



THE SAHEL SEEKS SOVEREIGNTY



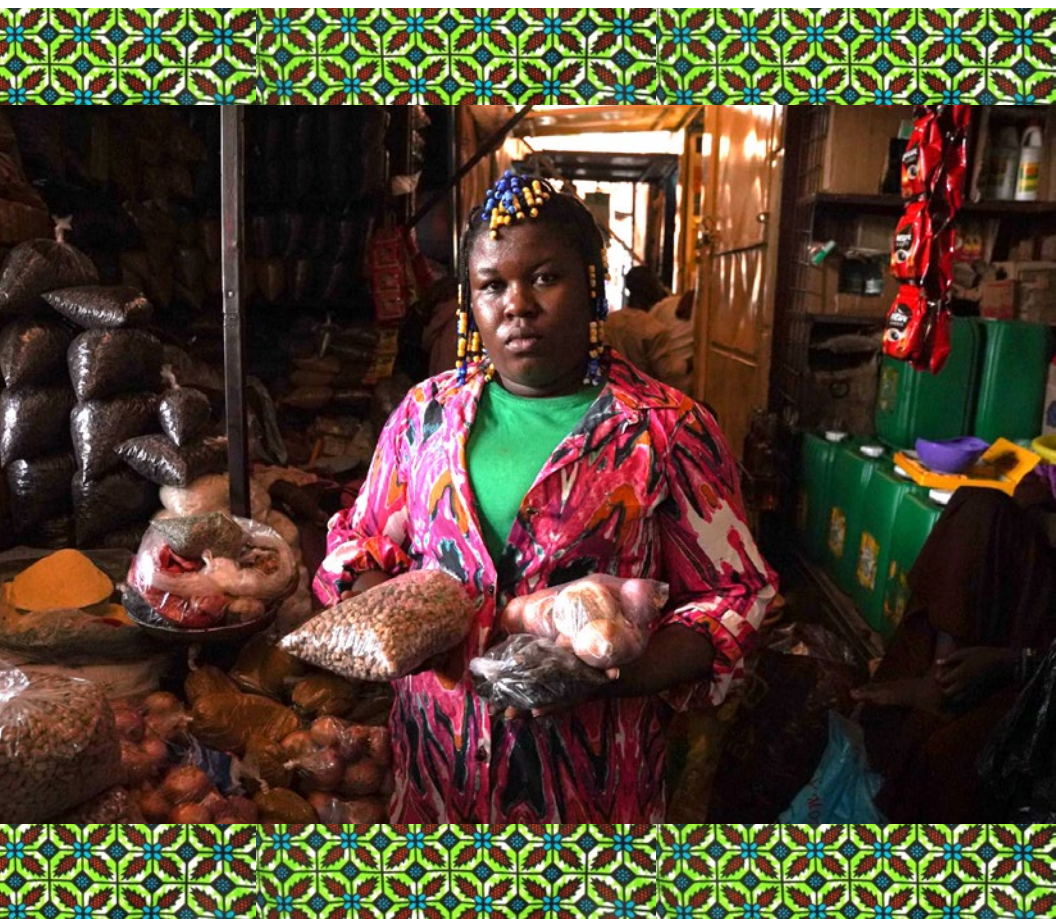
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The images in this dossier highlight the everyday life of working-class people in the Sahel, who form the base of the region's popularly supported military coups. Taken by Pedro Stropasolas (*Brasil de Fato*), the photographs document scenes from the International Conference in Solidarity with the Peoples of the Sahel in Niamey, Niger (November 2024), from Sakété, Benin (July 2025), and from Ouagadougou and Koubri, Burkina Faso (July 2025).

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Introduction

In September 2023, coming on the heels of coups led by progressive factions of the military, the heads of state of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger met in Bamako (Mali) to sign the *Charter of Liptako-Gourma Establishing the Alliance of Sahel States* (AES).¹ Article VI of the charter stipulates that:

Any violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of one or more contracting parties shall be considered as an aggression against the other parties and shall give rise to a duty of assistance and relief by all the parties, individually or collectively, including the use of armed force, to restore and ensure security within the area covered by the alliance.²

The move to form the AES was a direct response to the threat of military intervention in Niger by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) following the country's popularly supported military coup. ECOWAS, along with the African Union (AU), also imposed sanctions and suspended the memberships of all three AES member states following their respective coups: Mali in August 2020, Burkina Faso in January 2022, and Niger in July 2023.

In January 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger jointly announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS. The decision, which became official in January 2025, was justified as follows:

The brave peoples of Burkina, Mali, and Niger note with deep regret and great disappointment that the organisation [ECOWAS] has strayed from the ideals of its founding fathers and from Pan-Africanism. It no longer serves the interests of its peoples but has instead become a threat to its member states and populations, whose happiness it is supposed to guarantee.³

The leaders of the AES – Mali’s Assimi Goïta, Burkina Faso’s Ibrahim Traoré, and Niger’s Abdourahamane Tchiani – are united by their emergence from popular coups and their impatience with ECOWAS’s pro-Western politics. They represent a new generation of military officers channelling widespread public frustration with French neocolonialism, and their withdrawal from ECOWAS is rooted in the bloc’s historical limitations.

Though ECOWAS was established in 1975 with the Pan-African rhetoric of leaders like Ghana’s General Acheampong, who promised that this new regional organisation would ‘remove centuries of division and artificial barriers imposed on West Africa from outside’, it was always a limited project. In reality, it was established to focus on economic issues, such as creating a common market, without serious aims for political integration.⁴ This limited scope was immediately hobbled by internal divisions and, more significantly, competing external loyalties. The parallel francophone West African Economic Community (CEAO), backed by France, often subverted the bloc’s goals. This was demonstrated during the Chadian crisis of 1979–1981, when France and the CEAO undermined Nigeria’s peacekeeping mission, turning it into a failure for ECOWAS and a

victory for their own bloc. Similarly, existing military pacts between France and its former colonies stymied efforts to create a common defence strategy.⁵

It is this history of internal division and persistent foreign influence that informs the AES perspective today. The alliance argues that ECOWAS now acts as a regional enforcer of external interests, betraying its founding principles by falling ‘under the influence of foreign powers’.⁶ Consequently, at the Niamey summit where the AES was launched, the member states affirmed that their withdrawal from ECOWAS is definitive, even as they plan transitions to civilian rule.

Though mainstream security institutions, political commentators, and non-governmental agencies acknowledged the failure of ECOWAS and other security partnerships to provide meaningful security in the region, they widely condemned the steps taken by the AES as ‘a huge blow to a regional integration project’ that would likely increase ‘greater fractures’ and ‘exacerbate the worsening [security] situation’ in the region.⁷ Yet, a counternarrative is forming across the Sahel. From the perspective not only of the AES’s political leaders but also local grassroots organisations and the broader population, the alliance was forged in the crucible of the broader contemporary insecurities and inequalities faced by many Global South countries actively grappling with questions of sovereignty and development. For AES members, 2023 marked a collective rupture with failed security arrangements (such as the G5 Sahel), the delegitimised leadership of regional bodies like ECOWAS and the AU, and long-standing and unequal political entanglements with the

European Union, France, and the United States – all underpinned by decades of neoliberal economic policy.*

This dossier explores the emergence of the AES and seeks to stimulate a debate on the current conjuncture in the region. We see this new formation as an example of anti-imperialist regionalism within the broader context of how Global South states navigate sovereignty, dependency, and internal-external security challenges. It invites reflection and debate on the meaning and implications of this return to the path of sovereignty – not as nostalgic nationalism, but as a bold and necessary attempt to reclaim political autonomy, economic self-determination, and civilisational dignity in the face of hyper-imperialism.



* The historical paths taken by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to address their colonial legacies differ in significant ways. Mali attempted to pursue a socialist agenda in the 1960s, which was thwarted by a 1968 coup; Burkina Faso embarked on a state-led sovereign development project between 1983–1987, which ended with the assassination of Thomas Sankara; and Niger's leading anti-colonial groups were largely squashed in the early 1960s. While a full analysis of these differences lies outside the scope of this dossier, these three countries' shared historical experiences – such as French colonialism, neocolonial economic arrangements, frequent military coups, and mineral resource dependency – are sufficient commonalities to merit analysing them together.



From Colonial Rule to Flag Independence

Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are land-locked neighbours with significant portions of their territories straddling the southern edge of the Sahara. Together, they account for roughly 45% of West Africa's land mass and 17% of its population, or 73 million people combined (Niger, 26.2 million; Mali, 23.8 million; and Burkina Faso, 23 million).⁸ These nations share deeply rooted cultural norms, with a significant emphasis on communal values, oral traditions, a predominantly agrarian lifestyle, and societal structures and daily life profoundly influenced by the dominant religion, Islam.

Like much of West Africa, these countries experienced the contradictions of colonial rule most acutely during the Second World War. While the Normandy landings are among the most celebrated moments in French military history, what is often left out of this narrative is that many of the troops and labour corps who helped secure victory over Nazi Germany were Africans from French colonies, including what are now Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Their sacrifice on European soil contributed to a growing political awareness and laid the groundwork for postwar demands for equality and self-determination.⁹

In the wake of the war, and encouraged by the emerging socialist bloc, the call for independence accelerated. In Niger, for instance, the Nigerien Progressive Party (PPN) was founded in 1946 and

affiliated with the African Democratic Rally (RDA), a Pan-African, anti-colonial movement led by figures such as Modibo Keita in Mali and Ahmed Sékou Touré in Guinea. The RDA initially demanded equal treatment with French citizens but quickly shifted toward demanding full independence. In Burkina Faso, the Voltaic Union (UV) party joined the RDA in hopes of building a regionally coordinated national liberation front, though the UV ultimately dissolved under French pressure. This political awakening would lay the foundation for national liberation struggles in West Africa.

Following the costly defeat in Vietnam in 1954 and amid the escalating war in Algeria (1954–1962), France faced growing pressure at home and abroad. Fearing a total loss of economic and political influence in Africa, President Charles de Gaulle, newly returned to power, called for a referendum in 1958 as part of the new constitution of the Fifth Republic. The referendum offered African colonies two choices: vote ‘yes’ to remain part of the Franco-African Community, under French influence, (the so-called ‘transitional’ option, which promised deferred independence while keeping key powers in French hands), or vote ‘no’ for immediate independence, with the threat of sudden French withdrawal and looming economic instability. Djibo Bakary, the founder of the Sawaba party (meaning ‘freedom’ in Hausa) and later head of the Nigerien government after the first elections in 1957, led the ‘vote no’ campaign. In the end, only Guinea, under the leadership of Sékou Touré, successfully voted ‘no’, becoming the first West African French colony to gain independence in 1958.

Advocates for a full break with France, like Bakary, were met with domestic repression and sidelined by colonial collaborators, including traditional leaders, colonial administrators, and *évolués* (meaning ‘the evolved ones’, these were Africans who had been educated in French institutions, granted limited rights or status, and groomed to serve the colonial order).¹⁰ To sabotage the referendum in Niger and undermine Sawaba, which had also fought against French uranium exploitation, de Gaulle sent a new governor: Don Jean Colombani. The Colombani government used its full control over key state institutions – such as security, finance, and territorial administration – to launch a campaign of repression, intimidation, and even psychological warfare, most notably by dropping leaflets from planes warning that ‘no’ voters were enemies of the state.¹¹ Despite widespread public support for Sawaba, massive electoral fraud ensured a manufactured victory for the ‘vote yes’ campaign in Niger in 1958.

Nonetheless, the victory of Guinea’s ‘vote no’ campaign that same year, building on Ghana’s earlier independence from Britain in 1957, forced the French to cede more ground on the question of political independence, and in 1960, seventeen African countries – including fourteen former French colonies – declared independence. Yet this flag independence was achieved with no real economic transformation. French tutelage and discretion continued, and economic control was retained through a range of ‘cooperation’ agreements, including defence accords, technical assistance protocols, and financial arrangements such as the CFA franc system. One such agreement was the April 1961 defence accord signed by Côte d’Ivoire, Benin (formerly Dahomey), and Niger, which enabled ‘France’s unrestricted use’ of assets of military interest.¹² In the

case of Niger, France also maintained significant control through the following mechanisms, reflecting a broader pattern employed across the region:

- **Colonial debt regimes:** Niger was required to ‘reimburse’ France for colonial-era infrastructure, such as roads and schools constructed through forced labour.
- **Resource control:** France retained the right of first refusal over Niger’s strategic exports, particularly uranium, and French companies received preferential access to key sectors of the economy.
- **Tax exemptions:** Based on the principle of non-double taxation, French businesses operating in Niger paid taxes only in France and were exempt from local obligations – including duties, sales taxes such as value-added taxes, and even fuel taxes – which significantly undermined the country’s fiscal revenue.
- **Monetary dependency:** Niger was required to use the CFA franc, a currency issued and regulated by the French Treasury, limiting its control over monetary and fiscal policy.
- **Military entrenchment:** France maintained military bases and was granted ‘free use of military installations’. This included unrestricted movement on land, air, and waters; free access to transportation and communication infrastructure;

and the right to install aerial and maritime signalling and transmission systems.¹³

Furthermore, Annex II of the 1961 defence accord secured the military's role as an enforcer of French capital interests and economic policy in the signatory countries. Notably, Article I of the annex established two categories of strategic raw materials: 1) liquid or gaseous hydrocarbons; and 2) uranium, thorium, lithium, and beryllium, as well as their ores and compounds. Article II stated that 'the French Republic shall regularly inform the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, the Republic of Dahomey, and the Republic of Niger of the policy it intends to follow concerning strategic raw materials and products, taking into account the general needs of defence, the evolution of resources, and the *situation of the world market*' [emphasis added]. Article V stated that the Africans in turn had to ensure that France was 'kept informed of programmes and projects concerning the export outside the territory... of second-category raw materials and strategic products'. In addition, all three countries were required to 'facilitate, for the benefit of the French armed forces, the storage of strategic raw materials and products' and, when defence interests required it, 'limit or prohibit their export to other countries'.¹⁴ By embedding economic directives within military cooperation frameworks, the accord transformed the country's defence infrastructure into a tool for safeguarding French commercial and geopolitical interests.

Mali, too, attempted to assert its economic and political sovereignty in the years immediately following its independence in 1960. Under the leadership of Modibo Keita (1960–1968), the country pursued

socialist-oriented economic policies such as establishing state enterprises and adopting a national currency independent of the CFA franc in 1962 to break French monetary dominance. These efforts faced significant retaliation, including diplomatic isolation, trade restrictions, and the withdrawal of French technical and financial support, all of which contributed to a deepening economic crisis. The economic turmoil that followed enabled Lieutenant Moussa Traoré's French-backed military coup in 1968, leading Mali to rejoin the CFA franc zone in 1984.

As the Cold War ended, France shifted its Africa policy by introducing 'political conditionality' at the 1990 La Baule summit, with President Mitterrand declaring that French aid would be tied to so-called democratic reforms such as multiparty elections.¹⁵ This ushered in a wave of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) imposed across Africa in the 1980s, such as in Mali, where austerity measures, public sector cuts, and trade liberalisation accompanied the country's 1984 re-entry into the CFA franc zone. The 1990s ushered in a second wave of SAPs on the continent, especially after the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994, when the currency was halved in value under pressure from France, the IMF, and the World Bank. Framed as a measure to boost exports and restore financial stability, in reality the devaluation triggered sharp price increases, wage erosion, and widespread unrest across the region. This second phase combined economic liberalisation with donor-enforced governance reforms.¹⁶ While framed as democratisation, these changes reinforced neo-colonial control through debt, privatisation, and externally managed state restructuring.

These reconfigured instruments of domination were accompanied by the expansion of US military presence under the pretext of combatting terrorism. In 2002, the United States launched the Pan-Sahel Initiative, which marked the beginning of a sustained Western military presence in a number of countries in the region, including Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania, later expanding into Burkina Faso under its successor, the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership in 2005.

The regional security crisis was, as Mali's Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Maïga explained to the UN General Assembly in 2024, 'exacerbated by NATO's reckless military intervention in Libya in 2011'.¹⁷ The collapse of the Libyan state opened the floodgates for unregulated arms trade and growing terrorist activities. The bombing of what was then one of the most developed African states – with the highest Human Development Index figures on the continent and large infrastructural development projects such as the Great Man-Made River irrigation project – was widely seen as a turning point. It also undermined the African Union's Peace and Security Council, which was ready to send a mission to Libya's capital, Tripoli, when the first bombs were dropped.¹⁸

Following the 2011 bombing of Libya – again under the banner of counterterrorism – French and US military activities expanded significantly across the Sahel. New US drone operations, AFRI-COM-led training missions, and US and French military deployments and bases were established in Gao (Mali), N'Djamena (Chad), Niamey (Niger), and Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso). In 2014, French troops launched Operation Barkhane, consolidating

their regional presence and forming the G5 Sahel joint task force, which included Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.¹⁹ Yet terrorist activity has increased significantly in the decade since. Malian officials have repeatedly alleged that French military operations not only failed to contain terrorism but were in fact the drivers of terrorist activity, accusing France of selectively targeting armed groups, tolerating or protecting others, and using the security crisis to justify its prolonged military presence and safeguard strategic interests. In August 2022, Mali's then Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop openly accused France of repeated airspace violations, espionage, and direct support to terrorist groups – including the aerial delivery of weapons and coordination with jihadist leaders – and demanded an emergency UN Security Council meeting to halt what he described as ‘acts of aggression against [Mali’s] sovereignty and territorial integrity’.²⁰

As foreign military actors undermined national sovereignty under the guise of counterterrorism, transnational corporations continued to extract wealth from the Sahel under deeply unequal terms. These nations remain heavily dependent on the export of raw materials – such as uranium from Niger and gold from Mali – under exploitative terms. In 2010, for example, Niger received only 13% of the total export value generated by the two dominant French uranium mining companies operating in the country.²¹ Despite becoming one of Africa’s largest gold producers from the 1990s onwards, Mali retained minimal economic benefits. Tax exemptions, inequitable royalty structures and other policies enabled companies such as Randgold Resources (which merged with Barrick Gold

Corporation in 2018) and AngloGold Ashanti to extract profits with little reinvestment.

This economic dependency reinforced long-term underdevelopment, leaving states vulnerable to external pressures and limiting their capacity to diversify their economies or negotiate favourable terms of trade. The resulting lack of sustainable development has contributed to a range of political, social, and security crises. Since the 1990s, coups and regime changes have become a common feature as elites compete for power in weak institutional environments. Corruption, inadequate public services, and the exclusion of marginalised groups have further undermined state legitimacy and deepened public distrust.



PLACE DE LA PATRIE
LABOU SANNI NO! ZANCÉ KASSA NÉ!
LA PATRIE OU LA MORT NOUS VAINCRON



Military Intervention for National Sovereignty

Mass mobilisations

Popular frustration with state institutions hollowed out by decades of neoliberal restructuring and foreign interference erupted into mass mobilisations in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2017 and 2022, which eventually led to popular coups in the three countries.

Starting with protests against the CFA franc in Senegal in September 2017, demonstrations quickly intensified across the Sahel. The currency – issued by the French Treasury – was widely seen as a tool of continued economic domination and a symbol of neocolonial control. In Mali, large-scale protests emerged in April 2019 following a surge of intercommunal violence, including the massacre of around 160 Fulani villagers by members of the Dogon ethnic community.²² These events, together with mounting frustration over corruption, economic hardship, and the presence of foreign troops, fuelled mass demonstrations that demanded the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and the withdrawal of French and international forces, culminating in Keïta's removal and the formation of a military-led government in August 2020. In January 2021, a French airstrike hit a wedding party in the village of Bounti, killing at least nineteen civilians. While the French military claimed to have targeted jihadist fighters, a subsequent UN investigation concluded that the strike had overwhelmingly affected civilians

in violation of international law, further intensifying public anger towards the foreign military presence.²³

Similarly, Burkina Faso saw mass mobilisations against President Roch Kaboré's ineffective security policies starting in 2018. They reached a turning point in November 2021 when protesters in Kaya and elsewhere blocked French military convoys, suspecting them of complicity with terrorist groups. This sustained unrest culminated in a military revolt in January 2022 that brought Captain Ibrahim Traoré to power.

Concurrently, in Niger, protests erupted following a deadly attack by Islamic State militants on a military base in December 2019 which killed at least 71 Nigerien soldiers and fuelled public anger over state incapacity. Tensions flared again in November 2021 in the town of Tera, where demonstrators confronted a French military convoy that had previously been delayed for over a week by protesters in Burkina Faso. The convoy opened fire, killing at least two civilians and injuring several more, further intensifying public outrage.²⁴

Popular Coups

Africa has frequently been cited as suffering from a 'coup epidemic'.²⁵ Between 1950 and 2022, the majority of the attempted military coups in the world – 214 of 486 – took place in Africa, half of which were successful.²⁶ The mainstream narrative about the recent coups in the Sahel has largely framed them as yet another cycle of political instability in Africa – part of a pattern of 'autocratic political

entrepreneurs in the coup belt bidding for power'.²⁷ Yet, unlike previous coups across the continent, these seem to exemplify a distinct patriotism, which President of the West African Peoples' Organisation Philippe Toyo Noudjnome describes as 'military intervention for sovereignty'.²⁸

These military governments are distinct from previous ones in the region in at least three significant ways: first, in the class origins and ideological orientation of the coup leaders; second, in the active participation of popular organisations; and third, in their development of endogenous Pan-African, anti-imperialist national programmes.

1) The class origins and ideological orientation of the coup leaders. Many of the key coup leaders are of a different ilk compared to other officers that have led coups in the region. The archetypal coups of the 1960s and 1980s were largely Western-backed and targeted national liberation leaders to curtail the spread of anti-imperialist or left-aligned governments and social forces. In those cases, the survival of a military government was less tied to ideological concerns and more to securing support from civilian elites and foreign backers.²⁹ These recent coups do not fit that mould. As Vijay Prashad, director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, observes:

People like Burkina Faso's Captain Ibrahim Traoré (born in 1988), who was raised in the rural province of Mouhoun and studied geology in Ouagadougou, and Mali's Colonel Assimi Goïta (born in 1983), who comes from the cattle market town and military redoubt of Kati, represent these broad class fractions... Discarded with no real political platform to speak for

them, large sections of the country have rallied behind the patriotic intentions of these young military men, who have themselves been pushed by mass movements – such as trade unions and peasant organisations – in their countries. That is why the coup in Niger is being defended in mass rallies from the capital city of Niamey to the small, remote towns that border Libya. These young leaders do not come to power with a well-worked agenda. However, they have a level of admiration for people like Thomas Sankara: Captain Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso, for instance, sports a red beret like Sankara, speaks with Sankara’s left-wing frankness, and even mimics Sankara’s diction.³⁰

2) The active participation of popular organisations. Popular organisations have shaped core elements of the national agenda and are actively participating in its construction. When the coup in Niger took place in July 2023, mass organisations across all sectors laid siege to French military bases and the French embassy – not only to celebrate the toppling of a flailing regime and defend the coup, but also to assert long-standing demands to eject the French neocolonial forces. Prior to the coup, social movements had already begun to build a mass front against imperialism, a process that can be traced to popular organising in 2022 building upon decades of political organisation and education. When Niger’s military government broke with France, it signalled to the people that their interests were being advanced. Grassroots leaders have since continued to call for the AES to uphold its anti-imperialist commitments and have emphasised the need for institutional mechanisms that ensure both accountability and popular participation. Effred Mouloul

Al-Hassan, secretary general of the Nigerien School Union, articulated this dynamic of conditional support at a November 2024 conference in Niamey: ‘We support you as long as you are for the people. If not, we will fight you as we have fought the colonialists’.³¹

3) The development of endogenous Pan-African, anti-imperialist national programmes. The new coup governments have initiated new national programmes that have a distinctly anti-imperialist orientation based on endogenous development models and the region’s social and intellectual heritage. Mali’s *National Strategy for Emergence and Sustainable Development* (SNEDD 2024–2033) outlines a medium-term programme for national renewal rooted in a historical rupture with externally imposed models of governance and development. SNEDD 2024–2033 is informed by *Mali Kura netaasira ka ben san 2063 ma* (A New Mali: A Vision for 2063), a government-issued foresight report that articulates a broader vision for the country’s future.³² Together, these frameworks seek to re-anchor national reconstruction in Mali’s precolonial political thought and ethical traditions.

As part of its redefinition of national identity and institutional priorities, SNEDD 2024–2033 explicitly links Mali’s post-coup renewal to three pillars of the country’s civilisational heritage. First, the Manden Charter – the constitution of the Mali Empire, created in 1236 and often cited as one of the world’s earliest declarations of human rights – which promoted values such as social solidarity, protection of vulnerable sectors of the population, and participatory governance through assembly-based decision-making. Second, the legal codes of the Massina Empire (1818–1862), founded in the

Inner Niger Delta in central Mali, which combined Islamic jurisprudence with local governance to institutionalise justice, environmental stewardship, and checks on executive authority. Third, the manuscript traditions of Timbuktu, which span law, science, ethics, and public administration and reflect centuries of homegrown intellectual production and debate on just rule, the moral responsibilities of leadership, and the pursuit of knowledge in service of the common good.

Together, these traditions serve as foundations for a new anti-imperialist vision of Malian identity and statecraft based on social justice, collective governance, and civilisational dignity.³³ The Mali 2063 Vision calls for the development of ‘a new Malian individual (*Maliden kura*). ... a responsible, patriotic, respectful of values citizen, [who] is hardworking, conscientious, and open-minded – who works for the sovereignty and well-being of all’.³⁴

This national strategy affirms the reconstruction of Mali as both a national and civilisational project based on ‘a strong, stable, and economically sovereign state’ that ‘must ensure its sovereignty over several strategic sectors’.³⁵ Anchored in popular participation and resistance to neocolonial influence, it proposes a holistic transformation centred on a ‘new endogenous development model (*Mali Kura Taasira*)’ in areas such as governance, education, justice, and economic sovereignty.³⁶ This foundational vision places cultural integrity and sovereignty at the heart of national development, marking a clear departure from neocolonial donor-driven frameworks of the past.

This programme is being gradually realised through several major initiatives. Key infrastructure projects include upgrading the Bamako-Koulouba-Kati dual carriageway and the strategic Trans-Saharan Road (Bourem-Kidal section) and building the 200 MW Sanankoroba solar plant (authorised in 2024).³⁷ In the mining sector, described by the government as the strategic ‘lever of growth and economic development’, major reforms were enacted through the 2023 Mining Code, issuance of large-scale gold permits (such as the Korali-Sud licence in the Kayes region), and Mali’s acquisition of an 80% stake in the Yatela gold mine, which was formerly held by foreign companies.³⁸ The 2023 Mining Code revised the terms of engagement with all foreign multinationals, mandating increased state participation of up to 30% in mining ventures, stripping away tax exemptions, and set the stage for the state to pursue unpaid taxes and dividends. These measures aim to recover billions of CFA francs previously lost through inequitable agreements (a recent audit revealed a loss of 300–600 billion CFA francs in state revenue due to such deals) and signal an aggressive posture towards historical plunderers of Mali’s gold wealth.³⁹ The government has also advanced plans to build a Russian-backed gold refinery and develop lithium extraction with Chinese assistance through the Goulamina project, positioning Mali to climb the value chain rather than remaining a supplier of raw ores.⁴⁰



The Formation and Development of the AES

The AES countries continue to face substantial economic challenges. For instance, in 2023, Niger's per capita GDP was just \$560 – one of the lowest in the world – with an international poverty rate of 47.8% and a life expectancy of 61 years.⁴¹ Mali and Burkina Faso also exhibit comparable indicators, reflecting widespread poverty and limited access to essential services. Security challenges have only been exacerbated by the prevailing economic challenges. Over the past fifteen years, the Sahel has experienced a dramatic rise in terrorist activity, with a 2,860% increase in deaths and a 1,266% increase in incidents. In 2023 alone, nearly 4,000 people were killed in terrorist attacks in the region, accounting for 47% of global terrorism deaths and 26% of all recorded incidents. The vast majority occurred in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.⁴² Ongoing violence, combined with environmental degradation, has displaced millions of people across the region, contributing to a growing population of internally displaced persons and refugees.⁴³ These demographic and security pressures collectively influence the AES's strategic priorities and policy decisions.

It is in this context and against the backdrop of growing anti-French sentiment that the AES began to take shape. By February 2022, Mali had expelled French diplomatic and military forces and withdrawn from regional security partnerships such as the G5 Sahel, condemning their failure to address the region's security needs. By July, Mali deepened military cooperation with Russia through new

agreements for training and joint operations. That September, Burkina Faso experienced its second coup of the year, bringing to power new leadership that echoed Mali's anti-Western stance and sought alternative security partnerships. In Mali, tensions with France escalated further, culminating in the suspension of French aid programmes in November 2022.

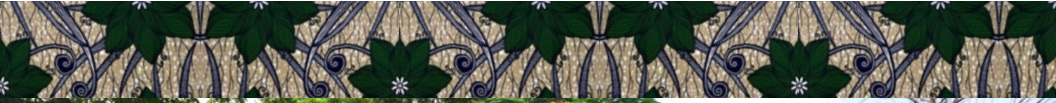
The year 2023 marked the formal establishment of the AES as a regional bloc. In January, Burkina Faso demanded the withdrawal of French troops, effectively ending military agreements and closing French bases in the country. By July, Niger joined Mali and Burkina Faso in rejecting Western political and military influence in the wake of their respective military coups. In August, the AES declared a collective defence pact – later formalised in the *Charter of Liptako-Gourma* signed the following month – stating that an attack on one member would be considered an attack on all. The alliance also expanded its international partnerships at the Russia-Africa Summit in Saint Petersburg, where member states secured new military and economic agreements with Russia. By September, AES member states expelled US and European diplomats accused of interference and began formal negotiations with China to explore infrastructure investment and resource-sharing projects.

In 2024, the AES undertook a series of strategic initiatives to deepen its regional presence and assert its sovereignty. In July, it held its first Heads of State Summit and formalised its withdrawal from ECOWAS. In the months that followed, the alliance conducted its first joint military exercises, centred on coordinated counterterrorism operations and border security. By March, on the heels of Niger

terminating operations of one of the largest US drone airbases, the AES had further expanded its security agreements with Russia, focusing on arms procurement and intelligence-sharing.⁴⁴

In April 2024, AES leaders participated in a Pan-African Security Forum, advocating for greater regional autonomy and African-led solutions to security challenges. By June, the alliance reaffirmed its commitment to resource sovereignty, highlighting the strategic importance of uranium in Niger, gold in Mali, and agricultural resources in Burkina Faso. In July, the AES rejected calls from the United Nations and Western powers for accelerated transitions to liberal democratic civilian rule, prioritising stability over externally imposed timelines. The alliance also issued a statement condemning ongoing Western sanctions against member states, framing them as imperialist tools designed to undermine regional sovereignty. On 6 July 2024, AES members adopted a treaty officially establishing the Confederation of Sahel States, deepening the alliance formed under the 2023 *Charter of Liptako-Gourma*. The treaty outlines shared priorities in security and defence, the fight against terrorism, and the promotion of economic, commercial, and cultural cooperation among the three countries.⁴⁵

These developments underscore the AES's commitment to strengthening regional autonomy and fostering a unified approach to addressing the Sahel's complex challenges. As France was expelled and its influence diminished, the region expanded its relations with China and Russia. This shift raised concerns in Washington and the West over the erosion of Western influence in the region, turning the Sahel into a battleground for international conflict.



Economic Challenges Ahead

The AES faces fundamental constraints as their economies remain anchored in extractive resource dependency, reflecting ongoing neocolonial patterns of unequal trade relations and limited value addition.

Country	Main Export Commodity (2023)	Share of Exports (%)	Total Exports (USD Billion)	Top Destination
Burkina Faso	Gold	81.8%	3.65	Switzerland (67%)
Mali	Gold	94.1%	5.02	UAE (72%)
Niger	Gold, Oilseeds, Uranium	~68.5% combined	0.8	UAE (25%), China (20%)

Compiled from Harvard's Atlas of Economic Complexity based on UN Comtrade data.⁴⁶

As the AES countries leverage their mineral wealth to kickstart changes in their economies, they do so against the backdrop of dependency, diversification, and value addition.⁴⁷ Though trade destinations have shifted from French dominance, today Switzerland (a gold refining hub) and the UAE (a growing regional trade and refining centre) dominate AES exports. While Switzerland largely functions as a transit hub, re-exporting refined gold with minimal local value addition for African states, the UAE engages in some refining, reflecting a slight strategic improvement in diversification. Yet, in both cases, the value chain remains overwhelmingly outside African control, sustaining commodity dependency. AES economies

therefore remain vulnerable to global commodity price fluctuations. For example, a decline in gold prices or disruptions in UAE financial markets could severely impact Mali and Burkina Faso's foreign exchange earnings. Meanwhile, Niger's uranium dependency remains politically sensitive. As a major supplier to Europe's nuclear energy sector – particularly France – the country's post-coup political realignment and tensions with Western powers have raised concerns over supply security. These tensions have been exacerbated by sanctions and aid suspensions, turning uranium into both an economic lifeline and a geopolitical bargaining chip.

While AES countries have demonstrated a clear political aspiration towards sovereign economic development, structural vulnerabilities remain, from resource ownership to CFA currency hegemony. Genuine self-reliance will require not only diversifying export destinations and products but fundamentally altering production structures: building domestic refining capacity, controlling monetary policy, strengthening regional trade, and industrialising beyond raw commodity dependence.



Strongly Seeking Sovereignty

As most of Africa's leaders began arriving at the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit, international press followed closely. When Burkina Faso's President Ibrahim Traoré and Malian President Assimi Goïta entered the venue, there was a media frenzy over these 'renegade' leaders who had adopted increasingly assertive behaviour indicative of the broader geopolitical shift underway in strategic nodes of the Global South.

During the bilateral meeting with Russia's President Vladimir Putin, Traoré prioritised national security and development agreements but also pointedly referred to 'the developments in Niger', where General Abdourahamane Tchiani was leading a military coup at that very moment. This gesture signalled alignment with Niger's political rupture and reinforced a narrative of shared struggle within an unjust international order that AES leaders argue must be reshaped.⁴⁸ Traoré and Goïta's diplomatic strategies reflected a deliberate pivot away from neocolonial entanglements and toward sovereign development partnerships, echoing a growing tendency among many Global South states within today's architecture of hyper-imperialism to adopt what might be called a posture of 'strongly seeking sovereignty'.⁴⁹

These diplomatic engagements – including strategic realignments and joint economic or security initiatives – are not simply opportunistic alliances but expressions of deeper aspirations for structural repositioning. The AES is not merely balancing threats in the

mainstream security studies sense (i.e., aligning with one power to offset another), nor is it merely seeking new patrons. Rather, its posture could be described as a ‘sovereignty offensive’ – a condition in which states, confronted by the constraints of a hyper-imperialist order, assert policies and institutional strategies that aim to break with dependency and reconfigure their place in the global system.

At the November 2024 International Conference in Solidarity with the Peoples of the Sahel in Niamey, Brigadier General Abdou Assoumane Harouna – a leader of Niger’s National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) and governor of Niamey – declared: ‘We will face the might of imperialism... No military power in the world can stop the bid for independence and the rejection of the former world order’.⁵⁰ This framing reflects a broader aspiration not only in the Sahel but across the Global South to break free from the straitjacket of imperial command and to assert independent paths of development, regional cooperation, and ideological clarity.⁵¹

The AES’s sovereign repositioning is not ideologically spontaneous; it emerges from deeply rooted traditions of liberation struggles and the rejection of dependency that grassroots movements have long demanded. The bellowing calls from below have distinctly shaped how the AES leaders have framed their military-led transitions as forms of ‘corrective sovereignty’.

While some analysts reduce these shifts to ‘band wagoning’ with Russia or opportunistic military populism, such framing misses the structural dynamics of delinking from a system of enforced

subordination. As President Goïta noted in his bilateral negotiations with President Putin during the 2023 Russia-Africa summit:

Numerous African countries, especially Mali, are suffering from the unprecedented pressure from several countries that are all but ready to introduce sanctions against us for our partnership with Russia – for our *sovereign choice* [emphasis added]. We are stunned by this neocolonialist practice that must be curbed through a concerted effort at the international level.⁵²

This ‘sovereign choice’ comes from shared interests and longer historical processes that are still unfolding. Burkina Faso’s President Traoré explained during his speech at the summit that Russia was like family to the African people because of their shared history. ‘Russia made enormous sacrifices to liberate the world from Nazism during the Second World War. The African people, our grandfathers, were also forcibly deported to help Europe rid itself of Nazism,’ he explained. ‘We share the same history in the sense that we are the forgotten peoples of the world’.⁵³

This posture of the AES remains significant. When President Ibrahim Traoré declares that ‘a slave who cannot assume their own revolt does not deserve to be pitied’ or when Malian Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop states that ‘the fate of our countries will not be decided in Brussels, Paris, Washington, or London. It will be decided in Bamako, Ouagadougou, Niamey’, it is not simply a rhetorical flourish.⁵⁴ Such statements are political affirmations that resonate with a popular sentiment for sovereignty through armed

and institutional struggle – a break from the demobilised, comprador-led liberal regimes of recent decades. This was made abundantly clear when a series of attempted attacks and interventions against Traoré were met with multiple rallies, protests, and demonstrations in support of his leadership on 30 April 2025 in countries across the continent and the world, from Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, and Kenya to the United States, United Kingdom, and France.⁵⁵

This is not to romanticise the AES. These governments face profound internal contradictions and must navigate the dangers of old and new dependencies. Changes in the geopolitical landscape can quickly shift the AES’s ability to leverage its new relationships. As Vijay Prashad writes about the events in Syria and their repercussions in the Sahel:

The change of government in Syria has not only weakened Iran in the short term but has also weakened Russia (a long-term strategic goal of the United States), which previously used Syrian airports to refuel its supply planes en route to various African countries. It is no longer possible for Russia to use these bases, and it remains unclear where Russian military aircraft will be able to refuel for journeys into the region, notably to countries in the Sahel. This will provide the United States with an opportunity to push the countries that border the Sahel, such as Nigeria and Benin, to launch operations against the governments of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. This will require a close watch.⁵⁶

Despite its symbolic and strategic achievements so far, the alliance's success hinges on its ability to create durable institutions, foster economic integration, and align its internal goals with regional stability. New initiatives – such as regional coordination regarding resource management; proposals for a Sahelian currency; a single AES passport enabling free movement between states; network interconnection; joint military forces; and calls for South-South cooperation – reflect initial steps toward a new development paradigm rooted in sovereignty, self-reliance, and popular participation. The emerging paradigm in the Sahel remains fragile, but it reflects a decisive rejection of the imperial command model and a political horizon aligned with the emancipatory aspirations of the Global South.





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