

France and the war in Ukraine. A realist constructivist perspective

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Abstract

France's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was initially conciliatory. However, Macron's statements gradually changed, suggesting a potential shift in France's stance. The French president recently suggested troops could be sent to Ukraine to fight the Russians, a move that could significantly impact the course of the war. Our paper aims to address this possibility. How feasible would this be from a military perspective? Second, are there any other relevant political actors that will support it? Third, why has Paris changed its position to such a radical stance? We start from the theoretical design of realist constructivism. Postcolonial theories and the concept of locked-in path dependence supported this research. The methods follow the path of historical synthesis, discourse analysis of key political actors, and text analysis of defense white papers. Quantitative military variables will be used to understand France's and the EU's military-industrial complex capabilities and assess its potential. The collapse of France's neocolonial empire in Africa and Russia's growing influence in the region partially explains Macron's discourse change.

Keywords: *Realist Constructivism, France, Russia, Ukraine, West Africa*

Introduction

Macron played a pivotal role in the unfolding of events. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the chances of establishing a security partnership between the EU and the Russian Federation decreased drastically. With the power vacuum within the EU created by Brexit in 2016, France's recently elected president perceived Russia's security threat as an opportunity to enhance France's international standing and pursue an independent European defense policy. This was highlighted in the Defence and National Security Strategic Review 2017. The declared security goals were “to preserve its strategic autonomy and to build a stronger Europe to face the growing number of common challenges” (Orbis, 2017, p. 14). Macron was the last Western leader to talk with Putin in the call four days before Russia invaded Ukraine. Parts of the conversations were leaked to the press by the French to the protests of Russia (Chemin and Ricard, 2022). Throughout 2022, France offered

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economic and military aid to Ukraine but tried to persuade Russia to negotiate the end of hostilities (Pietralunga and Ricard, 2022). Macron talked about how Russia made a historical mistake but should not isolate itself from the rest of the international community because Russia is a great nation. As the Russians suffered serious defeats through 2022 and it seemed that Ukraine had the upper hand, the French president insisted on a compromise that infuriated President Zelenskyy. Macron advised that Russia should not be humiliated because the West will need to find a diplomatic solution once the war ends. The West should not impose harsh terms because this will increase resentment and offer the excuse of revenge. Macron estimated that his conversations with Putin for negotiating peace took at least 100 hours throughout 2022. Still, France can still play a key mediator role (Sandford, 2022). At this point in time, Macron's arguments were closer to Mearsheimer's controversial thesis of the West's failure to prevent the war (Mearsheimer, 2014). Ukraine, many opposition leaders in France, and the Western allies harshly criticized Macron's statements. Still, this policy continued well into 2023, with France admitting that it desires to facilitate peace negotiations if Russia is willing to make the first step and contact Macron. Simultaneously, France held joint declarations with Ukraine, increased its military support, and agreed with Ukraine's application to NATO (Élysée, 2023).

In February 2024, Macron made another statement that shocked both the West and Russia. France radically changed its strategy from mediating the conflict to proposing sending troops to Ukraine. The United States, Germany, the EU, and the French opposition parties once again criticized the declarations and denied any such intention (Gatinois, 2024). Another important provocation from Russia's perspective was the NATO military exercise organized in March 2024 in Northern Poland, where 20,000 soldiers took part. NATO announced that around 90,000 soldiers would participate in similar exercises as part of the Steadfast Defender strategy between January and May 2024 (NATO, 2024). This is the largest NATO exercise since the end of the Cold War. Russia responded by threatening with a nuclear war. Putin argued that Macron's declarations were emotionally motivated by Russia's growing influence in Africa to the detriment of France (Le Monde, 2024). If the rest of his speech is propagandistic, Putin has a point about Wagner's intervention in Africa that France perceives as a great threat. In this context, Macron's policy change simply follows France's national security priorities, as defined by official documents. This threat was identified two years ago.

The latest updated defense paper was published in 2022, reiterating the same geopolitical ambition and highlighting that France's defense budget has increased as per the previous plan. It also acknowledges that Russia's invasion of Ukraine requires a radical change in strategy. France recognized even from 2022 that Moscow represents a severe threat to its national interests due to its expansionist plans in Africa. Concomitantly, the growing partnership between China and Russia and

the Chinese investments further destabilize Africa. The two countries coordinate their efforts to gain influence in the region. The document concludes that France should prepare for a possible confrontation with Russia:

The split caused by the war and the irreversibility of Russia's strategy choices makes it necessary to anticipate confrontation with Moscow based on the trio of competition, dispute and confrontation, taking place over a long period of time, in multiple regions and spaces. This move towards confrontation is already taking place in Africa, through offensive diplomatic manoeuvres combined with anti-Western information-based attacks and the use of mercenaries. Moscow sees in this globalised hybrid war substantial leverage in external theatres and in environments where new types of action are now being taken (SGDSN, 2022, p. 10).

Russia did not expel France from West Africa; it just took advantage of the situation. The anti-French sentiment in the Sahel region was on the rise long before Wagner's activity in Africa. France's retreat after the military operation Barkhane left a vacuum of power. With the scale of jihadist attacks going beyond any control, a wave of military coups in the Sahel region replaced the former authoritarian leaders and corrupt quasi-democratic governments with military dictatorships. The new leadership rose to power using an accentuated discourse in favor of Pan-Africanism, the discriminatory double standards of the EU, and the fight of the Global South against the collective West. The anti-colonial sentiments against the French in West Africa have reached an unprecedented level since these countries gained formal independence (Guiffard, 2023). This unstable political environment and ideological wave represented the perfect opportunity for Russian propaganda of multilateralism. Moscow had a lot of discursive narratives in common and points of complete overlap with the new authoritarian African leaders and with China's pose as the protector of the Global South. Putin weaponized the Wagner mercenaries that offered to protect the new regimes in exchange for gaining a foothold in the Sahel region.

The present paper's main argument is that France's new approach to the war in Ukraine was caused by Russia's geopolitical gains in Africa. There are other relevant variables, such as the 2024 EU elections, France's commitment to the security of Europe, the worsening situation on the front, and the need to protect French core values by supporting Ukraine's war effort, but the implications of Moscow's existential threats for the *Françafrique* are the most

important. This is not the result of the Kremlin's propaganda. The existence of a French neocolonial empire in West and Central Africa has been documented in the academic sphere since the 1960s till the present date. From the perspective of the realist constructivist theory that we employ, there is no contraction in a liberal democratic France firmly committed to noble moral values and the persistence of a French sphere of influence. In the complexity of the political world, these two realities coexist.

The article is divided into five parts. We summarize the specialized literature and then discuss our theoretical assumptions and methodology. The content section examines the evolution and implications of the French neocolonial empire at the beginning of the 21st century. This is not history, for history's sake. It represents an attempt to understand how the anti-colonial sentiments developed and why Russia's discourse became so persuasive. It also aims to shatter the myth that spheres of influence and power politics are no longer relevant instruments to the Western world. The research moves to understanding the leading causes for the collapse of France's neocolonial empire and why Paris perceives Russia's involvement as an existential threat. We return to the war in Ukraine and examine the EU's and France's military capabilities and near-future potential. This part also tries to hypothesize how France might be able to military intervene in Ukraine on its own without provoking a nuclear war or a confrontation between NATO and Russia. However, the danger of escalation is exceptionally high and most probably is not worth the costs. Even if everything goes according to plan diplomatically, France will also have to overcome incredible logistical difficulties.

1. Literature review

This section summarises the discussions about four separate topics: the existence and evolution of the French neocolonial empire long past the 1960s; how France's recent fight against terrorism in the Sahel region ultimately led to its collapse; and how Russia's growing influence in Africa is challenging France's interests and eroding its international prestige. Finally, we return to how France's position concerning the war in Ukraine changed over time. The main argument of this paper is that these variables are intrinsically linked and explain France's behavior towards Russia. France's influence in West and Central Africa has been long documented. To track French neocolonialism's evolution in detail exceeds this article's purpose. We will only sketch some of the most relevant key aspects highlighted in the specialized literature and offer a few examples using case studies.

France's military interventions in West Africa were gradually replaced by a French-led coalition supported by the United States and the EU. Bruno Charbonneau argues that the African states were arbitrarily created by the French colonial empire. The multinational interventions in Chad and Côte d'Ivoire do not automatically legitimize French neocolonial practices. It also fails to counterbalance France's influence in the region. The authoritarian leaders of these states still expect France to protect them under its security umbrella. If the EU tries to replace France by promoting unilateral interventions followed by strict governance conditions, then it will only perpetuate the unequal relationship between the global North and South (Charbonneau, 2008, p. 294).

More than fifty years after they gained *de jure* independence, the Communauté Financière Africaine comprises countries under French neocolonial rule (Taylor, 2019). This argument is supported by the lack of monetary sovereignty due to the use of the CFA franc, which is controlled by the Bank of France. Taylor argues that the CFA system creates the community's dependence on France's economic growth, encourages widespread corruption, and prevents those countries from pursuing the development of other economic sectors. The author notes that the complicity of the local elites perpetuates this relationship, and they are no less morally responsible than France. Other authors have reevaluated France's neocolonialism in the light of new changes, with positive and negative aspects. Timothy Gibbs attempts to summarize the latest debates on this topic (Gibbs, 2024). Since being elected in 2017 as president, Macron has made controversial declarations, including the recognition that France committed war crimes during the process of decolonization. It even appointed a commission to investigate France's role in Rwanda's 1994 genocide. France has taken active steps to reduce its military presence in the region. The importance of trade with Africa has drastically decreased. Critics point out that the corrupt political relations within *Françafrique* stayed the same, as these countries remained undeveloped. France increased the number of military interventions but failed to stop the spread of terrorism. These states are more unstable and institutionally fragile than ever.

Out of the fourteen countries of the French Community of Africa, Gabon is arguably one of the most illustrious examples of neocolonial practices. Even in the Cold War era, scholars pointed out the neocolonial relationship long after Gabon's independence in 1960. The leading cause was Gabon's political leadership, completely under Paris's control. France imposed Omar Bongo, Gabon's *de facto* dictator, who became one of the wealthiest men in Africa. In exchange, the French colonial companies exploiting the country in the past were replaced by other French multinationals. Gabon's government granted them unlimited access (Reed, 1987). Bongo's regime was under threat between 1988 and 1993 when France's left-wing ruling party considered abandoning him. The

opposition parties hoped to gain Paris's help to organize fair elections. However, the neocolonial relationship was restored in 1993 when France's new government reinforced its support, including sending troops to repress any possible rebellion (Gardinier, 2000).

More recent case studies emphasized the persistence of France's neocolonialism in countries such as Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and Niger. Panira Ali argues that Mali continues to experience neocolonialism mainly due to France's military interventions aimed at securing access to natural resources and raw materials. Mali accepted France's military presence because it could not afford the costs of a modern army that could secure its borders, but it never agreed with losing its sovereignty. The exploitation is accentuated by the United States' military interventions and by China's growing investments that are only for the benefit of Beijing (Ali, 2018). The numerous French military interventions in Côte d'Ivoire and the direct involvement of French presidents in the country's internal affairs are given as examples of neocolonialism. The country remained poor and undeveloped despite its rich natural resources, partially due to France's hegemonic influence. Still, between President Jacques Chirac and President Emmanuel Macron, France made efforts to change its neocolonial policies and focus more on humanitarian aid (Krupova and Cech, 2020). The use of military force is not the only instrument that France used to impose neocolonial practices. When France decided to invest heavily in nuclear energy, its former colony of Niger provided the much-needed uranium ore. Paris used its privileged position to impose unfair trade practices on Niger. Behind the liberal speech of free trade for the benefit of all, France uses its superior technology and French multinational companies, such as Areva, to the detriment of Niger's economic security. The authors conclude that between 1945 and 2020, Niger only obtained 3.2% of the value of the electricity that the French companies produced in France by exploiting its uranium (Murat *et al.*, 2023, p. 177).

Nigeria's case offers another interesting angle to the debate on French neo-colonialism (Omotuyi, 2020). Nigeria was a British colony that obtained independence in 1960 and was never part of the *Françafrique*. Still, well after obtaining independence, Nigeria perceived France's significant influence in West Africa as a serious challenge to its regional security ambitions. Sunday Omotuyi makes the case that this perception only recently changed due to the increasing cooperation between France and Nigeria in fighting the Boko Haram terrorist organization. Nigeria is part of the Multinational Joint Task Force composed of Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

In 2013, with a growing number of terrorist insurgencies in West Africa, France, the EU, and the United States decided to intensify their cooperation (Olsen, 2014). Olsen explains the position of the United States and the EU through the lens of neoclassical realism. Despite France's and the United States' military presence in the region, the West decided to mainly enlist proxy soldiers to

fight off the terrorists. In support of this argument, Gorm Rye Olsen points out the AMISOM in Somalia and AFISMA in Mali. These multinational coalitions are supported by the West's funds, technology, reconnaissance, and logistical capabilities, while African troops do most of the infantry fighting. In an updated paper, the same author noticed that little progress has been made in the fight against terrorism. France has become even more dependent on the United States logistical support in sending so many troops overseas. Both nations have strong incentives to cooperate to contain the spread of an Islamic caliphate in the Sahel region. Still, the coordination of forces in the region left much to be desired. Hollande was more motivated by its unpopularity at home to send French troops to Mali, while Obama was reluctant to increase the level of American direct intervention (Olsen, 2018).

As the security situation continued to deteriorate, the number of studies noticing Russia's intervention in West Africa increased. Even though France has the EU's strongest military, it is already strategically overextended. France has commitments with Australia and India to contain China's rise in the Indo-Pacific. The French troops are unable to patrol the Sahel region efficiently and keep the peace with the limited number of France's current forces. The war in Eastern Ukraine became France's primary security concern. Significant units were retreated from African countries. This was speculated by the Russian Federation, which increased its military interventions, espionage operations, propaganda campaigns, and cyberattacks in the Middle East and Africa. France must prioritize what is vital for its national interests and security agenda to reach its core political goals (Pannier and Schmitt, 2019). The present situation has led to the almost total collapse of the French neocolonial empire in West Africa. The insurgencies in Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mali have only increased in size. The Economic Community of West African States has to choose between tolerating the rise of military dictatorships or disintegrating into a regional war. France's military presence has been limited only to Chad and Niger, while the CFA franc might be replaced with new African currencies. China uses its Belt and Road Initiative to replace France's economic influence. Russia aims to replace France's security role. With the EU and the United States' attention focused on other crises, West Africa seems to fall under a Sino-Russian protectorate (Avila and Quinn, 2023).

Several scholars identified the Wagner group's growing political importance in Africa. Wagner's activity in Mali, Sudan, Lybia, and the Central African Republic proves that it is more than just a private army in the service of authoritarian leaders. Moscow used Wagner to spread its influence in the region and compete with the United States and France (Pokalova, 2023). Wagner has become a quasi-state actor working as a proxy for Russia's interests. It operates in failed states that have rich natural resources that could be exploited and return profits for Moscow. Lybia is important for its oil

resources and its strategic position in North Africa; the Central African Republic can provide gold and diamond mines; Sudan is also rich in gold, gas, and oil; and finally, Mali is used as a puppet state to counter France influence in West Africa (Neethling, 2023). The Wagner group declared purpose is to fight terrorism, but its real aim is to establish a long-lasting military presence in Africa and expel the United States, the EU, and France from the region. The Russian soldiers gain valuable combat experience and test new tactics while Russia forges new alliances and signs deals with military dictatorships to exploit valuable resources. Wagner has been rebranded after Prigozhin's assassination in 2023 as Russia's Africa Corps. The mercenaries are under the direct control of the institution of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. Moscow also has under its influence more than 20 smaller quasi-private military companies similar to the previous Wagner that it will probably use to expand further in Africa (Olech, 2024).

France's change of posture regarding the war in Ukraine can be correlated with the above-described events but should be understood in a broader strategic context. When Macron won the elections in 2017, his foreign policy aim was to return France to the center of the world's geopolitics. France should seek an independent security policy outside of NATO and reduce American influence in Europe. France could become a leader within the EU, pursue a historic rapprochement with Russia, and solve the Ukrainian crisis. Macron's efforts were shattered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. France had to adapt to the changing circumstances, but its main goal of a European security independent of the United States remained the same. This recalibration meant uniting the European nations against the Russian threat (Nougué, 2023). Henry Welc's approach to applying offensive realism to explain France's security policy is more nuanced. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has indeed provided a great opportunity. France tried to elevate its international position by mediating between the United States and Russia. Macron organized a diplomatic tour in an attempt to save France from losing control of West Africa, but it was of no use. Most of those states have not condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and have now fallen under Moscow's and Beijing's influence. The problem is that France's economy does not support Macron's geopolitical ambitions. Even simple policy acts, such as slightly raising the retirement age, were met with determined protests. The conservative and left-wing opposition to his ambitious initiatives from France also hinders what France can achieve. No less relevant is the growing rivalry with Germany within the EU, which has the potential to block any substantial reform in the defense sector (Welc, 2023).

The regime of economic sanctions imposed costs on the United States and Europe. The war in Ukraine has negatively impacted the global economy with unintentional consequences. A quantitative study estimated that France suffered the most significant costs from all the other EU member states

due to spillover effects (Qureshi *et al.*, 2022). France's ambivalence towards Russia can also be explained through its complicated partnership with the United Kingdom. Cooperation between Washington and London was strengthened to face the challenge posed by Russia and China, but this did not include Paris. France seeks an alternative to the NATO partnership, while Brexit and the AUKUS treaty only escalated diplomatic tensions with the United Kingdom. The French military should have provided nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, but the United Kingdom replaced them at the last moment. Similarly, Macron asked for a ceasefire in Gaza, to the dismay of Washington and London (Rees, Xu, 2024).

1.1. Theory and methods

Realism constructivism borrows the classical realist ontology and combines its study with constructivist methods (Barkin, 2003). The theory studies the application of power politics to a socially constructed reality. The apparent incompatibility of realism and constructivism is rooted in the confusion of what classical realism and constructivism represent and in treating international relations theory as opposing paradigms (Barkin, 2010). We aim to build on the existing literature on applying the realist constructivist theory to case studies (Barkin, 2020). This paper tries to show that France's behavior in the ever-changing security environment can be better explained through the concepts of co-constitution and intersubjectivity. Without getting into too much detail, as this is not the scope of the current article, we also borrow from post-colonial and critical theories the idea of exploitation of former colonies that are only *de jure* independent. Realist constructivism has this element in common with critical theories, as both oppose the excessive optimism of liberal constructivism, even though for different reasons and with very different conclusions (Jacob, 2023).

Macron's policy towards Russia concomitantly reflects France's moral posture and rational political interests. The two cannot be separated. France seeks the leadership of the EU and an independent policy from the US. It aims to strengthen its security against the Russian threat. It understands that Russia can be a major economic partner in the future and that the post-war security framework in Europe will have to include Moscow in one way or another. Promoting France's interests includes reinforcing the commitments to its liberal democratic values, respect for the rule of law, and strengthening the UN charter's international norms. France's support for Ukraine reflects this nuanced understanding of foreign policy conduct. The same can be applied to its neocolonial empire. France has economic, political, and strategic interests in Africa, but its actions were also

driven by a sense of guilt for its colonial past and a commitment to the doctrine of human rights, to which France had a decisive historical contribution.

France's strategy is intersubjective because it tries to reconcile rational power politics interests with moral values in conditions of imperfect information. It is co-constituted because the actual foreign policy act results from the constant interactions of France with its partners and competitors, some of whom have very different cultural and political values. This interaction conditions France's intersubjective perception of its position in the world and determines its recalibration. Starting in the 1990s, Paris tried to gradually reform its approach to *Françafrique* with little success. After decades of unfair practices, the states of the former French West Africa no longer trusted the sincerity of French politicians. The accumulated frustrations culminated in the failure of Operation Barkhane to obtain its military goals against the terrorist insurgencies between 2014 and 2022. From the perspective of the African leadership, France could no longer even guarantee their security, but it still wanted to maintain its neocolonial domination.

Path dependence has a long history in political science (Greener, 2005). Path dependence can be defined in the social world as self-reinforcing sequences of events that explain the resilience of specific political institutions or political behavior (Georg and Jörg, 2010, p. 16). The theory can be explained in two mutually complementary ways. First, the results in the social world depend on the build-up of a precise sequence of events. Second, the chronological sequence of events is causally connected and is "both a reaction to the antecedent events and a cause of subsequent events" (Georg and Jörg, 2010, p. 29). Other authors propose an actor-network approach where human agency is taken into account to explain the transformation of path-dependent structures (Munck, 2022). Some tried to differentiate between path dependence studies of resilient institutions for recent events and proposed the terminology of historical persistence for studying long-term patterns that imply connections between political, economic, social, and symbolic variables (Cirone and Pepinsky, 2022).

We use this concept to explain why France was reluctant to abandon its neocolonial empire. During the Cold War period, these nations provided an invaluable set of natural resources. They supported France's struggling economy after the disastrous and costly Nazi occupation, the First Indochina War, and the Algerian War of Independence. In terms of values, France aimed to stop the spread of communism and counter the soviet influence in the former French West Africa. France was path-dependent in maintaining its influence over a region it had colonized, starting in the 18th century. Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall and even after it became more economically costly to maintain its influence over *Françafrique*, Paris refused to grant *de facto* independence to those countries. The

African states asked for permission to leave the CFA franc, but France used its economic leverage to block the reform.

In a path-dependent fashion, the French leaders considered it a far more significant prestige blow. The French leadership was used to have an economic, political, and cultural influence over *Françafrique*. They wanted the African states to be grateful for France's investments, humanitarian aid, and regional security guarantees. Similar to Napoleon the Third's failed attempt to establish a monarchy in Mexico, France could not accept that it was no longer a great power. By the mid-2010s, the local populations lost patience in the face of never-ending corruption and widespread terrorist attacks. France no longer had a viable option. If it pulled out of Africa, it would have been accused of exploiting these countries and then abandoning them. If it increased its presence, it was accused of further neocolonial practices.

Macron chose the middle ground, which only postponed the inevitable. For an authoritarian state like Russia to take France's place was perceived as a great humiliation. With its record of human rights abuses, internal law infringements, and war crimes, Russia was welcomed with enthusiasm by the local population that harshly criticized decades of French support. From the French perspective, this is not only a security threat to its remaining presence in the region but a great affront to France's complex colonial legacy in the Sahel region.

The paper uses historical synthesis to understand the evolution of France's interaction with its former African colonies. The intersubjective co-constitution of identity in these countries is brought to light via the speech act analysis of key political leaders. The objective is to understand how they perceive each other and to explain Russia's propagandistic success in the region. Quantitative economic indicators support the thesis of a French colonial empire but also reflect on the vulnerability of those states and societies. The level of education and future prospects in the context of a demographic boom is also highly relevant. Military data, official defense papers, and the reports of military experts reflect how France defined its security policy. The figures reflect French military capacity in the event of sending troops to Ukraine.

1.2. France's neocolonial empire

France already has an official empire called Overseas France. This empire is composed of 13 territories spread all over the world, with a population of three million people. The territories were initially colonial possessions assimilated into France. Unlike, for example, the US Territories and Freely Associated States, the people living in Overseas France are French citizens, have the right to

vote, and are represented in the French Parliament. They can also theoretically organize a referendum if they want to declare independence. Because they are part of France, they are also part of the European Union and use the Euro as currency. Still, this does not change the fact that these remote points on the map from the Hexagon are used to increase France's sphere of influence at a global scale. Thanks to Overseas France, the Exclusive economic zone of France is the biggest in the world, with 11,691,000 km². It is followed by the United States 11,351,000 km², Australia 8,505,348 km², Russia 7,566,673 km², and the United Kingdom 6,805,586 km² (WorldAtlas, 2024). The territories represent strategic points from distant places such as the Caribbean (French West Indies), Latin America (French Guiana, bordering Brazil), North America (Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, bordering Canada), Antarctica (French Southern and Antarctic Lands), the Indian Ocean (Réunion), and the Pacific (French Polynesia and New Caledonia). Following the United States and the United Kingdom, France is third in terms of the number of overseas military bases. As of today, after it had to abandon its military bases in Mali, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, and Niger, France had 16 remaining overseas military bases. France's forces in Africa are still present in Djibouti, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Senegal, and Chad. As of early 2024, Paris declared its plans to pull back most of its troops from Africa.

France simultaneously controlled a neocolonial empire in Africa. To understand the political mechanics of this unofficial empire, we have to go back in history. France understood that it could no longer maintain its colonial empire after the conflicts of the First Indochina War (1946-1954) and the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). International law infringements were a common practice in France's case. Even after Algeria's independence, between 1960 and 1966, France conducted 17 nuclear tests in the deserts of Algeria (Henni, 2022). Almost two hundred nuclear warheads were tested between 1966 and 1996 in the Pacific, French Polynesia (Macumber *et al.*, 2023). In both cases, activists are now asking France to take responsibility. The war in Algeria was ruthless, with over two million casualties, other two million Algerians internally displaced into concentration camps, and one million French colonists returning to mainland France. The French forces recruited local Algerian soldiers and committed horrible war crimes and crimes against humanity (Horne, 2014).

France had serious economic difficulties, so it had to formulate a strategy. The CFA franc was designed to maintain France's influence in Africa with minimum costs. France promised to grant independence to all the countries in French West Africa. The CFA franc has been used in these colonies since 1945. The exchange rate was fixed at 1 CFA franc to 2 French francs as of 1948. During the negotiations between France and the African leaders between 1958 and 1960, Paris

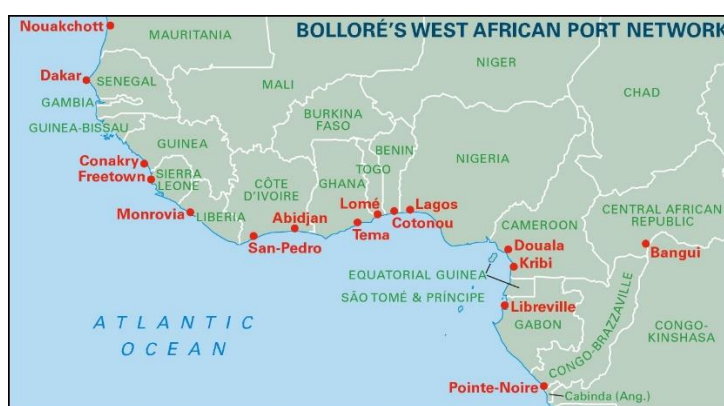
proposed the continuation of the CFA franc as a common currency within this new community of states. The community represents 14 states with more than 200 million French speakers. It was divided in two. The West African CFA franc is composed of Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo. The Central African CFA franc is used in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Gabon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and the Republic of the Congo. The official name of the CFA community changed from the French colonies of Africa to the Financial Cooperation in Central Africa. *Françafrique* was used in the 1950s to define the close relations of France with West Africa, but the terminology later changed to represent a critique of French neocolonialism. The CFA franc remained in place even after France adopted the Euro currency in 1999, with 1 euro to 655.957 CFA franc. France claims that granting independence was not conditioned by the CFA franc since this was totally optional. The French politicians argued that the CFA franc would provide financial stability to new countries and avoid rampant inflation. They usually give the example of Equatorial Guinea in 1985 and Guinea-Bissau in 1997, which voluntarily joined the CFA franc even though they were never a French colony. Mali left the CFA franc and later rejoined on its free will. The French arguments are correct, but this is just a part of the story.

Equatorial Guinea and Guinea-Bissau decided to join the financial community because they were struggling with major economic issues caused by political turmoil. Guinea-Bissau would plunge into another civil war in 1998, just one year after joining the CFA. The country has known a series of rebellions and coups that continue until today (the last failed coup took place in 2023). Equatorial Guinea joined after Teodoro Obiang was instaurated as a military dictator after the 1979 coup, with the involvement of the United States and Spain. Teodoro Obiang remains in power to this day, and his regime has one of the worst human rights abuses recorded in Africa. The two countries were former colonies of Spain and Portugal.

The CFA franc fixed exchange rate led to its overvaluation. The African countries using this currency produced goods at prices that were not competitive on the global market compared to other developing nations at that time. Export-orientated economies benefited from a weak national currency, with Japan arguably the most famous success story of currency depreciation. The only remaining option was to sell what they produced only to France. These economies were undeveloped and mostly exported raw materials. France benefited from a monopoly on a steady reserve of uranium, gold, copper, diamond, bauxite, timber, crude oil, iron ore, and agricultural products. The French multinationals obtained a monopoly on exploiting natural resources from the African governments. From 1927 until now, the French conglomerate Bolloré Transport & Logistics controlled West Africa's biggest ports (16 ports now) and has businesses in 46 African states (Weir, 2021). The state

benefited from a guaranteed supply of above-market prices. However, most of the funds were used by the African leaders imposed by France to enrich themselves and their families above anything else. The national economies were not stimulated to diversify or produce anything else more complex with added value. Due to the overvaluation, it was cheaper for the CFA African countries to import high-value products from France than from any other developed economy. In Wallerstein's terminology, this represented a classic system of a neocolonial relationship between exporting raw materials exclusively to the center, which sells back to the periphery manufactured goods.

Figure 1. Bolloré ports in West Africa as of 2021



Source: Weir (2021)

The CFA countries kept inflation under control, unlike many other neighboring non-CFA states. However, they also registered modest rates of growth. This was partially caused by the fact that developing nations can induce inflation to stimulate growth and create jobs. Typically, a high level of inflation creates low levels of unemployment and vice-versa. It was a matter of economic sovereignty. The CFA countries depended on how well France's economy was behaving. The newly independent nations also lacked monetary and financial sovereignty. France imposed strict conditions. The CFA countries had to deposit 50% of the state reserves and another 20% for financial liabilities to the French treasury. Only 30% of the state's funds remained in Africa. The reserves had a 0.75% interest rate paid to the African central banks. France guaranteed the security of these reserves, unlimited exchange disponibility with other international currencies, and printed the CFA currency. With France's entrance into the Eurozone, the European Central Bank dictates the monetary policy. The EU comprises developed nations with very different interests from those of developing African countries. Facing harsh criticism, Paris finally agreed in 2020 to renounce the 50% deposit condition but not the 20% guarantee for financial liabilities.

Guinea was the only country from the former French colonial empire that gained independence in 1958 but rejected the CFA franc from the beginning after organizing a popular referendum. In a historical speech, the first president of Guinea, Sekou Toure, proclaimed that they preferred to live in poverty but free rather than rich and still enslaved (Pace, 1984). France retaliated in full force under Operation Persil and set an example for other countries that may be tempted to follow Guinea's example. It tried to block Guinea's application as a UN member and destroyed all the infrastructure built by the French during the colonial era, including dismantling the country's power grid. All financial aid was stopped, and Paris tried to diplomatically isolate Guinea from the rest of the world. With no other remaining allies, Guinea sought help from the Soviet Union. France also armed anti-government resistance and flooded the country with counterfeit bills to ensure Guinea's inflation rose to uncontrollable levels. The literature from that era talked about Guinea's resistance and the acceptance of the other countries of their limited autonomy under the CFA franc (Hapgood, 1963). France prevented others from following Guinea's example. Sylvanus Olympio, Togo's first president, was replaced in a military coup and later assassinated on the 13th of January 1963, right outside the American embassy. He was a pacifist who effectively disbanded Togo's army, keeping only a tiny garrison force, and pursued the modernization of his country. Ghana and France were involved. France was worried that Togo had closer relations with the United States and the United Kingdom. On the 10th of July 1963, France signed an updated defense agreement with Togo's new government that increased the cooperation between the two countries (Desmarescaux, 1964). Another famous case was the assassination of Félix-Roland Moumié on the 3rd of November 1960 by France's secret services in Switzerland, where he sought refuge against France. He was a Cameroonian anti-colonial activist murdered with thallium poisoning.

During the ideological context of the Cold War era, other African leaders forged alliances with Moscow or had communist sympathies. However, it would be an exaggeration to label them as profoundly convinced neo-Marxists, as they were rather nationalist opportunists. The United States formally opposed European colonialism but did little to help the newly independent nations. Moscow and China offered the development aid that these countries desperately needed. One such example is Thomas Sankara, a Marxist, and pan-africanist who rejected any form of foreign aid. He became Burkina Faso's president after a coup in 1983 and was assassinated in 1987 with the direct aid of the French secret services. Sankara and 12 of his council members were killed by a professional death squad during a meeting. The man behind the plot was one of his close collaborators, Blaise Compaoré. Blaise explicitly motivated his act due to Thomas Sankara's rebellious attitude that endangered the country's relations with France and the Ivory Coast (arguably France's closest ally in West Africa).

He remained the president of Burkina Faso with France's support until 2014, when he fled to Ivory Coast after an uprising against his rule. He was sentenced in 2022 in his absence to life imprisonment for the assassination. Burkina Faso officially asked France to reopen its archives and acknowledge its responsibility (Obadare, 2022).

France was among the most enthusiastic supporters of the military intervention in Lybia in 2012. It continued to be involved in the following civil war by supporting one of the rebel factions and simultaneously trying to act as a mediator (Mezran, Fasanotti, 2020). In addition to securing Lybia's oil reserves, some political scientists argued that France had every intention of getting Muammar Gaddafi killed by the rebels instead of being arrested and facing trial. Gaddafi proposed the African Union and the gold dinar, a common currency that would have threatened the CFA franc (Ebatamehi, 2022).

Not only did France crush any dissent, but it also systematically appointed and protected military dictators and authoritarian rules in Françafrique even until the 21st century. The tragedy of those countries was that they were simultaneously exploited by France and by their local highly corrupt authorities. This generation of African leaders remained under France's de facto protectorate and were given the freedom to rule as they pleased. Rebellions and coup attempts against them were crushed with France's direct military support. Researchers usually approximate the number of French military interventions in Africa post-1960 to around 50 (Powell, 2017). Including multilateral interventions, between 1990 and 2022, France initiated approximately 20 military operations in Africa (Recchia and Tardy, 2020, p. 93). Another estimate offers a staggering number of 122 military interventions from 1945 to 2005 (Charbonneau, 2008, p. 67).

Viewed from this perspective, the French exploitation only partially caused the economic stagnation of the countries of Françafrique. However, we argue that the neocolonial relationship with the corrupt local governments caused even more harm. For example, Omar Bongo was directly named President of Gabon in 1967 after a coup ordered by Charles de Gaulle. Despite numerous protests, failed coups, and rebellions, he remained in power until his death in 2009. His son Ali Bongo became president until 2023, when he rigged another election and was removed from power by the military junta that had enough of the Bongo family. The French companies that benefited from monopoly exploited the country's oil, gas, rare materials, manganese, diamonds, gold, and uranium resources. Gabon remained extremely undeveloped despite the French payments. Gabon's GDP increased from 0.27 billion dollars in 1967 only to 12 billion dollars in 2009 and reached 21 billion in 2022 (Trading Economics, 2024). Around 80% of Gabon's exports are represented by oil, so most of that growth filled the pockets of Bongo's family. As of 2022, 40% of the population lived under the poverty line,

and the unemployment rate was 30% (Donmez, 2023). The French authorities discovered that Omar Bongo received hundreds of millions of euros as bribes from the French company Elf Aquitaine for oil exploitation (Henley, 2003). At the time of his death, Omar Bongo was one of the wealthiest state leaders in the world, with hundreds of millions of dollars in bank accounts and luxurious properties worldwide (Reddy, 2023).

At the end of the Cold War, there were some attempts to reform the CFA system, and Jacques Chirac was the first French President who broke ranks and acknowledged France's colonial past but then retracted much of what he said. In a 2005 French law on colonialism, the French youth should be taught about the positive aspects of French colonialism. Macron apologized for the French war crimes in Algeria but refused to do the same for the colonial rule (Camut, 2023). As time passed, the growing resentment in Africa against France's neocolonial rule eroded the stability of the *Françafrique*. In the following section, we will try to understand the main causes of its collapse and explain how Russia managed to speculate the political chaos.

1.3. Beyond the Coup Belt and Russia's Africa Corps

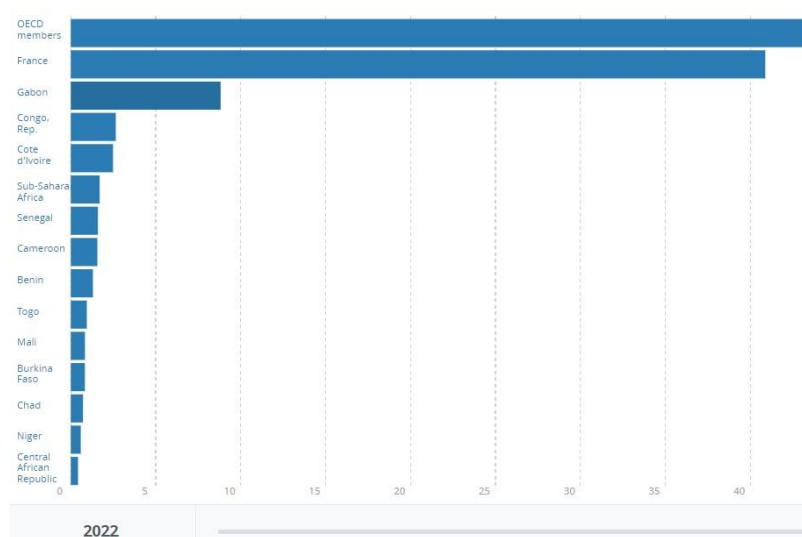
The economic problems in *Françafrique*, coupled with demographic growth and the advancement of telecommunication technology and social media, were among the leading causes of the growing political dissent against their corrupt governments and France. The complexity of this social phenomenon deserves a separate case study; here, we will only sketch the bigger picture by analyzing some macro indicators.

If most developed regions of the world are facing demographic decline, the population of Sub-Saharan Africa continued to grow at an accelerated pace, from 929 million in 2012 to 1.211 billion in 2022 (Statista, 2024). The population is very young, with a median age of 18.8 years compared with France's 42 years (CIA Factbook, 2024). Some relevant examples of CFA countries are Niger, with an increase from 2.6 million in 1950 to 26 million in 2022; Burkina Faso 4.2 million in 1950 to 22 million in 2022; and Mali 4.6 million in 1950 to 22 million in 2022 (Worldometer, 2024). Despite a slight decrease in the poverty rate from the 1990s to 2010s due to population growth, the actual number of people living in poverty has increased in the region. It is estimated that most Sahel countries will double their population by 2050. The younger citizens in the African states barely have access to elementary education, but they also use their phones to access political news. Because they lack any perspectives for growth, they are more capable and motivated to protest and even raise their

arms against their governments. Criminal organizations, populist politicians, and ambitious military leaders thrive in this environment and can quickly undermine fragile democratic institutions.

France's GDP per capita in 1960 was \$1300, at the same rate as the OECD average, and above Senegal with \$300, the wealthiest CFA country at that time. Fast forward to 2022, the difference has dramatically increased. France's GDP per capita reached \$40,000, and the average OECD was \$43,000. Sub-Saharan Africa had the lowest GDP per capita in the world, with \$1700 in 2022. In the same year, out of all 12 CFA countries that were former French colonies, only Gabon, with \$8800, the Republic of the Congo, with \$2600, and Côte d'Ivoire, with \$2400, had a higher GDP per capita than the Sub-Saharan average. Niger's GDP per capita barely increased in sixty years, from \$128 in 1960 to \$585 in 2022. (The World Bank, 2022). The figures for Gabon are misleading due to its low population, rich oil resources, and the monopoly of the Bongo family on the country's wealth.

Figure 2. GDP per capita (current US\$) 2022



Source: World Bank (2024)

Ethnic tensions represent another major cause of conflict within the CFA countries and across borders. The borders of the African nations were set by French colonial rule without considering local cultures or religious differences. In post-independence West Africa, voting is primarily based on ethnic and religious groups. An ethnic minority that represents only 10% or 20% of the population of an African state but might be majoritarian in a particular province will never win a fair election, so it can only hope to get its interests represented through violent means. In correlation with the economic struggle, government corruption, and France's neocolonialism, this explains the numerous coups and periods of social unrest. Particularly impactful for the Sahel region is the existence of the Tuareg and Fulani ethnic groups.

The Tuareg are composed of around 4 million people, present in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Libya, Algeria, Mauritania, and Nigeria. There are also 40 million Fulani scattered all across the Sahel, from the Red Sea to the Atlantic. Unlike any other major ethnic groups in Africa, most of the Tuareg and Fulani are still nomadic pastoralists and have been practicing this lifestyle for thousands of years. They were at the base of the Trans-Saharan trade (which included slaves well before the European powers arrived), making Mansa Musa one of the world's wealthiest men in the 14th century. From their perspective, the new African nations' borders overlap with the trade network. The growing size of the Sahara desert is pushing them further south into the territories of the West African states. The nomadic people did not want to recognize the legitimacy of these societies created by the European colonial powers and repeatedly asked for a state of their own. The Tuaregs rebelled against the African states backed by the French between 1962 and 1964, 1990 and 1995, 2007 and 2009, and again in 2012 till the current date. They acted as mercenaries in the Lybian civil war between 2014 and 2020. The rise of the Islamist insurgency in the Sahel region, starting in 2012 in Mali, should be understood on this background.

The Islamic terrorists defeated in the Middle East regrouped in the fertile grounds of the Sahel region. The current conflicts are, first and foremost, culturally and economically based. The so-called Islamic insurgency is rather better represented as a series of ethical conflicts with a newly added religious variable. The government in Mali was unable to fend off this rebellion, so it called for the help of France, which launched Operation Serval in December 2012, followed by Operation Barkhane in August 2014. At the height of the mission, the French forces had 5,500 soldiers supported by another 5,000 locally recruited troops. The Islamist rebels were pushed back, and the local population initially welcomed the French as saviors, chanting slogans such as *Vive Hollande* and *Vive la France* (Lewis and Valdmanis, 2013).

The Islamists benefited from the Tuareg and Fulani's help, who knew the land and retreated into the Sahara desert, from where they continuously launched terrorist attacks. The hostilities turned into France's forever war, similar to the United States in Afghanistan. The conflict spilled over from Mali into neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger. The Tuaregs mercenaries, who gained experience in the Lybian Civil War, returned in 2020 to support the insurgency. Now, the Islamists control large territories of all of these three nations. Before the 2010s, there was almost no terrorist activity in the region. The Overall Terrorism Index Score 2023 measures the incidents, fatalities, injuries, and hostages of terrorist activity and ranks the situation from 0, the best, to 10, the worst. Burkina Faso has an 8.57 score, Mali 8.00, and Niger 7.27, occupying the first, third, and tenth place in the world. Neighboring Nigeria is noted with 7.57, the eighth position. From 2018 to 2019, Burkina Faso's

terrorist attacks increased by 590%. Burkina Faso registered 2,000 deaths due to terror attacks only in 2023, which is a quarter of the world's total for that year. Around 1.5 million people in Burkina Faso have been internally displaced (Vision of Humanity, 2023). The Burkina Faso and Mali attacks represented 73% of the Sahel region and 52% of sub-Saharan Africa. The entire Sahel region accounted for 43% of the terrorist attacks in the world in 2022, a massive increase from only 7% in 2007. This means more than the terror attacks in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia combined. "Across the Sahel, 22,074 people were killed in 6,408 terror attacks between 2007 and 2022" (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023, p. 62).

We argue that the above causes caused the collapse of the French neocolonial empire. A series of coups replaced both democratic and authoritarian governments generally loyal to France with military juntas that hated the French in the Sahel region. Political scientists named it the Coup Belt. In chronological order, this happened as follows: Mali in May 2021, Chad in April 2021, Guinea in September 2021, Sudan in October 2021, Burkina Faso in September 2022, Niger in July 2023, Gabon in August 2023. Numerous failed coups also occurred in the Sahel, starting with the 2020s. Additionally, a civil war erupted in Sudan in April 2023. France was forced to retreat from the Central African Republic in 2021, which first requested the military support of Russia in 2018. At the request of the new governments that ceased diplomatic relations with France, the French military presence was expelled from Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso.

The Wagner mercenaries have already been active in Sudan since 2017 and in Lybia since 2018. They proved their efficiency, so the new military juntas ravaged by terrorist insurgencies invited them to take France's place. The local populations celebrated this decision, which, according to them, meant the release from France's colonial rule. The protestors attacked the French embassy in Ouagadougou and the French Institute in Bobo-Dioulasso. Anti-French demonstrations took place in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. They waved Russian flags and shouted death to France, France go home, long live Russia, and Merci Wagner (Le Cam, 2023).

The United States was also forced to leave Niger in April 2024, and their place was taken by Wagner Russian soldiers. In the same month, Chad sent a letter to the US requesting that they leave the country. This negatively affects the United States' capability to fight terrorism in the region. In the face of strategic overextension, Washington might decide to abandon the Sahel. France still has 1,000 soldiers in Chad, but the new military junta met with Putin in January 2024. Chad seems to favor a strengthened partnership with Russia (Reuters, 2024). The Economic Community of West African States imposed sanctions on the new military juntas and even threatened with a military intervention. In response, in January 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger proclaimed the Alliance of

Sahelian States, promising military aid and formulating plans to abandon the CFA franc in favor of a new currency. Russia is quoted as the primary security provider. The rest of the countries from the ECOWAS felt threatened by this new wave, as their governments might be next in line to be replaced. The ECOWAS seriously contemplates declaring war on the Alliance of Sahelian States, and most of its members promised to support the campaign (Aning and Bjarnesen, 2024). This would represent a regional war supported by great power proxies of unprecedented scale for Africa in the 21st century.

Russia exploited the turmoil by manipulating the strong sentiments of pan-Africanism and anti-colonialism. This was coordinated with China's Global South rhetoric and the fight against the collective West. The G77 meetings held in September 2023, January 2024, and the BRICS summit in August 2023 supported the same idea of multilateralism and contesting the supremacy of the US dollar. Most of the people from the Sahel region were convinced by Russia's propaganda of its fight against NATO in Ukraine. Within the UN General Assembly, only 10 African states voted to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council. The votes for the ES-11 various resolutions directed at punishing Russia for its invasion showed 140 votes in favor, 18 against, and 122 abstained (Götz *et al.*, 2023).

It matters less for the distressed local populations in the Sahel regions that the new military juntas have already committed crimes against humanity, as Burkina Faso executed over 200 civilians without trial (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Wagner's similar war crimes against civilians in the region fall within the same category. With the reform of Wagner and its transformation into Africa Corps, Moscow now directly controls the mercenaries that took over France's neocolonial empire. Their mission is also to exploit the natural resources in the region to bypass the regime of sanctions and provide extra funds for Russia's war effort in Ukraine. France had no choice but to retaliate.

1.4. Military capabilities and logistical limitations

France initiated several diplomatic missions to defend its security priorities and represent its moral commitments to the international community and the EU. These actions were simultaneously directed against what Russia considers its core sphere of influence. In late 2023 and early 2024, France enhanced its nuclear cooperation with Kazakhstan and Mongolia by signing deals for uranium exploitation. Kazakhstan is the world's biggest producer of uranium. Macron visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in November 2023 with the declared objective of increasing the cooperation between these countries. France agreed to sell weapons to Armenia in two deals signed in October 2023 and February 2024 (Kayali and Gavin, 2024). With the exception of Mongolia, these states are part of the

Eurasian Economic Union and are controlled by Russia. On March 6, 2024, Macron met with Maia Sandu and signed a defense pact with Moldova to counter the destabilization efforts of Russian forces in Transnistria (Irish, 2024). In an interview on the second of May 2024, Macron reiterated that France should not abandon the idea of sending troops to Ukraine in case the frontline collapses and Kyiv asks for direct support (Le Monde, 2024). The question is, is France ready for war?

According to the 2024 Military Strength Ranking, out of 145 countries, Russia remains the second-largest power in the world, while France occupies the 11th place. It has 200,000 active personnel and 26,000 reservists. Macron introduced the Service National Universal Program in 2021 to boost these numbers, an optional military service for one month for citizens aged 15 to 17. France only has around 180 fighters, 55 attack helicopters, 178 tanks, and 77 mobile artillery pieces ready for combat (Global Firepower, 2024). France sent a significant amount of its arsenal as aid to Ukraine. The military equipment sent between 24 February 2022 and 31 December 2023 amounts to €2.615 billion (Ministère des Armées, 2024). France's military has the same problems as the other European powers. Its core strategy was to build a high-performance but reduced-size army capable of low-scale warfare. Its professional efficiency in targeted missions is remarkable. The main issue is that it lacks the ammunition stockpiles and logistical capabilities for more ambitious operations.

France struggled to maintain a 5,000-strong force in Africa and had to rely on American logistical support. France already has 30,000 troops abroad, and its power projection abroad is limited to an estimated maximum expeditionary force of 35,000 soldiers simultaneously (Schmitt and Tenenbaum, 2023). These forces do not have the combat experience of a large-scale industrial war. Macron stimulated France's military industry, and now France has overtaken Russia and is the second arms exporter in the world after the United States. However, shifting France to mass production will take many years and more sustained efforts. Even before the invasion, Russia had a stockpile of 16 million artillery rounds and had the capacity to produce 1 million rounds per year. This increased to 4.5 million in 2024. The estimates range from an average of 10,000 to 80,000 shells fired by the Russians daily, while the Ukrainians were able only to fire back 2,000 to 9,000 shells daily (Ruokonen, 2024). In comparison, France produced 24,000 artillery shells in 2023 (Shekina, 2024). The EU has the economic potential to vastly surpass Russia's military industry, but despite the rhetoric, there seems to be little political will to take action in this direction. Even if the European nations would be willing to take the costs, it would take years to build the necessary infrastructure.

France is not to blame for this situation. The EU faces the same shortcomings, failing to produce the promised one million shells for Ukraine by March 2024 and instead producing only 300,000 as of November 2023 (Kayali *et al.*, 2023). The United States aid package was finally approved in April

2024 after six months of delay caused by an internal squabble. Some of the equipment will be delivered starting in June 2024, but it will take at least two years to transform the \$61 billion package into weapons for Ukraine. In complete contrast, a very modest economy like North Korea was able to send more than 3 million shells to Russia since the beginning of the war (Kobara, 2024). Even with the additional Western weaponry, Ukraine faces a major manpower crisis. According to President Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine needs at least 500,000 recruits. Some experts say that Ukraine will lose the war if it does not pass a law for a mass mobilization of all men aged between 18 and 60, but the Ukrainian politicians still hesitate because this measure will be highly unpopular and there will not be enough people supporting the economy (Dettemer, 2024). The situation on the front has worsened after the failed counteroffensive, Russia's victories in Bakhmut and Avdiivka, and the latest advancements towards Kharkiv.

If the front collapses, what can France do to stop Russia's advance without provoking an all-out war with NATO? Macron suggested sending French troops to Kyiv or Odesa. We believe that Kyiv is out of the question. Even if the Ukrainian front collapses, Kyiv is a metropolis with 3 million people. Russia does not have the forces to occupy it and will most likely avoid engaging again on that front. Instead, a more plausible plan would be for France to send an expiratory force to Poland and from there into Ukraine. They will be deployed in northern Ukraine, right at the border with Belarus. The French forces will not directly confront the Russian ones and will relieve some of the Ukrainian border forces that could be redirected elsewhere. A second scenario implies that France sent troops to Moldova and then siege Transnistria to free Chisinau from Moscow's pressure without engaging in an actual firefight. Because Transnistria is a separatist regime, a direct confrontation would be avoided. A third hypothetical plan involves Romania. In response to Russia's invasion, France initiated Mission Aigle in February 2022, sending a mechanized rapid force of 1,000 soldiers to Romania. This force could be further supplemented with more French troops that could cross the border from Romania through South-West Ukraine and dangerously bypass Transnistria through the south. The French forces will rush to deploy on the Tylihul Estuary, which would provide a great natural barrier for the defense of Odesa. The brigades will work as peacekeeping forces right between the Ukrainian and Russian forces. Macron could try forcing Putin's hand into negotiating an armistice to avoid a war with NATO, which he knows that he will lose.

This compromise would likely mean ceasing hostilities and Russia keeping most of the territory it gained until that moment without obtaining international recognition for the annexation. This result will severely impair Ukraine's future capabilities as a functional state integrated into the EU and NATO, but it will at least ensure its survival and the end of a devastating conflict with over one

million casualties. All the above plans imply a high risk of escalating to a world war. France will also struggle with the logistical nightmare of sending rapid task forces 2,500 km away from its borders. These scenarios do not represent foreign policy prescriptions or international relations forecasting. Their purpose is to show what, in our view, France's tactical options are if it decides to pursue an unwise strategy that goes against the realist tradition.

Conclusions

Unlike other European colonial powers, France tried to directly assimilate the people from its colonies into the French civilization. It tried to delegate the administration of the colonies to loyal locals. This set the French colonies in Africa on a long path of dependence that started in the 18th century on Paris's central authority. This dependence also meant the complicity of the local rulers with the colonizers. Sometimes, these local leaders were far more ruthless and corrupt than the French. After the Second World War, France found ways to maintain its regional influence through the CFA system. Their authority was reinforced by the already existing historical path dependence of the newly born African states.

Since the demise of the French colonial empire, Paris has maintained a privileged and close relationship with the states of the former French West Africa that represents the textbook definition of neocolonialism (Etogho *et al.*, 2023). Some might argue that France's neocolonial exploitation was balanced by its investments and development aid that it provided to the region. The CFA countries had a stable currency. Côte d'Ivoire, for example, partially obtained a relative level of industrialization thanks to France's help. France sent to Africa as aid an average of 2.800 million dollars in the 1970s, \$3.900 in the 1980s, \$4.700 in the 1990s, and \$4.300 in the 2000s (Jacquemot, 2011). Even if we could be inclined to accept this argument, France is still morally and legally responsible for the perpetuation of authoritarian and kleptocratic regimes in the Sahel region for sixty years. This caused significantly more harm indirectly than the direct exploitation. Due to the same path of dependence, France refused to let go of what it considered a part of its legacy and a sign that France could still be a great power. The extreme poverty and boiling political frustration could not have continued indefinitely. The repeated interactions between colonizers and colonized co-constituted strong cultural identities.

Starting in 2012, a series of events endangered control over the CFA franc by sparking terrorist insurgencies, military coups, civil wars, and interstate conflicts. Ironically, Macron is also partially to blame for hesitating to act sooner out of fear of being labeled a colonizer. France struggled to find

a strategy for Africa, and its actions reflected a case-to-case reaction to what was happening instead of a broader plan (Beloff, 2024). France's presence was gradually replaced by the reformed Wagner group, which took advantage of the anti-colonial sentiments in the region. The intersubjective perceptions of the collective West's double standards and the ruthless exploitation of the Global South were already present before Russia's propaganda took the initiative in the region and monopolized this discursive course. France responded to the new challenge by being far more active in countries under Russia's sphere of influence and by taking a hawkish stance on the war in Ukraine. This represented a radical strategic change.

The results suggest that despite having one of the largest and most experienced armies within the EU, France is not ready for a large-scale war. The best it could hope for are limited operations to support the defense of vital strategic points such as Odesa. This might require sending a rapid force from Romania and crossing through the Republic of Moldova. Poland is the most likely candidate for unofficially backing France's efforts due to its ideological motivation and military preparations, with 200,000 military personnel and another 350,000 reservists. European values, the balance between France and Germany within the EU, and the 2024 EU elections partially explain Macron's change of strategy. Still, what matters the most is France's clash with the Russian Federation over the Sahel and West Africa.

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