

Humanitarian Crisis in Central Sahel and The Fight for Survival - Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger's Fight against Violent Extremism

by Silverio Gabriel, Visiting Researcher at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation



In this issue:

- Humanitarian Crisis in Central Sahel and the fight for survival - Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger's fight against violent extremism
- The Russo-Ukraine Conflict and Western Interests: What Direction for Africa?

Introduction

Opinions vary on the causes of the relentless violence in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, a region known as the Central Sahel. However, there is consensus on the damage and suffering this violence is inflicting on already vulnerable communities. Leaving the Governments in the region to resolve their own problems is a cruel fate to resign the millions affected. This decade-long violent extremist conflict has created a tremendous humanitarian crisis that has claimed thousands of lives, displaced over 3 million, disrupted regional trade and economic activity, and has the potential to spread further in the region. Climate change and its accompanying environmental shocks have exacerbated conditions and created acute food insecurity and other hardships in Central Sahel.

The withdrawal of Western governments' involvement from the region, whether in the form of diplomatic engagement, financial and military support, or humanitarian assistance, hurts the region's chances of quickly recovering from this conflict. It erodes the hard-earned democratic gains, and compounds the suffering of the most vulnerable in that society. With other man-made and natural disasters drawing donor attention and resources, the deteriorating situation continues claiming the lives of children, young women, and men. Regional and international bodies should continue to do their utmost to reestablish connection with the leaders of the military juntas and continue working with them while encouraging them to return to democratic forms of government.

The situation on the ground

After seizing power, the military juntas severed ties with Western partners who up to that point, supported the regional fight against violent extremism and the fledgling democracies.

Part of this separation included the ousting of French and American coalition forces who were supporting the fight against violent extremists. Instead, the junta looked to the East for support, opting to replace Western coalition partners with Russian state-sponsored private military company Wagner Group (now Africa Corps). Approximately 300 military staff were deployed to support Burkina Faso's fight against extremist organizations. This support consists of Russia providing military training and equipment and leads to stronger cooperation between the partners. Although this military support and increased cooperation bodes well for the junta, there may also be implications for Sahelian democratic progress. As it stands, the Transition President's extension for an additional year of an April 2023 mobilization law that grants the government sweeping powers, including dominion over people and goods and "authorizes restrictions on unspecified rights", is being used to check dissent. The transition government has been accused of using this law to enlist critics into military auxiliary volunteers for the defence of the Homeland, created to augment security forces. On another occasion, the government suspended international media outlets for reporting on government security forces' alleged summary execution of more than 220 civilians in Northern Burkina Faso. These acts of suppressing press freedom and the right to information fly in the face of democratic ideals.

The junta also severed ties with the Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and formed the Alliance of Sahel States. This alliance is focused on stronger military cooperation in the fight against violent extremists. However, security in these three countries has worsened, despite promises to reverse the situation. Civilians are at the mercy of government security forces who accuse them of sympathising with violent extremist groups, self-defence militia who carry out revenge attacks on villages they suspect of being of the same ethnic groups represented in violent extremist organisations that murder, plunder and hold

villages hostage, in months and year-long sieges. Only 50% of the country is under government control, the other half is controlled by violent extremist groups like Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State of Greater Sahara (ISGS). Communities in insurgent-controlled territories are subject to extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, beatings, extortion, restrictions on economic activities, school closures, and cultural restrictions that forbid practices like celebrations at weddings. The same insecurity exists in Mali, where government troops are also struggling to maintain control of the country. The resources required to retain recently recovered Kidal, an important northern city that was controlled by predominantly separatist Tuareg groups, may worsen security elsewhere. Jeopardising important commercial routes and threatening to spread to neighbouring countries. Algeria, especially, is keen on keeping violent extremist operating in northern Mali out of their territory.

How can regional and international partners help?

Despite the bleak outlook of the region, the hope and potential remain unabated. The hope is that now, more than ever, despite the Central Sahel's departure from the African Union, this continental body, with behind-the-scenes support from Western governments and multilateral organisations, continue its humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development outreach, reestablishing government-to-government diplomacy (Track I Diplomacy) and, until that is accomplished, pursue unofficial or Track II Diplomacy as a humanitarian response mechanism.

The near-exclusive security response suggests that the root causes of these conflicts remain unattended. The lack of state presence, absence of basic services like health care, security, education, regional and ethnic marginalisation,

and a worsening conflict between displaced people and host communities because of a scarcity of resources. What is more, the conflict has created a host of new traumas among the population that have the potential to be the source of resentment towards the state and its security forces. There is a window of opportunity regional actors should aggressively exploit, especially considering this current low point in the conflict. The military junta has proven resolute in resolving this, though commendable, the cost in terms of human suffering, is too steep a price to pay when less austere alternatives would serve the same purpose.

These coups should be viewed for what they are: A sign of frustration at the security impasse and the continued disenfranchisement of a people by political elites that enrich themselves at the expense of the majority. Similar sentiments have been expressed by critics who blame Western support for the long tenure of autocratic governments, that serve personal interests instead of those of its constituents. Coup leaders should be made to abide by their promise to hand over governance to democratically elected governments, but they should not be ostracised at the expense of those they represent. By now, the military junta's appreciation for the myriad of challenges involved in achieving development goals has been tempered by the realities of their recent experiences. Testing the resolve of the military junta only prolongs the suffering of Central Sahelians, delays the delivery of much-needed humanitarian and development support and further emboldens the violent extremist into growing their reach.

The Russo-Ukraine Conflict and Western Interests: What Direction for Africa?

by Justin Steyn, Deputy Director: Research, City of Johannesburg



Ukrainian relations with the West and the East as a proxy conflict may replicate in African foreign relations

When a CIA-backed coup d'état against a democratically elected Ukrainian government transpired in 2014 (Young 2022, Michel, 2022), little did the world know this would usher in multipolar instability. Contemporary geopolitical events in Africa can be understood against the backdrop of the fallout of European conflict that recasts parts of Africa as a neo-Cold War battleground. Based on the source material covered, it is the intent of this paper to make a case that military conflict between the West and Ukraine on the one hand and Russia on the other has emerging consequences for Africa. Although Russia is backed by an emerging economic bloc comprising Brazil, China, India, and South Africa (BRICS), there is a dominant polarization pattern in African external relations that tests the tolerance of pro-developmental non-alignment. The suggestion made here is that Ukrainian relations with the West and the East as a proxy conflict may replicate in African foreign relations.

The Foreign Relations of Ukraine: 1991 to the Start of the Special Military Operation

Ukraine was governed as an integral part of a Russophone cultural and ideological empire until 1991. Ukraine committed to denuclearization and neutrality, effectively providing Western Europe and Moscow with a buffer.

Viktor Yanukovich, a Russia-aligned leader, was deposed in the Maidan revolution of 2014. Some suggest this was orchestrated by Victoria Nuland, an operative of the Central Intelligence Agency. Petro Poroshenko, a Ukrainian nationalist and economic oligarch, assumed the Ukrainian presidency. Poroshenko and his fascist supporters in Sloboda and Right Sector actively worked to exclude Russian speakers from society. They publicly blamed Russia for the efforts of Russian speakers, the so-called separatists in the Donbas, for defending themselves against the shelling of civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2014) and cultural and economic suppression. Poroshenko consented to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) training Ukrainian troops (Radio Free Europe, 2017). Many Ukrainians and Russians share family members and a long history, so it was clear the popular position was one of conciliation. In the 2019 election, Volodimir Zelensky assumed the presidency on a platform of reconciliation with Russia (BBC, 2019). The deal appears to have been cast before he assumed the presidency. Rightwing forces behind the Maidan coup of 2014 and firmly ensconced in decision-making structures by Poroshenko escalated the conflict with Russia at the behest of Western politico-economic elites.

The Relationship between Russia, Ukraine and the West Prior to the Special Military Operation

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict may be seen as a localized conflict between Ukrainian nationalists and Russian-backed separatists. Geopolitically, foreign governments and powers actively exploit and exacerbate existing conflict-inducing conditions. The Rand Corporation (2019) frames a possible Washington Strategy towards Moscow within a Cold War approach. The overextension of Russian economic resources and politico-diplomatic authority forces Russia to remilitarize while the West applies financial stressors through sanctions, exclusion from financial payment systems, and the denial of Western market access in areas of raw materials and energy supplies.

These actions are designed to collapse the political system. Similarly, defence agreements with nations currently within the Russian sphere of political and economic influence would undermine the stability of the Russian government (Dobbins, et al., 2019). The report assumes that actively supporting groups and committing actions hostile to the existence of the Russian state comes without real-world consequences. The stated objective of this policy is to carve Russia up into separate small republics that Western corporations can exploit. The strategy has been backed by active sabotage of peace agreements and active provocations. There are five examples of this. The annexation of Crimea, the Minsk Agreement of 2015, the March 2022 discussions in Turkey, the destruction of the Nordstream Pipelines and the presence of NATO and military personnel in Ukraine.

Firstly, the Crimean annexation is seen as Western proof of Russian expansionism but ignores the historical context and that Crimea was Russian territory prior to 1954. The build-up of a Eurocentric pressure center in Ukraine following the Bucharest Summit of 2008 was brought about by European leaders' announcement that Georgia and Ukraine would be incorporated into NATO and the European Union. Russian annexation of Crimea would never have likely occurred if NATO had not initiated a policy of encirclement and denial of strategic infrastructure towards Russia.

Secondly, the Minsk Agreement was arrived at in 2015 to create peace guaranteed by France and Germany. Under the Minsk Agreement, the conflict between the Ukrainian state and its two dissident areas of Donetsk and Luhansk would end. This meant that the Ukrainian government would have to cease its policies of cultural destruction of Russians living in these two areas (Mearsheimer, 2017). The conflict escalated and Minsk proved to be devoid of force. Francois Hollande and Angela Merkel, respective former prime ministers of France and Germany, openly admitted that the Minsk Agreement provided Western nations time to militarise Ukrainians and

escalate the conflict (News18, 2022, Sputnik, 2024).

Thirdly, Belarussian President Lukashenko initiated peace talks, which moved to Istanbul, Turkey. A preparatory peace deal and dialogue resolved all the issues that had given rise to the armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia. All the effort put into reinstating a condition of peace was negated by Boris Johnson under the direction of the Americans who forced Zelensky to reject the peace deal.

Fourthly, the economic warfare waged against Russia by the West is in contravention of international law. The West illegally froze Russian foreign reserves amounting to 300 billion Dollars in 2022 and then made subsequent plans to use the interest to fund conflict in Ukraine. The initial intention expressed in the West was to confiscate the whole foreign reserve (Hirsh, 2024). As part of this economic warfare, Rand Corporation (Dobbins et al. op cit.) argues that economically destroying Russia's capacity to supply Western markets with oil and gas was critical to an American destabilization strategy directed towards Russia. Around 50 meters of the Nordstream pipeline, which supplied Russian gas to Germany, was destroyed by deliberate sabotage (Reuters, 2022). The Swedish government investigated the destruction of the pipeline in their territorial waters, but the reported findings were inconclusive. It is largely assumed that the Americans were responsible. Active involvement of NATO military advisors and intelligence officers, and threats from individual NATO members to send their militaries into Ukraine indicates NATO has invested in the Ukrainian ability to wage war through financial, technical, intelligence and material support way beyond any other conflict. By April 2024, the Americans had transferred 175 billion dollars to the Ukrainian government (Masters and Mellow, 2024). This excludes European donations. From the American elite's point of view, a frozen conflict is the worst possible outcome.

Senator Lindsay Graham has openly claimed that Russian-occupied Ukraine holds between 10 and 12 trillion dollars of resources, which America must control.

The Outcome of Inferred Experience

In this proxy war between Russia and Ukraine and American corporate interests, what have the outstanding features been? It is suggested here that the Western world does not recognize spheres of influence other than its own. Couching its actions in terms of spreading democracy and prosperity does not hold true when the international "rules-based order" is only used to support the interests of Western governments. We can infer that property rights are only respected when western-owned. The looting of Russian foreign reserves indicates that one cannot entrust Western countries with the custodianship of any sovereign wealth. As a subcategory to this, any natural wealth cannot be utilized without a clear, internationally recognized agreement that will allow recourse to mechanisms of restitution falling outside of Western control.

Africa, the East and the West

The politico-economic relationship between Africa and Europe since the 1970s has not traditionally been one between equals in the creation of rules and norms and in the negotiation of trade agreements. Russia was never historically interested in the resources of Africa. During the Cold War, denial of the field strategies Russians employed in Africa meant supporting ideologically friendly liberation movements of former French, British and Portuguese colonies through the provision of weapons and training. Very little of this engagement was directed towards the promotion of economic development, being guided by the principle of the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Both Western and Russian intelligence operatives overthrew governments and manoeuvred to install friendly African leaders in pursuit of their own national interests. While this may be considered a simplistic account, the fundamental driving force of African States'

relationships with other nations is driven by national political and economic interests. Duursma and Masuhr (2022) indicate that Russia politically disengaged from Africa in the post-Cold War era, closing embassies and missions but began to reengage with Africa after 2014. Capitalizing on the narrative of anti-imperialism and respect for sovereignty, Russia resurrected its old Soviet-era cachet in Africa and has begun to rebuild its influence. Since 2014, Russia has signed defense agreements with 20 African countries and the Wagner military group has operated freely in African countries where France and America held influence, displacing resident western military structures to some extent.

The expulsion of the French ambassador to Niger and French Troops, the cancellation of 5 mutual military agreements, the severing of all ties between France and Niger are a part of the Niger junta's response to the French government not recognizing the outcome of the coup d'etat (The Conversation, 2023). In western circles, the French made a strategic decision to withdraw its troops and recall its ambassador to Niger, following coups and disagreements in and with Gabon, Burkina Faso and Mali (BBC, 2023). The lack of capacity in the Sahel to counter the jihadi movement in that geographical area presents a threat to the interests of many state and non-state actors. The closure of American bases in Chad and Niger illustrates this geopolitical displacement and forces a search for new western allies but it does not guarantee that the security condition of Africans will improve.

Russia, like the West, has demonstrated tendencies to favour despotic authoritarians to advance their national interests by proxy. An expert in South Africa-Russia relations, Irina Filatova suggested in an interview that the Russian preference for authoritarianism is likely, indicating that the South African election in 2024 was influenced by Russian finances.

The MK party led by former president Jacob Zuma was funded by Russian military intelligence with the objective of undermining the leadership of Ramaphosa and returning Zuma or leaders within his faction to power. The consequence being a destabilization of a country for the sake of asserting comprehensive influence over the governance of the country (Steyn, 2024). One must recall that it was under the Zuma administration that South Africa joined the BRICS, the Russians being the underwriters of South African inclusion. MKs manifesto, incredibly anti-constitutionalist in its orientation, reflects many solutions to the impediments Zuma faced in his presidency – for example the abolition of the Public Finance Management Act that prevented him from unilaterally signing an agreement for the construction of nuclear power plants with Russia without constitutionally mandated competitive bidding.

In South Africa, Western economic warfare is presently mostly political in nature. The US ambassador accused the South African government of supplying weapons to Russia in 2022. Joint naval exercises between the South African and Russian navies in 2023 were part of American discontent. Subsequently, the American government threatened to withdraw most favoured nation trading status secured under the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA). Similarly, Gabon, Niger, Mali and Uganda – all who failed to meet criteria or had passed anti-homosexuality laws – were threatened with expulsion from AGOA by the Biden administration (BBC 2023 b). It may be the case that these countries may politically and economically gravitate towards Moscow and China who appear unlikely to place the same politically prescriptive strings on their trade deals. By 2024, there was a bill before the US house of representatives which will make mandatory for the administration to report to congress if South Africa has “engaged in activities that undermine United States national security or foreign policy interests” (Fabricius, 2024).

It signals how the American government intends to deal with dissent among allies and periphery countries. Both Russian and American policies in Africa clearly demonstrate that ends justify the means.

Conclusion

Russia has demonstrated commitment to “horizontal escalation”, a term which practically means interfering in the Asian and African interests of western countries in the same way western countries have interfered in Russia’s sphere of influence. Russia has sent naval forces to Cuba, a traditional cold war ally, and South Africa, concluding mutual protection agreements with 20 other countries and developed a military relationship with North Korea, all mostly within the western sphere of proclaimed influence, to counter western actions in Ukraine. The world is reverting to the Cold War dynamics of proxies and disruption in a broader denial of the field strategy. The resurgence of great power conflict and competition presaged by the Russo-Ukraine conflict cannot bode well for Africa. Africa is currently struggling to assert its economic sovereignty as political elites sign financial and economic deals with Chinese companies that are wholly opaque and result in debt for capital equity swaps. The Chinese government now owns Entebbe airport in Uganda as well as the majority of Zambia’s key transport and mining infrastructure. Adding Russians to the mix of western and Chinese national interests and companies competing in Africa means that there is just another opportunistic wolf at the door. It is very clear that the prosecution of the Ukraine conflict has warnings and unintended consequences for nation states in Africa. The world is recognizably antagonistic and multipolar again, translating into an incredibly unstable and competitive environment that can easily degenerate into intra national conflicts as internal factions and nations coalesce around preferred patrons. Great powers should not be the cause of African struggles as the war in Ukraine has clearly demonstrated that the great power political and

economic elites will use foreign policy as a means of ensuring that their interests reflect in any geopolitical contest over influence and resources, irrespective of the human costs. Africa ought to reassert its non-alignment and claim its individual sovereignty in a collective fashion through its own continental structures and through its own regional associations. Great powers can only be involved if it suits Africa’s collective developmental agenda rather the individual interests of authoritarian and military rulers.

References

- BBC (2023). Niger Coup: Macron says France to Withdraw Troops and Ambassador. Accessed on 28/06/2024 at [Niger coup: Macron says France to withdraw troops and ambassador \(bbc.com\)](#).
- BBC (2023 b). US to remove Uganda and Three Other African Countries from AGOA Trade Deal. Accessed on 28/06/2024 at [US to remove Uganda and three other African countries from Agoa trade deal \(bbc.com\)](#)
- BBC (2019) Ukraine Election: Comedian Zelensky Wins Presidency in a Landslide. Accessed on 28/06/2024 at [Ukraine election: Comedian Zelensky wins presidency by landslide \(bbc.com\)](#)
- Conversation (2023). France’s decision to leave Niger was a bad move for three reasons. Accessed on 28/06/2024 at [France’s decision to leave Niger was a bad move: three reasons why \(theconversation.com\)](#)
- Dobbins, J., et al. (2019). Overextending and Unbalancing Russia: Assessing the Impact of Cost-Imposing Options. Accessed on 28/06/2024 at [Overextending and Unbalancing Russia: Assessing the Impact of Cost-Imposing Options | RAND](#)
- Duursma, A., and Masuhr, N., (2022). Russia’s Return to Africa in an Historical and Global Context: Anti-imperialism, Patronage and Opportunism. South African Journal of International Affairs, 29:4, 407-423, Available at [Russia’s return to Africa in a historical and global context: Anti-imperialism, patronage, and oppor \(tandfonline.com\)](#)
- Fabricius, P., (2024). Bill that Calls for Full Review of US Relations with SA Crosses First Hurdle in US Congress. Accessed on 28/06/2024 at [https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-03-21-bill-that-calls-for-full-review-of-us-relations-with-sa-crosses-first-hurdle-in-us-congress/](#)
- Steyn, C., (2024). Funding MK, Fighting the GNU... Russia’s Strategy for SA – Irina Filatova. [Funding MK, Fighting the GNU... Russia’s Strategy for SA - Irina Filatova \(biznews.com\)](#)
- Hirsh, M., (2024). A New Era of Financial Warfare Has Begun. Foreign Policy [G-7 Seizing Profits on Frozen Russian Assets and Warning to China Carry Risks to Global Financial System \(foreignpolicy.com\)](#)
- Human Rights Watch. (2014). Ukraine: Unguided Rockets Killing Civilians. Accessed on 28/06/2024 at [Ukraine: Unguided Rockets Killing Civilians | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](#)
- Masters, J., and Merrow, W., (2024). How much US Aid is Going to Ukraine. Accessed on 28/06/2024 at [How Much U.S. Aid Is Going to Ukraine? | Council on Foreign Relations \(cfr.org\)](#)
- Mearsheimer, J.,(2014). Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin. Foreign Affairs [Vol. 93, No. 5 \(SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2014\)](#), pp. 77-84, 85-89.
- Mearsheimer, J., (2017). Why is Ukraine the West’s Fault? Presentation to Alumni of University of Chicago on June 2015. Accessed on 28/06/2024 at [Why is Ukraine the West’s Fault? Featuring John Mearsheimer \(youtube.com\)](#)
- Michel, C., (2022). The Covert Operation to Back Ukrainian Independence Haunts the CIA. Politico. Accessed 28/06/2024 at [The Covert Operation to Back Ukrainian Independence that Haunts the CIA - POLITICO.](#)
- News18 (2022) Ukraine War: Merkel Says Minsk Talks Helped Kyiv Buy Time, Prepare Better. Accessed on 28/06/2024 at [Ukraine War: Merkel Says Minsk Talks Helped Kyiv Buy Time, Prepare Better - News18](#)
- Petro, N., (2019). Poroshenko’s nationalism Cost him the Presidency. National Interest. Accessed at [Petro Poroshenko’s Nationalism Cost Him the Presidency | The National Interest](#) on 28/6/2024.
- Reuters, (2024). Biden Pledges to End Nordstream 2 if Russia Invades Ukraine. Accessed on 28/06/2024 at [Biden pledges end to Nord Stream 2 if Russia invades Ukraine | Reuters](#)
- Sputnik, (2024). West was Arming Ukraine in Violation of Minsk Agreements, Ukrainian Opposition Politician says. Accessed 28/06/2024 at [West Was Arming Ukraine in Violation of Minsk Agreements, Ukrainian Opposition Politician Says \(sputnikglobe.com\)](#)
- Radio Free Europe (2017) Proshenko Signs Decree Allowing NATO Training in Ukraine During 2017. Accessed 28/06/2024 at [Poroshenko Signs Decree Allowing NATO Training In Ukraine During 2017 \(rferl.org\)](#)
- Young, C., (2022). What really happened in Ukraine in 2014 – and since then. The Bulwark. Accessed 28/06/2024 at [What Really Happened in Ukraine in 2014—and Since Then \(thebulwark.com\)](#)