

The Future of Neo-Colonialism: Mali and the Wagner Group Forces

by Matthew Paul Gonzalez

At the epicentre of the crisis in the Sahel, Mali continues to suffer through what is now over a decade of civil war. In this paper, the theme of ‘Western Neocolonialism’ will be explored through an analysis of France’s zone of influence in its former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, I will examine the implications of French withdrawal from Mali and the subsequent involvement of the Wagner group (a Russian paramilitary organisation) through a neocolonial lens. I will argue that Mali’s rupture with France represents a moment of agency and an expression of popular frustration with French involvement. In this sense, changing from French to Russian forces represents more than simply giving a new face to Mali’s neocolonial dynamic. However, there remain significant questions over the long-term success of Mali’s invitation of Russian involvement. First, I will give some background on the conflict and French involvement. Then I will examine the structures of neocolonialism in Mali before analysing the implications of the presence of Wagner forces in the region on these dynamics.

Contextualisation – The War in Mali

The conflict in Mali was sparked in 2012 by separatist forces which were quickly supplanted by a range of radical groups including Al Qaeda and IS (Wing, 2016; CFR, 2023). In the context of state weakness, the movement rapidly gained large portions of territory in Northern Mali, and amid the deepening crisis and fear of state failure in the international community, the French government initiated a military intervention at the request of the Malian government (Guichaoua, 2020). While initially successful in pushing back the armed groups encroaching on the capital, after nine years of involvement French security forces failed to bring long lasting stability to Mali. Despite its initial popularity, French involvement

quickly fell out of favour. This stemmed in large part from the perception that French forces were not doing enough to support Malian forces and combat insurgent groups, and more generally for what the current government has described as Macron's "neocolonial and patronising" attitude (Barthet, 2023; France24, 2022, p. 1). By 2022 protestors were marching through the streets holding placards with "*Mort à la France et alliés*" (transl. "Death to France and allies") printed in bold letters and burning French flags (Durmaz, 2022). Amid this public pressure, multiple coups, and a diplomatic spat in which Emmanuel Macron said the new regime in Mali was "not even a government," France announced it would withdraw its forces from Mali in 2022. (Africa Research Bulletin, 2021, p. 23356).

French Neo-Colonialism in Mali

It is difficult to understate the importance of France's relationship to its former Africa. Jacques Chirac said that "without Africa, France will slide down into the rank of a third world power," and this sentiment was echoed by both Mitterand and De Gaulle (Ali, 2018, p. 116). France still maintains significant power over its former colonies in Africa through military, economic and institutional structures. In particular, the Central African Franc, the common currency used across the Sahel, is controlled by Paris which allows it to dictate the fiscal policies of these countries and dominate its international trade (Taylor, 2019). This is, of course, highly profitable for the French government and the myriad of French companies operating in the Sahel (Taylor, 2019). This arrangement has been upheld by a network of military bases and a history of highly active military involvement across the region (Vallin, 2015). In addition, France has maintained huge amounts of soft power in the region, and its influence across Africa bolsters its image as a global power (Etogho, Eben & Dalton, 2022). Mali is no exception in this regard, as it is a central piece in France's wider colonial network. Under a neocolonial lens, French intervention can be understood as a means to maintain these

structures of control, and to ensure the conflict does not spill-over into neighbouring states also important to French interests (Ali, 2018).

Wagner group forces in Mali

It is within this context that the arrival of Wagner (a Russian paramilitary group) in Mali at the end of 2021 represents such a marked transition: it represents a threat to French hegemony in the region. At the cost of \$10mil a month, Wagner is occupying the role of the French in counter-insurgency operations (Ochieng, 2023). Due to involvement in Syria and the Central African Republic, Russia has bolstered its reputation in being effective at supporting embattled regimes (Issaev, Shishkina & Liokumovich, 2022). Perhaps more importantly, Russia seems to be popular with the public in the region, as one study found that 80% of respondents in Mali had a positive view of Russia's role in the country, and Russian flags were waved at protests in support of their greater involvement in the region (Issaev, Shishkina & Liokumovich, 2022). Recently, Mali has doubled down in its commitment to Moscow, despite concerns raised by UN experts regarding human rights abuses allegedly committed by Wagner Group forces (Kuczyński, 2023; Al-Jazeera, 2023).

Ultimately, it is unlikely that Wagner and Russia can resolve the crisis in Mali. The French have proven that a military solution to the conflict is not likely, while Moscow lacks the economic muscle and political will to invest as much in the region as other powers such as France or the EU (Eguegu, 2022). However, by choosing to partner with Wagner group, Mali manages to partially decouple itself from one arm of French neocolonial rule. While it continues to rely on external partners with independent interests to manage its security, Mali is demonstrating it can choose to chart its course despite the confines of French influence in the region. Whether or not Russia is a better partner, by rejecting French involvement, the

actions of the Malian government represent a symbolic shift and greater agency in its international affairs.

Conclusion

At a regional summit, a Russian delegate emphasised the importance of supporting “African solutions to African problems,” (Eguegu, 2022, p. 450). While perhaps representing only a rhetorical position, this argument has gained significant traction in Mali. Referring again to the words of Mali’s Prime Minister, Choguel Maïga: “France’s leaders are the ones who wanted to impose on our country what should be done, what we should think about, and what to say. But we told them this era and this time has been long gone. We choose and the people choose,” (Assi, 2023, p. 4). This, if nothing else, embodies the decolonial spirit. It is now left only to hope Mali can navigate its future wisely.

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