Assessing the Geo-Strategic Implications of France's Withdrawal from the Sahel

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ABSTRACT

Since their independence, postcolonial Sahelian republics have lived in the shadow of Paris, as the French have maintained enormous influence over their former African colonies, particularly those in the Sahel region. France's self-proclaimed decades-long restoration of relations with Sahelian countries has achieved varied outcomes. France's relations with the five Sahelian countries have been hampered by a colonial heritage that France has been hesitant to admit. Furthermore, it has been harmed by the years that followed African independence in the early 1960s, as well as by "França frique" – an era defined by collusion and involvement with illegitimate regimes. However, much has changed, and France is now facing opposition from Francophone Sahelian republics and communities. This has resulted in France's economic, political, and military departure. The geostrategic consequences of France's disengagement from the Sahel are examined in this study. A comprehensive desk review including secondary data is used in the paper. The paper concludes that France's disengagement from the Sahel has far-reaching consequences. First, Salafi-Jihadist extremist organizations have discovered new leeway for maneuver (and more armaments), fomenting and exploiting sectarian and ethnic conflicts in countries that are multi-ethnic and multi-faith due to their often artificial colonial origins. Second, the French withdrawal will exacerbate geopolitical conflicts between Great Powers and Area Boys like Algeria.

Keywords: geostrategic, geopolitical conflicts, terrorism, ethno-sectarian conflicts

INTRODUCTION

France was once home to a far-flung empire in the Sahel. In the wake of independence in 1960, the *annus mirabilis* of the independence of Sahelian states, post-colonial Sahelian states were left under the shadow of a domineering former colonial master. This is because, although having formally departed the region, France retained substantial influence over its former African colonies, particularly those in the Sahel region. France has long been at the center of the political arena in the Sahel region, from economy and security to investment and politics. One of its top aims has always been to maintain its influence in the Sahel region, which it has done successfully from the Cold War era to the present. Furthermore, France was unconcerned about other significant influences competing in the region.[1]

France's self-proclaimed decades-long restoration of relations with Sahelian countries has achieved varied outcomes. France's relations with the five Sahelian countries have been hampered by a colonial heritage that France has been hesitant to admit. Furthermore, it has been harmed by the years that followed African independence in the early 1960s, as well as by "França frique" – an era marked by collusion and involvement with illegitimate regimes.[2]However, much has changed since then, with France now facing opposition from Francophone Sahelian states and communities.[3]An entire generation of Sahelian masses despises France as an economic parasite and a propagator of Western principles despised by both orthodox

and extremist Islamic parties. While not all radical Islamic groups are jihadists, they do oppose the political and social model that African countries have followed since independence and prey on their flaws and economic failings.[4]

This has led to the withdrawal of France economically, politically and militarily. This paper examines the geo-strategic implications of France's withdrawal from the Sahel. This paper employed a systematic desk review using secondary data. The data for the study was collected through the desk review of previous studies, reports, journals, and books. To arrive at relevant studies that relate to this study, a scoping was employed to help the author map relevant literature with various study designs. The secondary data to be used in this paper was collected through qualitative methods of data collection. The data was collected from books, journal articles, and reviews of other printed and published materials. The researcher used inductive analysis, which studied and interpreted the data's patterns, topics, and categories of analysis.

BACKGROUND TO THE GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES OF THE SAHEL

Geographically, the Sahel region extends from the Atlantic Ocean coasts of Mauritania and Senegal in the west to the Red Sea coasts of Sudan and Eritrea in the east. However, in recent years, the Sahel's geographical focus has shifted to a portion of western and central Sahel that includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Several socioeconomic and political issues have plagued the Sahel during the last three decades. These include widespread poverty, inadequate educational and social infrastructure, grave macroeconomic issues such as significant unemployment, and precarious agricultural resources.[5]

Furthermore, Salafi-jihadist organizations in the Sahel have gradually matured into full-fledged and unusually resilient geopolitical actors capable of projecting influence beyond geographic zones where violent extremism has become institutionalized. The expansion of this space from local to regional hotspots to a continental dimension, where cross-border organizations have emerged in the Sahel region. Salafi-jihadist groups gain not just from local grievances and weak governance, but they have also adapted to local feelings and broader national politics: their rhetoric is anti-colonial, and they portray themselves as local agents expelling foreign forces.Militant groups have also learned to act as go-betweens between rival local communal factions, offering services such as public goods distribution, arbitration, as well as dispute resolution that are not provided by central and/or local state actors. In Mali's Macina region, for example, numerous herder clans rely on terrorist organizations to restrict access to pasture.[6]

As a result, previously unseen interactions of transnational and trans-regional militarism have shown themselves as armed rebellions, transnational drug networks, jihadi inspired insurgencies, civil war, protest movements that threaten the fabric of the state, as well as coups. This has paved the way for the growth of illegal trafficking, including drugs, human trafficking, counterfeit goods, small arms and light weapons, and, more lately, the recruitment of young men by salafi-jihadi extremist groups. Small guns and light weapons, as well as narcotics and people trafficking, are estimated to generate US\$ 3.8 billion yearly in the five countries.[7]Furthermore, the emergence and consolidation of Salafi-jihadi groups in Africa associated with al Qaeda and the Islamic State perplexes the continent. This escalating violence is taking place against a backdrop of regionalized insecurity, blurring conventional distinctions between what is local and global in scope, military and/or civilian, domestic and/or foreign, and politics and/or identity. This is compounded by the post-colonial state of the Sahel[8].

While the democratization agenda in post-colonial West African states has been vibrant, there has been a pattern of growing division within these consolidating democracies as power struggles and ethno-linguistic political mobilization termite at the underdeveloped and/or fragile democratic institutions, hollowing them from within and killing the ethos of good governance. Furthermore, post-colonial nations in the Sahel have a history of constraining peasant movements' democratic potential. Furthermore, these postcolonial

governments have failed to change the colonial method of indirect control via customary tribal authorities, which is the main mode of authority and power in rural Africa. Furthermore, political, social, and economic events in the Arab Maghreb have shaped the tough situation in the Sahel.[9]

Furthermore, the absence of democratic institutions, authoritarian and ineffective governance, a lack of development, and inadequate infrastructure have increased ethnic strife.[10]As a result, the Sahel faces a slew of major difficulties for global policymakers, including unstable nations, poverty, refugees and migrants, transnational organized crime (TOC), and jihadist insurgencies.[11]This complexity of regionalized insecurity is exacerbated by the fact that, while the Sahel nation-states constitute some of the poorest states in the entire globe, they have an abundance of natural resources, including vast deposits of iron ore in countries such as Mauritania, uranium which is abundantly found in Niger, which happens to be the world's fourth largest producer, as well as oil potential in Chad, Mauritania, and Niger. Natural resource predation revenues, rather than being allocated into development projects, are used for militarism and rent transfer among power clans, exacerbating marginalized communities' grievances and claims. Furthermore, the Sahel states' incapacity to effectively battle terrorism and drug trafficking justifies international intervention in the name of security, particularly from powers seeking to dominate the region's mineral resources[12].

The risk profile for violent extremism in the Sahel region is based on two major arcs. The first arc connects Mali and Mauritania's ungoverned spaces, while the second links Guinea-Bissau with Mauritania. Due to these geopolitical realities, the issue of state stability and the desire to exploit resources in the Sahel has piqued the interest of a number of foreign entities. France, a former colonial power, is one of the Sahel's most recognizable protagonists.

FRANCE IN THE SAHEL

France has always been at the center of the Sahel region's political domain. One of its top aims has always been to maintain its influence in the Sahel region, which it has done successfully from the Cold War era to the present. Furthermore, France was unconcerned about other significant influences competing in the region.[13]Since the mid-1990s, France's foreign and security policy with francophone Sahelian countries has oscillated between historical continuity and an eagerness for transformation. Hollande, too, came into power as a modernizer. At the same time, his worldview was shaped by his observations of the Global War on Terror in the aftermath of September 11, France's linguistic, historical, geographic, as well as socio-cultural proximity to its former colonies, and a cross-party consciousness of France's special place and duty in the world, for which Africa frequently serves as a projection screen.[14] Now, however, much has changed; France is witnessing a pushback from Francophone Sahelian states and populations.[15]

In the 2010s, the geopolitical realities in the Sahel came to boiling as the complexities of organised crime, poverty, weakness of security forces, poor state-society relations, militia and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and the availability of illicit goods created a regionalized security environment.[16] Furthermore, the region has seen a gradual collapse of sovereign institutions, as well as coordination between organized crime, Salafi-Jihadist extremist groups, and state authorities. This was most represented by the Malian government's incapacity to deal with the rebel Tuareg-Islamist coalition in the north, which ultimately led to the coup that deposed President Touré.[17]

France acted militarily in response to Salafi-Jihadist extremist groups seeking to destabilize the Sahelian states' systems. In 2014, the operation was transformed into a regional and open-ended military initiative known as Operation Barkhane. Paris adopted a policy of internationalizing the intervention from the start, claiming global cooperation as well as French leadership. This helped to share the burden and legitimize French involvement, as indicated by the mobilization of the UN (MINUSMA), the European Union (EUTM,

EUCAP Sahel), alongside other bilateral European partners, most notably Germany.[18]

Regrettably, France's political agenda remained uncertain until the end, giving the impression of a military thrust with no strategic purpose. Paris took a more measured and reluctant approach. For example, development cooperation had only a minor role in the French policy to stabilize the region. Aid was largely considered as a means of promoting counterinsurgency measures and legitimizing French military action. Despite Paris declaring the Sahel a foreign policy priority, the five Sahel governments got only 10% of total French funding for development to Africa in 2018, with Mali obtaining a paltry 2.5 percent. This figure has remained consistent since 2013, highlighting the gap between declared political goals and actual budget distribution.[19]

It's no surprise that the mood in Mali and the Sahel swung drastically toward France between 2013 and 2021. Initially hailed as a liberator, Paris has been chastised for failing to regulate the security situation and for fostering neocolonial patterns of dependency. The disagreement with the Malian military government led in the expulsion of the French ambassador in January 2022, subsequently resulting in the end of bilateral military cooperation. Paris opted to leave before Barkhane was expelled. Despite its singularity, the breakdown of the Malian-French relationship is indicative of a French Africa policy quandary. Deep-seated resentments are crystallizing and rising to the surface in Paris' former colonies.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FRENCH WITHDRAWAL IN THE SAHEL

The French retreat from the Sahel has far-reaching consequences. First, Salafi-Jihadist extremist organizations have discovered new leeway for maneuver (and more armaments), fomenting and exploiting sectarian and ethnic conflicts in countries that are multi-ethnic and multi-faith due to their often artificial colonial origins. The political earthquake that struck the Mediterranean's southern coasts is certain to have repercussions in another critical region, particularly the Horn of Africa. Insecurity and instability in East Africa, both on land and at sea, have the potential to spread into Red Sea areas that Egypt, preoccupied with the enormous challenges of its political transition, may be unable to handle.[20]

Another geostrategic result will be an increase in geopolitical tensions between Great Powers and Area Boys such as Algeria. Algeria's influence in the Sahara-Sahel region is expected to rise in the coming years. This is because Algiers thinks that the Sahel is not only necessary for national security, but also that Algeria is the natural leader in the region. Algeria, unwilling to allow foreign meddling in the region, has taken a number of actions to limit the influence of outside parties. However, because Algeria does not oppose international collaboration, close ties between Algiers and other actors such as the United States are likely. [21]

Beijing will almost probably increase its strategic footprint in the region. China's 'Going Out' (Zouchuqu) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) programs will most likely engage the area. As a result, China is likely to increase its economic and political presence in the Sahel, as well as aid its massive state-owned enterprises in expanding and internationalizing in the region.[22]China will coordinate its state-financed financing and construction activities with the African Union's flagship Program Infrastructure Development for Africa (PIDA) to achieve this. Transportation advancements will aid in the extraction of hitherto unknown commodities such as oil, uranium, and lithium. Beijing will gradually boost its military presence in the region to protect its citizens, project the image of a responsible Great Power, and gain combat experience. A Chinese naval base in the Gulf of Guinea will also give Beijing a strategic site on the Atlantic coast.[23] Moscow is also likely to expand its footprint in the region by strengthening existing military alliances and patron-client connections with nations such as Mali, Guinea, Niger, and Burkina Faso.[24]

The end of Operation Barkhane and the withdrawal of the Takuba Task Force, as well as Russia's growing military presence in the region, will pave the way for different spheres of influence in the Sahel and beyond.

Countries will have an ally other than the West. Under Niger's regional leadership, Sahelian countries would opt to strengthen relations with France and the EU while rejecting the Malian junta's allegiance plan. Furthermore, economic sanctions and isolation aimed at Sahelian countries will boost the region's security, economic, and diplomatic ties with Moscow and Beijing.[25]

Niger is an important part of the Sahel's security system. The country is actively involved in and contributes to security groups such as the G5 Sahel, an organization formed by France to unite the Sahelian governments. Niger is also a member of the Multinational Joint Task Force. These groups are participating in the region's fight against terrorism. Aside from funding both organizations, particularly the G5 Sahel, France is also involved in training Nigerien soldiers and flying reconnaissance and attack drones in the region, actively attacking militants. As a result, France's decision to withdraw from Niger will have an influence on regional counter-terrorism efforts.[26]

The spread of Salafi-jihadi militancy in Africa is harmful not only to the militants' direct victims, but also to anybody touched by the linked wars and humanitarian problems. Salafi-jihadi expansion also causes continued instability, exacerbating the state's problems. Furthermore, increased cooperation among terrorist organizations, particularly Daesh in the Sahel and ISWAP, as well as among terrorist and criminal organizations, has increased and could continue to worsen the danger that these groups pose in the region and beyond.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving regional state-society ties is critical for reducing state friction. In order to combat poverty, marginalization, and societal inequalities, it is also critical for the state to steer clear of the militarization of the state and instead deal with the fragility of the state as well as its institutions by bolstering fixing their shortcomings, promoting a robust civil society, and championing sustainable development as building blocks for long-term peace. This will help not just regain government legitimacy, but also to promote inclusive governance solutions in the ungoverned zones of West Africa and the Sahel region.

Youth have an important part in violent extremism as both victims and perpetrators, and Sahelian states must understand this. Harnessing the energy, creativity, and power that youth contribute is crucial in increasing these countries' resilience, not only in confronting violent extremism, but also in constructing more peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. Third, the military campaign against terror must be ended immediately. Authoritarianism and rights repression are aided by a militarized security posture. Typically, this results in a militarized citizen backlash. Furthermore, in the post-September 11 era, the United States' "one-size-fits-all" approach to violent extremism has often encouraged rather than averted situations conducive to violent extremism. As a result, West African and Sahelian states should look into and promote "bottom-up" local solutions to the region's worries about violent extremism. As a result, in order to represent local reality, affected communities must decentralize counter-terrorism operations.

Increased regional collaboration among West African and Sahelian states is required. The threat of regional terrorism extends beyond the state level. As a result, how states respond as a region must be reconsidered. To defeat this dragon, national and multilateral actors such as the United Nations, the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States, and the G5 Sahel should form a united front. West African and Sahelian states should join forces in sub-regional and regional engagements to counter violent extremism and violent extremism in the region, not only by sharing intelligence and conducting joint counter-violent terrorism activities, but also to enhance state-society relations; disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate terror operatives; employ security sector reforms, and collaborate on longer-term measures such as addressing the causes of terror as well violent extremism.

There is an urgent need to address the fundamental causes of violent extremism, and the militarization of the

region is also crucial to the abolition of violent extremism. Violent extremism and violent extremism do not appear from nowhere. When the state and its institutions repeatedly violate human rights, the ethos of good governance is pushed to the sidelines. Violations of human rights, authoritarian governance, poverty, and marginalization must all be addressed. The emphasis should be on diplomatic approaches to preventing, managing, and resolving societal crises.

The near and recent priority is to prevent attacks in the Sahel region, and the danger of violent extremists carrying out attacks on Sahel territory is critical. To do this, it is also required to reduce and restrict drug and other criminal activity, secure lawful trade and communication channels (roads, pipelines) throughout the Sahel, North-South, and East-West, and maintain current economic interests while laying the framework for trade and investment.

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FOOTNOTE

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