

The Dynamics of Influence Warfare in Francophone Africa: Analyzing External Powers' Strategies and Impacts

Katica Janeva¹

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60073/euper.2023.10.05>

ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence warfare in Francophone Africa, analyzing strategies and impacts of external powers. Influence warfare shapes the region's politics, economy, and society through information manipulation and psychological tactics. Rooted in colonial legacies, Francophone Africa is contested by global powers like France, US, China, and Russia, using diverse tactics such as spreading information, economic investment and military cooperation. Additionally, the study shows the implications of influence warfare on governance structures, democratic processes, and socio-economic development in Francophone Africa are examined. This shows the conflicts between states and outside interference, how external actors take advantage, and how local population can resist. As geopolitics change, understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing the complexities of Francophone Africa.

KEYWORDS: Influence Warfare, Francophone Africa, External Powers, Geopolitics, Influence Strategies, Military Coups

POVZETEK

Ta študija raziskuje vplivno vojno v frankofonski Afriki, analizira strategije in vplive zunanjih sil. Vplivna vojna oblikuje politiko, gospodarstvo in družbo regije z manipulacijo informacij in psihološkimi taktikami. Frankofonska Afrika, ki je zakoreninjena v kolonialni dediščini, nasprotuje svetovnim silam, kot so Francija, ZDA, Kitajska in Rusija, z uporabo različnih taktik, kot so širjenje informacij, gospodarske naložbe in vojaško sodelovanje. Poleg tega so v študiji preučene posledice bojevanja za vpliv na strukture upravljanja, demokratične procese in socialno-ekonomski razvoj v frankofonski Afriki. Prikazani so konflikti med državami in zunanjim vmešavanjem, kako zunanji akterji to izkoriščajo in kako se lahko lokalno prebivalstvo upre. Ker se geopolitika spreminja, je razumevanje te dinamike ključnega pomena za obravnavo zapletenosti frankofonske Afrike.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Vplivna vojna, frankofonska Afrika, zunanje sile, geopolitika, strategije vplivanja, vojaški udari

1 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Katica Janeva, MSc in Management, HEC Ecole de gestion, Université de Liège, Belgium. Master's student in Political Science, University American College Skopje, North Macedonia. Head of Western Balkan Unit and Director of the European Association for Local democracy office in Skopje, North Macedonia. Email: katicajaneva@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The former colonial powers in Africa, including France, Britain, Portugal, Belgium, and Germany, each had a significant impact on the continent. France's colonial presence in West, Central, and North Africa left a legacy of French culture, language, and administrative systems that continue to shape many Francophone African countries. British colonialism focused on economic exploitation, Portugal's were marked by harsh labor practices and economic exploitation, Belgium's brutal colonization of the Congo resulted in political instability and ethnic tensions, while Germany's short colonial presence in East Africa left legacies of infrastructure development and social divisions.

Colonialism changed Africa forever, messing up their culture, economy, and society. Before, Africa had strong economies, especially during the empires of Ghana², Mali³, and Songhai⁴. But then, the slave trade came, changing things and putting Africa under Europe's control. After the abolition of the slave trade, Africa became a source of raw materials for European industrialization. European powers imposed policies to maximize their own economic gain, exploiting African resources and restricting local development. Colonial economic policies focused agriculture for export, delaying technological and industrial progress. Despite some infrastructure and education reforms, colonialism's long-term economic impact was negative. After independence, many African nations struggled to diversify their economies due to the legacy of colonial structures. Overall, colonialism obstructed Africa's natural progress and contributed to its current economic challenges.

Today, the presence and influence of other external powers such as the USA, China, Turkey, and Russia in Africa are significant factors influencing the continent's dynamics. Historically, the USA has been significantly involved in African affairs, particularly during the Cold War era, when it competed with the Soviet Union for influence. In recent decades, the USA's engagement has directed towards security cooperation, economic investment, and development aid. Similarly, Russia has been reaffirming its influence in Africa, focusing on diplomatic

2 The Ghana Empire was the first of the great medieval trading empires of western Africa during the 7th and 13th centuries.

3 The Mali Empire flourished in West Africa during the 13th and 17th centuries.

4 The Songhai Empire was a state located in the western part of the Sahel during the 15th and 16th centuries.

engagement, arms sales, and energy partnerships. Chinese influence in Africa has reemerged with extensive economic investments, infrastructure projects, and trade agreements, making China Africa's largest trading partner. Turkey's presence in Africa has also expanded, with Turkish companies involved in various sectors and Turkey providing development assistance while strengthening diplomatic ties. These external powers play crucial roles in making Africa's political environment, economic development, and social relations.

In Francophone Africa, different countries are trying to have more control and power. They use various methods, like historical ties, economic needs, and their beliefs, to gain influence. It's important to understand how these outside powers work and how it affects the social and political situation in the region. This article looks closely at the details of this influence struggle, exploring the past, the ideas involved, and the specific methods used by outside players.

By looking at specific examples and understanding the effects on how the region is governed, how stable it is, and its overall dynamics, this article aims to make sense of the complicated competition among outside powers in Francophone Africa. Utilizing a variety of sources including academic studies, scientific research, investigative journalism, and media broadcasts, the article aims to clear up the complicated strategies employed by external powers in the region. Through this holistic approach, the article seeks to provide a clear understanding of how historical ties, economic interests, and ideological beliefs shape the competition for influence. Specifically, this article explores the complex geopolitical landscape of Francophone Africa, focusing on the emergence of military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Since 2020, these countries have witnessed a series of military coups, challenging the established political order and redefining regional dynamics. Initially perceived as a break from colonial legacies, these coups have evolved into complex geopolitical maneuvers with global implications. Additionally, this research considers media broadcasts from the region, providing real-time insights into the tactics and narratives employed by external actors. This article looks at how outside factors, like using information strategically and considering historical connections, affect how a region is governed and how stable and dynamic it is.

THE CONCEPT OF INFLUENCE WARFARE

Influence warfare, also known as information or psychological warfare, it is generally described as a strategic method that uses information and communication to intentionally shape, manipulate, or control the thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors of individuals or groups. It focuses on the cognitive domain, aiming to impact the mental and psychological facets of the target audience.

The key objective of influence warfare is to achieve strategic goals by effectively managing information flows. This includes the dissemination of messages through various channels such as media, social media, and other communication platforms. Tactics employed in influence warfare include propaganda, disinformation, and psychological operations, all of which are designed to create a desired narrative, influence public opinion and decision-making processes.

Influence warfare taps into the ways our minds naturally work, exploiting our tendencies to see things a certain way or to react emotionally. By understanding these cognitive biases, those engaged in influence warfare can influence opinions and behaviors without people even realizing it. This approach underlines the importance of understanding human behavior and the psychological mechanisms that drive it. In essence, influence warfare represents a sophisticated application of psychological principles to achieve strategic objectives in the information age.

In the foreword of "Influence Warfare: How Terrorists and Governments Fight to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas," as noted by Forest (2009), understanding your enemy is a crucial prerequisite for both offense and defense. He asserts, "Simply, military tactics are doomed to failure when they are applied without a sophisticated knowledge of whom they are being applied against or an understanding of how the enemy thinks and therefore how he is likely to respond and, moreover, adapt or adjust to those tactics." Moreover, he explores how various actors, including terrorists and governments, engage in strategic communication to shape perceptions and manipulate public opinion within the domain of influence warfare. Providing insights into the tactics and strategies employed by different entities to influence narratives and influence public sentiment in their favor, Forest examines the role of propaganda, disinformation, and psychological operations

in contemporary conflicts, clarifying on the changing landscape of information warfare.

Influence warfare, including psychological warfare, has been a part of warfare throughout history. Psychological warfare, as a segment of influence warfare, has evolved alongside advancements in technology and communication, becoming increasingly sophisticated and intricate. In contemporary geopolitical landscapes, psychological warfare operates within a highly developed framework of information architecture, designed to target and manipulate public perception. This architecture serves multiple purposes, including the implementation of active measures, the exercise of reflexive control, and the strategic deployment of psychological tactics. The final goal is to achieve desired outcomes by shaping the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of target audiences in ways that benefit the interests of the entity conducting the influence operations. Despite its complexity, primarily psychological warfare relies on effective communication to influence attitudes and behaviors.

In the conclusion of his book "The Birth of Psychological Warfare," Jeffrey Whyte (2013) contextualizes the historical course of psychological warfare within the contemporary context of the "post-truth era." He concludes that psychological warfare not only changes the self but also transforms how individuals perceive others and "represents not only the mystical transformation of the self, but also the transformation of the Other as the achievement of the psychological warrior" (2013, pp.186-194). This notion illustrates the dynamic interaction between individuals or groups engaged in psychological warfare, highlighting the complex nature of influence operations in modern conflict scenarios.

It's important to note that influence warfare extends beyond military contexts and can be applied in political, economic, and social arenas. The ability to control the narrative and manipulate information has become important in our interconnected world, where information plays a central role in shaping perceptions and attitudes, thus influencing the course of events.

An interesting perspective on the influence and information warfare is presented in "Democracy Hacked: Political Turmoil and Information Warfare in the Digital Age," Martin Moore (2018) explores how social

media's rise, particularly on platforms like Facebook, Google, and Twitter, made existing problems worse. He explains how these companies used advertising to profit, relying on algorithms to maximize efficiency. Moore warns that these algorithms can't tell the difference between harmless ads and extreme content, which helps spread political propaganda. He highlights the weakening influence of traditional media on political accountability, while outlining three potential paths forward: platform democracies, surveillance democracies, and the optimistic vision of "democracy re-hacked" (2018, p. 266).

In platform democracies, digital platforms take over essential services, while surveillance democracies involve state control like in terrifying stories. "Democracy re-hacked" offers hope through new ideas like big talks with citizens participation and budgeting together. Moore says we need to think hard and have strong leaders to deal with these problems, stressing the need for smart thinking, bravery, and skills. He thinks this is a very important time for democracy as it deals with changes from technology, and he wants us to understand these problems and make sure technology helps people instead of controlling them, so we can trust democracy again.

Influence warfare represents a complex interplay of psychological manipulation, technological innovation, and socio-political dynamics. Understanding its mechanisms and implications is crucial for safeguarding democratic principles and ensuring that technology serves the interests of society rather than controlling it.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

Moving from talking about influence warfare in theory to looking at the history of Francophone Africa, we can see that the strategic methods we discussed earlier are actually happening in the real-world politics of this region. In recent years, Francophone Africa has emerged as a focal point for influence warfare, where external powers actively engage in strategies to establish dominance and pursue strategic interests. In the era of globalization, Africa is undergoing profound transformations, challenging traditional models and demanding innovative approaches from its international partners. France, with its historical ties to Africa, finds itself at a crossroads, struggling with the need to adapt its policies to the evolving dynamics of the continent.



*Map of Francophone Africa*⁶

Francophone Africa, including 21 countries⁵ where French is the official language or use it as one of their other official languages, has long been a geopolitical arena where external powers compete for influence. Inhabited by approximately 500 million individuals, this geographic area has witnessed a fourfold increase in its population over the past five decades. While coastal areas boast high population concentrations, landlocked countries generally exhibit lower densities. Rapid urbanization has been a prominent trend, with nearly half of the population now residing in urban centers.

According to the World Bank, around 12% of the population is under the age of 15, rendering Western and Central Africa among the regions with the most youthful demographics globally. From the mid-2000s onwards, the region underwent substantial economic expansion driven by elevated commodity prices due to its abundance of natural resources. The region's strategic importance, rich natural resources, and historical ties with former colonial powers make it a hotspot for influence warfare.

To understand the contemporary dynamics of influence warfare in Francophone Africa, one must first acknowledge the historical roots of external involvement. The origins of external involvement lie in the colonial legacies established by European powers in the past two centuries in the African continent. During the colonial era, France exerted substantial control over its African colonies, imposing its language, culture, and governance structures on local societies. This dominance facilitated economic exploitation and resource extraction, sustaining inequalities and oppression.

France, among others, claimed vast territories in West, Central, and

5 Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo (Republic of the Congo), Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, Togo.

6 [afriquefrancophone.com](https://www.afriquefrancophone.com/afrique-francophone-carte.html). 2020. *Map of Francophone Africa*. [image online] Available at: <https://www.afriquefrancophone.com/afrique-francophone-carte.html>

North Africa, leaving a lasting mark on the political structures and cultural identities of these nations. These territories are commonly referred to as Francophone Africa and they share a common linguistic and cultural bond, but they are diverse in terms of geography, history, and cultural traditions. The struggles for independence, marked by protests, uprisings, and political mobilization, challenged French rule, and eventually led to the decolonization of many African nations. Even after more than 60 years of gaining independence, France maintains strong ties with its former colonies. Over the past decades, France has made concerted efforts to extend its sphere of influence beyond the core ex-colonial regions. France's legacy of colonialism continued to influence socio-economic dynamics, as former colonies navigated complex relationships with their former colonizer.

In the past, France maintained control over its former colonies in Africa using a system called "la Françafrique." Through this neocolonial system, France controlled the economics and politics of these nations. They achieved this by utilizing the CFA franc, managing natural resources, and imposing one-sided commercial contracts, allowing them to benefit significantly from these countries' economic surplus. Furthermore, France set up puppet governments, often at the expense of democratic processes and the will of the people. Opposition movements were frequently suppressed, dissenting voices stifled, and puppet regimes installed to maintain French dominance and safeguard its economic interests.

Over time, resistance to French dominance in Africa has emerged, becoming more pronounced in recent years. Some West African governments are openly challenging France, and communities and influential individuals in the diaspora are increasingly expressing support for and interpreting this resistance. This growing resistance signals a shift in power dynamics and a reclamation of African nations, challenging the legacy of neocolonialism and asserting their right to chart their own destinies. As this movement grows stronger, it shows how important it is for France to rethink how it deals with its former colonies. France should aim for partnerships that are fair, equal, and truly cooperative.

The increasing interest of global powers such as China, the United States, and emerging economies in Africa underscores the continent's strategic significance. France must recognize and adapt to this changing geopolitical landscape, ensuring that its African policy remains

relevant and effective amidst growing competition for influence and resources.

EXTERNAL POWERS STRATEGIES AND IMPACTS IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

Due to its substantial growth potential, vast population, and strategic significance, Francophone Africa has become a focal point for numerous external actors, extending beyond former colonial powers to include players like China and Russia. In the changing global system, African countries now have more options for partnerships, indicating a withdraw from a single dominant power. The strong interdependence in the international political context means that the political objectives of different actors influence one another.

Former colonial powers maintain vested interests, global superpowers seek strategic advantages, and regional actors pursue control. Examining the motivations behind their involvement sets the stage for understanding the strategies they employ and the impacts these strategies have on the region.

The strategies employed by external powers range from soft power diplomacy to secret operations, economic influence, and media warfare. Cultural exchanges, educational programs, and public diplomacy are employed to shape perceptions, while secret operations and economic leverage serve as instruments to advance geopolitical interests. Media and information warfare, with its arsenal of propaganda and disinformation, further complicates the landscape.

Investigating the tactics employed by external powers to apply influence in Francophone Africa reveals a complex interaction of political, economic, and strategic maneuvers. Various nations and international actors engage in a range of tactics to advance their interests in the region.

External powers often seek access to the abundant natural resources in Francophone Africa. They negotiate resource extraction agreements, gaining control over minerals, oil, and other valuable commodities. This approach allows them to use economic influence while fulfilling their own resource needs.

Offering financial assistance for infrastructure projects, such as roads,

ports, and energy facilities, enables external powers to foster economic development. In return, recipient countries may become economically dependent, creating a leverage point for the influencing nation. For instance, China's economic impact in Africa mainly comes from investing in mining and oil, building infrastructure, and advancing the telecommunications industry on the continent. As Africa's top trading partner, China has significantly boosted its trade since the 1990s and established special economic zones to replicate its industrial success in Africa. French development assistance continues to rank among the most substantial. Africa is a key focus of French development policy: it receives one third of French bilateral official development assistance (ODA) (2.9 billion in 2020). At the same time, The United States is actively strengthening its economic connections with Francophone Africa. To enhance trade and economic relations with these countries, the US is utilizing existing laws like the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Additionally, the US is advocating for a continent-wide free trade zone in Africa. This initiative will reduce France's economic influence in Francophone countries, while also providing the US with better access to resources and products from French-speaking African nations.

Russia has also expanded its economic influence in Africa playing a significant role in meeting Africa's grain requirements, by supplying nearly 30 percent of the continent's grain needs. The country exports various goods, such as wheat, coal, refined petroleum, and electronics, to African nations and, in turn, imports fruits, sugar, and vegetables. The involvement of Russia in Africa's economy is primarily driven by state-owned or partially state-owned entities like Gazprom and Rosatom. Although Russia prioritizes collaboration in its pursuit of business opportunities rather than providing aid, its economic activities in Africa are relatively modest when compared to the contributions of China, the United States, and the European Union. According to the World Investment Report 2022, Russian investment in Africa constitutes less than 1 percent of the total foreign direct investment on the continent.

Nations engage in bilateral agreements with Francophone African countries, addressing not only economic but also political and military cooperation. In recent times, France has faced challenges in maintaining regional security as it had done in the past, and Francophone nations find it difficult to fill the void left by France's role as a stabilizing

force in the region. France has had to pull back its military presence from Mali and Burkina Faso, where troops were deployed to combat terrorist groups. Additionally, France has observed the overthrow of regimes aligned with French interests through coups, with the most recent instance occurring in Niger.

In military and regional security matters, the United States has increased its presence in Africa by setting up a military base in Djibouti and establishing in 2007 the United States Africa Command. AFRICOM coordinates security activities and responses to crises in Africa.

Despite differences in various areas, US and French interests are more in sync regarding security issues. Both nations frequently support the same goals, especially in counterterrorism efforts in this region. This alignment often results in joint advocacy for similar outcomes, such as responding to the coup in Niger. However, these joint efforts have seen limited success.

Based on SIPRI's Fact sheet from March 2023 and the trends in international arms transfers in 2022, Russia emerged as the primary arms supplier to Africa. Moscow's competitive advantage lies in offering relatively inexpensive security and military services, including arms transfers, anti-insurgency training, and consultancy services and unlike the United States and its allies, it does not link the delivery of its arms to the adherence of democratic principles.

External powers actively participate in regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Through this platform, they influence regional policies and decisions, furthering their own geopolitical objectives. Evidence shows that ECOWAS, as a sub-regional organization, has adopted the integration strategy of the EU, resulting in similar achievements. ECOWAS often collaborates with France to address regional security challenges especially in Francophone countries. The UN depends on this regional organization to share the burden of dealing with conflicts, viewing them as beneficial for effectively handling disputes within their specific geographic areas. Certain ECOWAS member countries might establish or enhance diplomatic relations with Russia, potentially expanding to regional engagements.

The International Organisation of the "Francophonie" brings together

French-speaking states, offering diverse cooperation programs. While its influence extends beyond France, the cultural alignment of elites in West and Central Africa remains directed towards France.

Political interference and influence in the African continent, is manifested through the organization of a distinct and high-profile events. For instance, the Africa-France Summits, formerly known as France-Africa Summits until 2010, commenced in 1973 as yearly gatherings between Francophone African and French leaders. The objective is to promote collaboration beyond the traditional colonial framework, with France partnering with independent Francophone African nations for mutual benefit. The summit serves as a means of connecting France with its former colonies.

The Russia–Africa Summit, a large scale event organized for the first time in 2019 in Souchi, with the purpose of addressing the challenges of the 21st century and to foster initiatives that enhance comprehensive and equitable cooperation between Russia and African countries across various sectors, encompassing politics, security, economic ties, science, and technology, as well as cultural and humanitarian domains.

The China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC) is a platform created by China and African nations for collective consultation and dialogue, serving as a cooperation mechanism among developing countries. The Forum is established at the ministerial level to strengthen practical cooperation through consultation and to enhance political and economic ties for mutual benefit.

Foreign powers utilize media platforms and communication channels to shape public sentiment in Francophone Africa. The manipulation of narratives and the impact on perceptions can enhance the soft power of these countries. China is intensifying its soft power efforts in Africa, seizing the opportunity as traditional powers like the European Union and the United States appear to reduce their global commitments on the continent.

Establishing educational programs and exchanges strengthens cultural connections and amplifies the influence of external powers. Through educating future leaders and professionals, these powers establish networks of individuals aligned with their ideologies. It is evident that France holds a crucial role in the education system of Francophone Af-

rica, engaging education leaders through various programs in France. Additionally, there is the example of the Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, founded in 1960 to offer education to individuals liberated from colonial oppression, experiencing a notable increase in student numbers in recent years.

In the context of external powers' strategies and impacts in Francophone Africa, the European Union (EU) plays a significant role, particularly in economic cooperation and development initiatives. As Francophone Africa emerges as a key area of interest due to its growth potential and strategic importance, the EU has increasingly engaged with the region. Through various partnership agreements and development programs, the EU seeks to promote stability, democracy, and sustainable development in Francophone Africa. Economic cooperation between the EU and Francophone African countries encompasses trade agreements, investment initiatives, educational exchange programs and development aid aimed at fostering economic growth and reducing poverty. Additionally, the EU provides support for governance reforms, institution-building, and capacity-building efforts to strengthen democratic governance and promote human rights in the region. Furthermore, the EU actively participates in regional organizations such as the ECOWAS, where it contributes to peacekeeping missions and regional security initiatives.

Certainly, this illustrates that external powers' strategies in Francophone Africa profoundly influence and shape the region's political, economic, and social dynamics.

EVOLUTION AND CHALLENGES IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

External forces' strategies in Francophone Africa, discussed earlier, are evident in increased political instability marked by coups and unlawful regime changes. The interplay of global influence tactics and domestic challenges creates a complex dynamic, shaping recent developments and challenges in Francophone Africa.

The Francophone Africa region is one of Africa's most unstable, ravaged by various jihadist, separatist, and criminal armed groups, caught in a cycle of coups, corruption, and poor governance. Political instability has been on the rise in Francophone Africa, particularly due to a series of coups in West Africa. Since 1990, 78% of the 27 coups in West

Africa occurred in Francophone states, reflecting French policies, indifference to public demands, and support for corrupt leaders. Over the past three years, several countries, including Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, Chad, Niger, and most recently Gabon, have witnessed coups or unconstitutional regime changes.

While each event has unique triggers, common themes include dissatisfaction with existing political leaders, inability to improve economic conditions, and challenges in addressing security issues. Many African having anti-French sentiments have distanced themselves from their former colonizer through military coups. Notably, Gabon, the latest in the series of military takeovers, has not yet shown anti-French hostility.

There is a notable shift from the era of *Francafrrique*, characterized by close ties between France and its former colonies, to a populist sentiment that is anti-French, marked by resentment and a desire to eliminate any French military presence. The question arises: Why does this anti-French feeling arise and spread, potentially affecting African countries like Ivory Coast, Senegal, Gabon, Djibouti, and Chad, which still host French military forces? This leads to the inquiry of whether evacuating these military bases is necessary.

Russia has set its sights on Africa, finding fertile ground for its mercenaries where France, the former colonial power, is indecisive. The Wagner Group, led by Evgeniy Prigozhin and primarily known for its involvement in the Ukraine conflict alongside Russian forces, has made significant inroads into Mali and the Central African Republic. It has also expanded its presence into Burkina Faso and conducted some form of activity in countries like Mozambique and Madagascar. Their activities often coincide with serious human rights violations, as highlighted by institutions such as the United Nations. Russia comes with an all-in-one package: offering security services, political counsel, media campaigns, disinformation, and arms sales. In return, Wagner gains political influence and a possibility to exploit the rich natural resources of these African countries. Following his visit to several African countries, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that the West's attempts to isolate Russia had failed. Lavrov also mentioned that Russia was strengthening its relationships with countries in Africa, the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific, and elsewhere. "Today we can say that the Western attempts to isolate Russia by encircling us with a barrier of containment have failed," Lavrov informed Russian

diplomats during an event at his ministry following his return from his visit to Africa⁷.

The actions of the semi-official Russian paramilitary team Wagner often grab attention. They've been hired by various governments, including the Central African Republic, and are connected to military operations in Mali and Niger. This has led France to accuse Russia of causing instability in Africa.

THE THREE JUNTAS OF THE FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

Since 2020, a series of military coups in Francophone Africa has reshaped the political landscape, leading to the emergence of anti-French military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Initially perceived as a move to separate from their former colonial power, France, these coups have evolved into complex geopolitical dynamics with far-reaching implications.

Three former French colonies, now under military rule, surprised many by announcing their "immediate" withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) at the end of January 2024. They accuse ECOWAS of being manipulated by France and failing to assist them against jihadists active since 2012, resulting in thousands of deaths and displacing millions. They argue that the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS on their countries were unfair because they wanted to control their own destiny, especially after several coups replaced civilian governments. However, ECOWAS's responsive measures have had little effect on bringing back civilian rule in their countries.

After years of confrontation with military coup leaders in Mali, Guinea, and Niger, ECOWAS has changed its approach. At an extraordinary summit in February 2024, it opted to remove most sanctions imposed to these countries after military overthrows of elected presidents between 2020 and 2023. These sanctions aimed to pressure the military into holding timely elections, but thus far, they've been ineffective.

Recently, the three countries united within the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)⁸, established in September 2023, are progressing towards depart-

7 Reuters. 2023. *Lavrov back from Africa, says West has failed to isolate Russia*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/lavrov-back-africa-says-west-has-failed-isolate-russia-2023-02-10/>

8 The Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) is a mutual defense pact created between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso on 16 September 2023.

ing from the CFA franc, the shared currency of eight member nations of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), which is tied to the euro. Today, Bamako, Niamey, and Ouagadougou are reportedly considering the creation of their own single currency, the Sahel. This decision, more than merely marking a new break with the West African regional bloc, appears to carry significant consequences and risks for these three of the world's poorest states.

France maintains numerous strategic bases in West Africa. However, new actors are emerging in the Sahel region, notably Russia via the Wagner paramilitary group, alongside China and Turkey. This shift in diplomacy is profound and seems set to endure.

The rejection of the French presence extends beyond military implications to include political and economic aspects. Critiques directed at France include its inconsistent approach towards current regimes, concerns regarding the CFA franc and its neocolonial connotations, and a perceived paternalistic nature in its development aid policies. The region has caught Russia's attention, and Burkina Faso is now seen as an extra stronghold for the Kremlin in the west of the continent. France frequently accuses Russia of conducting disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting it. In response, the military has initiated a counter-media offensive on the internet. There is ongoing power struggle: a contest for influence between Russia, and France, which has encountered violent opposition from the population.

Francophone Africa's shifting geopolitical dynamics, marked by the rise of military regimes and realignment of alliances, pose significant challenges to Western powers' influence. The case of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso illustrates the challenges of forming partnerships in the region, highlighting the necessity for flexible and sophisticated foreign policies to tackle shifting geopolitical environments.

NIGER'S SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

The break with France after the 26 July 2023 upheaval in Niger was a significant moment, characterized by the rejection of defense pacts and the complete departure of French soldiers by the end of December 2023. Anticipating a similar outcome, the United States aimed to safeguard its strategic interests, especially at the Agadez base⁹, important

⁹ Niger Air Base 201 is a United States drone airbase near Agadez, Niger

for anti-terrorism efforts and countering Russia's increasing course in the area. Despite distancing from France's actions, the US hesitated to brand the Nigerien upheaval as a "coup d'état" and maintained its embassy in Niamey, contrasting with the expulsion of the French envoy. Other European countries, like Germany and Italy, also tried to manage their ties with Niger independently of French influence.

However, the declaration of enhanced military collaboration between Niamey and Moscow in December 2023 escalated tensions with Washington. The rejection of the Nigerien military leadership to engage with the US Deputy Secretary of African Affairs and the subsequent ousting of American troops indicated a notable shift in alliances. Niger, previously seen as a key location for Western military operations in the area, suddenly emerged as a strategic ally of Moscow, surprising Western nations.

The response from the United States, characterized by a strategy of awaiting "clarifications" from Niamey, underscored a significant misjudgment in their assessment of the evolving dynamics in West Africa. Despite their efforts to uphold their influence, the suspension of American aid, mandated by law following a coup, proved insufficient in compelling democratic reforms within the Nigerien administration. On the contrary, Washington's insistence and warnings regarding external influences served only to worsen the already strained relationship with the military junta. The latter, in turn, seized the opportunity to criticize the United States for what they perceived as an violation upon the sovereign right of the Nigerien people to determine their own partnerships and alliances.

Additionally, the fact that Niger is getting closer to Russia and might make friends with other countries like Iran is making it harder for Washington and Brussels. They're worried about things like uranium in Niger and Iran wanting nuclear weapons. The junta's denunciation of the French and US military presence and critique of their aid programs underscored the decreasing influence of Western powers in the region. This shows that Western countries aren't as important in this area as they used to be. Even though they're trying to act like it's not a big deal, leaders from the US and Europe keep talking about how they're still fighting terrorism using bases in Europe and drones with weapons.

The situation in Niger serves as a reminder of the complex and dynamic nature of geopolitics, where unforeseen events can rapidly reshape power dynamics and alliances. Moving forward, Western powers must adapt to these changes and reassess their approaches to engagement and influence in the Sahel region and beyond.

MALI'S SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

The political landscape of Mali has been turbulent, marked by repeated coups and ongoing challenges. In May 2021, another coup happened following one in August 2020. This was the second coup in less than a year and the third in only ten years, indicating the instability of Mali's government. Consequently, in January 2022, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) announced an embargo on Mali, except for essential goods, as a response to the military's continued hold on power.

In the same month, the military junta ruling Mali demanded the departure of the French ambassador, increasing tensions. This was followed by calls for the withdrawal of French anti-jihadist force "Barkhane". Operation Barkhane was a French-led operation spread out between Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad that started on 1 August 2014 and formally ended on 9 November 2022. The severing of military ties with France in 2022 and the subsequent blame placed on the former colonial power for many of Mali's problems marked a significant shift in alliances. Furthermore, the United States suspended military aid to Mali, and the World Bank ceased monetary operations in the country.

With all these changes happenings, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) officially wrapped up its operations after a decade-long presence in the country in December 2023. Their departure came under pressure from the ruling authorities in Mali. This marked a significant turning point, signaling the end of an extensive engagement that began back in 2013, aimed at addressing the escalating violence that posed a threat to Mali's stability. Throughout its tenure, MINUSMA worked to promote peace and security in Mali, undertaking various tasks such as protecting civilians, supporting political processes, and facilitating humanitarian aid delivery. However, despite their efforts, the mission faced numerous challenges, including attacks by militant groups and

obstacles to implementing peace agreements. Additionally, MINUS-MA's departure has implications beyond Mali's borders, particularly for neighboring nations like Burkina Faso and Niger, which have also been struggling with similar security challenges. The mission's presence had provided a sense of stability and security in the region, and its absence may create uncertainties and potentially make worse existing security threats.

The leaders in charge of Mali, even though they were dealing with economic punishments from ECOWAS, found a way to get money by charging taxes to Western mining companies that dig for gold in Mali. This information comes from a report called *The Blood Gold Report*, made by a group of researchers from different countries. This report explains how the money from these taxes is being used to pay for Russian soldiers who are working in Mali. With political and military allegiance shifting towards Russia, demonstrated by President Putin's commitments during a Russia-Africa summit in July 2023, Mali's geopolitical landscape continues to evolve and to change.

Even with these changes, Mali continues to suffer from jihadist attacks and worsening humanitarian and political issues. While the colonels who took control in 2020 might have seen some symbolic victories, rebel factions continue to operate in the difficult and extensive central Mali region. Mali's path since 2020 has been characterized by a series of coups, changing partnerships, and an increasing dependence on Russian backing, all during persistent security and humanitarian crises.

BURKINA FASO'S SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

The September 2022 coup d'état in Burkina Faso was a revolt that occurred eight months after the January 2022 coup d'état. Captain Ibrahim Traoré¹⁰ announced that he and a group of officers had decided to overthrow the interim president due to his inability to handle a worsening Islamist insurgency in the country. A curfew was imposed, all political and civil society activities were suspended, air and land borders were closed, and Burkina Faso's constitution was suspended. Additionally, the declaration of Traoré as the new leader of the Patriotic Movement for Safeguarding and Restoration was made. The Pa-

¹⁰ Ibrahim Traoré (born 14 March 1988) is a Burkinabè military officer who has been the interim leader of Burkina Faso since the 30 September 2022 coup d'état that ousted interim president Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba.

triotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (PMSR) has been the ruling military junta of Burkina Faso since the January 2022 Burkina Faso coup d'état.

Since Captain Ibrahim Traoré assumed power, there has been a significant deterioration in the relationship between France and Burkina Faso. This change was highlighted when a longstanding military agreement between Ouagadougou and France, dating back to 1961, was openly renounced, notably in March 2022, shortly after the orchestrated withdrawal of French forces from Burkina Faso's territory. The ascension of leadership under Captain Ibrahim Traoré was accompanied by promises of constitutional reforms, indicating a desire for internal change within the country. In December 2023, the Burkinabe government adopted a bill revising the constitution, now enshrining national languages as official languages instead of French, which is downgrading to the status of a "working language."

As the administration under Traoré strengthened, Burkina Faso actively distanced itself from France, a move of importance considering France's historical colonial influence and partnership with the nation. Instead, Burkina Faso redirected its focus towards Moscow, signaling a strategic reorientation of its foreign policy. The government of Burkina Faso has demonstrated a growing affinity with Moscow, spanning various sectors such as humanitarian assistance, energy, nuclear cooperation, and cultural exchange. Plans for the construction of a civilian nuclear power plant by a Russian agency have been unveiled to address the energy needs of the population. Collaborative efforts in healthcare to combat the dengue epidemic were also emphasized. However, it is in the military sphere that there is a perceived need for support from Moscow. This shift was not confined to diplomatic gestures alone but was substantiated by concrete actions, including the forging of closer military ties with Russia.

The establishment and expansion of the military base since December 2023, stemming from military collaboration, under the Russian newly introduced label, Africa Corps, have been openly acknowledged by the government, signaling a growing alliance. The Africa Corps represents a rebranding effort of the well-known Wagner Group, a paramilitary entity with a history marked by allegations and credible evidence of involvement in massacres, rape, torture, theft, and smuggling across the African continent. This new military presence is geared towards

conducting large-scale operations across the African continent, aiding countries in their quest for independence and sovereignty. Furthermore, in addition to cultivating closer ties with Moscow, Burkina Faso tried to strengthen relations with its neighboring countries, Mali and Niger. Both nations, like Burkina Faso, were governed by military regimes, suggesting a shared political landscape and potential for collaboration in regional security affairs.

A significant development in this realignment was Russia's commitment to constructing a nuclear power plant within Burkina Faso's borders. This commitment not only symbolized a deepening of ties between the two nations but also indicated Burkina Faso's intent to diversify its energy sources and decrease dependence on traditional allies. Additionally, Burkina Faso's turn towards Russia was reinforced by practical engagements, such as accepting humanitarian aid in the form of free Russian cereals.

Captain Traoré asserts that combating jihadists is a top priority for his administration. Despite this assertion, the regime's efforts have proven inadequate in suppressing the insurgent forces. Instead, the government has experienced setbacks, with jihadist and other militant groups gaining ground and seizing additional territory. Since 2015, Burkina Faso has been trapped in an ongoing cycle of violence caused by jihadist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS). These groups have consistently posed a grave threat to the stability and security of the nation, maintaining a state of insecurity and fear among its citizens.

CONCLUSION

Historically tied to African nations, France maintains influence through defense pacts, economic interests, and the use of the CFA franc in seven West African Francophone countries. Even with a strong military presence to counter terrorism, French backing of puppet leaders has caused dissatisfaction. The 2020 Mali coup signaled a threat to France's lasting influence, leading to strained relations and policy changes, but diplomatic efforts may be too late, as seen in the limited outcomes of the 2021 New Africa-France Summit initiated by President Macron.

Beyond the expressions of resentment, strategic considerations come into play. Africa stands as a geopolitical crossroads coveted by various global powers, with the geoeconomic landscape shaped by globalization creating new dependencies and exploitative relationships. The crucial question emerges: Does Africa possess the means to defend itself and ensure its security? Additionally, scrutiny is directed at French diplomacy, which, from Libya to the Maghreb, appears inconsistent and unsuccessful, regardless of the presence or absence of military bases.

In 2024, the connection between France and Africa is at a turning point, shaped by economic possibilities, security concerns, geopolitical shifts, and historical connections. France and African countries must navigate these challenges through mutual respect and cooperation, fostering a balanced partnership that supports Africa's development and stability, while also securing France's position in the changing global landscape.

The growing ties of this region with Russia in the military, diplomatic, and economic spheres signal a significant realignment of alliances and interests in the region. These developments pose significant challenges to Western powers' influence in the region and underscore the need for adaptive and nuanced foreign policies. The changing geopolitical landscape in Francophone Africa necessitates a reassessment of engagement strategies to adapt to evolving alliances and confront emerging security challenges effectively.

Consequently, the risk of continued political instability remains high in many parts of the continent. Investors must be well-prepared and armed with legal tools to protect their investments in this increasingly unpredictable environment.

REFERENCES:

- APF Francophonie. 2024. *Rapport sur les situations politiques*. [pdf]. Available at: https://apf-francophonie.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/06.%20Rapport%20sur%20les%20situations%20politiques%20%28modification%20Luxembourg%20p%20115%29_0.pdf
- Antil, A., Giovalucchi, F., Vircoulon, T., 2023. *Le discours antifrçais en Afrique francophone*. Études, 7-18. <https://doi.org/10.3917/etu.4307.0007>
- Berlin, J., Clement, D., Elufisan, L. P., Hicks, E., & Kész, Z., 2023. *The Blood Gold Report by 21 Democracy*. [pdf] Blood Gold Report. Available at: <https://bloodgoldreport.com>
- Cloke, F., 2020. *Soft Power Diplomacy on the African Continent: The Rise of China*. *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, 3(1), pp.268-276. Available at: <https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org>
- Dal, S., 2023. *Regional Integration in Africa: EAC and ECOWAS*. Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3398346>
- Droin, M., & Dolbaia, T., 2023. *Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa.: What's the Limit? Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep52751>
- Dionne, A., Epton, V., Fournel, C., Moindrot-Zilliox, N., Pelletier, B., 2022. *BURKINA FASO Conflict Diagnostic*. [pdf]. INAF 5203. Available at: <https://carleton.ca/cifp/wp-content/uploads/2022-Burkina-Faso-Conflict-Diagnostic.pdf>
- Forest, J., 2009. *Influence Warfare: How Terrorists and Governments Fight to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas*. Westport: Praeger Security International.
- Holder, G., & Sow, M., 2013. *L'Afrique des Laïcités: État, Religion et Pouvoirs au Sud du Sahara*. Éditions Tombouctou.
- Hellouin de Cenival, S., 2022. *Quelle présence chinoise en Afrique ? Institut EGA*. Available through: <https://www.institut-ega.org/l/quelle-presence-chinoise-en-afrique/>
- Le Gouriellec, S., 2022. *Géopolitique de l'Afrique*. Presses Universitaires de France.
- Lomøy, J., 2021. *Chinese aid – a blessing for Africa and a challenge to western donors*. *CMI Insight*. Available at: <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7750-chinese-aid-a-blessing-for-africa-and-a-challenge-to-western-donors>
- Madrid-Morales, D., Löffler, D., Birkevich, A., & Börekci, D., 2021. *How China, Turkey and Russia influence the media in Africa*. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Regional Media Programme Sub-Sahara Africa.
- Martin, P. n.d., *Sorting Out the Mess: External Interests in West Africa*. Available at: https://www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/sorting_out_the_mess_external_interests_west_africa_m_pabst.pdf
- Moore, M., 2018. *Democracy Hacked: Political Turmoil and Information Warfare in the Digital Age*. Oneworld Publications.

- New Eastern Europe. 2023. *Putin's stumble with lacklustre Russia-Africa summit presents an opportunity*. Available at: <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/08/04/putins-stumble-with-lacklustre-russia-africa-summit-presents-an-opportunity/>
- Nsenga Mpanda, E. J., 2023. *Francophonie: Politique et Perspectives en Afrique*. D'Encre.
- Sıradağ, A., 2014. "Understanding French Foreign and Security Policy towards Africa: Pragmatism or Altruism", *Afro Eurasian Studies Journal*, 3(1). Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/700279>
- Staniland, M., 1987. *Francophone Africa: The Enduring French Connection*. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 489, pp.51–62.
- Whyte, J., 2023. *The Birth of Psychological War: Propaganda, Espionage, and Military Violence from WWII to the Vietnam War*. The British Academy by Oxford University Press.
- Wu, M., 2023. *Intelligent Warfare: Prospects of Military Development in the Age of AI*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.