Research Article

How Has the US Withdrawal From the Sahel Affected the Operational Effectiveness of Counterterrorism Activities in the Region

Christopher Korkor*

Old Dominion University, United States

***Corresponding Author**
Christopher Korkor, Old Dominion University, United States.

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Abstract

The recent shift in U.S. foreign policy, including its withdrawal from the Sahel at the request of military leaders, raises significant questions about the effectiveness of counterterrorism operations in this volatile region. This paper examines the impact of the U.S.'s reduced military presence on the effectiveness of counterterrorism operations conducted by local and regional security forces. The Sahel region, as defined in this paper, includes countries such as Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. This area faces complex security challenges from violent extremist organizations exploiting political instability, poverty, economic decline, weak governance, and porous borders to establish sanctuaries in ungoverned spaces. U.S. involvement in the region since 9/11 has bolstered local and regional counterterrorism efforts by providing essential support in intelligence sharing, training, surveillance missions, and logistics. This paper analyzes the operational implications and consequences of this withdrawal, focusing on how reduced U.S. support affects the capabilities of Sahelian nations and local and regional security forces in countering violent extremist groups and managing their complex security environments. The U.S.'s departure from the region creates a significant security vacuum in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts, despite the actions of the G5 Sahel forces. Regional governments and local security forces may struggle to combat al-Qaeda-affiliated armed militant groups. The U.S. presence in the region aims to assist in addressing extremist organizations and tackling the political, socioeconomic, developmental, and governance challenges the area faces. Specifically, the paper seeks to assess the impact of reduced U.S. intelligence sharing, surveillance, reconnaissance, logistical support, and training for local and regional forces, as well as the potential power vacuums that extremist groups could exploit. The paper relies on secondary qualitative evidence from existing literature to conduct a comparative analysis of operational effectiveness before and after the U.S. withdrawal from the Sahel region. The findings indicate that the withdrawal has resulted in a decline in operational effectiveness, leading to fewer air and drone strikes, diminished surveillance capabilities, and compromised strategic coordination. The paper also explores the adaptive responses of regional actors and the increasing influence of alternative security providers, such as Russia's Wagner Group. The article concludes by assessing policy options for enhancing counterterrorism cooperation in the Sahel and emphasizing the importance of U.S. geopolitical engagement in fragile regions for maintaining global security and stability.

Keywords: Sahel, US Withdrawal, Counterterrorism, Operational Effectiveness, Security Cooperation, Violent Extremist Organizations, Terrorism

Introduction

The Sahel is a semi-arid region that stretches from east to west across Africa, separating the Sahara Desert to the north from the tropical savanna to the south.[1] Since gaining independence in the 1960s, the area has faced severe security and humanitarian crises driven by the actions of violent extremist organizations. These extremists have exploited the weaknesses of illegitimate governance, economic decline, and the escalating impacts of climate change. Over the past few decades, violence, conflict, and organized crime have surged in the region, transcending national borders and presenting significant challenges for countries within the area as well as for the littoral states.[2] In this paper, the Sahel, as defined as encompassing the countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. It is one of the poorest regions in the world, and except for Mauritania, all the countries in the area are landlocked. Despite the presence of various natural resources, including gold, uranium, oil, natural gas, and iron, the region ranks at the bottom of the United Nations Human Development Index

(HDI). For instance, 85 percent of the population depends on agriculture and pastoral farming. The Sahel has witnessed numerous rebellions and military coups throughout its post-independence era, with non-state Islamist jihadist groups gaining dominance in recent years.[3] During the Cold War, authoritarian and repressive governments in the region thrived on superpower patronage and substantial support from their former colonial power, France. Democratic movements in the 1990s altered governance patterns in the area. In 1991, Mali's longtime dictator was ousted following mass protests advocating for democracy. Mali has maintained a civilian government for two decades, while Burkina Faso and Niger have also seen democratic consolidation. However, many of these countries have recently regressed into military regimes. Following independence, US foreign policy towards the region initially concentrated on humanitarian assistance, development, Cold War politics, and democracy promotion. However, it underwent a shift during the post-Cold War era, prioritizing democracy, free trade, and the promotion of human rights in these areas.[4]

After the 9/11 attacks, US foreign policy toward the Sahel changed dramatically. The US became increasingly concerned about ungoverned territories and spaces becoming terrorist sanctuaries due to weak governance and conflict-affected states. The US has adopted a global war on terror policy, accepted by the Sahelian states, with Mali emerging as a critical US security partner. During this period, the United States has pursued a policy of indirect intervention in the Sahel, focusing on building military capacity for various nations in the region. In collaboration with the Sahelian states, the US worked closely during the global war on terror paradigm to combat violent extremist organizations in the area. During this period, the US foreign policy toward the Sahel region has been characterized by security assistance and military cooperation, primarily focused on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts.[5] This paper focuses on both indirect and direct interventions in the Sahel following the attacks on the homeland. The indirect intervention aimed to enhance the capacity of local and regional security forces against Islamist jihadist groups, while direct involvement included cooperation and operational support for the French armed forces, the Nigerien forces, and other international actors in the region.[6] Section one examines the history of US intervention in the Sahel since 9/11. The paper provides a comprehensive historical overview of the United States' direct and indirect military interventions in the Sahel. The literature review on counterterrorism and security cooperation has indicated that the principal-agent and alliance theories are the appropriate theoretical frameworks for addressing the research question. The second section heavily focuses on US security cooperation with Mali between 2002 and 2012, with an emphasis on counterterrorism operations that intensified as the civil war escalated. The third section explores the more direct US intervention pursued through military cooperation with France beyond 2012. The fourth section examines the impact of the US withdrawal on the operational effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts. The fifth section examines regional and non-Western security providers, such as the Wagner Group, now known as the Africa Corp, as well as the military, security, political, and

economic influence of Russia and China in the region. The final section offers key policy recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

2. Theoretical Framework

After 9/11, the US Congress authorized the president to use all necessary force against nations, organizations, or individuals who planned and executed terrorist attacks, as well as to prevent future acts of international terrorism against the homeland. The legislative branch enacted the Authorization for the Use of Military Force 2001 (AUMF), which is limited to those involved in the attacks. The AUMF does not focus solely on al-Qaeda; it also addresses emerging threats from Islamist jihadist organizations and aims to eliminate their sanctuaries and territories.[7] The counterterrorism campaign concentrated on Muslim-majority countries where governments struggled to assert sovereignty over ungoverned areas, and these counterterrorism programs fall under the Department of Defense (DOD). It is crucial to distinguish US counterterrorism initiatives into direct and indirect military interventions. Direct intervention refers to US forces engaging in combat within another country using force, such as airstrikes, drone strikes, or missile strikes, without deploying ground troops. In contrast, indirect intervention involves providing security assistance, such as intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, training programs, advisory support, and aerial refueling, to facilitate a third party's use of force.[8] A classic example is the United States' support for the French intervention in Mali in 2013. Furthermore, some US policy goals emphasize cooperation, which is the process wherein two or more individuals or states collaborate to achieve a common objective and strengthen bonds between allies or actors with shared interests. Counterterrorism cooperation emerges when allies or security partners collaborate on tactical security issues, with politics taking a secondary role. For example, US counterterrorism cooperation occurs within coalitions such as the one formed to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the G5 Sahel force in Mali. The significance of security partnerships in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency scholarship is rooted in the belief that the US and its partners or allies share similar interests. The existing literature on counterterrorism initiatives and counterinsurgency employs principal-agent and alliance theories as a framework to analyze US counterterrorism and counterinsurgency scholarship in the Sahel. Additionally, political scientists and security scholars have examined counterterrorism operations through the lens of principal-agent theory or alliance theory. Principal-agent theory arises when one actor (the principal) delegates tasks to another (the agent), with aligned interests.[9]

In counterterrorism literature, principal-agent theory clarifies the challenges of delegation among states, international organizations, and local partners in the fight against terrorism. Typically, this involves a state (the principal) delegating counterterrorism responsibilities to another state, a military unit, or a regional security force (the agent).[10] It illustrates the issues that arise when a powerful state relies on a weaker one to achieve a specific foreign policy objective. The theory suggests that the principal depends on the host or local partners to meet its obligations,

especially when their interests align. The US military assistance and training programs for Sahelian governments and their security forces, aimed at addressing threats posed by Islamist jihadist organizations, highlight the theory's primary objective. Security assistance encompasses a range of services, including military equipment, advice, military exercises, information sharing, institution-building, financial resources, logistics, intelligence sharing, and the provision of defense materiel.[11]

The governments and security apparatus of Sahelian nations, including the G5 Sahel Force, have utilized these tools to counter and disrupt terrorist networks affecting the region. Alliance theory, on the other hand, explains why states form security partnerships and how these alliances function. Within the counterterrorism literature, alliance theory helps illustrate how states collaborate to combat terrorism. The rationale for counterterrorism alliances arises when states pool their resources, share intelligence, and coordinate military operations against terrorist threats. A classic example is the G5 Sahel Joint Force, comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, which was established to enhance regional counterterrorism cooperation. Additionally, the traditional alliance theory suggests that states form alliances against powerful adversaries to maintain a balance of power, and at times, against non-state armed actors or terrorist organizations. The US allied with Sahelian governments not because of their military strength but due to shared concerns about jihadist expansion.[12] This paper demonstrates how US counterterrorism operations, notably the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), are analyzed through the lens of principal-agent and alliance theory. More importantly, this study reveals that US counterterrorism operations often stem from a principal-agent nexus. The US created counterterrorism initiatives (the principal) and partnered with states in the Sahel region, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, along with their security forces, to combat violent extremist organizations that have established sanctuaries in the ungoverned spaces in the area. The agents may not fully align with the principal's goals. While the primary objective of the principal is to neutralize terrorist threats, the agent might prioritize regime survival and political control or sometimes tacitly cooperate with the militant groups for short-term gains.[13] For example, some Sahelian states have been accused of using counterterrorism operations to suppress political opposition rather than targeting violent extremist groups, and have also engaged in corruption by diverting resources intended for counterterrorism purposes for personal gains due to a lack of oversight mechanisms. This was prevalent between the Malian state and the Ministry of Defense. Moreover, in Nigeria, arms and weapons are sold in black markets to Boko Haram members to combat the Nigerian armed forces. Interestingly, the principal-agent theory frequently encounters challenges related to asymmetric information and monitoring. The agent typically possesses better local intelligence and operational knowledge than the principal, creating an information asymmetry. For instance, reports suggest that some governments in the Sahel exaggerate the effectiveness of counterterrorism missions to maintain Western support.

To mitigate risks, the principal employs mechanisms such as financial incentives, training programs, and military oversight to align agent behavior with their objectives. However, these mechanisms are not foolproof or infallible against corruption; shifting alliances and altering political dynamics can occasionally undermine their effectiveness. For example, the US attached a series of conditions to the security assistance, including the promotion of democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law, and civilian control of the armed forces. Violating these norms and values may result in sanctions and the suspension of military assistance, as the Leahy law prohibits the US from providing security assistance to a foreign country implicated in human rights abuses or to its armed forces that oust a democratically elected president from office.[14]

Moreover, the US withdrawal from the Sahel has altered the principal-agent dynamic, shifting reliance from France, the European Union, and regional coalitions to new actors in the Sahel region. The Sahelian states have contracted a Russian private security company, the Wagner Group, now known as the Africa Corp, to fill the void left by the US and other international actors. More importantly, China and Russia have moved to occupy the vacuum created by the departure of the UN peacekeeping force and other Western states.[15] As a result, China, Russia (the principal), and the Sahelian states have security forces (agents) to counter the Islamic jihadist groups in the area. Thus, the growing involvement of non-Western security providers, including the Wagner Group, presents new challenges in monitoring and aligning counterterrorism strategies with those of the US, France, and Europe. Similarly, a shift in alliances can open the door for alternative partners. When one alliance weakens, states may seek alternative security providers. A typical example is that after the US and France scaled back counterterrorism operations, Burkina Faso and Mali turned to Russia's private security company, the Wagner Group, for military support. The decline of Western-backed alliances has led to a more fragmented counterterrorism approach in the Sahel.[16] Interestingly, all the Sahelian states, such as Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, have shifted away from Western-backed counterterrorism efforts and realigned their alliances with non-Western actors. Alliance theory in counterterrorism literature explains why states cooperate against terrorism, how these partnerships operate, and why they often fail. The US withdrawal from the Sahel exemplifies the fragility of alliances and the risks associated with dependence on Western external security guarantees.[17]

In summary, the principal-agent theory offers a valuable lens for understanding the complexities of counterterrorism cooperation, particularly in fragile regions such as the Sahel. The theory highlights the challenges in delegation, oversight, and maintaining aligned incentives between external security actors and local government.

3. The Role of the US in Sahel Counterterrorism Efforts

Historically, the United States has played a pivotal role in the Sahel, with a primary focus on humanitarian assistance, development, and Cold War-era geopolitics.[18] Following the 9/11 attacks, the US foreign policy toward the Sahel has been

primarily driven by security assistance and military cooperation centered on counterterrorism. The global security environment changed dramatically, and the US global war on terror, initiated during President George W. Bush's administration, contributed to the expansion of the US military footprint worldwide, including in the Sahel with counterterrorism efforts intended to provide security forces with training, military exercises, and participation in combat against militant groups reflecting the enormity of the challenges in the region.[19] The US has become increasingly concerned about ungoverned spaces turning into havens for violent extremist organizations, resulting in the establishment of the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) in 2002 to train and equip local forces to secure porous borders, monitor human trafficking, and promote regional cooperation and stability. The counterterrorism program was designed as a capacity-building effort for security forces in Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad to combat the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), militant group from Algeria establishing a presence in northern Mali. The PSI initiated its capacity-building efforts with $7.5 million for training and equipping, as part of the counterterrorism initiative.[20] In 2005, PSI was rebranded as the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) with expanded membership and funding. Six new countries joined the TSCTP, including Algeria, Burkina Faso, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia, bringing the total to ten. The mission of the TSCTP expanded beyond security cooperation to include development and diplomacy programs, addressing the socio-economic drivers that enable violent extremist organizations to thrive, while promoting coordination among participating nations.[21] According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), countries involved in the TSCTP received $340 million in counterterrorism programs between 2005 and 2013. This counterterrorism approach has dominated US foreign policy in the Sahel and Sahara since the global war on terror paradigm began. The US has invested over $ 1 billion in the TSCTP since its creation, coordinating a whole-of-government approach in the region that emphasizes equipping and training local militaries to advance counterterrorism initiatives.[22] Furthermore, counterterrorism operations have expanded to other parts of Africa with the establishment of the United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM). Established in 2007, AFRICOM oversees all US military and security activities, including those in the Sahel region.[23] The significance of US counterterrorism operations in the Sahel region is immense, given the region's strategic importance and the escalating threat from violent extremist organizations. US operations in the area have been instrumental in supporting local governments' efforts to stabilize their nations and in preventing extremist groups from increasing their influence across Africa and into Europe.[24] Islamist Jihadist activities have surged in the Sahel since the 2000s, with 2010 marking a notable increase in terrorist attacks in Mali and Nigeria. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have become an epicenter of violent extremism, according to existing counterterrorism literature. The threats from militant jihadist organizations have evolved and escalated. The number of militant groups has increased alongside the expansion of US counterterrorism operations. The current crisis in the region is linked to the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's government in Libya in 2011, which triggered a proliferation of weapons and armed groups in the area.[25] The inflow of extremists into northern Mali ignited the Tuareg rebellion and civil war in 2012. Tuaregs soldiers returned to Mali and Niger after Gaddafi's regime was overthrown to form the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) in pursuit of an independent state spurred by economic marginalization and political exclusion by the Malian government. Tuareg separatists aligned with several foreign Islamist jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and al-Mourabitoun, to overthrow the Malian government.[26] During the conflict involving Malian security forces, Tuareg separatists, and the Islamist jihadist organizations in the north, the militant groups captured three key cities, Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu, and declared independence under Sharia law. The Malian armed forces faced humiliation, and President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) was blamed for the defeat. In 2012, the Malian security forces ousted the democratically elected president, plunging the Sahel region into political instability.[27] Meanwhile, the US has played a critical role in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts in the Sahel, ensuring regional stability and preventing the spread of violent extremist organizations in the area through the deployment of its military personnel, intelligence sharing, surveillance, reconnaissance, training, and the provision of funding, logistical support, and equipment. Extremist groups like Boko Haram, AQIM, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) or Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims have exploited weak state control, poverty, and ethnic tension to recruit and expand their capacity to carry out attacks on innocent civilians across borders. However, the US counterterrorism efforts through training, intelligence, and logistical support have helped Sahelian countries contain extremist violence and restrict the spread of these groups to neighboring regions and Europe.[28] US security cooperation with Mali diminished during the Tuareg rebellion due to concerns that the government might use it against the rebels. Military assistance and security cooperation ceased after the coup because the Leahy Law prohibits the US from providing security assistance to foreign governments that remove a democratically elected president from office.

Moreover, the US supported the French armed forces and neighboring countries in their fight against jihadist groups in the north. In Niger, the US increased its military assistance and security cooperation, and its military personnel sometimes engaged in combat operations against extremists. The US intervened directly in the Sahel when the civil war in Mali began. The French government also played a significant role in the region before the civil war, establishing a capacity-building initiative that included a counterterrorism regiment in Mali. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Tuareg rebels posed a threat to the 6,000 French forces in Mali. Against this backdrop, in 2013, the US supported the French government's Operation Serval to drive extremist groups out of the three key cities under their control. The US provided logistical support, such as airlift and in-flight refueling, for French aircraft and unmanned drones

conducting reconnaissance operations in support of French forces. Additionally, a few US Special Operations Forces (SOFs) were deployed in Mali to assist French and African Union troops. The operation was successful, and the extremist groups were driven away, and the contested cities were reclaimed.[29] The French government launched Operation Barkhane in 2014, which expanded to include counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram in Nigeria and other extremist groups in the area. The US armed forces participated directly and indirectly in the counterterrorism operations in the Sahel.[30]

Furthermore, Boko Haram, which was formed in northeastern Nigeria in 2002 by Muhammed Yusuf, has spread its activities to the Lake Chad Basin, including Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. The US provided training, logistical support, and intelligence to the African Union's Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat the extremist group, which gained international recognition when it abducted 276 Chibok schoolgirls in 2014. The extremist group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015 and rebranded itself as the Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP). With US support, the MNJTF reclaimed all the contested territories from Boko Haram and ISWAP in the basin. Additionally, and more importantly, with US military assistance and counterterrorism efforts, France established the G5 Sahel Joint Force, comprising the five Sahel nations, with a counterterrorism force of 5,000 aimed at combating militant groups within the borders of all member states. This support has also enhanced regional cooperation, as seen in the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which unites Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to collaborate in fighting terrorism. US support has been crucial in enhancing the capabilities of local militaries and police forces through programs led by the US Africa Command (AFRICOM). Through the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership, the United States has provided training and equipment, enabling Sahelian forces to conduct counterterrorism operations independently.[31] US military personnel engaged in the Sahel address extremist threats through the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) against al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Security assistance to Niger has increased from $12.5 million in 2012 to $39 million in 2014 and $94.7 million in 2016. As a result, the US footprint in Niger has increased significantly, leading to the establishment of a drone base in Agadez, Niger, at the cost of 100 million dollars and 30 million in maintenance per year to fight jihadist groups. AFRICOM oversees training and equipment programs, security assistance, and joint military exercises across the continent. The US military footprint in Africa has expanded significantly, with 29 military bases across the continent and 7,000 military personnel deployed.[32] The US intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities have been critical in tracking movements and identifying threats. More importantly, the drone base in Niger and other assets provide real-time intelligence that Sahelian forces can use to conduct targeted operations. The intelligence-sharing framework has increased the success rate of operations against high-value targets and disrupted planned attacks that could pose risks to African countries, Europe, and US interests abroad.[33]

Similarly, the instability in the Sahel has the potential to spill over into neighboring regions, impacting West African littoral states and beyond. Unchecked violent extremist organizations can create humanitarian emergencies that result in mass displacement, ungoverned spaces, and trafficking routes that can serve criminal and terrorist interests. Therefore, the US counterterrorism programs help mitigate these risks by addressing root causes and reducing opportunities for extremists to exploit vulnerable populations. This is significant given Europe's geographical proximity to the Sahel and the potential for refugee flows and extremist infiltration that could threaten Western nations.[34] The US presence in the Sahel acts as a counterbalance to the growing influence of Russia and China, both of which have increased their engagement in Africa through security partnerships and economic investments. By maintaining a presence in the Sahel, the US promotes a more stable environment that aligns with its broader geopolitical interests, thereby limiting opportunities for revisionist countries to exert influence through security dependencies. Stability in the Sahel supports humanitarian and development goals, as counterterrorism operations foster safer conditions for organizations to provide aid, education, and infrastructure. The US significantly contributes to the region's security by tackling the conflict drivers that encourage recruitment into extremist groups.[35] In conclusion, US counterterrorism operations in the Sahel are essential for supporting regional security, containing violent extremism, and stabilizing fragile states. However, these operations do not provide a permanent solution but play a critical role in countering Salafi Islamist jihadist groups, supporting regional forces, and fostering an environment where governance and development can take root. Nevertheless, the gradual US withdrawal from the Sahel risks reversing the gains achieved over decades, leading to increased instability and opportunities for adversarial powers and extremist groups to expand their influence.[36]

Furthermore, the US was not the only Western actor confronting violent extremist groups in the Sahel. Several key regional and other international partners have been involved in the fight against these militants. The first major actor in the region was the former colonial power of the Sahelian states, France. France launched Operation Serval in 2013 to reclaim contested territories from extremist organizations in the north.[37] France's counterterrorism efforts successfully reclaimed the territories that the Islamist jihadist groups from northern Mali had occupied. In 2014, the French transitioned Operation Serval into Operation Barkhane, a new counterterrorism strategy involving 6,000 French military personnel. Among these, forces 3,000 forces were based in Chad, while the remaining troops were deployed in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to combat violent extremist groups, with support from Chad and Mauritania.[38] In 2017, France established the G5 Sahel Joint Forces to address terrorism, organized crime, and human trafficking in the region. Operation Barkhane's mandate, was expanded to provide additional support to the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) which consist of Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria aiming to deal with threats from Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP), as well as organized crime and banditry in the Lake Chad Basin.[39] The UN

has also deployed the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) peacekeeping force to support the G5 Sahel Joint Force, providing 5,000 counterterrorism personnel to combat militant groups across the borders of all member states, thereby contributing to regional stability. The European Union's support in the Sahel, particularly in Mali, led to the establishment of the Special Operation Task Force, Takuba, in 2020, aimed at securing regional stability. US counterterrorism operations, under the TSCTP, along with regional and international partners in the area, worked together to achieve a common goal in the region. France has deployed 5,100 troops backed by 15,000 UN peacekeepers in the Sahel.[40] Notably, the United States has played a crucial role in the Sahel by providing logistics and advisory support to all the regional and international partners and multinational forces in the area to help neutralize extremist jihadist activities.

4. Impact of US Withdrawal on Counterterrorism Operational Effectiveness

The United Nations has recently labeled sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the Sahel, as the 'new epicenter of violent extremism.[41] The US counterterrorism efforts, along with the crucial roles France and other international actors in ensuring regional stability in the Sahel, should not be underestimated despite the demands of Mali and Niger to withdraw from the region. This section of the paper focuses on the withdrawal of the US and other international partners, as well as their ramifications for Sahelian security and the effectiveness of regional counterterrorism operations against Salafi-Islamist jihadist organizations. The security landscape in the Sahel has dramatically changed, ravaged by several interconnected armed conflicts and the expansion of jihadist insurgencies in recent years.[42] Figures indicate an increase in violent attacks by militant groups in recent years compared to the periods when the US, France, the European Union, and the UN MINUSMA peacekeeping force were present in the region. The epicenter of the Salafi jihadist activities is the tri-border region between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. From 2012 and 2022, the Sahel has been a focus of attention from Western partners, due to the Tuareg rebellion, and the spread of jihadism in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Recently, a military coup in these three countries alienated Western partners, leading the US to suspend its military assistance and security cooperation with the nations, aside from humanitarian aid. The area has undergone significant political and economic transformation since 2020. Military interventions in politics have resulted in regional fragmentation and increased isolation from Western partners, including the United States. These actions angered the military juntas, which have decided to expel international actors from their various countries. This has contributed to a bilateral dispute between the current Malian government and France. The deteriorating diplomatic and political relationship between these former partners led to a rupture in their military cooperation and collaboration. Anti-French and anti-European sentiments have sparked several protests in various countries against their presence in the Sahel. The Malian authorities have decided to terminate the Defense Cooperation Treaty between France and Mali, as well as the Status of Forces Agreement governing the French and European partner forces engaged in the Takuba Task Force (TTF). This means

the French and European forces can no longer operate in Mali. The military leader has also called on the UN peacekeeping operation, MINUSMA, to withdraw from the country. The withdrawal of international actors from the region has created a vacuum that militant groups have exploited, exacerbating the insecurity crisis in the area.[43] In 2022, France, Canada, and the European Union withdrew their armed forces and military resources from Mali. This development impacted Operation Barkhane, a counterinsurgency operation with 5,000 military personnel deployed in the Sahel, as well as EU special operations units, including the Takuba Task Force, which supports local counterterrorism efforts. The G5 Sahel Joint Force is a regional counterterrorism task force composed of military personnel from Sahelian states, primarily responsible for counterterrorism operations.[44] France's growing unpopularity led to the suspension of Operation Barkhane and the European Task Force Takuba in 2022, resulting in the complete withdrawal of troops from Mali and marking the end of the decade-long intervention.[45]

Meanwhile, the US footprint in Niger increased significantly, as it signed a Status of Forces Agreement to operate unarmed drones in support of Operation Serval in the region. President Obama deployed 150 Special Operations Forces (SOFs) to Niger to establish a drone base and conduct reconnaissance flights and assist French forces in Mali with intelligence against the militant groups. Niger signed a second agreement with the US in 2015, focusing on counterterrorism operations, which increased the number of US military personnel to 800.[46] The military regime in Niamey has asked the French armed forces and US military personnel to withdraw from the country, surprising the US. The US established a drone base in Agadez, Niger, in the Western Sahel worth 100 million dollars which has been operating with manned and unmanned surveillance flights against violent extremist groups, the backbone of US counterterrorism operations in the region. Additionally, the US has invested millions of dollars in training the Nigerien armed forces, which has led to strained relations between the two nations. The US expressed concerns about the Nigerien administration supplying uranium to Iran and discouraged the military regime from collaborating with Russia. President Mohammed Bazoum of Niger criticized the counterterrorism initiatives of the US and France for failing to achieve the desired results, despite extensive security assistance aimed at eliminating extremism for the G5 partners. The US departure from the region could pose significant challenges to counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel, with repercussions for the entire continent.[47] The withdrawal was completed on September 15, 2024, indicating that counterterrorism operations are now under the auspices of the Nigerien armed forces.[48] Some of the new military regimes in the Sahel believe that the US military presence shares a similar colonialist and imperialist agenda, prioritizing the security and diplomatic interests of superpowers at the expense of regional demands to address the root causes of conflict drivers in the region.[49] Meanwhile, the US also decided to withdraw its military personnel from Chad in compliance with the country's military demands. Today, anti-French sentiment in the region has impacted all international partners in the area, with significant

implications for the United States.

In recent years, as the US has reduced its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, regional forces have encountered intelligence gaps that hinder proactive counterterrorism measures. France's Operation Barkhane, which concluded in 2022, has exacerbated the challenges faced by the Sahelian states in addressing security issues. The loss of US drone surveillance and strikes in Niger and Mali has significantly diminished situational awareness.[50] Furthermore, the withdrawal has left regional forces with fewer training opportunities, which in turn impacts their ability to conduct complex counterterrorism missions. In the absence of the European Union Takuba Task Force and the UN peacekeeping force (MINUSMA) to fill the void, the contributions of the G5 Sahel Force and the African Union Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) are limited to neutralizing jihadist groups in the region. Most importantly, the area faces logistical and strategic coordination challenges. Counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel depend on effective coordination among US forces, France, and regional coalitions, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force. The departure of US military personnel has disrupted logistical supply chains and emergency response mechanisms, further undermining operational effectiveness in the region.[51]

Additionally, the existing literature has empirically demonstrated how the withdrawal of the US and other international actors has impacted the operational effectiveness of counterterrorism, the increase in Salafi-Islamist Jihadist groups, and the deterioration of security in the region. In recent years, Salafi jihadist extremist groups have exploited the security vacuum to escalate their attacks across the region. Following the departure of French armed forces and the European Union, the Takuba Task Force experienced an increase in attacks, resulting in the deaths of about 2,000 civilians, a 50 percent increase from 2021. These attacks have also targeted regional security forces, local security apparatus, MINUSMA, and various governments in the area. Empirical data analysis from the US State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations has shown that the Sahel region experienced the highest number of terrorist attacks in 2021.[52] The deadliest terrorist groups operating in Mali and Burkina Faso, and Niger are Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslim (JNIM), or the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The collapse of international counterterrorism support, combined with weakening governance, poverty, democratic backsliding, legitimacy deficit, and human rights violations in the region, has created a vacuum for extremist groups to expand. These groups are capitalizing on the security crisis to intensify their attacks.[53] Furthermore, according to the African Center for Strategic Studies, the Sahel experienced a 44 percent increase in violence in 2020, with 1,170 violent events and 4,122 fatalities involving Islamist groups like the Macina Liberation Front (MLF). JNIM and ISGS are accountable for all attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.[54] The terrorist attacks in these areas have created humanitarian emergencies, and the violence has displaced millions of people in the Sahel, with Burkina Faso being the most affected country in the region. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), violent conflict has led to the displacement of one million Burkinabes, and 3.5 million people require urgent assistance.[55] Additionally, empirical evidence from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) reveals that the region saw a 35 percent increase in organized political violence in 2020, with 2022 marking the deadliest year for attacks by the two prominent jihadist groups (JNIM, ISGS). Niger has faced threats from the militant groups Boko Haram and ISWAP along its southern border as well as JNIM and ISGS along the western flank.[56] The violence in the Sahel region is evolving into a regional problem that threatens coastal West African nations, including Benin, Togo, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast, along their northern borders. The worsening security situation in the Sahel has placed significant pressure on these littoral states to contain extremist groups, leading to an increased sense of urgency both internationally and domestically in the sub-region. This threat has contributed to the 2022 Accra Initiative, which includes these littoral countries, and aims to establish a 10,000-strong Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to counter jihadi spillover violence.[57]

Meanwhile, the activities of JNIM and ISGS attacks have spilled over into the Sahel, threatening the Gulf of Guinea littoral states in the West African sub-region. JNIM has gained control over territory in northern and central Mali. At the same time, the ISGS has taken control of areas north of Burkina Faso and western Niger, following clashes with JNIM in 2020. The Sahel region has undergone significant political and economic transformations since the military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These countries have withdrawn from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the regimes have been accused of human rights abuses. The three countries signed a mutual defense pact, solidifying their alliance against external intervention to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). These rapid political changes have affected the West's ability to maintain focus on the Sahel, leading major donors, including Germany, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, to reduce their foreign aid. Western powers currently face challenges in navigating a complex, multipolar environment where power is diffused among several global actors vying for influence. The declining monitoring of Sahelian dynamics hampers understanding of the strategies employed by extremist groups. The militants' territorial expansion is underpinned by their strategic involvement in illicit economies, which generate revenues and legitimacy among local communities, allowing them to thrive.[58]

Empirical evidence from the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) indicates that the Sahel accounts for 43 percent of the world's terrorism deaths, surpassing those in South Asia, the Middle East, and the North Africa region combined. In 2021, there were 6,000 recorded deaths; in 2022, 9,000; and in 2023, 12,000 deaths in the area, predominantly civilians, with 3 million people internally displaced. Given the continued fatalities resulting from jihadist groups in the Sahel, the US may opt to maintain security partnerships through counterterrorism operations with military regimes to negotiate roadmaps and timetables for democratic elections rather than succumb to political violence.[59] According

to ACLED, Islamist jihadist violence surged across the region in 2023. From January to July 2023, 7,800 civilian deaths were recorded, marking a significant increase from 2022. This empirical data contradicts claims made by the military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger that they are addressing insecurity in the region. Regional security has deteriorated since the US and its international partners withdrew from the area. The fiercest terrorist group, JNIM, launched a renewed offensive against northern cities, notably Timbuktu, targeting both security forces and civilians. As a result, extremist group activities have increased, and Mali is on the brink of civil war. The Malian security forces in the north have clashed with Tuareg ethnic groups, while the jihadists have gained control of Kidal city. Recently, several members of security forces and volunteer fighters have been killed by Islamist jihadist groups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and the Sahelian governments are struggling to regain control over their territorial integrity following the departure of international actors.[60]

5. The Role of Russia and China in the Sahel After the Withdrawal of the US and France

The geopolitical vacuum created by the French and US withdrawals from the Sahel grants Russia and China significant leverage to expand their political, economic, and military influence in support of the Sahelian army regimes. Western powers, especially the United States and France, have attached permanent political and moral conditionalities to their military assistance. Russia, however, has adopted a strategy of non-interference in domestic affairs, providing security, arms, and weapons in exchange for access to power and natural resources. Similarly, China, the region's largest foreign direct investor, offers prompt support and infrastructure promises in return for mineral resources, which has helped the junta in consolidating power without transitioning to a democratic regime. Beijing and Moscow have capitalized on the failures of Western peacekeeping missions and military withdrawals, offering diplomatic, economic, and security assistance to these regimes. Consequently, following after the Franco-American departure, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have deepened their economic and military partnerships with Russia and China.[61] Russia is leveraging its security policy to enhance its influence in Africa and the Sahel through its private security company, the Wagner Group. The Malian government has welcomed the group to fill the counterterrorism security vacuum by training local armed forces and providing security to senior Malian officials against attacks from violent extremist organizations, particularly JNIM and ISGS. The group will earn $10.8 million a month and deploy 1,000 troops in Mali, which dwarfs the Takuba Task Force and the French armed forces deployed during Operation Barkhane.[62] Russia has exploited France's troubles in the area to bolster its counterterrorism operations and its security assistance package to the military juntas across Africa, especially in the Sahel. Moscow has established military partnerships and patron-client relationships with the Sahelian states. The Kremlin has partnered with the Wagner Group, a state-affiliated company comprising former members of the Kremlin's Special Forces and intelligence personnel.[63] The Wagner Group provides security assistance and counterterrorism programs to Mali and the Central African

Republic. It is in the interest of both Russia and China to maintain the new military regimes to curb frequent coups and counter-coups. After the 2021 coup in Mali, Russian military advisors and the Wagner Group, now rebranded as the African Corp, deployed L-39 jets, Sukhoi-25 fighter jets, and Mi-24P helicopter gunships, along with 400 mercenaries, aimed at combating jihadist insurgencies in the region. Russian has become the ally of choice for Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Additionally, Russia's armed forces and the Wagner Group are also operating in the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Sudan, and South Sudan.[64] In 2023, a Gallup poll found that African approval of US leadership had decreased, while that of China and Russia had increased. It remains unclear whether this shift will reduce the extremist violence that has destabilized the region for several years. As the US and France retreat from the Sahel, the new geopolitical reality of East-West competition that emerged during the Cold War has resurfaced in contemporary African politics, specifically in the Sahel, driving strategic realignment.[65] This transition from Western to Eastern alliances in the Sahel raises critical questions about the future of regional security and the management of local resources. The only question that remains is whether China and Russia can provide a lasting solution to violent extremism, banditry, armed group proliferation, corruption, and poverty. For instance, Burkina Faso is facing increasing insecurity despite Russia's security assistance and a team of 100 paramilitary fighters; violence continues to engulf the nation. Currently, 2.1 million Burkinabes have been internally displaced due to ongoing conflict, and many schools have been closed. The African Center for Strategic Studies forecasts 8,600 deaths in Burkina Faso caused by militant Islamic groups, a 137 percent increase from the previous year's 3,627 fatalities. This empirical evidence underscores the complex geopolitical dynamics regarding extremist violence, highlighting the mixed results of foreign military intervention in the Sahel.[66]

The Wagner Group leads Moscow's counterterrorism operations in the region, particularly in Mali, and Burkina Faso and has faced accusations of human rights abuses, including rape, excessive use of force, torture, kidnapping, and murder against civilians. Alternatively, the Wagner Group is facing challenges from the two dangerous terrorist groups in the Sahel, JNIM and ISGS. JNIM has killed 35 Wagner Group mercenaries and injured over 100 in 2023.[67] The Group has also been accused of involvement in state mining and economic contracts in exchange for services in the Sahel and other parts of Africa, rather than focusing on defeating Salafi-jihadist organizations.[68] Russia fully supports the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and takes control of the security architecture and framework established by the Wagner Group. In conclusion, Islamist jihadist attacks have surged dramatically as international actors withdrew from the region due to reduced military pressure, which has fueled militant violence. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), terrorist attacks committed by the Groups for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the Islamic States of Greater Sahara increased by 70 percent in 2021 compared to 2020. The departure of Western countries and other regional players has solidified JNIM and ISGS's political control and strengthened their ideological presence in the area. Despite this

withdrawal, African-led security initiatives, such as the Accra Initiative, continue to focus on enhancing intelligence sharing and cross-border counterterrorism efforts.[69]

6. Policy Recommendations

• Reassessing US Security Assistance: Although a full re-engagement of Western and other actors may not be feasible, targeted intelligence and surveillance reconnaissance, as well as intelligence-sharing agreements, could enhance operational effectiveness in neutralizing jihadist groups in the region.

• Enhancing African-Led Counterterrorism Initiatives: The Economic Community of African States (ECOWAS) and African Union-led missions must be strengthened to mitigate the impact of reduced Western involvement.

• Diplomatic Engagement with Regional Governments: To discourage military intervention in politics, governments in the Sahelian states should incorporate liberal norms and values into their training programs, particularly those promoting democracy, respect for human rights, and civilian control of the armed forces.

7. Conclusion

The US departure and retreat from the Sahel region have created a significant security vacuum, raising concerns about regional stability, the possibility of expanded militant operations, and the strategic advantages gained by other international actors and revisionist powers competing for influence in the area. The US withdrawal from the Sahel has undermined the operational effectiveness of counterterrorism missions by diminishing intelligence capabilities, training support, and strategic coordination. The security vacuum left by the US forces, French armed forces, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission peacekeeping force, and the European Union Takuba Task Force has been partially filled by non-Western actors, particularly China and Russia. Russia has emerged as the leading actor provider of counterterrorism operations and security assistance to the tri-border Sahelian states including Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in their fight against Salafi jihadist groups in the region. Conversely, China maintains strong economic ties with the Sahelian countries, which help sustain their regimes and reduce the frequency of coups and counter-coups in the region. A shift in US foreign policy and a reduction of its military presence in the area have emboldened violent extremist groups, undermining local governments and security apparatus while exacerbating instability. Despite the Wagner Group's counterterrorism efforts in the region, the security crisis has allowed two of the deadliest Salafi jihadist groups, JNIM and ISGS, to increase and escalate their lethal attacks in the region against governments, security forces, and innocent civilians. The US withdrawal from the Sahel region has affected regional stability, leading violent extremist organizations to expand and gain more territory. Evidence indicates that the US military's presence has provided critical infrastructure and intelligence capabilities that other allies or regional forces cannot easily replace. The presence of African Corps and Russian paramilitary fighters has not stopped terrorist attacks. These forces are struggling to counter the two dangerous jihadist groups in the Sahel. Future counterterrorism strategies should concentrate on sustainable, locally led efforts supported by targeted international cooperation to help address and neutralize extremist groups in the region [1-28].

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