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The 21st century, geopolitical reconfiguration: And the Sahel as an outpost of it?

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Abstract:

In a global environment of geopolitical reconfiguration, powers employ powerful forces to achieve their interests, more or less overtly, more or less covertly. In the current era, in a new realist era, the interests of nations and powers are the key factor in international relations.

In this complex environment, Russia is once again trying to avoid what it feels is an encirclement of its territory, and is attempting to create a kind of 'forward detachment' in the Sahel, from which it intends, in addition to gaining other advantages, to threaten and help break up the ring of land that encircles its country, the centuries-old 'Rimland'.

And, in the framework of this geopolitical reconfiguration, perhaps nothing is random, and events and developments - Ukraine, Sahel, Syria, Libya... - however remote and unconnected they may seem, follow one another as in a card game, where bets and moves, with an apparent logic - or not - respond to the purpose of each player to maximise his or her benefit, beyond other issues.

A final reflection on this subject concludes this paper.

Keywords:

Geopolitical reconfiguration, Sahel, Syria, Libya, Rimland, Russia, Realism.

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Introduction: Conflicts and remote settings - and is the Sahel remote?

In this current global struggle, in this ongoing geopolitical reconfiguration, with emerging powers and revisionist powers of this so-called global order, it is not clear, nor can it be realistically sketched out at this time, beyond grandiloquent declarations related to the end of US hegemony and the birth of a more just world -or with the struggle of autocracies to put an end to freedom and democracy on the planet- whether the dispute will result in¹ a new unipolar world order led by China -or by the United States-, a bipolar world led by Washington and Beijing, or a multipolar world -or polycentric, in Putin's words- in which several powers live together in a sort of balance on a planetary scale, a bipolar world led by Washington and Beijing, or a multipolar - or polycentric, in Putin's words - world, in which several powers coexist in a kind of planetary equilibrium, with their zones of influence and security distributed and distributed.

The reconfiguration of the global order, of international relations themselves, framed essentially in a realist sphere - basically, interests versus ideals - and above all for the powers, old and new, all seeking "their place in the sun", the military tool has once again appeared unambiguously. When it was thought, only a few years ago, that a conflict in Europe with hundreds of thousands of dead would be quite impossible, the war in Ukraine is the stark reality² of this new era, in which, in essence, a new balance of global power is being sought.

Whatever the final objective of each contender in the battle, whatever the ultimate outcome of this struggle, it seems reasonable to think that disputes take place on a planetary scale - and certainly, on reflection, at what point in history, in terms of major conflicts, has this not been the case -; suffice it to think of the different battle environments, since in addition to the "classic" land, sea and air, new areas such as space, cyberspace, the cognitive sphere, etc. must be added due to technology. The struggle takes place in all environments in which it is possible to gain an advantageous position, and not only in physical and obvious spaces. And for this reason, and again as

¹ In this sense, SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. *The new struggle of the powers: World War 3.0 or Cold War 2.0?* Analysis Paper 28/2023. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. 19 April 2023. BIE3, number 30. 2023, pp. 43-59. Available at: <https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/BoletinesIEEE3/2023/BoletinIEEE30.pdf> NOTE: All internet links in this document are active as of the closing date of this document, 2 January 2025.

² While it is impossible to know the exact figures, there are several approximations. For example, *BBC*, '43,000 troops killed in war with Russia', Zelensky says, 5 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yv75nydy3o>

on other occasions in the past, apparently local wars, conflicts with more or less deep roots or disputes perceived as remote and unconnected can be understood to a greater extent if they are properly framed in this context of global dispute, in this ongoing planetary reconfiguration.

And in a global, hyper-connected and connected world, nothing is really remote. Not even the Sahel, that wide strip of land that stretches across Africa from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea for some 5,500 kilometres, some 400 kilometres wide; and as befits its meaning (Sahel means shore), it forms the southern shore of the Sahara desert, that strip of land that, from the south of the Saharan sand sea, has for centuries constituted the space of mobility and interconnection between equatorial Africa and the Mediterranean and Europe. And if it was in the past, in today's world³ ...

Politically, it encompasses a dozen countries - with more or less "sabelian" space within its borders - although when speaking of the Sahel, reference is usually made to the Sahel G5, a group of five nations (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad) because they share a series of common characteristics and are located in West Africa; Among these common aspects - and problems - insecurity, the monopoly of violence, weak or non-existent governance in large areas, together with low economic development and a weak perception of the concept of citizenship as opposed to that of ethnicity or tribe, These are all part of a complex panorama to which the addition of exponential demographic growth - the population doubles every twenty years - and climate change - which affects three quarters of its inhabitants, who live off the primary sector - make for a bleak picture, to such an extent that there is talk of a "Sahelian perfect storm"⁴ .

And this institutional weakness, these structural complexities may constitute the perfect breeding ground for others, making good the adage "when the waters are troubled, the fishermen's gain", to try to reach this area, not as remote as it seems, but full of conflicts, and where settling in may be, in principle, apparently easier. How not to take advantage of this?

³ MESA, Beatriz. "Europe's open fronts in the Sahel", *Política Exterior*. 17 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/los-frentes-abiertos-de-europa-en-el-sahel/>

⁴ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. "Sahel: Perfect Storm of Growing Intensity and Amplitude!", in *Panorama Geopolítico de los conflictos 2021*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Ministry of Defence, Madrid, 2021, pp. 229-252.

Available at:

https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/p/a/panorama_geopolitico_conflictos_2021.pdf

Isolation attempt? Advanced detachment!

In this era of geopolitical reconfiguration, it is perhaps necessary to return to classical geopolitics, to rigorous and contrasted analyses assessing the struggle for power on a planetary scale; and the attempted isolation of the so-called "Heartland" - in Mackinder's terminology - from that immense land mass (one-sixth of the world's emerged surface) essentially made up of Russia, has been a constant over the past centuries; whether through the British "Great Game" with the Russian Empire during the 19th century or through the "Theory of Containment" during the Cold War in the 20th century, the fact is that the naval powers - the United Kingdom and the United States respectively - have taken all sorts of actions - alliances, proxy wars, the creation of buffer states, etc. - to prevent Moscow from gaining access to its territory.- to prevent Moscow from gaining access to warm seas, to the global highway and thus to the ability and possibility of projecting its power much more easily by controlling, or denying Moscow control over, the so-called "Rimland", the vast land belt that encircles the Heartland from China through the Middle East and the Balkans to Eastern Europe.

That is why, at present, and in the framework of the aforementioned global reconfiguration, it is pointed out⁵ that Russia, the bear - as a symbolic national animal - is trying to get out of the taiga again, is trying to reach the sea; but other nations, and some physically located in that Rimland, with their own agenda and with a real or mythologised past, new revisionist powers, are also trying to achieve their national objectives and interests, more or less confessable. And according to the geopolitical axiom "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", they collaborate with Moscow in certain spaces and on certain issues, in a complex balance, in a kind of hard and difficult game of "cards" where cards are exchanged, being aware that a circumstantial alliance, a tactical "friendship" cannot hide a long-running strategic dispute, as happens between Russia and Turkey, between Russia and China, no matter how many declarations of friendship and strategic cooperation are made.

But, and considering that Turkey, 'the wolf', aims to regain at least some influence in the areas of the former Ottoman Empire - which extended over large regions of Africa, the

⁵ In this sense SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. *21st Century: A Return to the Struggle for Rimland?* Analysis Paper 12/2021. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. 17 March 2021. Available at: BIE³, issue 21, 2021, pp. 201-224. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7957059>

Middle East and Europe -, and considering also that China, 'the dragon', aims to be the first world power in the year 2049, the centenary of the birth of Mao's People's Republic... all these nations dispute, cooperate and compete, each one playing its trump cards - physical presence, influence, infrastructure development, agreements, etc. - for control - or in the case of Russia, the achievement of a safe breach - in the Rimland, while Moscow tries to establish a 'spearhead' in the Sahel, a sort of 'forward detachment' in the Sahel, a sort of 'advanced detachment' in the case of Russia.- for control - or a secure foothold, in Russia's case - in Rimland, while Moscow seeks to establish a 'spearhead' in the Sahel, a kind of 'forward detachment' that not only allows it to make direct use of Africa's enormous potential - resources, population, etc. - but also to put a firm footing beyond its borders.- but to set a firm foot beyond the encirclement that Rimland can be, as it has been for decades or centuries; and therefore, in order to create a path to such a forward detachment, it needs to secure a passage to such a "forward" position. In this way, it is possible to enjoy the geopolitical advantages of the Sahelian region, and also to deny them to the adversary by having a presence and activity in his rear.

The creation of such a "forward detachment" could be associated with part of what is sometimes referred to as the attempted "re-imperialisation"⁶ of Russia, with the desire to recapture the greatness - real or imagined - of the past, of those more glorious times that, in times of change - and therefore opportunity - one longs to restore; and a powerful military tool, an effective government and a strong economy are essential for such a process; and if preconditions such as past links and/or strong institutional relationships exist, the process is easier. Perhaps.

But it is also necessary to consider the states that have the capacity to act in these contested spaces. And in addition to the classic rival powers - the maritime powers, the United Kingdom and the United States - even the new revisionist powers, the "tactical allies" may not entirely agree with the establishment of this powerful forward detachment, this firm footing that can contribute to opening a breach in the Rimland by Russia, using for this purpose⁷, essentially the Wagner group - later called Africa Korps - and support for governments that emerge from coups d'état.

⁶ MOTYL, Alexander J. "The inevitable fall of Putin's new Russian Empire", *Foreign Policy*. 5 November 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/05/russia-ukraine-empire-imperialism-war/>

⁷ DE LEÓN COBO, Beatriz. "Russian Influence in the Sahel: Wagner and the Support of the Military juntas", *Friedrich Naumann Foundation*. 17 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.freiheit.org/es/espana-italia-portugal-y-dialogo-mediterraneo/influencia-rusa-en-el-sahel-wagner-y-el-apoyo-de-las>

A clear illustration of this realistic view is the apparent "geopolitical paradox" that opposing powers, or even "allied" powers, agree on the lack of interest in Russia's pursuit of a breakthrough in Rimland - it suffices to recall how Turkey, although a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), has a very clear and powerful particular agenda that leads it to cooperate and compete with Moscow in various fields.

For this reason, and in the attempt to degrade Russia's possibilities, the Western economic sanctions applied to Moscow since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, together with the degradation of military capabilities due to the conflict in Ukraine - where many Western nations have provided arms to Kiev - and the constant media and political discrediting of Putin's regime... the aim, logically from the other point of view, is to break these pillars necessary for re-imperialisation; and if to this is added the presence on Sahelian soil, and in increasing proportions, of other nations⁸, the disputes, in addition to those noted due to the dismantling of the monopoly of violence in the Sahel - the presence of terrorist groups and organised crime, self-defence militias... - also reflect this global struggle.

So do you only fight in the "forward detachment" or do you also fight for it?

Fight in and for the forward detachment!

Chad's recent announcement⁹ regarding the departure of French troops from its territory, as well as Senegal's¹⁰, means that after the departure of French troops from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the presence not only of French troops, but also of international troops - the UN missions (MINUSMA and the European Union (EUTM-Mali) were also invited to withdraw - is decreasing in the Sahel, The presence of international troops - the United Nations (MINUSMA) and European Union (EUTM-Mali) missions were also invited to withdraw - is decreasing in the Sahel, creating a vacuum that Russia and China are

⁸ In this sense, SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. "África: la pugna de viejas y nuevas potencias por su dominio", in *África: la ambición de las potencias mundiales sobre el continente*, Cuaderno de Estrategia 220. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Madrid, 2023, pp. 13-59. Available at: https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/_/frica_la_ambici_n_potencias_sobre_el_conti_nente.pdf

⁹ INTERNATIONAL PRESS AGENCY. "Chad and Senegal team up to drive France out of the Sahel. 2 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.pressenza.com/es/2024/12/chad-y-senegal-se-alian-para-expulsar-a-francia-del-sahel/>

¹⁰ SWI. "Senegal announces that 2025 will mark the end of foreign military presence". <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/senegal-anuncia-que-2025-marcar%C3%A1-el-fin-de-la-presencia-militar-extranjera/88663661>

gradually filling from different angles and in different spheres... The Sahel, an enclaved space - far from the sea for the most part - but as an area of secular mobility, can provide access, in the event of control of part of its territory, to the Atlantic Ocean, either along the west coast of West Africa or through the Gulf of Guinea... as was the case centuries ago for the Sahelian empires of the past.

And to achieve or prevent this, foreign nations manoeuvre and, to achieve their ends, they use different ways and means; from attempting to deploy forces in other surrounding nations - as the United States intends to do in countries in the Gulf of Guinea to create a sort of new outer ring around the Sahel?- to the use of *proxy* forces - delegated forces - instrumentalising - and supporting, more or less covertly - the cause of any of the wide range of actors capable of exercising violence in the region so that their struggle contributes to the demise of some power. Or like France, which, expelled from the Sahel, is trying to establish a new strategy towards Africa, redirecting¹¹ the mission of its base in Djibouti (in the Horn of Africa), traditionally oriented towards the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, which will become the new projection point for missions in Africa.

As a simple example of these real or supposed "delegated forces", it should be noted that in this extremely complex framework, the Tuareg separatist groups, with the aim of creating an independent state in the Azawad, in the north of Mali, have created a new entity called the Azawad Liberation Front¹², with which they intend to confront the government, Malian troops and their Russian allies - in fact, in July 2024, an ambush¹³ by Tuareg rebels and jihadists in Tinzawaténe, northern Mali, killed nearly a hundred Wagner/Africa Korps troops, many of them seasoned veterans of multiple combat engagements, and nearly half a hundred Malian army soldiers. Allegations that foreign nations support these - and other - groups are constant.

Indeed, Russia's position on the Sahel was defined by the Russian Chief of General Staff, General Gerasimov, who noted that 'Ukrainian-backed terrorist organisations pose a special threat to the security of the Sahel region. We are talking about training terrorists

¹¹ INFOBAE. "Macron praises the French military base in Djibouti as a "projection point" for missions in Africa". 21 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/americas/agencias/2024/12/21/macron-ensalza-la-base-militar-francesa-en-yibuti-como-punto-de-proyeccion-para-misiones-en-africa/>

¹² THE REASON. "Azawad independence fighters unite under a single group to confront the Malian military junta". 1 December 2024. Available at: https://www.larazon.es/internacional/independentistas-azawad-unifican-nuevo-grupo-enfrentarse-junta-militar-mali_20241201674cc2847337f20001b1d0f0.html

¹³ YAHOO. "Wagner loses veterans in Mali ambush, setback for Russian campaign in Africa". 11 September 2024. Available at: <https://es-us.noticias.yahoo.com/wagner-pierde-veteranos-emboscada-mal%C3%AD-082851503.html>

in the use of unmanned aerial vehicles and training in subversive activities against civilians"¹⁴ , and that the West persists in maintaining neo-colonialist approaches and thinking of Africa essentially as a source of strategic resources. Moscow's accusations are constant and relate to pointing out how the Kiev regime openly supports the action, presence and influence of terrorist groups in Africa¹⁵ , which, from Russia's point of view, is an absolutely unacceptable practice, considering that international terrorism is considered a formal threat by most of the world's nations.

And, following the attack on Wagner/Africa Korps forces and the Malian army mentioned above, it is claimed that this is no longer just a proxy war between powers fought on Malian soil - a country far removed from Ukraine - but a "real cold war whose new playground is the Sahel region" ¹⁶ , leading the countries of the so-called Alliance of Sahel States (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) to break off diplomatic relations with Ukraine.

Therefore, on Malian - and Sahelian - soil, many of the disputes, challenges and threats of global scope and impact are being disputed: from the growth of jihadist terrorism in West Africa to the genesis of part of the migratory flows towards the European continent, to the growing transit of drugs to Europe and the rich countries of the Arab world, among others. Likewise, the birth and growth of a renewed pan-Africanism can be seen, which under the aegis of military governments¹⁷ is tending to spread across Africa, as well as to become the spearhead not only of Russia's presence on NATO's southern flank, but also in its attempt to consolidate a forward detachment and contribute to generating a potential breach in Rimland. This is why what happens in the Sahel is important, not only regionally, not only continentally, but also globally.

But the fight is not only on the battlefield... it is also on the battlefield of narratives and perceptions, of the model of regional and global order to be established. And it is necessary to start somewhere, in a nucleus, however small it may be.

¹⁴ LATIN AMERICAN SUMMARY. Russia. "Russian Chief of General Staff denounces Ukraine's support for terrorist groups in the Sahel". 18 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2024/12/18/rusia-jefe-del-estado-mayor-ruso-denuncia-el-apoyo-de-ucrania-a-grupos-terroristas-en-el-sahel/>

¹⁵ SWI. "Russia reiterates to Africa its condemnation of Ukrainian support for African terrorist groups". 9 November 2024. Available at: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/rusia-reitera-a-%C3%81frica-su-condena-al-apoyo-ucraniano-a-grupos-terroristas-africanos/88055695>

¹⁶ GLOBAL VOICES. "New line of conflict moves from the Ukrainian Dombas to the Malian Sahel". 29 August 2024. Available at: <https://es.globalvoices.org/2024/08/29/nueva-linea-de-conflicto-pasa-del-donbas-ucraniano-al-sahel-maliense/>

¹⁷ In this sense, SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, *El Sahel en llamas: ¿Vuelta al caudillismo?* Analysis Paper 61/2022. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 5 October 2022. BIE³, issue 27, 2022, pp. 247-259. Available at: <https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/BoletinesIEEE3/2022/BoletinIEEE27.pdf>

An advanced stand against the established order!

The road to a 'new order', breaking the 'old' one, also passes through the Sahel; In fact, the countries that make up the so-called Alliance of Sahel States (AES) - Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger - which came into being in September 2023, have expressly rejected the six-month moratorium granted by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to reconsider their decision to leave the organisation, declaring¹⁸ that the date of 29 January 2025 is irreversible, as well as accusing it of instigating destabilisation manoeuvres supported by foreign countries, as well as pointing the finger at France in its attempts to put an end to the ESA's own freely chosen path.

So much so that, in a somewhat sensationalist manner, but reflecting a certain perceived reality, it is noted that "the countdown begins for an event that will forever change the map of West Africa"¹⁹ , since after the departure of these three nations from an organisation that has been in existence for 30 years, In this framework that allowed for a certain mobility of people and goods, the central position of the departing ESA states in ECOWAS represents not only a hard political blow, but even a physical fracture of this space.

For example, Germany is stepping up its diplomatic efforts to highlight²⁰ the importance for Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger of remaining in ECOWAS, and points to the serious economic and security consequences that leaving ECOWAS will have for these nations.

But the narrative employed by the ESA countries - and others that are being tempted to join this new confederation - is largely impregnated with powerful reminders of the past, with aspects and elements that encourage attempts to change living conditions, expectations and possibilities; in fact, expressions such as "a patriotic revolution, a

¹⁸ DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL SECURITY. *Sahel-ECOWAS-ECOWAS Alliance*. 23 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/ultima-hora/alianza-sahel-cedeao>

¹⁹ THE REASON. "The countdown begins for an event that will forever change the map of West Africa". 21 December 2024. Available at: https://www.larazon.es/internacional/comienzo-cuenta-atras-acontecimiento-que-cambiara-siempre-mapa-africa-occidental_202412216766bfb4f1fb7000199181e.html

²⁰ INFOBAE. "Germany supports the diplomatic route for Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali to return to ECOWAS". 11 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/alemania-apoya-la-v%C3%ADa-diplom%C3%A1tica-para-que-n%C3%ADger,-burkina-faso-y-mali-vuelvan-a-la-cedeao/88578464>

struggle for a second independence"²¹ or calls for pan-Africanism are constant, as are criticisms of the actions of France and the West as a whole.

And this narrative, sometimes bordering on or fully falling into the realm of disinformation, is encouraged by the revisionist powers - in this case, essentially Russia and China, to varying degrees and levels - reinforcing the idea of the West's own exhausted model²² and that, despite years of presence in the Sahel by the most powerful foreign nations on the planet, the local populations continue, despite the existing wealth, to be among the poorest on the planet.

Accusations are growing against the West of having double standards - of the "do as I say but not as I do" type, of the "you give Ukraine weapons but you did not give them to me to fight terrorists" type, of trying to implement a social model that is increasingly questioned from within - in the face of the growing polarisation and radicalisation of Western societies themselves - and of the paradox that societies that have been slave-owning and colonialist in the past are now pretending to use narratives of human rights and freedom, but which are in fact nothing more than neo-imperialist attempts at neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism, of the paradox of societies that have been slave-owning and colonialist in the past pretending to use narratives of human rights and freedom, but which in reality are nothing more than neo-imperialist attempts to impose values and customs that are not their own.

Therefore, and as a corollary, it is essential, it is imperative for these local populations, for these nations, to fight to "regain sovereignty" and to do so at all levels, in all areas²³ : economic, financial, political, security... even linguistic - from the creation of a currency other than the CFA (Central African franc, whose exchange rate is linked to the French franc by a fixed exchange rate) to the gradual abandonment of French as the "lingua franca" in the region. All in pursuit of "real sovereignty".

²¹ LATIN AMERICAN SUMMARY. "Africa. We must look to the Sahel and the second African independence". 31 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2024/12/31/afrika-hay-que-mirar-al-sahel-y-a-la-segunda-independencia-africana/>

²² SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. *21st century, geopolitical reconfiguration: and the geopolitics of hope?* Analysis Paper 02/2024. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. 10 January 2024. BIE³ number 33, 2024, pp. 65-82. Available at: <https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/BoletinesIEEE3/2024/BoletinIEEE33.pdf>

²³ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. *Siglo XXI, reconfiguración geopolítica: Obras son amores y no buenas razones!* Analysis Paper 51/2024. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. 4 September 2024. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2024/DIEEEA51_2024_PEDSAN_Reconfiguracion.pdf

And so, despite the difficulties, it seems that the (Russian) forward detachment is consolidating and achieving some of its objectives. But one of the vulnerabilities of the forward detachments is their relative isolation, which is why it is essential to secure routes and lines of communication ... and everyone knows this, all the powers, all the actors with a certain capacity for action.

What will be the answer?

Isolate the detachment: Syria

The surprisingly rapid fall of the al-Assad regime in Syria - in less than two weeks²⁴ - has created a serious problem for Russia, which is contemplating how the line of communication and supply with the Sahel could be hampered. Moscow is therefore in the midst of negotiations with the country's new authorities, some or all of whom it has fought in the past. Russia has two military bases in Syria, an air base in Latakia and a naval base in Tartous in the eastern Mediterranean, the only Russian base outside the country's territory.²⁵

Not only is the real impact on Russia's military - and logistical - capacity in the region, both in terms of supplying Wagner/Africa Korps and the ability to operate in Syria and in sub-Saharan and West Africa as a whole²⁶, but also, and no less importantly, losing the military bases could have a powerful impact on Moscow's prestige. In any case, considering the instability in the area, the network of groups that make up the alliance that has overthrown the Syrian regime, and in light of the powerful forces at play in the region, it is difficult to make any kind of prediction or whether it will have any validity in the medium term, as this Syrian instability could also be used by Moscow, supporting some factions over others and thus perhaps obtaining some potential advantages from the new situation that has arisen.

²⁴ EURONEWS. "After 14 years of conflict, Al-Assad's fall ends dynastic rule in Syria". 5 December 2024. Available at: <https://es.euronews.com/2024/12/08/tras-14-anos-de-conflicto-la-caida-de-al-assad-pone-fin-al-dominio-dinastico-de-siria>

²⁵ INFOBAE. "The Kremlin will negotiate the future of its military bases in Syria with new authorities". 9 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/agencias/2024/12/09/el-kremlin-negociara-el-futuro-de-sus-bases-militares-en-siria-con-nuevas-autoridades/>

²⁶ EUROPA PRESS. "Russia tries to preserve Syria's military bases after the fall of Al Assad". 9 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-rusia-trata-preservar-bases-militares-siria-caida-assad-20241209143535.html>

Turkey has been a major player in the fall of al-Assad²⁷ ; the complex Syrian equation, with multiple variables: some linked to the Black Sea - Turkey fears it will become a 'Russian lake', but since Moscow has withdrawn most of its fleet from Crimea because of the risk of attacks in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the situation has improved from Ankara's point of view; others, energy, for which Turkey is heavily dependent on Russia, but at the same time Russia depends on the South Stream pipeline as an alternative route to Ukraine to supply Europe - and even more so since the blowing up of the Nordstream I and II pipelines in September 2022, a few months after the start of the war in Ukraine, the investigation into the perpetrators of which is still going on with many difficulties²⁸ -.

And all of this without forgetting other variables such as the position of Moscow and Ankara in the Caucasus, an area that has been leaning in favour of Azerbaijan -pro-Turkish- against Armenia -supported by Russia-²⁹ and that also has connotations, in addition to the presence and hegemony in this key Rimland corridor, related to energy, due to the possibility of laying gas pipelines from Central Asia or the Middle East outside Russian territory... the variables, like the cards in a complex game, can be played in many ways, and therefore the cause-effect relationship taken simplistically does not always fully correspond to reality.

Even in this complexity, it is suggested that Ukraine may have sent drones and drone operators to support the offensive against Assad shortly before the start of the offensive, in an attempt, as in the Sahel, to strike at Russia.³⁰

In any case, the defeat of Al Assad is a serious blow for Moscow, since, to make matters worse, with Russia having military bases in the country, the rapid fall of the regime occurred without a powerful reaction from the Syrian leader's main ally, which has perhaps contributed to sowing a certain doubt about Moscow's capacity to support like-minded regimes, about the possibility of the existence of a certain Russian 'strategic weakness', and it has even been claimed that 'African regimes in Africa are not able to

²⁷ BECHEV, Dimitar. "What does regime change in Syria mean for Russian-Turkish relations?", *Carnegie Politika*. 13 December 2024. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/12/syria-russia-turkiye-relationships?lang=en>

²⁸ <https://onu.delegfrance.org/explosions-of-nord-stream-i-and-ii-the-investigation-must-be-completed-without>

²⁹ In this sense ARSLANIAN, Beatriz. "A year on from forced displacement, an uncertain peace in Nagorno-Karabakh", *France24*. 19 September 2024. Available at: <https://afrique.lalibre.be/79356/les-positions-russes-en-afrique-menacees-par-la-chute-du-regime-syrien/https://www.france24.com/es/europa/20240919-a-un-a%C3%B1o-del-desplazamiento-forzado-una-paz-incierta-en-nagorno-karabaj>

³⁰ THE WASHINGTON POST. "Syrian rebels had help from Ukraine in humiliating Russia". 10 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/12/10/ukraine-syria-russia-war/>

support their own regimes', sowing a certain doubt about Moscow's ability to support like-minded regimes, about the possibility of the existence of a certain Russian 'strategic weakness', and it is even claimed that 'African regimes that have relied on Moscow's protection will not be reassured by what they have seen in Syria'³¹ .

Thus, perhaps, Moscow may lose much of its ascendancy and prestige in other areas, especially in the Sahel³² and other parts of Africa, where it also supports regimes that are largely dependent on Russia for their hold on power; Thus, the Sahel and the Central African Republic³³ may feel that their ally may be weakened by the long-running conflict in Ukraine, and may cast its accounts on a somewhat different basis than just a few weeks ago; or that nations that help circumvent economic sanctions imposed on Moscow may rethink Russia's ability to continue to support them vis-à-vis the West.

And it is not excluded that in the framework of the talks and contacts prior to the changeover of the US presidency in early 2025, with Trump's arrival in the Oval Office, the linkage of the Russian presence in Syria was not one of the trump cards, one of the "cards" exchanged between Washington and Moscow with respect to a potential ceasefire agreement in Ukraine³⁴ and the resulting situation after it.

In these twists and turns -one more- that show how interest is the current capital geopolitical argument, and in the same line as the governments of other nations, the new Syrian leader and a large part of the groups that support him have gone from being called terrorists to groups formerly in the opposition, or simply rebels, by the official foreign media. In the same vein, the United States, which in 2017 had put a 10 million dollar bounty on the head of Ahmad Al Sharaa - Syria's new leader - has withdrawn the same³⁵.

In any case, Russia began the withdrawal of material and personnel from its bases in Syria, as well as from certain areas and positions with an Alawite majority - and with the

³¹ LECLERQ, Hubert. "Les positions russes en Afrique menacées par la chute du régime syrien", *La Libre Afrique*. 11 December 2024. Available at: <https://afrique.lalibre.be/79356/les-positions-russes-en-afrique-menacees-par-la-chute-du-regime-syrien/>

³² AUDIJE, Paco. "El ejemplo de Siria erosiona la presencia rusa en el Sahel", *Periodistas en Español*. 21 December 2024. Available at: <https://periodistas-es.com/el-ejemplo-de-siria-erosiona-la-presencia-rusa-en-el-sahel-184321>

³³ SOFUOGLU, Murat. "How the fall of Assad impacts Russia in Ukraine and elsewhere", *TRT English*. 17 December 2024. Available at: <https://trtespanol.com/oriente-medio/como-la-caida-de-assad-impacta-a-rusia-en-ucrania-y-en-otros-lugares-14933541>

³⁴ BOULAICH, Koussay. "Middle East, the US, Russia and Iran after Al Assad. 10 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/oriente-proximo-eeuu-rusia-e-iran-despues-de-al-asad/>

³⁵ CNN. "U.S. WITHDRAWS LONG-STANDING US\$10 MILLION BOUNTY IN EXCHANGE FOR SYRIAN REBEL LEADER". US withdraws long-standing US\$10 million bounty in exchange for Syrian rebel leader". 20 December 2024. Available at: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2024/12/20/mundo/eeuu-elimina-recompensa-lider-rebelde-sirio-trax>

support of Turkey in this withdrawal, the same Turkey that has unequivocally supported the overthrow of Assad; but as one of Moscow's priorities is to maintain bases in the region, to maintain support points that guarantee passage to the forward detachment, it continues to consider possibilities and alternatives.

And, among the possibilities and alternatives, one of them could be Libya.

Searching for a new path! Libya? ...?

Since the civil war that followed the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has been divided between several actors on the ground, each with a number of external allies³⁶ ; Thus, Turkey has been trying for some time to increase its weight in the area - which is crucial because the country's 'legitimate' and internationally recognised government is supported by Ankara, and without this support perhaps Libya's future would have been different during the civil war - although the options are complex³⁷ , because in the 'equation' of alliances and support, disputes and rivals, nations such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Russia... with which there are shared and opposing interests in different areas and spheres, makes "changing the cards" a tremendously complex activity due to the balance of interests to be balanced and counterbalanced.

The presence of Turkey and Russia in Libya continues, and for Russia, which has been reducing its visibility in the country for some time now - but not its activity - the positions it holds are vital for providing support to the Wagner/Africa Korps group and its action and presence in the entire region - remember that Libya has access to the sea and a land border with Niger and Chad, which makes the country a very suitable transit point to maintain the chains and flows to and from the Sahel -, consequently generating the need for a complex balance³⁸ between two nations - Russia and Turkey - on the soil of another - Libya.

³⁶ In this sense, SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. *Libya: The 21st Century Conflict Model?* Analysis Paper 21/2019. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. 3 July 2019. Available at: BIE³ Bulletin 15, 2019, pp. 7-22.

<https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/BoletinesIEEE3/2019/boletinieee15.pdf>
<https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/BoletinesIEEE3/2019/boletinieee15.pdf>

³⁷ GURBUZ, Mustafa. "Turkey Faces a Dilemma in its Foreign Policy Toward Libya", *Arab Center Washington DC*. 24 January 2023. Available at: <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/turkey-faces-a-dilemma-in-its-foreign-policy-toward-libya/>

³⁸ LACHER, Wolfram, "Invisible occupation: Turkey and Russia in Libya", 10 July 2024. 10 July 2024. Available at: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/mta-spotlight-35-invisible-occupation-turkey-and-russia-in-libya>

There is speculation that if Russia should finally abandon its bases in Syria, it would leave and/or reinforce its presence in Libya³⁹, thus making Libya a new key point for supporting the Sahel and maintaining a permanent presence in the Mediterranean and Africa, considering the possibility of deploying some of the materiel being evacuated from Syria to Libya, in the area of Libya occupied by the Libyan National Army commanded by Marshal Haftar⁴⁰, including the port of Benghazi, an area outside the control of the country's legitimate government.

Libya seems, *a priori*, a relatively simple option - if there is such a thing as simple in geopolitics - but, on a different profile, it is not the only one.

Algeria, the largest country in Africa and bordering Mauritania, Mali and Niger, is a significant potential foothold for Moscow in relation to the Sahel, the Mediterranean and West Africa as a whole. For this reason, Algeria, a key country for access to the Sahel and with a long tradition of ties with Moscow - albeit not exclusively or exclusively for years - and from which it receives most of its military equipment and weapons, received a visit from Russia's special representative for the Middle East and Africa, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, where the situation in the Sahel⁴¹ and the impact that the latest events in Syria could have on the region were discussed.

It is also necessary to highlight the rapprochement and strengthening of ties between Algeria and Burkina Faso by supporting efforts in the fight against terrorism and in the achievement and maintenance of national and regional stability⁴², within the framework of a renewed impetus of the Algerian executive's activity towards Africa. For Moscow, the road to the Sahel can take different paths...

... even from more remote areas; thus, it is also necessary to understand Russia's ambitions to establish a naval base in Sudan, in the Red Sea, in the far east of the Sahel, - negotiations that have been going on for some time, as far back as 2017, and which

³⁹ SPEAKMAN CORDALL, Simon. "More bullets: analysts mull whether Russia will move to Libya after Syria", *Aljazeera*. 24 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/24/more-bullets-analysts-mull-whether-russia-will-move-to-libya-from-syria>

⁴⁰ CNN. "Russian military began large-scale withdrawal from Syria, according to US and Western officials". 16 December 2024. Available at: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2024/12/16/mundo/ejercito-ruso-retirada-siria-trax>

⁴¹ SWI. "Russian deputy minister discusses Sahel situation with Algerian president". 19 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/el-vice-ministro-ruso-trata-con-el-presidente-argelino-la-situacion-en-el-sahel/88617532>

⁴² KAOS ON THE NET. "Algeria and the Sahel". 23 December 2024. Available at: <https://kaosenlared.net/argelia-y-el-sahel/>

seem to have regained momentum - and where there is talk of a facility with the capacity for a few hundred troops and four warships .⁴³

It is not feasible to leave a forward detachment without liaison, it is not possible to put a firm foot on the other side of the "fence"... and then let it die of starvation. And for this, the options and variables, the spaces and tools, the means and ways are diverse and complex, even in seemingly remote places and seemingly minor conflicts.

Geopolitics is complex ... as complex as life itself.

On reflection?

Maybe it is all just a fiction, maybe it is all just a way of forcing the "pieces of the puzzle" to fit together, but maybe, even if the variables on the world chessboard are many, in a realistic age, the concept of interest is key to interpreting the actions - and inactions - of rational actors, as - mistakes aside - states and powers tend to be. Another thing is that the underlying interest is understood, that the reason for certain actions or failures to act is clear and notorious.

But, of course, in a global and globalised world, in an era of geopolitical reconfiguration, to think that certain things happen by chance tends to lead to a lack of real understanding of the magnitude of the changes that are taking place and brewing on the planet.

Certainly, there are opportunities, unexpected occasions from which to gain advantage... but normally, at this level, everything usually comes from a rigorous analysis, from conveniently aligning ends, means and ways, in the right place and at the right time... and also from "changing cards" on certain occasions.

⁴³ KNIPP, Kersten. "Russian military presence in Sudan boots Africa strategy", *DW*. 16 June 2024. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-military-presence-in-sudan-boots-africa-strategy/a-69354272>

The more - and better - cards you have, the more tricks you can play and win.

Trusting that, at the end of the game, the winner (or winners) will share the profits with everyone can be a bit illusory.

Or, in an idealised world, perhaps not.

Is that the world today?

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