

The Role of the American Variable in Shaping the Orientations of Russian Foreign Policy Toward West and Central Africa after 2014

Asst. Inst. Naba Ahmed Abdullah^{1*}, Professor Dr. Ahmed Abdulameer Alanbary¹

¹College of Political Science, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq

¹Email: naba.abd2201@copolicy.uobaghdad.edu.iq

¹Email: ahmed.alanbary@cis.uobaghdad.edu.iq

***Corresponding Author:** Asst. Inst. Naba Ahmed Abdullah, College of Political Science, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq | Email: naba.abd2201@copolicy.uobaghdad.edu.iq

Abstract

The United States of America ranks high in terms of influence on the Russian foreign policy towards Africa due to the ongoing geopolitical competition between the two giants on the continent. One of the strange paradoxes here is that the collapse of French military operations in West Africa paved the way for Russian expansion instead of securing Western superiority. After the 2021 Mali coup, Russian private military companies rapidly made their way into the bases vacated by France.

This paper examines why Russia has gained influence in West and Central Africa despite American military and economic superiority. It argues that the United States faces a dilemma that has roots in competing visions of partnership. According to American policymakers, as mentioned in the 2022 National Defense Strategy, Russia stands as the primary geopolitical threat on the continent; yet, this framework overlooks that Russia did not create the vacuum it now occupies but rather filled the vacuum left by the West.

The key distinction is that the United States offers conditional assistance based on democratic reform and transparency of institutions while Russia offers nothing for democracy and transparency. This is a model of stability, in which governance is needed to be restructured (Kaya, 2011, p. 36). Russia provides military assistance on a nonpolitical basis. African countries with urgent security challenges have not been able to leverage the technical military superiority into geopolitical influence because they focus on the short-term rather than long-term institutional development.

Keywords: United States of America, Russian Federation, Economic Sanctions, African Continent, Energy.

Introduction

Because a fundamental shift in U.S. interests has occurred in West and Central Africa since the end of the Cold War, in which the region was largely ignored by U.S. strategic policy (Talaat, 2010, p. 94), it is crucial to understand the reasons behind Russia's recent surge in the region. The American reassessment came after 2001, when the opportunities in Africa were realised as a strategic mistake would be considered (Marei, 2021, p. 33). But within this newfound American interest lay a premise that democracy and anti-terror training, coupled with development assistance, would lead African interests to join those of the West. The model was unsuccessful because it was premised on the wrong idea that African states would welcome Western institutional leadership in the event of a crisis.

Russia's success wasn't due to military strength but because of an understanding of the needs of the African coup leaders. When the United States demanded that it work through the Economic Community of West African States to isolate the new government in Mali after the 2020 coup, Russia was quick to provide the military council with what it wanted, namely arms, advisers and recognition without conditions. This contrast allowed for

the conclusion that the United States was indecisive between withdrawal and focus, that between effectiveness and inertia (Kaya, 2011, p. 36), and that between commitment and uncertainty, at a time when the Russians appeared to be all in. It became evident after the French withdrawal in Operation Barkhane, a counterterrorism operation, following 20 years of military presence that only Western military forces would not guarantee stability. Russia stepped in where Western development partnerships left off, transforming engagement into an act of opposition to the 'colonial logic' of their development strategies, and a theme that is found in the former French colonies who want to assert their sovereignty.

The issue that should be addressed in this analysis is not only 'How does the United States react to Russian expansion?' but 'Why have American reactions to Russian expansion failed, given U.S. superior resources?' This is because West and Central Africa hold key minerals vital to the energy transition in America, while at the same time having become a space rife with political developments that weren't fully expected if there had been a military coup. Russian gains are real and significant; so are American interests in energy resources, in critical minerals, in security partnerships and arms sales, and in a host of other areas but they could not be affected by traditional avenues of pursuit. Russia's strength was that it was simple, while the American system was complicated which countries in distress can't handle.

Research Significance:

The first step of this paper is to trace the nature of American interests in Africa, West and Central Africa at least, in reality, rather than to presume that they are self-evident; and then to examine the formulation of American interests and efforts to explain them to the rest of the world, as well as to defend them against Russian encroachment. The analysis will reveal that American interests (in energy resources, certain minerals, security cooperation, and arms sales) are real and significant, but the means by which they pursue them have proven inadequate, in that they make certain assumptions about African countries that don't hold true, namely that they share American interests. Russia's strength lies not in its military power, but in its political certainty – security without democracy, aid without conditions, partnership without structural change. Theoretically, this model has not been able to bring the results it has promised; however, in the short-term, it has worked in just those areas where the American model has not.

Research Objective:

This research is set to help achieve:

- Identify the most important American interests in the African continent.
- Explain the attitude of the Americans towards the expansion of Russian influence in America, especially in the West and the Central African part of the continent.

Research Problem:

The competition between the two pressures in U.S. foreign policy in West and Central Africa is a challenge that this paper tries to address. Since 2021, Russian military contractors have increasingly set up bases in Mali, Niger, and the Central African Republic, where the United States has substantial military bases and has recently bolstered counterterrorism cooperation. Yet, the U.S. reaction to Russian encroachment has been reactive and inconsistent, and U.S. policy makers seem to be uncertain about what U.S. interests in the region are. The confusion is growing as African nations find and start to develop lithium, cobalt and other resources that are critical to the U.S. renewable energy objectives. So, the question is: if the U.S. is as interested in resources and security partnerships as officials have suggested, why hasn't U.S. policy succeeded in stopping Russian advances in strategic areas?

Research Hypothesis:

The paper presents the hypothesis that American constraints are different from Russian constraints. The United States cannot provide weapons and recognition to coup governments without raising the red flag with Congress about providing military support to governments that don't abide by the rule of law. Domestically, Russia has no

such political constraints. That is the structural explanation for the fact that the Russian military has gained alliances in those countries where the United States had suspended aid. If this is the case, we should see a change in American policy when the restrictions on it are relaxed and Russian policy unchanged as a result of condemnatory international action. The implication is uneasy, however, because American strategic interests may be as great as Russian ones, but American democratic processes limit the effectiveness with which these interests can be pursued.

Research Methodology:

The analysis is based on three types of evidence. First, it is important to understand how U.S. policy makers framed U.S. interests from 2014 to 2025. Second, the paper looks at elections conducted in the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union to see how U.S. diplomatic pressure – or perhaps, the failure to translate it – led to real results. Third, the study draws on information from Russian authorities, such as the Foreign Minister Lavrov's interpretation of Russian engagement, as well as on press reports of the actual deployment of Russian military contractors.

Section One

American Strategic Interests in the West and Central African Region

The West and Central Africa region constitutes a basic geographical area that draws the attention of many international powers, foremost among them the United States of America, France, the European Union, and the Russian Federation, as well as China, India, and Israel. This interest is attributed to the continent's vast reserves of natural resources such as oil, natural gas, coal, and uranium, in addition to agricultural, livestock, and mineral wealth, including bauxite, diamonds, gold, iron, and copper. The region is also endowed with a tremendous water wealth, making it one of the largest water reservoirs in the world. Forests cover large areas of its countries, serving as a major source of timber, and the region also represents a broad market for the products of major countries.

Similarly, the West and Central Africa region is considered one of the most important strategic areas that capture American political interest, especially after the events of September 11, 2001. This contrasts with the post-Cold War period when the region was almost neglected from the American perspective, whether in terms of strategy, economy, or politics (Talaat, 2010, p. 94). However, this neglect, Marei (2021, p. 33) notes, did not last long, as the United States quickly reassessed its interest in the continent, due to its view that continuing to leave the strategic opportunities that the continent possesses unattended by the American administration is a serious mistake.

The United States' interest in the African continent in general, and in these regions in particular, has been characterized by dynamism and fluctuation. The levels of its foreign policy attention have varied between retreat and focus, and between effectiveness and stagnation, which has affected the extent of its actual presence. This fluctuation in American policy is attributed to a set of factors and considerations, whether internal or external, that influence the decision-making process and the formation of strategic perceptions among the American elite, Kaya (2011, p. 36) explains. The United States of America aims, through its movements and policies in the African continent, particularly in the regions of West and Central Africa, to achieve and enhance a set of objectives and interests in the region, most notably: First: Enhancing American investments and trade exchange: The Export-Import Bank of the United States holds investments exceeding seven (7) billion dollars in all African countries, as noted by Alwan & Majeed (2022, p. 655).

This is in addition to signing a memorandum of understanding with the (Africa 50) platform worth (300) million dollars to facilitate the transfer of American goods and services throughout the African continent, especially those related to infrastructure, renewable energy, and technology projects. According to the White House, from the beginning of 2021 until December 2022, the United States concluded more than (800) investment deals with (47) African countries with a total value exceeding (18) billion dollars (White House, 2022). Confirming this approach, the United States of America committed during the U.S.-Africa Summit held in December 2025 to invest in sustainable energy projects, digital connectivity, agricultural trade, and infrastructure. Among the most prominent initiatives is the funding of the "Lobito Railway" project with an amount of \$550 million, which aims

to connect Angola, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to facilitate the export of critical minerals such as copper and cobalt to global markets (Mustafa, 2025).

This momentum is attributed to what Africa represents in terms of massive investment opportunities and vast markets open to foreign exports, in addition to its large number of consumers. Federal trade agencies have assisted American companies in enhancing their presence in African markets and developing their exports there, which has led to an increase in annual American trade to \$61 billion, as well as an increase in American exports to the African continent, reaching \$72 billion in 2024 (Schwidrowski, 2025).

The American presence in the African market is limited compared to other international powers such as China, with the trade volume between African countries and China being about four times the trade between African countries and the United States. On the overall level, trade with Africa accounts for only 1% of the total foreign trade of the United States, while African countries export natural resources, especially crude oil, which represents a third of their total exports, and in return, they import many manufactured goods from the United States. This imbalance in trade in favor of the United States has been exacerbated by the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), enacted during the presidency of former U.S. President Clinton in 2000. This law allows the import of goods duty-free from many African countries (Mutlak & Lahmood, 2024, p. 1965). Nevertheless, successive American administrations did not work to stop this law and merely limited themselves to periodically extending it, which allowed China to exploit this situation to strengthen its relations with the countries of the continent at an accelerated pace (Hassan, 2021). An example of this is the decision of President Donald Trump's administration in his second term to extend the AGOA law for an additional three years until 2028, despite its official expiration date on December 30, 2025, and this is considered a positive step towards enhancing trade between the United States and African countries (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2025). See Table 1.

Table (1): Trade Balance Between the United States and the African Continent for the Period 2016–2025 (in millions of dollars)

Year	Exports	Imports	Trade Balance
2016	22,264.5	26,556.3	-4,281.8
2017	22,066.3	33,410.1	-11,343.8
2018	26,089.7	35,808.2	-9,718.5
2019	26,734.7	30,166.6	-3,431.9
2020	21,980.2	23,731.8	-1,751.6
2021	26,725.4	37,625.5	-10,900.1
2022	30,596.4	41,799.5	-11,203.1
2023	28,677.9	38,556.4	-9,878.6
2024	32,374.6	39,582.3	-7,207.7
2025	37,367.4	40,138.3	-2,770.9

Source: *Trade in Goods With Africa, Census United States, Date of Visit 3 December 2025, at: <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c0013.html>*

The United States of America also seeks to develop its trade relations with West African countries, as its largest trading partners in Africa are Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire. The total exports of American goods to Nigeria in 2024 amounted to about \$4.3 billion, while total imports of goods from Nigeria to the United States in the same year reached \$5.7 billion (Office of the United States Trade Representative [Nigeria], 2025). Total American goods exports to Côte d'Ivoire in 2024 amounted to \$591.2 million, and total goods imports to the United States from Côte d'Ivoire stood at \$1.0 billion (Office of the United States Trade Representative [Côte d'Ivoire], 2025).

Second: Securing Energy Resources and Minerals

Obtaining energy and mineral resources: The United States of America is one of the largest energy-consuming countries in the world due to its large industrial base. Therefore, it needs to import large quantities of oil, not only for consumption purposes, but also to increase American reserves by injecting it into empty wells. The United States relies on a specific strategy to increase its oil reserves through injecting crude oil into underground salt caverns. This process, known as storing oil in these salt formations, depends on the nature of the reservoirs that do not chemically react with the oil, making them ideal for long-term storage. Through this measure, the United States seeks to reinforce the country's strategic oil stock in anticipation of any potential price increases or supply disruptions. The United States has already succeeded in maintaining massive reserves despite its enormous energy consumption (Hajim, 2020, pp. 71-72).

The enormous American consumption of energy resources constitutes a major driving force for seeking resource-rich regions, which pushed it towards the African continent. Africa meets 30% of U.S. energy imports for the year 2023, with Algeria, Nigeria, and Angola topping the list of countries exporting energy to the United States, with imports of 26,130 thousand barrels from Algeria, 58,350 thousand barrels from Nigeria, and 14,697 thousand barrels from Angola (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024).

The United States of America also seeks to ensure its access to rare metals. In light of the dangerous climate changes the world is witnessing and the need to mitigate their effects by turning to the use of clean and renewable energy, the demand for several rare metals such as lithium, cobalt, nickel, and rare earth elements has emerged to operate wind turbines and solar power plants, which in turn generate clean and renewable energy, leading to an increase in American consumption of these metals. See Table 2.

Table (2): U.S. Consumption of Rare Minerals for the Year 2024

Type	Quantity
Nickel	29,567,700 kg
Rare Earth Elements	9,680 metric tons
Cobalt	9,600 metric tons
Lithium	3,400 metric tons

Sources:

- (National Minerals Information Center, 2024, p. 8)
- (USGS Science for a Changing World, 2024, p. 5)

Third: An Important Market for American Weapons

Africa occupies an uneasy but lucrative position in the global arms trade. The persistence of armed conflict across the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and the Horn keeps demand high, while governments across West and Central Africa increasingly refuse to tie themselves to a single supplier, preferring instead to play vendors against one another. Arms transfers, in this meaning, are no longer a regular trade. Ali (2008, p. 41) has argued that they are increasingly one of the key tools by which large powers establish political access on the continent, and that this is one of the key factors in the bargaining game between African states and external patrons.

In this market U.S. is now the second largest arms exporter to Africa after Russian Federation. This is not viewed by Fawzi (2023, p. 65) as a commercial success but as a strategic position that Washington is continuing to turn to in order to secure bilateral relations with West and Central African nations and to outflank other powers on the same playing field. In the 2022 U.S. Africa Strategy, this strategy was officially stated as: "Ahmad (2023, pp." The article (188-189) isn't about a new partnership on African terms, but about an effort to check China's economic advances and reverse Russian military presence.

The military presence which backs this policy might possibly be much more extensive than the diplomatic record would suggest. The U.S. Army has bases in East Africa to support its operations against al-Shabaab in Simba, Kenya, as well as the forward operating locations of Bujumbura, South Sudan, and Entebbe, Uganda, and the airport in Kismayo, southern Somalia. The buildings are designed to spread out to the west. Some 300 American soldiers are operating drones and intelligence missions against Boko Haram fighters in the Cameroon Nigeria border in a military base in the north of the country. The 2023 coup in northern Niger, where the Americans are based at Agadez, was a blow to Washington's efforts to strengthen this presence, which had already suffered from the 2021 arrest of the U.S. ambassador and the 2023 protest by the U.S. Navy. Many U.S. units in Africa Command (AFRICOM) have been posted in Nigeria as part of Operation Juniper and Operation Shield against jihadist networks (Op Mansour), working within the Nigerian military (Mansour, 2022). Logistical nodes in Accra, Dakar, Libreville, Liberia, Mali and Mauritania support this network, with smaller bases in Botswana and Seychelles providing drone capabilities against al-Qaeda supporters and N'Djamena in Chad, against the Nusra Front (Mansour, 2022).

What this geography demonstrates is that the policy literature becomes softer in the case of the American presence in West and Central Africa and that it is not organised in any real sense in a diplomatic manner. This could be quite clearly structured around access. Bases, training missions, and arms pipelines function together as a single instrument for holding ground against rival powers, and the recent wave of coups across the Sahel suggests that local actors have begun to read the arrangement the same way.

Section Two

The American Position on the Growing Russian Presence in the West and Central African Region

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has faced active movements by the United States of America on the continent. This is aimed at influencing most of the decisions of African countries regarding the redevelopment of their relations with Russia and China. This is attributed to Russia's increasing engagement in the African continent, which has raised growing concern among Western powers, especially the United States of America and France, which directly accused Russia of working to undermine Western influence in Africa. Based on this, the United States of America has worked on a comprehensive redesign of its policy to counter Russian expansion in Africa (Jabr, 2023).

The United States is a significant international factor in Russia's policy toward Africa, followed by other competing major powers. The U.S. influences Russia's geopolitical strategies through various means, including imposing economic sanctions and supporting its allies, as it seeks to weaken Russia's global influence. Additionally, American intervention in conflict areas poses new challenges to Russia, pushing it to reassess its policies. This is evident from a statement by former U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis in 2018, cited in (Marei, 2021, p. 47), while presenting the U.S. National Defense Strategy. Regarding Africa and global competition, he said, 'Great power competition, not terrorism, is now the main focus of U.S. national security. We face growing threats from various powers, most notably the Russian Federation. And for those who threaten the U.S. democratic experience, you should know that if you challenge us, it will be a long and bad road for you.'

Tawfiq (2019, p. 14) notes that the U.S. policy has also set interconnected goals towards Africa, which involve strengthening trade and economic relations with African countries on an equal basis in ways that serve American business interests. This approach aims to protect U.S. national security in the face of the growing economic, political, and military influence of Russia within the continent, especially in West and Central Africa.

And through that, the French newspaper Le Monde revealed in February 2023 that the U.S. administration offered a deal to the President of the Central African Republic to cut ties with Russia, in exchange for receiving humanitarian aid from the United States, as well as U.S. military training for the government forces in the Central African Republic (Center for Future Studies, 2023, p. 2). Western reports such as the Center for Future Studies, also pointed out that the United States pledged to provide long-term aid to several West African countries, especially Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Togo, in an attempt to prevent Russian Wagner forces from advancing into new countries in the region. The U.S. administration also worked on supporting the ruling military council in Burkina Faso to counter growing terrorist groups and to convince the authorities not to use Wagner forces, after military training overseen by U.S. forces in Ouagadougou for the Burkinabe army stopped in 2022 (2023, p. 3). In addition to the American pressures represented by the Congress's threats to impose sanctions under the 2017 CAATSA law, which aims to confront the United States' adversaries through sanctions, these threats show

the direct impact of the U.S. on Russia's policy toward African countries, for example Algeria. They aim to reduce Russian arms supplies to Algeria, which is accused of supporting Russia in its war on Ukraine. Despite that, Algeria's position remained stable and independent, which led Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to acknowledge how hard it is to overlook Algeria's significance as a key player in the African balance (Zahhar, 2024).

Here, the American position on the Russian presence in the West and Central African region can be outlined as follows:

First: The Russian Presence Constitutes a Strategic Threat to the United States

Russia's intensified diplomatic offensive across Africa since 2022 has forced Washington into a reactive posture it would prefer not to occupy. It's clear by now: Lavrov has been visiting the capitals of the nations in the Sahel and the sub-Saharan region repeatedly and has seen Wagner Group and successor groups come together in Mali, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic, while African states have abstained on the UN General Assembly resolutions against the invasion of Ukraine. Moscow did not just step in to fill a vacuum; it created one, playing upon the accumulated grievances against Western conditions and lingering vestiges of French neocolonialism to make an alternative security patron. What this creates is that a good chunk of the continent is now part of Russia's kingdom of something more valuable than alignment: studied neutrality, which in a global sanctions regime is more a way of saying "we support you, but we don't say a lot. What this means is that a good chunk of the continent is now part of a studied neutrality status a more diplomatic version of what in a global sanctions regime is called quiet support and that's something more valuable than alignment.

The new Africa strategy, Washington's, must be understood in this light, not as a good-faith gesture toward development partnership, but as a check to the Russians before they set deep roots in the continent. The counter-terrorism reason plays this role in a double capacity. It maintains American military force in the Sahel and the Horn in a permissible system of legitimization that is more palatable to African governments than to the threat of great power competition. In politics, it conveys to its European allies, especially France, that the United States is not a sleepy giant, but a steadfast security partner. What Washington does not want is not Russian bases, per se, but the normalisation of a world in which African states would consider Moscow as a viable alternative to the Western security frameworks, which kills the Western security architecture not just in Africa, but everywhere it operates (Sawan, 2022).

Khalil (2023) argues that despite the presence of US military forces concentrated in several countries on the continent, the current challenges indicate how difficult it is to curb Russia's growing military influence in Africa, especially in West and Central Africa. Based on this, the United States is planning to establish a presence in other strategically important areas like the Red Sea and the Gulf of Guinea.

As the United States strategy published in 2022 pointed out, Russia is making efforts to bring African countries to its side, and Moscow has already succeeded in strengthening its relations with several countries like the Central African Republic, Mali, and South Africa, taking advantage of the political unrest that occurred in some of these countries. Russia aims to achieve three goals through this: first, to use its agents and supporters within these countries to ease the impact of Western sanctions imposed on it; second, to counter the expansion of Western influence in these areas, Ayman (2022, p. 103) notes in this regard. Thgeel & Abed, (2022, p. 6418) mentions the third goal which is to fulfill Russian President Vladimir Putin's desire to restore Russia's status as a great power.

Jaafer & Salih (2022, p. 588) refer to the Russian military activities in the continent which have also become more diverse and gradually expanded in scope. Russian forces have actively participated and provided military assistance to both Burkina Faso and Mali. In Niger, military cooperation between the two countries has developed further. High-level political meetings in Chad, including President Deby's visit to Moscow at the beginning of 2024, indicate a deepening of the bilateral relationship. In this way, Russia is increasing its focus on West Africa by tightening its grip on several Sahel countries and also seeking new partners in regions beyond the continent. Russia's strategic interests in West Africa are centered on securing military, diplomatic, and economic agreements with leaders of these countries in exchange for strategic access to the Atlantic Ocean. This approach is similar to the U.S. military presence in Djibouti, where the 'Lemonnier' base provides the United States with strategic control over areas of the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal (The Future Center for Research and Advanced Studies, 2024).

Russia also relies on a different approach in providing its security services to African countries in general, and to Central and West Africa in particular. This is particularly through the spread of private Russian military companies, especially the former Wagner forces, which offer security services and military training to local governments. The Russian presence has led to worry in the United States about building democratic institutions and contributing to instability. The indirect rivalry is also visible in the attempts of each side to shape the security policies of the other nations on the continent and guide them toward their own interests, as seen in the arms transfers, or the security pact which could limit the power of the other side, with each trying to do the same in their own way. (Narbone 2024, p. 85).

Second: Filling the Vacuum Left by the Retreat of Western Influence

The numerous military coup d'etats in West Africa since 2020 have significantly affected the dynamics in the region, and all this has pushed its ties with Western powers, especially France and the United States of America to the limit. The function of such interventions as deliberate geopolitical hinges distinguishes them from those of previous decades, which were coups. In fact, military coups in the African Sahel have not only been internal political processes but also turning moments that have contributed to a shift in the geopolitical balance, especially in terms of the extent to which Russian influence has been established and Western powers have been pushed out, as Hamdi Abd al-Rahman Hassan (2023, p. 47) points out.

Some leaders of the coup in Mali, such as Malick Diaw, Sadio Camara and Assimi Goita, are said to have been provided with partial training in Russia. The coups have also helped shape the Sahel Alliance (AES), an alliance between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso that has seen the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) being influenced by external powers, such as France. So military coup is a quick and efficient way for Russia to gain influence in the region, without relying on Western diplomacy. These are not only signs of the weaknesses of the region, but also drivers that are changing the geopolitical landscape and forming a new order in the region.

The establishment of Sahel States Alliance (AES) by the three military councils is a direct reaction to the problems created by the Economic Community of West African States and the dynamics associated with post-colonial approach. This formation reflects a strong commitment to the concept of 'African solutions' and a determined effort to strengthen national sovereignty. The Sahel countries' approach to current conflicts has helped highlight features of a new global system, emphasizing the need for international partners to respect the sovereignty of African countries and prioritize 'African solutions for African problems', Rajosefa (2023, p. 23) contends. This drive towards sovereignty is considered a key factor in rejecting Western presence and embracing new partners such as Russia. Although reality indicates a competition between the United States and Russia for influence in Africa, the Sahel countries increasingly show their ability to actively choose their partners and exploit this competition to achieve their own goals Hassan (2023, p. 48) asserts.

The United States was very keen to have cooperation and coordination between its forces deployed in the West African region and the French forces also present there. During Operation (Barkhane), in 2020, American and French forces were able to kill leader (Abdulmalik Droukdel), one of the founders of Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb. In addition, American officers participated in 2020 and 2021 in planning and executing two joint operations led by the French, namely (Bourrasque) and (Eclipse), alongside the participation of military forces from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Despite the long duration of Operation (Barkhane), it failed to eliminate terrorist organizations or expel them from Mali and Niger, and popular resentment towards the Western military presence, especially the French, increased. France decided to end Operation (Barkhane) following the coup in Mali led by officer (Assimi Goita) in 2021, to withdraw French forces from their bases in Kidal, Tessalit, and Timbuktu in Mali, and handed over those bases to the Malian Armed Forces. What's more, Mutlaq (2023, p. 576) notes here that there was an escalation in anti-French rhetoric by the transitional authority in Mali. As a result, Russian Wagner forces began to spread on a wide scale in Mali.

The French stance was similar in the case of the coup that happened in Niger on July 26, 2023, which led to a worsening of tensions with the coup leaders. As such, the French Ministry of Defense announced in a statement issued on October 5 of the same year that it would begin withdrawing its armed forces, totaling 1,500 soldiers, from Niger (Vincent & Le Cam, 2023).

In this way, Russia sought to fill this void caused by the Western military withdrawal from the region by strengthening its relations with the military councils in the Sahel region of Africa. It worked on enhancing its

military presence in both Mali and Niger in 2025 (Karr et al., 2025). Russia is also doubling its influence in the region by tightening its control over many West African countries, because it is looking for new partners in more distant areas. This is a policy Russia has adopted to face other competing global powers on the continent. After Russian military equipment and advisors arrived, hundreds of protests took place in Niamey demanding the withdrawal of American forces. In addition, Niger has been the base for U.S. operations in West and North Africa since the two countries signed a military agreement in 2012. As a result, the United States announced it would withdraw more than 1,000 military personnel from Niger. Consequently, Olumba & Ojo (2024) reason that the Sahel countries, stretching from Senegal to the Red Sea, have turned to Russia for security assistance to deal with increasing regional instability.

The administration of former President Joe Biden, for its part, criticized those Russian movements and insisted that there were no changes with regard to the American military presence in the region. U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin also confirmed this during his visit to the Kenyan capital Nairobi as part of his African tour (TRT Africa, 2023). He states that the United States had made no tangible change to the status of its forces in the region. The U.S. Department of Defense had previously announced on September 7, 2023, the transfer of elements of its armed forces and equipment from an air base near Niamey to another air base near Agadez (Garamone, 2023).

When U.S. President Donald Trump took office for his second term in January 2025, he became more aware of the geostrategic importance of Africa. This awareness comes amid the strategic vacuum resulting from the Western withdrawal, especially following French failures and the subsequent pullout of French and American troops from their bases in West Africa, which has experienced military coups. In addition, the features of U.S. policy under Trump's leadership are highly pragmatic, aligning with his 'America First' principle. This policy aims to confront strategic rivals like Russia and China and seeks to acquire as much African wealth and resources as possible within the context of Russian-French competition in the region (Askar, 2025).

American moves in 2025 quickly led to new forms of change in the structure of U.S.-African relations based on several indicators. The United States went beyond its previous model of relations with African countries, which had long relied on humanitarian aid mainly provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which announced its closure that same year (Othman, 2025). This way, a new phase was launched based on mutually profitable partnerships and the exchange of benefits. The changes weren't limited to this indicator alone, as the recent US-African summit came just days after the United States sponsored a peace agreement between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. This wasn't announced only as a plan to restore peace and stability in the Great Lakes region, but it was also accompanied by the announcement of a major long-term US and Western investment plan (Center for Future Studies, 2025).

Third: Curtailing the Expansion of Russian Influence

The current U.S. moves in West and Central Africa are attributed to its efforts to counter Russia's growing influence in the region. In this context, the head of the U.S. Africa Command accused Russia of running disinformation campaigns in the Sahel to undermine U.S. influence in West Africa, noting that his country is trying to counter this campaign (Center for Future Studies, 2024, p. 2).

Nevertheless, the expansion of Russian influence in West and Central African countries through Wagner forces led the United States to decide to counter this expansion through a series of strategic moves aimed essentially at limiting Russian influence in these regions. One of the most notable of these moves was the U.S. decision in December 2023 to establish drone bases in three West African countries, i.e. Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Benin, under the pretext of fighting terrorism and monitoring the activities of terrorist groups on the continent (Center for Future Studies, 2023). Besides that, some reports (cited by Blanchard & Christopher, 2025, p. 2) pointed out that President Biden's administration offered the President of the Central African Republic alternative security arrangements and incentives to those provided by Wagner forces, aiming to reduce Russian influence on the continent. At the outset of 2024, the American newspaper *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the U.S. states are looking to deploy military aircraft, as part of their efforts to contain the spread of terrorist organizations in West Africa. At the same time, the U.S. embassy in the Burkinabe capital, Ouagadougou, announced an increase in the American military aid given to it (Qansawa et al., 2024, p. 480).

In the same context, the United States confirmed that its growing military influence in West African countries, supported by the presence of temporary or permanent U.S. military facilities and bases in five West African

nations, is not solely aimed at combating terrorism, but also extends to providing a more comprehensive regional surveillance capability. This approach reflects the U.S. focus on African countries along the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea to contain the Russians on the continent, and it will also allow them to monitor the movements of the Russian Defense Ministry's "African Corps" within Africa (Arabi 21, 2024).

Conclusion

The United States is seeking to reposition its forces in Africa, as well as to review the strategy of the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) regarding Central and West Africa, in line with the repositioning of its forces amid the increasing Russian presence in these areas. These trends coincide with President Donald Trump's second-term policy aimed at reducing foreign spending. This approach has led to adopting a strategy characterized by diversity and realism in dealing with Central and West Africa. This approach moves away from the traditional focus on democratic governing systems and shifts toward cooperation in infrastructure and benefiting from available resources on the continent. Moreover, the United States seeks to confront economic blocs that are opening up to Russian-Chinese cooperation, such as the expansion to join the BRICS group. Therefore, it is expected that the American approach will be more cooperative with the countries of the region, contributing to expanding its presence in West and Central African countries, in an attempt to maintain its power and influence there, even if it requires a higher cost.

This study has reached a set of conclusions, including:

- 1- In light of the growing American concern over Russia's increasing influence in Africa, especially in West and Central Africa, the United States is facing difficulty in containing this expansion. This situation has led the U.S. to adopt a new approach in Africa, aiming to overcome the consequences of its previous strategy on the continent.
- 2- The United States has imposed numerous sanctions on the Russian Federation to hinder the expansion of its influence in Africa.
- 3- The U.S. has spread a lot of misleading information about Russia to prevent it from expanding in African countries.
- 4- The competition between major powers like the U.S. and China in Africa has intensified, prompting Russia to strengthen its influence through economic and military cooperation with African countries.

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