

Shadows Over Sahel: Unveiling Russia's grip on Africa's resource frontier

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Following on from KCS Group Europe's (KCSGE's) review of the Sahel conflicts in April 2024 and how the situation will worsen, one can see the region continues to exhibit significant geopolitical complexity.



International attention is being drawn to the belt as a result of its large natural resources to include uranium, oil, gas, iron ore and gold. Rising insurgency has also brought with it a burgeoning illegal trade market that is crippling regional stability.

Building on insights revealed from KCSGE's article in April, the Sahel's resource wealth works for and against its wellbeing, providing economic growth on the one hand, while enticing greedy exploitation on the other. International involvement has historically hidden efforts to resolve issues relating to poor governance and ethnic conflict. The Sahel continues to navigate troubling waters, with its people yearning for some kind of intervention that can assist in safely shaping its future.

Current stakeholders and the scope of Russia's involvement

Our associate partners 'Africa Risk Consulting' (<https://www.africariskconsulting.com>) kindly agreed to contribute to this opinion piece and have provided the following in-country intelligence on the region (Africa Risk Consulting, 2024):

Several countries in the Sahel belt are former French colonies that maintained political and economic ties to France under its post-colonial Africa policy – *Françafrique*. Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Senegal still use the CFA Franc, which is pegged to the Euro and, until about 18 months ago, all were considered close political and military French allies in the region.

However, the region has historically been coup-prone and politically unstable, leading to increased insecurity and proliferation of armed groups. This, coupled with the new, younger military leaders seizing power in Burkina Faso (January and September 2022), Mali (August 2020 and May 2021) and Niger (July 2023), has created an opportunity for other powers to push their way into the region, just as Russia has done.

Russia's entry into the Sahel as a new ally was helped by these new coup leaders' focus on cutting ties with France (and the wider West) in a bid for greater national sovereignty. France – which was heavily involved militarily in the region through Operation Sabre – has also become the scapegoat for these leaders, someone to blame for the increased insecurity and a way to justify their juntas as the only solution to the problem. Russia has also been key in developing anti-French propaganda that has spread among the region's social media-savvy young population.

However, these countries cannot tackle these issues by themselves as they lack the economic and military capabilities. But what these countries do have is resources, something Russia has been happy to tap into, as it did in the Central African Republic (CAR).

Wagner entered Mali in December 2021 to reportedly offer training to local soldiers. However, it has since been reported that often the mercenary group fights alongside the local army, even being accused several times of carrying out massacres. The initial deal that saw Wagner deploy into Mali reportedly cost US\$10 million per month, a massive amount for a country that relies on gold and cotton exports, with the former suffering with the increased insecurity. Since arriving in the country, Wagner has not only accepted payment in gold but also moved to control gold deposits.

A key development in Russia's expansion into West Africa is the death of one of Wagner's founders, Yevgeni Prigozhin, in August 2023. His death forced Wagner to be folded into the Russian defence ministry and was even rebranded. Before this, while there were obviously ties between Prigozhin and the Kremlin, the exposure was less. However, since his death, there is no longer a 'middleman', and the government is likely the direct beneficiary of any payment/potential mine control. The loss of the middleman has also seen Wagner step up its pursuit of expansion in the region.

While Mali was a slow deal (culminating in the government even signing an agreement with Russia to build a gold refinery in November 2023), the moves in Niger and Burkina Faso were far quicker. Wagner's presence in Niger is not as obvious as in Mali, but there have been reports that the junta looked to the group for assistance just a week after the 31 July 2023 coup. Niger has since kicked the French out, asked the United States military to leave, and has nearly monthly meetings with someone from Russia's defence ministry (the line between Wagner and the defence ministry would appear to have become increasingly blurred, as mentioned, a change since the death of Prigozhin). It was reported on 3 June by several media outlets that Russia's Rosatom is now seeking to acquire uranium assets held by France's Orano SA. Niger's insecurity is not as widespread as in Mali and Burkina Faso, however, as the situation continues to get worse, it is likely there will be a greater Russian presence in the country.

Burkina Faso is a slight outlier. Burkina Faso has opened itself up to Russia, re-opening Russia's embassy in Ouagadougou after 30 years, often meeting with representatives and sending soldiers to train in Russia (including those who show dissent) but has not signed a deal with Wagner in the 'traditional sense'. Rather, Wagner has been tasked with providing close protection security to the increasingly nervous junta leader, Captain Ibrahim Traoré. At this point, there has not been confirmation of them actively fighting alongside the armed forces like in Mali, however, as Burkina Faso's security situation deteriorates (FT reported last month that the army only controls 40% of the country's territory), there is a possibility for this kind of agreement. Like Mali, Burkina Faso has a lack of financial resources to pay for its military and a Russian deployment, opening Burkina Faso's gold mines up to exploitation.

It is no coincidence that the three countries have chosen to leave the Economic Community of West African States (which still favours France) and start their own Alliance des États du Sahel (AES). Both Burkina Faso and Mali have extended their transitions, and Niger will likely follow suit. The longer these transitions go on, the longer Russia has to entrench itself in these countries and gain greater control of their resources.

Conclusion

As Russia strengthens its foothold in the Sahel, exploiting weak governance and stability, the region appears, for the time being, to be dominated by the Kremlin's strategic ambitions. The belts transition from Western to Russian control also marks a historical milestone in geopolitics, one fuelled by resource control and power through military collaborations with the indigenous juntas. Now that Wagner has been absorbed into the Russian defence ministry following the death of leader and middleman Yevgeny Prigozhin, instructions are now direct from Moscow.

It is anticipated that the Sahel could witness a restructured geopolitical landscape, possibly at the expense of its autonomy and stability, as Russia rules as the indispensable partner in the region.

"Когда денег много, любая дверь откроется."

"When there's a lot of money, any door will open."

A Russian proverb.

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