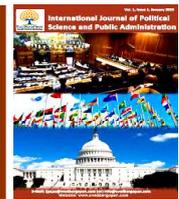




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Transitioning from Paralyzed Democracy to Stratocracy: Grassroots Revolutions as Catalysts for Anticolonial Liberation in West Africa

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Abstract

A stratocracy is a political system characterized by the predominance of military authority. Recently, three West African military leaders—General Assimi Goita (Mali), Captain Ibrahim Traore (Burkina Faso), and General Abdourahamane Tiani (Niger)—came to power through coups d'état in 2021, 2022, and 2023 respectively. Criticizing their former governments and the regional body ECOWAS of allegedly following the diktats of colonial powers, they formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in September 2023. Yet, the hierarchical structure of the army plays a central role in shaping the political dynamics in the AES, with the military officers having significant power and influence over decision-making and governance. Interestingly, the civil society broadly supports their ideologies through sporadic popular movements against perceived 'imperialism' or 'Western interferences'. The stratocratic approach is perceived by the populace as catalysts for anticolonial liberation. This study explores the intersection of grassroots activism and decolonial theory through the prism of West African stratocracy. Thus, the research emphasizes the dynamics and transformative nature of popular movements in the AES while framing them as a form of active resistance against neocolonialism. Methodologically, this study employs a narrative research design, incorporating primary data from participant observation, discourse analysis, and in-depth interviews.

Keywords: AES, Grassroots revolutions, Neocolonialism, Stratocracy, West Africa

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1. Introduction

In the wake of the coups d'état that occurred in Mali in 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in 2023, the populations of these three countries took to the streets of Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey to celebrate the military takeover, waving Russian flags. Between an endemic humanitarian crisis and reminiscences of a

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colonial past, the complexity of the situation in the Sahel raises questions about the legitimacy of stratocracy and challenges the very notion of democracy. The motivations behind these coups, according to the military juntas of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)¹, are “the continuing deterioration of the security situation” and the “poor economic and social governance” of previous governments (De la Pena and Mores, 2023: 2). These demands, according to the military regimes, justify the overthrow of democratically elected governments.

In this context, the military authorities of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger signed a framework document initiating the creation of the AES in order to pool their forces to fight against terrorism. The so-called Liptako-Gourma charter, which enshrines this creation, was made public on September 16, 2023, in Bamako, Mali. The fight of the AES is not only military; it is also cultural, economic and political. The AES has already started closing their doors to France, their former colonial power – through various diplomatic initiatives – and looking for new partners. In this new scramble, the AES stratocratic regimes believe that geostrategic alliances and well-established strategic partnerships with new countries such as China, Russia, Turkey, etc. can help the AES member states to attain a sustainable development.

In this sense, beyond the superficial questions of political regimes and democracy, the military leaders of the AES implemented a combination of technocratic political style² and populist approach³; ambitioning to industrialize their confederation in order to increase living standards, resolve the problems of youth unemployment, and diversify their exports. In fact, Sub-Saharan African (SSA) nations, especially West African Francophone states, have not made much progress in terms of employment and manufacturing value. In order to accelerate industrialization, AES decisions-makers started implementing adaptable policies that support structural change and increase productivity in both small and large businesses. Additionally, because the Sahel region is vulnerable to climate change, they prioritize ecological and environmentally-friendly policies; thus, taking the environmental issues into consideration.

As a result, these populist moves are hugely supported by the vast majority of the West African populace who regularly organize numerous marches, meetings, sit-ins, and various public demonstrations in the biggest cities of the AES confederation to show their adherence to the ideology of the stratocratic regimes.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Methodology

As we are investigating the nexus between grassroots activism, democratic principles, stratocratic regimes and the struggle for anticolonial liberation in the Alliance of Sahel States, the central question raised throughout the research is related to the decolonization of governmentality⁴ in West Africa. Thus, this study will be achieved through the use of a decolonial lens; that is to say, by using a decolonial research method. Put it in a different way of thinking, the scholar Mafeje (2000) qualified this approach as “endogeneity”, which implies the use of non-western representations, such as traditional values and cultural identity, to affirm the country’s insights, experience(s), knowledge, and socio-political context. Articulated differently, Mafeje (2000) called it a “combative methodology”.

In the academia, the process of decolonization keeps going forward, incorporating almost all humanities and social sciences’ research areas. In his academic work, Moyo (2020) emphasized that decoloniality appears

¹ In the French language, AES stands for Alliance des Etats du Sahel [English: Alliance of Sahel States]. The Alliance is formed by three West African countries, ruled by military authorities: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

² According to the scholar Benjamin Moffit (2016: 47), the technocratic political style—which has an appeal to expertise, good manners, stability and progress – differs from the populist political style which entails the confrontation of the ‘people’ against the ‘elite’, performance of crisis, bad manners, breakdown between citizens and their representatives, and threat (See Noufou Ouedraogo, 2022, 46-55).

³ In his book “What is Populism?” (2016), Jan-Werner Müller argued that “populists maintain the proximity to the people”. This populist approach makes it similar to the conceptual definition of democracy proposed by the 16th American president Abraham Lincoln: “the power of the people, by the people and for the people” (Ouedraogo, 2022: 46-55). In doing so, “populists portray their political competitors as part of the immoral, corrupt elite; when ruling, they refuse to recognize any opposition as legitimate” (Müller, 2016: 19).

⁴ In his lectures at the Collège de France in 1977, Michel Foucault defined governmentality as the art of government or the organized practices (mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed. (See Foucault (1991a) Governmentality. In: The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality (Ed.) G. Burchell, C. Cordon and p. Miller, 87-104. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf).

to be a necessary moral and epistemic venture to cultivate a nuanced praxis of imperialist agenda. Similarly, Varol (2022) critiques the dominance of Western values in the Global South, advocating for postcolonial interventions that recognize and include non-Western experiences. For these theorists, this epistemic revolution is necessary in order to preserve “indigenous intellectualism” and apprehend the crucial aspect of intellectual freedom; initiating the defense, preservation, creation, formation, and promotion of “home-made ideas and ways of thinking” (Karam and Mutsvairo, 2022).

Arguing alongside, this is what Grosfoguel (2007) and Mignolo (2011) referred to as “epistemic disobedience”. In fact, instead of maintaining the existing status quo in communication studies, the epistemic disobedience (or combative methodology) consists in destabilizing, challenging, disrupting, and questioning the current status quo, which is somehow based on a sort of westernized hierarchization, racialization, gentrification, capitalism, classism, and imperialism. In the current study, which is essentially qualitative, the investigative data is based on discourse analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interviews with revolutionary activists, spin doctors and West African decisions makers.

2.2. Grassroots Revolution Seen from the Critical Thinking Standpoint

The critical thinking theory was developed by some scholars – such as Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, etc. – of Frankfurt School in the 20th century. These researchers focused especially on the criticism of the modern capitalist society, the definition of social emancipation and the critique of perceived social pathologies. In this regards, the process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information obtained from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication as a guide to belief and action is precisely what is meant to be understood as critical thinking.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer (1947), critical thinking can be grounded in universally intellectual ideals that cut beyond subject matter boundaries. A family of interconnected modes of thinking, including scientific, mathematical, historical, anthropological, economic, moral, and philosophical thinking, comprises critical thinking because it is flexible in its approach to various subjects, problems, and goals. Thus, the ability to question, acknowledge, and test preconceived notions, recognize ambiguity, examine, interpret, evaluate, reason, and reflect, make informed decisions, and articulate, justify, and clarify positions are all considered aspects of critical thinking process (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947; Gramsci, 1947; Marcuse, 1969; Honneth, 1987, etc.).

As for this current research related to the exploration of the intersection of grassroots revolution and decolonial theory through the prism of West African stratocracy, a wise way to apply critical thinking approach is to question the implication of political ideology. In fact, the new political ideology implemented by the AES military rulers is supposed to abolish Western imperialistic hegemony. Antonio Gramsci, one of the key authors of the notion of ideology, considered hegemony as a struggle and defined it as the “winning and (re)winning of the consent of the majority to a system that subordinates them” (Gramsci, 1947). This, for Gramsci, entails “resistance and instability” in the class struggle (Gramsci, 1947).

Arguing on the notion of hegemony, Fiske (1990) claimed that ideology always works to maintain exploitation and class domination. In more elaborated terms, he put it as it follows:

Hegemony is necessary, and has to work so hard, because the social experience of subordinated groups (whether by class, gender, race, age, or other factor) constantly contradicts the picture that the dominant ideology paints for them of themselves and their social relations. In other words, the dominant ideology constantly meets resistances that it has to overcome in order to win people’s consent to the social order that it is promoting. These resistances may be overcome, but they are never eliminated. So any hegemonic victory, any consent that it wins, is necessarily unstable; it can never be taken for granted, so it has to be constantly rewon and struggled over (Fiske, 1990:176).

In consequence, the fundamental element of hegemonic strategy becomes the construction of what Marx and Engels called “the manufacture of the common sense” (Marx and Engels, 1848). In this logic, the Hollywood star Denzel Washington put it straightforward, in *The Great Debaters*: “this consists in keeping the slaves physically strong, but mentally weak, dependent on the slave master; keeping the body but

taking the mind”⁵. As a result, this constitutes the core question of the struggle against neocolonialism in the AES.

3. The Struggle Against Neocolonialism in the AES

The perception of France among its former colonies in West Africa is further damaged. Hence, numerous of these once French colonies are attempting to broaden their alliances with other international players, including China, Russia, and Turkey. According to a survey conducted in 2020 by a South African charity institution, known as Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 71% of Gabonese, 68% of Senegalese, 60% of Malians, and 58% of Togolese had a negative opinion of France (Ouedraogo, 2024). This bad perception of the former colonizer is recurrently depicted through parodies, vehement criticisms, hate speech, and disparaging pictures that severely denounce and denigrate France’s involvement into African internal affairs.

For AES leaders, it was the plundering of resources that sparked the popular revolution in the three Sahel states. In July 2024, the President of Burkina Faso, Captain Ibrahim Traore, explained it this way:

When we take the case of Niger, for over 40 years, some countries have been mining uranium to produce energy at home. From Ottawa to Paris, the streets are lit; but in Niger, we are served darkness. When you go to our countries, our soil is pockmarked everywhere to search for precious metals like gold. But often, there are not even the slightest roads to access the areas where they mine gold, let alone some basic social services. This is why we have decided to revolt and take the destiny of our countries into our own hands (Traore, 2024: 3)⁶.

Additionally, during the protests held in a number of West African nations, including the Central African Republic in 2013, Senegal in 2015, Mali in 2020, Burkina Faso in 2021, and most recently Niger in 2023, demonstrators chanted phrases like “Down with France!”, “France, get out!”, “We need Russia,” and so on (Traore, 2024). The degenerate “anti-imperialist” protests in certain African countries have been known to cause great financial losses for French corporations, such as Auchan, Areva, Total, Bolloré, and many others firms that are frequently charged as being neocolonial and imperial enterprises. According to these youthful demonstrators, France has the primary blame for their difficult circumstances, which are marked by chronic unemployment and unbearable underdevelopment.

Nonetheless, the Sahel states’ long-standing political, economic, and military dominance is surely to blame for this anti-French sentiment. In fact, France is occasionally charged with building French military bases in sovereign states, somewhat in an oppressive manner, and with aiding and abetting African dictators. For instance, in November 2022, demonstrators in the city of Kaya, northern Burkina Faso, blocked a French military convoy that was traveling to Niger. They demanded to know what was inside the vehicle, claiming it included food and weapons that would be used to supply the terrorists.

Similar to this, French diplomatic and cultural representations were targeted during the protests that followed Burkina Faso’s second putsch on September 30, 2022, both in Bobo-Dioulasso, the country’s second-biggest city, and Ouagadougou, its capital. Numerous demonstrators set fire to the diplomatic enclave building and vandalized the two French cultural centers. Similar actions happened in Niger where demonstrators defaced the French embassy after the Nigerien army’s coup in July 2023. Russian and Turkish flags have been waved by demonstrators during the protests. The latter demanded that French forces withdraw from the Sahel immediately and that military cooperation with other countries like Russia and Turkey take place.

With the military administration taking control of Mali in 2020, the situation there is much more telling. Under Assimi Goïta’s leadership, the nation was engulfed in a pan-Africanist and nationalist fever, severely worsening relations with France, which has been sending thousands of soldiers to fight terrorism for almost a decade. As a result, Joël Meyer, the French ambassador to Mali, was forced to leave the country. The media also reflects these inequalities.

⁵ Denzel Washington (2007). The Great Debaters: Podcast & Transcript available online at: <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/17640535>.

⁶ Speech by Captain Ibrahim Traore, President of Faso, Head of State—Delivered on Saturday, July 6, 2024, in Niamey, Niger, at the opening of the 1st Summit of Heads of State of the member countries of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)—Presidency of Burkina Faso; Available online at the following link: <https://www.presidencedufaso.bf/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Discours.pdf>.

Following a brutal terrorist attack in Mourah, a central Mali town, on March 23-30, 2022, the transitional military regime, headed by Assimi Goïta and Choguel Kokalla Maïga, claimed that the French “imperialist media” were exacerbating the situation by disseminating false information about the Malian armed forces. This marked the beginning of the information war between Mali and France. The government’s official information stated that the attack claimed the lives of 203 terrorists, however the two biggest French international networks, RFI and France 24, reported that civilians were arbitrarily executed by Malian soldiers.

It was Burkina Faso’s turn to stop RFI in December of that same year (2022), citing the French media outlet as having disseminated a message of intimidation from a terrorist leader. The same situation occurs in March 2023 when the Burkinabè authorities suspended France 24.

By opening its newsroom to the first head of AQIM [a terrorist group linked to Al-Qaida in the Maghreb], France 24 is not only acting as a communication agency for these terrorists, worse it offers a space for legitimizing terrorist actions and hate speech conveyed to satisfy the evil aims of this organization on Burkina Faso, said Burkinabè government spokesperson Jean-Emmanuel Ouédraogo in a press release ([Ouedraogo, 2024](#)).

4. How to Readjust France’s Relationship with Africa?

The conditions of France’s involvement in Africa need to be reviewed by French President Emmanuelle Macron. When confronted by African youth, he had previously declared his intention to form an equal partnership with African states. “I do not belong to the colonization generation, and I believe that the French are the ones who are having the hardest time moving on. We have to start building a shared future,” Emmanuel Macron stated ([Ouedraogo, 2024](#)).

As other former colonizing nations like Belgium and England do, France might profit from being far more discrete on the continent rather than always moaning about the anti-French narrative in Africa. It is quite unlikely that a nation like France, which engaged in slavery, colonization, and a protracted process of decolonization, will receive special “adulation and praise” from the colonized peoples. Up to the tragic genocide in Rwanda, France used cooperation agreements or more or less constrained defense agreements to militarily interfere in numerous wars during the post-colonial era and the protracted Cold War.

Influencers from all over the African continent, including Kemi Seba, Franklin Nyamsi, and Nathalie Yamb, etc. just to name very few, are becoming more and more prevalent and critic about the relations between France and Francophone Africa. They express themselves through social media in particular. Some of them, who support extreme anti-Western and sovereigntist ideologies, hold the blame for the changes in government that have occurred in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

This story is reminiscent of Moscow’s attempts to promote its geopolitical trajectories through Africa. Likewise, other countries like Turkey and China are now presenting themselves as new partners for many African states. Each of these new partners constitutes an alternative to France and pronounces rather soft, seductive and reassuring discourses. These soothing speeches are delivered via their new transnational media channels such as the Russian RT [Russia Today] and Sputnik channels, the Chinese CCTV channel, and the Turkish global media group TRT World.

5. Conceptual Framework

5.1. Disruption and Partnership Diversification

In the last decade, most of the West African nations – especially France’s ex-colonies – started diversifying their partnership with new partners which do not have a colonial past in Africa. This can be qualified as a disruption in the political and economic system. The Cambridge Dictionary defines the notion of ‘disruption’ as an “action of preventing something, especially a system, a process, or an event, from continuing as usual or as expected. It is an interruption in the usual way that a system, a process, or an event works” ([Cambridge Dictionary, 2025](#)).

Contextually speaking, in partnership diversification, disruption may occur when states or organizations seek unconditional alliances, explore cross-industry and transcontinental collaborations, or leverage revolutionary and emerging methods to create synergies in order to attain envisioned goals. As a reminder, this is exactly what is implied in the African Union's (AU) 2063 agenda expressed as "The Africa We Want" or even the Turkey's way of putting it as the "African solutions for African problems" (TR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

Harvard professor Clayton (1997) initially introduced the concept of 'disruptive innovation' in his book entitled "The Innovator's Dilemma" in 1997. In other words, disruption in the academic sense refers to a transformative process that is marked by the drastic modification or transformation of existing industries, structures, systems, or paradigms, frequently resulting in major and unexpected changes to the status quo. This phenomenon usually results from the introduction of new ideas, technology, or openness and diversification tactics that upend established conventions, practices, and market dynamics, having a significant and long-lasting effect on the impacted domains.

Additionally, disruption is the process of replacing established practices, methods, or activities with new ones that are more valuable, efficient, or effective. This is what the African Union planned to achieve in its 2063 Agenda. In this sense, *disruption* is commonly linked to the idea of creative revolution, in which the introduction of novel services or technological advancements not only replaces preexisting models but also completely reshapes the competitive environment and calls for stakeholders to take flexible actions.

Since the idea of disruption cuts across many academic fields, such as business, economics, technology, sociology, politics, and management, it is crucial to investigate the underlying processes, motivators, and outcomes of disruptive activities in West Africa. Examining how important players—such as companies, regulators, entrepreneurs, and policymakers—shaped the course and results of disruptive processes is a common step in the current disruption analysis. Subsequently, it is also important to look into the possible advantages and difficulties of disruptive breakthroughs, taking into account things like market dynamics, societal ramifications, and the development of the political and economic ecosystems impacted by these revolutionary forces which constitute the cornerstones of grassroots revolutions in the Alliance of Sahel States. In order to decipher this, it is highly crucial to closely examine the corollary notions of colonialism and post-colonial legacy in the West African context.

5.2. Colonialism and Post-colonial Legacy

The dominance of one culture, community, or nation over another is referred to as colonialism. To oversimplify it in the context of the contemporary globalization, colonialism explicitly refers to the dominance of Western countries over a large portion of the Southern world beginning in the fifteenth century, while the movement's roots are in the previously established Asian overland trade routes. Any mention of colonialism in this study exclusively pertains to colonialism from Western powers upon Sub-Saharan African countries.

Prominent postcolonial thinker Frantz Fanon maintained that colonialism causes psychological harm to colonized peoples as well as political and economic subjugation, leading to internalized oppression and sentiments of inferiority (Fanon, 1963). He promoted the violent overthrow of colonial systems as a way of liberation, emphasizing the necessity of decolonization not just in terms of political independence but also as a process of regaining self-esteem and dignity (Fanon, 1963). Fanon's writings emphasize the need of addressing the psychological as well as the material aspects of oppression and draw attention to the complexity of power relations in colonial and postcolonial contexts (Gibson, 2003).

Stated in a different way, the Europeans left behind a significant cultural legacy when they "packed their bags" (Mohammadi, 1995: 366). Their "views and attitudes, including religion, ways of organizing public life, styles of politics, systems of education and professional training, clothing style and many other cultural habits" were also left behind, along with their languages (Mohammadi, 1995).

As a result, the new mushrooming African states became completely dependent on their former invaders, which further increased their discontent on all fronts. The languages, practices, and worldviews of former colonies still bear the scars of colonial cultural imperialism, or the spread of one culture at the expense of

another. As an illustration, in West African France's former colonies – like Ivory Coast, Benin, Burkina Faso, Togo, Mali, Niger, etc. – French is the national language; and in British former colonies such as Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, etc., English is their official language.

Media outlets are not completely innocent in this sense of 'neo-imperialism' or neocolonialism. The mass media, according to Michel Foucault, are "technologies that disseminate a dominant truth" (Foucault, 1991a: 151). Additionally, he criticizes modern media for its part in disconnecting national and international identities (Foucault, 1991a). In this sense, Foucault appears to agree with Galtung and Vincent (1992), who see the media as imperialism's deadly weapons. As a matter of fact, the closing French media outlets – such as France 24, Jeune Afrique, RFI, Le Monde, etc. – by the AES leaders is a concrete illustration of the anticolonial struggle.

In fact, the Africa continent remains on the margins in this situation of what is commonly referred to as cultural internationalization or 'cultural imperialism'. In the 1970s, the idea of cultural imperialism was first proposed. In his 1993 book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward (1993) provided a conceptual definition of this notion and presented a theoretical framework for analyzing imperialism and its contemporary cultural forms. Over the past 30 years, the desire for Western firms to discover new markets for labor and products has spurred the internationalization of the cultural industries.

6. Diplomatic Paralysis between France and West African Countries

On July 6, 2024, in Niamey, at the opening of the first Summit of Heads of State of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), Captain Ibrahim Traore, President of Burkina Faso, justified the motives for the popular revolution and the establishment of the stratocratic regimes in the following terms:

Africa is the continent that has suffered so much, and continues to suffer, at the hands of the imperialists. These imperialists have only one cliché in mind. Africa is the continent of slaves; that is how they see Africa. They have never been able to update their software until today, and it is deplorable. But how do they proceed? Unfortunately, it has been since the 1960s, when these sham independences were granted to Africa. All they did was place local servants at the head, according to them, of their sub-prefectures, so they can continue to feed them (...) They like to say every year, in their economic surveys, that Burkina Faso is a poor country, that Mali is a poor country, that Niger is a poor country. We are ranked among the last. If we are as poor as they say, why don't they want to leave when the time has come for us to take responsibility and ask this master to leave? (Traore, 2024: 2-7).

Moreover, the former French ambassador to Niger, Sylvain Itté, recently published a book entitled "At the heart of French diplomacy in Africa" (Itté, 2024). The book, which was to be released on January 15, 2024, contained explosive revelations on the political and security crisis that has shaken Niger since the coup d'état occurred in July 2023. Then, the Quai d'Orsay, France's Presidency, banned the publication of the book.

It is arguable that this book which lifts the veil behind the scenes of French diplomacy in West Africa was censored by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which fears compromising revelations. The author, Sylvain Itté⁷, the very last French ambassador to Niger, denounces an attack on freedom of expression. The book is announced as an unprecedented and fascinating testimony on relations between France and the African continent, through the prism of his experience as ambassador to Niger.

But to everyone's surprise, the official release of the book was postponed indefinitely, without any justification. The editors confirmed having received a veto from the French presidency, which asked them not to publish the book, without giving them a clear explanation (Africa Intelligence, 2024). The decision of the presidency of the French Republic was revealed by the weekly newspaper 'Le Canard Enchaîné', which published a letter dated mid-January, addressed to Sylvain Itté by the secretary general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this letter, the ministry argues that the proposed work presents "more risks than benefits" (Africa Intelligence, 2024).

⁷ Given the rapidly deteriorating bilateral relations with France, the Niger coup leaders have given the French ambassador 48 hours to depart the nation. The junta claims that the French ambassador declined an invitation to speak with the new foreign minister of Niger.

The secretary general of the ministry adds that it seems “impossible to authorize its publication”, giving a formal character to the blockage ([Africa Intelligence, 2024](#)). Sylvain Itté’s book contains embarrassing revelations for French diplomacy, which was confronted with several crises in French-speaking West Africa in general, and more particularly in Niger during the ambassador’s mandate. Without condoning crises for any reason whatsoever, it is possible to say that these diplomatic crises favor the strengthening of bilateral relations between West African states and new partners like Turkey which started playing important in the region. The theoretical framework will give more insight about how this can work concretely.

7. A Confederation of Sahel States to Get Rid of France’s Hegemony

7.1. The Alliance of Sahel States in Battle Order

Faced with the threat of a looming attack on Niger by ECOWAS, supposedly sponsored by France, and the deterioration of relations with the former colonial power, and in order to unit their assets to defend themselves, the Heads of State of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have decided to set up the AES. The framework document initiating the creation of the AES was signed on September 16, 2023, by the military regimes of the three abovementioned states. Indeed, the initiative is to be welcomed and encouraged, because in addition to the porosity of the borders which requires increased vigilance, these three countries have in common the vast Sahel region (infested by terrorists) which is larger than many West African countries combined.

The birth of this alliance occurs in the midst of a crisis in Niger where the army overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum, in power since 2021. ECOWAS threatens to intervene militarily to restore constitutional order in the country. Hence, after ratifying the AES charter, the Interim president of Niger, General Abdourahmane Tchiani welcomed the birth of this new alliance. He believes strongly that “Together, we [the AES] will build a peaceful, prosperous and united Sahel” ([Jeune Afrique, 2023](#)). This goes without saying that new geopolitical partners can highly contribute to the sustainable development of the Alliance.

If the Alliance of Sahel States succeeds in creating a prosperous independent federal state in the region, rid of foreign interference, it will definitely be the vanguard of the Pan-Africanist movement which is rising across the continent. In fact, after more than six decades of independence, almost all African youth is still in quest of real, true and serious political, economic and cultural autonomy. In doing so, the ideology of the Alliance is officially supported by some Sub-Saharan African countries such as Guinea, Togo, Chad, Mauritania, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and even the Senegalese new regime which took power in April 2024. That is why the AES member states have set up a plan to reinvigorate the union.

7.2. Creation of a Confederal Block in the West African Sahel Region

The military leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger signed the constitutive act of the Confederation of Sahel States on July 6, 2024, in Niamey, Niger. The States of the confederation have decided to lead a common and effective fight against terrorism in the Sahel in general, and in the Liptako-Gourma area in particular. In their declaration, the three Heads of Sahel’s States welcomed the results obtained thanks to the synergy of actions between the three states in the fight against terrorism in the Alliance area. General Tiani, General Goïta and Captain Traoré are committed to strengthening their cooperation in several areas.

The Niamey summit gave pride of place to the free movement of people and goods within the Confederation. By taking this new step, the AES heads of state decided to establish a unified AES force and a so-called permanent trilateral plan for military actions. In terms of economic and social development, the AES Confederation has decided to create, among other things, an investment bank and the establishment of a stabilization fund.

Diplomatically, the summit highlighted the need to speak with one voice. The heads of state endorsed the conclusions of the meetings in Bamako, Niamey and Ouagadougou which had laid the foundations for the formation of the AES. Indeed, the ministers of foreign affairs of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso recommended on December 1st, 2023, the creation of a confederation with the ambition of ultimately achieving the formation of a federation.

The meeting of the AES ministers aimed to set guidelines for the operationalization of the Organization. This meeting, which was preceded by that of experts (on November 27 to 29) from Business, Defense, Security, Economy and Finance, and another meeting held earlier (on November 25) on economic development, aimed at deciding on “appropriate measures” for the operationalization of the Alliance; to agree on a mechanism for political and diplomatic action; and to determine the modalities necessary to strengthen integration between the three member countries of the Alliance: Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

In fact, Mali and Burkina Faso, respectively led by General Assimi Goïta and Captain Ibrahim Traoré, soldiers who came to power through coups d'états in 2021 and 2022, quickly displayed their solidarity with the military junta of Niger, led by General Abdourahamane Tiani, after their takeover at the end of July 2023. Together, they created the AES which provides for mutual assistance in the event of an attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the three member states and, as a matter of fact, they started strengthening their economic ties.

The fundamental objective is to get rid of Western hegemony; and this goes not only through the cooperation with new global partners, but also the implementation of a solid Defense, Development, and Diplomacy (3D). In December 2023, during the meeting which aimed to make the *modus operandi* of the new alliance more concrete, the three ministers of the AES insisted on diplomacy, defense and development “to consolidate political and economic integration” between their three respective countries ([Africa Intelligence, 2024](#)).

7.3. Plan of the AES to Reinvigorate Their Union

As it is stated in the Charter of the AES, in the event of a military intervention in any of its member states, the other members will provide full support including armed forces and military equipment. This clause is similar to the Article 5 of the NATO⁸. There is no doubt that the AES forces will be fully mobilized to intervene if needed. As a matter of fact, Burkina Faso and Mali have already provided airpower and other military weaponry to Niger after the expiration of ECOWAS' ultimatum given to Niamey's junta. Moreover, more than 300 trucks of food moved from Burkina Faso to Niamey, as the most frequented borders of Niger remained closed with Nigeria and Benin. The support was still ongoing until the lift of sanctions upon Niger and the opening of the borders.

In fact, the AES is supposed to operate as the former G5 Sahel. The G5 Sahel was partially dislocated before the establishment of the AES. Indeed, it was established in February 2014, at a summit in Nouakchott, Mauritania, amongst representatives from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. On December 19, 2014, a convention of establishment was adopted, and Mauritania served as its permanent seat. However, the dislocation begun when Mali announced its exit from the coalition on May 15, 2022; followed by Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023. Henceforth, three states out of the former G5 no longer share the ideals of the Organization. They claimed to have taken a “historic responsibility” by leaving an organization which:

Could serve foreign interests to the detriment of those of the peoples of the Sahel, much less accept the diktat of any power whatsoever in the name of a misguided and infantilizing partnership which denies the right to sovereignty of our peoples and our States ([Africa Intelligence, 2024](#)).

Only Chad and, more or less, Mauritania are now members of this G5 Sahel (reduced to a sort of G2) organization which seems destined to disappear.

The military coups which successively occurred respectively in Mali in 2021, in Burkina Faso in 2022, and in Niger in 2023, have obviously created a domino effect in the West African Francophone geography. Actually, the image of France is further tarnished in the eyes of its former colonies in West Africa. As a result, many of these former French colonies are seriously looking forwards to diversifying their partnerships with other foreign emerging powers such as Russia, China and Turkey. In this logic, the three West African juntas believe that creating a confederal block in the Sahel region will alleviate the situation.

⁸ According to NATO's Article 5, every other member of the Alliance shall see any act of violence against a NATO ally as an armed attack against all members and shall take whatever necessary measures to support the attacked Ally.

7.4. *The Consolidation of the AES' Economic Integration*

Gathering on November 25, 2023, the Ministers of Economy and Finance of the AES recommended the creation of a stabilization fund and an investment bank, as well as the establishment of a committee responsible for deepening reflections on questions of economic and monetary union. They also made recommendations to promote the economic development of the AES, in particular the realization of structuring projects in the fields of energy, infrastructure, transport (including the establishment of an airline of the three States) and food security. The recent agreement made between Burkina Faso and the Russian energy company, ROSATOM⁹, for the construction of a nuclear power plant in the country can help alleviate this situation in the long run.

At the end of the second meeting, the AES diplomats affirmed that they are “aware of the tremendous potential for peace, stability, diplomatic strength and economic emergence that a strengthened political alliance offers” and underlined the need to “urgently address the challenges” common to the three states (*Jeune Afrique, 2023*). The conclusions of the work which lasted 48 hours have been submitted to the heads of state.

Beside the economic matters, the AES makes the security issue its prime priority.

7.5. *The AES on the Security Level*

The upheaval of the geostrategic landscape opens a new uncertain and unpredictable era in the West African sub-region. The creation of the AES and their withdrawal from both the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS bodies brings about an unprecedented configuration and a major geopolitical change against the other members of ECOWAS. In fact, the three AES member countries might now perceive the ECOWAS principle of collective security as a strategic threat against them (*Ecowas, 1999*). This could constitute a significant security regression in terms of peacekeeping which makes the environment for sub-regional stability even more complex.

The three military regimes intend to establish common defense architecture in the event of aggression by one of the stakeholders. Some contours remain unclear but its birth constitutes a geopolitical change in the West African sub-region. According to the terms of Article 6 of the AES Charter, Nigerien and Burkinabe soldiers can now replace the Malian forces facing predominantly Tuareg armed groups in the north of the country. As a reminder, this Article 6 is the equivalent of NATO's Article 5. Indeed, Article 5 of NATO states that to attack one member is to attack the entire Alliance. Thus, by uniting their forces, the AES countries have even initiated a major operation in November 2023 at the border between Burkina Faso and Niger.

7.6. *The First Major Operation of the AES Forces*

Around 3,000 terrorists from the JNIM¹⁰ movement attacked the Djibo military camp in northern Burkina Faso on November 26, 2023. The attack was repelled by Burkina Faso forces present in the camp. The counter-offensive was supported by Turkish made Bayraktar TB2 drones, neutralizing several terrorists from the sky. The following days, the air forces of Mali and Niger joined their Burkinabe counterpart to conduct a military operation against the perpetrators of the Djibo attack. No precise assessment has been provided by the General Staff of the Burkinabe army. However, the provisional toll is more than 400 terrorists decimated.

The fight reportedly started around 3 p.m. (local time) and the confrontation lasted three hours. The soldiers valiantly maintained their positions within the military camp. Several devices were deployed in the area during the attack. The response of the Burkinabè army to this attack was rather adapted to the threat, and seemed to be very effective, from a tactical point of view, causing the criminals to suffer significant losses. A Burkinabè intelligence plane, Diamond DA-42 type, took off at 5:27 p.m. from Ouagadougou, and arrived at the attack zone around 6:20 p.m. The intelligence plane (ISR) carried out several rotations over the city. The

⁹ In an effort to increase access to electricity, Burkina Faso and Russia's Rosatom inked an agreement in June 2023 to construct a nuclear power plant. Signed during Atomexpo-2024, the agreement bolsters Burkina Faso's 2030 target of 95% urban and 50% rural access to power. The MOU was the result of a request made to Russian President Putin by the leader of Burkina Faso's junta during the Russia-Africa conference in July 2023. The Memorandum encourages closer cooperation in a number of areas, such as approaches to nuclear generation projects, non-energy applications of nuclear energy in industry, agriculture, and medicine, the development of nuclear infrastructure in Burkina Faso, and increasing public awareness of nuclear technologies.

¹⁰ Terrorist organization Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) is headquartered in Mali and operates throughout most of West Africa, including portions of Niger and Burkina Faso. It was established in March 2017 with the announcement of the formalization of cooperation between four extremist groups located in Mali: Ansar al-Din, al-Murabitun, the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), and the Sahara Emirate subgroup of al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Burkinabè army knows very well the Soum region (Djibo) where they have been fighting armed terrorist groups for several years. In 2022, this same military base had been attacked. The Diamond MPP aircraft made the geolocation possible, thanks to its cameras, to better understand the situation, inform command, identify escape routes for armed terrorist groups and possibly coordinate strikes.

Based on the images provided by the Burkinabè army, it was possible to see that the attackers made several breaches by destroying the southern wall of the military base. To achieve their goals, the terrorists used a heavy armored vehicle, serving as a ram car. The surrounding wall, which is not reinforced at this location by Bastion Wall, gave way at the first blow. The vehicle used by the terrorists is an MRAP "Puma" made in South Africa, but available to the Burkinabe army too. During the combats, the coordination between the AES armed forces was efficient.

8. The Military Coups in West Africa and the Repercussions on the Necessity of Partnership Diversification

Within three years—from 2020 to 2023—seven military coups occurred in African francophone countries; amongst which five are in West Africa. Thus, these coups bring about a sudden change in the political order and entail a strategic reorientation of the foreign policy's priorities. Arguably, the term coup *per se* is polysemic and bears various connotations that the scholar Berktaý (2019) clarified in the following terms:

In French, just coup means simply strike or blow. As a political term, coup is short for coup d'états, which connotes a sudden blow struck to change, overthrow, and/or establish control over the state, the government or the political regime. Hence it stands for one major variant of abnormal, violence-reliant politics (...) [But], how much mass involvement do you have to have before you can call something a revolution? (...) Paradoxically, coups or military takeovers are a corollary—but of course a pathological corollary—of democratic development (Berktaý, 2019).

The abovementioned excerpt was stated by the Turkish history professor Halil Berktaý in one of his columns published by TRT World Research Centre in 2019. Through these lines, we can comprehend the plausible connotations that public opinion can make in a context of military coups like experienced recently in West African Sahel region, namely in the republic of Mali in 2021, in Burkina Faso in 2022, and lastly in the republic of Niger in 2023.

On July 26, 2023, General Abdourahamane Tchiani appeared on the national television [Télé Sahel] as Niger's new leader after perpetrating a military coup that glimmered international condemnation. In his brief speech, he introduced himself as the "President of the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland [Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (CNSP)]" (Africa Intelligence, 2024). For him, the military takeover was motivated by, on the one hand, the desire to "preserve the homeland" in a context of a "deteriorating security situation", and on the other hand, the poor economic and social governance. According to General Tchiani, "the security approach today has not brought security to the country despite heavy sacrifices" (Africa Intelligence, 2024).

The coup perpetrated by members of the presidential guard was supported by the army command of Niger, which stated that maintaining national stability was its top priority. This situation in Niger had drawn rapid condemnations from the international community. Alassane Ouattara, President of Ivory Coast, announced that his nation would participate in the military action alongside Nigeria and Benin following the ECOWAS conference. "Ivory Coast has secured all of the necessary funding and will contribute with a battalion. We are committed to putting Bazoum back in power. Peace and stability in the sub-region are our goals"; stated president Ouattara in his speech. Following the military coup, borders' closure was the first measures taken against the military government in Niger.

9. The Future of ECOWAS

The crisis in Niger dealt "a fatal blow" to the ECOWAS which had lost a little more credibility in this crisis, a situation that had proved to be an additional inefficiency. Be that as it may, ECOWAS found itself in a very uncomfortable position. Forced to back down and, perhaps, even to compromise with the juntas of Mali,

Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger that it threatened to punish, the ECOWAS surely paid the price. For the sub-regional organization, Niger was an opportunity to bounce back and relaunch.

In fact, ECOWAS condoned presidents Alpha Condé¹¹ and Alassane Ouattara¹² after their controversial elections. Similarly, ECOWAS did not say a word when Patrice Talon [president of Benin] began to imprison his opponents. The sub-regional organization has within its members a certain Faure Gnassingbé [president of Togo], the embodiment of dynastic management. Before the advent of Niger, the organization was already struggling to make sense to Captain Ibrahim Traoré, General Assimi Goïta and General Mamady Doumbouya; military officers respectively at the head of the juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea.

Ultimately, ECOWAS disappointed and disenchanted everyone; given that it had failed to meet the expectations of the people of the West African sub-region. And in doing so, perhaps, it is not so bad that it disappears completely to reappear in a quite different [acceptable] form. After his election in April 2024, Senegalese President Bassirou Diomaye Faye promised to reform the ECOWAS and work in a way of reintegrating the AES member states into the organization again. In any case, a serious reform [of depoliticization] of the Organization must imperatively be carried out for greater credibility. The abortion of the military intervention in Niger helped avoid a 'new Afghanistan' in Sub-Saharan African region.

10. The Role of France in the Nigerien Issue

As I mentioned earlier, the image of France is even more tarnished in the eyes of its former colonies in Africa. Many of these former French colonies are looking to diversify their partnerships with other foreign powers like Russia, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. But this new policy of openness is opposed to the geopolitical ambition of the former colonizer. Thus, this anti-French feeling which is growing everywhere in Africa is beginning to annoy President Emmanuel Macron who has vehemently condemned the coup perpetrated against President Bazoum with whom he used to make good agreements. Two years earlier, he maintained the same ideological posture against the military juntas of Mali and Burkina Faso.

Subsequently, France was suspected of supporting the ECOWAS to prepare troops for a military intervention in Niger in order to restore the constitutional order. Furthermore, the "top secret" document elaborated by ECOWAS and its French ally put it as it follows:

The military coups in Mali and Burkina Faso challenged French interests in Africa in general and particularly in the Sahel region. The Republic has invested enormously in human, logistical and financial resources for decades to protect the vital interests of France in this part of the world. These two coups are in the process of reshuffling the maps of geopolitics and geostrategy in the world with Russia's growing interest in African countries. The advent of these exceptional regimes devoid of all humanity forced the French Forces to withdraw temporarily to Niger in order to better reorganize themselves to regain control of these countries. Unfortunately, the arrest of the legitimate president of Niger by rebel and terrorist groups in the pay of the Burkinabe and Malian juntas definitively calls into question French interests in Africa ([Secret Defence, 2023:3](#)).

However, these anti-French movements are undoubtedly due to factors of political, financial and military domination that the country has been exercising for several decades. Indeed, France is sometimes accused of protecting and supporting African dictators and of establishing French military bases, often in a restrictive manner, in sovereign African nations. As evidenced before, this does not please the new generation of the African young activists.

Given the rapidly deteriorating bilateral relations with France, the Niger coup leaders had given the French ambassador Sylvain Itté 48 hours to depart the nation. The junta claimed that the French ambassador had declined an invitation to speak with the new foreign minister of Niger. A day after the country's new military authorities gave France's ambassador an ultimatum to leave the country, tens of thousands of people demonstrated in Niamey in support of the military junta. President Macron assured that Sylvain Itté must

¹¹ The former Guinean president re-elected in 2020 for a third term after controversial elections for which ECOWAS had sent observers.

¹² In 2020, ECOWAS had congratulated the Ivorian president for his re-election to a third term that the opposition deemed unconstitutional.

continue his mission “despite the pressures, [and] despite all the declarations of illegitimate authorities” ([Le Monde, 2023](#)). He reiterated France’s support for ousted President Mohamed Bazoum.

When the ultimatum expired, the French Embassy in the country’s capital Niamey had had its water and electricity shut off by the military government of Niger. According to reports on August 27, not even food supplies were allowed to the French embassy. Similar actions were purportedly done at the French consulate in Zinder by the leaders of the Nigerien coup. In the meantime, the population threatened to storm the French Embassy and its military installation if French troops and its envoy did not leave the country.

11. Discussion

In light of all the above, it appears that the Alliance of Sahel States is moving from a paralysis of democracy – marked by non-compliance with the constitution regarding presidential term limits, election rigging, constitutional amendments, etc. just to name a few – to a Stratocracy wherein grassroots revolutions are seen as a panacea for liberation from neocolonialism. Indeed, stratocracy is not against democratic principles. Everything depends naturally on the will of the leaders. In 1748, Montesquieu emphasized in “*The Spirit of Law*, Book I, Chap. 3” that “laws must be so specific to the people for whom they are made, [and] it is a very great chance if those of one nation can suit another” ([Montesquieu, 1748](#): 95). This implies that there are few universal laws, and therefore there is no political regime that is universally valid.

Nowadays, there is increasing talk of diversifying partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa because France’s African policy – which for a long time remained stuck on issues of universal principles – no longer reflects the reality on the ground in Sub-Saharan Africa. In other words, regardless of the political regime adopted (monarchy, democracy, or stratocracy), the most important thing is to satisfy the majority. We have been given the opportunity to observe that the heads of state of the AES are working for the well-being of their respective peoples. To illustrate this, West African nationals are exempt from visas throughout the AES confederal territory. This is precisely the essence of integration and free movement; all of which is enshrined in the ECOWAS Charter ([Ecowas, 1999](#)). Yet, the politicization of the regional institution, occurred in 2003¹³, remains the main issue. This political move was made to the detriment of central issues such as economic integration, the free movement of people and goods, and many other economic and social issues.

Today, everyone is unanimous that serious reforms are needed within the ECOWAS for its proper functioning. From the beginning of the mediation between the regional body and the AES, Togo, through its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Robert Dussey, was categorical: the ECOWAS no longer meets the expectations of the sub-regional population. Similarly, in May 2024, Senegalese President Bassirou Dimaye Faye called for a profound reform of the organization. Also, in March 2025, Guinean President Umaro Sissoco Embaló mistreated the ECOWAS delegation that came to discuss electoral issues in Bissau. All this testifies to the degree of politicization of the institution. Most recently, it was the turn of Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara, one of the most skeptical, to recognize the need to reform the ECOWAS during the recent West African tour of the newly elected Ghanaian President, John Dramani Mahama.

12. Conclusion

Since 2015, the African Sahel region has been plagued by an increase in terrorist activity, and the years 2021, 2022, and 2023 marked the most violent periods in terms of the number of victims compared to previous years. This is the main reason for the various armed seizures of power by the new military leaders of the AES countries. While some pro-democracy groups vehemently criticize the seizure of power by military governments, a significant wave of popular support for the stratocratic regimes regularly gathers in the major cities of the Confederation of Sahel States to denounce, among other things, French interference in internal affairs, the ambiguous attitude of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), etc.

In such a context, the AES leaders decided to diversify their partnerships for the supply of military equipment with a view to confronting terrorism in the West African sub-region. This implies *de facto* the use of both

¹³ In 2003, the ECOWAS’ Additional Protocol included issues of democracy and good governance in its texts. This is considered by many political observers and analysts as a politicization of the sub-regional organization.

“minilateral diplomacy”¹⁴ and business diplomacy. In this dynamic, the AES faces new emerging states which, to boost their economies and/or assert their influence on the world stage, have adopted public diplomacy and soft power for some, and a combination of business diplomacy and hard power for others. It is the case for instance for China, Turkey, and Russia respectively. This further reinforced the willing of the AES for partnership diversification.

In all eventualities, history will remind that the years 2020s were that of unprecedented challenges to French foreign policy in Africa. It is a tumultuous history, where geopolitics, geostrategic alliances, and local resistances intertwine, to become only one multicolored side of the same spectrum in the face of the anticolonial ideological hydra. The motives – of the eight coups¹⁵ in three years – always remain the same: denunciation of French interference in African internal affairs, the struggle against imperialism, Western hegemony, and neocolonialism that prevail in Africa. This being materialized by the French military bases present in certain states of the Sahel region, the use of the colonial currency, i.e., the CFA franc, which impoverishes the continent, enriches the supporters of the neoliberal system and, above all, the collaboration of the occult networks of ‘Élysée’ with the dictators of the African continent. All this does not work in favor of fostering a sustainable development on the African continent.

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¹⁴ The salient feature of minilateralism is its prioritization of common interests over ideological alignment or shared values. Consequently, countries can work together on important issues without needing to share a common viewpoint or reach consensus on everything. Minilateral diplomatic arrangements are more adaptable and dynamic than traditional diplomacy, enabling nations to respond to opportunities and crises more quickly without being hampered by red tape. In addition, this flexibility frees governments from having to operate under the confines of a more expansive and fragmented group, allowing them to forge closer, stronger bonds based on common interests. Further details on the following link: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/minilateralism-concept-changing-world-order>

¹⁵ From 2020 to 2023, there have been eight (08) military coups in Africa in general: two coups in Mali, two in Burkina Faso, a constitutional coup in Chad after the death of Idris Deby Itno, one coup d’état in Guinea, another coup in Niger, and finally a new coup d’état recently in Gabon after the proclamation of the electoral results by rigged judges.

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