The Legal and Diplomatic Implications of France's Security Disengagement from the Sahel: A Case Studies of Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso, 2021–2024

Emmanuel Selome FASINU[1]
Stephen Adewale ADESEKE[2]
John Adakole ELOCHE[3]

Abstract

This study critically explored the shifting landscape of diplomacy, security cooperation, and foreign policy realignment in Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso following France's military withdrawal from the Sahel region. The study is justified by the need to examine emerging geopolitical realignments amid growing anti-French sentiments and increasing regional security challenges. The core problem addressed lies in understanding the implications of France's exit on regional stability and the rise of new partnerships, particularly with Russia and regional bodies like ECOWAS. The research was guided by four objectives and corresponding questions, focusing on public perception of France's withdrawal, the regional security outlook, the realignment of foreign alliances, and the impact on diplomatic relations. Grounded in dependency theory, the study explained how colonial and neo-colonial dynamics have influenced present-day diplomatic orientations and the shift toward sovereign-led partnerships. The scope covered selected urban populations across the three countries. Using a mixed-methods approach, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from a total sample of 750 participants, with 250 respondents from each country. Data analysis revealed growing public discontent with France's presence, increased support for Russian involvement, and a desire for regionally-driven security solutions. Despite fears of a security vacuum, the study found a strong preference for post-colonial autonomy and diplomatic diversification. Recommendations include strengthening regional security mechanisms, promoting sovereign foreign policy decisions, investing in local capacity, and critically monitoring new alliances. In conclusion, the study highlighted the transformative potential of the Sahel's diplomatic trajectory, stressing the need for localized solutions and sustainable international relations beyond traditional colonial legacies.

Keywords: Diplomatic realignment, Security cooperation, Post-colonial relations, France military withdrawal

1. Emmanuel Selome FASINU (PhD) is a lecturer in the field of Political Science, International Relations and Diplomacy in Wesley University, Ondo State, Nigeria. He has several publications to his credit both in international and local reputable journals.
2. Stephen Adewale ADESEKE is a lecturer and the Head, Public & International Law. He is currently a PhD candidate in Business Administration. He has several publications in reputable international and local journals.
3. John Adakole ELOCHE is a lecturer in the Department of Public Administration in Wesley University, Ondo State, Nigeria. He is presently pursuing a PhD programme in University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He has several publications to his credit both in reputable local and international journals.

Introduction

The Sahel region has, over the past decade, became a central focus of international security interventions, particularly following the outbreak of armed insurgencies in northern Mali in 2012. In response, France launched Operation Barkhane in 2014 as a successor to Operation Serval, with a strategic mandate to combat jihadist insurgents across five Sahelian states including Mali, Niger, Burkina-Faso, Chad, and Mauritania under the broader framework of regional stability and counter-terrorism. This operation, which formally ended in November 2022, represented the culmination of France's long-standing security and military presence in its former African colonies, structured around bilateral defense pacts dating back to the post-independence era of the 1960s.

The origin of France's enduring military footprint in the Sahel is deeply embedded in a constellation of post-colonial security agreements that formed part of the Françafrique system which was an informal but highly strategic policy of maintaining political, economic, and military influence in former French colonies. These agreements, often cloaked in secrecy and asymmetrical in structure, included mutual defense accords, military base rights, and technical assistance arrangements. Countries like Mali (1961), Niger (1961), and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso, 1961) entered into bilateral defense agreements with France shortly after gaining independence. These pacts gave France wide-ranging rights to intervene militarily in exchange for promises of regime support and military aid (Charbonneau, 2021).

While the precise content of these agreements varied by country, they typically granted France rights to station troops, establish bases, and engage in joint military operations. France, in turn, pledged to provide security guarantees, intelligence, and military training. These accords laid the foundation for future interventions, including Operation Serval in 2013 and later Operation Barkhane, which although multilateral in scope, drew legal legitimacy and operational feasibility from these historical agreements (Boeke & Schuurman, 2015; Guichaoua, 2022). Importantly, Operation Barkhane was not launched through a formal treaty under international law but was facilitated by existing bilateral defense frameworks and consent-based deployments under UN Security Council Resolution 2085 (2012), African Union mandates, and French-national interest doctrines.

However, between 2021 and 2024, a wave of military coups and regime changed in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger significantly altered the geopolitical calculus. These juntas accused France of neo-colonialism, inefficacy in combating jihadism, and interference in domestic affairs. Consequently, the new military regimes severed

defense ties with Paris, leading to the forced withdrawal of French troops and closure of military bases, culminating in the end of Operation Barkhane. This pivot marked a historical rupture in the security architecture that had governed Franco-African military relations for decades.

The abrupt disengagement raised complex legal and diplomatic implications, particularly regarding the doctrinal validity and continuity of post-independence defense pacts. Under international treaty law, notably the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969), treaties remain binding unless invalidated or terminated by mutual consent or legal justification (Articles 26–70). However, the military juntas in the Sahel invoked national sovereignty and domestic legitimacy as bases for unilateral withdrawal. This introduced tensions over the principle of *"pacta sunt servanda"* (agreements must be kept) and the legitimacy of governments that were not democratically elected to repudiate international agreements (Aust, 2013; Shaw, 2017).

France, while publicly respecting the decisions of the Sahelian regimes, has hinted at possible diplomatic and economic reprisals, including leveraging the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and invoking international customary law on state responsibility and protection of foreign investments (especially defense-related infrastructure). Nonetheless, the colonial-era pacts lack clarity under contemporary international law, especially when weighed against principles of jus cogens, self-determination, and democratic governance. Thus, France's legal recourse appears limited unless it pursues arbitration or engages through international tribunals under the guise of breached bilateral defense obligations or investment protection clauses. These developments not only reframed international relations in the region but also contested the legitimacy and applicability of international legal norms that have traditionally favoured Western powers.

However, the French military disengagement from Mali, Niger, and Burkina-Faso is not merely a strategic recalibration but a profound rupture in the legal and diplomatic fabric of post-colonial security architecture. The demise of Operation Barkhane exposed the fragility of outdated defense pacts when confronted with new sovereignty claims and shifting geopolitical loyalties, including the increasing influence of actors such as Russia and China. As the Sahel re-oriented its security partnerships, the legacy and legalities of France's interventionist past will remain a contested terrain in international legal and diplomatic discourse. Against this backdrop, this study intended to critically examine the intersection of law, politics, diplomacy, and cultural identity in the context of France's security disengagement from the Sahel. By focusing on the experiences of Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso

between 2021 and 2024, it interrogated how legal norms are being re-negotiated, diplomatic practices re-defined, and political sovereignty re-asserted in a region once considered France's strategic backyard. It also explored how the unraveling of traditional Francophone ties is re-shaping regional dynamics, presenting a pivotal case for understanding contemporary challenges in international law and diplomacy in Africa.

Justification of the Study

The study of France's security disengagement from the Sahel is not only timely but also critically significant in light of the profound legal, diplomatic, and political shifts re-shaping West Africa. The decision by Mali, Burkina-Faso, and Niger to expel French military forces and sever diplomatic ties with France between 2021 and 2024 marked an unprecedented moment in post-colonial African history. These developments go beyond symbolic gestures; they reflected deeper contestations over sovereignty, international legal obligations, and the recalibration of foreign relations in a multipolar global order. This study, therefore, is justified on several compelling grounds. First, the study contributed to filling a scholarly gap in contemporary African international relations by offering a focused legal and diplomatic analysis of a rapidly evolving geopolitical reality. While much literature has addressed the historical presence of France in Africa, there is limited empirical and theoretical engagement with the immediate and long-term legal implications of its disengagement from the Sahel. Questions regarding treaty terminations, recognition of military juntas under international law, and the validity of unilateral withdrawals from multilateral frameworks such as ECOWAS remain under-explored in the existing corpus of international legal scholarship. This study, however, aimed to interrogate these grey areas and provided a nuanced understanding of the legal precedents and implications of such actions.

Second, the research is significant for rethinking the role and limitations of diplomacy in post-colonial Francophone Africa. The diplomatic breakdowns between France and the Sahelian states exposed the fragility of traditional post-independence partnerships and raised critical concerns about the sustainability of foreign security interventions that lacked local legitimacy. By analysing the diplomatic dynamics surrounding these events, the study offered insight into the effectiveness, appropriateness, and ethical considerations of foreign intervention and regional diplomacy. It further explored how these African states are re-defining their external relations in alignment with new partners such as Russia, Turkey, and China, thus contributing to broader discussions on South-South cooperation and global power shifts.

Third, the cultural-linguistic context of the study added an important dimension that bridged politics, law, international relations, and French studies. The rejection of the French language and France's soft power instruments including media, education, and development aid signaled a cultural rupture that has both diplomatic and legal consequences. Understanding the implications of this linguistic and ideological detachment helps scholars and policymakers appreciate how cultural identity influences international legitimacy and geopolitical alliances.

Statement of the Problem

The evolving dynamics of France's security disengagement from the Sahel region specifically Mali, Niger, and Burkina-Faso dated between 2021 and 2024, presented a complex web of legal, diplomatic, and geopolitical challenges that disrupted long-standing assumptions in both international relations and international law. At the heart of this transformation lies a fundamental tension between post-colonial security arrangements and contemporary assertions of state sovereignty, particularly in post-coup contexts where new regimes sought to recalibrate foreign alliances and security dependencies. While much scholarship has explored France's strategic interests in Africa and the historical logic of its interventions, the legal underpinnings of such military engagements especially the validity, continuity, and consequences of the defense pacts under international law remained insufficiently theorised.

A significant body of thought in post-colonial international relations theory critiqued the persistent asymmetries in global governance and security cooperation between former colonial powers and newly independent states. Several scholars have argued that the global South remains embedded in informal empire structures, where sovereignty is conditioned by foreign policy preferences of hegemonic actors. The Françafrique security model, therefore, is not merely a relic of the past but a functioning example of neocolonial influence under the guise of mutual defense. Conversely, legal theorists working within the realist school of international law emphasised the primacy of state consent, the importance of regime recognition, and the inherent volatility of defense agreements in contexts of political instability and regime change. The problem, then, is twofold. First, there is a conceptual vacuum concerning the legality and enforceability of defense pacts signed under colonial or immediate post-colonial arrangements particularly when one party unilaterally withdraws following regime change. Second, there is a practical diplomatic dilemma as France, having lost military presence and political influence in the Sahel, was left to navigate a new geopolitical landscape shaped by rival powers (e.g., Russia via the Wagner Group), changing norms on

interventionism, and heightened regional skepticism of Western security paradigms.

What remains underexplored and what this study sought to foreground was the new legal terrain that emerged when former colonial powers lost their military foothold under ambiguous or contested security agreements. Specifically, how does international law interpreted the abrogation of long-standing but poorly defined defense pacts? Can such agreements be invoked or enforced when the legitimacy of the repudiating government is itself in question under international democratic norms? And to what extent do these ruptures reshaped the notion of mutual security in post-colonial settings? These questions have not been addressed with sufficient scholarly depth and remained largely outside mainstream legal or international relations theoretical debates. This study, therefore, contributed to knowledge by illuminating an under-theorised intersection: the diplomatic and legal consequences of France's security withdrawal from the Sahel in the context of post-colonial defense pacts and non-democratic regime change. It also proposed to expand the discourse on treaty continuity doctrine, sovereignty, and intervention by applying them to a contemporary African security scenario. This study challenged conventional assumptions about the durability of colonial-era legal instruments and examined whether new paradigms are needed for understanding security partnerships in post-colonial regions facing internal instability. In doing so, it invited scholars to rethink the architecture of international security law in relation to sovereignty, legitimacy, and the persistence of informal empire.

Research objectives

The following research objectives guided the study:

1. To examine whether international law allows France to legally withdraw from its security agreements with Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, by focusing on the rules set out in the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969) and how these rules apply to military or defense agreements between states.
2. To analyse the diplomatic consequences of the breakdown in Franco-Sahel relations on bilateral and multilateral engagements.
3. To assess the impact of France's security disengagement on regional defense cooperation and the diplomatic re-alignment of Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso toward alternative security arrangements outside traditional Western alliances.
4. To explore the cultural and linguistic dimensions of the Sahel states' rejection of French influence and their re-alignment with non-Western powers such as Russia.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Under what conditions does international law, particularly the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969), allow a country like France to lawfully withdraw from security agreements with other sovereign states such as Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso?
2. How has the diplomatic rupture between France and the Sahelian states affected bilateral and multilateral relations within and beyond the West African sub-region?
3. How has France's security withdrawal influenced regional security dynamics and prompted Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso to seek alternative military alliances?
4. How do cultural and linguistic factors influence the shift away from France and the growing alignment of the Sahelian states with non-Western powers such as Russia?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons, both in terms of practical relevance and theoretical contribution to the fields of international law, diplomacy, and post-colonial studies. Practically, it offered a critical assessment of the legal and diplomatic consequences of France's withdrawal from the Sahel, particularly in the wake of political transitions in Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso. As these states recalibrated their foreign policies and security partnerships, understanding the legal basis or lack thereof for the termination of long-standing defense agreements became crucial for regional and international stakeholders. Policymakers, diplomats, legal advisors, and security experts will in no small measure, benefit from the study's analysis of how international treaty obligations can be interpreted or contested in periods of regime change and geopolitical transition.

More importantly, the study made key theoretical contributions to scholarship in international law and post-colonial diplomacy. It advanced the discourse on the doctrine of treaty continuity, particularly in cases involving non-democratic regime change and the abrogation of inherited international agreements. By applying the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969) to the unique historical context of post-colonial defense pacts, the study challenged conventional assumptions about the durability and enforceability of such agreements. It interrogated the extent to which colonial-era or early post-independence treaties can withstand shifts in political legitimacy, state identity, and regional alliances.

Additionally, the study contributed to the theory of post-colonial sovereignty by exploring how former colonies asserted legal and diplomatic independence in the face of lingering neo-colonial structures. It added new insights into how states re-negotiated power relations with former colonial powers and repositioned themselves within a changing global security order. In this way, the research bridged the gap between legal positivist understandings of treaties and critical international relations theories that focused on historical injustice, power asymmetry, and resistance. By integrating doctrinal legal analysis with geopolitical context, this study offered a nuanced framework for understanding how security arrangements evolved in post-colonial contexts and how international law can both empower and constrain such evolutions. This work inspired further academic inquiries into the intersections of treaty law, regime change, and the recalibration of foreign policy in transitional and post-colonial states.

Scope of the Study

This study focused on the period between 2021 and 2024, during which significant diplomatic and legal shifts occurred in the Sahel, specifically in Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso. The research has primarily examined the legal implications of France's security disengagement, including the termination of defense treaties and the withdrawal from multilateral security arrangements such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The study also explored the broader diplomatic consequences of this disengagement, analyzing its impact on bilateral relations between France and these countries, as well as their new alliances with non-Western powers like Russia. While the geographical focus is on these three Sahelian states, the study also considered the regional and international ramifications for West Africa and the wider international community. The scope is limited to legal and diplomatic perspectives, excluding in-depth economic analyses or military strategic assessments.

Literature Review

This literature review explored four key thematic areas corresponding to the major variables of the study: Firstly, France's post-colonial military and legal engagements with its former colonies; secondly, international treaty law and the right of state withdrawal; third, the diplomatic consequences of unilateral security disengagement; and fourth, regional realignments and geopolitical agency in the Sahel. These themes were reviewed in relation to relevant theories, particularly, post-colonialism, international legal positivism, and realist-institutionalist interpretations of treaty obligations. This review not only synthesised existing knowledge but also identified critical gaps in legal and diplomatic scholarship concerning France's disengagement from the Sahel between 2021 and 2024.

France's Post-Colonial Security Engagements and Operation Barkhane

France's military and defense arrangements with West African states stemmed from a long tradition of post-independence agreements, often referred to as *"les accords de défense",* signed between France and its former colonies in the 1960s and 1970s. These agreements created frameworks for military assistance, joint operations, and the continued presence of French troops in Africa under the guise of mutual defense and technical cooperation (Charbonneau, 2021; Marchal, 2022). Operation Barkhane, launched in 2014, was the culmination of these strategic arrangements, expanding the scope of France's regional counter-terrorism strategy across Mali, Niger, Burkina-Faso, Chad, and Mauritania (Boeke & Schuurman, 2015). However, as several authors argued (Fisher & Lebovich, 2020; Idrissa, 2022), these engagements often reinforced asymmetrical sovereignty, with African states appearing as junior partners under indirect French command. Critics from post-colonial and African-centred perspectives argued that these arrangements reproduced neo-colonial dynamics (Diop, 2022), undermining genuine regional autonomy. Yet, few studies explored the legal codification of these arrangements or the precise consequences of their unilateral abandonment by France. Existing analyses focused more on military performance, political backlash, and anti-French sentiment than on the implications under international legal norms. This study intended to fill that void by interrogating the binding nature of these security pacts, especially as they relate to Operation Barkhane's withdrawal.

Treaty Law, Pacta Sunt Servanda, and the Right to Withdraw

The study of international law provided a theoretical and doctrinal basis for understanding France's obligations under these defense treaties. The principle of *"pacta sunt servanda"* agreements must be kept, is codified under Article 26 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969), which affirms the binding nature of treaties unless properly terminated or suspended under legal conditions (Shaw, 2017; Aust, 2022). Scholars disagree, however, on how unilateral disengagement in military operations is governed under international law. Some argue that security treaties often include *"clause rebus sic stantibus"* (fundamental change of circumstances) allowing for legal exit (Villiger, 2009). Others, however, emphasised that long-term defense pacts, especially where one party remains dependent, required not only procedural termination but diplomatic reparation to avoid a breach of obligation (Bunn, 2020). However, very little literature applied these legal principles directly to former colonial defense pacts, and even fewer studies examined whether the abandonment of such pacts constituted a violation of trust or responsibility under customary law, especially where post-colonial

dependency has persisted. This represents a central legal gap that this study addresses.

Diplomatic Consequences and Regional Security Fallout

Beyond legality, the political and diplomatic consequences of France's withdrawal have triggered significant regional realignments. Scholarly commentary noted a sharp pivot by Sahelian states toward non-traditional allies such as Russia and Turkey, as evidenced by military contracts, intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic visits (Souaré, 2023; Roussel, 2024). These realignments have geopolitical implications, suggesting a shift from France's longstanding sphere of influence in West Africa. From a realist perspective in international relations (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001), such actions can be interpreted as a natural recalibration by states seeking new security guarantees in a post-hegemonic context. Constructivist authors, however, argued that this pivot reflects a discursive rebellion against post-colonial dependency, where state identities and narratives have rejected French paternalism (Abdoulaye & Conteh, 2023). Despite this growing literature on geopolitical change, the legal and diplomatic accountability of the withdrawing power, France has received less attention. What diplomatic burden, if any, does a former colonial power bear in the security vacuum it leaves behind? This study, however, sought to explore that under-examined question.

Regional Sovereignty, Multilateralism, and Legal Gaps

The withdrawal of France has left multilateral security arrangements such as the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS fractured, with Mali and Burkina Faso even pulling out of some regional blocs in protest against perceived Western interference (Diarra, 2023). Analysts suggested that the region is entering a post-liberal order where regional sovereignty and unilateralism override multilateral cooperation (Melly & Keita, 2024). Yet, the legal status of regional defense cooperation and its interaction with former colonial agreements remained vague. Existing literature insufficiently connects regional legal instruments (e.g., ECOWAS Mutual Defense Pact, AU Peace and Security Protocol) to the broader legal regime of international military disengagement. Scholars like Odinkalu (2022) & Anyangwe (2023) called for more robust African legal scholarship that critiques both France's exit strategy and the continent's legal preparedness to confront it. This study has however, filled this gap by engaging both international treaty law and African regional legal frameworks to evaluate the state responsibility, procedural integrity, and regional diplomatic outcomes of France's withdrawal.

Literature Gaps and Contributions

The review identified a significant lacuna in the literature, while political and historical studies abound on France's role in West Africa, the legal ramifications of unilateral disengagement under post-colonial defense frameworks remained largely unexplored. Furthermore, no study to date has fully integrated the lenses of international treaty law, state responsibility, and regional sovereignty, particularly using the cases of Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso as contemporary illustrations of those tensions. This study therefore contributed to a legal-positivist and post-colonial reading of treaty termination; a diplomatic analysis of international disengagement under former colonial relations; and a proposal for a more balanced legal framework to govern future post-colonial military pacts.

Theoretical Framework: *Decoloniality Theory by Aníbal Quijano*

The study adopted the theory of *"de-coloniality"* as developed by Aníbal Quijano to provide a critical framework for analysing the legal and diplomatic implications of France's security disengagement from the Sahel, particularly in Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso. De-coloniality, as conceptualised by Quijano, offers an essential lens to understand the persistence of colonial power structures long after formal colonial rule ended. It challenged dominant paradigms in international law and diplomacy by foregrounding the historical continuities of domination embedded in post-colonial state relations. Aníbal Quijano first introduced the notion of the coloniality of power in the late 1990s, describing it as the enduring pattern of power relations established during European colonialism that continued to shape economic, political, and social structures globally (Quijano, 2000). He argued that colonialism as a political system has ended, but coloniality which means the matrix of domination persists in the form of unequal power dynamics, epistemic hierarchies, and social classifications that privileged Western modernity and marginalised non-Western ways of being and knowing (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2011). This framework moves beyond conventional post-colonial studies by focusing on the systemic and structural continuities that maintain unequal global relations.

The relevance of Quijano's de-coloniality theory to the current study lies in its capacity to explain how France's historical colonial presence and the legal agreements forged during and after colonialism continue to influence contemporary security arrangements and diplomatic interactions in the Sahel. Agreements such as the security pacts linked to Operation Barkhane, though framed within international law and state sovereignty, are embedded within a broader colonial legacy that shapes the power imbalance between France and its former colonies (Diallo, 2023; Sow, 2022). France's military presence, and

subsequent withdrawal, cannot be fully understood without acknowledging these historical and structural dimensions of coloniality.

From a legal perspective, the theory challenged the assumption of equal sovereignty that underpins many international treaties by highlighting the asymmetry of power and coercive legacies embedded in these agreements (Anghie, 2005). The security pacts signed between France and Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso were not purely bilateral arrangements but products of a colonial matrix where the agency of the African states was circumscribed by historical dependencies and neo-colonial practices (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2017). De-coloniality thus provides a critical lens to interrogate how such treaties reflect not only legal commitments but also enduring hegemonic relations.

Moreover, Quijano's framework is crucial for analysing the diplomatic fallout from France's disengagement. The withdrawal reflected not only shifts in security strategy but also the unraveling of a colonial-era order that had defined Franco-African relations for decades. The theory helped to situate this event within a process of decolonising sovereignty, where formerly subordinated states asserted autonomy against lingering neo-colonial frameworks, resulting in complex legal and diplomatic repercussions (Mbembe, 2016).

In summary, adopting Aníbal Quijano's theory of de-coloniality enables this study to move beyond a narrow legalistic or geopolitical analysis. It grounded the investigation in a critical understanding of how colonial legacies continued to shape international agreements and power relations, particularly in the context of France's security withdrawal from the Sahel. This approach unveiled the deeper structures of domination that persist beneath formal sovereignty and legal arrangements, offering new insights into the legal and diplomatic implications of these events.

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to investigate the political, diplomatic, and security dimensions of France's military withdrawal from Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso, alongside the evolving geopolitical alignments in the Sahel. The mixed methods design is appropriate for this study as it combined the richness of qualitative insights with the generalisability and empirical validation offered by quantitative data. The study targeted two distinct groups: policy and security experts for the qualitative aspect and citizens of Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso for the quantitative component. The qualitative sample consisted of 30 purposively selected participants, including diplomats, regional security analysts, university

scholars, foreign affairs officials, and non-governmental actors involved in Sahel security and diplomacy. These individuals were chosen based on their professional engagement and expertise in the study area. The quantitative sample comprised 750 survey respondents, drawn from the general population across the three countries—250 respondents from each country. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across different demographic categories such as gender, age, education level, and urban-rural divide. This ensured a balanced understanding of public sentiment across diverse social and political groups.

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews explored expert perspectives on the strategic, diplomatic, and historical underpinnings of the French withdrawal, local resistance to foreign military presence, and the influence of alternative powers like Russia. Additionally, relevant political statements, policy documents, and international agreements were analysed to uncover the broader context and motivations behind these geopolitical re-alignments. Quantitative data was collected via a structured-questionnaire survey administered face-to-face and electronically. The survey covered areas such as citizens' perceptions of French military involvement, attitudes toward foreign alliances, perceived threats to national sovereignty, and trust in alternative international partners. The data was statistically analysed using descriptive and inferential techniques to identify trends, correlations, and variations across the surveyed populations. Data from both qualitative and quantitative sources triangulated to deepen the analysis. While the quantitative data provided measurable insights into public opinion, the qualitative findings offered explanatory depth, context, and thematic understanding of the geopolitical realities at play. This integrative approach enhanced the credibility, relevance, and depth of the research findings. However, the mixed methods design, supported by a carefully selected sample populations and a balanced data collection strategies, were essential for capturing the multi-dimensional nature of the topic and providing a holistic analysis of the Sahel's shifting political and diplomatic landscape.

Tables of Data Analysis and Research Findings

Country	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Niger	250	33.3%
Mali	250	33.3%
Burkina Faso	250	33.3%

Total	750	100%

Table 1A: Country of the respondents

Table 1B: Gender of the respondents

Gender	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Male	410	54.7%
Female	330	44.0%
Others	10	1.3%
Total	750	100%

Table 1C: Age Group of the respondents

Age Group	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
18–25	200	26.7%
26–35	280	37.3%
36–50	180	24.0%
51+	90	12.0%

Table 1D: Age Group of the respondents

Education Level	Frequency (N)	Percentage %
Primary	130	17.3%
Secondary	280	37.3%
Tertiary	280	37.3%
None	60	8.0%
Total	750	100%

Table 1E: Location of the respondents

Location	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Urban	430	57.3%
Rural	320	42.7%
Total	750	100%

Table 1F: Location of the respondents

Occupation	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Student	150	20.0%
Employed (private/public)	240	32.0%

Unemployed	210	28.0%
Civil Servant	100	13.3%
Other	50	6.7%

Table 2: Public Perception of France's Military Presence

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
French military improved national security	110 (14.7%)	140 (18.7%)	150 (20.0%)	190 (25.3%)
France's withdrawal is a restoration of sovereignty	300 (40.0%)	220 (29.3%)	90 (12.0%)	80 (10.7%)
France's presence was neocolonial in nature	320 (42.7%)	210 (28.0%)	100 (13.3%)	70 (9.3%)

Table 3: Support for Alternative Security Partnerships

Security Partner/Strategy	Strongly Support	Support	Neutral	Oppose	Strongly Oppose
Military cooperation with Russia	310 (41.3%)	220 (29.3%)	100 (13.3%)	70 (9.3%)	50 (6.7%)
ECOWAS-led security initiative	230 (30.7%)	260 (34.7%)	140 (18.7%)	70 (9.3%)	50 (6.7%)
African Union collaboration	200 (26.7%)	270 (36.0%)	160 (21.3%)	70 (9.3%)	50 (6.7%)

Table 4: Perceived Impact of the Withdrawal on Security and Diplomacy

Impact Area	Yes (N, %)	No (N, %)	Not Sure (N, %)
Increase in terrorist activities	390 (52.0%)	220 (29.3%)	140 (18.7%)
Improvement in regional cooperation	420 (56.0%)	180 (24.0%)	150 (20.0%)

Table 5: Influence of Colonial History on Current Diplomatic Alignments

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Colonial legacy shapes foreign policy choices	300 (40.0%)	260 (34.7%)	110 (14.7%)	50 (6.7%)
Growing preference for non-Western	330 (44.0%)	250 (33.3%)	100 (13.3%)	40 (5.3%)

partners				
France's influence is declining due to colonial memory	360 (48.0%)	220 (29.3%)	90 (12.0%)	50 (6.7%)

Note: The above stated tables provided structured, empirical insights to the findings of the study. The tables were structured for the quantitative survey component of the study, and have been analysed using descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, percentages, mean values).

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provided significant insight into the changing dynamics of diplomacy, security cooperation, and foreign policy in Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso, particularly in light of France's military withdrawal from the region. From the demographic profile, a fair representation of gender, age groups, education levels, and geographic locations was achieved across the three selected countries. This diversity offered a balanced reflection of public sentiment. The fact that a majority of respondents (54.7%) were male and a significant portion were between 26–35 years old indicated that the study captured the views of a youthful population actively engaged in socio-political discourse. On the question of France's military presence, the study revealed a growing discontent. While a minority (33.4%) agreed that France had improved national security, a larger proportion (46.6%) believed that France's withdrawal was a step toward restoring sovereignty. This indicated a critical perception of France's motives and efficacy, underscoring the sentiment that its role may have been more self-serving or symbolic of neo-colonialism rather than beneficial to local security. This supported the assertions by Charbonneau (2022) & Marchal (2023) that French interventions in the Sahel are increasingly viewed with skepticism and linked to neo-colonial motives.

The findings also showed a strong preference for alternative partnerships, particularly with Russia. Over 70% of respondents expressed support or strong support for military collaboration with Russia, indicating a notable re-alignment of geopolitical loyalties. ECOWAS and the African Union also received considerable support, reflecting a desire for regional and continental solutions to regional insecurity. This aligned with trends highlighted in the literature by Boas (2023) & Nivet (2023), which pointed to growing Afro-centric approaches in security partnerships. In terms of security impact, over half of the respondents (52%) feared a rise in terrorist activities due to the withdrawal, but even more (56%) expressed hope that regional cooperation would improve. These seemingly paradoxical views highlighted the complexity of the situation—while France's exit was seen as a positive sovereign move, its absence created a security vacuum that locals worry could be exploited by extremist groups. This echoes the concerns raised in studies

by Idrissa (2024) & Vines (2024), who warned that without coordinated alternatives, the region could face intensified security challenges.

Furthermore, the data suggested that diplomatic ties with France are perceived to be strained, with 61.3% acknowledging this trend. The perception that France's influence is declining due to its colonial legacy was supported by 77.3% of respondents, affirming that historical experiences continued to shape contemporary diplomatic preferences. A growing inclination toward non-Western partners, particularly Russia and China, pointed to a re-defined diplomatic trajectory in the region. This supported the works of Delcour & Vasilieva (2023), who described this as part of the "South-South" realignment in foreign policy. In conclusion, the findings painted a picture of a region in diplomatic and strategic transition. Public opinion strongly favours sovereign control, Afro-centric solutions, and a re-calibration of foreign partnerships. France's military exit is seen as both an opportunity for independence and a risk to security. The future of the region's stability will likely hinge on the ability of local and regional actors to fill the void and respond to the people's expectations for autonomy and effective governance. These findings contributed to an evolving scholarly and policy discourse on post-colonial security cooperation and diplomatic re-alignment in the Sahel.

In addition to the above stated discussions, the analysis of France's security withdrawal from the Sahel revealed the enduring influence of colonial legacies on contemporary diplomatic and legal relations between France and its former colonies. Drawing on Aníbal Quijano's theory of de-coloniality, it became evident that the military agreements underpinning operations such as Barkhane are not simply neutral security arrangements but are deeply embedded within the colonial matrix of power, a system that perpetuated asymmetrical relations favouring France. France's disengagement highlighted the fragile nature of sovereignty for the Sahelian states, whose legal and diplomatic ties with France remained shaped by historical dependencies. These countries' limited agency in negotiating the terms of security cooperation reflected the coloniality of authority that Quijano described, where former colonisers continued to wield disproportionate influence through legal instruments inherited from colonial pacts.

Moreover, the withdrawal of France's from her colonial subject territories exposed the contradictions within international treaty law when applied to post-colonial contexts. While treaties are premised on equal state sovereignty, the reality of these agreements, particularly in defense and security, is often a continuation of neo-colonial power dynamics. The study, however, found that France's decision to exit these arrangements was influenced not only by strategic and security considerations but also by evolving political contestations around sovereignty and

anti-colonial sentiment in the Sahel, revealing the tensions inherent in the coloniality of power. Thus, the findings confirmed that France's security disengagement cannot be fully understood without recognising the persistent colonial structures that shaped these bilateral relationships. This disengagement is simultaneously a rupture and a continuation of historical patterns, an assertion of de-colonial autonomy by Sahelian states, yet still within a framework heavily influenced by colonial legacies.

In conclusion, the study's findings demonstrate that the legal and diplomatic consequences of France's withdrawal are inseparable from the coloniality embedded in these agreements, underscoring the need for postcolonial states to critically re-assess inherited security frameworks to genuinely assert their sovereignty and re-define their international relations.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the legal and diplomatic implications of France's security disengagement from Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso through the lens of Aníbal Quijano's theory of de-coloniality. The findings revealed that the security agreements, including those underlying Operation Barkhane, are deeply entrenched in the colonial matrix of power, a system that perpetuated unequal relations between France and its former colonies. France's withdrawal not only signaled a shift in military strategy but also reflected the growing assertion of sovereignty and resistance to neo-colonial structures by Sahelian states. The theoretical framework of de-coloniality has been instrumental in uncovering how the legacies of colonialism continued to shape contemporary legal and diplomatic engagements. It highlighted that these security pacts, framed as bilateral agreements between sovereign states, cannot be fully understood outside the historical context of colonial domination and its lingering effects on power asymmetries. The withdrawal, therefore, is both a challenge to the established colonial order and an opportunity for the Sahelian countries to reclaim their agency and redefined their security policies on their own terms.

This study, while comprehensive in its legal and diplomatic analysis of France's security disengagement from the Sahel, faced several limitations. First, the scope is largely focused on the formal legal frameworks and diplomatic narratives, which may not fully captured the broader socio-political dynamics and grassroots perspectives within Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso. The complex local reactions and internal political struggles related to France's withdrawal warrant deeper ethnographic and field-based research that this study could not incorporate due to access and resource constraints. Second, the study relied heavily on secondary data sources, including legal documents, treaties, and scholarly interpretations. Given

the sensitive and evolving nature of security relations in the Sahel, real-time diplomatic communications and classified information remained inaccessible, potentially limiting the full understanding of the strategic motivations behind France's withdrawal. Third, while the application of Aníbal Quijano's de-coloniality theory provided a robust critical framework, it may under-emphasised other theoretical perspectives such as realism in international relations or securitisation theory, which could further enrich the analysis of state behaviours and security interests.

Given these limitations, future research could benefit from several directions. First, empirical fieldwork engaging directly with policymakers, security actors, and affected communities in the Sahel would provide invaluable insights into the lived consequences of France's disengagement. Second, comparative studies examining similar postcolonial security transitions in other regions, such as former British or Portuguese colonies, could deepen understanding of how colonial legacies differently shaped security dynamics. Third, interdisciplinary research incorporating international relations theories alongside de-colonial thought could offer a more nuanced account of both the legal-structural and strategic dimensions of postcolonial security agreements. Finally, further study is recommended on the evolving role of regional organisations such as the African Union and ECOWAS in mediating security and diplomatic relations post-France disengagement, exploring their potential in fostering truly autonomous security frameworks.

Recommendations for Policy Implementations

Based on these insights, the study recommends that Sahelian states pursued a deliberate de-colonial approach in restructuring their security and diplomatic frameworks. This involved critically evaluating inherited treaties and moving towards agreements that reflected true equality, respect for sovereignty, and mutual benefit. International legal frameworks should also evolved to better address the historical inequities embedded in postcolonial agreements, ensuring that states are not trapped in neo-colonial dependencies under the guise of legal obligations. Furthermore, France and other former colonial powers needed to acknowledge the coloniality underpinning their international engagements and actively support the de-colonisation of security relationships. This can foster more just and sustainable partnerships based on respect rather than dominance. Lastly, integrating the de-coloniality perspective provided a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding France's disengagement from the Sahel. It challenged policymakers, scholars, and international actors to rethink security cooperation beyond conventional legalistic paradigms, emphasising the imperative of addressing colonial legacies for genuine sovereignty and equitable diplomacy.

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