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The umpteenth scenario of the clash between Western powers and Russia in Africa

A radical change in the parties involved threatens to call into question the influence of Western powers on Mali.

I. Introduction

Mali's membership to the Western powers' area of influence seemed certain thanks to its long-standing ties with the French state, which in 2013 immediately accepted the Malian government's call and deployed its own troops to repel jihadist groups based in the North of the country.

However, earlier this year the situation changed radically due to the gradual rupture of relations between Mali and European forces engaged in the country and the suspicion of a deployment of troops belonging to the paramilitary group Wagner in the country, both of these events challenged Mali's allegiance to the Western sphere.

The aim of the following article is to analyse the events that have most influenced Mali's current internal political

dynamics but, above all, changes occurred in the country's foreign policy.

The analysis considers the different military operations deployed in the territory, which differ from one another in terms of aims and instruments used, observing how the situation has evolved over time and the different reactions occurred on several fronts: on the one hand, changes in public opinion in Mali, and on the other, Western powers' renunciation of further cooperation with the Malian military junta.

The research was carried out by analysing the choices of the different stakeholders involved and the consequences related to the country's political status in order to measure the changes that have taken place in this context, also making direct reference to the most recent events.

II. Influence of Western powers on Mali

From 2012 the Republic of Mali suffers an ongoing conflict that divides the population in two factions, as it often happens in ancient colonies whose borders have been stated disregarding the actual ethnic composition of the territory.

As demonstrated by the recent coup

d'état occurred in Burkina Faso, the region suffers from a high instability, breeding ground for jihadist groups that makes the situation worse. Since 2012 Mali has been affected by several violent events: the Tuareg rebellion that led to the proclamation of independence of the Northern region of Azawad and favoured the infiltration of extremist groups affiliated to Al-Qaeda and the consequent coup d'état with a new military junta to rule the country.

In 2013, the progressive rise of Islamic extremists in the North, gathered in the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa – MOJWA, forced Traoré's government to ask for an international support to prevent the country from reaching an irredeemable condition. As a result, in January 2013 the French President, François Hollande, announced the setting up of the Serval Operation and the following deployment of French military forces through the country. Besides, the operation wasn't supposed to have a fixed duration to help the national army to fend off Islamic extremists, as Hollande announced "cette opération durera le temps nécessaire"¹.

The French army has been soon

supported by other international organizations' initiatives, most of them as part of a stabilization project in the whole Sahel area. The 3,500 French soldiers deployed as soon as the Operation Serval has been launched² have been joined the same year by 500 European soldiers³ from the European Training Mission in Mali – EUTM, operation designed to train the Malian army⁴.

Not surprisingly, the continuous and huge military deployment in the area induced a high sense of distrust toward foreign soldiers in the local population that still today, after ten years, attends helpless to an ongoing war and to all the unfulfilled promises made by Western countries' leaders in their speeches while announcing the continuous deployment of weapons and soldiers.

Among the most relevant military operations, supporting the French army, there is the international military operation, "African-led International Support Mission to Mali – AFISMA", authorized by the Resolution 2085 adopted by the UN Security Council and which involved almost 8,000 soldiers⁵ led by the Economic Community of West African States – ECOWAS, organization of

¹ Franceinfo Afrique (January 10th, 2013).

² Le Monde & Agence France-Presse & Reuters (January 29th, 2013).

³ Italian Ministry of Defense (April 17th, 2018).

⁴ Council of the European Union, Decision (January 17th, 2013).

⁵ Taddele Maru (February 14th, 2013).

which Mali was a member until 2021.

In April 2013 the UN Security Council introduced also a peace-keeping operation in the country, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, with the aim of protecting civilians and supporting the national government. The operation has involved so far 18,108⁶ staff members.

Although, at the beginning the international forces were perceived as the only hope for the country even by the national government, the relations between France and Mali deteriorated very soon especially when, only three weeks after the announcement of the setting up of the Serval Operation, the French army entered triumphant in Kidal, a city in the Northern area, without any Malian soldier in tow.

The hatred against the French army became to spread in the whole Sahel area among a population in dire straits that still does not see the promised improvement of their life and that lives in a continuous condition of uncertainty hoping for a change that, however, is still slow in coming. An event that helped this feeling to spread was the decision of the French government to immediately create a new operation, the Barkhane

Operation, right after the dismissal of the Serval Operation.

Analysing the recent military developments, in 2020 the European Union has established a task force, the Task Force Takuba, which was supposed to help the French ongoing operation, but it is actually formed by a majority of French soldiers.

Nevertheless, 2020 has been a crucial year also because of the worsening of the political situation in Mali that has brought the military government to be at odds with the international forces settled in the country: an episode that has drawn attention was the decision of the Malian government to order to ninety Danish soldiers, who had joined the EU's operations, to leave the country because they were not authorized by the government to settle there.

There are different opinions about this radical change in the government and in the public opinion of Mali, according to several diplomatic sources the military junta does not trust the real aim of the European soldiers and the multilateral character of the operations.⁷

However, sources from the French government argue that one of the reason to this reaction was the strong will of the

⁶ United Nations Peacekeeping (2022).

⁷ Le Cam & Vincent (January 26th, 2022).

military junta to avoid a democratic transition, continuously asked by European countries, in order to maintain power over the country and that another proof of this will is the direct involvement of alternative forces who won't react toward the authoritarian system existing nowadays in the country because they don't have rigid principles to observe: the Russian paramilitary organization named Wagner.⁸

On May 21st 2021, right after the announcement of the birth of a new civil government lead by Ouane, the Colonel Goïta, accusing the member of the new government of having formed the government without his consultation, announced that Ouane's government has been stripped of its powers. Soon after, the ECOWAS decided to expel Mali from the organization.

European powers stood by and watch, since bilateral relations with Mali get worse and worse especially regarding relations with France: Bamako accuses Paris of having influenced the ECOWAS and convinced the organization to take a hard line toward the country, but a point of no return was the Malian

government's decision at the end of January 2022 to ask the French ambassador to Mali, Joël Meyer, to leave the country within 72 hours⁹.

On February 17th 2022, Emmanuel Macron officially announced the withdrawal of French troops from the country into the neighbouring state of Niger, the French President justified his decision by talking about the unfixable disagreement between the two states but, among the causes, he mentioned also the hidden interests of Mali¹⁰.

The French withdrawal is followed by the deployment in the country of soldiers from the Wagner group which, according to General Stephen Townsend Commander of the US Army for Africa – AFRICOM, in January 2022 have already been several hundred¹¹, confirmed also by sources from UN based diplomats. However, the Malian government justified their presence by saying that no mercenaries have been deployed and that only "Russian trainers" are in Mali as part of a bilateral agreement with Russia, endorsed by a Russian diplomat at the UN Security Council¹².

As previously mentioned, the

⁸ Aljazeera & News Agencies (December 24th, 2021).

⁹ Bensimon, Le Cam, Ricard & Vincent (2022).

¹⁰ Bensimon, Ricard & Vincent (February 17th,

2022).

¹¹ Sudouest.fr & Agence France-Presse (January 21st, 2022).

¹² Lynch, MackInnon & Gramer (April 14th, 2022).

population shows a common distrust notably toward the French army, according to Niagalé Bagayoko, Senior expert at the African Security Sector Network – ASSN, there is a substratum of anti-colonial resentment and the populations have reached a real scepticism toward the real utility of the French presence¹³. This common feeling is also witnessed by some Russian flags appeared during a demonstration in the capital in favour of the Malian armed forces to underline the appreciation of the population toward Russian soldiers, but also their conviction that their presence is the only effective solution to combat terrorism.

Therefore, Mali has become the umpteenth scenario of the clash between the European Union and Russia to gain their sphere of influence in the African continent, but in this case the EU seems to suffer a defeat.

The United Nation, through their Secretary General Guterres, have taken notice about the decision of the Malian government but at the same time Guterres asked the country and its “bilateral partners” to respect humanitarian international law in their operation and that they shall not interfere with the UN

missions still present in the country¹⁴.

In fact, it should be pointed out that these concerns are not unjustified because, if it is confirmed that the soldiers involved belong to the Wagner group, members of this organization are already under EU sanctions for human rights violations and abuses.

The reaction of the French government is not long in coming and the Foreign Affairs Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian has accused the Wagner group and referred to them by saying that: “They are already at the moment using the country’s resources in exchange for protecting the junta. They are despoiling Mali”. He has also accused the Russian government of lying about the real status of this group¹⁵.

However, the fight against the spread of terrorism progressively takes heinous shades by involving in most cases the civil population; this is what happened at the end of March 2022 in Moura, a city of 10,000 inhabitants in the centre of the country. The clash between the two factions, the national army and jihadist groups has taken place during a market hitting, without distinction, everyone who tried to escape.

On April the 1st the Malian État-

¹³ Elboudrari (January 16th, 2022).

¹⁴ UN Security Council (April 13th, 2022), p. 16.

¹⁵ The Guardian & Agence France-Presse (January 30th, 2022).

Major Général des Armées announced the successful operation saying that 203 men from terrorist armed groups have been neutralized. However, several witnesses among civilians said that the soldiers intervening in the operation were white soldiers who did not speak the local language¹⁶, so this may lead those who fear the presence of the Wagner group to consider these testimonies as evidence.

The government has assured that the operation has been conducted in full compliance with the international humanitarian law. However, the main Non-Governmental Organizations, among others Human Rights Watch - HRW, tell another version. Some documents talk about 300 people killed through summary executions, even those suspected to have collaborated with extremist groups. In addition, HRW points out the presence of more than 100 Russian mercenaries¹⁷.

Some of the witnesses talks about summary executions based on physical features that can be traced back to those of Islamist extremists, others think that the executions were also based on ethnic reasons. The outcry over this event

forced the military junta to announce on April 6th 2022 that an investigation will be hold regarding the responsibilities of the army. Meanwhile, Issa Konfourou, Mali's Ambassador at the Security Council, taking the floor during a meeting, called on all stakeholders to refrain from accusing the Malian armed forces of massacres.

During the same meeting the Russian ambassador pointed out how the Malian authorities have demonstrated a constructive approach and that they don't have a "hidden agenda" as if to respond to Macron's words mentioned above; she also protested against claims about the involvement of Russian mercenaries describing these charges as part of a geopolitical game¹⁸.

On the political side, the prospect of a democratic government seems distant, the new government has promised, in the Transition Charter and through an explicit agreement with the ECOWAS, to hold new elections at the end of February 2022, but to date no elections have been held.

Anyway, on January 8th 2022 the Malian government announced a new calendar scheduling new elections for

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, press release (April 5th, 2022).

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, press release (April

5th, 2022).

¹⁸ United Nations Security Council, press release (April 7th, 2022).

December 2025. As a response, the ECOWAS imposed stricter sanctions¹⁹ and the Council of the European Union did the same by imposing restrictive measures against five relevant actors held responsible for that action²⁰.

A month later the National Transitional Council of Mali has adopted a new Transition Charter which established a duration of 5 years and 6 months for the transition, another decision was to increase the number of seats in the Council from 120 to 147. The New Charter also removes the figure of the Vice President and forbid to the President to candidate himself in the upcoming elections. Some think that this rule was introduced only to give an appearance of democratic spirit and that Goïta will soon resign in order to bypass this rule and to stand in the next elections.

Among the latest noteworthy events, on April 11th 2022 the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell announced that the EU has decided to reduce its effort in the training operation of the Malian army due to the fact that the involvement of the Wagner group does not give the EU the necessary guarantees to

carry out its work safely and without any interference²¹, an announcement that marks a further breaking in the relations with Mali.

III. Summary and way ahead

The Western countries' continuous call to respect democratic principles and to restore the rule of law have led the military junta to seek a way out of these pressures by eliminating any link with them and relying on international aids that are not dependent on results in terms of domestic policy but only for the ultimate purpose of winning a war.

However, even if connections with the Wagner group have not yet been confirmed, the decision of the Malian government to stipulate a bilateral partnership with Russia will bring to foreign policy changes that will see Mali increasingly closer to Russia, this change of direction can be convenient not only from an economic point of view but also for political aspects as evidenced by the mutual support of the Malian and Russian ambassadors to the Security Council mentioned above but also by the

¹⁹ Council of the European Union, press release (February 4th, 2022).

²⁰ Council of the European Union, Decision

(February 4th, 2022).

²¹ Emmott (April 12th, 2022).

decision of Mali to abstain from voting on a resolution of the UN General Assembly condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The EU needs to re-establish its role on a global scale, especially in the face of recent events and the growth of other powers such as China and India, which question Eurocentrism and the success of the European Union – United States alliance.

This article highlights also how the EU's defeat in Mali is not much a military as a political one, the failure of the operations carried out in Mali symbolized also the umpteenth failure of the Western democratic states in the attempt to stabilize areas of Africa and to introduce their principles within these territories; what happened in Mali could be an example for other Sahel states to rely on Russian forces who can guarantee a result without all the implications relating to the respect of human and democratic rights, as perhaps will be shown by what happened in Moura.

In conclusion, possible predictions on Mali's future situation suggest another stratocracy settling in Africa, whose power is ensured by international ties that guarantee economic and political stability, and which is enriched through wars and corruption at the

expense of a population that will probably never know its rights.

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