



24/09/2026

Marta Molero Reina

The Africa Corps strategy and the collapse of Western influence in the Sahel

The Africa Corps strategy and the collapse of Western influence in the Sahel

Abstract:

Over the past decade, the Sahel has evolved from a peripheral concern into the global epicentre of jihadist terrorism and political instability. Following the withdrawal of Western missions such as Barkhane and EUTM, and even the UN mission (MINUSMA), a strategic vacuum emerged which the Russian Federation. This study examines the shift from the Wagner Group to Africa Corps, and demonstrates how Moscow has displaced the Western normative framework in favour of a transactional paradigm: offering security in exchange for access to natural resources. The research concludes that, whilst this model ensures the short-term survival of military regimes, it has deepened economic dependence and intensified violence against the civilian population.

Keywords:

Sahel, Africa Corps, grey zone, Russia, security, geopolitics, southern flank.

How to quote:

MOLERO REINA, Marta. *The Africa Corps strategy and the collapse of Western influence in the Sahel*. Opinion Paper. IEEE 95/2026.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Introduction.

The Sahel, which stretches from the coast of Senegal to Sudan, is currently facing a situation characterised by institutional fragility, climate breakdown and, above all, chronic insecurity. This region has replaced the Middle East as the new global epicentre of jihadist terrorism, accounting for an alarming proportion of victims of political violence worldwide¹.

Furthermore, the West's withdrawal from the region represents a "power vacuum" that has been swiftly and aggressively filled by a new actor: the Russian Federation. However, unlike the Soviet Union, which sought to export communist ideology and a socialist state model, Putin's Russia operates according to a radically different logic.

This strategy is reflected in the transition from the Wagner Group to the Africa Corps. Following the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Kremlin has placed its paramilitary forces under state control to offer the Sahelian military juntas precisely what the West denied them: a "regime survival package"².

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the effectiveness and implications of this new Russian security model in contrast to the failed European normative model. Finally, it aims to examine how the Sahel has become the 21st century's most advanced testing ground for competition between great powers, where security has become a commodity and sovereignty a bargaining chip.

Analytical framework.

The reconfiguration of the Sahel is not an isolated event, but rather a reflection of a global strategic struggle that goes beyond conventional warfare. To analyse Russia's entry and the West's withdrawal, we must turn to two fundamental concepts of the modern era: "hybrid warfare" and the "grey zone".

According to Frank Hoffman, hybrid warfare goes beyond the definition of regular and irregular conflict, combining conventional capabilities, insurgent tactics and terrorism with criminal disorder³. In the Sahel, armed conflict is intertwined with information warfare and political influence.

¹ Pedro Sánchez Herráez, "Capítulo 6: El Sahel: ¿también epicentro de la reconfiguración global?", in *Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2024* (Madrid: Ministerio de Defensa - IEEE, 2024), 145. [CUADERNOS DE LA GUARDIA CIVIL - CGC60 - 2020](#)

² Josep Baqués (CSIS), "Russia in the Gray Zone", (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), 5. [Russia in the Gray Zone](#)

³ Frank G. Hoffman, "Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars" (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy

Russia operates precisely within what is known as the grey zone, an intermediate space on the conflict spectrum whose aim is to alter the status quo without crossing the threshold that would trigger open warfare or a massive conventional military response from rival powers⁴.

The effectiveness of Russia's strategy has depended, to a large extent, on the collapse of the security architecture led by France. Operation Barkhane, despite its tactical successes in neutralising the jihadist leadership, created a complete disconnect between military action and the building of political legitimacy⁵. Barkhane became an example of how a militarily superior force can win battles but lose the strategic war, due to the absence of a viable political solution and growing rejection by the local population⁶.

This failure created a security vacuum and a vacuum of legitimacy that the military juntas have filled with a new rhetoric of sovereignty. This situation has facilitated the entry of actors who offer protection to the regime without the democratic conditions demanded by the European Union⁷.

The local context: the perfect conditions for the Grey Zone.

For the Africa Corps strategy to work, it is essential to have receptive local actors and a climate of constant threat. The paradigm shift is being led by the military juntas of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, now grouped together in the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). These regimes have exploited anti-French sentiment to legitimise their coups, presenting the break with Paris as a restoration of national sovereignty⁸.

Studies, 2016), 23.

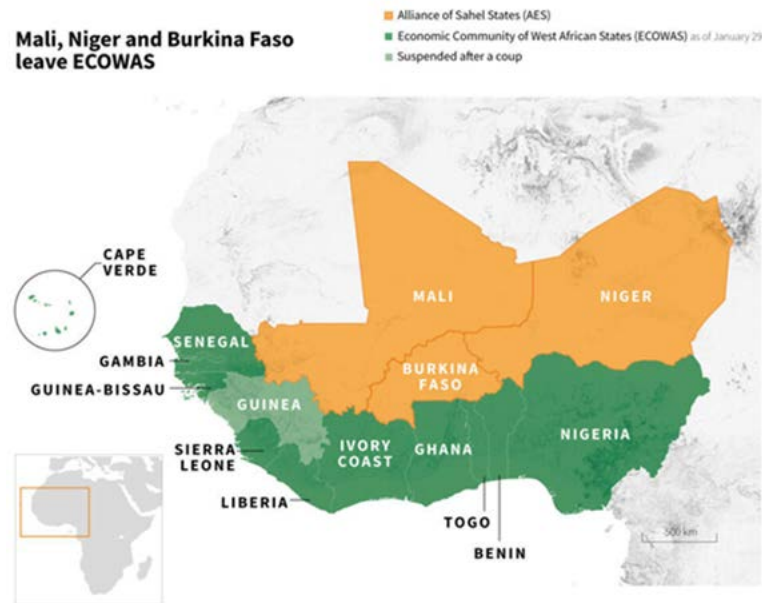
⁴ Josep Baqués (CSIS), "Russia in the Gray Zone" (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), 2.

⁵ Aleksander Olech, "French Operation Barkhane in Africa, success or failure?", *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 3, n.º 2 (2023).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Del Grupo Wagner al Africa Corps: La evolución de la presencia paramilitar rusa en el Sahel", *LISA News*, 2024.

⁸ Miguel Ángel Ballesteros Martín, 'Geopolitical Analysis of the Sahel: The Role of Regional and International Actors,' *Security and Defence Documents*, no. 65 (2015): 20.



Source: ECOWAS Map data: Natural Earth, Global Earth

AFP

Figure 1. Geopolitical map showing the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Source: Agence France-Presse (AFP), "Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso leave ECOWAS," January 29, 2024.

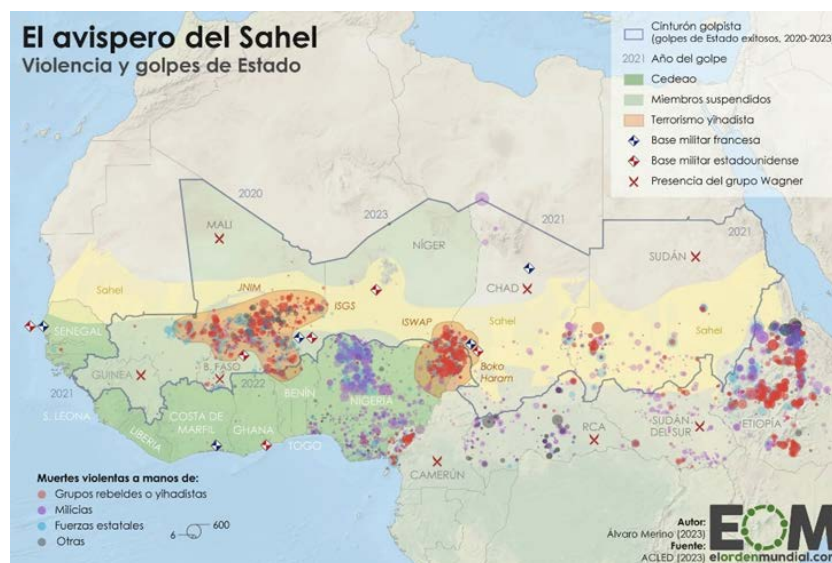


Figure 2. The "Sahel Hornet's Nest": Map illustrating violence, coups d'état, and foreign military presence in the region. Source: Álvaro Merino, "El avispero del Sahel," El Orden Mundial (EOM), 2023. Based on data from ACLED.

The ultimate justification for the presence of Russian mercenaries is the inability of Sahelian states to contain the violence. Groups such as JNIM (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) and EIGS (Islamic State) have evolved beyond religious fanaticism to become actors controlling illicit economies. These groups operate according to

the logic of organised crime, where territorial control is aimed at securing drug trafficking routes⁹.

⁹ Beatriz Mesa García, Los grupos armados del Sahel: conflicto y economía criminal en el norte de Malí (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata; Casa África, 2022).

The security situation has continued to deteriorate, with a rise in the death toll highlighting the limitations of a purely military response, whether French or Russian¹⁰. This chaos is the very factor that perpetuates the need for external assistance.

The Russian presence in the Sahel: from the Wagner Group to Africa Corps.

The nationalisation of the armed forces.

The deaths of Wagner's leaders forced the Kremlin, amongst other things, to restructure its most valuable foreign policy asset. The institutional response was the creation of Africa Corps, an entity which, unlike its predecessor, operates under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation¹¹.

Africa Corps seeks to legitimise the intervention by offering formalised military cooperation, distancing itself from Wagner's reputation for uncontrolled mercenary activity, whilst maintaining its operational flexibility¹².

The architect of this transition is Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov. In the weeks leading up to and following Prigozhin's death, Yevkurov undertook an intensive diplomatic tour of Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey. His objective was twofold: firstly, to assure the military juntas of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) that security commitments would remain intact following Wagner's dissolution; and, secondly, to establish that the Russian Ministry of Defence would be the sole point of contact¹³. This nationalisation has enabled more ambitious agreements, such as the deployment of an official military base in Burkina Faso¹⁴.

The role of the GRU and information warfare.

Russia's strategy in the Sahel is characterised by a hybrid approach in which military action is subordinate to information warfare. Coordination of these operations in the grey zone falls to the GRU (Russian Military Intelligence Service), which integrates the armed

¹⁰ Pedro Sánchez Herráez, "Capítulo 6: El Sahel: ¿también epicentro de la reconfiguración global?", en Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2024 (Madrid: Ministerio de Defensa - Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos [IEEE], 2024), 141-172.

¹¹ "Del Grupo Wagner al Africa Corps: La evolución de la presencia paramilitar rusa en el Sahel", LISA News, 2024. <https://www.lisanews.org/especial-sahel/del-grupo-wagner-al-africa-corps-la-evolucion-de-la-presencia-paramilitar-rusa-en-el-sahel/>

¹² Filip Bryjka y Jędrzej Czerep, *Africa Corps: A New Iteration of Russia's Old Military Presence in Africa*, PISM Report (Varsovia: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, mayo 2024), 2.

¹³ "Del Grupo Wagner al Africa Corps", LISA News.

¹⁴ "Burkina Faso: Russia to open military base in junta-led nation", BBC News, 23 de febrero de 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68322230>

forces with psychological operations (PSYOP) to shape the narrative both before and during the conflict¹⁵.

According to the recent joint technical report by European intelligence services (VIGINUM, FCDO and EEAS), Russia has refined its influence apparatus by creating new structures. The clearest example is the “African Initiative” agency, established in late 2023. This organisation presents itself publicly as a press agency and a “public diplomacy” association, but it operates to exert influence and is linked to the Russian intelligence services¹⁶.

African Initiative has been identified as responsible for orchestrating massive disinformation campaigns designed to exploit anti-Western sentiment. A key case was the campaign in Burkina Faso, where claims were spread blaming Western laboratories for dengue outbreaks in order to undermine public trust in the medical system¹⁷.

Furthermore, these networks are also reshaping historical memory. They employ a rhetoric of “reverse neo-colonialism”, in which Russia is portrayed as the sole guarantor of African sovereignty in the face of a “predatory” France. To this end, they make use of local media outlets (such as Savane FM in Burkina Faso) and organise cultural events through the “Russian Houses”¹⁸.

The regime’s survival package.

The most compelling offer that Africa Corps presents to the military juntas of the Sahel is not military victory over jihadism, but what analysts have termed the “regime survival package”¹⁹. Whilst European aid was conditional on the restoration of constitutional order and respect for human rights, Russia offers unconditional political and physical protection to the ruling elites.

Africa Corps’ operational priority in the Sahel has shifted from counter-terrorism in peripheral areas to security in the capitals. Russian elite units act de facto as personal

¹⁵ Josep Baqués, “Russia in the Gray Zone” (Washington, DC: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), 4.

¹⁶ VIGINUM, FCDO y EEAS, *African Initiative: From Public Diplomacy to Covert Influence Operations*, Joint Technical Report (2025), 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁸ Marie-Line Deleye, “Disinformation and Propaganda in Proxy Warfare Anatomy: An Analysis of Russian Narratives in Francophone African Countries” (tesis de maestría, Vilnius University, 2024), 45.

¹⁹ Josep Baqués, “Russia in the Gray Zone” (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), 5.

guards for leaders such as Ibrahim Traoré in Burkina Faso or Assimi Goïta in Mali²⁰. This protection is vital for fragile regimes whose main existential threat is internal dissent.

Furthermore, this package includes the export of digital surveillance technologies and advice on counter-insurgency under a brute force doctrine. Brutality is not a side effect, but a feature of the service²¹.

Funding the model: the exploitation of strategic resources.

The deployment of Africa Corps must be understood as an economic operation vital to the Kremlin's financial survival in times of war. Subject to Western sanctions, Russia is using the Sahel to acquire foreign currency and opaque assets that are difficult to trace.

The central mechanism of this strategy is the exchange of security for natural resources. The Russian state has perfected a system of money laundering on an industrial scale. Since February 2022, Russia has extracted more than \$2.5 billion worth of gold from African countries, using smuggling routes that connect mines in Mali, Sudan and the Central African Republic with markets in the United Arab Emirates²².

In Mali, the regime's dependence is such that mining legislation has been reformed to favour Russian interests, and Africa Corps troops have secured physical control of key deposits (such as the Intahaka mine)²³.

This predatory model has a dual strategic effect. On the one hand, it allows Moscow to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions by accumulating gold bars outside the SWIFT banking system. On the other, it deprives Sahelian states of tax revenue for their own development, trapping them in a cycle of debt from which they can scarcely escape²⁴.

In addition to gold, control of Niger opens the door to uranium, a strategic resource for the European Union's energy security. Although the direct extraction of uranium is more complex than gold mining, simply controlling the production areas gives Russia geopolitical influence over Europe's southern flank²⁵.

²⁰ Filip Bryjka y Jędrzej Czerep, *Africa Corps: A New Iteration of Russia's Old Military Presence in Africa*, PISM Report (Varsovia: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, mayo 2024), 3.

²¹ "Del Grupo Wagner al Africa Corps" *LISA News*, 2024.

²² Jessica Berlin et al., *The Blood Gold Report: How the Kremlin is using Wagner to launder billions in African gold* (Washington D. C.: 21 Democracy; The Blood Gold Report, diciembre 2023), 4. <https://africacenter.org/security-article/the-blood-gold-report-how-the-kremlin-is-using-wagner-to-launder-billions-in-african-gold/>

²³ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁵ Miguel Ángel Ballesteros Martín, "Análisis geopolítico del Sahel: el papel de los actores regionales e internacionales", *Documentos de Seguridad y Defensa*, no. 65 (2015): 20.

Comparative analysis: the Russian and Western models.

The Sahel has become the scene of a clash between two opposing visions of security: the West's normative and conditional approach versus Russia's praetorian and transactional approach.

The West's regulatory failure.

The collapse of Western influence can be explained by the inability to reconcile security objectives with political demands. France (Operation Barkhane), the European Union (EUTM/EUCAP) and MINUSMA (United Nations) acted on the premise that there can be no security without development and democratic legitimacy.

However, this "democratic conditionality" became an obstacle. For the military juntas, the West's demands and the presence of the UN peacekeepers were perceived as a direct threat to their sovereignty, which precipitated the expulsion of the UN mission in 2023 following pressure from the Malian government²⁶. The European missions found themselves caught in a paradox: they were attempting to create state armies in countries where a large part of the population perceived the state itself as either absent or predatory²⁷.

The West's failure culminated in the United States' complete withdrawal from Niger, which was finalised on 5 August 2024 with the handover of Air Base 201 in Agadez. This facility had served as the drone intelligence hub in the Sahel²⁸. The arrival of Russian instructors and air defence systems at Niamey airport, where the Americans had been operating, precipitated a humiliating exit that leaves the West blind in terms of intelligence in the region.

²⁶ Naciones Unidas, "El Consejo de Seguridad pone fin a la misión de paz en Mali", *Noticias ONU*, 30 de junio de 2023, <https://news.un.org/es/story/2023/06/1522412>

²⁷ Ana Martín, "The European Union in the Sahel: building peace or containing migration?", *Comillas Journal of International Relations*, n.º 26 (2023): 12, <https://doi.org/10.14422/cir.i26.y2023.001>

²⁸ Alexander Cornwell, "U.S. military completes withdrawal from key drone base in Niger", Reuters, 5 de agosto de 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-military-completes-withdrawal-key-drone-base-niger-2024-08-05/>

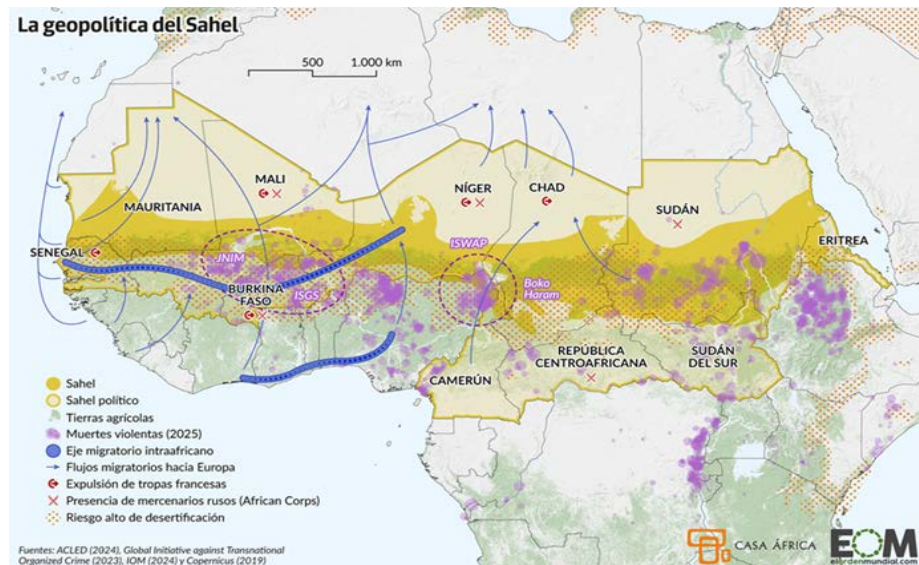


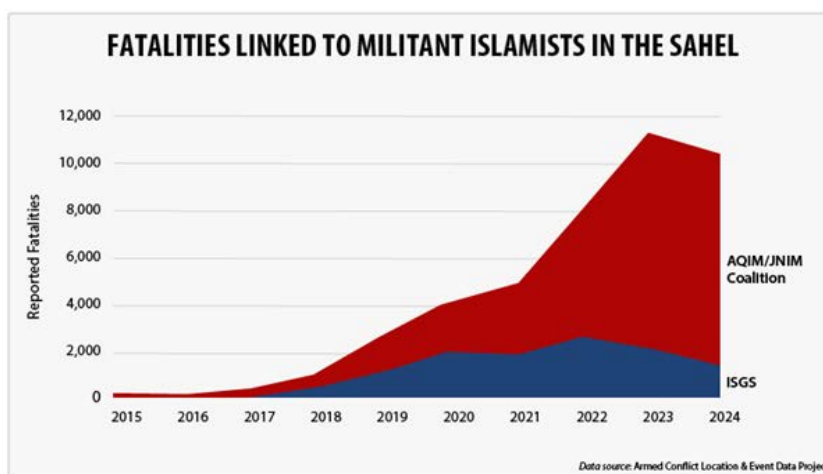
Figure 3. The Geopolitics of the Sahel: Map illustrating the convergence of insecurity, migration routes, and the substitution of French forces by Russian mercenaries (Africa Corps). Source: El Orden Mundial (EOM) and Casa África, "La geopolítica del Sahel," 2024.

4.2. The Russian model: "no-questions-asked" pragmatism.

The Kremlin's strategy is based on an offensive realism that prioritises the stability of the client regime above any ethical considerations. Russia's offer is clear: the supply of weapons and direct protection to the juntas, without demanding any political change. However, this model comes at a devastating human cost. The arrival of Russian paramilitaries has coincided with an exponential rise in violence against the civilian population²⁹.

4.3. Security outcomes: the paradox of violence.

When comparing outcomes on the ground, the data lead to one conclusion: Russia is not bringing peace to the Sahel, but setting it ablaze. According to data from the Blood Gold



Report and ACLED, violent deaths in Mali and Burkina Faso have skyrocketed since France's withdrawal and Russia's arrival. The mercenaries' indiscriminate violence has driven entire communities

²⁹ Del Grupo Wagner al Africa Corps" LISA News, 2024.

into the arms of jihadist groups as a means of self-defence, which, paradoxically, has strengthened JNIM and EIGS³⁰.

Figure 4. Figure 4. Fatalities linked to militant Islamists in the Sahel (2015–2024). Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Militant Islamist Groups in Africa Sustain High Pace of Lethality," February 18, 2025. Based on data from ACLED.

Despite AES's propaganda about the reconquest of territory, the state's effective control has been reduced to the capital cities and the main transport corridors. Rural areas and outlying mining regions have become zones of open conflict, where security is privatised to protect gold, not people.

It can be argued that the change in model has entailed a transition from ineffective but regulated security (the Western model) to predatory and unregulated insecurity (the Russian model).

Implications for Europe.

The consolidation of Africa Corps in the Sahel represents a structural transformation of NATO's security architecture and that of the European Union's southern flank. The region has become an area exploited by Russia from which to project its power towards the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, China is consolidating its economic position through a parallel security strategy.

Threat to Europe: the militarisation of migration flows.

The grey zone theory suggests that revisionist actors, such as Russia, use non-military resources to exert coercion on other countries. In this context, Russia's presence in Niger and Mali provides Moscow with what analysts call "the key to the migration tap". The Central Mediterranean route, connecting Agadez with the coasts of Libya and Italy, is the most critical entry point for irregular migration into Europe.

By controlling security hubs in northern Niger, Russia gains the ability to use migration as a weapon in a hybrid war. EU policies have focused on containing migration by funding

³⁰ Jessica Berlin et al., *The Blood Gold Report: How the Kremlin is using Wagner to launder billions in African gold* (Washington D. C.: 21 Democracy; The Blood Gold Report, diciembre 2023), 8.

local actors³¹. Now that these actors answer to Moscow, the Kremlin has the potential to destabilise or relax border controls to increase political pressure on Brussels.

The Sahel-Libya axis: the logistical link to the Mediterranean.

Perhaps the most serious military implication for NATO is the creation of an uninterrupted logistical corridor linking sub-Saharan Africa with the Mediterranean. Africa Corps relies on the military infrastructure that Russia already possesses in eastern Libya³².

Air bases in Libya now serve as a rear logistics hub for operations in the Sahel. This allows Russia to move troops, gold and equipment from Bamako or Ouagadougou to the Mediterranean without passing through Western-controlled airspace. The recent opening of a Russian base in Burkina Faso confirms the desire to consolidate this “vertical axis” that divides Africa in two and places Russian military assets a few hundred kilometres from NATO’s borders³³.

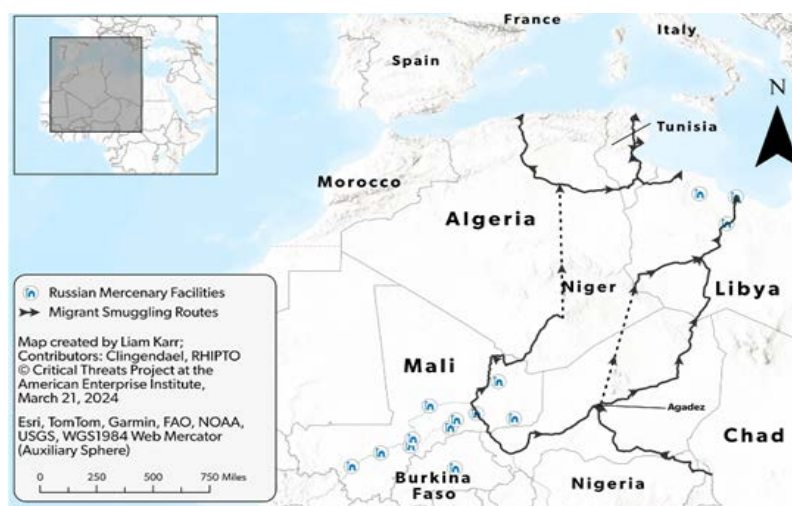


Figure 5. Africa Corps presence in the Sahel and migratory routes to Europe. Source: Ignacio Montes de Oca, Africa Corps: Putin advances in the African continent and only Ukraine opposes him, *Pucará Defensa*, May 9, 2024.

Global competition: the Chinese security model with its own distinctive features.

Whilst Russia acts as a “security disruptor” through Africa Corps, China maintains a profile of strategic silence, though not inaction. Beijing is watching with interest as Russia erodes the Western liberal order, exploiting the vacuum to gain economic footholds.

³¹ Ana Martín, “La Unión Europea en el Sahel: ¿construyendo la paz o conteniendo la migración?”, *Comillas Journal of International Relations*, no. 26 (2023): 18. <https://doi.org/10.14422/cir.i26.y2023.001>

³² Filip Bryjka y Jędrzej Czerep, *Africa Corps: A New Iteration of Russia's Old Military Presence in Africa*, PISM Report (Varsovia: PISM, mayo 2024), 5.

³³ “Burkina Faso: Russia to open military base in junta-led nation”, BBC News, 23 February 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68322230>

However, recent analyses refute the notion that China is limited to merely financing or building civilian infrastructure. China has established itself as a key supplier of small arms and surveillance technology to the Sahelian juntas, competing in the defence market with a supply of weapons free from political interference³⁴.

Furthermore, in the face of deteriorating security, China is increasing the deployment of its own private security companies (PSCs). Unlike the Wagner Group or Africa Corps, which fight on the front line and support regimes, Chinese PSCs focus exclusively on protecting New Silk Road investments (mines, oil pipelines and civil engineering works)³⁵.

However, does China represent a genuine opportunity for development or a new form of neo-colonialism? Although Beijing benefits from having no colonial past in the region and promotes a narrative of “brotherhood”, Chinese control over critical infrastructure and strategic resources creates structural dependency. The Chinese model dictates the economic future of these states, leading to a de facto loss of sovereignty over their own national resources³⁶.

The Sahel may be swapping Russia's security tutelage for China's economic tutelage, trapped in a web of asymmetric interdependence in which the military juntas' real autonomy is becoming increasingly illusory.

³⁴ Ilaria Carrozza y Nic Marsh, "China's Arms Exports to Africa", PRIO Blogs, 18 de mayo de 2023, <https://www.prio.org/comments/581>

³⁵ "China's military and private security companies in Africa", GIS Reports, 13 de septiembre de 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-africa-military-private-security/>

³⁶ Marcos Bosschart Martínez, "China en el Sahel: ¿Oportunidad o neocolonialismo?", The Political Room, 10 de octubre de 2024, <https://thepoliticalroom.com/blog/china-en-el-sahel-oportunidad-o-neocolonialismo>

Nearly 90 China-African clean energy projects have been agreed since 2021

China-Africa low-carbon energy projects signed, 2021-2024

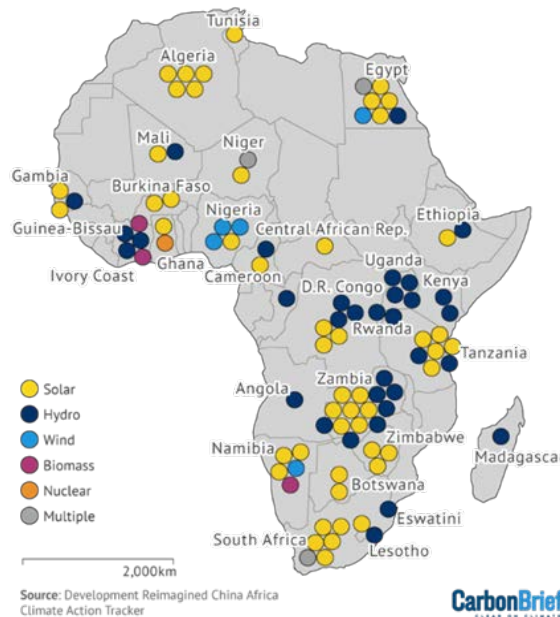


Figure 6. Map showing the distribution of nearly 90 China-Africa clean energy projects agreed upon between 2021 and 2024. Source: Carbon Brief, based on data from Development Reimagined China Africa Climate Action Tracker (2024).

Conclusions.

In conclusion, the transition from the Wagner Group to Africa Corps demonstrates that the model of “unconditional security” has supplanted the Western normative model, consolidating a system in which regime protection is directly exchanged for strategic resources held by African states.

One of the most alarming conclusions of this analysis is the operational and political irrelevance into which Europe has fallen on its own southern border. The European Union has gone from being the hegemonic actor to becoming a mere passive spectator in the region. This vacuum poses a direct threat to its security. By losing its capacity for action in the Sahel, the Mediterranean becomes a far more vulnerable and unpredictable frontier for Europe.

This vacuum has been filled by its strategic rival, Russia, through Africa Corps. The security that Africa Corps offers to coup-plotting elites is financed through the direct granting of gold mines. This has allowed the Kremlin to extract billions of dollars to circumvent international sanctions, further impoverishing local states. Not only does it control strategic resources, but it also controls migration flows towards southern Europe.

However, the Russian model is not perfect and is showing signs of strain and instability. This suggests that the Sahel is heading towards a scenario of prolonged fragmentation. Meanwhile, actors such as China are quietly filling the economic void with infrastructure projects, taking advantage of the vacuum left by the West.

Marta Molero Reina

Master's student in Geopolitics and Strategic Studies, UC3M