

## Stepping up Engagement in the Sahel: Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States

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*Over the past five years, since the latest wave of coups began in 2020, states in the Sahel have **strategically realigned** and shifted external partnerships. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger suspended their security collaboration with their long-term ally, France, following their respective coups between 2020 and 2023, and demanded for the immediate withdrawal of French troops while advancing a new narrative of sovereignty. In 2023 **Mali's regime ousted the decade-long, 13,000 troops-strong UN peacekeeping mission in the country, MINUSMA**, while Niger expelled the EU's two security and defense missions, one of which had been deployed since 2012. A few months later, Niger also broke off a decade-long defense **partnership with the US**. In a second wave of expulsions, yet **different in manner and context**, Chad, Senegal and Ivory Coast also suspended military collaboration with France in 2024.*

This recent expulsion of Western and multilateral partners has been accompanied by a turn by Sahelian states to old and new, predominantly authoritarian, actors. The shift reflects an effort by the military regimes to project independence, diversify their partners and ultimately maintain their hold on power. Traditional partners like China and Russia have intensified economic and security relationships with their Sahelian partners during the past few years, while newer partners like Turkey and the Gulf states have increased their presence and influence in the region through infrastructure projects, arms exports and natural resource deals. At the same time, the exit by the AES states from the regional organisation ECOWAS has resulted in both new partnerships and new tensions among member states, profoundly reshaping the regional landscape.

This article, the second in a two-part series [examining the security and political](#) context in the Sahel, explores these evolving partnerships with non-Western actors, focusing in particular on the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. It examines the broader lines of cooperation and engagement by Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf states and identifies both similarities and important differences in their approaches. The aim is to provide a clearer overview of the Sahel's shifting international relationships and to deepen the understanding of the dynamics, tensions and strategic choices among non-Western partners. With a growing number of external actors competing for influence in the Sahel, Europe must base its recalibrated (re)engagement on a solid understanding of these dynamics.

### CHINA AND RUSSIA IN THE SAHEL: ELEPHANT VS PITBULL APPROACH

China and Russia are both two major authoritarian actors focused on extending their influence and presence across the globe. Yet, while they often are grouped together as principal competitors to Western interests and objectives, they have adopted very different approaches to expanding their influence in Africa. China has developed a deliberate, gradual, and weighty - but stable - presence on the continent, an approach that can be described as an "elephant strategy". In contrast, although also a long-standing partner, Russia has expanded its presence in a more reactive and tenacious manner, particularly following its growing isolation on the international stage after its aggressions against neighboring states in 2008, 2014 and more recently in 2022. Russia has taken a far more interventionist stance with a focus on immediate

impact primarily in states which are experiencing some type of armed conflict, in an attempt to develop strong, close relationships with the African leaders.

The following paragraphs examine Russia and China's distinct engagements with the AES states.

### ***Russia: Combat, Surveillance and Protection***

Russia's presence in the Sahel has primarily taken the form of both official and unofficial military cooperation including arms export, the supply of military equipment and the deployment of troops. While Russia's engagement in the Sahel predates the arrival of Wagner forces in Mali in 2021, it was their deployment that marked the starting point of the AES states' strategic realignment and catalyzed Russia's broader involvement in the region. Combined with [strategic and effective disinformation campaigns](#), Russia has been able to punch above its weight in the Sahel.

In Mali, the Wagner troops – whose presence has never officially been acknowledged by the transitional authorities, yet somewhat ironically confirmed by Russian officials - have actively participated in combat operations against both jihadist and armed separatist groups since their arrival. Tellingly, it was [Wagner's black flag](#) which was first raised - though quickly taken down - when the Malian army alongside Russian forces captured the symbolically important northern town Kidal from separatist control.

While the presence and activities of Wagner troops have been relatively clear in Mali, they are far less evident in Niger and Burkina Faso. A few hundred Russian troops, deployed under the banner of the Africa Corps – the successor to the Wagner group – [arrived in both states](#) during the winter and [spring of 2024](#) yet they have so far not appeared to take part in operations against jihadist groups. In Mali, a transition from Wagner forces to the Africa Corps is reportedly underway, but the process is slow, and verified information about it remains scarce.

The regimes in Niger and Burkina Faso have been [less inclined to allow assault detachments and foreign](#)

[troops operating in their countries](#). Instead, in Niger, Russian personnel are rumored to have taken control of and restructured the intelligence services, remaking the surveillance systems and managing disinformation campaigns. In Burkina Faso, Russian troops appear to be focused more on regime protection than on fighting jihadist groups. Between May and August 2024, around a hundred troops from the Russian Bear Brigade - a private military company linked to the Russian Ministry of Defense - were [deployed to Burkina Faso](#), reportedly to support the regime during a period of heightened risk of a new coup.

In 2024, Russia experienced several setbacks in its engagements on the African continent which provoked speculations about a possible withdrawal from the Sahel. These setbacks included the [Tinzaouaten ambush in northern Mali in July](#), where Malian military forces and Russian troops were attacked by Tuareg separatist and jihadist groups. The ambush resulted in Wagner's largest loss in the region to date, [with 80 troops killed](#). Additionally, the fall of the Syrian Bashar al-Assad regime – a close ally to Russia – and the subsequent evacuation of Russia's key [logistical military bases in Syria](#), which had been crucial for supporting their presence in Africa, fueled further discussions about Russia's overstretch in the region.

Yet, Russian troops remain present in the Sahel. Although some military equipment—such as an air defense system intended for Niger—has yet to arrive, Russia [delivered military vehicles](#) to Mali on an unprecedented scale in January 2025, including light tanks, armored vehicles, and military ambulances. Another shipment followed at the end of March according to observers in the country. In April 2025, Russia also publicly pledged support for the procurement of arms and the provision of training for the new AES joint force of 5,000 troops in April 2025. This backing led the Malian Foreign Minister to describe Russia as a ["sincere ally"](#) of the AES.

China, while also considered an ally by Sahelian states, has recently experienced tensions with the regimes in Niger and, to a lesser extent, in Mali.



### **China: Investing in Strategic Natural Resources**

China's presence in the Sahel region mirrors its broader continental imprint: a stable, growing influence mainly in the economic and natural resources spheres, through key engagements, such as investments in oil and mining.

In Niger, a Chinese national oil company developed the Agadem oil field and, since 2019, has been constructing a 2,000 km long pipeline from Niger to Benin for oil export. The \$6 billion project represents the [longest pipeline on the continent](#) and was initially expected to help remedy Niger's declining financial situation following the coup. Yet, since 2024, when the first expected 200,000 barrels per day were to be exported through the port of Cotonou, the project has faced numerous challenges.

The border closure between Benin and Niger - first due to ECOWAS sanctions against Niger following the coup and later because of ['security concerns' raised by the Niger regime](#) - has been the most visible obstacle. More recently tensions between the Nigerien regime and China have increased, following the [kidnapping of Chinese workers](#) and the [expulsion of three Chinese](#) oil executives. Additionally, the license for the Chinese-owned Soluxe hotel in Niamey was [revoked permanently](#), allegedly due to non-compliance with a new ordinance adopted by the Nigerien authorities in August 2024. The ordinance aims to assert more equal relations between Nigerien and foreign staff and greater influence over its resources.

Burkina Faso's military government has also [revised its mining code since taking power](#) to increase state benefits and oversight, particularly affecting the gold mining activities, as Burkina is Africa's fourth largest gold producer. Mining is the pillar of the Burkina Faso's economy, with gold dominating exports, accounting for approximately 76% of total exports in 2023 - a slightly declining figure since the coups in 2022. A Canadian company plays a major role in the sector, while Australia and Russia also control and operate mines in the country. A speech by Captain Traoré in October 2024, announcing the potential [withdrawal of licenses and a possible nationalisation](#), plunged the sector into uncertainty. However, no licenses

seem to have been withdrawn so far.

In Mali, the military authorities have similarly increased pressure on external partners following the introduction of a new mining code which ensures that a greater share of profits benefits the authorities. The prolonged dispute with the Canadian gold mining company Barricks has made the the headlines over the past two years, [recently resulting in the forced closure](#) of the company's offices after arrests of employees and the seizure of tons of gold stock, allegedly due to unpaid taxes.

Up until recently, Chinese illicit miners have profited from a largely unregulated artisanal mining, operating in the shadow of larger international companies. However, the [collapse of artisanal gold mines](#) in January and February, which killed more than 50 people, put the spotlight on the activities of foreign, particularly Chinese, artisanal miners. In late March, Mali demanded an immediate halt to illegal mining activities involving Chinese nationals and [summoned the Chinese Ambassador](#) to address the activities and their nefast environmental impact, including the overuse of mercury. However, since the miners were not acting on behalf of the Chinese government, the matter is unlikely to strain relations between the two countries.

Outside of the gold sector, the Chinese company, Ganfeng, signed [an agreement with the Malian authorities in 2024 for exploitation of lithium at the Goulamina](#) mine, located 150 kilometers south of Bamako. This agreement aligns with the new mining code, allowing the government to have a greater share of ownership. However, so far, there have been no public tensions regarding this development.

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As major global players, both China and, especially a semi-isolated Russia have increased their presence and influence in the AES countries since their respective coups. Yet, the AES states have maintained their new sovereignty and nationality narratives, as exemplified by the introduction of stricter rules for foreign companies – especially Western firms – but also, as seen here, for Chinese enterprises in

the mining sector. The crackdown on external actors in this sector has so far allegedly led to [increased state revenues](#) in Mali, while Niger's oil endeavours hold potential to do so, if the Nigerien regime manages to negotiate a better deal with the Chinese company.

However, it is difficult to predict whether this trend will be sustainable, given the increased insecurity and instability, which generally disadvantage foreign investments. In the security sector, Russia dominates as an external actor, yet recent setbacks in Mali suggest a bumpier road ahead than before. In neighbouring AES states, especially in Niger, the Russian influence remains difficult to discern. So far, however, Russia remains a key ally to the AES more broadly. Yet, Sahel states have lived up to their promises of diversifying their partnerships, with Turkey and the Gulf states emerging as important new actors in the region.

### MIDDLE POWERS MAKING INROADS

Russia and China may have increased their presence in the AES countries over the past few years, and especially after the recent coup wave, but so have other external partners. These actors have benefitted from the global power competition to provide a politically less sensitive alternative. Turkey especially and increasingly the Gulf states have made inroads into the Sahel more broadly and the AES states specifically.

#### *Turkey: Much More than an Alternative Arms Exporter*

Turkey has significantly increased its influence and presence across Africa over the past 15 years. Between 2003 and 2019, Turkey went from [12 to 42 embassies on the continent](#), a figure which further increased to 44 by 2024. This can be compared to longstanding partners like France, which has [46 embassies](#) in Africa, and the US, which has 50.

Turkey opened [embassies in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso](#) in 2010 and 2012. While initially adopting a multi-faceted approach to the Sahel focused on trade and aid, Turkey has more recently deepened its engagement with the AES states through arms provision, infrastructure

development, and a growing interest for the region's natural resources.

In terms of infrastructure, Turkey built both mosques and hospitals in Niger and Mali prior to their respective coups. These were strategic investments that allowed Turkey to pursue a ['nation-branding' strategy](#) and establish itself as a reliable partner, while at the same time building a strong reputation in religious affairs and less politically sensitive sectors, such as the health care. In addition to these initiatives, in 2019, the Turkish company Summa rebuilt and financed Niger's [international airport](#) and constructed the Radisson Blu Presidential Hotel in Niamey ahead of the African Union summit - both important strategic investments. Direct flights operated by Turkish airlines to all three AES states have facilitated these growing connections.

Turkey has also expanded its engagement in the security sphere. As early as 2018, it provided [\\$5 million in support](#) of the now-defunct G5 Sahel Joint Force, while two years later, it signed a new defense agreement with Niger. More recently, Turkey has become [Africa's leading supplier of drones](#), with a total of 32 agreements - 28 of which have been signed since 2021. The country has emerged as one of the main arms providers to the Sahelian states, notably through its BayraktarTB2 drones. These drones provide a significantly cheaper alternative to Western ones, with each unit costing approximately [\\$4 million in comparison to \\$30 million for an American Reaper drone](#).

More importantly, buying drones from Turkey allows states to avoid taking an explicit stand in the global power competition – something that buying from [Russia or China could imply – potentially further alienating Western or other partners](#). Turkish instructors are reportedly present in [all three AES countries](#), delivering training and maintenance support for the drones they have supplied.

The training that accompanies Turkey's arms exports is delivered by the Turkish state military. However, reports also suggest the deployment of Syrian mercenaries affiliated with the Turkish private military company SADAT in the Sahel, particularly in Niger. While the full extent

and objectives of their presence remain opaque, sources indicate they are involved in [protecting mining, oil, and military infrastructure](#), and have at times [engaged jihadist groups](#)—reportedly even under Russian command—in the tri-border area between Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. SADAT’s explicitly religious orientation enables Turkey to project not only military but also ideological influence. In this context, Niger—where [Salafist currents have gained traction](#), especially following the recent coup—has emerged as a [strategic entry point for Turkey’s](#) broader ambitions on the continent.

As a country that produced only 25% of its own energy in 2022, Turkey is also interested in natural resources in the region - especially in Niger’s uranium, which could provide an important alternative to [Russian imports for its planned nuclear power plants](#). In October 2024, [Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in mining](#) with Niger, while discussions with the Malian authorities about potential gold mining projects are underway, though they currently appear to be stalled. That notwithstanding, trade between Turkey and Mali is steadily increasing: figures went from [just \\$5 million in 2003 to \\$57 million](#) in 2019 – a more than ten-fold increase. Trade and mining cooperation have also increased between the Gulf states and the AES countries, with religious influence and mediation playing increasingly important roles.

### ***The Gulf States: Gold, Religion and Mediation***

The Gulf states - here referring to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Qatar - have increasingly projected their influence into the AES countries and broader Sahel through a mix of security, economic, and religious strategies. The UAE has taken the lead with a militarized, transactional approach, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar pursue more state-centric models focused on diplomacy and development. The Gulf states’ presence is driven by a desire to shape outcomes in a region that straddles key geostrategic corridors, as well as by the emerging opportunities following the withdrawal of Western states and multilateral organisations and the AES states’ ongoing realignments. As oil and gas producers

aware of the global energy transition, the Gulf states also view engagement in sub-Saharan Africa as a means [to diversify their economies](#).

Already in 2017 Saudi Arabia and the UAE [pledged €100 and €30 million respectively](#), for the then recently created G5 Sahel Joint Force. Since then, both states have increased their influence in the Sahel region. In 2019, the UAE and Mali signed a [military cooperation agreement](#); a year later, Abu Dhabi provided 60 armoured vehicles to Bamako. More broadly across Africa, the UAE has developed a distinctive model of “military support without an army,” by relying on mercenaries, proxies, and logistics networks to support armed actors like Libya’s National Army (LNA) and Sudan’s Rapid Support Forces (RSF). It has financed, trained, and equipped fighters—often Sudanese or Chadian—through covert supply chains and Emirati-run logistics companies.

The UAE is also rumoured to have [collaborated with the Wagner Group](#) to ship arms to RSF via Chad, while acting as a transportation hub and key focal point for illicit gold and diamond smuggling networks. Gold trafficking from Mali and Sudan to Dubai has exposed a major shadow economy that funds armed groups and extends the UAE’s influence. Weak enforcement in Mali—where only the first [50 kg of gold per month is taxed](#), and where illicit gold between Bamako and Dubai [is hand-carried](#)—has made the country a conduit for these flows, with up to \$1 billion worth of Venezuelan gold reportedly moved [through Mali to the UAE in 2020](#).

Other Gulf states, like Saudi Arabia and Qatar have opted for soft-power strategies rooted in diplomacy, religious influence, and development assistance. In November 2023, Riyadh hosted the first [Saudi-Africa summit](#), during which Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced plans to invest \$25 billion in Africa by 2030, targeting sectors like clean energy, infrastructure, and mining. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has deepened ties with Sahelian states through energy diplomacy and Salafi outreach, backing missionary networks like Izala across the Sahel. The Izala network is particularly active in Niger, a country that has seen an [increasing ‘salafisation’](#) since the coup, supported by Saudi Arabia. In October 2024, the Saudi

Ministry of Islamic Affairs organised a [five-day scientific qualification course](#) for over 700 preachers, imams and orators, underscoring its emphasis on promoting religious engagement in Burkina Faso in the Sahel.

Meanwhile, Qatar has positioned itself as a mediator and development partner in Africa. The emirate has been involved in [mediating conflicts](#) across the continent, although with mixed results. Qatar's foreign aid strategy includes funding infrastructure projects and humanitarian initiatives. In 2021, for example, the [Qatar cancer treatment center in Burkina Faso](#) was inaugurated, financed by the Qatar Fund for Development, while in February 2025, the Fund signed a [\\$50 million loan and grant agreement](#) with the Ministry of Economy and Finance of Mali. Rumours also suggest that Qatar may be given a mediation role between the Malian military regime and both Islamist and separatist groups in the north, though these claims remain unconfirmed.

In summary, the UAE has employed a more assertive and militarized strategy, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar have focused on economic investments, religious outreach, and diplomatic mediation - each shaping their unique influence across the Sahel.

## CONCLUSION

As Western and multilateral organisations' influence has declined in the Sahel, the emerging space has increasingly been filled by both larger players, like China and Russia, but also middle powers such as Turkey and the Gulf states. These actors are similar in the sense that they are all non-Western, (semi) authoritarian and in pursuit of more influence in Africa. Yet, they deploy different approaches to do so, and engage in distinct manners with their partners on the continent.

Russia's engagement with its African partners in the Sahel [benefits from instability, conflict and fragile regimes](#). Stable states are unlikely to hire mercenaries and strong and legitimate governments do not ask for regime protection. Russia's limited offer of troop deployment and regime protection to Sahelian states is therefore only

attractive as long as there is disorder and uncertainty. And while Russia's partnership may come without conditionalities about elections and good governance, it also comes without ambitions to improve the lives of civilians in the region and in some cases a rather intrusive presence. Something that [citizens demonstrating against Wagner's](#) presence in the Central African Republic recently illustrated. Russia is also actively working against Western influence in the Sahel and Africa more broadly, through disinformation campaigns. Thus, while Western states and multilateral organisations may have to coexist in the same region, country or town as Russia, they have conflicting interests which makes any type of coordination or cooperation unlikely and undesirable.

China's engagement in Africa, and more specifically in the Sahel, differs from Russia's approach. China has so far focused on economic partnerships and infrastructure projects, both of which need a certain stability to function. This was exemplified when China stepped in and discreetly mediated between Niger's regime and the Beninese government about the border closure in 2024, which hindered oil export from Agadem to Cotonou's port. While illicit Chinese artisanal miners may benefit from unrest resulting in relaxed surveillance, state-owned Chinese companies do not – or at least not to the same extent. A minimum of stability is therefore desirable for China to maintain and expand its economic ties in the region. Limited and carefully calibrated information exchange between European states and China remains therefore possible. Yet, that does not mean that Western states should look to China for cooperation; interests and norms are still strongly diverging and the competition for influence is real.

Turkey and the Gulf states have rapidly gained ground in the Sahel by positioning themselves between Western actors and Russia and China. Direct flights with Turkish Airlines to Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey may seem like a minor detail in the grand scheme of things, but sustained connectivity plays a key role in building lasting partnerships. A solid budget to invest is also an important asset for building relationships. The Gulf states' finances allow them to play increasingly important roles

in development and infrastructure projects in the Sahel region. This also gives them the opportunity to project religious influence, through the building of mosques and training of imams.

Turkey's [position in the Sahel has also been significantly strengthened](#) by its drone exports to the military regimes who have drastically increased their use of drones over the past three years. This role as an arms exporter, combined with involvement in less sensitive areas, like infrastructure work, makes Turkey an attractive partner to the Sahel states. Especially, as it is playing a middle role in the global power competition. Yet, this middle position and the fact that Turkey is a NATO member, also makes it a potentially attractive actor for Western states to coordinate with, and even – in specific areas – to cooperate with to facilitate a (re) engagement or an expansion of influence in the broader region.

However, Turkey's recent [deployment of 500 troops to fight al-Shabaab](#) in Somalia also shows that it is willing to get involved militarily and take risks on the battlefield in Africa. If it offers such a support to the AES states or other Sahel countries, it is likely that the regional and international security landscape will further be reshuffled, resulting in a repositioning of other actors as well.

Across the AES states, a strong reassertion of sovereignty continues through efforts to renegotiate foreign control over natural resources. Revised mining and energy codes, stricter licensing, and threats of nationalization reflect economic nationalism aimed at maximizing domestic benefits. These moves have raised short-term revenues in cases like Mali, but also sparked tensions with key partners such as China and Canada. Structural vulnerabilities—including weak institutions, insecurity, and regulatory fragility—limit the long-term viability of this strategy, as seen in the troubled Niger oil pipeline and Mali's artisanal mining accidents and it is likely to discourage other foreign investors in the sector.

In the security sphere, AES countries are also promoting a sovereignty narrative, yet their current lack of territorial control makes it less convincing, especially as they are still

partnering up with foreign partners like Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf states in an attempt to exercise territorial control.

While Russia remains dominant in Mali, its role is increasingly contested; meanwhile, Turkey and the UAE project military influence via drones and trainings, and other Gulf states leverage covert supply chains. These partnerships have yet to yield clear stability gains. At the same time, religious and ideological influence—particularly from Turkey and Saudi Arabia—deepens societal engagement, adding complexity to the geopolitical landscape.

Thus, despite anti-Western rhetoric, AES regimes embrace a multi-alignment strategy, balancing external actors to enhance autonomy and avoid overreliance on any single partner. That also means that there is space for European actors to (re) engage, but before they do, they should elaborate a strategy based on their own priorities, and carefully reflect on how their presence will affect the current balance of power, both locally, in the Sahel, and on the broader global scale.

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