

The Impact of US Withdrawal from the Sahel on Counterterrorism Operational Effectiveness: Qualitative Comparative thematic analysis

Author: Christopher Korkor

Affiliation: Old Dominion University

Email: kkorkor@yahoo.com

Abstract

The recent shift in US foreign policy, including its withdrawal from the Sahel, poses significant to the effectiveness of counterterrorism operations in this volatile region. This paper examines the effect of the US's reduced military footprint on the effectiveness of counterterrorism operations conducted by local and regional security forces. The paper focuses on countries such as Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger which faces complex security challenges from violent extremist organizations because of poverty, economic decline, weak governance, and porous borders to establish a sanctuary in ungoverned spaces in the region. The US presence in the region since 9/11 has bolstered local and regional counterterrorism efforts by providing essential support in intelligence-sharing, training, surveillance missions, and logistics. This paper examines the operational implications and consequences of this withdrawal, focusing on how reduced US support affects the capabilities of Sahelian nations and local and regional security forces in countering violent extremist groups and managing their complex security environments. The US's departure from the region creates weak counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts, resulting in a significant security vacuum despite the efforts of the G5 Sahel forces. Regional governments and local security forces would struggle to combat al-Qaeda-affiliated armed militant groups. The presence of the US in the region aims to assist in tackling extremist organizations and addressing political, socioeconomic, developmental, and governance challenges in the area. Specifically, the paper seeks to examine the impact of diminished US intelligence-sharing, surveillance, reconnaissance, logistical, and training support for local and regional forces, as well as the potential power vacuums that extremist groups could exploit. The paper relies on secondary qualitative evidence from the existing literature to draw a comparative thematic analysis of operational effectiveness before and after the US withdrawal from the Sahel region. The findings indicate that the withdrawal has led to a decline in operational effectiveness, resulting in reduced air and drone strikes, diminished surveillance capabilities, and compromised strategic coordination. The paper also explores the adaptive responses of regional actors and the growing influence of alternative security providers, such as Russia's Wagner Group. The paper concludes by assessing policy options for enhancing counterterrorism cooperation in the Sahel and highlighting the importance of US geopolitical engagement in fragile regions for maintaining global security stability.

Keywords: Sahel, US withdrawal, counterterrorism, operational effectiveness, security cooperation, violent extremist organizations, terrorism

Introduction

The Sahel is a semi-arid region that extends east to west across Africa, separating the Sahara Desert to the north from the tropical savanna in the south.¹ Since its independence in the 1960s, the area has been affected by severe security and humanitarian crises due to the activities of violent extremist organizations. The extremists capitalized on the weaknesses of illegitimate governance, economic decline, and the worsening effects of climate change. Violence, conflict, and organized crime activities have surged in the region over the last decades, transcending national borders and causing significant challenges to countries in the area and the littoral states.² The Sahel in this paper includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The area is one of the world's poorest regions, and, apart from Mauritania, all the countries in the region are landlocked. Despite the presence of several natural resources in the area, including gold, uranium, oil, natural gas, and iron, the region ranks at the bottom of the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI). For example, 85 percent of the population relies on agriculture and pastoral farming. The Sahel has experienced numerous rebellions and military coups throughout its post-independence, and non-state Islamist jihadist groups have dominated the region in recent years.³ During the Cold War, authoritarian, repressive governments benefited from superpower patronage and significant support from their colonial power, France. Democratic waves in the 1990s changed patterns of governance in the region. In 1991, Mali's longtime dictator was removed from power following mass protests for democracy. Mali has had a civilian government for two decades, and Burkina Faso and Niger also witnessed democratic consolidation, but many of them have backslid into military regimes in recent years. The US foreign policy toward the region after independence was limited to humanitarian assistance, development, Cold War politics, and democracy promotion post-Cold War.⁴ The paper addresses the question how has the US withdrawal from the Sahel affected the operational effectiveness of counterterrorism activities in the region?

After the 9/11 attacks, the US foreign policy toward the Sahel changed dramatically. It became a concern about ungoverned territories and spaces becoming terrorist sanctuaries because of weak governance and conflict-affected states. The US has adopted a global war on terror policy, which was accepted by the Sahelian states, and Mali became a critical US security partner. During this period, the United States has pursued a policy of indirect intervention in the Sahel, building military capacity for various nations in the region. The US, in collaboration with the Sahelian states, worked hand in hand during the global war on terror paradigm to drive away violent extremist organizations in the area. US foreign policy toward the Sahel region has been

¹ David Vergun (2023). Department of Defense Seeks to Quell Violent Extremism in Africa's Sahel Region.

² The Center for Prevention Action (2024). Violent Extremism in the Sahel, cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/-/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel.

³ Alex Thurston (2022). An Alternative Approach to Sahel Policy, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.

⁴ Ibid

predominated by security assistance and military cooperation centered on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency.⁵ The paper focuses on both indirect and direct interventions in the Sahel following the attacks on the homeland. The indirect intervention aimed to build the capacity of local and regional security forces against the Islamist jihadist groups, while direct involvement included cooperation and operational support for the French armed forces, Nigerien forces, and other international actors in the region.⁶ Section one of the paper examines the history of US intervention in the Sahel following the 9/11 attacks. The paper offers a comprehensive historical overview of the United States' direct and indirect military interventions in the Sahel. The literature review on counterterrorism and security cooperation has indicated that the principal-agent and alliance theories are the appropriate theoretical frameworks for addressing the research question. The second section focuses heavily on US security cooperation with Mali between 2002 and 2012, with a particular emphasis on counterterrorism operations, which intensified as the civil war erupted. The third section explores the more direct US intervention pursued through military cooperation with France beyond 2012. The fourth section examines the impact of the US withdrawal on the operational effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts. The fifth section examines regional and non-Western security providers such as the Wagner Group, now known as the Africa Corp, and the military, security, political, and economic influence of Russia and China in the region. The final section offers key policy recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

Theoretical Framework

The US Legislature, popularly known as the Congress, authorized the president after 9/11 to use all necessary force against nations, organizations, or persons who planned and authorized terrorist attacks and prevent future acts of international terrorism against the homeland. Congress enacted the Authorization for the Use of Military Force 2001 (AUMF), which was restricted to actors involved in the attacks.⁷ The use of AUMF does not focus only on al-Qaeda but acts to address emerging threats posed by Islamist jihadist organizations and eliminate their sanctuaries and territories. The counterterrorism campaign was concentrated in Muslim-majority countries where governments struggled to exert sovereignty over ungoverned territories. The US counterterrorism programs fall under the umbrella of the Department of Defense (DOD). It is crucial to distinguish US counterterrorism initiatives into direct and indirect military interventions. Direct intervention refers to US forces fighting or defending territories in another country using force, such as air, drone, or missile strikes, without deploying ground troops. In contrast, indirect intervention includes providing security assistance, such as intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, training programs, advisory support, and aerial refueling, to facilitate a third party's use of force. For instance, the US supported the French intervention in Mali in 2013. Cooperation is the process by

⁵ John Ramming Chappell (2021). A New Framework for US Policy in the Sahel, Marcellus Policy Analysis, No. 1

⁶ Stephen Tankel (2020). US Counterterrorism in the Sahel: From Indirect to Direct Intervention, *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 4, 875-893

⁷ Ibid

which two or more individuals or states work together to achieve a common goal. Moreover, cooperation is stronger between allies or actors with shared interests. The US counterterrorism cooperation is bilateral between allies or security partners who collaborate on tactical security issues, where politics take a back seat. For example, US counterterrorism cooperation occurs within coalitions such as the one formed to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the G5 Sahel force in Mali. The importance of security partnerships in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency scholarship often overlooks the roles of partners and assumes that the US and its partners share the same interests. The body of literature has attempted to redress the imbalance through the prism/lens of principal-agent theory and alliance theory.⁸

Meanwhile, political scientists and security scholars have analyzed US counterterrorism initiatives in the Sahel region through the lens of principal-agent theory or alliance theory. The principal-agent theory occurs when one act (the principal) delegates tasks to another (the agent), but their interests may not always fully align. In counterterrorism literature, the principal-agent theory helps explain the challenges of delegation between states, international organizations, and local partners in combating terrorism. This usually involves a state (the principal) that often delegates counterterrorism responsibilities to another state, a military unit, or a local security force (the agent).⁹ The principal-agent theory explains the problems that arise when a powerful state relies on a weaker state to achieve a particular goal. The theory posits that the financier, or principal, depends on the host or local partners to fulfill its duties, especially when their interests align with one another. The US provided military assistance and training programs to Sahelian governments and their security forces to combat the threats posed by Islamist jihadist organizations. These include military equipment, advice, military exercises, information sharing, institution-building, financial resources, logistics, intelligence sharing, and the provision of defense materiel.¹⁰

The governments and security apparatus of Sahelian nations, including the G5 Sahel Force, utilized these tools to counter and disrupt terrorist networks. Alliance theory in international relations explains why states form security partnerships and how these alliances function. In counterterrorism literature, alliance theory helps explain how states collaborate to combat terrorism. The rationale for counterterrorism alliances arises when states pool their resources, share intelligence, and coordinate military operations against terrorist threats. A classic example is the G5 Sahel Joint Force (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) was created to enhance regional counterterrorism cooperation. Additionally, the traditional alliance theory suggests that states form alliances against powerful adversaries, thereby maintaining a balance of power. However, in counterterrorism, states often ally against non-state armed actors due to a balance of threats. The US allied with Sahelian governments not because of their military strength but because

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Daniel Byman (2006). *Friends Like These: Counterterrorism and the War on Terrorism*, *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 79-115

¹⁰ David A. Lake (2007). *Delegating War: The Nature of Military Alliances*, *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 79-112

of shared concerns about jihadist expansion.¹¹ This paper demonstrates how US counterterrorism operations, notably the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), are analyzed through the prism of principal-agent and alliance theory. More importantly, this study reveals that US counterterrorism operations often result from a principal-agent nexus. The US created the counterterrorism initiatives (the principal) and the states in the Sahel region, such as Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, and their security apparatus to combat violent extremist organizations that have established a sanctuary in the ungoverned spaces in the area. The agents may not fully share the principal's goals. While the primary objective of the principal is to neutralize terrorist threats, the agent might prioritize regime survival and political control or sometimes tacitly cooperate with the militant groups for short-term gains.¹² For example, some Sahelian states have been accused of using counterterrorism operations to suppress political opposition rather than targeting violent extremist groups and sometimes engaged in corruption by diverting resources meant for counterterrorism purposes for private gains because of the absence of oversight mechanisms. This was common between the Malian state and the Ministry of Defense. Also, in Nigeria, arms and weapons are sold in black markets to Boko Haram members to fight the Nigerian armed forces. Interestingly, the principal-agent theory most often faces challenges related to asymmetric information and monitoring. The agent usually possesses better local intelligence and operational knowledge than the principal, resulting in an information asymmetry. For instance, reports suggest that some governments in the Sahel overstate the effectiveness of counterterrorism missions to maintain Western support.

To mitigate risks, the principal uses mechanisms such as financial incentives, training programs, and military oversight to align agent behavior with their objectives. However, these mechanisms are not infallible against corruption; shifting alliances and changing political dynamics at times weaken their effectiveness. For instance, the US attached a series of conditions to the security assistance, including democracy promotion, respect for human rights, the rule of law, and civilian control of the armed forces. Violation of the norms and values might lead to sanctions and suspension of military assistance since the Leahy law prohibits the US from providing security assistance to a foreign country implicated in human rights abuses or its armed forces removing a democratically elected president from office.¹³

Moreover, the US withdrawal from the Sahel has altered the principal-agent dynamic, shifting reliance on France, the European Union, and regional coalitions to new principals in the Sahel region. The Sahelian states have contracted a Russian private security company, the Wagner Group, now known as the Africa Corp, to fill the void left by the US and other international actors. More importantly, China and Russia have moved to occupy the vacuum created by the departure

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Bruno Charbonneau (2022). France's Disengagement and the Future of Sahel Counterterrorism, *African Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 89-104

¹³ Peter D. Feaver (2003). *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations*, Harvard University Press.

of the UN peacekeeping force and other Western states. As a result, China, Russia (the principal), and the Sahelian states, security forces (agents) to counter the Islamic jihadist groups in the area. Thus, the growing involvement of non-Western security providers in the Wagner Group presents new challenges in monitoring and aligning counterterrorism strategies with those of the US, France, and Europe. Similarly, a shift in the alliance can open the door for alternative partners. When one alliance weakens, states may seek alternative security providers. A typical example is that after the US and France scaled back counterterrorism operations, Burkina Faso and Mali turned to Russia's private security company, the Wagner Group, for military support. The decline of Western-backed alliances has led to a more fragmented counterterrorism approach in the Sahel. Interestingly, all the Sahelian states such as Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali have moved away from Western-backed counterterrorism efforts and realigned their alliances toward non-Western actors. Alliance theory in counterterrorism literature explains why states cooperate against terrorism, how these partnerships function, and why they break down. The US withdrawal from the Sahel exemplifies the fragility of alliances and the risks associated with dependence on Western external security guarantees.

In summary, the principal-agent theory offers a valuable lens for understanding the complexities of counterterrorism cooperation, particularly in fragile regions such as the Sahel. The theory highlights the challenges in delegation, oversight, and maintaining aligned incentives between external security actors and local government.

The Role of the US in Sahel Counterterrorism Efforts

Historically, the United States has played a pivotal role in the Sahel, with its activity primarily focused on humanitarian assistance, development, and Cold War-era geopolitics.¹⁴ After the 9/11 attacks, the US foreign policy toward the Sahel has been predominated by security assistance and military cooperation centered on counterterrorism. The global security environment changed dramatically, and the US global war on terror, which started under President George W. Bush's administration, contributed to the expansion of the US military footprint worldwide, including the Sahel with counterterrorism to provide security forces with training, military exercises, and participation in combat against militant groups which has reflected the enormity of the problems in the area.¹⁵ The US has become concerned about ungoverned spaces becoming a haven for violent extremist organizations, leading to the establishment of the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) in 2002 to train and equip local forces to secure porous borders, monitor human trafficking, and foster regional cooperation and stability. The counterterrorism program was created as a capacity-building effort for security forces in Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad to combat the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). This militant group from Algeria has established a presence in

¹⁴ Alex Thurston (2022). *An Alternative Approach to US Sahel Policy*, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.

¹⁵ Nani Detti (2021). *US Strategy in the Sahel: Toward a Human Security Centered Approach*, Marcellus Policy Analysis, No. 4

northern Mali. The capacity-building efforts of the PSI began with \$ 7.5 million for training and equipping as part of the counterterrorism initiative.¹⁶ The PSI was rebranded the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) in 2005 with expanded membership and funding. Six new countries were added to the TSCTP, including Algeria, Burkina Faso, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia, bringing the total to ten. The mission of the TSCTP expanded beyond security cooperation to include development and diplomacy programs. These new areas addressed socio-economic drivers that helped violent extremist organizations thrive and promote coordination among the participant nations.¹⁷ According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), countries participating in the TSCTP received \$340 million between 2005 and 2013 for counterterrorism programs. The counterterrorism approach has dominated US foreign policy in the Sahel and Sahara since the inception of the global war on terror paradigm. The US has over \$ 1 billion invested in TSCTP since its creation to coordinate a whole-of-government approach in the region, focusing on equipping and training local militaries to advance counterterrorism programs.¹⁸ Additionally, counterterrorism operations expanded to other parts of Africa with the establishment of the Africa Command (AFRICOM). AFRICOM was established in 2007 to oversee all US military and security activities, including those in the Sahel region.¹⁹ The significance of US counterterrorism operations in the Sahel region is substantial, given the region's strategic importance and the escalating threat posed by violent extremist organizations. US operations in the area have been instrumental in supporting local governments' efforts to stabilize their countries and in preventing extremist groups from expanding their influence across Africa and into Europe.²⁰ Islamist Jihadist activities have grown in the Sahel since the 2000s, and 2010 witnessed a surge in terrorist attacks in Mali and Nigeria. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have become an epicenter of violent extremism, according to existing counterterrorism literature. Threats from militant jihadist organizations have evolved and escalated. The militant groups have increased as the US has expanded its counterterrorism operations. The current crisis in the area was associated with the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's government in Libya in 2011, which led to a proliferation of weapons and armed groups in the region.²¹ The influx of extremists into northern Mali resurrected the Tuareg rebellion and civil war in 2012. The Tuaregs soldiers returned home to Mali and Niger after the overthrow of Gaddafi's regime to form the National Movement

¹⁶ Stephen Tankel (2020). US Counterterrorism in the Sahel: From Indirect to Direct Intervention, *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 4, 875-893

¹⁷ Harmon, & Stephen Albert (2019). Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012-2013.

¹⁸ Nick Turse (2020). How One of the Most Stable Nations in West Africa Descended Into Mayhem, *The New York Times*

¹⁹ Camara Kamissa (2021). It's Time to Rethink US Strategy in the Sahel, *United States Institute of Peace*.

²⁰ Steven Feldstein (2018). Do Terrorist Trends in Africa Justify the US Military Expansion, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

²¹ Christopher Faulkner, Raphael Parens, & Marcel Plichta (2023). US Counterterrorism in the Sahel Amid Great Power Competition, *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, Vol. 16, Issue 4.

for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) to establish an independent state because of economic marginalization and political exclusion by the Malian government. Tuareg separatists aligned themselves with several foreign Islamist jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamist Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and al-Mourabitoun, to remove the Malian government from power.²² During the conflict between the Malian security forces, Tuareg separatists, and the Islamist jihadist organizations in the north, the militant groups captured three key cities, including Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu, and declared independence with Sharia law. The Malian armed forces were humiliated and accused President Amadou Toumani Toure (ATT) of the defeat. The Malian security forces removed the democratically elected president from power in 2012, which has thrown the Sahel region into political instability.²³

Meanwhile, the US has played a critical role in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts in the Sahel, ensuring regional stability and preventing the spread of violent extremist organizations in the area through the deployment of its military personnel, intelligence sharing, surveillance, reconnaissance, training, and provision of funds, logistical support, and equipment. Extremist groups like Boko Haram, AQIM, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) or Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims have exploited the weak state control, poverty, and ethnic tension to recruit and expand to carry out attacks on innocent civilians across borders. However, the US counterterrorism efforts through training, intelligence, and logistical support have helped Sahelian countries contain extremist violence and limit the spread of these groups to neighboring regions and Europe.²⁴ US security cooperation with Mali diminished during the Tuareg rebellion due to concerns that the government might use it against the rebels. Military assistance and security cooperation ceased after the coup because the Leahy Law prohibits the US from providing security assistance to foreign governments that remove a democratically elected president from power.

Moreover, the US supported the French armed forces and surrounding countries to fight against the jihadist groups in the north. In Niger, the US increased its military assistance and security cooperation, and its military personnel sometimes engaged in combat operations against extremists. The US intervened directly in the Sahel when the civil war in Mali began. The French government also played a significant role in the region before the Civil War and established a capacity-building initiative, including a counterterrorism regiment in Mali. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Tuareg rebels became a threat to 6,000 French forces in Mali. Against this backdrop, in 2013, the US supported the French government's Operation Serval to

²² Colin Clarke & Jacob Zenn (2021). ISIS and Al-Qaeda's Sub-Saharan Affiliates Are Posed for Growth in 2021.

²³ Center for Prevention Action: Violent Extremism in the Sahel, October 2024, cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel

²⁴ Niranjan Jose (2020). Colonial Borders in the Sahel After Tuareg Aspirations for Autonomy and Regional Stability.

drive away the extremist groups from the three crucial cities under their control. The US provided logistical support, including airlift and in-flight refueling, for French aircraft and unmanned drones to conduct reconnaissance operations in support of French forces. Additionally, a few US Special Operations Forces (SOFs) were deployed in Mali to support French and African Union troops. The operation was successful, the extremist groups were chased away, and the contested cities were reclaimed.²⁵ The French government launched Operation Barkhane in 2014, which expanded to involve counterinsurgency against Boko Haram in Nigeria and other extremist groups in the area. The US armed forces participated directly and indirectly in the counterterrorism operations in the Sahel.

Furthermore, Boko Haram, which was formed in northeastern Nigeria in 2002 by Muhammed Yusuf, activities spread to the Lake Chad Basin, including Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. The US provided training, logistical support, and intelligence to the African Union's Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat the extremist group, which gained international recognition when the group abducted 276 Chibok schoolgirls in 2014. The extremist group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015 and rebranded itself as the Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP). Through US support, the MNJTF reclaimed all the contested territories from Boko Haram and ISWAP in the basin. Additionally, and more importantly, with US military assistance and counterterrorism efforts, France established the G5 Sahel Joint Force, comprising the five Sahel nations, with a counterterrorism force of 5,000 aimed at combating militant groups within the borders of all members. This support has also enhanced regional cooperation seen in the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which brings together Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to combat terrorism collaboratively. The US support has been critical in building the capacities of local militaries and police forces through programs led by AFRICOM. Through the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership, the United States has provided training and equipment, enabling Sahelian forces to conduct counterterrorism operations independently.²⁶ The US military personnel engaged in the Sahel about extremist threats through the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) against al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Security assistance to Niger has increased from 12.5 million dollars in 2012 to 39 million in 2014 and 94.7 million in 2016. As a result, the US footprint in Niger increased significantly, and built a drone base in Agadez, Niger, at the cost of 100 million dollars and 30 million maintenance a year to fight jihadist groups. AFRICOM oversees training and equipment programs, security assistance, and joint military exercises across the continent. The US military footprint in Africa has expanded astronomically, with 29 military bases across the continent and 7,000 military personnel deployed.²⁷ The US intelligence, surveillance,

²⁵ Stephen Tinkel (2020). US Counterterrorism in the Sahel: From Indirect to Direct Intervention, *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 4, 875-893

²⁶ Center for Prevention Action: Violent Extremism in the Sahel, October 2024, cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel.

²⁷ Nani Detti (2021). US Strategy in the Sahel: Towards a Human Security-Centered Approach, *Marcellus Policy Analysis*, No. 4

and reconnaissance capabilities have been critical in tracking the movements and identifying threats. More importantly, the drone base in Niger and other assets provide real-time intelligence that Sahelian forces can use to conduct targeted operations. The intelligence-sharing framework has increased the success rate of operations against high-value targets and disrupted planned attacks that might pose risks to African countries, Europe, and US interests abroad.²⁸

Similarly, the Sahel's instability has the potential to spill over into neighboring regions, affecting West African littoral states and beyond. Thus, unchecked violent extremist organizations can create humanitarian emergencies that lead to mass displacement, ungoverned spaces, and trafficking routes that can serve criminal and terrorist interests. As a result, the US counterterrorism programs help mitigate these risks by addressing root causes and reducing opportunities for extremists to exploit vulnerable populations. This is important, given Europe's geographical proximity to the Sahel and the potential for refugee flows and extremist infiltration to attack Western nations.²⁹ The US presence in the Sahel serves as a counterbalance to the growing influence of Russia and China, both of which have increased their engagement in Africa through security partnerships and economic investments. Thus, by maintaining a role in the Sahel, the US supports a more stable environment that aligns with its broader geopolitical interests, limiting opportunities for these revisionist countries to exert influence through security dependencies. Stability in the Sahel underpins humanitarian and development goals, as counterterrorism operations create safer conditions for organizations to provide aid, education, and infrastructure. The US contributes immensely to the region's security by tackling the conflict drivers that foster recruitment into extremist groups.³⁰ In conclusion, the US counterterrorism operations in the Sahel are significant in their support of regional security, the containment of violent extremism, and the stabilization of fragile states. Notwithstanding, these operations do not offer a permanent solution but play a crucial role in countering Salafi Islamist jihadist groups, supporting regional forces, and promoting an environment where governance and development can be established. However, the gradual US withdrawal from the Sahel risks reversing the gains made over decades, leading to increased instability and opportunities for adversarial powers and extremist groups to expand their influence.

Furthermore, the US was not the only Western actor confronting violent extremist groups in the Sahel. Several key regional and other international actors have been involved in the fight against the militants. The first major actor in the region was the Sahelian state's former colonial power, France. France established Operation Serval in 2013 to recapture the contested territories from the violent extremist organizations in the north.³¹ France's counterterrorism efforts were successful in

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Laurence-Aida Ammour (2020). How Violent Extremist Groups Exploit Intercommunal Conflicts in the Sahel, African Center for Strategic Studies.

³⁰ John Ramming Chappell (2021). A New Framework for US Policy in the Sahel, Marcellus Policy Analysis, No. 1

³¹ Nani Detti (2021). US Strategy in the Sahel: Toward a Human Security-Centered Approach, Marcellus Policy Analysis, No. 4

reclaiming the territories that ousted the Islamist jihadist groups from northern Mali. In 2014, the French transitioned Operation Serval into Operation Barkhane, a new counterterrorism strategy with 6,000 French military personnel. Among these, 3,000 forces were based in Chad, and the remaining deployed in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to counter violent extremist groups with the support of Chad and Mauritania. In 2017, France established the G5 Sahel Joint Forces to combat terrorism, organized crime, and human trafficking in the Sahel. Operation Barkhane, a counterterrorism strategy mandate, was expanded to provide additional support to the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) comprised of Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria to address the threats of Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP), organized crime and banditry in the Lake Chad Basin.³² The UN has also deployed the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) peacekeeping force to support the G5 Sahel Joint Force, providing 5,000 counterterrorism personnel to combat militant groups within the borders of all member states, thereby helping to maintain regional stability. The European Union's support in the Sahel, notably Mali, led to the creation of the Special Operation Task Force, Takuba, in 2020 to ensure regional stability. The US counterterrorism operations under TSCTP, along with regional and international actors in the region, cooperated to achieve a common goal in the area. France has deployed 5,100 troops supported by 15,000 UN peacekeepers in the Sahel.³³ Notably, the United States has played a critical role in the Sahel by providing logistics and advisory support to all the regional and international partners and multinational forces in the area to help neutralize extremist jihadist activities.

Impact of US Withdrawal on Counterterrorism Operational Effectiveness

United Nations recently has labeled sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the Sahel, as the 'new epicenter of violent extremism.'³⁴ The US counterterrorism efforts, along with the crucial role France and other international actors have played in ensuring regional stability in the Sahel, cannot be underestimated despite the demands of Mali and Niger to withdraw from the region. This section of the paper focuses on the withdrawal of the US and other international partners or actors, as well as their ramifications for Sahelian security and the effectiveness of regional counterterrorism operations to combat Salafi-Islamist jihadist organizations. The security landscape in the Sahel has taken a new, dramatic turn, ravaged by numerous increased interconnected armed conflicts and the expansion of jihadist insurgencies in recent years.³⁵ Figures have shown an increase in violent attacks by militant groups in recent years compared to the periods of the US, France, the European Union, and the UN MINUSMA peacekeeping force

³² Center for Prevention Action: Violent Extremism in the Sahel, October 2024, cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Christopher Faulkner, Raphael Parens, & Marcel Plichta (2023). US Counterterrorism in the Sahel Amid Great Power Competition, *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, Vol. 16, Issue 4

³⁵ Silva D'Amato & Edoardo Baldaro (2022). Counterterrorism in the Sahel: Increased Instability and Political Tensions, *International Center for Counterterrorism*.

presence in the region. The epicenter of the Salafi jihadist activities is the tri-border region between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Between 2012 and 2022, the Sahel has been a focus of attention from the Western partners, the Tuareg rebellion, and the spread of jihadism in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Recently, a military coup in the three countries alienated Western partners, and the US suspended its military assistance and security cooperation with the nations, except for humanitarian aid. The area has undergone significant political and economic transformation since 2020. Military interventions in politics have led to regional fragmentation and increased isolation from Western partners, including the United States. These actions angered the military juntas, which decided to expel international actors from their various countries. This has contributed to a bilateral quarrel between the current Malian government and France. The deteriorating diplomatic and political relationship between the two former partners ruptured their military cooperation and collaboration. Anti-French and anti-European sentiments led to several protests in various countries against their presence in the Sahel. The Malian authorities have decided to terminate the Defense Cooperation Treaty between France and Mali, as well as the Status of Forces Agreement governing the French and European partner forces engaged in the Takuba Task Force (TTF). This means the French and European forces can no longer operate in Mali. The military leader also called on the UN peacekeeping operation, MINUSMA, to withdraw from the country. The withdrawal of the international actors in the region has given room for the militant groups to fill the vacuum, which has exacerbated the insecurity crises in the area.³⁶ In 2022, France, Canada, and the European Union withdrew their armed forces and military resources from Mali. This development impacted Operation Barkhane, a counterinsurgency operation with 5,000 military personnel deployed in the Sahel, as well as EU special operations units, including the Takuba Task Forces, which support local counterterrorism efforts. The G5 Sahel Joint Force is a regional counterterrorism task force comprising military personnel from Sahelian states primarily responsible for counterterrorism operations.³⁷ France's growing unpopularity led to the suspension of Operation Barkhane and the European Task Force Takuba in 2022, resulting in the withdrawal of all troops from Mali and marking the end of the decade-long intervention.³⁸

Meanwhile, the US footprint in Niger increased significantly, and signed a Status of Agreement of Forces to operate unarmed drones to support Operation Serval in the region. President Obama deployed 150 Special Operations Forces (SOFs) to Niger to establish a drone base and conduct reconnaissance flights and assist French forces in Mali with intelligence against the militant groups. Niger signed a second agreement with the US focused on counterterrorism operations in 2015, and the number of US military personnel increased to 800.³⁹ The military regime of Niamey

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Catrina Doxsee, Jared Thompson, & Marielle Harris (2022). The End of Operation Barkhane and the Future of Counterterrorism in Mali

³⁸ Center for Prevention Action: Violent Extremism in the Sahel, October 2024, cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel

³⁹ Stephen Tinkel (2020). US Counterterrorism in the Sahel: From Indirect to Direct Intervention, *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 4, 875-893

has asked the French armed forces and the US military personnel to withdraw from the country as a surprise to the US. The US established a drone base in Agadez, Niger, in the Western Sahel worth 100 million dollars which has been operating with manned and unmanned surveillance flights in the region against violent extremist groups, which have been the backbone of the US counterterrorism operations across the region. Additionally, the US has invested millions of dollars in training the Nigerien armed forces, and relations between the two nations have become strained. The US expressed concerns about the Nigerien administration supplying uranium to Iran and discouraging the military regime from working with Russia. President Mohammed Bazoum of Niger criticized the counterterrorism initiatives of the US and France for the failure to achieve the desired results despite extensive security assistance to the G5 partners to eliminate extremism. US departure from the region could pose significant obstacles to counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel region, with repercussions for the entire continent.⁴⁰ The withdrawal was completed on September 15, 2024, indicating that counterterrorism operations are now under the auspices of the Nigerien armed forces.⁴¹ Some of the new military regimes in the Sahel believe that the US military presence shares a similar colonialist and imperialist agenda, prioritizing the security and diplomatic interests of the superpowers at the expense of regional demands in addressing the root causes of conflict drivers in the region.⁴² Meanwhile, the US also decided to withdraw its military personnel from Chad in compliance with the country's military demands. Today, anti-French sentiment in the region has affected all international partners in the area, with significant implications for the United States.

In recent years, as the US has reduced its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, regional forces have faced intelligence gaps that hinder proactive counterterrorism measures. France's Operation Barkhane, which also concluded in 2022, exacerbated the challenges facing the Sahelian states in addressing security issues. The loss of US drone surveillance and strikes in Niger and Mali has significantly reduced situational awareness. Additionally, the withdrawal has left regional forces with diminished training opportunities, affecting their ability to execute complex counterterrorism missions. In the absence of the European Union Takuba Task Force and the UN peacekeeping force (MINUSMA) to fill the vacuum, the contributions of the G5 Sahel Force and the African Union Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) remain limited to neutralizing jihadist groups in the area. More importantly, the region faces logistical and strategic coordination challenges. Because counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel rely on effective coordination among US forces, France, and regional coalitions, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

⁴⁰ Abigail Kabandula (2024). US Withdrawal from Niger Signals A Shift in Western Influence in the Sahel, Foreign Policy Institute.

⁴¹ Charles Welty (2024). US Completes Withdrawal from Niger AB 201

⁴² Omer Taspinar (2024). Implications of US Retreat from the Sahel

The departure of US military personnel has disrupted logistical supply chains and emergency response mechanisms, further weakening operational effectiveness in the area.⁴³

Moreover, the existing literature has demonstrated empirically how the withdrawal of the US and other international actors has impacted counterterrorism operational effectiveness, the increase in Salafi-Islamist Jihadist groups, and the deterioration of security in the region. Salafi jihadist extremist groups in recent years have exploited the security vacuum to escalate attacks across the region. With the departure of French armed forces and the European Union, the Takuba Task Force saw an increase in attacks, and about 2,000 civilians were killed, which was a 50 percent increase from 2021. The attacks were also directed at the regional security forces, local security apparatus, MINUSMA, and various governments in the region. Empirical data analysis from the US State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations has indicated that the Sahel region witnessed the highest number of terrorist attacks in 2021.⁴⁴ The main deadliest terrorist groups in Mali and Burkina Faso, and Niger are Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslim (JNIM), or Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The collapse of international counterterrorism support, together with the weakening governance, poverty, democratic backsliding, legitimacy deficit, and human rights violations in the region, has created a vacuum for extremist groups to expand. These extremist groups have taken advantage of the security crisis to increase attacks.⁴⁵ In addition, according to the African Center for Strategic Studies, the Sahel saw a 44 percent increase in violence in 2020, with 1,170 violent events and 4,122 fatalities involving Islamist groups such as the Macina Liberation Front (MLF). JNIM and ISGS are responsible for all attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.⁴⁶ Terrorist attacks in the area have created humanitarian emergencies, and the violence has displaced millions of people in the Sahel and Burkina Faso, the most affected country in the region. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), violent conflict has led to the displacement of one million Burkinabes, and 3.5 million need urgent assistance.⁴⁷ Additionally, empirical evidence from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) has shown that the region saw a 35 percent increase in organized political violence in 2020, and 2022 was the deadliest year for attacks by the two prominent jihadist groups (JNIM, ISGS). Niger has been affected by the militant groups Boko Haram and ISWAP on its southern border and JNIM and ISGS on the western flank.⁴⁸ The violence in the Sahel region is becoming a regional problem

⁴³ Silva D'Amato & Eduardo Baldaro (2022). Counterterrorism in the Sahel: Increased Instability and Political Tensions, International Center for Counterterrorism

⁴⁴ The US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability 10 Years Strategic Plan for Coastal West Africa, Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, US Department of State, March 24, 2023

⁴⁵ Center for Prevention (2024). Violent Extremism in the Sahel.

⁴⁶ Yousif Elias & Nani Detti (2021). US Security Assistance to the Sahel, Security Assistance Monitor, Center for International Policy

⁴⁷ <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/burkina-faso/>

⁴⁸ Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel, European Council on Foreign Relations

threatening coastal West African nations, including Benin, Togo, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast, in their northern borders. The deteriorating security in the Sahel region has placed significant pressure on these littoral states to contain extremist groups, which has led to a renewed sense of international and domestic urgency in the sub-region. This threat has contributed to the 2022 Accra Initiative, comprised of the above littoral countries, which agreed to establish a 10,000 Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to curb jihadi spillover violence.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the activities of JNIM and ISGS attacks have spilled over in the Sahel to threaten the Gulf of Guinea littoral states in the West African sub-region. JNIM has gained control over territory in northern and central Mali, while the ISGS has controlled north of Burkina Faso and western Niger due to clashes with JNIM in 2020. The Sahel region has witnessed political and economic transformation since the military coup in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These countries have existed from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the regimes have been accused of human rights abuses. The three countries signed a mutual defense pact, solidifying their alliance against external intervention to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). These rapid political changes have impacted the West's ability to maintain attention on the Sahel, and the major donors, including Germany, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, have reduced their foreign aid. Western powers are currently facing challenges in navigating the complex, multipolar environment, where power is diffused among several global powers vying for influence. The declining monitoring of Sahelian dynamics hampers the understanding of extremist groups' strategies. The militant's territorial expansion is underpinned by its strategic involvement in illicit economies, which generate revenues and legitimacy among local communities, helping them to thrive.⁵⁰

Empirical evidence from the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) has indicated that the Sahel accounts for 43 percent of the world's terrorism deaths, more than South Asia, the Middle East, and the North Africa region combined. In 2021, 6,000 deaths were recorded; in 2022, 9,000; and in 2023, 12,000 deaths in the area, mainly civilians, and 3 million people were internally displaced. Given the continued deaths resulting from jihadist groups in the Sahel, the US might prefer to keep the security partnerships through counterterrorism operations with the military regimes to negotiate roadmaps and timetables for democratic elections instead of political violence.⁵¹ According to ACLED, Islamist jihadist violence surged across the region in 2023. From January to July 2023, 7,800 civilian deaths were recorded, a significant increase from 2022. This empirical data contradicts the claim by the military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger that they are tackling insecurity in the region. Regional security has been exacerbated since the US and its international partners have withdrawn from the area. The fiercest terrorist group, JNIM, launched a renewed offensive against the cities in the north, notably Timbuktu, targeting security forces and civilians. Consequently, the activities of the extremist groups increased, and Mali is about to degenerate into

⁴⁹ Caleb Weiss (2021). Jihadist Attacks Flow into Littoral West Africa, Long War Journal

⁵⁰ The Center for Prevention Action (2024). Violent Extremism in the Sahel

⁵¹ Omer Taspinar (2024). Implications of US Retreat from the Sahel

civil war. The Malian security forces in the north have clashed with Tuareg ethnic groups, and the jihadists have gained control over Kidal city. In recent times, several security apparatus and volunteer fighters were killed by the Islamist jihadist groups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and the Sahelian governments struggled to regain control over their territorial integrity following the departure of international actors.⁵²

The Role of Russia and China in the Sahel After the Withdrawal of the US and France.

The geopolitical vacuum created by the French and US withdrawals from the Sahel gives Russia and China tremendous leverage to expand their political, economic, and military influence in support of the Sahelian army regimes. Western powers, notably the United States and France, have attached permanent political and moral conditionalities to their military assistance. Russia, instead, has adopted a strategy of non-interference in domestic affairs, providing security, arms, and weapons in return for access to power and natural resources. Similarly, China, the region's largest foreign direct investor, offers prompt financial resources and promises of infrastructure in exchange for mineral resources, which has helped the juntas consolidate power without transitioning to a democratic regime. Beijing and Moscow have benefited from the failures of Western peacekeeping missions and military withdrawals, offering diplomatic, economic, and security assistance to the regimes. As a result, after the Franco-American departure, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have deepened their economic and military partnerships with Russia and China.⁵³

Russia is leveraging its security policy to strengthen its influence in Africa and the Sahel through its private security company, the Wagner Group. The Malian government has welcomed the group to fill the counterterrorism security vacuum to train local armed forces and provide security to senior Malian officials against the attacks by the violent extremist organizations, particularly JNIM and ISGS. The group will earn \$10.8 million a month and deploy 1,000 troops in Mali, which dwarfs the Takuba Task Force and the French armed forces deployed during Operation Barkhane.⁵⁴ Russia has exploited France's troubles in the area to leverage its counterterrorism operations and its security assistance package to the military juntas across Africa, notably in the Sahel. Moscow established military partnerships and patron-client relationships with the Sahelian states. The Kremlin has partnered with the Wagner Group, a state-affiliated company comprising former Kremlin Special Forces and intelligence personnel.⁵⁵ The Wagner Group provides security assistance and counterterrorism programs to Mali and the Central African Republic. It is in the interest of Russia and China to keep the new military regimes in place to stop frequent coups and counter-coups. After the 2021 coup in Mali, Russian military advisors and the Wagner Group, now

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Omer Taspinar (2024). Implications of US Retreat from the Sahel

⁵⁴ Silva D'Amato & Edoardo Baldaro (2022). Counterterrorism in the Sahel: Increased Instability and Political Tensions, International Center for Counterterrorism

⁵⁵ Candace Rondeaux & Ben Dalton (2023). Putin's Stealth Mobilization: Russian Irregulars and the Wagner Group's Shadow Command Structure, New America.

rebranded the African Corp, deployed L-39 jets, Sukhoi-25 fighter jets, and Mi-24P helicopter gunships, together with 400 mercenaries aimed at combating jihadist insurgencies in the region. Russian has become an ally of choice for Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Additionally, Russia's armed forces and the Wagner Group are also operating in the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Sudan, and South Sudan in Africa. In 2023, a Gallup poll found that African approval of US leadership had decreased, while that of China and Russia had increased. It remains unclear whether this shift will mitigate the extremist violence that has destabilized the region for several years. As the US and France retreat from the Sahel, the new geopolitical reality of East-West competition that emerged during the Cold War has resurfaced in contemporary African politics, notably in the Sahel, driving strategic realignment.⁵⁶ This transition from Western to Eastern alliances in the Sahel poses critical questions about the future of regional security and the management of local resources. The only question that remains is whether China and Russia can bring a lasting solution to violent extremism, banditry, armed group proliferation, corruption, and poverty. For example, Burkina Faso is experiencing growing insecurity despite Russia's security assistance and a team of 100 paramilitary fighters in the country; violence continues to engulf the nation. Currently, 2.1 million Burkinabes have been internally displaced due to ongoing conflict, and many schools have been closed. The African Center for Strategic Studies forecasts 8,600 deaths in Burkina Faso caused by militant Islamic groups, a 137 percent increase from the previous year's 3,627 fatalities. This empirical evidence underscores the complex geopolitical dynamics regarding extremist violence, highlighting the mixed results of foreign military intervention in the Sahel.⁵⁷

The Wagner Group spearheads Moscow's counterterrorism operations in the region, particularly in Mali, and Burkina Faso and has been accused of human rights abuses, including rape, excessive use of force, torture, kidnapping, and murder against civilians. Alternatively, the Wagner Group is facing challenges to overcome the two dangerous terrorist groups in the Sahel, JNIM and ISGS. JNIM has killed 35 Wagner Group mercenaries and injured over 100 in 2023.⁵⁸ The Group has also been accused of being involved in state mining and economic contracts in exchange for services in the Sahel and other parts of Africa instead of defeating Salafi-jihadist organizations.⁵⁹ Russia fully supports the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and assumes control of the security architecture established by the Wagner Group. In summary, Islamist jihadist attacks have increased astronomically as the international actors departed from the region because of a decrease in military pressure, which has given rise to militant violence activities. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), terrorist attacks committed by the Groups for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the Islamic States of Greater Sahara increased by 70 percent in

⁵⁶ Omer Taspinar (2024). Implications of US Retreat from the Sahel

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Benjamin Roger (2023). The Wagner Wars: Malian Edition, Africa Report

⁵⁹ Follow the Redwood Trees- Tracking Wagner's Forestry Business in the Central African Republic.

2021 compared to 2020. The withdrawal of Western countries and other regional actors has consolidated JNIM and ISGS's political control and reinforced their ideology in the area. Despite the withdrawal, African-led security initiatives, such as the Accra Initiative, continue to aim to enhance intelligence sharing and cross-border counterterrorism efforts.

Policy Recommendations

- **Reassessing US Security Assistance:** Although a full re-engagement of Western and other actors may not be feasible, targeted intelligence and surveillance reconnaissance, as well as intelligence-sharing agreements, could enhance operational effectiveness in neutralizing jihadist groups in the region.
- **Enhancing African-Led Counterterrorism Initiatives:** The Economic Community of African States (ECOWAS) and African Union-led missions must be strengthened to mitigate the impact of reduced Western involvement.
- **Diplomatic Engagement with Regional Governments:** To discourage military intervention in politics, governments in the Sahelian states should incorporate liberal norms and values into their training programs, particularly those promoting democracy, respect for human rights, and civilian control of the armed forces.

Conclusion

The US departure and retreat from the Sahel region has left a severe security vacuum, raising concerns over regional stability, the risk of expanded militant operations, and the strategic gains of other international actors and revisionist powers vying for influence in the area. The US withdrawal from the Sahel has weakened the operational effectiveness of counterterrorism missions by reducing intelligence capabilities, training support, and strategic coordination. The security vacuum left by the US forces, French armed forces, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission peacekeeping force, and the European Union Takuba Task Force has been partially filled by non-Western actors, notably China and Russia. Russia has become the leading actor providing counterterrorism operations and security assistance package to the tri-border Sahelian states including Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to fight the Salafi jihadist groups in the region. China, on the other hand, has robust economic relationships with the Sahelian countries, which help preserve the survival of their regimes and prevent frequent coups and counter-coups in the region. A shift in the US foreign policy and decrease in its military footprint in the area has emboldened violent extremist groups, which has weakened local governments and security apparatus and intensified instability. Despite the Wagner Group's counterterrorism efforts in the region, the security crisis has empowered two of the deadliest Salafi jihadist groups, JNIM and ISGS, to increase their lethal attacks in the region against governments, security forces, and innocent civilians. The US withdrawal from the Sahel region has impacted regional stability, and violent extremist organizations have expanded and gained more territories in the region. Evidence suggests that the US military's presence has provided critical infrastructure and intelligence capabilities, which other allies or regional forces cannot easily replace. The presence of African

Corp and Russian paramilitary fighters have not prevented terrorist attacks. The groups are facing challenges to overcome the two dangerous jihadist groups in the Sahel. Future counterterrorism strategies should focus on sustainable, locally led efforts supported by targeted international cooperation to help mitigate and neutralize extremist groups in the region.

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