



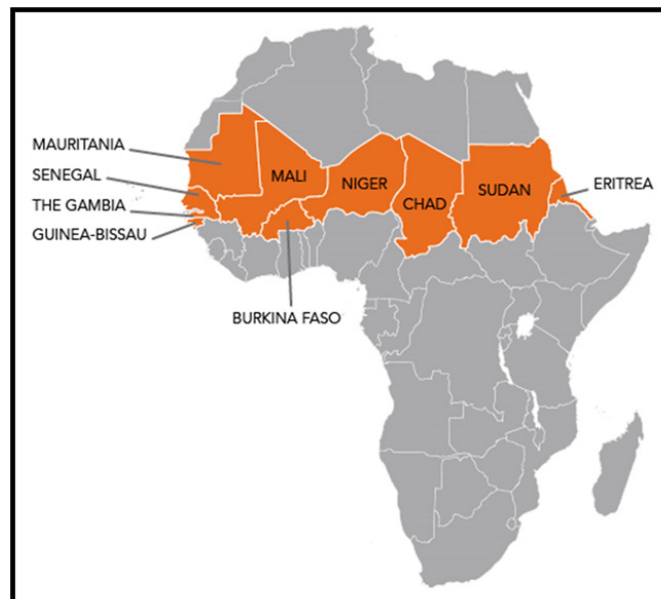
DECREASING WESTERN INFLUENCE IN AFRICA: A CASE STUDY OF SAHEL REGION

Colonel Amit Bedi

Senior Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies

The Sahel region (Figure 1) is a part of Africa that links the Sahara Desert in the North with grasslands in the South. It spans from Senegal to Sudan, covering about ten countries, the majority being landlocked. The region receives less rainfall and is inhabited by nomadic people. Life is tough due to the climatic conditions, and it separates countries in the North, like Algeria, Libya, and Egypt, from countries in the South. The Northern countries are predominantly Muslim, while the Southern countries have more Christians. This is because Islam spread from the North while Christianity spread through European colonisers in the South.

Figure 1: Sahel Region



Source: “Demographic Challenges of the Sahel,” PRB, January 14, 2015, <https://www.prb.org/resources/demographic-challenges-of-the-sahel/>.

Population explosion, along with the impact of climate change, has had an impact on the fragile environment. General progress, which is taking place worldwide, is also affecting traditional ways of life, leading to people moving southward for a better life. Accordingly, it can be seen as a serious fault line, marking a geographical, cultural, and economic divide between the predominantly Muslim-majority countries to the North and the more Christian-populated countries to the South. It is currently a zone of substantial environmental and political upheaval.¹

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In the last few years, Islamic extremism has become a major issue with the increasing presence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb—the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara—and Boko Haram, which has links to the Sahel but operates in Nigeria. These groups exploit weak governance, corruption, poverty, and lack of opportunities to recruit disillusioned youth. They commit violence against the local population, military, and government establishments, which weakens the region and poses a threat to security and development.²

France, which once had 17 colonies in Africa, mainly in West and Central Africa, had a military base virtually in every country it had ruled, even after these colonies gained independence in the 1960s. The same was due to close political and economic ties or benefits like military training and equipment aid in exchange. After the Libyan crisis of 2012, ISIS and Al-Qaeda started their actions in this region, and the security situation started deteriorating. The French government, under the umbrella of Interpol and with support from some European partners and funding from Germany, helped establish the G5 Sahel Force in 2014. It comprised Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, all from the Sahel region. Since its inception, this force has been involved in conducting anti-terrorist operations, named Operation Barkhane.

The US military divided Africa based on the two coastlines and had a majority of its deployments along the Eastern coast. Its military activity in Africa increased in the 1990s, with interventions like those in Somalia and efforts to gain access to oil and mineral resources. Post-9/11, it was primarily for counter-terrorism. The creation of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007 marked a significant shift by consolidating military operations in Africa under a single command. AFRICOM focuses on:

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1. Counter-terrorism efforts, particularly against groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates.

2. Training and equipping African militaries for regional security.
3. Providing logistical support for operations across the continent.

AFRICOM's headquarters is located in Stuttgart, Germany, and it has major deployments within Europe, including airbases in Molesworth, United Kingdom and Florida. On the African continent, it has Defence Attaches in 38 out of a total of 54 countries, along with bases for operational, logistic and training requirements. Post-2013, in order to support French counter-terrorism efforts (Operation Barkhane), the US signed a treaty with Niger Government and deployed unarmed Predator drones, which were to provide surveillance capabilities over Mali at Air Base 201, Niamey, and Niger. In 2017, this was further extended to armed drone operations, which are being operated from Nigerian Air Base 101, Agadez, Niger. Apart from this, it also has a number of other bases in Africa, as listed in Table 1.³

Table 1: US Bases in Africa

Name of Base	Location	Year of Establishment	Mission	Important Consideration
Naval Air Station Sigonella	Sicily, Italy	1959	Aerial surveillance and maritime security in North Africa and the Mediterranean; logistics for African operations	Oldest logistics base to support North Africa
Camp Lemonnier	Djibouti	2001	HQ of Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa; Supports regional stability and counter-terrorism operations in East Africa	Largest military base in Africa
Base Manda Bay Airfield	Manda Bay, Kenya	2004	Provides logistical support and training for Kenyan forces; counter-terrorism operations	Supports military operations against extremist groups in East Africa
Entebbe Support Base	Entebbe, Uganda	2009	Peacekeeping missions and regional security cooperation	Logistical support and training, supports African Union's operations

Air Base 201	Niamey, Niger	2014	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) and logistical support against extremist groups in the Sahel	Support Operation Barkhane
Nigerien Air Base 101	Agadez, Niger	2018	ISR and Armed Drone missions against extremist groups in the Sahel	Latest deployment

Source: Compiled by the author based on inputs from <https://www.africom.mil/> and <https://www.army.mil/africa>

The US has shifted its focus from the Horn of Africa to the Sahel region in the last ten years, especially after operations in Libya. However, with the turn of the last decade, the Sahel region has also experienced significant political upheaval, with five coups occurring in the last four years, including three countries which are part of the G5 Sahel Force, exploiting the ‘anti-French sentiment’ and severely impacting geopolitical relations. The details are as under:⁴

- **Mali, August 2020:** A group of Malian colonels ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, leading to political instability. However, he regained power in May 2021 after dismissing interim President Bah Ndaw in another coup.
- **Sudan, October 2021:** General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan seized power in Sudan through a military takeover, disrupting the country's democratic transition.
- **Guinea, September 2021:** Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, a Special Forces Commander, led a coup in Guinea.
- **Burkina Faso, January 2022:** Burkina Faso's army removed President Roch Kabore, citing failures to contain Islamist militant violence. Captain Ibrahim Traoré was later appointed President.
- **Niger, August 2023:** The military overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum in Niger, with General Abdourahamane Tiani, the commander of Niger's presidential guard, being appointed head of state.

Apart from these, in April 2021, the 30-year reigning Chadian President, Idriss Déby, was killed during the offensive initiated by the Chadian rebel group Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT). His son, Gen Mahamat Déby, became acting President of Chad on the same day. The subsequent operations ended in a Chadian Military victory,

though minor clashes continue.⁵

The main reason the military took over from civil leadership was that the latter was unable to effectively control extremism. Consequently, after the change, the new dispensation, especially the countries of the G5 Sahel Force, wanted to distance themselves from Western influence, leading to opposition to the deployment of foreign armies and an ultimatum for their withdrawal.

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- Mali, August 2022 - France withdrew from Mali after nine years due to strained relations and public opposition.
- Burkina Faso, January 2023 - Burkina Faso gave France a month to withdraw its troops, ending a military agreement and allowing the country to handle its own defence.
- Niger, August 2023 - Niger military-led government announced the eviction of French and US troops from Niger. French withdrew all 1,500 troops by December 2023. The US is trying to find ways to keep troops in the country despite the arrival of Russian forces to assist the Niger Government. The issue became more prominent in May 2024 when both of them were stationed together at Air Base 101 at Agadez. The US forces were subsequently moved to Air Base 201, Niamey.
- Chad, April 2024 – Due to discussions with the Chadian Government regarding the legal status of US troops, the US decided to temporarily withdraw most of its troops.

After the withdrawal of the forces, the newly established governments/military rulers are slowly and steadily choosing Russia, specifically the Wagner group (rechristened as the Africa Corps in December 2023), over the conventional armed forces of France and the US. This change is happening because of historical reasons, political issues, and strategic benefits. Some of the political reasons for this shift are as follows:

- The Wagner Group/Africa Corps of Russia is seen as effective in providing security and fighting insurgents in countries like Mali and other countries vis-a-vis the perceived ineffectiveness of the French military in Operation Barkhane, which had not fully stabilised the region.
- Russian support often comes with fewer political conditions compared to Western aid. It is viewed as a more reliable partner for regimes that want to consolidate power

without being pressured to democratise or improve human rights. For military-led governments, this support is crucial for maintaining control.

Russia reached out to African leaders and offered them diplomatic and economic assistance.

- It also offers African countries good deals on weapons and helps them pay off their debts. These deals are attractive to these countries because they are struggling for money, and Russia doesn't put many conditions on its deals. The West, on the other hand, has stricter rules and closely watches how the money is spent.
- Russia has been working hard to build good relationships in the region. They've reached out to African leaders and offered them diplomatic and economic assistance. These nations are more likely to side with Russia when they vote on issues at various international organisations.⁶
- Military rulers also view it in the light of interventions in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, where old allies were abruptly branded as enemies or abandoned for convenience. The West's recent exit from Afghanistan has led some African countries to question whether it can be trusted anymore. They're looking for new partners who are more reliable, cheaper, and less restrictive.

The general public from Sahel countries also harbours negative sentiments about the Western forces, especially France and the US. Apart from the Black-White divide, countries like Mali and Burkina Faso were once ruled by France, leaving a lot of resentment and a strong desire to reduce French influence. People often see the French Military presence as a form of ongoing colonialism and support for corrupt or oppressive regimes, driven more by economic interests and resource access than by genuine concern for local well-being. They also feel that the root causes of instability, like poverty and lack of development, are not being addressed, and the entire focus is on the conduct of counter-terrorism operations, including drone strikes, which sometimes cause collateral civilian casualties, leading to resentment and anger among local communities.⁷

As per the latest reports published in *The Washington Times*, the US Army in Niger is planning to wind up its fewer than 500 troops and equipment from a critical drone base, Air Base 101, by the third week of July, much earlier than the stipulated time period of September 2024. The majority of these troops are most likely to be shifted to Europe, with some sprinkling in Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) and Ghana.⁸ Moreover, the French voters have, once again, kept the far right out of power, which means the continuation of existing state policy for countries in West Africa and the Sahel region in particular. This is likely to continue restrictive access to French and Western troops operating in this region.

A number of Indian companies are currently involved in various commercial projects in this region, where India is seen as a neutral entity and a better alternative to Western firms, which are seen as more oriented towards economic exploitation of the country. India has skilfully balanced its relations with both the West and Russia. This diplomatic approach minimises the risk of severe sanctions on Indian firms, which could occur if India openly favoured one side over the other. Apart from this, India has also been highlighting security concerns, especially related to the growing threat of terrorism in the region, at the UN and other platforms.⁹ The need for a stable and reliable partner to participate in the development of this area has been demonstrated repeatedly by India, and especially seen during the inclusion of African Union as a full member of the G-20 Summit at the New Delhi in September 2023 as well as hosting of Army Chiefs of African Countries at the India-Africa Army Chief's Conclave held in Pune in December 2023, reiterating Africa being India's top priority.¹⁰

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In the end, the Western concept of establishing bases abroad for conducting operations is becoming outdated due to changes in geopolitics, the concept of multi-polarity as well as the rise of large-scale non-state actors. The events of the last two years will influence how the West deploys armies in the future. Currently, Western countries are struggling to balance what they want to achieve in Africa with the actual requirements/aspirations of affected African countries, especially in the Sahel region, resulting in the withdrawal of Western armies from erstwhile military bases at an expeditious pace. Lastly, there is growing assertiveness of newly established military-backed governments, reducing US and Western deployment in counter-terrorist missions to curb the spread of fundamentalist Islam as well as the increasing influence of Russia. In view of the same, it is crucial to monitor this region to safeguard our economic/political interests and extend an arm of support where required, as Africa's special relationship with India provides a foundation for a mutually beneficial and sustainable partnership built on cooperation and capacity-building.¹¹

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Notes:

- ¹ John F. May and Jean-Pierre Guengant “Demographic Challenges of the Sahel”, Population Reference Bureau, January 14, 2015, <https://www.prb.org/resources/demographic-challenges-of-the-sahel/>. Accessed on July 10, 2024.
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- ³ United States Africa Command, “United States Africa Command”, <https://www.africom.mil/>. Accessed on July 20, 2024.
- ⁴ Haidara, Boubacar, “A Coup after Coup in the Sahel”, *International Politics and Society*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/a-coup-after-coup-in-the-sahel-6976/>. Accessed May 11, 2024
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- ⁹ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “India Calls for Countering Terror in Africa’s Sahel and Libya”, *The Economic Times*, January 26, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-calls-for-countering-terror-in-africas-sahel-and-libya/articleshow/89129269.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on July 20, 2024.
- ¹⁰ Paul Nantulya, “Africa-India Cooperation Sets Benchmark for Partnership”, *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, December 12, 2023, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/africa-india-cooperation-benchmark-partnership/>. Accessed on June 08, 2024.
- ¹¹ Ibid.



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Centre for Air Power Studies

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010

Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

Formatting and Assistance: Ms Radhey Tambi, Ms Khyati Singh and Mr Rohit Singh

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