



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



AFRICAN PULSE

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The official Logo of the Confederation of Sahel States or the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) Confederation. Source: [CONFEDERATION DES ETATS DU SAHEL\(AES\)](#)

The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov met with his counterparts from the Alliance of Sahel States for the first Russia-Alliance of Sahel States meeting in Moscow on April 3, 2025. Source: [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russia Federation](#)

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African Pulse: The Shifting Geopolitics of the Sahel

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The Shifting Geopolitics of the Sahel

by

Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj & Arshiya Chaturvedi

Executive Summary

Over the past few years, the Sahel region in West Africa has undergone a major strategic reorientation. In September 2023, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, three countries from the region, formed a trilateral defence pact, the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel – AES), breaking away from the regional organisation ECOWAS as well as traditional external partners, including France.¹ This shift has enabled alternative power states, most notably Russia, to expand their influence, as evident from the AES's increased engagement with Moscow since 2023².

On January 21, 2026³, Russian Ambassador Igor Martynov met Burkina Faso's Prime Minister, Rimalba Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo, to discuss expanding bilateral cooperation in space exploration, including the potential use of Russian space technologies. The talks also focused on the launching of a Russian telecommunications satellite in the interest of the AES, part of a broader agreement signed between Russia and the AES in September 2024⁴ for developing the latter's national capacities in communications, surveillance, and natural disaster management.

With these developments in the background, the present brief will delve deep into this strategic shift in the Sahel region and its larger geopolitical implications.

France and the Françafrique System

France's enduring influence over its former African colonies did not end with decolonization; if anything, it merely took on new forms. Having ruled major parts of West Africa as a colonial power, encompassing present-day Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Niger, it continued to maintain significant influence over these territories across political, economic, and security

¹ Aina, F., Afolabi, B. & Fayemi, J.K. The Alliance of Sahel States, Democratic Relapse, Insecurity, and the Prospects of Regional (Dis)integration or (Re)integration in West Africa. *Soc* (2025).

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-025-01154-0>

² *Ibid*

³ Safonova, Maria . "Russia and Burkina Faso Discuss Possibility of Launching Russian Communications Satellite for Sahel Countries." African Initiative - news agency, January 22, 2026. <https://afrinz.ru/en/2026/01/russia-and-burkina-faso-discuss-possibility-of-launching-russian-communications-satellite-for-sahel-countries/>.

⁴ Thachil, Julia Jose . "Russia's Growing Engagement with the Alliance of Sahel States - Indian Council of World Affairs (Government of India)." Indian Council of World Affairs (Icwa), 2025.

https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=12289&lid=7490.

spheres well into the post-colonial era, under the commonly referred to system of *Françafrique*. Through the *Communauté Financière Africaine* (African Financial Community) CFA Franc, France tied its African colonies to the French currency and, later, to the Euro. While certain monetary reforms were introduced in 2019, including the renaming of the currency and the ending of the reserve deposit requirement, France remains the guarantor of the currency's convertibility to the Euro. France also enjoyed a strong grip on resources within the region. The majority of resource extraction, including uranium and petroleum mining, has been carried out and controlled by French state-owned enterprises and major private corporations, such as Areva, TotalEnergies, Société Générale, Crédit Agricole, Orange, and BNP Paribas.⁵

On the military and security front too, France held a leading role in the region by formalising multiple military cooperation agreements with various countries, which allowed it to establish bases within their territories. As of 2019, France had as many as nine military bases across West African countries, including Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.⁶

However, this unwarranted influence has, over the years, been increasingly criticised and has, in fact, sown the seeds of strong anti-French sentiment. France's influence has neither bolstered the socio-economic and political development of its former colonies nor mitigated their security challenges, but has instead served as a tool for France's own enrichment. Studies show that the financial relationships between France and the *Françafrique* countries in West Africa have been deeply asymmetric. For years, African countries earned very low interest, around 1.5%, on their deposits in the French treasury's special account, while borrowings from French banks were charged at markedly higher rates of 5-6%, clearly reflecting the asymmetric bias in France's favour. It is further argued that France has used its influence, particularly its strong military presence in the region, to advance its strategic interests by propping up friendly regimes regardless of how internally unpopular, authoritarian, or corrupt they were, and by working to destabilise uncongenial governments.⁷ France has also been widely seen as ineffective in the counterinsurgency and anti-terrorism operations it undertook in the early 2010s.⁸

This anti-French sentiment is particularly pronounced in the three Sahel countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. All three have recently witnessed regime change, with

⁵ Simura, Blessing . "West Africa's Post 2020 Coups and Decoloniality." *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (October 7, 2024). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2409296>.

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *Supra* Note 5

⁸ Ojeh, Bassel. "The Collapse of Western Power in Francophone Africa." *The Stanford Review*, November 22, 2025. <https://stanfordreview.org/the-collapse-of-western-power-in-francophone-africa/>.

military juntas coming to power following successful coup attempts: Mali in 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in 2023. The new regimes have actively pursued policy measures to strategically disengage from France. The governments of Mali and Burkina Faso demanded the immediate withdrawal of French troops from their respective territories in 2022, and in 2023, Niger's new military ruler similarly ordered French forces to leave the country. This Sahelian troika also withdrew from the French co-established G5 Sahel Force, with Mali exiting in 2022, followed by Niger and Burkina Faso in 2023.⁹ As of 2025, they have further announced their withdrawal from the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF).¹⁰

In 2023, Mali also called for the withdrawal of the 12,000 UN peacekeepers serving under MINUSMA¹¹, a mission that, while not directly staffed by French troops, was nonetheless portrayed by the Malian junta as operating under undue French influence, a charge that reflected the broader erosion of trust in Western-backed institutions in the region. Further, the three countries declared in 2024 and formally withdrew in 2025 from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), of which they had been founding members. Established in 1975, ECOWAS is a regional bloc comprising 15 West African countries, aimed at promoting economic integration, development, and regional stability. This breakaway was the direct consequence of ECOWAS's hardline stance against the coups and the resulting military junta regimes. The bloc imposed heavy sanctions on all three military regimes – with Niger being the most recent case, which was also threatened with force deployment. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger strongly criticised these measures, characterising the sanctions as inhumane and accusing ECOWAS of being excessively influenced by Western powers.¹²

While strategically distancing themselves from Western-backed political and security arrangements, they moved toward forging their own independent regional framework. In September 2023, the trio entered into a trilateral mutual defence pact under the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), seeking to integrate their military and other resources to counter threats posed by terrorism and other forms of external aggression. In July 2024, at the inaugural AES summit held in Niamey, Niger, they established the Confederation of Sahel States¹³, expanding cooperation from a primarily military focus to deeper political, economic, and defence integration. In February of last year, the AES

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Tagba, Kamailoudini, and Diakaridia Dembele. "Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso Quit Organization to Promote French." Bloomberg.com. Bloomberg, March 19, 2025. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-03-19/mali-niger-and-burkina-faso-quit-organization-to-promote-french>.

¹¹ De Simone, Daniel. "Mali: UN Peacekeeping Mission Ends after Decade." *Www.bbc.com*, December 31, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67851525>.

¹² h Ewoker, Chris. "Ecowas: What Changes as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger Leave the West African Bloc?" *BBC*, January 29, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yvvd91j72eo>.

¹³ Vaz, Ricardo. "The Sahel Seeks Sovereignty." *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*, August 12, 2025. <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-sahel-alliance-sovereignty/>.

proclaimed the establishment of a joint military force of up to 5,000 personnel to combat terrorist groups and foster peace and stability in the region.¹⁴

Russia's Strategic Advance into the Sahel

Creating an independent alternative regional system is strategically prudent and desirable for asserting national autonomy and encouraging regional integration, but it is also ambitious. For undertaking counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations in tandem with overarching political, economic, and defence development, the AES countries require considerable material resources, strategic expertise, and technical competence. The abrupt exit of Western powers and institutions from the region, coupled with the limited national capacities of the AES states, has created a strategic vacuum that Russia is moving swiftly to fill.

Russia was among the first countries to recognise the AES following its establishment in 2023.¹⁵ In the security landscape of the AES countries, Russia's involvement dates to the early 2020s through the deployment of the Wagner Group. With an estimated deployment of 1,000–2,000 personnel in Mali and a considerable presence in Burkina Faso and Niger, these private Russian mercenaries have been actively supporting the AES governments through counterterrorism training and field operations.¹⁶ However, the group has faced criticism for its limited effectiveness against extremist groups, as well as for reported atrocities and high civilian casualties amounting to human rights violations.¹⁷ In 2025, its operations were terminated and it was replaced by a rebranded state-controlled paramilitary group, Africa Corps.¹⁸

Further, in April 2025, Russia also expressed its unwavering support for the AES Joint Military Force and committed to facilitating training and the provision of advanced operational military assets.¹⁹ Subsequently, in August, 2025, Russia formalised defence cooperation by signing Memoranda of Understanding with the three AES countries.²⁰ Russia also broadened its cooperation with the AES countries in

¹⁴ Supra Note 1.

¹⁵ Bhattacharya, Samir. "Conflicts in Africa | Sahel's Strategic Drift towards Russia." orfonline.org. OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION (ORF), April 30, 2025. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/conflicts-in-africa-sahel-s-strategic-drift-towards-russia>.

¹⁶ Mathur, Dr. Gauri Narain. "Tracing Wagner Group's Footprint in Africa - Indian Council of World Affairs (Government of India)." Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), 2023. https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=10262&lid=6527.

¹⁷ Supra Note 1

¹⁸ Vorobyov, Niko. "Wagner vs Africa Corps: The Future of Russian Paramilitaries in Mali." Al Jazeera, June 16, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/16/wagner-vs-africa-corps-the-future-of-russian-paramilitaries-in-mali>.

¹⁹ Reuters Staff. "Russia Vows Military Backing for Sahel Juntas' Joint Force." Reuters, April 4, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/russia-vows-military-backing-sahel-juntas-joint-force-2025-04-04/>.

²⁰ AFP. "Russia Hosts First Military Meeting with Sahel Juntas." The Moscow Times, August 14, 2025. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/08/14/russia-hosts-first-military-meeting-with-sahel-juntas-a90221>.

advancing their telecommunications, surveillance, and early warning capabilities. In November 2024, Glavkosmos, the commercial arm of Russia's Roscosmos, and the Niger government signed an agreement to purchase three satellites for telecommunications, remote sensing, and radar purposes. A year later, in September 2025, a significant development followed as Russia finalised a broader confederation-level agreement with the AES to facilitate the acquisition of satellites and other requisites.²¹ The operational modalities of this agreement were discussed at the January 2026 meeting between the Russian ambassador and Burkina Faso's leadership, where the two sides also agreed on a partnership in space exploration.

The Sahel's New Partnership Pathway

The strategic pivot of the three Sahel states, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, typified by their breakaway from legacy external actors and the creation of an independent regional architecture, reflects a deep-seated strategic ambition for greater agency. Such an aspiration is not isolated but forms part of a broader pan-African strategic vision. Articulated through multiple policy instruments, including Agenda 2063, NEPAD, and AfCFTA, this vision calls for external partnerships to be mutually respectful and aligned with continental priorities.

Recognising this strategic awakening and associated opportunities, Russia is already positioning itself by structuring its cooperation around the immediate as well as long-term needs of the Sahel states. It is increasingly diversifying its engagement beyond security assistance to areas of broader state-building, especially infrastructure development. China, which also maintains a presence in the region, has long had well-established economic engagement through its Belt and Road projects. In recent times, however, its security involvement has been deepening, driven primarily by the need to protect its economic interests from the growing threat of extremism.

India, which otherwise has modest engagement in the region, is potentially well-positioned to deepen its presence there in light of these evolving dynamics. This is because India's partnership approach with Africa, as emphasised by the Prime Minister during his state visit to Namibia in 2025, "is not to compete but cooperate or not to take but grow together"²². India's External Affairs Minister, has articulated India's partnership approach towards Africa as one guided by the principles of mutual benefit, with a focus on building local capacity, generating employment, and

²¹ Supra Note 4

²² PM India. "PM's Address to the National Assembly of Namibia." Pmindia.gov.in, 2026.

https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-address-to-the-national-assembly-of-namibia/.

fostering sustainable growth²³, in deliberate contrast to extractive models. Given its vast experience, India is well-placed to offer counterinsurgency and anti-terrorism capacity building. Its defence equipment, inexpensive yet efficient, is already gaining traction and can meaningfully support operational readiness. Beyond security, India can also play a pivotal role in advancing digital capabilities and supporting core infrastructure development. In this sense, India's engagement offers the AES countries something distinctly different, a partner unburdened by colonial legacy and untainted by the extractive relationships that have long defined external involvement in the region.

Conclusion

Long beset by entrenched extremism and developmental challenges, the Sahel region has in recent years undergone major political and strategic transition. It witnessed political decline, marked by successful coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which was followed by a strategic restructuring to disengage from longstanding Western dominance and influence. This shift has opened a strategic window for new external actors, and Russia has been among the first to capitalise. By positioning itself as a responsive partner and offering security assistance, state-building support, and capacity development, it has steadily expanded its influence in a region historically dominated by Western powers. For India, this moment presents a compelling opportunity, one that aligns naturally with its broader foreign policy vision. Its established goodwill, combined with a model of cooperation rooted in mutual benefit and respect for African agency, places it in a strong position to deepen engagement across defence, development, capacity building, and technology. As the Sahel undergoes a fundamental realignment, India's measured but purposeful presence could prove to be not only strategically advantageous but also a genuine contribution to the region's stability and self-determined development.

²³ Media Center. "EAM's Address at the Africa Day Celebrations (May 28, 2025)." Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, 2025. https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/39573/EAMs_address_at_the_Africa_Day_Celebrations_May_28_2025.



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