

## **AFRICA'S SOVEREIGNTY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MULTIPOLARIZING GLOBAL ORDER: A PRE-EXPLORATORY DISCOURSE ON THE SAHEL**

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OKOLI Al Chukwuma, PhD (Defence and Strategic Studies), PhD (History and International Studies), Reader in Security Governance, Department of Political Science, Federal University of Lafia, Lafia, Nigeria. ORCID: 0000-0002-1685-3230. E-mail: okochu007@yahoo.com

**Abstract.** A new wave of geopolitical transformation is sweeping across the world, and Africa is not exempt from its dynamics. The evolving global geopolitical order is characterized by the realignments and counter-alignments of ties and interests at the multilateral and minilateral levels, with far-reaching consequences for nations. The study analyzes African sovereignty in the context of the geopolitical dynamics of the continent. Using the Sahel as a case study and secondary sources, the author identifies and substantiates the implications of the new geopolitical situation on the continent in terms of state sovereignty. Using a broad conceptual framework, the author views African sovereignty as the ability of the continent's states to control their political, economic, military, and cultural destinies in the transition to multipolarity. Emphasizing the growing influence of China and Russia, as opposed to the countervailing influence of the United States, the author argues that the geopolitical struggle of the great powers in Africa is primarily driven by their geostrategic interests. Under the current balance of power and conditions, the countries of the continent can win or lose depending on how strategically active they are in terms of functional diplomatic relations with extra-regional geopolitical leaders.

The article argues that such engagement should be pragmatic enough to advance the interests of Africa and all stakeholders on the basis of mutual respect and functional interdependence. Otherwise, Africa's agency and self-determination are doomed to be objectified again, similar to the pre-colonial "scramble" for Africa.

**Keywords:** Africa, geopolitics, multipolarity, Sahel, sovereignty, super-powers, rivalry

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### INTRODUCTION

Africa has been one of the most dramatic geopolitical sites in the contemporary world. Although the continent does not constitute a very powerful force, it has over the years attracted the interests of the world's great powers. In effect, the continent has been a veritable destination for geopolitical contests, in which the interests of its people and states have often been merely incidental or secondary.

During the Victorian era, Africa was the epicentre of the world's imperial expansionism [Ake 1981]. The then-colonial powers sliced the continents into various

spheres of influence that corresponded to their respective geo-strategic interests. This arbitrary partitioning got a diplomatic seal at the 1884–85 Berlin Conference, at which Africans were wholly not represented. Hitherto, and further on, the colonial powers sought the consolidation of their hold on Africa through forced annexations, imperial raids, and gunboat diplomacy [Rodney 1972].

During the Cold War, Africa became a theatre of ideological contestations between the global East and West. As the contestants sought to enlist strategic allies on the continent, they instigated proxy wars and military coups in some of African states [Rodney 1972]. Intransigent regimes and statesmen were eliminated in a bid to serve the geo-strategic interests of the superpowers [Rodney 1972]. The bipolar structure and contours of geopolitics in the era had formed a diplomatic alignment pattern that reflected the East/West binaries on the continent. Even the ‘non-aligned’ states largely remained politically connected with their erstwhile colonial masters, maintaining a manifest pro-Western diplomatic inclination and bias.

Since the end of the Cold War, the geopolitical terrain in Africa has been witnessing remarkable shifts and transformations. New global and regional players have emerged on the scene. This has been accompanied by new stakes, new interests, and new agendas. The once dominant pro-Western orientation of foreign policy on the continent has been significantly altered by the burgeoning multipolar dynamics of geopolitical relations in that context. The new actors are competing for relevance and dominance with the older ones amid the changing domestic and regional contexts of geopolitics on the continent.

The evolving geopolitical terrain has come with huge prospects and challenges for the states of Africa. It promises an era of competitive and diversified diplomacy capable of placing Africa’s interests at the centre of the geopolitical bargain. Yet, a lot depends on how African states are able to pragmatically harness the associated opportunities while safeguarding jealously their sovereign virtues.

This paper problematizes Africa’s sovereignty in the light of the emerging multipolar geopolitical dispensation on the continent. From the standpoint of the Sahelian experience, the paper seeks to highlight how the contemporary geopolitical context on the continent is changing and what that portends for the military, economic, and political dimensions of sovereignty for African states. The essence of the paper is to stimulate theoretical and teleological reflections on aspects of the subject matter towards informing and guiding praxis.

#### CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS: MULTIPOLARITY, SOVEREIGNTY

The notion of polarity presupposes the existence of a pole of power in the international system. The pole of power in this sense refers to a state or an alliance of states that wields an enormous power to influence the behaviour of other states in the context of international politics. According to Ashford and Cooper, “polarity describes the distribution of power in the international system and how it changes over time” [Ashford, Cooper, 2023].

The pattern of power distribution in the contemporary international system has witnessed remarkable shifts over the years. These shifts have produced specific outcomes variously designated as unipolarity (one pole system), bipolarity (two-pole system), and multipolarity (many poles system). Each of these systems marks an epochal dispensation in the structure of the international system.

The present international system is neither unipolar nor bipolar. It is multipolar in the sense that there is a significant diffusion of hegemonic influence in a number of big, middle, and rising global powers, and none of them wields a clear-cut paramount economic, military, and political leverage to predominate in global affairs. The big powers are the United States, China, and Russia, which wield considerable hegemonic clout to control the world. Among the middle powers are France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Australia. There are also many rising powers at the various levels of international affairs, namely, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Iran, South Korea, and so on. Each of these countries exerts a significant measure of influence on the affairs of the world at the global or regional levels.

Sovereignty is the quality of being the ultimate political authority, subject to no higher power with regard to making and enforcing civic decisions [McLean, McMillan 2003]. It is one of the defining attributes of the Westphalian state system [Okoli, Ngwu 2019], without which the state loses its whole essence. In basic and simple terms, it presupposes the state's supremacy of rule within its territorial sphere [Okoli, Atelhe 2021].

In international relations, sovereignty refers to the state's legitimate claim to full self-government [McLean, McMillan 2003]. It is also the basis for the recognition of states as legitimate territorial authorities in the international system. Sovereignty does not entail an absolute freedom of action. In fact, it is often limited and moderated by self-imposed constraints on states, arising from their obligations as members of, or signatories to, existing international organizations, treaties, or agreements.

Table 1. **Determinants of Sovereignty**

| Factor                                | Commentary   |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Political independence                | Being free from any shadow of direct foreign domination or control   |
| Effective military                    | A competent military to wield and exercise the monopoly of legitimate violence (without usurping the same), defend the state's sovereignty and territoriality, and subject itself to civilian control    |
| Supremacy of the state and its rule   | The state and its rule must prevail over and above any other comparative or competitive jurisdictions. The state must wield and exercise effective and coercive competencies within its sovereign domain |
| Legitimate government                 | The government must be right by the reckoning of the civilian population. It must be competent and functional enough to command popular allegiance and civic identification                              |
| Patriotic leadership and followership | Both the leaders and followers must have faith in the state and the authorities thereof. They must be able to commit to upholding the security and supremacy of the constitution and national ideals     |
| Diplomatic vibrancy                   | How deliberate and assertive, or otherwise, a state is with regard to the pursuit of its strategic interests in global affairs   |

Source: Author's compilation from [Okoli, Atelhe 2021].

The meaning of sovereignty in the context of the present discourse comprehends its most expansive and ramifying understanding. In a nutshell, sovereignty, as used herein, implies the ability of the state to:

- safeguard its territory;

- determine and enforce its will without any encumbrances from within or without;
- protect its political, cultural, and economic values and heritage;
- protect and promote its national interests;
- determine and drive its political future and destiny.

The sovereignty of a state is determined, in relative terms, by a variety of factors, including political independence, an effective military, legitimate government, the supremacy of the state and its rule, patriotic leadership and followership, and diplomatic vibrancy. *Table 1* puts these attributes in proper perspective.

### THEORETICAL PREMISE: GEOPOLITICS

This paper appropriates the discursive assumptions of geopolitics as its analytical framework. Geopolitics is a paradigm of modern political realism that emphasizes the place of location, community, and geo-environments in foreign policy analysis [McLean, McMillan 2003]. The paradigm originated in the late 19th century, based on the pioneering thoughts of Karl Haushofar and Halford Mackinder [McLean, McMillan 2003]. It was, however, popularized by the works of the American scholars, N. Spykman and S. B. Cohen [Colin 2022].

According to Colin [Colin 2022], geopolitics refers to the struggle for the control of geopolitical entities within international and/or global space and the use of such entities for political advantage. Essentially, geopolitics looks at the means and use of power within globally competitive spheres, with reference to how states and non-state actors compete to control and exploit such spheres for the advancement of their competitive strategic interests. In effect, it explains the behaviour of the state and other formal and non-formal actors in relation to geo-strategic competition, contestations, and control. Simply put, geopolitics seeks to understand how these actors pursue their competitive and contestable interests in global geopolitical entities.

**Table 2. Mixed Actors in the Sahel's Current Geopolitics**

| №  | Category of Actor    | Examples   |
|----|----------------------|--|
| 1. | State actors         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– National government and militaries</li> <li>– Political regimes</li> <li>– Multilateral and minilateral bodies</li> <li>– Foreign diplomatic and military missions</li> </ul> |
| 2. | Clandestine actors   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Terrorists</li> <li>– Insurgents</li> <li>– Terror franchises</li> <li>– Transnational organized crime syndicates</li> </ul>  |
| 3. | Businesses           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Industries/ firms</li> <li>– Investments</li> </ul>   |
| 4. | Foreign agents       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Proxies</li> <li>– Spies</li> <li>– Mercenaries</li> </ul>  |
| 5. | Civil society actors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Charities</li> <li>– Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)</li> <li>– Humanitarian workers</li> </ul>   |

Source: Author's original conception.

“Geopolitical entities”, in the context of the present discourse, refers to any geo-strategic sphere – locations, territories, scales, networks – within the sub-regional, regional, or global remit of world’s politics [Colin 2022]. Contours of such entities would include sovereign domains, geo-physical spaces, aerial and cyber spaces, maritime domain, et cetera. Geopolitical actors include the state and its agents, businesses, interest groups, clandestine networks, and other relevant actors that can exert significant influence on the dynamics of a geopolitical entity.

It needs to be added that there is no morality in geopolitics. In effect, even legality often falters at the expense of exigency in that respect. Thus, the behaviour of actors in geopolitics is not governed or determined by concerns about moral or ethical propriety. Instead, it is dictated by the strategic utility of choices or preferences arising from the rational calculus of *Realpolitik*.

The geopolitical context of the Sahel constitutes a complex mix of strategic entities, actors, interests, and stakes (*Table 2*). Among these actors are states, political regimes, terrorist groups, criminal networks, business organizations, civil society organizations, and proxy elements. Each of these actors is engaged in a conscious pursuit of stake-wielding in specific geopolitical domains, where their geostrategic interests may accord with or conflict with those of others. The dialectics of such competitive stake-wielding can precipitate conditions for either cooperation or contestation.

Several comments on the *Table 2* should be done:

1. State actors go beyond the established governments and armed forces of the state. They include interventionist, multilateral, and unilateral systems that support security governance in the states. Examples include the defunct United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the G5 Sahel, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), etc.

2. The term “clandestine networks” refers to the transnational terrorist and organized crime groups operating in the states of the region. These groups maintain either regionalized or extra-regionalized operational networks. Examples include Al-Qaeda in the Greater Maghreb (AQIM)\*, trans-Sahelian arms, drugs and human traffickers, and the like.

3. Businesses indicates international industrial, commercial, and corporate concerns whose proprietorship involves extra-African interests. Some of the businesses are wholly owned by foreign investors, while others are jointly owned by foreign investors and government or private investors in the host states. A case in point is SOMINA in Niger, whose over 60% stake is held by the China National Uranium Corporation Ltd (Chinese CNUC).

4. Foreign agents include secret, undercover, or disguised security and intelligence forces that work formally or non-formally to protect and promote the strategic interests of their countries abroad. A tentative instance of those is the erstwhile Wagner Group, a private military company which, besides selling its services to governments of various countries, was also protecting Russian commercial interests in the Sahel.

5. Civil society actors are non-governmental elements that pursue wide-ranging developmental, governance, or humanitarian objectives in the region. They include international charities, aid workers, and sundry non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that play within the civic space of the focal states. Some of these organizations have often been accused of partisanship in the context of conflict, elections, or other interventions.

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\* Here and hereinafter, words marked with an asterisk (\*) denote a terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

## THE SAHEL AND ITS SHIFTING GEO-POLITICAL DYNAMICS

The Sahel lies horizontally between the Maghreb and the Sub-Sahara. It forms a strip of 6,000 kilometres, spanning the continent from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea.<sup>1</sup> Broadly, the region encompasses a wide range of countries, including Eritrea, Sudan, Chad, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Mauritania, Senegal, and the Gambia. It is pertinent to note, however, that while the core countries of the region are Mauritania, Mali, Sudan, Niger, Senegal, the Gambia, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Eritrea, the rest (Nigeria and Cameroon) could be referred to as the adjacent countries.

Since the fall of Libya in 2011, the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi, and the proliferation of arms and militants that have ensued in the region, the countries that constitute the Western Sahel – Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – along with their eastern neighbour, Chad, have been plagued by a multifaceted incidence of instability.<sup>2</sup> In effect, the region has swung from being the ‘arc of terror’ to being the infamous ‘coup belt’ in Africa. The region is also afflicted by dire socio-ecological and demographic adversities.

The average state in the Sahel is associated with a complex fragility syndrome. This has emanated from and been accentuated by diverse and divergent political and socio-ecological factors. These factors include climate-change adversities instantiated by desertification, drought, flooding, and other weather-related extremities [Okoli, Lenshie 2018]. These conditions have sparked dire environmental scarcities as well as allied livelihood insecurities and conflicts, especially in parts of the region. The scourge of resource-based conflicts, exemplified in the prevalence of farmer-herder crises in the region, is testament to this threat.

Many states in the Sahel have also been under the sapping pressure of rising jihado-extremist incursions [Okoli 2023]. Al-Qaeda\*-inspired insurgencies have been active in the region, engendering widespread instability as well as governance-development crises in Mali and Burkina Faso. The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)\* has been active and destructive in parts of Niger, Northern Nigeria, and Northern Cameroon. This is in addition to the factional elements of Boko Haram\* in the areas. Available records indicate that the Sahel has become the global fulcrum of jihadist militantism, with escalating spread of both Al Qaeda\* and ISIS\* in the region.<sup>3</sup>

The Sahel has also been a hotbed for other forms of non-state violence. Events such as armed rebellion, communal violence, herder/farmer militancy, banditry, drugs and arms trafficking, and allied organized criminalities have been posing a debilitating threat to the government and people of the region over the years [Gaye 2018; Okoli 2023]. Mali and Niger have suffered episodic Tuareg’s rebellion in the past, with the Malian government falling for it in 2012. Chad has also been contending with spiralling waves of armed rebellion, an episode of which led to the death of its former President, Idriss Deby, in 2021. These events have borne some dangerous trappings of transnationalism, posing a major risk to the peace and stability of the region and its immediate vicinity.

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<sup>1</sup> USIP (2024, January). Senior Study Group for the Sahel. *United States Institute for Peace*. 18.01.2024. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/01/senior-study-group-sahel-final-report-and-recommendations> (accessed: 03.06.2024)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP] (2023). Global Terrorism Index 2023. *IEP*. 14.05.2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2023> (accessed: 03.06.2024)

Furthermore, some countries in the Sahel have witnessed an upsurge of unconstitutional regime changes and transitions over the years, even in quick and dramatic succession. There have been recurrent military coups in the region. At present, five countries in the region are effectively under military rule. The states are Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Sudan. In the aftermath of the coups, these states have faced a series of sanctions by regional bodies in Africa in order to force them to return to the path of a constitutional order. The new regimes have further isolated themselves by withdrawing from existing regional and sub-regional bodies, apparently in protest against the sanctions meted out to them. For instance, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso exited the G5 Sahel platform in 2023. These three countries also announced their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in January, 2024 to protest the sanctions imposed on them by the organization. In February 2024, ECOWAS lifted the economic sanctions on Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, thereby courting the trio back into the sub-regional fold.

Apart from being critically embattled and diplomatically estranged, the aforementioned countries have been the destinations for the geopolitical opportunism of global and regional great powers. France and its Western allies have withdrawn their traditional military and political support mechanisms from these countries amid escalating instability and rising anti-French populism.<sup>4</sup> They have left a vacuum that is currently being filled by the Eastern players – Russia and China [Conteh-Morgan 2015; Matusevich 2019]. The Russian military has been consolidating its hold on this sphere of geopolitics amid rising apprehension of the United States and its Western diplomatic allies.

Essentially, Sahel's geopolitical landscape has been transforming rather dramatically over the years. Since the demise of the Cold War, there have been incremental but significant shifts in the diplomatic alignments of African states. As such, states have lost or gained allies across the traditional divides that defined the erstwhile Cold War bipolarity [Gruzd, Ramani 2022]. Even the once Francophone/Anglophone post-colonial diplomatic alliance system has lost much of its strategic salience, vitality, and utility.

The evolving geopolitical context on the continent has witnessed the emergence of new players, new interests, and new alignments [Elbassoussy 2021; Tadesse 2024]. The emergent and the incumbent powers are up to a sort of 'neo-colonial scramble for Africa'.<sup>5</sup> Prominent among the new players are China and Russia, whose influences have been amply manifest in the various parts of the continent. These countries have deployed both regular and irregular tactics in the pursuit of their geo-strategic interests on the continent [Keenan 2004; Duursma, Masuhr 2022].

The new geopolitical terrain in the Sahel has also been associated with a growing wave of de-colonial populism. This has been instantiated by the widespread anti-French resentment across a substantial part of the Francophone Western Sahel. Even among the non-Francophone countries of the region, there has been a significant departure from the traditional pro-Western diplomatic orientation to something that (cor)responds to the imperative of the emerging multipolar world order.

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<sup>4</sup> Landay J., Lewis S. US intelligence report alleging Russia election interference shared with 100 countries. *Reuters*. 20.10.2023. <https://reuters.com/world/us/us-intelligence-report-alleging-russia-election-interference-shared-with-100-2023-10-20/> (accessed: 03.06.2024)

<sup>5</sup> Siegle J. Intervening to undermine democracy in Africa: Russia Playbook for influence (A review of Samuel Ramani's book: *Russia in Africa: Resurgent great power or bellicose pretender?* Hurst, 2023). *Democracy in Africa*. 22.02.2023. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/intervening-to-undermine-democracy-in-africa-russias-playbook-for-influence/> (accessed: 03.06.2024)

Amid the apparent declining influence of the traditional imperial powers, such as France and Britain, the geopolitical stage in the Sahel today is arguably left to the United States and its Eastern competitors – China and Russia. Although, arguably, without much proven economic clout and leverage, Russia has stamped immense presence and influence in the region and beyond. According to Siegle:

Russia has arguably expanded its influence in Africa in recent years more than any other external actor. (Its) engagements extend from deepening ties in North Africa, expanding its reach in the Central African Republic and the Sahel, and rekindling Cold War ties in southern Africa<sup>6</sup>.

Alongside Russia's growing influence are the pervasive incursions of China in the domains of trade, investment, and defence in many African states. These Eastern actors compete with their Western counterparts, especially the United States, in a high-stakes contest that characterizes the post-Cold War multipolar geopolitics in Africa. The exigencies of this contest tend to engender critical outcomes that undermine democracy and stability in the region.

Table 3. **State Actors in Africa's New Geopolitics According to African Observers**

| Actor         | Strategies   |
|---------------|--|
| Russia        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Elite co-optation</li> <li>– Propaganda</li> <li>– Mercenarism</li> <li>– Military basing</li> </ul>  |
| China         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Neo-mercantilism</li> <li>– Kleptocratic cooperation</li> <li>– Economic diplomacy</li> <li>– Maritime diplomacy</li> <li>– Military basing</li> </ul>        |
| Unites States | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– High/ military diplomacy</li> <li>– Trade diplomacy</li> <li>– Propaganda</li> <li>– Espionage</li> <li>– Neoliberalism</li> <li>– Military basing</li> </ul> |
| Saudi Arabia  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Diplomatic suasion</li> </ul>   |

Source: Author's compilation with insights from Kwaja<sup>7</sup> and sundry anecdotal and media sources.

*Table 3* highlights a number of prominent contemporary state actors on Africa's geopolitical terrain. These actors range from the great powers to the middle and rising powers. There is also the involvement of foreign multinational and supranational organizations. A case in point is the activities of the European Union (EU) along the Sahel-Sahara strip aimed at combating trans-Mediterranean migration and human trafficking challenges. It should be noted that these state-actors have often operated

<sup>6</sup> Siegle J. Russia in Africa. Washington, DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, para 1. *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*. September 2023. <https://africacenter.org/in-focus/russia-in-africa/> (accessed: 03.06.2024)

<sup>7</sup> Kwaja C. Africa's New Geopolitical Dynamics: Currents, Actors, and Implications for Democratic Resilience. Presentation at Working Session on 'Strengthening Resilience to Kremlin Influence across Africa'. 28-29.02.2024.

formally or non-formally through either multilateral platforms or proxies. On the African/Sahelian side, a couple of multilateral and minilateral platforms have also been prominent on the scene, namely the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States, the G5 Sahel, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), et cetera.

Among these actors, the stakes of Russia, China, and the United States have been most prominent in the Sahel. Each of these actors has deployed a variety of means, including hard or soft power diplomacy, strategic disinformation, propaganda, and undercover interventionism often enabled by proxies [Hassen 2023; Tadesse 2024]. A crucial dimension of the prevailing geopolitical contest has been the propagation of pragmatic rhetoric by which the United States sanitizes its involvement in the Sahel while demonizing the role of China and Russia. One strand of such rhetoric is woven around what is seen as the disruptive role of the Russia-aligned Wagner Group. Through its global diplomatic, think-tank, intelligence, and media channels, the United States has created and propagated a narrative that presents the Wagner Group as an agent of Russia's disruptive geopolitics in Africa and the wider world.

Consistent with this narrative is the claim that Wagner Group is a harbinger of strategic disinformation aimed at advancing Russia's vested interest across the world. Recent research (see also *Table 4*) by a United States Department of Defense think-tank, Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS)<sup>8</sup>, captures the alleged Russia's disruptive disinformation influence on Africa thus:

Russia remains the main purveyor of disinformation in Africa, sponsoring 80 documented campaigns, targeting more than 22 countries. This represents almost 40% of all disinformation campaigns in Africa. These 80 campaigns reached several million users thanks to tens of thousands of fake pages and coordinated fake messages. Aggressive use of disinformation is one of the pillars of Russia's use of irregular channels to gain influence in Africa. Russia has spread disinformation to undermine democracy in at least 19 African countries, contributing to its decline on the continent.<sup>9</sup>

Such a rhetoric has also characterized China as a disruptive player that uses mainstream and social media to propagate pragmatic narratives and ideas that favour its strategic interests in Africa.<sup>10</sup> The claim further holds that China engages in illicit extractivism through firms and proxies that represent its interests.<sup>11</sup>

Although the United States has been involved in countering what it views as the rising and disruptive influence of Russia and China within a hitherto Western geopolitical sphere, using diverse patterns of neo-liberal rhetoric, its role as an equally self-interested actor on the Sahelian geopolitical scale and domain needs to be interrogated. The United States anti-Wagner narrative, couched in extreme securitization, can be contested as one of double standards, judging by the activities of its spy missions and undercover interventionism around the world<sup>12</sup>. The same could be said of the hue and cry about

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<sup>8</sup> Mapping a surge of disinformation in Africa, para. 6. *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*. 13.03.2024. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/> (accessed: 03.06.2024)

<sup>9</sup> This quotation constitutes an illustrative example of the information war campaign waged against Russia, whereby any narrative that differs from the Western is called "disinformation" (*Editor's Note*).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Adedokun T. How Chinese are financing terrorists to illegally access mineral resources in Nigeria. Report. *International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR)*. 15.04.2023. <https://icirnigeria.org/how-chinese-are-financing-terrorists-to-illegally-access-mineral-resources-in-nigeria-report/> (accessed: 03.06.2024)

<sup>12</sup> C.I.A. Agents in Libya Aid Airstrikes and Meet Rebels. *The New York Times*. 31.03.2011. <https://ny-times.com/2011/03/31/world/africa/31intel.html> (accessed: 03.06.2024)

Chinese ‘illicit extractivism’ and allied claims, especially when considered against the comparable antics of some US-based multinational corporations [Kim, Milner 2021].

In the same vein, the concern that the United States authorities and its allies hold regarding Russia’s disinformation foray in the Sahel and beyond may be viewed as something that smacks of moral sycophancy. This is in view of the fact that ‘disinformation’ probably does for Russia the same as propaganda does for the United States. To be sure, propaganda has been an essential and integral facet of the United States foreign policy [Belmonte 2017]. Partly through the instrumentality of propaganda, the United States has, over the years, ensured pragmatic rationalizations of its actions and inactions in world politics before the global audience [Stecopoulos 2011].

Russia and China have seized the opportunities created by the internal dynamics of the Sahel’s geopolitics to consolidate their hold in the region. For instance, the withdrawal of Western-backed military missions in that context meant that there was a security vacuum to be filled. It is apparent that both Russia and China are contributing to filling this gap. Besides, the rising anti-West resentment in the wider Sahel has coincided with the resurgence of military regimes to create a political order that favours a diplomatic realignment from the West to the East. This development has come with huge setbacks on the United States strategic interests in the region. Already, the ruling military regimes in the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) have often resorted to rhetoric that portrays the West as neo-colonial opportunists, in addition to discrediting ECOWAS and UN-led interventions as Western-biased interferences. This has further lampooned the influence of the United States in the region, hence its apparent reactionary geopolitical stance.

**Table 4. Alleged Russian Disinformation Campaign around Africa since 2018, According to ACSS (a US Department of Defense Think-Tank)**

| Country / Region               | Instance(s)  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| West Africa                    | Using Wagner Group-linked media and info platforms to stoke pro-coup and anti-democracy narratives in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger  |
| Central African Republic (CAR) | Promoting pro-Touadera’s regime agenda, including rationalization and justification of the removal of the tenure limits, through commissioned journalists, bloggers, and spokespersons   |
| South Africa                   | Using influential South Africans to promote pro-Russian narratives within the country and abroad   |
| North Africa                   | Promoting media content and narratives that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bolster warlord Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA)</li> <li>• Stoke populist nostalgia for the Qaddafi regime</li> <li>• Disrupt the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum</li> </ul> |

Source: ACSS.<sup>13</sup>

It is to be noted that the anti-China/Russia rhetoric canvassed globally by the US and its allies has been heavily contested, and often refuted. For instance, the Hong Kong Free

<sup>13</sup> Mapping a surge of disinformation in Africa, para. 6. *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*. 13.03.2024. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/> (accessed: 03.06.2024)

Press (HKFP) reports, citing Chinese state-owned Xinhua agency, that Chinese authorities have rejected the US State Department's claims that Beijing is investing in disruptive disinformation globally as a hoax.<sup>14</sup> This rebuttal is akin to that of election interference allegations, also propagated widely by the US.<sup>15</sup>

### AFRICA'S SOVEREIGNTY AMID THE PREVAILING MULTIPOLAR GEOPOLITICS: INSIGHTS FROM THE SAHEL

Africa's sovereignty in the prevailing multipolar geopolitical conjuncture is destined for a mixed outcome. Depending on how the contending global powers and African states engage with the process, the outcome can be positive or negative. Potentially, the geopolitical context offers African states a new and viable opportunity for diversifying and repositioning their diplomatic engagements with the global powers on fresh terms. The dividends of evolving competitive and multi-stakes geopolitics and diplomacy could be harnessed by the leadership of African states to leverage their national sovereign objectives, depending on what they are able to bring to the table and how they are able to serve such offerings.

Leveraging on the opportunities and prospects of the moment for African states would, however, mean their ability to be reasonably pragmatic in terms of their 'gives' and 'takes' in the process. A more rational and forthright engagement, based on functional interdependence and mutual respect, can place African states in a position other than the receiving end. But a lot depends on how they are able to navigate the incumbent challenges and, indeed, the downside of the unfolding geopolitical dynamics on the continent. So, what are these challenges and their threat-implications for the sovereignty of African states?

To begin with, the prevailing geopolitical scenario presents Africa as a theatre of great-power contests, whereby the territories and resources of the African states are exploited by external actors whose interests are hardly coterminous with those of Africa. In the ensuing competition, the interests of Africa remain secondary and nominally incidental. By enlisting the patronage of African governments and people in the geopolitical contest, a new scramble for the continent is initiated. This comes with the potential for the re-enactment of the erstwhile Cold War ideological alignments that polarized Africa, not only politically, but also socio-culturally [Hjorth, Adler-Nissen 2019]. The current efforts of the Western media to stoke anti-Russia/China populism [Sibiri 2020] in Africa have, in part, incentivized ideological resentment against the West among the population. This contradiction seems to be the case in the Sahel, where the Western-engineered drive to revive the waning traditional Francophone alignment through propaganda and the like tends to have suffered significant populist resistance.

Although the political consequences of the ongoing geopolitical contest is yet to crystalize, chances are that Africa could be worse off for it. Already, meddlesome diplomacy has resurfaced on the continent amid a recrudescence of military coups, allegedly instigated, but obviously validated, by some external geopolitical interests. Associated

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<sup>14</sup> China rejects State Department report claiming Beijing spends billions to spread disinformation globally. *HKFP*. 01.10.2023. <https://hongkongfp.com/2023/10/01/china-rejects-state-dept-report-claiming-beijing-spends-billions-to-spread-disinformation-globally/> (accessed: 03.06.2024)

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance: Putin rejects claims of Russian interference in US elections. *The Epoch Times*. 27.10.2016. <https://theepochtimes.com/article/putin-rejects-claims-of-russian-interference-in-us-election-2178156?> (accessed: 03.06.2024)

with this development is evolving strategic complacency driven by pragmatic opportunism, which makes big geopolitical powers condone and excuse unconstitutional regimes and transitions in the service of vested interests. The regime changes in Africa do not only affect the internal political situation of its states; they also hold critical implications for the prospects of regional security, integration, and governance in the sub-region. In the aftermath of the Niger Coup in 2023, ECOWAS's attempt to pressure the new military regimes to relinquish power to the constituted authority ended in a dramatic backlash that nearly shattered the hitherto fragile multilateral cohesion of the regional body. Niger, along with Mali and Burkina Faso, launched a protest withdrawal from ECOWAS amid the organization's ineffectual sanctions threats.<sup>16</sup>

Essentially, the prevailing geopolitical competition in the Sahel is a threat to democracy and civil order. If military takeovers and contested democratic transitions are tolerated, or even celebrated, in the name of geo-strategic imperatives, then the prospects of sustainable democracy in the region is mortally jeopardized. Already, the taste and fancy for democracy and civil rule are significantly being redefined by both African states and their geopolitical allies within and without. Apart from laying the foundation for a constitutional or transitional crisis in the affected states, it also has the potential to cause diplomatic tension within the existing regional and sub-regional bodies in Africa. The latter has been evidenced in the destabilizing impact of the Niger Coup on both ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel, following the protest withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from them.

To put it mildly, there seems to be an air of geopolitical and diplomatic opportunism in Africa in general and the Sahel in particular. State actors are increasingly enlisting the services of regular and irregular non-state elements in order to gain a support. This is evident in the activities of the Wagner Group and a host of other proxies representing the interests of different powers. Diplomacy is becoming excessively politicized and securitized in a way that impugns its very essence. There is interference by external forces in the internal affairs of states. In the face of all this, African states are constrained to play within an asymmetrical geopolitical context where their sovereign virtues are either negotiated, compromised or negated by forces that are alien or indifferent to their strategic interests. With reference to the Sahel, what seems to be playing out is a dangerous mix of desperate statecraft and diplomatic opportunism, whereby the interests of the host African states are completely disregarded or compromised. Neither China, nor Russia, nor the US are completely exonerated in this saga. For instance, the US' denial of military and humanitarian assistance to countries such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso under the pretext of concerns about unconstitutional rule leaves millions of their civilian population in dire existential conditions.

#### SOME STRATEGIC HINTS FOR THE GEOPOLITICAL CONTENDERS AND THEIR AFRICAN COUNTERPARTS

The great powers of the new African geopolitics should understand the strategic implications of the prevailing geopolitical order for their actions and inactions. The evolving global multipolar structure is such that the hegemonic power and leverage of the great powers are relative to their competitive and comparative strengths, which are

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<sup>16</sup> Le Cam M. From Niger to Guinea, ECOWAS sanctions against juntas have failed. *Le Monde*. 28.02.2024. [https://lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/02/28/from-niger-to-guinea-ecowas-sanctions-against-juntas-have-failed\\_6566933\\_124.html](https://lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/02/28/from-niger-to-guinea-ecowas-sanctions-against-juntas-have-failed_6566933_124.html) (accessed: 03.06.2024)

determined by a wide range of factors, ranging from industrial to military power. The great powers, therefore, must appreciate the fact that they are playing within a context where there are not only viable competitors, but also substitutable opponents. Such a context is, in essence, characterized by new and high stakes, interests, and demands that do not (cor)respond to the hitherto subsisting patterns of geopolitical alignments of the Victorian or Cold War era. For instance, colonial background and ideological affinity have become much less significant in determining the foreign policies of nations compared to other variables such as trade, investment, aid, etc. In effect, diplomatic ties are now more commonly shaped by shared material interests than by abstract ideational or ideological considerations.

African states should do well to capitalize on the evolving geopolitical dynamics to diversify their foreign engagements and external alignments. The long-standing pro-Western tendency in African foreign relations needs to be pragmatically re-attuned in the light of the exigencies of the moment. What should constitute the ultimate priority in the foreign policy considerations of African states is the imperative of enlightened national interest.

To take advantage of the opportunities and prospects of the new geopolitical context in Africa, all parties must seek to pursue their interests rationally but also in mutual respect and goodwill. The African states should be deliberate and tactful in their engagements with foreign geopolitical counterparts. They should seek to enhance their bargaining powers and prowess through African-led multilateral and minilateral diplomacy. They should also leverage the prospects of foreign direct investments and assistance through assertive foreign policy and interest-driven diplomacy. A skilful application of the principles and strategies of economic diplomacy is recommended in this respect. For their part, the foreign actors should demonstrate good faith by ensuring that they:

- respect African cultural cherished values and heritage
- depoliticize their diplomatic deportment and engagements by eschewing any form of ideological partisanship
- de-securitize their foreign policy approach and agendas by avoiding to engage in force-backed or threat-borne diplomacy in Africa
- partner more with organized civil society on the continent than the governments
- respect the sovereign integrity of African states
- honour existing diplomatic obligations towards their African counterparts
- be responsive to African public opinion and sensibilities.

## CONCLUSION

Africa's geopolitical trajectory in the present multi-polarizing world is responding to two important dynamics. Externally, new actors are joining the older ones to compete for the continent's geopolitical space. Prominent among the new actors are the great powers of the global East, veritably represented by China and Russia and their formal and non-formal franchises. The rising influence of these actors on the continent caused a major disruption in Africa's geopolitical order, which had been hitherto pro-Western.

Internally, there has been a significant departure in diplomatic affinity from the colonial club of allies to something much more diversified and competitive. This is particularly true among the new military regimes, whose foreign policy inclinations have manifested an obvious predilection towards China and Russia. There has also been

widespread de-colonial populism in some African states – a sentiment directed against what is generally perceived as the continued neo-colonial influence of the West on the continent. Essentially, the current geopolitical situation in Africa is characterized by the alignments and realignments of forces, a development that portends both challenges and prospects for the geostrategic interests of its states.

This paper has examined the nature and implications of Africa's new geopolitical dispensation, albeit from the standpoint of the Sahel. The paper found that Africa's case with regard to the unfolding geopolitical dynamics is one of mixed fate. Considering the multi-polarizing geopolitical dynamics in the Sahel vis-à-vis the sovereignty of its states, the paper posited that the continent stands to gain or lose, depending on how strategic her states are in terms of their diplomatic engagements with the then prevailing geopolitical forces. Such engagements must be pragmatic enough to advance Africa's interests, as well as those of all stakeholders, in mutual respect and functional interdependence.

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## **СУВЕРЕНИТЕТ АФРИКИ В КОНТЕКСТЕ ПЕРЕХОДА К МНОГОПОЛЯРНОМУ МИРОПОРЯДКУ (НА ПРИМЕРЕ ДИСКУРСА ВОКРУГ САХЕЛЯ)**

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ОКОЛИ Аль Чуквума, PhD (оборона и стратегия), PhD (история и международные отношения), преподаватель (управление безопасностью), Факультет политических наук, Федеральный университет Лафии, Лафия, Нигерия. ORCID: 0000-0002-1685-3230. E-mail: okocho007@yahoo.com

**Аннотация.** Мир переживает новую волну геополитических трансформаций, и Африка в этом отношении не является исключением. Формирующийся глобальный геополитический порядок характеризуется перестраиванием и встречным выстраиванием связей и интересов как на многостороннем, так и на минилатеральном уровне, порождающих долгосрочные последствия для стран и народов. В исследовании анализируется суверенитет Африки в контексте геополитической динамики континента. Рассматривая регион Сахеля с опорой на вторичные источники, автор раскрывает и обосновывает последствия новой геополитической ситуации на континенте с точки зрения суверенитета государств. Автор использует широкую концептуальную рамку, анализируя суверенитет Африки как способность государств континента контролировать свою политическую, экономическую, военную и культурную судьбу в условиях перехода к многополярности. Подчеркивая растущее влияние Китая и России в противовес влиянию Соединенных Штатов, автор утверждает, что геополитическая борьба великих держав в Африке обусловлена прежде всего их геостратегическими интересами. При нынешней расстановке сил и сложившихся условиях страны континента могут оказаться в выигрыше или в проигрыше в зависимости от того, насколько стратегически активны они будут в плане функциональных дипломатических отношений с внерегиональными геополитическими лидерами.

В статье утверждается, что такое взаимодействие должно быть достаточно прагматичным, чтобы продвигать интересы Африки на основе взаимного уважения и функциональной взаимозависимости. В противном случае агентность и самоопределение Африки вновь ставятся под вопрос, как это было в ходе доколониальной «битвы» за Африку.

**Ключевые слова:** Африка, геополитика, многополярность, Сахель, суверенитет, сверхдержавы, соперничество

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