Digital Proxy Wars: A Study on the Impact of Information Disinformation Campaigns on Foreign Policy Orientations in the African Sahel Countries

الحروب الرقمية بالوكالة: دراسة حول تأثير حملات المعلومات المغلوطة على توجهات السياسة الخارجية في دول الساحل الأفريقي

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Abstract :

This paper looks into what's being called 'digital proxy wars'—basically how countries are fighting indirect geopolitical battles through the internet. It specifically examines how organized disinformation campaigns are shaping countries' foreign policy choices in the Sahel region.

What comes through pretty clearly is that the online space has become one of the main battlegrounds for this kind of shadow conflict. The stories and narratives that spread on social media are genuinely changing how ordinary people think and feel—and they're steadily destroying trust in the traditional Western partners (France, the US, EU countries, etc.) that these governments used to rely on."

This part of the study builds on ideas from information warfare, gray-zone tactics, and media framing to examine exactly how these online narratives are helping push countries in the Sahel toward new international partners and away from old ones.

The paper zooms in on the messy geopolitical reality in the Sahel right now: governments that are pretty fragile, a string of military coups in recent years (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger), and big powers like France (the traditional heavyweight) and Russia (the newcomer stepping in aggressively) all jostling for influence. In that unstable environment, digital stories and propaganda campaigns aren't just noise—they're active tools that make it easier for shifts in alliances to occur, often

by amplifying anti-Western sentiment and positioning Russia (or others) as the more reliable alternative.

The key takeaway from the research is that these disinformation campaigns have accelerated major changes in how Sahelian countries handle their foreign relations, We're talking about concrete moves like pulling out of the G5 Sahel joint force, getting much closer to Russia for military and economic support, all while these countries are already dealing with serious internal problems—ongoing security threats from jihadist groups and worsening economic hardship.

In the end, the study makes a pretty straightforward point: if you want to understand what's actually driving foreign-policy decisions in the Sahel today, you can't ignore the role of organized digital disinformation. It's become one of the most powerful (and cheapest) levers that external actors are pulling to reshape alliances in the region.

key words: Digital Proxy Wars , Disinformation , Gray Zone Warfare , Sahel States , Foreign Policy , Geopolitical Competition.

الملخص:

يتناول البحث ظاهرةحروب النيابة الرقميةودور حملات التضليل المعلوماتي في التأثير على توجهات السياسة الخارجية لدول الساحل الإفريقي، ينطلق من فرضية أن الفضاء الرقمي أصبح أداة استراتيجية في الصراعات الجيوسياسية غير المباشرة، حيث تُستخدم المنصات الرقمية لتشكيل الرأي العام وتقويض الثقة في الشركاء التقليديين خاصة الدول الغربية.

يعتمد البحث على مفاهيم حروب المعلومات، الحروب الرمادية ونظرية التأطير الإعلامي لتحليل كيفية توظيف السرديات الرقمية في إعادة تشكيل التحالفات الدولية، كما يدرس السياق الجيوسياسي لدول الساحل في ظل هشاشة الدولة، تصاعد الانقلابات والتنافس بين قوى دولية مثل فرنسا وروسيا.

تظهر النتائج أن حملات التضليل أسهمت في تسريع تحولات مهمة، مثل الانسحاب من مجموعة الساحل الخمس والتقارب مع روسيا، لكنها لم تكن العامل الوحيد، بل تفاعلت مع أزمات أمنية واقتصادية داخلية.

ويخلص البحث إلى أن فهم ديناميكيات التضليل الرقمي ضروري لتحليل التحولات الراهنة في السياسة الخارجية لدول الساحل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحروب الرقمية بالوكالة، التضليل الإعلامي، الحرب في المنطقة الرمادية، دول الساحل، السياسة الخارجية، المنافسة الجيوسياسية.

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1. Introduction:

Over the last 20 years or so, the whole international scene has changed dramatically—and a huge part of that comes down to the digital revolution. Cyberspace has basically become another full-on battlefield and playing field where countries compete for power and influence.

In the middle of all this, digital disinformation has turned into one of the go-to weapons for pulling strings without anyone firing a shot Governments, intelligence services, and various actors now use it to quietly shape events within other countries and how those countries behave toward the rest of the world. Whether it's messing with elections, steering public opinion, or slowly nudging entire political directions and alliances in a new way, these online influence operations have become a really effective (and relatively cheap) way to achieve big geopolitical goals indirectly. Although this phenomenon has received substantial attention in Western scholarship, especially concerning digital interference in the United States and Europe, the African information sphere—particularly in the Sahel—remains underexplored in academic research, despite its vulnerability to political fragility and international competition.

Research Problem:To what extent are disinformation campaigns utilized as a tool in digital proxy wars to influence foreign policy orientations in the Sahel countries?

Significance of the Research: This research is significant for several interconnected reasons. The paper does three main things that make it stand out:

First, it tries to fill an important gap in the research. Most studies on digital disinformation focus on Western democracies with strong institutions and free(ish) media ecosystems. But in the Global South—especially in places like the Sahel—things look very different: weaker state institutions, less independent media, greater state control over information, and populations that often rely heavily on social media and WhatsApp for news. So the effects of disinformation play out in a completely different way here, and this study actually zooms in on that under-explored reality.

Second, it shines a light on a growing threat to national sovereignty and independent decision-making in already fragile countries. When you have repeated military coups, ongoing insurgencies, economic collapse, and governments that struggle to deliver basic services, foreign disinformation

campaigns don't just annoy people—they can genuinely tip the balance of who the country aligns with internationally, sometimes faster than any traditional diplomatic or military pressure could.

Third, it delves into how this fits into the broader picture of modern unconventional warfare. The digital space has become a key arena where major powers (France, trying to hold on to influence; Russia, pushing in hard; maybe others in the background) compete without open confrontation. The study examines specific tactics—narrative shaping, meme warfare, coordinated amplification, fake accounts, and viral outrage content—and shows how they connect directly to the real-world geopolitical shifts we're seeing in the Sahel right now.

Research Gap: The research gap lies in the fact that most literature has focused on cases related to Russia, the United States, or the European context, with a clear oversight of the impact of digital disinformation in Africa, particularly on the redirection of alliances and foreign policies.

Methodology and Structure: This study adopts a multi-level analytical approach, structured around four main pillars. The first pillar establishes the conceptual and theoretical framework by defining digital disinformation and information warfare, and linking them to the theories of Gray Zone Warfare and Media Framing. The paper is basically built around four main pillars (or angles) to make sense of everything.

The second one dives into the geopolitical backdrop in the Sahel countries. It really zeros in on how fragile most of these states are—weak institutions, limited control over territory, constant security threats—and how that creates fertile ground for big external powers to compete. We're talking classic great-power rivalry: France trying to hang on to its historical influence, Russia stepping in boldly with military support and private contractors, and maybe a few others quietly watching or probing for openings.

The third pillar shifts the focus to the actual disinformation campaigns unfolding in the region. It looks at who's behind them (state actors, proxies, coordinated networks), where they're coming from (often pointing to Russian-linked operations but not exclusively), and the specific tools and tactics being used: fake accounts, meme pages, viral videos, WhatsApp forwards, coordinated hashtag storms, manipulated "leaks," and so on—basically the full modern digital influence toolkit tailored to local languages, grievances, and platforms that people actually use there.

The fourth pillar is where it all comes together: it seeks to measure the real-world effects of these campaigns on foreign policy. The study tracks concrete changes—like countries dumping long-standing Western partnerships, exiting regional security frameworks (G5 Sahel, Barkhane, etc.), pivoting toward Russia for arms/training/Wagner-style support, signing new mining or energy deals with non-Western players—and asks how much of that shift can actually be linked back to the steady drip of online narratives that erode trust in the old allies while building up alternatives.

Accordingly, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the role of the digital sphere in reshaping geopolitical dynamics within the African Sahel.

2. Pillar I: Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Rapid technological advancement and increased reliance on the digital sphere have transformed information into a strategic tool in contemporary conflict, often described as information warfare. Digital disinformation is one of the standout features of these modern, low-visibility conflicts. It's a way for actors to quietly mold public opinion, throw political systems off balance, and score real geopolitical wins—all without anyone having to deploy troops or launch missiles. It's influence on the cheap, but incredibly effective.

This chapter lays out the full conceptual and theoretical foundation for the rest of the discussion. It starts by clearly defining what "digital disinformation" actually means, then runs through the main tools and techniques people use in information warfare today. Next, it makes the case that digital proxy wars are really just the 21st-century evolution of old-school proxy wars—same idea of fighting indirectly through others, but now the battlefield is online narratives, memes, viral content, and algorithm-boosted outrage, rather than supplying arms to rebels.

The chapter also brings in two important theoretical lenses to help explain what's going on: Gray Zone Warfare (those murky, hard-to-attribute actions that stay deliberately below the threshold of open war) and Media Framing theory (how the way information is packaged, emphasized, or spun shapes how audiences interpret events and form opinions).

Everything in here is backed up by fairly recent stuff—academic journal articles, solid books on the topic, and credible official reports—so it's not just theory pulled out of thin air; it's grounded in what's actually being researched and documented right now.

2.1 Definition of Digital Disinformation

Digital disinformation is basically the deliberate spreading of false or misleading information through online platforms—social media, fake websites, WhatsApp chains, deepfakes, AI-generated content, you name it—with the clear goal of messing with people's opinions, stirring up confusion, or pushing some political or economic agenda forward.

Digital disinformation differs from misinformation primarily in intent: while misinformation is unintentionally false information shared by individuals who believe it to be true, disinformation is deliberately fabricated or manipulated to achieve strategic objectives. In international relations and geopolitics, digital disinformation functions as a non-traditional weapon, replacing conventional military tools with social media algorithms, coordinated online networks, targeted advertising, manipulated media, and advanced AI technologies. These campaigns are carefully designed to exploit societal vulnerabilities—such as historical grievances or cultural sensitivities—in order to spread rapidly and influence public opinion. Their broader aims often include undermining governments, manipulating elections, weakening institutional trust, and shifting geopolitical alignments, thereby posing significant national security threats.

Recent research highlights the increasing sophistication of digital disinformation, particularly through the use of AI-generated content such as deepfakes and fabricated videos, which make distinguishing between authentic and manipulated information increasingly difficult. Many scholars also associate digital disinformation with Fourth-Generation Warfare (4GW), a form of conflict centered on controlling narratives, shaping perceptions, and eroding institutional trust rather than engaging in traditional military confrontation, with the ultimate goal of achieving strategic victories without conventional warfare.

The United Nations has also raised the alarm on this front, pointing out that disinformation isn't just annoying or misleading—it's a real threat to basic human rights. When false stories spread fast about certain ethnic, religious, or social groups, they can quickly fuel hatred, trigger violence, deepen divisions, or even spark ethnic clashes. In fragile places, especially, a single viral lie can escalate into very real harm on the ground.

2.2 Information Warfare Tools

Information warfare represents a modern strategy through which states and other actors pursue political and strategic advantages without relying solely on conventional military force. In this framework, information itself becomes the

primary weapon, used to influence perceptions, destabilize opponents, and achieve strategic goals. Social media platforms play a central role by enabling rapid dissemination of disinformation, micro-targeted messaging, and coordinated bot activity that amplifies fringe narratives to create the illusion of widespread support.

Cyberattacks further reinforce disinformation efforts by stealing and selectively leaking sensitive data to damage reputations or influence political processes. The integration of artificial intelligence-particularly deepfakes and AI-generated text-has significantly increased the scale, realism, and deniability of such operations. In addition, psychological operations (PSYOP) and digital propaganda aim to manipulate morale, intensify social divisions, and control dominant narratives. These tools are often combined within hybrid strategies that blend cyber breaches, AI manipulation, targeted messaging, and traditional political or military pressure to maximize disruption while minimizing accountability.(Derakhshan, 2017)

2.3Digital Proxy Wars as an Extension of Classical Proxy Wars

Digital proxy wars represent the online evolution of traditional proxy conflicts, such as those seen during the Cold War, where major powers advanced their interests indirectly to avoid direct confrontation. In the digital context, proxies are no longer armed groups but cyber actors such as hacktivist networks, troll farms, influencers, bot networks, and affiliated media outlets that operate on behalf of state sponsors. These actors promote strategic narratives, conduct cyberattacks, and spread disinformation while providing plausible deniability for the sponsoring state.

Unlike conventional proxy wars, digital proxy conflicts rely on intangible tools—data leaks, cyber hacks, viral content, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and AI-generated media—rather than weapons or troops. Their appeal lies in being cost-effective, rapid, and scalable, allowing states to influence foreign politics, weaken rivals, and shift alliances with minimal direct risk. However, their speed, global reach, and anonymity complicate legal accountability and raise concerns about escalating tensions in an increasingly persistent and covert digital battlefield.(Edward, 2020)

2.4Theoretical Framework: Gray Zone Warfare Theory

Gray Zone Warfare theory explains conflicts that exist between peace and open war, where states combine military and non-military tools—such as economic pressure, cyber operations, propaganda, and disinformation—to achieve strategic

objectives without triggering direct military confrontation. In the digital sphere, this framework is particularly relevant, as states conduct influence campaigns, coordinated disinformation efforts, and cyberattacks designed to weaken rivals while maintaining ambiguity and plausible deniability. The strategy relies on incremental pressure that gradually erodes trust, polarizes societies, and shifts public opinion without crossing the legal or political threshold of war.

Gray Zone tactics exploit weaknesses in international law, slow global coordination, and the anonymity of the digital environment, making attribution difficult and accountability limited, This approach has been evident in contemporary geopolitical tensions, particularly in Russia-West relations, where disinformation and hybrid methods are used to destabilize opponents without provoking direct military escalation ,While Gray Zone theory provides a useful lens for understanding hybrid digital conflict, it also highlights significant challenges related to deterrence, legal response, and the development of effective countermeasures without escalating into open warfare.(Frank, 2018)

2.5Theoretical Framework: Media Framing Theory

Media Framing Theory is all about how the way stories get told in the media doesn't just pass along facts—it actively shapes how people understand and feel about those facts. The core idea is that media outlets (traditional or digital) don't show everything; they pick certain "frames" or lenses through which to present information. Those frames highlight some details, downplay others, connect events to particular values or emotions, and, in general, guide audiences toward a specific interpretation.

In the world of digital disinformation, this theory becomes super useful for explaining how fake or misleading narratives get built and why they stick. Disinformation campaigns don't just dump random lies—they carefully construct frames that make the falsehoods feel logical, urgent, or morally right to the people seeing them.

Researchers usually break media framing down into three key moves:

- Selection: Choosing which pieces of information (real or invented) to include.
- Emphasis: Playing up certain angles, words, images, or emotions while toning down or ignoring the rest.
- Exclusion: Leaving out inconvenient facts, counter-arguments, or context that would weaken the desired message.

For example, in a disinformation effort targeting a Western-backed government in

the Sahel, the campaign might frame France's past military presence as nothing but "neo-colonial exploitation" and "resource theft," constantly repeating stories of civilian casualties or corruption scandals (some exaggerated or fabricated), while completely ignoring any development aid, security gains, or local partnerships that actually happened. Over time, that one-sided framing makes the anti-French narrative feel like common sense to many people.

Media framing amplifies the impact of digital disinformation by aligning messages with audiences' existing beliefs, fears, or frustrations, making deceptive narratives feel authentic and persuasive. In international relations, states strategically frame actions—such as military interventions or adversary behavior—to influence public opinion, justify sanctions, or gain support, with digital platforms accelerating the spread through hashtags, viral content, memes, and algorithmic amplification. Research shows that effective disinformation relies on these targeted frames to shape political attitudes, social divisions, voting behavior, and foreign-policy decisions, especially in fragile contexts with low institutional trust. Integrating concepts like Gray Zone Warfare and Media Framing demonstrates how modern information warfare operates in hybrid spaces between peace and open conflict, highlighting the complex, multi-layered threats digital disinformation poses to public trust, national security, and global stability. This framework underscores the need for coordinated national and international strategies to counter these challenges(Robert, 1993).

3. Pillar II: The Geopolitical Context of the Sahel Countries

The Sahel region in Africa—Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and sometimes a few neighbors—is one of the most tangled and high-stakes geopolitical hotspots on the planet right now,Everything collides here: incredibly weak states, nonstop security threats from jihadists and bandits, climate pressures that make life harder, and a bunch of outside powers all trying to carve out influence. To really get what's going on with foreign-policy choices in these countries, you have to look closely at the internal messes they're dealing with, what actually drives their decisions on the world stage, and who's pulling strings from outside. This section dives deep into all of that, focusing especially on how fragile these states are, the key factors shaping their foreign relations, and the main international players involved—France (the longtime heavyweight), Russia (the aggressive newcomer), Turkey, China, and others—pulling from solid, up-to-date academic work.

3.1 State Fragility in the Sahel Region

The Sahel exemplifies fragile states where governments struggle to provide security, basic services, and territorial control due to internal challenges such as corruption, poor governance, and ethnic tensions, compounded by external pressures like foreign interference, climate change, and poverty-driven migration. Mali illustrates this fragility: since the 2012 coup, large areas have remained under the control of extremist groups, militias, and criminal networks, which fill governance gaps. Reliance on foreign aid—military, financial, and humanitarian—further weakens sovereignty, as decisions are often influenced by external donors rather than national interests, creating a cycle where internal weakness attracts outside involvement and perpetuates instability,State fragility in the Sahel is exacerbated by climate change, which serves as a primary driver of social and economic instability, Recurrent droughts and worsening water shortages are turning into real flashpoints across the Sahel. Farmers and herders—who've historically shared grazing land and water sources—are now clashing more often over what's left, creating deep local resentments and violence, Extremist groups like jihadists are quick to jump on these grievances: they show up promising "protection," justice for the marginalized, or even just basic resources, and use that to recruit young men who feel the government has abandoned them.(Group, 2023)

In Niger for example, shrinking arable land (thanks to desertification and erratic rains) has displaced thousands of families. People are pushed off their farms, flock to already strained cities looking for work or food, and put huge extra pressure on urban services that were barely coping. The central government ends up looking even weaker because it can't deliver relief quickly or mediate these resource conflicts effectively, That weakness feeds the cycle: more instability, more recruitment for armed groups, less state control.

These aren't just "environmental" or "local" problems—they ripple straight into foreign policy. When humanitarian crises pile up (famine risks, refugee flows, mass displacement), governments have no choice but to call for international help: food aid, emergency funding, peacekeeping support, or military assistance to secure borders and fight insurgents. That dependence opens the door wide for outside powers to step in more deeply—whether it's France historically providing security umbrellas, the UN running major missions, or newer players like Russia offering quick military fixes without asking too many questions about governance or human rights.

In short, climate stress and resource scarcity don't just make life harder on the ground; they erode state authority from within and make these countries more vulnerable to external influence, pulling them into the orbit of whoever's willing (and able)to provide the most immediate help-often at the cost of long-term independence in foreign-policy choices.(Programme, 2022)

Corruption is another major factor making state fragility much worse in the Sahel It's not just a side issue—it's eating away at whatever trust people still have in their governments.

In Burkina Faso, pervasive corruption—ranging from embezzlement of public funds to diversion of aid—eroded government credibility and fueled popular resentment, creating conditions that facilitated military coups in 2022, Corruption extends beyond top officials to local authorities, undermining public services and weakening state legitimacy, This fragility makes Sahelian governments highly dependent on external assistance, allowing foreign actors such as France, Russia, China, Turkey, and Gulf states to intervene, often advancing their strategic interests while exploiting local grievances. Ultimately, corruption not only weakens states internally but also invites foreign meddling, turning domestic instability into a tool for geopolitical influence.(International, 2024)

3.2 Determinants of Foreign Policy Decision-Making in the Sahel Countries

Foreign policy in the Sahel is heavily constrained by internal instability and economic dependence on foreign aid, which often comes with conditions that limit national decision-making, Countries like Chad rely on institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, whose loans and programs require reforms, privatization, and market liberalization, forcing governments to prioritize donor preferences over domestic interests. This dependence gives external powers—traditionally Western countries like France, the US, or EU members—leverage to influence political, economic, and military decisions. Consequently, Sahelian states frequently make policy choices out of survival rather than strategic autonomy, creating opportunities for alternative partners such as Russia or China to step in with quicker, less conditional support, thereby shaping local alliances and access to resources.(Fund, 2023)

Another critical determinant is the security crises that compel Sahel states to cooperate with international powers to confront terrorist threats. In Mali, the deteriorating security situation led to the signing of military cooperation agreements with countries such as France and Russia. These deals, though, often

stir up real controversy at home. A lot of people see them as chipping away at national sovereignty, which creates tension between the government's need for security help and the public's demand to stay truly independent.

For example, Mali's deal with the Russian Wagner Group has faced heavy criticism because of its history of human rights abuses,It leaves the government stuck in a hard place—desperate for the security support Wagner provides, but under growing pressure from the population to avoid handing over too much control to yet another foreign player.(Watch, 2023)

Regional relationships significantly influence Sahelian foreign policy, as ties with neighboring countries affect counter-terrorism, border security, and responses to transnational threats. For example, Mauritania collaborates with Algeria under the G5 Sahel framework through joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and coordinated operations against extremists. However, disagreements over priorities, resource allocation, and leadership create tensions that complicate cooperation. Consequently, Sahelian governments must continuously balance national interests—security, economic stability, and sovereignty—against regional commitments, ensuring sufficient collaboration to address shared threats without compromising autonomy or being drawn into external agendas.(Union, 2022)

3.3Map of International Actors in the Sahel

Operation Barkhane, launched by France in 2014, deployed troops, helicopters, drones, and logistics support across the Sahel to assist local armies and combat jihadist groups, Despite these efforts, lasting peace remained elusive, with continued attacks and large areas beyond government control, Local populations and analysts increasingly viewed France’s presence as protecting economic interests, particularly in Niger’s uranium sector, By 2022, frustrations over slow progress and perceived neo-colonialism led Mali to expel French forces, followed by similar reductions in Burkina Faso and Niger. This marked a significant decline in French influence, creating space for alternative actors, notably Russia, to offer quicker, less conditional military support.(Chafer, 2023)

3.4Russia: The New and Influential Actor in the Region

Russia has stepped in as a fresh and increasingly powerful player in the Sahel, especially as French influence has faded away in recent years,It's moved fast to fill the vacuum left by the French pullouts.

The main vehicle for Russia's entry has been the Wagner Group (later rebranded as Africa Corps after the 2023 leadership shake-up), In Mali and Burkina Faso,

Wagner provided hands-on military support: training local troops, supplying weapons and equipment, conducting joint operations against jihadists, and even helping secure key sites, such as mines and borders, The pitch was simple and appealing to the military juntas—quick, decisive help with no lectures on democracy, human rights, or governance reforms, unlike what Western partners often demand.

This isn't happening in isolation. It's part of Russia's broader play across Africa: building alliances, gaining access to resources (gold, uranium, oil), securing votes in international forums (such as the UN), and pushing back against Western dominance. In the Sahel specifically, Russia has framed itself as the anti-colonial alternative—"We're here to help you stand on your own, not control you"—which resonates strongly in places where anti-French sentiment has been running high.

That said, there are real questions about how sustainable this Russian involvement really is, The model relies heavily on private military contractors (mercenaries, essentially), which means it's more about short-term security fixes and resource deals than a serious long-term plan to build stable institutions, improve governance, or foster economic development, Critics point out that once the immediate threats calm down (or if the juntas lose power), there's little left in terms of enduring support or investment. It can also come with downsides—reports of civilian abuses, opaque contracts, and a focus on extraction over nation-building—which might eventually wear thin on local populations or create new resentments.

In short, Russia has capitalized brilliantly on the moment, offering exactly what frustrated Sahelian leaders want right now: fast, no-strings military backup. But whether this turns into a lasting partnership or just a temporary swap of one foreign influence for another remains very much up in the air.(Ramani, 2024)

3.5 Turkey: Soft Power and Military Diplomacy

Turkey has carved out its own distinctive role in the Sahel by blending soft power with straightforward military cooperation. It's not going in heavy-handed like some players—it's trying to build goodwill first, then layer on security.

On the soft side, Turkey has invested in humanitarian aid (food, medical supplies, disaster relief) and educational initiatives—such as scholarships for Sahelian students to study in Turkey, the construction of schools, and the organization of cultural exchange programs. In places like Niger and Chad, this helps create a positive, non-colonial image: Turkey positions itself as a fellow

Muslim-majority country that's here to help without the baggage of past domination, and that message lands well in communities tired of Western lectures.

At the same time, Turkey is very active on the military front,It has signed defense agreements with several Sahel countries to train their armies, provide military advisors, and—most notably—sell and support Bayraktar TB2 drones and other unmanned aerial vehicles. Those drones have proven effective in counter-insurgency operations elsewhere (like in Libya or Nagorno-Karabakh), so they're attractive to juntas looking for affordable, high-impact tools against jihadists without relying on big Western suppliers.

Overall, this mix reflects Turkey's broader goal: to grow into a serious player in Africa, expand its influence, secure economic opportunities (trade, construction contracts), and gain diplomatic leverage on the continent. It's part of Ankara's "Africa opening" strategy, which has been ramping up for over a decade.

That said, it's not an easy space to break into. Turkey has to navigate competition from the traditional heavyweight (France, even as it's pulling back) and the aggressive newcomer (Russia, offering similar military packages but with different conditions), Balancing those rivalries while keeping local governments happy and avoiding being dragged into bigger geopolitical fights is a real challenge for Turkey's ambitions in the region.(Donelli, 2024)

3.6 China: Economy First

China has taken a very different path in the Sahel compared to France or Russia—it's all about the economy rather than boots on the ground or mercenary-style security deals. Beijing's strategy centers on large investments in key sectors such as mining and infrastructure, building long-term economic ties rather than short-term military fixes.

In Niger, for instance, Chinese companies (especially through China National Nuclear Corporation and others) have major stakes in some of the country's uranium mines—one of the world's largest reserves,Those deals give China reliable access to a strategic resource while providing Niger with investment, jobs, roads, and other infrastructure projects that accompany the mining operations. It's a classic win-win pitch from China's perspective: you get development money and expertise, we get stable supplies and a foothold.

Unlike France's military deployments or Russia's Wagner/Africa Corps approach, China stays away from direct involvement in security or counter-terrorism,It doesn't send troops, run training programs, or push political conditions. The focus is purely on economic partnerships—loans, construction contracts, resource

extraction—framed as "mutual benefit" and non-interference in internal affairs,That low-profile, no-strings (or fewer strings) style has made China an attractive partner for Sahelian governments looking for funding without the governance lectures that often come from Western donors.

That said, the model isn't without its share of pushback. Environmental concerns are major—mining operations (especially uranium) can cause serious damage to land, water, and local communities if not carefully managed—and there have been complaints about pollution, displacement, and a lack of transparency in some projects,On top of that, the heavy reliance on Chinese loans has raised worries about debt traps: countries borrow big for infrastructure, struggle to repay, and then face pressure to hand over more concessions or assets. In fragile economies like those in the Sahel, this can deepen vulnerability rather than build real independence.

Overall, China's "economy first" playbook has quietly expanded its influence in the region, offering an alternative to both Western and Russian models,But whether it leads to genuine development or just a new form of dependency is still very much debated on the ground.(Jiang, 2023)

3.7: Comparative Analysis: Dynamics of International Competition

The Sahel has become a real hotspot of international rivalry these days, with the old guard and new players jostling for position. It's not just about who has troops on the ground—it's a full-spectrum contest that plays out in military support, economic deals, diplomatic maneuvering, and even cultural soft power.

France, as the longstanding heavyweight, is basically trying to hang on to its historical role,For decades, it was the default security partner, development donor, and political influencer. But that grip has loosened a lot lately, Public anger over the long French military presence—seen by many as neo-colonial, ineffective against jihadists, or too tied to protecting French business interests—has fueled massive protests, anti-French sentiment, and junta-led pushback. Barkhane's withdrawal and the scaling back of French forces in multiple countries show just how much ground France has lost.

Russia has jumped on exactly that resentment,It positions itself as the straightforward alternative: "No lectures on democracy, no strings attached—just fast military help when you need it," Through Wagner (now Africa Corps), Russia has offered training, weapons, and security muscle to juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso, often framing it as anti-imperial solidarity. The pitch works well in the

current mood, but many question how long it can last. The mercenary model is great for quick wins and resource deals, but it doesn't build lasting institutions, infrastructure, or genuine development. Once the immediate threats ease (or if things go south), there's not much left to sustain the partnership.

Then you have Turkey and China, each playing their own game with more flexibility but also tighter limits.

Turkey mixes soft power (humanitarian aid, scholarships, cultural ties as a fellow Muslim country) with practical military sales—especially those effective Bayraktar drones that give local forces real capability against insurgents. It's a smart, low-cost way to build goodwill and influence without overcommitting troops or money. But Turkey's resources aren't endless, so it has to pick its spots carefully and avoid getting squeezed out by bigger rivals.

China sticks almost entirely to the economic lane: big investments in mining (uranium in Niger stands out), roads, ports, and infrastructure loans under the Belt and Road umbrella, It avoids military entanglements and sells a non-interference message that's appealing to governments tired of Western conditions,The downside? Environmental damage from extractive projects, mounting debt that can trap countries, and a perception that it's more about securing resources for Beijing than truly lifting the region.

In the end, the Sahel is no longer a "France-first" zone—it's become a crowded arena where each power brings its own toolkit, exploits local frustrations in different ways, and tries to lock in advantages. France is on the defensive, Russia rides the wave of anti-Western sentiment (but with question marks about its longevity), and Turkey and China carve out niches through economic and targeted cooperation. The competition keeps shifting the foreign-policy calculations of Sahelian states, as they weigh who offers the best immediate help versus who might deliver (or not) in the long run.(Powell, 2023)

3.8Future Prospects

The Sahel is likely to remain a major geopolitical hotspot due to persistent internal weaknesses—fragile governments, insurgencies, economic challenges, and climate stress—combined with growing external competition. For lasting stability, Sahelian countries need to strengthen institutions, combat corruption, deliver basic services, and reduce dependence on conditional foreign aid, allowing policy decisions to reflect national priorities. Meanwhile, international actors—including France, Russia, China, and Turkey—must adopt collaborative approaches that prioritize sustainable development and long-term capacity-

building over short-term geopolitical gains. Genuine dialogue through regional forums and inclusive international talks, centered on local needs, is essential to break the cycle of fragility and external influence; otherwise, the Sahel risks remaining a stage for foreign agendas, with local populations bearing the greatest burden.(Nations, 2024)

The Sahel's geopolitical landscape is shaped by deep internal fragility, limited foreign-policy autonomy, and intense competition from external powers. Corruption, ongoing conflicts, and environmental stress make the region highly susceptible to foreign influence, while reliance on aid and security pressures constrain national sovereignty. Major actors—including France, Russia, Turkey, and China—pursue divergent strategies to expand their influence, adding complexity to an already unstable environment. The Sahel has also become a key battleground for disinformation campaigns, particularly on social media platforms like X and Facebook, where governments, digital militias, and private actors exploit weak governance, low digital literacy, and ethnic tensions to manipulate public opinion, erode institutional trust, and advance hidden agendas. This vulnerability allows false narratives to spread rapidly, influencing political behavior and exacerbating instability, Cross-disciplinary research examines the main disinformation narratives, their sources, and implications for regional stability, highlighting how technology, power, and information intersect in one of Africa's most fragile regions**.**

4. Pillar III: Impact on Foreign Policy in the African Sahel Countries

The Sahel region—Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania—is undergoing major geopolitical changes, dramatically reshaping how these countries manage their foreign relations. A lot of this has sped up in the last few years, fueled by disinformation campaigns, a wave of military coups, and big powers repositioning themselves in the region, We've seen things like pulling out of the G5 Sahel framework, controversial partnerships with Russia's Wagner Group (and later Africa Corps), and the expulsion of Western troops and diplomats. All of this reflects a mix of internal pressures and external influences,This chapter examines how these changes are affecting Sahelian foreign policy, tracing the connections between disinformation efforts and actual political shifts, drawing on recent academic work and official reports. It breaks down into several main areas: how disinformation shapes public opinion and pushes foreign-policy decisions; what

the exit from the G5 Sahel really means; Wagner as a new security option; the diplomatic expulsions and the pivot to new international alignments; and finally, an assessment of whether disinformation is genuinely causing these bigger changes.

4.1 Disinformation Campaigns and Their Influence on Foreign Policy

Disinformation campaigns have become a powerful way to shape what ordinary people think and, ultimately, to steer foreign policy in the Sahel,Running mostly through social media and digital channels, these efforts focus on destroying trust in traditional Western partners—especially France and the United States—while building up positive images of Russia or other non-Western alternatives. In Mali and Burkina Faso, for example, waves of online content repeatedly framed French military operations like Operation Barkhane as straight-up neo-colonialism: exploiting resources, failing to stop terrorism, hurting civilians,These stories helped fuel massive public anger, which in turn put real pressure on the new military governments to cut ties with France and seek help elsewhere.

Recent studies point to coordinated campaigns, often linked to Wagner Group networks, using slick tactics: fake news stories, manipulated videos showing supposed Western failures or atrocities, and viral content that mixes real grievances (like economic hardship or security breakdowns) with outright fabrications. The result isn't just changed opinions—it's tangible pressure on leaders. When the streets are full of anti-French protests and social media is flooded with calls to "kick out the imperialists," governments feel compelled to respond by shifting alliances, In practice, this has meant ending long-standing defense pacts with France, expelling ambassadors or troops, and turning to Russia for quicker, less conditional military support. It's a clear example of how digital influence operations can shift from online narratives to real-world foreign policy decisions, especially in fragile states where public sentiment can quickly become a political necessity.(Eizenga, 2024)

4.2 Repercussions of Withdrawing from the G5 Sahel

The G5 Sahel, created in 2014 by Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania, aimed to coordinate regional security and development, particularly against jihadist threats. However, starting in 2022, Mali, followed by Niger and Burkina Faso, withdrew, influenced in part by disinformation portraying the G5 as a Western-controlled tool undermining sovereignty, Their exit weakened regional counter-terrorism efforts, fragmented intelligence sharing, and contributed to a 38% rise in violence in 2023, In response, the three countries formed the Alliance of

Sahel States (AES) to pursue self-reliant, anti-Western strategies, but it faces significant challenges, including limited military capacity, funding constraints, and ongoing internal insecurity. While the withdrawals emphasized sovereignty, they came at the cost of collective security and stability.(Armed, 2024)

4.3 Cooperation with Wagner as a Security Alternative

As Western influence—especially from France—began to fade in the Sahel, the Wagner Group (which later rebranded as the Africa Corps after internal shake-ups) quickly emerged as an appealing new security option for these countries, The partnership really took off in Mali around 2021, then spread to Burkina Faso and Niger, Wagner offered what the juntas needed most: boots-on-the-ground support, military training for local forces, direct protection for the ruling leaders, and aggressive operations against jihadist groups—all without the lectures on democracy, human rights, or governance reforms that often came with Western help.

In exchange, Wagner (and now Africa Corps) got access to valuable natural resources—gold mines, uranium, copper deposits, and other mining concessions, It's a straightforward quid pro quo: security and loyalty in return for economic stakes.

Disinformation played a huge role in making this shift feel acceptable, even popular. Coordinated online campaigns painted Wagner as the tough, effective anti-terror force that actually gets results, while hammering Western troops (like those in Operation Barkhane) as incompetent, neo-colonial, or even complicit in failures. These narratives—spread through viral videos, memes, fake reports, and local-language posts—helped build a story that resonated: "The West failed us; Russia/Wagner is here to protect us and respect our sovereignty," That messaging helped ease public and elite resistance to the hiring of foreign contractors, especially when anti-French sentiment was already running high.

But Wagner's track record has sparked serious backlash. They've been linked to numerous human rights abuses, with the most infamous being the Moura massacre in Mali in 2022, where reports documented over 500 civilians killed in what was described as a brutal operation targeting suspected jihadist sympathizers. International organizations, human rights groups, and Western governments condemned these actions, calling them war crimes and pointing to a pattern of indiscriminate violence, summary executions, and lack of accountability.

Politically, teaming up with Wagner has locked in a clear pivot toward Russia.

Moscow provides not just military muscle but also diplomatic cover in forums like the UN, vetoing resolutions or blocking sanctions, and offering a no-strings-attached model that suits military regimes wary of Western conditionalities. It's helped these governments feel more secure in their anti-Western stance.

That said, the move has come with real costs. Cooperating with Wagner has deepened the Sahel countries' isolation from regional bodies like ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States), which slapped sanctions on the juntas in Mali and Niger over the coups and democratic backsliding. Trade restrictions, frozen assets, and suspended memberships have hurt economies already under strain, while the security gains have been mixed—violence hasn't dropped dramatically, and in some areas it has actually risen.

In the end, Wagner/Africa Corps offered a quick, low-condition fix to immediate security and political threats, and disinformation helped sell it locally. But it traded one set of dependencies (Western aid and conditions) for another (Russian resource extraction and potential abuses), while pushing these countries further away from regional and international mainstream cooperation.(Rights, 2023)

4.4 Diplomatic Expulsion and the Redirection of International Relations

In recent years, Sahelian countries have gone through a real wave of kicking out Western military forces and diplomats—a clear sign of how sharply their foreign policies have shifted. In Mali, French troops were told to leave in 2022 after months of rising tensions, protests, and official demands. In Niger, things escalated in 2024 when the military government canceled its defense pacts with the United States, forcing American soldiers out of Air Base 101 (a key drone and counter-terrorism hub). Similar moves happened in Burkina Faso, where French special forces and other Western personnel were also pushed out.

These expulsions weren't random—they were heavily fueled by disinformation campaigns that kept repeating claims of Western meddling, spying, or even plotting against the new regimes. The messaging hammered home the idea that kicking out the West was about finally "restoring national sovereignty" and breaking free from neo-colonial control. That narrative caught on fast, especially with public anger already high over perceived failures in fighting terrorism and economic exploitation. It gave the military leaders strong domestic backing to make these bold moves.

As a result, these countries quickly pivoted their international relationships toward new partners. Russia became the main go-to: in Niger, for example, they signed fresh military and economic deals in 2024, including deliveries of weapons,

training support, and investments in mining (uranium, gold). China has stepped up, too, offering infrastructure loans, mining contracts, and economic projects with fewer political strings attached. Turkey has been in the mix with drone sales and some security cooperation, and there's been occasional outreach to Iran for military gear.

But this redirection hasn't been smooth or cost-free. The countries now face serious economic pressure—ECOWAS sanctions on the juntas (trade restrictions, frozen assets, border closures) have hurt everyday people and governments alike. At the same time, leaning heavily on Russia comes with its own risks: Moscow is stretched thin by the war in Ukraine, so its ability to deliver consistent aid, equipment, or investment isn't unlimited. That leaves these Sahelian states more isolated regionally, economically squeezed, and potentially dependent on partners who may not always be able to (or want to) provide long-term stability.

In short, the expulsions felt like a powerful assertion of independence at the time—backed by strong anti-Western online narratives—but they've come with real trade-offs: short-term political wins against longer-term economic and security vulnerabilities.(Lavrov, 2024)

4.5 Causal Assessment

Figuring out exactly how much disinformation campaigns have actually caused the big foreign-policy changes in the Sahel requires looking at both what's happening inside these countries and what's coming from outside.

On the internal side, things were already primed for people to buy into these narratives. Economic hardship, nonstop insecurity from jihadist groups, and political chaos after repeated coups created a lot of frustration and distrust. When Western-backed forces (like French troops under Barkhane or international partners) couldn't deliver decisive wins against Al-Qaeda affiliates or ISIS branches—despite years of effort—people started feeling let down. That disappointment made it easier for messages to land: "The West isn't helping; they're just here for their own interests." Russia (or Wagner-linked operations) stepped in with stories positioning themselves as the no-nonsense alternative that actually fights terrorists without endless conditions.

Externally Russia clearly took advantage of that vulnerability. They backed (and in some cases directly ran) disinformation efforts that built up their image as a reliable, unconditional partner—quick military help, no lectures on elections or human rights—while constantly highlighting Western "failures" or "imperialism."

These campaigns weren't random; they were targeted to amplify existing anger and guide public opinion toward supporting a pivot away from the West.

That said, disinformation isn't the whole story—it's not like these shifts happened only because of viral posts or fake videos. Military coups played a huge role: the new junta leaders needed to legitimize themselves quickly, and breaking with the West became a powerful way to show "We're in charge now, not outsiders." In Niger, for example, expelling U.S. troops in 2024 was partly about the military regime proving its independence and rallying domestic support by tapping into anti-Western sentiment that was already there.

In the end, the most accurate way to see it is that disinformation campaigns acted as an accelerator—they sped up and amplified changes that were already in motion due to deeper internal problems (insecurity, economic pain, coup dynamics, elite ambitions) and external opportunism. They didn't single-handedly create the pivot toward Russia or the expulsions of Western forces, but they made those moves feel more urgent, more popular, and harder to resist. Without the underlying grievances and power struggles, the disinformation probably wouldn't have had nearly as much impact.(Monetary, 2024)

4.6 Future Challenges and Foreign Policy Prospects

The Sahel countries are navigating some really tough waters as they try to redraw their foreign-policy maps. The path ahead is full of serious hurdles that could make things harder before they get better.

First off, leaning more heavily on Russia is starting to cut these countries off from the rest of the region. ECOWAS (the West African economic and political bloc) has been firm in rejecting military takeovers, imposing sanctions, suspending membership, and keeping borders tense with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. That isolation hurts trade, movement of people and goods, and access to regional funding or support—making everyday life and governance even more strained.

Second, the underlying weaknesses in their economies—deep poverty, limited resources, high unemployment—and the fact that terrorist groups like JNIM or IS-Sahel affiliates are still very active mean true stability feels out of reach. Without stronger local economies or real progress against insecurity, any foreign partnerships (no matter who they're with) can only do so much. Governments end up chasing short-term security fixes instead of building long-term resilience.

Thirdthe partnership with Wagner (now Africa Corps) keeps bringing international criticism over human rights issues—reports of civilian killings, lack of accountability, and abuses in operations. That stigma makes it harder for these

countries to secure broad global backing, whether in the form of humanitarian aid, development loans, or diplomatic goodwill from organizations like the UN or the African Union. It risks turning them into pariahs in some circles, even if Russia provides cover in others.

On the brighter side, these changes could open doors to new kinds of partnerships. Closer South-South ties with China (through infrastructure and mining investments) or Turkey (drones, training, cultural links) offer alternatives that entail fewer political demands than those with the West. There's also talk of building more homegrown regional security arrangements—maybe through the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)—in which these countries pool their resources to address threats independently.

But none of that will work well without fixing things at home first. Tackling poverty, rebuilding weak institutions, fighting corruption, and creating governments that actually deliver services and earn public trust are the real foundations. At the same time, the foreign-policy game needs balance: standing up for sovereignty is important, but completely cutting off international cooperation could leave these countries more vulnerable, not less.

In the end, the Sahel's future foreign policy will depend on whether its leaders can turn the current momentum—anti-Western sentiment, new alliances, digital narratives—into something sustainable. If they manage to address internal crises while maintaining pragmatic ties with a range of partners (Russia, China, Turkey, and maybe even selective re-engagement with the West), there's a chance for greater genuine independence and stability. If not, the risks of deeper isolation, ongoing violence, and economic stagnation could outweigh the short-term gains of the big shifts we've seen so far.(Fund, “Complex Challenges in the Sahel,” , 2024)

The big changes we've seen in how Sahel countries handle their foreign relations stem from a messy mix: rapid online disinformation, deep internal problems such as insecurity and economic struggles, and major powers shifting their strategies in the region. Pulling out of the G5 Sahel, teaming up with Wagner (now Africa Corps), and pushing out Western troops all boil down to a strong drive to take back control and say, "This is our sovereignty, not someone else's." But these moves come with real downsides—cutting off neighbors and groups like ECOWAS, and the very real chance that security will get even worse without the old joint efforts.

When we look at what actually caused these turns, disinformation stands out as a major factor in the speed-up. It fed on existing anger, eroded trust in Western partners, and helped make the idea of switching sides feel urgent and popular. Still, it wasn't the only thing at play—coups, leaders wanting to look strong, real failures in fighting terrorism, and long-term economic pain all helped shape the path. Disinformation didn't start the fire; it just threw gasoline on it.

Going forward, these countries will have to walk a fine line. They want real independence and decisions that put their own people first, but shutting out the wider world completely could leave them weaker and more alone. The key will be fixing things at home—fighting poverty, rebuilding broken institutions, reducing corruption—while keeping smart, balanced ties with different partners (Russia, China, Turkey, and maybe even carefully selected re-engagement with the West).

4. Conclusion:

This study concludes that the digital space has evolved from a medium for communication and information exchange into a central arena for geopolitical conflict, where tools of informational influence intersect with international competition strategies. The analysis demonstrates that African Sahel countries, due to their institutional fragility and security and economic challenges, constitute a fertile environment for the deployment of disinformation campaigns within the context of "Digital Proxy Wars."

Conceptual and theoretical analysis indicates that digital disinformation is an effective tool within the framework of "Gray Zone Warfare." It is used to shape collective perception, influence public opinion trends, and reframe sovereignty and security issues to serve the interests of external actors. Additionally, the geopolitical context analysis demonstrates that competition among international powers in the Sahel extends beyond military or economic tools to include the informational sphere, which has become central to re-engineering alliances and redirecting foreign policies.

The study demonstrates that disinformation campaigns have played a significant role in accelerating tangible shifts in the policies of certain Sahelian states, including withdrawal from regional cooperation frameworks and realignment toward new international partners. However, these campaigns must be understood in conjunction with internal factors such as security crises, military coups, and low institutional trust, confirming that digital disinformation functions as an accelerator within a complex structure of political, economic, and social determinants.

At the theoretical level, this study expands the scope of information warfare analysis to include the African context, emphasizing the need for approaches that account for the specificities of the Global South. In practical terms, the findings underscore the necessity of developing national and regional strategies to enhance information security and build institutional capacities to monitor and counter disinformation campaigns, thereby safeguarding independent foreign decision-making and promoting regional stability.

In conclusion, understanding the dynamics of digital proxy wars is essential for anticipating future geopolitical interactions in the African Sahel, as digital soft power becomes increasingly significant in reshaping international influence.