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Security, Sovereignty and the Collapse of Multilateralism in the Sahel

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Executive summary

Developments in the Sahel illustrate the erosion of the liberal international order and its capability to deliver stability, democratic governance and development. A wave of coups in the central Sahel, justified by leaders as acts of sovereignty restoration, has dismantled democratic institutions without improving security, economic performance or state capacity. The subsequent withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS, the G5 Sahel and other multilateral frameworks has further fragmented regional security architecture, creating power vacuums increasingly exploited by opportunistic external actors, notably Russia.

At the domestic level, anti-Western narratives dominate political discourse but frequently obscure deeper trends of institutional decay and authoritarian consolidation. Internationally, the selective application of norms and accountability mechanisms has weakened the legitimacy of institutions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the UN, reinforcing perceptions of a weakening global order. Western disengagement and inconsistent enforcement of human rights commitments have amplified frustration across the Global South, accelerating distrust in multilateral governance.

Overall, the Sahel crisis exposes the limits of externally driven intervention and peacekeeping. It underscores the necessity of locally anchored, Africa-led approaches to security and governance reform that move beyond imposed democratic templates toward context-specific political compromises.

Introduction

The Sahel's descent into violence and authoritarian rule is more than a regional security crisis. The stretch of Western Africa just below the Sahara has become a testing ground for whether the liberal international order can adapt to its own legitimacy deficits. Should it be unable to do so, frustration with the current multilateral system may accelerate shifts towards alternative governance models and patronage relationships. Furthermore, the political breakdown in the Sahel has revealed the necessity of a complete overhaul of the way regional and continental peacekeeping operations are structured, starting with more leadership being placed in the hands of African states. Coups d'état in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023) dismantled weak hybrid-democratic regimes and led to the formation of the new Alliance des États du Sahel (AES). This bloc was established in September 2023 after ECOWAS threatened military intervention in Niger following the coup. While these military takeovers received significant support from domestic nationalist groups, they have failed to deliver the economic, security and judicial reforms originally promised. Instead, they expose a pattern in the Sahel: appeals for regional sovereignty are instrumentalised by successive military juntas to legitimise unconstitutional rule and deflect scrutiny. This further entrenches regional insecurity.

The current Sahel crisis differs from previous cycles of instability in terms of its geopolitical timing and ideological framing. Following the 2011 Arab Spring, state collapse in Mali and Libya created vacuums that jihadist groups rapidly exploited, generating intertwined insurgencies that persist today. Yet what distinguishes the present moment is how the new leaders are leveraging anti-Western sentiment, using it as a scapegoat for the region's inability to combat militant Islamists and rebels. Meanwhile, the juntas are expelling traditional partners and actively courting alternative actors as violence reaches unprecedented levels. By 2024, the Sahel accounted for 51% of global terrorism-related deaths.[1] The region now epitomises how polarisation and populism are exploited in fragile contexts, while also revealing the consequences when international institutions lose credibility among those they claim to serve. This policy insight argues that the Sahel crisis is both a symptom and a test of the liberal international order's decline. Military populism is masking fragile governance, Western legitimacy deficits have enabled authoritarian alternatives, and the selective application of democratic norms is accelerating disengagement from multilateral frameworks.

The decline of the liberal international order

The post-1945 liberal international order, built on multilateral institutions, rules-based governance and universal norms, was neither uniformly liberal nor orderly for the Global South. Yet, for decades, it provided a framework within which states could pursue development, resolve disputes and claim rights against more powerful actors. That framework is now fracturing. The erosion manifests across multiple dimensions: great powers openly violate the norms they once championed; multilateral institutions struggle to enforce their own rules; and the selective application of standards has hollowed out institutional legitimacy. Since beginning his second term in January 2025, US President Donald Trump has pushed an 'America First' policy agenda that champions unilateralism across the economic, diplomatic and immigration fronts, encouraging other nations to follow suit. These global trends have empowered authoritarian regimes and fomented conflict in the Middle East, caused security shocks and strains on the EU, especially in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, and fuelled democratic stagnation and backsliding in Latin America. Unsurprisingly, the human rights watchdog Freedom House reported that 2024 marked the 19th consecutive year global freedom had declined.[2] For regions like the Sahel, historically positioned at the periphery of this order, the consequences are acute. Where institutional decay meets structural fragility, the space for authoritarian alternatives expands rapidly.

1 Center for Preventative Action, "Violent Extremism in the Sahel", Global Conflict Tracker, September 4, 2025.

2 Yana Gorokhovskaia and Cathryn Grothe, "Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights", Freedom House, 2025.

Following the end of the Second World War, the UN was established as the pinnacle of global peacebuilding and prosperity, serving as the centre of the liberal international order alongside specialised agencies such as the World Health Organization and the World Bank Group. The visionary era during which these principles reigned – an era that saw rapid decolonisation, free market expansion and the formation of large-scale alliances – was intrinsically tied to American leadership. While the US remained steadfast in its defence of liberalism and so-called 'free world' values through the end of the Cold War, the system it built has rapidly been unravelling since the turn of the 21st century. The legal constraints on war that the UN system upheld have been rendered moot, particularly with the start of the 'Global War on Terror' in 2001 and the rise of belligerent nonstate groups that propel much of the conflict we know today. From 2013 to 2022, the number of nonstate conflicts was nearly 76 per year, double the number in the two preceding decades.[3] Now, as great-power competition intensifies, many nations are scrambling to re-stabilise the global order, while despots are filling the void left by diminished democratic solidarity. In 2025, the Economist Intelligence Unit reported that only 6% of the global population lives under full democracy. A total of 38% lives under 'flawed democracy', 39% under authoritarian rule and 15% under 'hybrid regimes' that combine electoral democracy with authoritarian tendencies.[4]

The crossroads at which liberal internationalism now stands is defined by protectionist economic policies, a retreat from alliances and shared goals and a general sense of insecurity about the current state of world affairs. The tariff war waged by Trump has fractured what was once a shared understanding of a rules-based trade system. NATO, formerly a bulwark of Western military cooperation, is disintegrating as a result of deep internal divisions over security obligations and threats of invasion. Rising middle powers and regional leaders, many of which still have a vested interest in seeing multilateral institutions remain functional, must still walk a fine line between the US, Russia and China. In Africa – a continent that, despite having nearly one-fifth of the world's population, has historically been sidelined in multilateral discussions and decisions – this crossroads presents major opportunities for newfound leadership and autonomy. Regional leaders such as Nigeria and South Africa have an unprecedented window to craft and execute policies that benefit the continent as a whole, especially in the security realm. Yet international policymakers and representatives from these middle powers face the question of how to keep multilateral organisations fit for purpose and legitimate without the support, moral or financial, of the US.

The legitimacy crisis intensified dramatically in 2025. Several multilateral conferences and international summits failed to reach consensus on issues ranging from climate change to development finance and monetary reform. The UN's most recent Climate Change Conference (COP30) in Belém, Brazil, shaken by protests on an unparalleled scale, omitted

3 Benjamin Petrini, "Non-State Armed Groups and Today's Intractability of Conflict", UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, May 2025.

4 Economist Intelligence Unit, "Democracy Index 2024", accessed April 23, 2026, https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/.

the term 'fossil fuels' from its declaration, resulting in a major step back in environmental protection efforts.[5] Key leaders were absent from, and in some cases boycotted, the 2025 G20 Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa; the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in Seville, Spain; and the BRICS Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. At the BRICS Summit, the bloc failed to issue a joint foreign ministers' statement for the first time in its history due to disputes over African representation on the UN Security Council. Even the UN General Assembly, once the pinnacle of multilateralism and cooperation, has been dominated by distrust and a lack of faith in the institution.

Leaders across the globe now face a stark choice: commit to reformed multilateralism or abandon it entirely in favour of fragmented bilateral and regional arrangements. Yet international cooperation and regional solidarity need not be mutually exclusive. The question is whether the liberal order's traditional champions have the political will to transform the institutions they dominate into frameworks that genuinely serve those beyond the transatlantic core. For the Sahel, this is not an abstract debate. It determines whether democratic governance can deliver tangible security and development, or whether authoritarianism masked as sovereignty has become the only alternative to Western paternalism. The region is essentially a laboratory for testing whether a reformed liberal order remains viable or whether its decline is irreversible.

Among regional and continental actors in the Sahel, the current major players are the AU, ECOWAS and the African Standby Force (ASF). Their respective shortcomings tell an important story that is intertwined with that of the liberal international order, particularly on the topic of legitimacy. The AU's Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), established in 2004, has collided with the political reality of the Sahel. Beyond the organisation's condemnation of the AES coups, action and enforcement on the ground have been inconsistent, especially as the AU is overwhelmingly dependent on logistical support and funding from European partners. The AES's decision to exit ECOWAS in January 2024 exposed the delayed and selective ways in which ECOWAS responded to the earlier coups. By imposing sanctions, halting international aid and shutting down border crossings, ECOWAS hurt civilians, not the military leaders it intended to put pressure on.[6] Finally, the ASF, designed as the operational backbone of APSA, never fully achieved rapid deployment capability in the Sahel (or anywhere else). This has manifested as fragmented groups working in parallel: UN missions, French counterterrorism forces, Russian mercenary groups and local militias are all competing for control. Although one of the key strengths of the liberal international order was once its ability to coordinate collective responses to global conflicts, leaders have not been able to close the gap between normative aspiration and material capability in the Sahel.

5 COP30 Brasil, "COP30 Approves Belém Package", November 22, 2025.

6 Dalatou Mamane and Chinedu Asadu, "Many in Niger Are Suffering Under Coup-Related Sanctions. Junta Backers Call It a Worthy Sacrifice", *Associated Press*, October 26, 2023.

Human development, demographics and structural pressures

Exponential population growth in the Sahel, particularly Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, has not been matched by adequate human services, including education, health and nutrition programmes, thereby exacerbating existing social and political tensions. The three countries have some of the world's lowest Human Development Index values, which combine progress indicators, including standards of living and education rates, into a single score from 0 to 1. Niger and Mali were at 0.419 in 2023 and Burkina Faso at 0.459.[7] The global average is 0.76, and African nations average around 0.55. These deficits translate directly into governance challenges: states with limited fiscal capacity, chronically under-resourced institutions and overstretched security forces struggle to provide basic services, let alone counter well-resourced insurgencies. This creates a legitimacy trap where governments cannot deliver what populations need, fuelling the very instability that further undermines development.

The scale of human need compounds this governance deficit. Across the region, nearly 29 million people need humanitarian assistance.[8] Yet an increasingly politicised aid climate, as well as sieges laid by militants, has prevented resources from reaching those who need them most. Journalists in the region face increasing violence and threats, with independent coverage being targeted in favour of state propaganda.[9] Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of the Sahel's population is under 25, making it one of the fastest-growing regions in the world with significant potential for both demographic dividends and demographic challenges such as poverty and unemployment.[10]

On top of these realities, there are also the Sahel's longstanding conflict drivers. Tribalism and ethnic dynamics, competition over natural resources, illicit cross-border economies and the proliferation of armed groups have entrenched a conflict–development nexus in which insecurity and underdevelopment reinforce one another. Armed insurgencies exploit weak state presence and local grievances, while state responses, often heavily militarised and perpetuators of violence themselves, deepen distrust and disillusionment. The coups d'état that Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger experienced were all justified by military leaders as necessary correctives to the failures of civilian governments in containing insurgencies. Yet this cycle has only internationalised the security crisis,

7 UN Development Programme, "Human Development Index (HDI)", accessed April 23, 2026, https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI.

8 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *2025 Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Overview, Sahel* (OCHA, May 2025).

9 Reporters without Borders, "2024 World Press Freedom Index – Journalism Under Political Pressure", accessed April 23, 2026, https://rsf.org/en/2024-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-under-political-pressure.

10 UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa, *Sahel Human Development Report 2023: Sustainable Energy for Economic and Climate Security in the Sahel* (UNDP, January 2024).

reconfiguring alliances and further straining already fragile institutions. The persistence of insurgency, in turn, has been used to legitimise prolonged military rule, disguising unconstitutional governance as political longevity and solidity.

TABLE 1 KEY AES POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS, 2020–2025

Date	Event
18 August 2020	Coup d'état in Mali (president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta overthrown)
20 August 2020	Mali suspended from ECOWAS
24 May 2021	Second coup in Mali consolidates military control under Assimi Goïta
24 January 2022	Coup d'état in Burkina Faso (president Roch Marc Christian Kaboré overthrown)
28 January 2022	Burkina Faso suspended from ECOWAS
30 September 2022	Second coup in Burkina Faso brings Captain Ibrahim Traoré to power
26 July 2023	Coup d'état in Niger (president Mohamed Bazoum overthrown)
30 July 2023	Niger suspended from ECOWAS
16 September 2023	Establishment of the AES through the Liptako–Gourma Charter
28 January 2024	Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger jointly announce their immediate withdrawal from ECOWAS
29 January 2025	ECOWAS withdrawal takes legal effect

Source: Created by author

These intertwined structural and conflict dynamics are part of the reason why the AES abandoned existing regional frameworks. In January 2025 all three AES members withdrew from ECOWAS, coinciding with the bloc's 50th anniversary, a move that cemented a collective break from regional and global norms.[11] This decision came in the wake of sanctions and membership suspensions imposed by ECOWAS and the AU after the coups. The withdrawal also reflected deeper frustrations. ECOWAS's perceived drift from pan-African ideals towards alignment with Western security and governance agendas had, in the eyes of the AES, rendered it unfit for purpose. Yet many African nations facing comparable development deficits and insecurity remain part of multilateral organisations, even when sanctioned.

Therefore, the AES's withdrawal reflects not only structural strain but also a particular political calculus, shaped by cycles of armed insurgencies and anti-Western rhetoric. For military-led governments whose legitimacy rests on securitised nationalism, ECOWAS's insistence on rapid democratic restoration and constitutional order is a major threat. The creation of a parallel regional bloc thus functioned as both a strategic response

11 Chris Ewokor, "Three Military-Run States Leave West African Bloc – What Will Change?", *BBC News*, January 29, 2025.

to sanctions and a political instrument for consolidating regime survival within an environment defined by the mutually reinforcing dynamics of underdevelopment, insurgent violence and repeated unconstitutional change.

International opportunism in the Sahel

International responses reinforced this rupture. Leaders and representatives of the UN, the AU and other institutions quickly condemned the AES military takeovers, seeking to prevent a domino effect as the remaining hybrid democracies in the Sahelian coastal states (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo) remain fragile. The AES coups severely disrupted, and in some cases ended, the few existing regional and international security interventions, including the G5 Sahel Joint Force, France's Operation Barkhane and the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Now, the void left by the departure of those peacekeeping missions is rapidly being filled by a number of competing forces. Terrorist organisations, specifically the al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel), are gaining power. At the same time, foreign actors like the Wagner Group (rebranded as the Africa Corps in 2024 and now controlled by Russia's Defence Ministry) have secured footholds.[12] The belt's instability now extends far beyond its borders, fuelling humanitarian crises, mass displacement and the diffusion of authoritarian governance models across the continent. Where demographic pressures meet institutional collapse and external actors offer military support without democratic conditionality, the space for illiberal governance grows rapidly. Furthermore, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have all withdrawn from the G5 Sahel alliance, a regional cooperative framework established in 2014, leaving only Mauritania and Chad as members.[13] Without the active participation of and support from member states, many of the African-led initiatives designed to mediate conflicts, both in the Sahel and across the continent, have been futile.

Since 2025, the amplified weaponisation of humanitarian and development aid, by not only the US but also several of the world's wealthiest nations, has eroded the limited credibility that international peacekeeping still holds. Arguments for sustainable development, free and fair elections and the upholding of human rights seem much less appealing without financial backing. In the case of the central Sahel, jihadist insurgencies have spread unimpeded since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, and international conflict responses like Operation Barkhane were recognised as disastrous long before their forces were expelled. For its part, MINUSMA's trajectory in Mali was not just a country-specific failure but also a wider symptom of deep structural stress across the international peacekeeping ecosystem. The mission, originally deployed in 2013, focused

12 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data, "The Wagner Group and Africa Corps", accessed April 23, 2026, https://acleddata.com/armed-group/wagner-group-and-africa-corps.

13 International Criminal Police Organisation, "G5 Sahel", accessed April 24, 2026, https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Terrorism/Counter-terrorism-projects/G5-Sahel.

on stabilising Mali's northern region and re-establishing government authority; however, jihadist activity, combined with the coups in 2020 and 2021, prevented any real progress. While post-1990s peacekeeping models were designed for monitoring ceasefires and supporting post-conflict transitions, Mali's environment was markedly different, given that there has been no stable ceasefire or state territorial control for over a decade. Furthermore, waning faith in liberal interventionism and less willingness to engage have rapidly eroded access to conflict zones, constraining even basic external understandings of today's most violent regions. The proliferation of insular economic and foreign policy postures, combined with widespread disillusionment with multilateral bodies, is facilitating a worldwide shift towards bilateral security partnerships and direct military cooperation. With the traditional peacekeeping framework having been hollowed out, the opportunity for authoritarian leaders to receive unconditional political support from external illiberal actors is higher than ever.

In an era of renewed great-power competition, Russia has been an outspoken supporter of the AES, providing it with economic and military assistance. On the surface, the bloc's turn toward Moscow might appear to risk inviting proxy wars reminiscent of the Cold War. Yet the shift also reflects growing fatigue with the EU and Western partners, especially France, whose long-standing presence in the region is now largely unwelcome. This is partly fuelled by Russian disinformation campaigns that seek to widen societal tensions. Immediately following the AES coups, France and the EU imposed a series of sanctions to pressure the juntas to restore constitutional order, further alienating the Sahelian nations. This disenchantment has left Western actors without a pragmatic or realistic path forward, making withdrawal seem the only viable option. In this context, Russia's emergence on the scene as an alternative partner was less the product of strategic design than of the vacuum created by atrophying Western legitimacy. Even before the wave of coups, reports demonstrating Moscow's involvement in targeted disinformation campaigns – aimed at evoking anti-French sentiment – revealed the country's longstanding interest in seeing authoritarianism prosper in the Sahel and on the greater continent.[14] Beyond Russia, the AES has also solicited support from China, Türkiye and several Gulf nations, giving the juntas a myriad of alternative partners without their needing to change their governance methods.[15]

In August 2025, Russia hosted a defence summit with Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger at which a cooperation memorandum was signed, formalising an expanded military partnership between Moscow and the AES nations.[16] However, Russian forces have been present, at least in Mali, since late 2021, when the first Wagner troops were deployed to Bamako.[17] Shortly after that first deployment, evidence of human rights abuses and

14 Constantin Gouvy, "The Twilight of French Influence in the Sahel", Clingendael, September 27, 2023.
15 Andrew Lebovich, "'Sovereignty' Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry: The Sahel's New Geopolitics", Clingendael, June 2024.
16 African Security Analysis, "Russia–AES Military Cooperation: Developments and Regional Context", August 19, 2025.
17 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.

civilian massacres by the Malian Armed Forces and Wagner affiliates emerged.[18] Wagner's activities are not limited to the military realm: reports show that the group is involved in organised crime, exploitative business deals and political advisory.[19] Despite pledges by the AES to combat terrorism in the region, the situation has continued to deteriorate since the 2025 summit. Reports from the region suggest that JNIM has expanded its operational capacity in the AES nations and is poised to move into northern Togo, Benin and Nigeria's Sokoto region.[20] To say that the juntas have failed on their promises to rid the region of terrorism and restore public trust is an understatement.

Sovereignty narratives and the rise of anti-Western discourse

Beyond an authoritarian disposition and a unified stance against jihadism, the key link among the leaders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger is an inherent, outspoken distrust of international actors and their own neighbours. These narratives were a common thread in the speeches given by their leaders – Abdoulaye Maïga (Mali), Lamine Zeine Ali Mahaman (Niger) and Rimtalba Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo (Burkina Faso) – at the 80th UN General Assembly in September 2025. The three prime ministers were explicit in their accusations of foreign meddling, not only by other Sahel states but also by UN agencies and, of course, France. According to these leaders, the threats the AES faces are 'imported' by the West and 'subversive' in their efforts to undermine national sovereignty.[21] Niger accused France not only of sponsoring regional extremism but also of systematically voting against the country at the World Bank, IMF and African Development Bank to hinder its development projects. Calls for self-determination and sovereign development rang through the UN General Assembly Hall, echoing trends of economic unilateralism and protectionism across the globe.

Despite the rhetoric emanating from the Central Sahel about reclaiming sovereignty and ending colonial legacies, it is possible that by expelling European actors, the AES has only replaced one form of dependence with another. Chinese companies are now deep inside Niger's uranium sector and entrenched in its oil production, while in Burkina Faso, the technology giant Huawei is fortifying surveillance technologies and communications networks meant to combat terrorism.[22] Thus, Sahelian leaders must grapple with the prospect of becoming yet another arena for great-power competition while also finding a way to balance their chequebooks and capitalise on the natural resources at their

18 Julia Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon and Julian Rademeyer, "The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary, and Criminal Engagement in Africa", Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, February 16, 2023.
19 Stanyard, Vircoulon and Rademeyer, "The Grey Zone".
20 "November 2025 Monthly Forecast: West Africa and the Sahel", *Security Council Report*, November 2, 2025.
21 UN General Assembly, General Debate, "Niger, His Excellency Lamine Zeine Ali Mahaman, Prime Minister of the Transition Government", September 27, 2025.
22 Robert Bociaga, "China's Sahel Gamble Falters as Insurgencies Rage", *The Diplomat*, November 20, 2025.

disposal. The Westphalian vision of order that China preaches – based on the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-intervention – in theory aligns with pan-Africanism and for many is the ideal international rulebook. In practice, however, Beijing's foreign policy looks much different. By increasing its own ability to manoeuvre, China has exerted a type of influence in the developing world that relies on much of the same extractivism and predation that European colonialism employed.

Although the AES has shown extreme animosity towards most foreign actors, disengagement is by no means the solution. Instead, West African and broader continental institutions need to be integrated as fundamental parts of the global multilateral system, as they were created in the image of the latter's foundational structures. History has proven that unilateral foreign interventions are too often unsustainable, unpopular and unwinnable – consider Afghanistan, Haiti and Somalia. International missions, whether French counterterrorism operations or UN peacekeeping deployments in Africa, have struggled with legitimacy, limited mandates and coordination with national governments. France's image in West Africa is damaged, perhaps irreversibly, with politicians on all sides of the ideological spectrum blaming it for the region's conflicts, poverty and underdevelopment, again exacerbated by Russian hybrid warfare and disinformation operations in the region.[23] However, with France sidelined, the US and Europe may still operate in the region, given that they distance themselves from its former coloniser; now that the international order and multilateralism have been turned on their heads, anything goes. In an unexpected policy shift by the Trump administration, the US Department of State announced in February 2026 that a top representative from its Bureau of African Affairs would visit Mali's capital to chart a new course for bilateral relations.[24]

Various cases show that foreign interference that is poorly aligned with local realities, or perceived as externally imposed, tends to foster dependency, resentment and distorted incentives among local elites. The US certainly has no desire to become a security guarantor or piggy bank for yet another conflict zone. Indeed, the latest US National Security Strategy and National Defence Strategy articulate a strategic framework that prioritises homeland security, the Western hemisphere and great-power competition. Africa, in turn, is generally noted as a secondary concern, requiring prolonged security commitments. Although on paper Trump promised a presidency committed to domestic security, his second term has already seen a series of foreign interventions – Venezuela, Iran, Nigeria and possibly Greenland next – that have pushed the traditional bounds of unilateralism. However, if those in the West and beyond do want to see a return to democracy, or at least an end to violence and humanitarian crises in the Sahel and beyond, they must lead by example. First and foremost, this means ending the selective application of morals and the flexibility of standards, specifically by upholding the same democratic and sovereignty principles across foreign policies.

23 Alain Antil and Thierry Vircoulon, "After the Failure in the Sahel, Rethinking French Policy in Africa" (IFRI Memos, French Institute of International Relations, April 10, 2024).

24 Paul Melly, "Three West African Juntas Have Turned to Russia. Now the US Wants to Engage Them", *BBC News*, February 2, 2026.

In September 2025 the AES bloc announced its withdrawal from the Rome Statute, the 1998 treaty that established the ICC. AES leaders cited neocolonial repression and selective justice in a joint communiqué explaining their decision.[25] For democratic nations that champion institutions such as the ICC, credibility depends on upholding values such as objectivity and equality. However, the court has almost exclusively prosecuted individuals from smaller nations with less political power, many of them African. In contrast, various Western leaders act with impunity. This bias has only reinforced the perception of the ICC as an instrument of Western repression, turning the notion of justice into a euphemism for tyranny.

Multilateral organisations should establish and commit to independent review mechanisms that assess compliance with human rights and democracy standards, applied equally to all countries. Even the UN Charter, drafted in 1945, has never been reviewed, despite the existence of Article 109, which the authors included for this very purpose. Furthermore, publicly disclosing the criteria for sanctions, aid, suspensions and loans will reduce the secrecy surrounding these actions. Without making a space for review and reconstruction, the entire system will crumble.

New institutions, new currencies, new futures

For countries seeking tangible economic and political changes, not only in the Sahel but also across Africa and the developing world, the future lies in organisations outside the Bretton Woods framework. This shift is inseparable from growing fatigue with the long-standing Western presence in the central Sahara, most notably France's. Given the extremely complex and multilayered nature of conflict in the Sahel – characterised by overlapping insurgencies, transnational crime networks, climate stress and chronic underdevelopment – it is necessary to situate external interventions within the broader regional security architecture. The Sahel's institutionalised peace and security frameworks, anchored in AU and ECOWAS mechanisms, have long coexisted with a dense landscape of international and bilateral initiatives that overlap in mandate. Against this backdrop, the limited outcomes of regional and international efforts become more comprehensible. Projects such as MINUSMA, the regional Multinational Joint Task Force, the G5 Sahel Joint Force and France's successive bilateral operations (Serval, Barkhane, Sabre and Task Force Takuba) all operated in an environment where political transitions disrupted cooperation and the structural drivers of instability only became more difficult to address.[26] As distrust in Western-backed frameworks grows (and Western financing for multilateral initiatives dries up), institutions such as BRICS and its New Development Bank, the Asian

25 France 24 and AFP, "Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso to Withdraw from International Criminal Court", *France 24*, September 23, 2025.

26 UN Peacekeeping, "MINUSMA Fact Sheet", accessed March 13, 2026, https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/minusma-fact-sheet; Mariana Llorens Zabala, "Assessing the Effectiveness of the Multinational Joint Task Force" (Conflict & Resilience Monitor, ACCORD, February 24, 2023).

Infrastructure Investment Bank and other South–South partnerships are more attractive than ever. When offered fiscal pathways that emphasise infrastructure, state sovereignty and policy flexibility, countries that seek tangible economic and political change, both in the Sahel and across the Global South, no longer need to abide by the West's rules.

Currency sovereignty has become a central pillar of the broader push for political and economic autonomy in West and Central Africa. Calls to abandon the CFA franc are not merely symbolic; they reflect dissatisfaction with a monetary architecture that is embedded in the post-colonial extension of the liberal international order. Where institutions such as the IMF and World Bank traditionally tie lending to policy conditionality and macroeconomic orthodoxy, emerging African-led frameworks prioritise fiscal flexibility, regional value chains and domestically defined development strategies. Fairer lending rules, debt restructuring and relief initiatives, and trade policies designed around reciprocal benefit rather than asymmetrical dependency are increasingly being pursued. Furthermore, with development aid facing unprecedented cuts, lending and fiscal sovereignty structures are being reimagined worldwide.[27] In this context, initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) present real opportunities for nations to build resilience and bolster pan-African economic cooperation. The AfCFTA's emphasis on intra-African supply chains, tariff reduction and regulatory harmonisation seeks to correct historical cycles of external extraction. Now that the old playbook for investment, advocacy and development no longer follows predictable rules, Africans and non-Africans alike must adapt to this new reality and chart a new path for doing business on the continent.

Since 2024 Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have taken steps toward economic integration, including exploring a shared currency. However, no official timeline or framework has been announced, and Malian officials have rejected recent speculation that the regional currency, reportedly called 'Sira', was ready to be launched.[28] Despite setbacks on the AES currency front, 2026 has already seen some long-awaited developments in Africa's economic infrastructure, including the announcement that the African Export-Import Bank has terminated its relationship with Fitch Ratings, a move aimed at ending the prejudice premium that has long inflated Africa's cost of capital.[29] Just as the UN and Bretton Woods institutions codified post-1945 Western norms in governance and finance, these newer African organisations aim to recalibrate risk assessment, capital access and trade governance. By making it cheaper to do business in Africa, the continent is likely to see a major increase in foreign investment and economic integration. Intra-continental cooperation is therefore not simply desirable but strategic. As disruptions in the financing of the international order create space for institutional experimentation, African-led

27 Emma Ratchford and Gustavo de Carvalho, "Reclaiming Development: Africa's Voice at the UN's 80th Anniversary", International Peace Institute Global Observatory, October 22, 2025.

28 Segun Adeyemi, "Mali Releases Fresh Update on Talks Over New Three-State Sahel Currency", *Business Insider Africa*, January 27, 2026.

29 African Export-Import Bank, "Afreximbank Announces Termination of Its Credit Rating Relationship with Fitch", Press Release, January 23, 2026.

mechanisms are positioning themselves not as wholesale replacements for the old system but as parallel structures capable of reducing vulnerability to it. Whether this moment results in genuine structural transformation will depend less on rhetoric than on whether these institutions can deliver what their global counterparts have long promised: stability, growth and equitable integration on sustainable terms.

Conclusion

While epitomising the decline of the liberal international order, the Sahel crisis also presents a test of how external and regional actors choose to respond to states that reject existing multilateral frameworks. One possible pathway is continued diplomatic and economic disengagement from the AES, signalling disapproval of military rule and alignment with authoritarian partners. This approach may preserve normative consistency for democracies, but it risks further entrenching Russian-backed security actors, narrowing channels of influence and reinforcing local perceptions of Western unreliability or irrelevance. Unless the West feels ready to meet the juntas where they are – that is, funding security provisions in the region and supplying weapons – chances of engagement solely on the political front are low.

An alternative pathway involves selective re-engagement that distinguishes between state authorities and external security enablers. Rather than isolating the AES as a bloc, Western and regional actors could prioritise countering the influence of Russian state-backed mercenary groups. These have exacerbated violence and repression under the pretence of counterterrorism. The trade-off lies between maintaining pressure on governing elites and accepting a degree of pragmatic cooperation that may be perceived as legitimising contested regimes, yet could mitigate civilian harm and preserve a foothold for longer-term engagement.

A third angle centres on recalibrating African-led security mechanisms in response to the legitimacy deficit that underpinned the AES's withdrawal from ECOWAS. If ECOWAS and AU instruments are seen as part of the problem, their relevance depends both on whether they can be meaningfully reformed and depoliticised and on internal reflection on why regional and continental projects continue to fall short in the Sahel. Beyond operational shortfalls, this failure reflects deeper structural tensions: uneven burden-sharing, the politicisation of sanctions and intervention mandates, regime-survival logics among member states and resource dependency on external partners. These dynamics have produced a pattern in which institutional responses appear reactive, externally steered or disconnected from the security priorities of affected communities.

Accordingly, revitalising tools such as the ECOWAS Standby Force or the AU Counter-Terrorism Centre around local priorities, equitable burden-sharing and transparent governance would need to be accompanied by a clearer conceptualisation of how this conflict-response architecture relates to, and is embedded within, the broader liberal

international order. The normative commitments to constitutionalism, multilateralism and collective security that underpin these institutions are closely aligned with the principles of the liberal international order. Yet their operationalisation in the Sahel has often been mediated through external funding streams, security partnerships and donor-driven conditionalities. Clarifying this linkage is essential to determining whether reform can genuinely enhance African agency or merely reproduce hierarchical dependencies in new institutional forms. However, such an approach requires political concessions and institutional restructuring that may dilute existing power structures, complicate consensus-building and slow decision-making.

At the global level, expanded African representation within the UN system, including two permanent Security Council seats with veto power, offers another long-term pathway to continental stability. This could enhance legitimacy and organisational effectiveness, but it would also challenge entrenched hierarchies in the international system and face resistance from current power holders, potentially delaying broader reform. The present climate of mutual distrust between African nations, particularly in the Sahel, and Western actors will require many gradual repairs if promises are ever to be taken at face value again.

Taken together, these pathways highlight the strategic dilemma that currently defines governance in the Sahel. Determining what the blueprint for peace will look like is a task that lies in the hands of the AES states themselves, in conjunction with other regional actors. On a broader scale, democratic nations that still want to protect the liberal international order are grappling with a far more existential issue. Structural transformation of multilateral engagement, rather than moral rhetoric or nostalgia for a fading order, is central to preserving the UN system and the core beliefs on which it was founded. While the situation may seem bleak right now, the millions of people, especially youth, living in the vast Sahel region deserve attention and investment from the world. For its part, the international community must tread carefully, maintaining a continuity of values while facilitating reform and drawing on the past even as it charts a course for the future.

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Cover image

French troops, under escort from Niger forces, withdraw from Niamey, on October 10, 2023 (Balima Boureima/Anadolu via Getty Images)

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