

The Imperialist Rift in the Sahel

By Hassan Ould Moctar

For Lenin, imperialism was anything but a static system. “Is it conceivable,” he rhetorically asked in his renowned work on the topic in 1916, “that in ten or twenty years’ time, the relative strength of the imperialist powers will have remained unchanged? Absolutely inconceivable.”¹ This is because “there can be no other conceivable basis under capitalism for the division of spheres of influence, of interests, of colonies, etc., than a calculation of the *strength* of the participants in the division.”² The degree of relative strength is ever shifting, and this struggle between imperialist powers for “spheres of influence”, in which access to raw materials and outlets for capital export can be secured, is a defining feature of imperialism as Lenin saw it. One such shift in the relative strength of the forces of world imperialism is currently unfolding in the Sahel, and it is being driven by a range of actors in the region.

Over the past three years, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have embarked upon an unprecedented regional political experiment. Dubbed the *Alliance des États du Sahel* (AES)³, this has involved the ejection of various instruments of Western imperialism, a deepening of cooperation with Russian forces, and steps toward economic sovereignty and cultural decolonisation. The Sahel is also witnessing a displacement crisis of unprecedented proportions, with a grim milestone of four million people currently displaced across the region.⁴ This displacement crisis preceded the AES experiment, and in many respects, it was caused by the Western interference currently being rejected across the Sahel. But coupled with the external circumstances of its implementation, this experiment has deepened the displacement crisis.

Rooting the current conjuncture

The roots of the current conjuncture in the Sahel are many and deep, but a prominent trigger can be found in the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011. The collapse of the Libyan state saw an influx of arms and mercenaries to northern Mali, breathing new life into a Tuareg separatist movement, whose armed wing restarted an insurgency against the central government in Mali in 2012. In ambivalent conjunction with an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, they advanced south on the capital Bamako.⁵ In response, Mali’s then interim head of state reached out to French President Francois Hollande for assistance, resulting in a tactically limited French military intervention aimed at stemming the coalition of insurgents advancing on Bamako. Within a year, however, the counterinsurgency had expanded from its operational home in Mali to include Chad, Niger, and Burkina Faso, in the form of Operation Barkhane.

Operation Barkhane sat at the heart of a vast and unwieldy international intervention structure in the Sahel. From 2014, this included MINUSMA, a United Nations peacekeeping mission⁶, and the G5 Sahel, a regional security alliance consisting of Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso. Intended to give greater local ownership to the fight against violent extremism, the G5 Sahel's financial and operational dependencies reduced it in practice to an embodiment of Western interests.⁷ Despite – or perhaps because of – its vast scale, this regime of Western military and security intervention made little headway in tackling the insecurity it was tasked with preventing, as armed militant activity gradually spread from northern and central Mali into northern Burkina Faso and western Niger.⁸

For this reason, the French military campaign became a target of popular anger in the central Sahel. While partisan commentators tended to analyse these protests through the exclusive lens of the Russian flags which often figured prominently at them, these mobilisations also drew from a rich regional history of radical student activism, trade union organising and pan-Africanist and Marxist thought.⁹ This regional memory is of crucial significance in understanding what were often strategically sophisticated mobilisations. In November 2021, for instance, a coalition of social movements in Burkina Faso staged a blockade of a French military convoy along multiple sites of its route to its base in Gao, Mali, stalling it and forcing a reroute.¹⁰ Combined with military frustration in the face of losses at the hands of insurgent groups, such popular mobilisations drove the imperialist rift that is currently unfolding across the region.¹¹

Delinking?¹²

In August 2020, Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was ousted amidst growing anti-government protests and military defeats. Over the next three years, four further coups unfolded in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. In each context, military leaders have capitalised upon grassroots anti-colonial sentiment, stripping back France's military presence, cultural institutions, NGO's, and media outlets.¹³ Much of the wider regional architecture of Western intervention has also been dismantled, most notably the UN MINUSMA mission and the G5 Sahel, from which Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger withdrew to establish the parallel structure of the AES. A final *coup de grace* came in January 2025, with the AES withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS),¹⁴ following ECOWAS sanctions and threats of military intervention against coup leaders. This harsh ECOWAS reaction was perceived in the AES as submission to the hypocrisy of Western actors, who – having presided over an unprecedented militarisation of Sahelian societies over the preceding decade – were also swift to condemn and sanction the military coup leaders.

The AES bloc has also taken steps to break with various economic and cultural embodiments of Western imperialism. Public spaces and monuments have

been renamed across AES states¹⁵, dropping references to French leaders in favour of national anti-colonial figures such as the Nigérien socialist leader Djibo Bakary and Thomas Sankara, Burkina Faso's famed anti-imperialist president who was assassinated in 1987. AES states have also targeted Western economic interests, with Mali taking control of several mines from Barrick Gold following a dispute with the Canadian company, and Niger nationalising a uranium firm that had been majority operated by French company Orano.¹⁶ In Burkina Faso, a newly established state mining company has taken control of two industrial gold mines previously owned by London-listed Endeavour Mining.¹⁷ The CFA franc, the colonial-era currency which denies monetary sovereignty to fourteen West and Central African states¹⁸, has proven a more resilient instrument of neocolonial domination. While proposals have also been floated for breaking with the CFA,¹⁹ there is as yet no roadmap for withdrawal.

The AES has also deepened economic and military cooperation with Russia, most notoriously by trading Operation Barkhane for Russia's Wagner private mercenary outfit in Mali. Reports of summary executions, mass torture and atrocities have since become widespread.²⁰ Russia's reconstitution of Wagner as the Africa Corps following Yevgeny Prigozhin's abortive Moscow coup has not, in the immediate term, entailed much transformation in this tactical approach.²¹ Nor has it stymied the vicious cycle whereby armed forces allied with international counterinsurgents carry out atrocities in reprisal for attacks on their battalions and bases, which, in turn, drives further recruitment to armed groups.²² While the geopolitical alliances framing this cycle have evolved, it represents a continuation and intensification of a trend born between 2013 and 2015.²³

Regional ambivalence

While the AES forms the violent epicentre of this imperialist rift, it has also rippled outward, affecting traditionally loyal partners of the French neocolonial enterprise. Since the end of 2024, the withdrawal of French armed forces has been declared and initiated in Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, and Senegal.²⁴ In both Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, this is likely an effort to capture a sufficient degree of the regional current to satiate popular sentiment, while keeping the wider infrastructure of Western interests and relations intact. In Mauritania, the government has adopted a different tack, leveraging the anti-Western regional current to its own advantage by securing greater concessions from EU actors, while steering clear of any French military deployment on its territory.²⁵ All of this highlights the political ambivalence of the transformation currently unfolding in the Sahel.

The wider regional **context further complicates this picture**. Algeria, which often presents an anti-imperialist posture that it has long abandoned in practice, has been in bitter dispute with Mali over a drone incursion incident and mass migrant expulsions.²⁶ Morocco, meanwhile, which has signed up to Donald Trump's Abraham

Accords initiative and has had a historically more ambivalent relationship to Western neocolonialism than Algeria, has been eager to deepen cooperation with the AES.²⁷ And while the US has seen the closure of its military base in Agadez, it continues to maintain a discreet counterterror presence in the region through its AFRICOM operation. A far younger imperialist power than France, the US geostrategy for the region (insofar as one can speak of such a thing under Donald Trump) may involve keeping a safe distance as the French presence dies a natural death.

One thing is certain, however, the legitimacy and feasibility of the AES project is currently in question due to a deteriorating security situation which the military governments have played a part in creating. Burkina Faso and Niger have each seen sharp increases in violence against civilians by both militant insurgents and armed forces, who have also suffered heavy losses in militant raids and ambushes in recent years.²⁸ And in Mali, the counterinsurgency campaign has had little success beyond massacring and displacing in unprecedented numbers, with Wagner/Africa Corps themselves suffering heavy losses in a July 2024 ambush in the north of the country. More recently, extremist outfit JNIM (Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin) has succeeded in imposing a crippling fuel blockade on Bamako, prompting fears of a general social collapse.²⁹

Conclusion

If imperialism is characterised by a constant struggle for strength and spheres of influence between world systemic blocs, then we appear to be witnessing one such movement in the Sahel. This shift is not yet completed, and nor is it a foregone conclusion. For one thing, France's regime of monetary colonialism and its ongoing interest in Niger for 15-20% of its uranium supply represent a greater imperialist stake than the mining concessions Russia obtains in exchange for Wagner's "security" services in Mali.³⁰ Moreover, a range of EU projects continue to operate across the AES, despite the proclaimed rupture with the West.³¹ In general terms, however, a historic page does appear to be turning, a process which – if nothing else – was inevitable.

Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso each figure in the bottom ten countries of the UN's human development index, as well as in its 'least developed countries' list.³² This is ultimately the product of a history of deeply polarised intra-regional capitalist development, which saw the region's land, labour, and resources harnessed to the needs of European capital throughout the colonial and much of the post-colonial period.³³ The Western intervention apparatus that has been recently dismantled in the region did little to alleviate this situation, focused as it was on military solutions over socio-economic ones.³⁴ Indeed, it further compounded inequality through astronomical financial costs and the lavish and bunkered lifestyle such intervention structures gave rise to in highly polarised cities like Bamako.³⁵

It is little wonder, in this light, that this intervention structure came in for such hostility in the context of rampant uncertainty and multidimensional crisis. The geopolitical balance of power that emerged from this history is slowly shifting, but the popular forces that forced this shift will do so again if it does not deliver material justice.

Notes

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