

# **Russia's Resurgence in West Africa: Arms Trade, Military Alliances, and Democratic Decline in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger**

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## **Introduction**

The Sahel region of West Africa has increasingly become a focal point of global geopolitical realignments amid rising political instability and democratic backsliding. Over the past three years, military takeovers in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) have disrupted fragile democratic transitions, replacing elected governments with military juntas. These coups are not isolated events but reflect a broader regional trend of deteriorating governance, insecurity, and the resurgence of external powers competing for influence. Notably, Russia has reemerged as a prominent actor in the Sahel, capitalizing on political instability and dissatisfaction with traditional Western allies, particularly France and the United States.

Historically, during the Cold War, Africa was a battleground for influence between the Soviet Union and the United States. Both superpowers provided military, economic, and ideological support to African governments as part of their broader competition for global dominance. The Soviet Union, in particular, utilized military aid and arms trade to build alliances with authoritarian regimes that aligned ideologically with Moscow. This strategy often reinforced autocratic governance while sidelining democratic reforms. Today, Russia's involvement in the Sahel mirrors this approach, albeit with critical differences. Unlike the ideologically driven Soviet Union, contemporary Russia adopts a more pragmatic strategy, prioritizing geopolitical leverage, economic access, and military partnerships over ideological alignment.

In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, Russia's influence is evident through significant arms transfers, military training, and the activities of state-backed entities like the Wagner Group. For example, following the expulsion of French forces, the Malian military junta turned to Russia for military support, securing arms deals and deploying Wagner Group operatives to counter jihadist insurgencies. Similarly, Burkina Faso has strengthened its ties with Moscow, receiving weapons and tactical assistance to consolidate the ruling regime's authority. In Niger, the 2023 coup resulted in a diplomatic rupture with Western partners and a pivot toward Russia, which has positioned itself as a stabilizing force through promises of security assistance.

***This study addresses the following question***

How does Russia's involvement in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, particularly through arms sales and military support, reflect Cold War-era Soviet strategies, and what is its impact on the decline of democracy in these countries?

Russia's engagement in the Sahel mirrors Cold War tactics of influence-building through military and arms support. However, its modern strategy is driven by pragmatic interests rather than ideological expansion. This military assistance consolidates authoritarian regimes, suppresses political opposition, and accelerates democratic backsliding. This study is significant for understanding the changing dynamics of global power in West Africa. The findings highlight the risks posed by Russia's involvement in exacerbating democratic decline while reshaping regional geopolitics. By examining this realignment, the study sheds light on the broader implications for international governance, regional stability, and future relations between African states and external powers.

## ***The Argument***

This study argues that Russia's growing involvement in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger reflects a modern adaptation of Cold War-era Soviet strategies, where military support and arms trade are used as tools to gain influence over fragile states. However, Russia's contemporary approach is notably more pragmatic, prioritizing short-term strategic and economic gains over ideological expansion. By providing military assistance and arms, Russia enables the ruling military juntas to consolidate power, suppress opposition, and delay democratic transitions. This dynamic accelerates the decline of democracy, as external support undermines domestic and international pressure for political reforms.

Russia's engagement in the Sahel contributes to a wider geopolitical realignment, reducing Western influence in the region. Anti-French sentiment, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso, has created an environment where Russian involvement is welcomed as an alternative to perceived Western "neo-colonialism." However, while Russia presents itself as a partner in stability, its focus on military solutions and regime consolidation risks exacerbating governance challenges, deepening insecurity, and further entrenching authoritarian rule.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Historical Context of External Intervention in Africa***

The African continent was a central stage for geopolitical competition during the Cold War (1945–1991), particularly as newly independent states became targets of ideological influence by the United States and the Soviet Union. Both powers employed military aid, arms transfers, and economic partnerships as tools for securing political alliances, often propping up authoritarian regimes to secure their respective geopolitical interests.

Rajosefa (2024) explains that Africa's significance in Cold War geopolitics stemmed from its strategic positioning, vast natural resources, and political instability, which provided opportunities for external actors to gain influence. For example, the Soviet Union offered extensive military aid to governments in Ethiopia under Mengistu Haile Mariam and in Angola, where the MPLA regime received arms, funding, and training to combat U.S.-supported factions. Soviet support bolstered these regimes' capacity to wage prolonged conflicts, sustaining autocratic rule under the guise of ideological alignment.

Similarly, in Mozambique, the Soviet Union provided arms and logistical support to the FRELIMO government during the civil war, effectively maintaining its alliance despite widespread governance issues. The U.S., on the other hand, supported rival groups like RENAMO, further entrenching instability. This competitive intervention had long-term consequences, delaying democratization and weakening local institutions. Eguegu (2022) argues that such military dependence entrenched authoritarianism across Africa by allowing regimes to prioritize regime survival over democratic governance. Leaders leveraged external military aid to suppress dissent, consolidate power, and sideline democratic norms, creating governance deficits that persist to this day.

Although the Cold War ended, its legacy of external intervention lingered in Africa. Post-1991, as Russia retreated from its African commitments, Western powers, particularly France and the United States, assumed dominant roles. However, the persistence of insecurity, jihadist insurgencies, and resource competition—especially in the Sahel—created grievances against Western involvement. Operation Barkhane, France's flagship counterterrorism mission launched in 2014, faced criticism for its failure to address growing instability in Mali and Burkina Faso, fueling resentment among local populations. This disillusionment laid the groundwork for

Russia's resurgence as an alternative partner, offering military solutions unencumbered by political demands.

### ***A Pragmatic Strategy***

Russia's contemporary engagement in Africa reflects continuities and discontinuities with Soviet Cold War strategies. Following decades of disengagement after the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia has reasserted itself as a significant geopolitical actor, particularly in West Africa and the Sahel. Unlike its ideological predecessor, modern Russia pursues a pragmatic strategy centered on arms trade, military cooperation, and resource extraction. Unlike during the Cold War, Russia now avoids long-term financial and political commitments, opting instead for transactional relationships. Nietvelt (2023) describes Russia's involvement in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger as a calculated effort to exploit political instability and anti-Western sentiment to deepen its influence. This strategy aligns with Russia's global ambition to challenge Western dominance while securing economic opportunities, such as access to gold, uranium, and other critical resources in the Sahel.

An important feature of Russia's modern engagement is its reliance on private military companies (PMCs) like the Wagner Group, which offer plausible deniability while delivering direct military support. For instance, following the 2020 coup in Mali, the Wagner Group was deployed to bolster the junta's fight against jihadist insurgencies. In exchange, Wagner secured access to gold mines in northern Mali, illustrating the transactional nature of Russia's strategy (Horak et al., 2024).

Similarly, in Burkina Faso, Russian arms transfers have been accompanied by Wagner Group operatives offering tactical training and military assistance. By framing itself as an

alternative to Western actors, Russia appeals to regimes seeking external support without conditional ties. Lellou (2024) argues that Russia's focus on pragmatic partnerships, rather than ideological alignment, allows it to navigate complex political landscapes effectively. This approach has proven attractive to military juntas facing domestic and international isolation.

### ***The Role of Arms Trade in Russian Influence***

Arms trade is central to Russia's strategy for gaining influence in Africa, particularly in the Sahel. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reports that Russia now accounts for over 40% of arms imports to Sub-Saharan Africa, surpassing other major suppliers like China and the United States. This dominance reflects Russia's ability to provide affordable and non-conditional arms agreements to African states.

In Mali, for example, Russia delivered fighter jets, helicopters, and small arms following the military junta's 2021 decision to expel French forces. This influx of weaponry strengthened the junta's ability to suppress internal dissent while countering jihadist insurgencies. Horak et al. (2024) highlight that Russia's arms sales are often accompanied by military training and advisory support, further consolidating the regime's control. A similar pattern is evident in Burkina Faso, where Russian arms transfers have bolstered the military regime's capacity to wage operations against jihadist groups in the north. The regime's reliance on Russian weapons reflects its broader strategic shift away from Western partners, particularly France. In Niger, following the 2023 coup, the junta turned to Russia to secure military support after France and the U.S. suspended aid. Lellou (2024) notes that Russia's swift response provided the regime with the tools to consolidate power while presenting its partnership as a rejection of neo-colonial influence. These underscores that Russian arms sales have emboldened authoritarian leaders in these countries, enabling them to resist external pressure for democratic reforms. Ojewale (2024)

argues that by reducing the regimes' reliance on Western aid, Russia undermines international efforts to promote political accountability and good governance.

### ***The Decline of Democracy and the Role of External Support***

The growing alignment with Russia has significant consequences for democracy in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This dynamic aligns with Levitsky and Way's (2010) concept of competitive authoritarianism, where regimes maintain a veneer of legitimacy—such as holding elections—while systematically undermining democratic institutions. For example, the Malian junta postponed elections originally planned for 2022, citing security concerns while relying on Wagner Group operatives to maintain control. This delay undermines international and regional efforts, such as those led by ECOWAS, to restore democratic governance. Similarly, in Burkina Faso, Russian arms and tactical support have strengthened the regime's capacity to suppress civil society and political opponents. In Niger, the 2023 military regime leveraged its new alliance with Russia to resist international sanctions and calls for a return to constitutional rule. Nietvelt (2023) highlights that Russia's “*no-strings-attached*” approach appeals to authoritarian leaders seeking to maintain power without adhering to Western demands for transparency and accountability. However, as Horak et al. (2024) caution, this approach exacerbates governance deficits, delaying necessary reforms and fostering long-term instability.

### ***Anti-Western Sentiment and Russia's Appeal***

Anti-Western sentiment is a driving force behind Russia's growing influence in the Sahel. In Mali, years of French military intervention under Operation Barkhane failed to quell jihadist insurgencies, leading to widespread frustration and resentment. Rajosefa (2024) explains that Russia has effectively exploited this discontent by positioning itself as a partner that respects

African sovereignty. By framing its involvement as a rejection of Western neo-colonialism, Russia appeals to both elites and segments of the population disillusioned with Western policies. For instance, the expulsion of French forces in Mali was celebrated as a symbolic victory for national sovereignty, with the junta using Russian support to solidify its narrative. In Burkina Faso, the regime has similarly leveraged public dissatisfaction with France to justify its alignment with Russia. Ojewale (2024) notes that this narrative resonates deeply, particularly in rural areas affected by insurgency and economic marginalization. While Russia's engagement offers short-term military and political gains, critics warn of its limitations. Lellou (2024) argues that Russia's focus on militarized solutions does little to address the underlying causes of instability, such as poverty, inequality, and weak institutions. This raises concerns about the sustainability of its partnerships and the long-term consequences for regional stability.

### ***The Geopolitical Consequences of Russia's Engagement***

The alignment of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger with Russia has broader geopolitical implications, challenging the dominance of traditional Western powers. Horak et al. (2024) argue that Russia's resurgence in the Sahel represents a significant realignment, as Western influence, particularly France's, has declined sharply. This shift reflects a broader trend of multipolar competition, with Russia and other emerging powers like China offering alternatives to Western engagement. However, the consequences for regional stability are concerning. Eguegu (2022) warns that Russia's focus on arms sales and military partnerships undermines international efforts to promote democracy and human rights. By emboldening military regimes, Russia risks perpetuating cycles of conflict and instability, with long-term implications for governance and development in the Sahel.



## **Case Studies**

The resurgence of Russian influence in the Sahel—particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—draws clear parallels to Cold War-era Soviet strategies while exhibiting notable differences adapted to modern realities. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union competed with the United States for influence in Africa, using arms transfers, military aid, and resource-based agreements to align newly independent nations with its geopolitical vision. The Soviet strategy was explicitly ideological, aimed at countering Western capitalism through the promotion of socialism and support for anti-colonial struggles. In contrast, Russia's current involvement is pragmatically driven, prioritizing economic and military interests while avoiding ideological entanglements. However, the tools remain strikingly similar: military alliances, arms sales, and political backing for authoritarian regimes. As with Cold War dynamics, Russia's engagement today consolidates ruling elites, undermines democratic transitions, and reshapes regional alliances at the expense of local governance and stability.

### ***Mali***

Mali's political instability and security challenges over the past decade have reshaped its alliances, leading to a strategic realignment that mirrors Cold War-era Soviet partnerships. Mali, once a key recipient of French military assistance through Operation Barkhane, turned decisively toward Russia after successive military coups in 2020 and 2021. While this partnership has yielded certain security and operational successes, its implications for governance and democracy raise significant questions about the long-term consequences of external involvement.

Mali's partnership with Russia emerged amid growing dissatisfaction with the perceived failures of French and Western military interventions. Since the outbreak of the Tuareg rebellion

in 2012 and the rise of jihadist insurgencies in northern Mali, France's Operation Serval and its successor, Operation Barkhane, had struggled to contain the spread of militant violence. Over time, public resentment against France intensified, fueled by frustrations over France's inability to deliver security, allegations of neocolonialism, and perceived interference in Malian domestic affairs. This sentiment provided fertile ground for a political shift following the August 2020 coup, which saw Colonel Assimi Goïta and the military junta seize power. The coup was followed by another in May 2021, further consolidating the military's control. Rejecting Western pressure to restore civilian rule, the junta sought alternative partnerships that prioritized military support without conditions tied to governance reforms. Russia emerged as the partner of choice, offering a pragmatic alliance similar to Cold War-era Soviet interventions in Africa.

The deployment of the Wagner Group, Russia's state-linked private military company, became a cornerstone of Mali's new security strategy. Wagner operatives began operations in late 2021, providing tactical military support, training to Malian forces, and direct involvement in counterinsurgency campaigns. Simultaneously, Russia delivered critical military hardware, including Mi-35 combat helicopters, armored vehicles, and small arms. This level of support closely mirrors Soviet practices during the Cold War, when Moscow supplied African allies like Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique with military advisors and equipment to bolster regimes against insurgencies and opposition forces.

The symbolic and practical shift was further cemented when Mali's military government expelled French forces in 2022, signaling a definitive break with its former colonial partner. This decision was widely celebrated domestically, as anti-French sentiment had reached a boiling point. Much like Soviet-backed leaders who leveraged anti-imperialist rhetoric to consolidate power, Mali's junta framed its alignment with Russia as a move toward national sovereignty and

self-determination. Russia's involvement has brought certain measurable improvements in Mali's security apparatus, particularly in its capacity to conduct counterinsurgency operations. Wagner Group personnel, alongside newly supplied Russian military equipment, have supported the Malian army in reclaiming territories previously controlled by jihadist groups. Reports suggest that operations in central Mali, particularly in regions such as Mopti and Ségou, have disrupted militant activities and pushed back insurgent forces that had expanded their influence during years of ineffective Western interventions. The military government has also invested in strengthening localized defense initiatives. Similar to Burkina Faso's use of civilian militias, Mali has mobilized local self-defense groups to supplement its counterinsurgency efforts. This multi-faceted approach, combined with Russian tactical support, reflects a more assertive security strategy under the junta compared to the years of dependency on French-led missions.

From a geopolitical perspective, Russia's support has allowed Mali to assert greater independence in its foreign policy, reducing reliance on Western actors and demonstrating a strategic diversification of partnerships. Horak et al. (2024) argue that this approach mirrors the Soviet Union's Cold War-era interventions, where Moscow offered military solutions to African states seeking to counter external threats and internal rebellions. While Russia's involvement has contributed to security gains, its impact on governance and democracy raises significant concerns. As during the Cold War, external military support has emboldened authoritarian consolidation at the expense of institutional development and political accountability. In Mali, the military government has repeatedly postponed democratic elections, citing ongoing security challenges as justification. Initially planned for 2022, elections have been pushed to 2024, with no clear assurances that the timeline will be respected.

The presence of the Wagner Group has further complicated Mali's political landscape. Reports from Human Rights Watch and other international observers have documented allegations of human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances, particularly in regions like Moura and Gao. These operations, while militarily effective, have alienated local communities and deepened mistrust between the state and its citizens—similar to Cold War-era Soviet interventions, where collateral damage often undermined the legitimacy of supported regimes.

Moreover, the Malian junta's reliance on external military backing has reduced its accountability to domestic and international actors. Western pressure to restore democratic governance has been effectively neutralized by Russia's unconditional support, mirroring Soviet strategies of insulating allied regimes from external scrutiny. Nietvelt (2023) highlights how this dynamic has enabled Mali's leadership to suppress dissent, restrict civil liberties, and consolidate power under the guise of restoring national stability.

The parallels between Mali's current trajectory and Cold War-era Soviet strategies are clear. In both contexts, external military support—whether from Moscow during the Soviet period or through Russia's Wagner Group today—has served as a tool for consolidating power, strengthening state security, and countering internal opposition. Much like Cold War African regimes that leveraged Soviet alliances to resist Western influence, Mali's junta has embraced Russia's partnership as a pathway to achieving sovereignty and independence from former colonial powers.

However, there are critical differences in Russia's contemporary approach. Unlike the Soviet Union, which sought ideological alignment and the promotion of socialism, modern Russia's engagement is pragmatically driven, focused on transactional gains such as resource

extraction and geopolitical influence. Russia's access to Mali's gold reserves, secured through its partnership with the junta, reflects this pragmatic orientation. The relationship is not framed by ideological narratives but by mutual interests: military support in exchange for economic and strategic benefits. Mali's partnership with Russia has produced mixed outcomes. On one hand, the military government has achieved tangible security gains, reclaiming territories and asserting greater control over jihadist-affected regions. Russia's involvement has empowered Mali to break away from Western dominance, aligning itself with a partner that prioritizes sovereignty and military solutions over political conditional ties. This strategic realignment reflects the resilience of Cold War dynamics, where external actors shape African state trajectories through arms, alliances, and resource deals.

On the other hand, these short-term gains come at a significant cost to governance and democracy. The postponement of elections, suppression of dissent, and documented human rights violations highlight the authoritarian trade-offs associated with external military support. Much like Soviet-backed regimes during the Cold War, Mali risks perpetuating cycles of instability if its military strategy is not accompanied by institutional reforms and efforts to address the root causes of insurgency, including poverty, inequality, and political exclusion.

### ***Burkina Faso***

Burkina Faso's trajectory under Captain Ibrahim Traoré provides a compelling case where Russia's involvement has coincided with tangible successes in improving national security. Since 2015, Burkina Faso has faced a growing insurgency led by jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and ISIS, resulting in significant territorial losses, large-scale displacement, and erosion of state control. Widespread frustration with the failures of French-led interventions under Operation Barkhane culminated in two military coups in 2022, the second of

which brought Traoré to power. Unlike his predecessor, Paul-Henri Damiba, Traoré adopted a more decisive and independent approach to tackling insecurity, pivoting away from Western partners toward Russia. Russia's engagement in Burkina Faso has been marked by an emphasis on pragmatic military cooperation, drawing comparisons to Soviet-era Cold War strategies where external support bolstered regimes under duress. The Burkinabé leadership invited Russian military assistance to replace the departing French troops, framing the realignment as a reclaiming of national sovereignty and independence. This decision resonated strongly with the population, as anti-French sentiment had grown over years of failed military campaigns and accusations of Western neo-colonialism. Horak et al. (2024) argue that Russia's ability to provide military support without conditional ties—combined with effective public messaging—has strengthened the regime's legitimacy domestically.

Unlike in Mali, where Wagner Group activities have been linked to human rights abuses and societal mistrust, Russia's role in Burkina Faso has been associated with measurable successes on the ground. Traoré's government has focused on improving coordination among military forces, reclaiming key territories previously controlled by insurgents, and prioritizing local defense initiatives. For instance, Burkina Faso's strategy of arming local civilian militias (Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland, VDP), alongside the acquisition of Russian-supplied weapons, has significantly improved the military's capacity to push back against jihadist forces. Reports suggest that under Traoré's leadership, the Burkinabé government has reclaimed parts of northern territories that were virtually inaccessible under French-led interventions.

However, while Russia's support has strengthened security outcomes, its engagement has raised concerns about the long-term implications for governance and democracy. As seen during

the Cold War, external military backing often comes at the expense of institutional development and political accountability. Nietvelt (2023) notes that the Traoré regime, while effective in addressing security concerns, has also delayed democratic reforms and electoral processes, citing ongoing insecurity as a justification. Opposition voices, civil society groups, and independent media have faced growing restrictions, echoing patterns of authoritarian consolidation observed in other Russia-aligned regimes. The militarization of governance—an approach that mirrors Soviet Cold War dynamics—prioritizes short-term stabilization over comprehensive reforms. While Traoré’s leadership has achieved notable progress on the battlefield, questions remain regarding the sustainability of this approach. Ojewale (2024) warns that reliance on external military support, such as Russian arms transfers, may exacerbate underlying grievances, including poverty, political exclusion, and economic disparities, if not accompanied by meaningful governance reforms.

Unlike previous Burkinabé leaders, Traoré’s strategic pivot to Russia has produced visible improvements in security, offering a degree of stability that eluded his predecessors under Western partnerships. His government’s emphasis on national sovereignty and practical security strategies—combined with Russia’s flexible and unconditional support—reflect a significant departure from the failures of the past decade. This success cannot be dismissed; it demonstrates that external partnerships can be effective when tailored to local realities and when combined with decisive leadership. At the same time, parallels to Cold War-era Soviet engagements remain evident. The consolidation of power, restrictions on opposition, and delayed transitions to civilian rule suggest that Russia’s involvement may perpetuate the same governance deficits that characterized Soviet-aligned regimes in Africa. While security gains are critical, they must be

balanced with efforts to rebuild democratic institutions, address socio-economic challenges, and ensure long-term stability

## *Niger*

Niger's trajectory following its 2023 military coup underscores both the challenges and opportunities of Russia's growing influence in West Africa. Historically, Niger had been a reliable partner for the United States and France in the global fight against jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel. The country hosted French troops and U.S. drone bases, reflecting its strategic importance for counterterrorism operations. However, decades of military dependence on Western actors failed to yield significant progress, as jihadist groups expanded their operations across Niger's borders, particularly in the Tillabéri and Diffa regions.

The coup led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani in July 2023 marked a turning point, signaling Niger's disillusionment with Western interventions and its pivot toward alternative partners like Russia. Much like the Cold War dynamics when African leaders rejected Western influence and embraced the Soviet Union as a counterbalance, Niger's realignment reflects a calculated attempt to assert sovereignty, address security needs, and reduce dependence on conditional Western aid. Prior to the coup, Niger was regarded as a "Western stronghold" in the Sahel. France maintained over 1,500 troops in the country, while the United States invested heavily in military infrastructure, including the \$110 million Air Base 201 in Agadez, used for counterterrorism drone operations. However, local frustrations with Western involvement—perceived as ineffective, exploitative, and neo-colonial—fueled growing resentment. Despite significant international investment, Niger remained plagued by insecurity, economic stagnation, and governance deficits, leading to discontent among both military elites and the civilian population.



General Tchiani justified the coup as a response to the failures of former President Mohamed Bazoum to address Niger's security challenges and to assert national sovereignty. This rhetoric mirrors Cold War-era leaders like Sekou Touré in Guinea, who rejected Western dominance in favor of Soviet partnerships under the banner of anti-colonial liberation. Today, Russia has assumed a similar role in Niger, offering military assistance and economic partnerships without the political conditionalities attached to Western aid.

In the aftermath of the coup, Russia positioned itself as a viable alternative to Western partners. Moscow quickly extended diplomatic support to the junta, framing its involvement as a defense of Niger's sovereignty against ECOWAS sanctions and Western criticism. This narrative resonated domestically, particularly as public frustration with France reached a peak, with anti-French protests erupting in Niamey and other urban centers. Since its pivot toward Russia, Niger has sought to diversify its military partnerships and reduce reliance on Western forces. Russia has pledged to supply military equipment, including small arms, vehicles, and tactical support, which the junta claims will enhance Niger's capacity to combat jihadist insurgencies. This shift represents a pragmatic recalibration, as Tchiani's government aims to prioritize short-term stability over the continuation of strained Western alliances.

Compared to previous Western engagements, Russia's approach appears less encumbered by bureaucratic restrictions and demands for democratization. For instance, the suspension of Western aid following the coup forced Niger's leadership to seek alternative economic partners, and Russia expressed interest in securing access to Niger's uranium reserves—one of the world's most significant sources of nuclear fuel. Much like the Soviet Union's resource-based partnerships during the Cold War, Russia's interest in Niger's uranium reflects a transactional relationship where military support is exchanged for strategic economic gains.

From a security perspective, Tchiani's government has adopted a more assertive stance, focusing on consolidating control over vulnerable regions where jihadist groups have destabilized governance. By strengthening its partnership with Russia, Niger has signaled a rejection of perceived Western paternalism in favor of an alliance that emphasizes mutual benefit and sovereignty.

While the realignment with Russia has bolstered Niger's leadership in the short term, it raises significant concerns regarding governance, accountability, and long-term stability. Similar to Soviet-backed African regimes during the Cold War, the reliance on external military support enables military juntas to consolidate power while delaying democratic transitions. General Tchiani's government has postponed elections indefinitely, citing the need to restore security before considering a return to civilian rule. This approach mirrors Cold War-era leaders who leveraged external support to sideline democratic pressures, often resulting in prolonged authoritarian rule. Moreover, the junta's suppression of dissent, including restrictions on media freedom and civil society organizations, echoes historical patterns where military-backed regimes relied on external legitimacy to stifle domestic opposition.

Despite Niger's successes in reframing its alliances and achieving symbolic victories against Western influence, challenges persist. Russia's engagement, while militarily effective, offers few solutions to Niger's socio-political and economic crises. As Ojewale (2024) notes, a militarized approach to governance risks perpetuating cycles of instability by failing to address the root causes of jihadist insurgencies, such as poverty, unemployment, and political exclusion. These structural challenges cannot be resolved through arms and tactical training alone, and Russia's focus on transactional partnerships does little to promote comprehensive development. Furthermore, Niger's uranium exports, while economically significant, raise concerns about

resource dependency and exploitation. Historically, Soviet partnerships in Africa often prioritized access to strategic resources over the welfare of local populations, resulting in minimal economic benefits for the host nations. Similar fears have emerged in Niger, where Russia's interest in uranium may exacerbate existing inequalities without contributing to broader economic growth.

Niger's pivot toward Russia represents a pragmatic attempt to address longstanding security failures and assert national sovereignty following decades of Western involvement. Much like Cold War-era alignments, this partnership provides the junta with military support, political backing, and economic opportunities while reducing its reliance on conditional Western aid. In the short term, General Tchiani's leadership has capitalized on public frustration with France and the United States to justify the realignment, presenting Russia as a reliable partner that respects Niger's independence.

However, the long-term implications remain uncertain. While Russian engagement has strengthened the regime's capacity to combat insurgencies, its emphasis on military solutions risks deepening governance challenges and delaying Niger's return to democracy. The historical parallels to Soviet Africa are evident: external support enables authoritarian consolidation, resource extraction prioritizes external gains over domestic development, and militarized governance exacerbates structural insecurities rather than resolving them. The case of Niger demonstrates that Russia's involvement, while effective in addressing immediate security and political needs, reflects broader Cold War dynamics where military alliances and resource-based partnerships enabled authoritarian resilience at the expense of democratic governance. Niger's leadership under General Tchiani has successfully reframed its external partnerships as a rejection of neo-colonialism, much like leaders during the Cold War, but questions remain

regarding the sustainability of this realignment. Without efforts to address root causes of instability and promote institutional reforms, the benefits of Russian engagement risk being short-lived, leaving Niger vulnerable to further political and economic crises.

### *Insights*

Russia's involvement in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger represents a modern manifestation of Cold War-era Soviet strategies, reshaped to meet contemporary geopolitical realities. Through arms sales, military partnerships, and resource-based agreements, Russia has successfully positioned itself as a key actor in the Sahel, offering an alternative to Western influence. Much like Soviet interventions in Africa and Asia during the Cold War, Russia's engagement prioritizes regime stability and geopolitical leverage over democratic governance, contributing significantly to democratic backsliding in these countries. By examining historical parallels, it becomes evident how Russia's approach combines military pragmatism, transactional alliances, and anti-Western rhetoric to strengthen fragile regimes while undermining democratic transitions.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union engaged in ideological and military competition with the United States, employing arms transfers and military support to prop up regimes in Asia and Africa. This strategy was most visible in regions like Vietnam, Laos, and Afghanistan, where the Soviet Union supplied weapons, advisors, and financial aid to allied governments. In Vietnam, for example, Soviet military assistance, including MiG fighter jets and artillery, bolstered North Vietnam's capacity to wage war against U.S.-backed South Vietnam (Ojewale, 2024; Bonnier & Hedenskog, 2020). These efforts were framed as support for national sovereignty and anti-colonial resistance, aligning with the Soviet Union's broader ideological goals of countering Western imperialism.

Russia's role in Mali today reflects similar patterns. Following the 2020 and 2021 coups, Mali's military government rejected Western pressure to transition back to civilian rule, instead embracing Russia's military support as a pragmatic alternative. The deployment of the Wagner Group—a private military company backed by the Russian state—and the provision of advanced weaponry, such as Mi-35 combat helicopters, mirror the Soviet Union's reliance on military advisors and arms transfers in Cold War Asia (Mishra, 2023; Issaev & Shishkina, 2022). This partnership has allowed the Malian junta to reclaim certain territories from jihadist insurgents, strengthening its domestic position while sidelining democratic reforms. However, much like Soviet interventions in Afghanistan, Russia's involvement has been accompanied by human rights abuses and growing mistrust among local populations. Reports of extrajudicial killings in regions like Moura highlight the risks of external militarization exacerbating societal grievances rather than resolving them (Rajosefa, 2024).

In Burkina Faso, Russia's support has also drawn comparisons to Soviet engagements in Southeast Asia, particularly in Laos, where the Soviet Union provided arms and training to the Pathet Lao regime. Following the 2022 coups, Captain Ibrahim Traoré adopted a localized and aggressive counterinsurgency strategy supported by Russian arms and advisors. By empowering local militias such as the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP), Traoré's government has achieved notable security successes, reclaiming territories that had long been under jihadist control (Odhiambo, 2020). This stands in stark contrast to the failures of Western-led interventions, particularly France's Operation Barkhane, which was widely criticized for its ineffectiveness and perceived neo-colonial undertones (Akinola, 2024). Russia's ability to provide arms without political conditions has allowed Traoré to consolidate power and deflect international criticism, reflecting a broader Soviet-era strategy of supporting regimes in exchange

for geopolitical alignment. Anti-Western rhetoric, amplified by Traoré's government, mirrors Cold War narratives in which Soviet alliances were framed as victories for national sovereignty and independence. However, as in Cold War Asia, the militarization of governance in Burkina Faso raises concerns about democratic backsliding. Media restrictions, suppression of opposition voices, and the postponement of elections highlight the trade-offs between security gains and political accountability.

Niger's case underscores similar dynamics. The 2023 coup led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani marked a decisive rejection of Western influence, particularly France and the United States, which had long relied on Niger as a cornerstone of their counterterrorism strategies in the Sahel. Russia's swift response—offering military support and pledging economic cooperation—mirrors Soviet policies in Central Asia, where resource access was often tied to military alliances (Mishra, 2023). Russia's interest in Niger's uranium reserves aligns with its broader economic and geopolitical priorities, much like the Soviet Union's extraction of oil, gas, and minerals in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Bonnier & Hedenskog, 2020). For the Nigerien junta, Russia's partnership has provided the tools to resist international sanctions while consolidating power domestically. However, this reliance on external military support, unaccompanied by institutional reforms, risks deepening governance challenges and perpetuating Niger's vulnerability to insurgencies.

Across all three countries, Russia's involvement reflects a clear adaptation of Cold War-era strategies to contemporary contexts. As during the Cold War, arms sales and military partnerships strengthen authoritarian regimes by enabling them to suppress opposition, delay elections, and resist external pressure for democratization. Russia's transactional approach—offering military solutions in exchange for geopolitical influence and resource access—mirrors

the Soviet Union's use of arms-for-alliance strategies in fragile states across Asia and Africa. The ideological framing of these partnerships, emphasizing sovereignty and resistance to Western dominance, further echoes Soviet narratives of anti-colonial liberation. Yet, the consequences of these alliances remain deeply troubling for democracy and governance in the Sahel. While Russia's support has delivered short-term security gains, particularly in Burkina Faso and parts of Mali, its militarized approach fails to address the underlying drivers of instability: poverty, political exclusion, and institutional weakness. As with Soviet-backed regimes in Afghanistan and Laos, external military assistance risks entrenching authoritarian rule, alienating local populations, and perpetuating cycles of conflict. In Mali, the Wagner Group's human rights violations have exacerbated tensions, while in Niger, the junta's resource agreements with Russia raise concerns about economic dependency and exploitation (Rajosefa, 2024; Odhiambo, 2020).

The parallels between Russia's engagement in the Sahel and Soviet policies in Cold War Asia highlight the enduring tools of external influence: arms transfers, military alliances, and resource extraction. However, Russia's modern approach, while pragmatic and flexible, remains rooted in the same trade-offs. By prioritizing regime stability and geopolitical leverage, Russia strengthens fragile military governments while undermining democratic accountability and long-term state resilience. This dynamic underscores the tension at the heart of Russia's role in the Sahel: while its support provides immediate security benefits and reinforces state sovereignty, it simultaneously accelerates democratic backsliding and exacerbates governance challenges, leaving these nations vulnerable to prolonged instability.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how Russia's involvement in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, particularly through arms sales and military support, reflects Cold War-era Soviet strategies while adapting to contemporary realities. By offering unconditional military assistance, resource-based agreements, and anti-Western narratives, Russia has successfully positioned itself as an alternative partner for military regimes in the Sahel. This approach mirrors Soviet engagements in Asia, where similar tools of influence were used to secure geopolitical leverage, albeit with an ideological focus that is absent in Russia's current pragmatism.

The findings highlight that while Russian support has addressed short-term security gaps—most notably in Burkina Faso—it has also enabled democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation in all three countries. Military juntas have leveraged Russia's involvement to postpone elections, suppress opposition, and resist international pressure for democratization. The parallels with Soviet Cold War policies in regions like Afghanistan, Laos, and Central Asia underscore the enduring risks of external militarization: failure to resolve the root causes of instability and a deepening of governance deficits.

Ultimately, Russia's modern engagement in the Sahel serves as a cautionary reflection of Cold War history. While offering immediate solutions to fragile regimes, its emphasis on military solutions over governance reforms risks perpetuating the very cycles of instability it seeks to resolve. Moving forward, addressing these challenges will require a recalibration of regional and international strategies to focus on inclusive governance, institutional resilience, and sustainable development.



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