

LINKAGES BETWEEN CIVIL STRIFE, INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION AND MILITARY PUTSCH IN SAHEL AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The indirect and systemic influence of former colonial powers, along with the enduring effects of European imperialism in Africa, has contributed to intra-state conflicts, political instability, and civil strife in several parts of the continent, particularly within the Sahel and other African sub-regions. These dynamics have pushed many national economies to the brink of collapse, resulting in severe humanitarian crises. This situation has also contributed to the resurgence of military coups. Over the past three years, the Sahel region has witnessed a wave of coups d'état across several countries, stretching from Guinea on the Atlantic coast to Sudan on the Red Sea. Successful military coups have occurred in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger, and Gabon, while constitutional coups have been reported in Tunisia, Chad, and Sudan. During roughly the same period, coup attempts were thwarted in The Gambia, the Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, and the island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe. For decades, countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea-Bissau have been affected by conflict, civil strife, and economic decline. Although violent conflicts have generally declined in the West African sub-region, recent military coups in the Sahel—particularly in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso—as well as insurgency, banditry, and rising tensions in Nigeria signal the potential re-emergence of internal and regional conflicts. These developments are driven by multiple factors, including poverty, human rights violations, poor governance and corruption, ethnic marginalization, the proliferation of small arms, and, significantly, the lingering influence of European imperialism. These challenges have persisted over time. This paper argues that a poor understanding of these underlying causes will continue to plunge African countries into deeper crises and economic instability. Primary sources, policy documents, and relevant secondary and tertiary materials were the main sources of data for this qualitative analysis.

Key words: Conflict, Africa, Political, Military, Coup d'état.

INTRODUCTION

The root of violent conflicts and civil strife in West Africa is linked to several complex factors. Conflict in West Africa are much deeper and complex, and are embedded in the interplay of historical factors, socio-economic crisis, legacies of authoritarianism and the politics of exclusion, international forces, and local struggles. Admittedly, while the aforementioned constitute the broader causal factors, embedded within and related to them are bad governance and corruption, human rights violations, poverty, ethnic marginalization and small arms and light weapons proliferation (among others), have continue to serve as triggers and drivers of violent conflicts in the sub-region. Even though there are several other specific causes of violent conflicts and civil strife in West Africa, the paper will focus on discussing and linking the to re emergence of military coups in the Sahel Africa. Many motives and circumstances have been cited for these civil strife and coups, as putschists accused the ruling regimes of corruption, economic mismanagement, and failure to confront armed separatist and jihadist movements that constitute a serious challenge to the regions states. Disparate international reactions to these coups also point to the complexities of the intense regional and international competition between interested major powers. France, and the United States to a lesser degree, adheres to supporting elected governments in countries that experienced coups for reasons that do not necessarily have anything to do with supporting democracy, but rather with the isolated authorities compatibilities with their own interests. On the other hand, other international players, led by Russia, have found opportunities to enhance their influence by supporting the emergent regimes and the new power brokers, exploiting the regions growing wave of discontent with the West.

CAUSES OF CIVIL STRIFE VIOLENT CONFLICTS IN AFRICA

Past conflicts

The civil conflict that plagued Côte d'Ivoire, the one-time economic power house and the beacon of stability in West Africa cannot be overlooked. Deeply rooted in ethnic-religious divisions and identity aggravated by politics of exclusion, the country erupted into full-fledged civil strife in September 2002. Following the explosion of the civil strife into a violent conflict, several peace initiatives were adopted but failed to resolve the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire until the successful signing of the Ouagadougou peace accord in 2007 restored peace and stability in the country. With three years of relative peace in the country, Ivorians were ready to take to the polls in November 2010; a critical election which was anticipated to consolidate the peace the country had enjoyed and unify its stratified population. Much to their chagrin, the country nearly relapsed back into a violent civil war after the

disputed elections led to a violent confrontation between loyalists of incumbent Laurent Gbagbo and main opposition Alassane Ouattara. The following five-month battle led to the death of over 3000 people and the displacement of many.⁴

Present and emerging conflicts

Generally, even though there is a decline in large scale violent conflict and civil strife, pockets of simmering tensions, insurgency and the re-emergence of coups d'état continues to trouble the sub-region. For example the recent coups d'état in Guinea-Bissau and Mali; insurgency in the Sahel region affecting West African countries of Mali, Niger and Mauritania; as well as low-scale conflicts in notably stable countries like Ghana, Senegal and Nigeria further makes the sub-region capricious and prone to more violent conflicts. Since gaining independence in 1960 from the French, Mali, Africa's third largest gold producer suffered several coups and ethnic tensions until attaining multi-party democracy in 1992 with the election of President Alpha Konare. Nevertheless, the democracy and relative stability in the country was not to last, as the re-surfacing of violent conflict in the north by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) Tuareg rebels and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM) in 2007 and the coup d'état in 2012 resulted in killings, mass forced displacement of civilians destabilizing Mali's political tranquility. Furthermore, the recent Boko Haram insurgency in northern Nigeria, which hinged upon religion and economic deprivation, also poses security concerns in the sub-region. Since its emergence in 2002, the Boko Haram insurgency has taken many lives, displaced several thousand and destroyed state property⁵. Travelling to the south of Nigeria, the prolonged Niger Delta conflict over oil has further compounded the insecurities in West Africa's most populous nation. The Niger Delta conflict has led to several kidnapping of expatriates, casualties and the increased use of sophisticated weaponry in the region by militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) thereby heightening insecurity within the country and across the sub-region.⁶

Bad governance and corruption

Post-colonial rule of West African countries has been fraught with several challenges. Elemental among them are the issues of bad governance and corruption. Following independence, several regimes across the sub-region have mismanaged state resources and weakened governance institutions which has resulted in economic stalemate, political apprehensions and breakdown of social peace and stability. Today, these twin factors constitute a major cause of violent conflicts and civil strife in West Africa. Several scholarly works on conflicts in the sub-region have identified bad governance and corruption as the underpinning factors fuelling and renewing violence in West Africa. Conflicts in Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and other West African countries notably hinge upon bad governance and corruption. For instance, in the Sierra Leonean war, it was identified that bad governance, corruption and poverty were the root causes of the conflict. Additionally, research conducted in Liberia by Patrick Vinck, Phuong Pham and Tino Kreutzer in 2011 indicated that majority of the population (64 per cent) identified, among other factors, greed and corruption as the cause of the Liberian civil war.⁷

Corruption in West Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria, has been highlighted as one of the underlining factors in the Niger Delta conflict and the more recent, yet very pronounced, Boko Haram insurgency. Ironically, the Niger Delta region though blessed with the largest oil resource in Nigeria is also the poorest region in the country. This is perhaps attributable to the high corruption at the national level which does not give opportunity for oil wealth to trickle down to the ordinary 'Deltarians' and the larger Nigerian population. In 2003 for example, the Nigerian Anti-Corruption Agency, the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) reportedly estimated that 70 per cent of the oil earnings, constituting over US\$ 14 billion was stolen and wasted.⁸ Reportedly, the majority of the perpetrators of corruption in Nigeria include senators, ministers, commissioners and individuals with higher connections in the political playground. In affirming the linkage between corruption and violence in Nigeria's Niger Delta, Hassan Tai Ejibunu indicates that 'seeing money coming from the Federal Government, on earnings on crude oil sales, with essentially none of it reaching the ordinary people, has created condition for insurrection'.⁹

Human rights violations

Incidences of human rights abuses and violations are numerous in West Africa and as such this forms the basis for the eruption and renewal of violent conflicts and civil strife in the sub-region. Across the sub-region, there are reported incidences of sexual and gender-based violence, reprisal killings, beatings, impunity for state officials and institutions, high social injustice, repressive and brutal leadership, and unequal distribution of state resources among others.¹⁰ All these serve as both triggers and consequences of war. For instance in Nigeria, violations of the human rights of local citizens underscore as one of the factors causing the militancy in the Niger Delta region. Many of the oil companies in the region are reported to be causing environmental pollution and economic marginalization while the state supinely looks on.

In Guinea-Bissau as well, the impunity for human rights abuse by state officials in part led to the violent conflict that destabilized the country in 1998. Local authorities are often accused of engaging in beatings and oppression of the local citizens creating a culture of 'Matchundade' (aggressive behaviours) which bred major conflict with brutal consequences.¹¹ Due to the continuous existence of these repressive acts against the citizens and among ethnic groups, even after the 1998 civil war, Guinea-Bissau seems to be sitting on a boiling pot of tensions which, unresolved, could explode into another violent conflict as was mildly witnessed in the 2010 mutiny and the recent April 2012 coup d'état.

Poverty

Poverty also stands to be one of the major setbacks in West Africa and the continent of Africa. According to the 2012 UNDP Human Development report nearly half of sub-Saharan Africans live in poverty.¹² Consequently, the poverty that many across the continent endure can be seen to be one of the major contributing factors to the occurrence of violent conflicts in Africa. Like the rest of Africa, the West Africa sub-region is neither immune to the poverty canker nor ignorant of its impact on their fragile peace and stability. With over 60 per cent of its population living below the poverty line of US\$1 a day, civil unrest and grievances, both recipes for conflicts, become widespread. These agitations sometimes take violent forms and are seen as channels for punishing governments for their failure to alleviate poverty. For instance, in research conducted shows that 30 per cent of the Liberian population indicated that poverty was one of the root causes of the Liberian civil war. Similar assertions have also been made with regards to the conflicts in Nigeria and Guinea. In Voz di Paz and Interpeace's 2010 report, poverty was stated as one of the major cause of the Bissau-Guinean conflicts, citing food insecurity, lack of infrastructure and access to basic social needs as some of the poverty indicators in the country. Emphasizing the connection between poverty and conflict, the Bissau-Guineans have an adage which states 'In homes where there is no bread everyone fights and no one is right'.¹³ Indeed hunger, starvation, lack of economic growth and development create a high likelihood of violent conflicts and civil strife.

Ethnic marginalization

Ethnicity by itself is not violent however the concept has been manipulated in 'societies polarized into two imbalanced divides with one faction feeling marginalized'.¹⁴ Correspondingly, James Fearon and David Laitin (2003) also believe that a greater degree of ethnic or religious diversity... by itself is not a major and direct cause of violent civil conflict...'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, to a larger extent, for a heterogeneous community like West Africa, ethnicity has become a dividing factor that continues to drive violent conflicts and civil strife within and among communities and states, destabilizing the peace in the sub-region. Research conducted across the sub-region identifies ethnicity and ethnic fragmentation as one of the root causes of violent conflicts in West Africa. Particularly for Liberia, this was prominent as 49 per cent of the population reportedly identified ethnicity and ethnic divisions as the root cause of the Liberian civil wars. More specifically, in the 10-year repressive rule of Samuel Doe, the Krahn and Mandingo ethnic groups were more favoured than the others which resulted in various ethnic tensions that saw the rebellious invasion of Charles Taylor, an Americo-Liberian, leading to the violent civil war that overthrew Doe's government in 1996. Currently, Liberians are still afraid of a potential renewal of civil war along ethnic lines when the United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping mission ends. Similar situations exist in other countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau and Nigeria.

Small arms and light weapons proliferation

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation is one of the major challenges in West Africa. The sub-region remains an area of considerable SALW proliferation because of their affordability, accessibility and availability, and porosity of the borders and legal frameworks legitimizing their use. As reported by Edeko Sunday, West Africa hosts about 7 to 10 million of the world's illegal SALW as well as 8 million out of the 100 million circulating in Africa.¹⁶ Additionally, 77,000 of the small arms are allegedly within the control of West African insurgent groups. The circulation of illegal arms within and across states has increased the proclivity of conflicts within the sub-region. Small arms proliferation has contributed to the mobilization for coups d'état, undemocratic overthrow of governments, increasing casualties and violent inter-communal and intra-state conflicts in West Africa.

Impact of International Competition over the Sahel

The return of coups to the Sahel region and to more parts of Africa—after everyone thought that they were a thing of the past—is evidence of the centrality of Africa to the raging international conflict between an old western camp (France) that presents itself as better than all others, and a new camp (China-Russia) that presents itself as a viable alternative, with all that it promises in terms of partnerships, development, and prosperity.

Before the coup, Niamey was France's main strategic partner in the Sahel region and the venue for French forces participating in Operation Barkhane after they left Mali in August 2022. This is in addition to French President Emmanuel Macron's bet on Niger for reconfiguring his country's strategy toward the Sahel region.

France bet on Niger goes beyond the military aspect to the search for a new legitimacy that depends on focusing on development, which it can market to the rest of Africa. The French Development Agency (FDA) has committed to investing €100 million to support development projects in the region in the form of loans.¹⁷

Additionally, Niger represents an important strategic point for the United States and a number of European countries, as it hosts western military bases—three French, two American—and training centers for Germany, Italy, and Canada, among others that train special forces in Niger.¹⁸ The country's geographic location between the Sahel and North and West Africa places it at the forefront of a dual struggle against extremist groups active in the Sahara Desert and Russian influence in more than one country (Central African Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso, and others).

France remains the country most negatively affected by what is happening in Niger. Niamey is the fourth capital it has lost to a military coup over the last four years in West Africa, where an unprecedented wave of popular hostility is spreading against everything French. This coincides with a time of a serious economic recession in France that has culminated in energy conservation policies after frequent power outages. The irony is that uranium mining in Niger, which represents seven percent of global production, contributes to lighting one out of every three electric lamps in France, while darkness engulfs large parts of Niger's cities and villages.

The cautious American approach to the Niger coup, in contrast to France's quick threat of military action, and later its urging the ECOWAS nations to use force to restore the Nigerien president, weakened trust between Washington and Paris. At the height of French agitation against the coup, the American administration dispatched Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland to hold talks with leaders of the Military Council. The talks ended with the US declaring its preference for a diplomatic solution, which dampened the prospects for a military intervention. These were the first indications that the White House was not concerned about changes in Niger.

Russia, on the other hand, appears to be the most prominent winner in Niger. The course of events is in the interests of Russia, which has been waging a soft, and sometimes harsh, war against France regarding the re-sharing of influence in the African continent.

Emergence of Russia and China as International Players in the Sahel

For years, Russia has been working to expand its influence in the region, using the rhetoric of political realism and the language of interests. Moscow, which aspires to contribute to the formation of a new world order, is exploiting the growing wave of discontent and tension against the West's failed security and development policies on the continent.

Russia has gained a strong presence in several regions of Africa, starting in the Central African Republic and moving to Libya in the north, and is currently working to strengthen its influence in the Sahel region with its geopolitical status as a depository of mineral resources. After Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, Niger's turn has come to join those moving away from France and the United States. The coup leaders may not necessarily express their bias toward Russia, but the removal of two major French allies from government (Issoufou and Bazoum) is a victory for Moscow, which has adopted a policy of non-interference in domestic affairs while providing assistance in arms, security, and food.

China, Russia's ally, is applying the same approach, as it is the largest foreign investor in Africa. It was the first to break into the region through its successful investment in extracting Sudanese oil at the end of the twentieth century. This was an incentive that pushed it to penetrate Chad and Niger until it came to control the oil market in the Sahel region.

PATTERNS OF COUPS/CHANGE IN SAHEL AFRICA

These represent a familiar pattern of change in Africa. Although this phenomenon declined at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it has seen resurgence in the last three years. Mali had two coups, in 2020 and 2021, the first of which ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita on August 18, 2020, and was led by Colonel Assimi Goïta (40 years old). The ousted president was accused of failing to address the deteriorating security situation and of widespread corruption. But pressure from the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) forced the military junta to accept the formation of a transitional government led by civilians and retired officers, for a maximum of 12 months, as part of a plan to hold general elections.

Former defense minister, Colonel Bah Ndaw, became head of state on September 25, 2020, but quickly clashed with the military that maintained its influence in the country. Goïta once again led another coup and ousted Ndaw because of disagreements over a cabinet reshuffle in which two military officers lost their positions. After the second putsch, Goïta became head of the transitional authority and head of state following a decision by the Constitutional Court on May 28, 2021.

The same thing took place in Burkina Faso, which had two coups as well, the first in January 2022 in which Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba (41 years old) detained President-elect Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, holding him responsible for the failure in confronting the jihadist insurgent movements in the country,

and formed a military council under his command. But this military junta soon lost territory to the same insurgents and Sandaogo Damiba was removed from power in another coup by 34-year-old Captain Ibrahim Traoré.

Burkina Faso has indeed suffered through decades of corrupt and oppressive military rule, and yet it witnessed one of the strongest popular movements demanding democracy in the Sahel region. Traoré represents a unique example of the new coup leaders in the region, and enjoys popular support due to his populists speeches and his young age. His speech last July at the Russia-Africa summit was very well received in Burkina Faso and neighboring countries, when he spoke about his country facing forms of neo-colonialism and imperialism. Guinea, in turn, had a coup on September 5, 2021, led by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya (41 years old), which was considered “an extension to the erosion of democracy” in the country under 11 years of rule by President Alpha Condé, who controlled all aspects of the state. Doumbouya declared that the ousted president was responsible for rampant corruption, disregard for human rights, and economic mismanagement.¹⁹

The coup in Niger received international attention because of Frances hardline position toward it, which was contrary to the situation of Nigers neighbors. Since its independence in 1960, Niger has had four bouts of military rule. In 2011, the country embarked on a democratic transition by organizing three elections, congruent with former President Mahamadou Issoufous commitment to the constitutional term of office, which put Niger on the road to democracy. This was not easy in a country surrounded by neighbors experiencing insurgencies, extremism, and military coups. After a decade of relatively stable progress toward democracy, Commander of the Presidential Guard General Abdourahamane Tchiani took over government last July (and deposed democratically-elected President Mohamed Bazoum) under the pretext of the erosion of security in the country.

The latest in this series of coups in West Africa took place in Gabon when army officers on August 30, 2023, seized power and ended the control of the Bongo family, which was close to France and which had governed since independence (55 years). The coup leaders placed President Ali Bongo under house arrest, arrested his son Nouredin for high treason, and appointed Commander of the Republican Guard General Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema as interim president in the transitional period.²⁰

The armys move to dismiss the president appears to have been linked to the results of the presidential election that were announced hours before the coup, in which President Bongo won a third term in office, with 64.27 percent of the popular vote according to the Gabonese Election Center. But the opposition rejected the result due to violations and the apparent partisanship of election authorities. The opposition also protested against a constitutional amendment proposed by the president to have the elections limited to one round instead of two so that he could ensure his reelection. It appears that the army took advantage of the tension to oust the president, announce the annulment of the results, and dissolve standing institutions.²¹

The African countries that had successful military coups have common borders and share the same accusations of security and economic failures and widespread corruption directed at democratically elected governments. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, coup leaders said that their motives were related to the deterioration of security and the spread of corruption, and that the army bears the responsibility of making necessary changes in governance. The structure of the state is also similar in those nations that underwent coups, with many having fragile institutions and the military in a powerful position, in addition to long histories of political and security problems.

In Mali, Guinea, and Niger, the armies were affected by internal and external pressures. Regional organizations, such as the African Union and ECOWAS, intervened in Mali, and France rejected the Guinea coup and, more strongly, that of Niger. This was accompanied by increased opportunities for mercenaries from the Russian Wagner Group to exploit the growing chaos and violence in the region.

Constitutional Coups

These are defined as coups to change the regime or government in an unconstitutional manner, regardless of the party implementing them. This type of coup usually leads to the removal of the legitimate government or other legitimate institutions and their replacement with an illegal authority, bypassing the popular will and the approval of democratic institutions.²²

A clear example of this is what happened in Tunisia in mid-2021 and afterward, as President Kais Saied led a campaign against constitutional institutions, suspending parliament, lifting immunity from representatives, and assuming the presidency of the Public Prosecution. Saied removed the government of Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and began to run state affairs through presidential decrees, awaiting the completion of the steps to dissolve parliament. On March 30, 2022, the president suspended the 2014 Constitution and put to a referendum a new national charter that was accepted by 92 percent of the participants in a low turnout vote of 27.54 percent according to the Supreme Elections Authority, a figure that was still doubted by independent and respectable opinion poll organizations.²³ Under the new constitution, the Tunisian political system was transformed from a

semi-presidential to a fully presidential one, which led to the weakening of parliament and the formation of a second chamber, known as the National Council of Regions and Districts, alongside the Council of Peoples Representatives. Early parliamentary elections were held based on a new electoral law. Voter turnout was very low (11.2 percent in the first round and 11.4 percent in the second) as a result of the full boycott of opposition parties.²⁴

The other constitutional coup in Africa took place in Chad in 2021 when General Mahamat Idriss Déby (37 years old) and senior army officers took control of the state following the killing of his father, President Idriss Déby (who ruled for 30 years), during clashes with armed opposition factions. Before taking power, young Déby had assumed the position of president of the Transitional Council that was to last for 18 months while the country prepared for presidential elections. But that did not come to pass due to heightened foreign interference by France and Russia. With the expiration of the deadline, the Chadian National Dialogue Conference announced on October 8, 2022, the nomination of Mahamat Idriss Déby as president of the transitional phase that was to last for two years. The step to extend the transitional phase and appoint Déby as president increased the oppositions rejection of the process, which was seen as bequeathing rule in the country as if it were an inheritance.

Since its independence in 1956, Sudan has witnessed six military coups. Elected governments have ruled for only nine years, while the military ruled for the remaining period (58 years). In 2019, the country witnessed a popular protest movement that prompted army officers to overthrow the regime of then President Omar al-Bashir (who had ruled since 1989) and to side with demands for a transition to democracy. But in 2021, less than a month before the army was to hand over the reins of government to civilians as stipulated in a power-sharing agreement establishing the Transitional Sovereignty Council, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan announced the end of the “legitimacy of compromise” because it supposedly threatened the security of the homeland.²⁵ Later, the military institution experienced its own split with the defection of the Rapid Support Forces, which plunged the country into an armed conflict that has made any transition to democracy unlikely.

Prospects of the Sahel in the wave of Military Coups

The Sahel region has seen many military coups in the last few years that elicited little noise, contrary to the remarkable western interest in the Nigerien coup, to the point of advocating for a military intervention to “save Nigerien democracy” under an international or regional umbrella became part of the solution despite the serious cost of the endeavor.

Many months after the Niger coup, and after more than one attempt to restore the deposed president, ECOWAS is still weighing the prospect of a military intervention, despite the announcement from the “National Council for the Protection of the Homeland” that it will include civilians in the government, appointing a technocratic prime minister and a cabinet of 21 ministers, in which the council reserved the defense and interior portfolios for itself. But ECOWAS Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace, and Security Abdel Fattah Mousa announced the organizations rejection of the council’s plan.

The ECOWAS military option has more than one obstacle. First and foremost, ECOWAS member states have different opinions regarding the use of force to restore President Bazoum to power. In addition, West African countries do not have sufficient military means for a quick solution if they decide to intervene militarily, which will require external support, in addition to the groups lack of previous real military intervention experience upon which it can call to deal with the changing situation in Niger.

The threat to use force in Niger raises important questions, compared to the coups in Mali and Burkina Faso, where ECOWAS was content with a traditional list of measures such as suspending membership, imposing economic and trade sanctions, and giving coup leaders some time to return to the democratic government.

It appears that the groups leadership rushed before it could carefully read the geopolitical dimensions of the crisis, even before doing enough consulting following the threat with military action, hoping that would halt the contagion of coups in the region. From its side, the Nigerien Military Council tried to absorb the domestic and external responses by forming a government, neutralizing some states, and calling for dialogue and mediation, among other things.

The succession of coups shows that the Sahel region has become the focus of international competition between the worlds major powers. In addition to the old camp led by Washington and Paris, and the newer one headed by Moscow and Beijing, there is an emergent third one (India, Turkey, Iran) that is seeking a foothold in the region. Each axis is trying hard to find allies who can represent it locally and supporters who can serve its agenda and defend its interests in a given country.

The region is undoubtedly becoming an arena of international competition for a multipolar world, despite the local nature of these conflicts among elites. The West, specifically the United States, is keen to overcome the negative image of French colonialism in the region, which necessitates the adoption of a strategy that takes conditions on the ground into consideration if and when it wants to exploit the vacuum following Frances withdrawal.

Despite obvious differences in behavior, Russia and China are most assuredly working on having a presence in an area that is moving, for different reasons, toward holding strategic importance for the world. The alignment of the new rulers in Mali and Burkina Faso, like the Central African Republic before them, to an alliance with Russia is proof that Africa will play a role in a new world order. But Moscow, in addition to its geographic distance, does not have much to offer the economies of African states. It is also incapable of making much of a difference against extremists who control Malis North, and half of Burkina Faso, which means that the Sahel region and West Africa will be exposed to fragmentation and chaos.

Conclusion

Ending violent conflicts and civil strife in the sub-region requires collaborative and coordinated efforts to:

- (a) identify the underlying causes and indicators of conflict;
- (b) develop concrete strategies and programmes for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts;
- (c) document, manage, and disseminate information on lessons learned and best practices in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding across the sub-region; and
- (d) harness indigenous conflict prevention mechanisms while integrating them with contemporary approaches to effectively address existing and emerging security challenges.

Although the sub-region is increasingly vulnerable to violent conflicts, its rich indigenous cultural and social values—such as respect for human life, freedom, cooperation, and tolerance—combined with its diverse population and vibrant civil society organizations, constitute significant strengths. If properly harnessed, these assets could serve as a driving force for reducing the prevalence of violent conflicts and civil strife in West Africa. The Sahel region remains dynamic and volatile in terms of political and security developments, and its prospects for democratic transition remain uncertain, particularly in the context of intensifying global geopolitical competition. A key challenge lies in reconciling the strategic interests of global powers with the aspirations of the regions populations for stability, development, and democratic governance.

Experience has shown that efforts to maintain stability without achieving sustainable development—capable of fostering genuine democratic transitions and reducing military involvement in politics—are unlikely to succeed. Without such an integrated approach, the region risks remaining trapped in a cycle of instability and unrealized development goals for the foreseeable future.

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