternative Sahelian imaginaries centred on sovereignty, anti-colonialism and resistance to external political tutelage. Recent field-based research reinforces this interpretation. Sandor and Berlingozzi (2025) show that sovereigntist geopolitical narratives in Burkina Faso and Niger are rooted partly in civil-society politics, while Stambøl et al. (2025) locate contemporary Malian sovereignty claims within a much longer history of anti-colonial political thought. These findings make it difficult to explain France's decline solely through Russian information operations or elite manipulation. The crisis extended beyond France because European engagement in the Sahel had become closely intertwined with the French-led security architecture. The European Union developed training, capacity-building, development and migration programmes alongside broader international stabilisation efforts. Yet the EU's approach increasingly suffered from its own contradictions. Security, development and migration management were brought together under the assumption that strengthening states and controlling instability would simultaneously advance European and Sahelian interests. In practice, European priorities sometimes became dominated by the containment of terrorism and irregular migration rather than by the political and socioeconomic conditions experienced by Sahelian societies.

Peccini (2025) argues that the EU's security-development nexus placed excessive emphasis on short-term security and migration objectives while insufficiently addressing deeper political, social and ethnic inequalities. Bisong (2025) similarly shows that European migration externalisation can reshape political relationships within African partner states and may reinforce authoritarian practices and institutional tensions. The broader problem was therefore not simply that European policies lacked resources. It was that substantial resources were often organised around policy priorities defined principally through European perceptions of insecurity. This helps explain why the collapse of the previous security architecture cannot be repaired simply by deploying different European missions or increasing development expenditure. The underlying political relationship has changed. Sahelian governments now operate in an environment in which alternative partners are available, sovereigntist discourse possesses significant domestic resonance, and association with former colonial arrangements can carry substantial political costs. Watling and Wilén (2024) consequently interpret the strategic realignment of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger as reflecting more than the objective attractiveness of alternative partners. Political dissatisfaction with previous relationships can make realignment attractive even where the material offer from a new partner appears comparatively limited.

Europe's dilemma is intensified by the fact that disengagement also imposes costs on European states. Reduced access means diminished political influence, but it can also mean weaker

situational awareness. Horák (2026) characterises this emerging problem as European “strategic blindness”: the displacement of Western actors has reduced intelligence access and the ability to influence developments while transnational challenges involving terrorism, migration, organised crime and foreign information operations remain directly relevant to European security. France’s reduction of its African military footprint likewise diminishes operational capacity even though instability in the Sahel and coastal West Africa continues to affect French security calculations (Griffin, 2026). Yet this vulnerability should not be interpreted as an argument for restoring the previous order. The more important question is whether Europe can construct a relationship with the Sahel that no longer depends upon assumptions of strategic privilege. A credible European approach would have to accept that African governments will maintain relations with China, Russia and other non-Western partners. European influence in a multipolar Africa cannot realistically depend upon exclusivity.

Europe nevertheless retains considerable advantages. Geographic proximity ensures that developments in the Sahel matter directly for European trade, migration and security. The EU remains an important source of development financing, commercial opportunity, humanitarian assistance and institutional cooperation. European universities, markets and development institutions also provide forms of social and economic connectivity that security-focused competitors cannot easily reproduce. These assets create opportunities for influence, but only if they are detached from the expectation that assistance should restore Europe’s previous political predominance. The strategic challenge for Europe is therefore not to defeat Russia in a geopolitical contest for the Sahel. Framing policy in those terms would risk reproducing the same external-centred logic that contributed to the legitimacy crisis of earlier interventions. A more sustainable strategy would begin with the recognition that Sahelian governments possess agency, that foreign-policy diversification is unlikely to be reversed, and that European credibility will depend increasingly on the quality rather than the exclusivity of its partnerships. In this sense, the decline of the French security model need not imply the disappearance of Europe from the Sahel. It could instead mark the transition from historically privileged influence toward a more negotiated and plural form of engagement.

Competitive Sovereignty Brokerage and Sahelian Agency

Comparison across the external actors examined in this article reveals an important feature of the emerging geopolitical order: Russia, China, the United States and Europe do not offer interchangeable partnerships. Their resources, political conditions and comparative advantages differ substantially. This diversity creates the bargaining environment within which competitive sovereignty brokerage becomes possible. Russia’s strongest appeal lies in security cooperation, military assistance, diplomatic backing and relatively weak political conditionality. China offers investment, infrastructure, trade, arms and a diplomatic approach centred on non-interference. The United States combines advanced security capabilities with development assistance, diplomatic networks and wider economic relationships, but its cooperation with military governments is constrained by legal and political considerations. Europe retains substantial economic and development resources alongside diplomatic and security instruments, although its position is complicated by colonial legacies and the declining legitimacy of the previous intervention model. Other actors including Türkiye, Gulf states and emerging

middle powers further expand the range of available partnerships. The consequence is that Sahelian governments no longer need to organise foreign policy around an exclusive external patron. Security cooperation can be obtained from one partner, infrastructure from another, investment from a third and diplomatic support from yet another. This sectoral diversification is one of the clearest reasons why a binary interpretation of the region as a contest between the “West” and Russia or China is inadequate. The emerging order is better described as a marketplace of differentiated partnerships in which Sahelian governments attempt to assemble external relationships according to their political, security and economic priorities.

The concept of competitive sovereignty brokerage captures this behaviour. Brokerage occurs when governments use competition among external actors to renegotiate the conditions under which they participate in international relationships. The purpose is not necessarily to eliminate dependence but to prevent any single partner from monopolising it. A government may invoke a potential Russian security relationship when negotiating with Western governments, maintain Chinese investment while adopting nationalist resource policies, or cultivate several diplomatic partners to reduce the effectiveness of international isolation. Recent research on sanctions provides empirical support for this mechanism. Lendzoumbou (2025) finds that Western aid sanctions following military coups become considerably less effective when military regimes can access alternative Russian military support and Chinese economic relationships. Multipolarity therefore changes the political cost of resisting external pressure. Measures that might have exercised considerable leverage in a more concentrated international environment lose some of their effectiveness when governments can redirect portions of their security or economic relationships elsewhere.

This is a meaningful form of African agency. Sahelian governments have terminated security agreements, demanded the departure of foreign forces, renegotiated diplomatic relationships and created new regional arrangements despite significant external opposition. These are not the actions of passive states upon which great-power competition is simply imposed. They demonstrate that comparatively weak states can exploit changes in the international distribution of power to widen their own diplomatic room for manoeuvre. Agency, however, should not be romanticised. The fact that governments resist external pressure tells us little about whose interests that resistance serves domestically. Military governments may use sovereignty claims to challenge foreign influence while simultaneously restricting political opposition, limiting civic freedoms or postponing democratic transition. Sandor and Berlingozzi (2025) show the complexity of the relationship between sovereigntist civil society and military governments, while Lenshie (2025) demonstrates how the confrontation between ECOWAS and military regimes has become entangled with wider geopolitical competition. This distinction exposes an important analytical problem in contemporary discussions of African sovereignty. Foreign-policy agency is not equivalent to democratic agency. A government may gain greater freedom in international bargaining while its citizens experience less influence over domestic political decisions. Similarly, the rejection of external conditionality can increase executive autonomy without strengthening institutions capable of holding that executive accountable.

Competitive sovereignty brokerage must therefore be distinguished from sovereign state-building. Brokerage concerns the ability to manoeuvre among external relationships. Sovereign state-building concerns the more difficult task of developing institutions capable of taxation, territorial administration, public service delivery, accountable security provision and productive economic management. The first can occur rapidly when geopolitical alternatives appear. The second generally requires sustained institutional development. The distinction helps resolve the apparent contradiction at the centre of contemporary Sahelian politics. Governments may simultaneously become more autonomous in relation to particular foreign powers and remain deeply dependent on external resources. Expelling a foreign military force demonstrates political autonomy, but needing another foreign security provider may reveal continuing structural weakness. Renegotiating a mining agreement may demonstrate greater bargaining confidence, but an economy dependent on a narrow range of commodity exports remains vulnerable to external markets. The central theoretical implication is therefore that multipolarity produces conditional rather than automatic sovereignty gains. It widens the strategic choices available to weaker states, but whether those choices become foundations for substantive sovereignty depends on domestic institutions and political decisions. Competitive sovereignty brokerage creates room for manoeuvre. It does not determine whether that room will be used to build capable states, entrench incumbent regimes or simply rearrange patterns of dependency.

Resources, Security and the Political Economy of Competition

Geopolitical competition in the Sahel also unfolds through the political economy of natural resources. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger possess commercially and strategically significant deposits of gold, uranium, oil and other minerals. These resources attract foreign investment, generate government revenues and shape relations with external actors. At the same time, their presence has historically coexisted with high levels of poverty, limited industrial transformation and substantial dependence on foreign capital and expertise. Resource competition should nevertheless be approached carefully. The contemporary geopolitics of the Sahel cannot credibly be reduced to a struggle over minerals. External powers pursue multiple objectives involving counterterrorism, migration, diplomatic alignment, regional access, commercial opportunity and broader international influence. Recent research nevertheless confirms that natural resources remain an important component of the region's strategic significance. Issa (2026), for example, places uranium, gold and oil alongside military access and regional security in explaining the intensification of geopolitical rivalry. Research on Burkina Faso likewise identifies the interaction among security politics, external alignment and competition surrounding strategic minerals as part of the country's recent geopolitical transformation (John et al., 2026).

Resources matter politically because they connect foreign policy with domestic claims about sovereignty. In several Sahelian states, economic sovereignty has increasingly become part of the same political vocabulary as military sovereignty. The argument is straightforward: a state cannot be fully sovereign if it controls neither the security of its territory nor the economic value generated from its natural resources. Contemporary sovereigntist discourse therefore extends beyond the removal of foreign troops to questions of mining contracts, resource ownership, monetary arrangements and the distribution of extractive revenues. Stambøl

et al. (2025) show that economic sovereignty forms an important component of the wider anti-colonial imaginaries shaping contemporary Malian politics. Niger illustrates this intersection particularly clearly because uranium and oil connect domestic development to international strategic interests. Gold plays a similarly important role in Mali and Burkina Faso. In each case, external relationships can provide investment, technology, market access and security while also generating new forms of bargaining asymmetry. Governments seeking greater control over natural resources consequently confront a difficult question: how can foreign capital be used without allowing the state's dependence on external firms, technologies and markets to reproduce the very vulnerabilities that sovereignty policies seek to overcome?

Russia and China occupy different positions within this resource political economy. Russian security engagement elsewhere in Africa has generated substantial debate about the relationship among military assistance, elite protection and commercial access. Firmian's analysis of Russian state-capture strategies, for example, identifies the combination of armed support, political influence and commercial relationships as an important feature of Moscow's African engagements. In the Sahel, this raises legitimate questions about whether security relationships may eventually generate privileged access to politically or economically strategic sectors. China's approach is generally more institutionalised around state-backed commercial relationships, infrastructure and investment. Its influence therefore operates through longer-term economic interdependence rather than principally through regime-security arrangements. This can contribute to development where infrastructure reduces production costs, improves connectivity or supports economic diversification. Yet investment can also reinforce dependency when economic activity remains concentrated in extraction and export rather than domestic value creation. The broader risk is that intensifying geopolitical competition increases the international value of access to Sahelian elites without substantially changing the domestic distribution of economic benefits. Governments may obtain improved contract terms, additional investment or alternative markets while extractive sectors remain weakly connected to employment creation and productive transformation. Under these circumstances, multipolarity may redistribute external access without transforming the political economy that has historically limited developmental sovereignty.

Recent work on African dependency in an increasingly multipolar international system makes precisely this distinction. Kapoor and Vasishta (2026) argue that the availability of competing external partners can create opportunities for African states, but meaningful developmental sovereignty requires stronger fiscal and regulatory institutions, diversified partnerships and reduced structural dependency. This argument closely parallels the distinction developed in this article between competitive sovereignty brokerage and substantive sovereignty. The developmental implications are therefore conditional. Competition among external actors can increase the bargaining leverage of resource-producing governments. It may enable them to renegotiate contracts, diversify markets and resist political pressure. But these opportunities become transformative only when states possess the institutional capacity to convert resource revenues into infrastructure, human capital, industrial development and public goods. Otherwise, geopolitical competition may simply produce a more diversified form of extractive dependency.

Geopolitical Competition and the Future of Regional Order

The geopolitical transformation of the Sahel is occurring simultaneously with a profound restructuring of West African regionalism. The creation of the Alliance of Sahel States and the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS represent more than diplomatic disagreements between neighbouring governments. They challenge assumptions about how political legitimacy, regional security and sovereignty should be organised in West Africa. For decades, ECOWAS gradually developed beyond its original economic mandate into a regional institution with significant political and security functions. Its protocols on democracy and good governance established opposition to unconstitutional changes of government as an important regional norm. The organisation also developed mechanisms for mediation, sanctions and, in exceptional circumstances, coercive intervention. The recent wave of military coups placed this normative architecture under extraordinary pressure.

The AES represents an alternative response to the same crisis. Its member governments argue that existing regional arrangements failed to provide effective security while becoming excessively intrusive in domestic political affairs. Their alternative emphasises sovereignty, mutual defence and greater strategic independence from Western partners. Aina et al. (2025) therefore interpret the emergence of the AES as raising fundamental questions about both disintegration and possible reintegration in West Africa. Ologe and Eramah (2025) similarly argue that the AES should be understood as part of a deeper disagreement over the content and direction of African regionalism rather than simply as an isolated political rupture. The disagreement concerns competing conceptions of sovereignty. ECOWAS's post-Cold War political order increasingly treated sovereignty as constrained by regional commitments to constitutional government. The AES leaderships have articulated a more traditional and sovereigntist conception in which external or regional pressure concerning domestic political arrangements is regarded with greater suspicion. The resulting institutional conflict is therefore not simply about membership. It concerns who possesses legitimate authority to judge domestic political order and what obligations states owe to regional democratic norms.

External competition complicates this divide. Russia's willingness to cooperate with military governments reduces the international costs of political isolation. China's non-interference doctrine allows economic relationships to continue without equivalent demands concerning regime type. Western governments and European institutions generally place greater formal emphasis on constitutional government, although their application of democratic conditionality has historically been inconsistent. Lendzoumbou (2025) demonstrates that these competing external options weaken the coercive effectiveness of Western sanctions, while Lenshie (2025) argues that punitive responses to recent coups have themselves interacted with great-power competition and contributed to regional geopolitical entanglement. The danger is that differences over governance become increasingly mapped onto external geopolitical alignments. If AES governments become associated primarily with Russia and other non-Western actors while ECOWAS states are perceived as aligned with Western partners, regional political disagreements could harden into competing geopolitical blocs. Such an outcome would be

particularly damaging because the principal security threats facing the region are inherently transnational.

Jihadist organisations move across borders, exploit peripheral spaces and adapt their operations according to differences in state pressure. Arms, illicit commodities and displaced populations similarly cross formal political boundaries. Abubakar and Garba (2026) find that political instability and military coups have weakened intelligence sharing and fragmented regional counterterrorism cooperation. Asikabulu (2026) likewise emphasises that the interaction of porous borders, weak governance and transnational armed actors requires cooperation extending beyond purely national military strategies. The AES Unified Force represents an attempt to address some of these challenges through an alternative regional framework. Ojewale (2026) regards its establishment as a meaningful institutional innovation and a genuine departure from previous externally driven security arrangements. Yet the same analysis identifies serious constraints, including limited fiscal resources, persistent insurgent mobility, civilian harm and the consequences of increasing regional isolation. Most importantly, military cooperation among the three AES states cannot eliminate their geographical interdependence with coastal West African neighbours. This creates a fundamental security paradox. The political search for greater sovereignty can generate institutional fragmentation precisely when effective security requires deeper cross-border cooperation. If sovereignty becomes defined primarily as insulation from external or regional influence, governments may find themselves less capable of addressing threats that no state can manage independently.

The long-term viability of the Sahelian regional order therefore depends upon some form of pragmatic coexistence between the AES and the wider West African system. Political disagreements over constitutional governance will remain important, but counterterrorism coordination, trade, mobility, humanitarian access and intelligence sharing cannot be organised sustainably around rigid geopolitical blocs. Hassan (2026) consequently warns that Sahelexit represents a challenge not only to ECOWAS but to the broader institutional coherence of West Africa. No external power can resolve this dilemma on behalf of regional states. Russia, China, Europe and the United States can provide resources, but durable regional security ultimately requires institutions through which African governments can manage shared vulnerabilities. The decisive geopolitical question is therefore not simply which external power gains influence. It is whether intensifying external competition strengthens African collective capacity or contributes to the fragmentation of institutions necessary for regional security.

Discussion: From a "New Scramble" to Competitive Multipolarity

The preceding analysis challenges three influential interpretations of the contemporary Sahel. The first portrays the region as undergoing a straightforward geopolitical transition in which Russia is replacing France and the wider West. The second presents Sahelian states as passive arenas in a renewed scramble among major powers. The third, found particularly in sovereigntist political discourse, assumes that diversification away from Western partners is itself evidence of substantive sovereignty. None adequately captures the complexity of the emerging regional order. The replacement thesis exaggerates the extent to which geopolitical influence operates as a zero-sum transfer. Russia has gained substantial visibility and influence, especially through military

cooperation with governments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Yet Moscow does not reproduce the full spectrum of relationships historically maintained by France and the European Union. China remains more significant in many dimensions of economic engagement. European states continue to possess development, commercial and institutional connections, while the United States retains important diplomatic and security relationships across wider West Africa. Other actors further complicate the picture. The emerging order is therefore characterised less by geopolitical substitution than by competitive pluralisation.

The “new scramble” interpretation captures the renewed interest of external powers but encounters a different problem: it risks reproducing the very image of African passivity that contemporary Sahelian politics challenges. Governments in the region have not merely received competing foreign policies. They have actively altered the conditions under which external actors operate. They have terminated agreements, demanded troop withdrawals, diversified arms suppliers, cultivated new diplomatic partners and reorganised regional institutions. Recent scholarship increasingly emphasises this agency. Sandor and Berlingozzi (2025) show how civil-society actors themselves participate in constructing geopolitical alternatives, while Stambøl et al. (2025) demonstrate that contemporary foreign-policy change in Mali draws on locally rooted anti-colonial understandings of sovereignty. The third interpretation requires equal caution. Agency is real, but it does not follow that every rejection of Western influence constitutes decolonisation or that every alternative partnership increases substantive sovereignty. Multipolarity creates additional choices, but choices occur within continuing asymmetries of military power, technology, finance and market access. Geröcs (2025) warns against conflating anti-imperial aspirations with geopolitical competition among powerful external actors. This distinction is particularly important in the Sahel, where governments can resist one relationship of dependence while simultaneously entering another.

The concept of competitive sovereignty brokerage provides a way through these competing interpretations. It recognises Sahelian governments as strategic actors without assuming that they possess unlimited autonomy. Their agency lies in the capacity to exploit differences among external partners and renegotiate the terms of dependence. This produces relational autonomy: greater freedom from the demands of a particular external actor. Whether relational autonomy develops into substantive sovereignty depends on what governments do with the political space that diversification creates. This finding contributes to wider debates about multipolarity. Conventional approaches frequently analyse multipolar systems by concentrating on major-power behaviour, alliance formation and changes in the distribution of material capabilities. The Sahel demonstrates that shifts in polarity also affect weaker states by changing the availability of external alternatives. When several powerful actors seek influence, comparatively weak governments may acquire bargaining leverage because their diplomatic alignment, military access, resources or political support become more valuable. Yet this leverage is inherently conditional. It exists only while competing external actors regard partnership as strategically worthwhile, and it can be undermined by domestic institutional weakness. A state unable to collect revenue effectively, secure its territory or regulate foreign economic activity may negotiate among several partners while remaining structurally vulnerable to all of them.

The Sahel therefore reveals an important distinction between multipolarity as opportunity structure and multipolarity as developmental outcome. The first is increasingly evident: governments have more external options than they possessed under a more Western-centred regional order. The second remains uncertain. More options can facilitate state-building, but they can also strengthen regime survival, increase militarisation and multiply channels of external dependency. This is why the region is better understood as an arena of competitive multipolarity than as a new scramble. Competition is certainly occurring among external powers, but the regional order is simultaneously being produced through the choices, bargaining strategies and political projects of Sahelian actors themselves. The analytical task is not to ask which great power “controls” the Sahel, but to examine how interactions between external rivalry and local agency reshape sovereignty, security and regional order.

Policy Implications

The analysis has several implications for external and regional policymakers. The first is that attempts to recreate exclusive spheres of influence are increasingly inconsistent with the political realities of the Sahel. Sahelian governments now operate within a more diversified international environment, and efforts to force binary alignment may strengthen rather than weaken sovereigntist opposition. Western governments in particular should avoid treating every relationship with Russia or China as evidence that African states have entered an opposing geopolitical camp. For Europe, the priority should be to move beyond the assumptions associated with the previous French-centred security architecture. Rebuilding influence cannot mean restoring *Françafrique* in a modified form. European engagement would be more credible if it concentrated on areas in which European institutions retain substantial comparative advantages: infrastructure, education, trade, climate adaptation, humanitarian assistance, local governance and long-term economic development. Peccini's (2025) critique of the earlier security-development nexus suggests that these policies should be shaped less by short-term European migration and counterterrorism priorities and more by locally identified political and socioeconomic needs. Europe must also avoid allowing reduced military access to become complete political disengagement. Horák's (2026) analysis of European strategic blindness indicates that withdrawal carries significant informational and security costs. The alternative is a more diversified diplomatic presence involving national governments, civil society, regional institutions and neighbouring coastal states rather than relationships concentrated primarily around central governments and security establishments.

The United States faces a related challenge. The withdrawal from Niger demonstrated the vulnerability of security strategies organised around a small number of strategically important military hubs. Future engagement should be geographically broader and politically deeper. Cooperation with coastal West African governments may help contain the southward spread of violent extremism, but simply relocating counterterrorism infrastructure would reproduce the weaknesses of the earlier model. Security assistance should be integrated with support for accountable institutions, community resilience and socioeconomic development. Russia's role requires a different form of scrutiny. Its security partnerships should be evaluated according to their consequences for civilian security, state capacity and institutional accountability rather than according to either Western geopolitical

anxiety or Moscow's sovereignty rhetoric. Security assistance that protects governing regimes while insurgency, civilian harm and institutional fragility continue cannot credibly be regarded as successful stabilisation. Sahelian governments themselves therefore have an interest in ensuring that relationships with Russian security actors remain subject to national law, command structures and political accountability. China possesses perhaps the greatest opportunity to influence the long-term political economy of the region. Infrastructure and investment can strengthen sovereignty when they expand productive capacity, connectivity and employment. The same relationships can deepen structural dependency when concentrated overwhelmingly in extractive sectors. Sahelian governments should therefore negotiate Chinese investment with greater emphasis on local value creation, technology transfer, employment, taxation and economic diversification.

For Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the most important opportunity presented by multipolarity is the possibility of avoiding exclusive dependence on any single external actor. Yet diversification should be treated as a means rather than an end. The ultimate objective should be to convert external competition into domestic capacity: stronger public institutions, professional and accountable security forces, diversified economies and greater fiscal autonomy. Regional institutions are equally important. Whatever the political disagreements between the AES and ECOWAS, both sides have powerful incentives to preserve practical cooperation. Intelligence sharing, cross-border trade, counterterrorism coordination, humanitarian access and population mobility cannot be managed effectively through geopolitical separation. Ojewale's (2026) analysis suggests that militarised sovereignty without wider regional cooperation risks reproducing many of the security problems the AES was created to overcome. The broader policy principle emerging from the article is therefore straightforward: external diversification produces durable sovereignty only when bargaining gains are converted into domestic and regional capacity. This applies equally to relations with Russia, China, Europe, the United States and other partners. The identity of the external actor matters, but the institutional consequences of the relationship matter more.

Conclusion

The Sahel has emerged as one of the clearest regional expressions of a changing international order. The weakening of the French-led security model, repeated military coups, persistent jihadist violence, the growth of sovereigntist politics and the increasing availability of non-Western partnerships have combined to transform the political environment in which external powers and Sahelian governments interact. What has emerged is not a settled post-Western order but a fluid geopolitical arena in which established and rising powers compete while regional governments attempt to renegotiate their place within the international system. Russia, China, the United States and Europe enter this environment with different capabilities and strategic advantages. Russia has expanded its influence primarily through military cooperation, regime-security assistance and a political discourse centred on sovereignty and resistance to Western dominance. China exercises influence principally through investment, infrastructure, trade and increasingly diversified security relationships. The United States is adapting a counterterrorism strategy disrupted by political change and the loss of important operational access. Europe faces the more fundamental challenge of developing a credible regional role after

the decline of a security architecture closely associated with France. The resulting order cannot adequately be described as a simple replacement of Western influence by Russia or China. External relationships are increasingly distributed across different actors and policy sectors. Sahelian governments can cooperate with one partner for security, another for infrastructure and others for finance, technology or diplomatic support. This pattern is better understood as competitive pluralisation than geopolitical substitution. Nor does the familiar metaphor of a "new scramble for Africa" fully explain these developments. It correctly draws attention to intensified external competition but risks reducing African states to territories over which stronger powers struggle. The evidence presented here suggests a more interactive process. Sahelian governments, political elites and social actors have themselves contributed to the restructuring of external relationships. Contemporary sovereignty politics cannot be understood without recognising local dissatisfaction with earlier interventions, anti-colonial political traditions and the strategic calculations of governments seeking alternatives to established partnerships (Sandor & Berlingozzi, 2025; Stambøl et al., 2025).

This article has conceptualised that process as competitive sovereignty brokerage. The concept describes the capacity of comparatively weaker states to exploit competition among external powers in order to renegotiate political conditions, diversify security and economic relationships, resist unwanted pressure and expand diplomatic room for manoeuvre. It shifts analysis away from the question of which great power is "winning" the Sahel and toward the interaction between systemic multipolarity and local foreign-policy agency. The concept also exposes the limits of geopolitical diversification. Competitive sovereignty brokerage can produce relational autonomy by reducing dependence on a particular external partner. It does not automatically create substantive sovereignty. A government may remove French troops while becoming dependent on Russian security assistance. It may attract Chinese capital while remaining dependent on commodity exports and external technology. It may resist Western political conditionality while lacking the fiscal or institutional capacity to provide security independently. Greater freedom to choose among external relationships is therefore not the same as freedom from structural dependence. This distinction constitutes the article's principal theoretical contribution. Multipolarity should not be understood simply as a distribution of power among major states. It also creates an opportunity structure for weaker-state bargaining. As external alternatives increase, comparatively weak states may gain leverage because competing powers value their cooperation, diplomatic alignment, resources and strategic access. Yet the sovereignty gains generated by this environment remain conditional upon domestic institutional capacity.

The future of the Sahel will therefore be determined neither solely in Moscow, Beijing, Washington or European capitals nor solely by the foreign-policy preferences of military governments in Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey. It will emerge from the interaction between external competition and domestic state-building. The crucial question is whether governments can convert increased geopolitical choice into territorial authority, accountable security institutions, productive economic transformation and sustainable regional cooperation. Regional order represents the most immediate test. The emergence of the AES expresses a genuine demand for greater ownership of security, but sovereignty cannot resolve transnational insecurity through political isolation. Jihadist organisations, illicit economies, migration flows and arms

networks cross the boundary between AES and ECOWAS states with little regard for institutional rivalry. A durable regional order will therefore require political mechanisms capable of reconciling demands for sovereignty with the practical necessity of interdependence. The Sahel is consequently neither experiencing completed decolonisation nor simply becoming the battlefield of a new Cold War. It is undergoing a contested transition toward competitive multipolarity, in which external powers seek influence while Sahelian actors attempt to reshape the terms under which external relationships are conducted. That transformation creates opportunities for greater agency, but it also generates new vulnerabilities. Whether the emerging order becomes more sovereign and secure will ultimately depend less on which external power gains the largest share of influence than on what Sahelian states do with the bargaining space that geopolitical competition creates. Multipolarity can provide alternatives; it cannot substitute for institutions. The decisive measure of sovereignty will therefore not be the number of foreign partners from which a government can choose, but its capacity to engage those partners without surrendering the political, economic and institutional foundations of self-government.

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