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Governance, Geopolitics, Fragile State, and Insecurity in the Sahel: A Case Study of Mali

By

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ABSTRACT: Governance has very often been pointed at the developments approaches as the main cause of development delays and political instability in African countries such as Mali. The question of security, which is added to the chapel of the grievances expressed by the populations towards their governments, continues to arouse the interest of many research works that have such relevance. What role can good governance play in the concern for the construction of security and peace, measures of stability and development in the Allies in a context of geopolitical uncertainty? The lack of governance as a factor in the fragility of the State aggravated by the geopolitical issues also increases the level of insecurity in the country with its evident repercussions in the Sahel. The study examines the mechanisms by which state fragility feeds regional insecurity, analyses attempt at institutional refoundation and formulates recommendations for post-crisis reconstruction.

KEYWORDS: Fragile State, Geopolitics, Governance, Insecurity, Mali, Sahel.

INTRODUCTION

The deficit in political and economic governance has been a subject of criticism in Sub-Saharan African countries in general since their attainment of independence. This governance issue has very frequently been singled out by developmentalist approaches as the primary cause of developmental lags and political instability. The security issue—which has been added to the litany of grievances voiced by populations against their rulers—has sparked the interest of numerous research studies, thereby retaining its continued relevance. This so-called "bad" governance is identified as one of the root causes of the rise of violent extremism and its manifold consequences for the State. Among the manifestations of this "bad" governance are, inter alia, the absence of competitive democratic processes and the rule of law, an inefficient and corrupt administration, and a lack of accountability—all compounded by a generalized sense of injustice and frustration. This entire constellation of grievances characterizes a so-called

"fragile" State. The governance deficit, acting as a factor that renders the State fragile, thus paves the way for insecurity in Mali, with evident repercussions across the Sahel region. An initial inquiry into the critical importance of the imperative to restore peace and security within this uncertain context would serve to highlight the interplay between governance and security policy.

This study examines the mechanisms through which state fragility fuels regional insecurity and analyses attempt at post-crisis institutional reconstruction. The weakness of Malian state institutions—combined with historical, geographical, socio-economic, and geostrategic challenges—contributes to creating a vicious cycle of political and security instability. Consequently, the inadequacy of international responses in addressing the specific local characteristics of Sahelian governance becomes apparent. Furthermore, the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2023 marks a new regional

dynamic, the implications of which for stability and governance are analyzed herein.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of the "fragile state" has emerged as a central analytical lens in the study of contemporary crises in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to Rotberg (2003), a fragile state is characterized by its limited capacity to provide essential public goods to its citizens, particularly in the areas of security, education, and health. Scholarly literature on the subject proposes various approaches to state fragility. Call (2008) distinguishes three dimensions: capacity, legitimacy, and security. This three-dimensional approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the Malian case, where these three elements interact dynamically.

According to the Fragile States Index developed by the Fund for Peace, Mali has oscillated between "high alert" and "alert" rankings since 2012, attesting to a persistent fragility despite international interventions (Mesmer, 2017). This classification is based on twelve indicators grouped into four categories—cohesion, economy, politics, and social—which we will not elaborate upon here.

As for the Sahel, the term means "shore" in Arabic and traditionally designates, for nomadic peoples, the southern fringe of the Sahara Desert. It is a zone stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, spanning a width of between 500 and 700 kilometers. It is also an arid zone where climatic risks are significant. It is a zone of conflict between nomadic pastoralists—Moors, Fula, and Tuareg—and Black Sudanese and semi-Bantu peasant farmers.

As for security, defining the term is no easy task; the debate centers on insecurity—or public security—and is structured around the search for the causes and factors of conflict and political instability. For some, insecurity is explained by geopolitical variables, whereas for others, it is the post-colonial state itself that generates insecurity. This second approach is predominant in Africa, yet it draws inspiration from a range of complementary perspectives, including Realism; the bipolar approach (positing that conflicts are stoked by the two blocs—Communist and Capitalist—); the post-bipolar approach (focusing on Africa's geopolitical realignment in the post-9/11 era); and Neo-Marxism (which argues that major powers install **comprador**

bureaucrats—Samir Amin, 1973—at the helm of African governments to secure access to natural and mineral resources). In this vein, Marc-Louis Ropovia asserts that conflicts in Africa are instigated by major powers seeking to carve up the "African pie"—a phenomenon he terms the "Gondwanan Imperialism Paradigm" (Ropovia, 1996).

Moreover, some argue that African states are the result of an arbitrary segmentation that fails to take into account Africa's sociocultural realities (Bangoura and Mwayila, 1990). Given that the colonial state preceded the nation-state, the latter acts as a source of insecurity due to its sociographic and geocultural legacy, as well as its transnational hybridization with criminal elements.

Governance, in its broad sense, refers to the entire set of processes, structures, and mechanisms through which societies, organizations, and states are directed and controlled. The study of governance theories is essential for understanding the political, economic, and social dynamics that govern our contemporary societies.

As defined by Daniel Kaufmann (2010) in his work on the "Worldwide Governance Indicators," governance encompasses the dimensions of administrative effectiveness, political accountability, citizen participation, and respect for the rule of law. The concept of governance—as elaborated notably by Hyden and Court (2002)—designates the full range of processes, mechanisms, and interactions through which public and private actors manage collective affairs. It entails citizen participation, transparency, and accountability, extending far beyond the mere exercise of administrative functions.

According to Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, governance in Africa relies more heavily on hybrid dynamics, combining formal institutions with informal practices. Several theoretical approaches have emerged in an effort to ensure applicability across various domains of public action. Governance may therefore take various forms: democratic, decentralized, participatory, network-based, results-based, or security-oriented.

Governance and Security in the Sahelian Region

The work of Benjaminsen and Ba (2009) highlights the unique nature of governance challenges in the Sahelian region, which is characterized by population mobility, a pastoral economy, and

traditional social structures. This particular geography challenges Westphalian models of state sovereignty.

Hagberg & Korling (2012) analyze how governance crises in Mali revolve around the tension between traditional and democratic legitimacy, creating spaces for contestation that are exploited by violent non-state actors. Tisseron (2020) enriches this analysis by highlighting the geopolitical stakes specific to the Sahel, where regional rivalries and the ambitions of external powers overlap.

Theoretical Framework

This resolutely constructivist analysis, adopting a strategic approach, draws upon security theories, the sociology of public action, and governance studies to examine the construction of a governance framework aimed at restoring State authority and upholding national and sub-regional (Sahel) security order.

This study aligns with a broadened conception of international security. Indeed, a joint declaration by the United Nations Security Council—meeting symbolically for the first time at the level of Heads of State and Government on January 31, 1992—affirms: "International peace and security do not derive solely from the absence of war and armed conflict. Other threats to peace and security, of a non-military nature, stem from instability existing in the economic, social, humanitarian, and ecological spheres." The implicit premise of this text suggests that the stability of the international order is a *sine qua non* for international security—a proposition that is, incidentally, open to debate. The mechanism that appears most apposite for interpreting this context is collective security. This centralized mechanism—first devised with the League of Nations and subsequently revamped under the United Nations—aims to manage issues of international security. It thereby transforms security into a shared responsibility, grounded in the postulate that a threat to the security of any single State constitutes a threat to international security as a whole. Consequently, reactive measures aimed at restoring peace may be undertaken by an international body (specifically, the Security Council), in accordance with a pre-established procedure that is then binding upon all parties.

The concept of international security allows us to revisit the conceptual foundations established by Arnold Wolfers and Barry Buzan, asserting that

international security can be viewed through a dual lens: one broad and inclusive, the other narrow and restrictive. In an objective sense, Wolfers (1962) posits that security measures the absence of threats to acquired values; in a subjective sense, it denotes the absence of fear that these values might be attacked. Barry Buzan (1991) defines it as the absence of threat. Following in the footsteps of John Hertz (1951) regarding the security dilemma, this concept acknowledges that attempts to ensure the security of State A may—unintentionally—result in heightened insecurity for State B. It is therefore necessary to examine the interactions between states and the interdependencies that may impact security issues (Buzan 2008), as is the case in the Sahel. A deficit in political and economic governance has been a subject of criticism in Sub-Saharan African countries in general since their attainment of independence.

Methodologically, this study relies on a qualitative analysis combining documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources with the utilization of conflict databases. The approach adopted aligns with the tradition of process-oriented conflict analysis developed by Lund (2003), prioritizing a diachronic understanding of the dynamics of state fragility.

Against this backdrop—where governance acts as a factor contributing to the fragility of the Malian state and, consequently, to insecurity across the Sahelian belt—a central question emerges: What role can good governance play in the pursuit of building security and peace—the twin guarantors of stability and development—within the Sahelian belt, particularly in an uncertain geopolitical context? We advance a two-part hypothesis: First, by virtue of its strategic location at the heart of the Sahel, Mali serves as a veritable keystone; consequently, its security fragility—specifically that linked to criminalization—constitutes a major regional challenge (I). Second, the improvement of governance contributes to the consolidation of the Malian state, which serves as both a prerequisite for and a guarantor of security for the entire Sahelian belt (II).

I. STATE FRAGILITY IN MALI AND INSECURITY IN THE SAHEL

Examining the link between the fragility of the Malian state and insecurity in the Sahel enables a sociogenetic and causal analysis of this fragility.

Ultimately, an analysis of the spread of insecurity positions Mali as the keystone of security in the Sahel.

A. SOCIOGENESIS AND CAUSALITY OF THE WEAKENING OF THE MALIAN STATE

The crisis of 2012 constitutes a major turning point in the understanding of Malian fragility. Wing (2013) identifies four triggering factors: the collapse of the Libyan regime and the return of Tuareg fighters; drought and food insecurity; inter-communal tensions in the North; and the weakness of the Malian army.

The rapid collapse of the central state bears witness to what Chazal and Van Damme (2015) term "cascading fragility"—a phenomenon in which the failure of one sector (security) triggers the collapse of other state functions. Galy (2013) enriches this analysis by contextualizing the Malian crisis within the broader Saharan-Saharan geopolitical landscape, a region characterized by transnational flows of weapons, combatants, and ideologies.

The Undermining of The Malian State

The crisis of the Malian state reveals a distinct institutional dimension—one that has persisted since the coup d'état that brought about the downfall of President Amadou Toumani Touré, and which was further exacerbated by the seizure of the country's northern region by the MNLA and its allies. This situation has grown increasingly complex since the Islamist insurrection of 2012, owing to the multiplicity of actors involved—including AQIM and MUJAO—who have lent the conflict a distinct sub-regional dimension.

Some observers have argued that the conflict could have been averted had the Malian state not failed to provide essential public goods to the citizens of the country's northern and central regions (Walter & Christopoulos, 2015), or had the state been constructed in a manner better suited to its available resources and prevailing conditions (Craven & Engelbert, 2018)—thereby calling into question the nature of its governance. Subsequently, Colonel Assimi Goïta would orchestrate two successive coups d'état: first against President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in 2020, and then against the transitional government led by Bah Ndaou in 2021—events that starkly demonstrate the chronic instability plaguing the country's political arrangements.

Indeed, the crisis of the Malian state appears to be synonymous with a crisis of governance. It manifests itself through widespread poverty among the population, endemic unemployment, the marginalization of certain segments of society, urban and peri-urban banditry, communal conflicts, the ravages of pandemics, and food insecurity—compounded by natural disasters, drought, desertification, and the effects of global warming. Furthermore, there are security challenges, including the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, drug trafficking, human trafficking, irregular migration, and transnational crime, all exacerbated by porous borders.

[populations that are] semi-Bantu and Bantu, most often adhering to Animist or Christian faiths. They are sedentary peoples, engaged primarily in agriculture or fishing. The northern region, conversely, is inhabited by Sudano-Saharan peoples—generally Muslim nomads engaged in livestock rearing. This distinction is frequently instrumentalized for political ends. The geographical configuration—which characterizes the South as a forested zone and the North as a more arid, desert-like region—further contributes to this structural fragility within society.

The historical causes stem from the enduring weight of the colonial institutional legacy; specifically, the "permineralization" of power reveals a persistent reliance on the colonial path—a phenomenon known as "path dependence." The colonial power often cynically exploited socio-anthropological differences, adhering to the Roman maxim "divide and rule," while simultaneously engineering a fragile communal equilibrium that enabled it to maintain political and administrative control—even from a distance—in a manner that some have termed "neocolonialism." Mali did not escape this fate; the transition of power along the South-North axis failed to function effectively. The consequence was the emergence of a deep-seated sense of injustice and marginalization within the northern region of the country.

The roots of the Malian state's fragility can be traced back to the structures established during the French colonial era. As Cooper (2002) points out, French colonial administration in Sudan (present-day Mali) was characterized by indirect control that relied on traditional elites while neglecting the construction of modern state institutions. The independence

achieved in 1960 failed to remedy these institutional deficits. Related scholarship—such as that of Villalon & Huxtable (1998)—demonstrates how successive regimes perpetuated a model of patrimonial governance in which access to public resources depends more on personal networks than on formal institutions.

Generally speaking, the colonial legacy under scrutiny here appears to constitute a factor of institutional weakness in former colonies that have since become independent states. As Mamdani (1996) indicates, the colonial state created an institutional bifurcation between urban citizens and rural subjects—a divide that persists to this day. Imported institutions have not always found a favorable foothold within local sociocultural realities, thereby creating a hiatus between formal law and social practices.

For Jean-François Médard (1991), it is evident that neopatrimonialism remains a pertinent analytical lens for examining the phenomenology of political power management in Africa. According to Médard, the African state operates according to a patrimonial logic in which the distinction between the public and private spheres becomes blurred.

This patrimonialization of power is accompanied by an excessive personalization of institutions. Thus, Diarrah (2009) analyzes the attempts at state-building under Modibo Keita—Mali's first president—revealing the contradictions between socialist aspirations and local sociopolitical realities.

On a different note, geopolitical dynamics are also at play. The influence of these geopolitical dynamics highlights external interventions—whether Western, Chinese, or Russian—which often redefine internal political balances. As Roland Marchal analyzes in his work *Puissances émergentes et sécurité en Afrique* (Emerging Powers and Security in Africa), geopolitical competition in Africa can encourage support for authoritarian regimes in the name of stability or economic interests. The presence of the Wagner Group in Mali, the Central African Republic, and Burkina Faso amply illustrates this new geopolitical landscape. According to the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), Wagner trades military protection for access to mineral resources, without any democratic conditionality.

The weakening of France's traditional influence and the emergence of new actors are shifting the balance of power. The forced withdrawal of French troops from Mali in 2022—replaced by Russian "instructors"—symbolizes this geopolitical transition, which may encourage military adventurism by offering alternatives to traditional partners (Marchal, Roland, 2020).

Thus, we have identified causes related to governance, internal causes linked to the country's social structure and history, as well as exogenous causes more closely tied to geopolitical dynamics within the sub-region.

B. THE EXPANSION OF THE MALIAN CRISIS INTO A SAHALIAN CRISIS

Upon analysis, the expansion of Mali's security crisis into the wider Sahel region appears to be the result of a dual political and military failure. Indeed, it remains a stark memory that the offensive launched by Islamist rebel groups during 2012–2013 went so far as to threaten the very existence of the Malian state. Protests by the population of Bamako—exasperated by government corruption, a generalized governance deficit, and the collapse of the army in the north—led to the ousting of President Amadou Toumani Touré on March 22, 2012. He was replaced by a transitional government led by Dioncounda Traoré. By early April, the MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) controlled the cities of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, and attempted to proclaim the independence of the North under the name "Azawad." The Islamist groups (MUJAO, Ansar Dine)—which were more radical than their ally AQIM—eventually drove the MNLA out of Kidal.

On January 11, 2013, France launched Operation Serval to halt the extremist groups' offensive, acting at the request of the Malian government and under the authority of a UN Security Council resolution. The country was liberated, and negotiations subsequently began, with President Compaoré serving as the mediator on behalf of ECOWAS. A ceasefire—followed by a preliminary peace agreement—was signed on June 18, 2013, between the Malian government, the MNLA, and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA, established in May 2013). The implementation of the agreement was to be monitored by a Joint Technical Security Commission, supervised by MINUSMA with the assistance of Operation Serval.

The new Malian President, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, did indeed attempt to implement decentralization reforms in the North; however, he ultimately prioritized a resumption of hostilities over the consolidation of the peace agreement—an accord which he would, in fact, subsequently denounce. Following the Malian army's defeat in Kidal in May 2014—and coinciding with Compaoré's fall from power on October 31—Keita designated Algeria as the new mediator; the latter had long been critical of Compaoré's support for the MNLA.

Rivalries quickly emerged between Morocco—a supporter of the MNLA—and Algeria, which views Northern Mali as an integral part of its own sphere of influence. Moreover, Algeria prioritized a negotiated peace settlement.

The Malian army's defeat in the north exposed the Sahel to multifaceted threats spanning the entire Sahelian belt. Nevertheless, the inter-Malian dialogue—initiated in July 2014—culminated in June 2015 with the signing of an Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali. This accord was signed by the Malian government; the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA)—which includes the MNLA, the HCUA, and the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA); and the Platform, a coalition of groups loyal to the Malian government.

However, while the security situation in the north appeared to be stabilizing, it deteriorated significantly in central Mali. New groups began to emerge, such as the Macina Liberation Front (FLM)—later renamed Katibat Macina—which operates in the Niger Delta region and channels the grievances of the Fulani people. Two additional groups also established a foothold in the region: Ansarul Islam in the Burkinabé Sahel, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in the area known as the "Three Borders" zone.

In 2017, Katibat Macina merged with Ansar Dine, Al-Mourabitoun, and AQIM to form Jama'a Nusrat Ul-Islam wa Al-Muslimin (JNIM)—a group dedicated to supporting Islam and Muslims—led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of Ansar Dine. These new hotbeds of conflict have established the Liptako-Gourma region as a critical epicenter of insecurity, with spillover effects extending to the neighboring states of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which have become the primary theaters for attacks by these armed groups.

Mali therefore constitutes the security keystone of the Sahelian belt, fitting perfectly with the concept of a "borderland state"—a concept developed within the framework of the African Union (AU). A borderland state is defined as a geographical space straddling the dividing lines between two or more contiguous states, inhabited by populations bound together by shared socio-economic and cultural ties. As a true crossroads nation, Mali shares a vast border—spanning 7,561 kilometers—with its neighbors: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal. This unique geographical position facilitates the spread of insecurity throughout the entire Sahel region.

Ultimately, the fragility of the Malian state is a direct consequence of poor governance. This manifests as an absence of state presence—specifically, the abandonment of certain territories—which creates lawless zones that are highly conducive to the growth of criminal activities by extremist groups. The result is a chronic state of insecurity—a defining characteristic of the country—which, exacerbated by Mali's status as a borderland state, radiates across the Sahelian belt, sowing instability and undermining the security, stability, and economic development of the entire region.

II. GOVERNANCE, CONSOLIDATION OF THE MALIAN STATE, AND SECURITY IN THE SAHEL

This section aims to examine the conditions required for the (re)consolidation of the state, as well as the ongoing efforts to restore security across the Sahel. This is achieved through national responses and international contributions.

A. GOVERNANCE AND THE RETURN OF THE STATE: NATIONAL RESPONSES

Restoring State authority in Mali—specifically through effective governance—in order to re-establish security across the Sahelian belt, necessarily entails navigating numerous obstacles that must be confronted here.

1. A Path Paved with Pitfalls

These pitfalls constitute a range of obstacles—political, economic (including budgetary), cultural, and sociological in nature.

Regarding political resistance, the incumbent political elites—specifically the military—often have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Consequently, they may offer fierce resistance to

democratic reforms that threaten to undermine their positions of power. Worse still, they may suppress any nascent attempts at pluralistic expression—for instance, by banning political parties and dismantling other democratic institutions, such as the parliament.

From the perspective of a return to normalcy, the formation of broad-based reformist coalitions becomes crucial. Such coalitions must include segments of the political elite—taking into account the diversity of the partisan political landscape—as well as other relevant political actors, such as traditional and religious authorities; furthermore, they must explicitly incorporate the interests of sociological minorities. Moreover, political alternation—which already appears to be a reality at the level of local institutions—should be extended to the highest echelons of the State, as well as throughout the broader political and institutional apparatus. To this, one might add the contribution of civil society—manifested through the encouragement of citizen oversight and the critical evaluation of public policy—which would serve as a further guarantee of improved national governance.

Endemic poverty, massive youth unemployment, and widening inequalities create a fertile ground for political instability. According to Thomas Piketty in *Capital and Ideology*, Sub-Saharan Africa exhibits the most extreme inequalities in the world, with an average Gini coefficient of 0.65 (Piketty 2019). Populations, confronted with immediate survival needs, may be tempted to trade their political rights for short-term economic benefits. In Mali, according to a 2022 Afrobarometer survey, 68% of young people aged 18 to 35 stated they would be willing to support a non-democratic regime if it could guarantee them employment and basic services. This "democratic fatigue" is attributable to the failure of elected governments to improve the living conditions of the population.

A rentier economy—based on the exploitation of natural resources—reinforces the concentration of power and limits incentives to develop transparent and accountable institutions. Chad, for instance—despite its substantial oil reserves—remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with 42% of the population living below the poverty line (World Bank 2023), thereby illustrating the "resource curse" analyzed by Jeffrey Sachs.

(World Bank, 2023). Despite its gold production—totaling 72 tons in 2022, a figure that ranks it among Africa's top producers—Mali continues to grapple with structural poverty. With 43.9% of the population living below the poverty line, the country ranked 188th out of 193 nations on the Human Development Index in 2023 (World Bank/UNDP).

Economically, budgetary constraints act as significant impediments. Consequently, the implementation of effective, instrumental governance necessitates a reallocation of budgetary priorities and an improvement in domestic resource mobilization. Redistributive policies aimed at providing basic social services—extending beyond the mere provision and functionality of infrastructure to include direct assistance for the most vulnerable populations—should be established as a genuine public policy priority.

Regarding cultural and sociological factors, cultural diversity and sociological inequalities constitute a cross-cutting feature of the social structure within Sahelian states. These nations comprise a mosaic of peoples whose geographical distribution is both uneven and discontinuous. Thus, integrating these sociological disparities into the design and implementation of public policies—embedding them within the normative framework—and fostering public ownership of reforms are indispensable steps toward the effective consolidation of governance that upholds the rule of law.

2. The Necessity of Governance Aligned with the Expectations of The Population

According to Zartman (1995), state collapse—which he defines as the dissolution of the functions of state legitimacy and authority—is a multidimensional process requiring equally multidimensional responses for its resolution. In Mali, a country that exemplifies this dynamic, the reconsolidation of the state cannot be achieved solely through the restoration of security order; it must necessarily encompass the restoration of institutions, the re-establishment of the social contract, and the reconfiguration of the relationship between the central state and its peripheries. In this context, concepts such as state-building and hybrid governance are frequently invoked to identify structural governance deficits. These structural deficits stem from the permineralization of the state

and endemic corruption, as well as from the expanding dynamics of insecurity. A new approach to governance encompasses institutional reconstruction, legitimacy, administrative reform, dialogue, and security sector reform.

As theorized by Beetham (1991), the legitimacy of a regime rests upon adherence to rules, the justification of those rules through shared values, and the consent of the governed. In Mali, however, all three of these components have been undermined: constitutional legality has been suspended; democratic values are being challenged by the military authorities; and popular consent is eroding in the face of persistent security deterioration.

The administrative capacity of the state constitutes another structural imperative. Fukuyama's work (2004) on state-building distinguishes between two concepts: **scope** (the range of functions) and **strength** (institutional capacity). Viewed through this lens, Mali possesses a sprawling state apparatus in terms of its claimed functions, yet remains profoundly deficient in terms of actual capacity for policy implementation, tax collection, and the delivery of public services.

The regional dimension is of equal importance, given the geographical spread of insecurity. The dissolution of the G5 Sahel in 2022–2023 illustrates the fragmentation of regional cooperation frameworks (Lebovich, 2023)—occurring at the very moment when concerted regional action appears most urgent. The reconsolidation of the Malian state cannot be envisioned in isolation; on the contrary, it demands an integrated regional approach that takes into account the transnational dynamics of armed conflict.

National reconciliation and intra-Malian dialogue are indispensable factors in this process of reconsolidation. Several reconciliation initiatives have been launched since 2013: the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (CVJR), established in 2014, and the Inclusive National Dialogue of 2019. Upon analysis, the results remain mixed. In this regard, Bankamp and Kallio (2017) emphasize that the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on their capacity to address not only past human rights violations but also the structural injustices that fuel conflict. However, the CVJR suffered from a chronic lack of resources and weak national ownership. While Lederach (1997)

demonstrated that sustainable peace processes require a multi-level architecture involving elites, middle-range actors, and grassroots communities, the current configuration of the inter-Malian dialogue still struggles to meet these requirements for inclusivity.

Security Sector Reform (SSR) constitutes one of the pillars of any strategy for state reconsolidation. In Mali, efforts in this domain have been bolstered by a dense multilateral architecture: MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali), EUTM (European Union Training Mission in Mali), and EUCAP Sahel Mali (European Union Capacity Building Mission for the Malian Internal Security Forces). According to Boutellis & Nauche (2021), these missions have contributed to the training of several thousand Malian military personnel and police officers; however, their impact remains limited due to the absence of structural reforms addressing both the chain of command and the accountability mechanisms of the security forces. Caplan (2004), in the context of external state-building operations, warns against the risk of a technocratic approach that neglects the political and social dimensions of reconsolidation. In Mali, international donors appear to have prioritized the development of military capabilities at the expense of reforming the civilian governance of the security forces, thereby creating a disconnect between enhanced operational capabilities and persistent deficits in legitimacy and accountability.

Ultimately, the reconstruction of the Malian state represents a challenge of the highest order, requiring a comprehensive approach grounded in local political realities. Sustainable reconsolidation demands simultaneous investment in political legitimacy, administrative capacity, and social cohesion—three highly interdependent dimensions that national actors and their international partners still struggle to address in an integrated manner. Mali's institutional future hinges on the ability of political actors to transcend short-term power dynamics and commit themselves to building a state that truly serves the entire population—including those in the geographic peripheries that have all too often been excluded from the national project.

B. INTERNATIONAL SECURITY RESPONSES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES FOR THE STABILITY OF THE SAHEL

This section examines the principal international operations undertaken in the region: the French intervention—comprising Operations Serval and Barkhane—the UN-led MINUSMA mission, and, at the regional level, the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

1. The French Intervention: Operation Serval and Barkhane

The French military intervention—initiated in January 2013 with Operation Serval and subsequently extended through Operation Barkhane—illustrates the inherent limitations of security-centric responses to governance crises. In this regard, observers highlight the paradox of a military intervention that, while tactically successful, ultimately failed to durably restore Malian state authority (Charbonneau, 2017). Indeed, we concur with the analysis put forward by Matelly (2020), who characterizes these missions as an "invisible war"—defined by a prolonged military presence in the absence of a clear political strategy for resolving the crisis. This situation progressively fueled Franco-Malian tensions, culminating in the withdrawal of French forces in 2022.

Operation Barkhane was launched by France in 2014 to combat jihadism in the Sahel, serving as the successor to Operation Serval. Barkhane aimed to support the forces of the G5 Sahel (Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad) in their fight against jihadist groups. At its peak, the mission comprised over 5,000 troops, backed by substantial military assets and logistical capabilities. The mission officially withdrew from Mali in August 2022, leaving behind a security vacuum and a rather mixed legacy. While Barkhane did succeed in eliminating numerous prominent jihadist figures—such as the leader of AQIM in 2020—it ultimately failed to achieve a lasting stabilization of the security situation. A resurgence of attacks was quickly observed in central and northern Mali. Consequently, the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) found themselves confronting armed groups alone. This fragility undoubtedly facilitated the influence of other international actors in the region.

MINUSMA and the Challenges of Peacekeeping

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), deployed in 2013, represents an ambitious attempt at institutional reconstruction. However, as Karlsrud (2019) analyzes, the mission faced the

inherent limitations of peacekeeping within a context of persistent state fragility. Locoquierre (2016) also highlights the challenges encountered by the G5 Sahel in coordinating regional security and development efforts.

The Algiers Peace Agreement: Between Hopes and Disillusionment

The Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, signed in 2015, constitutes an attempted political response to the crisis. However, analyses by Boas (2021) reveal the difficulties involved in its implementation—particularly due to inter-communal rifts and the weakness of state institutions. Thriot (2017) examines how this agreement fits into a deeper crisis of Malian democracy, wherein formal institutions struggle to gain the trust of citizens in the northern and central regions.

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES): A New Regional Paradigm

An examination of its context of creation and institutional architecture reveals that the establishment of the AES in September 2023—bringing together Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—marks a significant rupture in regional geopolitics. Formalized by the Liptako-Gourma Charter, this alliance is driven by a dual logic: the pooling of security efforts to confront armed terrorist groups, and the assertion of regional sovereignty vis-à-vis international actors (Guichaoua, 2024).

The AES aligns with what Pomerolle & Simeant (2010) term "dynamics of reappropriation"—whereby African states reclaim their own security and political agendas. This initiative reflects a desire to break with traditional cooperation mechanisms, particularly ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel. Traoré (2021) analyzes this alliance as an attempt to reconcile the imperatives of national sovereignty with the necessity of regional cooperation.

2. Mali's Integration into the AES: Motivations and Consequences for Regional Stability

Mali's accession to the AES is attributable to several converging factors. First, the deterioration of relations with Western partners—particularly France—has created a strategic vacuum that the regional alliance seeks to fill (Schmitz, 2023). Second, the Malian transitional authorities perceived the AES as an instrument of political

legitimation in the face of international pressure to return to constitutional order.

On an operational level, the AES institutionalizes military cooperation that already existed in the Liptako-Gourma border zones. Research by Rainieri & Rossi (2022) demonstrates that these cross-border areas serve as key transit corridors for armed groups, thereby necessitating a coordinated response. Diawara (2020) highlights that this cooperation also serves a logic of political survival for the military regimes currently in power.

In terms of consequences, Mali's integration into the AES is observed to generate multidimensional implications for regional governance and security. On the positive side, Aning & Atuobi (2024) identify several potential benefits in both the political and security spheres.

From a (geo)political standpoint, the AES offers military regimes a platform for mutual legitimation and a bulwark against international pressure—a dynamic that some analysts interpret as a form of "club of juntas" (Turianskiy, 2024).

Regarding the security dimension, operational coordination among the armed forces of the three countries enables better coverage of border zones and complicates the movements of armed groups. The creation of a joint force, while still in its nascent stages, aligns with the cross-border nature of the insurgency.

The implications also manifest in terms of risks and limitations—notably a deficit in geographic legitimacy, limited operational capabilities, and the risk of regional isolation. Indeed, the AES comprises three countries led by military juntas, thereby raising questions regarding the democratic legitimacy of this alliance. Hagberg's work (2024) calls into question the sustainability of a cooperative framework founded upon the circumstantial convergence of these transitional regimes, rather than upon robust democratic institutions.

The Alliance also exhibits limited financial and military capabilities. Despite declarations of intent, the three member countries suffer from significant budgetary and capacity constraints. Pellerin's analysis (2024) reveals that the Malian, Burkinabé, and Nigerien armies already struggle individually to control their respective territories, raising doubts about their collective ability to reverse current security trends. Keita (2014) had previously

highlighted these capacity deficits as a major obstacle to the stabilization of Mali.

The rupture with ECOWAS—sealed by the simultaneous withdrawal of the three countries in January 2024—weakens the architecture of West African integration built over decades. As noted by SY (2024), this regional fragmentation could exacerbate rivalries and jeopardize the free movement of people and goods. It thus entrenches a form of regional isolation for the AES that, while acknowledged, remains detrimental.

Paradoxically, the desire for emancipation proclaimed by the AES is accompanied by a reorientation toward new partners rather than the attainment of true autonomy. The rapprochement with Russia—notably through the deployment of the Wagner Group (now the Africa Corps) in Mali—creates new forms of dependency (Ramani, 2024). Yet, rather than viewing this merely as a persistence of external dependency, this diplomatic realignment could usher in an era of cooperation based on more equitable terms, far removed from the specter of neocolonial domination.

The emergence of the AES also transforms local conflict dynamics. Research by Sangare (2024) indicates that armed groups have adapted their strategies by exploiting inter-state rivalries and capitalizing on porous borders. Furthermore, the predominantly military approach favored by the AES often appears to neglect the socio-economic and political dimensions of insecurity, thereby risking the perpetuation of the cycle of violence. Insecurity in northern Mali is also fueled by deficits in local governance and the historical marginalization of communities (Lassian, 2018)—aspects that purely security-based solutions cannot resolve.

The Dialectic Between Institutional Crisis and Hybrid Governance

A critical analysis clearly reveals the limitations of the institutional approaches implemented to date. Consequently, the outlook increasingly points toward the necessity of adopting a hybrid governance model.

Attempts at state reconstruction in Mali illustrate the limitations of technocratic approaches to governance. As Hagberg (2019) highlights, these approaches often overlook local social and cultural dynamics, thereby creating a disconnect between

formal institutions and their actual uptake by the population.

External-led, technocratic, and security-centric approaches to state-building have demonstrated their limitations (Paris & Stisk, 2009). Dia (2015) analyzes how the concept of a "failed state"—as applied to Mali—sometimes obscures the underlying logics of local actors and the alternative forms of social regulation that persist despite the collapse of formal institutions.

Upon analysis, the necessity of implementing a hybrid governance model emerges clearly. The work of Boege et al. (2009) could offer an alternative analytical framework for understanding the political realities of Mali. This approach acknowledges the coexistence of—and interaction between—formal institutions and traditional governance structures. In a similar vein, Konate (2013) explores the endogenous foundations of a culture of peace in Mali, suggesting that traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms could be more effectively integrated into stabilization strategies. This is particularly pertinent given that Peter Wallensteen defines peacebuilding as a process aimed at preventing a return to violence following a conflict by establishing institutions and mechanisms that foster reconciliation and economic development. Others, such as John Paul Lederach in his research on peace, emphasize the importance of involving local populations in the process in order to ensure a sustainable and inclusive peace. This perspective calls for rethinking Malian governance beyond imported models, with a view to adopting an endogenous perspective.

Public Policy and Action Recommendations

These recommendations focus on institutional strengthening, democratic governance, the fight against corruption, and security sector reform.

It is clear that the re-establishment of state presence—through the restoration of its institutions in crisis-affected zones—is the sine qua non for initiating any guarantee of security. Consideration could be given to a participatory reform process aimed at strengthening the constitution. It appears essential to initiate inclusive constitutional review processes involving all components of the political and institutional apparatus, including civil society. These reforms must aim to reinforce democratic mechanisms regarding the separation of powers,

limit presidential terms, and guarantee the independence of oversight institutions.

To advance toward greater modernization of the judicial system, governments should substantially increase budgets and improve infrastructure allocated to the justice sector, enhance the training of magistrates, and establish mechanisms to protect judges from political pressure. In this regard, the creation of truly independent constitutional courts constitutes a genuine priority. To facilitate post-conflict reconstruction efforts, consideration could be given to implementing transitional justice mechanisms in countries emerging from conflict or authoritarian regimes. These transitional justice mechanisms could be established to address past violations and promote national reconciliation.

Regarding international judicial cooperation, strengthening such cooperation could ideally contribute to unified action against impunity. Mechanisms for mutual legal assistance must be reinforced to enable the recovery of misappropriated assets—in the all-too-numerous cases of economic crimes—and to facilitate the prosecution of perpetrators of serious crimes.

The fight against corruption constitutes one of the main pillars of governance. The proliferation of independent anti-corruption institutions—specifically, the creation of anti-corruption bodies endowed with autonomous investigative and prosecutorial powers—may well be a necessity. Furthermore, these institutions must benefit from legal protection and adequate resources. Security sector reform entails the professionalization of the armed forces. This implies that military forces should be adequately trained in republican values and in the principle of subordination to civilian authority. Training programs focused on human rights and the maintenance of democratic order could be systematically implemented. This also encompasses civilian oversight of defense, which mandates that parliaments exercise effective control over military budgets and security operations. As Bryden and Hanggi (2005) assert, an effective military is one that enjoys legitimacy in the eyes of the population.

The role of regional and international actors could prove decisive through the institutional and operational strengthening of regional organizations, the integration of democratic principles and the rule of law into development cooperation, and the

promotion of international judicial cooperation to combat impunity.

Within the framework of development cooperation, international partners could more explicitly condition their aid and development contributions upon respect for democratic principles and the rule of law.

To optimize the regional framework of the AES, it appears essential to institutionalize the Alliance by embedding it with democratic mechanisms. This entails endowing the Alliance with transparent institutions that incorporate mechanisms for parliamentary oversight and civil society participation. Indeed, a purely military and insular architecture could compromise the legitimacy of the initiative (Cilliers, 2024). In an effort to strike a balance between security and development, the AES agenda should integrate a substantial development component alongside its security dimension. The experience of the G5 Sahel has since demonstrated the limitations of an exclusively military approach (Bergamaschi & Diawara, 2023).

It is crucial to maintain channels for dialogue with ECOWAS—notwithstanding the formal withdrawal—and to preserve mechanisms for consultation with the organization in order to avoid regional isolation and to facilitate the movement of people and goods, which is vital for the economies of the Sahel. This also calls for a redefinition of international partnerships—specifically, a less arrogant approach to partnership relations that acknowledges past failures and prioritizes local ownership of solutions. As advocated by Aussere (2021), external interventions must be designed with—rather than for—local populations.

Conclusion

The failure of the State in Mali appears to be a consequence of the institutional and governance crises that have persisted continuously in the country since the 2000s.

The manifestations of this state crisis are manifold and multifaceted, extending across the entire Sahel region—albeit within specific local contexts. Certain common constants are evident, such as encroachments upon democracy and the constitutional order; legal institutions subservient to political power; the inequitable redistribution of resources; weak security mechanisms; and endemic corruption.

Other causal constants are also observable, including exogenous influences, the colonial legacy, and the enduring sway of traditional and religious values over societal structures and practices. This fragility has paved the way for the expansion of terrorist group activities; operating against a backdrop of irredentist claims, these groups engage in illicit activities, thereby transforming the Sahel into a permanent hotbed of tension.

Beyond geopolitical stakes, the rationalization of governance—which serves as a guarantor of peace, security, and stability—necessarily entails the return of the State and respect for the rule of law. This, in turn, presupposes the subjection of all individuals to the law, an independent judiciary, equitable access to justice, and adherence to democratic norms.

There also emerges a requirement to implement a form of "hybrid governance" that models the coexistence and interaction between formal institutions and traditional governance structures. Similarly, the endogenous foundations of a culture of peace in Mali suggest that traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms could be more effectively integrated into stabilization strategies.

The engagement of international actors is decisive for fostering a cooperative approach to peace—one that transcends the interplay of hegemonic interests within the Sahelian belt.

What is needed is action that is more concerted, effective, and dedicated—much in the spirit of the G5 Sahel initiative—along with an increased contribution from the international community, grounded in respect for international law. But above all else, the realization by African leaders of the imperative necessity of a common path—one that offers them the opportunity to truly take charge of their own destiny and that of their people.

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