

## Struggle for Influence: Russia and Türkiye's Sahel Policies (2019–2024)

Ahmet Turan 

Inonu University, Head of the  
International Relations Office, Malatya,  
Türkiye,  
ahmet.turan@inonu.edu.tr,  
ror.org/04ttnw109



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**Abstract:** The landscape of competitive and cooperative interactions between global and regional actors are undergoing continuous diversification. In the 21st century, the African continent has emerged as a primary focus for these actors, with Russia and Türkiye being two countries that have made significant advancements in their African policies in recent years. Russia's intensified interest in Africa became particularly evident during the late 1990s. Similarly, Türkiye has developed a comprehensive African strategy since the early 2000s. The aim of this research is to comparatively analyze the Sahel policies of Türkiye and Russia between 2019 and 2024, highlighting areas of competition and cooperation between the two actors in the region. The central research question guiding this study is: To what extent are Türkiye's and Russia's engagements in the Sahel region driven by rivalry, cooperation, or a broader struggle for influence? To address this question, the study examines the military, economic, and political engagements of both states with Sahelian countries, drawing upon a range of official sources, statistical data, and institutional reports. The findings suggest that while both nations seek to expand their presence, they employ notably different strategies, Türkiye favoring soft power and long-term partnerships, and Russia relying more on hard power and operational relationships. These different approaches yield critical information about the changing nature of great power competition in Africa's most contested sub-region.

**Keywords:** Sahel, Russia, Türkiye, Struggle for Influence, Competition, Cooperation

### 1. Introduction

In the early years of the 21st century, the Sahel region has emerged as a pivotal nexus in the African context, commanding heightened interest from both established global powers and nascent emerging powers. While the prevailing literature has predominantly focused on the role of Western actors, particularly France, there is an emerging imperative to explore the engagement of non-Western actors, such as Türkiye and Russia, with the region. This article investigates the foreign policies of Russia and Türkiye in the Sahel, focusing on the motivations, strategies, and implications of their involvement. The central research question guiding this study is as follows: How do Türkiye and Russia pursue influence in the Sahel, and what are the implications of their engagement for regional security and international competition?

The relevance of this question is twofold: firstly, because the issue is timely; and secondly, because the question is significant. As military coups, terrorism, and governance challenges intensify in the region, understanding how Türkiye and Russia position themselves – and how local actors respond – provides critical insight into the changing geopolitical landscape of the Sahel. To disregard these dynamics would be to limit our capacity to interpret emergent patterns of international engagement in Africa and the consequences of shifting alliances and power vacuums.

While Russia's presence is often viewed through the lens of great-power rivalry and security influence, Türkiye presents a different model – one rooted in soft power, humanitarian diplomacy, and economic engagement. A comparative analysis of these two non-Western actors with distinct foreign policy identities is therefore recommended in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of how they approach the same geopolitical space.

The extant academic literature has paid limited attention to Türkiye's rising role in the Sahel, while Russia's presence has often been analysed in isolation or in the context of its rivalry with the West.

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Scholars such as Whitman (2024) have been critical of the West's overemphasis on Russia, whereas Zoubir (2022) and Cooke et al. (2017) have explored broader external competition in the region. However, there is a paucity of studies that have examined the interaction or comparison between Türkiye and Russia in this context, and this article aims to address this gap.

The present article employs a qualitative comparative analysis based on official policy documents, speeches, regional case studies (with a focus on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger), and secondary academic sources. The study reveals that while Russia often engages through military and security channels, Türkiye relies more on development aid, religious diplomacy, and economic partnerships. The comparison demonstrates that both countries are reshaping regional alignments, but in contrasting ways that reflect their broader global strategies.

The structure of the paper is as follows: The first section outlines the theoretical and methodological framework. The second section analyzes Türkiye's and Russia's policies in the Sahel in light of the system-level variables of neoclassical realism. The third section examines their policies through unit-level variables, focusing on the diplomatic, military, and economic relations each actor maintains with Sahel countries. Finally, the article concludes with an evaluation of whether Türkiye's and Russia's engagement in the Sahel is characterized by competition, cooperation, or a broader struggle for influence, both with each other and with other great powers.

### **1.1. Literature review: Struggle for influence in the Sahel**

Both recent academic studies and traditional literature recognize the Sahel region as an area of competition between Russia and various Western actors. Recent studies focus on developments in the Sahel following the coup d'état that began in 2021. In this context, Nikoloz Samkharadze (2024) argues that the Sahel has become a battleground for influence between Russia, the United States, and France, with this rivalry intensifying after 2022. Similarly, Andrew Lebovich (2024) interprets the ongoing withdrawal of American troops from Niger and the arrival of a group of Russian military advisors at bases there as a direct sign of competition between the two actors. This view is not unique to the two scholars mentioned above, but is also shared by many political scientists in the international relations literature.

Although Dan Whitman (2024) emphasizes Russia's role in the recent developments in the Sahel region, he argues that it would be incorrect to evaluate the situation solely from the perspective of Russia's policies. This approach, which Whitman refers to as 'the West's obsession with Russia,' is a highly accurate observation. On the other hand, Yahia H. Zoubir (2022) attributes part of the security problems in the Sahel to the competition among great powers in the region. Jennifer Cooke et al. (2017) take this a step further, arguing that the interests of extra-regional actors create a kind of 'regional security traffic jam.' Namely, Whitman (2024) warns against fixating on Russia in the Sahel, while Zoubir (2022) highlights great power rivalries, and Cooke et al. (2017) describe a "security traffic jam" caused by competing external interests.

In some publications, Türkiye's Sahel policy is also analyzed in the context of its competition with great powers. Federico Donelli and Brendon J. Cannon (2025) emphasize that, over the past decade, Türkiye's Sahel policy has strengthened its position as a partner capable of competing with stronger actors, such as China and France, through defense exports, military training, and education and infrastructure projects. Publications discussing Türkiye's competition with France in the Sahel are not limited to this. Indeed, Osman Tekir (2023) provides numerous examples of Turkish-French rivalry in the region. Similarly, Ahmed Askar (2020) argues that Türkiye's growing influence in the Sahel has hindered France's presence in the region.

Although both Russia's and Türkiye's Sahel policies have been discussed in the literature in the context of competition with various Western actors, studies on their relations with each other in the region are

scarce. Illustratively, Nadzharov and Entina (2023) underline that Russia competes with France in the Sahel both militarily with fighters and fighter bombers such as Su-35, Su-34, Su-30 and economically with companies such as Gazprom, Rosneft, Sroytransgaz and NordGold. On the other hand, analysts also evaluate Türkiye's increasing presence in the region, both militarily and economically, in the context of competition with Western actors, especially France (Tekir, 2023).

In this context, the study aims to fill a gap in the literature by examining the nature of Russia and Türkiye's policies in the Sahel region. In particular, it explores whether these policies are primarily driven by competition, co-operation or a broader struggle for influence between Ankara and Moscow. The study also seeks to identify, through comparative case studies, the main similarities and differences in the ways in which both countries engage with the Sahel countries. In this way, it contributes to a better understanding of emerging non-Western influences in the region and offers perspectives on the changing dynamics of international competition in Africa.

### **1.2. Methodology**

This study analyzes the Sahel policies of Russia and Türkiye. During the analysis, the political, military, and economic relations of the two actors in the region are examined. In this context, the study investigates how the increasing political influence of both Russia and Türkiye in the Sahel affects the Ankara-Moscow bilateral relations. Over the past two decades, Russia has maintained its military presence in the region primarily by engaging various military groups. Türkiye, on the other hand, has strengthened its military presence through various defense agreements and military advisory services. The study comparatively analyzes the commonalities and contrasts in the military policies of Russia and Türkiye and assesses the nature of their military relations.

Economically, the presence of Turkish companies in the Sahel is growing exponentially each year. Russia, on the other hand, continues its economic engagement with Sahel countries by exploiting the region's natural resources in line with its own interests. The trade volume data for Ankara and Moscow, including exports and imports with Sahel countries, will also be analyzed in the context of their economic relations.

Within the scope of the case studies, several selected Sahel countries were analyzed and their relations with both Russia and Türkiye were examined. The aim is to determine whether Türkiye and Russia's policies towards the Sahel are characterized by competition or cooperation. Accordingly, the findings reveal that the two actors do not directly compete in the Sahel, but their policies may lead to rivalry.

### **1.3. Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of the study is based on neoclassical realism. Any faction of realism that accepts the material elements of power as valid may be suitable for analyzing the comparison in this study. However, other components of the realist tradition, such as classical realism, neorealism, offensive realism, and defensive realism, view states as a whole and ignore unit-level variables. As such the neoclassical realism is an ideal theory for analyzing the foreign policies of Russia and Türkiye in the Sahel region, as it considers both unit-level and system-level variables in foreign policy analysis.

Neoclassical realists argue that state behavior is influenced by systemic factors, such as the structure of the international system and the relative distribution of power, as well as unit-level variables like states' material power capacity, leadership perceptions, and strategic culture (Rose, 1998; Lobel, Ripsman, & Taliaferro, 2009). When applied to the context of Türkiye's and Russia's Sahel policies, the increasing influence of both actors in the region is, to a certain extent, directly proportional to the relative distribution of power and aligns with the weakening position of specific Western actors in the region.

Secondly, the structure of the international system, the Sahel's natural resources, geographical location, and security issues make it a favorable area for great power policies. Gideon Rose (1998) argues that in

regions where power transitions occur, states seek to maximize their influence. In this context, it can be said that the Sahel aligns with this neoclassical assumption. Indeed, from Russia's perspective, Moscow's goals of becoming a great power, controlling access to resources such as uranium and gold in the Sahel, and repositioning itself as a great power in the region despite the West's weakening position, align with the arguments of neoclassical realism. On the other hand, similar objectives align with Türkiye's foreign policy vision of 'regional ownership.'

In terms of both actors' Sahel policies, it is clear that domestic factors are intricately linked to foreign policy. Russia exemplifies this through the use of private military companies in the region, while Türkiye's Sahel strategy, which combines other tools like infrastructure projects, military education, and training programs with hard power elements such as defense agreements and arms exports, highlights the role of unit-level variables in foreign policy analysis. In conclusion, the presence of both unit-level and system-level variables (such as the dynamic changes in the material power capacity of both Russia and Türkiye, and the growing struggle for influence in the Sahel) makes neoclassical realism the most suitable theory for explaining the situation analyzed in this study.

## **2. System-level analysis**

To comprehensively analyze Russia's and Türkiye's Sahel policies, two key levels of analysis should be applied within the framework of neoclassical realism. At the system level, it is useful to examine how both actors respond to great power competition in the region and their relationships with other regional actors.

For neoclassical realists, system-level variables are one of the two main paradigms that influence state behavior. These variables include elements such as the structure of the international system, the distribution of power among states, and power shifts. Similarly, analyzing the Sahel policies of Russia and Türkiye requires considering these factors within the region.

### **2.1. Structure of the international system**

The first key aspect of the international system's structure, even before considering polarity, is its nature. For neoclassical realists, the anarchic nature of the international system is a fundamental assumption. Rose (1998) argues that neoclassical realists view this anarchy as compelling states to respond to uncertainty by attempting to control and shape their external environment. Indeed, according to Rose, neoclassical realism holds that the primary means for states to achieve their objectives (regardless of how they define their interests) is to expand their spheres of influence abroad (Rose, 1998, p. 152).

A second important aspect of the international system's structure is polarity, which refers to how power is distributed among states or power blocs. This concept, which indicates the number of dominant actors in the system, is used to classify the international order as unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar (Jackson, 1978: 89-92). Neoclassical realists argue that misinterpreting this variable can lead to catastrophic consequences, including global conflict. Randall L. Schweller (1998) contends that the series of miscalculations leading to the Second World War cannot be attributed solely to Hitler's personality and worldview. Instead, he argues that the most significant factor was the tri-polar alliance structure of the 1930s, involving the USA, the USSR, and Germany (Rose, 1998, p. 157).

In the context of Russia's and Türkiye's Sahel policies, the nature and structure of the international system fuel the struggle for influence in the region. The 21st-century international system remains as anarchic as its predecessors. According to the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, nowadays more than 110 armed conflicts are ongoing worldwide, with 35 (approximately one-third) occurring in Africa. Among these, five conflicts (affecting Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal) are in the Sahel countries analyzed in this study (Geneva

Academy, 2022). Conflicts in the region often have both international and non-international dimensions. In the case of non-international conflicts, the involvement of extra-regional actors through proxies highlights the anarchic nature of the international system. This dynamic fosters competition, particularly among Western actors vying for influence across different parts of the world.

With the end of the Cold War, the bipolar international system was replaced by new debates on world order and systemic structure. While various definitions exist for the current era, the widely accepted view is that of a unipolar system dominated by a single superpower (the United States), alongside multiple global and regional powers of varying influence. Samuel P. Huntington describes this arrangement as a “uni-multipolar” system (AEI, 1998). Although the ongoing great power rivalry in the Sahel and across Africa is not a direct product of this system, it is nonetheless influenced by it. The limitations of the uni-multipolar system in resolving international conflicts are evident, as more than 110 armed conflicts persist globally in the 21st century. Moreover, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has criticized the current global governance framework as an “ineffective system” in addressing international crises (Anadolu Agency, 2024).

## **2.2. ‘Perceived power shift’ in the international system**

In addition to the nature and structure of the international system, power shifts represent a crucial system-level variable in neoclassical realism. The introduction of this concept to international relations predates Gideon Rose’s 1998 article on neoclassical realism by four decades. In 1958, Abram F. Kennedy (A.F.K.) Organski introduced power transition theory, which posits that shifts in power between states can influence the structure of the international system (Organski, 1958). Neoclassical realists later expanded on this idea, refining it into the concept of “perceived power shift.” Rose (1998), citing scholars such as Melvyn P. Leffler and William Curti Wohlforth, argues that the formation and collapse of the bipolar international system resulted more from perceptions of shifting power rather than the actual potential power capacity of the competing actors (Rose, 1998, pp. 159-160).

The relationship between neoclassical realism, power shifts, and the Turkish-Russian competition in the Sahel is how perceptions of power, rather than merely material capabilities, drive the strategic actions of regional and external players. As Türkiye and Russia project their influence in the Sahel, their competition is not just based on their actual power, but on how states in the region perceive these developments. This is in line with the theory of “perceived power shift” in neoclassical realism, where shifting power dynamics inform political affiliations and foreign policy decisions in the Sahel region, particularly as local actors seek to play off against contending global powers.

On the other hand, Paul Kennedy also emphasises that power change is an important factor for the international system. Kennedy (1987), in his famous work systematically analysing the problematic of the search for order and polarity caused by the power shift among the actors of the international system, reveals that the power shift among the actors is directly proportional to the military and economic change in the material power capacity of the states. The fact of China’s rapid rise despite the stagnation and relative decline of the United States in recent years, which Kennedy predicted, is also an important detail for this study, is also an important dimension of power change in the international system. This is important for understanding the role of systemic variables in analyzing the Sahel policies of Russia and Türkiye, as the global decline of the United States creates a power vacuum in Washington’s presence in the Sahel, as in other parts of the world. This vacuum, in turn, pushes actors like Russia and Türkiye (both seeking influence in the region) into a race. The most important outcome of the nature and structure of the international system, together with the perceived power shift, is the rivalry between actors of various sizes in the Sahel.



### **2.3. Output of systemic variables: Rivalry in the Sahel**

Given these characteristics of the international system, the Sahel has been a battleground for external actors competing for influence for nearly sixty years. Traditionally, France and the United States have been the dominant players in this struggle. However, in the 21st century, the presence of global and regional actors (such as Russia, China, the European Union (EU), and Türkiye) has grown increasingly significant. Summarizing these actors' Sahel policies will help illuminate the competitive environment shaped by systemic variables.

Analyzing the situation in the Sahel independently of U.S. policies, particularly within the context of systemic rivalries, may lead to erroneous conclusions. For the U.S. remains the most influential actor in the current unipolar-multipolar system, and its Sahel policy is generally framed in terms of security. The prevailing perception is that the U.S. views the region primarily as a security threat. In the Trump era, however, this was hardly the case. One of the characteristic features of Trump's America's foreign policy was its focus on limiting the allocation of resources to the pursuit of U.S. security abroad. One of the most important reasons why this happened in the pre-Trump era is the strategic link between U.S. policy in the Sahel and Afghanistan.

Indeed, the "Pan-Sahel Initiative," launched by the U.S. in 2002 (one year after the invasion of Afghanistan) aimed to assist Sahelian countries such as Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania in detecting and responding to suspicious movements of people and goods across their borders. This was achieved through training, equipment provisions, and cooperative efforts (U.S. Department of State, 2002). However, as in the "Trump 1.0" era, in "Trump 2.0," the sustainability of Washington's foreign policy will face a significant challenge, as U.S. foreign policy moves are primarily driven by economic motives.

One of the instruments of U.S. policy in the Sahel is the U.S. Africa Command. Claiming to promote U.S. national interests and regional security, its military presence was established to support U.S. government's foreign policy through operations, exercises, and security cooperation programs, primarily through military-to-military activities and assistance programs. U.S. Africa Command openly declares that its presence has helped reduce threats to U.S. interests, a position that has also fueled competition in the Sahel (U.S. Africa Command, n.d.).

In contrast to the U.S. approach, which emphasizes security threats, Russia and Türkiye have been expanding their presence in the region through military assistance, humanitarian aid, and anti-colonial rhetoric. One consequence of these differing strategies is an increasingly competitive environment in the Sahel. Beyond the United States, another major international actor with interests in the Sahel is the European Union (EU). While the EU shares similar objectives with the U.S., the instruments used in their respective policies differ. Whereas the U.S. primarily addresses the region from a defense-oriented perspective, the EU, lacking a fully integrated defense mechanism, relies more on economic development tools to advance its policy goals (Pellerin, 2014). However, it remains a big question mark whether the US will continue to pursue a similarly motivated policy under Trump II. Some analysts attribute this to Trump's messages during the election campaign about avoiding military obligations and his reluctance to support NATO financially (Parens & Clarke, 2024).

France, a country historically associated with the African continent, remains a key player in the competition among international actors in the Sahel. Between 1962 and 1995, France intervened in Africa 19 times. However, since 1997, it has had to scale back its military presence on the continent (Melly & Darracq, 2013, p. 4). Since the 2000s, France's policies toward Sahelian states have often been contradictory. For instance, between 2013 and 2021, France politically confronted the military government that seized power in Mali, yet in 2021, it supported Mahamat Déby's unconstitutional takeover in Chad (Erforth & Tull, 2022). Additionally, France's military withdrawal from Mali in 2021 pushed the Malian government toward closer ties with Russia and its military proxy in Africa, the

Wagner Group (Antil & Vircoulon, 2024, p. 3). In some Sahelian countries, such as Mali, this shift has created a competitive environment in which Russia has stepped in to fill the power vacuum left by France's withdrawal.

Türkiye's recent advances in the Sahel have unsettled France. Ankara's African policy, which blends soft power with military engagement, has raised concerns in Paris, as noted by various analysts. Despite Türkiye's growing diplomatic and military presence in the region, France's increasingly weakened position has fueled an Ankara-Paris rivalry (Fabricius, 2021). However, Türkiye's political elites have also signaled a willingness to cooperate with France in counterbalancing China's expanding influence in Africa (Jones, 2021). This suggests that France is the primary actor favoring competition in the Sahel. Meanwhile, China is another key player in the region, particularly in the context of shifting global power dynamics.

China's Sahel policy traces its roots to the 1980s, beginning with industrial cooperation projects in Mali and later expanding to include other countries in the region throughout the 21st century. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2015 following legal reforms that enabled China to extend its spheres of influence beyond its borders, includes support for infrastructure projects in Sahelian countries. Additionally, China's political strategy in Africa (centered on backing politicians aligned with its interests) has contributed to efforts aimed at weakening U.S. and French influence in the region (Cheick, 2022). A key outcome of these systemic dynamics is the increasingly competitive environment in the Sahel. This competition mirrors the rivalry seen in the Sahel policies of both Russia and Türkiye.

Namely, China's growing influence in the Sahel, primarily through infrastructure development and political support, is contributing to a more competitive geopolitical environment in the region. By leveraging the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and aligning with local leaders, China is not only expanding its own sphere of influence but also challenging the established dominance of Western powers like the U.S. and France. This shift in influence dynamics intensifies the rivalry in the Sahel, as other external actors, such as Russia and Türkiye, also vie for power and partnerships in a region increasingly shaped by contesting foreign interests.

### **3. Unit-level analysis**

Analyzing Russia's and Türkiye's Sahel policies through the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism requires consideration of both system-level and unit-level variables. Unit-level variables include leadership perceptions, strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations. These factors shape key aspects of foreign policy execution, such as how the international system is perceived, decision-making processes, resource mobilization, and policy implementation (Ripsman et al., 2016). Accordingly, under the heading of diplomatic relations, the leaders' perceptions of the Sahel states in both countries are presented, while the strategic cultures of both nations are also discussed. On the other hand, under the headings of military and economic relations, the involvement of domestic institutions in Türkiye's Sahel policy is explored. Within this context, examining the diplomatic, military, and economic dimensions of Russia's and Türkiye's Sahel policies between 2019 and 2024 through these lenses would provide valuable insights. Regarding political relations, issues such as summit meetings at the leadership level, bilateral diplomatic ties, and political discourses will be examined.

#### **3.1. Diplomatic relations**

##### **3.1.1. Russia**

Russia's commitment to strengthening diplomatic relations with the Sahel countries is reflected in the updated Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, revised by President Vladimir Putin in 2016. Decree No. 640, specifically Paragraphs 95 and 99, outlines the goal of deepening bilateral relations with North African countries, including through foreign ministerial engagements. Additionally, the decree emphasizes expanding multilateral cooperation with African states at both bilateral and regional levels.

Key objectives include enhancing political dialogue, fostering mutually beneficial trade and economic ties, strengthening comprehensive cooperation based on shared interests, preventing regional conflicts and crises, and supporting post-conflict resolution efforts in Africa (Президент России, 2016).

The 2023 revision of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation highlights the extent of Russia's efforts to expand its influence across Africa, with particular emphasis on the Sahel. Article 7 of the document, signed by President Putin on March 31, 2023, reaffirms Africa's strategic importance, stating that a "fairer, multipolar world is taking shape," while criticizing colonial powers for achieving accelerated economic growth by exploiting Africa's resources (Президент России, 2023). A key aspect of this revision is Russia's commitment to supporting regional and sub-regional integration in Africa through friendly multilateral organizations, dialogue platforms, and regional alliances. Notably, Article 57 introduces, for the first time, a dedicated sub-section on Africa, underscoring Russia's diplomatic, military, and economic engagement with the continent. This article also reinforces that future cooperation mechanisms will adhere to the principle of "African solutions to African problems" (Президент России, 2023).

One of the most important mechanisms contributing to the development of Russia's diplomatic cooperation with Sahel countries between 2019 and 2024 is the Russia-Africa summits that started in 2019. The summits, which were organised twice between 2019 and 2024, the first in 2019 and the second in 2023, were interpreted as Russia's re-engagement with the African continent (Paul & Carlo, 2019). The first summit, held in Sochi, Russia on 23-24 October 2019, was attended by 43 heads of state and 2 vice presidents from 54 countries in the African continent. Of the 10 Sahel states analysed within the scope of this study, except Cameroon, the other 9 heads of state attended the summit. Within the scope of the summit organised with the theme 'For Peace, Security and Development', 92 agreements, contracts and memorandums of understanding were signed (Фонд Росконгресс, 2019).

The second Russia-Africa Summit took place on July 27-28, 2023, in St. Petersburg, Russia. With only 49 out of 54 African countries participating, the summit saw lower attendance compared to the first one. Notably, just 17 heads of state and 10 prime ministers were present, highlighting a significant drop in high-level representation. When focusing on the Sahel countries, only five heads of state attended, indicating particularly low participation from the region (Teslova, 2023). Several factors contributed to this decline, the most prominent being Western sanctions on Moscow due to the Russia-Ukraine war and the war's negative impact on the global food supply, which has had severe repercussions for the African continent.

Vladimir Putin's engagement with Africa has been limited but increasingly focused on strengthening Russia's presence. Since his first visit to Morocco in September 2006, Putin's trips to Africa have primarily been to North African countries such as Libya (2008) and Egypt (2015 and 2017). However his only sub-Saharan African visit was to South Africa. In contrast since 2015, African heads of state have visited Russia more frequently, signaling a shift in Moscow's approach to the continent (Dedet, 2019).

### **3.1.2. Türkiye**

Türkiye's engagement with the African continent began in the late 20th century. The 1998 African Opening Policy marked the initial phase, later evolving into the African Partnership Policy in 2013. Announced in 1998, the Africa Initiative Action Plan outlined several important steps, including increasing the number of embassies in Africa to 15, inviting African countries' leaders (such as Presidents, Prime Ministers, and Ministers) to Türkiye, enhancing engagement with African countries in international organizations like the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, mutually encouraging investments, contributing to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa, accepting African students into military education institutions in Türkiye, and establishing the Institute of African Studies (SAM, 2024).



Broadly speaking, the first quarter of the 21st century has been highly productive for Türkiye's diplomatic relations with Africa. Türkiye's Africa policy in the 21st century can be categorized into three key pillars: vision, action, and sustainability. Vision refers to a well-defined roadmap that began with the 1998 Africa Action Plan and has been reinforced through initiatives such as the Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summits held in 2008, 2014, and 2021 (Kavak, 2021).

In terms of Ankara's relations with the countries of the continent, the action is the bilateral meetings held at the level of leaders. In particular, one of the most important features of the period between 2019 and 2024 in terms of Türkiye's Sahel policy has been the summit diplomacy conducted through direct bilateral and multilateral contacts of leaders. As a matter of fact, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visits to more than 30 African countries during his term in office is a decisive data in terms of this summit diplomacy. In this direction, except for Cameroon and Burkina Faso, he visited 8 other Sahel countries. President Erdoğan, who also met with the presidents of Cameroon and Burkina Faso in Ankara, visited more than 30 African countries nearly 40 times during his term in office (Bambou, 2013; Anadolu Agency, 2019).

A crucial factor in Türkiye's Sahel policy is the sustainability of its relations with the region. The primary driver of this sustainability is Ankara's expanding diplomatic presence across the African continent. While Türkiye had only 12 embassies in Africa in 2002, this number grew to 44 by 2022. This expansion has not been one-sided; the number of African embassies in Ankara has also increased significantly. In 2008, only 10 African countries had embassies in Türkiye, whereas today, that number has risen to 38 (İncekaya, 2022). While Türkiye may have initially been a latecomer to the Sahel compared to other powers like France or China, its rapid diplomatic expansion across Africa since the early 2000s shows a deliberate effort to build a sustainable and growing presence. Türkiye's increase in both the number of its embassies across the continent and the number of African embassies in Ankara highlights its growing influence, signaling that it is now a significant player in the region, despite its later start in comparison to other powers.

To fully understand this development, it is essential to consider Türkiye's African policy in the late 20th century. At that time, the Ethiopian, Somali, and Nigerian embassies in Ankara had closed for various reasons, and Sudan was the only Black African country with an embassy in Türkiye. Against this backdrop, the 1998 African Initiative was conceived as a strategic response to strengthen Türkiye's engagement with the continent (SAM, 2024).

The story of Türkiye's Sahel policy is quite similar to what has been said so far regarding her Africa policy in general. In the early 2000s, Türkiye did not have an embassy in any of the ten Sahel countries analysed in this study, whereas today it has opened diplomatic missions in all of these countries. In addition, in order to understand the struggle for influence analysed in this study, Türkiye is the fourth country in the world (after China (52), the USA (50) and France (47)) with the number of embassies reaching 44 (SAM, 2024), thanks to its increasing influence in Africa, especially between 2019 and 2024. In this respect, it is seen that both Russia and Türkiye are in a race involving Western actors in terms of developing diplomatic relations with Sahel countries. It would be helpful to examine whether a similar situation exists in the context of military and economic relations.

Türkiye and Russia's Sahel policies both aim to expand their influence in the region, but they approach it through different strategies. Türkiye's engagement, rooted in its 1998 African Opening Policy, focuses on long-term, sustainable relations, emphasizing diplomacy, economic cooperation, and soft power initiatives such as cultural exchanges, military training, and humanitarian support. Türkiye has significantly increased its diplomatic presence, with embassy openings in all ten Sahel countries, underscoring its growing influence in the region. President Erdoğan's summit diplomacy and high-level visits to African countries, particularly in the Sahel, demonstrate Türkiye's commitment to

strengthening bilateral and multilateral ties. In contrast, Russia's approach is more reactive and focused on military engagement, using private military contractors like Wagner and offering security assistance to Sahelian governments. While Türkiye invests in long-term diplomatic and economic relationships, Russia seeks to solidify its position through arms deals, military support, and political alliances, often challenging Western dominance in the region. Both countries, however, are actively vying for with each other and Western powers, positioning themselves as key players in the Sahel through expanding diplomatic and strategic ties.

### **3.2. Military relations**

#### **3.2.1. Russia**

A key component of Russia's Sahel policy is its military relations through various defense actors on the continent. According to a 2022 report by Rand Corporation analysts, Russian private military companies (PMCs) (which officially claim no state affiliation but are largely state-funded) have carried out more than 34 operations in 16 African countries since 2005 (Grissom et al., 2022). Among these PMCs, the Wagner Group is the one most closely linked to Sahel countries. Reports indicate that Russia's efforts to expand its military influence in the Sahel were largely coordinated by former Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, with Moscow's strategic involvement becoming more evident between 2019 and 2024.

The first allegations of Russia using Wagner as a tool for power struggles in the Sahel surfaced in June 2019, following the leak of classified documents. According to these documents, Wagner (led by St. Petersburg-based businessman and close Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin) aimed to weaken US and former colonial powers Britain and France in the region, while bolstering Russia's African influence by suppressing pro-Western uprisings on the continent (The Guardian, 2019).

A second significant report on Russia's use of the Wagner Group as an instrument in its struggle for influence in Africa was published by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the British Parliament in July 2023. This report asserts that Wagner is funded by Russia's Ministry of Defence and is specifically tasked with facilitating Moscow's activities in the Sahel and across the African continent (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2023).

One of the most prominent criticisms of Russia's military involvement in the Sahel is the allegation that Moscow uses Wagner to prop up authoritarian regimes. Between 2019 and 2024, Wagner maintained long-term operations in several African nations, including the Central African Republic, Sudan, Libya, Zimbabwe, Mali, and Burkina Faso—with only the last two being Sahel countries. Additionally, Wagner has been accused of directly supporting anti-Western uprisings in Sahel nations such as Niger (Wolff, 2023).

Although Russia officially acknowledged that the Wagner Group was state-funded following the death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in August 2023, the gradual decline of Russia's military presence in Africa has been particularly striking. While some analysts interpret this shift as a result of Moscow's need to focus on Ukraine, others view it as a strategic defeat for Russia in Africa (Holmedahl, 2024). Regardless of the underlying reason, the outcome remains unchanged: the military dimension of Russia's struggle for influence in the Sahel (largely maintained through private military companies since 2019) significantly weakened by 2024. In contrast, Türkiye's military engagements in the region, integrated with elements of soft power, have gained momentum.

Russia's military setbacks in Ukraine have damaged its image as a military power and led to a significant decline in arms exports. In 2023, Russia lost its position as the world's second-largest arms exporter to France, with a 53% drop in weapon sales. In sub-Saharan Africa, Russia's arms market share fell from 26% (2018-22) to 17% (2019-23), while China's share also decreased but remained higher at 19%. This decline, coupled with a 52% drop in overall arms imports by African countries, shows a major revenue loss for Russia, which now relies more on arms deals with conflict-ridden nations (Ramani, 2024).

On the contrary Türkiye has become a significant exporter of military equipment to African countries, notably selling drones like the Bayraktar TB2, as well as other UAVs, armored vehicles, and training aircraft. These sales have targeted countries including Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Djibouti, Angola, Somalia, and others such as Rwanda. Unlike Western nations, Türkiye imposes few conditions on its arms sales, positioning itself as a key partner in a region where Western influence has waned. Türkiye's arms exports to Africa surged from \$83 million in 2020 to \$460 million in 2021. Overall, Türkiye's defense industry has expanded significantly, with total exports reaching \$5.5 billion in 2023, up from \$248 million in 2002 (Vial & Bouvier, 2025).

### **3.2.2. Türkiye**

Like Russia, Türkiye aims to consolidate its presence in Africa through military relations, but its approach differs in principles and objectives. Ankara's strategy in the Sahel region revolves around three key pillars. First, it focuses on defence industry exports and diversifying cooperation in this sector, leveraging advanced military technology such as drones to establish itself as a reliable partner. Second, Türkiye prioritizes maintaining its military engagements within the framework of international organizations like the UN and the African Union, emphasizing multilateralism and legitimacy. Finally, Ankara ensures the sustainability of its defence partnerships by providing training and consultancy services to African militaries, fostering long-term capacity-building and goodwill. This balanced approach, combining economic interests with soft power and capacity development, sets Türkiye apart from other external actors like Russia (SAM, 2024).

In this context, Türkiye has strengthened its cooperation with African countries, including the Sahel, based on "a win-win principle", leveraging its recent advancements in the defence industry. As a result, between 2019 and 2024, Türkiye has become a reliable supplier of critical defence products, particularly armed and unarmed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and armored personnel carriers for Sahel countries (SAM, 2024).

Today, Türkiye exports military equipment to 7 out of 10 Sahel countries, with the exceptions of Guinea, Chad, and Cameroon. Furthermore, in 2022, Türkiye demonstrated its growing role in Africa's defence sector by participating in Africa Aerospace and Defence (AAD) (the continent's largest defence industry exhibition) held biennially in Pretoria, South Africa. Notably, Türkiye had the largest number of participating companies after the host nation (SAM, 2024).

The second pillar of Türkiye's military strategy in the Sahel focuses on institutionalizing relations and actively engaging within international organizations. A key element of this effort is the establishment of Military Attaché Offices in 19 African countries, which underscores Türkiye's commitment to formalizing its presence. Additionally, Ankara contributes to UN peacekeeping missions in Africa, including several Sahel nations, with nearly 40 police officers and experts (SAM, 2024). This highlights Türkiye's emphasis on multilateral cooperation and its role in promoting regional stability. Overall, the military dimension of Türkiye's Sahel policy is built on three main components: Defence industry collaboration, participation in international missions, and the provision of military training and consultancy services. Beyond military ties, the third and equally significant pillar of Türkiye's engagement with the Sahel is its focus on strengthening economic relations, further solidifying its influence on the continent.

Both Russia and Türkiye utilize military tools to expand their leverage in the Sahel, but with very different approaches in both action and actual motives. Russia's Sahel military strategy has been more of using private military companies (PMCs), notably the Wagner Group, as a tool to help authoritarian regimes, counter Western designs, and provide access to resources. Wagner's operations in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso have also been criticized for their role in helping to fuel anti-Western revolutions and backing shaky regimes. Despite its initial success in establishing military footholds

across Africa, Russia's military footprint in the Sahel has decreased, particularly after the death of Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2023 and Russia's overall diminished influence on the continent as it reaffirms itself on the warfront in Ukraine.

In comparison, Türkiye's Sahel military intervention is based on a more structured and sustainable policy that emphasizes defense industry exports, multilateralism, and capacity building. Türkiye has positioned itself as a reliable counterpart for Sahelian countries by selling cutting-edge military technology, including drones and armored personnel carriers, and offering training and consultancy services to African armed forces. Türkiye's regional military strategy is based on international institutions like the UN and African Union, which is an expression of its commitment to regional stability and multilateralism. In addition, Türkiye's involvement in peacekeeping missions and its active engagement in defense industry exhibitions, such as the Africa Aerospace and Defence show, further attest to its increasing influence through hard and soft power. By doing so, while Russian military strategy in the Sahel has been characterized by opportunist and secret behavior, Türkiye has attempted to build long-term, institutionalized military alliances consistent with its general diplomatic and economic goals.

### **3.3. Economic relations**

#### **3.3.1. Russia**

Although Russia's economic relations with the Sahel are often analyzed solely within the economic sphere, they are closely intertwined with diplomatic and military ties. The Russia-Africa summits (key symbols of Russia's diplomatic engagement with the Sahel) have largely centered on economic themes. At the first summit in 2019, President Vladimir Putin set a goal of increasing trade with Africa from \$17 billion to \$40 billion within five years. However, by 2023, trade volume had only reached \$18 billion (Bhattacharya, 2023).

An important dimension of Russia's economic objectives in its Sahel policy consists of defence exports and the exploitation of precious metals and minerals in this continent. As a matter of fact, between 2018 and 2022, Russia will meet 40 per cent of the continent's imports of major weapon systems, while consolidating its presence in the mining and energy markets in African countries such as the Central African Republic, Madagascar, Mozambique and Sudan, including the Sahel country of Guinea. On the other hand, Moscow has signed nuclear co-operation agreements of significant economic value with 20 countries, including the Sahel country Nigeria (Re: Russia, 2024). In addition, in May 2024, Russian companies started to build a 200 MW solar power plant covering an area of 314 hectares in Sanankoroba near Bamako in May 2024 (Ecofin Agency, 2024).

Between 2019 and 2024, it is seen that Russia's economic relations with Africa are not in direct proportion to the targets despite everything. When a comparison is made between the target announced by Russia in 2019 and the current result, it is clearly evident that Moscow has not even reached half of its 5-year target.

#### **3.3.2. Türkiye**

In 2003, Türkiye's total trade volume with the African continent stood at \$5.4 billion. By the end of 2022, this figure had risen to approximately \$40.7 billion. From the perspective of Sahel countries, trade volume increased from \$1.35 billion in 2003 to over \$10 billion in 2021. In the same year, the top two Sahel trading partners were Nigeria (\$1.9 billion) and Mauritania (\$686 million) (SAM, 2024).

On the contrary, Russia's foreign trade volume with African countries in 2022 remains around 18 billion dollars. Only 2 of Russia's top 10 trading partners in Africa (Senegal and Nigeria) are Sahel countries. On the other hand, while 85% of Russia's trade volume with Africa is exports, Moscow imports only

around 15% from the continent. The share of food products in these exports is about 1.8 billion dollars, accounting for 10% of total exports (Гвилия, 2024).

The volume of projects undertaken by Turkish construction firms in Africa has also expanded rapidly, exceeding \$82 billion as of 2022. These firms have played a crucial role in implementing key infrastructure projects (such as railways, airports, energy initiatives, and port operations) contributing significantly to the economic development of African nations (SAM, 2024).

Currently, Türkiye has Business Councils with 45 African countries. Additionally, Ankara continues to enhance transportation links with African nations, facilitate business interactions, and position Türkiye as a strategic hub for African connectivity. A key element of this effort is the expansion of Turkish Airlines (THY) flights to Africa. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, THY operated flights to 62 destinations across 41 African countries. With the lifting of travel restrictions, THY has gradually restored and expanded its routes, solidifying its role as the airline that most effectively connects Africa to the world (SAM, 2024). Given these developments, the economic dimension of Türkiye's Sahel policy remains highly significant.

When comparing the economic aspects of both countries' Sahel policies, it is clear that Türkiye leads in terms of total trade volume on the continent. At the same time, both countries maintain strong economic relations with two Sahel states in the region.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Sahel region has become a focal point for global and regional powers seeking to expand their influence in Africa, with Russia and Türkiye emerging as key players. While both nations aim to consolidate their presence in the region, their strategies and approaches differ significantly. Russia's policy, characterized by the use of private military companies like the Wagner Group and a focus on resource exploitation, reflects a hard power approach aimed at filling the vacuum left by retreating Western powers. However, its military and economic engagements have faced challenges, particularly due to the fallout from the Ukraine conflict and internal shifts within its military apparatus. In contrast, Türkiye has adopted a more balanced strategy, combining defence industry exports, multilateral engagement, and capacity-building initiatives to foster long-term partnerships. This approach, underpinned by soft power tools and economic investments, has allowed Türkiye to position itself as a reliable and sustainable partner in the region.

The race between Russia and Türkiye, both with each other and with other great powers in the Sahel, while not overtly confrontational, highlights the broader struggle for influence in a region rich in resources and strategic importance. Russia's reliance on hard power and transactional relationships has yielded mixed results, with its influence waning in recent years. Türkiye, on the other hand, has leveraged its growing defence industry, institutionalized military relations, and economic investments to build a more enduring presence. This divergence in strategies underscores the differing priorities and capabilities of the two nations, with Türkiye's emphasis on soft power and multilateralism setting it apart from Russia's more unilateral and resource-driven approach.

The Sahel's future will be shaped by the interplay of these external actors' strategies, as well as the agency of Sahelian states in navigating these complex dynamics. As the region continues to grapple with security challenges, political instability, and economic underdevelopment, the role of external powers like Russia and Türkiye will remain pivotal. However, the sustainability of their influence will depend on their ability to address the region's pressing needs, foster local partnerships, and adapt to the evolving geopolitical landscape. Ultimately, the Sahel's trajectory will be determined not only by the actions of external actors but also by the capacity of Sahelian states to leverage these engagements for their own development and stability.



In this context, the rivalry and cooperation between Russia and Türkiye in the Sahel offer valuable insights into the broader dynamics of great power competition in Africa. While both nations seek to maximize their influence, their differing approaches reflect the complexities of engaging with a region marked by both opportunities and challenges. As the Sahel continues to attract global attention, the policies of Russia and Türkiye will serve as a litmus test for the effectiveness of hard power versus soft power strategies in shaping the future of Africa's most contested region.

In the context of the Sahel region, Russia and Türkiye are undoubtedly competing for influence, albeit through divergent methods and priorities. While the competition may not always be overtly confrontational, both nations are strategically vying for control over key partnerships and access to the region's valuable resources. Russia, employing hard power tactics through private military companies like the Wagner Group, seeks to establish dominance by exploiting resource-rich areas and challenging the influence of Western powers. This approach, however, has shown limitations, particularly as Russia's geopolitical situation (due to the war in Ukraine and internal military struggles) has weakened its position. On the other hand, Türkiye's competition is marked by its multifaceted strategy, which integrates soft power elements such as defense industry exports, multilateral engagements, and capacity-building initiatives. Türkiye's growing influence in the region is not driven solely by immediate military advantage, but rather by long-term, sustainable partnerships that appeal to Sahelian nations seeking stable and diversified cooperation. By focusing on fostering deeper institutional ties, providing training, and offering economic support, Türkiye has positioned itself as a more reliable and enduring partner compared to Russia's more transactional, resource-focused approach.

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