

# Russia and the G5 Sahel Group's Indivisible Security Relationship

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*In practical terms, the indisputable geopolitical changes and the restructuring of global power architecture have significant impact on Russia's military influence in Saharan-Sahel region, an elongated landlocked territory located between North Africa (Maghreb) and West Africa, and also stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. Almost all West African countries face a kind of multilayered crisis. But the G5 Sahel group was established in February 2014 to maintain security in the western part of the Sahel region and coordinate a joint armed forces to fight against growing terrorism.*

Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have withdrawn from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and, more significantly have also created their own military bloc citing reasons as follows: the bloc's failure to provide no support against the jihadists, the imposition of "illegal sanctions" that are harming the people and that the bloc has fallen under the influence of and indiscriminately manipulated by foreign governments.

By creating their own Alliance of Sahel States (AES), it exposes ECOWAS powerlessness, weaknesses and its long-term inability and incompetency to deal with regional problems through mediation. In the ECOWAS guidelines, Article 91 of the bloc's treaty stipulates that member countries remain bound by their obligations for a period of one year after notification of their withdrawal. For better or for worse, these interim military governments have adopted hardline stance, consistently delayed in fixing concrete dates to hold democratic elections.

With renewed and full-fledged interest, Russia has ultimately begun making inroads into the Sahel region after two historical marked summits in Black Sea resort city of Sochi (October 2019) and in St. Petersburg (July 2023). Russian President Vladimir Putin mentioned this

security issue during his opening and closing speeches at the summit, and even previously, indicating its importance on Russia's agenda with Africa.

At the end, both Russian and African leaders reaffirmed their collective stance to deal with the persistent ethnic conflicts and militant threats among the magnitude of wide range of priorities. In fact, there were five key documents and one of them is on 'Strengthening Cooperation to Combat Terrorism' which neatly relates this article under discussion.

That elongated region constantly faces frequent threats of terrorism from militant groups, which requires adequate security action measures needed to combat the threats. The biggest vulnerabilities in this regard include weak border control, unprotected industrial facilities, and large urban areas where it becomes easy to disappear into a crowd.

Russia has rich experiences as in developing an effective set of measures to counter terrorism, curtail illegal activity, and provide dependable protection for citizens. Therefore, Russia's Ministry of Defense together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expresses readiness to coordinate in sharing their experiences with African partners and particularly in the Saharan-Sahel.

Revisiting the first summit declaration which says in part, "firm intention to fully contribute to achieving peace and security" points to the principles of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity on these countries in the region. The first primary step is implementing joint programmes to build the necessary capacity of the requesting African States and train African peace keeping personnel at specialized educational institutions of the Russian Federation and African States.

For fear and concerns about the new rise of terrorism, the Sahel-5 countries are turning to Russia. Now it is capitalizing on the opportunity, to broaden its geography of diplomacy covering fragile countries and eyeing as possible the leeway for penetrating into the entire region. Since the start of 2024, most of the interim military leaders have visited the Kremlin. During both meetings with Chad and Niger, several critical issues were raised including military assistance to fight growing terrorism, and efforts to strengthen political dialogue and promote partnerships relating to trade and the economy in the region.

Russian Foreign Ministry has explained in a statement posted on its website, that Russia's military-technical cooperation with African countries is primarily directed at settling regional conflicts and preventing the spread of terrorist threats and fighting the growing terrorism in the continent. Worth noting with precision here that Russia, in its strategy on Africa is reportedly looking into building military bases on the continent. Russia has signed bilateral military-technical cooperation agreements with more than 20 African countries.

In October 2021, a cargo plane has delivered four helicopters, weapons and ammunition from Russia to Mali, according to the military-led authorities in the West African country. "Mali bought these helicopters from the Russia Federation, a friendly country with which Mali has always maintained a very fruitful partnership," Interim Defence Minister Sadio Camara told the local media in the capital, Bamako, that the weapons and ammunition were gifts from Russia. A year later, Camara paid tribute to what he called Mali's "win-win partnership with the Russian Federation" during during a ceremony, L-39 and Sukhoi-25 jets as well as Mi-24P helicopter gunships were displayed.

In December 2021, two years after the first Russia-Africa summit, Foreign Minister Sergey

Lavrov noted in his speech:

“Russia will continue supporting it with the supply of arms and hardware and personnel training, including peacekeepers, as it is very important to help put an end to this evil and other challenges and threats, including drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime.”

For instance, Lavrov explicitly points to creating favourable conditions for the implementation of Russian projects in Chad, including in the field of energy and the extraction of mineral resources. Establishing, at least, relative peace is necessary for holding substantive and credible elections and for economic development pursuits.

Lavrov also indicated that Russia would support G5 Sahel group by providing weapons and training peacekeepers, but at the same time, Moscow would always insist that those African countries should find ways to solve their problems themselves and the international community needs to provide them with support through the UN Security Council and other agencies. The Foreign Minister at a press conference following talks with Chad's top diplomat Mahamat Zene Cherif, referred to those countries as Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger and Mauritania.

According to several narratives, Russia pushed the Wagner mercenaries (military instructors) into the entire region which primary focus on combating terrorism. After the death of Wagner Group chief Yevgeny Prigozhin last year, the Wagner group has now, beginning 2024, transformed and rebranded as a military structure called the Africa Corps, which works under the Russian Defense Ministry appeared on Telegram channel last November. Moscow is now laying the foundations for its military deployment in Burkina Faso and negotiating with Niger to become a key military ally.

The latest developments are that on January 28, 2024, the military juntas of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger jointly announced their immediate exit out of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The three earlier in September formed the Alliance des États du Sahel (translates in English as the Alliance of Sahel States), a security defence pact forged in response to the threat of ECOWAS military intervention in Niger. This military cooperation emerged following the detainment of Niger's democratically elected president, Mohamed Bazoum, by the military junta led by Abdourahamane Tchiani.

In December 2023, Nigerien Prime Minister, Ali Mahamane Lamine Zeine, had already asked for the creation of a Russian military base during his working visit to discuss military and economic ties in the Kremlin.

He was appointed by the military, which came to power in a coup in July 2023. Mondafrigue reported Ali Lamine Zeine was on tour of Iran, Russia, Serbia and Turkey, accompanied by the ministers of defense, petroleum, sports, commerce and other senior officials. Niger's new government intends to diversify partnerships in defense, agriculture and energy and develop relations in the trading of oil and medical equipment. At the same time, Niamey is looking to Moscow as an alternative to Western assistance.

Military statistics are hard to find at the State Ministries and Agencies, but media reports cited as many as 250 Wagner operatives in Ségou, a town in central Mali, and a group of military personnels have also deployed to the city of Timbuktu, occupying former Operation Barkhane bases that were turned over to the Malian army by French forces in December

2021. With regards to training and offering military capacity-building, Russia has trained thousands of military from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger in Military Academy and Universities in the Russian Federation.

There have been arguments these past several months. In February for example, the Director General of Radio France International (RFI), Jean Marc argued that the latest development in ECOWAS presents an opportunity for Africa to build new bridges and alliances. The fundamental question lies with ECOWAS, about its effective and making positive impact as regional bloc. In reality, it is all about Africa's autonomy, equal partnership, and building new bridges. There are plenty of foreign interventions like Russia, that's a fact; but it is up to African countries to choose who to align with.

Research reports further published by The Conversation, Agence France Press, British Broadcasting and many others, indicated that the unilateral withdrawal of three West African countries would be hit by trade regulations and restrictions, thus impacting on the population and the economy. The three are landlocked and among the poorest in the world, already illustrates their disadvantage and limited position.

In addition and to a large degree, the Sahelian countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger depend more on regional trade than coastal countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana or Nigeria. Without free access to the ports of Cotonou, Lomé, Abidjan or Tema, Sahelian imports would be far more expensive. And their expulsion further means exclusion from participating in the single continental African free landscape and the formation of new Confederation would definitely provide any suitable solution to the root causes and future ambitions.

Notwithstanding the complexities of the evolving political situation especially in West Africa, Russia has simply turned its back to the standing guidelines and explicit positions of both ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) with respect to "unconstitutional changes" across Africa. Russia has overwhelmingly declared support for military take-overs and consequently set the precedence, that any other group of gun-throttling soldiers could overthrow democratically elected government. Of course, Russia has the right to operate on the basis of bilateral mechanism, but at the same has to show uttermost respect to guidelines and protocols set by the regional and continental organization, according to the summary of several African expert interviews for this article.

On the other hand, Russia hopes that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) could still preserve unity despite the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from the association, Vsevolod Tkachenko, head of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Africa Department, said in an enlightening interview with TASS News Agency in February 2024.

Despite the threat it (the exit) poses to regional and continental integration, Russia has offered an overarching support to the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) as these French-speaking countries are fighting to uproot neo-colonialism. The diplomat noted that the move "was in many ways a response to the recent pressure actions taken by the community against Ouagadougou, Bamako and Niamey." In the interview, Vsevolod Tkachenko, however, emphasized the the fact that ECOWAS "is under the influence of foreign powers, having become a threat to member states and their peoples."

As previously the AU Commission chief Moussa Faki Mahamat repainted again the "bleak picture" with a "litany of difficulties" confronting many African countries during the 37th

Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union (AU) summit held, from 14th to 15th February, at the AU Headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Faki spoke of “worrying trends” in the North Africa, Horn of Africa and also in West Africa.

Moussa Faki Mahamat blasted a failure to counter multiple “unconstitutional changes of government” following a string of coups in West Africa and warned the scourge of “terrorism” was diverting money away from vital social needs to military spending. In practical reality, the summit was now concerned about looking inward, closely protecting their sovereign prerogatives rather than investing in collective security, somehow to fund most of its budget rather than foreign donors. Gabon and Niger were absent from the summit following their suspension over coups last year — joining Mali, Guinea, Sudan and Burkina Faso, which are also barred for similar reasons.

Usually referred to as the G5 Sahel, it is the vast semi-arid region that consists of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The Saharan-Sahel region remains largely underdeveloped and the greater part of the population impoverished, terrorist organizations including Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) are operating and have contributed to the frequent violence, extremism and instability in this vast region. In addition to insecurity and instability, these countries are engulfed with various socio-economic problems combined with traditional cultural practices that have lessened development. The system of governance and poor policies also largely hinder sustainable development.

Nevertheless, there is hope in the near future to overcome all these existing smooth development roadblocks, with Russia pledging enormous diverse support especially within the context of its renewed bilateral interest in Saharan-Sahel region, which is as much a land of opportunities as it is of challenges. Although it has abundant human and natural resources, offering tremendous potential for rapid growth, there are deep-rooted challenges – environmental, political and security – that may affect the prosperity and peace of the Sahel. That however, Russia’s collaboration with Saharan-Sahel countries will be on the basis of international law, primarily the UN Charter, relevant UN Security Council resolutions, the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

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