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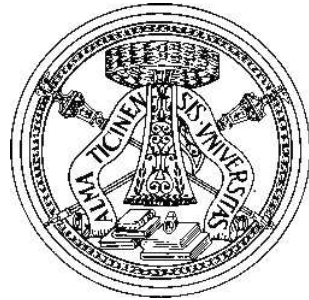
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali

Corso di laurea in World Politics and International Relations

France and Mali at Loggerheads:

Explaining Opération Barkhane's Withdrawal Through the Lens of Historical Institutionalism

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ABSTRACT

Per quasi dieci anni la Francia – forte del suo retaggio coloniale – ha operato nella regione del Sahel nel contesto della Guerra al Terrorismo. L'Eliseo ha dato avvio al suo intervento nel 2012, successivamente all'offensiva dei Tuareg che stava mettendo a repentaglio l'integrità dello stato maliano. L'*Opération Barkhane*, la missione di contro-insurrezione francese, rientrava nel quadro dell'assistenza per la sicurezza (*security force assistance)*, nonché un nuovo approccio a basso costo che evita l'impegno militare diretto e mira a rafforzare la capacità militare del partner beneficiario attraverso l'equipaggiamento e l'addestramento.

L'oggetto della tesi è l'altalenante relazione costituitasi tra Francia e Mali sullo sfondo del processo di messa in sicurezza del Sahel. Nello specifico, la tesi indaga le ragioni che hanno condotto al ritiro volontario o involontario della Francia dal Mali nel 2022. La ricerca offre un punto di vista innovativo poiché analizza la rottura delle relazioni tra le due parti tramite la lente dell'istituzionalismo storico, con l'obiettivo di identificare i cambiamenti istituzionali nel meccanismo di sicurezza che hanno costretto Francia e Mali a intraprendere due traiettorie differenti. Giacché l'istituzionalismo storico riconosce l'importanza delle dinamiche di potere per comprendere eventuali cambiamenti endogeni che interrompono l'inerzia propria delle istituzioni, la tesi prende in esame le dinamiche di potere che intercorrono tra questi due stati nel quadro politico-militare della Forza Congiunta del G5 Sahel (*G5S-Joint Force*), con il fine ultimo di aggiungere un tassello alla domanda di ricerca.

Si dimostrerà che l'interdipendenza asimmetrica che ne è derivata ha impedito alla Forza Congiunta di acquisire la titolarità del processo di securitizzazione e l'ha resa dipendente dal sostegno francese. Allo stesso modo, la strategia francese di contro-insurrezione, essendo eccessivamente orientata al rafforzamento della capacità militare e all'annientamento delle personalità di spicco dei gruppi jihadisti, ha aumentato l'instabilità regionale e ha compromesso la reputazione dell'intervento francese nel Sahel. La tesi sostiene che è proprio la combinazione

di interdipendenza asimmetrica ed eccessiva militarizzazione che, a monte, ha deteriorato la relazione fra Francia e Mali, conducendo inesorabilmente al ritiro della Francia. Tali fattori hanno dato vita ad un'intensa insoddisfazione della popolazione maliana che, a sua volta, ha agito come una miccia che ha innescato una serie di eventi che hanno portato all'espulsione della Francia. In effetti, l'istituzionalismo storico consente di dedurre meccanismi causali dalla "sequenza reattiva", ossia dalla catena di eventi che si verificano a seguito di un innesco. La tesi, coerentemente con la procedura dell'istituzionalismo, passa in rassegna i meccanismi intermedi che hanno contribuito all'esito, ovvero i colpi di stato in Mali, la riconfigurazione di Barkhane, la propensione della giunta militare ad intavolare un dialogo con i gruppi jihadisti e, infine, il dispiegamento del gruppo Wagner in Mali.

ABSTRACT

Durante casi diez años, Francia – fuerte de su legado colonial – ha operado en la región del Sahel en el contexto de la Guerra contra el Terrorismo. El Elíseo dio inicio a su intervención en 2012, después de la ofensiva de los Tuareg que estaba perjudicando la integridad del estado maliense. La Operación Barkhane, la misión de contrainsurgencia francesa, se enmarca en la asistencia para la seguridad (*security force assistance)*, o sea un nuevo enfoque de bajo costo que evita el compromiso militar directo y aspira a fortalecer la capacidad militar de la parte beneficiaria a través de equipamiento y entrenamiento.

La tesis discute la errática relación entre Francia y Mali contra el fondo del proceso de puesta en seguridad de la región. Específicamente, hace hincapié en la pregunta central de qué explica la retirada voluntaria o involuntaria de Francia de Mali en 2022. La disertación ofrece un rumbo innovador, ya que analiza la ruptura de las relaciones entre ambas partes con la lente del institucionalismo histórico, con el objetivo de identificar cambios institucionales en el mecanismo de seguridad que llevaron a Francia y Mali a emprender trayectorias diferentes. Dado que el institucionalismo histórico reconoce el impacto significativo de las dinámicas de poder en la comprensión de los cambios endógenos que interrumpen el ciclo auto-sostenido de las instituciones, la tesis examina las dinámicas de poder entre los dos países en el marco de la Fuerza Conjunta del G5 Sahel, con el objetivo final de agregar una pieza para responder a la pregunta de investigación.

Se demostrará que la interdependencia asimétrica, que las partes dieron lugar, impidió que el G5S-JF adquiriera propiedad sobre el proceso de securitización regional y lo hizo depender del apoyo francés. De manera similar, la estrategia de contrainsurgencia francesa, al estar excesivamente orientada hacia *capacity-building* y militarización, aumentó la inestabilidad regional y puso en peligro el éxito de la intervención de Francia en el Sahel. La tesis argumenta que es precisamente la combinación de interdependencia asimétrica y excesiva militarización la que, aguas arriba, comprometió la relación entre Francia y Malí,

llevando eventualmente a la retirada de Francia. Estas características impulsaron una intensa insatisfacción maliense con el marco de seguridad, que a su vez actuó como una mecha que provocó eventos que llevaron a la expulsión de Francia de Malí. De hecho, el institucionalismo histórico emplea la "secuencia reactiva", es decir, la cadena de eventos que ocurren después de un desencadenante y que permiten inferir mecanismos causales. La tesis, en consonancia con el procedimiento del institucionalismo histórico, revisa los mecanismos intervinientes que han contribuido al resultado, como los golpes de estado en Malí, la reconfiguración de Barkhane, la nueva inclinación de la junta militar hacia el diálogo con grupos yihadistas, y el despliegue del Grupo Wagner en Malí.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission to Mali
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AU	African Union
CMAS	Coordination of Movements, Associations and Sympathisers
CNSP	National Committee for the Salvation of the People
CNT	National Transitional Council
COIN	Counterinsurgency
CT	Counterterrorism
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EUCAP	European Union Capacity Building Mission
EUTM Mali	European Union Training Mission
FAMa	Malian Armed Forces
FSD	Front for Safeguarding Democracy
G5S	G5 Sahel
G5S-JF	G5 Sahel Joint Force
HI	Historical Institutionalism
IBK	Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IR	International Relations
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahel
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
M5-RFP	The 5 June Movement – Rally for Patriotic Forces
MINUSMA	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MUJAO	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PITF	Political Instability Task Force

PMC	Private Military Company
RPM	Rally for Mali
RSC	Regional Security Complex
SFA	Security Force Assistance
SSR	Security Sector Reform
WGI	Worldwide Governance Indicator

INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years, various armed Salafist-jihadist organisations have built their strongholds in the countries of the north-western coast of sub-Saharan Africa: jihadist-style insurgencies are indeed spreading in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania, Chad, Ivory Coast, and Benin, showing evident signs of trans-nationalisation and interconnection. Moreover, the state apparatuses' clear inability of territorial penetration, weak institutions, and the entrenched neo-patrimonialism have provided the decisive assist for the roots of the jihadist to take vigorous hold. Since the dawn of the new century, the Sahel – a region that includes most of the aforementioned states – has thus gained increasing relevance in the foreign policy agendas of world powers (both Western and non-Western), as a new front of the Jihad and theatre of the War on Terror initiated by the international community. Thus, the spotlight has not spared this region which, only a few decades ago, was extremely peripheral and marginal, a "transitional space" and "gateway to the true Africa"[1].

In the wake of the events of September 11th, 2001, state actors and international organisations kick-started initiatives and programs aimed to countering the jihadist insurgency, but it was with the Malian conflict that the formula of "Sahelistan" made in-road, intended to indicate a region of inherent insecurity, barbarism, and threat that requires the imposition of a perpetual state of emergency, an Afghanistan 2.0. It is in this context that the military and capacity-building operations, predominantly funded by France and the United States, which – for colonial heritage and alleged defence necessity – have positioned themselves at the forefront of the War on Terrorism.

In Mali, the recipient of the bulk of the international community's interventions, in February 2012 the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) – a movement of an ethnic minority ensconced in the north of the country, the

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[1] Edoardo Baldaro and Luca Raineri, *Jihad in Africa: Terrorismo e Controterrorismo nel Sahel* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2022), 127.

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Tuaregs – after obtaining military and strategic support from the Islamist militias of Ansar Dine and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), launched ferocious attacks on Malian military positions. The northern regions of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal easily fell under the impact of the military coalition between the Tuaregs and jihadist groups. With armed groups occupying about two-thirds of the territory, in October 2012 the transitional government of Mali requested international intervention to facilitate the stabilisation of the country. The invitation was well received by the United Nations Security Council, which within a few months, under the aegis of the Economic Community of West African States (from now on, ECOWAS), authorised the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), which later merged into the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (from now on, MINUSMA). Operation Serval, a similar short-term military mission launched by the Élysée with the mandate to eradicate the jihadist insurgency, flanked it. Serval fulfilled its mandate in less than a month, in fact between 2012 and 2013 the French operation had already recaptured all the key junctions in northern Mali.

However, despite the tactical victories, Islamic militias continued to grow, finding fertile ground in the vast desert areas of the Sahel, and France's eagerness to remain the leader in ensuring security in the region found expression in the launch of Operation Barkhane, which built on the success of Operation Serval but was designed to expand French army manoeuvres on a large scale, including the entire Sahel. The declared objective was indeed to help the region's ruling elites maintain control of their territory to prevent terrorist spill-overs at the gates of the "new southern frontier of Europe". To achieve this goal and in desperate search of allies in the Sahel, in 2017 France encouraged the creation of the G5 Sahel Joint Forces (from now on, G5S-JF), the armed wing of the homonymous regional organisation, created *ad hoc* by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to provide a transnational response to a problem that was spreading beyond state borders. The innovative counterterrorism method by which the Joint Force operated was constructed so that member states would maintain their sovereignty and, through

substantial operational and capacity-building support from international actors, manage their security themselves. In fact, the division of labour was clear: Joint Force and Operation Barkhane were to give the jihadist insurgency a hard time and make a clean sweep before handing the helm to MINUSMA, which would work to promote peace and conflict resolution.

However, in August 2022 French armed forces withdrew from Mali, ending their decade-long military presence. Similarly, the Burkinabé and Nigerien military juntas, with no reservations or doubts, also expelled Operation Barkhane. The purpose of the research is to find the rationale that drove France, voluntarily or involuntarily, to withdraw from Mali, hoping to fill the gap left by academic literature on the subject. Indeed, many researchers have focused on arguments that plausibly explain the Sahelo-Saharan – or more specifically Malian – civil resentment towards France's military presence but have overlooked the causes for the French disengagement.

1. THE SAHEL AND THE SECURITY CONTEXT

In the Western geopolitical imaginary, the Sahel has always represented the transitional space between order and anarchy, the threshold of black Africa where the alleged absence of laws and principles, harbinger of political disorder and moral confusion, would require a proper normalisation before terrorism,[2] civil wars, and uncontrollable migration flows reinforce and threaten the security of the Western world. For centuries, Western historiography has denied the decisive role

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[2] The thesis is very careful when using the term terrorism because of its subjective and politicised understanding and the potential consequences. The thesis does not avoid using the word terrorism, but it attempts to use the term only when it has been referred to as such in official papers and directives, or when discussing the widely recognised concept of counterterrorism. However, when commenting on violent groups, an effort to refer to them by name or as violent and/or armed Salafist-jihadist groups will be made. This term also has biases, but it is a more precise description for many groups in the Sahel region compared to terrorism. It is problematic to determine whether a jihadist group is terrorist and profit-driven in orientation or politically-ideologically violent. The blurring stems from a lack of clear definition of terrorism.

played by African civilizations in the construction of a global system. This operation has crystallised the consideration of the Sahel as an empty space (and therefore, penetrable) in a world system that, on the contrary, followed rigidly hierarchical logic and principles of order. Decolonization, although not stopping this process, has changed its paradigms, giving rise to new conceptual categories and consequent governance practices whereby the Sahel would be unable to independently regulate its political, institutional, economic, and social dynamics. In the context of Global Jihad and the War on Terror, the Sahel embodies the order-disorder dichotomy, namely the new axis along which the division between Global North and South develops. The various geopolitical reconfigurations of the area, which have never lost their strong class-based connotations, have legitimised the need to impose an *état d'emergence* on a large scale to address the inherent threats of this region. At the same time, its nature as a space of connection would make it even more dangerous as a potential conveyor of danger.

Taking a closer look at the dominant narrative surrounding the Sahel, which interprets it as an incubator of global threats, a lack of a clear-cut definition in geographical, political, and institutional terms stands out from the clutter, despite the unproblematized way the policy-makers make use of it. The Sahel loses (or perhaps, never developed) its spatial dimension and holds at 'discursive practice', a theatre in which external actors' practices, policies, and discourses converge, interact, and clash, condemning the region to perpetual instability. Indeed, the Sahel as an autonomous geopolitical space seems to exist solely as a function of the security crisis. However, in this way its borders are susceptible to variations as the crisis takes on new shapes and dimensions and don't reflect the accurate translation of the will of local agents, rather the vague result of external actors' interplay. Three alternative political designs convened on this portion of the African continent.

The first regional project has been carried out by international security actors, i.e. states and organisations that, aiming to secure the potential transnational threat's hub, gave free rein to interventionism and neoliberal counterterrorism's principles.

Driven by a liberal *ethos*, these actors capitalised on the War on Terror for outlining a strategy which shed the light on the reconstruction of fragile states in order to prevent them from falling under the impact of the jihadist advance. With the goal of containing transnational insurgencies and migration flows elicited by the Sahelian ungoverned spaces, they pursued a process of territorial demarcation that ended up identifying a range of states plagued by shared and common threats: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. In doing so, international actors also reinforced and crystalised the porous borders, forcibly imposing on all region's actors and processes the paradigm of European nation-states, which indirectly aims to erase alternative forms of grassroots governance.

Openly opposing the international actors' regional project, jihadist uprising built on the institutional weaknesses the international partners had written off as potential risk factors and exploited to justify their securitization process. Salafist-jihadist armed groups, whether they are loyal to al-Qaeda or devoted to the Islamic State, evoked affiliations and ethnic identities among the local population to integrate into their social fabric and assert themselves as alternative centres of power. From the jihadist's perspective, the Sahel is the scenario designated for dismantling existing political and social structures inherited from the colonial *époque* and establishing a new system that aligns with Islamic law and better suits the needs of the local people.

Finally, the last group of actors that has redefined and continues to redefine the Sahel are the local states' governmental elites. They have sought security cooperation with external actors to strengthen their neo-patrimonial, clientelist, sometimes corrupt, and authoritarian regimes, which have become the target of increasingly violent mass protests. Tracing the spatial imaginary mapped out by international actors, in 2014 the heads of state of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger established the G5 Sahel, officially formalising the existence of a Sahelian region for the first time. However, the strategies implemented by the G5 Sahel accelerate the security crisis because they do not

address the root causes of conflicts and instead aim to consolidate the dominant position of local cliques.

Throughout the thesis, it will be illustrated how these actors have interacted with each other, breeding, modifying, suspending, and shifting the power dynamics' equilibria in the context of the security crisis. Thus, the Sahel, meeting theatre for heterogeneous local actors and equally heterogeneous external actors, serves as a backdrop for the interplays that have contributed to France's withdrawal from Mali, and subsequently from Burkina Faso and Niger.

Figure 1: Map of North Africa and the Sahel, with the G5S's member states highlighted.

Source: Marie Sandnes, "Understanding Power Dynamics between Intervening and Host Military Forces: The Case of the G5 Sahel Joint Force and External Actors in the Sahel." PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2023.

2. AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In August 2022, France withdrew its armed forces from Mali, putting an end to nearly ten years of indirect military intervention in the country to face the threats of armed jihadist groups. Over the years of French-Malian military cooperation, France fell into the trap of the security force assistance (from now on, SFA) and counterinsurgency (from now on, COIN) operations, carrying them out in a westernised manner, not entirely appropriate to the context in which it operated. This triggered a wave of civil society protest, already reluctant to the French

presence on Malian soil due to the colonisation's legacy. This tension created a fertile ground for the two military coups of 2020 and 2021, after which the Malian military junta began to engage with the Russian Wagner Group, which France strongly objected to. Similarly, Burkina Faso and Niger experienced coups in 2022 and 2023 respectively, leading to the expulsion of the French-led Opération Barkhane and the choice of Russia as a new strategic partner. Western perspectives have pointed to this pattern as the resumption of West-East rivalry for influence. Scholars and analysts have raised doubts about this strategic reorientation, taking into account the mutual interests of France and the Sahelian countries in the fight against the common enemy. On the one hand, France was keen on maintaining and securing regional stability in the Sahel to protect the European borders from terrorism and uncontrolled immigration. It leveraged its colonial experience for coordinating and directing the joint offensives, but it overlooked the root causes of the instability, preserving the conditions terrorist sanctuaries need to thrive. On the other, Mali's interests lay in its survival. In the light of this, it is hard to understand why Mali turned to Russia, especially considering that Russia guarantees less offensive capacity than Francia did. Indeed, field opinions deem that Russia won't be able to replace the security assurances previously provided by France, particularly due to the resources being used in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.[3] The Russian presence in Mali seems insufficient in terms of both numbers and capabilities, as shown by the rise in security incidents after Barkhane's redeployment in early 2022.[4] Wagner's deployment spans between 1000 and 1200 troops, against the 5100 (at its height) allocated by France, then downsized to 3000, to which however were added 600 troops from Takuba Task Force, a European special forces coalition France spurred.

The existing literature doesn't offer any innovative food for thought, except pointing to the usual motivations based on sovereignty and anti-colonialist

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[3] Catrina Doxsee, Jared Thompson, and Marielle Harris, "The End of Operation Barkhane and the Future of Counterterrorism in Mali," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, March 2, 2022.
[4] International Crisis Group, "Mali: Avoiding the Trap of Isolation," *ICG*, February 9, 2023.

sentiments, which, truth be told, still hold a significant relevance and contributed to the withdrawal. Yet, these grievances might not align with the strategic plans of the Malian ruling *élite*. Thereby, the literature does not address the reasons behind Barkhane's exit despite Mali supposedly requiring security assistance from it, nor does it investigate why Russia is considered as a potential substitute security partner. The popular dissatisfaction might clarify the worsening cooperation between the two sides, but it does not explain why Mali expelled France (or France left Mali)[5] in 2022 and not sooner.

The thesis is focused on detailing why France left Mali in 2022, whether it was a voluntary or involuntary decision. It examines the series of events that occurred before the announcement of Barkhane's withdrawal. The main research question of the dissertation is therefore:

RQ: *What explains the severance of relations between France and Mali, leading to France's withdrawal from Mali in 2022 despite shared French and Malian security interests?*

This calls for additional clarification. In order to reply to this question, there is the need to understand how the military cooperation in the context of the securitization came about and how it operated, highlighting its successes and failures. Once it has been outlined, it will be possible to infer the causes that frayed the relations between the two sides. Therefore, the main research question called for two sub-questions that the thesis seeks to answer:

SQ1: *How did military cooperation come about and what forms did it take?*

SQ2: *How did power dynamics within military cooperation shape the outcome?*

The first sub-question focuses on the basis for the military cooperation and it's crucial because it highlights those conditions that in 2013 pushed Mali to request

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[5] The dynamics are ambiguous; without giving too much away, suffice it to say that on February 17th, 2022, France, following the expulsion of its ambassador by the Malian military junta and further skirmishes that frayed its relations with this country, announced its troops' redeployment in Niger. Mali responded, requiring France to speed up the process. Although the decision to dispense with cooperation lies with France, there is clear evidence that it coincided with Mali's will. The thesis will play with this duality because, despite acknowledging that the choice was officially taken by France, the author believes that Mali, although seeming to have passively suffered the unilateral initiative of the counterpart, has actually had an active role (more than France, which was forced by circumstances) to the realisation of the outcome.

help (and France to apply for it) and came up short in 2022. The second sub-question is equally important since it addresses the dimensions of the dynamics such as autonomy, capacity, and influence in decision-making.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review will examine the current academic research on the relation between France and Mali, with particular reference to their military cooperation within the Sahelian security context. First, this section will address the topic of military coalition through SFA and the linked issue of donor-dependency, which didn't allow the G5S-JF (the regional military joint force Mali was part of) to develop ownership over the responses to the armed jihadist groups' threat. Second, since the literature addressing France's redeployment from Mali is scant (tending to focus mainly on grievances against France and neglecting the operational obstacles that hindered the good outcome of the cooperation, which, from the author's point of view, might represent a cause for France's withdrawal, as will be explained later), the literature review will follow the path undertaken by the academic debate with special regards to the explanations for persisting instability and the dissatisfaction with France's military presence.

Research on coalitions largely deals with the reasons for their creation, as well as the power dynamics between member states.[6] Scholars point out that if the coalition's member states have different objectives, it is likely to come up against a political hazard and inefficiency.[7] However, Nilsson claims that a hegemonic structure, improving unity, may overcome the issue of inefficiency.[8] Yet, this is

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[6] See Scott D. Bennet, "Testing Alternative Models of Alliance Duration, 1816-1984," *American Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 3 (1997); Brett Ashley Leeds and Burcu Savun, "Terminating Alliances: Why Do States Abrogate Agreements?" *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (2007).
[7] See Hylke Dijkstra, "The Military Operation of the EU in Chad and the Central African Republic: Good Policy, Bad Politics," *International Peacekeeping* 17, no.3 (2010);
[8] Mikael Nilsson, "The Power of Technology: U.S. Hegemony and the Transfer of Guided Missiles to NATO during the Cold War, 1953-1962," *Comparative Technology Transfer and Society* 6, no. 2 (2008): 134-135.

not the case with the G5S-JF since, as Sandnes argues, despite France playing a leading role, enhancing its effectiveness, the joint force's member states hold agency.[9]

Moreover, France provided training and equipment to the JF, consistently to the SFA'S design. Although the G5S-JF enhanced its efficiency thanks to the French training and the shared command, it started to be reliant on France's assistance, developing an intense donor-dependency. It happens when a recipient of aid becomes reliant on this and does not develop ownership of the securitization process. Indeed, Tull waves whether security force assistance "in the guise of train and equip projects offers an efficient path", being likely to incur severe complications.[10] In this respect, Weinstein asserts that the provider of the military assistance holds more power than the recipient's,[11] while Lefebvre demonstrates how those receiving military aid or donations often become dependent.[12] Yet, Sandnes recalls that it is more appropriate to refer to the French-Malian military relation as an asymmetric interdependence, since France too exploited the alliance for holding its influence over the region.[13] Nevertheless, the asymmetric interdependence tainted the outcome of the SFA France provided to Mali, condemning the program to a miserable failure.

Similarly, Dieng notes that Barkhane's counterinsurgency operations favoured security-focused strategies and spotlighted military capacity building at the expense of efforts tackling the structural issues that fuel instability.[14] Kfir is on the same wavelength as he suggests that France turned to hard power and militarisation to deal with the terrorist threat without addressing the urge for

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[9] Marie Sandnes, "The Impact of External Support on Coalition Efficiency: The Case of the G5 Sahel Joint Force," *Defense Studies* 23, no. 3 (2023): 478.

[10] Denis M. Tull, "Mali, the G5 and Security Sector Assistance: Political Obstacles to Effective Cooperation," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs* 52 (2017): 1.

[11] Warren Weinstein, "The Limits of Military Dependency: The Case of Belgian Military Aid to Burundi, 1961-1973," *Journal of African Studies* 2, no. 3, (1975): 427.

[12] Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Donor Dependency and American Arms Transfers to the Horn of Africa: The F-5 Legacy," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 25, no. 3 (1987): 475.

[13] Marie Sandnes, "The Effect of Asymmetric Interdependence on the Outcome of Military Cooperation in the Sahel," *Cooperation and Conflict* (2023): 13-14.

[14] Moda Dieng, "The Multi-National Joint Task Force and the G5 Sahel Joint Force: The Limits of Military Capacity-Building Efforts," *Contemporary Security Policy* 40, no.4 (2019): 491-493.

substantive reform of the Malian system.[15] Other authors have highlighted the military successes of Operation Barkhane and the strategic-technical contribution it provided to the Joint Force and national armies.[16] Yet, many have criticised the French counterinsurgency strategy for not being able to recognize (and adapt to) the geopolitical context in which it operated.[17] Indeed, local armies do not have the same expertise as the French's, and have no idea how to use the weapons France supplied.[18] In addition, these are very expensive equipment which require constant technical revision, the beneficiary countries – figuring among the poorest in the world – cannot afford. Fouchard and Brabant question whether such exports contribute to the security of the countries involved, since the local armies supplied with the equipment made in France faced allegations of human rights abuses.[19] This would make France's intervention unnecessary, fuelling the resentment of the local population, already biased by the colonial legacy. However, this point of view is not taken into account by the scholars aiming to explain the reasons for France's withdrawal. Indeed, although a large part of the literature has focused on the operational obstacles that spoiled France's intervention mismatching its premises with the outcome, none of the abovementioned scholars related such hurdles to France's departure.

One branch of the literature addressing the French redeployment from Mali focuses on the root causes of instability. Wing argues that Malian citizens place much more trust in their armed forces (*Forces armées maliennes*, from now on FAMa) than in the principles of democracy, which the interventionist force alleges

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[15] Isaac Kfir, "Organized Criminal-Terrorist Groups in the Sahel: How Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Approaches Ignore the Roots of the Problem," *International Studies Perspectives* 19, no. 4 (2018): 352.

[16] See Fiifi Edu-Afful, and Andrew E. Yaw Tchie, "Fin de La Dépendance de l'Aide Extérieure: Reconfiguration de la FC-G5S," EPON - Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network. *Institut norvégien des relations internationales, Programme de Formation pour la Paix (TfP)*, 2022.

[17] See Michael Shurkin, "France's War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine," *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 1 (2020); Bruno Charbonneau, "Counter-Insurgency Governance in the Sahel," *International Affairs* 97, no. 6 (2021).

[18] David J. Francis, *The Regional Impact of the Armed Conflict and French Intervention in Mali*, (Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 2023): 13.

[19] Anthony Fouchard and Justine Brabant, "In Africa, French Development Aid Equip Soldiers Accused of Human Rights Abuses," *Disclose*, October 15, 2021.

to promote.[20] He hypothesises that the strong resentment of the Malian civilian community towards the ruling classes is due to the persistent perception of impunity and corruption that hovers throughout the country. Morgan, on the other hand, states that the distrust of democratic institutions is explainable in light of the fact that Mali has experienced short democratic phases during which the much-prophesied "democracy-stability" binomial did not find confirmation.[21] Akanji states that due to the violence, jihadist groups were able to expand, capitalising on poverty and people's dissatisfaction.[22] Indeed, as Morgan explained, some Malians attribute greater confidence to the security governance put forward by the armed groups.[23] The more the population shows their dissatisfaction with the civilian government, the higher the chances of military coups, as it provides military leaders with a reason to step in on behalf of the people.[24]

Another academic strand identifies the presence of external forces as the main cause of transnational instability. Amoha, in fact, notes that with the arrival of external troops, areas that had not been victims of attacks were targeted.[25] France expected that its involvement would lead to claims of neocolonialism and resentment of both the jihadist groups and population, so it urged the Sahelian countries to validate the operations.[26] Anyhow, heedless of the increasing instability France had condemned them to, the ruling élites remained tightly bound to the external actor because only in this way could they perpetuate their clientelistic practices and consolidate. Gazeley argues that the government's reliance on the French military presence triggered a vicious circle whereby, despite

[20] Susanna D. Wing, "Coups d'État, Political Legitimacy, and Instability in Mali," *Africa Today* 70, no. 1 (2023): 89.

[21] Andy Morgan, "Democracy Versus the People: Mali Has Seen a Government Coup Following Escalating Protests. What Has Caused the Unrest?" *Index on Censorship* 49, no. 4 (2020): 44.

[22] Olajide O. Akanji, "Sub-regional Security Challenge: ECOWAS and the War on Terror in West Africa," *Insight on Africa* 11, no. 1 (2019): 98.

[23] Morgan, "Democracy Versus the People," 44.

[24] Taku Yukawa, Kaoru Hidaka, Kaori Kushima, and Masafumu Fujita, "Coup d'État and a Democratic Signal: The Connection between Protests and Coups after the Cold War," *Journal of Peace Research* 59, no. 6 (2022): 841.

[25] Michael Amoah,"Private Military Companies, Foreign Legions and Counterterrorism in Mali and Central African Republic," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 48, no. 2 (2023): 144.

[26] Sandnes, "The Effect of Asymmetric," 13.

widespread discontent with Barkhane, the Malian government found itself forced to align with French interests.[27] This hastened the wave of popular dissatisfaction that FAMa capitalised on to legitimise the two coups.[28] So far, with the aim of finding the cause of the deterioration of relations between the two countries, literature has focused on the Malian population's dissatisfaction with the French presence, believed to increase the level of instability in the region. However, this does not explain why France's exit occurred in 2022 and not before. Far from ignoring the role of Malian dissatisfaction which, as will be presented in the final chapter, played a very important role in triggering and driving the sequence of events leading to the withdrawal, the author deems that it didn't represent the deeper cause. Such a literature's lack boosted the present research.

4. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

In order to explain the breakdown of the French-Malian relation and the consequent France's withdrawal/expulsion from Mali, this thesis draws on historical institutionalism (from now on, HI) to make sense of institutional alterations in Mali's security framework that would cut short the cooperation with France and shift towards the Wagner Group. HI originated in the field of political science to address the reasons behind the gradual and piecemeal changes of institutions over time, patterning human behaviours and shaping political outcomes. Since historical institutionalists regard institutions as the political legacy of historical struggles, they adopt a perspective focusing on the distributional impact on power dynamics.[29] While initially HI has been questioned for its relevance to international relations (from now on, IR), Zürn eventually acknowledges that international institutions exhibit self-reinforcing mechanisms

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[27] Joe Gazeley, "The Strong 'Weak State': French Statebuilding and Military Rule in Mali," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 16, no. 3 (2022): 281.
[28] Ibid., 279.
[29] James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, "A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change," in *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, ed. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 7.

akin to domestic ones.[30] Thus it offers a set of analytical resources and substantive insights IR can benefit from. Applying HI to puzzles of interest to the field of IR can be enlightening, and that is what this research strives to do.

Changes here are not conceived as static images, they are rather part of a dynamic process, thus HI captures alterations through what Mahoney refers to as "reactive sequence", that is an event chain in which events occurring after a trigger are a reaction and causal inference to prior events.[31] When it comes to explaining changes, HI frequently turns to critical junctures, meaning contingency events, usually exogenous, creating a disruption that reorients the self-reinforcing trajectory of an institution[32] and loosens the constraints preserving institutions.[33] Therefore, when a modification in the norms and regulations of an institution occurs, it triggers a feedback loop that promotes adherence to such changes, also known as "path dependence" in technical jargon.[34] Path dependence is the process set in motion by an event, decision, or choice, which becomes endogenously self-reinforcing and exhibits stability over time.

However, short bursts of change disrupting long periods of stasis are rare events,[35] consequently even in the absence of an exogenous shock, alterations can develop gradually over time. This could happen endogenously since institutions, being distributional instruments that define sets of rules, are laden with tensions and conflicts over resource's allocation and powers. Dominant actors often shape institutions to align with their preferences, but such arrangements are not self-perpetuating and are vulnerable to shift due to changes in power dynamics or

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[30] Michael Zürn, "Historical Institutionalism and International Relations – Strange Bedfellows?" in *Historical Institutionalism and International Relations: Explaining Institutional Development in World Politics*, ed. Thomas Rixen, Lora Anne Viola, Michael Zürn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 212.
[31] James Mahoney, "Path Dependence in Historical Sociology," *Theory and Society* 29, no. 4 (2000): 534.
[32] Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism," *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007): 342.
[33] Mahoney and Thelen, "A Theory of Gradual," 7.
[34] Ibid., 10; Thomas Rixen and Lora Anna Viola, "Historical Institutionalism and International Relations: Towards Explaining Change and Stability in International Institutions," in *Historical Institutionalism and International Relations: Explaining Institutional Development in World Politics*, ed. Thomas Rixen, Lora Anne Viola, Michael Zürn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 13.
[35] Capoccia and Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures," 368.

distributional conflicts.[36] This dynamic, encouraging disadvantaged and subordinated agents to pursue distinctive strategies to reverse the power's distribution, accredits more agency to actors and reduces the risk of determinism. Mahoney and Thelen conceptualised four patterns of gradual institutional change.[37] *Displacement* occurs when the existing rules are replaced with entirely new ones; *layering* happens when new rules are attached to existing ones, thereby altering the ways in which the original rules shape behaviours; *drift* ensues from shifts in external conditions that provoke variations to the impact of existing rules; *conversion* comes about when the ambiguity of the rules allows for different interpretations and enforcements.

The use of HI opens up for taking on both neo-positivist and constructivist research's methods.[38] Nevertheless, the research question, investigating the causal relationship, sets up a positivist tradition which asserts that knowledge is based on empirics and logic, requiring the researcher to be detached from the subject of study. Moreover, the research problem is focused on explaining the outcome of France and Mali's cooperation in the security framework. This encourages the thesis to rely on process tracing to make "strong within-case causal inferences about causal mechanisms based on in-depth single-case studies".[39] Mahoney provides a structure for making deductive causal inferences through the verification of the question "was X a cause of Y in case Z?".[40] Process tracing evaluates the validity of hypotheses by examining the cause-and-effect connection between two factors. If a hypothesis includes an intricate series with intervening mechanisms (M) to connect X and Y, then a hoop test is suitable. If X is proven necessary for M and M is proven sufficient for Y, the hypothesis is bolstered.[41] However, if failing a hoop test dismisses the hypothesis to a large degree, passing

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[36] Mahoney and Thelen, "A Theory of Gradual," 8-9.
[37] Ibid., 16-17.
[38] Ibid., 32.
[39] Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 2.
[40] See James Mahoney, "Process Tracing and Historical Explanation," *Security Studies* 24, no. 2 (2015).
[41] Ibid., 207.

it doesn't confirm a hypothesis. On the other hand, if the hypothesis directly links X and Y, a smoking gun test is preferable. With this test, the presence of a piece of evidence validates the hypothesis, though the absence of evidence doesn't rule out the hypothesis.[42]

In a nutshell, while HI describes the impact of the causal variable X on the security framework in Mali leading to France's withdrawal in 2022, process tracing attests the validity of the causal variable X and the intervening mechanisms M. In this deductive method, the theory of HI is exploited to provide a framework for institutional change within the security context in Mali. Disadvantaged actors are referred to as actors of change and, as such, are expected to play a role in carrying out alteration, given their dissatisfaction with the operational failures (X) of the security system. Thus, changes are expected within the security structure which would be likely to snowball Mali's security arrangements onto an unfavourable path to France's involvement, leading to the withdrawal (Y). The investigation checks if the hypothesis aligns with the sequence of events in Mali. Figure no. 2 depicts the thesis' hypothesis explaining all the factors causing, powering up and contributing to France's withdrawal.
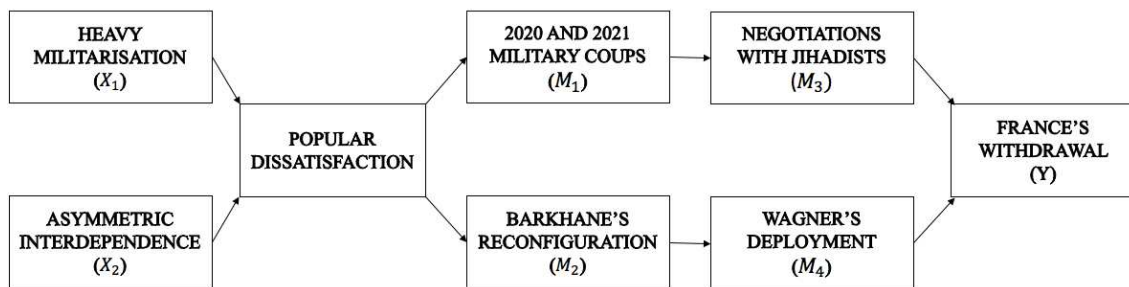

Figure 2: Author's construction of the causal chain ("reactive sequence") leading to Barkhane's withdrawal from Mali.

5. STRUCTURE AND OUTLINE

The first chapter is concerned with the conceptual and theoretical framework, meaning it deals with the discourses relative to the key topics for understanding

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[42] Ibid., 211.

the thesis. Following a brief review of the concept of instability, which is one of the rationales upstream for France's intervention in the Sahel, there will be taken up the topic of counterinsurgency and security force assistance, which represent the framework France carried out its operations in. The chapter also highlights the risk the assistance's recipients may fall into while receiving support from providers, that is the donor-dependency. Once the relevant topics are introduced, they will be operationalised. The indicators exposed through the operationalisation will be used in the following chapters to demonstrate that the French intervention in Mali, failing to reduce instability and increasing donor-dependency, is to be considered a failure.

To answer the two sub-questions, the second chapter examines power dynamics. Initially, the justifications that legitimised the French intervention in the context of the securitisation of the region will be introduced, namely the fragility of the state and the discourse on the War on Terror, two arguments going hand in hand. It will be shown how France, as well as other extern actors, capitalised on these rationales to defend the "southern borders of Europe" from the threats that were plaguing them. Second, the chapter follows the establishment of the G5S-JF and its first step in the security arena. To lay the foundations for the development of the asymmetric interdependence, the chapter proceeds by analysing the power dynamics between France and the G5S-JF at the three levels of warfare. It will be explained that France has assumed a pseudo-hegemonic role in both the strategic, operational, and tactical level, boosting the efficiency of the force but compromising its independence. At this point, it will be possible to theorise the asymmetric interdependence that binds the two sides. This is crucial since, despite the premises of SFA which is the operational framework France's military policy moves, the asymmetric interdependence implied a lack of JF's ownership over the responses to the security crisis. At last, this chapter is also concerned with the description of the counterinsurgency mission carried out by France, definitely leaning towards excessive militarisation.

The third chapter carries out a qualitative analysis, that is a process training aimed at determining whether the theoretical hypothesis of the thesis finds robust empirical confirmation. It will be argued that the asymmetric interdependence and the excessive militarisation have marred the success of the French military intervention in Mali and the broader Sahel. Due to these two shortcomings, an unprecedented popular protest has arisen, which has legitimised the 2020 and 2021 coups. Popular dissatisfaction has also pushed Emmanuel Macron to scale back French involvement to make it more commensurate with changing threats. This partial vacuum has been filled by the deployment of the Wagner Group promoted by the new military junta. In addition to strengthening ties with the Kremlin, the new transitional authorities have also promoted dialogue with armed jihadist groups. It is not even necessary to specify that France has opposed both initiatives implemented by the interim government, leading to a deterioration of relations, escalating with the withdrawal.

CHAPTER 1: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to understand the severance of Mali from France (and the other way around), this study investigates the relationship between the G5S-JF – as regional military coalition Mali was member of – and Opération Barkhane, meaning it engages with different types of military relations. In particular, the thesis deals with literature on external interventions, SFA, and donor-dependency since they address different features of the host-intervening actors' interplay.

First, following a brief review of the concept of (in)stability, a focus on external intervention and its several forms will be taken up. This is due to the intrinsic nature of the Joint Force, which has been a military coalition,[43] and its ties with external forces. Second, the topic of SFA will be touched upon; SFA constitutes a form of military partnership through which one side provides assistance to the benefit of the other and it's relevant for the purposes of the research because Mali, as a member of the Joint Force, has received military support from France, as well as other providers. Next, the thesis will bring up the issues of local ownership and donor-dependency, which are military intervention and/or partnership's precondition and counterproductive side-effect, respectively. Thus, this section first introduces different conceptions of relevant topics to later operationalise those. Operationalisation is crucial in order to better understand the findings of chapter three. Indeed, being a process allowing to define the measurement of phenomena, the operationalisation will provide the indicators for gauging instability and donor-dependency, which, in turn, will be pivotal for finding out the root causes of France's withdrawal from Mali.

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[43] On May 15th, 2022, Mali declared its exit from the G5S-JF, on December 2nd, 2023, Burkina Faso and Niger followed suit. A few days later, the remaining members of the force, Chad and Mauritania, announced the upcoming dissolution of the G5 Sahel and its mechanism. Such a decision is coherent with Article 20 of the agreement establishing the regional organisation, which states "The Force can be dispersed at the request of at least three member states". G5 Sahel, *Convention Portant Création du G5 Sahel* (2014): 8.

1.1. CONCEPT OF (IN)STABILITY

In the framework of international politics, (in)stability is a in vogue – albeit still vague – concept which the subjects of international law call upon to legitimise the use of force, even at the cost of falling into the faulty rhetoric of employing Euro-centric and post-Westphalian notions to unsuitable contexts.

Since the safeguard of security figures among the basic principles states are typically tasked with, sovereign states play a key role in the politics of security stability (and instability), both at national, regional, and international levels. Helman and Ratner were among the first to shed light on the issue of instability; they stated that a failed nation-state is "utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community".[44] Failing to exert the slightest control over voracious breakdowns of government functioning and civil order or the outbreak of random warfare, widespread violence and instability master in a failed state. However, even non-failed states may present insufficient capacity to discharge responsibilities to their sub-national actors.

A weak state lacks the institutional capacity to provide all the pivotal political, economic, social, and security services which are crucial in "constructing statehood legitimacy, exerting government hegemony, consolidating internal cohesion, and securing human survival".[45] From the security standpoint, weak states often struggle to effectively control their borders and are unable to harness the required capacity to defend their citizens from violent sub-national groups.[46] Such states tend to strive to maintain a monopoly of the legitimate use of force while unintentionally accommodating armed groups with access to weapons. In the political sphere, weak states' inefficient governing bodies and institutions fail to ensure the protection of individual and minority rights, prevent the political marginalisation of opponents, and promote accountability of national authorities

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[44] Gerald B. Helman and Steven R. Ratner, "Saving Failed States," *Foreign Policy*, no.89 (1992): 3.
[45] Babatunde F. Obamamoye, "State Weakness and Regional Security Instability: Evidence from Africa's Lake Chad Region," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 13, (2019): 3.
[46] Stewart Patrick, "Weak States and Global Threats: Fact of Fiction?" *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2006): 29.

to the constituency. Therefore, state weakness comes down to insufficient delivery of services, fragile border control, poor enforcement of laws, and inadequate monopoly of the use of force.

Given their difficulties in performing fundamental functions, weak states are more likely to nurture security threats and crises because sub-national armed groups find in the unsafe atmosphere fertile ground for emerging and both spreading terror and challenging the legitimacy of the conventional forces and societal order of the state.[47] Moreover, state weakness prevents the effective control of internal order until violent campaigns orchestrated by sub-national actors have possibly escalated into widespread security unrest.[48]

Francis Fukuyama found a direct linkage between fragile states and instability when he argued that "weak states have posed threats to international order because they are the source of conflict[s]".[49] The state being unable to address its core duties (and everything that comes with it) serves "as a potential incubator or conveyor belt" of security woes that have the potential to put national stability through the wringer.[50]

Whereby internal state weakness creates heaven for insurgents, it "may also create negative security externalities for neighbouring states".[51] Therefore, national instability could also expand to regional security instability, meaning the scenarios where addressing a security threat becomes a concern for an entire region and cannot be effectively managed without a regional strategy.

While security issues resulting from a state's internal weakness may not always create regional security problems, negative security effects and regional instability

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[47] Susan E. Rice, "Poverty Breeds Insecurity," in *Too Poor for Peace? Global Poverty, Conflict, and Security in the 21st Century*, ed. Leal Brainard and Derek Chollet (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007): 33.

[48] Obamamoye, "State Weakness and," 4.

[49] Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004): 120.

[50] Rice, "Poverty Breeds Insecurity," 33.

[51] David A. Lake, "Regional Security Complexes: A Systems Approach," in *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, ed. David A. Lake and Patrick Morgan (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press), 50.

are likely or inevitable if two scenarios are met.[52] First, if neighbouring states share the same weakness, spontaneous violent conflicts are more likely to spill over, facilitating cross-border mobilisation of combats. Second, cultural and religious affinities play a role in contributing to the diffusion of political violence and security unrest, causing regional instability. This facilitates the recruitment of cross-border fighters and the expansion of conflict throughout a regional area. When at least one state is critically weak, it is difficult for the security structures in the region to remain stable.

In this regard, Buzan and Wæver asserted that regional security issues are clustered in such a way that the (in)stability of one state affects the others'.[53] The inherent peculiarities of a region in terms of porous borders, ethnic affinities, and religious resemblances are instrumental in extending conflicts and menaces over borders, particularly in volatile regions.

1.2.   EXTERNAL INTERVENTIONS

It's common knowledge that armed conflicts bring along tremendous spill-over costs including human suffering, regional depression and global downturn. This implies that international actors, being prompted by humanitarian as well as self-interested reasons, are eager to intervene. Since the end of the Cold War, external intervention has become a main reaction to increasing violence in states that are deemed to be unable to address security issues independently. The forms through which external actors get involved are manifold and range from diplomatic intervention, economic intervention, military intervention to peacekeeping and post conflict operations.

Diplomatic intervention mainly refers to "limitation or termination of diplomatic relations (e.g. the recall of ambassadors), the use of international forums (e.g. the

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[52] Obamamoye, "State Weakness and," 5.
[53] Buzan and Ola Wæver, *Regions and Power. The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 27.

UN) or mediation".[54] Economic interventions, on the other hand, are essentially carried out through economic sanctions – namely trade embargoes, asset seizures, export and import restrictions – to provide disincentives or punishments for targeted actions and/or policies.[55]

Military intervention serves as *extrema ratio* and takes over only when the above-mentioned available responses are not fruitful. It refers to "military involvement or the encouragement of the use of the force by an outside power in a domestic conflict" to direct the warring parties towards a certain path that wouldn't otherwise be considered.[56] All in all, military intervention takes several forms: armed intervention of a third external actor, counterinsurgency, counterterrorism (from now on, CT), and peacekeeping operation, even though this latter differs as it activates by invitation.[57]

Moreover, it should be pointed out that the customary practice of intervention violates the system brought about in the Westphalian order, which enshrined the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other states. The UN Charter also harks back to the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) as it declares that nothing authorises the intervention of external actors in the domestic jurisdiction of any states.[58] However, Chapter VII of the Charter legitimises interventions in the exceptional cases of threats to international peace and security.[59] Thus, putting humanitarian concerns at the top of the agenda and labelling violent instabilities threats to peace and security provide the dodge to bypass the consolidated Westphalian principles.[60]

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[54] Anke Hoeffler, "Can International Interventions Secure the Peace?" *International Area Studies Review* 17, no.1 (2014): 81.

[55] Ibid., 84.

[56] Karin von Hipple, *Democracy by Force: US Military Intervention in the Post-Cold War World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

[57] Ibid., 3-6.

[58] UN Charter art. 2, para. 7.

[59] Ibid., art. 39.

[60] Liberal authors, such as Ramesh Thakur, use the term "responsibility to protect" (R2P) instead of "intervention", arguing that states have the responsibility to ensure their citizens security and human rights. When states are unable or openly put them at risk, such a responsibility is transferred to the international community. See Ramesh Thakur, "The Development and Evolution of R2P as International Policy," *Global Policy* 6, no. 3 (2015).

1.2.1.   Peacekeeping Operations

One of the most noteworthy tools the international community makes use of to reduce violence and foster conflict resolution is the peacekeeping operation. According to the UN, peacekeeping can be defined as "an operation involving military personnel, but without enforcement powers, undertaken by the United Nations to help maintain or restore international peace and security in areas of conflict".[61] Such operations are voluntary and rest on warring parties' consent or even request. Restraint from the use of force except in the sole cases of self-defence or defence of the mandate is, besides "impartiality" and the already covered "consent of the parties", a pillar principle for peacekeeping operations – at least of the first generation ones. Thus, if the requirements are met, the UN provides international legitimization, yet it doesn't imply support by the locals. In a nutshell, "all the substantive, legal, and observable activities to fulfil the mandate and contribute to the overarching goal of providing security and building peace" fall within the remit of peacekeeping operations.[62]

It was recently noticed that these practices are so affected by the dynamic global politics that they've undergone a substantial evolution from the traditional form which corresponds to a progressive expansion of mandates. [63]

"First-generation" peacekeeping operations' mandates focus merely on security tasks; from this it followed that operations took place in post-ceasefire or post-peace agreement countries deploying armed military observers subjected to severe engagement rules. Since they were forbidden to take on weapons, their main tasks were limited to monitoring ceasefires, supervising borders and demilitarised areas,

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[61] United Nation, *The Blue Helmets: A Review of United Nations Peacekeeping* (New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1991), 4.
[62] Sabine Otto, Felix Kube, and Hannah Smidt, "UN Peacekeeping Upon Deployment: Peacekeeping Activities in Theory and Practice," *Cooperation and Conflict,* no. 0 (2024): 3.
[63] Ibid., 7-8; Isiaka Alani Badmus and Bertram Ashby Jenkins, "Basic Concepts and Theories in International Peacekeeping: An Analytic Review," *Austral Brazilian Journal of Strategy* 8, no.16 (November 2019): 57-59.

and establishing buffer zones,[64] in general between two states under a post inter-state war or confrontation.

As the Cold War ended, peacekeeping operations embarked on a new course following a liberal agenda which emphasises political and civil rights as well as participatory governance. The "second-generation" peacekeeping operations – or otherwise known as "multidimensional" operations – focused on institutional peacebuilding tasks (e.g. election support) and individual rights' promotion. Their mandated security tasks also branched out to include disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration,[65] under intra-national or transnational post conflict scenarios.

Around the 2000s, a "third-generation" peacekeeping emerged and underwent major shifts. First, "the stance on using force evolved from strict self-defence mode to a means of operation", albeit limited by precise boundaries and aimed at deterring threats rather than proactively confronting warring parties.[66] Second, the focus on the protection of civilians was getting increasingly intense: the mandate gave up institutional tasks in favour of people-centred ones prioritising public health, socio-economic rights, and reconciliation.[67]

The last stage of the evolution is the "stabilisation" peacekeeping, whose drivers have been global anti-liberal trends and a renewed emphasis on hierarchical governance. A great part of these peacekeeping operations has been held under an ongoing conflict scenario. For such kind of peacekeeping the offensive use of force is expressly mandated since it aims at (re)establishing legitimate authority in failed states, maintaining order, delivering key state services, and developing a minimum institutional system.[68]

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[64] Alex J Bellamy, Paul D. Williams, and Stuart Griffin, *Understanding Peacekeeping* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 177-79.
[65] Otto, Kube, and Smidt, "UN Peacekeeping Upon Deployment", 5.
[66] Ibid.
[67] John Karlsrud, "From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism," *International Peacekeeping* 26, no.1 (July 2019): 3-4.
[68] Otto, Kube, and Smidt, "UN Peacekeeping Upon Deployment", 5-6.

According to Pugh, peace and humanitarianism represent the *trait d'union* among all the above-mentioned reconfigurations of peacekeeping operations.[69] Essentially, dominant states have been tending (and still do) to take disguise as humanitarian actors emphasising the moral design to uphold human rights, justice, and to maintain peace and security. In the framework of security management, by using peacekeeping operations as escort for such new concepts, hegemonic powers managed to convey their priorities and identify these values with the international community. "Representation of humanitarian emergencies tends to reinforce a representation of crisis on the lines of a victim–rescuer model", which in return is likely to perpetuate and crystallise the alleged superiority of liberal ideology.[70] The idea of "new military humanism" – which hinges on what Paris calls *mission civilisatrice* to mean the political rationale for armed intervention and colonisation to accomplish the Westernization of conflict-prone scenarios – is pivotal in the superpowers' plan to redefine security, protect liberalism, and preserve the dichotomy between "selves and others" in the post-Cold war era.[71]

1.2.2. Counterterrorism

Although there is no unanimous agreement on the definition of terrorism, it is evident that contemporary terrorism, being perceived as a potential threat to the local as well as global security, leaves an imprint on geopolitics. Counterterrorism is basically the coordinated and all-inclusive response to such a terror threat and strives to prevent, deter, and pre-empt it by implementing various methods, tactics, and policies. Ganor highlighted three key aims of CT policy, which in ascending

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[69] Micheal Pugh, "Peacekeeping and Critical Theory," *International Peacekeeping* 11, no. 1 (January 2004): 47-48.

[70] Ibid., 48.

[71] Ibid., 41; Roland Paris "Echoes of the Mission Civilisatrice: Peacekeeping in the Post-Cold War Era," In *The United Nations and Human Security,* e. Edward Newman and OlIver P. Richmond (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 111.

order are preventing conflict escalation, minimising damages caused by terrorism, and eradicating terrorism.[72]

Since superpowers' governments dispose of a "panoply of responses" to accomplish the above-mentioned goals, existing research pointed out that stances towards CT have often been polarised into the war model and the criminal-justice model, depending on whether it relies on legal or military means.[73] While the former advocates both democratic values and the rule of law, the latter "tends to frame the struggle against terrorism in military terms of an enemy-centric war where the armed forces of a state are primarily in charge of developing counterterrorism strategy".[74] Since terrorism is considered as a serious violation of public order, the criminal-justice approach attempts to adhere to the rule of law and, as Wilkison pointed out, pivoting on the law enforcement and moving within the state's jurisdiction, its pillars are the intelligence services, the police, and the legal system.[75] Responding to *ad-hoc*-fashioned terroristic attacks, such an approach finds its limit in its reactive nature. Nonetheless, the legal-repressive criminal-justice model of CT dominated Western attitudes; having at heart the preservation of civil liberties and the respect of democratic and liberal values, Western democracies' struggle to cope with terrorism have assiduously pushed its boundaries. Yet, with the spread of the "War on Terror", an inclination to militarise CT started making inroads and giving rise to a "set of practices which made counterterrorism a form of warfare in its own right".[76] This, added to the fact that over the past fifty years the nature of terrorism has been undergoing an evolution,

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[72] Boaz Ganor, *The Counter-terrorism Puzzle: A Guide for Decision Makers* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publisher, 2005), 44-47.

[73] Ronald D. Crelinsten and Alex P. Schmid, "Western Responses to Terrorism. A Twenty-five Year Balance Sheet," *Terrorism and Politics Violence* 4, no. 4 (December 2007): 309.

[74] Jason Rineheart, "Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency," *Perspective on Terrorism* 4, no.5 (November 2010): 37.

[75] Paul Wilkison, *Terrorism versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response* (London: Routledge, 2006), 72.

[76] Michael J. Boyle, "Do Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Go Together?" *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 86, no. 2 (March 2010): 342.

led to the necessity of reconfiguring the operational CT framework around the dichotomy "direct-indirect" or "hard-soft".[77]

The direct enemy-centric approach would mostly consist of offensive and hard power tactics. On the other hand, the indirect soft power stance would be a population-centric doctrine which not only directly addresses the rooted causes that allow terrorism to thrive, but also fosters capacity-building and economic development.[78] Due to its alleged efficiency in deterring terroristic violence, the hard approach represents a crucial feature of the Western CT arsenal, but – raising questions about the ethical use of force – it triggers the real reliance of Western powers on democratic and peace ideals they export. However, some scholars question that soft power alternatives succeed in addressing terrorism-related challenges.[79] To settle this issue, Crelinsten argued that counterterrorism should take on a comprehensive approach – rather than merely militaristic – in order to stamp out the threat.[80]

1.2.3.   Counterinsurgency

An insurgency is a fight for authority over a disputed political area between a state (or rather – given its contemporary trans-national nature – a group of states or occupying forces), and one or more popularly based non-state opponents.[81] Said in plain words, insurgencies are popular uprisings that originate and operate within pre-existing social networks (such as village, tribe, political or religious party) and are found in a multifaceted and chaotic social setting, which Kilcullen referred to as "conflict ecosystem".[82]

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[77] Rineheart, "Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency," 38
[78] Ibid.
[79] See: Robert Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
[80] Ronald D. Crelinsten, *Counterterrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 248.
[81] David Kilcullen, "Three Pillars of Counterinsurgency," in *US Government Counterinsurgency Conference*, vol. 28, (Washington DC: US Department of State, 2006), 2; Gordon H. McCormick, Steven B. Horton, and Lauren A. Harrison, "Things Fall Apart: The Endgame Dynamics of Internal Wars," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no.2 (2007): 322.
[82] Kilcullen, "Three Pillars of,", 2-3.

Correspondingly, counterinsurgency (COIN) is the "attempt to confound a challenge to established authority".[83] A stable tendency to regard counterinsurgency as a practice running parallel with stability operations, foreign internal defence, and counterguerrilla operations gained strength over the years. Moreover, COIN is considered a subcomponent of various military operations such as small wars, unconventional, irregular and asymmetric warfare, and low-intensity conflict. Therefore, depending on the strategic circumstances, COIN can be part of or include efforts to fight terrorism, quell guerrilla forces, restore stability, back up foreign internal defence, and rebuild post-conflict societies.[84] To overcome such inter-relational confusion, Moore defined counterinsurgency as an integrated set of political, economic, social, and security tactics aiming at stopping and preventing armed violence, achieving and preserving secure political, economic, and social structures, as well as addressing the root issues of insurgency for long-term stability.[85] This definition reveals the all-encompassing nature of COIN which combines military, political, and civilian-centric stances.[86]

Nagl argued that, similarly to counterterrorism, counterinsurgency can be interpreted in light of two basic strategic approaches.[87] The first, a mostly military one, paradoxically aspires to ending violence and defeating insurgents by using extreme methods and conducting drastic actions. Being lasting stability the ultimate goal of counterinsurgency, direct COIN is not the right tool since it achieves the objective by force or repression. This approach – needless to specify – is flawed because, despite the rebels being defeated or, more likely, turned to crime, the underlying issues leading to insurgency remain unaddressed. This spawns repressive and authoritarian governments, which often arise through

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[83] Michael L. R. Smith and David Martin Jones, "Counterinsurgency and Strategy: Problems and Paradoxes," in *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency: Strategic Problems, Puzzles, and Paradoxes,* (New York Cichester: Columbia University Press, 2015), 32.
[84] Scott R. Moore, "The Basics of Counterinsurgency," *Small Wars Journal*, no. 14 (2007): 13.
[85] Ibid., 14.
[86] Rineheart, "Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency," 40.
[87] John A. Nagl, *Learning to East Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 58.

military coups, and fosters process of ongoing containment and suppression.[88] On the contrary, the second strategic approach is more likely to achieve long-term stability, disposing of a more population-centric scope and aiming to address the conflict in all its dimensions. The indirect strategy follows three trajectories: 1) reducing violence and subversion to a level manageable by local security forces; 2) establishing institutions to tackle underlying issues causing instability; 3) reversing the animosities, distrust, and biases that fuel the conflict.[89]

Indirect COIN is efficient because it not only defeats insurgent forces, but also restores (and maintains) peace and prevents the reinstatement of conflicts by solving the root causes that burst it. Therefore, success in indirect COIN could imply one of the ultimate and puzzling paradoxes in military history since fruitful operations mean "meeting the demands of the enemy, or, more accurately, the causes they espouse, without giving in to their methods".[90] Such a counterinsurgency seeks indeed to deny the insurgency the support of the local communities and outside sanctuaries by promoting good governance, building infrastructure, and eliminating political corruption, thereby winning population's "hearts and minds". Only in this way is it possible to achieve long-term legitimation of the security actor(s). Besides, Jones stressed the importance of involving locals in the operations: considering that host government's security forces and local police are familiar with the geographical, cultural, and political landscape, they have to be trained to take the lead in the COIN effort.[91] By doing so, the involvement of external actor(s) in the struggle can be reduced or eliminated.

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[88] Moore, "The Basic of," 14.
[89] Ibid., 16.
[90] Ibid., 15.
[91] Seth Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica: The RAND Corporation, 2008), 21-24.

1.3. SECURITY FORCE ASSISTANCE

External interventions have hitherto ranged from vast programs to develop the security sector and enhance peacetime functionality. The contemporary idea of security force assistance (SFA) developed in the aftermath of the early stage of the Global War on Terror: it arose as an alternative to the failures of the large-scale international military interventions and settled as critical elements of operations with a smaller footprint.[92] SFA is a low cost and low risk approach to boosting the armed forces of a state aiming at maintaining security and stability.

SFA is defined as "a set of activities of an external actor (provider) equipping and training an armed unit (recipient) with a stated aim to strengthen the recipients' operational capacity and professionalism".[93] The most direct way to address operational capacity is by providing both training and equipment's provisions. Professionalism involves effectively utilising coercive power in a consistent and appropriate manner, tailored to the level and nature of the threat and aiming to minimise collateral damage. Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker's definition of SFA as "help in training, equipping, and advising allied or partner militaries to enable them to defend themselves" does not take into account the essence of SFA programs as implemented on the ground.[94] In fact, although militaries may have a significant role, the security apparatus involves many other actors such as paramilitary forces, border patrol forces, police, and sometimes loosely affiliated vigilante or civil defence groups.[95]

Broadly speaking, as it has been stated so far, SFA activities carry out two primary functions: one involving training and mentoring security forces, and the other involving supplying equipment and resources. The first task, which entails working closely with security forces in combat situations, is performed by

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[92] Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance," *Journal of Strategic* Studies 41, no. 1-2 (2018): 89-90.
[93] Øystein H. Rolandsen, Maggie Dwayer, and William Reno, "Security Force Assistance to Fragile States: A Framework of Analysis," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 5 (2021): 566.
[94] Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, "Small Footprint," 90.
[95] Rolandsen, Dwayer, and Reno, "Security Force Assistance," 566-67.

assisting and supporting the training of high-ranking personnel who will then mentor their subordinates. This topic is also discussed in the second chapter of the dissertation. The resources side is commonly seen in the form of donations but can also encompass arms trade and trade agreements between states.[96]

SFA programs' parties are *providers* on the one hand, and *recipients* on the other. Providers are those states or organisations offering training and/or assistance, while the recipients benefit from it. The concept of SFA is based on the assumption that recipient states possess inadequate and inefficient national security forces that are unable or unwilling to maintain order, combat armed threats, or protect their national territory.[97] Indeed, the purpose of providing training and equipment is to lessen these shortcomings.

SFA is the currently operating preferred method for engaging with security sectors in fragile states, both complementing and replacing the Security Sector Reform (SSR): Western donors have recourse to SFA not only to tackle specific recipient's issues (e.g. uprisings, terror groups, migration, and weak borders), but also as response to broader security concerns, such as spill-overs of threats into Europe, or to strengthen their influence in an era of global competition among major powers.[98] In fact, SFA is often viewed in the light of the *principal-agent* relationship where the provider (principal) takes advantage of the provision of SFA to achieve goals through the recipient's (agent) services.[99] The shortcoming of the principal-agent dynamic is that it assumes that SFA is provided from one actor directly to the recipient, simplifying the interactions involved in the SFA process. Iwuoha and Karssen have examined situations where the recipient involves the

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[96] Marie Sandnes, "Understanding Power Dynamics between Intervening and Host Military Forces: The Case of the G5 Sahel Joint Force and External Actors in the Sahel" (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2023), 29.

[97] Nicholas Marsh and Øystein H. Rolandsen, "Fragmented We Fall: Security Sector Cohesion and the Impact of Foreign Security Force Assistance in Mali," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 5 (2021): 614.

[98] Ibid., 615; Emily Knowles and Jahara Matisek, "Western Security Force Assistance in Weak States: Time for Peacebuilding Approach," *The RUSI Journal* 164, no. 3 (2019): 13.

[99] Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, "Small Footprint," 94; Stephanie Burchard and Stephen Burgess, "U.S. Training of African Forces and Military Assistance, 1997-2017: Security Versus Human Rights in Principal-Agent Relations," *African Security* 11, no. 4 (2018): 342-45.

militaries of several states, like the G5S-JF coalition, object of this thesis.[100] Donations to the Joint Force have been given bilaterally to G5 Sahel member states, making them the middle-men in the chain of provision and serving as both recipients and providers of support.[101]

SFA has recently been approached by a large number of scholars and researchers, who have not spared several critical issues. For example, Shurkin, Gordon, Frederick, and Pernin asserted that a military-centred SFA is ineffective because it fails to recognize the importance of nation-building and establishing legitimacy.[102] While Harkness suggested that SFA can lead to positive results like backing democratic movements and military reform if the recipient side moves in this direction, Larsdotter believed that military aid could have adverse effects by the recipients using it to perpetrate violence against civilians or sell resources to insurgent groups, ultimately hindering democratic processes.[103] Both Harkness and Larsdotter highlighted the importance of the recipient's characteristics in determining the potential impact of SFA.

Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker argued that SFA has a limited impact in developing a strong partner-force, as it is deemed inadequate for long-term effectiveness despite its positive contributions.[104] Matisek and Reno stated that it is essential for providers to improve their understanding of the recipient state's political context in order for SFA to be successful.[105] This is because SFA must be politically embraced and prioritised in order to have a beneficial impact. Knowles and Matisek also suggested that providers would benefit from adopting a

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[100] See: Victor Chidubem Iwuoha, "Clash of Counterterrorism-Assistance-Seeking and Their Super Power Sponsors Implications on the War Against Boko Haram," *African Security Review* 28, no. 1 (2019); Julian Karssen, "Building African Solutions to American Problems: US Security Assistance to the African Union Mission in Somalia (2001-2016)" (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2019).

[101] Sandnes, "Understanding Power," 31.

[102] Michael Shurkin, John IV Gordon, Bryan Frederick, and Cristopher G. Pernin, *Building Armies, Building Nations: Toward a New Approach to Security Force Assistance* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2017), 13-16.

[103] Kristen Harkness, "Security Assistance in Africa: The Case for More," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 45, no. 2 (2015): 19-21; Kersti Larsdotter, "Security Assistance in Africa: The Case for Less," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 45, no.2 (2015): 28.

[104] Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, "Small Footprint," 106.

[105] Jahara Matisek and William Reno, "Getting American Security Force Assistance Right: Political Context Matters," *Joint Force Quarterly* no. 92 (2019): 67.

peacebuilding strategy that encompasses not only military factors but also political, social, and economic aspects of the recipient side.[106] These scholars put the light on the provider side to evaluate the outcomes of such missions.

Following the provider-recipient lens in SFA literature, the thesis will focus on the characteristics of both recipient and the provider side in explaining why SFA outcomes have not been successful. This dissertation expands on the idea that the interplay between the provider and the recipient offers fresh perspectives to the SFA research.

1.4. LOCAL OWNERSHIP AND DONOR-DEPENDENCY

Within the field of peacebuilding and external-host actors' relationship, an increasing emphasis has been put on the concept of local ownership, which is widely recognized as a paramount requirement for sustainable peace processes. The reason for its importance lies in the assumption that for peace interventions to have a lasting impact, they must be integrated into the local culture and the hosts need to hold ownership and control of the process in order to maintain stability if external actors withdraw.[107] The growing weight on the host actors' side has led to a "localization" of peacebuilding, which entails a greater focus on developing local capacities for as long as the external interventions' process, with the ultimate goal being developing the local ownership. Local ownership, besides being crucial to the long-term securitization reforms' sustainability, represents also an efficient way to come to grips with the root causes of dysfunctional governance. A locally owned security sector, with local actors being responsive and accountable, is far less susceptible to experience violent political instability.[108]

Despite gaining popularity within international peacebuilding, the actual concept of local ownership remains deeply contested. For instance, broadly speaking it can

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[106] Knowles and Matisek, "Western Security Force," 15.

[107] Sandnes, "Understanding Power," 31-33; Timothy Donais, "Operationalising Local Ownership in SSR," in *Local Ownership and Security Sector Reform*, ed. Timothy Donais (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008), 278.

[108] Donais, "Operationalising Local Ownership," 278.

be interpreted as the "domestication" of externally developed peacebuilding models to fit the local context by involving local actors in consultations and engaging their participation. Hughes and Pupavac assert that local ownership is the extent to which the domestic political structures are able to assume responsibility for implementing a pre-existing (and externally determined) set of policy norms.[109] In post-conflict contexts, handing over the baton to locals is crucial since any peace process will likely be unsuccessful if it is not supported by those directly affected. It is important to stress because where there is no effective mechanism of accountability, it could be unclear which of these sets of actors (whether intervening forces or host *élites*) better represent post-conflict societies' voice.[110] Nathan underscores the importance of local ownership as he stated that "reform of security policies, institutions and activities in a given country must be designed, managed and implemented by domestic actors rather than external actors".[111] Following his logic, the role for foreign actors is restricted to supporting local actors in living up to their Security Sector Reform (from now on, SSR) goals while control over the process must lie in local hands. From Nathan's perspective, building the ability of locals to undertake the securitization reform would be more important than building their capacity to provide security. This is due to the fact that "a process-oriented approach that […] empowers local actors is more likely to yield good results in the long-term than a product-oriented approach that undermines local actors and is not sustainable".[112]

Nonetheless, the absence of agreement around a universal definition of local ownership has resulted in criticisms that the concept has turned into just another buzzword.[113] Critics argue that the term is being used to legitimise the hegemony

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[109] Caroline Hughes and Vanessa Pupavac, "Framing Post-Conflict Societies: International Pathologisation of Cambodian and the Post-Yugoslav States," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 6 (2005) 883.

[110] Timothy Donais, "Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Process," *Peace & Change* 34, no. 3 (2009): 7.

[111] Laurie Nathan, "The Challenge of Local Ownership of SSR: From Donor Rhetoric to Practice," in *Local Ownership and Security Sector Reform*, ed. Timothy Donais (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008), 21.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Tobias Pietz and Leopold von Carlowitz, "Local Ownership in Peacebuilding Process in Failed States: Approaches, Experiences, and Prerequisites for Success," in *Report on an Expert Meeting,* ed. Center for

of international peace interventions and superficially obtain local approval.[114] Others have claimed that the intervening actors have been drawing on local ownership as a ploy to justify their exit strategies and leave local actors with undue burdens.

The peacebuilding literature has focused on the challenges that arise in the interaction between external and host actors, highlighting power imbalances[115] and the resulting hybridity of the two sides' relational dynamics.[116] One major challenge in achieving local ownership over the process has been the potential for the host to become reliant on external assistance.

Donor-dependency is a relevant issue in military assistance and SFA; it occurs when a recipient of aid becomes dependent on the provider's assistance to perpetuate its role and is unable to carry out the peace process on its own skills. Moreover, financing assistance is detrimental to the quality of the recipient's governance because "the more resources flow into the government budget, the more a government […] loses motivation to work effectively and efficiently".[117] The reasons that drive the external actors to provide assistance lie in the goal of gaining a certain degree of influence in the region and/or security context. A literature strain underlines the benefit that both the provider and the recipient gain from the mutual-exchange relationship. Other scholars, on the other hand, allege that the process' dynamics work in favour of the provider, whereas the recipient ends up being a pawn in the external side's hands.[118] However, recent studies put

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International Peace Operations (Osnabrück: Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung, 2007): 2; Donais, "Operationalising Local Ownership," 275.

[114] See: Roland Paris, "Peacebuilding and the Limits of Liberal Internationalism," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (1997); Olivier P. Richmond "The Problem of Peace Understanding the "Liberal Peace"," *Conflict, Security & Development* 6, no. 3 (2006); Sung Yong Lee, "The Limit of Ethnocentric Perceptions in Civil War Peace Negotiations," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2011).

[115] Donais, "Empowerment or," 15.

[116] See: Annika Björkdahl and Kristine Höglund, "Precarious Peacebuilding Friction in Global-Local Encounters," *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 3 (2013); Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond, "The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace," *Third Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013).

[117] Seunghyun Lee and Tobin Im, "The Impact of Official Development Assistance on Government Effectiveness: The Mediating Effect of Corruption," *The Korean Journal of Policy Studies* 30, no. 2 (2015): 200.

[118] Warren Weinstein, "The Limits of Military Dependency: The Case of Belgian Military Aid to Burundi, 1961-1973," *Journal of African Studies* 2, no. 3 (1975): 422-24; Itai Kabonga, "Dependency Theory and Donor Aid Critical Analysis," *Africanus: Journal of Development Studies* 46, no. 2 (2016): 32.

the lens on the agency of the recipient. For instance, Bayart and Ellis brought forth the extraversion theory, which suggests that numerous African states assert their sovereignty by effectively managing their reliance on foreign actors.[119] Following this train of thought, African *élites* may seek out providers' assistance to acquire domestic legitimacy and authority, other than resources and provisions.[120] This seems to indicate that the interplay between external actors and host might be more interdependent than one-sided dependent. This peculiarity will be analysed in detail in the following chapter.

1.5. OPERATIONALISATION

This section aims to convert the theoretical conceptualizations of instability and donor-dependency into operational measures that can be later employed to assess the (in)success of France SFA in the Sahel. In fact, the data-set analysis will show whether the intervention led by France has shown a sustainable positive impact over the securitization process in the region, in particular with regards to Mali. Thus, it provides an essential step to answer the research question and enable a measurable examination.

1.5.1. Integrated Counterinsurgency Governance

Since insurgencies aim to address endemic diseases and achieve significant changes by employing violent, political, social, and economic means, counterinsurgency "requires a mirror-imaged strategy in which the tasks […] are carefully choreographed".[121] The strategy should involve a cohesive and integrated

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[119] Jean-François Bayart and Stephen Ellis, "Africa in the World History of Extraversion," *African Affairs* 99, no. 395 (2000): 222-24.
[120] Caryn Peiffer and Pierre Englebert, "Extraversion, Vulnerability to Donors, and Political Liberalization in Africa," *African Affairs* 111, no. 444 (2012): 361; Ricardo Soares de Oliveira and Harry Verhoeven, "Taming Intervention: Sovereignty, Statehood and Political Order in Africa," Survival 60, no. 2 (2018): 11-12.
[121] Moore, "The Basic of," 23.

civil-military mix of ongoing actions that builds long-term stability by tackling deep-rooted and underlying issues. Counterinsurgent forces should draw on military, political, and economic fields for resorting to an encompassing and cross approach that carries out mutually-supporting and intermingled operations. This is because, as Dierk Walter noticed, counterinsurgency is a form of politics that "incorporates political measures into the military sphere, subjects them to military logic, and makes them into ancillary methods for achieving […] victory".[122]

Considering that substantive security, political, and economic measures need to be combined with a wider information strategy in order to be effective, information lies at the heart and underpins all the efforts. Perception is essential in exerting control and influence over civilians, consequently the information campaign's crucial task is to consolidate and unify the message the counterinsurgency sends while operating. This consists of gathering intelligence, analysing and disseminating information, engaging in information operations (including computer network operations, electronic warfare, and psychological operations), media operations (such as public diplomacy), and implementing measures to combat insurgent motivation, sanctuary, and ideology.[123] The radius of action of the information campaign is not restricted to this: to play the field, it also involves census data, public opinion polls, collection of cultural information in areas where access is restricted, as well as measuring the impact of COIN actions.

Resting of this base are three equally important pillars that need to be developed in parallel: security, political, and economic domains.[124] The risk of getting an unbalanced outcome is around the corner: excessive economic assistance neglecting security operations creates vulnerable targets for insurgents, while excessive security assistance with inadequate political consensus or governance leads to stronger armed groups.

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[122] Dierk Walter, *Colonial Violence: European Empires and the Use of Force* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 108.
[123] Kilcullen, "Three Pillars of," 5.
[124] Ibid.

The security pillar consists of three interrelated subcomponents: restoring security, demobilisation, and maintaining stability.[125] Restoring security goes beyond the mere defeat of insurgent guerrillas and the coercive imposition of order, it also covers measures to ensure the welfare of the population and its essential institutions and infrastructure and the provisions of basic services. Once the insurgents are rooted out of populated areas, patrolling is indispensable. Disarmament and demobilisation of armed factions are meant to guarantee that the ruling government holds the monopoly of the use and means of force.[126] Equally important to collecting and disposing of the weapons for preventing the proliferation of arms, insurgents who have been captured need to be demobilised and reintegrated into society. Moreover, this subcomponent involves the rearmament of law enforcement, security personnel, and local militias in a way that ensures security at the local level and, most importantly, does not contribute to the training or equipping of rebel groups or rival factions. Finally, maintaining stability entails paving the way for the reactivation of the social and political apparatus without any turmoil interfering. To maintain stability, counterinsurgent forces have to restore social and civil services' networks and capabilities, protect the freedom of movement, and enforce human rights.[127]

The political pillar focuses on establishing and maintaining political and legal systems that can provide governance under the rule of law, address the basic social needs of the people, and ensure both internal and external security for the country.[128] Counterinsurgency strategies often aim to establish governance able to create a bidding social contract where the government's main goal is to improve the welfare of the people, leading citizenry to perceive it as a legitimate representation of their interests and thus worthy of their allegiance and support. Promoting effective governance (especially in populated areas) is a key node for weakening insurgencies' grip.

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[125] Moore, "The Basic of," 17.
[126] Ibid., 18.
[127] Ibid., 19.
[128] Kilcullen, "Three Pillars of," 5.

The economic pillar consists of both short-term humanitarian assistance and long-term development programs across a range of agricultural, industrial, and commercial sectors. Effective resource and infrastructure management assistance, such as building crucial infrastructure systems, is of utmost importance. Building and sustaining economic development is crucial in sorting out the underlying causes of insurgency. Economic structures, practices, and attitudes are vital for growth and long-term prosperity. Military forces play a pivotal role in protecting economic growth, enhancing local development and supporting it to expansion. Within the COIN framework, the economic pillar is carried out by protecting and supporting the result of the economic growth, as well as collecting taxes.[129] Local leadership, with support from donors and corporations, also plays a significant role. However, economic development must be closely monitored to prevent corruption and incompetence. Adapting initiatives to match the society's ability to handle spending, along with efforts to boost capacity for absorption, are essential for various development projects.[130]

These three pillars support the overarching counterinsurgency's fundamental goals of control and stability. Indeed, COIN is meant to seek stability "as a means to an end, a step on the way of regaining control over an out-of-control environment, rather than as an end in itself".[131] The ultimate aim, besides establishing control, is to transfer it to legitimate and effective local institutions. SFA falls under this logic, since – by training and equipping – it fosters host actors to develop ownership over the security context. Below, the operationalization of the two COIN's goals – stability and ownership – follows.

1.5.2.   (In)stability

In the concluding passage of their article, Helman and Ratner encouraged an active role of the international community in finding an effective way to deal with the

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[129] Moore, "The Basic of," 19.
[130] Kilcullen, "Three Pillars of," 6.
[131] Ibid.

phenomenon of state instability and emphasise the need to rescue or repair any failed and failing states posing such a threat to international security.[132] A few years later, the idea of fixing or even preventing state failure was taken up by US Vice President Al Gore who commissioned a government-sponsored task force to design a database on major domestic political conflicts leading to state failures, the State Failure Task Force. Over time, they broadened their focus to include situations of political instability: the term "state failure" was replaced by "state instability" and the Task Force was rebaptized "Political Instability Task Force" (PITF). It defines political instability as "civil conflicts, political crises, and massive human rights violations that are typically associated with state breakdown".[133] Another critical tool for measuring political stability is the "Fragile State Index" which highlights pressures that states experience and warns whenever those vulnerabilities exceed states' capacity to cope with them.

However, the above-mentioned indicators focus on instability and thereby crystalize the recurring paradigm on the negative definition of political stability. Defining stability as nothing but the absence of obstructive events is rather limiting and this makes it necessary to adopt tools promoting the idea for which stability goes beyond "the absence of certain pathological indicators, but is instead a positive and some degree mutually reinforcing state in itself".[134] Following this argument, the Worldwide Governance Indicator (WGI) represents a positive indicator for political stability, with special reference to its "political stability and absence of violence/terrorism" subcategory. This specific dimension yearns to "capture perceptions of the likelihood that the government will be destabilised or overthrown by unconstitutional or violent means, including politically-motivated

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[132] Helman and Ratner, "Saving Failed States," 18-20.

[133] Daniel C. Esty, Jack A. Goldstone, Ted Robert Gurr, Pamela T. Surko, and Alan N. Unger, "Working Papers: State Failure Task Force Report," *Science Applications International Corporation* (November 1995): 1.

[134] Karl DeRouen and Shaun Goldfinch, "What Makes a State Stable and Peaceful? Good Governance, Legitimacy, and Legal-Rationality Matter Even More for Low-Income Countries," *Civil Wars* 14, no. 4 (2013): 515.

violence and terrorism".[135] In other words, stability hints at the steadiness of the government and its institutions and the possibility for both internal and external actors to rely on them. DeRouen and Goldfinch argued that good governance and good administrations are regarded as the most impactful variable for political stability, although many other variables – such as democratisation, legitimization and rule of law – have to be taken into account. [136]

1.5.3. Donor-Dependency

From the perspective of trying to operationalise local ownership, the stress on the civil society is far from irrelevant, even if it is nearly overlooked in practical terms. Mainstream SFA practice put the emphasis on official mechanisms of security provision, namely state and military actors, paradoxically neglecting the key set of non-state actors which are "the predominant local owner in terms of concrete […] delivery on the ground".[137] Furthermore, civil society may serve as a counterweight to the conventional governing bodies, which are deemed to be excessively reliant on external support and more likely to carry out corruption.[138] Widening the base of local ownership is a delicate task and donors may take the bait of exploiting civil society "as simply a conduit for the promotion of externally-generated agendas".[139] SFA's approach to civil society suffered criticism for being overly rigid and project-oriented, perpetuating its foreclosure from the security sector governance.[140] Reaching out to marginalised groups is just as crucial, as they are not only the most vulnerable but also the most alienated from mainstream security matters. This would foster a sense of inclusion and a grass-roots adhesion

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[135] Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay, and Massimo Mastruzzi, "The Worldwide Governance Indicators: Methodology and Analytical Issues," *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, no. 3 (2011): 4.
[136] DeRouen and Goldfinch, "What Makes a State," 515-16.
[137] Eric Scheye, "Unknotting Local Ownership Redux: Bringing Non-State/Local Justice Network Back In," in *Local Ownership and Security Sector Reform*, ed. Timothy Donais (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008), 64.
[138] Lee and Im, "The Impact of Official," 198-199.
[139] Donais, "Operationalising Local Ownership," 285.
[140] Riefqi Muna, "Local Ownership and the Experience of SSR in Indonesia," in *Local Ownership and Security Sector Reform*, ed. Timothy Donais (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008), 240.

to SFA, which in turn could serve as a deterrent to self-interested elites manipulating the SFA processes for their own benefit and challenge the notion that security matters are the sole preserve of military personnel and political *élites*.[141] Considering that within the SFA framework a people-centred approach hasn't gained momentum yet, it is more likely for recipient states to fall into the donor-dependency trap. Thus, it all comes down to a question: what leads donor states to provide assistance to recipient states? According to realists, SFA as a foreign policy instrument is driven by donors' self-interest in expanding their sphere of influence and broadening market's access.[142] From the neorealist perspective, states' first priority is security and SFA is nothing but a tool to achieve it.

Either way, donor-dependency is an urgent risk that hinders SFA to perform a successful outcome. The indicator that is broadly accepted as a criterion for donor-dependency is net Official Development Assistance (from now on, ODA) received. Indeed, the ratio of aid to central government expenses provides measures of the recipient country's dependency on external assistance.[143] However, ODA is also the global standard for measuring the flip side of the coin, that is donor efforts in supporting cooperation. It has set the yardstick for recording the volume and terms of the concessional resources provided, evaluating donor achievement against their aid pledges, and enabling recipient countries to hold donors to account.[144] Yet for all its values, reflecting "a compromise between political expediency and statistical reality",[145] it allows for flexibility.

Moreover, critics revealed high percentages of distortion which the thesis can't overlook. According to Action Aid International, ODA is likely to be "phantom aid".[146] In fact, in 2003 20% of aid funding was allocated to ineffective technical cooperation "whose inflated costs benefited primarily […] donor countries", while

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[141] Donais, "Operationalising Local Ownership," 286.
[142] Pierre Jacquet, "Revisiter l'Aide Publique au Développement," *Economie Internationale*, no. 108 (2006): 142.
[143] Lee and Im, "The Impact of Official," 201.
[144] William Hynes and Simon Scott, "The Evolution of Official Development Assistance: Achievement, Criticism and a Way Forward," *OECD Development Co-operation Working Papers*, no. 12 (2013): 1.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Action Aid International, *Real Aid: An Agenda for Making Aid Work* (London: Action Aid, 2005): 17.

14% of ODA was used to pay off foreign debts. [147] As per the organisation's data, ODA is frequently inflated due to high transaction costs and expenses associated with managing aid coordination.[148]

Another aspect the thesis has to take into account is that ODA was created with the initial aim of keeping track of flows directing to promoting economic development and welfare. In the post 9/11, the interdependent link between development, conflict prevention, security, and peace strengthened, and the definition of ODA was broadened to include expenditure in the fields of conflict and security.[149] Nevertheless, SFA encompasses activities that may not meet the criteria for ODA, remaining outside it. These primarily pertain to improving defence or intelligence systems, or more specifically to enhancing the fighting capacity of the military or intelligence-gathering.[150] Most of the other activities linked to SFA can be asked for and funded through ODA funds though.

Although being flawed, ODA is the only tool that allows an estimate of the donor-dependency's degree recipient states may have developed, hence the thesis will draw on this indicator without neglecting the margin of error it might bring along.

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[147] Gilles Carbonnier, "Official Development Assistance Once More Under Fire from Critics," *Revue internationale de politique de développement*, no. 1 (2010): 139.

[148] Action Aid International, *Real Aid*, 11.

[149] Hynes and Scott, "The Evolution," 11.

[150] OECD, *The OECD DAC Handbook on Security System Reform (SSR): Supporting Security and Justice* (Paris: OECD, 2007), 238.

CHAPTER 2: POWER DYNAMICS

The conceptual framework provided the basis for a better understanding of the context in which France (along with other external actors) and Mali (with its Sahelian host actors) interact, cooperate, and occasionally fight. Analysing the relations between these agents for answering to the research question implies engaging with the concept of power and relational power dynamics. Drawing on the perspective that power is a relational phenomenon that arises from interactions, this chapter will investigate how France and the Sahelian states (gathered together in the G5 Sahel organisation) exert autonomy, capacity, and influence on decision-making in their reciprocal relations. In other words, the section will explore how their power dynamics work.

First, a review of the rationales for France's military intervention in the region will be presented: it will be shown that the fragile state and terrorism discourses laid the legal groundwork for France's presence. Second, the chapter will showcase the establishment of the G5S-JF as a local response for a local problem. It will be brought out how, since the very first steps of the joint force, the power dynamics were unbalanced in favour of France. The unbalance will grow stronger as the chapter delves into the interplay of the actors within the three levels of warfare: strategic, operational, and tactical. The fourth paragraph will reveal that France and the host actors found themselves in an asymmetric interdependence, which didn't allow the G5S-JF's member states to develop the ownership over the security context. Finally, a detailed insight of the French COIN, emphasising its tendency to over-militarisation, will be pursued.

2.1. DISCURSIVE RATIONALES FOR EXTERNAL INTERVENTION

A wide range of the military interventions' literature emphasises the importance of discourse since, by shaping the (perceived) knowledge, it influences the decision-making. In fact, part of the literature suggests that the identification of

threats assigns responsibility to different actors. Moreover, discourses are likely to build dualistic identities presented through opposites, such as "good" and "evil". This establishes a normative binary division among actors, leading to a storyline that can validate and to some extent authorise specific policies and actions. The draft of identities through contrast holds significant political power because it legitimises some actions and actors and delegitimises others. In this section, the thesis expands on this literature and focuses on the military intervention's rationales through the lens of the discourses on terrorism and fragile states. Before turning to the analysis of the justifications for French intervention in the Sahel, and more specifically in Mali, it should be noted that France acts on the region in the triple role of leading member of the EU (operating in the region through military and crisis management missions, such as EUTM and EUCAP), permanent member of the Security Council of the UN (intervening in the Sahel through MINUSMA), and, ultimately, as a state actor itself. In other words, besides impacting on account of its colonial legacy, France also shapes EU and UN stances vis-à-vis the Sahelian securitization.

2.1.1.   Fragile State Discourse

The intervening side's discourse on the Sahel revolves around the fragility statehood. The «fragile state» category crossed the threshold of the international security jargon to identify those states where weak institutions and a merely formal exercise of sovereignty risk jeopardising the international security system.[151] Generally speaking, a fragile state fails to perform core roles, such as guaranteeing the supply of public services and basic needs. Thus, fragility refers to the failing structures and to circumstances where the social contract needs to be recovered because the state is unable or unwilling to fulfil its basic duties.[152]

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[151] Edoardo Baldaro and Irene Costantini, "Fragility and Resilience in the European Union's Security Strategy: Comparing Policy Paradigms," *Italians Political Science Review* 51, no. 3 (2021): 307.
[152] Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusion on an EU Response to Situations of Fragility* (Brussels: Council of European Union, 2007): 1.

According to the EU, the Sahel "faces a number of pressing challenges such as extreme poverty, frequent food crises, high population growth rates, institutional weaknesses, irregular migration and related crimes such as trafficking in human beings and migrant smuggling".[153] Pointing to Mali, the UN website about the stabilisation mission MINUSMA states that the country has been dealing with a profound crisis that "stems from long-standing structural conditions such as weak state institutions".[154] The stress on these plagues brings out the urgency of actions and the alleged absence of structure to face the security threats suggests the need of assistance in overcoming such challenges. This has been explicitly upheld by the EU, as it pointed out the importance of regional and international coordination "to ensure the effectiveness of international efforts in support to local and regional endeavours". [155]

The G5S member states, for their part, have called for external support. This came to light when the late president of Chad Idriss Déby in 2016 stated that the Sahelian context is such that it "deserves a deep assessment of the international community"[156] and when the late Malian president Dioncounda Traoré paid tribute to the French Opération Serval for "responding positively and without delay to […] the request for military assistance".[157] As noticed by de Oliveira and Verhoeven, adhering to the intervening side's discourse advocating for the intervention in the region has become a strategy for political leaders to enhance their power by gaining military and financial support.[158]

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[153] European External Action Services, *Factsheet: EU Relations with Sahel Countries – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger* (Brussel, 2016): 1.

[154] "MINUSMA", United Nations Peacekeeping, accessed May 29, 2024.

[155] European Council, *Council conclusions on Implementation of the EU Strategy and Development in the Sahel* (Brussels: European Council, 2014): 3.

[156] Idriss Déby, "Déclaration de son Excellence Idriss Deby Itno, Président de la République du Tchad, Chef de l'État, Président en exercice de l'Union Africaine," *71st session of the UN General Assembly*, 20 (2016): 3.

[157] Dioncounda Traoré, "Discours de M. Dioncounda Traoré, Président de la République du Mali, et du Président de la République Française," *Déclaration d'Élysée Présidence de la République* (2013): 2.

[158] De Oliveira and Verhoeven, "Taming Intervention," 8.

Therefore, besides validating the Sahelian need of assistance, the fragility rationale legitimises external intervention by highlighting the "potential spill-over effects outside the region" if the threats are left unaddressed.[159]

2.1.2. Discourse on Terrorism and Organised Crime

The terrorism threat represents the second rationale legitimising external – and more precisely for the purpose of the thesis, French – intervention in the Sahel. Indeed, the War on Terror has seized the category of fragile state by inextricably linking it to the terrorist phenomenon.[160] This is based on the assumption that places characterised by the government inability to make a grip on the rural areas are more likely to become terrorist sanctuaries.[161]

In 2012, the UN emphasised its deep apprehension about "the increasing entrenchment of terrorist elements [...] and its consequences for the countries of the Sahel and beyond".[162] One year later, with the terrorist and insurgent menace at Mali central government's heels, the foreign minister of France raised concerns about the downfall of the state into the terrorist's hands.[163] Not even the EU refrained from giving voice to its worries because of "the continued extension of terrorist attacks in the Sahel region".[164]

Sahelian states have also embraced this discourse. Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso are especially vulnerable to attacks from al Qaeda and Islamic State-related organisations. As a result, countries in the Sahel region are reflecting the international concerns about terrorism as a major danger.

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[159] European Council, "Council Conclusions on the Sahel Region Action Plan 2015-2020," (Brussels: European Council, 2015): 4.

[160] Edoardo Baldaro and Luca Raineri, *Jihad in Africa. Terrorismo e Controterrorismo nel Sahel* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2022): 130

[161] Ibid., 131.

[162] UN Security Council, *Resolution 2071* (October 2012): 1.

[163] Benedikt Erforth, "Multilateralism as a Tool: Exploring French Military Cooperation in the Sahel," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 4 (2020): 565.

[164] European Council, "African Union-European Union Relation: Joint Consultative Meeting on Peace and Security," (Brussels: European Council, 2018): 3.

Moreover, the UN revealed the transnational dimension of terrorism, meaning a phenomenon that not only operates within and across multiple countries but has also expanded beyond its original borders, putting other regions at risk.[165] Labelling terrorism as a transnational threat implies that the only fruitful answer is a "sustained and comprehensive approach involving the active participation and collaboration of all states, and regional and international organisations".[166] The Sahel, being depicted as the threat *par excellence* to external actors and surrounding areas, has become to the eyes of the West the «African front» of the Global War on Terror as well as the «Southern front» of Europe.[167] This set up another justification for the external engagement in the region. In addition, over the years in the western debates the tendency to link the discourse on terrorism with organised crime and irregular migration have been making inroads. The idea of the crime-terror nexus has been pursued also by the host side, even though it is "largely rhetorical and is supported by only tenuous evidence".[168] By echoing the superpowers' concerns and considering the terrorist threats as common, the G5 member states not only provided the intervening powers with another justification to engage in the region, but they also highlighted the indispensability and urgence of the intervention.

2.2. POWER DYNAMICS IN THE G5S-EXTERNAL ACTORS' RELATION

The section on the discursive knowledge creation showed how insecurity is portrayed through the discourses on fragile states and terrorism, leading to general agreement on the need for external intervention in the Sahel. In the light of these

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[165] UN Security Council, *Resolution 2227* (June 2015): 3.
[166] UN Security Council, *Resolution 2100* (April 2013): 1.
[167] See: Maria Ryan, "War in Countries We Are Not at War With: The War on Terror on the Periphery from Bush to Obama," *International Politics*, no. 48 (2011): 370-373; Dalia Ghanem, Raquel Barras Tejudo, Giovanni Faleg, and Yahia H. Zoubir, *The Sahel: Europe's African Borders* (Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2018): 37.
[168] Marie Sandnes, "The Relationship between the G5 Sahel Joint Force and External Actors: A discursive Interpretation," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 57, no. 1 (2022): 8.

rationales, this section will focus on how the conceptualization of the security threat impacts power dynamics that have occurred among different actors. First, the thesis will dwell on how the discursive notion of providing training to the G5 militaries reinforces the narrative of external actors as competent, while suggesting that the host actors lack capacity. It will be discussed that the external narrative holds national actors accountable for addressing the security situation, while also emphasising the importance of external support. A growing focus on the transnational nature of security challenges corresponded to a call for cooperation among the sub-region. Second, there follows a detailed description of the subregional military response, namely the G5S Joint Force, and its first interplays with the actors that were already operating in the Sahelian security arena. Finally, while presenting the funding system, it will be addressed the topic of donor-dependency. This goes hand in hand with the risk that, being excessively trained and mentored, the G5S member states may develop a dependency on military coalition headed by external actors.

2.2.1.   Working Towards a Comprehensive Solution

The multi-dimensional and steadily worsening crisis in the Sahel has alarmed the international community which have joined forces to collectively outline strategies to deal with the growing threat that is feared to spill over outside the region.

The recent push for the "Africanization" of conflict management, meaning the strive of African states to assume their own responsibility for the securitization of the region, has surprised and attracted the attention of extra-African powers.[169] Nevertheless, given the restricted operational effectiveness in carrying out large-scale and long-term actions, the international community has not been as confident in its African partners' capabilities to tackle the terrorist menace. This scepticism

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[169] Karolina Gasinska and Elias Bohman, *The Joint Force of the Group of Five: A Review of Multiple Challenges* (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2007): 9.

is enclosed in the core aims of the several operations working on the African ground. For instance, the very existence of the EUTM Mali (or in full, European Union Training Mission) rested on giving guidance and training to the *forces armées Maliennes* (FAMa) to address their operational needs by providing expertise and advice, specifically in areas such as command and control, logistics, and human resources.[170] Similarly, in 2015 the UN highlighted Barkhane's effort to "support G5 member states to increase regional counter-terrorism cooperation".[171] The overhauling of the security sector is depicted as essential for achieving stability and building peace.[172]

Therefore, the solution to the downward insecurity spiral lies in the training of G5S national armies and not in national armies *per se*.[173] This logic implies that the responsibility falls to external actors, which are regarded as the security providers, being held responsible for the military training and assistance. The focus on strengthening capabilities is in line with the latest Western inclination towards military capacity building rather than direct combat operations. External actors – including and especially France – have limited interest in direct military intervention and the costs that come with it. Instead, they prioritise a smaller footprint aiming at enhancing the military and security capabilities of the host partners, usually wobbly state authorities.[174] Security sector assistance, being carried out through training, advising, and equipping, is perceived as a cost-effective and low-risk approach that has gained traction due to concerns about non-state phenomena that policy-makers frame as transnational risks. Initially, the G5S's member states, for their part, endorsed external actors' engagement and stimulated the international community to mobilise for support the local political *élites* would benefit from.

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[170] European Action Service, "Factsheet: EU Relations," 2.
[171] UN Security Council, *Resolution 2227* (June 2015): 3.
[172] Denis M. Tull, "The European Union Training Mission and the Struggle for a New Model Army in Mali," *IRSEM* 11, NO. 89 (2020): 2.
[173] Sandnes, "The Relationship between," 9.
[174] Moda Dieng, Philip Onguny, and Amadou Ghouenen Mfondi, "Leadership Without Membership: France and the G5 Sahel Joint Force," *African Journal of Terrorism and Insurgency Research* 1, no. 2 (2020): 482-83; Tull, "The European Union Training," 3-4; Sandnes, "The Relationship between," 8-9.

Hence, the pattern suggesting that the key for the securitization of the Sahel lies in training the G5 militaries has crystalized the narrative of external actors as competent and skilled, while portraying the host actors as lacking in capacity. In fact, although the SFA's ultimate purpose is to strengthen national armies, this discourse also "empowers external actors by providing them with influence over national militaries".[175] At the same time, however, the transnational nature of the threat referred to above requires a close cooperation between subregional and global levels. This not only provides a justification for the presence of external actors in the Sahel, but also serves as a gimmick through which G5 member states keep taking advantage of outside actors' engagement.

In 2012, while expressing serious concerns about the deteriorating insecurity context and its negative implications, the UN called for the mobilisation of the "Sahel and Maghreb States to enhance interregional cooperation and coordination in order to take all necessary measures to develop strategies to combat" the common threat.[176] Following this, in 2014 Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger established the G5 Sahel organisation, an institutional framework complying with the UN's bid for regional coordination. The core of this initiative expanded upon the areas of development, security, and governance; indeed, its purposes were to ensure development and security conditions, offer a strategic intervention framework, enhance democracy and good governance within the framework of mutually beneficial regional and international cooperation, and advocate for inclusive and sustainable regional growth.[177] The G5S was a clear sign that the states of the region were responding promptly to the guidelines drawn up by the international community, as the latter started to put the stress on the transnational character of the threat. The better framed and redefined subregional level roughed out by the G5S provided external actors with a reliable partner in the security efforts. In fact, parallel to this, Opération Barkhane, MINUSMA, and

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[175] Sandnes, "The Relationship between," 10.
[176] UN Security Council, *Resolution 2056* (July 2012): 5.
[177] G5 Sahel, *Convention Portant Création du G5 Sahel (2014):* art. 4.

the EUTM were already operating in the Sahel region under the aegis of France, the UN, and the EU, respectively.[178]

However, despite welcoming the establishment of the G5S, the UN put more pressure on the host actors as it claimed that the responsibility in addressing the challenges posed by the terrorist threat would fall on the Sahelian states.[179] If power is understood as a relational phenomenon exerting persuasion and influence, the setting-up of the G5S Joint Force was a response to external actors advocating for more collaboration on security matters. Nevertheless, the G5 member states have also performed agency by aligning their discourse with intervening actors', thereby wielding power within the process.[180]

2.2.2. The G5S Joint Force in the Security Arena

In 2015, the G5S extended the collaboration to enable military cross-border cooperation among the member states. Initially, these joint actions were conducted *ad hoc*, but were made official in 2017 with the establishment of the G5S-JF. Endorsed by the African Union (AU) and recognized by the UN, the G5S's armed wing was specifically mandated to "combat terrorism, transnational organised crime, drug trafficking, and human trafficking" in order to create a safe environment and restore security in compliance with international law.[181] Several researchers pinpointed that the mandate aspired to bridge the gap between the mandates of MINUSMA and Opération Barkhane.[182] The JF mandate goes beyond Opération Barkhane by addressing both terrorism and organised crime, whereas

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[178] The engagement of external actors in the region is not limited to Opération Barkhane, MINUSMA, and the EUTM. However, being considered as a direct (Barkhane) and indirect (MINUSMA and the EUTM) indicators of France involvement in the Sahel, only these latter are relevant for the thesis' purpose.

[179] UN Security Council, *Resolution 2295* (June 2016): 3.

[180] Sandnes, "The Relationship between," 11.

[181] AU Peace and Security Council. *679 Meeting PSC/PR/COMM(DCLXXIX)* (April 2017): 3.

[182] See: Jennifer G. Cooke, Boris Toucas, and Katrin Heger, "Understanding the G5 Sahel Joint Force: Fighting Terror, Building Regional Security?" *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, no. 15 (2017); Micheal Shurkin, "What is the Sahel G5 Force and Why should the US Support it?" *RAND*, November 6, 2017; Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, "A Fragile Military Response: International Support of the G5 Sahel Joint Force," *Danish Institute for International Studie*, November 2018.

the mandate of the French operation only authorised activities to counter terrorist groups. On the other hand, while the mandate of MINUSMA is restricted to Mali, the G5S Joint Force expanded the range of action to the G5S member states' territoriality.[183] In any event, the establishment of the G5S-JF and the content of its mandate provide further evidence that the G5 member states were willing to respond to the external actors' discourse and assume the responsibility for local and global threats.

Coordination within the Joint Force was fostered by a structure aiming to assure greater stability: the G5S-JF was politically overseen by the Chairman of the G5S, while its strategic control was maintained by the Defence and Security Committee. The Committee, convening biannually, consisted of member states' Defence Ministers.[184] The command architecture took the shape of a pyramid structure capable of coordinating transnational cooperation on different levels.

Addressing the transnationality of the threat, the G5S-JF separates the Sahel into three sectors: (1) Sector West on the border between Mauritania and Mali; (2) Sector Central on the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger – the Liptako-Gourma zone; and (3) Sector East on the border between Chad and Niger. Originally, the G5S-JF included a total of 5,000 military and civil personnel. Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania deployed one battalion each, while Niger and Mali sent out two battalions each. Each battalion will comprise 650 soldiers. The different sectors were provided with their own tactical command post – Sector West headquarter in Nema (Mauritania), Sector Centre in Niamey (Niger), and Sector East in N'Djamena (Chad) – while a mail headquarter had been set up in Bamako, Mali. The battalions were instructed to operate on border areas within their respective states but were given permission to cross each other's borders by up to 50 km (extended to 100 km in 2020), if needed. Figure no. 3 illustrates the operational division of the three sectors with orange-marked borderlines. In 2021,

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[183] Gasinska and Bohman, "The Joint Force of," 16.
[184] G5 Sahel, R*èglement Portant sur: La Mission, la Composition et le Fonctionnement du Comité de Défense et de Sécurité des États membres du G5 Sahel,* 2015: 4.

Chad deployed its second battalion which was positioned in Sector Central because of rising violence. The addition of the eight battalion marked a significant milestone as it was the first cross-sectoral battalion to be sent outside its own state.[185] The emphasis on border areas aligns with the external actors' discourse on transnational threats but at the same time reveals the geographical constraints of the military response prepared by the Sahelian states, as violent extremist groups operate within the states.

Figure 3: Operational division of the three sectors.

Source: Marie Sandnes, "Understanding Power Dynamics between Intervening and Host Military Forces: The Case of the G5 Sahel Joint Force and External Actors in the Sahel." PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2023.

When the G5S-JF was founded, it joined a thriving theatre flourishing with a diverse range of actors and was integrated into the framework. MINUSMA provided logistical support, the EUTM was responsible for training national militaries in a pre-deployment capacity, and Barkhane was in charge of training and mentoring troops during joint operations in the field.

Since its establishment in 2013, the EUTM Mali had the purpose of strengthening the military capabilities of the FAMa. In 2018 it broadened its mandate to provide support to the "development of the military capabilities of the G5S-JF".[186] In other words, this meant offering assistance and support at the joint force's headquarters

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[185] Sandnes, "Understanding Power," 43-44.
[186] EUTM Mali, *Press Kit* (2019): 9.

on organisational, structural, and planning matters, along with conducting pre-deployment training for the upcoming headquarters personnel. In 2020, the EUTM's scope was broadened to encompass military training for the G5S-JF troops as well.[187] The EUTM adopted a regional strategy to extend its operations beyond Mali's boundaries up till including under its umbrella also Burkina Faso.

Following the mimics of the EUTM-JF ties, old dynamics between the French Opération and the G5S member states' militaries have been redefined. In fact, the legality of Barkhane's presence finds its pillars in bilateral agreements France had with the G5S member state because of its colonial legacy.[188] Established in 2014 from the ashes of the applauded Opération Serval, Barkhane had a dual mandate. On the one hand, it has been tasked with operating as an independent proactive COIN force. On the other, it was mandated to train and mentor the national armies of Mali, Niger, and Chad, besides operating jointly with them. From 2017, it broadened its mandate to include supporting the G5S-JF through joint operations and SFA.[189] Further, in January 2020, at the G5 Summit in Pau, the G5S-JF and Barkhane agreed to set up a shared command with a joint headquarters and a joint intelligence unit in Niamey to supervise the joint operations. It goes without saying that the shared command has perpetuated the narrative of France as capable and indispensable for the fragile and in need of assistance Sahelian states.

An additional relevant aspect of the tricky host-external actors' relationship may come to the light if the JF is understood as a regional security complex (RSC),[190] meaning – following the Copenhagen School – "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities

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[187] European Council, "EUTM Mali: Council Extends Training Mission with Broadened Mandate and Increased Budget," European Council Press Release, accessed May 30, 2024.

[188] When granting independence, France made its African colonies sign bilateral defence and military cooperation treaties, mostly covering military cooperation in training and peacekeeping. Such agreements established new forms of political and military ties with France, which was holding tenuously the privileges and control it had over the former colonies due to asymmetric relations. See Cristopher Griffin, "Operation Barkhane and Boko Haram: French Counterterrorism and Military Cooperation in the Sahel," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016): 900; François Heisbourg, "A Surprising Little War: First Lessons of Mali," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 55, no. 2 (2013): 7.

[189] Dieng, "The Multi-National Joint," 490.

[190] See Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Power*, 3.

cannot realistically be considered apart from one another".[191] Extra-regional powers play an important role because regional security is a component of the wider international security and, as such, without strong cooperation any security effort would be in vain.

In the view of the above, it is easier to understand how the patterns centring around the fragile states and terrorism discourses that have been introduced in the previous sections find correspondence in the power dynamics coming up in the G5S-JF's partnership with Opération Barkhane, the EUTM, and MINUSMA. The upcoming section will address the implications of these pre-set dynamics on the interaction between external actors and the G5S-JF.

2.2.3.   The G5S-JF's Dynamics with External Actors

This paragraph discusses obstacles related to the independent operationalization of the G5S-JF, and securing finances is the most pressing issue the initiative has to face. Since the Joint Force is not UN-funded, it is the responsibility of the member states, which are among the poorest and most aid-dependent in the world, to procure the financial resources to fulfil the mandate.[192] Within the Security Council, difficult negotiations occurred on whether to use UN-assessed contributions to fund the JF's budget.[193] At last, the resolution stated that it was up to the G5S countries "to provide [the Force with] the adequate resources", while urging "bilateral and multilateral partners to [...] ensure coordination of donor assistance efforts".[194] Parallel to this, the G5 member states and the African Union (AU) have reiterated the plea for assistance from external actors as they pushed "the international community to provide [...] financial and logistical assistance [and] equipment" to guarantee the full operationalization of the Force.[195]

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[191] Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1991): 190.
[192] Dieng, "The Multi-National Joint," 498.
[193] Security Council, "October 2017 Monthly Forecast," Security Council Report, accessed April 24, 2024.
[194] UN Security Council, *Resolution 2359* (June 2017): 3
[195] AU Peace and Security Council, "679 Meeting," 4.

In response, France has taken the lead in rallying funding for the G5S-JF and held donor conferences in 2017 and 2018 that raised €414 million for training and equipment.[196] In addition, the member states contributed about €10 million each and the US allocated €100 million in bilateral assistance to the G5S countries.[197] These figures highlight yet again how external actors were willing to take the wheels of the security context in the Sahel by channelling funds. Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out the G5S member states' ability to leverage the international community "through the deployment of ideological tropes" to secure external investments they would benefit from, at least in material terms.[198] Thus, mention must be made of the donation system.

Most of the donations and resources are allocated bilaterally to the G5 member states, rather than the G5 organisation as a whole.[199] This implies that the Sahelian countries are accountable for transferring any donations designated for the Joint Force to its battalions. Such a system removes responsibility from both the G5S organisation and the G5S-JF, which were designated to manage the security situation in the Sahel. Given the lack of an overarching G5S institutional framework for channelling and disbursing donor contributions, there is a higher likelihood of corruption and potential competition for resources among the G5S member states.[200] Sandnes claimed that this mechanism allowed the Sahelian countries to perform agency by handling their dependency on external funds.[201]

Within the interplay between the JF and external actors, dependency is not limited to financial resources, but it also comes as reliance on military cooperation. In the wake of this, Gorman and Chauzal discussed the delicate balance between local ownership and the dependency on external partners' expertise.[202] This related to

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[196] France Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, *G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Sahel Alliance* (February 2019).
[197] Fergus Kelly, "US Counter-Terrorism Assistance to the G5 Sahel Member States Almost Double to 11 Million Dollars," *The Defense Post*, November 5, 2018.
[198] De Oliveira and Verhoeven, "Taming Intervention," 12.
[199] International Crisis Group, *Finding the Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force* (2017).
[200] Gasinska and Bohman, "The Joint Force of," 25.
[201] Sandnes, "The Relationship between," 14.
[202] Zoë Gorman and Grégory Chauzal, "Establishing a Regional Security Architecture in the Sahel" *SIPRI Commentary*, June 25, 2018.

the EUTM providing advice, assistance, and training to the G5S-JF troops, as well as Barkhane's mentoring and joint operations with them. Although criticism has been directed towards the effectiveness of the EUTM, questioning its impact due to diverging military traditions, the reliance on external actors for military training raises concerns about the sub-regional ownership of the G5S-JF. While training may enhance the G5 states' military capacity – albeit on the premises of external militaries since the recipients might not be familiar with the offered equipment, it also underscores power dynamics between external trainers and the G5S-JF. Indeed, capacity-building surely is beneficial for strengthening both the G5S-JF and the state structures of its member countries but "it is the external actors who are placed in a position of power in their relationship with the G5S-JF".[203]

The shared command structure between Barkhane and the G5S-JF further highlights the complex relationships and power dynamics at play within the joint force and external actors. This close cooperation, through joint operations and intelligence sharing, has improved the skills and discipline of the JF's battalions. While improving the G5S-JF's efficiency is crucial for regional leverage and external support, it may also lead to decreasing reliance on external support and developing an autonomous organisation. However, this shared command could potentially increase French influence over operations, limiting the G5S-JF's autonomy and regional ownership. The joint force's dependency on external actors for financial support, training, and resources challenges its identity as a sub-regional and home-grown initiative.[204]

2.3. THE THREE-LEVEL POWER DYNAMICS BETWEEN THE G5S-JF AND FRANCE

So far, the thesis showed how discursive conceptualizations of threats have spurred the sub-regional military response and opened the way for the establishment of the

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[203] Sandnes, "The Relationship between," 14.
[204] Ibid., 15-16.

G5S-JF. The discourse has also justified external involvement in combating terrorism and their influence over the Joint Force due to their allegedly superior strength and capacity. Moreover, by drawing on a relational approach and engaging with the theoretical aspects of extraversion, the analysis demonstrated that the G5 member states have mimicked these discourses to attract international attention and support, which they benefited from. Indeed, the Sahelian countries have performed agency by managing to some extent external actors' intervention which has been manifested through the logic of SFA, meaning military training and resources distribution. These findings would suggest that both the intervening and host sides took advantage – though in varying degrees – from their relational power dynamics. In this section, the analysis will focus on how the above-addressed G5S-JF'S dependency on external actors took shape within the interactions between the JF's chain of command and external partners on the three levels of warfare.

2.3.1. Efficiency in Military Coalitions

Undertaking "joint operations" holds a special prestige in the Western military actions. Suffice it to consider France embarking on the security joint-venture (tapping into a purely economic term) in the Sahel. Joint operations and/or military coalitions are efficient when they manage to achieve the highest level of productivity through effective organisation and competence, therefore the responsibility falls on the chain of command.[205] Sandnes pinpointed three factors that may influence joint operation's efficiency: the coherency of its objective, the clarity of its communication flows, and the dual chain of command for personnel.[206]

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[205] Anthony Rice, "Command and Control: The Essence of Coalition Warfare," *Parameters* 27, no. 1 (1997): 2.
[206] Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 480.

First, a major challenge in the efficiency of a coalition's chain of command is the different objectives of the participating states, which stems from conflicting geopolitical interests. This makes it difficult to agree on a common objective and exhibit cohesion as a unit. Without a common political purpose, joint operations and/or coalitions struggle to identify threats and organise the internal structure. Differing aims complicate the process of agreeing on joint political and military objectives at the strategic level, impacting efficiency at operational and tactical levels.

Second, efficient military coalitions rely on effective information flow, communication channels, precise distribution of responsibility, and responsive authorities. Horizontal and vertical trust is essential for effective command, requiring strong information and communication flows. Collaborative decisions contribute to a responsive chain of command, preventing decision-making bottlenecks. This combination of top-down and bottom-up communication enables efficient command, allowing troops to respond rapidly and effectively to security situations. Ultimately, coalition efficiency directly impacts military effectiveness on the ground, highlighting the importance of clear communication and shared understanding in achieving successful military outcomes.

Third, military personnel in a coalition must obey both the coalition's chain of command and their own state's Ministry of Defence. This creates a unique hybrid principal-agent relationship.[207] The state promotes and selects military leaders for the coalition and sets their limitations and authority. Conflicting commands from the coalition can lead to indecisiveness and reduced effectiveness on the ground. Understanding a partner's authority and legitimacy within the command structure is crucial for successful operations.

The above-mentioned elements' impact on the efficiency could be mitigated by one powerful member state playing a decisive role in the coalition's decision-

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[207] Kathleen J. McInnis, "Lessons in Coalition Warfare: Past, Present and Implications for the Future" *International Politics Review* 1, no. 2 (2013): 85.

making.[208] This argument is in line with the hegemonic theory, which argues that where one actor holds power over other actors by dominating resources and capabilities in a system, it creates dependency and ultimately stability through asymmetry of power. In coalitions lacking a clear leading state, such as the G5S-JF, challenges like divergent objectives and unclear command may be more prominent compared to those with a dominant state. Hegemonic theory underscores the importance of power dynamics in relationships and their impact on stability in the international system.[209] To test whether the hegemonic theory applies to the G5S-JF's chain of command and its interplay with France and other external actors, in the next section the thesis will browse their power dynamics within the three levels of warfare: the strategic level, the operational level, and the tactical level.

2.3.2. Dynamics at the Strategic Level

The strategic level of the Joint Force is made up of a political branch, which is carried out by the G5 Sahel member states' presidents, and a military branch, which the defence and security committee leads. The political strategic level is centred on delineating and bolstering policies and pertains directly to the overall result of the conflict. As a complement, the military strategy refers to coordinating military operations and battles to use power effectively.

The headquarters of the G5S organisation is based in Nouakchott, Mauritania. There, the Conference of the Heads of State is appointed to determine the orientations and the strategic options, while the Permanent Secretariat, a council of ministers and the heads of state, oversees strategic interfaces and handles logistics and finances. However, the cornerstone of the military strategic level is embodied by the Defence and Security Committee, which coordinates military

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[208] Daniel Patrick Marston, "Operation TELIC VIII to XI: Difficulties of Twenty-First-Century Command," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2021): 87.
[209] Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 490.

cooperation and dialogues among the G5 member states' chiefs of staff and officials.

The internal dynamics at the strategic level seem to give way to disagreement issues. Within the Joint Force, a crucial obstacle is aligning member states' interests and setting strategic goals. Despite sharing the burden of coping with a common regional threat, agreement is hindered as member states prioritise responding to threats within their own borders. The absence of a clear leader or unity among G5 member states in decision-making affects the efficiency of the coalition's chain of command and makes it susceptible to external influences.[210] External actors, for their part, exacerbate the tensions since reaching an agreement at the strategic level is made more critical by their significant involvement. Echoing the G5S member states' public opinion, there is a strong suspicion that the strategy of the military response is affected by external actors' pressure.[211] France defining the enemy impacts strategic tasks that follow closely behind the identification of the threat, such as operational planning, goals-setting, and resource allocation.[212]

France's role in the G5S-JF's strategic level is deeply rooted, likely stemming from its colonial history in the region. The strong relations between France and Sahelian states are noted, with claims that France retains significant control over the G5 Sahel. Concerns exist about French hegemony within the G5S-JF, with some observers suggesting that French involvement may be too dominant.[213] Reports suggest that decision-making in the G5S-JF might be influenced by France, with meetings often concluding with decisions made behind closed doors between G5S and French officials.[214] As mentioned previously, such influence France exerts in

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[210] Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 482-483.
[211] Yvan Guichaoua, "The Bitter Harvest of French Intervention in the Sahel," *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (July 2020): 897.
[212] Dieng, Onguny, and Mfondi, "Leadership Without Membership," 28-29; Martin Welz, "Institutional Choice, Risk, and Control: The G5 Sahel and Conflict Management in the Sahel," *International Peacekeeping* 29, no. 2 (2022): 248.
[213] Gasinska and Bohman, "The Joint Force of," 42; Dieng, "The Multi-National Joint," 488.
[214] Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 483.

the relationship, according to hegemonic theory, may enhance the efficiency of the G5S-JF.

Moreover, distributing resources like weapons and finances falls among the tasks the strategic level is in command of. However, the G5S-JF's dependency on external financial support entails external actors' influence over this assignment. Yet, since resources were provided bilaterally, as explained in point 3 of the previous paragraph, the funds' allocation slipped from the G5S-JF's strategic level and was "found outside the coalition structure".[215] This system's anomaly resulted in the Joint Force's lack of ownership over decision-making. Indeed, the primary consequence of a supply-driven and foreign-owned security sector is the lack of a strategic framework defined by JF's chain of command.[216]

Heretofore, it has been highlighted that France, as well as other external actors, seems to play a hegemonic role in the relationship with the Joint Force. This is due to the lack of a clear leader within the strategic level of the G5S-JF and the resulting vacancy. Additionally, France has gained influence because of a loophole in the resource system which, by depriving the JF as a whole of any responsibility concerning the funding' allocation, jeopardises its ownership.

2.3.3.   Dynamics at the Operational Level

The primary purpose of the operational level is to convert in operational terms the strategic level's objectives and oversee the coordination, planning, and control of the campaigns. In Allen and Cunningham's words, the operational level "involves the formation and use of a conceptual and contextual framework as the foundation for campaign planning, joint operations order development, and subsequent execution of the campaign".[217] The Joint Force's headquarters is based in Bamako,

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[215] Ibid., 484.

[216] Denis M. Tull, "Rebuilding Mali's Army: The Dissonant Relationship between Mali and its International Partners," *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2019): 414; Tull, "The European Union Training," 14.

[217] Charles D. Allen and Grenn K. Cunningham, "System Thinking in Campaign Designs," in *The U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Issues*, ed. Bartholomees J. Boone (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2010), 258.

Mali, and it is there that the operational level is carried out. Moreover, each sector has its headquarters which mostly engages in tactical planning, though performing some limited operational tasks.

The G5 Sahel Joint Force faces harsh challenges in coordinating and planning operations owing to the centralised power of the force commander, which hinders delegation of responsibility and slows down decision-making processes.[218] Indeed, at the operational level, the G5S-JF force commander's approval is required for all decisions, emphasising his crucial role.[219] The person holding this office must be constantly available to address the ever-changing threats in order for the battalions to operate effectively. The communication and chain of command within the Task Force have been affected by this structure, leading to inefficiencies. Such a structure might imply that the force commander of the Joint Force could take on a leading role in the coalition which, drawing on the hegemonic theory, could enhance the force's efficiency. Nonetheless, it rests more on the commander's personal skills than on the structural system itself.

The above is fully reflected in the improvement that has occurred in the third mandate, when the force commander delegated more responsibility and ensured better-equipped staff officers to deal with such responsibility. Furthermore, the efficiency of the operational level's centralised structure is compounded by the G5 member states' reluctance to send their best personnel abroad.[220] Overall, while the centralization of power remains a risk factor for inefficiency, the operational level of the G5S-JF highlights the importance of the delegation of responsibilities. External actors, on their part, are heavily involved at the operational level of the G5 Sahel Joint Force (G5S-JF). The European Union Training Mission has a permanent delegation at the G5S-JF headquarters in Bamako and provides pre-deployment training for personnel.[221] Opération Barkhane also has three to four

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[218] Gasinska and Bohman, "The Joint Force of," 41.
[219] Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 484.
[220] Ibid., 485.
[221] European Council, "EUTM Mali."

personnel at the headquarters.[222] While the EUTM personnel are cut out from operational planning, they offer theoretical training on planning operations, manoeuvring one of the key tasks of the operational level. The EUTM presence enhances efficiency and operationalization but raises questions about the sustainability of this arrangement since it does not facilitate the handover of administrative responsibility to the G5S-JF, suggesting that their presence is essential for the operational level to function effectively.[223]

In 2020, the G5S-JF embarked on a shared command structure with Barkhane, consisting of 12 senior officers from each.[224] Headquartered in Niamey, Niger, they plan joint operations at the operational level, sometimes involving strategic planning. This collaboration has increased the G5S-JF's effectiveness, improving the chain of command and combat against violent extremist groups in the central sector. French military assistance has enhanced the joint force's military efficiency, aiming to make them more autonomous but ultimately leading to dependency.[225] Critics argue that France is using the shared command to control the G5S-JF and other European actors are less involved due to France's assurance of operational effectiveness.[226] Overall, the collaboration has brought positive results in combat operations, but there are concerns about the level of autonomy and control within the Joint Force under French influence.

Another sphere France manifests its significant degree of leadership over the Joint Force at the operational level is the joint intelligence cell, a feature of the shared command. Barkhane provides the majority of electronic intelligence, such as phone tapping and drone usage, while the G5S-JF intelligence cell couldn't boast the same prowess. Indeed, the Joint Force encounters specific difficulties in collecting intelligence and pinpointing terrorists.[227] Barkhane decides what

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[222] Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 485.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Fergus Kelly, "Sahel Coalition: GR Sahel and France Agree New Joint Command, Will Prioritize Fight Against Islamic State," *The Defense Post*, January 14, 2020.
[225] Dieng, Onguny, and Mfondi, "Leadership Without Membership," 35; Sandnes, "The Relationship between," 15.
[226] Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 486.
[227] Gasinska and Bohman, "The Joint Force of," 39.

information to share with G5 Sahel partners, indicating their dominance in intelligence gathering. This, once again, shows that the JF got to improve its efficiency thanks to external actors, but it also highlights France's leadership over the Joint Force at the operational level. However, there is no substantial evidence indicating that external actors are handing over their expertise and decision-making power to the G5S-JF. This poses a dilemma as the Joint Force has shown increased effectiveness under the French leadership, although it heavily depends on Barkhane for this efficiency, leading to concerns about its long-term sustainability.

2.3.4. Dynamics at the Tactical Level

The various campaign's operations are made up of manoeuvres, engagements, and battles. From this perspective, the tactical level translates potential combat power into success in battles through thoughtful decisions and actions and leading units. Tactics deal in the details of prosecuting engagements and are extremely sensitive to the changing environment of the battlefield. Thus, the tactical level of warfare refers to the means to achieve goals set at the operational – and more broadly, strategic –level. Within the JF, this level is implemented by battalions in the battlefield, as well as the headquarters of the three sectors, with each sector headquarters housing its own tactical operations.

The internal dynamic of the G5S-JF at the tactical level is complex and misleading, with unreliable and flexible numbers of soldiers in each battalion. As a corollary of the lack of overview over the force's soldiers owing to countries' shifting soldier pledges, standardisation in training among the troops from different states seems to be weak.[228] This results in varying skill levels within the G5S-JF's battalions, leading to unpredictable delegation of responsibility and decision-making on the ground. The diversity in military traditions and training among the G5S member

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[228] Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 487.

states makes it challenging to establish a unified and effective force within the G5S-JF, hindering its operational effectiveness.[229]

What contributes to thwarting the troops' unity at the tactical level is the "hybrid principal-agent relationship" between the G5 chain of command and national chain of command.[230] Troops tend to be more loyal to their national chain of command, especially when stationed in their home-state.[231] One exception is the Chadian battalion in Sector Central which, being stationed outside its state, may have a different dynamic. Varying levels of training, capacity, and command loyalty among G5 troops pose challenges for consistency and efficiency in operations.

With regards to decision-making process, troops may be bewildered due to a lack of commanding and reporting within this level, indicating communication issues or lack of understanding of channels.[232] Indeed, the insufficient higher-ranking personnel deployed fails to grant troops proper disciplinary guidance. Such military culture seems to promote individualism rather than unity, hampering military effectiveness. Nevertheless, coordination and effectiveness of operations improve when external actors tap into by virtue of the clear leadership they offer. In 2020, the EUTM was tasked with providing military support to the G5 Sahel Joint Force and national armed forces in the G5 Sahel countries through training and mentoring. The EUTM's training courses are determined in consultation with Barkhane, which is considered to have a better understanding of needs due to their field work alongside the Joint Force.[233] This implies that the G5S-JF doesn't have a say about its perceived own needs. Yet, critics have pointed out that the EUTM training has been inadequate and ineffective.[234] A possible explanation lies in the fact that the EU training does not include the necessary equipment provision, hence soldiers are trained with equipment that they neither possess nor are likely to

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[229] Ibid.
[230] McInnis, "Lessons in Coalition," 85.
[231] Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 487.
[232] Gasinska and Bohman, "The Joint Force of," 42.
[233] Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 488.
[234] See Tull, "The European Union Training," 11-12; Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Christine Nissen, "Schizophrenic Agendas in the EU's External Actions in Mali," *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): 953.

dispose of. This means that "significant parts of EUTM training provided are a far cry away from the real conditions under which [...] recruits do operate" on the tactical level.[235]

Barkhane, on the other hand, is believed to have enhanced the efficiency of the G5S-JF's troops thanks to the joint operations it conducts. What has contributed to the effectiveness is assumed to be the presence of assertive and senior officers to relate to during joint operations.[236] Additionally, there is a perception within the G5S-JF that Westerners are more competent, leading to France taking a leading role in joint operations and enhancing the overall efficiency of the Joint Force.[237] The analysis of the tactical level revealed that within the JF the strong leader's office remains vacant and that external actors are eager to hold it. This implies that for the G5S-JF to be efficient at the tactical level, France's leadership is unavoidable.

2.4. FRANCE AND HOST ACTORS' RELATION THROUGH THE LENS OF ASYMMETRIC INTERDEPENDENCE

The power dynamics between France – used here as a synecdoche for external actors – and the G5S member states at the three levels of warfare demonstrate that France has assumed leading roles within the Joint Force's chain of command, through assessing the influence on decision-making and division of responsibilities. The intervening force's leadership has improved the G5S-JF efficiency, suggesting a hegemonic relationship between the sides. Barkhane, and to a lesser extent the EUTM, improved the G5S-JF's operational and tactical effectiveness in particular. However, external support mostly involved intervening forces taking on responsibility and carrying out different tasks independently. Hence, it should be noted that the G5S-JF's ability to enhance efficiency still appears to rely on the involvement of France and other external actors. This brings

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[235] Tull, "The European Union Training," 10.
[236] Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 488.
[237] Ibid.

up important issues about the sustainability and the stability of the operational efficiency: the leading role played by France indicates that this can't be maintained without active efforts to transfer this responsibility. If anything, it seems more proper to claim that France's SFA is set up to de-responsibilise its African partners, even though Barkhane's end goal is to transfer responsibility. Thereby, the hegemonic theory does not apply to the Sahel security system since a hegemonic relationship would result in efficiency and ultimately stability. France and the EU have generated a contingent efficiency, as it remains dependent on external involvement, rather than a sustainable efficiency. With that said, an in-depth analysis of the France and G5S states' relationship is necessary.

2.4.1.   Conceptualisation of the Asymmetric Interdependence

With the intent of investigating the interplay between regional ownership of the JF and external influence, Sandnes stated that the power dynamic between France and the G5S-JF "can be explained as a relationship of asymmetric interdependence".[238] She tapped into relational power dynamics between the intervener and the host because it is just what determines whether the host force could develop ownership and autonomy over its own security responses, which the JF didn't.[239] Power here is understood as a social phenomenon that occurs in interactions between agents.[240] Indeed, it has been seen that interactions between the Joint Force and France – or, more broadly, external actors – have been expressed and played out through agency, ownership, autonomy and dependence. If we retrace what has been expressed so far, since the first stages of the relationship, the Joint Force lied in a dependency-position towards France, which the former managed to make mutual through making itself crucial for external actors to gain legitimacy and exert

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[238] Sandnes, "Understanding Power," 69.
[239] Sandnes, "The Effect of Asymmetric," 2.
[240] See Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics," *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005); Stefano Guzzini, *Power, Realism and Constructivism* (London: Routledge, 2013); David A. Baldwin, *Power and International Relations: A Conceptual Approach* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

influence over the region. This interdependence grew stronger and showed clear signs of asymmetry within the framework of the interactions between the G5S-JF's chain of command and France at the three warfare's levels.

Sandnes' findings of asymmetric interdependence merge two concepts from the field of political sciences – interdependence and asymmetry – that deserve further assessment.

Interdependence occurs when there is a mutual dependence between agents, meaning they to some extent rely and depend on each other. Interdependence is closely connected to a relational view of power, as interdependent relationships inherently limit one agent's autonomy[241] and award power to the other(s).[242] In military coalitions, this implies that the actor who depends less on the other holds more agency and, due to its greater self-sufficiency, also wields more influence. Military interdependence influences "agent's ownership of the response to the security situation".[243] It has to be noted that the degree of (inter)dependence is likely to differ among agents, with one actor relying more on the other than vice versa, leading to asymmetry.

An asymmetric relationship occurs when actors, being unequal, contribute with uneven commitments to the relationship, for instance with different military capabilities. Since the contribution is reciprocal, the asymmetry never escalates into pure domination or hegemony.[244] In military coalitions and/or partnerships this might involve the external actor offering resources and training, while the host actor entrusts to the external programme.

An asymmetric interdependence thereby refers to a relationship where agents "depend on each other but to a different degree".[245] This moves away from the

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[241] See Robert Owen Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (Northbrook: Scott Foresman, 1989).

[242] See Nadim N. Rouhana and Susan T. Fiske, "Perception of Power, Threat and Conflict Intensity in Asymmetric Intergroup Conflict: Arab and Jewish Citizens of Israel," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 39, no. 1 (2019).

[243] Sandnes, "The Effect of Asymmetric," 6.

[244] Ksenia Efremova, "Small States in Great Power Politics: Understanding the 'Buffer Effect'," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 13, no. 1 (2019): 101.

[245] Sandnes, "The Effect of Asymmetric," 7.

binary juxtaposition between "weak" and "strong"; instead, the asymmetric interdependence suggests that agents possess varying capabilities that can be leveraged for other aspects of the relationship. Indeed, as a power dynamic, asymmetric interdependence is not fixed and conforms with changing contexts. The change in context affects the importance of power facets, altering the asymmetry, demonstrated by Mali's move-away from France in 2022.

2.4.2.   The Asymmetric Interdependence Applied to the Case Study

In the early stages of the military cooperation between the JF and France, both actors benefitted from their partnership. On the one side, France needed a legal bond with the then newly established G5S Joint Force to exert influence over the Sahel region, where it already could boast a certain degree of power in the light of its colonial legacy. What prompted France to play a significant role in the Sahel were, besides its ever-lasting neo-colonial aspirations,[246] the terrorism and the immigration discourse, as explained in the first paragraph of this section. The establishment of the JF was a step forward towards the achievement of its strategy of subcontracting security: supporting countries and multinational and/or regional organisations was less risky and expensive than sending soldiers on the ground.[247] On the other hand, the G5S's member states, aware of their scarcity of resources to give an independent regional response to the terroristic threat, established the Joint Force to attract international stakeholders.[248] Their aim was to give rise to a homegrown sustainable coalition that could bear the responsibility of providing security in its own region. When sealing the JF-Barkhane cooperation, both sides emphasised the importance of developing the regional ownership needed to tackle the terrorist menace autonomously. This leaks out from Macron's speech at the UN General Assembly in 2017 when he claimed that France couldn't succeed in

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[246] Genevieve Jesse, "The French Intervention in the 2012 Malian Conflict: Neocolonialism Disguised as Counterterrorism," *SUURJ* 3, no. 15 (2019): 104.
[247] Dieng, Onguny, and Mfondi, "Leadership Without Membership," 29.
[248] Ibid., 28; Sandnes, "The Relationship between," 72.

its shared mission "if the countries most concerned cannot assume their own responsibilities", suggesting that the end point of the military cooperation was an independent G5S-JF.[249] This is reflected also in the G5S's call for "contributions to support the action of the national and regional forces of the G5 Sahel so [...] to acquire autonomy and take ownership of the situation on the ground".[250]

The asymmetric interdependence's early signs emerged as the Joint Force, in order to enhance its operativity, received operational assistance, mentoring, and training from Opération Barkhane. The formalisation of the shared command spelt the tightening of the asymmetric interdependence as it has inexorably tied the JF's efficiency to the French assistance. Undoubtedly, it has improved the G5S-JF's effectiveness and capacity in the field, but such efficiency was contingent since it was reliant on Barkhane's assistance. Critics have argued that the shared command was a gimmick for France to gain more control over the region.[251] Indeed, France took up a leading role within the JF's chain of command to such an extent that Dieng, Mfondi, and Onguny coined the expression "leadership without membership".[252] However, it should also be noted that the ability of Barkhane to influence the G5S-JF has relied on the Joint Force being inclined to receive its support instead of other external actors' support. The Sahel region has garnered significant attention from external agents, enabling the JF to select which support to accept.[253] Drawing up to the extraversion theory, it could be said that the G5S-JF has thus performed agency by effectively using France' interests in the region to its advantage. Hence, although to different extent, there has been an interdependence going both ways, that the G5S-JF appeared to recognize and be willing to leverage for burden-sharing in the Sahel security context.

[249] Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, "United Nations General Assembly – Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic," Released September 19, 2017.
[250] Direction de l'Information Légale et Administrative Français, "Communiqué Final du Sommet de Nouakchott," Vie-publique, June 30, 2020.
[251] Moda Dieng, "Fin de Parcours pour la Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel: Quels Enseignements en Tirer?" *The Conversation*, January 21, 2024.
[252] Dieng, Onguny, and Mfondi, "Leadership Without Membership".
[253] Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 490.

Nevertheless, this interdependence was also asymmetric: the G5S-JF's reliance on France and other external actors has been "rather urgent in nature, as it has related to the joint force's efficiency and ultimately its operational capacity", while external actors' dependence on the Joint Force has related more to influence and managing potential threats to European territory.[254] It is nonetheless true that the cooperation brought benefits to the Sahelian side too. De Oliveira and Verhoeven highlighted that external actors' military engagement in the Sahel has given local political *élites* the legitimacy on the international arena they sought out, as well as access to resources that fostered their domestic support.[255] This cooperation was thus beneficial for both external actors aspiring to hold influence in the Sahel and African *élites* looking to strengthen their political power.

However, the dynamics of the asymmetric interdependence have hindered the development of a self-sustainable and independent G5S-JF, foiling the SFA's endpoint of handing over the responsibility in the security context. For this reason, both critics and the Sahelian public opinion have seen the asymmetric interdependence as being in France's favour. Yet, it is worth remembering that power dynamics and relationships do not elude context alterations. Although external actors have been heavily involved in the Sahel since 2012, the security situation has continued to deteriorate significantly, leading to growing frustration towards external presence.[256] This turned the table and, following a succession of facts that will be sorted through in the following chapter, led to Mali leaving the G5S-JF and France's withdrawal (or expulsion) from Mali.

2.5. COUNTERINSURGENCY À LA FRANÇAISE

Only a short time after Opération Serval achieved the purpose of its mandate, the increasing amounts of attacks worsening the situation in central Mali and the

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[254] Sandnes, "The Effect of Asymmetric," 12.

[255] De Oliveira and Verhoeven, "Taming Intervention," 11.

[256] Alexander Thurston, "Who Are France's Sahelian Critics and What Are They Saying?," *Africa Up Close*, July 6, 2022.

spillover of the conflict into Burkina Faso and parts of Niger prompted the idea of establishing a follow-up mission. Indeed, France didn't give up its security commitment in the region, but rather, on the contrary, as stated by the French Armed Forces Ministry website, its Sahelian strategy rested "on a global approach (politics, security, and development), the military aspect of which [would be] carried out by Opération Barkhane".[257] Barkhane was launched in 2014 and had a larger regional operation scale, meaning it operated across and within the borders of the G5S states in order to face the transnational threat. Its goal had been defined in the general sense of "bringing the terrorist threat within the reach of local forces" which should have been accomplished by the two sub-goals of preventing any resurgence of terrorist strongholds and backing the local security forces.[258] In other words, despite Barkhane being conceived of in terms of the *long durée*, France just aimed to reach a point where it could hand over control to local forces, on the shoulders of which the responsibility of managing the securitization context would fall.

The hallmark of French philosophy of COIN governance is doubtless the security-development nexus whereby the military would pave the way for fruitful development plans and predetermined political implementations.[259] Thus, this paragraph will provide an insight of how these spheres have been carried out.

French COIN doctrine was rife with procedures highlighting the importance of civilians, absolute centre of gravity in a war against insurgents. Indeed, in confirmation of this, one of the major networks for dealing with insurgency was the *Bureaux Arabes* (Arab Bureaus), which were blueprints for local administrative structures aiming to establish a bridge between the French authority and local people. However, despite the active role that "recruiting locals into *supplétif* regiments or […] into French combat units" could have played in shifting

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[257] Ministère des Armées, "Opération Barkhane" accessed May 26, 2024.

[258] Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport d'Information no. 4089* (Paris: Commission de la Défense Nationale et des Forces Armées, 2021): 45.

[259] Charbonneau, "Counter-Insurgency Governance," 1817.

the balance of power in their favour, French recourse to militias in the Sahel has been minimal.[260]

What France opted for in Sahel was instead the "evil" half of the two-part strategy, the *razzia* (the raid), which was a quick attack conducted by light, mobile troops in the apparent attempt to mimic local tactics of combat and aspiring to terrorising civilians.[261] Moreover, military operations frequently involved airborne operations with paratroopers, open skirmishes, traditional cordon-and-search tactics, *ratissage* (sweep), and *bouclage* (buckling), supported by a high degree of mobility.[262]

The main purpose of these operations was to neutralise the threat (by eliminating important figures) and seize important supplies such as weapons and ammunition. They also fitted into the logic of forcing the enemy to stay on the move and taking control of the initiative, as prescribed by French military doctrine. For doing so, the COIN operations needed to ward insurgents and violent extremist organisations off villages, which hindered their ability to recruit, regroup, and gather local intelligence for organising subversive operations. Furthermore, the French COIN approach also included cutting off the insurgents' lines of communication "through interdiction and intelligence-surveillance and reconnaissance missions".[263]

Holding territory through oil spots or *quadrillage* (lockdown) was difficult due to the limited available manpower, even if the number of personnel being deployed increased from 3500 in 2014 to 4050 in 2016 and 4800 in 2018, and then gradually reduced.[264] In any case, local security forces would idealistically have handled the above-mentioned task on their behalf.[265] However, they had no capacity, neither

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[260] Shurkin, "France's War in," 56.

[261] See Thomas Rid, "Razzia: A Turning Point in Modern Strategy," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 4 (2009): 617-35.

[262] Jan Strnad, "French Counterinsurgency: Case Study of Mali" (Master diss., Charles University, 2022), 39.

[263] Francis Okpaleke, Bernard Ugochukwu Nwosu, Chukwuma Rowland Okoli, and Ezenwa E. Olumba, "The Case for Drones in Counter-insurgency Operations in West African Sahel," *African Security Review* 32, no. 4 (2023): 8.

[264] Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport d'Information*, 52.

[265] Shurkin, "France's War in," 57.

in terms of numbers nor in terms of mobility that would help offset their limited personnel.

One challenge France's troops had to face dealt with the use of light vehicles, leading to a high number of casualties due to improvised explosive devices (from now on, IED).[266] Indeed, the progressive infantry fighting vehicles France has made use of lacked heavy armour, leaving troops vulnerable when confronted with IEDs.[267]

Another crucial activity the French troops have conducted falls in the civil-military engagement's sphere, meaning the external forces have provided basic services for "winning the heart and mind" of the civilian population of the areas in which they operated.[268] In this perspective, the French military has developed a strong ability in lower intensity operations, largely due to its colonial heritage and its "French touch", which entails building close relations with local communities and accepting the high-level risk that comes with residing in their midst with minimal force protection.[269]

To come full circle, the last activity Barkhane's COIN efforts engaged in was providing training to local forces, as it has been gone over in the previous paragraphs; SFA's training and equipping were part of a broader counterinsurgency strategy. In doing so, France has been striving to create separation between their new policy and colonial practices. One method they turned to was emphasising the terms *partenaire* (partner) and *partenariat* (partnership). Likewise, shifting the focus of training foreign forces from "operational military assistance" to "operational military partnership" is a deliberate move to hush up colonialism accusations.[270] However, the French

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[266] Strnad, "French Counterinsurgency," 47.

[267] Light vehicles were also flanked by Tiger attack helicopters and monitored by Reaper drones. See Shurkin, "France's War in," 57.

[268] The notion "hearts and minds" was initially employed by French general Hubert Lyautey as part of a strategy to counter an insurgency.

[269] Michael Shurkin, "What It Means to be Expeditionary: A Look at the French Army in Africa", *Joint Force Quarterly* 82, 3 (2016): 83; Shurkin, "France's War in," 57; Strnad, "French Counterinsurgency," 45.

[270] Shurkin, "France's War in," 57

intervening forces haven't incorporated local forces into their ranks and nor have they established units of *supplétifs* or guerrilla groups led by a cadre that traditionally included a French officer and French non-commissioned officer.[271] Instead of training host security forces, the French delegated the task to the EUTM and EUCAP, accountable for enhancing the locals' combat abilities. However, critics have pointed out that mentoring and training's mechanisms have been inadequate or beyond the ability of their local *partenaire*.[272] In any case, as it has already been explained, this delegation of responsibility allowed Barkhane to step away from its training role and engage in conducting joint operations in the field alongside the local military forces.

What stands out in this analysis is the absence of political commitment, despite the initial premises. One thing is for certain: Barkhane's agenda has shifted the focus from concerns for politics to attention to governance, limitedly understood in terms of provision of basic services. Yet, within this restricted scope, the bulk of the critical work has been carried out by the local *élites* which have built and improved legitimacy and garnered widespread support. As for France's contribution, intervening bureaucracies have replaced the typical 1950s COIN political strategy with an ostensibly apolitical and technical approach.[273] This stance implied that France moved from prioritising politics to trying to depoliticize what is inherently political. Following Shurkin's point of view, Barkhane's non-political approach is described as "acting politically without being political".[274] The intervening force's analytical mistake lies in underestimating the military-politics binary, meaning France believed the military or security solutions to be separate from politics, rather than recognizing them as its drivers.[275] Consequently, the security-development nexus that has been touched upon at the beginning of the paragraph

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[271] Ibid., 58.
[272] Tull, "Mali, the G5 and Security," 3.
[273] Guichaoua, "The Bitter Harvest," 907-909.
[274] Shurkin, "France's War in," 59.
[275] Charbonneau, "Counter-Insurgency Governance," 1820.

was condemned to remain "wishful thinking [since] nobody seems to know how to make it happen on the ground".[276]

[276] Nicolas Desgrais, "La Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel, Nouveau Mythe de Sisyphe?" *The Conversation*, July 17, 2018.

CHAPTER 3: THE SEQUENCE LEADING TO BARKHANE'S WITHDRAWAL

The empirical analysis will present the timeline of events that preceded France's announcement on February 17th, 2022, of Barkhane's withdrawal from Mali. The chapter seeks to determine whether the sequence of events can infer a causal relationship between the operational obstacles within the France-Mali military coalition in the security framework – namely, the excessive militarisation of the COIN (X_1) and the asymmetric interdependence (X_2) – and France's voluntary or involuntary exit from Mali (Y). Therefore, the previous chapter, reviewing the circumstances through which the JF came about and the balance of power dynamics between its member states and France, provided a basis for orienting the research. Indeed, according to HI, power dynamics can compel disadvantaged and subordinated actors vis-à-vis the distribution of power and the resulting norms' layout to pursue a change in the institutional framework.

Before plunging into an in-depth process tracing analysis, Mahoney's method requires that the cause-and-effect connection between X and Y be verified.[277] By using a minimalist process-tracing approach, the thesis can logically deduce that operational obstacles undermining the success of the securitization intervention, and the consequent dissatisfaction with the security structure, is a prerequisite for seeking change.

The timeline presented in this chapter verifies whether the series of events prior to France's exit announcement is connected to the heavy militarisation and the asymmetric interdependence resulting from France's COIN and SFA operations in Mali and the broader Sahel. Through the lens of HI, the present chapter will begin by observing how the operational failures mentioned above shaped the Malian's dissatisfaction with the security strategies. Second, it will be shown that the disadvantaged governmental actors leveraged on the public discontent for overthrowing Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's regime (M_1), which was aligned with

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[277] Mahoney, "Process Tracing and," 208.

France. In the third paragraph, the agency of France will be discussed. Malian complaints about France's presence compelled Macron to reconfigure the French efforts in the War on Terror (M_2), indeed. Next, it will be highlighted how the new Malian transitional authorities have taken up the reins of the security structure and reoriented the trajectory, seeking negotiations with jihadist groups (M_3) and steering away from the French strategy, believed to have worsened the already precarious (in)stability in the Sahel. Simultaneously, the military junta was forced to fill the gap left by Barkhane's reconstructing and drew closer to the Russian Wagner Group (M_4). The last paragraph, finally, will take stock and describe the findings.

3.1. HEAVY MILITARISATION AND ASYMMETRIC INTERDEPENDENCE SHAPING MALIAN DISSATISFACTION

This section seeks to underline to what degree the asymmetric interdependence and the heavy militarization analysed in detail in the previous chapter set forth Operation Barkhane's failure. France being incapable of improving the security context in Mali (and more broadly, in the Sahel region) despite the means at its disposal fuelled growing anti-French sentiments. The perceived France's supremacy, due to its colonial past and its strong military, influenced public expectations of the French intervention and exacerbated local dissatisfaction with the French army's presence. In the backdrop to this discontent stood multiple conspiracy theories about the presumed real motivations behind the French engagement, which then spread on social media.[278]

If the French intervention, internationally justified in the light of the War on Terror, was aimed at preventing Mali from falling into the hands of jihadist groups, it is clear that the mission was not accomplished.

The thesis argues that France's failure is primarily due to the excessive militarisation of its COIN strategy, which neglected addressing the root causes of

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[278] Thurston, "Who Are France's."

the crisis. The lack of Malian ownership over the securitization process, caused by the development of the aforementioned asymmetric interdependence, also contributed to the fiasco. This paragraph will provide an analysis of these two factors' implications and will describe how they resulted in popular dissatisfaction. In order to do so, the thesis will make use of the indicators that have been presented in the last paragraph of the first chapter.

3.1.1.   Militarisation of the French COIN and its Implications

Over the past decade, France has frequently resorted to hard power and militarization to tackle jihadist groups. French intervention in the Sahel tended towards militarization, as part of the security-based approach implemented by both the international "traffic jam" of external actors and local authorities.[279] The conceptual link of militarization and (in)security runs deep and has been largely investigated. The French COIN assumption about the need to prioritise security by consolidating political and military authority under the control of the military commander-as-administrator for rescuing vulnerable populations falls under the above-mentioned link.[280] Although militarization was thought to be likely to "[divest] its military-ness amongst a growing, global culture of security", French intervention in the Sahel doesn't leave room for doubt.[281] The elasticity and ambiguity inherent in the concept of (in)security lends itself to adapt to circumstances and provides the alibi for legitimising external interventions. Sahelian states' internal dysfunctions attracted extensive international engagements that have transformed the regional security governance, giving impetus to numerous transnational networks that normalised the use of force as

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[279] The expression recalls the metaphor Cold-Ravnkilde and Jacobsen made use of for referring to the plethora of actors intervening in the region with different multidimensional and comprehensive approaches. See Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, "Disentangling the Security Traffic Jam in the Sahel: Constitutive Effects of Contemporary Interventionism," *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020).
[280] Charbonneau, "Counter-Insurgency Governance," 1809.
[281] Matthew Rech, Daniel Bos, K. Neil Jenkings, Alison Williams, and Rachel Woodward, "Geography, Military Geography, and Critical Military Studies," *Critical Military Studies* 1, no.1 (2014): 57.

essential for political viability. It could be deemed that it was precisely for normalising the use of force that French military intervention encompassed a holistic approach into its logic. Indeed, Barkhane's mandate aspired to incorporate political measures and make them subjected to the military domain. Thus, formally expanding the range of action to include political measures was expected to contribute to French military victory and the legitimation of the use of force.[282] Militarization spurred government abuse: it hinted at the threat of terrorism to engage in arbitrary arrests and electoral fraud.[283] For its part, abusive government boosts and has boosted jihadist activities rather than tackle them. Moreover, France and other international actors set a bad example for local national armies: the intercommunal conflicts stoked state-sponsored counterinsurgency that exacerbated the vicious circle of violence. The Malian government, for example, supported proxy forces, local militias, to carry out its tasks, helping to retain control and suppress dissent while avoiding direct blame for fuelling violence.[284] In other words, French military tactics have led to a system that encourages the use of violent repression in the name of counterinsurgency. For a graph expressing rising violent incidents, see figure no. 4.

This has been possible because relying on external partners acting as an effective security guarantee prompted local governments to disregard the consequences of their actions. Neither have they taken the reins of social and political changes. The exclusive focus on security threats and the state of emergency shrank public spaces for local governments to meet voters' needs (e.g. rule of law and social services) and address the root problem of the crisis, which are mainly about human security. Following up on this lead, Tull warned that the G5S-JF's rationale was to "assuage and distract from […] local concerns about major challenges that are more national than regional".[285]

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[282] Bruno Charbonneau, "Intervention as Counter-Insurgency Politics," *Conflict, Security & Development* 19, no. 3 (2019): 310.

[283] Kfir, "Organized Criminal-Terrorist Groups," 354.

[284] Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, "Fulani-Dogon Killings in Mali: Farmer-Herder Conflicts as Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency," *African Security* 14, no. 1 (2021): 19.

[285] Tull, "Mali, the G5 and Security," 4.

Thus, one of the major implications of French and international militarization is the preservation of the status quo. By accident or design, before-2020-coup France invested in the maintenance of the status quo. The COIN governance that France brought forth stimulated a set of power dynamics and configurations that enforced pre-determined parameters and boundaries on the G5S member states, opening up the way to a permanent state of intervention. Charbonneau stated that external commitment in the Sahel has been orchestrated to be a "(reactive) mode of ruling that [participated] in the constitution of the objects and subjects it [sought] to secure or govern".[286]
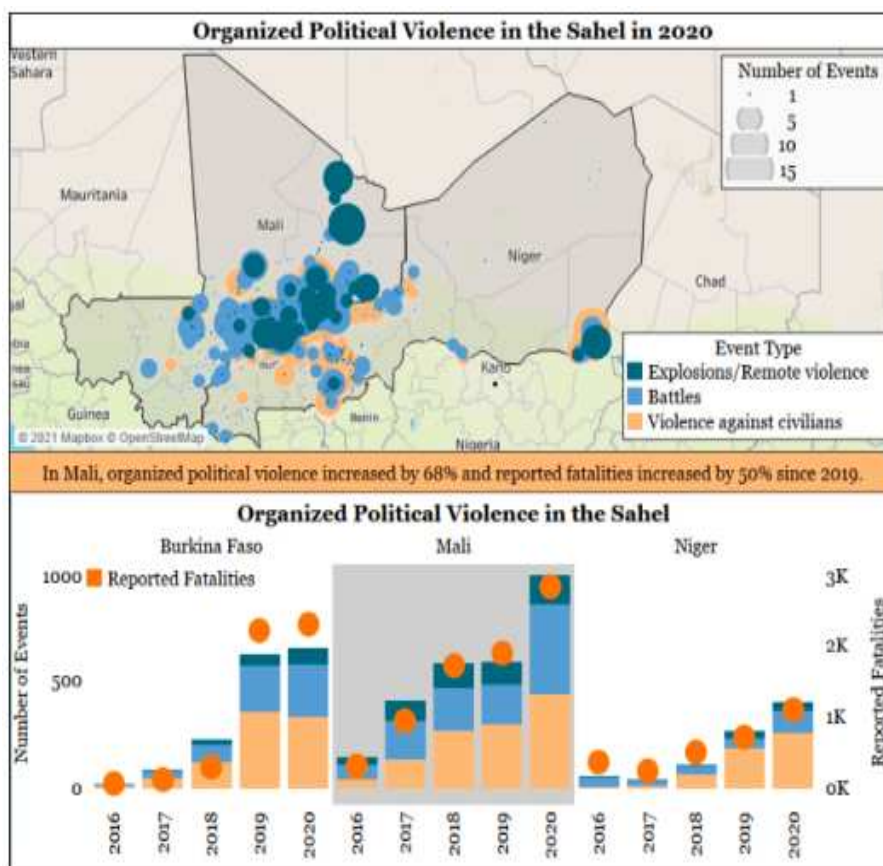

Figure 4: Organise Political Violence in the Sahel (2016-2020).

Source: Françoise Dumas, Rapport d'Information no. 4089, (Paris: Assemblée Nationale, 2021): 37.

Furthermore, militarisation has increased the level of instability within the region. For a comparison of violent incidents within the region see figure no. 5. Figure no.

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[286] Charbonneau, "Counter-Insurgency Governance," 1806.

6 displays the indicator (WGI) that has been analysed in the operationalisation section for showing the worsening of the stability and the increase in terrorist violence. The perpetual state of war is the result of French and international "necessity to govern complexity, the fluidity and the entanglement of the War on Terror".[287] French neo-colonial endeavour has not gone unnoticed: external actors used to operate without seeking the consent of local authorities and this lack of coordination escalated the Sahelian resentment against foreign presence. An anti-French sentiment that jihadist groups leveraged has exploded within the region, and especially in Mali. By promoting themselves as the only ones facing up to Western imperialism, these groups became proficient in exploiting French and Western interventionism as a recruitment tool. Kleptocratic and ineffective local authorities, guilty of being puppets of the West, were in their crosshairs too. For example, in 2008 the former head of AQIM Abdelmalek Droukdal declared that they would strive for rescuing their "countries from the tentacles of the criminal regimes that betrayed their religion and their people".[288]
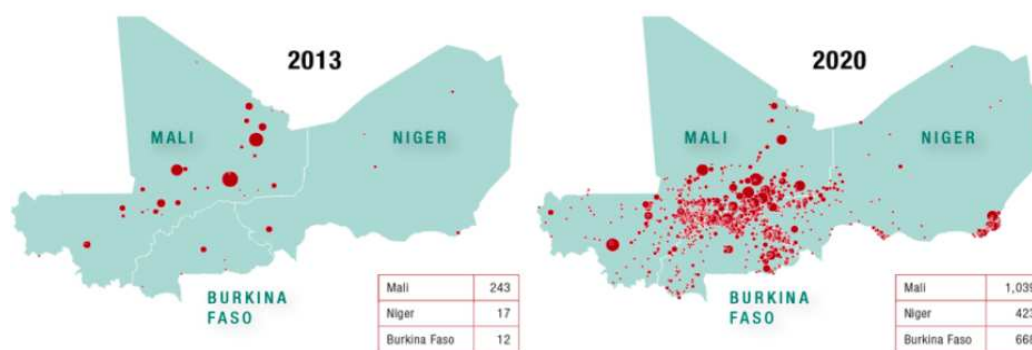

Figure 5: Incidents in the three-border region (Liptako-Gourma) in 2013 and 2020.

Source: International Crisis Group, Réordonner les Stratégies de Stabilisation du Sahel (Dakar/Bruxelles: ICG, 2021).

In the light of the above, Hüsken and Klute's allegation of France being driven by post-colonial order renegotiation's aspirations proved to be founded.[289] Similarly,

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[287] Charbonneau, "Intervention as Counter-Insurgency," 312.
[288] New York Times, "An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdal," *New York Times*, July 1, 2008.
[289] Thomas Hüsken and George Klute, "Political Orders in the Making: Emerging Forms of Political Organization from Libya to Northern Mali," *African Security* 8, no. 4 (2015): 320.

Bøås and Strazzari argued that, despite the jihadist threat, what was at stake in the Sahel was "nothing less than political order(ing)".[290] As a result, the local population brushed up their dozed-off anti-French sentiment and grew increasingly suspicious of France's intentions. Anti-imperialist protesters taking to the streets burning cardboard cut-out of France's President Emmanuel Macron became more regular.[291] Thousands of people gathered periodically in the centre of Bamako and denounced France's presence with slogans such as "*Á bas la France*" (down with France) and "*France dégage*" (France out).[292] France, which was acclaimed when its Opération Serval recaptured all the key junctures that had fallen into the jihadist clutches, was blamed for worsening the security context due to its heavy militarization and run into accusation of being incompetent. At the same time, anger was algo turned against local authorities, charged with being at the imperialist France's mercy.[293]

	Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism: Estimate
2013	-1.7
2014	-1.7
2015	-1.7
2016	-1.6
2017	-1.9
2018	-2.1
2019	-2.2
2020	-2.1
2021	-2.3
2022	-2.5

Figure 6: Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism in Mali (2013-2022).

Source: Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI)

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[290] Morten Bøås and Francesco Strazzari, "Governance, Fragility and Insurgency in the Sahel: A Hybrid Political Order in the Making," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (2020): 3.
[291] Folahanmi Aina, "French Mistakes Helped Create Africa's Coup Belt," *Al Jazeera*, August 17, 2023.
[292] Franceinfo, "Les Manifestations Anti-Françaises se Multiplient au Mali," *Franceinfo*, January 14, 2020.
[293] Paul Lorgerie, "Au Mali, le Sentiment Antifrançais Gagne du Terrain," *Le Monde*, January 10, 2020.

3.1.2. Asymmetric Interdependence's Implications

France embarked on SFA in Mali with the ultimate aim of engaging local security forces in its externally driven securitization's operations, in order to hand them over the ownership of the security mechanism. SFA's doctrine is set up to avoid any criticism about the direct military intervention's non-compliance with the system of international law. However, what France has failed to evade are the Malian local population's complaints. Such grievances emphasised that Mali-France military cooperation within the framework of SFA has been ineffective, and thus there was no longer any legal basis that legitimised France's army presence on the Malian soil.

There are several reasons as to why SFA may not be successful in enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of a host force. Matisek and Reno suggested that SFA providers, facing challenges in navigating local politics that hinders operational procedures, develop *ad hoc* relations with fragmented local actors and often end up being involved in the very issues SFA aims to address.[294] In a bid to explain this hurdle, Matisek and Fowler pointed to the provider's lack of understanding of the political context's nuances and of inherent civil-military relations which vary from recipient state to recipient state.[295] Shurkin, Gordon, Frederick, and Pernin underscored the importance of sprouting the seed of a unified national identity, in order for a military to operate cohesively, which is a condition for military efficiency. Weak and fragile states are unlikely to develop such a cohesiveness and, thus, doomed not to satisfy the prerequisite for military effectiveness from the get-go.[296] Marsh and Rolandsen pinpointed recipients' fragmentation and the absence of coordination among different SFA's providers as obstacles to the

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[294] Matisek and Reno, "Getting American Security," 67.
[295] Jahara Matisek and Michael W. Fowler, "The Paradox of Security Assistance after the Rise and Fall of the Islamic State in Syria-Iraq," *Special Operations* Journal 62, no. 2 (2020): 124.
[296] Shurkin, Gordon, Frederick, and Pernin, *Building Armies, Building Nations,* 12-15.

effectiveness of the SFA,[297] while Biddle, Macdonald and Baker spotted it in the interests' misalignment between providers and recipients.[298]

Literature mostly points to shortcomings in either side of SFA and overlooks relationship dynamics between external actors and host actors. However, focusing on the power dynamics uncovers the degree of ownership and autonomy held by each side and provides interesting insights for fully understanding Malian vicissitudes. In fact, SFA brings along hybridity, which ushers in the attempt to blend recipient and provider's structures, warding off SFA from the external-host binary opposites' logic. Tsing made use of the metaphor of friction to suggest that this hybridity entails a dynamic of imbalance and asymmetry between the two sides.[299] Similarly, Donais highlighted the power imbalance between recipient and host actors, in terms of both resources and decision-making.[300]

The second chapter of the thesis has outlined the interplay between France and the G5S-JF's member states within the framework of the SFA. These actors developed an interdependent relationship. In its early stages, the Joint Force was reliant on France (both in financial and military terms), yet it has also managed its dependency by making itself crucial and indispensable for France to exert influence in the Sahel region. However, the interdependence was asymmetric, with the JF's dependence being more vital than vice versa. The asymmetry poured into the dynamics at the three levels of warfare of the G5S-JF's chain command. France has always been at the helm of the securitization process in the Sahel and people started denouncing that it drafted the strategy of the military responses without taking G5 Sahel's own perceived needs into consideration.[301] France had its own *savoir faire*, which might not align with the Sahelian culture and capacity. Stating that the Sahel still "[was] the backyard of the French" and that "the G5 Sahel [consisted] of five Francophone states that France [could] still control" several

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[297] Marsh and Rolandsen, "Fragmented We Fall," 624.

[298] Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, "Small Footprint," 90-94.

[299] Thomas Yarrow, "Book Review," review of *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, by Anna Lawenhaupt Tsing, *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 29, no. 2 (2006): 292.

[300] Donais, "Empowerment or," 21.

[301] Charles Millon, "Mali's Struggle for Stability," *GIS*, May 19, 2023.

interviewees alluded to the fact that the external actor's involvement is predominantly hegemonic in nature.[302] France's leadership unquestionably enhanced the JF's military efficiency and joint operations yielded valuable results, yet the G5S-JF didn't develop the responsibility for, nor autonomy in, its tasks. Hence, the asymmetric interdependence accredited the Joint Force's contingent efficiency, as it remained reliant on France's support. In this regard, interviewees stated that France "[created] that environment in which the system [was] able to stay operational even though it [hadn't got] the ability to stay operational by itself"[303] since its assistance was such that it "'[deresponsibilised]' more and more".[304] This kind of relational dynamic has been a hindrance to the JF developing into an independent coalition because the asymmetric interdependence prevented it from acquiring ownership and responsibility for the security context it has operated in.

Figure no. 7 represents the indicator the thesis makes use of for measuring donor-dependency, meaning net Official Development Assistance (ODA) received (referred to in paragraph five of the first chapter). Although the indicator is nearly inaccurate due to the reasons explained in the section dealing the topic, the figure highlights the increasing donor-dependency Mali has suffered from 2014 to 2019, that is right before the coup. Mali got stuck with the reliance on France's assistance and was incapable of developing ownership over its security strategies. Malian people fired up a tirade against France, accused of capitalising on SFA's operations and shared command for gaining more control over the state.[305]

The France-Mali asymmetric interdependence transcends the static external-host (and/or strong-weak) binary opposites' logic and underscores that actors possess different degrees of power that can be leveraged for other dimensions of the relationship. These power dynamics are prone to adaptation to changing contexts, allowing actors' power, capacity, and influence to change over time according to

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[302] The thesis draws on Marie Sandnes's interviews. Sandnes, "The Impact of External," 483.
[303] Ibid., 485.
[304] Ibid., 490.
[305] Sandnes, "The Effect of Asymmetric,"

critical junctures occurring. It is meaningless to specify that a shift in the asymmetry ensues. France-Mali relationship's adjustment to vicissitudes and changing environment will be dealt with in the following paragraphs.
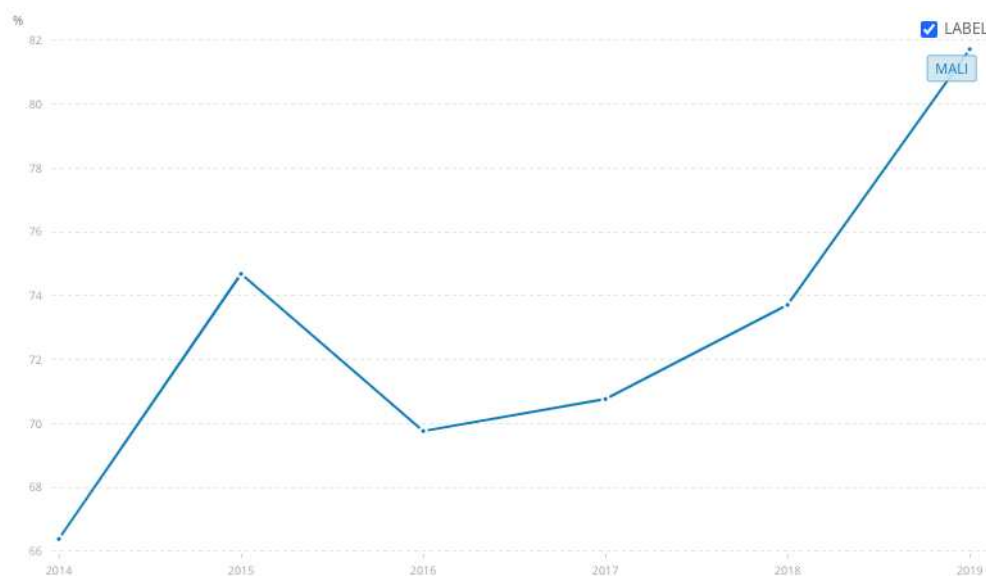

Figure 7: Mali's donor-dependency 2014-2019, net ODA received (% of central government expense).

Source: The World Bank.

3.2. DISSATISFACTION IN THE CONTEXT OF COUP-VOLUTION

The previous paragraph discussed the militarization and France-Mali asymmetric interdependence's implications, primarily stressing how they influenced the Malian public opinion and had a central role in exacerbating tensions. A strong anti-French sentiment was beginning to take hold indeed, and the Malian people called for France's withdrawal from the state. As a matter of fact, if in 2013 97% of the Malian population was in favour of French military intervention and 76% was in favour of a permanent military presence in Mali,[306] by the end of 2019 79% of respondents was dissatisfied with Barkhane's operations.[307] Polling showed that

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[306] FES, *Mali-Mètre. Enquête d'Opinion: Que Pensent les Maliens? No. 2* (Bamako: Firedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2013): 27, 34.

[307] FES, *Mali-Mètre. Enquête d'Opinion: Que Pensent les Malie(ne)s? No. 11* (Bamako: Firedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2019): 15.

civilians blamed Barkhane for failing in protecting them from armed groups and it was also thought to cooperate with jihadists.[308] Moreover, at the turn of 2020, popular confidence in who had the ability to restore stability in the region rested with FAMa, while Barkhane gathered support from only 2,8% of interviewees.[309] Hence, heavy militarization and the asymmetric interdependence lie at the basis of Opération Barkhane's failure and ushered in an intense Malian dissatisfaction with the security framework, which in turn acted as a fuse that set off events leading to France's withdrawal/expulsion from Mali. The deteriorating regional and national security context, along with France's waning legitimacy within the region, has wiped out France's importance in supporting local élites to hold office, as was the case before the 2020 and 2021 coups. This paragraph will focus on the disadvantaged actors' agency in triggering junctures, notably the coup-volution pulled off by the 2020 and 2021 Malian putsches.

3.2.1.   Disadvantaged Actors and the First Coup

Parliamentary elections were initially scheduled for November 25th of 2018 and, after being postponed twice, finally were held on March 29th, 2020. Cancelling the results of the second round of elections, the Constitutional Court awarded 31 seats to the ruling party the President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (from now on, IBK) was the head, *Rassemblement pour le Mali* (Rally for Mali, from now on, RPM). Hence, owing to the court tampering with results, RPM gained 10 more seats in Mali National Assembly, becoming the largest bloc. The two-year delay and the unfair outcome of the elections triggered dissatisfaction among the political opposition factions of Mali and mobilised protests.[310]

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[308] Ibid., 16.
[309] Ibid., 54.
[310] Jeune Africa, "Mali: Adoption d'un Projet de Loi Prolongeant le Mandat des Députés jusqu'en 2020," *Jeune Africa*, June 8, 2020; Sébastien Duhamel, "Crise Politique au Mali: les Raisons de la Colère," *Tv5monde*, July 23, 2020.

The significant breaches of democratic procedures, alongside with critical security issues within the country, damaged Keïta's position and protests in Bamako called for him to step down. Him banning any anti-government demonstration was worthless: protest actions gathered thousands of people in the capital and their ranks were filled with various political, military, and religious figureheads.[311] Disdain for Keïta's corrupted and nepotistic government cut the society across, indeed former officials who served for his administration, religious leaders, and the military involved in the 2012 coups came together united by the shared dissatisfaction with the president's policies. The opposition consolidated as "*Mouvement du 5 Juin – Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques"* (The 5 June Movement – Rally for Patriotic Forces, from now on, M5-RFP) and comprised of the "Front for Safeguarding Democracy" (*Front pour la sauveguarde de la démocratie*, from now on, FSD), "Hope for a new Mali" (*Espoir Mali Koura*), and the "Coordination of Movements, Associations and Sympathisers (*Coordination des Mouvements, Associations et Sympathisants*, from now on, CMAS).[312]

In response to mounting frustration, Keïta tried to offer political concessions, such as the creation of a united government with representatives from the protest movements, but the concession didn't comply with the M5-RFP's requests for better education system, effective work of governmental services, reforms implementation, and expulsion of the French forces.[313] Therefore, the president tried to mitigate tensions by announcing the dissolution of the Constitutional Court. However, the protests turned out to be bloody on July 10th, with protestors storming the building of the National Assembly. The shock from the violence allowed a segment of the FAMa led by Special Forces Colonel Assimi Goïta to arrest IBK (and his closest advisors who were isolated in the presidential palace)

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[311] Al Jazeera, "Anti-government Protests resume in Mali after Weeks-long Pause," *Al Jazeera*, August 11, 2020.

[312] Agence France-Presse, "Who is Behind Mali's Surging Protest Movement?," *VOA*, July 17, 2020.

[313] Alessandra Prentice, "Thousands of Protesters Demand Mali President Step Down," *Reuters*, June 20, 2020.

with no gunshot being fired.[314] By August 18th, in a speech on national television, Keïta dissolved parliament and announced his resignation from office.[315] Meanwhile, five Malian colonels established the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (*Comité Nationale pour le Salut du Peuple*, CNSP), which claimed both the executive and the legislative powers and declared the "Transitional Founding Principles". By overturning the democratic institutions, the CNSP *displaced* the institutional framework and marked a *juncture*.

What contributed to the success of the coup, besides the turmoil, is believed to be the widespread support for FAMa. Indeed, the putsch and restoration of the military's power were positively met by 53,4% of the respondents.[316] On the other hand, the rise of a military government, with suspected ties to Russia, alarmed Mali's traditional partner, France. For a short time, the Malian people were filled with hope of Mali breaking off relations with France. Yet, on September 25th, a board of 17 people appointed the former Minister of Defence and retired military Bah N'Daw as president. Faced with sanctions from the ECOWAS, in his presidential speech, he announced its commitment to the previous strategy to tackle armed groups, as well as its adherence to the existing agreements.[317]

On December 5th the CNSP established the National Transitional Council (*Conseil National de la Transition*, CNT), an extra-constitutional transnational legislative body consisting of 10 committees that would manage the 18-month transition period. The M5-RFP laid claim to being involved in the transitional process and, after joining the drafting of the transitional charter, it contended that the final document didn't align with the deliberations, notably in naming Colonel Assimi Goïta as Vice-President in charge of security and defence affairs. Other than its exclusion from the government cabinet, it also contested the CNT seat distribution

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[314] Morten Bøås and Abdoul Wakhab Cissé, "The Sheikh Versus the President: The Making of Imam Dicko as a Political Big Man in Mali," *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 5, no 3-6 (2020): 271.

[315] Al Jazeera, "Mali's Keïta Resigns as President after Military Coup," *Al Jazeera*, August 19, 2020.

[316] FES, *Mali-Mètre. Enquête d'Opinion: Que Pensent les Malie(ne)s?* (Bamako: Firedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2020): 5.

[317] Aïssatou Diallo, "Mali: Who is Bah N'Daw, the New Transitional President?," *The African Report*, September 25. 2020.

allocating only 8 seats to the M5-RFP while assigning 22 seats to the military and security forces. The M5-RFP accused the CNSP of hogging power to the detriment of the political opposition. Although the security framework remained unaffected, there has been a noticeable *conversion* towards militarising the state's apparatus, which failed to address issues concerning centralised power.

3.2.2. Disadvantaged Actors and the Second Coup

In order to avoid international pressure and comply with the demands of ECOWAS,[318] Bah N'Daw was appointed president of the CNT and the CNSP, the committee that was established by the putschist military on the very same day of the coup, was dissolved by presidential decree on January 18th, 2021. An additional example of the transitional government's progress on good governance is provided by its pledge to draft a new constitution, which had been put off thrice since 2011. However, deviations and *drifts* from democratic values and procedures persevered. The implementation of the state of emergency in response to Covid-19 allowed state authorities to take severe restrictive measures, leading the media to warn about the encroachment on freedom.[319] Moreover, six individuals were detained for an alleged conspiracy against the government but were later released due to insufficient evidence.[320] The opposition's voice was weak and divided, only on May 6th, 2021 the chairman of the Strategic Committee, Choguel Kokalla Maïga, speaking on behalf of the M5-RFP, demanded the dissolution of the government and the CNT and its replacement with a more law-abiding and legitimate body.[321] On top of that, he also called for the end of the repression of demonstrations, which

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[318] ECOWAS required the Malian political transition to be civilian during the entire period in order to lift sanctions and support the Republic of Mali towards the restoration of constitutional order. See ECOWAS, "Déclaration of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government on Mali," Accra, October 5, 2020.

[319] Mali-online, "Conférence de Presse des Organisations Faîtières de la Presse," Facebook, December 20, 2020.

[320] Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Due Process Concerns in 'Conspiracy' Case," *Human Rights Watch*, March 14, 2021.

[321] Mali Jet, "Allocution du Président du M5-RFP à l'Occasion de la Rencontre avec le Président de la Transition Bah N'Daw," *Mali Jet*, May 6, 2021.

are covered by constitution, as well as the stop of abusive and extrajudicial arrests.[322]

With respect to the relations with Mali's traditional partners, as it has been stated in the previous sub-paragraph, the appointment of Bah N'Daw assured that Mali's would commit to the pre-existing security framework, since in 2014 he had signed the military cooperation agreements with France, holding the position of Minister of Defence. Yet, the interim leaders aimed to *layer* negotiations with extremist militants affiliated to *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (from now on, JNIM), which France opposed. Moreover, after coming to power, N'Daw began to distance himself from Vice-President Goïta and Minister of Defence Sadio Camara. The intra-elite perturbation was due to different foreign-policy stances: while the president had a pro-French attitude, Goïta went after a cooperation with Russia.

Amid increasing criticism of the army-dominated cabinet and under pressure from the M5-RFP protests, transitional Prime Minister Ouane resigned on May 14th, 2021 but was immediately reappointed for carrying out the reshuffle.[323] The executive body superseded two former CNSP members with two generals, besides assigning ministerial roles to five M5-RFP members. However, on May 24th, N'Daw and Ouane were stripped off their offices and arrested by the military. N'Daw stepped down and Vice-President Goïta announced the former colleagues were relieved for supposedly obstructing and sabotaging the transition to a democratically elected government.[324] In a nutshell, Goïta leveraged the authority over defence and security matters the transitional charter attributed him as rationale for staging a putsch: he alleged that the deposed figures hadn't consulted him on the designations beforehand. Acting in compliance with the interim institutional framework, Goïta managed to *convert* the transition authority to support the CNSP, which didn't want to give up on its authoritative positions.

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[322] Ibid.

[323] France 24, "Mali's Interim Prime Minister to Form New Government," *France 24*, May 14, 2021.

[324] The Guardian, "Mali: Leader of 2020 Coup Takes Power after President's Arrest," *The Guardian*, May 25, 2021.

He became the president of the transition and chief executive, while the CNT took on the functions of the legislative body. On May 28th, Mali's Constitutional Court acknowledged his presidency, implying that the judiciary branch was under the authority of the executive branch.[325]

The M5-RFP's members are actors of change and catalysts for institutional variations since they got to leverage their exclusion from (or rather, partial inclusion in) the transitional junta for triggering the overthrowing of state authorities. Notwithstanding, the crucial actor that elicited an alteration must surely be the ex-CNSP which, thanks to its agency, *converted* national institutions.

3.3.   DISSATISFACTION AND BARKHANE'S RECONFIGURATION

The Sahelian anti-French sentiments due to Barkhane's failure didn't go on the sly in the sight of France's President Macron. Since the end of 2019, he has stressed the compelling necessity of redefining the institutional, political, and jurisdictional framework within Barkhane operated, as well as its terms and objectives, in concert with his Sahelian partners. The priority ought to be given to coordinating the efforts in order to arrange a common strategy for crushing the enemy. However, in his public speeches, Macron underlined that opposition groups labelling France's presence as imperialist and neo-colonialist were thriving without being condemned by the ruling class. For that very reason, France was reluctant to send more troops on the ground.[326] Thus, France's assistance was conditional on a sort of *captatio benevolentiae* through which the Sahelian leaders renewed the urgence of the French intervention.

Following the coups, tension between France and Mali escalated at the expense of the security arrangements, which grew fragile. In January 2021 Macron disclosed

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[325] Présidence de la République du Mali, "Le Colonel Assimi Goïta Officiellement Installé dans ses Fonctions après Avoir Prêté Serment devant la Cour Suprême," *Présidence de la République du Mali*, June 7, 2021.

[326] Élisée, "Au Niger, Point Presse du Président Emmanuel Macron et du Président Mahamadou Issoufou," *Youtube*, December 22, 2019, 17:40.

that France would adjust its efforts in the broader Sahel region, and urged for a collective international action, aiming to de-responsibilise its commitment.[327] By doing so, France laid the foundation for its exit strategy.

In reaction to the second putsch, France halted its joint military operations with Mali's forces, as a temporary measure awaiting guarantees about a return to civilian rule in the country.[328] Although French troops persisted in operating there independently, in June 2021 Macron announced that France would redefine its presence, advocating a paradigm shift without committing to a timetable or a numerical reduction of the personnel.[329] The Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, backed up Macron's decision as he stated that a "readaptation of the Barkhane's system in the face of the new threat scenario" was imperative.[330]

On July 9th, 2021, Macron informed that France would reshape its military effort relocating its troops further south to contain the jihadists' coastal advance. Moreover, France would shrink its footprint up to around half of the level of some 5100 soldiers primarily in the north of the Sahel.[331] The reconfiguration was set to begin during the second half of 2021 and be completed by the start of 2022, notably closing French bases in the Mali regions of Kida, Tessalit, and Timbuktu.[332] The reorientation towards central Mali was coherent with France prioritising the elimination of some figureheads of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS). Nonetheless, such a move didn't spell the end of France's commitment, rather it meant an internationalisation of its efforts in the Takuba Task Force's disguise. Takuba was a French-led task force which initially fell under the umbrella of Operation Barkhane. Notwithstanding the European weak commitment to security

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[327] Vie Publique, "Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, Président de la République, sur la Politique de Défense, à Paris le 19 Janvier 2021," *Vie Publique*, January 19, 2021.

[328] Ministère des Armées, "Point de Situation des Opérations du 2 Juillet au 8 Juillet," *Site Archives du Ministère des Armées*, July 8, 2021.

[329] Nicolas Barotte, "Sahel: Emmanuel Macron Tourne la Page de Barkhane," *International*, June 10, 2021.

[330] France 24, "Emmanuel Macron Annonce la Fin de l'Opération Barkhane au Sahel," *France 24*, June 10, 2021.

[331] Tangi Salaün and Bate Felix, "France to Reshape Troop Presence in Sahel within Weeks," *Reuters*, July 9, 2021.

[332] Ibid.

initiatives in the region, Takuba received extensive pledges of support from EU's member states. France formed the backbone of it and beefed up its ranks by working on its European partners. In this way France took steps towards a more minimalist and stripped-back engagement in the Sahel indeed, with the aim of reducing its financial and human burden, as well as easing pressure in the Sahelian countries.

The Malian junta didn't respond well to the reconfiguration of Barkhane. France was accused of stepping back from the collective fight, leaving precarious FAMa to handle the jihadist threat.[333] France was also held responsible for leaving a vacuum without anchoring government control. Prime Minister Maïga charged France with betrayal for establishing an extremist stronghold in northern Mali.[334] He also complained of France's abandonment, while already winking at Russia.[335]

3.4.   TWO CRITICAL JUNCTURES

So far, in the previous paragraphs it has emerged that the dissatisfaction of the Malian people, caused by the excessive militarisation and asymmetric interdependence within the SFA's framework, and exacerbated by a steady resentment against the neo-colonial power's military presence, led to the 2020 and 2021 military coups and Barkhane's reconfiguration. In turn, these events primed the pump for two critical junctures, namely the Malian opening to negotiations with jihadist groups and the deployment of the Wagner Group in Mali, that resulted in France's withdrawal/expulsion from Mali. Thus, large-base dissatisfaction in Mali, triggered by both the heavy militarisation and asymmetric interdependence – the root causes– acted as a driver for changes in the regional security context. This section will provide an insight of the Malian military junta's willingness to engage in talks with JNIM and Wagner's deployment, adding a piece to explain

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[333] RFI, "Mali – Choguel K. Maïga: 'Pourquoi Je Parle de Trahison," *Youtube*, February 22, 2022, 6:25.
[334] Ibid., 1:30, 3:40.
[335] Africanews, "Mali: Vers un Report des Élections?," *Africanews*, September 27, 2021.

the outcome. Both turning points, or rather the combination of them, damaged the already precarious relations between Mali and France, driving Macron to announce the withdrawal of France's troops from Mali.

3.4.1.   Mali Opening Up to JNIM Amid France's Reluctance

Bogged down in a mutually damaging deadlock with both sides being unable to achieve the final blow, the Malian government and the jihadist coalition JNIM have expressed tentative willingness to consider negotiations over settling their conflict by military operations. Anti-jihadists military operations have yielded mixed results. Although they have caused significant losses on JNIM, they didn't stamp out the menace, nor have they secured zones they had recaptured from the militants. By the by, being France the driving force of foreign military operations in the region, the reconfiguration of its efforts compounded Mali's position.

On the other hand, the four *katibas* (battalions) operating under JNIM's banner had established strongholds throughout central and northern Mali. Ansar Dine had power over the northern and eastern Kidal, the Katiba Macina controlled the Mopti and Segou regions, al-Furqan put down roots in northern and western Timbuktu while south-eastern Timbuktu was a al-Mourabitoun's sanctuary, together with northern Gao.[336] Since 2017, JNIM has gradually strengthened its control over these regions, entered into adjacent Burkina Faso, and expanded into southern and western Mali, as well as into western Niger. However, despite its widespread influence, JNIM wouldn't be likely to overcome the enemies and force them to retreat. Figure no. 8 shows JNIM's strongholds in Mali.

The war of attrition that was wearing down both the jihadist organisation and FAMa compelled the two sides to soften their anti-negotiation stances. Already at the beginning of 2020, Mali was prone to explore dialogue with the jihadist insurgents, even if president Keïta has always declared himself a resolute opponent

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[336] International Crisis Group, *Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM* (Bamako/Dakar/Brussels: ICG, 2021).

of such talks.[337] His change of heart was to be attributed to mounting mass killings of civilians and large-scale raids, resulting in an escalation of the security crisis, as well as to Malian people's demand to open up to jihadists. High representative for central Mali, Dioncounda Traoré ushered in a breakthrough by sending emissaries to test the ground for initiating talks.[338]
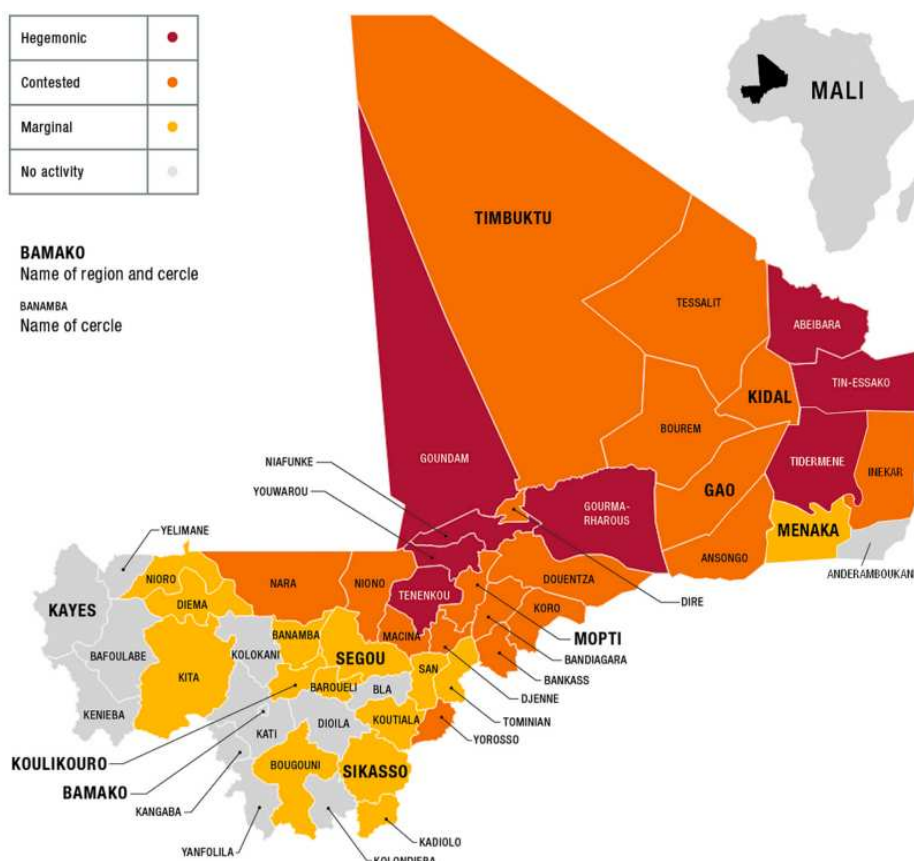

Figure 8: JNIM's penetration in Mali.

Source: International Crisis Group, Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM (Bamako/Dakar/Brussels: ICG, 2021).

Dialogue was thwarted by the first military coup that ousted Keïta. Yet, the transitional authorities supported the line of engagement with jihadists, being coherent with the will of the Malian people.[339] Certainly, the interim government's

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[337] RFI, "Le Président Malien IBK Announce un Dialogue avec les Chefs Djihadistes," *RFI*, February 10, 2020.

[338] Studio Tamani, "Dialogue avec les Djihadistes : des Émissaires Chez Iyad et Kouffa," *Studio Tamani*, January 23, 2020.

[339] David Baché and Marc Perelman, "Moctar Ouane, Premier Ministre Malien : 'Chacun Joue sa Partition au Gouvernement'," *RFI*, December 4, 2020.

roadmap set dialogue with militants as a core priority. Indeed, the cabinet's action plan drawn up by Prime Minister Ouane envisaged a mending relationship between discontented citizens and the state before reaching out to the jihadist leaders to lay the groundwork for dialogue. Notwithstanding that, the last stage of the plan involved an increase in military operations aiming to undermine the insurgents.[340] Although the junta's leader Goïta was in favour of dialogue in order to mitigate dissent, a second coup overthrowing the interim premier along with president N'Daw foiled the plan.

It is fair to specify that the transitional authorities' line has been ambiguous. The military junta appointed a new Prime Minister, Choguel Kokalla Maïga, who included talks with jihadists in his action plan, complying with the widespread public demand.[341] However, continuous pressure from France, threatening to pull out its troops as long as Mali engaged in dialogue, eventually led the interim authorities to refrain from supporting negotiations with JNIM's leadership.[342] Indeed, in October 2021, when France had already announced Barkhane's reconfiguration, the government clarified that no official had been assigned to start negotiation, while expressing gratitude to those who had stepped up. In a nutshell, vis-à-vis dialogue with JNIM, "the government has at best taken two steps forward and one step back".[343] Thus, dialogue was not off the table.

France was convinced of leveraging its military assistance to sway the Malian position. Its hardline opposition, which stemmed from its concern that dialogue would legitimate JNIM's requests and empower jihadists to attempt enforcing their interpretation of Islam in Mali, represented a major obstacle. In November 2020, a French airstrike killing a JNIM senior commander Bah ag Moussa Diarra and

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[340] International Crisis Group, *Mali: Enabling Dialogue*.
[341] Primature de la République du Mali, "Plan d'Action du Gouvernement de Transition 2021-2022," July 2021, p. 22.
[342] François Clemenceau, "Les Confidences de Macron en Afrique," *Le Journal du Dimanche*, May 29, 2021.
[343] International Crisis Group, *Mali: Enabling Dialogue*.

sabotaging rapprochement's attempts provides an example.[344] On that occasion, Malian media condemned the raid as France's interference to achieve its will.

JNIM was equally reticent about opening up to dialogue with Malian authorities while foreign troops were stationed on Malian territory. Insurgents urged the government to sever its ties with France in order to start talks and claimed that the government was delaying the process. Thus, dialogue hinged on the withdrawal of French and international forces.[345]According to JNIM's leaders, dialogue with the Malian government was a tool for throwing foreign troops out of Mali, indeed. JNIM held a strong grudge against France for its colonial history in the region and for ending their brief control in the north of Mali with Opération Serval in 2013. However, JNIM aimed to prevent France from achieving victory rather than defeating the French forces in combat. JNIM aims to engage France in a lengthy conflict that would tire out its military until Paris no longer wanted to continue fighting.

Following France's reconfiguration of Barkhane, the possibility of negotiating with the jihadist insurgents could have gained the upper hand, given the military stalemate. However, the French troops' halving was likely to shift the balance of power in favour of JNIM, dwindling the Malian government's negotiating strength. Yet, domestic pressure calling for dialogue could compel Mali to pursue this path amid France's opposition.

3.4.2.   The Wagner Group's Deployment in Mali

In September 2021, the British news agency Reuters leaked that Mali and the Russian private military company (from now on, PMC) Wagner Group closed a deal that would allow the deployment of a thousand Wagner mercenaries to Mali

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[344] Antoine Delpierre, "Mali: Mort du Haut Responsable Djihadiste Ba Ag Moussa," *TV5 Monde*, November 13, 2020.
[345] Al-Zallaqa Media Foundation, "On calls for negotiations," *Al-Zallaqa Media Foundation*, March 8, 2020.

for $10.8 million a month.[346] The reports sparked alarm in France, which stressed the necessity to persuade the Malian junta not to move forward with the deal and dispatch high-ranking diplomats to Moscow and Bamako for discussions. The Wagner Group's hallmark is indeed its melding of mercenary endeavours, aligned with the Kremlin's geopolitical goals, with opportunities for profitable natural resource extraction in the countries where they are active. In Mali the Russian PMC could presumably be on the hunt for accessing some of the gold, uranium, and bauxite mines. The deployment of Wagner fighters in Mali fitted the Russian pattern of sending mercenaries to support struggling African leaders, providing substantial leverage for minimal investment. From the Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Drian's point of view, such a scheme would be incompatible with Operation Barkhane, implying that the two factions couldn't cohabit.[347] Mali embarking on a new course frightened also its Sahelian partners: the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Niger Hassaoumi Massoudou denounced that the Wagner Group would further exacerbate the already vulnerable security situation in the broader Sahel region.[348] Refuting the allegations, the Malian Prime Minister deplored France's reconfiguration of Barkhane, being announced without prior debate, and asserted that Mali needed to fill the vacuum left by France's desertion, being entitled to choose any partner.[349] Moreover, the transitional authorities dismissed Massoudou's offensive tirade and clarified that the Mali-Russia relationship's allegation was based on a rumour that fell under a campaign of Mali's denigration and demonisation of its leaders.[350]

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[346] John Irish and David Lewis, "Exclusive Deal Allowing Russian Mercenaries into Mali is Close – sources," *Reuters*, September 13, 2021.

[347] Assemblée Nationale, "Commission des Affaires Étrangères: M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, ministre de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères – Mardi 14 Septembre 2021," *Dailymotion*, September 15, 2021, 1:56:30.

[348] Christophe Boisbouvier, "Hassoumi Massaoudou: au Mali, pour la Cédéao, «les Élections Sont Notre Priorité»," *RFI*, September 17, 2021.

[349] UNGA, United Nation, "Mali- Prime Minister Addresses United Nations General Debate, 76th Session," *Youtube*, September 26, 2021, 13:33.

[350] Ministère des Affaires Étrangères du Mali (@MaliMaeci), "Communiqué du Gouvernement de la République du Mali," X image, September 19, 2021.

After arriving in Mali by the end of December 2021, Wagner troops started building a base near Bamako's Modibo Keïta International Airport, southwest of Airbase 101, which was believed to be used by Russian and Wagner agents to help their deployment to Mali.[351] A more detailed analysis revealed the building of a fresh entrance route to this location, which was shielded by a series of defensive barriers.[352] French government sources also reported the construction of military tents, transport trucks, and armoured vehicles,[353] as well as frequent air movements by Russian military transport planes.[354] Moreover, Russian operatives expanded their operation to central Mali and to the city of Timbuktu, taking over former vacated Barkhane's bases.[355] Although the precise extent and scope of Wagner's operations in Mali has always been fuzzy, they were believed to train FAMa and provide protection to high-ranking government officials.[356] In any case, it seemed to be more likely that the Malian junta sought assistance primarily to strengthen its domestic political position, rather than effectively tackling insecurity.

Nevertheless, Malian officials consistently rejected the presence of Wagner's operatives and claimed to collaborate only with the Russian trainers, as part of operational capacity building's activities.[357] According to these statements, the Bamako's military junta would exclusively be engaged in a government-to-government relationship with the Russian Federation, a longstanding ally Mali had signed a military cooperation agreement with in 2019.

Western countries, for their part, denounced that Wagner-linked actors had capitalised on Malian domestic dissatisfaction with the security situation and broad-based pro-Russian sentiment for expanding their influence in sub-Saharan

[351] Jared Thompson, Catrina Doxsee, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr, "Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, February 2, 2022.
[352] Ibid.
[353] Morgan Le Cam, Cyril Bensimon, and Elise Vincent, "Paris et Ses Alliés Dénoncent le Déploiement du Group Wagner au Mali," *Le Monde*, December 24, 2021.
[354] France 24, "Mali Denies Deployment of Russian Mercenaries from Wagner Group," *France 24,* December 25, 2021.
[355] Reuters, "Russian Troops Deploy to Timbuktu in Mali after French Withdrawal," *Reuters*, January 6, 2022.
[356] Irish and Lewis, "Exclusive Deal Allowing Russian."
[357] Amb. Abdoulaye Diop (@AbdoulayeDiop8), "Communiqué no. 004 du Gouvernement de la Transition," X image, December 24, 2021.

Africa. Yet, on the other hand, Malian people bore a grudge against French (perceived) neo-colonialism and unilateral actions, whereas France utopically wanted to reduce its engagement while retaining power. Russian involvement fell into the Malian junta's lap since it provided an alternative for addressing the void left by France scaling back its role in handling Mali's security issues, satisfying Mali's quest for a plan B.

Converging with the Russian PMC's deployment, on November 7th, 2021, Mali's interim military authorities abandoned the agreements to hand over power to a civilian government, protracting the transitional period up to five years until elections were held in 2026. In response, ECOWAS hit the country with harsh sanctions, which included shutting down air and land borders, recalling ambassadors, and suspending Mali from regional financial organisations.[358] Mali claimed that ECOWAS was a puppet in the hands of Western powers, which were instrumentalizing it, but France dismissed such a critique.[359] At this stage, tension was high and Mali criticised the unbalanced partnership with the traditional-ally and former colonial ruler, while publicly turning to Russia.

Subsequently, Sweden declared that it would be removing its 150 troops from Takuba due to concerns about the nature of Malian ties with the Wagner Groups. Moreover, also in January 2022, Mali turned down the deployment of Danish troops to the task force because of the lack of formal approval.[360] Malian officials also stated that Norway, Hungary, and Portugal lacked official authorization at that moment of their deployment.[361] This is coherent with Malian Prime Minister Maïga's accusation of France stationing boots on Mali's soil in 2013 without prior and formal authorization.[362] In response to Denmark's redeployment, French officials asserted that the junta was leveraging Wagner to secure its illegitimate

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[358] ECOWAS, "4th Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government on the Political Situation in Mali," Accra: ECOWAS, January 9, 2022.

[359] Al Jazeera, "Mali 'strongly condemns' ECOWAS sanctions; closes land borders," *Al Jazeera*, January 10, 2022.

[360] Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale et de la Décentralisation, "Communiqué no. 15 du Gouvernement de la Transition," *Facebook image*, January 26, 2022.

[361] Ibid.

[362] RFI, "Mali – Choguel K. Maïga."

authority, while cautioning against partnering with the PMC. After weeks of verbal escalation and following the hostile comments made by French officials, Mali demanded the departure of the French ambassador within 72 hours, according to a decree read out during the news on national television, on January 31st, 2022.[363] The announcement sparked off large-scale demonstrations, pouring into the streets of Bamako and cheering at the expulsion of the French representative. In a nutshell, Mali was moving towards a decisive showdown since it aimed to take control of the security cooperation bilaterally instead of being subject to France's orientations. As a response to the increasing tension with the erstwhile partner, on February 17th, 2022, Macron announced its withdrawal of troops and military resources from Mali and, despite the military junta requested to speed up, the French military completed its exit in mid-August 2022.

3.5. FINDINGS

The sequence of events analysed in the course of the chapter relates the heavy militarisation of the counterinsurgency operation (X_1) and the asymmetric interdependence (X_2) – that developed between France and Mali within the operational framework of the G5S-JF – with the withdrawal of France's troops from Mali (Y) through a series of intervening mechanisms (M). Process tracing demonstrates that the no single event examined here is assigned with explanatory power, rather it is the combination and sequence of various events. On the basis of what has been illustrated in the preliminary methodology paragraph, the smoking gun test is ruled out, but in order to pass the hoop test, X_1 and X_2 must be necessary for the intervening variables, which in turn must be sufficient for Y.

As such, it has been explained how the excessive militarisation of the COIN has exacerbated the vicious circle of violence and instability throughout the region,

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[363] Reuters, "Mali Expels Paris Envoy Over 'Hostile and Outrageous' French Comments," *Reuters*, January 31, 2022.

causing a violent outcry from the Malian population. Similarly, the asymmetric interdependence, a flaw in the SFA system, has meant that, relying excessively on French assistance, Mali and the coalition of Sahelian states it was part of, failed to develop ownership over the security context's responses. This alarmed Mali's public opinion (starting from local military officials working in the Joint Force) which, seeing no benefit from the French intervention, gave rise to a wave of anti-French protests. For its part, popular dissatisfaction with the security framework has been the driver that triggered the military coups of 2020 and 2021 (M_1), as well as Barkane's reconfiguration (M_2). Therefore, X_1 and X_2, conveyed by the echo of the Malian dissatisfaction, were necessary conditions for M_1 and M_1 to occur.

First, although corruption played a role in setting off the coups, the characteristics of the coups' leader are shaped by the unstable security situation and dissatisfaction within the security system. Indeed, FAMa's popularity over political figureheads, the widespread support for military rule, and the discontent with IBK's security strategy and adherence to the external precept, indicate that the coups required dissatisfaction with the pre-existing security framework. Moreover, the CNSP prioritising security-centric strategies indicates that issues it was mostly concerned about fell within the security field. Second, the failure of France's strategy, emphasising the militarisation instead of addressing the root causes of instability, unleashed Malian resentment which compelled Macron to restructure Barkhane. Besides Macron officially spelling out that the reconfiguration was to be expected as a result of the opposition shown by local people, an evidence that France's strategic partial withdrawal was due to dissatisfaction lies in the Barkane's reorientation to the tri-border region of Liptako Gourma, an area more favourable to the French operation.

Prior to the coup, the CNSP was subjected to IBK's civilian political authority and its France-friendly administration. For these reasons it is argued to be a disadvantaged actor and, as such, leveraged the unbalanced power dynamics within the local political élite and the Malian dissatisfaction to overthrow IBK's regime. Once in power, the CNSP and the transitional authorities displayed other

preferences and reoriented the Malian's security trajectory. It follows that they were actors of change vi-à-vis the Malian security landscape.

M_1 and M_1 entered a feedback loop leading to France's withdrawal. The transitional authorities were keen to open up to the jihadists to appease instability, which France opposed. The penchant for negotiating with armed jihadists groups marks a clear evidence of misalignment with France's strategies. Barkhane's restructuring impacted too, since it was a difficult move to reverse. This decision also sparked disapproval from the interim government and paved the way for a military collaboration with the Russian PSC Wagner Group. These patterns further strengthened Mali's alignment with institutional challengers. As such, Mali's bent for dialogue with the jihadists (M_3), as well as Wagner's deployment (M_4) influenced France's decision to withdraw, working as sufficient contributing variables for the outcome Y. Wagner's deployment, although being denied by the military junta, worsened operational synergies between the two sides. The deteriorating relations escalated further with a cycle of verbal insults and diplomatic feuds, including France questioning the legitimacy of the transitional government and Mali expelling the French ambassador. The interim authority was willing to win the trial of strength with France and recalibrate the power balance. It made it clear that France was facing an actor able to *displace* and *convert* steady arrangements, which could potentially pressure France's operational autonomy. The path dependence is evident in the irreversible adoption of new normative stances by France and Mali, leading to increasing tension until Macron's announcement of the withdrawal.

In line with the requirements of the hoop test, the hypothesis is bolstered, though not validated. Evidence suggests that France delayed withdrawing because a shift in state authority was necessary to spark the tension, since IBK's governance was highly reliant on France. The exogenous shock given by the restructuring of Barkhane weakened the France-Mali relationship and triggered a sequence of events, inexorably contributing to the outcome. Moreover, the occurrence of the contributing variables M_3 and M_4 is perfectly coherent with the assumption that

power dynamics, which had given rise to the asymmetric interdependence (X_2), change as context changes, leading to a shift in the asymmetry between France and the Malian state.

CONCLUSION

The thesis discussed the relationship between France and Mali within the framework of military cooperation in the War on Terror. Specifically, the thesis examined the reasons that led France, voluntarily or involuntarily, to withdraw from Mali in August 2022. Indeed, the decade-long armed conflict in the Sahel seemed to be at a turning point with the redeployment of Barkhane's – France's counterinsurgency mission that had been under way in many Sahelian countries since 2014 – and the fresh Russia's role as security actor in the region.

The thesis provided an innovative angle of the breakdown of relations between France and Mali, as it sought to explain the outcome in light of historical institutionalism, aiming to identify institutional changes in the security skeleton that pushed the two sides to undertake different trajectories. Since HI recognizes the key role that power dynamics play in understanding the endogenous alterations that disrupt the self-reinforcing pattern of institutions, in order to answer the research question, the thesis investigated the power dynamics between France and Mali within the cadre of G5S-JF, an *ad hoc* regional military coalition spurred by the former colonial power to better harmonise efforts for the securitization of the region.

France's military intervention in Mali in 2013 marked a new path in French military policy, since it adopted a multilateral approach set against the backdrop of unilateral military tendency that sank its roots in its colonial past. Contrary to how it used to intervene through the mere self-legitimation when it was the *gendarme* of Africa, the Malian scenario provided France with the internationally recognised justification on the war on terrorism and organised crime. Moreover, terrorism is inextricably linked to the concept of state's fragility, a disease Mali is particularly affected by. Indeed, places characterised by the governmental inability to control the rural areas are believed to be likely to become terrorist sanctuaries. These rationales, besides the Sahelian authorities specifically calling for it, paved the way for France's intervention.

Another break with the past technique consisted in the practice of SFA. In fact, if before the French military replaced and substituted Francophone African armies, with the Malian conflict the idea of "African solutions to African problems" gained ground. The logic of SFA rested on giving guidance and training to the *forces armées Maliennes* to address their operational needs by providing expertise and advice, specifically in areas such as command and control, logistics, and human resources. However, this implied that the solution to the Sahelian crisis lay in the training of the local armies (and not in the national armies *per se*) and the responsibility fell on France, which was regarded as the security provider. Such a pattern crystallised the narrative of France as competent and skilled, while portraying Mali and the other G5S-JF member states as lacking in capacity. Besides, capacity-building might have been beneficial for strengthening the military efficiency of both the G5S-JF apparatus and member states' structures, but it appointed France (as well as other provider actors) a pivotal role within the intra-relational dynamics, questioning the G5S-JF and its member states' sub-regional ownership over the security responses.

The thesis highlighted that the reliance on France was exacerbated within the three levels of warfare, where the power dynamics resulted in France taking on a quasi-hegemonic role. Indeed, the absence of a clear leader or unity among G5 member states affected the efficiency of the coalition's chain of command and made it susceptible to external influences. At the strategic level, France capitalised on the tensions among the G5S-JF member states for taking the lead of strategic planning, goal-settings, and resource allocation. It goes without saying that the primary consequence of a supply-driven and foreign-owned security sector was the lack of a strategic framework defined by JF's chain of command. At the operational level, the French personnel has enhanced the JF efficiency, but it did not facilitate the handover of administrative responsibility. Furthermore, in 2020 the G5S-JF embarked on a shared command structure with Barkhane, and this arrangement has brought the Malian dependence on France to the highest degree. The thesis argued that the shared command was a gimmick for France to gain more control

over the region. At the tactical level, beside training and supplying equipment provisions, Barkhane conducted joint operations, boosting the troops' efficiency. Therefore, once again, France has taken over a competence and a role that should have belonged to the member states of the JF.

The thesis stressed the fact that, despite the end goal of Barkhane being to transfer responsibility, France's SFA deresponsibilised its African partners and made them reliant on its presence. Indeed, France has generated a contingent efficiency, as the G5S-JF remained dependent on external involvement, rather than a sustainable efficiency. Yet, Mali and the other JF's member states managed to make the dependence mutual through making themselves crucial for France to gain legitimacy and exert influence over the region. As a matter of fact, since the Sahelian countries have performed agency by managing to some extent external actors' intervention and selecting which support to accept, both sides took advantage – though in varying degrees – from their relational power dynamics. Drawing up to the extraversion theory, the thesis argued that the G5S-JF has performed agency by effectively using France' interests in the region to its advantage. Hence, although to different extent, there has been an interdependence going both ways, that the G5S-JF appeared to recognize and be willing to leverage for burden-sharing in the Sahel security context.

Nevertheless, the interdependence showed clear signs of asymmetry since the Sahelian states needed France for ensuring their survival, under threat from the terrorist march, while France relied on the local partners for consolidating its influence over the region and managing menace that could reach on the doorstep of Europe. The asymmetric interdependence suggested that agents possess varying capabilities that can be leveraged for other aspects of the relationship. The development of such a kind of power relation has certainly benefited France, as for almost ten years it has remained firmly anchored to its former colonies, taking advantage in terms of influence, natural resources, international political prestige, and economic opportunities. Similarly, local political *élites* tapped into France's military engagement in the Sahel for acquiring the legitimacy on the international

arena they sought out, as well as access to resources that fostered their domestic support. This cooperation was thus beneficial for both external actors aspiring to hold influence in the Sahel and African authorities looking to strengthen their corrupted, neo-patrimonial, and clientelistic political power.

The thesis defended that the deeper reasons behind France's withdrawal from Mali must be sought in this asymmetric pattern. In fact, the power dynamics that favoured France and the small circle of local governments left the Malian population in the shadow of the benefits elicited by the military coalition. It is precisely the unbalanced distribution of power dynamics – on the basis of which norms and practices have crystallised and perpetuated – that compelled the disadvantaged actor to cast about a change that could reorient the stabilised path; a change that was only possible after a coup that displaced the pro Western élites. Indeed, as a power dynamic, asymmetric interdependence is not fixed and conforms with changing contexts, reflecting the stances of those driving it.

Alongside the asymmetric interdependence, the counterinsurgency mission carried out by France through Operation Barkhane has focused excessively on capacity-building and neutralising the enemy, at the expense of fostering governance's adjustments that would have addressed the root causes of the regional crisis. Moreover, militarisation spurred government abuse: it hinted at the threat of terrorism to engage in arbitrary arrests and electoral fraud. For its part, abusive governments have boosted jihadist activities rather than tackle them. In a nutshell, the excessive militarisation of COIN has increased the level of instability over the region, exposing the Malian population to severe threat. A strong anti-French sentiment was beginning to take hold indeed, and the Malian people called for France's withdrawal from the state.

The thesis claimed that heavy militarisation and the asymmetric interdependence lay at the basis of Opération Barkhane's failure and ushered in an intense Malian dissatisfaction with the security framework, which in turn acted as a fuse that set off events leading to France's expulsion from Mali. Indeed, HI the dissertation draws on allows with "reactive sequence", namely chain of events occurring after

a trigger, to infer causal mechanisms. Deeming that the timing and the order of events are crucial for causal inferences, HI highlights the importance of process tracing and calls for an in-depth analysis.

The popular dissatisfaction and the impatience of Malians vis-à-vis France's presence and security arrangements provided legitimacy to the 2020 and 2021 coups that overthrew the corrupt regime of IBK. The military putsches stand for the first intervening variable leading to France's withdrawal since, by overturning the democratic institutions, the transitional authority CNSP *displaced* the institutional framework and marked a turning point which was likely to divert the path. The dissatisfaction with the security framework was also a necessary condition for the rearrangement of Barkhane in the face of the new threat scenario, which represents the second intervening mechanism. The Malian junta soured on the French mission's reconfiguration. France was accused of stepping back from the collective fight, leaving precarious FAMa, which was suffering the majority of casualties in the battle, to handle the Salafist extremist groups. France was also held responsible for leaving a vacuum without anchoring government control. Due to the drives of the actors of change, Mali's new political scene and the reconfiguration of Barkhane entered a feedback loop contributing to the outcome. The thesis maintained that these events primed the pump for two critical *junctures*, namely the Malian opening to negotiations with jihadist groups and the deployment of the Wagner Group in Mali, that resulted in France's withdrawal/expulsion from Mali.

First, both the Malian military authority and the leaders of the jihadist coalition JNIM showed a tentative willingness to engage in negotiations instead of relying solely on military tactics. This bent denoted a clear sign of the military junta's deviance from French policy. However, continuous pressure from France, threatening to pull out its troops as long as Mali engaged in dialogue, eventually led the interim authorities to refrain from supporting negotiations with JNIM's leadership. For a short time, France leveraged its military assistance to sway the Malian position. Simultaneously, the rift between Paris and Bamako grew after the

junta established security ties with Moscow. The cleavage solidified when the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-linked private military company, sent mercenary troops to Mali in late 2021 to fill the gap left by France. The deployment caused multiple European Union countries to pull out of the French-led Takuba Task Force, a multinational special-forces unit launched to contribute to Barkhane. The Mali-Wagner alignment sparked alarm in France, which stressed the necessity to persuade the Malian junta not to move forward with the deal since such a scheme was incompatible with Operation Barkhane. These patterns reinforced Mali's connection with institutional challengers and made it harder to stick to the decade-long path. Mali engaging with the jihadists and Wagner's deployment counted heavily towards France's exit, making them more than sufficient contributing factors for the outcome. As such, the path dependency lay in the irreversibility of France and Mali's normative position, escalating until, following diplomatic skirmishes and verbal insults, Macron announced Barkhane's withdrawal from Mali on February 17th, 2022.

Process tracing demonstrates that the no single event examined here is assigned with explanatory power, rather it is the combination and sequence of the above-mentioned events. Since heavy militarisation (X_1) and asymmetric interdependence (X_2), driven by the popular dissatisfaction, have been necessary for the coups to take place (M_1) and Barkhane's reconfiguration (M_2), which led to Mali's rapprochement to JNIM (M_3) and Wagner Group's deployment (M_4), which in turn primed the pump for France's withdrawal (Y), the hypothesis put forward by the thesis is bolstered.

The dissertation, thus, showed that the hypothesis' arguments are strengthened, although other explanatory courses are possible. The thesis, capturing several contributing variables in the timeline commented upon, leaves spaces to consider alternative hypotheses to clarify the result. Indeed, finding the deeper causes of the French withdrawal in the asymmetric interdependence and the excessive militarisation may apply in the Malian case, yet it doesn't explain why Chad and Mauritania haven't undertaken a similar path, leading to the breakdown of

relations with France. Perhaps, the distribution of power was not as unbalanced as it was in Mali and, therefore, didn't stimulate the subordinate actors to impose a change that realigned the arrangements. Alternatively, on the contrary, the allocation could be so disproportionately in favour of France and local authorities that the actors of change didn't find room to set off alterations, surrendering to the self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating character of the path. Nonetheless, Chad and Mauritania's armies stood out among the strongest within the JF, this could have played in favour of a coup attempt that, as happened in Mali, could have led to the two countries to take new courses. Another clue is provided by Marsh and Rolandsen, who argue that in Mali, security force assistance has contributed to a crowded and uncoordinated *milieu* – or, as Cold-Ravnkilde would call it, traffic jam – in which at least twenty separate programmes at times operated at cross-purposes.[364] They claimed that overcrowded and uncoordinated SFA exacerbated the tendencies for fragmentation in the Malian security sector, spelling out its failure. It could be the case that, not being the target of so many capacity-building and peacekeeping projects from different providers, in Chad and Mauritania the assistance offered by France within the SFA framework, although creating asymmetric interdependence, yielded overall benefits, without running up against fragmentation risk. What is certain is that literature has not focused on this aspect and a research on the matter would promote a better understanding of broader dynamics.

The thesis's scope is constrained but enlarging the picture and adding further time and space indicators, as well as introducing more events and actors, may affect the hypothesis's validity and create new hypotheses. In process tracing, having a strong theoretical background is essential to develop hypotheses or derive generalizable results through induction. The departure of France would likely lead to additional studies on the military capabilities of the local armed forces in the Sahel region, alongside potential collaboration between Wagner and FAMa. The

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[364] Marsh and Rolandsen, "Fragmented We Fall," 624.

establishment of the Sahelian States Alliance involving Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger also offers an alternative route to analyse the military forces' effectiveness in combat. Moreover, considering the similar outcomes in Burkina Faso and Niger, it would be beneficial to analyse the timeline in these countries and compare explanatory variables in the coup-volution wave.

Precisely taking into account new developments in the region and the replication of the Malian pattern in Burkina Faso and Niger – from which the French presence was declared unwelcome respectively in 2022 and 2023 – a research defining a new trend in French military policy in its former colonies could be carried out. The work of Chafer, Cumming, and van der Velde,[365] who analysed the shift in France's approach to military interventions from unilateralism to multilateralism, paves the way for considering a possible and necessary reconfiguration of France's approach increasingly resembling disengagement. Following the theory of path-dependence, it stands to reason that, if French military withdrawal finds correspondence in other realities of the sub-Saharan region such as Ivory Coast and Benin, the traits of a new French disengaged posture towards its African partners are likely to acquire generalised characteristics in the near future.

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[365] See Tony Chafer, Gordon D. Cumming, and Roel van der Velde, "France's Interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A Historical Institutionalist Perspective," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 4 (March 2020).

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