

A geopolitoical study of the Sahel region

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Abstract:

The African Sahel region is one of the most prominent regions around which there has been extensive academic discussion among experts and political scientists recently. This region, which had no importance before the events of September 11, has now become the focus of attention of international powers, because of its great importance as it extends over a location An important strategy, in addition to the widespread spread of all threats, whether classical or asymmetric, that affect security at all levels

Therefore, we will try, through this article, to address the strategic importance of the African Sahel region, which is represented by its important geographical location and rich in various natural resources, which have always been a reason for the major powers to compete with their various strategies in order to achieve their vital interests in the region

In addition to highlighting the most important factors responsible for the security threats in the African Sahel, the aggravation of which at the local, regional and international levels has led to the emergence of new threats that threaten the lives of the individual and the state together, which have had a negative impact on the Sahel countries and impede the achievement of security and stability in them, in addition to the historical and cultural disruption that it has played. Colonialism in these countries and

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the imposition of guardianship over them, by linking the regimes to the interests of the colonial countries

Keywords: the African Sahel region ; foreign interventions ; geostrategic

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of international relations, given the inevitability of complexity and overlap among various actors and objectives, there has arisen a necessity to shift the role of state activity from the traditional focus primarily on hard power centrality and traditional diplomacy, to what has become known in international relations literature as soft power and parallel diplomacy, especially after the end of the Cold War.

Thus, we observe that despite the priority of hard power, it alone is not sufficient to keep pace with transformations, particularly in the African Sahel region, which is one of the most important areas around which a broad academic debate has taken place among experts and political scientists recently. This region, which was not significant before the events of September 11, has now become the focus of international powers due to its great importance, extending over a strategically significant location. Additionally, it faces widespread dissemination of all types of threats, whether classical or asymmetrical, impacting security at all levels.

Addressing the strategic importance of the African Sahel region is represented by its significant geographical location rich in diverse natural resources, which has long been and remains the reason for competition among major powers to satisfy their vital interests in the region.

In addition to highlighting the most important factors responsible for security threats in the African Sahel, whose escalation at the local, regional, and international levels has led to the emergence of new threats endangering both individual and state lives, significantly impacting Sahel countries and hindering the achievement of security and stability. This includes the historical and cultural disruption caused by colonialism in these countries and the imposition of guardianship over them, linking regimes to the interests of colonial powers.

Based on the above, this study attempts to address the following issue: What is the strategic importance of the African Sahel region?

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Method of analysis : Geostrategic analysis: This is highlighted by presenting the strategic importance of the Sahel region, the extent of foreign intervention and the conflict of international agendas and the resulting repercussions, the impact of this on the stability of the regional system, and the transitory transmission of various security phenomena in various strategic spaces, as is evident in migration. Crossing from the coast to the Mediterranean space, which highlights the overlap, complexity, and structure on the regional and international scale

Through the geostrategic analysis of the African Sahel region, this study aims to highlight the geographical characteristics and determinants, in an attempt to scrutinize this crisis belt and study the historical context of the region, in addition to clarifying the strategic and geo-civilizational importance. In order to clarify the basic backgrounds for the emergence of geopolitical problems, the security environment in the region will be described as the permanent ethnic conflict between the region's tribes and economic, social and political fragility such as weak democratic performance, which in turn was produced by factors threatening security such as terrorism, organized crime and illegal immigration. The purpose of this study is to provide a geographical and historical picture and description. A wish about the most important and dangerous region on the African continent, which is the Sahel region of Africa.

2. The first axis: The strategic importance of the African Sahel region

The African Sahel region is one of the most significant areas that have recently gained recognition in political and international dynamics, due to the widespread security challenges currently facing it. In response to this situation, the region has become one of the geopolitical arenas attracting international attention. This importance arises from the interactions it contains, which constitute the intersection point between the interests of powers at regional and international levels, and elements of international competition based on acquiring wealth and resources, which are fundamental to the economy. This has prompted international powers to intensify their strategies in the region due to its significance.

2.1 The geographical extent of the African coast

Many researchers and those interested in geopolitics, including some in the academic field, have varied in determining the geographical space of the African Sahel countries due to multiple criteria for control and classification of these countries.

If we base the geographical extension to delineate the African Sahel countries, it is said to encompass all the desert regions of Africa. According to social/ethnic and tribal determinants, the Sahel extends to include the territories of the indigenous tribes of the Sahara, even though its scope extends beyond the geographically defined zone.

The social dimension, based on tribalism, negatively affects the political life of the countries in the region, especially those in the Sahel. Tribal loyalty often outweighs loyalty to the state, especially as many tribes have transnational dispersion such as the Tuaregs, Soninke, Fulani, and Kanuri, which affects the sense of national belonging and weakens state cohesion due to tribal affiliations.

The issues posed by the social/ethnic-tribal criterion, which have negative repercussions on the region, can be enumerated as follows:

Historical conflicts overshadow ethnic, religious, and linguistic pluralism, leading to the creation of an environment conducive to conflicts.

The semi-arid desert environment complicates the possibility of settlement due to the lack of life's necessities, often prompting control over water sources to improve living conditions.

The absence of distributive justice in terms of wealth, due to the tribal dimension of the states, is at the root of the emergence of corruption and the weakness in confronting it.

The African coast constitutes the region separating North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, as it extends from the Red Sea in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west, passing through Sudan, Chad, Mali, Senegal, and Mauritania. Considering the geo-economic importance, the coastal area extends to include Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and even the Cape Verde islands.

The word Sahel is of Arabic origin, synonymous with beach, and is considered a southern passage point for the Maghreb Arab countries. The Sahel is one of the peripheries of the extreme desert frontier, extending

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from Cape Verde to Chad, covering an area of 5.4 million square kilometers and a population of over 50 million inhabitants. The Sahel is a transition zone between the arid north and the fertile tropical forests that extend along the coastal area.

*The name "Touareg" is commonly written in a number of Arab countries, and in another, it is written as "Touareg." Researching the origin of the word, references indicate that it is the name given by the Arabs to the Amazigh people of the Sahara Desert. However, these references do not definitively specify the source of the name, as there are two widespread versions. One version suggests that the name is a distortion of the expression "Tuark" - meaning the abandoned or Tarakoun - in the language from which the Tuaregs are believed to descend. It is worth mentioning that the "Tuaregs" call themselves "KulTamachak" (or those who speak "Tamashak," which is the Tuareg pronunciation of the name of the Tamazight language, meaning (abdelkade)Amazigh). Mansour Lakhdari, The African Sahel and the Strengthening of National Security in Algeria, research paper at the International Forum on the African Sahel and Security Threats, unpublished, (University of M'sila, December 4-5, 2010), p. 05.*The name "Touareg" is commonly written in a number of Arab countries, and in another, it is written as "Touareg." Researching the origin of the word, references indicate that it is the name given by the Arabs to the Amazigh people of the Sahara Desert. However, these references do not definitively specify the source of the name, as there are two widespread versions. One version suggests that the name is a distortion of the expression "Tuark" - meaning the abandoned or Tarakoun - in the language from which the Tuaregs are believed to descend. It is worth mentioning that the "Tuaregs" call themselves "KulTamachak" (or those who speak "Tamashak," which is the Tuareg pronunciation of the name of the Tamazight language, meaning Amazigh). Mansour Lakhdari, The African Sahel and the Strengthening of National Security in Algeria, research paper at the International Forum on the African Sahel and Security Threats, unpublished, (University of M'sila, December 4-5, 2010), p. 05.*The name "Touareg" is commonly written in a number of Arab countries, and in

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The Sahel is a transition zone between the arid north and the fertile tropical forests that extend along the coastal area. The term Sahel is also used to refer to the countries that fall under the name "Interstate Committee for Drought Control" from 1971, which includes: Burkina Faso, Gambia, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire,

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and Senegal.

The Sahel is also defined as the frontier between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, that is, the strip separating the Maghreb Arab countries from Sudan. Historically and traditionally, the Sahel is a commercial corridor between West Africa and the Mediterranean. One of its famous names is "Bilad al-Siba," a region primarily populated by Tuaregs, Arabs, Sonrai, and Peuls.

The coast is a point of intersection of civilization, culture, and language, which has made it an environment for ethnic/racial conflicts, resulting in numerous contradictions and wars, making it pay the price for this location due to a complex mix of causes and motives, the most important of which are the colonial legacy and foreign interventions.

The coast is defined in ancient Arabic texts as the area separating the Maghreb and the land of Sudan. From this anchor point, it is a corridor between North Africa overlooking the Mediterranean and the southern Sahara. Regarding the different classifications that define the African Sahel region, it extends from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the confines of the Red Sea in the east. This means that its transboundary space includes the following countries: southern Algeria, Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Niger, Eritrea, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan.

We find the African Sahel region situated between the Mediterranean countries of North Africa and Central and Southern Africa, extending from Eritrea in the east to Mauritania in the west. This region is both crisis-ridden and vital due to its geostrategic location and its wealth. Additionally, it is characterized by pathological phenomena such as military coups and racial and ethnic conflicts, making it one of the most dynamic and interactive hotspots on the African continent, especially due to its complex tribal social structure.

2.2 The natural resources of the African Coast

Oil and Gas in the Sahel Region:

Africa's oil reserves have slightly decreased over the past year (2023), with estimates for most countries, except for two, remaining stable, while

the continent's crude oil production has seen a slight increase. According to recent figures from the Energy Research Unit, Africa's oil reserves reached 119.050 billion barrels by the end of 2023, down from 119.099 billion barrels the previous year (2022), representing a decrease of 0.04%. Africa's oil reserves account for approximately 6.8% of the world's total reserves, which amounted to 1,754 billion barrels in 2023, compared to 1,746 billion barrels in 2022. Preliminary estimates indicate that Africa's oil production will reach 7.146 million barrels per day in 2023, up from 7.131 million barrels per day the previous year. Africa's oil reserves have only changed in number in Nigeria and Angola, both increasing and decreasing, according to estimates from the Oil & Gas Journal, which include crude oil, condensates, and natural gas liquids. Nigeria's oil reserves, the second largest in Africa after Libya, fell to 36.96 billion barrels in 2023, down from 37.05 billion barrels the previous year (2022).

Minerals in the Sahel Region:

Mali is the third-largest gold producer in Africa and is also rich in various other natural resources. The country's Ministry of Mines estimates gold deposits at about 800 tonnes, iron ore at 2 million tonnes, uranium at 5,000 tonnes, manganese at 20 million tonnes, lithium at 4 million tonnes, and limestone at 10 million tonnes.

Conversely, Niger is the world's leading source of uranium. The World Nuclear Association states that Niger, which began mining uranium for commercial purposes in 1971, has two significant mines that produce around 5% of the uranium-rich ores produced worldwide. Other resources found in Niger include oil, gypsum, gold, and coal. Natural resources found in Guinea include bauxite, iron ore, gold, and diamonds. It is the second-biggest bauxite producer in the world. More than a quarter of the world's bauxite deposits, or over 7.4 billion metric tonnes, are found in the nation, according to a survey by the KPMG Global Mining Institute. Despite being a significant producer of aluminum, its people continue to be among the poorest on the continent.

Burkina Faso is also rich in minerals, with copper, manganese, phosphate, limestone, diamonds, gold, and zinc among them. Chad possesses the tenth-largest oil reserves in Africa and is also rich in oil.

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Despite having 1.5 billion barrels of reserves and producing over 140,000 barrels per day, the United States International Trade Administration reports that the nation is among the poorest on the continent with a short life expectancy.

The previous two years have seen military takeovers in Niger, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad; thus, the Sahel has become more famous for its coups d'état than for its natural riches.

Renewable Energies:

A new study from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Human Development Report on the Sahel 2023: Sustainable Energy for Economic and Climate Security in the Sahel, reveals that fossil fuels (55.9%) – primarily oil and gas – dominate energy production, while renewable sources such as hydroelectricity, solar, and wind remain marginal. A shift by the mid-2030s, with reduced dependence on oil (30%) and increased gas production (70%), could pave the way for solar and wind power, which would eventually constitute a substantial share (54%) of energy production by 2063.

The African Sahel region also has a reservoir of renewable energies, which are effective tools towards sustainable development as they can meet the energy needs of its countries. These needs are diverse, including solar energy, where sunlight is converted into electrical energy, underground energies from the earth, and wind energy. Moroccan researcher Khaled Ben Hammou, who heads the Desert Wind Institute in Rabat, estimates that the West African coasts, spanning 2,000 km, can produce enough electrical energy to build dams. All the energy needs of the European continent can be met by wind intensity on the West African coast, where the deployment of fans to produce electricity from wind at a density of 2.4 kilowatt-hours per year, and this amount of energy is sufficient to cover half of Europe's electricity needs, and can cover the entire electricity needs of Europe by doubling the density of the fans at a later stage.

As such, it is considered one of the most radioactive regions in the world due to the vastness of its deserts, so external ambitions, especially European ones, seek to benefit from energy from African deserts through

the use of advanced European technologies in the field of renewable energies, to reduce the energy bill for it, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, where German researcher at the Solar Energy Institute at the University of Kassel, "Georg Cech," told "Der Spiegel" magazine that studies conducted in Germany prove that it is possible to deliver Energy produced from wind energy in Africa to Germany at a cost of 4.5 cents per kilowatt-hour, while all studies by the Federal Environment Department reveal that the price of producing the kilowatt-hour in Germany stands at 6.5 cents, as confirmed by researcher "Joachim Nietzsche" from the Institute of Thermodynamics at the German Center for Air and Space Research, that wind in Africa provides a huge source of electrical energy equivalent to what Saudi Arabia provides to Europe in energy through oil.

Therefore, despite the fact that most of the lands in the African Sahel region are arid desert lands that do not have the conditions for normal life, this region is of great importance in the decision-making circles of major countries because it is a reservoir of enormous economic interests, as it contains a large reservoir of natural and energy resources that can rival the Middle East in terms of strategic importance. It also contains an estimated 10 million cattle, making it one of the most important countries for cotton production, especially in southern Mali. In addition to this, anyone who can control the region can control international maritime routes through the maritime routes that form its extension, such as the Red Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, and can play a key role in shaping and imposing the political and economic perceptions of the world

3. Foreign Presence in the African Sahel Region:

The African coast is of great importance due to its geostrategic location linking North Africa and Central Africa. It represents a clear band from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean and controls the continent's trade routes, in addition to its natural and mineral resources, which have attracted the ambitions of global powers, each with its policies and covert objectives. We find:

3.1 France

The African coast represents a point of intersection for France with parts of the International Organization of La Francophonie, given the

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region's former colonies. France believes its previous colonization gives it a natural right to continue influencing affairs, even intervening if its interests demand. France has developed alternative frameworks to establish itself in the region, notably through bilateral defense treaties and agreements, such as those signed with Senegal in March 1974, Mauritania in September 1976, Niger in February 1977, and Mali in October 1974. It has maintained military presence in Chad, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast, responding to escalating terrorist acts in the African Sahel, including dangerous manifestations like the kidnapping of European hostages, many of whom were French. This provided an opportunity to re-launch military intervention under the guise of cooperation and rehabilitating regional armed forces. Economically, "the African Sahel region is a zone of prime influence for France, fulfilling multiple energy needs as it monopolizes uranium extraction in Niger, accounting for over 249 tonnes, a major source for its nuclear program, alongside economic investments across various Sahelian countries." France's monopoly of influence in its former African colonies, including the Sahel region, makes any discussion of notable economic activity by other countries in the region interference in a "pre-reserved" domain. Signs of France's particular interest in the Sahel region date back to 1957, when the French Parliament approved the law establishing the Organization of the Saharan Regions as a framework including:

- Saharan provinces of Algeria.
- Regions of French Equatorial Africa.
- Regions of French West Africa.

3.2 United States of America

Initially delaying its interest in Africa and particularly the African Sahel due to its perceived traditional influence zone of France, the US revised its policy towards the region in the early post-Cold War years, with "Africa" becoming a region of crisis production due to poverty, backwardness, and political instability. This led to increased US interest in the region, particularly after the events of September 11, 2001, and the emergence of what became "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" in early

2007, which legitimized US attention to the African region under its leadership in what it termed the "war on terrorism." US interest in the African coast manifested through the establishment of the new United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), officially announced by the US administration on February 6, 2007. Practical launch was delayed to October 2008 due to unsuccessful attempts to find an official headquarters in Africa, prompting the relocation of the "European Command - EUCOM" headquarters to Stuttgart, Germany. However, US interest in the region primarily revolves around economic stakes represented by the coast, where the argument of combating terrorism was a cover to extend influence over the region's various oil sources and corridors, especially after explorations in West Africa south of the African coast. The region's comparison to the Persian Gulf in terms of oil wealth enhanced Africa's ability to supply the US with about 16% in recent years. This is particularly true due to its high quality meeting US environmental standards, along with ease of extraction from shallow depths, attracting American attention to translate the volume of its main oil partners' investments into exploration operations in the Chad Basin region (southern Lake Chad), and transportation to Cameroon's port 1,076 km away, enabling export of 225,000 barrels per day in addition to what is produced in the Gulf of Guinea. Through emerging economic interests and strategic stakes of the United States of America in the adjacent Sahel and Gulf of Guinea, and revisiting the complex duality of "US national security" based on combining counterterrorism and securing energy supply sources, it becomes more evident that AFRICOM is just a link in a series of US security policies and strategies in the Sahel, appearing solely to secure energy sources and invest in the region's unstable security situation.

3.3China

The People's Republic of China is the continent of Africa's largest trading partner, with over 250 billion dollars in exchanges between the two countries, and 10,000 Chinese companies on the continent. While France's influence in the Sahel is nourished by the depth and particularities of its historical relations with the region's countries and overt American intervention ostensibly motivated by counterterrorism, China's access to the

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Sahel is characterized by calm, stability, and primarily economic language of investment, cooperation, and trade exchanges. This has sparked competition among major powers with strategic interests and stakes in the region, making China the third economic operator with Africa after the United States and France. China's investments in Africa have multiplied over a quarter century (between 1980 and 2007) by fifty times, surpassing many countries with a foothold on the continent due to their previous colonial history, like Britain, Portugal, Italy, and the Netherlands. There are many Chinese investments on the African continent in general and the African coast in particular, following the activities of Chinese oil companies, especially the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and China Petrochemical Corporation (SINOPEC), which have massively launched into exploration and research in the Sahel region to monopolize discoveries made. SINOPEC concluded two agreements with Niger in November 2003, allowing China to begin exploration work in the "Erg Tinar" and "Belma" areas. In July 2005, CNPC obtained 65% exploitation rights for discoveries made in Mauritania, covering an area of 10,630 km² along the land border with Senegal, starting exploration work in Mali after deciding to start oil discovery work in the sixties of the twentieth century, whose geological nature prevented the start of exploration and extraction work, so investments in the "Tawni Basin" were not far from the Mauritanian borders, as well as in areas adjacent to the borders with Burkina Faso and Niger. Investments extended to Senegal and Nigeria, where they were able to dismantle 45% of the exploitation of certain oil basins in 2006 to compete directly with companies existing at the time in the region, the most important of which was the French company Total. It sparked intense Chinese presence in Africa, accompanied by remarkable development and rapid growth of Chinese economy indicators, which reached a growth rate of 10% in 2008, in which gross domestic product per capita quadrupled over the past 30 years to reach 3,180 dollars per capita in 2008, prompting a sense of threat among many of the world's major economic powers, whose economies are experiencing serious financial crises. On the sidelines of the G8 Summit held in 2008, the German Finance

Minister reserved China's humiliating policy in Africa - according to her - to balance global finance, particularly regarding indebtedness. "We note that there is growing Chinese interest in African resources, which contradicts the Group of Eight's debt reduction policy," she said. Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy put it more bluntly: "I do not want the West to do everything to increase Africa's debt and turn it into a new debt for the Chinese." The World Bank's 2006 report highlighted China's remarkable and somewhat unsettling presence in Africa, specifically: "... Hydrocarbons make up 71% of China's imports from Africa, mainly distributed on: 94% of Angolan oil and 80% of Sudan, but these figures recall the illicit exchanges that existed in colonial times.

3.4 Russia

Following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia's engagement in Africa rose dramatically. Moscow's approach was centered on a combination of military sales, security cooperation, and political support, particularly to authoritarian governments, in return for market access, mining rights, and diplomatic backing for its foreign policy. Russia is becoming Africa's main provider of armaments.

In addition, it made a greater effort to sway elections in weaker governments, supporting despotic rulers in return for privileged access to their natural resources. Moscow extended support to nations that were economically and politically isolated as a result of Western sanctions. It even sent in private military contractors, like the Wagner Group, to sway the results of regional wars to its advantage. Thus, by encouraging non-interference in the domestic affairs of nations, Russia and China, who were asymmetric adversaries in Africa from the 1960s to the 1980s, have effectively challenged Western values. Apart from the latest instance of substituting French forces to confront Islamic terrorism in Mali, Mozambique has also been a case.

Since 2019, in exchange for military, economic, and political cooperation—including the potential for a future Russian naval military base in the nation—Russian mercenaries and military hardware have been provided to the Maputo government to help fight insurgents in the northern

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Mozambican province of Cabo Delgado and jihadists affiliated with terrorist organizations ISIS and Al-Shabaab. Thus, Moscow may potentially obstruct Total LNG's rival French project in Mozambique. Furthermore, a German intelligence dossier leaked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a tabloid said that Russia had been "contractually assured" of establishing military bases in the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Sudan, Madagascar, Egypt, and Eritrea.

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A \$20 billion annual trade between Russia and Africa is expected in 2021, according to Benedict Oramah, President of the African Export-Import Bank. This trade has doubled since 2015. Russia purchased goods and services worth about \$5 billion from Africa and exported goods and services worth \$14 billion. Particular emphasis is shown on strategic raw resources. For instance, the nuclear business Rosatom collects uranium in

Namibia, and the company Rusal operates in Guinea to harvest bauxite, the source of aluminum. According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Alrosa, the largest diamond mining corporation in the world, was looking to expand its operations in Zimbabwe and Angola.

2. Second Axis: The Security Environment in the Sahel

The Sahel region saw significant changes in 2023, which changed the region's geopolitical environment and the types of regional and global alliances that existed there.

The region experienced eight military strike against the state over the past three years, forecasting a potential new 'strike against the state' in 2024. Military leaders have generally been well received by the public, while regional and international responses have proven ineffective. Many countries exhibit vulnerabilities that make them potential targets for strike against the state, such as Cameroon, where President Paul Biya, aged 90, increasingly shows signs of frailty amid internal rivalries and divisions. While Biya has worked diligently to 'immunize' his regime against strikes against the state, health issues or permanent deficits could create a power vacuum to be filled by the military.

2024 will probably see the greatest threat of a coup in nations already ruled by the military, as elections are unlikely to produce a true political transition of power and force the military back into the barracks. As military councils in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali seem to be becoming more unstable, these three nations signed the LiptkoJorma pact on September 16, 2023, intending to integrate their respective military and economic efforts.

It is noteworthy that recent strike against the state in various Sahel African countries share common fundamental issues:

In most countries of the region, the fragility of governments formed by extended periods of colonial rule and subsequent authoritarian post-colonial regimes continues to be prevalent. Although several African nations have effectively shifted to pluralistic democracies, those who are vulnerable to

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political unrest often maintain control among a small group of ruling elites, who are bound together by internal connections or external associations.

ANYA: In Africa, like in Mali, where almost half of the people are under 14, a new group of populist young leaders has come to power. These leaders have taken advantage of the growing anger among young people that they can't find better ways to get power.

Foreign approaches have predominantly enhanced the military capabilities of national armies, despite significant financial investments, without addressing the underlying causes of insurgency and public discontent, which are a result of poor outcomes and a lack of development dividends.

The African Sahel will likely remain a focal point for jihadist groups affiliated with ISIS and Al-Qaeda, notably Jama'atNusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, Islamic State in the Sahel, and Islamic State of West Africa Province, exploiting opportunities amidst political and security instability and vast ungoverned areas. Militancy will persist in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in 2024. Militants will strengthen their presence in the region, expand their operations and networks to other West African countries. Security vacuums in the border areas between these three countries are expected to worsen, with military councils seemingly unable to fill the void left by the departure of international forces in 2022. Prioritizing a violent response, military actions will escalate targeting civilians and sectarian tensions. While military councils are distracted by internal challenges, armed groups will continue expanding into new regions, creating new hotspots of militancy, notably in northern Benin, Togo, southwestern Mali, and possibly southern Niger.

In 2024, it is important to monitor the increase in anti-French sentiment in the Sahel region. The distrust of foreign intervention, particularly from France, has been exacerbated by economic factors, insecurity, and historical grievances. The region's reaction to military coups is currently being influenced by anti-French sentiment, and it will be essential to address these sentiments in order to preserve stability. The geopolitical landscape is

further complicated by Western efforts to counter Russian influence in the Sahel. The potential exploitation of economic challenges and anti-French sentiment by military officers could result in increased political instability, which would require a reevaluation of international security strategies in the region.

Despite this, France maintains a presence in the Sahel, with military forces in Chad and in certain West African countries such as Ivory Coast, Gabon, and Senegal, and there's also the CFA franc and about 60% of francophones living in Africa. However, the emerging shift in 2024 is the reshaping of Franco-African relations away from the perspective of 'France-Afrique,' a term redolent of patriarchal influence and corrupt deals among elites.

The 2024 Sahel influence race is a complex interplay between the strategic realignment of global powers, the resurgence of military coups, and international competition. The military presence of France has been significantly impacted by coups, resulting in the withdrawal of troops and the loss of strategic alliances. Consequently, France has encountered significant challenges. In the interim, Russia is becoming a significant victor, as it capitalises on a soft power strategy and the increasing dissatisfaction with Western policies. Moscow's influence in the Sahel is influenced by its policy of non-interference. China is currently implementing a comparable approach, establishing itself as the greatest foreign investor in Africa and gaining control of the Sahel's oil market by means of strategic investments in Chad and Niger.

The Sahel remains a major transit point for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa to coastal states in the north and onward to Europe. New violence could lead to a significant increase in displacement and migration rates from the region, exacerbating pressure on North African countries, coastal states, and Europe.

As stabilisation necessitates sustained and effective measures that exhibit their efficacy in the medium and long term, the strategies presently implemented in the Sahel are unlikely to have an immediate impact. Migration northward has already become a continuous phenomenon and is

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anticipated to increase in the years ahead. Consequently, it is imperative that Maghreb countries continue and intensify their efforts to mitigate the potential negative impacts of migration.

The dynamic evolution of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and regional cooperation are among the prospective trends in the Sahel in 2024. The response to the coup in Niger has emphasised the profound divisions within ECOWAS, as coastal states have called for intervention, while the landlocked triumvirate of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have rejected such intervention. Furthermore, the ECOWAS sanctions have resulted in substantial hardships in Niger, which have had severe negative repercussions on the border communities with neighbouring Nigeria.

4. CONCLUSION

The Sahel, a vast semi-arid African region that divides the Sahara Desert to the north and tropical savannas to the south, is a land of both opportunities and challenges. It is endowed with an abundance of natural and human resources, which presents an immense opportunity for rapid expansion. Nevertheless, prosperity and peace are imperilled by profoundly rooted environmental, political, and security challenges.

In addition to being viewed as an export zone for crises from North African and European countries through asymmetric threats, foremost among them clandestine immigration, which has impacted security dynamics in the Mediterranean region, along with terrorism and criminal activities in the region, and the foreign presence doesn't help.

Consequently, this fertile environment represented by the proliferation of arms, drug trafficking, human trafficking, various illegal practices, and criminal activities has led the Sahel to witness increased violations reported by various human rights organizations, threatening individual lives. This has been exacerbated by state failure caused by the functional deficit of the state in the Sahel, contributing to worsening security and humanitarian challenges in the African Sahel, weakening state authority across various sectors in Sahel countries and reducing development opportunities in the

region.

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